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# ADAM SMITH, ANTI-STOIC

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# Adam Smith, Anti-Stoic

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## Abstract

Commerce changes the production of wealth in a society as well as its ethics. What is appropriate in a non-commercial society is not necessarily appropriate in a commercial one. Adam Smith criticizes Stoic self-command in commercial societies, rather than embracing it, as is often suggested. He argues that Stoicism, with its promotion of indifference to passions, is an ethic appropriate for savages. Savages live in hard conditions where expressing emotions is detrimental and reprehensible. In contrast, the ease of life brought about by commerce fosters the appropriate expressions and sharing of emotions. Imposing Stoicism on a commercial society is therefore imposing an ethic for savages onto a refined society—something to abhor. Smith's rejection of Stoicism in commercial societies can thus be seen as a defense of commerce.

JEL: B12, B15, D91, F69, O1, Z1

Key words: Adam Smith, Stoicism, Commerce, Commercial Societies, Savages, Expression of Emotions, Insensitivity.

## Adam Smith, Anti-Stoic

Commerce, and the wealth that comes with it, is often criticized for destroying traditional ethical systems and social structures. This destruction can be seen as leaving a vacuum, therefore worth criticizing it, or as replacing the old system with a new one (for an overview see for example Berry 1994, 2013). For Adam Smith (1723-1790) commerce does not leave a moral vacuum, but it changes the mores of a society. It replaces a system that would no longer be appropriate with a system that, under the different circumstances, is more appropriate. Smith therefore offers a defense of commerce based not only on economic ground but also on a moral ground (for an overview see, among others, Paganelli 2010, 2017a). His position on Stoicism exemplifies our claim.

We suggest that Smith considers the emphasis that ancient Stoicism placed on self-command an ethic suited to savages rather than to civilized people, and he disapproves of embracing Stoic self-command among non-savages, or in circumstances different from those of savages. For Smith, self-command is not a sort of on and off switch, rather, self-command over passions implies a continuum of their expressions, Stoicism taking one extreme of it. Differently from the Stoics, for Smith, the appropriate degree of self-command, in terms of *degree of expression* of emotions, varies with historical circumstances and is inversely proportional to the improvement of living conditions.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS (1759)) Smith argues that any expression of emotions is inappropriate among people who live in such harsh conditions as savages; for such people, Stoical self-command, or *apatheia*, has to be the norm. By contrast, the ease generated by commercial societies renders acceptable a freer expression and sharing of emotions. Rather than complete restraint of the expressions of the passions, commerce allows for the appropriate degree of expression of sentiments. This ‘free communication of

sentiments and opinions’ represents the ‘most delightful harmony’ individuals can obtain (TMS VII.iv.28). Far from embracing Stoicism, albeit moderately, for Smith the adoption of Stoic self-command, while appropriate in savage societies, seems to be something to abhor in commercial societies. We therefore see Smith anti-Stoicism for a commercial society as a defense of commerce: it is true that commerce pushes aside the existing set of moral values. But it replaces it with a different one. And this is appropriate given the different material circumstances that commerce creates.

We therefore suggest an alternative interpretation of Adam Smith’s frequent references to Stoicism commonly present in the literature and often associated with the editors of the *Glasgow edition* who hold that in Smith ‘self-command has come to permeate the whole of virtue, an indication of the way in which Stoicism permeated his reflection over the whole range of ethics and social science’ (Raphael and Macfie 1976, 6). This alleged influence of Stoicism on Smith includes the influence of ‘the strand of Christian Stoicism chiefly associated with his teacher, Francis Hutcheson’ (Clarke 2000; see also Jones 2010, 92; Hanley 2009, 151–52; Evensky 1987, 450).<sup>1</sup> More generally, the literature on the various points of convergence between Smith’s thought and that of the Stoics is vast (for an overview, see for example Brown 1997; Maurer 2016).<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge but do not engage here with the discussion of the Stoic theme of the divine design of Providence, in particular regarding the idea of the ‘invisible hand’,<sup>3</sup> of the reference to Stoic *oikeiosis* related to the ‘circle of sympathy’,<sup>4</sup> or with the distinction between an ideal perfect virtue and a popular propriety

