

Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments *

If Adam Smith had restricted himself to a description of the general sentiments or feelings which lead men to praise or blame others, he would perhaps have written a good work, but far less original. However, he was striving for more than that, in a direction that was indeed original for his time. In spite of his protestation that he is concerned with "fact" and not "right,"¹ in spite of his statement that "We are not at present examining upon what principles a perfect being would approve of the punishment of bad actions; but upon what principles so weak and imperfect a creature as man actually and in fact approves of it,"² and in spite of his many references to the vulgar applause of the mob, he is speaking of human actions and their principles, subjects upon which he is unfortunately vague. He is aware of a difference between the actual state of a man's character and the judgment of society about the man.³ This leads him to seek some common denominator which will unite these two. Briefly, he does this by his theory of moral sentiments. Moral sentiments, for him, are founded upon instincts implanted in man by an all-wise Nature. While these may be corrupted, and frequently are, still if we know the causes of corruption and have recourse to the judgment of society we shall be able to determine virtue for man in his present weak and imperfect state.

Contrary to many modern writers on moral philosophy, Smith happily does not attempt to exhaust the subject in a purely speculative manner but actually proceeds in the practical mode. Thus we find many passages which, viewed by themselves, we must agree with. However, when we examine these in the light of the principles which he uses, we cannot follow him unreservedly. He extols friendship,⁴ he exalts the common good,⁵ he stresses the necessity of virtue; but in all this, while remaining in the practical order, he fails to see the proper role of prudence in human actions. For this reason, whenever he attempts to investigate these ideas, he is led to conclusions which are quite unacceptable. In a discussion of the common good, for example,⁶ with respect to the reason for the punish-

* For the first part of this study see *Laval théologique et philosophique*, vol. XVII, 1961, n.1, pp.100-121.

1. Adam Smith, *Essays*, p.71, footnote.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, pp.57-59.

4. *Ibid.*, p.200.

5. *Ibid.*, p.209.

6. *Ibid.*, p.82.

ment of crime he appears to condone personal vindictiveness — which is of course quite spontaneous.

That it is not a regard to the preservation of society, which originally interests us in the punishment of crimes committed against individuals, may be demonstrated by many obvious considerations. The concern which we take in the fortune and happiness of individuals does not, in common-cases, arise from that which we take in the fortune and happiness of society. We are no more concerned for the destruction or loss of a single man, because this man is a member or part of society, and because we should be concerned for the destruction of society, than we are concerned for the loss of a single guinea, because this guinea is a part of a thousand guineas, and because we should be concerned for the loss of the whole sum. In neither case does our regard for the individual arise from our regard for the multitude : but in both cases our regard for the multitude is compounded and made up of the particular regards which we feel for the different individuals of which it is composed.¹

In this confusion of the rule of practical action with judgments based upon the cause and effect of the action² he apparently gives moral action a firm foundation in the individual. Actually, however, to so overlook the proximate rule of action leads to the alienation of the individual. This can be seen in his discussion of sympathy where he says that I judge the passion expressed by another to be good or bad in so far as it agrees with that which I would imagine myself to feel under the same circumstances ; on the other hand, the goodness of the other's actions depends upon my judgment, which must in turn be validated by society. If my judgment in this case is the same as that of the greater part of the community I may feel certain that it is good. The implicit alienation of the self in this judgment as subject to others is made explicit when he describes how it is that I judge my own actions. In order to know whether our own action is good or bad " we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us."³ In the same passage he adds : " Whatever judgment we can form concerning (our own sentiments and motives), accordingly, 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 judgment of others." He follows this with a very remarkable metaphor to show man's dependence on society for his judgments of moral actions.⁴ Thus we have the

1. *Ibid.*, p.82.

2. *Ibid.*, p.19.

3. *Ibid.*, p.99.

4. *Ibid.*, p.100. " Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and

other judged by the self, the self judged by becoming other, and both judgments validated by the community. Here it must be noted that Smith attempts to base this validation by the community on something more than mere numerical superiority. Still, he feels compelled to admit that there are no perfect men and that we must also rely on the fact that a wise nature would not allow the corruption of these sentiments in the totality of mankind. In practice this means that the common sentiments of the community must be adequate.

Here again we see the paradoxical nature of this 'theory.' The "impartial spectator" is not human. He is always "other." The proximate norm of human action thus appears far too detached. This alone would make us fail to see the distinction of prudence from the moral virtues¹ and even lead one to assimilate prudence all too nearly with art.

Smith was not aware that it belongs to prudence to determine the mean in all the moral virtues; that, in this respect, it is the principle of all virtue which is strictly so called. In one of his first references to it he speaks of prudence as modifying our show of emotion in victory lest we cause envy in others.² It is a virtue which properly looks to the well-being of the individual.³ Thus we do not take too great a pleasure in seeing a prudent man, but view him with a certain "cold esteem."⁴ In the latter place, however, he speaks of a "superior prudence" when we combine it "with many greater and more splendid virtues, with valour, with extensive and strong benevolence, with a sacred regard for the rules of justice, and all these supported by a proper degree of self-command."⁵ Here and in other places⁶ he seems to give to "self-command" the directive power of prudence properly so called. In various references to what are, for him, the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice and benevolence⁷ he always gives the lowest place to prudence. In other words, on the whole he uses the term prudence in a very narrow and

conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. All these are objects which he cannot easily see, which naturally he does not look at, and with regard to which he is provided with no mirror which can present them to his view. Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind."

