THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

INDISPENSABLE HUME: FROM ISAAC NEWTON’S NATURAL PHILOSOPHY TO ADAM SMITH’S “SCIENCE OF MAN.”

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Eric Schliesser,
Chicago
July 2002
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# Abbreviations

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<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Ancient Logics”</td>
<td>“The History of Ancient Logics and Metaphysics,”</td>
<td>EPS</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Ancient Physics”</td>
<td>“The History of Ancient Physics,”</td>
<td>EPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Astronomy”</td>
<td>“The History of Astronomy,”</td>
<td>EPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td>Correspondence of Adam Smith.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ED</td>
<td>“Early Draft of Part of The Wealth of Nations,”</td>
<td>LJ</td>
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<td>“Edinburgh Review”</td>
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<td>EPS</td>
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<td>EPS</td>
<td>Essays on Philosophical Subjects.</td>
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<td>“Of the Nature of the Imitation which takes place in what are called the Imitative Arts,”</td>
<td>EPS</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Letter to Strahan”</td>
<td>Letter from Adam Smith, LL.D. to William Strahan, ESQ”</td>
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<tr>
<td>LJ</td>
<td>Lectures on Jurisprudence.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>LJ(B)</td>
<td>“Lectures on Jurisprudence: Report dated 1766,”</td>
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<td>LRBL</td>
<td>Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres.</td>
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<td>“Languages”</td>
<td>“Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages,”</td>
<td>LBRL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TMS</td>
<td>The Theory of Moral Sentiments.</td>
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## David Hume’s Writings

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<td>“Ancient Nations”</td>
<td>“Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations”</td>
<td>EMPL</td>
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<td>Dialogues</td>
<td>Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.</td>
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<td>The Letters of David Hume.</td>
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<td>NHR</td>
<td>The Natural History of Religion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Enquiry</td>
<td>An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals.</td>
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<td>Treatise</td>
<td>A Treatise of Human Nature.</td>
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## Isaac Newton’s Writings

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<tr>
<td>Principia</td>
<td>Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Opticks</td>
<td>Optics or A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections &amp; Colours of Light.</td>
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Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Writings

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<td>Second Discourse</td>
<td><em>Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPE</td>
<td><em>Discourse on Political Economy.</em></td>
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John Locke’s Writings

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td><em>An Essay concerning Human Understanding.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Treatise</td>
<td><em>Second Treatise of Government.</em></td>
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OED          | Oxford English Dictionary.                |
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“But though man is … employed to alter that distribution of things which natural events would make, if left to themselves; though, like the gods of the poets, he is perpetually interposing, by extraordinary means, in favour of virtue, and in opposition to vice, and, like them, endeavours to turn away the arrow that is aimed at the head of the righteous, but to accelerate the sword of destruction that is lifted up against the wicked; yet he is by no means able to render the fortune of either quite suitable to his own sentiments and wishes. The natural course of things cannot be entirely controlled by the impotent endeavours of man: the current is too rapid and too strong for him to stop it; and though the rules which direct it appears to have been established for the wisest and best purposes, they sometimes produce effects which shock all his natural sentiments.” Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, III.5.10, 168.

This introduction is divided into two parts. First I make some very brief general remarks on my methods and aims. After that, I present a chapter-by-chapter outline of my dissertation.

Adam Smith’s ideas are widely taken for granted in our age. The main conceit of my dissertation is to suppose that if we were not to take for granted that we have understood him, then reflection on his ambitions and writings would still have much to teach us, both on topics that are not normally associated with his name, as well as in areas that have long been thought to be central to his oeuvre. In this dissertation, I investigate the epistemological and methodological strategies of David Hume’s and Adam Smith’s attempts to construct what Hume termed a “Science of Man,” while not ignoring the political and philosophic motivations fuelling this project.
The focus of the dissertation is on Adam Smith’s response to David Hume. I presuppose that Smith’s work can be understood as a creative and critical extension of David Hume’s two-fold program (announced in the “Introduction” to Hume’s *Treatise*), that is, 1) to found a “Science of Man”¹ and 2) to use that “Science of Man” to illuminate and provide an epistemological foundation for the achievements of natural philosophy.² Roughly, Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to the latter, while the fourth is devoted to the former. Chapters five and six look at the political and philosophic aims, respectively, driving this “Science of Man.” Although Smith is a systematic philosopher worthy of sustained interest, analyzing Smith’s response to Hume provides new and important insights into Hume’s thought. It turns out that Smith is a perceptive judge and, at times, a critic of Hume’s works. For instance, one of the most important themes of Chapters 2 through 4, is that Smith has a much more sophisticated understanding of Newton’s achievements than Hume ever managed to incorporate into his philosophy. Although I do not argue this in the dissertation, I think Smith’s works present us with one – the other being Kant’s – fundamental response to Hume’s reflections on philosophy after Newton. Smith’s contributions in this area are largely unknown, even among specialists in 18th century thought, and will be presented sympathetically here.

My dissertation is pitched to philosophers and historians who care about: the 18th century reception of Newton’s natural philosophy; the role and influence of scientific thinking on the study — and improvement! — of human beings; and the interaction between these two areas of intellectual activity. Practicing social scientists, and their

¹I treat the 18th century terms “science of Man” and “Moral Philosophy” as rough synonyms and as even rougher forerunners of what is now known as “social science” and “Geisteswissenschaft” (of course, these are not identical either).

²I follow mid-eighteenth century practice and use “philosophy,” “natural philosophy,” “physicks,” and (physical) “science” as loose synonyms of each other (for example, see *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (WN), V.i.f.23-4, 776-8).
methodologists, may find Chapter 4 on the methodological and evidential strategies of *Wealth of Nations* (WN) of interest. Finally, the dissertation as a whole sheds light on why intellectually honest, even virtuous, Enlightenment thinkers could be advocates of commercial society.

It is worth stressing that, although my project is broad in scope, I do not pursue in detail many important sources of influence on Smith’s thinking. Sometimes I make, of course, passing comments about Smith’s relationship to other areas of thought. While I have learned a lot from studies in the history of ideas and contextual intellectual history, it is my conviction that these studies have also obscured important elements of Hume’s and Smith’s thought. So, while I accept that knowledge of the sociological and historical (etc.) context of Hume’s or Smith’s enterprise can be both genuinely illuminating as well as be appealed to as *constraints* on any interpretation offered of Smith’s or Hume’s work, we must also be willing to read their writings as original products of sustained reflection on, and a response to, these constraints.

Let me give an example of what I have in mind. It has been maintained that Smith was at most a grand synthesizer of economic ideas that were being discussed widely at the time.\(^3\) My dissertation is relatively agnostic about the novelty of any of Smith’s economic claims. I am not a historian of economic ideas. Moreover, I do not attempt to reconstruct or translate Smith’s economic theorizing into modern terminology; I do not explore to what degree Smith anticipated various modern ‘schools’ (or as he would say, “sects”) of economics or social theorizing more broadly, and their respective insights. This should keep the text accessible to non-economists. Not doing so may annoy readers trained in modern economics and, more importantly, means, at times, a potential loss in conceptual rigor. Nevertheless, by not worrying too much about the origins, contemporary reception, and later

\(^3\)Schumpeter 1954; Rothbard 1995 follows Schumpeter and insists that Smith’s influence retarded the development of economics.
influence of WN — an exclusive focus on this often presupposes that nothing new of interest can be said about the aims of the book — I have been able to ‘discover’ a totally new understanding of Smith’s methods in WN. I believe my interpretation presents even a widely discussed and influential subject, i.e., Smith’s account of price and value, in a new and improved light (Chapters 4 and 5).  

Here follows a chapter-by-chapter outline of this dissertation. In Chapter 2, “Newton and Hume’s Foundations for the Science of Man,” I show that, despite David Hume’s interest in Newtonian science, Hume’s understanding of important features of Isaac Newton’s system was lacking. I argue that this explains why Hume is unable to execute his own program, that is, to use the “Science of Man” to provide an epistemological foundation for the other sciences in a satisfying fashion. I focus on Hume’s account of causality and the Missing Shade of Blue. I offer some suggestions for a new understanding of Hume’s project. I also call attention to resources available within Newtonian natural philosophy that could have aided Hume’s program.

The main claim of my discussion of Hume’s treatment of causality is that it cannot do justice to Newton’s natural philosophy. But the more important point is that Hume’s attempt to provide a “foundation” for the sciences is too restrictive to account for the remarkable success achieved by Newton. I argue that Hume’s strategy runs into trouble because it tries, without paying attention to the messy details of scientific practice, to constrain what science can be about.

My discussion of the Missing Shade of Blue example is less ambitious than the account of causality, but in certain respects more original. I argue that Hume’s treatment of

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4For the best general assessments of Smith’s aims, see Cropsey 1957 and A.S. Skinner 1996; for overviews of his economics, see Hollander 1973, Blaug 1997, and Schumpeter 1954; for illuminating interpretations of Smith’s moral psychology, see Griswold 1999 and the curiously neglected Morrow 1923; for a reconstruction of his Jurisprudence, see Haakonsen 1981; see, for his politics, besides Cropsey, Winch 1978, Fleischacker 1999, and Pack 1991; for the reception of Smith, see Rothschild 2001.
the Missing Shade of Blue reveals ignorance of what Newton had demonstrated about the
nature of color perception. The more fundamental point is that Hume does not take
advantage of Newton’s methodological insights to enable him to turn the Missing Shade of
Blue from an objection into a constructive element in an ongoing research enterprise.

In Chapter 3, “Smith’s Account of Inquiry,” I reconstruct Adam Smith’s
epistemology and explain his response to Isaac Newton’s achievements. I show that the
major theoretical concept of Smith’s moral psychology, the “Impartial Spectator,” is
important for understanding his views on the articulation and reception of scientific theories;
it brings out the social and norm-governed nature of science. For Smith, both scientific
theories and the norms by which they are evaluated are generated and maintained by open-
ended processes.

I demonstrate that Smith thought one can recognize that sentiments motivate inquiry,
while still insisting that it is reasonable to accept the results of inquiry. Moreover, I argue
that Smith is not a skeptic, but a modest realist with respect to Newton’s natural philosophy.
I pay special attention to Smith’s treatment of how Newton’s theory changed the grounds
for accepting Copernicanism. It shows how Smith is willing to adopt a historically sensitive
and critical stance toward scientific positions based on norms operating within science.

In Chapter 4, “Some Principles of Adam Smith’s ‘Newtonian’ Methods in the
Wealth of Nations,” I give an account of important aspects of Smith’s methods in WN. I
reinterpret Smith’s distinction between natural and market prices. I focus on Smith’s
account of the causes of the discrepancies of market prices from natural prices. I argue that
Smith postulates an idealized model of the course of events in order to stimulate research
into institutions that cause the real world to deviate from it.

Smith’s employment of the fiction of a natural price should, thus, not be seen as an
instance of general or partial equilibrium analysis, but, instead, as being part of a theoretical
framework that will enable observed deviations from expected regularities to uncover
genuine social causes and aid in improving his theory. I argue that, for Smith, theory is a research tool that allows for a potentially open-ended process of successive approximation. These are the Newtonian elements in Smith. I provide evidence that all of this accords with Smith’s views on methodology by calling attention to a very insightful passage in *The History of Astronomy* in which Smith takes Descartes to task for trying to explain away deviations from general rules instead of explaining them. By way of illumination, I contrast Smith’s explanation of the introduction of commerce in Europe with that of Hume. While Hume’s writings on political economy may have inspired Smith, I argue that Smith’s treatment is methodologically superior.

In Chapter 5, “Redistribution & ‘Sacred and Inviolable Property’ in Locke, Hume, and Smith,” I explain the political aims of Smith’s WN. I argue that Adam Smith was an Incremental Redistributionist (IR). I provide a compilation of a number of reasons (mostly from WN) for thinking that the thrust of Smith’s proposed political reform and the values that guide his theorizing on economic affairs was humane and equitable and in aid of the working poor. Most of my evidence comes from WN, although I also draw on The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS). Moreover, I cast doubt on one of the strongest possible political counter-arguments against the position that he was an IR and defender of the poor by showing that Smith’s defense of property rights was far less absolute than a casual reading of WN would suggest. I pay special attention to Smith’s historical understanding of property rights. As part of my argument, I look at some of Locke’s and Hume’s ideas on property-rights. I conclude this chapter by diagnosing a new problem in Smith’s enterprise; Smith’s repeated appeals to “humanity” appear without justification in WN.

In Chapter 6, “The Obituary of a Vain Philosopher: Smith’s reflections on Hume’s ‘Life,’” I investigate what the purpose of doing philosophy is for David Hume and Adam Smith in a commercial society. While I draw on Smith’s explicit comments about the nature of philosophy in TMS and WN, I chiefly rely on extended reflection on Adam Smith’s
written response to David Hume’s death: “Letter to Strahan.” I argue that in the debate between Rousseau and Hume on proper philosophic self-understanding, or between self-sufficiency and independence, Smith sided largely with the latter, but not without sympathy with the sensibilities of the former.

Hume’s autobiography attempts to show that the philosopher can thrive in a commercial society. Yet, Smith’s sketch of Hume’s last days is designed as a subtle correction to Hume’s self-portrait. While agreeing with the substance of Hume’s picture, Smith thinks that in certain circumstances philosophers can enjoy the rewards of companionship in this life and immortality after their death if they attempted to be benefactors to humanity. But the most important point is that for Smith, once certain basic needs are met, the unlimited pursuit of money is not life’s ultimate purpose. Friendship among equals is a much more valuable goal; it provides happiness and is within every one’s reach when a minimum level of security within society is guaranteed. In this sense, Smith is a genuine egalitarian. Yet, Smith also believes that philosophic friendship is its own and highest possible reward.
CHAPTER 2
NEWTON AND HUME’S FOUNDATIONS
FOR THE SCIENCE OF MAN

I: Summary and Introduction

This chapter shows that despite David Hume’s interest in Newtonian science Hume’s understanding of important features of Isaac Newton’s natural philosophy is lacking. I argue that because of this Hume is unable to execute his own program, that is, to use the “science of Man” to provide an epistemological foundation for the other sciences. I focus on Hume’s account of causality and his treatment of the Missing Shade of Blue. While I do not provide a general discussion of Hume’s epistemology, I offer some suggestions for a new understanding of Hume’s project. I also call attention to resources available within Newtonian natural philosophy that could have aided Hume's program.

Let us start with Hume’s “Introduction” to his A Treatise of Human Nature (Treatise):

’Tis evident, that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature; and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another. Even Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Natural Religion, are in some measure dependent on the science of Man; since they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties … [W]e ourselves are not only the beings, that reason, but also one of the objects, concerning which we reason

... ... ... ...
And as the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give this science itself must be laid on experience and observation (xv-xvi).¹

I am not the first to note that in this “Introduction” Hume inverted Descartes’ tree of the sciences; the roots are not metaphysics as Descartes thought, but a theory of human nature.² According to Hume “the only solid foundation” for the “science of Man,” in turn the “foundation” for the other sciences, is based “on experience and observation.” Hume’s “science of Man” is not merely a goal in its own right, interesting as that may be, ³ but also requisite to help us better understand the other sciences. Thomas Reid caught some of this spirit in the opening paragraph of a work otherwise deeply critical of Hume: “The human mind is curious and wonderful … a subject highly worthy of inquiry on its own account, but still more worthy on account of the extensive influence which the knowledge of it hath over every other branch of science.”⁴

The exact nature of Hume’s “foundationalism” is not apparent from the quote from the “Introduction.” Hume certainly makes no obvious move in the direction of deriving the basic principles of, say, physics from his theory of human nature. For the sake of argument, I provisionally assume it is the justification of the methods employed in the sciences, i.e., inductive argument and causal reasoning, that he seeks in his theory of human


²Passmore 1968, 12.