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<sup>1</sup> Also Raphael and Macfie (1976, 6) refer to ‘a combination of Stoic and Christian virtues – or, in philosophical terms, a combination of Stoicism and Hutcheson’. On the relation between Hutcheson and the Stoic philosophy see Maurer 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For criticisms of the editors taking Stoicism too literally see among others Montes 2003, 2008; Schliesser 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See among others Macfie 1967; Viner 1972; Evensky 1987; Kleer 1995; Clarke 2000; Hill 2001; Otteson 2002; Waterman 2002; Force 2003; Ross 2010 and cf. among others Pack 1991; Brubaker 2006; Rothschild 2013; Heydt 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See Nieli 1986. Cf. also Hanley 2009; Forman-Barzilai 2010.

accessible to everyone.<sup>5</sup> We do not question that all these issues may be present to a certain degree in Smith's thought. Instead, we focus only on Smith's treatment of Stoic self-command, and we suggest that Smith's ethic was *not* 'predominantly Stoic' (Raphael and Macfie 1976, 10) or 'neo-stoic' (Muller 1993) or even that it was inclined towards a 'mitigated Stoicism' (Vivenza 2001, 59)<sup>6</sup> but rather that Smith's approbation of Stoic self-command was confined to savage societies and not to commercial societies.

Our interpretation of Smith "Stoicism", or lack of it, offers a consistent reading of Smith's defense of commerce. Commerce is a silent revolution which changes means of production, level and distribution of wealth, institutions, forms of government, as well as ethics and what is considered appropriate and what is consider inappropriate. The substitution of system of mores for another allows Smith to see both systems as appropriate under their particular set of circumstances, but not under others. Like institutions, mores, and the degree of expression of emotions that self-command controls, adapt to different environments. While Stoicism and its lack of expression of emotions is appropriate and admirable in a savage or savage-like society, it is no longer appropriate in a commercial society. Commerce is based on the exchange of goods and services as well as on the exchange of passions, which requires a "free communication of sentiments" instead of the lack of their expression.

### **The insensitive and the sensitive Stoic**

On the whole it would be difficult to justify Smith's alleged Stoicism on the ground of his treatment of the 'ancient Stoics' of Greece and their endorsement of apathy alone (Maurer 2016). Smith's criticism of the Stoic Chrysippus is severe and explicit. Reputed as one of the greatest logicians of his time, Chrysippus was the third head of the Stoic school but was also

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<sup>5</sup> See Waszek 1984; Dickey 1986; Muller 1993; Brown 1994; Vivenza 2001; Hanley 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Among the scholars advocating the idea of a moderated Stoicism of Smith see also Brown 1994; Fitzgibbons 1995; Griswold 1996, 1999; Montes 2008, 2016; Hanley 2009; Forman-Barzilai 2010. Cf. Carrasco 2004.

considered as the second founder of Stoicism (Mates 1953, 7). Smith describes Chrysippus as being ‘a mere dialectical pedant [...] who reduced their doctrines into a scholastic or technical system of artificial definitions, divisions, and subdivisions; one of the most effectual expedients, perhaps, for extinguishing whatever degree of good sense there may be in any moral or metaphysical doctrine’ (TMS VII.ii.1.41).

Chrysippus is the most fervent upholder of the hegemony of reason (*logos*) over the passions, to the extent that passions are simply a weakness within reason itself. For Chrysippus *apatheia*, in the sense of total absence of all passions, means freedom from any possible disturbance of the tranquility of the soul, and thus complete self-command (Pohlenz 1959, 223–318). But this negation of human sensitivity is contrary to Smith’s moral theory, based on sentiments and on sharing them with others (see also Vivenza 2001, 64–75; Montes 2008, 36). Smith’s critique of this kind of Stoic apathy is indeed scathing, to the effect that ‘all the metaphysical sophisms by which it is supported can seldom serve any other purpose than to blow up the hard insensibility of a coxcomb to ten times its native impertinence’ (TMS III.3.14).

Smith holds that the total lack of sensibility would take away the whole merit of self-command (TMS VI.iii.19). A Stoic sage devoid of sensitivity would therefore be unworthy of merit. Smith writes that a man who is totally insensible to bodily pain would not deserve any applause from showing no pain in a severely painful situation. Not so for a man who feels the normal disappointments of life: if he behaves with firmness when suffering unexpected misfortunes, he entirely deserves our admiration, because he demonstrates a great effort to command the pain he feels (TMS III.3.44).

