



## A Critique of the Humean Justification of Private Property

*Özel Mülkiyetin Hume'cu Temellendirilmesinin Eleştirisi*

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### Abstract

*Hume contends that the only way to avoid destructive conflicts among people with infinite desires for scarce resources is to converge on some regulatory human conventions. In the Humean theory of property, avidity of individuals, which is defined as a kind of insatiable greed for wealth, cannot be eliminated. As such, a property system can appropriately regulate a society only if individuals tend to comply with property rules out of their avidity. Since the private property system enables individuals to pursue their love of material gain, it is in a complete harmony with human avidity. In this paper, I argue that even if it is assumed that avidity is a human universal, private property cannot be justified by appealing to avidity. Other property systems are capable of dealing with human avidity as well if the objects of avidity are not necessarily material goods.*

**Keywords:** Hume, private property, avidity, social conventions.

### Öz

*Hume kıt kaynaklar için sınırsız arzulara sahip insanlar arasındaki yıkıcı çatışmaları önlemenin tek yolunun düzenleyici gelenekler üzerinde birleşme olduğunu iddia eder. Hume'cu mülkiyet kuramına göre insanların zenginliğe ilişkin doymak bilmez açgözlülüğü olarak tanımlanan hırs duygusu ortadan kaldırılamaz. Bir mülkiyet sisteminin toplumu uygun şekilde düzenleyebilmesi ancak bireylerin mülkiyet kurallarına açgözlülükleri dolayısıyla riayet etmesi durumunda mümkün olur. Özel mülkiyet sistemi bireylere maddi kazanç arzularını takip etme olanağını tanıdığı için insan hırsıyla uyum halindedir. Bu makalede hırs duygusunun, evrensel bir insan özelliği olduğu kabul edilse dahi, özel mülkiyet sistemini temellendiremeyeceğini savunuyorum. Diğer mülkiyet sistemleri maddi kaynaklar dışında farklı hırs nesnelere ulaşabildiği ölçüde bu duyguyla bir arada var olabilmektedir.*

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Hume, özel mülkiyet, hırs, toplumsal gelenekler.

The central tenet of the Humean account of property is that the private property system is essential for a decently functioning human society (Panichas 2012, 227). Hume (1978, 491) contends that the only way to avoid destructive *conflicts* among people with infinite desires for scarce resources is to converge on some regulatory human *conventions*. In this sense, property systems are conventions which create a stable environment for everyone to enjoy his/her possessions without being threatened by other individuals.

Although it is difficult to make a clear distinction between Hume's *explanation* on the emergence of basic systems of property due to a social need and his *justification* of the private property system, Panichas (2012) reconstructs Hume's account of property to fulfill this task. The distinction between the explanation of *property systems* in general and the specific justification of the *private property system* is important because the former alone does not suffice to explicate what kind of property system is normatively justified. Panichas argues that the Humean account of property is necessarily connected to the justification of the private property system. According to Hume, avidity of individuals, which is defined as a kind of insatiable greed for wealth, cannot be eliminated. As such, a property system can appropriately regulate a society only if people tend to comply with property rules



out of their avidity. Since the private property system enables people to pursue their love of material gain, it is in a complete harmony with human avidity (*Ibid.*, 232-233).

In this paper, I argue that even if it is assumed that avidity is a human universal, private property cannot be justified by appealing to avidity. Other property systems are capable of dealing with human avidity as well if the objects of avidity are not necessarily material goods. In complex societies, the object of avidity can be determined by what a society culturally praises. The Humean justification of private property is problematic through *its own standards* because *the avidity condition* does not necessarily undermine the justification of other property systems. The paper proceeds as follows: firstly, I will explicate the Humean explanation of property systems. In the second section, Panichas' reconstruction of Hume's justification of private property will be presented. In the third section, I will argue that other property systems can be justified through Hume's own standards because the objects of human avidity are not necessarily material resources. I will review a possible objection in the fourth section.

### 1. Hume's explanation of basic systems of property

The first step of Hume's explanation of the emergence of property is to illustrate the social character of human beings. Hume begins with claiming that there is a gap between people's infinite "wants and necessities", and "their slender means" to relieve these wants and necessities (1978, 484). Panichas (2012, 235) interprets Hume's use of infinite "wants and necessities" as a finite number of *insatiable desires* rather than an infinite number of desires about infinite number of goods. According to this interpretation, people want to get more and more of what they like. Hume claims that human beings, in comparison to other animals, lack the physical force and other natural abilities necessary to fulfill their needs (*Ibid.*, 485). As a result, the formation of society becomes a necessary solution to human beings' deficiencies: "... by society alone he is able to supply his defects, and raise himself up to an equality with his fellow-creatures, and even acquire a superiority above them. By society all his infirmities are compensated..." (*Ibid.*, 485).

