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Was Smith A Moral Subjectivist?

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Abstract

This paper challenges the commonly held view that Smith's moral theory is a subjectivist theory. Smith's test for goodness and rightness – for propriety – is not the approbation of an impartial spectator, but the *warranted* approbation of such a spectator. Something is right or good not because an impartial spectator would approve of it, but because such a spectator would be warranted in so approving.

Keywords: B12, B31

JEL codes: Adam Smith, impartial spectator

1. Introduction

This paper may appear quixotic in the extreme. Adam Smith's *Theory of The Moral Sentiments* (TMS) has generally been seen as a species of the genus of moral sentimentalism.¹ Moral sentimentalists agree in grounding our moral distinctions in our sentiments, as opposed to the world. They are in this respect the progenitors of various stripes of subjectivism in meta-ethics. I want to argue that Smith does not necessarily fit this picture. I think he can be easily read to do so, and that he was sometimes confused about what he was doing, but that we ought to, at a minimum, recognise an alternative, objectivist (and therefore, I think, correct) strain in Smith, in tension with his apparent subjectivism.²

Parfit (2011, pp. 378-80) identifies two variants of what he calls Moral Sentimentalism. An exponent might argue either that moral judgements make no claims at all - that they are disguised *expressions* of how we feel or what we approve of³ - or that they are claims about what we either do feel or would feel under certain ideal conditions, not claims about the way things are. So 'This is good,' for the for the first type of subjectivist, may be

¹ In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, e.g., the first thinkers cited in the article 'Moral Sentimentalism', are Smith and Hume.

² At the outset, I should say that I do not attempt to make a case-closed argument for Smith's objectivism; instead, I argue that the case for his subjectivism is *not* closed. That is, I take for granted the *prima facie* case for subjectivism that support the views of Griswold, Larmore (see the sequel) and many others, that this is the camp to which Smith belongs, and so play devil's advocate, trying to complicate the dominant picture. Further, one goal of the paper is to point out resources for modern anti-subjectivism in a thinker who is at first sight not a very likely source. I know it is out of fashion to use the history of thought in this way- treating thinkers from the past as if they were co-participants in dialogue with contemporary thinkers concerning common, as it were perennial, concerns and questions. Instead we are to contextualise (that is Moses and all the prophets!) – so that the default position is that we share no questions in common with the inhabitants of that other country, the past. I think there is room for both approaches; the one which makes the apparently familiar strange, and the other, which makes the apparently strange familiar. It is true that the approach employed here makes the history of thought, in a sense, instrumental to (but also, I think, crucial to the advancement of) first-order ethical and meta-ethical thought.

³ This is Moral Expressivism, for which the canonical reference is C. L. Stevenson (1944).

analysed as something like 'Hurray for this!','⁴ while for the second type it would be read as 'I approve of this,' or 'We would approve of this,' or 'I would approve of this if I knew more'. It is either an expression of approval or a statement of the fact that we approve. In either case, the statement is not to be interpreted in a common sense way; that is a claim about how the world is or a claim that 'this' has the non-natural property of 'goodness'. Common sense takes in this respect an objectivist meta-ethical position. For common sense, the subjectivist has things backward: we approve of what is good, because it is good; our approval doesn't make it good. Goodness pre-exists and calls forth our approval.⁵

The philosophers Charles Larmore and Derek Parfit have both argued for objectivism about norms generally, with moral norms a special case. Norms, in this usage, give us reasons, whether they are moral norms, practical norms, or epistemic norms: they state what we *ought to do* or believe, where the fact that we ought to do x or believe y is a non-natural fact about the world, something we discover.⁶ Modern economics has given almost unquestioned allegiance to a subjectivism about practical norms, by identifying reasons with desires or preferences: that you 'ought to do x' means, in the subjectivist account, that you have some preferences which are best served by your x-ing. Subjectivist philosophers analyse 'you have a reason to x' as 'you either want x or would want x if fully informed' (Parfit, 2011, p. 269). For an objectivist about norms, on the other hand, what we have reason to do, what we ought to do is objective (as Larmore (1996) emphasises, we 'find' that we have a reason to do x) and this reason needn't necessarily coincide with what would fulfil either our actual or fully-informed desires.