1. *Ibid.*, p.229.

2. *Ibid.*, p.45.

3. *Ibid.*, p.188.

4. *Ibid.*, p.191.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, pp.214, 215, 234, 235.

7. *Ibid.*, pp.210, 233, 234 and esp.269.

improper sense.¹ Actually, "prudence" can also mean the universally directive virtue of the whole of human life, as in Aristotle's *Ethics*. A man who is prudent only with respect to some particular end, such as making money, is actually imprudent if we bear in mind the meaning just mentioned. The best that could be said of Smith's conception of prudence is that he apparently restricts it to the level of the purely personal virtue, the way temperance is primarily concerned with the personal good. Again, when he speaks of that "superior prudence," we could understand this to mean that perfect prudence which is attended by all the moral virtues, namely, the right reason of whatever is to be done. He seems to have this in mind when he in fact describes the virtuous man.² Smith himself, however, in his criticism of Epicurus,³ rejects prudence as the source of virtue. This falls in line with his disinclination to give any kind of normative office to the reason in practical affairs. The reason of man is too weak to comprehend the ends which Providence has set for him⁴ — as if this were a *sine qua non*.

Although Smith says many things about the practical order that we agree with, it must be added that his ideas on the nature of virtue, prudence, justice, etc., are at least inconsistent. He failed on the speculative side to see the nature of human acts, and his moral philosophy faltered accordingly.

In his conception of prudence he took no account of the distinction between the virtues of speculative and practical reason on the one hand, and the widely different virtues of practical reason itself, that is, art and prudence. Art, in its first meaning, determines the intellect with respect to a certain work that is external, as in the case of building; or at least external to the moral agent as such, for instance computation, logic and the like. In the case of these speculative arts, the word "art" has acquired an extended meaning — it is an analogical name. Now a man may produce a fine work, and accordingly prove that he is a good artisan or artist, but this alone does not make him a good man. On the other hand, a good man may be a bad craftsman and a genuine artist can be a morally weak or even a wicked person. Naturally speaking, it is the moral virtues of justice, fortitude, and temperance, directed by the intellectual virtue of prudence, that qualify the man as good. The proper end of prudence, as we here take this term, is the perfection of a man in his whole life, and not

1. We must realize that the pejorative meaning of the word 'prudence' is also an ancient one. Even the Greek *phronêsis* and the Latin *prudentia* are often used to mean scheming narrowness, astuteness, or arrogance. In other words, 'prudence' taken in a sense which declines from the architectonic virtue of action is by no means new nor to be frowned upon.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.219-220.

3. *Ibid.*, p.260ff.

4. *Ibid.*, p.71.

just with respect to some particular end. Actions are of course always in the particular and they are particular actions (whether those of speculative or of practical reason), but all stand in need of a direction which leads to an ultimate good, the kind of activity that is in conformity with the right reason of the individual agent. Now, this "right reason" is prudence.

To appreciate the shortcomings of Smith's theory, one must bear in mind that distinction already referred to, namely between speculative and practical truths. The former consists in the conformity of the mind with what is : if I say that Socrates is seated, and he is, my saying this is true. But prudential truth, which is practical, depends upon the conformity with right desire ; it cannot be divorced from the disposition of the appetite, which colors our judgment, so to speak. If a man is in an inordinate state of anger he is likely to judge that the wrong thing to do here and now is right. If the concupiscible appetite is out of control, he will judge that to eat or drink in excess is right here and now. While he knows it is wrong, he still orders himself to do it. It is in the actual doing that prudence or imprudence find their fulfilment. The whole point is that prudential truth cannot be detached in the sense of speculative truth. Now this is precisely what Adam Smith appears to do in his emphasis on the impartial spectator. It is true that the good counsellor as such is in a sense a disengaged spectator, but he is not the one who is to perform the action which he counsels. The one who seeks advice must still judge for himself whether the advice ought to be followed, and if so, he must still order himself to carry it out ; he himself must be the final judge whom no one else can replace.

If we replace the rules of conduct by those of art we would set up for man an end which is not his own immanent good, but the good of something external to him, of a self outside, for whose actions the inner man would nevertheless be held responsible. By putting the burden on the impartial observer, Smith seems to disintegrate the moral self. In so doing, he appears to emancipate the moral agent from the condition of the appetite, and thereby subjects the agent to a morally unjust and tyrannical objective truth. He will return to this point later ; for the present it will do to show how Smith may have been led to this confusion.

A striking feature of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is the lavish use of illustration from art, and more particularly from drama. At every turn he exemplifies the notions of sympathy, propriety, approbation, etc., by reference to characters in dramas. Now there is a certain plausibility in this method, seeing that drama has to do with human actions. Whatever the explicit intention of the dramatist, if his work is good it will be morally good. The villainy of Jago would be both artistically and morally false if he were made out to be good in what he does ; the same for Cordelia if her actions were inter-

puted as one in quality with those of her sisters. Any one knows that in great tragedy such distortions would be revolting, impossible. We must allow that great drama can provide the moral philosopher with ample material and that its cathartic effect upon the audience is morally good. But such material remains quite remote from what an individual must do here and now ; to shed tears during a tragedy may reveal a basic goodness, but this falls short of what one needs to be a good person.

