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INEQUALITY, DOMINATION AND MORAL DISCIPLINING:

An Essay on the Naturalism Behind Adam Smith's Politics for Commercial Societies

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EPIGRAPH

But scarce observ'd the knowing and the Bold,
Fall in the gen'ral Massacre of Gold;
Wide-wasting Pest! that rages unconfin'd,
And crouds with Crimes the Record of Mankind,
For Gold his Sword the Hireling Ruffian draws,
For Gold the hireling Judge distorts the Laws;
Wealth heap'd on Wealth, nor Truth nor Safety buys,
The Dangers gather as the Treasures rise.

Samuel Johnson, The Vanity of Human Wishes[1]

One of the most prominent and expressive characteristics of our people is their sense of merit and their thirst for justice. ... Our know-it-alls cannot teach them much. On the contrary, I believe that, generally speaking, it is the learned gentlemen who should learn from the people.

Fiódor Dostoevsky, Memoirs from the House of the Dead[2]

[1] Johnson, S. 1749, *The Vanity of Human Wishes: the tenth satire of Juvenal*, London, Printed for R. Dodsley at Tully's Head in Pall-Mall and sold by M. Cooper in Pater-noster Row.
[2] Dostoevsky, F. 2015 [1860], *Recordações da Casa dos Mortos*, São Paulo, Nova Alexandria, 165.

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My journey through economics was marked by initial scepticism and self-doubt. The pressures to pursue a conventional career in finance and the uncertainty of academia weighed heavily on me; but I needed to be sure that I would be doing more good than harm in my profession. I was inspired, then and now, by Dostoevsky, who was certain that "tyranny" is a "habit" one may learn even in the most trivial hierarchies of daily economic life. "Every industrialist, every entrepreneur, he noticed, feels a dose of pleasure from the fact that his workers and their respective families depend solely on him."[3] My work is the fruit of a daily engagement with the consequences of our choices amidst varying labour relations, ways of living, modes of community-building, and inequality.

It was the unwavering support of my parents, Flavio and Ana, that provided the foundation I needed to embark on this academic path. Their belief in me and their sacrifices have been invaluable. I pledge to honour them every single day.

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[3] Dostoevsky, 2015, 209.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ALW: Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith.

CAS: Correspondence of Adam Smith.

CCFFL: Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages.

EPS: Essays on Philosophical Subjects

HA: The History of Astronomy.

IA: Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes place in what are called The Imitative Arts.

LER: A Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review.

LJA: Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms (Lectures on Jurisprudence), Report of 1762-1763.

LJB: Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms (Lectures on Jurisprudence), Report of 1766.

LRBL: Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres.

TMS: The Theory of Moral Sentiments.

WN: An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations.

SUMMARY

This thesis challenges the enduring notion that Adam Smith did not produce a Political Philosophy. Uncovering Smith's understanding of *moral principles*, I use them to weave threads between his economic thought and a consistent and modern political vision that informs it. The role of moral virtues in his economic thought has often been either overlooked as moralist mannerisms or as a naivety, a blind hope on the spontaneous conversion of economic development into moral progress. By examining his published works, letters, lectures, and essays, I seek to understand, first, his conception of human nature, then his political objectives, and finally re-explain the underlying moral philosophy that guided his proposals for economic and political reforms.

The thesis contends that Smith's primary goal was to establish a just and equitable society through the "perfect and impartial administration of Justice" where the opportunities for personal modes of domination was minimized. His belief in the importance of "security" and "independence" for humans' *natural* flourishing led him to advocate for changes that would restrain the domination of the wealthy over the poor. Understanding Smith's naturalist paradigm – which emphasizes the role of "natural virtues" as *the driving force behind* development and not its obvious consequence – explains the heavy morally disciplining character of his propositions. I hope to shed new light on the coherence between certain modes of virtue ethics with Political Liberalism, inspired by recent debates against their association.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adam Smith is commonly excluded from the canons of the History of Political Thought.[4] The reason generally acknowledged is that none of his published works dealt specifically with Political Philosophy.[5] Studies of his work, in most parts of the world, are restricted to economics departments. But anyone who thinks that only the economic side of his theses kept receiving attention is mistaken. 'Smith's bastards' have continuously carried their supposed forefather into politics; against them, the infamous "invisible hand" was continually treated as a scarecrow that prevented an accurate understanding of Smith's ideas. My previous work was dedicated to sowing seeds of scepticism against what those either on the left or right took to be his economic-political principles.[6] To this day, it is my intuition that economists have become the *de facto* sovereigns of modern politics – as they define what is possible and how to think about our collective choices – that leads me to keep revisiting the WN.

The path towards solidifying the scientific claims of economics brought with it a proleptic and anachronistic habit of rewriting Smith.[7] In this work, I follow a long trend of scholarship that re-evaluates Smith's ideas against traditional views. I prefer, however, to concentrate on an internal textual analysis of his work rather than presenting a broad literature review, which I gathered both in my last thesis, and in three papers for future publication. An extensive engagement with his thought was hereby promoted, exploring not only his published books, but also his letters, lectures and essays.

[4] In the 41 entries of the newly published Research Handbook of the History of Political Thought, not a single one was dedicated to his ideas. See Nederman & Bogiaris, 2024.
[5] Winch, 1978; Hont, 2009.
[6] Bruno, 2022. See also Dunn, 1990.
[7] See Winch 2016.

First, I aimed to explain what he believed to be the principles of human nature, and secondly, how they informed his understanding of economic behaviour and his political vision. This allowed me to provide a fresh account of how his moral theory is interwoven into his calls for reforms in England based on an essentially political objective of limiting the co-optation of the rule of law in modern commercial societies by the richest. Smith's attempt, I argue, was to end the translation of inequality into domination that he saw as part of the daily life of most polities on the planet.

The approach was chosen to address the puzzling sense of disorientation that a person from the 21st century might experience when confronted with the nebulous role that moral virtues play in his economic reasoning. As virtues are frequently cited as the desired outcomes of proposed changes in labour markets, tax systems, public spending, and broader economic policies, it seems that dwelling on this detail is of utmost importance.[8] The disciplinary tone of many of his policy-proposals is surprising for anyone familiar with non-interventionist liberal theory and its constant emphasis on 'negative freedom' and the illegitimacy of any imposition of ends to individuals' own harmless choices and personal sets of values.[9]

This thesis can also be seen as an attempt to address this apparent incoherence. I argue that Smith had a thoroughly political project in mind, grounded on the spread of "security" by the "equal and impartial administration of Justice,"[10] and "liberty" understood as "independence" or non-domination.[11] This is revealed by his nuanced, complex and historically situated position regarding socioeconomic inequality. As he saw

[8] For example, "industry," "diligence," "prudence," "judiciousness," "frugality" and other virtues are stated to be expected as a result of his reform proposals. You can check it in the comprehensive list of references that follows: WN, I.v.21; I.v.37; I.viii.44-48; I.viii.45; I.x.b.20; I.x.e.14; II.ii.33-36; II.ii.94; III.ii.4; III.ii.5; IV.ii.4-7; IV.ii.24; IV.v.a.8; IV.v.a.39; IV.vii.c.9;43; V.i.b.20-21; V.i.c.13; V.i.d.3; V.i.d.8; V.i.d.9; V.i.e.5; V.i.e.40; V.i.f.3; V.i.f.56; V.ii.b.4; V.ii.b.6; V.ii.c.12-13;15;18; V.ii.e.7;9; V.ii.i.2; ; V.ii.k.7; V.ii.k.63;66; V.iii.54; LJA, ii.31;39; TMS, VI.iii.13.
[9] Skinner, 2003, 238.
[10] WN, IV.vii.c.54.
[11] WN, III f.iii.5.

it, the consequences of inequality vary with different available modes of subsistence, established institutions, and labour relations. He was able to arrive at this dynamic perspective through a very particular epistemology dedicated to the study of what he calls the "irresistible moral causes"[12] behind human choices, grounded on what I call the 'naturalist paradigm' that sees the "progress of opulence"[13] as relying on, instead of producing, "natural virtues" accessible to ordinary people.

This task will require a return to Smith's TMS. Chapter 2 describes what I mean by a 'naturalist paradigm' and traces its presence in the WN. To see what Smith understands by "virtues" we must first start by his moral epistemology: how can anyone *know* right from wrong? Smith's systematic account relies on a contextualist and procedural, rather than deductive, reasoning. As we shall see, Smith provides a theory of social order interrelated with a theory of judgement, seeing moral self-disciplining and the capacity for good reasoning as intimately tied. From this point on, we shall address how he accounts for the 'natural ends' of our passions, what conditions in people's circumstances must be present to encourage their self-discipline, and how can injustice be so pervasive in the political and economic structures of most of human history. Chapter 2 ends with the problem of inequality. Chapter 3 starts by the most important political considerations Smith took from his methodological analysis of human choices, moral learning and history. It envisages to show why he believed that modern commercial societies could have a unique opportunity to align manmade laws with Nature's – both diminishing exploitation and increasing the potential for human flourishing – and why he worried, nevertheless, that domination could be knocking on the door of Modernity.

[12] WN, V.i.e.26.
[13] WN, III.i

2. SMITHIAN VIRTUES: FROM THE TMS TO THE WN

Smith's work is permeated by references to an all-encompassing "Nature", a term he uses interchangeably with "the Deity" or "God," evoking a continuance with the divine œconomy tradition.[14] I believe this is reason enough to justify my foundational methodological claim that to comprehend the principles he has laid out to guide reforms, it is crucial to start by his epistemological remarks on the study of nature.

Smith once defined "philosophy" as a "science of the connecting principles of nature." Any conclusions we could derive from its practice, however, should be humbly understood as an "invention of the imagination,"[15] one that appealed to a discomfort derived from observing the "chaos of jarring and discordant appearances" presented before our eyes.[16] The "agreeableness" we derive from attempting to formulate explanations to the causal links that produce any phenomenon was the same that led us to take part in "political disquisitions," which he defined as "the contemplation" of the "harmony" between public concerns, people's private lives and policies.

Philosophy reflected a natural "love of system" which could motivate the "most useful speculation" if carried out in a "just, reasonable and practicable" manner.[17] The adjectives here were not chosen unintentionally. They were the other side of the coin of Smith's famous contention against the "man of system" who mistakes personal "arrogance" for "public spirit." By looking at ordinary people as "materials of a … political mechanics,"[18] as if they were simply "pieces upon a chess-board" with no

[14] Waterman, 2004; Harrison, 2011.
[15] HA, IV.76.
[16] HA, II.12.
[17] TMS, IV.1.11.
[18] ALW, IV.25.

"principle of motion of their own," his "arrogance" belittle any opposition that may be raised by them. No one with power could be more "dangerous" than him.[19]

Notice how Smith's language stresses not the bad potential consequences of this way of thinking, but its vices, as if this *reasoning process* was immoral and unjust. If we want to fully understand why this is so, we must consider how Smith accounts for two different modes of knowledge, one systematic, the other contextual,[20] and that when it comes to moral investigations, as we will see, the former is subordinate to the latter. The first is directly related to Smith's naturalist perspective. The second, to his procedural moral theory. We will address each in its own time.