As Smith sees it, genuine, noble Stoic self-command does not require total ‘eradication’ of our sensitivity towards others (TMS III.3.14) and towards ourselves (TMS VII.ii.1.46). Rather, it entails command over the passions, so that no unreasonable expression

of them occurs (Pohlenz 1959, 307–309 and 346). In his criticism of Chrysippus, Smith sets out to vindicate a different connotation of the Stoic sage, more genuine, as he sees it, and closer to the thought of Zeno. The stoical sage is not someone who achieves total insensitivity, but rather someone who is able to control passions and restrain their expression, to the extent of appearing insensitive while remaining sensitive (TMS VII.ii.1.47).<sup>7</sup>

This more moderate version of the stoical sage shows some affinity with that of the Academics and Peripatetics, as Smith himself points out (TMS VII.ii.1.17).<sup>8</sup> Academics and Peripatetics, direct opponents of the Stoics, criticize their extreme apathy, while accepting ‘some degree of perturbation as suitable to the weakness of human nature, and as useful to so imperfect a creature as man’ (TMS VII.ii.1.17). In his criticism of Chrysippus Smith refers to Seneca. The Roman Stoics, Seneca and Cicero in particular, present critical arguments similar to the ones offered by Academics and Peripatetics, and appear more indulgent towards the passions than Chrysippus (TMS VII.ii.1.42).<sup>9</sup> The ancient Stoics imply that virtue requires complete self-command. But this makes Stoic self-command into ‘metaphysical sophisms’ which drive it to deny any merit to all but the totally virtuous. If man is an imperfect creature, he cannot reach that rare perfect virtue of excellence. The more genuine stoical sage, as conceived by Seneca, able to feel passions and to control them instead of eradicating them, accepts that everyone can at least act with propriety and thus be merit-worthy.<sup>10</sup> But this is not

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Brown 1994; Fitzgibbons 1995; Griswold 1996, 1999; Vivenza 2001; Montes 2008, 2016; Hanley 2009; Forman-Barzilai 2010.

<sup>8</sup> On the vehemence of the opposition between Academics and Peripatetics, and in particular on the issue of apathy, see Pohlenz 1959, 344–347.

<sup>9</sup> On the criticism of the insensitivity upheld by Chrysippus made by Posidonius and followed independently by Cicero and Seneca and on the difference between the intransigent position of the Greek Stoics, and in particular Chrysippus, and the more indulgent attitude towards sensitivity shown by the Romans see Pohlenz 1959. On a certain preference for the Roman Stoics as compared with the Greeks on the part of Smith and on their differences, see Raphael and Macfie 1976, 7; Waszek 1984, 604; Fitzgibbons 1995, 59–60; Montes 2008, 31–33.

<sup>10</sup> On the connotation of *ordinary morality* attributed by the Stoics and by Smith, and the difference between *virtue* and *propriety*, see Waszek 1984, 594–604; Griswold 1999, 6–9; Vivenza 2001, 60; Levy and Peart 2008, 62; Forman-Barzilai 2010, 111. On an Aristotelian influence on Smith’s idea of propriety, see Hanley 2009;



very different from the Academic or Peripatetic sage who, in turn, according to Smith, constitutes very nearly the character of the Epicurean sage (TMS VI.i.15 and VII.ii.1.17).<sup>11</sup>

Stoic self-command requires a complete control of the passions and the lack of their expression. For Smith, self-command includes a continuum of the expression of the passions instead. Stoicism is on one extreme, with its complete lack of expression of them. An infant is on the other extreme, with a complete lack of command on the expression of passions. A mature human being requires self-command for any meaningful interaction with other human being. Self-command remains a virtue in Smith's system. The challenge Smith brings to Stoicism is that its virtue consists also in different degrees which are appropriate in different circumstances, and not always a complete suppression of the expression of our passions. This is how Stoicism and its complete lack of expression of passions becomes a special case, appropriate only under specific circumstances.

### *Stormy skies*

Even with the distinction between the insensitive and the sensitive forms of Stoicism, for Smith Stoic self-command remains inappropriate for commercial societies. Insensitive Stoic ethics, as expounded by the Greek Chrysippus, comes in for severe criticism because it suppresses that harmony of feelings that commerce promotes. Sensitive Stoic ethics, as advocated by the Roman Seneca, censures the expression of passions and is therefore also inadequate in commercial societies, unable to adjust to the more sensitive mankind that commerce brings about. However, Smith recognizes that there are conditions under which the Stoic lack of expression of passions is appropriate.