If Smith intended no more than illustration from drama of praiseworthy and blameful conduct, he would be without reproach in point of moral philosophy. Yet he appears to have more than that in mind, viz., some relation between the basis for true moral sentiment — the impartial spectator — and the viewer of a tragedy. The viewer may judge that right and wrong are being shown as they should be represented, but this judgment is not *eo ipso* a moral action. What he is witness to may illustrate a remote principle of action, and in this measure he can be an impartial observer. But this does not give him power to provide the proximate norm of action. Now Smith, if we understand him correctly, invests the impartial observer of ourselves with such a norm : when we follow his judgment we do right. Smith would be closer to the truth had his impartial observer been a device to bring out the role of conscience. But it is difficult to see how such a construction could be put upon his words.

We have already suggested that the impartial observer Smith is after might be identified with conscience. But this will not do, for conscience is one's own, nor does it constitute the proximate norm of action, else no one could do wrong. Smith was no doubt aware that more was needed to guarantee the goodness of an action, and in this he was right. But where, then, is the proximate norm to be found ?

There are many good things in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but it is vitiated by an attempt to provide an utterly detached rule of behaviour that will at the same time be sufficient to ensure the rightness of this particular action here and now. He sought a clarity which cannot be found in moral philosophy, not to mention the act of prudence itself, which is incommunicable. He was not wholly ignorant of the latter point, but he shirked away from it for social reasons — as if he could not bear society's condemnation of a person's action that would nonetheless be simply good.

Smith did not underestimate the role of fortune in human actions. Yet, here again, there is an over-emphasis on the other man's view. Fortune, good or bad, concerns Smith inasmuch as it affects the very quality of the action. For example, fortune may impede the intended effect of this action and thus, he would say, lessen the intrinsic good or evil of the act ; or, on the other hand, fortune can cause a good or evil action by facing the agent with an unexpected situation. Aris-

tote had taught that fortune proper is nowhere to be found except in human actions, but could never be more than an accidental cause for which the agent himself should not be held to account, no matter how society might judge him. Let us mention, in passing, that fortune in history and fortune in tragedy are not quite the same. In tragedy, misfortune is not to be divorced from a moral flaw in the hero himself — in his character and some past action of his own — whereas in history, misfortune may beset the best of man, and he will in no way be responsible for what so happens to him. The tragic hero is in some measure the object of blame when bad fortune strikes ; but can one truly blame the man who, performing an act of mercy, becomes therein the object of outrageous fortune ? This is frequent enough in history, but would lack the significant unity which drama requires.

Analysing the effect of fortune upon the amount of praise or blame which we give to any actions, Smith says that there are three different things which " constitute the whole nature and circumstances of the action, and must be the foundation of whatever quality can belong to it. " ¹ These are the intention, the external act or movement of the body, and the good or bad consequences. Of these three he says that the last two obviously cannot be the foundation of any praise or blame. Still, while all may admit this as an abstract principle, " when we come to particular cases, the actual consequences which happen to proceed from any action, have a very great effect upon our sentiments concerning its merit or demerit, and almost always either enhance or diminish our sense of both. " ² He then proceeds to examine and explain this " irregularity of sentiment " and here he will assign its cause, influence and purpose.

As to the cause of the influence of fortune on the praise or blame attributed to actions, he points out that we have passions of gratitude and revenge or resentment. These, although they can be and are directed to animals and even to inanimate objects, are properly directed to those which can be conscious of this passion in the one having it. We wish those who are the object of our gratitude or resentment to be aware of it. Thus he says that in order to be a proper object of these passions three qualifications are necessary. ³ It must be the cause of pleasure or pain. It must be itself capable of feeling these. Finally it must have produced these " from design, and from a design that is approved of in the one case, and disapproved of in the other. " ⁴ It is by the first that the object is capable of exciting the passions ; by the second, that it is capable of gratifying

1. *Ibid.*, p.84.

2. *Ibid.*, p.85.

3. *Ibid.*, p.88.

4. *Ibid.*

them ; and by the third it " is not only necessary for their complete satisfaction, but as it gives a pleasure or pain that is both exquisite and peculiar; it is likewise an additional exciting cause of those passions." ¹ Thus, because that which gives pleasure or pain " is the sole exciting cause of gratitude or resentment," we feel the need of expressing these passions even " though in the intentions of any person, there was either no laudable degree of benevolence on the one hand, or no blamable degree of malice on the other." ²

When he inquires as to how far the influence of fortune extends in this respect he shows first that it diminishes the sense of merit or demerit in those actions which fail of their effects, even when they arise from the best or the worst intentions.³ Conversely it increases the sense of merit or demerit of actions, regardless of motives, when they accidentally cause extraordinary pleasure or pain. In a rather ambiguous passage he concludes that " good fortune either diminishes, or takes away altogether, all sense of guilt." ⁴

1. *Ibid.*

2. *Ibid.*, " As what gives pleasure or pain, therefore, either in one way or another, is the sole exciting cause of gratitude and resentment ; though the intentions of any person should be ever so proper and beneficent, on the one hand, or ever so improper and malevolent on the other ; yet, if he has failed in producing either the good or the evil which he had intended, as one of the exciting causes is wanting in both cases, less gratitude seems due to him in the one, and less resentment in the other. And, on the contrary, though in the intentions of any person, there was either no laudable degree of benevolence on the one hand, or no blamable degree of malice on the other ; yet, if his actions should produce either great good or great evil, as one of the exciting causes takes place upon both these occasions, some gratitude is apt to arise towards him in the one, and some resentment in the other. A shadow of merit seems to fall upon him in the first, a shadow of demerit in the second. And as the consequences of actions are altogether under the empire of Fortune, hence arises her influence upon the sentiments of mankind with regard to merit and demerit."