On the evidence of the Theory of Moral Sentiments, I believe Smith was neither a moral sentimentalist, in either variant identified by Parfit, nor a subjectivist about reasons. Prominent philosophers on both sides of the subjective / objective divide disagree.

2. Smith's Moral Objectivism

Take first Charles Griswold (1999), whose *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* marked the beginning of a new interest in Smith among moral philosophers, for whom he had hitherto been not much more than a footnote to Hume, if noticed at all. Commenting on Smith's notion of the Impartial Spectator, perhaps the lynchpin of TMS, he writes:

'Since the agent's disapprobation of self or other must be reached from the standpoint of a spectator, moral judgements cannot be simply expressions of our own emotion. Smith's theory of moral sentiments is not emotivist in a narrow sense of the term ... it's a sophisticated emotivism according to which the emotions that the judgement of an informed and judicious spectator finds warranted (or appropriate, suitable, fitting) are moral' (Griswold, 1999, pp. 129-30).

⁴ Parfit calls Expressivism the 'Boo-Hurray Theory'!

⁵ The great musical philosophers Rodgers and Hammerstein ask, in a famous lyric, 'Do I love you because you're beautiful, or are you beautiful because I love you'. If the former, we have objectivism about beauty; if the latter we have subjectivism.

⁶ For Objectivists like Larmore and Parfit, it is a *non-natural* fact. There are objectivists who make norms natural facts. The work of Larmore, in *The Morals of Modernity* and *The Autonomy of Morality*, Parfit, in *On What Matters*, years in the making and his magnum opus, the late Jean Hampton, in *The Authority of Reason*, and Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of The Self* – all woke me from my dogmatic subjectivist slumber, as it were! The case they collectively make for: objectivity, the reality of reasons, irreducibly normative entities – however shocking it may be to a scientific age – is, for me, overwhelming and profound.

And:

'Smith's account of morality in terms of emotions is subjectivist, in the sense that the meaning of moral terms is determined by what pleases or displeases the impartial spectator and not by some altogether external stimulus or state of affairs' (Griswold, 1999, p. 158).

Griswold sees Smith as a sophisticated emotivist, a nuanced subjectivist, and he is friendly to such a position. Reviewing Griswold's book, in *The New Republic*, Charles Larmore, who is a full-throated moral realist, and so opposed to subjectivism, nevertheless agrees with Larmore that this was indeed Smith's position:

'For Smith, morality is a point of view that we develop more as members of society than as separate individuals. In large part, conscience amounts to society within' (Larmore, 1999, p. 45).

And:

For Smith, the proper standards of moral judgement are simply the ones we imagine an impartial spectator using, not the ones an impartial spectator would be well-equipped to discover. In ordinary life people may believe that our moral judgements answer to the way things are, morally speaking. But in this belief, Smith only saw, as Hume had put it, 'the mind's great propensity to spread itself on external objects' (Larmore, 1999, p. 45).

And he contrasts an understanding of the impartial spectator as 'someone well-placed to discern the correct principles of morality' with Smith's view that he is 'the very author of their validity'.⁷

In this last distinction, we recognise the Rodgers-and Hammerstein question: does an impartial spectator approve of this because it is good, or is it good because an impartial spectator approves of it?⁸ I think Smith, on balance and *pace* Larmore and Griswold, gives the former, objectivist, answer to the question. He writes:

'Whatever judgement we can form {concerning our own sentiments and motives} must always bear some secret reference, either to what are, or to what, upon a certain condition would be, or to what, we imagine, *ought to be* the judgement of others. We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it (Smith, 1976, p. 110; emphasis added).⁹

⁷ More recently, see Rasmussen: 'Smith's fundamental claim in TMS is that the impartial spectator sets the ultimate standard for moral judgement: sentiments, qualities and actions that earn such a spectator's sympathy or approval are morally right, and those that earn his disapproval or resentment are morally wrong' (Rasmussen, 2014, p. 49).

⁸ It is also the question raised by voluntarist theologians, who claimed that 'God commands the good' should be read not, as their opponents held, as constraining God to command what can be independently defined as good, but as *defining* the good as 'that which God commands'. Canonically, this is the problem first raised by Plato in his dialogue *Euthyphro*: 'the point which I first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods' (Plato, 1937, p. 391).