³“There is no question of importance, whose decision is not compriz’d in the science of man; and there is none, which can be decided with any certainty, before we become acquainted with that science. In pretending therefore to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security” (Treatise, Introduction, 6; see also I.4.7).

⁴Chapter 1, Section I of An Inquiry into the Human Mind: or the Principles of Common Sense (An Inquiry). In a Humean vein, Reid talks about an “anatomy of the mind” (12) in the same section.
nature. This must be part of the story. In what follows, I present elements of Hume’s epistemological position, but not his whole picture; in Section III.C, I argue that Hume’s “foundationalism” is designed to provide principled constraints on the claims allowed in the sciences.

The leading edge of science in Hume’s day was Newtonian natural philosophy. There is little doubt that Hume was very interested in Newton’s contribution to natural philosophy.5 Nevertheless, it is the aim of this chapter to show that Hume showed few signs of understanding the contents of Newton’s natural philosophy. I am going against the grain of much Hume scholarship, which often makes an almost obligatory reference to the Newtonian element in Hume.6 Some scholars have argued that Hume’s method of investigation, his “Experiments” and his “Anatomy” (I.iv.6.23), especially in Books II and III of the Treatise, were modeled on Newton’s Rules of Reasoning or other examples of natural philosophy.7 Also, many scholars have noted that Hume derived several metaphors from Newtonian natural philosophy. For instance, Hume wants to talk of an “attraction” in the “mental world” on a par with that in the “natural world” (I.1.4.6). My claim is not that Newton did not figure importantly in Hume’s philosophy, but, instead, that Hume’s deviations from the content and strategy of Newton’s philosophy are quite revealing in at least two ways: they allow us to critically assess Hume’s philosophy from the point of view of an informed, impartial 18th century reader; they provide insight into Hume’s project.

In this chapter, I give two examples of Hume’s disregard of actual scientific results by discussing his account of causality (Parts II-III) and his Missing Shade of Blue example from the point of view of Newton’s natural philosophy (Part IV). I think these cases are

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5The best account is Force 1987; he provides an excellent overview of different approaches to understanding the relationship between Hume and Newton.

6See, for instance, Stroud 1977, chapter 1, or more recently, De Pierris 2001.

exemplary in demonstrating that Hume’s epistemology does not illuminate the achievement of the natural philosophers, and that some of their results contradict his principles. Both examples have been chosen because they are widely discussed and have become central to how many philosophers think.

II: Hume on Causality and Newton’s Principia

Let us first turn to Hume’s famous approach to causality. Hume’s account covers three related issues: 1) how we acquire a notion of ‘cause’; 2) what we mean by ‘cause;’ 3) whether causes are in the mind or in nature.8 Now much has been written on this, and my limited comments should be understood in light of my interest in Hume’s programmatic statements in the “Introduction” and in assessing his relationship to Newton’s physics. I argue that Hume’s approach is inadequate.

In the Treatise, Hume quite elegantly analyzes how our notion of causality9 — one applying to events that are contiguous, exhibit temporal priority of the cause, and have constant conjunction (I.iii, Sections 2, 6, and 15) — is derived from experiencing a constant conjunction of objects that produce a union in the imagination (I.iii.6.16). The relation of a necessary connection is also very important to Hume’s thinking on causation (see, I.iii.2.11; I.iii.14, and Section VI of the First Enquiry). I suspect that Hume is self-consciously

8By bifurcating epistemology into a theory of meaning and a theory of truth, or “the conceptual and the doctrinal,” Quine misses the tripartite nature of Hume’s account in “Epistemology Naturalized,” (Quine 1969, 69-90). Elsewhere, Quine is not unaware that he bypasses Hume’s interest in the acquisition of concepts (Quine 1960, 9).

9At Treatise, I.iii.14.31, Hume gives two similar definitions of ‘cause’: 1) “We may define a CAUSE to be ‘An Object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac’d in like relations of precedence to those objects, that resemble the latter.’” 2) “A Cause is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of another, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other.” For an excellent discussion and analysis of these two definitions, see Garrett 1993. Garrett also provides a bibliography to recent literature on this topic.
echoing the language from his own “Introduction” to the *Treatise* when he concludes, “Since it is not from knowledge or scientific reasoning that we derive the opinion of the necessity of a cause to every new production, that opinion must necessarily arise from observation and experience” (I.iii.3.9). Nevertheless, I am not sure if Hume’s own analysis of causality is the result of “experience and observation” – after all, it is the “only solid foundation” for the “science of Man” as he insisted in the Introduction to the *Treatise* — or the product of the imagination in some other way. Even so, Hume’s account is elegant because it is causal in its own terms, that is, his two definitions of the meaning of ‘cause’ (Treatise, I.iii.14.31) are patterned on the chain of events that he thinks lead people to acquire the idea of ‘cause.’ Hume’s analysis is a useful first approximation of what we ‘Moderns’ tend to mean by ‘causation.’ In his hands, a redefined version of Aristotelian ‘efficient causation’ is the only kind of ‘causation’ available for use (Treatise, I.iii.14.32).

However, the system described in Newton’s *Principia* does not fit with Hume's analysis. Recall, for instance, that the behavior of the moon in its orbit and that of, say, apples falling on the earth have the same cause: namely, the force of gravity, or weight, towards the earth (*Principia*, Book III, Scholium to Proposition IV, Theorem IV). This conflicts with the contiguity requirement. It is hard to see how contiguity could be made

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10 Of course, for Hume “necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects” and is merely a “propensity, which costum produces” (I.iii.14.22). My presentation deliberately ignores interesting problems surrounding the status of causes as necessary connections in Hume’s theory of understanding. I believe this omission does not weaken the arguments I will develop.

11 Of course, reading the definition need not cause us to acquire the notion of causality, as Sam Fleischacker pointed out to me, but the meaning of the definition does, perhaps, capture the pattern. What I call “elegant,” others view as potentially circular (Garrett 1993, 174-175).

12 The two paragraphs that follow have been inspired by Stein 1993.

13 At *Treatise*, II.i.11.5, contiguity plays a striking role in explaining why blood-relation is a species of causation. Garrett 1999, 179, n.1, points out that contiguity disappeared from the definitions of ‘cause’ in the *Enquiry Concerning Human
consistent with the universal nature of attraction. The most distant particles of the universe attract each other. Since this was one of the most hotly debated issues of the period, it would have been nice if Hume had acknowledged awareness of the problem to his theory.\textsuperscript{14}

Moreover, attraction between, say, the sun and Jupiter (and all their parts and all other parts of the universe) is mutual (\textit{Principia}, Book III, Proposition VII, Theorem VII); the acceleration produced by the exercise of a force is \textit{simultaneous} with that exercise—thus defying temporal priority. It is hard to see how to make sense of this in light of Hume's approach, which explicitly attacks the possibility of an effect being simultaneous with its cause (\textit{Treatise}, I.3.2.7-8). I believe that the temporal priority of the cause over the effect is central to Hume’s understanding; it appears explicitly or implicitly in all of his definitions of ‘cause’ and his examples.\textsuperscript{15} This alone should warn us that whatever notion of causality Newton is employing it is far removed from Hume’s conception, and, more importantly, it should make us worry about the relevance of Hume’s approach in understanding the notion of causality in natural philosophy. Hume’s approach to causality has been so influential, and has appears to have such intuitive appeal, that it has become

\textit{Understanding} (First \textit{Enquiry}), Section VII, part 2, 76-77. But Hume’s examples, i.e., the billiard balls on p. 78 and a vibrating string on. p. 77 still seem to rely on intuitions utilizing contiguity. By the time he wrote the \textit{Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals} (Second \textit{Enquiry}) Hume was certainly aware that natural philosophers thought behavior of the moon in its orbit and that of falling bodies on earth have the same cause, see Section VI, Part 1, 236. All my references to Hume’s two \textit{Enquiries} are from the Third, revised Selby-Bigge edition, edited by P.H. Nidditch.

\textsuperscript{14}By the time he wrote the First \textit{Enquiry}, Hume was, however, aware that Newton had proposed an “ethereal active fluid” as a “mere hypothesis” to explain universal attraction; see Hume’s own footnote at the end of part I, Section VII, 73.

\textsuperscript{15}Perhaps, the following is a counter-example to my claim: Hume clarifies one of his definitions of ‘cause” as follows: “if the first object had not been, the second never had existed” (First \textit{Enquiry}, Section VII, Part II, 76). In the clarification, “first” and “second” are not obviously temporal in kind. But in the original definition, Hume talks about one object “followed” by another, and this is temporal.
difficult for people to imagine simultaneous causes. I think it is quite common to overlook how strange Newton’s universe was.\textsuperscript{16}

One of Newton’s attempts at explaining his conception of the causal nature of attraction would have been available to Hume. For, in 1728 (just after Newton’s death), a translation of the first draft of Book III appeared in English as \textit{A Treatise of the System of the World}.\textsuperscript{17} It is instructive to sketch the outlines of Newton’s approach in order to see how different it is from Hume’s. In ¶20, Newton had made a distinction between a mathematical and natural point of view. From a mathematical perspective, “one body may be considered as attracting, another as attracted.” But, in nature, “the attraction really is of each body towards the other.” In ¶21, Newton explains this more fully, specifically, in terms of the attraction between Jupiter and the Sun. Let me quote two passages. The first one reads, “The cause of the action is twofold, indisputably [that cause is] the disposition of each body; the action is likewise twofold in so far as it is \textit{upon} two bodies; but as \textit{between} two bodies it is sole and single,” (emphasis added; the Latin is: \textit{Causa actionis gemina est, nimirum dispositio utriusque corporis; actio item gemina quatenus in bina corpora: at quatenus inter bina corpora simplex est & unica}). The second reads: “Conceive a single operation arising from the conspiring nature of both to be exerted in this way between two Planets,” (“\textit{Ad hunc modo concipe simplicem exerceri enter binos Planetas ab utriusque conspirante natura oriundam operationem}”). In order to get the conception of cause, or more precisely the nature of an interaction, at work in Newton we must note the difference between 1) the “cause of the action” — this is “the disposition of each body” and 2) the

\textsuperscript{16}In the Second \textit{Enquiry}, Appendix II, 299, Hume shows, by quoting Fontenelle, awareness of this.

\textsuperscript{17}A translation (published first) of \textit{De Motu Corporum liber secundus}, which appeared as \textit{De Mundi Systemate Liber}, London, 1728. My discussion of this material leans heavily on Howard Stein’s translation and interpretation that he has shared with me in private correspondence. Cf. Stein 2002, 287-289.
“action” itself. The action is a) twofold as it is *upon* two bodies, and b) single as *between* two bodies.\(^{18}\) Thus, we see that the “cause” of the action is “the conspiring nature of both bodies.” Note that this is something intrinsic to the bodies (not something episodic). For the “conspiring” to occur, the bodies must *share* a “nature.” To sum up: the cause is twofold, as consisting in the “nature” or “disposition” of two bodies, but it is one interaction (or, confusingly, “nature.”) What is caused is *one interaction*, and *two “actions upon bodies;”* there are two impressed forces. As Howard Stein writes, “exactly those bodies that are susceptible to the action of a given interaction-field are also the sources of the field.”\(^{19}\)

If all of this seems rather complex and unintuitive—so much the better! (The great Dutch natural philosopher, Huygens, thought universal gravity absurd.) The point is that, if one wants to provide a causal account of universal gravity, then one is going to have come up with a story far removed from Hume’s account of causality. It is important to stress that I am not claiming here that Newton was always committed to the account sketched in the previous paragraph (for instance, he offers the action of a highly elastic aethereal medium as a cause of gravity in *Opticks*, Query 21, added in the second edition of 1717); had a univocal understanding of causation; or was only committed to (what the Aristotelians called) “efficient causation.”\(^{20}\) Here it would lead us too far away from Hume’s project to

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\(^{18}\)The word “operation” in the second passage corresponds to “action” — or “action as between two” — in the first passage; and “[operation as] arising from \(X\)” corresponds to “[\(X\) as] cause of the action.”

\(^{19}\)Stein 2002, 288.

\(^{20}\)For instance, it would not be unreasonable if somebody thought either that Newton provided an inductive account for the existence of God as a *final* cause in the famous “General Scholium” of the *Principia* or that the *vis insita* of bodies (see definition 3 of the *Principia*) is the *formal* cause (or “force of nature;” a “natural power”) by which the laws of motion hold. Although I am less sympathetic to the idea that the laws of motion, separate or jointly, should be understood as formal cause(s), I do not think the idea is silly. In these reflections I have benefited from discussion with Howard Stein and George Smith, but they should not be viewed as endorsing these remarks. A careful, systematic discussion of
try to investigate more fully the different conceptions of cause at work in Newton’s natural philosophy.

Now, I am not arguing here that Hume ought to have adopted Newton’s (complicated) understanding of what attraction is in nature. He could have offered arguments against it. Rather, I am suggesting that Hume’s own conception is defective as an explication of ‘cause’ in natural philosophy of his day, and that he ignored an available alternative. And, even if Humean ‘causality’ is sometimes best understood as an attribute that the mind projects or “spreads” on the world, \(^2\) there is no indication of how Newton’s seemingly conflicting story can be incorporated into Hume’s program. More important, it is also unclear how Hume’s analysis helps us better understand Newton’s achievements (by this I mean both Newton’s method of inquiry and the contents of Newton’s *Principia*).

Since Hume did not derive his notion of ‘cause’ from observing (Newtonian) science, the suspicion is raised that Hume’s conceptual analysis of ‘cause’ — convincing, perhaps, only as an account of the original acquisition of the idea — is really a form of philosophic legislation of the meaning of the term without considering its application in the most recent and successful natural philosophy. This raises the question of what the intended scope of Hume’s account of causality is.

Newton’s conceptions and uses for different kinds of causes would be most welcome. Meanwhile, Howard Stein 2002 and Alan Gabbey 2002 are excellent places to be introduced to the relevant issues.

\(^2\) According to Garrett 1999, 159, this has often been concluded from the second definition of ‘cause.’ This interpretation would turn on whether the “object” in this definition is external or internal to the mind. Sometimes Hume may have thought causation was a projection because Hume writes: “When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only that they have acquired a connexion in our thought, and give rise to this inference, by which they become proofs of each other’s existence” (First *Enquiry*, Section VII, Part II, 76). For the mind’s propensity to “spread itself on external objects,” see Hume’s comments at *Treatise*, I.iii.14.25. He, nevertheless, seems to deny the implication that there is no causation in nature at I.iii.14.28; only our ascription of it is problematic.
In the *Principia*, Newton asked his readers not to push him on what the cause of this attraction was:22 “I have not yet assigned a cause to gravity … I have not as yet been able to deduce from phenomena the reason for these properties of gravity” (Book III, General Scholium).23 Newton was hesitant about getting into this issue.24 It is, perhaps, the great virtue of Hume’s analysis to make clear what several generations of natural philosophers could have presupposed in discussing (efficient) causes. From a mechanical point of view, as Leibniz and Huygens insisted, one is then unable to make sense of universal gravity.25 Yet, many of Hume’s examples — and I am thinking especially of the “obvious illustration” of billiard balls (First *Enquiry*, Section VII, Part II, 78) to which Hume returns (he had used it at *Treatise*, I.iii.14.18)26 — seem to presuppose something like what has been called a mechanistic world-view.27 Quite diverse thinkers proposed various

22 Apparently Kant thought this question was unanswerable (¶56, *Prolegomena*).

23 All my translations of the *Principia* are quoted from Newton 1999. In the section of the *Treatise* where Hume introduces the analogy between mental and natural attraction, he undoubtedly consciously echoes Newton’s resistance to ultimate explanations: “as to its [i.e., the mind’s] causes, they are mostly unknown, and must be resolv’d into original qualities of human nature, which I pretend not to explain” (I.i.4.6; emphasis in original; I.1.7.11).