3. *Ibid.*, pp.88-89. " The effect of this influence of fortune is, first, to diminish our sense of the merit or demerit of those actions which arose from the most laudable or blamable intentions, when they fail of producing their proposed effects ; and, secondly, to increase our sense of the merit or demerit of actions, beyond what is due to the motives or affections from which they proceed, when they accidentally give occasion either to extraordinary pleasure or pain."

4. *Ibid.*, p.92. " The person himself who either from passion or from the influence of bad company, has resolved, and perhaps taken measures to perpetrate some crime, but who has fortunately been prevented by an accident which put it out of his power, is sure, if he has any remains of conscience, to regard this event all his life after as a great and signal deliverance. He can never think of it without returning thanks to Heaven, for having been thus graciously pleased to save him from the guilt in which he was just ready to plunge himself, and to hinder him from rendering all the rest of his life a scene of horror, remorse, and repentance. But though his hands are innocent, he is conscious that his heart is equally guilty as if he had actually executed what he was so fully resolved upon. It gives great ease to his conscience, however, to consider that the crime was not executed, though he knows that the failure arose from no virtue in him. He still considers himself less deserving of punishment and resentment ; and this good fortune either diminishes or takes away altogether, all sense of guilt. To remember how much he was resolved

Finally, in a passage which speaks of fortune as the governor of the world¹ he attributes this "irregularity of sentiment" to Nature. The purpose is to prevent sentiments, thoughts and intentions from becoming the objects of punishment, and force us to give human jurisdiction power only over actions. He argues further that there is a certain utility in this that it makes men strive to implement their good will that it may produce its effects, rather than being satisfied with merely wishing for the good of their fellows. Even the evil aspect of blaming where no blame is due is useful in teaching man "to reverence the happiness of his brethren, to tremble lest he should, even unknowingly, do anything that can hurt them."²

Smith attempts, in two chapters,³ to clarify the distinction between art and prudence. The result is more confusion. In the first chapter, having stated that one of the principal sources of beauty is utility (he fails to mention any others), he tries to analyse the pleasure which utility causes. He credits an unnamed philosopher approvingly with the idea that "the utility of any object pleases the master by perpetually suggesting to him the pleasure or conveniency which it is fitted to promote."⁴ Then "the spectator enters by sympathy into the sentiments of the master, and necessarily views the object under the same agreeable aspect." Smith, however, has a discovery of his own to add: "But that this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued than the very end for which it was intended; and that the exact adjustment of the means for attaining any conveniency or pleasure, should frequently be more regarded, than that very conveniency or pleasure, in the attainment of which their whole merit would seem to consist has not, so far as I know, been yet taken notice of by any body."⁵ One example he gives is that of the person who has his pockets full of knickknacks. He claims that such a one carries these not because of their utility but for their contrivance. His proof is based upon the observation that their combined utility would not compensate for the "fatigue of bearing the burden" of them.

upon it, has no other effect than to make him regard his escape as the greater and more miraculous: for he still fancies that he has escaped, and he looks back upon the danger to which his peace of mind was exposed, with that terror, with which one who is in safety may sometimes remember the hazard he was in of falling over a precipice, and shudders with horror at the thought." — This analysis may be psychologically sound but, morally, the question is one of guilty desire, no matter what the issue.

1. *Ibid.*, p.96.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.97-98.

3. *Ibid.*, pp.158-171.

4. *Ibid.*, p.158.

5. *Ibid.*, pp.158-159.

Then he expands this principle by saying that this applies not only "to such frivolous objects" but that "it is often the secret motive of the most serious and important pursuits of both private and public life."¹ It is this deception of ourselves that causes the rustic to work all his life to attain some of the conveniences of the wealthy; and then makes the same rustic wonder, when he has attained them, whether they were really worth the effort after all. Smith dwells on this for a while and then decides that "it is well that nature imposes upon 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."² He goes on by further reasoning of the same type to the idea that it is this same "spirit of system" which recommends to us the promotion of the happiness of our fellow-creatures. Thus, while we can say that Smith perceives the utility contained in the notion of art, we must add that it is very difficult to see just what his exact notion of utility was.