Human beings benefit from social life in several respects. First of all, "by the conjunction of forces, our power is augmented." In other words, individuals compensate for their physical weaknesses by unifying their power. Secondly, a society's division of labor enables people to enjoy the products of different specialized abilities in a society. Since it is inefficient for an individual to labor in a variety of fields, society makes it possible for individuals to enjoy a wider range of products without any difficulty. Finally, people are less likely to suffer from external threats and accidents because of the intra-community cooperation. (*Ibid.*, 485). However, Hume believes that the existence of such advantages of society is not enough to explain the formation of social life. Additionally, at the initial stages of mankind, human beings should be aware of these advantages (*Ibid.*, 486). It is assumed that human beings cannot immediately realize the benefits of social life in their "wild uncultivated state" (*Ibid.*, 486). Hume defines this awareness of the advantages of social life as a kind of knowledge that can be acquired through "study and reflection" (*Ibid.*, 486). Therefore, Hume contends that society gradually, through a process of reflection and learning, emerges from families and small kinship groups, which are the product of the natural attraction between sexes and affection towards one's own children. (*Ibid.*, 486):

In a little time, custom and habit operating on the tender minds of the children, makes them sensible of the advantages, which they may reap from society, as well as fashions them by degrees for it, by rubbing of those rough corners and untoward affections, which prevent their coalition (*Ibid.*, 486).

On the other hand, Hume identifies a significant danger in the newly-emerging social life. The danger is that self-interested individuals may come into severe conflicts and *destabilize social life* due to their insatiable desires for moderately scarce resources (*Ibid.*, 487; Panichas 2012, 225-226). The basic idea is that self-love, as a dominant psychological attitude of human beings', leads to a competition between individuals (*Ibid.*, 487) because the scarce resources cannot satisfy every individuals' desires at the same time. Hume also clarifies what individuals compete for. To understand Hume's idea of destructive competition for scarce resources, his account of goods has to be explicated.



He states that there are three different kinds of goods: "the internal satisfaction of our minds, the external advantages of our body and the enjoyment of such possessions as we have acquir'd by our industry and good fortune" (*Ibid.*, 487). Hume does not provide a detailed description of these three different goods. However, it may be reasonably interpreted that the first one, internal satisfaction of our minds, is the pleasure that is derived from our mental states such as thoughts, dreams or fantasies. Since it consists of mental states of individuals, it is not threatened by other individuals' physical attacks according to Hume. The second, external advantages of our body, can be "ravish'd from us, but can be of no advantage to him who deprives us of them" because the parts of bodies are not useful when they are not an extension of a living organism (*Ibid.*, 487). In this kind of good, the cases like slavery where some individuals can profit from others' bodily effort are excluded. I will skip the discussion of these cases since it is beyond the scope of this paper. Hume concludes that only the third kind of good, *possession of material resources*, can be appropriated by others and yet remains useful. Moreover, it is assumed that material resources are moderately scarce, a level in between extreme scarcity and abundance (*Ibid.*, 488). Since material resources are moderately scarce and easily seized by others (Hardin 2007, 145), given that self-love and the love to the closest relatives dominate feelings of altruism towards strangers, the conflicts among different parties for scarce resources becomes inevitable. Moreover, these conflicts lead to instability in possession of goods.

The benefits of social life are undermined by the instability of possession because conditions of cooperation are likely to disappear due to the violent conflicts between individuals to appropriate each other's possessions. Hume contends that the property system is established as a response to *the problem of instability of possessions*:

I observe, that it will be for my interest to leave another in the possession of his goods, *provided* he will act in the same manner with regard to me. He is sensible of a like interest in the regulation of his conduct. When this common sense of interest is mutually express'd, and is known to both, it produces a suitable resolution and behavior... (Hume 1978, 490).

Property is a human convention which creates a stable environment for the enjoyment of what someone acquires by his or her "fortune and industry" (*Ibid.*, 489). According to Hume, self-interest is the original motive for the emergence of property conventions (*Ibid.*, 499). "When men ... have observ'd, that the principal disturbance in society arises from those goods<sup>1</sup>", people tend to make sense of the need for stability of possession and converge on property conventions (*Ibid.*, 489). Everyone is better off with property conventions since stability of possession is "the most necessary to the establishment of human society" where people can compensate their individual weaknesses by intra-community cooperation (*Ibid.*, 491). In the absence of property conventions the society as a cooperative whole collapses into a mass of individuals whose conflicts destroy the possibility of a stable social life based on mutual advantage. Moreover, in Hume's account of property, emergence and continuity of property conventions are a sort of game-theoretical equilibrium. Compliance of one individual to the convention of private property is conditioned by the belief regarding other individuals' compliance (De Jasay 2004, 63; Collier 2011, 134). Hence, the emergence of property conventions presupposes strategic rationality of the individuals who are involved in the convention.