2.1 Smith's naturalist paradigm in the epistemology of human conduct

Smith's TMS can be seen as an attempt to derive from an analysis of our passions a precise account of our capacity for action and knowledge, as David Hume attempted before him. Smith's naturalism is the consequence of his presupposition that there exists a "goal-directed order in the universe in general and in the physical world in particular."[21] He expected that an anatomy of our constitutive characteristics could point to us its "final cause," its "purposes." The phenomenon of "sympathy," the human ability to share sentiments with another people, was his choice to describe the "efficient causes" of moral conduct and judgement. [22]

[19] TMS, VI.ii.2.18.
[20] Haakonssen, 1981, 79.
[21] *Ibidem*, 77.
[22] TMS, II.ii.3.5.

It is an obvious statement to say that people are limited in their "power" and "comprehension."[23] Any attempt to describe the principles which ought to regulate our choices must bear in mind what we *can* do. This meant that Smith's moral theory had to start by exploring how people learn right from wrong in the first place, so that we could adjust our demands or expectations according to whether they had the means to act in any other way. What is appropriate to be done in different situations always depends, in Smith's view, on how ordinary people think, on the information they have available, and on the influence that different contexts have in encouraging or restraining their moral learning. It's not in abstract reason alone that we understand morality, Smith constantly repeats. The nature behind people's reactions, choices and overall conduct is revealed by the observation and the participation within the *praxis* of a daily life of encounters, conflicts, conversations, and co-operation.[24] The philosopher's purpose is to make legible and explainable what nature intended for everyone to somehow learn – though with less clarity and consistency – in the contexts which evoke their moral reasoning.[25]

According to him, if we want to fully explain peoples' choices, we need to look both for their (i) "externall" and their (ii) "internall causes," that is, respectively, the (i) "situation in which [people] are placed,"[26] the conjunctures that compose their "political circumstance, historical inheritance, levels of economic development, social stratification"[27] and international relations; and (ii) "the sentiments and mind" of historical actors, the "motives by which men act"[28] and the "character" of the agent investigated.[29] In Smith's thinking, Nature defines the contours of the varying modes of

[23] TMS, VI.ii.3.6.
[24] TMS, VII.ii.4.14; Forman-Barzilai, 2010, 49.
[25] Forman-Barzilai, 2010, 232.
[26] WN, IV.vii.c.107.
[27] Sagar, 2022, 103.
[28] LRBL, ii.67.
[29] LRBL, ii.194.

socialization that shape each individual, explaining the purposes behind our desires and aversions which spring only within well-situated circumstances.

2.1.1 Normative and descriptive reasoning united

He supposes that humans share an innate apparatus that operates as they interact with each other, constituted by our passions. They guide our acquisition of contextual knowledge by the awareness of what pleases or displeases us in the way others' choices and reactions to our own affect us. From birth, the most premature perception that we feel delight in attracting the attention, approval and affection of others, or pain, sadness and worry when it's otherwise, invites us to gradually discipline ourselves. In principle, Smith concludes that

> what is agreeable to our moral faculties is fit, and right, and proper to be done; the contrary wrong, unfit, and improper. … The very words, right, wrong, fit, improper, graceful, unbecoming, mean only what pleases or displeases those faculties.[30]

Smith, then, unites normative and descriptive reasonings through the naturalistic investigation of the moral sentiments. That's why he was optimistic that it was possible to achieve "solidity and Truth"[31] in the systematic study of morals. He sees our capacity to behave morally as one among the many designs God has intended while managing "the administration of the … universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings."[32] His premises reveal an immanent teleology grounded on two natural principles intrinsic to any living being:

[30] TMS, III.5.5.
[31] CAS, Letter 38.
[32] TMS, VI.ii.3.6.

> in every part of the universe we observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce; and in the mechanism of a plant, or animal body, admire how every thing is contrived for advancing the two great purposes of nature, the support of the individual, and the propagation of the species.[33]

This was not an uncommon method at the time, as shown by Smith's appraisal of De Pouilly,[34] who hoped to unite "the principles of natural theology and those of moral philosophy" by explaining "the rules which Nature has established in the distribution of pleasure," an expectation also grounded on the optimism that the "science of sentiments" behind moral conduct was "more certain and important than any natural science."[35]

2.1.2 The natural ends of our passions

These two principles lie behind two sets of emotional phenomena that make part of humans' experience with one another. First, a natural, but disciplinable, preference for our own care, followed by an affection that is gradually diminishing from those closer to us to those we have no familiarity. Second, a visceral, spontaneous, abomination for cruelty with innocents, regardless of the absence of connections between us and them. Smith's intended to prove that it was an equal error either to derive all human conduct from some form of self-interested motivation, or to deny the natural precedence of our concerns with our own selves and with those dear to us.[36]

[33] TMS, II.ii.3.5.
[34] LER, 10.
[35] De Pouilly, 1971, 1-2.
[36] EPS, LER.11.

2.1.2.1 Self-love

First, all living beings are endowed with a "principle of self-love"[37] which comes prior to any outward consideration. Every person is "by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care,"[38] being immediately attentive to maintaining the "healthful state of the body." As we grow old, we learn that self-preservation and care may be best attended by anticipating conditions that guarantee it, "increasing" our "external fortune" in complex ways which encompass supplies to physical needs, to wants of convenience and comfort, and also attempting to attain "respect" and "esteem" from others,[39] whose attention we "crave."[40] According to Smith, Nature intended that a proper socialization could adequately restrain actions blindly motivated by this principle from harming others due to an excessive self-regard and indifference to the consequences of our actions.

2.1.2.2 The circles of our affections: from self-love to love of humanity

Secondly, "how selfish soever man may be supposed," Smith remarks that "there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him."[41] Humans weave bonds of affection for some of those with whom they are in constant contact. Nature supposedly intended that the greater the closeness between two people, the greater the duties one has with the other, indicated to us by the gradually lower impulse to do spontaneous acts of kindness or to intuitively take the well-being of others into account when making decisions the more

[37] TMS, VII.ii.1.15.
[38] TMS, II.ii.2.1.
[39] TMS, VI.i.1-3.
[40] Walraevens, 2021, 218.
[41] TMS, I.i.1.1.

anonymous they are to us. Notice, nevertheless, how Smith stresses that only "statesmen" could be demanded to be moved by "great humanity" and consideration for "the great society of mankind" in their dealings, because they may directly affect the interest of other nations, and since they could also, partially, look after them, *then they should*.[42]

A failure to give sufficient attention to the proper duties entailed by our relative proximity is intuitively morally reprehensible, as "is dictated to us by Nature."[43] Of course, Smith considered what people *could effectively* do for one another. The "humble department" Nature would have "allotted" to us would be to simply focus on our most immediate "circles" of affections with diligence.[44] Nature does not demand anything we are unable to do. He excuses "miserably poor nations" for abandoning their "infants", "old" and "infirm people" in times of "want,"[45] for example. Though he sees it as unjustifiable in rich societies, Smith worried that very populous polities, in which most people are strangers interrelated only by a common "constitution" and "system of government," could not rely on a spontaneous "love of country" – "an earnest desire to render the condition of our fellow-citizens as safe, respectable, and happy" as possible.[46] Modern states, he believed, should take these diminishing affections into account, and could legitimately enforce order by limited demands of mutual beneficence between people,[47] a topic we will come back to in the final chapter.

Still, as a general rule, positive duties are not to be mandated. States that wish to see their societies "flourishing" and "happy" should focus in how to create the conditions for their subjects' "cooperation" to spring from reciprocal expressions of "mutual good

[42] TMS, VI.ii.2.3-6.
[43] TMS, II.ii.1.10.
[44] TMS, VI.ii.3.6.
[45] WN, 4.
[46] TMS, VI.ii.2.11.
[47] TMS, II.ii.1.8.

offices" led by "gratitude, friendships and esteem," rather than by "a mercenary exchange" only maintained by "a sense of its utility,"[48] which Smith believed to "expose the commonwealth to many gross disorders and shocking enormities."[49]

The more we ask people to "subdue … their private, partial, and selfish passions" in praise of the honourable "desire for universal happiness," the less we allow them to "breathe the free air of liberty and independency,"[50] essential to secure people's material, physical and mental "tranquillity and enjoyment" – Smith's definition of "happiness."[51] "Nature … exhorts mankind to acts of beneficence"[52] by the human capacity to partake in the joy of others and to stimulate it. It was nature's intent that people's "dignity," the pleasant certainty of their good character, relied on the feedback they received from their peers.[53] In our social passions, the two naturalistic principles operate together. But how is it, then, that Nature has protected distant strangers from our natural partiality?

2.1.2.3 Justice

Smith believes that there is no Justice in any positive sense of the word, as if it implied a *summum bonum* of indisputable and hierarchized goods.[54] Nature has not provided us with any way to build accounts of positive, substantial and universal goods. Justice is known – or rather *learned* – by the experience of *in*justice. In a perfect world,

[48] TMS, II.ii.3.1-3.
[49] TMS, II.ii.1.8.
[50] TMS, VII.ii.1.40.
[51] TMS, III.3.30.
[52] TMS, II.ii.3.4.
[53] WN, V.i.f.59-60.
[54] Forman-Barzilai, 2010, 232.

where nobody was "exposed to mutual injuries", there would be no idea of "Justice" in Smith's sense.[55]

As we learn in his lectures, Smith believed to be improving the Natural Jurisprudence tradition by more consistently defining "commutative justice,"[56] the search for principles which could guide the codification of rules aimed at maintaining their observance through the coercive use of force and arbitrate legitimate claims against past actions that were not in accordance with them. Injustices are defined by him as any "real and positive hurt" which is intentionally[57] done to an innocent person.[58] According to him, people have natural or "perfect rights," a "title to demand" certain duties, and "if refused, to compel an other to perform" them.[59] There are actions which deserve to be punished. They vary in history because in every age and in every society, there are multiple ways an individual "may be injured" in the "several respects" that their integrity may be conceived. This is only possible because Justice has a peculiar trait. To know what it is, let's see what the difference of other rules of conduct in comparison to those prescribed by Justice.

The "general rules of conduct" every society "insensibly" forms,[60] the moral codes we use to determine what we should do in different situations, and by implication the particular substance of an appropriate, or inappropriate, and a virtuous or a vicious choice, cannot avoid some degree of "looseness and inaccuracy." They are necessarily "vague and indeterminate."[61] Nature has intended it to be so, because it allowed people to adapt better to the different circumstances they face. Regarding them, "custom and fashion …

[55] TMS, II.ii.3.1.
[56] LJA, i.16.
[57] TMS, I.i.3.5.
[58] TMS, II.ii.1.3.
[59] LJA, i.14.
[60] TMS, III.4.7.
[61] TMS, III.6.9.

influence our judgements."[62] But Nature has also afforded a pillar, "independent of custom", to our conduct, impeding any moral culture whatsoever to be "entirely perverted."[63]

He attempts a significant departure from moral relativism by dividing his analysis in two parts: "the general style of conduct or behaviour" of any society, which he believes can never "departure from what is the natural propriety of action"; and the "particular usages" of these rules, which may render severe misunderstandings customary.[64] Nature has instilled in us something which holds social orders together even if most people lived in contradiction with the culturally infused moral principles available to them.

Smith's axioma is the prevalence of a sufficiently generalized safety from injustice. Insecurity fosters Hobbesian environments of "mutual resentment and animosity", breaking all "the bands" that hold people together. If people are at "all times ready to hurt and injure one another," "the immense fabric of human society" inevitably crumbles "into atoms"[65] because its members are "dissipated and scattered abroad by the violence and opposition of their discordant affections."[66] Yet, no culture or custom could have ever convinced its inhabitants to accept as goods that which all of them felt horrible about when imposed upon. In ordinary life, it is necessary that "vexations", "arbitrariness", violence, confiscations, "burdensome taxes," "imprisonment" with no due process or no legitimate cause are not so constant as to make it impossible not to consider that one would be better-off fleeing or fighting back. Justice entails creating the means to assure that others are not violated.[67]

[62] TMS, V.1.8.
[63] TMS, V.2.1.
[64] TMS, V.2.14.
[65] TMS, II.ii.3.4.
[66] TMS, II.ii.3.3.
[67] TMS, II.ii.1.9.