More than that, his notion of art was very scrappy. He seems unaware, for instance, that arts are not all of one kind; that there are arts which transform some external matter, as in making a saw or

1. *Ibid.*, p.159.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.162-163. It is on this principle that he has based his later work *The Wealth of Nations*. A wise and all-provident Nature directly orders even the naturally selfish and rapacious to the good of society. "It is no purpose, that the proud and unfeeling landlord views his extensive fields, and without a thought for the wants of his brethren, in imagination consumes himself the whole harvest that grows upon them. The homely and vulgar proverb, that the eye is larger than the belly, never was more fully verified than with regard to him. The capacity of his stomach bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires, and will receive no more than that of the meanest peasant. The rest he is obliged to distribute among those, who prepare, in the nicest manner, that little which he himself makes use of, among those who fit up the place in which this little is to be consumed, among those who provide and keep in order all the different baubles and trinkets which are employed in the economy of greatness; all of whom thus derive from his luxury and caprice, that share of the necessaries of life, which they would in vain have expected from his humanity or his justice. The produce of the soil maintains at all times nearly that number of inhabitants which it is capable of maintaining. The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own convenience, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species. When Providence divided the earth among a few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition.

in sawing ; that the liberal arts direct immanent operations, such as grammar, logic, mathematics, and the like ; then there are the so-called fine arts, some of which are liberal, e.g. poetry, whereas others demand considerable bodily exertion, such as hewing a statue out of stone. Had he payed more attention to this variety of arts, he might not have been so ready to link beauty with utility as he does.

Smith also fails to take into account the difference between a good that is sought for its utility, such as medicine ; a good that one seeks for pleasure, such as food or drink ; and a good that one pursues for its own sake, such as a noble friend to whom one would remain faithful even through the worst of trials. There is of course the respect in which all our works of art have man himself for their purpose, and in this regard utility — in at least a broad sense — would be a common note. For who would study logic if our mind did not need rectification ; or who would indulge in computation if a machine could do the work for us ?

There is of course an analogy between art and prudence, so that the moral philosopher may put it to some use ; but he should never proceed as if they were identical. Smith surely nowhere says that they are. Still, he draws too heavily upon the analogy, and leaves us in a haze as to what he really has in mind. Let me explain. He makes much of utility in the arts, and we allowed a broad sense in which this can be true in each and all of them. But when it comes to action, the case is no longer the same. If utility conveys the idea of what is for the sake of something else, we will not say that all friends are sought for their utility, no matter how necessary it may be to have useful friends.

The apparent likeness of Smith's use of the analogy between art and prudence is perhaps to be found in the way he associates beauty and utility which, in some areas of both nature and art, are inseparable. Darwin describes many natural instances in his reflections on the rôle of ornaments in natural selection. A handsome face is after all a composition of organs, this is, instruments of vital activities such as seeing, hearing, smelling, and so forth. The beauty of flying buttresses is destroyed when divorced from their utility. Now, in the moral virtues there is utility and beauty as well, though they be of a quite different nature from the cases just mentioned. In analogy we must of course be aware of the likeness which proportion provides, but it is just as important to set forth the differences between the proportional terms.

In the second of these two chapters, Smith wants to determine the extent to which the perception of that beauty with which the appearance of utility invests the characters and actions of men can be regarded as one of the original principles of approbation. We agree with him that there is beauty in virtue and deformity in vice. But, he allows, the utility which causes moral beauty does not account for

all that virtue is. This qualification rouses our attention. It appears to bring him nearer to the truth. He aptly observes that it seems impossible to feel no more in the sentiment which constitutes the approbation of virtue than in that by which we approve of a convenient or well-contrived building. More particularly, the approbation of virtue involves a sense of propriety.¹ But then, in a passage which ~~deserves to be quoted in full, Smith again unwittingly displays a~~ basic confusion of art and prudence.

It is to be observed that so far as the sentiment of approbation arises from the perception of this beauty of utility, it has no reference of any kind to the sentiments of others. If it were possible, therefore, that a person should grow up to manhood without any communication with society, his own actions might, notwithstanding, be agreeable or disagreeable to him on account of their tendency to his happiness or disadvantage. He might perceive a beauty of this kind in prudence, temperance, and good conduct, and a deformity in the opposite behaviour: he might view his own temper and character with that sort of satisfaction with which we consider a well-contrived machine, in the one case: or with that sort of distaste and dissatisfaction with which we regard a very awkward and clumsy contrivance, in the other. As these perceptions, however, are merely a matter of taste, and have all the feebleness and delicacy of that species of perceptions, upon the justness of which what is properly called taste is founded, they probably would not be much attended to by one in his solitary and miserable condition. Even though they should occur to him, they would by no means have the same effect upon him, antecedent to his connection with society, which they would have in consequence of that connection. He would not be cast down with inward shame at the thought of this deformity; nor would he be elevated with secret triumph of mind from the consciousness of the contrary beauty. He would not exult from the notion of deserving reward in the one case, nor tremble from the suspicion of meriting punishment in the other. All such sentiments suppose the idea of some other being, who is the natural judge of the person that feels them; and it is only by sympathy with the decision of this arbiter of his conduct, that he can conceive, either the triumph of self-applause, or the shame of self-condemnation.²

Smith is struggling here to add some note of distinction to the notion of moral action over that of art. However, it would seem, according to him, that the only judgment which the individual can make of his own actions in isolation from society is that of art. This in itself is significant. He then reverts to the merit or demerit as depending upon a judgment of self by another as other—the “impartial spectator”—and again virtue finally consists in the judgment.

1. *Ibid.*, p.167.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.170-171.

