



# Virtue Harvesting and Virtue Reclamation: Admiration-Based Projection as a Complementary Signal to Shadow-Oriented Analysis

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

This paper proposes virtue harvesting as a conceptual framework for understanding admiration-based projection and proximity-seeking. Building from Jungian accounts of the shadow, projection, and the unconscious personality, the paper argues that aversion is not the only emotionally charged signal through which unintegrated psychic material may appear. Admiration, fascination, idealization, and attraction may also reveal unrealized or underdeveloped aspects of the self. Virtue harvesting is defined as the unconscious pursuit of proximity to a person, figure, group, or archetype perceived to embody a valued trait, capacity, or mode of being that the observer has not yet integrated. The paper distinguishes virtue harvesting from virtue reclamation, a proposed reflective practice through which the observer identifies the projected trait, separates it from its external carrier, and translates admiration into deliberate self-cultivation. This framework is positioned as a theoretical and reflective model rather than a clinical diagnosis or therapeutic method. It draws connections to Jungian shadow theory, psychological projection, idealization, parasocial attachment, and self-expansion theory, while emphasizing the need for empirical refinement and interdisciplinary critique.

**Keywords:** projection, shadow work, admiration, idealization, virtue harvesting, virtue reclamation, self-expansion, parasocial attachment, Jungian psychology, identity formation.

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## 1. Introduction

Human beings orient themselves toward others through affectively charged patterns of attraction and aversion. Some people evoke disproportionate irritation, disgust, fear, contempt, or judgment. Others evoke fascination, admiration, longing, loyalty, reverence, envy, or attachment. Psychological and spiritual traditions influenced by Jungian

thought have often focused on the first category: the aversion signal. Shadow work, broadly understood, asks whether intense rejection of another person or trait may reveal something disowned, repressed, or insufficiently integrated within the observer.

This paper proposes that admiration may function as an equally important signal. If aversion can reveal what the self refuses to



recognize, admiration may reveal what the self has not yet permitted, developed, or embodied. The person who fascinates us may not merely be impressive. They may be carrying, symbolically or relationally, a trait we experience as missing in ourselves.

The proposed construct is called virtue harvesting. The term refers not to a deliberate practice of self-improvement, but to an unconscious orientation pattern: the pursuit of proximity to perceived excellence. In virtue harvesting, the individual becomes drawn toward a person, figure, group, or archetype because that external object appears to embody a valued trait. The admired other becomes a virtue carrier. The observer may then confuse proximity to the carrier with possession or development of the trait.

The corrective counterpart proposed here is virtue reclamation. Virtue reclamation is the conscious reflective process of identifying the admired trait, separating it from the external carrier, and cultivating the trait internally. This distinction is central: virtue harvesting names the unconscious pattern; virtue reclamation names the reflective counter-practice.

This paper does not claim that virtue harvesting is a formally validated clinical construct. It does not propose a diagnosis, treatment model, or replacement for existing theories of attachment, trauma bonding, idealization, projection, or parasociality. Rather, it offers a conceptual framework intended to make a recognizable psychological pattern easier to name, examine, and refine.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Shadow, Projection, and Aversion

In Jungian psychology, the shadow is commonly understood as the unconscious or insufficiently recognized portion of the personality that the ego does not readily accept. Jungian sources describe the shadow as that which ego-consciousness does not know about itself, including rejected, undeveloped, morally troubling, instinctual, or otherwise unassimilated aspects of the personality. The shadow is not merely “evil”; it may contain vitality, creativity, instinct, and

unrealized potential as well as destructive tendencies (Jung, 1951/1969; Jung, 1959/1969).

Shadow work, in popular and applied contexts, often begins with aversion. A strong reaction to another person may be treated as psychologically meaningful. The claim is not that every criticism is projection. Some criticisms are accurate, and some behaviors deserve condemnation. Rather, the signal becomes important when the emotional reaction is disproportionate, repetitive, unusually personal, or difficult to explain by the external facts alone.

Projection is a broader mechanism than shadow projection alone. In psychological usage, projection involves attributing one’s own characteristics, feelings, impulses, or attitudes to another person. Importantly, projection is not limited to negative material. Positive traits, desires, ideals, and capacities may also be externalized. This broader understanding allows for a complementary inquiry: if people can project disowned negative material onto others, they may also project unrealized positive material onto others.