24 See Hume’s footnote at the end of Part I of Section VII, First *Enquiry*, 73.

25 In Fontenelle, 1728, 8-10 and 16-17, Fontenelle pointed out (following Huygens and Leibniz) that universal gravitation could not be explained by mechanical causes. The problem of reconciling universal attraction with mechanical causes was a commonplace.

26 Frasca-Spada 1998, 92, correctly points out that Hume uses it in the “Abstract,” but she is wrong to claim it does not appear in the *Treatise*.

27 For the extension to animals, see *Treatise*, I.iii.16 and First *Enquiry*, Section IX, 108. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that there is no doubt that Hume thought that a “human body is a mighty and complicated machine” (First *Enquiry*, Section VIII, Part I, 87; on p. 88 Hume goes on to point out that if “he [the philosopher] be consistent, [he] must apply the same reasoning to the actions and volitions of intelligent agents.” For Hume even “experimental reasoning itself … is nothing but a species of instinct or mechanical power that acts in us unknown to ourselves” (First *Enquiry*, Section IX, 108). Someone may be tempted to wonder why, on my reading of Hume, he did not solve the problem of the “Appendix” of the *Treatise*, about what it is that binds together all our particular perceptions, by simply pointing to that single machine by whose operations they are produced. But that would be begging the question because it would not explain how this machine produces perceptions
mechanistic systems and principles. But here I mean this in the broadly Pre-Newtonian sense, that is, a view that not only rejects the ancients’ substantial forms and occult qualities, but also expects (hypothetical) explanations to be cast in terms of colliding bodies. The laws of their impact become fundamental. For Newton, by contrast, rational mechanics “will be the science, expressed in exact propositions and demonstrations, of the motions that result from any forces whatever and of the forces that are required for any motions whatever.” So, we need to be careful to distinguish Newton’s “mechanical principles,” (Principia, “Author’s Preface to the Reader”), which are framed in terms of forces, from the Pre-Newtonian sense.

Of course, Hume’s examples of mental causation obviously are not mechanistic, although he calls “instincts … mechanical tendencies,” (First Enquiry; Section V, Part II, 55) they are about the association of ideas, not bodies (e.g., Treatise, I.i.4). But they do have the same conceptual structure as (Pre-Newtonian) mechanical causes (e.g., priority of the cause over the effect, contiguity, and constant conjunction). That is, Pre-Newtonian mechanical causes are the paradigm or model causes for Hume.

Hume clearly expects mental functions to have some relationship to “animal spirits” (see, especially, Treatise, I.ii.5.20; also: I.iii.8.2; I.iv.1.10; I.iv.2.33, and 45; that may lead to an impression or idea of self “as something simple and individual” (Treatise, “Appendix,” 11).

28In the Principia’s “Author’s Preface to the Reader” Newton does not mention the moderns’ tendency to demand an explanation, or what may be termed a ‘rational-mechanical reconstruction’ of the sort that Newton’s great contemporary, Huygens, advocated in his Treatise on Light, in terms of colliding bodies, because that demand is precisely one of the things he rejects in his famous phrase from the General Scholium, “Hypotheses non fingo.”

29For a more rigorous treatment, see Stein 2002, especially pp. 282ff. and Gabbey 2002, 335-343. Kant’s distinction between a “mathematical-mechanical” and a “metaphysical-dynamical” is, although slightly different, useful in this regard; see Friedman 1992, 137-140 and 181-183.

30This is ignored by Redman 1997, 82.
I.iv.4.13; I.iv.5.30; I.iv.7.10, and First Enquiry, Part VII, Section I, 66). I should note, incidentally, that for Hume and his contemporaries “animal spirits” had a very different connotation than for modern readers; they were physical entities, fluids, that flowed from the brain into hollow nerves, while carrying instructions to the muscles. As Thomas Reid helpfully writes, “The system of the nerves, for many ages, was taken to be a hydraulic engine, consisting of a bundle of pipes which carry to and fro a liquor called animal spirits” (emphasis in original; see, An Inquiry, Chapter 6, Section XIX, 161-162). Hume generally wants to minimize what explanatory role, if any, we should attribute to these animal spirits. Hume did not regard the theory of animal spirits as having any fundamental role either in the analysis of the justification of mental operations or in their metaphysical, or ontological, support — in the explanation — or the analysis of the conditions of their existence. But he did write: “we may certainly conclude, that motion may be, and actually is, the cause of thought and perception” (Treatise, I.iv.5.30; I.iv.5.33).

Yet, in case one suspects this is the “foundation” of Hume’s thought, it is worth emphasizing here that I am not claiming that Hume was a strict mechanist. Not only did he accept the association of ideas, but in the First Enquiry he wrote, “Elasticity, gravity, cohesion of parts, communication of motion by impulse; these are probably the ultimate causes and principles which we shall ever discover in nature; and we may esteem ourselves sufficiently happy, if, by accurate enquiry and reasoning, we can trace up the particular phenomena to, or near to, these general principles” (Section IV, Part 1, 30). Most Pre-


32This is clear because Hume refrains from according any such status to bodies themselves, as having continuous existence (Treatise, I.iv.2).
Newtonian mechanical philosophers would only accept the last of these four principles. Although Hume’s conception of ‘cause’ appears to be inspired by Pre-Newtonian mechanical philosophy, Hume is from an explanatory point of view not in all things a Pre-Newtonian mechanical philosopher. Fair enough.

Hume’s approach to causation has been so influential in framing and inspiring philosophic discussion that it is easy to forget that, if it ever was intended to provide an account of the role causation plays in natural philosophy, it already was outdated before it was published. To the degree that his account reflects a ‘common’ understanding of causation, then or now, it illustrates how far removed from ‘common’ sense natural philosophy had become after the *Principia*. Now Hume could have provided arguments, observation, or experiments for reinterpreting Newton’s results. But what is striking is that nowhere in the *Treatise* or the First *Enquiry* does Hume show awareness of a potential conflict between his Pre-Newtonian mechanistic conception of causes and Newton’s natural philosophy.

**III: Hume’s “Science of Man” and Newtonian “Natural Philosophy”**

III.A: Hume’s general framework

In this part I want to elaborate on my discussion, and consider some implications of it for our understanding of Hume’s epistemology. I do this by considering an objection to my approach in the previous part. One could argue, for instance, that Hume provides a general framework that links his “science of Man” with epistemology, on the one hand, and natural philosophy, on the other hand, in the First *Enquiry*. This framework has the merit, so the argument goes, of not requiring detailed understanding, if any, of the sciences,
Newtonian or otherwise. That is, the framework is so general that it saves Hume from any gaps in his knowledge. In chapter IV, Hume divided the “objects of human reason” into “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact” (24). Propositions of the former kind are “discoverable by the mere operation of thought” (25). Unfortunately, Hume is rather vague about what he means by this. More important for my purposes, it is not clear in what sense he still believes that “Mathematics” is in “some measure dependent on the science of Man.” (To be discoverable by the operations of thought does not mean mathematical truth is obviously dependent on the operations of thought, although knowledge of mathematical truth clearly will be.) For the sake of brevity, I ignore Hume’s views on mathematics here. Hume does provide an elaborate, principled account of the relationship between matters of fact and human psychology (25-32). For Hume, all reasonings concerning matters of fact are grounded in cause and effect (26); all inferences about effects from cause are based on experience, that is, observation and custom (28 and 43; see also, Treatise, 1.iii.1.1 and I.iv.2.21). In Hume’s hands, this account has skeptical implications about the nature and justification of induction (32-39 and Section V). Regardless of whether one agrees with Hume’s skeptical worries about induction, it looks as though Hume has provided a principled account of how natural philosophy and his “science of Man” are connected. Others can work out the specific details for a particular science.

In my opinion, this objection imposes on Hume’s thought a more recent distinction between epistemology and philosophy of science. I find it remarkable how widespread this largely tacit move is.

If mathematics is about “relations of ideas,” mathematical truth could be something that is dependent on human thought. It all turns on what kind of theory of “ideas” one has.

This claim is somewhat controversial; Kemp Smith 1941 and Stroud 1977 have, among others, argued that Hume is a “naturalist” and not a skeptic. I cannot do justice to this debate here.
A crucial assumption in Hume’s approach is that all matters of fact are, in an important sense, alike. In the First Enquiry, Hume is quite explicit about this: “when we consider how aptly natural and moral evidence link together, and form only one chain of argument, we shall make no scruple to allow that they are of the same nature, and derived from the same principles,” (Section VIII, Part I, 90, emphasis in original; see also: “Thus it appears … that the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature” 88). Note how Hume subtly moves from the nature of the “chain of argument” to the “same nature;” he is relying on what he calls, “a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas” that is established by custom. No doubt Hume’s language is designed to make fun of Leibniz’s metaphysics, but the claim is, nevertheless, a serious one. Hume’s science of Man presupposes that custom and experience produce a uniformity in the operations of our minds; he insists on this even if we were to remain in the dark about the origin or nature of the internal mechanisms or “powers and forces” of the mind (First Enquiry, Section V, Part II, 54-55).

In the Treatise, Hume maintained, “there is but one kind of necessity, as there is but one kind of cause, and that the common distinction betwixt moral and physical necessity is without any foundation in nature” (I.iii.14.33). Hume thought that we apply the same type of inference about matters of fact, and that all facts have the same causal structure. This also implied that the facts of natural philosophy are contiguous with, or an extension of, the facts of ordinary life. He writes in the Treatise: “Passions are connected with their objects and with one another; no less than external bodies are connected together. The same relation,

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36Now, although for Hume reasonings about all matters of fact are alike, he does distinguish between particular and general facts: “All deliberations in life regard the former; as also all disquisitions in history, chronology, geography, and astronomy. The sciences, which treat of general facts are politics, natural philosophy, physic, chemistry, &c. where the qualities, causes and effects of a whole species of objects are enquired into” (First Enquiry, Section XII, Part III, 165).
then, of cause and effect, which belongs to one, must be common to all of them” (I.iii.2.16; see also, I.iii.12.16 and I.iii.14.33).

Nevertheless, I am unsure how convincing Hume’s position looks even to someone who is still sympathetic to his broad two-fold program. There are two troubling aspects here: first, although Hume’s approach is, perhaps, based on experience, it is oddly unrevisable. Now, since Hume dropped the contiguity requirement in the *Enquiry*, my complaint cannot be entirely accurate. What I am getting at is this: through my discussion of Newton’s natural philosophy, I have tried to provide empirical evidence against Hume’s claims, but it is hard to see how we can use that evidence to improve the theory. Earlier, I called Hume’s account “elegant,” because it is causal in its own terms, that is, the meaning of ‘cause’ he arrives at is about the same as that he uses to describe the chain of events that leads to people acquiring the idea of “cause.” In a way, Hume’s theory is too elegant. As long as we have confidence in his analysis of the meaning of ‘cause,’ his causal explanation of inference can be viewed as a foundation (with infamous skeptical implications) for the other sciences. But once one begins to doubt that his analysis of the meaning of the word ‘cause’ is adequate in science, one may also wonder how accurate Hume’s picture is in capturing the nature of human inference, or that it is a unified process. It could turn out that human inference works in the way Hume proposed, but that would depend on evidence collected from the (undoubtedly) messy details of the workings of the senses and the imagination.37 Hume tried to forestall such an investigation: “The examination of our sensations belongs more to anatomists and natural philosophers than to moral; and therefore shall not at present be enter’d upon” (*Treatise*, I.i.2).38 Of course, to

37For a modern approach, see Kahneman and Tversky 1982.

38Of course, elsewhere he does discuss the workings of the senses (*Treatise*, I.iii.5 and I.iv.2) and even occasionally refers to ‘experiments’ to illustrate their workings (e.g., I.iv.2.45). Cf. Frasca-Spada 1998, 73, and Noxon 1973, 117. Thomas Reid (in *An Inquiry*) and Adam Smith (in his essay “Of the External Senses”) took up this challenge.
assert that a theory is “too elegant” or potentially “unrevisable” is not a refutation, but we are in a position to understand why someone committed to observation and experience would find it unsatisfying.

Second, Hume’s account relies on a notion of causation that, as argued above, is inadequate to Newton’s *Principia*. I believe this should make us suspicious of the idea that there is a simple relationship between the facts we take for granted in everyday life and the facts uncovered by natural philosophy. Whatever the conception of causation that underpins simultaneous, mutual attraction of the planets, it is extremely complex and need not be exhaustive of all the kinds of ‘causes’ operating in Newton’s system. Hume sided, however, with (a properly reconstructed) common life (First *Enquiry*, Section V, Part I, 41) and was suspicious of theories: “Though the chain of arguments which conduct to [an extravagant conclusion] were ever so logical, there must arise a strong suspicion, if not an absolute assurance, that it has carried us quite beyond the reach of our faculties, when it leads to conclusions so extraordinary, and so remote from common life and experience” (Section VII, Part I, 72).

For instance, Quine’s Humean idea that science is merely an extension of “common sense” differing “only in degree of methodological sophistication” (“Natural Kinds,” in Quine 1969, 114-138, and for similar comments: Quine 1960, 21) seems to me extremely misguided. Reid also often talks this way: “the science of nature dwells so near to common understanding, that we cannot discern where the latter ends and the former begins” (*An Inquiry*, Chapter 6, Section XX, 173). But there is an element of Reid’s strategy, that all forms of induction are alike (Newton’s “regulae philosophandi are maxims of common sense;” see Chapter 1, Section I of *An Inquiry*), that is not touched by the claims of this chapter, although I am not sympathetic. But I think Reid seriously errs in claiming that Newton’s inductions are drawn from Bacon’s rules (*An Inquiry*, Chapter 6, Section XXIV, 200). I am more in agreement with Fontenelle: “Original and elementary facts seem to have been conceal’d from us by nature with as much care as their causes, and when once we come to discover ’em, the view is entirely new, and altogether unforeseen,” (13).


The rest of the passage is worth quoting: “We are got into fairy land, long ere we have reached the last steps of our theory; and there we have no reason to trust our common methods of argument, or to think that our usual analogies and probabilities have any authority. Our line is too short to fathom such immense abysses. And however we may flatter
philosophers of theories that have “the air of a paradox, and [are] contrary to the first and most unprejudiced notions of mankind” (Treatise, I.2.1.1). In context, Hume is discussing theologians’ adoption of a “supreme being” (in the passage from the Enquiry) or mathematicians’ insistence on infinite divisibility (in the Treatise passage); Hume obviously does not want to rule out all empirical science. But Hume’s adoption of “mitigated skepticism” results in the “limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding” (First Enquiry, Section XII, Part III, 162). But Newton’s theories – “deduced from the phenomena” — were remote from common life! I suspect Hume is so worried to prevent natural religion from acquiring the prestige of natural philosophy that he ends up underestimating the capacity of the human understanding.

Hume’s bias against very abstract theories has only one argument to recommend it: that human beings are likely to make mistakes in long chains of arguments/proofs (see also, Treatise, I.iii.13.3 and I.iii.15.11). But that does not mean we should reject the results of such proofs; it is only a call for careful scrutiny of long chains of argument.43

ourselves that we are guided, in every step which we take, by a kind of verisimilitude and experience, we may be assured that this fancied experience has no authority when we thus apply it to subjects that lie entirely out of the sphere of experience.”

