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Author: Eric Schliesser

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Reading Adam Smith after Darwin: On the Evolution of Propensities, Institutions, and Sentiments

Eric Schliesser

Blandijnberg 2, Philosophy and Moral Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent, 9000, Belgium

Email: nescio2@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper calls attention to Smith's "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages" in order to facilitate understanding Adam Smith from an evolutionary perspective. In particular, such an evolutionary view can be discerned in how Smith saw that generic "natural sentiments" are applied and articulated, in light of local circumstances, into "moral sentiments." In doing so, the paper calls attention to the developmental interplay between the propensities of human nature in Smith's thought. First, it argues that at the start of *Wealth of Nations* Smith signals that human nature is not fixed. Second, it connects this evidence with an infamous passage on infanticide in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in order to argue that Smith is committed to a thin group selection of institutions. Third, it argues that in "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages" one can find building blocks for the claim that mind and language co-develop over time. It claims that in TMS there is a distinction between natural sentiments and moral sentiments. Natural sentiments are evolved (presumably through cultural selection) and moral sentiments are developed (through acculturation within society).

Keywords

Adam Smith; Darwin; institutional evolution; economic psychology

JEL Classification Code:

B12; B31; B52

Introduction and Summary

This paper calls attention to Smith’s “Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages” (in Smith 1985 hereafter *Languages*) in order to facilitate understanding Adam Smith from an evolutionary perspective (see also Haig 2010).¹ In particular, such an evolutionary view can be discerned in how Smith saw that in light of local circumstances generic “natural sentiments” are applied and articulated into “moral sentiments.” In doing so, the paper calls attention to the developmental interplay between the propensities of human nature in Smith’s thought. In order to avoid confusion, I am not claiming that Smith embraces natural selection,² an idea familiar to him from Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, nor am I claiming here that Smith had any views on evolution’s influence on physiological changes.

First, the paper argues that at the start of *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (hereafter WN) Smith signals that human nature is not fixed. Second, this evidence is connected with an infamous passage on infanticide in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) in order to argue that Smith is committed to a thin group selection of institutions. Third, this paper argues that in *Languages* one can find building blocks for the claim that mind and language co-develop over time. More controversially the paper argues that in TMS there is a distinction between natural sentiments and moral sentiments. Natural sentiments are evolved (presumably through cultural selection) and moral sentiments are developed (through acculturation within society). The distinction between natural and moral sentiments is historical and conceptual.

Before turning to details of the argument, here follow four methodological and historical caveats. First, this paper offers a construction of Adam Smith’s views from an evolutionary point of view. This means that unity of thought may be imposed where there is none. Yet, Smith facilitated the construction by appending what he sometimes called, “The Dissertation upon the Origin of Languages” to the third edition of TMS in 1767.³ In Smith’s lifetime TMS and *Languages* could be seen as mutually enlightening. Inexplicably, the editors of the Glasgow edition have moved *Languages* into a volume with student notes of Smith’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. In current editions TMS ends with a historical survey of moral theories (part VII). This obscures Smith’s final intent; *Languages* is a response to Rousseau’s treatment on the origin of language—a topic heavily debated in eighteenth century. Removing *Languages* from its place at the end of TMS obscures Smith’s design of placing his treatment of the moral sentiments in a natural historical context.

As we know from his (1755) “Letter to the Edinburgh Review” (reprinted in Smith 1982b), Smith read widely in eighteenth century, especially French natural history, botany, and zoology; his posthumously published essay, “Of the External Senses” (also in Smith 1982b) also shows evidence that in researching the Molyneux problem (for an introduction see Degenaar and

¹ I quote Adam Smith from the Glasgow edition by paragraph and page-number.

² For useful discussion of the difference between the idea of evolution, which is not limited to Darwin, and natural selection mechanism, see Khalil 2009.

³ See:

<http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=202&chapter=55505&layout=html&Itemid=27>, accessed July 16, 2009.

Lokhorst 2008) Smith valued careful empirical comparison among man and other animals (see Glenney, Chapter 4).⁴ So, while this paper offers a construction, it is probably closer to Smith's own evolving self-understanding than the current practice of ignoring *Languages* when treating TMS (or WN).⁵ Second, the paper ignores some very important material found in the student notes to Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Smith 1982c). Ever since Haakonssen 1981, scholarship on Smith has integrated these quite fruitfully in understanding of Smith and his development. But the content of these lectures was largely unknown outside of eighteenth century Scotland; a focus on them gives a misleading impression of how Smith's non-Scottish contemporaries and later nineteenth century readers would have understood Smith. This paper attempts to contribute to a recovery of, given how Smith presented his views to the learned world, how Smith may have been received by such readers (for an example, see Schliesser Forthcoming on Sophie de Condorcet, who translated TMS and *Languages* into French in one volume, but the exercise could well be fruitfully extended to Alfred Marshall).