The peculiar trait Justice has in relation to other rules of conduct is that, because injustice may always be *precisely identified*, Justice may be codified with the "highest degree" of accuracy.[68] So even where the "administration of justice" is very bad, where people don't have anyone to appeal to but the Heavens, that does not make unjust acts ever 'naturalized,' though amidst "violence, licentiousness, falsehood and injustice" one's "sense" of its "dreadful enormity"[69] is diminished, hardened. Certain injuries are universally recognizable, such as those related to any physical imposition "by wounding" or by "infringing" one's "liberty." In complex societies, where a great division of labour took place and people have many different avenues to foster relationships with one another, the ways one may be harmed are also numerous and many are not universal. People's "reputation" may be deceitfully attacked, and their liberty may be also constrained "mentally," with no physical constraints to one's motion, the extreme consequence of arbitrary dependence. Thus natural rights give birth to "adventitious" rights as soon as the institution of private property spreads, making up most of the codes of law.

But how do we know what is properly punishable? Our innate aversion for injustice is first perceived as the repugnance for the mere sight of someone being "injured" or "hurt," which provokes a pre-rational "resentment" before we are even informed of the intentions that motivated it. This resentment is described by Smith as an "appetite": it creates a want for reparation, which is pleasantly satisfied by a certain relief we feel for "merited punishments" – an emotional approbation that is sustained beyond the immediate reflexive "horror," after a careful examination confirms the innocence of the injured and the "ill-intention" behind the injury.[70]

[68] TMS, III.6.10.
[69] TMS, V.2.2.
[70] TMS, II.ii.3.

The preservation of the individuals and of the species, Nature's "peculiar and darling care," is thus behind all characteristics that compose our human nature. Economic growth, moral discipline, and even the modern political institutions' foundational concern – the enforcement of impartial, equanimous and universal rules of justice – none can be thought of as *simply* great achievements of human ingenuity. The search after them comes from within. They are all built step by step upon the indications of passions springing in people who, in their particular context, aimed to appease their own – selfish and unselfish – desires. Even when specific and well-intentioned people did matter, when they did come up with important solutions that were the works of reason, their proposals could only be realizable amidst a myriad of unintended consequences that constituted their realm of possibilities. Their exertion of judgement could only, in any way, perfect the order they were part of or justly put it to the ground, because of its agreement with the moral sentiments Nature has encapsulated in the human breast.

2.1.3 On natural virtues

2.1.3.1 Why would nature make humans so impotent?

So far, we have described how Smith believed that the attributes of human nature are means ordered by a theodicy intending the continuance and the thriving of the species. We have accounted for the "final" and the "efficient" causes of the moral sentiments. We are now in a better position to understand why virtues are fundamental for his economic and political theory, consistently preserving this naturalist theoretical archetype in the formulation of his proposals for institutional, legislative, political and tax reforms.

The way forward can be found through revisiting the (in)famous and trite "invisible hand" metaphor, the most abused expression in the history of social sciences.[71] The first mention to it is an observation that though the whole earth was divided by a few people – the "rich," whom he describes as *naturally* "proud, unfeeling, luxurious, vain, selfish and rapacious" for reasons we will see later on – it was still possible for the poor to find a sufficient "distribution of the necessaries of life" to keep on "the multiplication of the species."[72] The second time Smith uses it was to explain why the natural preference of businessmen to invest their stocks where they can supervise them, close to where they lived, gave "support" to the "domestick industry" of their country and thus "promoted" the public good unintendedly, simply attending to their "own interest."[73]

From this, he concluded that "the wisdom of nature has fortunately made ample provision for remedying many of the bad effects of the folly and injustice of man."[74] But the closer the circumstances get to those which are naturally ideal for humans to flourish, beyond simply sustaining themselves, the more spontaneously they will, on average, do what brings them dignity.[75] That's why people have motives to keep on chasing after the improvement of their circumstances even without any intention to change the world around them – and why liberty, understood as the absence of domination, is the 'natural' complement to security.[76] Smith's providential hand does not interfere with the social world as an external agent.

Smith's endorsement of Malebranche's *Recherche Sur la Verité* is sufficient evidence. He agreed that all passions "justify themselves," because nature's final cause,

[71] Dellemotte, 2009, 28.
[72] TMS, IV.1.10.
[73] WN, IV.ii.9.
[74] WN, IV.ix.28.
[75] TMS, I.ii.3.8; III.3.4.
[76] WN, IV.vii.c.44.

God, operates through efficient causes as if they were occasions for the pursuit of His ends.[77] Smith's intent was to dive deeper into the Mandevillian insight that grand social changes result from unintended consequences. But it all depended on moral causes somehow, either because of how moral disciplining and good judgement are related – thus the lack of one would almost certainly imply the want of the other – and because people are driven by an instinct, a desire to seize opportunities that bring more security and tranquillity to their lives.[78]

But why would Nature leave us at the mercy of the "empire of Fortune"?[79] Surely it would be great if the "masters of mankind" did not pay attention to the temptations of "that vile maxim" – "all for ourselves, and nothing for other people."[80] Wouldn't it be good that well intentioned people were able to promote, enforce and guarantee a good life for all those around them? As Smith sees it, there is a problem with this reasoning.

It is good for the preservation of the individuals that we have a "more pungent" feeling for pain than for pleasure.[81] As people gradually build better life conditions for themselves, they become more prone to secure what they have got than to keep aiming higher. They do so because the pain of losing what we have worked so hard to conquer is much more severe than the joy derived from our ordinary, steady and gradual betterment.[82] So Nature has given us both a motivation to risk, attempt, work hard, but also a strong call to be careful, mindful about the fact that the more we have, the more there is to lose. As a result, the possibility of misusing a great power is much more fearsome than its good use would be desirable: the grievance of losing all that human

[77] TMS, III.4.3.
[78] Winch, D. 1996, Riches and Poverty: An intellectual history of political economy in Britain, 1750-1834, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 57-90.
[79] TMS, II.iii.1.7.
[80] WN, III.iv.10.
[81] TMS, I.iii.1.3.
[82] TMS, III.3.18.

struggle has achieved, due to the great capacity of a few to change the course of history, is, for Smith, disproportionately worse than what people would gain otherwise.

But don't economics and politics describe and prescribe activities through which we affect and direct the world around us? The key to unlock the meaning behind Smith's concern with moral discipline in his proposals is to describe how we in fact learn what we can, and should, do. In what contexts do we apprehend this? What does it mean to say, as he wrote, that "man is by Nature directed to correct, in some measure, that distribution of things which she herself would otherwise have made," being him so naturally powerless?[83] We are finally ready to address what Smith means by 'virtue.'

2.1.3.2 The contextualist character of universal virtues

According to Smith, the sheer observation that human beings build moral codes of behaviour everywhere proves that we should follow the principles which are pointed by the "rules of morality" *we have inherited*, though their guidance *can never tell precisely* what one should do regardless of one's own conscience, made out of judgements and sentiments. Smith means by these rules not a list, like the Ten Commandments, which mix rules of "commutative justice" with religious duties. Smith means by "rules of morality" a vague "sense of Duty." He acknowledges everyone's unavoidable engagement with the reasons behind their actions, without which no rule can be *meaningful*. No one can avoid to constantly recur to the "tribunal of their own consciences,"[84] which is why moral cultures are not treated, by Smith, as essentialist

[83] TMS, III.5.9.
[84] TMS, III.2.32.

monoliths, but rather as lively networks of slowly transforming ideas by each one's engagement with the contexts they act in.

As mature grown-ups, we can consult our memory and imagination to anticipate how others may react to what we do or say and how they may feel. We have learned this through the informal education provided by sharing experiences with those around us. We can do this because human beings can "sympathize" with each other's feelings, the backbone of their decision processes. We learn early on to derive from this awareness of our passions, moral judgements of other people's conduct and our own. We are prone to censor them whenever we cannot sympathize with the feelings that seem to motivate their actions, just as they are prone to do to us.

It is by following the "important rules of morality" we have learned by living with our "fellow-citizens" in cultural and historical settings that we are "obedient" towards "the commands and laws of the Deity."[85] To do so, we need a constant evaluation of our own selves in relation to others, which is why we are capable of forming, as Smith famously described, an imaginary "impartial and well-informed spectator"[86] to make fair judgements considering all the factors that might have incited observed actions. As it is implied, the better morally disciplined we are, Smith believes, the better our judgement is and vice versa – not only our *moral* judgement, but our judgement as whole. As he writes, a person of "superior reason" is one whose reasoning is "approved" by the impartial spectator "as just and right and accurate, not merely as useful or advantageous."[87] This gives us an indication why the "man of system" seemed to rely on an unjust reasoning process.

[85] TMS, III.5.3.
[86] TMS, III.2.32.
[87] TMS, IV.2.7.

Smith treats "virtues" here as the ideals an impartial spectator could provide us to evaluate what a perfect conduct would be. If all passions justify themselves by the *telos* of Nature, or they wouldn't even exist, each may motivate corresponding virtues, which are, by extension, also universal human traits, whose substance is infused by a knowledge that can only be acquired contextually.[88] Even "unsocial passions" can inspire virtues. For example, "envy" and "angriness" inspire courage and determination against the unjust money acquired by a wealthy businessman at the expense of unpaid labour.

Virtues, furthermore, evoke a "natural admiration" from others, while vices provoke "natural abhorrence."[89] All of the virtues are "founded" upon "two different efforts:" that of enlarging one's "fellow-feeling," stretching sympathy, and that of controlling one's own emotions and reactions, which helps others to "go along" with them, increasing "self-command."[90] There is no single ideal of a fully virtuous person. The one who masters "prudence," the main virtue of self-care which combines great discipline with a "superior reason" to discern "the remote consequences of all our actions,"[91] may have a different conduct from the person who masters the altruistic virtues of "humanity, justice, generosity and public spirit."[92] Depending on what they aim to do, their situation might require risks which are not the best for their own personal preservation, though they may matter significantly for the well-being of others. The diversity in human conduct reflects the variety of personal goals, which exists for the sake of the great society of mankind.[93]

Smith does not mean that any action praised by others is virtuous. If that were the case, it would be impossible to understand why he criticizes the confusion that, for him,

[88] Haakonssen, 1981, 69.
[89] TMS, I.ii.3.4.
[90] TMS, I.i.5.1.
[91] TMS, IV.2.6-8.
[92] TMS, IV.2.9.
[93] TMS, V.1.9.

is the “universal” cause of the corruption of moral sentiments: that people “often regard” riches and power “with the respect and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue,” and “unjustly” bestow a “contempt of which vice and folly are the only proper objects” towards the poor and meek, a confusion that will be crucial for our discussion in 2.2.