At this juncture we may refer to St. Thomas's doctrine on the proper and ultimate act of prudence, which is to command.¹ Concerning things to be done (*agibilia*) there are three acts. First, the act of counsel which considers the various means; after this, the act of judgment about these means which are found by counsel, and this is done by the speculative reason; then, since prudence is about actions to be performed, there is a third act which applies what was counseled and decided to what must be done here and now, namely the act of command, attended by the actual doing. This points to a wide difference between art and prudence, for "the perfection of art consists in judging, but not in commanding." Thus, insisting as he does on the sentiment arising from the judgment of another on the character or action, Smith overlooks this distinction between art and prudence. More than that, it can be said that for the most part he would insist that human actions are more under the rule of art than under the rule of prudence. There are several other passages to illustrate this.

In the discussion of self-command² he compares the development of perfect self-command in all things to the making of a perfect work of art. He says that just as it is an inferior artist who is completely satisfied with his production so it is in the character of virtue.³ He adds that contrary to the artist who sits down in leisure to work undisturbed, the man of virtue must operate in all the contingencies and difficulties of life. It would be easy enough, here as in other places, to interpret his analogies favourably — if only we could forget the purpose for which Smith uses them.

There is something to the opinion that Smith's *Theory of Moral sentiments* is a sane reaction against the rationalism of his time, provided we stress the qualification "of his time." That rationalism was indeed most simplistic: all moral problems and actions were to be solved and governed by pure reason. Man had at last discovered the clue leading to unhampered self-possession. Smith shows the crisis this oversimplification leads to. His *Theory* lays bare the successive contradictions which rationalism inevitably gets involved in. The solution of one contradiction leads to another. Smith still belongs to that phase of rationalism which did not accept contradiction as a legitimate step toward a 'higher level.' But he was on the way towards emancipation from prudential truth.

La vérité prudentielle, la vérité dans l'action dépend de la rectitude de l'appétit. Cette condition est en pratique extrêmement dure, à tel point que l'histoire de la philosophie pullule de positions et de doctrines où l'on essaie d'émanciper l'intelligence de toute soumission à l'appétit, afin de

1. *IIa IIae*, q.47, a.8, c.

2. SMITH, *op. cit.*, pp.210 ff.

3. *Ibid.* p.221.

contourner cette difficulté de bien agir que chacun éprouve en lui-même. Cette tentative regarde surtout l'action politique et cela se comprend aisément, car cette action engage directement le bien de la communauté, de tous et chacun. Or, soutenir que la vérité prudentielle en matière politique est conditionnée par la rectitude de l'appétit du politique, veut dire que le jugement du politique comme tel dépendra aussi de sa conduite privée : que le bon politique doit être un homme de bien. Si donc on pouvait déterminer une règle prochaine qui, d'une part, garantirait la vérité dans l'action politique, et qui, d'autre part, serait indépendante de la condition de l'appétit de celui qui agit, le bien public, semble-t-il, serait bien mieux assuré, son accomplissement serait moins sous la dépendance de la condition subjective du politique. On établirait ainsi une science politique dont la vérité serait pratique, et qui serait dès lors un substitut de la prudence. La prudence serait coextensive à la *dinotica*.¹

Does Smith's work fall in line with this attempt? A superficial glance at the *Theory of moral sentiments* might lead us to believe that he was precisely reacting against this rationalistic emancipation of man from the role of appetite in practical truth. Actually, his whole effort appears bent upon rationalizing this appetite. His clearly stated purpose was : to discover a "precise or distinct measure" by which the fitness or propriety of our moral actions can be ascertained or judged.

But how can this possibly be reconciled with Smith's identification of sympathy with the moral sense? Let us not forget his meaning of the term "sympathy." If we used it in connection with the very basis of morality, it would have a quite different meaning. It would mean the conformity of our appetite with an end that is truly good, and the conformity of our intellect with right appetite. Hence, while truth in action is *relative* to right appetite, the practical judgment of what is right or wrong is the judgment of the individual person, and its value depends essentially upon the above-mentioned conformity. The basis of Smith's morality finally resides in the sympathy of one man with the action of another. This sympathy is but an alienation of self in sympathy as we understand it. It is still, in a more subtle way, a rationalistic escape from the moral good. The sympathy he speaks of is, in truth, the subject of a speculative judgment. The value of the other's action is judged by our ability to sympathize with his action and judgment, and the value of our action and judgment is measured by the others's ability to sympathize with these in ourselves.

This vicious circle is still a form of subjection of man to man. In what sense can the individual person be free in his moral judgments?

Cette tentative de contourner les exigences de la vérité dans l'action n'en est pas moins une révolte contre la vérité et contre la liberté de conscience.