Third, there is no doubt that Darwin read or pretended to be familiar with some Smith (*Descent of Man* (hereafter *Descent*), 129, and the accompanying footnote).⁶ Nevertheless, it is neither the point of this paper to argue for a direct influence nor to compare Smith's impact with evidence from Hume, Malthus, Erasmus Darwin, Lyell, etc. Fourth, this paper ignores markets and invisible hands; these can be fruitfully connected to neo-Darwinian themes, but in this context focus on these tends to obscure Smith's texts.⁷ This means I also largely ignore the much debated extent of Smith's debt to Stoicism and to what degree his references to an "Author of Nature" reveal Christian commitments (see Hill, Evensky, Brown, Schliesser 2008).

1. Human Nature and the *Wealth of Nations*.

Right near the start of WN, just after Smith introduces his crucial concept, the division of labor, he adds the following remark:

“THIS division of labour, from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends that general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the

⁴ Spencer Pack has long argued that by reading Buffon, Smith was almost certainly aware of the extinction of the dodo. In WN there is a tantalizing passage that comes very close to acknowledging the possibility of extinction: “The Cori, something between a rat and a rabbit, and supposed by Mr. Buffon to be the same with the Aperea of Brazil, was the largest viviparous quadruped in St. Domingo. This species seems never to have been very numerous, and the dogs and cats of the Spaniards were said to have long ago almost entirely extirpated it, as well as some other tribes of a still smaller size” (IV.vii.a.11). Pack (2010, Chapter VII.II “Smith on Change,” particularly the section on “Aristotelian Residues and the Temporality of Species”). See also Schabas 2005 for more on these themes; cf. Schliesser 2007a.

⁵ Pioneering Berry 1974 is still the best piece on Smith's *Languages*. For other interesting treatments see Levy 1997 and Otteson 2002a or 2002b, chapter 7; Dascal ignores the previous literature (cf. Schliesser 2007b).

⁶ Here I ignore the relationship among David Hume, Adam Smith and Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Animals and Man*.

⁷ In Schliesser 2005a I have explored the relationship between counter-factual mobility of factor-resources and considerations of justice in *Wealth of Nations*.

propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another. Whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature of which no further account can be given; or whether, as seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech, it belongs not to our present subject to inquire. It is common to all men, and to be found in no other race of animals, which seem to know neither this nor any other species of contracts,” (WN 1.2.1, 25).

For present purposes, there are six important claims in this passage. First Smith appears to view human nature as a collection of human propensities. Second these propensities can either be bedrock parts of human nature (e.g., reason, speech) or the (necessary) consequence of such bedrock human nature. Let us call the former “original propensities” and the latter “derived propensities.” This language tracks Smith’s treatment. For example, he writes,

“[nature] has constantly. . . not only endowed mankind with an appetite for the end which she proposes, but likewise with an appetite for the means by which alone this end can be brought about, for their own sakes, and independent of their tendency to produce it. Thus self-preservation, and the propagation of the species, are the great ends which nature seems to have proposed in the formation of all animals. Mankind are endowed with a desire of those ends, and an aversion to the contrary. . . . But though we are. . . endowed with a very strong desire of those ends, it has not been entrusted to the slow and uncertain determinations of our reason, to find out the proper means of bringing them about. Nature has directed us to the greater part of these by original and immediate instincts. Hunger, thirst, the passion which unites the two sexes, the love of pleasure, and the dread of pain, prompt us to apply those means for their own sakes, and without any consideration of their tendency to those beneficent ends which the great Director of nature intended to produce by them,” (TMS 2.1.5.10, 77-8).⁸

On Smith’s view there are a great many “original and immediate” instincts that guide our behavior. Presumably these original and immediate instincts can combine in various ways to produce stable original propensities (Wight 2009).