A virtuous act is that which should be rewarded by what Nature has defined as a proportional encouragement to it, due to its importance in the preservation of individuals and their species. This reward may be, in certain situations, people’s admiration. But it does not need to be so: the recompense may have nothing to do with the specific people who observed the act. Smith’s point is that *if observed by an impartial and well-informed spectator*, it would conclude that the feelings the action should inspire make it “praise-worthy.”[94]

2.1.3.3 Virtue and its rewards

Smith’s system becomes even more like a theodicy when we look at his teleological comments about natural virtues. Virtues are part of a “natural” scheme of “general rules” to distribute “prosperity and adversity.” According to it, “every virtue naturally meets with its proper reward, with the recompense which is most fit to encourage and promote it.” Nature did not expect virtues to be only rewarded by the recognition of others, which would be a very fragile basis for people who are naturally concerned with themselves. “Industry, prudence, and circumspection,” some of the most cited virtues in his writings on political œconomy, naturally lead to “success in every sort of business” *everywhere*

[94] TMS, III.2.35.

across all ages.[95] Smith is not talking about 'commercial societies' here. He indicates that these virtues have been behind human success in the most different subsistence-related activities throughout history. This allows him to explain the origins of material inequality across families as resulting from virtues of the rich's and noblemen's "ancestors"[96] or "forefathers" in multiple occasions, be it in shepherdic communities of the European past or in other continents,[97] or in modern England.[98]

Though it is common to interpret these passages as a normative justification for present inequality, this cannot be further from the truth. Smith was emphasizing that those who have inherited positions of great power and wealth almost universally *lack the virtues which led to it*. A significant portion of the WN concerns the ill-acquired fortunes of European elites. He believed that whenever one achieves great fortunes rapidly, not as a "consequence of a long life of industry, frugality, and attention,"[99] it was an indication of probable misconduct. They may not be entirely unethical, just foolish, like those who make "injudicious" investments in what comes to be "unsuccessful projects" or spend fortunes in gambling and lotteries,[100] expenditures only recommended by the "prodigality,"[101] "profusion"[102] and the "profligacy"[103] of "idle" minds with poor self-command and little notion of its chances of success, all of which sometimes pay off. Smith even wished to see policies to prevent these erratic behaviours because more often than not they harmed other people's means of subsistence.[104] As an example, Smith believed that certain caps to "usury" – uncommonly high rates of interest – that banks were allowed

[95] TMS, III.5.8.
[96] TMS, I.iii.24.
[97] LJA, iv.23.
[98] WN, II.iii.19-22
[99] WN, I.x.b.37-38.
[100] WN, I.x.b.39; II.iii.25-26; V.i.e.40.
[101] WN, II.iii.22.
[102] WN, II.iii.38-39.
[103] TMS, I.iii.3.4.
[104] WN, II.iv.15; IV.vii.a.18; V.ii.c.12.

to lend to excessive risk-takers should be instituted,[105] because whenever large stocks were employed in trades destined to fail, the "funds" which could be employed to maintain "industrious labour" diminished,[106] as if they were partially destroyed, which is why these "imprudent" people were addressed by Smith as "publick enemies."[107] But the worst were the countless cases where fortunes were made from injustices, like the large returns derived from colonial and imperialist projects,[108] from monopolies established through extorsion and threats,[109] or from dishonesty, corruption, "knavery" and the "depredations" of people working in the private[110] and in the public sectors.[111]

Smith tells us how it was Nature's wish that virtues met their rewards individually. If excelling morally was necessary for someone to live a sufficiently good life, then Smith would be providing a very similar picture to the "moralists" he constantly criticized for their "abstruse syllogisms of quibbling dialectics."[112] He would also be denying the basic fact that humans are "imperfect creatures" which do not always abide by the "impartial spectator."[113] Nature, after all, allows for enormous flexibility in the search for the most appropriate virtues for each time, place and goal.

This is why from "truth, justice, and humanity," as from "magnanimity" and "generosity," follow "confidence, esteem, love" and "good-will." They are not rewarded with "greatness", "power", "richness", and "honours,"[114] which can only be conquered through ambition, courage and a lot of dedication, though not always directed at the best ends. This explains why an "industrious knave" may accumulate great fortunes, rewarded

[105] WN, II.iv.15; IV.vii.a.18; V.ii.c.12.
[106] WN, II.ii.33-36.
[107] WN, II.iii.19-22.
[108] WN, IV, vii.a.6-19; IV.vii.c.106.
[109] WN, V.i.g.1.
[110] WN, V.i.e.22.
[111] WN, V.i.d.8-12; V.ii.k.73.
[112] TMS, III.3.21.
[113] TMS, I.i.5.8.
[114] TMS, III.5.9.

by his industry, though his ostentation only excites the "scorn" of those who know about his vices, naturally – even if insufficiently – punishing him via the "sentiments and opinions of mankind,"[115] and inspiring people to build the means to "accelerate the sword" of Justice upon him. But as we have already discussed, the same natural trait that limits the amount of control a single powerful person can have upon history limits people's historical ability to punish him. This is why "violence and artifice prevailed" throughout time, harming with "oppression" the "innocent,"[116] who could never fail to know what they have endured in the hands of the unjust.

This naturalist reasoning is behind two of the most striking set of examples of Smith's policies, a positive and a negative one. Against the "utility of poverty doctrine,"[117] he deemed it an "obvious advantage" that the "lowest ranks" were seeing their "food, cloathing and lodging" increase in its quality standards.[118] Smith's problem was not never with inequality *per se*, but with the means that allowed unequal societies to force oppressive "burdens" on the relatively poor, perpetuating asymmetric power relations by shielding their personal power from dissipation, and by enforcing privileges that most didn't enjoy.[119] Smith's famous contention against the "the law of primogeniture" and the "entails" exemplify his worry with the use of police and legislation to precluded "great tracts of uncultivated land" from "being divided again,"[120] "preventing their dissipation,"[121] and allowing what should "very seldom remain long in the same family" to be "engrossed" by "many successive generations."[122] The same worry lies behind his attack on certain types of "sumptuary laws"[123] that "create the temptation" to smuggling,

[115] TMS, III.5.8.
[116] TMS, III.5.10.
[117] Winch, 1996, 76.
[118] WN, I.viii.35-36; LJB, 330; TMS, IV.1.10.
[119] ED, 48; WN, I.viii.13-32; II.iii.36; III.ii.5-6; III.iv.16; V.ii.b.6; V.ii.k.64; CAS, Letter 203.
[120] WN, III.ii.5-6.
[121] WN, III.iv.16.
[122] ED, 48.
[123] WN, II.iii.36.

and then "punish" the poor "who yield to it,"[124] while the rich still filled their houses with prohibited goods.[125] Smith even makes fun of the fact that when appointed to be a Commissioner of the Customs, there was "scarce" a "wearing apparel" in his office that was not "prohibited to be worn … in Great Britain," and joked if he should make an example and set it all on fire, advising his friend, William Eden, not to look too attentively for the origins of his "household furniture," avoiding the temptation to also burn his home down to the ground.[126]

If his naturalistic perspective grounded his call for taking down certain interferences imposed by the state that helped to sustain and magnify the inequity that follows from the lack of isonomy, it also grounded Smith's proposals to design tributes – an unavoidably positive interference in people's lives, necessary to sustain the state. As taxes were inevitable, Smith believes that their *moral consequences* should also be taken into account if they were to minimize the harm they produce as it decreases people's welfare. Smith asks policy-makers to reflect upon the effects taxes may have upon people's consumption patterns and their contractual deals. He separates the duties which might affect people's subsistence from those which affected only superfluous goods without which everyone could live by.

He believed that consumption taxes on non-necessary goods – the main stream of revenue that a state could get – could be designed to have a good moral outcome, legitimately working as the "best of sumptuary laws."[127] Though the "sober and industrious poor" would have the small inconvenience of having to "moderate or to refrain altogether from the use of superfluities," the nation as a whole would benefit from

[124] WN, V.ii.b.6.
[125] WN, V.ii.k.64.
[126] CAS, Letter 203.
[127] CAS, Letter 299.

this “forced frugality” because the state would then increase the pressures upon the “dissolute and disorderly” poor families to *cease to exist*. The poor families who maintained a “bad conduct” would face a “scant subsistence,” generating less children to be neglected, and increasing the share of the “industrious population” in the country.[128]

On the other hand, Smith believed that there was no need for worrying too much about large estates and great fortunes – as did ancient republican thought and its fears of “overgrown fortunes.”[129] If the state abolished monopolies, subsidies, bounties, and any other unequal encouragement to one branch of trade or to one company, and legislators revoked laws which prevented estates to become a “moveable” good like any other, inherited wealth would be “sufficiently divided again” in a “generation or two.”[130] Smith was also sure that large companies and rich universities, as they grow, become more susceptible to stiffen and be mismanaged, being overcome in time by “private adventurers”[131] and small, poorer colleges, that could easily promote “considerable change” in their services to adapt them to the needs of their customers and students, if no privileges prevented them from competing.[132]

In Smith’s view, modern commercial societies could promote a “graduall descent of fortunes betwixt” the “great” towards those of lower fortunes.[133] He is not talking about a ‘trickle-down effect’: he is literally saying that under the particular historical conditions of modern Europe, *wealth is very easily wasted away*. This, of course, had nothing to do with the fact that certain people could become much richer than it was ever possible in the past,[134] nor that an “unequal distribution of riches” would cease to exist.[135] But it was

[128] WN, V.ii.k.7.
[129] LJA, iii.140.
[130] WN, IV.vii.b.16-20.
[131] WN, V.i.e.18.
[132] WN, V.i.f.34.
[133] LJA, iii.139.
[134] WN, IV.vii.61.
[135] WN, IV.iii.c.12.

a relief because although Smith believes that one of the best potential sources of revenue for States could be taxation on treasuries[136] or on the interest of uninvested money, he also considers, not without irony, that in a globalized world the rich would become "citizens of the world," with no loyalty to their original polities, fleeing from such policies either by hiding away what they got from any public records or by taking investments away to another country.[137]

Smith is not legitimating inequalities by past virtues. He believes that virtues are instrumental for Nature. The "invisible hand" is the constant, microscopic, contextualized attempt to render virtues' natural rewards "fit" for mankind's "perfection and happiness" by constantly "negotiating" better conditions whenever there is opportunity to do so, though every suffering innocent knows how "impotent" our control is over "the natural course of things" whose "current is too rapid and too strong for us to stop it."[138] Religion, for Smith, "is a consequence of morality"[139] because under these conditions, humans never stop longing for a fairer "future state."[140] But what explains injustice being so common in the first place – beyond the fact that punishing or preventing it is itself a complex problem?

2.2 Moral discipline and good judgement

Smith often describes how most people have a bias towards self-approval which is due to their fear of ever being "the proper object of resentment."[141] But it is axiomatic in

[136] LJA, vi.170.
[137] WN, V.ii.f.5-13.
[138] TMS, III.5.9.
[139] Haakonssen, 1981, 75.
[140] TMS, III.5.10.
[141] TMS, IV.2.8; VII.ii.2.12.

his system that common people have access to a "mirror"[142] which may reflect the real colours of their character, or else moral cultures would not exist. Smith dealt constantly with situations which seemed to prevent their principles to be accessible to those who grow up within circumstances that do not afford the resources to morally educate themselves, those which compel the acquisition of "abilities and virtues" without which they could not excel in the existing occupations they may exercise.[143]

Any "vulgar education"[144] can teach most people to be at least able to recognize virtues they ought to admire and vices they ought to despise, because their actions will be constantly met with censure or praise. The complexity of Smith's argument lies in the fact that though the principles of one's moral culture are accessible to ordinary people, anyone can often depart from them. Smith's points on the problematic nature of inequality is, thus, an educational one: "superior ranks" face a structural departure from their society's "rules of morality" since they don't take part in the circumstances that originate them, becoming unable to morally discipline themselves in accordance with their society's impartial spectator.