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Broadie 2010, 79–89. On Cicero being an academic in speculation but a Stoic in practical morality see also Ferguson 1792, 8.

<sup>11</sup> On Smith's project going beyond the traditional opposition between Stoicism and Epicureism see Haakonssen 2002, xi–xxi. Cf. Ross (2010, 411) on Smith's inconsistency with the Epicurean moral philosophy; and Brooke (2012, 205–7) on Smith 'modern Epicureanism'.

For Smith, the circumstances that call for a complete command of the expression of passions and opinions, even to the extent of total dissimulation (TMS VI.iii.12), the circumstances representing the great school of self-command, the only masters from whom we can learn the exercise of this virtue, are those of constant hardships, dangers, injuries, misfortunes, the violence of factions, and the hardships and hazard of war (i.e. TMS III.3.24, III.3.36, VI.3.27). This permanent condition of continual exposure to the risk of death, with no escape from it at home or abroad, is a condition that drives everybody to become accustomed to visions of violent death, and to react in a way that an impartial spectator would approve of under the circumstances—with Stoical self-command:

But every man naturally, or rather necessarily, familiarizes his imagination with the distresses to which he foresees that his situation may frequently expose him. It is impossible that a sailor should not frequently think of storms and shipwrecks, and foundering at sea, and of how he himself is likely both to feel and to act upon such occasions. It was impossible, in the same manner, that a Grecian patriot or hero should not familiarize his imagination with all the different calamities to which he was sensible his situation must frequently, or rather constantly expose him. (TMS VII.ii.1.28)

The metaphor of the storm which Smith uses in this passage is a recurrent motif in TMS (I.iii.3.5, III.3.37, IV.1.8, VII.ii.1.20, VII.ii.1.25, VII.ii.1.28). Smith seems to have found it particularly apt to evoke the conditions in which stoical self-command proves appropriate and admirable. Being constantly exposed to the violence of storms implies imaginative familiarization with the tangible possibility of violent death, and thus becoming accustomed to be always ready to exercise due self-command. ‘When the storm is at a

distance', times are 'quiet and peaceable' (TMS I.iii.3.6), 'but under the boisterous and stormy sky of war and faction, of public tumult and confusion, the sturdy severity of self-command prospers the most, and can be the most successfully cultivated' (TMS III.3.37).

Smith's account of the emergence of Stoicism is consistent with this view. As he sees it, it is precisely a set of historical circumstances characterized by ceaseless wars and violence that created the fertile ground from which stoical thought sprang and propagated among the Greeks (TMS VII.ii.1.28). Stoicism is engendered in the 'stormy sky of war and faction', and is a philosophy that seems to be a natural and necessary response to such events (Levy and Peart 2008, 63). Such conditions may have driven the Stoics to universalize a philosophical position prompted by historical contingencies, reducing it practically to a kind of casuistry, with the conviction that it was the fate of all men to have to brave 'the stormy ocean of human life' (TMS VII.ii.1.25).

In civilized societies, the severe hardships that generate Stoic self-command come basically only from the experience of war (TMS III.3.37). Only a soldier may have enough self-command to show calmness after a cannon ball blows up his leg. And we properly approve of it (TMS III.3.26). But there are other kinds of societies in which it is common to experience such a 'disorderly state of things' (TMS VII.ii.1.28) which would lead an impartial spectator to approve of a similar extreme restraint. The societies more regularly facing these harsh circumstances are the societies of savages. A savage, in fact, 'is in continual danger: he is often exposed to the greatest extremities of hunger, and frequently dies of pure want... [he] undergoes a sort of Spartan discipline, and by the necessity of his situation is inured to every sort of hardship', thereby achieving 'absolute self-command' (TMS V.2.9). Note that Smith does not use the term 'savages' in a disparaging way. 'Savage' is a specific term that indicates a society of hunter-gathers. A pastoral society is often referred

to as barbarian. Agricultural and commercial societies are civilized, and commercial societies are also refined and polite (Sebastiani 2013).