Finally, I will explicate what Baillie (2000, 160) calls *natural preconditions of justice*. According to Hume, there are two preconditions that have to be met for property conventions to arise. Firstly, material resources should be *moderately scarce*. If there was abundance of resources on earth, there would be no social need for property since everyone would already get whatever he or she wants without taking other's possessions away (Hume 2010).

Moreover, extreme scarcity of resources is also not compatible with the emergence of property conventions (*Ibid.*). The rules of property would be unnecessary under extreme scarcity since these rules cannot function to fulfill people's material needs anymore (Baillie 200, 161). There is no point in approving stability of possession when the majority of people have no possession to enjoy. In other

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<sup>1</sup> Material possessions. The third kind in Hume's account of goods.



words, there is no mutual advantage in adopting property conventions where some people suffer from extreme scarcity of goods.

Secondly, there would be no need for property conventions if people were unlimitedly generous and altruist towards other individuals:

Why should I bind another, by a deed or promise, to do me any good office, when I know that he is already prompted, by the strongest inclination, to seek my happiness, and would, of himself, perform the desired service; except the hurt, he thereby receives, be greater than the benefit accruing to me? (Hume 2010).

Hume believes that property conventions exist because there is a social need stemming from people's *selfish psychological propensities* to appropriate others' possessions. Since individuals harm their long-run self-interest by destroying the benefits of stability of possession and social cooperation, property conventions arise to balance individuals' appetite for immediate access to others' possessions. By balancing this appetite, individuals' mutual convergence on property conventions ends with an equilibrium that serves for everyone's long-term interests.

Thus far, I have summarized the building blocks of Hume's explanation of basic systems of property. The aim of this section was to evaluate property systems in general. Given human nature and moderate scarcity of goods, property conventions are necessary for human societies to decently function.

## 2. The Justification of Private Property and the Avidity Condition

Although Hume does not explicitly specify private property as opposed to other alternatives in his explanation of property conventions, it is easy to notice that what he has in his mind is a system of private property. One reason to infer this conclusion is that Hume establishes a direct relationship between individuals' incentive to work and property conventions (Coventry & Sager 2013, 592).

According to Hume (2010), to encourage individuals to be industrious, one's ownership of the products of his labor and his first occupation should be guaranteed. Otherwise, no one would have a sufficient incentive to produce and work hard because someone's possessions can be seized by others at any time. In addition to this, the right to transfer property to someone else and inheritance are regarded as the features of property conventions (Hume 1978). The common ground of these different aspects of property conventions is that *individuals* have the ultimate authority over the things that are owned. Individuals' labor and occupation of material resources are directly connected to the bundle of rights on an individual level, which is acquired through property conventions. Hume reveals a theoretical preference for the system of private property, where individuals have property rights, over other alternatives, which can ensure stability of possession by collective or common ownership. However, there must be a *justification* to favor the system of private property, since any system of property could have emerged to maintain stability of possession and conditions of cooperation in a society (Mackie 1980, 93). Any system of property implies some regulatory rules about the ownership of resources to provide a stable social environment in which people can live under peace and order. It is not clear why other systems of property are inferior to private property to deal with the self-love of individuals and moderate scarcity of goods. In order to accomplish this justificatory task, Panichas (2012) reconstructs Hume's account of property in a way that Hume's claim about the superiority of private property is rendered more clear.

According to Panichas (*Ibid.*, 233), the Humean justification of private property is based on the idea of *human avidity*. Avidity is the central danger for a stable social life. Hume defines avidity as an insatiable love of gain for material goods: "This avidity alone, of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends, is insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society" (Hume 1978, 491-492).

In this interpretation of human psychology, individuals have a very strong propensity *to get more and more of what they like*. According to Hume, that stability of possession, and of social life in general, is



in danger unless human avidity is restrained (*Ibid.*, 492). If people act out of their avidity without limits, destructive conflicts among individuals and interest groups, which undermine the stability of social life, become inevitable. Since there is a moderate scarcity of goods, the endless desires of different parties in a society cannot be satisfied at the same time. Moreover, as it is discussed in the previous section, Hume assumes that individuals' self-love dominates their feelings of altruism towards others. Therefore, Hume contends that the conflict of desires consequently ends up with the conflict of individuals' actions, which destroys the stability of social life.