Third Smith thinks it highly probably that the propensity to barter and truck is a derived propensity.⁹ Fourth social phenomena (e.g., division of labor), which have social utility, can be explained by the unforeseen (and unintended) necessary workings of human propensities over time. Fifth such changes in the social order take place over very long periods of time. Smith, thus, embeds his treatment of political economy within an elongated account of time. Sixth Smith makes clear that from the point of view of WN certain original propensities are *epistemic* bedrock. This sixth point is reinforced by the observation that despite the presence of a stages theory of economic development in WN V.1.a, 689–708 (we can discern in it hunting, shepherding, agricultural, and commercial stages; see Meek or Skinner; see also Schliesser 2006b), Smith seems to presuppose that social institutions do not materially impact human nature, but there is no evidence to claim this decisively. This absence is surprising because we

⁸ According to Coase, “This comes very close to a modern attitude.”

⁹ In *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Smith points out that this propensity is derived from an instinctive desire to be believed and to persuade; this ties the propensity to man’s social nature (Fleischacker, 91-2).

know that Smith was very impressed by the arguments of Rousseau's second Discourse, which did famously seem to think that human nature was changed (and made worse) by civilization.

Below it is argued that in WN and TMS when it comes to accounting for institutions with social utility Smith hints at a group selection process. It is tempting to see in the passage quoted from WN 1.2.1 an analogy between the (slow, gradual, and unforeseen) development of social institutions and derived propensities. But in WN Smith leaves entirely open how original propensities play a role in producing derived propensities.

As an aside: if one reads Smith's phrase 'Director of Nature' sincerely then one thinks God is responsible for the original constitution of human nature (Evensky). Even if one is disinclined to read Smith metaphorically, it is worth noting that in just quoted TMS passage (2.1.5.10) a) human nature is assimilated to animal nature and b) the two ends (self-preservation and propagation of the species) of human nature are no different than those of all other animals. It provides little comfort to recently popular Christianizing (Hill) and (to lesser degree) Stoicizing readings (e.g. Brown) of Smith that our *natural* ends are reduced to mere material, animalistic survival. There is no grandeur here.

Moreover, Christian and even Stoic providential values are surprisingly absent when in the famous deception of nature passage in TMS Smith speaks of the activities ("arts and sciences") "which ennoble and embellish human life" (4.1.9–10, 183–4); Smith's nature has a role to play in making the ennobling activities possible, but strictly speaking their value is not given by or derived from nature or from (Christian) natural religion.¹⁰ This is not to deny that for Smith Christian "religion" can reinforce "the natural sense of duty" (TMS, 3.5.13, 170; the rest of passage is worth examining), but for Smith morality trumps religion and theology (Schliesser 2008). Now we are in position to address the core issue of how Smith sees the relationship between original human nature and derived propensities.

2A: Social Institutions and Group selection

Smith's treatment of infanticide has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Some see in it Smith's endorsement of universal morality; others read it as an endorsement of moral relativism. Here we focus on Smith's gloss on the example:

There is an obvious reason why custom should never pervert our sentiments with regard to the general style and character of conduct and behaviour, in the same degree as with regard to the propriety or unlawfulness of particular usages. There never can be any such custom. No society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men's conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice ["murder of new-born infants"] I have just now mentioned" (TMS 5.2.16, 211).

¹⁰ On ennobling activities in Smith, see Schliesser (2006a) and Wight (2006). Hanley (2009) traces out the theme of nobility in TMS.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that there is a non-question begging way of characterizing and connecting particular social institutions (customs, practices) with the “general style and character of conduct and behavior.” Let’s also assume that for Smith one of the dimensions along which one can characterize and evaluate both particular social institutions and the general style and character of conduct and behavior is justice. This is not implausible because in the example Smith uses the language of “propriety,” “murder,” and “unlawfulness” (even though in Athens exposure of children was *legal*). Smith’s argument seems to be that a group can persist with *some* unjust practices even claiming “public utility” (and “remote interest” 5.2.15, 210) on their behalf. A society cannot subsist if the general style and character of conduct is unjust. For Smith “justice . . . is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society . . . must in a moment crumble into atoms” (TMS 2.2.3.4, 86). Even if we allow for some poetic license, it is tempting to see in all of this a Darwinian point of view, especially because Darwin expressed nearly the same sentiment in *Descent*: “No tribe could hold together if murder, robbery, treachery, &c, were common; consequently such crimes within the limits of the same tribe ‘are branded with everlasting infamy’” (141).

The line of reasoning in TMS 5.2-15-6, 209-11 and the passage just quoted from *Descent* is a very thin-group selectionist argument; Smith and Darwin are not claiming that there is differential selection among different groups based on their customs. Rather they are claiming that the very possibility for a collective to remain a distinct group presupposes a minimal amount of intra-group justice. Of course, both Smith and Darwin believe that a failure to keep some group/tribal identity over time will lead to a massive unlikelihood that members of the tribe or group will reproduce. This is why one can discern in them a group selectionist argument. In *Descent* Darwin’s group-selectionist argument is more developed and explicit; as he writes shortly before the passage just quoted, “those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish the best, and rear the greatest number of offspring” (*Descent*, 130).

