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Smithian vitalism?¹

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1.

To seek to connect Adam Smith and vitalism seems like a perilous enterprise, and indeed my initial remarks will be primarily critical, with respect to some scholars who seek to make that connection in ways which seem unhelpful regarding either vitalism or Smith. But, as I'll propose on the basis of some scattered but suggestive remarks by Eric Schliesser concerning, not just Smith but also Newton and Spinoza, such a connection may still be possible. However, we need to start by clarifying the term 'vitalism', given the various ways in which the term is used (including by the authors who portray Smith as a vitalist). What is vitalism?

- To historians of the life sciences, it means, roughly, a doctrine usually opposed to 'mechanism', but also to 'animism', that is explanations in terms of soul.
- To scholars of early modern philosophy it means a doctrine of animate matter and/or thinking matter, generally emphasising dynamism and/or sentience, as in Margaret Cavendish, or Bacon's "appetites of matter" (I leave aside here the oddness of using 'vitalism' to describe doctrines where life and living bodies are not the crucial issue).
- In the present context, it means something else again, notably, P.H. Reill's idea of 'mediation' as characteristic of 18th century vitalism, thus not the foundation of a mechanistic ontology, but rather a doctrine of *affinities* (in the Scottish Enlightenment as well as Montpellier vitalism, for Reill²; this is also developed in the Scottish context in Tamas Demeter's recent work³). Reill explicitly applies this idea and the term 'vitalist' to Adam Smith. Similar, albeit rougher ideas on Smith as vitalist, are found in a recent work by Catherine Packham on Enlightenment vitalism.⁴

I now turn to Reill and Packham on Smith, before moving on to Schliesser.

¹ References to Smith follow the standard format (TMS, WN followed by book, chapter and section numbers).

² P.H. Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

³ T. Demeter, *David Hume and the Culture of Scottish Newtonianism: Methodology and Ideology in Enlightenment Inquiry* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

⁴ C. Packham, *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism: Bodies, Culture, Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

2.

Peter Hanns Reill has become in the last 15-odd years something of a standard reference on Enlightenment vitalism for Anglophone scholars, especially ones not already historians of science or medicine, notably with his book *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*. His vision of what he calls Enlightenment vitalism is the following:

“Relation, *rapport*, *Verwandschaft* [affinity], and interconnection replaced mechanical aggregation as one of the defining principles of matter. By emphasizing the centrality of interconnection, Enlightenment vitalists modified the concept of cause and effect. In the world of living nature, each part of an “organized body” was both cause and effect of the other parts.”⁵

Reill also cites Smith: “That order of things which necessity imposes in general, though not in every particular country, is, in every particular country, promoted by the natural inclinations of man” (*WN*, III.i.3 (377), cit. Reill, 81) and this for him means ‘mediation’, the core feature of Enlightenment vitalism, which he opposes thusly to *Naturphilosophie*, which he finds to be a kind of ontology *without* mediation. A mediation-centred vision of living nature can be played out along metaphorically Newtonian lines, as I have explored elsewhere.

Where Reill’s discussion gets into more trouble is indeed with Adam Smith:

“The most obvious and powerful explanatory analogy Herder and Smith deployed was that of the living body. . . it was central for their representation of a nation’s operations and dynamics; Smith’s extensive use of the idea of sympathy in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* anticipated and underscored the centrality of the body analogy” (84).

This seems wrong to me – not just a bit rough or misleading; I think *we confuse (at least) two senses of sympathy at our peril, namely the organic (organismic) and the moral*, which I will seek to explicate in what follows. It’s not just the merely factual error of claiming that Smithian sympathy is an embodiment theory (as one might find in Husserl or philosophical anthropology; it seems wholly absent in Smith), but the lack of distinctions regarding sympathy.

Similarly, C. Packham, in her literary-focused study of Enlightenment vitalism, tends to move freely between medical and social/economic themes, relying on what seem to be primarily metaphorical resonances (e.g. the language of ‘oecconomy’ in medicine and economics⁶), claiming that Whytt, Cullen, Hume and Smith all invoke a shared concept of a kind of immanent vitality. Packham also asserts deep connections between the ‘science of man’ and vitalism (31),

⁵ Reill, “Eighteenth-century uses of vitalism in constructing the human sciences,” in *Biology and ideology from Descartes to Dawkins*, eds. D.R. Alexander and R.L. Numbers, 61-87 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 66.