Hume's other contention is that human avidity cannot be eliminated because no other "affection of the human mind has both a sufficient force, and a proper direction to counter-balance the love of gain" (*Ibid.*, 492). Since it is assumed that avidity is too strong to be balanced by other psychological propensities, Hume's proposed solution to control avidity is to change its direction (*Ibid.*, 492):

The appropriate system of property, then incorporates, and neutralizes avidity by redirecting it towards long-term future gains. The intense desire of immediate gain (which will be insecure) is forestalled by a system of property allowing for eventual, secure gains in a context where, as Hume eventually argues, all property is owned by some individual" (Panichas 2012, 234).

A property system can maintain a stable social life and conditions of cooperation only if the system enables people to act out of avidity within the established property rules. Since a decently functioning social life is the ultimate concern in Hume's theory of property, a property system should be able to control and redirect avidity *in a peaceful manner* to be justified. I will call this requirement *the avidity condition*. Let me clarify the redirection of avidity more concretely. In the system of private property, individuals are allowed to accumulate huge amounts of wealth since there is no limit on individuals' right to own what they produce or trade. Although their avidity makes them tend to appropriate other individuals' possessions without the possessors' consent, they are better off by following the rules of private property and abstaining from taking others' possessions. The reason why they are better off with private property conventions is that individuals can satisfy their avidity more effectively under the rules of private property. If individuals do not comply with the rules of private property, then there would be no guarantee that they can preserve what they have in the long run. In the absence of property conventions, one can preserve what one has until someone else who is stronger emerges. Since avidity requires individuals to get more and more of what they like, *accumulation of wealth* is required for the satisfaction of avidity. Therefore, avidity can be followed more effectively if property conventions make it possible to enjoy a stable environment of possession and accumulation. Without private property conventions, accumulation of wealth, which is a requirement to effectively follow avidity, is under a significant threat because individuals' wealth can be seized by other individuals any time.

Even if it is explained why the system of private property is in coherence with human avidity, it should also be shown why other systems of property are not compatible with this alleged necessity of human nature. For this purpose, Panichas considers the "trusteeship system" as an alternative to private property. According to the trusteeship system, "individual possession or ownership of property is allowed only if the relevant individual has a need or use for the property at issue. There being no such need or use by an individual, the property at issue is assumed to be under community protection" (*Ibid.*, 232).

According to Panichas, given human avidity and moderate scarcity of material resources, the trusteeship system is not justifiable because it is not capable of redirecting avidity in a way where avidity becomes non-destructive (*Ibid.*, 234). In the system of private property, it is profitable for avaricious individuals to give up immediate short run gain of appropriating other's possessions because they can guarantee, by complying with the rules of private property, the stability of their wealth in the long run. However, in the trusteeship system, there is no such incentive for avaricious individuals to abstain from violating the rules of private property. Since the ownership of goods is conditioned by *actual or prospective need/use of individuals*, it is not possible to accumulate huge amounts of wealth. For instance, it is hard to justify the ownership of billions of dollars in one's bank account because it refers to neither one's use nor one's need regarding the financial asset at issue.



Strict limitations on the accumulation of wealth radically reduce the profitability of property rules because stability of possession is not really crucial for people who cannot enjoy growing amounts of wealth. Given that a person's needs or capacity to use resources are regular at a time, there is no point in strictly preferring stability of possession to the immediate gain of appropriating others' properties. In other words, since there is no overriding future gain that can be derived from the rules of property, the trusteeship system fails to redirect avidity and sustain itself in a stable manner. Individuals tend to violate the rules of property in the absence of long run incentives. Any property system, which fails to redirect avidity towards stability of possession, is vulnerable to destructive conflicts of avaricious individuals according to Hume. Therefore, Panichas concludes that the trusteeship system, and other systems of property except for private property, are not *justifiable* since they are not able to serve for obtaining a decent and stable social life.

It should be noted that there is a clear distinction between a need and an avaricious desire in Panichas' reconstruction of the Humean theory of property. Even though it may be possible for individuals to believe that they need things for which they have avaricious desires, what Panichas takes as a need is conditioned by either actual or prospective use. However, people can even "use" what they avariciously get. For example, a rich and avaricious person can use c-notes as toilet paper. To overcome this problem, since community protection over resources is ultimate in the trusteeship system, the appropriate criterion for use or need can be determined by the mutual recognition of the members of the community. Members of the community can discuss and select the appropriate criteria for what counts as a need. Given the moderate scarcity of goods, it is plausible to assume that the community members will refer to some impartial and modest standards such as public interest and mutually recognized decent life standards when they select the criteria for "appropriate" needs. In this sense, Panichas' claim that there is a gap between the satisfaction of the avidity condition and ownership which is conditioned by an actual or prospective need/use seems plausible. Since human avidity entails an insatiable desire to get more and more material resources, it is reasonable to expect that avaricious individuals tend to depart from mutually recognized needs in their desires. Hence, it is not possible to redirect avidity in the trusteeship system. Every time individuals try to get more and more, they are prevented by the trusteeship system since their insatiable desires can never be matched with a mutually recognized understanding of use or need.