2.2.1 On the conditions to excel morally and to develop good judgement

To be able to excel morally, one must be necessarily aligning the control over one's own actions with a continuous intellectual exercise of judgement; the exercise of judgement, on the other hand, depends on a great deal of self-discipline. To make sure we have judged anything correctly, we need to view ourselves and others apart from our own

[142] TMS, III.1.3.
[143] WN, IV.vii.c.107.
[144] TMS, III.3.7.

biases. A certain form of moral egalitarianism is a basic intuition which follows from the "impartiality between ourselves and others" that most of us learn in "the ordinary commerce of the world," compelling us to regulate the "inequalities of our passions."[145]

By living "with strangers … who know nothing, or care nothing about your misfortune,"[146] by sharing the daily companionship of "those who are independent of you, who can value you only for your character and conduct, and not for your fortune,"[147] by facing the "hardships, dangers, injuries and misfortunes"[148] of a life that does not have the social anchors that guarantee security against "adversities,"[149] Smith writes, is how you learn to regulate your excessive self-regard and pay attention to the needs of others. Unwilling necessity teaches the true virtues of self-care – those that afford, as their natural reward, conditions for our own individual preservation.[150]

Smith's moral theory is procedural; it depends on the circumstances that encourage people to acquire virtues which no one can, *a priori*, know to be good without experimenting it, seeing and feeling its effects. It is true that only those who are "at ease" can "best attend to the distress of others," but if one is not taught by hardships to move past one's puerile vanity, nothing can compel him to truly worry much about others, even if they have the time and means to do so.[151]

In modern European nations, the independent labourer is in the best position to be virtuous, because "his customers" exercise a "real and effectual discipline" over him. His "fear of losing his employment … restrains his frauds and corrects his negligence."[152]

[145] TMS, III.3.7.
[146] TMS, III.3.39.
[147] TMS, III.3.40.
[148] TMS, III.3.36.
[149] TMS, III.3.25.
[150] TMS, III.3.36.
[151] TMS, III.3.37.
[152] WN, I.x.c.31.

The "prudent man" in modern commercial societies learns "discipline" in the middle of his fellows, and because of it is

> enabled gradually to relax, both in the rigour of his parsimony and in the severity of his application; and he feels with double satisfaction this gradual increase of ease and enjoyment, from having felt before the hardship which attended the want of them

up to the point of creating "time and leisure to deliberate soberly and cooly" about the "consequences" of any "projects and enterprises" he may wish to take part.[153] Without any obligation to live in "anxiety" trying to build "enormous and operose machines" of "power and riches," prudent ordinary people were well "in what constitutes the real happiness of human life," provided they had "that security which kings are fighting for."[154]

The nation's prosperity could both increase the public goods shared by all and the quality of the poor's possessions,[155] and yet their livelihood would still depend on steady work and a reputation that could teach them to temper any excessively self-centred impulses. This was true not only for workers but for small owners, since their credit in the bank depended mostly on the "opinion" others have of their "probity, and prudence."[156] As noted by Samuel Fleischacker, when Smith writes that it "is not from the benevolence" of any shopkeeper that we get what we need, but from attending to "their own interest,"[157] it is clear that *he was proposing an "other-directed" view*:[158] for people to build the life they wish to live, they must find ways to satisfy the wants, needs, and opinions that others sympathize with. That does not mean that "self-love" is supposed

[153] TMS, VI.i.12.
[154] TMS, IV.1.8-11.
[155] WN, II.iii.38-39.
[156] WN, I.x.b.20.
[157] WN, I.ii.2.
[158] Fleischacker, 1999, 155.

to be repealed against its natural propriety, as we have claimed before. In fact, Smith argues that

> When the happiness or misery of others indeed in no respect depends upon our conduct … we do not always think it so necessary to restrain … our natural … anxiety about our own affairs.[159]

Unlike those born rich, which can acquire "public admiration" by an "easy price" without "knowledge, industry, patience, self-denial" or "any other kind" of virtue,[160] the majority of Smith's fellow-citizens, if they ever wished to ascend socially, would need to "acquire superior knowledge" in their professions, and "superior industry" in its exercise, as well as "probity and prudence, generosity and frankness."[161]

Because "reputation" is all they have, the majority of the people in "civilized societies" live upon a "strict or austere … system of morality," which abhors "the vices of levity" because they "are always ruinous" to those whose subsistence is insecure.[162] Their experience teaches them to flee from such temptations and their common attendance to religious sects helps them not to "neglect" and "abandon themselves,"[163] as the "obscurity and darkness" of their condition in the outskirts of large cities could incline them to do.[164] They know that if there are "two different roads" to "deserve, to acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind," – "the greatest objects of ambition and emulation" humans being may cherish – the road of virtue and wisdom, and the road of enrichment,[165] they strive to find a way to travel both.

[159] TMS, III.3.7.
[160] TMS, I.iii.2.4.
[161] TMS, I.iii.2.5.
[162] WN, I.viii.12.
[163] LJB, 330.
[164] WN, V.i.g.12.
[165] TMS, I.iii.2.

Smith is indeed optimistic that they can find this unified path: "in the middling and inferior stations of life" both roads are "happily … very nearly the same." Thus, the "situations" lived "by the greater part of mankind" foster "a considerable degree of virtue" and "good morals," simply because no "imprudence" may become "habitual" before they wreck themselves.[166] As a result, "the frugality and good conduct" of most of the people greatly overcompensates "the profusion or imprudence of some."[167]

If the "natural progress" of "national, as well as private opulence" is possible, it is due to the "uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition," a principle "powerful enough" to survive the structuralized injustices that so often hindered it[168] and to inspire "the private frugality and good conduct" of ordinary people across all societies, a phenomenon potentialized by the security afforded by the rule of law, and made more efficient by "systems of government" or public "administration" grounded on "liberty."[169]

Smith readily provides several examples of how virtues and good judgement are related to the ordinary people's circumstances in many different societies. In "savage" or "barbarous" nations, and in the countryside of European commercial societies, the "varied occupations" ordinary people exert "oblige" them to increase their physical and mental "capacity" due to the need of "inventing expedients for removing difficulties which are continually occurring,"[170] since their daily lives faced many "accidents."

To deal with them people need "knowledge", "discretion", "skill and experience."[171] Their understanding is not "benumbed" and, combined with the greater

[166] TMS, I.iii.5.
[167] WN, II.iii.26.
[168] WN, II.iii.31.
[169] WN, II.iii.36.
[170] WN, V.i.f.51.
[171] WN, I.x.c.23.

simplicity of manners and the smaller degree of labour division, everyone is able to act as a "statesman" because they can form "tolerable judgements" about the "interest of the society and the conduct of those who govern it."[172] When Smith reflected upon the "abject subjection" women faced among the "Turks, the Persian{s} and Mogulls," he emphasized how ordinary people's moral discipline is generally behind the exceptional legitimacy of revolutions, because only those who face enormous "severity and hard usage" from above have the contextual knowledge to know when to become the most "rebellious subjects" and at the same time manage to maintain the "apparent tranquillity" of the "most humble" of all people due to their great self-command.[173]

2.2.2 The distanced self

We have started this thesis mentioning that for Smith a good reasoning seemed to entail a just, appropriate and feasible thought procedure. If we have now shown that moral discipline is behind the kind of foresight of the consequences of our actions and the self-control that allows us not only to make good choices, but that teach us to have "a continual and long exertion of patience, industry, fortitude, and application of thought," without which not even prolific intellectual labour would be possible,[174] one can easily conclude that whatever prevents the acquisition of moral discipline, or whatever hinders one's learning process, will render one not only incapable of virtue, but also incapable of knowing what is "praise-worthy" and to judge what has "exact propriety."[175]

[172] WN, V.i.f.51.
[173] LJA, iii.28-29.
[174] TMS, I.iii.2.5.
[175] TMS, VI.ii.2.2.

Smith provides many examples of 'distanced selves' which cannot have any notions of propriety, and much less of virtue due to the circumstances of their upbringing. Though Samuel Fleischacker,[176] Dennis Rasmussen[177] and Benoit Walraevens[178] have all dealt with the issue of a 'distanced self' created by socioeconomic inequality, I don't believe they have grasped the axiomatic importance the "bulk of the people"[179] in Smith's account of the origins of principles of morality that allow them to lead a sufficiently virtuous life, while only almost entirely "corrupting" those from above. I claim that Smith has actually argued that distance, weather horizontal, or vertical, from one's general society, renders one undisciplined and injudicious.

2.2.2.1 On factions and national prejudices

Factions, "false notions of religion" promoted by sects,[180] and "national prejudices"[181] are the most important examples Smith provides of a horizontal cleavage which makes people prone to follow a "wrong sense of duty." The kind of appraisal and attention that distorted forms of heroism and valour bring from one's own party, church or tribe blind people from all over the social pyramid to the ill foundations of their motivations.

It is a sort of generalized confusion, because the principles which entail the minimum of politeness and tolerance among the two disputing parts are still the same – and when we look at the internation arena, *cannot but always be the same*, since the only

[176] Fleischacker, 2005; 2006; 2011.
[177] Rasmussen, 2016.
[178] Walraevens, 2021.
[179] TMS, I.iii.2.3.
[180] TMS, III.6.12-13.
[181] TMS, VI.ii.2.3.

bridge that connects two non-communicating moral fabrics is Justice. Only in relative isolation can people grow attached to a prevailing "sense" of their own "superiority," of the "vilification of enemies," of a "mythic elevation" of those from their own group, and of "jealousy and envy"[182] for those outside of it – or else they would be restrained right away by the disapproval naturally occasioned to strangers by their "unsocial … morals."[183] As he explains,

> The propriety of our moral sentiments is never so apt to be corrupted as when the indulgent and partial spectator is at hand, while the indifferent and impartial one is at a great distance.[184]

One should not underestimate the impact of this hindrance to the moral development of ordinary people, especially in modern commercial societies.[185] As we have hinted before, Smith believes that "the understanding of the greater part of men" is "formed by their ordinary employment."[186] Whenever there is a great division of labour – a precondition for the increase of productivity – people's work becomes easy, uniform and extremely predictable, with no encouragement for inquiry, reflection and inventiveness. This phenomenon is mainly urban, but slowly spreads to the countryside as well. Though rural labour preserves a greater variety of tasks – Nature "labours along with men"[187] at rhythms that are not entirely controllable by human action – Smith believes that the introduction of manufactured "improvements" in rich, commercial nations also significantly impacts the routines and specializes the tasks performed by rural populations.[188]

[182] Forman-Barzilai, 2010, 208.
[183] WN, V.i.g.13.
[184] TMS, III.3.41.
[185] Sagar, 2022, 169.
[186] WN, V.i.f.50.
[187] WN, II.v.12.
[188] WN, V.i.a.15.

As a consequence, like a "loathsome and offensive disease,"[189] people's minds and bodies become "mutilated and deformed."[190] He constantly refers to the worry that the "low people" in "commercial nations" become "exceedingly stupid"[191] and "ignorant,"[192] unable to "take part in any rational conversations" and to conceive "generous, noble, or tender sentiments", which lie behind anyone's contextual knowledge without which one cannot form "just judgements" about important subjects concerning the "ordinary duties of private life" or the "extensive interests of [their] country."