Given the constant exposure to death that savages face, no impartial spectator would approve of seeking out the sympathy of others with a show of one's emotions amidst those who are constantly facing the same adversities:

His circumstances not only habituate him to every sort of distress, but teach him to give way to none of the passions which that distress is apt to excite. He can expect from his countrymen no sympathy or indulgence for such weakness. Before we can feel much for others, we must in some measure be at ease ourselves. If our own misery pinches us very severely, we have no leisure to attend to that of our neighbour: and all savages are too much occupied with their own wants and necessities, to give much attention to those of another person. A savage, therefore, whatever be the nature of his distress, expects no sympathy from those about him, and disdains, upon that account, to expose himself, by allowing the least weakness to escape him. His passions, how furious and violent soever, are never permitted to disturb the serenity of his countenance or the composure of his conduct and behaviour. (TMS V.2.9).

Smith returns to the similarity between the Greeks in a constant state of war and the American savages several times: in both cases, it is constant hardship which causes the achievement of 'absolute self-command' (TMS V.2.9). Thus, when a savage is made prisoner of war, he submits to the most dreadful torments without ever displaying any other passion but contempt of his enemies (TMS V.2.9). Furthermore:

As an American savage prepares his *death-song*, and considers how he should act when he has fallen into the hands of his enemies, and is by them put to death in the most lingering tortures, and amidst the insults and derision of all the spectators; so a Grecian patriot or hero could not avoid frequently employing his thoughts in considering what he ought both to suffer and to do in banishment, in captivity, when reduced to slavery, when put to the torture, when brought to the scaffold. (VII.ii.1.28. Emphasis added)

Savages are in such a state of ceaseless precariousness and peril, that there is no choice for them but to get accustomed to death and to face their situation without expressing any emotions. Therefore, Stoic self-command is appropriate and approvable for savages and savage-like conditions.

### **Stoicism as the death-song of savages**

Accustomed to the idea of facing death through violence or indigence, savages early on familiarize themselves with the thought of death through the preparation of their *death-song*. Smith explains how this comes about:

Every savage is said to prepare himself from his earliest youth for this dreadful end. He composes, for this purpose, what they call the *song of death*, a song which he is to sing when he has fallen into the hands of his enemies, and is expiring under the tortures which they inflict upon him. It [...] expresses the highest contempt of death and pain. He sings this song upon all extraordinary occasions, when he goes out to war, when he meets his enemies in the field, or whenever he has a mind to show that he has familiarized his imagination to the most dreadful misfortunes, and that no

human event can daunt his resolution, or alter his purpose. The same contempt of death and torture prevails among all other savage nations. (TMS V.2.9. Emphasis added)

The death of an American savage, who, when taken prisoner, accepts his death by torture and faces it with ‘contempt’ is a form of the ‘most complete contentment with every event which the current of human affairs could possibly cast up’. That contempt is what Smith uses to connect savagery and the origins of Stoicism: ‘This contempt of life and death, [...] may be considered as the [...] fundamental doctrine[...] upon which rested the whole fabric of Stoical morality’ (VII.ii.1.35).

Just as their extreme living conditions drive savages to get accustomed to the thought of death and to shedding of every form of sensitivity, to the extent of being able to engage in infanticide (TMS V.2.15), so the Stoical philosophers ‘endeavoured to point out the comforts which a man might still enjoy when reduced to poverty, [...] the considerations which might contribute to support his constancy under the agonies of pain and even of torture, in sickness, in sorrow for the loss of children, for the death of friends and relations, etc.’ (TMS VII.ii.1.29). Therefore:

Those philosophers, in short, prepared *a death-song*, if I may say so, which the Grecian patriots and heroes might make use of upon the proper occasions; and, of all the different sects, the Stoics, I think it must be acknowledged, had prepared by far the most animated and spirited song. (TMS VII.ii.1.30. Emphasis added)

Thus, for Smith, Stoicism is a sort of death-song,<sup>12</sup> a philosophy appropriate for the conditions of systemic indigence as experienced by savages, and/or permanent war. Any impartial spectator would approve of the absolute self-command of the savages, considering the general conditions in which they lead their lives. Smith therefore does not reject the Stoics' contempt for life in general, as Emma Rothschild claims (2013, 321), but only in those circumstances in which it is no longer required, that is to say where a savage existence, or conditions of generalized war, no longer exist.