### 3. Other Systems of Property and the Objects of Avidity

In this section, I argue that the avidity condition, if we accept that avidity is a human universal, is not capable of justifying the system of private property because other property systems can also redirect human avidity. I will base my claim on the idea that the object of human avidity can be something else other than material possessions. Since it is possible for individuals to effectively follow their avidity by desiring something else other than possessions, the system of private property is not a necessary solution to maintain stability of social life. In a society where the object of avidity is not material possessions, the trusteeship system or the system of common property are not inferior to the system of private property in redirecting avidity.

As I have already discussed in the first section, Hume believes that the only appropriate kind of good to be appropriated by other individuals is material possessions. Other individuals do not have access to "the internal satisfaction of our minds" (Hume 1978, 487). Similarly, "the external advantages of our body" are also not suitable to be seized by other individuals (*Ibid.*, 487). Hume concludes that only material possessions remain useful after being seized. Hume's definition of avidity is closely related to his account of three kinds of goods. Since the only possible kind of thing that can be acquired by human beings' love of gain is material possessions, avidity is immediately equated with insatiable desire for possessions. This narrow definition of avidity is justified by appealing to Hume's account of three kinds of goods. If it is demonstrated that there are other ways of having insatiable desires about things other than possessions, the narrow definition of avidity based on possessions cannot be a plausible description.



In order to show the possibility of non-material objects of avidity, let me first speculate on the motivation behind *avidity in the narrow sense*. Even if we accept that avidity is a human universal, it is reasonable to look for an intelligible motivation behind avidity. For instance, one can say that human beings have a natural disposition to have social interaction. Given this, further elaboration on this natural disposition also makes sense. One can argue that we are disposed to be in social interaction because formation of the self is only possible through socialization, given that there is no distinguished self in the absence of other individuals. Similarly, further elaboration on the motivational aspect of other natural dispositions, including avidity, can be quite feasible. Moreover, when one reflects on avidity, desiring a steadily increasing amount of material resources for the sake of itself does not make sense to many people, even if we all admit that avidity is a part of human nature. Hence, it seems quite plausible to scrutinize the possible motivations behind avidity. I will propose, although these are not exhaustive, three possible alternatives as a candidate for the motivation behind avidity.

Firstly, one can claim that insatiable desires for material resources are caused by *the pleasure that is derived from goods*. Since we derive pleasure by consuming or using material resources, and given that we always want more and more pleasure, it follows that we want more and more material resources. Moreover, there is a moderate scarcity of resources available. Therefore, one can argue that our strong desire to get more and more material resources takes the form of avidity, which makes us compete for resources at the expense of other individuals.

The problem of this explanation is that it overestimates the link between avidity and the pleasure which is directly derived from the use of resources. When avidity makes people accumulate huge amounts of wealth there are cases in which people do not really benefit from the accumulated wealth directly. Commonsensical understanding of pleasure, which is derived from goods, presupposes some standard way of using these goods. For instance, in this standard interpretation the pleasure of having a yacht is equated with the use of that yacht. However, it is not plausible to imagine that a person who has 100 yachts derives that sort of pleasure from what he has because he only uses one of them at a time. One can say that what a person derives from 100 yachts is a special kind of pleasure which is derived from the idea of having 100 yachts. However, this explanation is a circular one since it refers back to our avidity, the disposition to want more and more resources. Since avidity is defined as insatiable love of gain, the pleasure which is derived from the idea of having 100 yachts and the pleasure which is derived from effectively following avidity seem to be the same. This "special kind of pleasure" explanation implies avidity as the source of pleasure rather than explaining avidity by referring to the motivation behind it.

The second explanation may be that individuals tend to have insatiable desires for goods since they derive a special kind of pleasure from *the feeling of security*, which moves individuals away from the fears of poverty and scarcity. According to this explanation, since aversion to poverty is a very strong human propensity, individuals try to move away from poverty as much as possible. The most secure means of reducing the probability of future poverty is to accumulate as much wealth as possible. When individuals accumulate huge amounts of wealth, they are much less vulnerable to the risk of falling in poverty. For instance, a bankrupt billionaire is more likely to have decent life standards in absolute terms even after he loses the vast majority of his wealth. As a result, the second explanation holds that individuals develop avaricious desires for goods out of the special kind of pleasure which is derived from economic security.