42The affirmation of this “mitigated skepticism” is said to be a “natural result of the Pyrrhonian doubts and scruples, ” and is, hence, on my reading not an alternative to it. I believe that for Hume the appearance of Pyrrhonian doubts always remain a live possibility that cannot be argued against. At the same time, for Hume one cannot live according to Pyrrhonian scruples. Pyrrhonian doubt is a philosophic doctrine, while mitigated skepticism is, perhaps the result of philosophizing, an attitude we can adopt in our daily lives that will allow us “never [to] be tempted to go beyond common life.”

43Friedman 1992, 92, attributes this view to Kant (without mentioning Hume).
III.B: Inferring Effects from Causes

There is a more fundamental issue lurking here. For Hume, we build up our causal theories from experience of particular events. (See, for instance, the demands at *Treatise*, I.iii.14.6-15, and also the following quote from the First *Enquiry*, Section XI.) This is an important constraint for Hume, for it allows him to ask who has ever perceived an instance of a power or force in action. As I explain shortly, this is crucial for Hume’s skeptical attack on theoretical and/or invisible entities, but it gets him into terrible trouble. In a footnote to Section XI of the First *Enquiry*, Hume writes: “In general, it may, I think, be established as a maxim that where any cause is known only by its particular effects, it must be impossible to infer any new effects from that cause” (145). While the footnote is offered in the context of a critical discussion about what we can know about the Deity, the “general” maxim and the discussion of the footnote as a whole do not seem to be limited to refection on the attributes and qualities of a “Supreme Being,” which is not even mentioned in the footnote. In the footnote, Hume provides an a priori argument for his “maxim.” Hume’s argument in the footnote does not rely on any general skeptical concerns about induction, although they are undoubtedly motivating it. Instead, it turns on concerns about extending the domain of a known action to say, a “different period of space and time.” Let us call this the argument against universality. It is not very compelling, as reflection on the surprising and new — and successful! — predictions that Newton derived from his theory would have immediately shown. Based on his bold inference to universal gravitation, Newton accurately predicted, for instance, a mutual attraction between Jupiter and Saturn that would

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44 Howard Stein first called my attention to the significance of the following passage.

45 At First *Enquiry*, Section IV, Part II, 33-34, Hume runs together the argument against universality and the problem of induction. But there is no reason why we would have to follow him.

46 See, for a recent treatment and further references, Harper 2002 and George Smith 2002b.
be strong enough to perturb their orbits when near conjunction (Book III, Proposition 5, Corollary 3 and Proposition 13). Not only was this effect unknown prior to Newton’s work, it was also undetectable with the instruments of his time. From the point of common sense it would have been ridiculous to look for it! Fontenelle wrote in his Éloge of Newton: “Sometimes [Newton’s] conclusions even foretell events which the astronomers themselves had not remarked.” Newton’s prediction is so surprising, precise, and accurate that it adds probability to Newton’s system.

In order to forestall misunderstanding: I am not attributing to Hume the claim that no predictions are possible. After all, for Hume it is only our custom and willingness to posit causes that only allow us to go beyond “the impressions of our senses” (I.iii.2.2). Hume teaches that to understand an object as a cause is to make a prediction about its effect. What I am attributing to Hume is the position that the kind of prediction that is permissible is rather restricted.

Hume is right to claim that “’tis impossible for us to satisfy ourselves by reason, why we shou’d extend … experience beyond those particular instances, which have fallen under our observation” (Treatise, I.iii.6.11). Unaided reason of the a priori deductive kind cannot fully justify extending experiences beyond particular instances or the drawing of inferences from causes known only by their particular effects. I am sympathetic to Hume’s efforts to undermine the claims of the proponents of natural religion about the properties and intentions of a Divine Being.

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47Cohen 1999, 211.

48See George E. Smith’s contribution to Cohen 1999, 216.

49Hume’s friend, Adam Smith, noted this achievement in “The History of Astronomy, ” (IV§68, 99), but he singled out Newton’s ability to calculate the weights and densities of the Sun and planets for special praise (IV§75, 103, EPS).
However, Hume’s analysis ignores the potential fruitfulness of extending the scope of a theory beyond one’s particular experiences. There is no guarantee of success, of course, but it can do no harm to put one’s conclusions about one’s observations to a test with new (kinds of) observations. If one is able to successfully predict such a new effect it is clearly not a matter of dumb luck, but instead provides, as Hume’s friend, Adam Smith, saw, a *reason* for accepting the theory that, for instance, posits the cause. This reason is drawn from observation and experiment. Thus, Hume is wrong to suggest that it is *impossible* to infer any *new* effects from a cause known by *particular* effects, as he did in the passage I quoted from the *First Enquiry*. It is not only possible, but it is also one of the most important methods that allows the sciences to advance. Of course, one can always turn out to be wrong, and in such instances Hume’s caution may have seemed salutary, but as a “foundation’ or psychological explanation of successes in inquiry, it is too restrictive (see my discussion in III.C below). Even if Hume did not think himself as ruling out science, his account cannot explain the nature and extent of success in the leading edge of natural philosophy of his day.

In fairness to Hume, it should be said that at one point he did realize that “as all reasoning concerning matters of fact arises only from custom, and custom can only be the effect of repeated perceptions, the extending of custom and reasoning beyond the perceptions can never be the direct and natural effect of the constant repetition and connexion, but must arise from the co-operation of some other principles, ” (*Treatise*, I.iv.2.21). Unfortunately, he has very little to say about these other principles and how, say,

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50 See my discussion of Adam Smith’s “Of the External Senses” in chapter 3, V.B.

51 In *Principia*’s “Preface to the Reader, ” Newton claimed that “the basic problem of philosophy seems to be to discover the forces of nature from the phenomena of motions and then to demonstrate the other phenomena from these forces.”
the imagination employs them (but, see *Treatise*, I.iv.2.14ff. and I.iv.7.3).52 I think
Newton’s Rules of Reasoning would not be a bad place to start.53 (In part IV of this
chapter, I give an example of this.)

It is worth asking how Hume could have gotten himself into this unattractive
position of denying the possibility of surprising, yet successful, predictions. To answer that
question, I must make some distinctions. I am taking Hume to task on a number of related
but separate issues. For instance, one can extend a theory by making novel predictions that
do not differ in kind from one’s experiences. This is dissimilar from novel predictions that
are different in kind. This distinction is not a sharp one; in what category does the
perturbation of the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn at conjunction fall? A successful theory can
force one to change one’s notion of what things are of one kind. For example, somewhere
in the course of the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, the — formerly distinct —
celestial and terrestrial spheres stopped being separate realms of nature. As far as I can tell,
Hume wants to reject novel predictions that are different in kind. But one could also
successfully extend a theory that it is reasonable to accept theoretical entities with properties
that enabled the novel predictions (whether or not the entities are of a new kind). This, too,
Hume wants to reject.54

III.C: The Foundations of the Science of Man

Now we are in the position to understand in what rich sense Hume’s “science of
Man” is intended to serve as a “foundation” for the other sciences. Hume’s desire not to
let theories outrun the particularity of (his philosophically understood) common sense can

52 Adam Smith’s “The History of Astronomy,” is in the service of “The Principles
which lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries.” I will discuss this in chapter 3.

53 See also the next to last paragraph of the final Query of Newton’s *Opticks*.

54 See Livingston 1984, chapter 6, for more on Hume's views on theoretical entities.
be explained by his desire to wield a strong criterion for — to use slightly anachronistic language — ontological commitment.

For Hume, all our ideas are derived from impressions—be they derived from the senses (I.ii.3.2) or “internal” ones (i.e., “our passions, emotions, desires, and aversions;” I.ii.3.3). Hume’s attacks on notions of substance, mode, essence, force, power, and — most importantly — God, especially arrived at through natural religion, all rely on his rhetorically powerful ability to ask to what impression such notions can be traced (e.g., *Treatise*, I.i.6; 1.ii.5.28; I.iii.14, and I.iv.5.3-4; on idea of God, see *Enquiry*, Section II, 19-20).\(^55\) For, “[I]deas always represent the objects or impressions, from which they are derived” (I.ii.3.11). If no such objects or impressions are to be found, then we must conclude that such ideas are the product of “passions and emotions” (I.i.6.1), a “trivial suggestion of the fancy” (I.4.7.6), or “some imperfection in [the] faculties [of mind]” (I.i.7.8). The thrust of Hume’s account is to make talk of, say, substance or God (power, force, etc.) seem either meaningless or restricted to the particular qualities of bodies from which the idea is derived (I.i.6.1 and *First Enquiry*, Section IV, Part II, 33). At best, they have reference to “an effect, or some other event constantly conjoined with” the cause (First *Enquiry*, Section VII, Part II, 77). Reid describes the strategy as “a tribunal of inquisition erected by certain modern philosophers before which every thing in nature must answer” (*An Inquiry*, Chapter 6, Section VIII, 98).

By now, the “foundation” that Hume’s “science of Man” aims at should be clearer. Hume thinks that, “Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects; and this we may in general observe to be the foundation of all human knowledge” (*Treatise,*

\(^{55}\)While the most famous instance may be when Hume asks the question about the origin of the idea of self at *Treatise*, I.iv.6.2, I think Hume is most concerned with God, especially in the *First Enquiry* (cf. Buckle 2001). Spada-Frasca 1998, 71, argues that for Hume the idea of space is different.
Moreover, Hume claims “that whatever appears impossible and contradictory upon the comparison of these ideas, must be really impossible and contradictory, without any farther excuse or evasion” (emphasis in original, *Treatise*, I.ii.2.1). Cf.: “we can never have reason to believe that any object exists, of which we cannot form an idea” (I.iii.14.36).

It is this foundation, I submit, that gets Hume in trouble because it takes him down the unempirical and metaphysical (here in the pejorative sense) path of attacking the conceivability and, hence, possibility of the vacuum: “[We] can form no idea of a vacuum, or space, where there is nothing visible or tangible” (I.ii.5.1; see also I.ii.4.1). Now, when Descartes attacked the existence of a vacuum, the empirical evidence was (largely) on his side. By contrast, when Hume wrote these lines, Newton, following Boyle, had already given experimental evidence for the existence of a vacuum (*Principia*, Book 3, Proposition 6, Corollaries 3-4; see also Proposition 10). By the structure of his theory and his desire to rule out invisible substances, Hume is led to the strange proposition that we can have no idea of a vacuum, thereby implying we cannot have well-founded theories of it, but admitting that this is a matter for “natural philosophy” to decide (I.ii.5.4).

Recall that in the “Introduction” to the *Treatise*, Hume inverted Descartes’ tree of the sciences; the roots are not metaphysics as Descartes thought, but a theory of human nature. Now, at first sight, it appeared that in the process Hume also shifts from stressing “clear and distinct” ideas to demanding “experience and observation.” No surprise here; Hume is known as an Empiricist after all. Yet, Hume accepts a Cartesian methodological

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56 See also: “The memory, senses, and understanding are … all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas” (*Treatise*, I.iv.7.3; note the skeptical turn this takes at I.iv.7.5).

57 Frasca-Spada 1998, chapter 4, offers a brave attempt to make sense of Hume’s views on the vacuum.

58 Thomas Reid was the first to spell out how the modern tradition from Descartes (through Locke, Berkeley, and Malebranche) to Hume should be viewed as sharing a common set of presuppositions (see for instance, *An Inquiry*, Chapter 1, Section VII, 22, and
position that, when the mind clearly conceives something, it can make claims about what is “really” (Hume’s emphasized word) the case.\(^{59}\) So, while it goes too far to claim that Hume derives a theory of the actions of bodies from his (foundational) theory of mind, it is the case that Hume’s account of human nature is designed to provide constraints on the kind of theories of the world that will be permissible (recall the “limitation” at First Enquiry, Section XII, Part III, 162).\(^{60}\) One is inclined to say that there is something regulative about Hume’s “science of Man.” This suspicion is confirmed by Hume’s own remarks on the purpose of the Rules of Reasoning: “We shall afterwards take notice of some general rules, by which we ought to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effects; and these rules are form’d on the nature of our understanding, and on our experience of its operations in the judgments we form concerning objects,” (emphasis added, Treatise, I.iii.XIII.11).\(^{61}\) I am not sure what justifies this regulative turn in Hume’s thought, but it would lead too far away from the main argument to explore it any further here.

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\(^{59}\)This Cartesian strain is evident in other doctrines that Hume expounds: “That whatever the mind clearly conceives, includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible” (Treatise, I.ii.2.8 and I.iv.510: “whatever we conceive is possible.”) See also: I.iv.5.35, and First Enquiry, Section IV, Part II, 35. Moreover, in a footnote to Treatise, I.ii.2, Hume suggests that there cannot be parts smaller than we conceive. See also I.ii.4.11: “Whatever can be conceived by clear and distinct idea necessarily implies the possibility of existence.” (At I.iv.5.20 Hume is more cautious.) While Hume is attacking Descartes in some of these passages, his way of thinking about the issues is still deeply influenced by Descartes. Frasca-Spada 1998, 22, n. 17, 113, has written very perceptively on this strain of “dissonant Cartesianism” in Hume.


\(^{61}\)De Pierris 2001, 351.
III.D: Theories, Predictions, and Learning

Let me return to the big picture. For Hume we cannot justify a move beyond particular events.\(^{62}\) Known causes will only allow us to infer known effects. Yet, Newton aimed at a natural philosophy with a universal domain. For, in Rule 3, Newton insists that “Those qualities of bodies that cannot be intended and remitted [i.e., qualities that cannot be increased and diminished] and that belong to all bodies in which experiments can be made should be taken as qualities of all bodies universally.” Hume would agree with Newton that the “qualities of bodies can be known only through experiments.” But, from Hume’s vantage point, neither reason nor experience can fully justify the argument that Newton gives in his explanation of the Rule 3 for this universal scope, that is, “nature is always simple and ever consonant with itself.” For Hume we “can at least conceive a change in the course of nature” (\textit{Treatise}, I.iii.6.5; \textit{Enquiry}, Section IV, Part II, 37-8); only habit makes us assume that nature is unchanging.

I am not going to challenge Hume’s famous skeptical conclusions about induction nor am I going to claim that Newton shows us how they can be avoided.\(^{63}\) But I do think that Hume overplays his hand.\(^{64}\) Note, for instance, Hume’s addition to the \textit{Treatise}: we must “confine our speculations to the \textit{appearances} of objects to our senses, without entering into disquisitions concerning their real nature and operations” (emphasis in original; I.ii.5.26 n. 12). For, given the fact that Newton was not merely able to account for many known experiences of the movement of bodies but even could predict until-then-

\(^{62}\)I take it that Kant’s project is designed to overthrow this attitude; see the closing lines of ¶26 of the \textit{Prolegomena} for an unusually clear articulation.

\(^{63}\)I agree with Hume that Pyrrhonian skepticism cannot be refuted through arguments.