### 2.2 Admiration as an Underexamined Signal

Admiration does not usually announce itself as a problem. Aversion disturbs the individual and often demands explanation. Admiration, by contrast, feels rewarding. Because it is experienced as positive, it may bypass reflection. A person who is irritated may ask, “Why did that bother me?” A person who is fascinated may simply move closer.

This asymmetry is especially relevant for individuals whose lives have involved deprivation, instability, disappointment, or prolonged emotional scarcity. When something finally feels good, alive, meaningful, or powerful, the impulse may be to preserve the experience rather than examine it. The positive affective charge may therefore conceal a dependency structure.

This paper proposes that admiration should be treated as a signal, not merely an endorsement. Admiration may indicate genuine respect, love, inspiration, or aesthetic appreciation. But it may

also indicate the presence of an unrealized self-capacity located symbolically in another person.

### 3. Defining Virtue Harvesting

Virtue harvesting is the unconscious process by which an individual seeks emotional, relational, social, ideological, or symbolic proximity to a person, figure, group, or archetype perceived to embody a valued trait the individual has not yet integrated within themselves.

The word virtue is used here in a broad sense. It does not refer only to moral goodness. It refers to perceived excellence, capacity, power, or desirable being. A virtue may be ethical, social, intellectual, aesthetic, erotic, emotional, spiritual, physical, or strategic.

Examples of projected virtues include confidence, charisma, courage, sensuality, social ease, intellectual authority, discipline, command presence, artistic freedom, beauty, emotional control, spiritual certainty, danger, elegance, ruthlessness, moral conviction, and capacity for refusal.

The admired person or figure is not necessarily virtuous in total. A person may carry a perceived virtue while also being harmful, immature, dishonest, unstable, narcissistic, exploitative, or morally compromised. This distinction is essential. Virtue harvesting is concerned with perceived traits, not total moral evaluation.

*The observer becomes drawn to the carrier because the carrier appears to possess a trait the observer has not yet developed, permitted, or embodied.*

### 4. The Virtue Carrier and Carrier-Trait Fusion

Virtue harvesting involves two primary components: (1) the projected virtue - the admired trait, capacity, or mode of being; and (2) the virtue carrier - the person, figure, group, object, or archetype perceived to embody the trait.

The central distortion in virtue harvesting is carrier-trait fusion: the confusion of the admired trait with the person or figure carrying it.

When carrier-trait fusion occurs, the external figure becomes more than a person. The carrier becomes a symbolic access point to the desired trait. The unconscious logic becomes: "I must remain close to this person because they have the thing I lack."

This fusion can generate dependency. The observer may tolerate incompatibility, mistreatment, humiliation, exploitation, ideological distortion, or self-erasure because proximity to the carrier feels like proximity to the projected virtue. Being near the confident person feels like confidence. Being selected by the powerful person feels like power. Being associated with the charismatic person feels like charisma. Being loved by the free person feels like freedom.

The psychological error is that proximity is mistaken for integration. The individual experiences nearness to the carrier as if it were development of the trait.

*Virtue harvesting mistakes nearness to a virtue carrier for cultivation of the virtue itself.*

## 5. Relationship to Existing Psychological Constructs

### 5.1 Projection

Projection provides the broadest theoretical foundation. In virtue harvesting, the projected content is not primarily rejected material but idealized, desired, or underdeveloped material. The external figure becomes the apparent location of a psychic possibility the observer has not integrated.

### 5.2 Idealization

Idealization research is relevant because virtue harvesting often involves inflated or selective perception. In close relationships, idealization can have both adaptive and maladaptive effects. Positive illusions may contribute to satisfaction and stability in some relationships, but they may also distort judgment if the idealized perception prevents accurate evaluation of the other person (Murray et al., 1996). Virtue harvesting specifically concerns the idealization of traits

that the observer experiences as missing or underdeveloped within the self.

### 5.3 Self-Expansion Theory

Self-expansion theory proposes that individuals are motivated to expand the self and may do so through close relationships, incorporating aspects of another person's resources, identities, and perspectives into the self-concept (Aron et al., 1992; Aron et al., 2004). Virtue harvesting differs in emphasis: it focuses on the unconscious pursuit of proximity to a perceived trait and the risk of confusing association with embodiment. However, self-expansion theory provides a useful adjacent framework for understanding why individuals may seek growth through relational closeness.