However, the second explanation for the motivation behind avidity relies on a contingency rather than a necessity of human nature. If avidity is only a matter of security against the threat of poverty, then it is conditioned by contingent external circumstances. In this scenario, avidity is possible if people have a very intense fear of poverty. If there were abundance of resources, then individuals would not be avaricious since there would be no ground to feel the necessity of securing one's decent life standards. In this interpretation, it is not possible to define avidity as a human universal because a component of human nature should be stable regardless of the external conditions. On the other



hand, Hume's account of private property is based on the idea that avidity is a part of human nature. Therefore, the second explanation is not compatible with what Hume defines as avidity.

The final explanation is that avidity for wealth is a sign of *another universal desire* for "reputation, honours and advancement" (Rousseau 1754). Rousseau states that other means of distinction, such as nobility or personal merit, are reduced into wealth for two reasons. One of these reasons is that wealth can be "used to purchase every other distinction" (*Ibid.*). In other words, wealth can elevate a person's rank given that a society values being wealthy.

But what does it mean for here to be a universal desire for reputation or honours? To make this universal desire intelligible, I will refer to another notion from Rousseau's moral psychology: *amour-propre* (self-love). According to Rousseau, through the social interaction with other individuals, a person starts to have a desire to be distinguished with respect to others:

Remember that as soon as *amour-propre* has developed, the relative *I* is constantly in play, and the young man never observes others without returning to himself and comparing himself with them. The issue, then, is to know in what rank among his fellows he will put himself after having examined them (Rousseau 1979, 243).

However, the aspect of this distinction is not necessarily material wealth. Some commentators agree that a person's desire to be distinguished with respect to others refers to a sort of moral superiority (Kolodny 2010, 169-170). Kolodny defines *amour-propre* in the broadest sense: "a desire to have, and to be evaluated by others as having, a certain value in comparison with others" (*Ibid.*, 169).

My aim is not to go into the details of Rousseau's moral psychology. What I want to show is that it is reasonable to believe that there is a more generic desire, derived from individuals' self-love, which explains the motive behind *avidity in the narrow sense*. Avidity for material wealth for its own sake does not seem to be a plausible understanding of avidity. This is a rather empirical question whether the existence of individuals' avidity for material wealth depends on the importance of being wealthy in a specific culture. There have been primitive communities and modern societies like the Soviet Union which survived for long periods of time without the possibility of following avidity in the narrow sense. There is no reason to reject that there were alternative objects of avidity other than material wealth in these societies unless there is strong evidence against this hypothesis. If we accept that individuals have a strong desire to be valuable in comparison to others by interpreting avidity in a broad sense, it is quite plausible to believe that individuals act out of avidity in the narrow sense to be distinguished in the eyes of others. Keep in mind that, wealth is a sign of distinguished rank in the society in question. Based on these ideas, I propose to construct a stipulative use of avidity in a broader sense. I define *avidity in a broad sense* (ABS) as *intense and insatiable desires of individuals which stem from self-love*.

If it is assumed that, and I take it as a very modest and sensible assumption, self-love entails a strong desire to be respected and valued by other individuals in the community, ABS can take many different forms depending on the cultural context of the society. In a society where material wealth is a significant bargaining power that makes your rivals respect and fear you, individuals can adopt avidity in the narrow sense (love of gain for material wealth) as a dominant strategy to consolidate their reputation in the community. Avidity in the narrow sense is derived from ABS, intense and insatiable desire of an individual, which stems from self-love, because the ultimate motive is to maintain one's own reputation or status given the cultural codes of the community. Similarly, if wealth is perceived as a sign of high reputation for some other reason, there is an immediate reason for individuals to be motivated by love of material gain.

Avidity in the narrow sense is not a human universal because it depends on a contingency of human societies; the cultural context in which material wealth is appreciated as a sign of high status is by no means a necessity of human nature. As it is mentioned above, throughout history there have been societies where property was collective and material wealth was not the sign of reputation. On the other hand, I do not claim that avidity in a broad sense was dissolved in these societies. Consider the



example of the Soviet Union. It would be naive to hold that human avidity was dissolved under the ideological commitments of socialism, at least within this period of 69 years. However, the Soviet system had been very stable for more than 60 years although their socio-economic system was not based on private property. Hume's contention that other property systems fail to redirect avidity seems to be wrong. Of course, one can argue that Hume's hypothesis was verified because the Soviet system collapsed in the end. But, keep in mind that Hume's description of avidity for material wealth is so intense that it is unlikely for a social order to survive for a long period of time. Moreover, there is no indisputable empirical evidence showing that the collapse of the Soviet system was because of its opposition to human avidity in the narrow sense.

Another objection may state that the stability of the soviet social system depended on suppression of political opponents. Hence, it does not count as the appropriate kind of stable social life as Hume has in his mind. I believe that other normative aspects like freedom and democracy from which we evaluate social systems are not directly relevant to the problem of stable social life. Hume's emphasis on stable social life fundamentally focuses on the question of whether a system manages to survive or not despite of individuals' avidity. It is clear that the Soviet system passed this kind of test of stable social life. Moreover, there is no evidence that Hume has other normative commitments, which are prior to the requirement of stability, to evaluate social systems.