\(^{64}\)Reid thought that “A natural philosopher can prove nothing, unless it is taken for granted that the course of nature is steady and uniform” (\textit{An Inquiry}, Chapter 5, Section VII, 72; for Reid this belief in the continuity of nature is a natural instinct, see Chapter 6, Section XXIV, 198). But this is begging the question.
unknown phenomena, Hume is unreasonable in thinking that our theories must restrict themselves to describing and predicting the known and visible movements of bodies. After all, probability is on Newton's side — given the new worlds opened up by microscope and telescope — when he notes in his comments on Rule 3 that there “are bodies beyond the range of [our] senses.” Moreover, Newton also discovered the reality of invisible forces, which are only made manifest by their influence on the motions and accelerations of visible bodies. Yet, Hume had, without mentioning Newton, tried to deny this in a footnote to First Enquiry, Section VII, Part II, 77-8: “Force, Power, Energy … [these] words, as commonly used, have very loose meanings annexed to them; and their ideas are very uncertain and confused.”65 Hume denies here the fundamental achievement of Newton’s Principia, which uses all these terms not in a “common” but in extremely precise ways.66

The issue I am getting at is not just about the scope (Newton’s universal vs. Hume’s particular) of natural philosophy, or about Hume’s argument against the justification that reason can provide for induction, it is also about the role of positing theoretical (or “invisible”) entities. As we have seen, Hume wants to rule this out tout court. Newton agrees that: “idle fancies ought not to be fabricated recklessly against the evidence of experiments,” (Principia, Book III, Rule 3). But Newton has demonstrated that it makes sense that, if one “deduces” some laws and theoretical entities “from the phenomena, ” one can assume them to make accurate, interesting and novel predictions. This is, of course,

65 As suggested by the note to Section IV, Part II, 33, we must use this passage to re-interpret the meaning of Section I, 14, where Hume had alluded to Newton’s achievement of having “determined the laws and forces, by which the revolutions of the planets are governed and directed.”

66 In the first paragraph of the footnote to Section VII, Part II, 77, Hume calls attention to the debate about the vis viva controversy to motivate his claim that the ideas associated with power or force are “very uncertain and confused.” But he does not seem to realize that this is a debate that is only made possible in the context of substantial agreement. None of the parties in the dispute denied, for instance, the reality and definitional clarity of, say, centrifugal and centripetal forces.
how theories get tested. The success of these predictions is additional evidence for accepting the entities posited in the theories.

But regardless what one thinks of Hume’s Instrumentalism, I do not want my focus on predictions, derived from theories (with posited entities), to obscure an important feature of theories that Hume seems to have missed entirely: theories can be tools of learning. While successful, accurate (surprising, etc.) predictions are a way of validating the reasonableness of accepting theoretical entities, failed predictions may be more important to guide ongoing research. They may force refinement in one’s theories or may tell one to look elsewhere. Newton’s methodological boldness, to push the implications of his robust theories beyond the easily observations available to the narrow frame of the human mind, is precisely one of the strengths of his natural philosophy.

Notice that my argument on behalf of Newton against Hume is, itself, based on experience. Despite Hume’s so-called Empiricism, he is sometimes very prone to armchair reasoning about topics about which he could and ought to have known better. All of this is not meant to deny Hume’s skeptical conclusion about induction. I accept that this cannot be refuted. It is only meant to show how Newton provides an empirical counterexample to Hume’s maxim, “where any cause is known only by its particular effects, it must be impossible to infer any new effects from that cause.” Hume thought we should restrict our talk to the external qualities of bodies and our ideas of them. For Hume, we cannot “penetrate into the nature of bodies, or explain the secret causes of their operations … such an enterprise is beyond the reach of human understanding” (Treatise, I.ii.5.26; see also the unduly pessimistic discussion of the lack of knowledge about how, say, milk and bread provide nutrition (First Enquiry, Section IV, Part I, 28 and Part II, 33). Yet, Newton’s

67Cf. Adam Smith’s non-instrumental account in chapter 3 below.

68As I will show in Chapter 4, IV.A, Adam Smith attempts to capture this by calling the systems of astronomers “machines” in his essay on “The History of Astronomy.”
Principia suggests that inertia, a “passive principle” (Opticks, Query 31), may be a property of matter; a thesis that cannot be dismissed by philosophic considerations derived from the “science of Man.”\textsuperscript{69} Moreover, in the final paragraph of the “General Scholium” to the Principia, Newton promises a program of research, perhaps inspired by the success of Francis Hauksbee’s electrical experiments,\textsuperscript{70} to penetrate unto the nature of matter. Although this program was by no means completed by the time of Newton’s death, his optical research did provide some further evidence about the nature of bodies. So, in the next Part, I turn to some of Hume’s comments on color vision. But here I want to conclude by noting that Hume’s “mitigated skepticism” is simply too restrictive; it rules out too much knowledge that had been secured by Newton.

\textbf{IV: Hume’s Missing Shades of Blue and Newton’s Natural Philosophy}

Newton’s Principia is a difficult book and it was little understood or even read by 18\textsuperscript{th} century readers (not just them, of course). In Hume’s lifetime, the received view of Newton was largely influenced by Newton’s optical writings and by the publications of various Newtonians (Pemberton, MacLaurin, ‘s Gravesande, Voltaire, etc.).\textsuperscript{71}


\textsuperscript{70}For more details, see Cohen 1999, 280-292.

\textsuperscript{71}For a richer view of the culture of scientific education and Hume’s experience of the culture of science in the Scottish Enlightenment, see Barfoot 1990. Yet, admirable as this essay is, it also illustrates the danger of too much contextualization in the history of philosophy; it fails to investigate to what degree any of the so-called Newtonians or Hume misrepresents or understand Newton. I think historians of science may go beyond reception theory.
example, which is derived from the introductory remarks of Hume’s discussion of the Missing Shade of Blue, treats optics. Hume writes:

I believe it will readily be allow’d, that the several distinct ideas of colours, which enter by the eyes, or those of sounds, which are convey’d by the hearing, are really different from each other, tho’ at the same time resembling. Now if this be true of different colours, it must be no less so of different shades of the same colour, that each of them produces a distinct idea, independent of the rest. For if this shou’d be deny’d, ’tis possible, by the continual graduation of shades, to run a colour insensibly into what is remote from it; and if you will not allow any of the means to be different, you cannot, without absurdity deny the extremes to be the same (Treatise, I.i.I; see for very similar remarks, First Enquiry, Section II, 20-1).

After these comments, Hume goes on to consider his much discussed Missing Shade of Blue example as an exception to his general theory about the source of our ideas. But before I get to that, I want to linger over these lines. It has been little remarked that Hume’s assumption in these last lines, that it is absurd to think that it is possible “by the continual graduation of shades, to run a colour insensibly into what is remote from it,” stands, in fact, in contradiction to the implications of Newton’s optical theory. This theory held, from Newton’s earliest published optical writings onward, that there were an “indefinite” or, as we now know, an infinite number of shades of colors. Newton’s experiments showed, in fact, that the differences among different adjoining shades were imperceptible to the human eye. Note that what is important in this connection is that Newton, in exhibiting his new kinds of monochromatic light, had observed that these ‘lights’ formed a series in which closely neighboring elements were perceptually indistinguishable—i.e., indistinguishable in

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72In the first letter to Oldenburg, published in the 1672 February issue of Philosophical Transactions, Newton wrote on p. 3082, “The original or primary colours are, Red, Yellow, Green, Blew, and a Violet-purple together with Orange, Indigo, and an indefinite variety of Intermediate gradations.” See also on p. 3081, “… to all the intermediate colours in a continued series belong intermediate degrees of refrangability” (emphasis added in both quotes). Hume should have learned this from popular accounts of Newton’s achievements; see Fontenelle 1728, 14: “This different Refrangibility of red, yellow, green, blue, violet and the vast variety of intermediate-colour’d Rays, a property which had never been suspected, and which no conjecture could have ever form’d, is the fundamental Discovery in Sir Is. Newton’s Treatise [on Optics] (emphasis added).” Note also how Fontenelle emphasizes the surprising nature of Newton’s theory.
color. Thus, it is possible, with enough patience, theoretical knowledge and extraordinary experimental skill “to run a colour insensibly into what is remote from it.” What Hume considers absurd is, in fact, the case.\(^{73}\)

For my purposes, it is important to note that, although it may seem that Hume’s account captures our common-sense phenomenological experiences or expectations, it is deeply flawed. As far as I can tell, Hume’s approach rests on two apparently commonsensical, but un-empirical tacit assumptions: that we view (shades of) colors as discrete entities and that our experiences and knowledge of the world does not influence what we see. Hume seems committed\(^{74}\) to the first assumption because he seems to have accepted a theory that he inherited from Bishop Berkeley\(^{75}\) in which the minimum visible is the minimal possible (or, perhaps more accurately for Hume, the minimally useful perception (\textit{Treatise}, I.ii.1.4 and I.iii.12).\(^{76}\) I think it is a weakness of Hume's account that his phenomenology rests on such assumptions; I think both assumptions can be investigated empirically. In fact, elsewhere in the \textit{Treatise}, Hume gives reasons for doubting

\(^{73}\)Poincaré uses a similar example to illustrate the paradoxical seeming difference between a mathematical and a physical continuum. A physical continuum, such as color, can be defined as having the following relations \(A=B, B=C, A<C\). This is always due to the imperfections of our senses (chapter 2, “Mathematical Experiment,” Poincaré 1952). I have to thank Howard Stein for reminding me of Poincaré’s discussion. Cf. Deleuze 1991, 101.

\(^{74}\)In his argument against the infinite divisibility of our ideas of space and time, Hume offers an “experiment” to back up his claim: “Put a spot of ink upon paper, fix your eye upon that spot, and retire to such a distance, that, at last you lose sight of it; 'tis plain, that the moment before it vanish’d the image or impression was perfectly indivisible” (\textit{Treatise}, I.ii.2.4). Even if we grant that this experiment shows that below a threshold our ideas are indivisible, this does not prove we see barely perceptible colors as discrete entities. I suspect that, at the distance Hume has in mind two such ink spots with contiguous shades of a color would be indistinguishable. Hume uses a similar experiment at I.ii.4.7.


\(^{76}\)See Frasca-Spada 1998, chapter 1, for discussion and useful references.
the latter assumption: philosophers and artisans learn through practice to see things that ordinary people miss (Treatise, I.iii.12.5 and I.ii.4.24).

Moreover, reflection on Newton’s optical theory would have shown to Hume (and this could have been congenial to Hume’s outlook) that our expectations about what we experience in certain controlled settings, but not only then, can be very misleading. Newton’s research tells us something about the properties of light and what we see. I certainly cannot prove that Hume is committed to these two assumptions, but I think they make sense of what Hume says in his discussion of the Missing Shade of Blue example.

Either way, I think Hume’s treatment of the Missing Shade of Blue example itself is quite revealing. Hume introduces the discussion as a possible objection to his own general rule that “our impressions are the causes of our ideas:”

Suppose therefore a person to have enjoyed his sight for thirty years, and to have become perfectly well acquainted with colours of all kinds, excepting one particular shade of blue, for instance, which it never has been his fortunate to meet with. Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be place’d before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the highest; ’tis plain, that he will perceive a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible, that there is a greater distance in that place betwixt the contiguous colours, than in any other. Now I ask, whether ’tis possible for him, from his own imagination, to supply that deficiency, and raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, tho’ it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe there are few but will be of opinion that he can; and this may serve as a proof, that the simple ideas are not always derived from the correspondent impressions; tho’ the instance is so particular and singular, that ’tis scarce worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim (Treatise, I.i.I; cf. First Enquiry, Section II, 21).

Hume’s psychological reasoning is a bit strange here. If the spectrum were continuous, a “gap” might be noticed as a discontinuity—a contrast between adjoining colors. But Hume thinks such a discontinuity—contrast—is the rule; one is supposed to perceive that this one contrast is larger than the norm. This is not likely in the realm of the “just perceivable.” In this I am merely following Hume’s own observation later in the Treatise: “it [is] impossible to judge exactly of the degrees of any quality, such as colour, taste, heat,
cold, when the difference betwixt them is very small” (I.iii.1.2). It is striking this insight comes so soon after the Missing Shade of Blue example!

Nevertheless, Hume missed out on a perfectly respectable Newtonian response, namely, that even minor empirical exceptions to general rules should be investigated because they open up either the possibility of discovering interesting refinements to general rules or the possibility of formulating a more sophisticated new theory. As Newton wrote:

In experimental philosophy, propositions gathered from phenomena by induction should be considered either exactly or very nearly true notwithstanding any contrary hypotheses, until yet other phenomena make such propositions either more exact or liable to exceptions. This Rule should be followed so that the arguments based on inductions may not be nullified by hypotheses (Principia, Book III, Rule IV).

We should treat well-confirmed propositions as true (or nearly true) until there are deviations that promote new research, which, in turn, lead us to refine our original propositions or reject them for new ones. That is, Newton accepts that physical inquiry may be open-ended.78

I think it goes a bit too far to call Rule IV a principle of the fallibility of induction, as has been argued.79 It does implicitly accept that the future may bring surprises and new

77The missing shade if blue case is not an isolated example. Hume often dismisses potential exceptions to general rules. For instance, in chapter 1 of The Natural History of Religion, “That Polytheism was the Primary Religion of Men,” Hume confidently asserts, “that about 1700 years ago [i.e., around the time of Christ] all mankind were polytheists. The doubtful and skeptical principles of a few philosophers, or the [mono-] theism, and that too not entirely pure, of one or two nations, form no objection worth regarding.” Also, in chapter 9 Hume explains away, much as a modern social scientist would, why an exception to a general rule he has just stated, (the religious tolerance of the Romans), should be ignored in a particular instance. Having provided these examples, I should point out that sometimes Hume does realize that general rules can be modified under pressure of irregularities (Treatise, I.iii.13.12).

78For a more elaborate defense of this point see George Smith 2002a and Howard Stein 2002. In chapters three and four below, I argue that this is also Adam Smith’s view. Kant, too, seems to have thought it was necessarily open-ended (Prolegomena, §56). For a discussion of Kant’s views, see Friedman 1992, 48ff., 143-149, and 171.

evidence, and, thus, anticipates one of Hume’s major insights. But it avoids Hume’s skeptical conclusions. Instead, Rule IV is 1) a proposal of how to treat Newton’s system — that is, as true until proven otherwise — and 2) an encouragement to find and exploit known deviations from the regularities he has established in order to make them “more exact.” If Hume had reflected on this last point, he would have been able to provide a more satisfactory reply against his own infamous Missing Shade of Blue counter-example.

It is true that Newton recognizes in the last three words of the first sentence of Rule IV that regularities can have exceptions. It would, thus, be tempting to claim on Hume’s behalf that his reasoning is in accord with Rule IV. But this will not do. Let me start by pointing out, that in the Rule, Newton makes a distinction between hypotheses and phenomena. The latter must be brought to bear on the found regularities in order to revise or make more precise such regularities. But, Newton’s “phenomena” are not simple observed events. This becomes clear from a look at the six phenomena he lists right after the Rules of Reasoning in Book III. They are best understood as robust, and widely accepted, observed generalizations.

80 Hume explicitly invokes Newton’s second “chief [i.e., the second] rule of philosophizing” in the last line of Second Enquiry, Section III, part II, 204: “where any principle has been found to have a great force and energy in one instance … ascribe to it a like energy in all similar instances.” See also Hume’s note attached to it.

81 I must thank Don Howard and Martin Lin for pressing this point. Newton is also clear about this in the next to last paragraph of the final Query of the Opticks.

82 In a footnote to the (2000) Oxford edition of Hume’s Treatise, the Nortons claim that “by not altering his maxim simply because he had discovered one contrary phenomenon, Hume practices Newton’s Fourth Rule.” It is true that Newton does not claim one should give up a maxim simply because one has found a contrary phenomenon, but that is not the main point of Rule 4.