Smith makes no mention of selection, so the evidence for even thin group-selectionist argument in Smith is not overwhelming. Nevertheless, the claim is reinforced by Smith’s obsession with the martial virtues in TMS (e.g., 1.3.2.5, 54-5; 6.3.17, 244) and WN (e.g., 5.i.f.59, 786-7) as documented by Montes 2004. In a well known passage deploring the negative externalities of hyper-specialization Smith remarks that a man “generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become” rendering him “incapable of defending his own country in war.” He goes even further, claiming that “[h]is dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expence of his intellectual, social, and *martial virtues*” (WN 5.i.f.50, 782, emphasis added). It is one of the few places where Smith, calls for explicit government intervention to remedy these defects through education. As he writes a few pages later in WN, “the security of every society must always depend, more or less, upon the martial spirit of the great body of the people” (5.i.f.59). This is why “the man of humanity” will, despite misgivings, go along with the fate of “A centinel [sic]..who falls asleep upon his watch, [who] suffers death by the laws of war, because such carelessness might endanger the whole army. This severity may, upon many occasions, appear necessary, and, for that reason, just and proper. When the preservation of an individual is inconsistent with the safety of a multitude, nothing can be more just than that the many should be preferred to the one,” (TMS 2.2.3.11: 90-

91). So the requirements of martial virtue that ensure group survival are never far from Smith's thoughts. For Smith without institutions that promote martial virtues and justice groups will not survive. Smith thought society ought to promote practices that ensure its own survival. This is why one can claim that we can find a very thin group selectionist argument in Smith. Before moving on to Smith's treatment of languages, the relationship among evolution of social institutions and considerations of utility in Smith must be clarified.

2B: Utility and Social Institutions

Recall from the treatment above of WN 1.2.1 that for Smith social phenomena (e.g., division of labor), which have social utility, can be explained by the unforeseen (and unintended) necessary workings of human propensities over time. As we have seen in the previous section (2A) these social phenomena are made possible by a set of background customs which ensure the existing of a modicum of justice, which, while useful, is itself the result of intricate workings of resentment (for full argument see Pack & Schliesser, or Schliesser 2006b). Smith explicitly and repeatedly argues the claim that for a proper explanation of the origin of justice we cannot point to its utility (as Hume had done). As Smith writes, "it is seldom this consideration which first animates us" against "licentious practices." All men, "even the most stupid and unthinking, abhor fraud, perfidy, and injustice, and delight to see them punished. But few men have reflected upon the necessity of justice to the existence of society, how obvious soever that necessity may appear to be" (TMS 2.2.3.9, 89). In fact, Smith devotes the whole of part four of TMS to a respectful criticism of Hume's views, which he thinks more suitable to "men of reflection and speculation" (TMS 4.2.12, 192)—note the irony in Smith taking Hume's explanation to task for being too reflective! Smith's main complaint is that the perception of utility is a secondary consideration that may enhance and enliven the sentiment that gives rise to the moral sentiment; the perception of utility is not the "first or principal source" of the feeling that produces the moral sentiment. It is indeed a contingent fact of nature that the useful and the virtuous can coincide (4.2.3, 188). Nevertheless, Smith maintains that the "sentiment of approbation always involves in it a sense of propriety quite distinct from the perception of utility" (4.2.5, 188). That is to say, for Smith we approve of an action not because we find it useful to society, but because we judge it right. In contradistinction to Hume, Smith writes: "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 we commend a chest of drawers" (4.2.4, 188). Thus, for Smith social norms can arise for considerations that have little to do with utility.

Smith certainly does not want to deny any role for utility (it can enliven the sentiment of justice). As we have seen in the case of the sleeping sentinel, Smith also thinks that regardless of individual judgments of propriety the *legislator* can uphold institutions with an appeal to social utility when society's survival is at stake (see Levy 1995; Witztum & Young, unpublished). Nevertheless, Smith does not want to claim (as a Hayekian might) that all evolved social institutions that persist must even when once useful, therefore, be still useful. As he writes, for example, "[L]aws frequently continue in force long after the circumstances which first gave occasion to them, and which could alone render them reasonable, are no more" (WN 3.2.4, 383).