⁹ David Andrews argues that I load the deck against subjectivism by ignoring the emphasis on the imagination in this passage. Weinstein similarly writes: 'Ultimately, the imaginary nature of the impartial spectator ends up limiting its detachment. Because it is imagined by an imperfect person, it is only as objective as its imaginer' (Weinstein, 2016, p. 352). In my view, we have to imagine, first, how we would evaluate our own action if we were, counter-factually, a spectator and not the actor, and secondly, we may have doubts about the correct standards to apply, so that we must imagine what an ethically impeccable spectator – which none of us are- would say about us. Weinstein goes on to contrast his

Any subjectivist reading of this passage is brought up short – very short! – by the ‘ought to be’ in this passage. For subjectivists, in this context, the idea is to analyse ‘what we ought to do’ as ‘what others in fact judge, or would judge with full information, to be right’. If we make the test what others ‘ought to’ judge, we are arguing in a circle. Compare ‘It is good because an impartial spectator approves’ with ‘It is good because an impartial spectator *correctly* approves’. The latter formulation quite obviously fails to reduce ‘the good’ to a natural fact about us – to our approving it – because the criteria of *correct* approval appeal to standards independent of our approval.

Look again at the quote from Griswold above. For Smith, he says, ‘the emotions that the judgement of an informed and judicious spectator finds warranted (or appropriate, suitable, fitting) are moral’. If this is what Smith says, he certainly is a subjectivist. But in contexts like this, as in the quoted material above, Smith would add another ‘warrant’ here; so that it would be not what the spectator *finds* warranted, but what the spectator *would be warranted in finding* warranted, that marks the moral. And this would spoil the subjectivism.

Smith fleshes out his notion of the connection between morality and the Impartial Spectator in ways which support an objectivist reading, I think. In Part 3, Chapter 2, ‘Of the Love of Praise, and of that of Praise-worthiness; and of the Dread of Blame, and of that of Blame-worthiness’, we see how the impartial spectator is the vehicle that takes us from the first to the second of each of these pairs. Examining our own conduct, morality involves imagining what a spectator would be warranted in approving, not what he would in fact approve. Doing what is praise-worthy, what a spectator would be warranted in praising, is doing one’s duty. To seek praise independent of praise- worthiness is vanity:

‘Praise and blame express what actually are; praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness what *naturally ought to be* the sentiments of other people with regard to our character and conduct. The love of praise is the desire of obtaining the favourable sentiments of our brethren. The love of praise-worthiness is the desire of rendering ourselves the *proper objects* of those sentiments’ (Smith, 1976, p. 126, emphasis added).

There is nothing in the least subjectivist about this. A subjectivist would be unable to mark this distinction, would reduce praise-worthiness to praise, and virtuous behaviour to vanity. For Smith, this is what ‘the licentious philosophy’ of Mandeville does, and this is what makes it licentious.

Immediately preceding the chapter under discussion, Smith remarks:

‘To be amiable and to be meritorious; that is, to deserve love and to deserve reward, are the great characters of virtue; and to be odious and punishable,

subjectivist reading with constructivist views such as Roderick Firth’s ‘ideal observer’ theory of the impartial spectator. I agree that Smith is not a constructivist. I read Smith as a ‘robust ethical realist’ in the sense specified by Fitzpatrick (2008), for whom ‘Ethical standards are independent of us in the sense that they are not constituted by the actual or hypothetical results of any *ethically-neutrally-specifiable* set of conditions or procedures applied to our beliefs, desires, attitudes, etc.’ (Kindle LOC 2096, emphasis added). So constructivism is, in this view, a non- realist, and thus a *subjectivist* position. Fitzgerald goes on to specify the Aristotelian lineage of this robust realist view, since it implies that ‘there is no way to characterise the route to ethical truth except from within a correct ethical perspective’ (Kindle LOC 2123). Such a position, were it Smith’s, would seem to satisfy Weinstein’s concern to differentiate Smith’s view from Ideal Observer theory and its ilk, but it would not make Smith’s theory subjectivist, since, as Fitzgerald goes on to argue, ‘there is no suggestion that what *makes* ethical claims true is that they would be endorsed by people deliberating from certain standpoints. In fact that couldn’t be so on this view, since among the true ethical claims are claims about what those proper starting points are.’

of vice. But these characters have an immediate reference to the sentiments of others' (Smith, 1976, p. 113).