83 Phenomenon 1, for instance, reads, “The satellites of Jupiter, by radii drawn to the center of Jupiter, describe areas proportional to the times, and their periodic times—the fixed stars being at rest—are as 3/2 powers of their distances from that center.” For a more Kantian understanding of the “phenomena” (in terms of relative motions of bodies in solar system), see Friedman 1992, 162-5 and 174-5.
controversial. I like best his own explanation: “whatever is not deduced from the phenomena must be called a hypothesis” (*Principia*, General Scholium). It is not unlikely that when Newton uses the word “hypotheses” in the 4th Rule, he has in mind the mechanical explanations (in the Pre-Newtonian sense) of the sort advanced by, say, Huygens or Hooke. But even if Newton had other hypotheses (say, electrical or occult) in mind, all he is saying in the Rule 4, and this is clearly stated in the second sentence, is that one must not be distracted by possible differing explanations for the found regularities until one has empirical reason to do so.84

Thus, what Hume should have offered in his analysis of the Missing Shade of Blue example, given my understanding of Rule 4, is an investigation of the nature of the counter-example in order to establish it as a “phenomenon.” So, for instance, Hume could have investigated to what degree the imagination’s ability to conjure up missing links in a continuous series is restricted to colors. He could have pursued to what degree this counter-example is true in sounds, smells or tastes.85 The crucial question is, of course, what is, in fact, the *phenomenon* in Newton’s sense, if any, that is proving the exception to the proposition that “our impressions are the causes of our ideas”? It is a bit surprising that Hume did not see all of this in the context of the Missing Shade of Blue example,86 because at several places he seems to be not very far removed from the spirit of Newton’s 4th Rule. At *Treatise*, II.i.2.27, for instance, Hume notes about an apparent contradiction to one of his own “Experimentally derived” rules, “This is not a contradiction, but an exception to the rule; and an exception that arises from the same reason

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84 This disarms the practical impact, on scientific theorizing, of what is now known as Quine-Duhem thesis.

85 Reid’s *An Inquiry*, for instance, is full of experimental results, and often proposes many lines of inquiry.

86 My discussion in this paragraph has benefited from conversation with Alessandro Pajewski.
with the rule itself. Such an exception as this is, therefore, rather a confirmation of the rule." Also, at *Treatise*, I.ii.4, 52, Hume discusses a potential objection to the infinite divisibility of mathematics and notes that “it seems more requisite to give the reason of this exception, than to shew, that we really must make such an exception.” Nevertheless, I think in all such cases Hume is attempting to *explain away* potential objections to regularities instead of *exploiting* their existence as a guide to further research. This is how I understand Hume’s own 6th Rule (to judge if something is a cause or an effect) at *Treatise*, I.iii.15, 174: “For as like causes always produce like effects, when in any instance we find our expectation to be disappointed, we must conclude that this irregularity proceeds from some difference in the causes.” For, in general, Hume thought, “it is the chief business of philosophers to regard the general course of things” and not worry too much about “exceptions” (“Of Commerce, ” EMPL, 254-255). Yet, the pay-off to having exact theories and exact and accurate measurements is that deviations from general rules open up pathways to refinement of theory.

By *trusting* his own intuitions about our phenomenology, Hume puts himself in the position in which he legislates what is or is not absurd without drawing on natural

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87See Frasca-Spada 1998, 62-64, for a defense of Hume’s tendency to introduce counter-examples of general rules they violate.

88See Hume’s diagnostic comments in First *Enquiry*, Section VI, 58: “It is true, when any cause fails of producing its usual effect, philosophers ascribe not this to any irregularity in nature; but suppose, that some secret causes, in the particular structure of parts, have prevented the operation.”

89Hume’s view was by no means unusual in the 17th and 18th centuries. Prior to the publication of the *Principia*, there was an ongoing debate in the Royal Society on to what degree one could expect to find exceptionless generalizations in natural philosophy. Robert Boyle was a leading advocate of the idea that all one could expect to discover was the general course of things under normal circumstances. See Boyle [1772] 1965, Volume I. I must thank George Smith for calling my attention to this work.

90In her well-known criticism of the emphasis by philosophers on physical laws, Nancy Cartwright 1983 ignores the evidential benefits of specifying the potential deviations from an expected regularity.
philosophy. If Hume had allowed himself to reflect on Newton’s optical theory when he wrote these lines at the start of his *Treatise*, a natural, and certainly reasonable, response would have been open to him: he could, at least, have suggested an empirical program to establish (minimal) threshold levels of seeing and, once that had been established, to discern if it accords with the commitments of the best available natural philosophy. This last suggestion may go beyond Hume’s own methodology, but he does claim to be committed to a method of “experience and observation.”

**V: Conclusion**

My examples suggest that Hume was not merely unable to carry out an important aspect of his own program because he seemed to lack the knowledge to do so, but, more important, that at times he did not seem worried about executing it and, in fact, was not adverse to arm-chair reasoning on fundamental issues. Recall, for instance, that Hume sometimes relies on conceivability arguments to prove that something is possible in nature (e.g., *Treatise*, I.3.6.5).

For my present purposes, it is notable that, despite its lofty introduction, the epistemology of Hume’s *Treatise* does not provide a foundation for understanding the scientific achievements of Newton and makes no sustained effort to do so—excepting a few scattered, and often better forgotten, comments about mathematics. Hume neither shows how his epistemology leads to a clearer understanding of natural philosophy, although he makes gestures in that direction at *Treatise*, 1.iii.15, nor does he apply the results from natural philosophy to epistemology. In Hume, we do not find sustained reflection on, say, a theory of vision, such as he could have found in Bishop Berkeley. In Hume, too many details of the workings of Man’s senses and faculties are missing (but see: *Treatise*,}
I.iii.9.11). There is also hardly ever an application of Hume’s own Science of Man to an analysis of any of the achievements of Newton or other important natural philosophers. (A possible exception is Treatise, I.iii.12.16.) In fact, as my examples indicate, Hume never came to grips with pretty basic results of Newtonian science. The natural place to have done this in the Treatise would have been in the section entitled, “Of the Modern Philosophy” (I.iv.IV). This is a fascinating and important section, but it does not deal with Newton’s system. As mentioned before, Hume was mistrustful of long chains of argument, and I suspect that Hume much preferred what he took to be modest refinements of the robust contents of common life than the (fallible) results of natural philosophy. So, we find in Hume no discussion of, e.g., theory construction in natural philosophy or the role of judgment by natural philosophers in the assessment of theories of astronomy, physics, optics, etc. It is possible that Hume thought the former could not be accounted for except by positing a “magical faculty in the soul” (I.i.7.15). And, if I am correct about the regulative nature of Hume’s epistemology, Hume may have thought his “science of Man” made judgment in natural philosophy superfluous; all one needed to do is investigate the relationship among our impressions, ideas, and the constructions of the imagination in order to evaluate theories (e.g., Treatise, I.iii.1.7).

I have been very critical of Hume, not only because he is one of my intellectual heroes, but also because his views have been influential in framing subsequent philosophic

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91Berkeley’s example and the gaps in Hume’s “Science of Man” probably inspired Adam Smith to write an essay “Of The External Senses” in which Smith relies heavily and explicitly on Berkeley’s theory and also on the ethological works of Linnaeus; according to Smith’s own testimony he also made his own field observations.

92This is precisely what Adam Smith undertakes in his “The Principles which lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; illustrated by The History of Astronomy;” (EPS).

93Hume is, of course, not alone in this in 18th century Europe. In their understanding of Newton, Kant and Adam Smith are exceptional figures among philosophers not known for their contributions to physics (although Kant’s astronomical work was not insignificant).
discussion. No doubt my limited focus has obscured what is genuinely of lasting value in Hume's philosophy both in the domain that is now known as philosophy as well as in the sciences. For instance, I do not want to give the impression that Hume did not write seriously about what we would now refer to as the social sciences. I am thinking in particular of his excellent and scholarly demographic essay, “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” his brilliant and influential essays on Political Economy, and, especially, his essay “The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,”94 which provides what we would call a quasi-sociological/anthropological investigation of the conditions of scientific flourishing and cultural transmission throughout history.95 There are related reflections in The Natural History of Religion (NHR).

Let me finish by rephrasing my main point: in NHR, Hume analyzed how religion has “its origin in human nature” (see the Introduction to NHR; this may not have been all Hume intended to do in this work). The account he gives in NHR is consistent with, and builds on, the “science of Man” of the Treatise. In contrast, nowhere in Hume’s corpus do we find a sustained effort to show how his insights help us better understand the development of natural philosophy or the minds of natural philosophers. (There are, of course, some important discussions that bear on this issue in the Treatise, see, for instance, II.iii.10: “Of Curiosity, or the Love of Truth.”) As my examples show, Hume had not assimilated Newton’s system. What his program required was someone who was in agreement with the basic outlines of his “science of Man” (refined, perhaps, by up-to-date empirical knowledge and proper reflection on history) and critically employed it in an analysis of the development of natural philosophy. I think there was such a person, Adam Smith, but that story I tell in my next chapter.

94 All reprinted in EMPL.

95 Hume was probably inspired by scattered comments in Bernard Mandeville’s Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits; see especially the Third, Fourth and Sixth Dialogues of Volume II, 128ff, 149ff and 320ff.
CHAPTER 3
SMITH’S ACCOUNT OF INQUIRY

I: Summary and Introduction

In this chapter, I reconstruct Adam Smith’s epistemology. I show that the major theoretical concept of Smith’s moral psychology, the “Impartial Spectator,” is important for understanding his views on the articulation and reception of scientific theories. I argue that Smith is not a skeptic, but a modest realist about the theories produced by natural philosophers. Scrutiny of Smith’s subtle remarks on the acceptance of Newton’s theory reveal a sophisticated understanding of Newton’s achievement and how changing norms of theory acceptance operate in natural philosophy.

In the “Introduction” to his *Treatise*, Hume announced a two-fold program; 1) to found a “science of Man,” and 2) to use that “science of Man” to illuminate and provide an epistemological foundation for the achievements of natural philosophy. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that Hume was unable to execute the second prong of his program, not only due to lack of knowledge of Newton’s theories, but also because some of his own principles stood in the way of a proper appreciation of those achievements. I reconstruct from some of Smith’s lesser known writings that were collected in his posthumous (1795) work, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (EPS), and from neglected passages of his major ethical work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS; first published in 1759), a promising vision for executing the second part of Hume’s two-fold program. In the next chapter, I look closely at Smith’s efforts at creating the first part of Hume’s program. Most of my evidence comes from a remarkable essay, “The History of Astronomy” (“Astronomy”),
but I draw on all of Smith’s writings. Much to my surprise, and in contrast to recent literature on Smith, I downplay the skeptical tendencies in Smith's philosophy.

I argue that Smith thought one can recognize that sentiments motivate inquiry, while still insisting that it is reasonable to accept the results of inquiry. I also argue that Smith is a realist about Copernicanism. I show that the most important concept in Smith’s moral psychology, the “Impartial Spectator,” has an important application in his epistemology; it brings out the social and norm-governed nature of science. This creates a significant difference in emphasis between Hume’s and Smith’s approaches. Hume’s epistemology attempts to legislate the permissible claims for the sciences and has, once Hume is through with his skeptical assault on induction, few epistemic resources available to explain success and failure in the sciences; Smith’s epistemology is generated by critical reflection on the historical practice of the sciences and, especially, how norms operate within it. Although I cannot prove that Smith saw all the shortcomings in Hume’s program that I identified in Chapter 2, I do believe Smith managed to avoid many of these pitfalls. In what follows, I occasionally highlight Smith’s divergence from Hume’s positions, but to do so in all instances would have made this chapter tedious.

This chapter is divided into four substantive segments. Part II briefly introduces the “Astronomy” and the related posthumous papers. After that I outline the main elements of Smith’s social-psychological account of the pursuit of scientific knowledge and the nature of theory-acceptance in it in Part III. Part IV focuses on the epistemological role of the Impartial Spectator. This part is divided into four sections. The main claim is that we can piece together from Smith’s writings a vision of how criteria of justification in theory-acceptance get introduced in natural philosophy.

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In the longest part of this chapter, I investigate whether Smith, given that he presents the acceptance of astronomical theories as a series of successive revolutions, is a skeptic or not. Part V is divided into four sections. The first two sections critically discuss evidence for a skeptical interpretation of Smith. The third section shows that Smith does not adopt Hume’s analysis of causation, and that Smith appears to have a realist understanding of causation. In the final section, I propose a series of novel arguments to show that Smith is not only a realist about Copernicanism, but also that his reasons for this are based on both a very subtle account of Newton’s achievements as well as a view of how an understanding of Newton’s theory changes how one experiences common life. It turns out that Smith’s stance can be explained by understanding Smith as having adopted the role of an Impartial Spectator. I end the chapter with some concluding remarks.

II: Adam Smith’s “The History of Astronomy”

Adam Smith burned nearly all of his notebooks before his death in 1790. But in 1795 his literary executors did publish the “Astronomy,” together with two shorter and less polished essays: “The History of the Ancient Physics” (“Ancient Physics”) and “The History of the Ancient Logics and Metaphysics” (“Ancient Logics”) in EPS, 2 that collected several of Smith’s writings in traditional areas of philosophy. According to Smith’s editors, all three essays were intended to illustrate “the Principles which lead and direct Philosophical Enquiries.”3 Other essays by Smith in the volume were an account

2 All my quotes are from Adam Smith’s Essays on Philosophical Subjects. (EPS). Edited by W.P.D. Wightman and J.C. Bryce.

3 Smith’s interest in science (and its epistemology) is not merely theoretical; it also has a practical concern. He believes that “[S]cience is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition.” For Smith the state should require the study of “science and philosophy” of “all people of middling or more than middling rank and fortune,” so that religious fanaticism and superstition may successfully be resisted by the citizenry (WN, V.i.g.14, 796); see for more discussion Griswold 1999, 369.
“Of the External Senses” and some works on Literature and the Arts. Together with “Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages” (“Languages”) published as an appendix to TMS, from the third edition onward, this group of essays provides my best evidence that Smith was filling gaps in Hume’s “science of Man” and its application to the other sciences.4

From internal textual evidence, there is reason to believe that Smith wrote a significant part of the “Astronomy” before any of the works he published in his lifetime. For instance, there is a clear allusion to the prediction of the forthcoming return of Halley’s comet (in 1758) in the text of the essay. Smith scholars have assumed that at least a large chunk of the essay was written either while Smith was still in college at Oxford or shortly thereafter, that is, around 1745-48 — during the decade after publication of Hume's Treatise. From letters to Hume and to the Duke de La Rochefoucauld, we know that Smith valued the “Astronomy” throughout his life and probably intended to include it and its companion essays in a never finished “Philosophical History of all the different branches of literature, of Philosophy, Poetry and Eloquence” (Correspondence, Letter No. 137, April 1773; Letter No. 248, 1 November, 1785). Moreover, as I explain below, some material of the “Astronomy” is recycled by Smith in WN, V.i.f.24, 767-8 and TMS, I.i.4.3, 20, thus, suggesting a remarkable continuity of vision throughout Smith’s life.

Smith and Hume probably became acquainted some time between 1749-51.5 From a letter by Hume to Francis Hutcheson we can infer that Smith probably read the Treatise as

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4It is easier to see that the two books Adam Smith published during his life, TMS, and WN, are contributions to (as well as revisions and extensions of) Hume’s proposed “science of Man.” Smith acknowledged the intellectual affinity between his work and that of Hume in a letter No. 261 to Thomas Cadell, their publisher, of 7 May 1786; Correspondence, 296.

a young college student under Hutcheson in 1740. The remained friends until Hume’s death.