Social institutions are (trailing) responses to society's needs, and they can persist or be entrenched for all kinds of reasons that have nothing to do with their current utility. Of course, institutions that have some utility can reinforce their own and society's persistence over time. We return to these features of Smith's thought below when we investigate the impact of institutions on the cultivation of the norms of propriety behind our moral sentiments.

3: Mind and Language

This section argues for the significance of Smith's *Languages* in order to understand what we may call the anthropological (or, less anachronistic, *natural historical*) assumptions behind TMS and WN. Smith starts his *Languages* as follows:

The assignation of particular names, to denote particular objects, that is, the institution of nouns substantive, would probably, be one of the first steps towards the formation of language. Two savages, who had never been taught to speak, but had been bred up remote from the societies of men, would naturally begin to form that language by which they would endeavour to make their mutual wants intelligible to each other, by uttering certain sounds, whenever they meant to denote certain objects. Those objects only which were most familiar to them, and which they had most frequent occasion to mention, would have particular names assigned to them," (*Languages* 1, 203-4).

Against Rousseau's (and Darwin's) speculations that language has its origin in a poetic and emotive language, Smith's conjectural history sees the origin of language in its concrete capacity to "denote certain objects." (Even so Rousseau and Smith *agree* that language has its origin in human need.)¹¹

For Smith language is not fully formed in human nature. This means that *even* the "faculties of reason and speech," which in WN are presented as possible bedrock original propensity can have a natural origin and need not be an original instinct or original propensity in human nature. They are themselves founded on our desire to make mutual wants intelligible to each other. Smith's emphasis on the importance of the familiarity of the objects probably reflects (despite important differences between Hume and Smith) a very Humean focus on the habituation that drives mental association.

In *Languages* Smith goes on to develop an account in which language and mind co-develop. (Here by "mind" is meant the organization and use of one's cognitive faculties.) The argument unfolds slowly in Smith's hands. Smith informs the reader,

"The man who first distinguished a particular object by the epithet of *green*, must have observed other objects that were not *green*, from which he meant to separate it by this appellation. The institution of this name, therefore, supposes comparison. It likewise supposes some degree of abstraction. The person who first invented this appellation must

¹¹ For more on the Rousseau-Smith relationship, see, for example, Pack (2000); Force; Hurtado; Schliesser (2006a); Hanley (2008); Rasmussen. It would be worthwhile to investigate Smith's emphasis on the denotation of objects as names in light of later treatments by Mill and Russell, but that is not our purpose here.

have distinguished the quality from the object to which it belonged, and must have conceived the object as capable of subsisting without the quality. The invention, therefore, even of the simplest nouns adjective, must have required more metaphysics than we are apt to be aware of. The different mental operations, of arrangement or classing, of comparison, and of abstraction, must all have been employed, before even the names of the different colours, the least metaphysical of all nouns adjective, could be instituted,” (*Languages* 7, 207).

Nouns get applied to familiar objects. The very possibility of applying what Smith calls a noun adjective, presupposes having a certain class of contrastive experiences and certain mental capacity for classification of and abstraction from these experiences. On Smith’s view objects must be conceived to be bearers of properties before adjectives can be applied to features of these objects. Moreover, in the quote Smith clearly conceives of nouns adjective with different degrees of ‘metaphysical--ness’--presumably here meant in terms of abstraction from the appearances. Abstraction turns out to be the key variable when Smith turns to prepositions: “The invention of such a word, therefore, must have required a considerable degree of abstraction... Whatever were the difficulties, therefore, which embarrassed the first invention of nouns adjective, the same, and many more, must have embarrassed that of prepositions,” (*Languages* 12, 210).

Smith conceives the development of more abstract components of a language as a barrier to be overcome in the development of language(s). Here are two examples from the essay: 1) “Though the different formation of nouns substantive, therefore, might, for some time, forestall the necessity of inventing nouns adjective, it was impossible that this necessity could be forestalled altogether,” (*Languages* 10, 208) and 2) “Number considered in general, without relation to any particular set of objects numbered, is one of the most abstract and metaphysical ideas, which the mind of man is capable of forming; and, consequently, is not an idea, which would readily occur to rude mortals, who were just beginning to form a language... In the rude beginnings of society, *one, two, and more*, might possibly be all the numeral distinctions which mankind would have any” (*Languages* 22-3. 214). As the second quote, especially, makes clear there is no doubt that Smith’s conjectural history is meant to capture the reality that the full metaphysical nature of language develops only slowly. Through *Languages* we, thus, learn that the faculties “reason and speech” (WN 1.2.1) build on various instincts and are really composed of various propensities; different aspects of speech develop long before humanity first developed the full capacity of reason. This, in turn, implies that the capacity to “truck and barter” is itself a late development in the life of the species. Smith’s main point in all of this is that different parts of language presuppose different mental developments. So for Smith mental capacities must be developed slowly before classes of (more abstract) words can be invented.