### *Mild sunshine*

Severely deprived and harsh conditions are not necessarily permanent. Should they change, then the impartial spectator's judgement of the expression of emotions would be bound to change too, and Stoicism itself would no longer be appropriate.

Smith finds the stoical self-command of the American savages admirable, yet he does not hesitate to point out that, while the savage subjected to torture is able to bear his torments without showing any suffering, his torturers similarly show no compassion. Tortured and torturers alike are able to play both roles, without expressing any feelings. Smith associates the insensitivity shown towards themselves with the insensitivity shown towards others. In the section dedicated to self-command in Part VI, Smith makes his position quite clear: 'the man who feels little for his own misfortunes must always feel less for those of other people' (TMS VI.iii.18).

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<sup>12</sup> Lafitau (1724), Smith's main source for this account of the American savages (see Ross 2010, 177–78) associates the savages' death song with the Hebrew songs contained in the Psalms in the Bible. Discussing the admirable self-command of the savages, Lafitau's mind also turns to the Stoics, and so he recalls a celebrated anecdote on Zeno: 'Parmi les anciens Peuple de l'Inde, à un certain âge ou l'on croyoit avoir assez vécu, il étoit ordinaire de se faire brûler vif soi-même de sang froid [...]. Zenon instruit de leurs maximes, et qui avoit peut-être été le témoin d'une pareille scène, les admiroit, et disoit qu'il aimoit mieux voir un Indien lorsqu'il se brûle lui-même, que d'entendre toutes les leçons que fait la Philosophie sur la constance', see Lafitau 1724, 281.

The school of self-command, appropriate for savages, is therefore not the best school for cultivating sensibility. Indeed, hardiness and self-command are juxtaposed to sensibility and the gentle virtue of humanity (TMS V.2.13), which are instead more appropriate for commercial societies.

The situations in which the gentle virtue of humanity can be most happily cultivated, are by no means the same with those which are best fitted for forming the austere virtue of self-command. [...] In the mild sunshine of undisturbed tranquillity, in the calm retirement of undissipated and philosophical leisure, the soft virtue of humanity flourishes the most, and is capable of the highest improvement. But, in such situations, the greatest and noblest exertions of self-command have little exercise. Under the boisterous and stormy sky of war and faction, of public tumult and confusion, the sturdy severity of self-command prospers the most, and can be the most successfully cultivated. But, in such situations, the strongest suggestions of humanity must frequently be stifled or neglected; and every such neglect necessarily tends to weaken the principle of humanity. (TMS III.3.37)

Civilized societies, and commercial societies in particular, guarantee greater economic security even among less privileged groups. Extreme self-command and abstinence from pleasure are therefore no longer needed among civilians away from the battlefield (TMS V.2.8). The milder and more prosperous conditions allow for their sensibility to develop and flourish with relatively little impediment.<sup>13</sup> The general circumstances of civilized societies are such that a relatively open expression of sentiments and opinions no longer appears out of place, but is actually appropriate. Smith's praise of the command over the expression of

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<sup>13</sup> On the connection between commercial societies and the rewards 'bourgeois virtues' such as sincerity or honesty see McCloskey 2006; Herzog 2013.



passions therefore varies according to the circumstances that allow people to share their emotions to a greater or a lesser degree (TMS V.2.7-10; see also Paganelli 2017b, 1–8).

The attention that Smith shows to the material conditions of life in TMS – and not only in the *Wealth of Nations*, as Martha Nussbaum (2002) asserts instead – proves even further the difference between his approach and that of the Stoics. It is the savages’ severe material indigence that induces them to constantly hide their passions. As a consequence, they become accustomed to falsehood and dissimulation (TMS V.2.11). And ‘reserve and concealment’ not only ‘call forth diffidence’ (TMS VII.iv.28) but also make them seem cold towards others, so others feel coldly towards them (TMS VII.iv.29). Smith insists on this idea of reciprocity, observing that those who show scant sensitivity towards themselves become accustomed to doing so towards others, and their ‘hardness of heart’ receives scant sensitivity in return, thereby severely limiting the communication of sentiments (TMS VI.iii.15).<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, people enjoying better living conditions tend to open up towards one another in a virtuous circle (TMS V.2.11; see also Schliesser 2003, 349–50). In commercial societies, the material comfort is such that people can share and understand when others express their emotions, so they will also feel free to express their own emotions, with no fear of being found blameworthy for doing so by any impartial spectator. This ‘frankness and openness conciliate confidence’ (TMS VII.iv.28), which reinforces the willingness of communicating and sharing emotions typical of friendship, ‘the best and most comfortable of all social enjoyments’ (TMS VI.iii.15).