The “Astronomy” is an account of the development and reasons for the popularity of various astronomical systems, including the Eudoxan, the Ptolemaic, the Copernican, the Cartesian and the Newtonian one. In the process, Smith also discusses in various degrees the roles Aristotle, Hipparchus, Purbach, Regiomantus, Tycho, Galileo and Kepler played or should have played in modifying these systems. In what follows, I do not pay much attention to his description of these systems. Smith shows that he grasped many of the essential details of the various systems and that he had a solid understanding of the historical facts that could have been available to him at the time, although the editors of his posthumous works claimed, in a note at the end of the “Astronomy,” that he was not satisfied with his description of Newton’s system. Certainly, there is more to say about Smith’s understanding and use of history and his choice of examples, but here I largely

6 The letter is dated March 4, 1740. Smith was a student of Hutcheson’s in Glasgow then. The identification is not absolutely certain because Smith is only mentioned by his last name. The letter mentions an “abstract” that was printed in London; the editor of Hume’s Letters, J.Y.T. Greig, thought that Smith wrote this abstract as a summary of the Treatise on behalf of Hutcheson. But the wording of the letter does not support that interpretation. It is more likely that this abstract is the one that Hume wrote to publicize the Treatise.

7 Smith’s treatment is reminiscent of Turgot’s “A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind,” first presented to the Sorbonne on 11 December 1750. [See the translation in Ronald L. Meek 1973.] Yet, Smith’s account is far more detailed about and ambitious in its description of the contents of the various theories adopted. Of course, it is nowhere near as detailed and exhaustive as the great history of mathematics, including astronomy, Montucla 1758.

8 The modern editors of EPS are quite diligent in commenting on Smith’s errors and sources. But in my opinion, Smith shows real acuity on several occasions. For what it is worth let me report the opinions of the following professionals: I.B. Cohen 1994, 62, comments favorably on Smith’s grasp of the history of science in the “History of Astronomy.” Lorraine Daston has mentioned, in conversation, that she considers the “History of Astronomy” one of the masterpieces of the 18th century. Noel Swerdlow has mentioned that he finds Smith’s history generally accurate (especially considering the sources available to him), and often praise-worthy. See also Schumpeter 1954, 182, noteworthy because the author is extremely critical of Smith.
limit myself to some philosophic implications of his work. This seems to me in keeping with the aims that he and his editors stated for the work.

III. Discomfort of the Imagination

Before I offer my reconstruction of Adam Smith’s naturalistic epistemology, I must provide some background information. In particular, I detail the building blocks of Smith’s approach to understanding the nature of the scientists’ theories. In this section, my discussion may appear a bit tedious, but the details are important for understanding the richness of Smith’s vision. In the “Astronomy,” Smith not only calls attention to the political and social preconditions that make theorizing about nature possible, but also focuses on several sentiments that he deems important for guiding scientific activity. The start of the “Astronomy” is surprising: Smith immediately introduces a discussion of three sentiments:

Wonder, Surprise, and Admiration, are words which, though often confounded, denote in our language sentiments that are indeed allied, but that are in some respects different also, and distinct from one another. What is new and singular, excites that sentiment which, in strict propriety, is called Wonder; what is unexpected, Surprise; and what is great or beautiful, admiration (“Astronomy,” Intro. ¶1, 33).

After Smith defines the meaning of words that refer to our sentiments, he is not averse to criticizing poets, e.g., Milton or Dryden, for sloppy usage (Intro. ¶5, 33; in the context of a discussion of the difference between rent and profit, Smith also corrects the usage of...

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9Smith may not have recognized this particular terminology (although his knowledge of Greek was excellent) as a distinct intellectual enterprise, but the kinds of questions I investigate in this chapter are not anachronistic. Smith rarely discusses traditional epistemological questions, although his brief fragment, “Ancient Logics,” which despite its title also mentions modern philosophers, is an important exception.

10In fact, the rhetorical structure of Smith’s “Astronomy” itself seems to be designed, first, through its unexpected start to surprise and, second, through its novel approach to induce wonder in the reader. See, also, TMS, I.i.4.3, 20, and I.ii.1.12, 31.

11For a more detailed account of Smith’s understanding of wonder, admiration and surprise, see Lundgren 1969, especially 897-907.
“common language,” which incorrectly claims that “Money … signifies wealth,” see WN, I.vi.19-20, 70 and WN, IV.i.34, 449-450). These sentiments are allied (and “mutually support and enliven each other” (Int. ¶6, 34)), but distinct enough so that they can be discussed separately. Smith tells us that,

It is the design of this Essay to consider particularly the nature and causes of these sentiments, whose influence is of far wider extent than we should be apt upon a careless view to imagine (Intro. ¶7, 34).12

In the “Astronomy,” Smith discusses surprise and wonder at considerable length, while admiration does not get treated separately at all, but is subsumed in his larger history. Smith’s discussion of surprise is, despite some vivid examples, not very remarkable. His account of wonder is very interesting and is summarized below, but I postpone detailed discussion of it to the next chapter where I analyze Smith’s methodological views.

According to Smith observing resemblance(s) is one of the roots of scientific theorizing.13 He writes: “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 endeavors to arrange and methodise all its ideas, and to reduce them into proper classes and assortments” (“Astronomy,” II¶1, 37-38).14 Elsewhere Smith also

12Skinner 1979, 36, notes that Smith does not claim an exclusive role for the sentiments. For more on Smith’s views on these sentiments, see his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. (LRBL). Edited by J.C. Bryce, Lecture, i. 164-165, 68-69. As Leon Montes pointed out to me, the passion of admiration is mentioned quite frequently in Part 1 of TMS. It is defined as “For approbation heightened by wonder and surprise, constitutes the sentiment which is properly called admiration, and of which applause is the natural expression” (TMS, I.4.3, 20). The editors of TMS claim that this definition contradicts the account offered in the “Astronomy” because it suggests that these sentiments are not distinct. They ignore, however, that in the “Astronomy” Smith calls these sentiments “allied” and only “in some respects different … and distinct from one another.” In my opinion this is not contradicted by the definition in TMS.

13I suspect this is common to all Empiricists.

14See also “Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages, and the Different Genius of original and compounded Languages,” (hereafter “Languages”), ¶1-2, 203-205; ¶16, 211, and ¶25, 215). The “Languages” is reprinted in LRBL, 203-226. It was first published in 1761, later attached by Smith to various editions of TMS.
stresses the importance of reasoning from analogy in science (“Astronomy,” II¶12, 47, and also the discussion of Kepler’s laws at IV¶56-7, 89). Smith may have believed that observing similarity is an innate capacity because at several points in “Of the External Senses,” Smith suggests that various capacities may be instinctive: a) fellow feeling with other men and to a lesser degree animals (¶7, 136); b) perception of the connection between visible and tangible object (see ¶69ff., 161, with an appeal to Linnaeus’ and his own observations); and c) the appetite of sex (¶79, 165). (For a list that includes, “Hunger, thirst, the passion which unites the two sexes, love of pleasure, and the dread of pain,” see the long footnote appended to TMS, II.i.5.6, 78.) But Smith is rather vague about the details.

In the “Astronomy,” Smith explains that in Botany general words such as Substance, Genera, and Species, i.e., “those abstract and general names” are used to

15See Skinner 1979, 38. We find more skeptical comments on the use of analogy in history in one of his students’ lecture notes of the Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (hereafter LRBL), lecture 6, i.62, 28. See also, LRBL, Lecture, i. 164-165, 68-69. In the “Astronomy” Smith claims that Kepler had an excessive “passion for discovering proportions and resemblances betwixt the different parts of nature,” (IV¶50, 84). Thomas Reid attacked the emphasis on analogical reasoning throughout his An Inquiry.

16Another essay first published in Smith’s posthumous EPS.

17In the context of a passage on the effects of music in “Of the Nature of the Imitation which takes place in what are called the Imitative Arts” (hereafter “Imitative Arts”), Smith provides a general account of the mind’s receptivity (when despondent) towards resemblance: “It is quite otherwise when we are melancholy and desponding … A slow succession of resembling or closely connected thoughts is the characteristic of this disposition of mind” (II¶20, 197). Even though Smith never explicitly mentions natural philosophy in this passage, he does compare the “very high intellectual pleasure” derived from contemplating systems of music with systems of other sciences shortly hereafter in the same essay (“Imitative Arts,” II¶30, 205). The “Imitative Arts” first appeared after Smith’s death and is reprinted in EPS, 176-213. The first reference Smith made to this work is in Correspondence, Letter No. 208, 252, from 1780 in which he suggests he had been working on the essay in the late 1770s. There is also some reason to believe that parts of the work had been presented to the Glasgow society in the late 1750s or early 1760s. See the Editors’ Introduction, EPS, 172-3.

18In Letter No. 208, 1780, Smith writes that he spent six years in the place of his nativity: “During this time I amused myself principally with writing my Enquiry concerning the Wealth of Nations, in studying Botany (in which however I made no great progress) as
classify and express our distinctions (II¶1-2, 37-8; see also Smith’s “Languages,” ¶1-2, 203-205 in which abstraction is presented as a distinct achievement for the human species). A child quite happily refers to a “thing” when it is pointing to an object whereas someone with specialized knowledge, e.g. a Botanist, wants to use a specific class or genus (“Astronomy,” II¶2-3, 38-9). It is clear from the context that the description of the practice of Botany can be generalized to the other sciences. I have no reason to assume that Adam Smith shared Berkeley’s and Hume’s mistrust of abstractions and theoretical entities introduced into natural philosophy. In fact, WN, is full of abstract entities. For instance, when Smith discusses one of his key theoretical concepts, the “Real Price,” he is aware that a “quantity of labor” is “an abstract notion, which, though it can be made sufficiently intelligible, is not altogether so natural and obvious” (WN, I.v.5, 49; I discuss this material in Chapters 4 and 5). Moreover, in section V.B below, I quote and comment on a long passage from “Of the External Senses,” ¶17-8, 139-140), in which Smith quite casually talks about “substances” and only seems to reject unempirical metaphysics. Elsewhere, he even offered as his one point of criticism of John Bruce’s moral philosophy, with which he recognized in other respects a great deal affinity to his WN that it was “too free of Metaphysics” (see Letter 261, to Thomas Cadell, 1 November 1786). Nevertheless, I do think Smith was cautious about introducing abstract entities into moral philosophy, and in the same section (V.B), I provide evidence for that view from TMS, II.iv.intro.5, 93.

For Smith, it is a mark of someone with advanced knowledge in an area, such as a Botanist, to notice that the connecting principles of a theory or explanation describing nature well as some other sciences to which I had never given much attention before” (Correspondence, 252). Smith’s interest in Botany is also attested by his knowledgeable remarks on works by Buffon and others in his first publication, the “Letter to Edinburgh Review,” ¶8-9, 248-249, EPS.

Haakonssen 1981, 79-82, claims that in Smith there is an (implicit) distinction between contextual knowledge and system knowledge, the former being “the knowledge we have of human behavior through the sympathy mechanism,” while the latter is “the
are not as tightly conjoined as ordinary people may be led to believe; Smith explicitly compares this skill to the heightened sensitivity of a musician or the special knowledge of an artisan. Moreover, Smith is quite emphatic that at other times this special knowledge allows an artisan to see order where a novice, or the “ordinary spectator” of Smith’s “Imitative Arts,” Annexe, ¶3, 210, will see disorder (“Astronomy,” II¶11, 45; on such differing skills see also “Imitative Arts” Annexe, 5, 211-2, and “External Senses,” ¶52, 151-2). This is a standard view in the period, see Hume’s *Treatise*, I.iii.12.5, d’Alembert *Preliminary Discourse*, 20 and, with different emphasis, Berkeley’s *Principles of Human Knowledge*, §104).

The major difference for Smith, it seems, between an artisan and a philosopher, besides possessing different skills and knowledge (for other examples, see “Of the External Senses, ¶31-2, 145) — a result of habit, custom, and education21 (see WN, I.ii.4, 28-9 where Smith compares a philosopher to a “common street porter”)22 — is a difference in curiosity (“History of Astronomy,” II¶11, 45). But for Smith, only the understanding of things, events, or persons in some sort of functional relationship to a greater ‘whole’ or system.” Although I am not unsympathetic, I wish Haakonssen had provided more evidence that Smith saw things this way. For a partial defense of Haakonssen, see Fleischacker forthcoming. I do think that Smith thought that there were different kinds of interest in, requirements on, and expectations from knowledge in moral and natural philosophy (TMS, VII.ii.4.14, 313-4), but I do not see him doing this in terms of contextual or system knowledge. Anyway, I do not think any of this affects our understanding of Smith’s account of experts.


21In the debate on nature vs. nurture Smith is clearly on the side of nurture. (Hume thought nurture merely “widened” already wide differences in natural endowments. See ECPM I, Section I, 169-170.) But Smith’s terminology is confusing because he thinks that socialization is natural; see TMS, VI.ii.1.10-7, 222-224. On education see also WN, V.i.f-g, 758-814.

22This is an important issue in Smith’s WN, I.i.6-9, 19-22 and I.ii.4, 28-9, where the division of labor *causes* different talents among different peoples and trades (including philosophers). Cf. Turgot’s (posthumously published in 1808-11) “On Universal History,” in Meek 1973, 89.
philosopher can attempt a view of the whole (WN, V.i.f.51, 783). For Smith, “philosophy is
the science of the connecting principles of nature” \(^{23}\) (“Astronomy,” II¶12, 45); or, as he
put it slightly differently elsewhere in the “Astronomy,” philosophy should “give some
coherence to the appearances of nature” (II¶9, 43; I discuss Smith’s understanding of
philosophy more fully in Chapter 6).

Now “new and singular” events (“Astronomy,” II¶3, 39) or unusual relations
(II¶6, 40) excite wonder in people’s imagination and make the mind’s customary
procession between connecting principles falter; this causes “uncertainty and anxious
curiosity” (II¶4; 40), \(^{24}\) even “discomfort” and “tumult” in the “imagination” (see,
“Astronomy,” II¶12, 45-6; Hume’s *Treatise*, II.iii.10.12, may have been the source for
this). This discomfort can manifest itself in somatic symptoms (“Astronomy,” II¶4, 39).\(^{25}\)
The uneasiness caused by the appearance(s) of exceptions to general order motivates
inquiry. In Chapter 4, I emphasize this in my discussion of Smith’s methodology. It is a
recurring theme in his works. For Smith provides a similar, shorter account in terms of
wonder and surprise in WN, V.i.f.24, 767-8, but there the discomfort is absent.\(^{26}\)

\(^{23}\)Turgot uses similar language in his (1750) “A Philosophical Review of the
Successive Advances of the Human Mind,” in Meek 1973, 45. Turgot is more impressed than
Smith by the contribution artisans have made to knowledge throughout history (55-58).

\(^{24}\)In “External Senses,” Smith suggests that “the most precise knowledge of the
relative situation of” very distant objects “could be of no other use than to satisfy the most
unnecessary curiosity,” (¶51, 151).

\(^{25}\)His account of Surprise and Wonder includes several physical manifestations of
these sentiments, e.g., “rolling of the eyes, suspension of breath, swelling of the heart,” etc.

\(^{26}\)Daston and Park 1998, 326-327, first noted that Smith’s account of wonder (and
surprise and admiration) deviates significantly from specific details in Hume’s picture in the
*Treatise*. They refer to *Treatise*, 453 2.3.10 and p. 301, 2.1.8. Wonder is largely absent from
Hume’s account of the passions, while surprise and admiration play no role in Hume’s
account of curiosity. (In First *Enquiry*, chapter X, Part II, 117, Hume notes that the pleasing
sensation of surprise and wonder can make people want to believe in miracles.) Prior to Daston
and Park, the traditional view was (as espoused by the editors of EPS and also Skinner 1979,
14-41, that Smith closely followed Hume’s psychology. Unfortunately, the otherwise
encyclopedic Daston and Park ignore Hume’s *The Natural History of Religion* (NHR; 1757)
to Smith unusual events do not merely motivate new inquiry, they are also the source of the introduction of new terms and classifications in a language ("Astronomy," II:2, 38).