Languages sheds some light on and is in turn illuminated by a passage from the better known (among Smith scholars) posthumously published, “History of Astronomy” (in Smith 1982b):

It is evident that the mind takes pleasure in observing the resemblances that are discoverable betwixt different objects. It is by means of such observations that it endeavours to arrange and methodise all its ideas, and to reduce them into proper classes and assortments. Where it can observe but one single quality, that is common to a great variety of otherwise widely different objects, that single circumstance will be sufficient for it to connect them all

together, to reduce them to one common class, and to call them by one general name. It is thus that all things endowed with a power of self-motion, beasts, birds, fishes, insects, are classed under the general name of Animal; and that these again, along with those which want that power, are arranged under the still more general word Substance: and this is the origin of those assortments of objects and ideas which in the schools are called Genera and Species, and of those abstract and general names, which in all languages are made use of to express them (*Astronomy*, 2.1, 37-8).

The treatment of ever increasing abstraction in the *Astronomy* compresses a process that gets decomposed analytically and ‘historically’ (in the manner of a conjectural history) in the *Languages* (Schliesser 2005b and 2006b). Yet, the “*Astronomy*” also teaches us that it’s not merely need that drives the process; Smith also describes the mental pleasure that comes from classification. As we have seen in the TMS (2.1.5.10, 77-8) passage on self-preservation and the propagation of the species, nature’s ends are brought about by (sometimes) pleasing instincts. So, in Smith we have a careful analysis of the (possible) mechanisms by which our instinctive needs get transformed into stable derived propensities.

Darwin describes much the same process, but he adds one crucial element that is consistent with, but, perhaps, not fully appreciated by Smith: “The mental powers in some early progenitor of man must have been more highly developed than in any existing ape, before even the most imperfect form of speech could have come into use; but we may confidently believe that the continued use and advancement of this power would have reacted on the mind itself, by enabling and encouraging it to carry on long trains of thought” (*Descent*, 110). Darwin sees clearly that the possession of rudimentary language also facilitates mental development.

Yet, Smith may have also discerned the possibility that mind and language can influence each other’s development. Let’s focus on a passage that was probably written as a response to Hume’s infamous claim that there was no constant impression of the self to be found in him. By Smith’s lights the very idea of self is such an extremely metaphysical idea so that Hume’s whole approach is doomed from the start. Smith argues:

“But in this early period of the language, which we are now endeavouring to describe, it is extremely improbable that any such words would be known. Though custom has now rendered them familiar to us, they, both of them, express ideas extremely metaphysical and abstract. The word *I*, for example, is a word of a very particular species. Whatever speaks may denote itself by this personal pronoun. The word *I*, therefore, is a general word, capable of being predicated, as the logicians say, of an infinite variety of objects. It differs, however, from all other general words in this respect; that the objects of which it may be predicated, do not form any particular species of objects distinguished from all others. The word *I*, does not, like the word *man*, denote a particular class of objects, separated from all others by peculiar qualities of their own. It is far from being the name of a species, but, on the contrary, whenever it is made use of, it always denotes a precise individual, the particular person who then speaks. It may be said to be, at once, both what the logicians call, a singular, and what they call, a common term; and to join in its signification the seemingly opposite qualities of the most precise individuality, and the most extensive generalization. This word, therefore, expressing so very abstract and metaphysical an idea, would not easily or readily occur to the

first formers of language. What are called the personal pronouns, it may be observed, are among the last words of a which children learn to make use. A child, speaking of itself, says, *Billy walks, Billy sits*, instead of *I walk, I sit*. As in the beginnings of language, therefore, mankind seem to have evaded the invention of at least the more abstract prepositions,” (*Languages* 32, 219).

In the last few lines of the passage, Smith uses evidence from child-development to capture the nature of minds of early humanoids. This is very much in line with Lockean anthropology, where the savage mind is likened to the child mind (Berry 2006). Unlike many of his contemporaries (e.g. Adam Ferguson) that liken then contemporary savages to children (the source of imperial ideology in which conquered nations require Western political/military guidance), Smith clearly has “early” and not existing savages in mind here. Even more interesting for our present purposes is that in the last lines of the quoted passage he expresses what has become known as (the largely discredited) Haeckel’s Biogenetic Law: (a child’s) individual development recaptures species development.¹²

This passage suggests an important addition to Smith’s famous treatment of how the self is socially constructed in part three of TMS; recall that there he claims that without others we cannot even think of our ‘own’ character; without others ‘we’ are utterly outer-directed by our passions (3.1.3, 110-111). In *Languages* we learn that these *social* achievements of self-hood presuppose considerable mental and linguistic development before they can be put into words.