In light of what follows, it would be a mistake to give the last sentence a subjectivist import, to make the sentiment of others constitutive of amiability and merit. What the sequel supports, rather, is the idea that it is essential to goodness that the sentiments of *good* people (people able to deploy the correct criteria of goodness) would approve of it. The 'characters' have an immediate reference, that is, not to the sentiments, but to the *warranted* sentiments of others, or so it will turn out.¹⁰

Now, to say that warranted sentiments are not reducible, in Smith, to actual sentiments, and that moral sentiments are the former rather than the latter, is not to deny any empirical connection between the two. Albeit very tenuously, and in some cases even inversely, praise can track praise- worthiness. Your conviction that you are acting in praise-worthy ways may be and likely will be biased in your favour, and the absence of any actual praise, coupled with the presence of clamorous actual blame, may lead you to re-evaluate yourself, coming closer to the truth. Thus:

'The agreement or disagreement both of the sentiments and judgements of other people is of more or less importance to us, exactly in proportion as we are more or less uncertain about the propriety of our own sentiments, about the accuracy of our own judgement' (Smith, 1976, p. 122).

In addition, a big theme, arguably the biggest, in TMS is the pilgrim's progress, by dint of his essential sociality, from the natural to the normative. By taking account of what other people think of us, we may learn better who we really are and become better people.

Smith gives these ideas a theological cast in the closing pages of Chapter 2. He tells us that our concern for the actual sentiments of others has been implanted in us by 'the all-wise Author of Nature':

'He has made man, if I may say so, the immediate judge of mankind; and has, in this respect, as in many others created him after his own image, and appointed him his vice-regent upon earth, to superintend the behaviour of his brethren But though man has in this manner been rendered the immediate judge of mankind, he has been rendered so only in the first instance; and an appeal lies from his sentence to a higher tribunal, to the tribunal of their own consciences, to that of the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator, to that of the man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of their conduct' (Smith, 1976, pp. 129-30).

Following Smith's metaphor, a subjectivist would make the decisions of the lower courts- the actual sentiments and judgements of mankind- constitutive of the law. Smith instead invokes the higher tribunal of the man within – our own conscience, and *identifies* the impartial spectator with that tribunal. Since the conscience is the locus of moral judgement, this supports my view that the impartial spectator approves what is good rather than constituting the good by his or her approval.

¹⁰ This reading would make Smith a precursor of Franz Brentano, who held, according to Elizabeth Anderson (1993, p.5), that an object is good if and only if it is correct to love it, and bad if and only if it is correct to hate it. She is herself in this tradition, 'in identifying what is good with the proper objects of positive valuation' (*Ibid*).

Note, as well, that this passage patently contradicts Larmore's claim, cited above, that for Smith, conscience is 'society within'. Just beyond the cited passage, glossing it, Smith identifies society, the immediate judge, with 'the man without', by contrast with conscience, the man within. They are clearly distinct.

For Smith then, though distinct, praise and praise-worthiness are not unrelated: the lower courts can faithfully apply the law. On the other hand, praise can sometimes track praise-worthiness, as I said, inversely. This is what Smith calls 'the corruption of our moral sentiments, which is occasioned by this disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise or neglect persons of poor and mean condition' (Smith, 1976, p. 61). This is the title of Part 1, Section 3, Chapter 3:

'That wealth and greatness are often regarded with the respect and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue; and that the contempt, of which vice and folly are the only proper objects, is often most unjustly bestowed on poverty and weakness, has been the complaint of moralists in all ages' (Smith, 1976, p. 61)

Notice that a moral sentimentalism in the traditional sense could find no meaning to the notion that our moral sentiments are 'corrupt'. If morality is essentially a matter of sentiments, however sophisticated, how can they fail to track the good!

This completes my case that Smith can be seen as a Moral Objectivist, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. But those appearances haunt me. There is no doubt that Smith's project breathes a subjectivist air, as it were. And he always seems on the verge of subjectivism, with some normative qualification – 'warranted', 'proper' – pulling him back from the brink, while making him sound puzzlingly circular. Why?