He also worries that the lack of self-respect of this "benumbed" state of mind provokes a lack of "courage." A "coward", he writes, "a man incapable either of defending or of revenging himself, evidently wants one of the most essential parts of the character of a man."[193] He is unable to raise his voice against injustices committed to himself or to others, be it a subject of international crimes put forth by one's own government or abuses in his immediate labour market. This is partially why Smith commonly describes workers' lack of "resistance" to the coercions of "manufactory" owners supported by the police to sink their wages.[194] Only when conditions became intolerable, effectively risking their lives, they would make the "loudest clamour" with "shocking violence and outrage" to "frighten their masters into an immediate compliance with their demands" – often resulting in failed demonstrations that ruined "the ringleaders."[195]

More often, the workers outcry is instrumentalized[196] for the wrong causes,[197] serving as employers' private "standing armies"[198] directed for "their own particular

[189] WN, V.i.f.60.
[190] WN, V.i.f.59.
[191] LJB, 329.
[192] WN, V.i.f.50.
[193] WN, V.i.f.60.
[194] WN, I.viii.13.
[195] WN, I.viii.14.
[196] Oprea, 2022.
[197] WN, I.viii.14.
[198] WN, IV.ii.43.

purposes,"[199] taking advantage of their improper judgment.[200] Workers living most of their lives within "large manufactories, frequently ruin [their] morals,"[201] becoming "bad company" to one another. The fatigue and boredom of their work increased the desire for "dissipation"[202] which the lack of self-discipline helped to make more imprudent, as "a general contagion."[203] Though the poor workers support "the whole frame of society"[204] Smith described them as "buried out of sight" by its weight.[205]

The worst their conditions, the more prone to "riots and debauchery"[206] and to the inflammatory calls of "small religious sects"[207]against the civil and secular government they are.[208] Smith was indeed greatly concerned that in England the people's "clamour always intimidates and faction often oppresses the Government," thorning the ground for good policies and bills and allowing the "regulations of Commerce" to be "dictated by those who are the most interested to deceive and impose upon the Public," true "pieces of dupery" that unjustly benefited the merchants and manufacturers.[209]

Merchants and "master manufacturers" were not exempt from bad judgement themselves, though they may have greater "acuteness of understanding" due to their constant planning. This "order of men" risks only thinking about "the interest of their particular branch of business." Smith presents a very complex and refined picture, according to which what benefits commerce and manufacture as a whole is good for the society, but what benefits merchants and manufacturers in particular may not be so, which

[199] WN, I.xi.p.9.
[200] Oprea, A. 2022, Adam Smith on Political Judgement: Revisiting the Political Theory of the Wealth of Nations, *The Journal of Politics*, 84:1, 18-32, 23.
[201] WN, I.viii.47-8.
[202] WN, I.viii.44.
[203] TMS, III.3.43.
[204] LJA, vi.28.
[205] ED, 5-6.
[206] LJB, 330.
[207] WN, V.i.g.12.
[208] WN, V.i.g.24.
[209] CAS, Letters 233 & 248.

makes them the worst state advisors.[210] Just like their own employees, their "views of things beyond [their] own trade are by no means so extensive" as those of non-commercial societies and country workmen.[211]

The situation was so critical, that not even the obvious "foresight of the heavy and unavoidable burdens of war" were enough to overrule the "animosity of national vengeance or the anxiety for national security" encouraged by the discursive power of the British Empire's elites, whose industries may be enriching financing battles and equipping armies *while the country impoverished.* Britain's Imperial foreign policy was continuously adding to the public debt, and Smith worried that this would put the state at the mercy of "the wealthy people."[212] The terrible alliance of the "private interest of many powerful individuals" with the "confirmed prejudices of great bodies of people" was the greatest "obstacle" to change.[213] From where Smith stood, no "dangers to liberty"[214] could be greater in "free countries" than the disposition of the ordinary people "to judge rashly or capriciously" concerning its government, since its "safety" depends directly on ordinary people's "favourable judgement" about its "conduct."[215]

Smith's Political Theory leads him to acknowledge that modern commercial societies do not "place the greater part of individuals in such situations as naturally form in them … the abilities and virtues" which their "state requires" to function properly. Because of that, the government acquires a duty to "prevent the almost entire corruption and degeneracy of the great body of people."[216] Though Smith named his principles a "system of natural liberty," Istvan Hont has shown that "natural liberty meant the lack of

[210] WN, I.ix.24; IV.i.29; IV.vii.b.49.
[211] LJB, 329.
[212] WN, V.iii.40.
[213] WN, V.iii.60-69.
[214] WN, V.i.f.59.
[215] WN, V.i.f.61.
[216] WN, V.i.f.49.

nonnatural, that is, artificial or political hierarchy between men," and what Smith praised was indeed "the opposite of natural liberty" which is "politics itself" in accordance to human nature.[217]

In Smith's lengthy justification to argue that it was the modern state's duty to generalize and enforce the access to education, he reveals a multidimensional concern for the importance of creating, artificially, the virtues which enabled the people to both "provide … a revenue or subsistence for themselves"[218] and to be good citizens, who cared about each other's needs. He believed that "the more they are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition" and to be "misled" because they would be "more capable of seeing through the interested complaints." Furthermore, an educated, critical, and morally disciplined people "feel themselves, each individually, more respectable, and more likely to obtain the respect of their lawful superiors."[219]

His proposals on education aimed at helping people to negotiate better their own working conditions, avoiding to become "dependents"[220] who could not resist the impositions determined by their hirers.[221] He hoped that by fostering greater independence, combined with the general prosperity he expected from his policies, and laws that were shielded from private interference, people that were taught "elementary … geometry and mechanics,"[222] literacy and "accounting,"[223] could keep exerting their creativity in the workplace, tackling the worst effects of the division of labour.

[217] Hont, 2005, 388.
[218] WN, IV.1.
[219] WN, V.i.f.61.
[220] WN, I.viii.48.
[221] LJA, vi.140.
[222] WN, V.i.f.55.
[223] WN, V.i.f.16.

Apart from the positive duties of the state, one should not underestimate the disciplinary power of his intended negative policies, aiming to prevent business owners from encroaching public treasures and imposing worse living conditions on their own workers. Afterall, Smith constantly evaluates laws or the conduct of sovereigns via the educational and moral influence they may have upon the people subject to them.[224] Smith's conception of Liberalism precluded top-down measures that would strengthen social ties between strangers united by a common constitution and system of government. A system that was too loose would make Liberalism an illusion: good rulers need citizens with good judgment, capable of understanding their role as vigilant in upholding equality and equity and of reinforcing, through public outcry, some discipline or moral modesty in the ruling classes, so that they do not undermine the very purpose of the Rule of Law. The horizontal separation between people in modern societies makes them *more likely to be dominated*. But why would the richest be so prone to being dominators?

2.2.2.2 On inequality and the loss of judgement

We have already hinted here that inequality may affect people's morals and good judgement. One of Smith's most repeated concerns is the lack of time and resources among the poor to provide the attention that their children's needs.[225] Much beyond food, they depend on love and a good deal of "domestic education" in order to grow as mature, upright adults.[226] For Smith, the informal moral education of human beings is everywhere "the institution of nature," unlike "public education" a "contrivance of man,"[227] much more imperfect in stimulating moral sentiments. He expected that the increase in the real

[224] WN, I.viii.12; II.iii.36; V.i.f.40-44.
[225] WN, I.i.6; I.viii.33; LJA, vi.38; LJB, 216; LJB, 330.
[226] WN, IV.v.a.8.
[227] TMS, VI.ii.1.10.

value of wages due to economic growth would, maybe, afford that.[228] People who grow up in total neglect don't receive the admonitions that shape their character during their childhood and adolescence. Without "the inspection and controul of their parents and relations" people become "unprincipled, more dissipated, and more incapable of any application either to study or to business," they don't acquire "useful habits" and can only end up ruined and "unemployed."[229]

Smith's emphasizes that whenever someone faces "indigence," one can expect him to be "driven by want and prompted by envy" to steal other people's "possessions," only stopped by the "powerful arm of the civil magistrate," with no inner moral resources neither to prevent "their hatred of labour and love of present ease and enjoyment," nor their unreasonable expectations of getting away with crimes,[230] due to the natural overestimation of one's own fortune which finds no inner measures of correction.[231] Smith is certain that ordinary crimes are committed by those who have not been properly socialized by their families, who live "sunk very much below the ordinary standard of human nature" and who have become accustomed "to the idea" of their "own meanness," losing themselves in a "slothful and sottish indifference,"[232] because no one has taught them any purpose in life except what they have learned from their impulses to go on surviving.

They recur to crimes first because they don't feel any sympathy for anyone else.[233] More importantly, they do so because in modern societies they are the most "dependents" and "helpless" of all. Their lack of education "renders them altogether depraved both in

[228] WN, I.viii.40.
[229] WN, V.i.f.36.
[230] Paganelli, & Simon, 2022.
[231] WN, V.i.b.2.
[232] TMS, I.iii.2.8.
[233] LJA, ii.179.

mind and body" and unable "to support themselves by work." Smith was confident, nevertheless, that if his proposals were implemented, a lot less people would face this abhorrent situation.[234]

The fact was otherwise to those minorities born with a silver spoon in their mouth, which should be even more of the concern of magistrates and legislators. Their "avarice and ambition" was the "universal" cause of the most powerful and far-reaching abuses,[235] since the greatest "tumult and bustle, … rapine and injustice" of the world originated among the superior ranks. Smith believed to be the only philosopher to have accurately described why this is so, by a peculiarity that Paul Sagar has labelled the "quirk of human rationality."[236]

Due to the first natural principle (self-love), most people are constantly concerned with their station in life. They worry about creating conditions to live as safe as possible from the perils of the weather, the miseries of extreme poverty, and the grievances of dependence on another person's resources. Because of that, they fall for a "deception"[237] according to which the "means for attaining any conveniency or pleasure" are "frequently more regarded than that very conveniency or pleasure" in itself.[238] It takes flashes of attention and continual self-discipline to restrain ourselves from compulsively troubling our ease by attempting to guarantee the means for potentially realizing utilities.[239] We are always subject to this "foolishness"[240] because when we are living on autopilot, we are commonly guided by impulses to ensure our survival, and the more assured it is, the more they shift our attention to what can make our lives richer with "conveniences and

[234] LJA, vi.4-8.
[235] WN, V.i.b.2.
[236] Sagar, 2022, 134.
[237] TMS, IV.1.10.
[238] TMS, IV.1.3.
[239] TMS, IV.1.4.
[240] TMS, IV.1.8.

ornaments." Under the naturalist paradigm, this explains what has "prompted" humans "to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life." The "principle which prompts" anyone "to save" money, namely the "hope"[241] or the "desire of bettering our condition,"[242] the foundation of Smith's economic thought, is an explicit reference to its reliance on the teleological vein of his moral theory.

