

The Flowering of Mediocrity



by Theodore Dalrymple

When someone is said to be lacking in ambition, it is usually meant as a criticism, as if people had a transcendent moral duty to be ambitious. How else but by ambition will mankind advance?

I grant that ambition is sometimes, or often, necessary, but it is a virtue, like bravery, that is not self-standing. To be brave in a bad cause is worse than to be cowardly in the same cause. And it hardly takes much historical knowledge to realize that ambition can be the closest ally of monstrous evil.

If everyone were ambitious, what a terrible world it would be! The constitution of human society requires people of very different qualities, the unambitious as much as the ambitious. In some respects, the unambitious, those who are not driven to achieve anything, are fortunate: They are not tortured by the idea that they must improve on what they have already done, that they must forever go onwards and upwards. They can be

content with their lot in a way that the ambitious never can be.

Of course, such contentment has not had good press; but that is because writing is always done by the ambitious, as history is usually written by the victors. The dilemma is posed in the following fashion: Is it better to be a discontented man or a contented pig? The "correct" answer is contained in the way the question is phrased; for who would say it is better to be a pig than a man? (I leave aside the question of the pig's actual level of intelligence and self-consciousness.)

The ambitious tend to regard the unambitious as wallowing in the swill and mud of ordinary existence. They have the contempt for the unambitious that the intellectual often has for those who've never read a book. No doubt this picture is sometimes true: One meets people whose steel-plated complacency repels. But this complacency is far from confined to the unambitious; it is found among the ambitious who have succeeded triumphantly without any particular talent. It is often written on their faces, as unmistakably as hardship is written on other faces.

My thoughts turned to the question of ambition when I considered our gardener in France, who comes twice a week. He is a man in his 50s who has always lived alone and who refuses all payment more than 50 percent higher than the minimum wage, though we would be prepared to pay him more.

To see him work is a rare pleasure. He obviously loves what he does. He works fast, efficiently, and with an aesthetic sense. You soon realize that supervision of his work would be an impertinence. Seeing him from the corner of your eye, however, you see that he never lets up. If he says he has worked three hours, he has worked three hours, with no time off for mooning or coffee breaks.

What he likes is to work alone. I would like to know what he

thinks about as he is working but of course do not ask. We have had conversations with him over a beer, however. He detests large cities, especially Paris, Marseille, and Lyon, and hopes never again to have to go to them. He dislikes the rush, the pollution, the insincerity, the greed, the incipient violence, the falsity of urban life. He is, as they say, *du coin*—he was born round here and wants to die round here.

He lives in a rather beautiful village a few kilometers away, though I doubt that his habitation is luxurious. I imagine, on the contrary, that it is very simple, where very little can go wrong. (We are always having to call the plumber, or the electrician, or the glazier, or the gasman, or the roofer, or the financial expert, etc., each time with a sinking heart.) When we either go to or pass through the village, we often see him sitting outside the bar, having a quiet pastis and chatting with a friend. He spends hours like this. I should add that he is far from stupid.

Because I am ambitious, I cannot imagine myself being contented with a life such as his. Since we tend to assume that everyone is like ourselves, I am inclined to suppose that there must be some deep psychological wound in him that renders him so superficially content with his life—but that underneath, he must be suffering a nameless sorrow.

No doubt I do this to lessen the torture that ambition inflicts upon me, though I am well past the age at which I can deceive myself into thinking that one day I might achieve something worthwhile, or even better than merely worthwhile. I shall be driven to effort until the day I die.

But at least my ambition has been harmless to others. One of the troubles of the modern age (it seems to me) is that its exacerbated individualism has spread ambition far too widely. Nietzsche had no time for the religion of the poor and humble, which he thought exacted a terrible price on superior persons rather like himself. He also seemed to extol the will to power

as a cure of the cultural anemia brought about, in his opinion, by religion, particularly the Christian religion.

Whatever one may think of Nietzsche as a philosopher, his prediction of the decline of religion—or rather, the continuation of its decline, for he was only 7 years old when Matthew Arnold wrote his great poem about the decline of religious faith, “Dover Beach”—has come true, and power is the transcendent goal that has replaced salvation in the beyond.

Nietzsche disdained the multitudes and thought that it was superior persons who should seek power, admittedly not in the political field. What happened, however, was that huge numbers of people sought power as the only transcendent good; and given the normal distribution of most human qualities such as talent, it was inevitable that most people who sought (and achieved) power were mediocrities. In other words, the decline of religion, far from conducing to an age of personal and artistic superiority, as Nietzsche hoped, conduced to the very opposite, the flowering (if I may be allowed what seems like an oxymoron) of mediocrity.

First published in [*Taki's magazine*](#).