1. Charles DE KONINCK, *Révolte contre la vérité prudentielle*, 1943, pp.109-121.

Elle conduit vers la pire tyrannie qui se puisse concevoir, non pas parce que ceux qui refuseraient de se soumettre à un régime politique édifié, en théorie et en pratique, sur la négation de la vérité prudentielle, seraient jetés dans des camps de concentration ou tout simplement 'éliminés' — *ne craignez pas ceux qui tuent le corps et ne peuvent tuer l'âme* — mais parce qu'elle tend à exterminer la notion même de vérité prudentielle et de liberté de conscience. Cette négation est d'autant plus sinistre qu'elle fait appel à cela même qu'elle veut détruire. Il est si facile de cacher une âme d'esclave sous l'étiquette d'homme libre.¹

Smith's idea of sympathy, far from recognizing the role of appetite in action, very definitely rules out this appetite as the faculty of a self-determining agent. Smith alienates the moral self into the otherness of society. Man must judge his own worth according to his attunement to the society he lives in, and to society as it is. Such an idea seems totalitarian. And this alienation is logically carried through in conformity with Smith's original intention. "We are not at present, he said, examining upon what principles a perfect being would approve of the punishment of bad actions; but upon what principles so weak and imperfect a creature as man actually and in fact approves of it." Unless the approbation of the latter is established by Smith as a true criterion of the value of our individual actions, his very theory of sympathy becomes wholly superfluous. But as soon as we accept this approbation as a norm, his theory of sympathy becomes inescapable:

The attractiveness of this position lies in the fact that it does convey the relevance of appetite in action and apparently recognize this role. It is nonetheless rationalistic in the end, for the self is objectively alienated, projected into detached otherness. Thus the self can treat itself as an external object, and place the burden of responsibility upon the self's otherness, upon society into which it has been absorbed.

In fact the text we have just quoted from Smith is a very significant statement of an idea that Hegel will finally reject, namely, the distinction between things as they *are* and things as they *ought* to be. While Smith maintains this distinction, his whole purpose is confined to things as they *are* as the very norm of what we must do. Hume and Hegel would explicitly cut all ties from the very transcendence involved in the idea of what *ought* to be as opposed to what is in fact. "It is not what is that makes us furious and torments us, Hegel says, but rather the fact that what is, is not as it ought to be; once we recognize that that which is, is as it ought to be, that is, not arbitrary, nor contingent, then we also recognize that it must be as it is." In other words, if I could eventually identify myself with the impartial spectator, *ought* would be what is.

1. Charles DE KONINCK, *Révolte contre la vérité prudentielle*, loc. cit.

One of the striking features of this logic is that at the very moment the human person is to enjoy freedom it is compelled to become the moral of its fellow-man. All becomes caprice and the person must free itself from utter randomness of its own actions by ignominiously subjecting itself to the Big Brother "impartial spectator," an impartial observer who is actually as subject to brute, irrational, fact as the depersonalized individual.

What are the truths that Smith can try to make his idea of sympathy hinge upon? There is first of all the principle: *Qualis unusquisque est talis finis videtur ei*.¹ This indeed shows well enough the role of appetite in action. But how is one to know the right way to act? Can moral science tell us exactly what is right and what is wrong in such a way that we would only have to apply this knowledge to any given situations in order to ensure the right or wrong of our actions? At the outset of his *Ethics* Aristotle had observed that in the sciences of action

we must be content, in speaking of such subjects and with such premisses to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premisses of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.²

In a subsequent passage he repeats that

this must be agreed upon beforehand, that the whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely, as we said at the very beginning that the accounts we demand must be in accordance with the subject-matter; matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health. The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation.³

1. ST. THOMAS, *In III Ethic.*, lect.13.

2. *Nichomachean Ethics*, I, 3, 1094 b 20.

3. *Op. cit.*, II, 2, 1104 a 1. — St. Thomas's commentary reads as follows: "Determinat [Philosophus] modum inquirendi de talibus. Et dicit, quod illud oportet primo supponere, quod omnis sermo qui est de operabilibus, sicut est iste, debet tradi typo, idest exemplariter, vel similitudinarie, et non secundum certitudinem; sicut dictum est in prooemio totius libri. Et hoc ideo, quia sermones sunt exquirendi secundum conditionem materiae, ut ibidem dictum est. Videmus autem, quod ea quae sunt in operationibus moralibus, et alia quae sunt ad hoc utilia, scilicet bona exteriora, non habent in seipsis aliquid stans per modum necessitatis, sed omnia sunt contingentia et variabilia. Sicut

No moral science, however elaborate, can become a substitute for prudence whose truth depends upon the condition of our appetite. Both Aristotle and St. Thomas go so far as to say that moral science contributes little to virtue. That the good should be done and evil avoided is true everywhere and always. This is the most general principle of all, but it does not tell what is to be done here and now. That we must act justly is a less universal principle, which must always be applied in matters of justice. But, if we narrow it down to 'One must pay one's debts,' its application here and now may be quite uncertain, for it is not plain that one must pay one's debts under all conceivable circumstances; to do so could, in a given case, be an act of treason. Again, an ill-disposed person might use this type of uncertainty as a pretext for not paying his debts where he should.

That the virtuous man is the measure and rule of human acts should not be interpreted to mean that he is the *proximate* rule for the actions of others. He is such a rule only for himself. For others his virtue is never more than a type, a general, remote measure. The way in which the good man is to be imitated is in doing what each person should do in his own contingent circumstances. The proximate rule of what I should do here and now is ineffable, incommunicable in purely rational terms. An impartial spectator, no matter how wise and well-intentioned, could not be such a norm.