This is my tentative suggestion. David Hume is seen by most people as an out-and-out subjectivist, with respect to both moral and practical reasons generally. Hume was an intellectual giant. Hume was Smith's friend and they were mutual admirers of each other's work.¹¹ But I don't think Smith would have considered himself Hume's equal in moral philosophy, just as I don't think Hume would have considered himself to be Smith's equal in political economy.

Hume's subjectivism was new and it was radical. Smith, while to some extent deferring to Hume in matters moral, may have nevertheless profoundly disagreed with Hume on the issue of how thorough-going subjectivism could be. Might Smith not have taken the new Humean subjectivist bottles and filled them with old, objectivist, common-sense wine? Is this why the ghosts of subjectivism surrounding TMS are so hard to bust?

3. Utility, Propriety and Love of System

Smith, I have argued, was no expressivist, not even a collective expressivist. The criterion for what is right and good is neither what we (individually) approve, nor is it what an impartial spectator would approve, but rather is what an impartial spectator *ought to* approve. I am arguing that Smith's *meta-ethics* were not, notwithstanding appearances to the contrary, subjectivist.

¹¹ For a moving account of the deep friendship between the two, see Rasmussen (2017).

But among meta-ethical objectivists we may distinguish more or less *substantively* subjectivist¹² positions. On the subjectivist extreme, a utilitarian, for example, believes that the property that makes something objectively good is that it maximizes the utility or preference satisfaction of the greatest number. The ability to satisfy preferences or desires is the exclusive moral-reason-giving property. (Notice that at the level of the Collective, as opposed to the individual, this substantive subjectivism is very hard to distinguish from meta-ethical subjectivism - what is good is what We desire, albeit not necessarily what you or I desire. 'We desire what is good' becomes tautological – the hall-mark of meta-ethical subjectivism.)

In what follows I want to argue that Smith was not a substantive subjectivist, either. But I find his objectivism much less full-throated than it could be, due, I think, to the deference he pays to Hume. The best place to see this tension at work, I think, is the short part 4 of *TMS*, called *Of the Effect of Utility Upon the Sentiment of Approbation*, containing just two chapters, 'Of the beauty which the appearance of utility bestows upon all productions of art, and of the extensive influence of this species of beauty' and 'Of the beauty which the appearance of utility bestows upon the characters and actions of men, and how far the perception of this beauty may be regarded as one of the original principles of approbation.'

This short section contains several of the most widely-quoted passages in *TMS* (including the single use of the phrase 'the invisible hand' in the entire volume). And the whole of the two chapters is a running argument with Hume: the first chapter quarrels with Hume's contention, in Smith's words, that 'the utility of any object pleases the master by perpetually suggesting to him the pleasure or conveniency which it is fitted to promote' (Smith, 1976, p. 179) and the second with Hume's attempt, as Smith thinks, 'to resolve our whole approbation of virtue into a perception of this species of beauty which results from the appearance of utility' (Smith, 1976, p. 188).

Smith will argue, in the first chapter, that objects which provide utility are appreciated as much for the art and contrivance they display – or, out of what Smith calls our 'love of system' – as for the utility they provide. Similarly, in Chapter 2, concerning the evaluation of human character, he argues that 'the sentiment of approbation always involves in it a sense of propriety quite distinct from the perception of utility'.

Now the particular positions of Hume that Smith is criticising here are not a minor part of the Humean legacy. Indeed, they form the basis for the common view of Hume as a proto-utilitarian. Why, then, is Smith often lumped with Hume in precisely this respect – as a forerunner of utilitarianism? I think it is because Smith's criticism takes place in the context of what may appear to be a fundamental agreement with Hume, that utility is the sole criterion of objective value. What he appears to argue is that while our moral sense is guided by our sense of propriety – which is of course tied for Smith to the (warranted) views of an impartial spectator, that either:

- i. Our sense of propriety in fact tracks what is useful (the Author of Nature has so seen to it); or, where it does not that
- ii. Our moral sentiments can be mistaken, just insofar as they fail to track utility'.