⁶ C. Packham, *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism*, 125f. Her rather loose sense of vitalism also appears when Packham claims that Smith’s appeal to Nature’s self-curative powers, in his advice to the dying Hume, is a specifically 18th-century vitalist motif (103f.). In fact, it is a very old, notably Hippocratic theme (*Natura medicatrix*).

connections which she does not articulate, any more than the reason she calls the economics of the *Wealth of Nations* vitalist (83f.). Tamas Demeter has argued in much less literal ways for a vitalist reading of Hume, as has Andrew Cunningham (who puts a lot of weight on the concept of vivacity⁷). Whether in the more literal version (Reill and Packham) or the more subtle version (Demeter and Cunningham), these articulations of ‘Smith and vitalism’ should also be distinguished from a focus on the *methodological* influence of Smith in medico-physiological matters, notably on Cullen, based on Smith’s essay on the History of Astronomy, as described in C. Lawrence’s dissertation.⁸

In contrast to the above ‘vitalist readings of Smith’, it seems to me important that *Smith on sympathy (like Hume) explicitly brackets off physiology and the mind/body problem!* (contra Packham, 53): *he focuses on the representational and imaginative workings of the mind as a socially mediated entity.* The occasional presence of the language of ‘animal spirits’, like in Locke, does not seem to have any impact on the system as a whole. True, in the opening paragraphs of TMS, Smith does seem to connect the two senses of sympathy: “Persons of delicate fibres and a weak constitution of body complain, that in looking on the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggars in the streets, they are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the correspondent part of their own bodies” (TMS 1.1.1), but he immediately goes on to speak about this phenomenon in strictly and irreducibly psychological or mental terms.⁹ Further, it is also misleading to claim that analogies to the living body are in and of themselves vitalist (a problem not specific to the reading of Smith: that is, I disagree in part with the ‘embodied’ reading of Smith, and more fully with the claim about vitalism, but presenting the two as meaning the same thing is itself misleading).

We indeed need to carefully distinguish between the organic or organismic sense of sympathy and the ‘moral’ sense of sympathy, notably in Smith’s sense. Smithian sympathy seems crucially different from any of the organic/organismic sympathy theories in its representational and indeed, artificialist dimension. It is odd to say that sympathy is “Smith’s ‘vital principle’ of social feeling,” as Packham does (64). For Packham, sympathy was only discussed in an imprecise way in Scottish thought before Smith (60), a judgment which would come as a surprise to Hume,

⁷ Demeter, “A Chemistry of Human Nature: Chemical Imagery in Hume’s Treatise,” *Early Sci.Med.* 22(2-3) (2017), 208–228 and *passim*. A. Cunningham draws passing attention to the possible connection between Hume’s thought and Montpellier vitalism in “Hume’s Vitalism and Its Implications,” *Brit.Jour.Hist.Phil.* 15 (2001), 59-73 – but ‘vitalism’ in Cunningham seems to mean ‘a doctrine concerning with the activity of the mind’ (more specifically its liveliness). I think ‘vivacity’ is metaphorically overplayed à la Reill and Packham if it is made into ‘vitalism’.

⁸ C. Lawrence, “Medicine as Culture: Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of London, 1984. E. Schliesser notes (discussion, Budapest, 2018) that Smith’s methodological writings (e.g. on astronomy) precede Cullen and Black by a generation (versus the idea that he learned from them), although T. Demeter responds that Cullen’s chemistry lectures were indeed contemporary of Smith’s. I would say that at that point, the issue becomes: what impact does it have on issues of content?

⁹ Cf. C. Lawrence, “The nervous system and society in the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *Natural Order: Historical studies of scientific culture*, ed. by B. Barnes & S. Shapin (Berkeley and London, 1979), 19-40, here 32. (The essay on the External Senses doesn’t seem to alter my point here.)

whose reflections on sympathy were both original and important for Smith. A more careful version of Packham's view is found in a useful article by Evelyn Forget from 2004.¹⁰ I quote Forget: "The epistemological continuity between the physiological theories of the Edinburgh medical school and the social theories of Smith and Hume seems apparent. The same principle explains the action of sensation, the coordination of the organs of the body, and the "social principle" that allows "fellowfeeling" to emerge in a society" (Forget 2004, 292). Yet this connection between bodily processes, physiological theory and social theory still seems misguided and overly literal to me.

3.

Sympathy in an organic sense is described in the Chevalier Jaucourt's entry "Sympathie (Physiologie)" in the *Encyclopédie*, which speaks rather canonically of the "communication between the parts of the body . . . a mutual suffering . . . the mechanism of which also sometimes conveys agreeable sensations," and defines sympathy as "the harmony, the mutual agreement between various parts of the human body by means of the nerves . . ."¹¹ 'Sympathy' is being further naturalized in relation to its 17th century, Digbyian – or earlier, Fracastorian – overtones and turned into a descriptor of the irreducible interconnections in the nervous system.