If one adopts ABS as the plausible interpretation of avidity, one can easily show *alternative objects of avidity* in the systems of non-private property. Political power is one of those objects. In a society, e.g. the Soviet system, where the governmental system is centralized and ideological commitments are crucial in the regulation of social coordination problems, holding political offices may be a substitute for owning material wealth. In these kinds of societies, it is likely that the political status of individuals is the ultimate sign of high status in the community. Assuming that ABS is a human universal, individuals are likely to have very intense and insatiable desires to get more and more political influence in these kinds of societies. Although intense and insatiable desires that are derived from self-love are observed in both the systems of private property and the systems of non-private property, the objects of avidity in two systems are completely different from each other. Hence, in a society where political power is appraised, as long as it is possible for individuals to advance in rank by increasing political power and influence, individuals may act out of their avidity.

One can raise an objection by claiming that there is an upper boundary for political power whereas avidity is supposed to be infinite in principal. For instance, one may argue that once a dictator has full totalitarian control over a society, his political power reaches a level of saturation because obtaining more political power is not possible. I respond to this objection in the following way: if avidity is a human universal, it should be accepted that not only a dictator but also other individuals have insatiable desire for political power. Following that, even a dictator with the full control of the country should always preserve his power against the possible opponents who may eventually overthrow him. This requirement makes the dictator act out of his avidity all the time since he has to take actions to constantly reproduce the conditions of his political power. Therefore, even a dictator can never achieve a full saturation of political power, if other individuals have a strong desire for political power as well.

Since avidity may have objects, e.g. political power, other than material wealth, the system of private property is not the unique social setting where individuals can effectively follow their avidity. Moreover, if something other than material wealth is esteemed in a society, the property system can even be irrelevant to the feeling of avidity. A non-private property system is fully justified, according to the avidity condition, if it allows individuals to act out of their avidity within the rules of the relevant property system. As long as the object of avidity is something else other than material wealth, individuals can always effectively follow their avidity without appealing to the accumulation of wealth, which is possible only under the rules of private property.



#### 4. A Possible Objection

Another objection to my position is that other objects of avidity are not as *peaceful* as avidity for material wealth in regulating social life. For instance, if a culture defines political power as the appropriate object of avidity, then that society at issue would suffer from the severe conflicts among the individuals who all seek power. Once some individuals attain political power, they would use the police force to suppress their opponents. Unlike material wealth, political power provides its owners with specific tools to suppress others. In such cases, the society would collapse into a perpetual and violent power struggle among different parties. The objector can further anticipate that only societies whose object of avidity is material wealth can eventually survive because only that sort of avidity can be *peacefully* redirected. Since the ultimate concern of Humean political philosophy is to maintain the conditions of stable social life, other systems of property, which redirect avidity through avidity for political power or something else, would be unjustified. In other words, it is not possible to prevent other forms of avidity from leading to destructive conflicts within a society.

My response to this objection will be in two steps. First, every form of avidity may be destructive including avidity for material wealth if *the appropriate measures* are not taken. I believe that Hume's claim that avidity for material wealth can be peacefully redirected within the rules of private property has some controversial components. From the history of capitalism, it can be inferred that the system of private property needs some additional institutional arrangements to maintain its stability. Advanced capitalist countries, where people can effectively follow their avidity under the secure system of private property, face serious social challenges such as rising inequality, deindustrialization, deunionization of the working class and even privatization of the education system in some countries. Each of these topics altered the distribution of privileges in many Western societies. Moreover, all of these social changes are related to the search for efficiency and profitability in economic life, which cannot be isolated from people's avidity for wealth. If we take the demands of fair distribution of wealth as one of the most important motivation of social movements into consideration, avidity for material wealth stimulate serious social problems that have destabilizing impacts on advanced capitalist societies. 20<sup>th</sup> century working class movements and the new social movements, which have recently risen as a result of the discontent with post-80s era of neo-liberalization, are the historical examples of social destabilization within the rules of private property. Increasing economic inequalities, which are fostered from the love of corporate profits, are one of the most central source of discontent in the contemporary world. It is difficult to deny the destabilizing effects of these social problems in the private property societies.