4. Natural vs Cultivated Sentiments

This section connects the various strands of the treatment of Smith’s proto-evolutionary views with important themes in Smith’s moral theory as illustrated by his account of property.

First, there is a very important, unappreciated distinction in Smith’s TMS. It is a distinction between natural and moral sentiments (Carrasco was the first to note the importance of the distinction; here it is used for different ends). Smith does not alert the reader to the distinction. In fact, the first explicit mention of the “natural sentiments” is only in TMS, part two (in a heavily reworked passage throughout the editions): “All our natural sentiments [of untaught nature but of an artificial refinement of reason and philosophy. Our untaught, natural sentiments, all] prompt us to believe, that as perfect virtue is supposed necessarily to appear to the Deity, as it does to us, for its own sake, and without any further view, the natural and proper object of love and reward, so must vice, of hatred and punishment” (2.2.3, 91).¹³ In context Smith is making a claim about the opposition between what reason teaches us about how to think of the deity and how we naturally feel about it. In the third, fourth, and fifth editions Smith helpfully explained that natural sentiments are untaught, that is to say, our uncultivated passions/feelings. Thus, in Smith

¹² I thank David Haig for discussion.

¹³ The part between brackets was included in the third through fifth editions. The paragraph was removed from the sixth edition. Almost certainly Smith reasons for removing it have to do with changes in his public presentation of God and the afterlife; these need not concern us here. I am using the paragraph as evidence for a technical, conceptual distinction, not Smith’s views on religion.

there is a distinction between the uncultivated feelings humans ‘naturally’ possess (“natural” sentiments) and the cultivated feelings humans acquire from the local social institutions that acculturate them (the so-called “moral sentiments”).

The distinction between natural and moral sentiments is important for Smith’s response to Hume’s account of the approval of justice. Above, it was noted that Smith criticizes Hume’s claim that it is originally derived from our appreciation of the social institution’s utility. This is the wrong kind of sensation. The crucial passage in favor of Smith’s alternative source is this:

“so when a single man is injured, or destroyed, we demand the punishment of the wrong that has been done to him, not so much from a concern for the general interest of society, as from a concern for that very individual who has been injured. It is to be observed, however, that this concern does not necessarily include in it any degree of those exquisite sentiments which are commonly called love, esteem, and affection, and by which we distinguish our particular friends and acquaintance. The concern which is requisite for this, is no more than the general fellow–feeling which we have with every man merely because he is our fellow–creature. We enter into the resentment even of an odious person, when he is injured by those to whom he has given no provocation. Our disapprobation of his ordinary character and conduct does not in this case altogether prevent our fellow–feeling with his *natural* indignation; though with those who are not either extremely candid, or who have not been accustomed to correct and regulate their natural sentiments by general rules, it is very apt to damp it” (TMS 2.2.3.10, 89-90; emphasis added).

Smith claims that we *even* naturally sympathize (from common humanity) with the “natural” indignation of (an unfairly) injured odious character. It is the “immediate and instinctive approbation of the very application [of punishment] which is most proper to attain [the welfare and preservation of society]” (TMS 2.1.5.10).¹⁴ This sympathetic resentment is the right kind of sentiment to do the explanatory job Smith has set himself. He avoids offering i) too abstract a sentiment (e.g., Humean “utility;” “general interest of society”); ii) too moralized a sentiment (e.g., love of virtue); or iii) too “exquisite” a sentiment (love, esteem, and affection). The first cannot ground an institution whose fruits can only be discerned after its establishment; the second presupposes (justice) what it is trying to explain; the third sentiment ties us to particular people but does not provide us the right sort of enlarged, social institution.

Smith need not explain the origin of our sympathetic resentment. On this score, even Darwin is in no better position: “It is a more probable that these sensations were first developed, in order that those animals would profit by living in society... With respect to the origin...of the social instincts, we know not the steps by which they have gained; but we may infer that it has been to a large extent through natural selection” (*Descent*, 128-129).