If we see the "distinction of ranks" as a historical phenomenon defined by a gradually wider separation and differentiation between the life the superior ranks live from the one lived by the ordinary people.[243] They don't share the same public spaces nor practice the same daily activities, they don't meet each other in the same places of leisure, and they don't enjoy the same luxuries nor services. So, when we try to conceive ourselves as wealthy or powerful, these "conditions" of life are generally so "distinct" and *unknown* to us, that our "imagination is apt to paint it" with the "idea of a perfect and happy state."[244]

Nothing in the present could allow us to "possess more" of the currently existing "means of happiness"[245] than pertaining to the upper classes. The problem comes from the fact that any mental act of sympathy inspires in us the sentiments we believe the envisaged situation would naturally excite. We end up susceptible to a "fellow-feeling"[246] for the rich and powerful, confusing the pleasure of imagining ourselves in their shoes

[241] WN, I.viii.44.
[242] WN, II.iii.27.
[243] LJA, iii.109.
[244] TMS, I.iii.2.2.
[245] TMS, IV.1.8.
[246] TMS, I.i.1.1.

with affection for them personally.[247] This culminates in a "disposition of mankind to go along with all the passions of the rich and powerful."[248]

The result of it was that they lived upon another "system of morality," a "loose" one. Since "luxury, wanton, disorderly mirth, the pursuit of pleasure" and "intemperance" don't bring immediate bankruptcy to them, they are not restrained by their equals, and are raised with "a good deal of indulgence."[249] Not to be "censored or reproached" is "one of the privileges of their station,"[250] *but a life without disagreements and denials does not teach the art of conversation, only that of discourse, of unidirectional demand*.[251] Curiously, what sets humans and animals apart, for Smith, is not particularly the faculty or reason, but the "faculty of speech."[252] The combination of both, he stipulates, lies behind the origin of "the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange" which "gives occasion to the division of labour."[253]

The presence of these faculties indicated that human beings had an instinctive "desire of being believed, the desire of persuading, of leading and directing other people."[254] It is manifested at its most superficial level even before we have "been taught to speak," as an attempt to make our "mutual wants intelligible to each other."[255] But it slowly complexifies, becoming part of a search for self-validation, according to which convincing others is a feedback that increases the plausibility of our opinions and the agreeableness of our intentions, and therefore, reveals the value of our judgment and the certainty of our moral correctness. Thus, the first indication Smith provides that higher

[247] TMS, I.iii.2.1.
[248] TMS, I.iii.2.3.
[249] WN, V.i.g.10.
[250] WN, V.i.g.12.
[251] WN, V.i.g.1.
[252] TMS, VII.iv.24.
[253] WN, I.ii.1.
[254] TMS, VII.iv.25.
[255] CCFFL, 1.

stations don't provide the means to mature morally and intellectually is the observation that they take pleasure "in having every{thing} done by their express orders" while "condescending to persuade" their "inferiors" seems like a "mortification." To "use" people "in a haughty way," to "domineer" them, to nourish a true "love of domination and authority"[256] are the stains left by "the pride" of vain men, whose pompous speech is incapable of supporting a dialogue and all the clashes it entails.[257]

To be born in great affluence, Smith says, it to almost annihilate the possibility of knowing what negligence and imprudence even mean.[258] Nothing compels them to the "steady perseverance in the practice of frugality, industry, and application," which means they never come to acquire the virtues of self-care entailed by Nature that are rewarded with material security.[259] In their public affairs, they are looked upon with such an easy approbation, that the virtues they acquire[260] are those related to the art of being looked at, such as extreme politeness, good manners, and oratory.

Their upbringing teaches them "vanity" and nothing else. They are surrounded not by "the esteem of intelligent and well-informed equals," but by "the fanciful and foolish behaviour of "ignorant, presumptuous and proud superiors" and by "dependants"[261] and "worshipers" who improperly "admire" them. "Flattery and falsehood" is almost all they get; they don't learn to truly respect "merit and abilities."[262] Smith is clear that only "the most frivolous and superficial of mankind" can delight in "unmerited" praise.[263] No wonder wealthy inheritors, big companies owners, rural and urban landlords, have generally, in Smith's account, some of the most "superficial minds" and almost none

[256] LJA, iii.114.
[257] WN, III.ii.9-10.
[258] TMS, I.iii.2.6.
[259] TMS, IV.2.6-8.
[260] TMS, I.iii.2.7.
[261] TMS, I.iii.2.6.
[262] TMS, I.iii.3.2-6.
[263] TMS, III.2.11.

"adherence to rules."[264] To spend away in in "festivity, vanity and dissipation," in "frivolous" things like "baubles," "ingenious trinkets" and fineries,[265] is the purpose of having "a large revenue"[266] in the first place.[267] If they had to build it all from scratch, they would be used to a different contextual knowledge. But since they don't, "the natural effect of the ease and security of their situation … renders them too often … incapable of that application of mind" which is necessary for a just, proper and accurate forethought.[268] This is why their spending, their investments, the bills they support, are all so "injudicious,"[269] and can be seen as "a real discouragement" to the "judicious industry and profit" of those from below.[270] If it was not by the "people educated in the middle and inferior ranks" that generally occupy the "highest public offices" due to their virtues, Monarchies would really struggle to last,[271] because there is no worst neighbour than a "court of noblemen" due to its "extravagance," its want of servants, "retainers and dependants," and its encouragement to "idle" and "unproductive labour."[272]

The "chief enjoyment" of their lives becomes the "parade of riches," which is "never so compleat as when they appear to possess those decisive marks of opulence which nobody can possess but themselves." Their shallowness is so great that "scarcity" becomes the variable they use to evaluate the "merit of an object", not its "utility" or "beauty."[273]

In the past, these people could stay in power for a very long time; but modern commercial societies *could* work, Smith hoped, as wheels of fortune whose axle elevates

[264] TMS, V.2.3.
[265] WN, II.iii.38.
[266] WN, V.i.g.42.
[267] TMS, VI.1.12.
[268] WN, I.xi.p.7-8.
[269] WN, II.iii.25-26.
[270] WN, V.i.e.40.
[271] TMS, I.iii.5.
[272] WN, II.iii.12; LJA, vi.4-8. LJB, 203-205.
[273] WN, I.xi.a.31; EPS, IA.I.13.

as the tide rises, because the "natural course of things" indicated that in the "general scramble for preeminence, when some get up others must necessarily fall undermost."[274] The superficial moral and intellectual formation that the situation of the great afforded them ensured this, provided that they did not interfere with laws to prevent their fall,[275] an interference in the perfect and impartial administration of justice. Their situation renders them morally and intellectually immature. The only thing we need to yet demonstrate is that inequality can be behind their insensitivity to injustice.[276]

2.2.2.3 On the injustices committed by the superior ranks

That those born rich struggle to learn the virtues which Nature rewards with material stability is clear: very "few men, born to easy fortunes have ever … been eminent" in their professions, he claims.[277] Most of Smithian economics is indeed *a study on education* that leads him to conclude that its "secret" is "to direct vanity to proper objects."[278] This is why Smith was sure that, under the presence of commerce and manufacturing as available modes of subsistence, the existence of rich people may be useful to the state and the community as a whole, "providing that there is a graduall" and as we've seen cyclical "descent of fortunes,"[279] because their expenses pulled the division of labour,[280] while freeing people from personal dependency on them.

But the reason why they are so prone *to commit or accept injustices* is related to an inability to sympathize with those below them, and this is what explains why, before

[274] LJA, vi.55.
[275] Rothschild, 2001.
[276] TMS, VI.2.16.
[277] WN, V.i.f.4.
[278] TMS, VI.iii.46.
[279] LJA, iii.139.
[280] WN, I.i.4.

modern commercial society, the history of the world was constantly a history of domination of the few over the many. The limit-case Smith provides is the difference between a rich slaveowner and a poor one. First of all, slavery is the "most miserable" and "cruel" condition anyone may be subject to, because the slave's subsistence is "the most dependent and uncertain" since "their lives, their liberty, and property" are entirely "at the mercy of the caprice and whim of another."[281]

Worse than that, because with no security nor liberty, *the virtue of industry is not unleashed*, so to speak, since self-preservation would rather incline one to work the least he can, the only way to increase profits while owning slaves would be by squeezing labour out of them through the "most tyrannical authority" and constant violence,[282] a condition that is so abominable, that if "slavery had to be established" so that "opulence and freedom" – "these greatest blessings" – could have come about in human history, any "humane man" led by the impartial spectator would wish that the world was still poor and unfree.[283]

The richer the slaveowner, the greater "the disproportion betwixt" him and his slaves, the less he will look upon them "as being of the same kind." "The great never look upon their inferiors as their fellow-creatures"[284] of the same "species".[285] "The greater the difference, the less" our feelings "are affected" by other people's "misfortunes." On the other hand, a poor "master" who eats at the same table, wears very similar clothes and works in the same fields as his slave, sees him as "almost an equall," being "therefore the

[281] LJA, iii.92-97.
[282] LJA, iii.105.
[283] LJA, iii.111.
[284] TMS, I.iii.2.5.
[285] WN, III.iii.8.

more capable" of having "compassion," one for the other, because their "sympathy" is affected.[286]

This explains why rich businessmen and traders often don't sympathize with the suffering of their workers caused by the policies that they defended, even when they had sufficient proximity as to manipulate them into fighting for their own causes. If they were able to truly "listen to the dictates of reason and humanity," Smith writes, they would move past prejudices and agree that well-paid labour, together with limits on working hours, make people much more productive and happier in the long run.[287] Smith's history, derived from his naturalist paradigm, is described as a series of contingent struggles which have fortunately and not necessarily resulted in laws that are not determined in a top-down manner, but are attentive to the potentially enlightened opinion of mankind.

It was clear for him that powerful people of "corrupt morals" write laws "in blood."[288] The stiffening of their fellow-feelings for those below, their lack of sympathy, their distance, explain, according to Smithian moral theory, the appeal that authoritarian systems of political economy could have upon legislators and policymakers. Nothing much could be done about the fact that the "superficial weakness and trivial folly" of the rich and powerful "hinder them from ever turning their eyes inwards" and "seeing themselves in that despicable point of view" in which they should be seen, if all deceptions vanished from people's observation.[289] But the bad implications that could come from their moral and intellectual failure could be "easily prevented," in Smith's mind, if it was not by the powerful interests standing in the way of the application of this

[286] LJA, iii.209-210.
[287] WN, I.viii.44.
[288] WN, IV.viii.17-20.
[289] TMS, III.2.4.

remedy: they should simply be restricted from influencing the principles that ought to be the backbone of laws and policies.[290]

It thus becomes very easy to see that Smith's proposals for taxation of any revenue that will not be employed to maintain productive labour, such as rents from urban and rural landlords and the interest upon fortunes – incomes that "cost them neither labour nor care," are part of a systematic scheme of moral re-disciplining. In the case of landlords this is even more explicit, as Smith believed they were the people most clearly subject to intellectual and moral immaturity. He adds to these taxes, fines aiming to punish landlords who insist on dictating how their tenants should conduct their business on the leased lands and properties, and tax reductions for those that prove to have plans to cultivate their lands.[291]

Through politics, Smith provides a framework for ordinary people to choose their employments and work in the way that most pleases them, with no worries about any kind of physical and mental unfreedom that may result from a personal imposition of the morally immature wealthy.[292] This whole picture ends up being in the best interest of society as a whole, also in terms of enrichment, with no need on the sovereign's part of "superintending the industry of private people, and of directing it."[293]

Having understood why vertical and horizontal social distances reinforce the conversion of inequality into domination, and why is it that the superior ranks so often commit injustices, we must proceed to finally ask: why is it that commercial societies afford unique opportunities for the dissipation of personal power?

[290] WN, IV.iii.c.9.
[291] WN, I.xi.p.7-8.
[292] WN, IV.vii.b.44.
[293] WN, IV.ix.51.