Someone who does *not* confuse the two senses of sympathy (organic and moral), yet succeeds in pointing to what they might have in common is Schliesser, who had developed, perhaps from a Newtonian context (I don't know in his case where he encountered the idea first, Smith or Newton) the idea of relational properties.¹² For indeed, in both the 'organic sense' (focusing on interconnections and systemic properties) and the 'moral' sense (that is, Hume and Smith), sympathy *sensu* Schliesser is a *relational* and *emergent* property: "it can be a means of generating linkages where previously connections were latent."¹³ He makes great suggestions to this effect, briefly in the Smith book and in his Introduction to the recent *Sympathy* volume, and also sketches out this idea of 'relational properties' in a different, yet complementary context,

¹⁰ E.L. Forget, "Evocations of Sympathy: Sympathetic Imagery in Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Physiology," *History of Political Economy*, 35/1 (2004), 282-308.

¹¹ "Sympathie (*Physiologie*)," *Enc.* 1765, XV, 736a, translation mine. The vast majority of occurrences of the term in the *Encyclopédie* are in a medical or chemical sense – Jaucourt actually mentions the 'fellow-feeling' sense and then says he will only be discussing the physiological sense. (D'Alembert authored a general entry "Sympathie" focusing more on chemistry. Newtonian medical chemistry is also a 'site' of 'negotiations' of a conceptual space which is neither Digbyan sympathy (let's call it 'mysterian sympathy'), nor the fully demystified and artificialized Hume-Smith sympathy.)

¹² E. Schliesser, "Without God: Gravity as a Relational Quality of Matter in Newton," in Dana Jalobeanu and Peter Anstey (eds.), *Vanishing Matter and the Laws of Motion: Descartes and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2011), 80-102.

¹³ Schliesser, "On Sympathy," introduction to Schliesser ed., *Sympathy. A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

in his reflections on Spinoza and the “philosophy of science,” in which he argues for a non- (or ‘meta’-?) mechanist Spinoza.¹⁴

It is notable, as Schliesser has observed (discussion, Budapest, 2018) that Smith makes no use of the metaphor of vibrating strings: he is not the ‘Hartley of economics’ (my expression) – Schliesser refers to James Stuart as a contemporary of Smith’s who *does* think of the economy in those terms. (Recall that ‘canonically understood’ Scientific Revolution science was meant to do away with sympathies and antipathies, understood as “the forces binding different elements of living bodies together and separating them during secretion. In Cartesian physiology such notions are replaced by the model of the strainers: the glands are described as tiny sieves, that are deemed capable of straining out some of the particles circulating in the blood, that are subsequently delivered to organs for the sake of nutrition.”¹⁵) Such sympathies are, not resurrected but reconfigured in 18th-century vitalist efforts to describe the systemic properties of the ‘animal economy’, as I’ve discussed elsewhere. ‘Sympathy’ becomes a technical term (albeit with archaic baggage), similar to “consensus,” “conspiracy,” “coordination,” and “connection,” with explicit reference to Hippocrates’ *sumpathia panta*, as was already the case in Daniel Le Clerc’s 17th century history of medicine; Claude Perrault also speaks of ‘commerce’ and ‘besoin mutuel’ in this regard¹⁶.

Now, if I reproach some commentators for confusing these senses of the term, it however was true that some authors of the period *did seek* to argue from the one to the other. Thus Anne Vila has noted that Jaucourt’s descriptive language in “Sympathie” not only makes moral sympathy analogous to organic sympathy, but actually suggests that the former is little more than a higher-level expression of the primordial mechanism by which all vital entities communicate.¹⁷ More fundamentally, in a kind of simplified, vital-materialist Spinozism, Cabanis in the late 1790s-early 1800s imagines that there must be some kind of continuity (not necessarily unbroken) from motion/laws of attraction and organic sensitivity to social sympathy.¹⁸ In the same period, for the physician Alibert, sensationalism was the “universal key

¹⁴ E. Schliesser, “Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science: Mathematics, Motion, and Being,” in M. Della Rocca ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Something I do not explore here is the way in which action at a distance was also taken to be a sympathetic process, an idea William Gilbert resisted (see the work of Laura Georgescu).

¹⁵ S. Gino, “On the Novelty of *Apollo Mathematicus’s* Medicine,” ms. 2016.

¹⁶ D. Le Clerc, *Histoire de la médecine* (Amsterdam: G. Gallet, 1702), 107-108; Cl. Perrault, *Essais de physique ou recueil de plusieurs traités touchant les choses naturelles* (Paris: Jean-Baptiste Coignard, 1680), vol.1, 2nde partie : *Expériences pour l’Éclaircissement de la circulation de la sève des plantes*, 201.

¹⁷ A. Vila, “Beyond Sympathy: Vapors, Melancholia, and the Pathologies of Sensibility in Tissot and Rousseau,” *Yale French Studies* (1997), 88-101, here 89.