The alienation of the self Smith carries through on the highest level, as we can see in his understanding of charity towards neighbour which, to him, means that we must love our neighbour as much as we love ourselves, to the point where self and neighbour are completely interchangeable. In truth, however, we must love ourselves more than our neighbour, as St. Thomas explains :

There are two things in man, his spiritual nature and his corporeal nature. And a man is said to love himself by reason of his loving himself with regard to his spiritual nature, as stated above (q.25, a.7) : so that accordingly, a man ought, out of charity, to love himself more than he loves any other person. This is evident from the very reason for loving :

etiam accidit in operibus medicinalibus quae sunt circa sana. Quia ipsa dispositio corporis sanandi et res quae assumantur ad sanandum, multipliciter variantur. — Et cum sermo moralium etiam in universalibus sit incertus et variabilis, adhuc magis incertus est si quis velit ulterius descendere trahendo doctrinam de singulis in speciali. Hoc enim non cadit neque sub arte, neque sub aliqua narratione. Quia causae singularium operabilium variantur infinitis modis. Unde iudicium de singulis relinquatur prudentiae uniuscujusque. Et hoc est, quod oportet ipsos operantes per suam prudentiam intendere ad considerandum, ea quae conveniunt agere secundum praesens tempus, consideratis omnibus particularibus circumstantiis ; sicut oportet medicum facere in medicando, et gubernatorem in regimine navis. Quamvis autem hic sermo sit talis, idest universaliter incertus, in particulari autem inenarrabilis, tamen attentare debemus, ut aliquod auxilium super hoc homini conferamus, per quod scilicet dirigatur in suis operibus. In *II Ethic.*, lect.2. nn.258-9. Cf. Book II, lect.8. nn.333-4 ; lect.9, n.351 ; lect. 11. a. 369 and n.381 ; Book III, lect.1, n.390 ; lect.2. n.399 : etc.

since, as stated above (q.25, aa. 1, 12), God is loved as the principle of good, on which the love of charity is founded ; while man, out of charity, loves himself by reason of his being a partaker of the aforesaid good, and loves his neighbor by reason of his fellowship in that good. Now fellowship is a reason for love according to a certain union in relation to God. Wherefore just as unity surpasses union, the fact that man himself has a share of the Divine good, is a more potent reason for loving than that another should be a partner with him in that share. Therefore man, out of charity, ought to love himself more than his neighbor : in sign whereof, a man ought not to give way to any evil of sin, which counteracts his share of happiness, not even that he may free his neighbor from sin.¹

It would therefore be contrary to charity to sacrifice one's own spiritual good for that of our neighbour. This shows how deeply perverse is the alienation which is at least intimated by Smith. And while his interpretation of the law of charity is in contradiction with several of his other positions, such as that one may not commit evil for the sake of a good, Smith has nonetheless erred in the matter at hand, and the evolution of rationalism will gradually eliminate the share of truth that remained associated with it in his *Theory*.

Smith's idea of charity already foreshadows the contradictory concept of brotherly love in Marxism. While on the one hand Marxism teaches that the individual self is the highest divinity, at the same time, the individual person is completely sacrificed for the welfare of some one or more individuals just as expendible. Here again the absolute assertion of the self implies its absolute negation.

No matter how we look at rationalism, it leads to a contradiction eventually to be accepted in principle ; to the " yes and no " of Hegelianism and Marxism. Smith was saved only by inconsistency. Some of the greater difficulties he sidesteps by suddenly bringing in the " Supreme Judge." But his God is never but a " deus ex machina " appealed to when a conflict arises between the spectator within and those without. Rationalism will soon accept this conflict as a principle, and substitute to God himself the " fecundity of contradiction."

The same idea of alienation underlies Smith's conception of justice as the only rule which allows no looseness or free interpretation in its application to particular cases. Justice thus becomes the first of the virtues. Now justice is not toward oneself but toward another. If held to be the architectonic virtue in lieu of prudence, then again we have alienation : virtue is primarily " ad alterum." And since justice is in the appetite, and if it is to have the primacy which in fact belongs to the intellectual virtue of prudence, justice and, accordingly, moral life as a whole become primarily irrational.

The same irrationality may be seen to follow logically from Smith's neglect to distinguish practical reason from speculative reason. When

1. *IIa IIae*, q.26, a. 4, c.

the whole burden of reason in action is placed upon speculative reason, the realm of action itself when characterized by more sentiment becomes, qua practical, irrational. That reason which attains the good as good is denied, and hence the good as such becomes inaccessible to anything but speculative reason.

It is not only in its moral philosophy that rationalism turns out to be irrationalism. This holds true of its most abstract and speculative teachings. The most basic idea of rationalism is that only the humanly rational is real; that the only rationality things have in themselves is the rationality they have *for me*. Human reason as such then becomes the very principle of their rationality. But actually what is first and most rational to *me* is least rational in itself. Hence, if the rational to us becomes the measure of rationality of things in themselves, then what is least rational in them is at the same time the norm of what is most rational in them.

It would of course be unfair and childish to hold Smith responsible for the conclusions his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* leads to. Like Hume he is typical of his Age, a particularly rootless one. It is amazing how little they knew of the ancient questions and answers concerning their subjects, and how confident was their approach. Following in the footsteps of their immediate forebears, Continental and English, they philosophized in a way that leads to the opposite of both speculative and practical wisdom.

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