3. A NATURALIST POLITICAL THEORY

To reconstruct Smith's account of "modern history"[294] using as an interpretative axis the naturalist paradigm at work is an important endeavour for a future work. They are useful to get the nuances behind his reform proposals, but for now I will restrain myself in explaining why Smith believed that without urgent reforms, Modernity would become "an optimum moment" that "was reached and passed,"[295] when the "liberty" once "lost" and recently "regained," would seem to have gone astray all over again.[296]

Paul Sagar[297] has devoted a great deal of work to reconstructing Smith's historical-political vision. The naturalist paradigm presented here is not a big part of his narrative, and his political focus has shifted the focus from the epistemological significance of "moral causes" in his theory. I believe this present thesis can be seen as an addition to his study, one that makes it even clearer the coherence of Smith's philosophical system with his liberal proposals, also explaining why they are only appropriate to modern states of commercial societies and should not be seen as a *laissez-faire absolutist*.

3.1 The unique opportunity of modern states

When reflecting about the similarities between the theoretical history of mankind provided by Rousseau and Mandeville, Smith noted that according to both,

[294] WN, III.iii.8.
[295] Pocock, 1975, 498.
[296] Hont, 2009, 165.
[297] Sagar, 2022, 10-113; 143-211.

> those laws of justice, which maintain the present inequality amongst mankind, were originally the inventions of the cunning and the powerful, in order to maintain or to acquire an unnatural and unjust superiority over the rest of their fellow-creatures.[298]

In line with his letter to the Edinburgh Review, Smith told his students that the institution of government arose "as a combination of the rich to oppress the poor, and preserve to themselves the inequality of the goods which would otherwise be soon destroyed by the attacks of the poor", forcing society to be equal "by open violence" but at the same time spreading poverty.[299] It all starts with durable modes of appropriation. While the simple objects and fresh foods of hunters and gatherers from indigenous tribes do not allow any leader to sustain a very disproportionate power over others, much less to pass on, as an inheritance, something of his own that would place his children above those of others, there was not much centralization.[300] The chiefs of different families had an almost equal voice to deliberate, and only occasionally certain "personal qualifications" would give one a short-term pre-eminence.[301] There was plenty of liberty, he believed, and to impose an extraneous and formal law upon them would be considered a grievance, which is why "the natural progress of law and government is … slower than the natural progress" of commerce and rude forms of manufacturing.[302]

It is only when other modes of subsistence which support larger populations, like grazing, agriculture and commerce, become widespread among a community – so that people don't need to rely on what is readily available in natural ecosystems, and its members have no culturally available means to find subsistence in different ways – that the possibility that some have more than they need, and others have nothing to ensure

[298] EPS, LER.11.
[299] LJA, iv.23.
[300] WN, V.i.b.5.
[301] WN, V.i.b.5.
[302] WN, IV.vii.b.

their survival arises. It is, then, that "civil government" is "instituted for the security of property," defending "the rich against the poor, or all of those who have some property against those who have none at all."[303]

The dispossessed and those born under the affluence that past virtues have built may both lack sympathy for one another, without any kind of 'education' to teach those below to respect the authority of those from above. Governments, thus, arise as a simple power apparatus, that forbade dispossessed people from finding subsistence through violence. Sustaining subordination, governments emerge to enforce social order amidst inequality. As people get used to some families inheriting more and more properties from their ancestors, the more they accept their ruling, for various reasons related to self-preservation and natural deference for superiors.[304] It is important to notice that nothing implied in this 'progressive' changes of circumstances that the life of the majority of mankind was getting any better, a nuance that affords Smith great analytical prowess and space for criticism. Though it is a well-known sentence written by Smith that "an industrious and frugal peasant" from modern Europe has a better "accommodation" than an "African king,"[305] he also argued that it was "not probable" that "the poor day labourer or indigent farmer should be more at ease" amidst "oppression and tyranny" than "the savage" who does not face "landlords, usurers, or tax gatherers."[306]

Smith uses an analysis of the subsistence modes of each society to derive a political theory closely associated with the limits and economic possibilities of each people. It is as if the solutions that each people found to sustain themselves delimited how their modes of organization could function. Labour relations, modes of production and exchange or

[303] WN, V.i.b.12.
[304] WN, V.i.b.7-8.
[305] WN, I.i.11.
[306] LJA, vi.24.

sharing, are all extremely relevant to understanding how human struggle takes place in different societies and what can individuals do to lead a sufficiently peaceful life. To understand what is special about commercial societies, let's look at how Smith describes other polities.

The power held by the superior ranks in "shepherdic," "allodial," "feudal" or other similar polities could only be sustained through time in the same generational line – even though the superiority of the few rendered them so prone to vices as well – because *there are no means to dissipate their power away through the dissipation of their particular modes of wealth,* the bulk of which were generally feeble materials destined to clothing and lodging, and, mainly, food in the form of cattle or crops.

In fact, the same vices naturally entailed by their affluent situation could only reinforce their domination over their inferiors. Because their "stomach" is "limited" just like everyone else's, and the poor state of techniques meant that their potentially unlimited desire for greater conveniences and ornaments in their dresses, equipages and dwellings could not be continuously satisfied,[307] they were simply unable to convert all that was produced under their dominions into means of their own pleasure. In such polities, the relatively rich are unable to "lay out" their "whole fortune" on themselves, and the "only way" to "dispose of it" becomes to "give it out to others" that become "dependent" on them.[308]

The "nations of shepherds" of "Tartarian descent", Smith claims, "are always strangers to every sort of luxury, and great wealth can scarce ever be dissipated among them by improvident profusion."[309] Under such conditions, there's no comparable polity

[307] WN, I.xi.c.7.
[308] LJA, i.118-119.
[309] WN, V.i.b.10.

"in which the superiority of fortunes gives so great authority to those who possess it" and "subordination" is "more perfectly established."[310] The same rang true to agricultural societies, but since land produce provides both the raw materials for arts and manufacturing, and a more consistent surplus to drive trade in fairs, it was easier for a town to establish itself as a market which could drain the rich's resources away.[311] Knowing that in his classes Smith said that the "Arabians … have a little agriculture",[312] it is easier to understand why in the WN he claims that the "Arabian scherif" had great authority, but could not maintain an "altogether despotical" form of government.[313]

Under these circumstances, people may only find subsistence by subservience, which explains Smith's concern in narrating the changes in the four most degrading types of relations between rich and poor in Europe, slavery, serfdom, villainy, and courtly servility, towards free labour managed by contracts. Wherever people are personally dependent on others, they are subject to their vilest demands. The difference between an independent artisan in a borough protected by the king, and a peasant tied to the land of one of the barons who competed for power, is that the former, having as his clients nobles from different kingdoms, does not feel himself imprisoned, and would not fight a war for any of them, while the latter goes wherever he is told.[314] Suffices to say that this is a state of life extremely "uncertain,"[315] permeated by "vexations" and "arbitrariness,"[316] "violence" and "insecurity."[317] The self-love principle of vulnerable people under these conditions leads them to idleness, because there is no point in trying too hard to produce more than enough to survive.

[310] WN, V.i.b.7.
[311] WN, III.i.4.
[312] LJA, i.29.
[313] WN, V.i.b.7.
[314] WN, III.iv.6-14.
[315] WN, V.ii.b.4.
[316] WN, III.ii.16-17.
[317] WN, III.iv.2-3.

But whenever there are many ways of "spending the greatest revenue upon his own person", any "rich man" faces too big a temptation and too little restraint – for "he frequently has no bounds to his vanity."[318] Smith's history of the "silent operation" of "foreign commerce" which produced the greatest "revolutions" in the people's "welfare" is a history of how the spread of the commerce of manufactures, which afforded the endless desire for conveniences and ornaments and the constant creation of new "inventions" to appeal to people's quirk of reason and vanity, is a history of how the "disordered" sentiments of the powerful led them to bargain away their "love of domination" with people who perceived, in their own contexts, opportunities that nurtured their hopes of bettering their condition,[319] and decided to "struggle for liberty."[320]

This is how, ultimately, Europe has inherited the institutions that made it "modern": not commerce nor manufactures, but the division and independence of sovereign powers which abide by the rule of law. They could, potentially, hinder governmental policy and law from being interfered with by private interests, and finally secure the impartiality and perfect administration of justice that would prevent personal domination and dependence altogether. Smith's lament is even louder when it comes to Britain, because the Common Law and the ruling of precedents meant that no living person, from whatever "order of men" could bent constitutional principles to the winds of the times. *Authority could finally have nobler, more positive purposes than maintaining inequality*.

[318] WN, III.iv.16.
[319] WN, I.x.c.63; III.iv.6-14; V.i.b.20-21; V.i.f.44; V.i.g.25; LJB, 22-23; 59-63; LRBL, ii.203; CAS, Letter 117; 208.
[320] LJA, iv.72-73.

3.2 Final remarks

Smith wished to see economic growth resulting from good laws and good policies that spread secure independence, together with the conditions for good judgement and moral self-discipline, the "greatest encouragements to industry."[321] The principles of Justice, unlike the way authority was generally carried on throughout world history, offered Smith no other way to do so than by "conquering rooted prejudices" always through the powers of "reason and persuasion" and never attempting "to subdue them by force."[322] The only exceptions he avowed were related to what had to be inevitably imposed by force, such as taxes or regulations, because without them, the state would not be able to provide security at all, nor to afford its new modern purposes for the sake of non-domination. Smith aimed to make the most out of these legitimate interferences with "natural liberty" justified for the sake of the preservation of everybody's liberty.[323]

His main objective was to provide statesmen with a "general, and even systematic, idea of the perfection of policy"[324] without attempting to overrule that contextual knowledge that only "the wisdom of future statesmen and legislators" could have recourse to.[325] There was, however, a problem that Smith himself identified: to be effective, measures that sought to put an end to the influence of wealth on the winds of politics would need to circumvent the existing power that would do everything to prevent them from being implemented in the first place! He hoped that better education, a focus on public works that increased competition, and tax reforms would help people to support those of great public spirit so that the reforms would come to fruition; but the history of British economic policies itself reveals that there were no political conditions for their

[321] WN, I.viii.47.
[322] TMS, VI.ii.2.16.
[323] WN, II.ii.106.
[324] TMS, VI.II.2.18.
[325] WN, IV.vii.c.44.

proposals to be carried out back then.[326] In Smith's view, finally, a morally disciplined people with better judgement was *a sine qua non* condition to be a freer people. As Paul Sagar has very well identified, the theoretical problem was precisely how to remove the pre-existing structures of unfreedom through the ethical framework provided by his commitment to Liberalism.[327]

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What I hope to have enlightened with this thesis is how Smith's Liberalism could rely on a very strong virtue ethics, one that affords many interesting conclusions regarding the social distances and cleavages we are so commonly complaining in today's world. At least, I hope to have shed a better light on what did Smith mean when he wrote that the "civil magistrate" should be entrusted to more than just "restraining injustice" in order to promote "prosperity, by establishing good disciplining and by discouraging every sort of vice."[328]

Smith complexly articulated one of the greatest challenges of modern times: how can we prevent horizontal distances between people – factionalism, sectarianism, and tribalist prejudices – from reinforcing vertical distances' translation into new modes of domination from the only order of people that he believed not to have their interests aligned to the public's in commercial societies, that of merchants and manufacturers. Horizontal distances are those that most harm the conditions for good judgment and good conduct of ordinary people, and the more distant they are from one another, in Smith's view, the more they are subject to dependence on powerful, non-ordinary people raised far from the "bulk of Mankind."

[326] Boucoyannis, 2013.
[327] Sagar, 2022.
[328] TMS, II.ii.1.8.

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