¹⁸ *Rapports du physique et du moral* (Paris: Crapart, Caille et Ravier, 1802), II, 498.

to the human mind.” Society must necessarily function according to the ability of each individual to “feel” sociability through sympathy.¹⁹

4.

And this dimension highlights a difference between organic sympathy and moral sympathy which the commentators I discussed earlier, leave out: the role of *artificiality* in the latter. Indeed, Smith speaks of an “imaginary change of situation” by which the spectator tries to expose himself to the same causal influences as the man originally concerned (TMS 6.3.1.4; cf. his example, that we have sympathy with the rich because we imagine their life to correspond to our fantasies, not just because we covet the items they have: TMS 1.3.2.2). As Schliesser puts it in his book, *sympathy does not merely deploy natural relations*, and is full of counterfactuals.²⁰ Further, Schliesser stresses in the first chapters of his book that Smithian social explanations are not explanations of society as a homeostatic organism but rather are concerned with social *dispositions*.²¹

Conversely, some of this sense of sympathy as social relatedness *without* organic (physiological, embodied) underpinnings, is not restricted to Smith. If for Smith, “Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them,” for Diderot, “He who has studied himself, will have advanced in the knowledge of others, given, I think, that there is no virtue which is foreign to the wicked, nor vice foreign to the good.”²² While he is by no means a theorist of sympathy as a defining feature of our moral psychology, like Hume or Smith, Diderot has a strongly social concept of self, more so than, say, La Mettrie; his vital materialism is more concerned with taking into account our ‘sentiments for others’, which brings to mind sympathy – a concept he uses, yet he almost never makes the move from an older, organic concept of ‘sympathies’, to a ‘Scottish Enlightenment’ focus on the moral psychology of sympathy.

¹⁹ J.-L. Alibert, “Discours sur les rapports de la médecine avec les sciences physiques et morales,” *Mémoires de la Société d’Émulation*, vol. 2 (1798), i-cxii, here lxxxiii, and E. Williams, *The Physical and the Moral: Anthropology, physiology and philosophical medicine in 18th-Century France, 1750-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 82.

²⁰ Schliesser, *Adam Smith: Systematic Philosopher and Public Thinker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 107, 118f.

²¹ For the contrary view, see Reill and Packham, but also Demeter, who also states that the “economic body” in Smith is to be understood as a “living organism,” and in vitalistic terms (*David Hume and the Culture of Scottish Newtonianism*, 151). I note that these are actually two separate claims (to view society or the economy like a living body or organism is not itself tantamount to vitalism, unless the latter is defined in truly general terms), and I differ from both, although more strongly from the latter.

²² TMS, 1.1.3.10, 19 cit. Schliesser, *Adam Smith*, 28 (cf. TMS 3.1.3., 110-111: if someone grew up alone, how could he judge the beauty or deformity of his face?); Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron*, in *Œuvres complètes*, DPV (Paris: Hermann, 1975-), XXV, 226.

5.

So: in handling the slippery, or weird, or almost-bogus topic of Smith and vitalism, Schliesser can help us avoid the pitfalls of either naïvely collapsing Smith into some amorphous construct of 18th century vitalism, or at least collapsing the different senses of sympathy. Not just by stating the obvious, namely that Smithian sympathy is really not at all like organic sympathy. But with this relational property concept that he first developed with respect to Newton (Schliesser 2011), a concept that can also be explored in the context of Smithian sympathy, given that for Smith, ‘X is sympathizing with Y’ *is not an ontological claim but a claim about relations*. In an interesting coincidence – but maybe there are no coincidences – this relational property idea crops up in a different context, in my work, when I seek to reconstruct 18th century Montpellier vitalist ideas of the animal economy²³ and insist on how life therein is portrayed in structural and relational terms, rather than as a substance or life force. And there are Newtonian elements in both Smith and vitalism²⁴, but can one infer from that that Smith was a vitalist or that vitalism is a meaningful albeit missing category with which to understand Smith? No.

²³ Where the key metaphor is the bee swarm, but not in a Mandevillian sense (although bees and ‘social sympathy’ appear in Scottish Enlightenment discourse; cf. Forget 2004, 284).

²⁴ That Newtonianism was a powerful methodological tool, not just e.g. in economics with Smith but in the life sciences *and explicitly* in vitalism, is something I examine in my contribution to a volume coedited by E. Schliesser (C.T. Wolfe, “On the Role of Newtonian Analogies in Eighteenth-Century Life Science: Vitalism and Provisionally Inexplicable Explicative Devices,” in Z. Biener and E. Schliesser, eds., *Newton and Empiricism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 223-261).