### 5.4 Parasocial Attachment and Celebrity Worship

Parasocial interaction refers to one-sided intimacy with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Celebrity worship research further shows that admiration for public figures can range from ordinary entertainment interest to intense-personal attachment or borderline-pathological preoccupation (McCutcheon et al., 2002; Sansone & Sansone, 2014). Virtue harvesting may help interpret one dimension of this phenomenon: the celebrity may operate as a virtue carrier, embodying beauty, freedom, status, visibility, talent, charisma, rebellion, or social power.

### 5.5 Attachment, Dependency, and Harmful Relationships

Virtue harvesting is not a replacement for attachment theory, coercive control research, trauma bonding, or accounts of abusive relational dynamics. However, it may help describe one layer of certain harmful attachments: the individual may remain near a harmful person not only because of fear, manipulation, dependency, or hope, but also because the person appears to carry an admired trait the individual feels unable to access independently.

### 6. Fictional Illustration: Gaston as Communal Virtue Carrier

Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast* provides a useful fictional illustration of virtue harvesting. The villagers do not admire Gaston because he is wise, kind, emotionally mature, or morally admirable. He is arrogant, possessive, coercive, and shallow. Yet he carries traits the village interprets as valuable: strength, confidence, certainty, masculine dominance, public status, and social belonging.

To the villagers, Gaston functions as a communal virtue carrier. He embodies the fantasy of being powerful without hesitation, admired without self-doubt, and socially central without introspection. The village's admiration is therefore not necessarily an endorsement of his character. It is an attraction to what he appears to represent.

Belle's difference lies partly in her ability to separate carrier from trait. She can perceive Gaston's confidence without mistaking it for wisdom. She can recognize his strength without interpreting it as goodness. The village, by contrast, fuses the trait with the carrier. Strength becomes Gaston. Confidence becomes Gaston. Masculinity becomes Gaston. Leadership becomes Gaston.

Once this fusion occurs, criticism of Gaston feels like criticism of the traits he carries. Rejecting Gaston appears to threaten the village's relationship to strength, certainty, and order. This illustrates the social danger of virtue harvesting: communities may defend a harmful carrier because they are not merely defending a person, but defending symbolic access to a trait they collectively value.

### 7. Destructive Admiration and Fan Obsession

Extreme cases of obsessive fandom must be discussed cautiously. Violence cannot be reduced to a single conceptual mechanism. Stalking, delusion, entitlement, access, isolation, grievance, mental illness, and social context may all be involved. Virtue harvesting is not a complete explanation for fan violence.

Nevertheless, cases of celebrity stalking and obsessive violence illustrate how admiration can

become possessive when the admired figure is transformed from a person into a symbolic object. In such cases, the celebrity may become a carrier of beauty, meaning, belonging, identity, visibility, or idealized life. The admirer's relationship to the celebrity may become organized around access to those symbolic traits. When access is denied or threatened, the obsessive admirer may experience the loss not merely as disappointment, but as annihilation or humiliation.

This dynamic is an extreme form of carrier-trait fusion. The admired person ceases to be experienced as autonomous. They become a source, mirror, shrine, or psychic necessity. At that point, admiration has decayed into possession.

### **8. Virtue Harvesting in Everyday Life**

Most virtue harvesting is not extreme. It is ordinary and often socially acceptable.

It may appear in romantic relationships when one partner is drawn to another's confidence, danger, erotic power, social status, discipline, or apparent freedom. It may appear in mentor relationships when a student becomes attached to a teacher's authority, brilliance, clarity, or permission to think boldly. It may appear in fandom when a celebrity or fictional character becomes a symbolic carrier of beauty, rebellion, wealth, genius, emotional invulnerability, or self-permission. It may appear in ideological movements when a leader embodies certainty, historical significance, belonging, or command.

In each case, the key question is not merely whether admiration is present. Admiration is normal and often healthy. The key question is whether the observer is using proximity as a substitute for development.

Does the individual become more capable through the relationship, or merely more dependent on the carrier? Does admiration

produce practice, or only orbit? Does the person internalize the trait, or defend the carrier at the cost of discernment?

### **9. Virtue Reclamation as Reflective Counter-Practice**

If virtue harvesting is the unconscious pattern, the corrective process may be called virtue reclamation.