¹² I am using term 'substantively subjectivist' differently from Parfit in *On What Matters*. He uses it in the context of his examinations of normative reasons generally (not moral reasons alone) to refer to the view that we have objective reason to do whatever best satisfies our desires (the latter usually filtered in some way - e.g. what we would desire in 'ideal' conditions). This counts as substantive subjectivism as a view of moral reasons as I am using the term, too, but so does utilitarianism (which Parfit holds to be true in important respects and not substantively subjectivist, since it doesn't make exclusive pursuit of *the agent's* desires to be what we have most reason to do).

The underlying agreement that what is in fact good is what is useful would in that case make Smith's comments a fundamentally friendly emendation to Hume's proto-utilitarian position. But I don't think all of what Smith says in these chapters can be squared with either i. or ii. There is a residual that speaks to a reluctance on Smith's part to accept the reduction of all values to utility, I believe.

In Chapter 2, there is a clear statement of (i.). Concerning Hume's view that 'no qualities of the mind... are approved as virtuous, but such as are useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others', Smith says:

'Nature herself seems to have so happily adjusted our sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, to the conveniency of both the individual and of society that ... I believe this is universally the case' (Smith, 1976, p. 188).

But, he also says, 'the view of this utility or hurtfulness is not the first or principal source of our approbation and disapprobation', and that these sentiments are 'originally and essentially different from this perception'. Tellingly, he says:

'It seems impossible that the approbation of virtue should be a sentiment of the same kind with that by which we approve of a convenient and well-contrived building; or that we should have no other reason for praising a man than that for which commend a chest of drawers' (Smith, 1976, p. 188).

He does not say, *nota bene*, that we *think we have* other reasons for praising a man than the utility he creates for himself or others: he says we in fact have other reasons.

He goes on to consider qualities which are approved as virtuous because they are useful to ourselves, reason and understanding, on the one hand, and self-command, on the other. With respect to reason, he points out that 'superior reason and understanding are originally approved of as just and right and accurate, and not merely as useful or advantageous'. Again, Smith's language betrays him: is approval of the justness and rightness of reasoning merely the way in which the underlying exclusive objective value of reasoning – its utility – appears to us, or are these in fact independent grounds of value?

Smith's position is unstable. This is because his account of propriety, as I have argued above, is based not on the brute sentiment but the *warranted judgement* of an impartial spectator. If that is so, then to establish that propriety is not transparently utilitarian in its evaluation is thereby to establish that an exclusively utilitarian account of objective value is wrong.

Finally, let me turn to the love of system, of art and contrivance, that Smith analyses in Chapter 1. He argues that we come to value the means to the end of utility for their own sake. The poor man's son, famously in Smith's telling, who spends his life striving for, and finally achieves, wealth and greatness, is no happier and no more secure that he would have been had he remained poor. The trappings of wealth and greatness are merely elaborate contrivances.

Here we have something that seems to fit (ii): the value we place on art and contrivance, our love of system apart from any utility it may bring, is a mistake. Concerning the 'beauty of that accommodation which reigns in the palaces and economy of the great':

'If we consider the real satisfaction which these things are capable of according, by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible

and trifling. But we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light. We naturally confound it in our imagination with the order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine or economy by means of which it is produced. The pleasures of wealth and greatness, when considered in this complex view, strike imagination as something grand and beautiful and noble, of which the attainment is well worth the toil and anxiety we are so apt to bestow upon it (Smith, 1976, p. 183).

What does Smith conclude from this? Having diagnosed, like a modern behavioural economist, a serious failure in our ability to choose in utility-maximising ways, does he suggest a fix, a nudge? On the contrary:

It is well that nature imposes on us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. It is this which first prompted them 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; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forest of nature into agreeable and fertile plain, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth (Smith, 1976, p. 183).

It is well! We have just been told that the strivers for wealth and greatness, at a great cost in anxiety and toil, find themselves no happier. Is there an argument that the unintended consequences Smith describes here so eloquently produce enough happiness to offset the cost? Not at all: what he lists here are all ‘contrivances’, means to happiness at most. I submit that they are valuable in themselves, apart from any happiness they might bring, and that this is the best way to make sense of Smith here. Science and Art *ennoble and embellish* human life – whatever they do for happiness. The founding of great cities and commonwealths, the creation of a civilisation is intrinsically valuable, whatever the consequences for happiness. Despite his deference to Hume, I think, Smith’s fundamental differences with both Hume and the modern economist, for whom, like Hume, preference satisfaction is all there is, are undeniable.

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