The fact that people are enabled to effectively follow their avidity without violating the rules of property does not entail that social life will necessarily be stable. On the contrary, the concentration of wealth into few hands, which usually arises as a result of avidity-driven economic systems, leads to aforementioned social problems. One of the reasons behind these problems is that other individuals, who are relatively excluded from accumulation of wealth, have an obstacle to reach more material resources. Relatively poor individuals have diminishing bargaining power and competitiveness against the richest ones as wealth is concentrated. Even if there is no egalitarian element in Hume's theory of property, the fact that the discontent with rising inequality destabilizes social life is an important concern through Hume's own evaluative standards. The system of private property *per se* is not capable of redirecting avidity for material resources in a peaceful manner. *The additional institutional and distributive measures* such as welfare policies and promotion of equality of opportunity play a key role in maintaining social stability in many societies where the system of private property is established.

If it is acceptable that the system of private property requires additional arrangements to maintain social stability, why should we not also accept that other systems of property can take measures regarding the other objects of avidity? I believe that other objects of avidity can also be peacefully redirected, given that appropriate measures are taken. If the system of private property needs similar arrangements to remain stable, then it does not have superiority to other property systems that can also function in coherence with a decent social life.



As a second step, let me further explicate the possible arrangements that are likely to reduce the destructive impacts of avidity for political power. If political power is the object of avidity in a society, individuals may converge on *mutually advantageous conventions* that specify the legitimate ways of seeking power. These kinds of conventions are not against the spirit of the Humean political philosophy. I merely apply what Hume suggests about avidity for wealth to a different context. Hume suggests that individuals converge on private property conventions out of self-interest because they realize that social stability makes them better off in their search of more and more gain of wealth. Similarly, if the object of avidity is political power, individuals can also converge on some regulatory conventions out of self-interest. If Hume's chain of reasoning is replicated, it would be plausible to believe that individuals are better off in their search of more and more political power given that there are non-arbitrary regulations in the political system. Conventions that guarantee a stable social life can be profitable even for the most powerful political figures in a society because they can be overthrown by other individuals who unite their power by coalition-formation. Through conventions, every player can more easily produce his strategies since he can anticipate which permissible actions can be taken by his opponents. Moreover, although a ruler may be strong enough to stay in power, he may not be strong enough to end disastrous conflicts within a society, which are costly for everyone. Another mutual advantage is that the cost of losing political power struggles can be much less thanks to regulatory conventions. Otherwise, losers can even lose their lives. Therefore, it is quite plausible to hold that regulations that force avidity for political power to stay within the boundaries of non-destructive competition are mutually beneficial to all parties of a society.

The specification of these conventions may change according to the cultural-historical features of the society at issue. What people find acceptable as the appropriate ways of gaining political influence may depend on the specific context of the society at issue. Members of a society may converge on meritocratic conventions which allow individuals to occupy political offices only if they have successful examination records. Individuals would try to get more political influence by studying hard for governmental exams in such a society. Another possibility is that members of a society may converge on democratic conventions that allow individuals to occupy political offices through free elections. In a democratic society, individuals are more likely to satisfy their avidity for political power by improving their rhetorical skills, public image shaping or other such measures to increase their popularity. In any of these scenarios, once the conventions are established, the destructive nature of avidity for political power can be radically diminished. Of course, there are always some individuals who are disadvantaged within these conventions. For instance, individuals who are shy and incapable of making public speeches would have great difficulty to act out of their avidity for political power. However, existence of such disadvantaged individuals is also a problem for avidity for material wealth under the rules of private property. Not every individual has the same level of productivity and business awareness in a society. In satisfying the intense desires for wealth, some individuals are also radically disadvantaged under the system of private property. Therefore, I do not consider these cases as a serious problem for the justification of other property systems.

Consequently, I believe that avidity for other things can be peacefully redirected as avidity for wealth is redirected. Every object of avidity may require special sorts of arrangements in a society so that its destructive nature can be inhibited. Avidity for wealth is no exception in this sense. Therefore, the system of private property has no justificatory superiority to other systems of property which praise other objects of avidity such as political power.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, my claim is that the appeal to avidity as a human universal is not adequate to justify the system of private property as opposed to other alternative systems of property. First of all, if avidity is defined in the narrow sense, only for wealth, it is not plausible to believe that it is a part of human nature. I proposed to define avidity in a broad sense as *intense and insatiable desires of individuals which stem from self-love*. In my stipulative use of the concept, there are other possible objects of avidity depending on what a society culturally acclaims as a sign of reputation. Since there are other possible objects of avidity, the system of private property is not a unique solution to redirect avidity in



a peaceful manner. In societies where material wealth is evaluated as irrelevant to the value of individuals, avidity should be redirected in other ways according to relevant object of avidity. Moreover, I argued that following avidity for material wealth is not more peaceful than other sorts of avidity. All kinds of avidity requires some additional conventions to curb their destructive impacts. The system of private property also needs redistributive measures to maintain social stability against the threats stemming from the extreme concentration of wealth into a few hands.

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