Note that the change in the amount of emotional expression works equally in private and public spheres. Indeed, talking about the vivacity with which the French and the Italian – that Smith considers the most polished nations on the continent – express themselves, he writes that ‘a young French nobleman will weep in the presence of the whole court upon

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<sup>14</sup> On the ‘hardness of heart’ in Hutcheson’s thought see Maurer 2010.

being refused a regiment. An Italian [...] expresses more emotion on being condemned a fine of twenty shillings than an Englishman on receiving the sentence of death' (TMS V.2.10).

Emerging from the respectable and honorable savage world therefore means leaving behind the stoical way of life, while going towards a society characterized by the exchange of good offices, opinions, and sentiments, and opening up to that 'correspondence of sentiments and opinions' leads to the 'most delightful harmony' (TMS VII.iv.28).

For Smith, it is therefore true that commerce makes a system of mores no longer appropriate, but it is also true that it replaces it with a different one which is more appropriate to the new circumstances.

### ***Abhorrence***

While Smith praises the complete self-command of savages because it is appropriate to their stormy and violent circumstances, he does not hold it to be appropriate for sunnier, civilized societies. In fact, he goes as far as to condemn Stoic self-command when present in a society where it is not needed, such as in commercial societies, where there are more tranquil and prosperous conditions.

Note that this difference in degree of self-command is not a form of cultural relativism as some have argued.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the difference in the degree to which self-command is exercised is a function of the connection Smith discerns between variations in general economic circumstances, and changes in moral judgement on the expression of emotions (see also Bee 2015). It is the improvements in living conditions that decrease the degree of self-command required for the impartial spectator to approve of a behavior (TMS V.2.10).

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Fleischacker 2004; Pitts 2005; Forman-Barzilai 2010; although they show awareness of the anachronism.

The complete lack of expression of emotion of a North American savage requires a level of self-command that is ‘inconceivable’ for a European of Smith’s time (TMS V.2.9). If a civilized man showed such self-command as to eliminate any demonstration of passions, to the extent that he should feel no more for the loss of his father or son than for the loss of any other’s father or son, it would be that ‘such unnatural indifference, far from exciting our applause, would incur our highest disapprobation’ (TMS III.3.13). In Smith’s society, it would be ‘unpardonable’ if a general at the head of an army offered public expression of grief for the death of his child, yet as a father he is expected to appropriately express grief in private at the loss of his only child (TMS V.2.5). Similarly, Smith does not seem to strongly condemn the savage practice of infanticide in very poor societies, but rather asserts that ‘such nations are so miserably poor, that from mere want, they are frequently reduced, or at least think themselves reduced, to the necessity sometimes of directly destroying, and sometimes of abandoning their infants [...] to perish with hunger, or to be devoured by wild beasts’ (WN intro.4) and that ‘to abandon [an infant] to hunger, or to wild beasts [...] in that rudest and lowest state of society it is undoubtedly more pardonable than in any other’ (TMS V.2.15). When, however, the practice is continued in rich and commercial societies, such as the latter ages of Greece, this custom becomes ‘so dreadful a violation of humanity’ and ‘the most unjust and unreasonable conduct’ (TMS V.2.15). An ethics of hardship typical of savages and barbarians or of military life is inappropriate and therefore condemnable in an age or place where such hardship is no longer present.

Maureen Harkin’s and Martha Nussbaum’s interpretations seem therefore to reverse the picture (Harkin 2005; Nussbaum 2002). They both remark that in Part V of TMS Smith criticizes the civilized Europeans for their lack of martial spirit, while admiring the American

savages for the virility of their absolute self-command.<sup>16</sup> For them, if Smith dispassionately endorses the virility of Stoicism, he cannot simultaneously endorse the feminine humanity of commercial prosperity, which would make TMS and WN inconsistent.<sup>17</sup>

The interpretation we suggest here, on the other hand, does not recognize the inconsistency that Harkin and Nussbaum seem to find in Smith's texts. Rather than embracing Stoicism independently of the circumstances, Smith views it as an ethics appropriate only for savages, or only for circumstances as hard as those experienced by savages. Stoicism is not an appropriate moral code for civilized and commercial societies, where the more feminine virtue of humanity is more appropriate, given the softer circumstances generated by the prosperity of commerce.