Virtue reclamation is not presented here as clinical treatment. It is a reflective practice through which an individual examines admiration as a possible signal of unrealized self-capacity. The goal is not to pathologize admiration but to make it conscious.

A preliminary virtue reclamation sequence may include recognition, trait specification, carrier separation, reality testing, self-relevance, behavioral translation, and independence. The individual identifies the figure that produces strong admiration, names the trait perceived in that figure, distinguishes the trait from the carrier, tests whether the trait is real or projected, asks what relationship they have to the trait, translates the trait into small repeatable behaviors, and reduces dependency on the carrier as the trait is cultivated internally.

The most direct reflective question may be: "Would I still want this person near me if I already possessed the trait I believe they carry?"

This question does not require rejection of the admired person. It asks whether the relationship is grounded in mutuality or in unconscious dependence on the carrier's symbolic function.

### **10. Dual Orientation Model: Shadow Work and Virtue Reclamation**

Shadow work and virtue reclamation can be understood as complementary responses to two unconscious orientation patterns.

Dimension	Shadow-Oriented Pattern	Virtue-Oriented Pattern
Unconscious process	Shadow projection	Virtue harvesting
Emotional signal	Aversion, disgust, judgment, fear	Admiration, fascination, attraction, longing
Psychic error	“That is only them, not me.”	“Being near them means I have it too.”
External figure becomes	Bearer of rejected traits	Carrier of unrealized traits
Risk	Denial, scapegoating, repression	Dependency, idealization, self-erasure
Corrective practice	Shadow work	Virtue reclamation
Mature outcome	Integration of rejected material	Internalization of unrealized capacity

This dual model suggests that the self may be revealed through both aversion and admiration. What the individual cannot stand may indicate disowned material. What the individual cannot stop admiring may indicate unrealized material.

### 11. Limitations

Several limitations must be emphasized.

First, virtue harvesting is proposed as a conceptual framework, not an empirically validated construct. It requires further theoretical development, comparison with existing literature, and possible operationalization.

Second, the framework should not be used to dismiss the reality of abuse, coercion, manipulation, trauma bonding, social dependency, or material constraint. A person may remain in a harmful relationship for many reasons unrelated to virtue harvesting.

Third, admiration is not inherently pathological. Healthy admiration, mentorship, love, inspiration, and identification are important parts of human development. The framework concerns admiration that becomes unconscious dependency or proximity-seeking without internalization.

Fourth, the language of “virtue” may require refinement. Because virtue has moral,

theological, and philosophical associations, readers may misunderstand the term as implying total moral goodness. In this framework, virtue means perceived excellence or desired capacity.

Fifth, the model must be distinguished from established clinical terminology. It should not be presented as a diagnosis or treatment method without empirical support.

### 12. Future Directions

Future work could refine the framework in several ways.

First, virtue harvesting could be compared more rigorously with Jungian accounts of projection, anima/animus projection, idealization, and individuation.

Second, the construct could be examined alongside self-expansion theory to distinguish healthy relational growth from dependency on a virtue carrier.

Third, researchers could explore whether virtue harvesting appears in patterns of celebrity worship, mentor idealization, cultic attachment, romantic dependency, or ideological leader loyalty.

Fourth, the framework could be operationalized through qualitative research. Participants might be asked to identify admired figures, specify

perceived traits, describe proximity-seeking behaviors, and evaluate whether admiration led to self-development or dependency.

Fifth, virtue reclamation could be developed as a non-clinical reflective exercise, with careful boundaries around trauma, abuse, stalking, and mental health crises.

### 13. Conclusion

Virtue harvesting names an unconscious pattern in which individuals pursue proximity to people, figures, groups, or archetypes perceived to embody traits they have not yet integrated within themselves. It is organized not around aversion but admiration. It is not inherently pathological, but it can become distorting when the observer confuses the admired trait with the external carrier.

The proposed corrective practice, virtue reclamation, invites the observer to identify the admired trait, separate it from the carrier, and cultivate it directly. In this sense, admiration becomes a map rather than a dependency.

Shadow work suggests that the self may be hidden in what it rejects. Virtue harvesting suggests that the self may also be hidden in what it worships.

The central question is therefore not only: “Why do I hate this so much?” but also: “What part of myself have I placed inside what I admire?”

Sometimes we do not admire people because they are good for us. Sometimes we admire them because they are carrying a version of us we have not become yet.

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