So, in Smith’s system “natural” sentiments must do some important work to ground the social institutions which allow for enlarged societies. (Smith does not use the language of “natural sentiments” very often, but for a striking passage see TMS 3.5.10, 168-69.) To use language from our earlier treatment, in Smith we find “original” propensities in human nature (e.g., the

¹⁴ I thank an anonymous referee for helping me see the significance of this passage.

natural sentiments) that help *ground* derived propensities (e.g., moral sentiments, which are regulated, in part, by “general rules”). This is not only crucial in Smith’s explanation of the origin of morality, some such distinction plays a crucial role in his moral theory.

Elsewhere I have explained that Smith has a two-tier moral theory: the first tier is a thin conception of universal morality governed by our common humanity founded in our natural sentiments; the second tier is the morality as cultivated by our local institutions governed by our judgments of propriety in our moral sentiments (Schliesser 2006b). Given the close link between justice and property in Smith’s (and Hume’s) thought, let me focus on a well known passage from WN which illustrates the claim: “The property which every man has in his own labour, as it is the original foundation of all other property, so it is the most sacred and inviolable. The patrimony of a poor man lies in the strength and dexterity of his hands; and to hinder him from employing this strength and dexterity in what manner he thinks proper without injury to his neighbour, is a plain violation of this most sacred property,” (I.x.c.12, 138).

There are four crucial points in this passage. First, the original foundation of property is the most sacred and inviolable; it is derived from every man’s labour. As we have seen in TMS this is supported by the natural sentiments. Second, “original” is, thus, not wholly a temporal claim, but also a conceptual claim. It is original because it is rooted in our natural sentiment of sympathetic resentment when confronted with “injury.” This focus on injury/society is why this treatment is linked to the TMS passage quoted before. Third, it points to Smith’s moral egalitarianism and universalism: the normative authority for appeal is available to us all (‘poor man’) and to this day (repeated “is”). Fourth, our injuries can come in degrees. If there is “most sacred and inviolable” property, this implies that in societies with advanced division of labor there can be less sacred and less inviolable property with less “plain violations.” This last point suggests that in different societies derived property rights might be protected by different institutions/customs. Our moral sentiments are cultivated by institutions that embody *local norms* of reasonableness, many of which may remain sub-optimal from the point of disinterested, impartial utility. From the point of view of our natural sentiments this is sometimes a good thing.

5. Darwinian Afterthoughts

This paper is not meant to convey the impression that Smith and Darwin agree much with each other. Darwin’s *Descent* identifies different mechanisms of natural selection (in Darwin, group selection is just a species of natural selection). In particular, Smith is largely silent on natural selection and especially blind to the role that sexual selection can play. As Darwin writes near the conclusion of *Descent*:

The views here advanced, on the part which sexual selection has played in the history of man, want scientific precision. He who does not admit this agency in the case of the lower animals, will disregard all that I have written in the later chapters on man. We cannot positively say this character, but not that, has been thus modified; it has, however, been shewn that the races of man differ from each other and from their nearest allies, in certain characters which are of no service to them in their daily habits of life, and which it is extremely probable would have been modified through sexual selection” (675).

For Darwin, sexual selection accounts for much cultural variance. (A note on terminology: for Darwin there are many races, but there is only one species of humanity.) It also provides a mechanism to account for otherwise sup-optimal outcomes. Nevertheless, this suggests a deeper underlying similarity between the two thinkers; neither Smith nor Darwin expects the most efficient outcomes.

Finally, for Darwin the lack of uniformity in human environment permits sexual selection to be so influential, which can account for much of the ethnic variance.¹⁵ Yet, because Darwin sees sexual selection as a species of *artificial* selection, the specter of eugenics hangs over *Descent* (Peart & Levy). For Darwin “Man in many respects may be compared with those animals which have long been domesticated” (*Descent*, 200; see also 220). It is but a small step from animal breeding to human breeding. As Levy and Peart have argued, we need Smithian sympathy to block the move (but cf. Khalil, unpublished). My argument has been that we obtain Smith’s move without having to think of him as entirely un-Darwinian. All Smith requires is the claim that the sympathetic resentment with others is a natural sentiment that can underwrite a thin, albeit universal, human justice. Smith’s distinction between natural and moral sentiments could prevent the moral approval of the marriage between utilitarian and eugenic thought; it is worth exploring if any of the eighteenth century participants in that debate saw this move. But that requires further exploration.*

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¹⁵ “Domesticated animals vary more than those in a state of nature of the conditions to which they have subjected; and this is apparently due to diversified and changing nature of the conditions which they have been subjected. In this respect the different races of man resemble domesticated animals, and so the individuals of the same race, when inhabiting a very wide area, like that of America” (*Descent*, 46)

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