On the contrary, we suggest that Smith's understanding of how we adapt to different material circumstances runs parallel and consistently in WN and TMS. For Smith, both institutions and morality adapt to changes in wealth, and when they do not, they create disruptive tensions. An example of this adaptation of institutions in WN is primogeniture. Primogeniture emerges and establishes itself as the appropriate response to continuous threats of invasion (WN III.ii.3-7). But when those threats are no longer present, the persistence of primogeniture is superfluous. Not surprisingly, its persistence in an environment in which it is no longer appropriate is something to abhor, and as such it is severely criticized as 'completely absurd' (WN III.ii.4-7).

Similarly, in WN Smith explicitly refers to two different systems of morality, simultaneously present and simultaneously appropriate to two different groups of people, given the different material conditions of these different groups. Rich people follow a 'liberal

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<sup>16</sup> For more on martial virtues, manliness, *vir virtutis*, and the discourse on Smith's own defense of the professional army see Montes 2009. On progress entailing some losses such as martial virtues see also Harkin 2002, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> On Smith's promotion of Stoic manhood as a way to balance the effeminacy brought by commercial society see Justman 1993. On a professional army as Smith's solution to the loss of martial spirit in civilized society see Berry 1992; Paganelli and Schumacher 2017.

or loose' morality, while poor people follow a 'strict or austere' morality. The difference is appropriate to their respective conditions. The rich, being rich, can afford some extravagance in their behavior. The poor cannot. If they engaged in the same behaviors as the rich, they would quickly ruin themselves.

In the austere system, [...] those excesses are regarded with the utmost abhorrence and detestation. [...] The wiser and better sort of the common people, therefore, have always the *utmost abhorrence* and detestation of such excesses, which their experience tells them are so immediately fatal to people of their condition. (WN V.i.g.10.

Emphasis added)

The interpretation we suggest here implies also that Smith does not see as appropriate for a commercial society even the more moderate forms of Stoicism such as that of the 'Academical or Peripatetical sage' who, in turn, according to Smith, constitutes very nearly the character of the Epicurean sage (VI.i.15). A number of scholars find a certain similarity between this 'moderate' figure of the stoical sage and the sage proposed by Smith in TMS, tracing the origins of the latter not only to the Stoics but also to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus.<sup>18</sup> Gloria Vivenza, for example, speaks of an 'alchemical approach', while Charles Griswold and Leonidas Montes detect 'eclecticism' (see Vivenza 2001, 8; Griswold 1991, 236; Montes 2008).<sup>19</sup> According to these interpretations, the judgement of the impartial spectator that guides the Smithian sage comes rather closer to the Aristotelian 'golden mean' or to Epicurean 'prudence', than to the extreme stoical apathy of Chrysippus (see Vivenza 2001, 82), whereas, guided by the impartial spectator, the Smithian sage attunes emotions at

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<sup>18</sup> Brown 1994; Fitzgibbons 1995; Griswold 1996, 1999; Vivenza 2001; Montes 2008; Hanley 2009; Forman-Barzilai 2010; Montes 2016.

<sup>19</sup> For Griswold (1991) Smith's theory was influenced by Scepticism.

the *right pitch*. But as circumstances change, the requisite degree of self-command changes too, and with it, the level at which emotions can be expressed without deserving disapprobation also changes. If this sage were to approve of the expression of emotions solely at their *golden mean*, he could not approve of their far more open expression as well as their *total* repression that Smith is prepared to endorse when the circumstances are of extreme hardship.

Thus, the wise Stoic does not represent the apex in the development of civilization for Smith – as Norbert Waszek (1994) and Harkin (2005) claim– but rather a particular case: its rudest expression and response to the crudest conditions of humankind. Commerce changes wealth, institutions, policies, and norms of conducts. For Smith, commerce’s system of mores can be embraced, rather than criticized, since the softer virtue of humanity is the most appropriate to it. Maintaining Stoicism in commercial society would mean maintain the ethic of savages in refined society – something to abhor.

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