It should be noted that, in order to forestall a one-sided interpretation of Smith’s views, soothing the imagination’s discomfort is not the only motivation that Smith recognizes as a source of inquiry. A desire for tranquility of mind is only one of several such driving forces that Smith recognizes, although it is the one that, according to Smith, gets the process going. I give ample evidence below that Smith realized that the love of fame, status, immortal glory, perception of system/order, the pleasure of using models to travel in one’s mind to the far reaches of the universe and even a desire to contribute something useful to the improvement of mankind can all motivate inquiry.

In the “Astronomy,” Smith signals the importance of social context by discussing some necessary conditions (law and order, a class with leisure time) and some additional conditions (lack of despotism and enough geographic isolation to reduce chance of invasions) that need to be in place for natural philosophy to flourish ("Astronomy,” III:3-5, 50-2, see also IV:21-2, 67-7) before he delves into the actual history of astronomy. In this work Hume’s position became closer to Smith’s when he argued that the novelty of unusual events, or “monsters,” excites curiosity. But Hume chose to emphasize that the fear such unusual events create is at the root of people’s religious opinions or affections. See, chapter 1 of NHR. In chapter 3 of that book, Hume does allow that hope and fear do not merely motivate religious opinions, but can also stimulate an elite few to create a “system” to account for the “mystery” of nature. On the nature of systems in Hume, see also the last lines of chapter 4 and the whole of chapter 11 of NHR. (For a fuller discussion of this work see Livingston 1994, 180-186.) Cf. TMS, I.i.12, 12, Smith writes: “The infant, however, feels only the uneasiness of the present instant, which can never be great. With regard to the future, it is perfectly secure, and in its thoughtlessness and want of foresight, possesses an antidote against fear and anxiety, the great tormentors of the human breast, from which reason and philosophy will, in vain, attempt to defend it, when it grows up to a man.” (See also Smith’s remarks on the “dread of death” at TMS, I.i.13, 13.)


Smith’s historical narrative, the social conditions play a relatively minor role. He does, nevertheless, point out, for instance, that in Ancient times some philosophers of the “Italian School” only taught their doctrines to pupils “under the seal of the most sacred secrecy, that they might avoid the fury of the people, and not incur the imputation of impiety” (IV¶4, 55-56;²⁹ oddly enough, when Smith discusses Galileo none of the latter’s troubles with the Church are alluded to). Smith’s attention to the social and historical context of science is not a mere rhetorical flourish in keeping with the values of the historical school of the Scottish Enlightenment; the social element of science plays a central role in Smith’s epistemology. It is the recognition of the social nature of science that allows Smith to depart from the skeptical straightjacket that the theory of ideas and impressions had become in Hume’s hands.³⁰

²⁹Interestingly, Smith remarks in “Ancient Physics” (¶9, 113) that the Pythagoreans were members of “a sect, which, in the antient world, was never regarded irreligious.” Smith never makes clear here that the Pythagoreans were the “Italian School” mentioned in the “Astronomy;” in context, Smith’s wording seems to suggest that in modern times the Pythagoreans were regarded as atheists (cf. WN, V.i.f.43, 777).

³⁰It is helpful for my point, I think, that in the “Ancient Logics,” Smith writes, “[T]o explain the nature, and to account for the origin of general Ideas is, even at this day, the greatest difficulty in abstract philosophy” (¶5, 125; Smith mentions the works of Locke and Malebranche, but not Hume). This remark signals that Smith believes that the theory of ideas is incomplete; I see in it recognition that for Smith it, therefore, cannot function as a epistemological starting point in understanding the sciences. One may be tempted to see in this evidence that Smith had not read Hume by the time he first drafted these essays. (Sam Fleischacker urged this view on me in private correspondence.) But, although not impossible, I think no such conclusion needs to be drawn by the absence of an explicit reference to Hume. For instance, Hume is also missing in a list of philosophers, which itself seems modeled on Hume’s list in the “Introduction” to Treatise, that made contributions to the study of human nature in “Letter to the Edinburgh Review,” ¶10, 250, EPS; there can be no doubt, however, that Smith had carefully read Hume by 1757—a mere two years before TMS, appeared and close to a decade after Hume and Smith had first met. After all, it was Hume whom had most clearly exposed the inadequacies in Locke’s and Malebranche’s accounts of Abstract Ideas; he had made it appropriate to talk of it as “even at this day, the greatest difficulty in abstract philosophy.” If anything, the reference to “this day” seems to me to confirm that Smith was thinking of Hume here.
IV: Spectatorship as a bridge between Natural Philosophy and Moral Philosophy

IV.A: The Tranquility of Mathematicians

In a separate section of the “Astronomy,” “Of the Origin of Philosophy,” Smith asserts, echoing Aristotle, that

Wonder ... and not any expectation of advantage from its discoveries, is the first principle which prompts mankind to the study of philosophy ... and they pursue this study for its own sake, as an original pleasure or good in itself, without regarding its tendency to procure them the means of other pleasures (III¶3, 51;31 Hume agrees that the “genius and capacity, which is emply’d in ... invention and discovery” is a source of pleasure; see Treatise, II.iii.10.2).

Contra Rousseau, who had claimed that the sciences were “born in idleness,”32 Smith is careful to point out that the origin of our interest in science is wonder. He makes the same claim, while resisting an exclusively Baconian understanding of science, at TMS, IV.2.7, 189:

But the utility of those sciences [mathematics and other “abstruse” sciences], either to the individual or to the public, is not very obvious, and to prove it, requires a discussion which is not always very easily comprehended. It was not, therefore, their utility which first recommended them to the public admiration. This quality was but little insisted upon, till it became necessary to make some reply to the reproaches of those, who, having themselves no taste for such sublime discoveries, endeavoured to depreciate them as useless” (emphasis added; criticizing Hume’s Treatise, II.iii.10.4, may also be on Smith’s mind)33

31This passage is ignored by those, e.g., Cropsey 1957, 7-9, and Griswold 1999, that claim that Smith believed that philosophy is not an end in itself. Such a position seems to be suggested by a remark such as: “Though you despise that picture, or that poem, or even that system of philosophy, which I admire, there is little danger of our quarrelling upon that account. Neither of us can reasonably be much interested about them” (TMS, I.i.4.5, 21; see also: TMS, VI.ii.3 and I.iii.1).

32Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, Part II, ¶39, OC III, 18.

33Smith did believe that the “study of science and philosophy” can have a social utility in suppressing “enthusiasm and superstition;” this is why he advocates mandatory exams in them for anybody who wants to practice a profession (WN, V.i.9.14, 796, see also V.i.f.50-56, 781-6). Smith thought that an educated populace was of the highest importance not merely to avert “the torpor of mind” of the common laborer that the division of labor will engender (WN, V.i.f.50, 781), it is also necessary to maintain freedom, public accountability and order in a modern society (WN, V.i.f.61, 788).
Although Smith claims that it was defense against resentment of folks that are uninterested in philosophy that has made philosophers stress the social benefits of philosophy, he does seem to have a somewhat idealized picture of what motivates philosophers. On the face of it, Smith makes similar remarks in TMS:

Mathematicians … who may have the most perfect assurance, both of the truth and of the importance of their discoveries, are frequently very indifferent about the reception which they may meet with from the public … The great work of Sir Isaac Newton, his *Mathematical Principles of Philosophy*, I have been told was for several years neglected by the public. The tranquility of that great man, it is probable, never suffered, upon that account, the interruption of a single quarter of an hour. Natural philosophers in their independency upon the public opinion, approach nearly to the mathematicians, and, in their judgments concerning the merit of their own discoveries and observations, enjoy some degree of the same security and tranquility … Mathematicians and natural philosophers, from their independency upon the public opinion, have little temptation to form themselves into factions and cabals, either for the support of their own reputation, or for the depression of that of their rivals. They are almost always men of the most amiable simplicity of manners, who live in good

34 This picture of Newton would not be endorsed by modern biographers; cf. Westfall, 1980. Perhaps Fontenelle’s *Éloge* on Newton is Smith’s source here. Smith probably read Fontenelle in French since he owned *Oeuvres de M. de Fontenelle* (Yanaihara 1966, 115). The following quotes are from Fontenelle, 1728. On Newton’s character: “[Newton] was satisfied with the enjoyment of it [i.e., an analysis of exponential series and the discovery of calculus], without being at all solicitous about the glory attending it … He suffer’d the honour of an Invention to be ravish’d from him without regret, from whence he might have promis’d himself the largest return of praise; and tho’ he lost no time in the pursuit of the noblest Attempts, yet he waited ‘till he was of a convenient age to shew himself to the World” (3). On the reception of the *Principia*: “This book … did not at first meet with all the applause it deserv’d, and which it was one day to receive … at last, when the Book came to be sufficiently known the approbation, which had been so slowly gain’d, became so universal, that nothing was to be heard from all quarters but one general cry of Admiration. Mankind were amaz’d at the masterly Strokes, which shone throughout the Work, and stood astonish’d at the vast Genius for Invention discov’d in it, which in all the Countries of the learned World hardly ever shews itself in above three or four Persons during the whole extent of a most fruitful age” (5). (See also p. 19, on Newton’s acclaim in England.) On Newton’s last days: “And tho’ the paroxysms were so violent, that large drops of sweat have run down his cheeks, he was never heard to utter a groan, or give any sign of impatience; and as soon as he had a moment’s ease, he would smile, and discourse with his usual cheerfulness” (23). On Newton’s general character: “He was naturally of a peaceable disposition, and passionately fond of his quiet. He would have rather chose to have lain in obscurity, than to have seen the calm of his life disturb’d by the wranglings and disputes which are the certain consequences of being eminent … He was plain and affable, and open in his dealings with all mankind” (24-5). When Fontenelle compares Newton to Descartes, he calls Newton “modest” (12; see also 25).
harmony with one another, are the friends of another’s reputation, enter into no intrigue in order to secure the public applause, but are pleased when their works are approved of, without being either much vexed or very angry when they are neglected (TMS, III.2.20-22, 124-5; see also TMS, I.i.4.3-5, 20-1).

I have no desire to defend Smith’s rather optimistic view of the community of mathematicians and natural philosophers, a view he seems to contradict elsewhere. If we get clear on the reasons for Smith’s optimism, other than the fact that he apparently happened to know two well-tempered mathematicians, Robert Simson and Matthew Stewart (TMS, III.2.20, 124), then we shall see that this is not merely an example of naivété. For Smith’s account proposes a way of bridging the gap between individual perception and social knowledge. What follows is a very brief detour through Smith's naturalistic, moral psychology as presented in TMS. In the detour, I will present a brief introduction to Smith’s ideas on the Impartial Spectator in order to discuss what role it plays in Smith’s epistemology.

IV.B: The Impartial Spectator

Note that in the previous quote Smith repeatedly makes mention of public opinion, the pleasure of public approval and “applause.” (There is, as always, a practical side to Smith’s thought; in his time, a college instructor relied for his living on his reputation to attract paying students, see WN, V.i.f.6ff., p 760ff.) Smith’s moral psychology turns on the idea that people are naturally social animals; from a very early age they are judged by others and once they become aware of this they, in turn, judge the people in their environment and themselves (TMS, III.i.2-6, 109-113). In Smith’s account this is all made possible by the process of sympathy—the mechanism of the imagination by which we have fellow-feeling

35See, for instance, his statement about Tycho: “notwithstanding the generosity of his character, some little jealousy of the fame of Copernicus” (“Astronomy,” IV§42, 81).
with the passions of others (TMS, III.1.2, 109 and I.1.1.5, 10). Smith thinks people desire praise from others and, more important, they want to understand their own behavior as praiseworthy (TMS, III.ii, 113-134). Moreover, in all the professions “rivalry and emulation will render excellency ... an object of ambition, and frequently occasion the very greatest exertions” (WN, V.i.f.4, 759-760). The upshot of Smith’s complex developmental account is that all normal people, including natural philosophers, routinely desire and seek approval from others and this is the source of our vanity, our ambition, and our morality. Philosophers and wise men will be shown to be motivated by some desire of fame. As he writes: “The love of just fame, of true glory, even for its own sake, and independent of any advantage which he can derive from it, is not unworthy even of a wise man” (TMS, III.2.8, 117; see also, III.2.29, 127). Smith claims that we end up behaving in ways for which we expect to be applauded or approved of by others (TMS, III.i.5, 112). In effect, as we grow up we internalize the values and expectations of our community, or more broadly, public opinion. We end up behaving as if we are being watched and judged by what Smith calls an “Impartial Spectator.” (He has many other metaphors for it, including: “society within;” “conscience;” “the inhabitant of the breast;” “the great inmate;” “the demigod within the breast;” “the great judge and arbiter of our conduct.”) “We must, here,” Smith writes (at TMS, II.ii.2.1, 83), “as in all other cases, view ourselves not so much according to that light in which we may naturally appear to ourselves, as according to that in which we naturally appear to others.” But Smith is not naïve about this. For he thinks that in general “we are all naturally disposed to over-rate the excellencies of our own character” (TMS, III.2.34, 133). But that is only the first step. This imagined “awful and respectable judge” within

36 For more on this, see Griswold 1999, chapter 2.

37 Raphael 1975, 92ff.

38 D’Alembert [1963] 1995, 93, also had no doubt about this. For more on love and friendship being the reward for virtue in Smith's system, see Cropsey 1957, 51-52; Den Uyl and Griswold 1966; and chapter 6 of my dissertation.
can help us correct the standards of our community when we desire to be praise-worthy (TMS, III.2.24-30, 126-128). This desire is the crucial step in Smith’s theory. The source of this desire – that the approval we receive is deserved — Smith locates in the fundamental uncertainty that each of us has about our own judgments (TMS, III.2.24 & III.2.28, 126-127; recall “Astronomy,” III.4, 40).

Smith was certainly aware of the dangers of “self-deceit, this fatal weakness of mankind,” (TMS, III.4.6, 158; on self-deception see all of III.4, 156-161 and WN, I.x.b.26-32, 124-127). Without the correcting mechanism of the impartial “eyes of a third person” with which we should judge, or the “Impartial Spectator,” our standards and values would not only be rather selfish or self-deceiving but also be merely mirroring our community’s values. Of course, often this is still the case even when we adopt a point of view outside ourselves. In IV.D, I will discuss TMS, VI.iii.23-26, 247-249, which offers some clues about why Smith thinks adopting the position of an Impartial Spectator need not reduce to merely mirroring a community’s norms.

IV.C: The Impartial Spectator and Epistemology

Surprisingly enough, our imagination is not only the source of our creativity in constructing scientific systems but also the source of our potential impartiality in evaluating them. For this notion of an “Impartial Spectator” bridges the gap between seeing and doing in Smith’s moral psychology, 39 or, to put it slightly differently for his epistemology, it can fill part of the gap between individual perception and social knowledge.40 (The

39Griswold 1999, 82.

40It may be objected that my appropriation to epistemology of Smith’s notion of the “Impartial Spectator” is unwarranted since TMS, is devoted to moral, and not “intellectual sentiments.” (For the introduction of this phrase, see Cropsey 1957, 43, n. 3. As my citations show, Smith does not merely comment frequently on the nature of natural philosophy in TMS, but he also assigns it a crucial role in correcting our standpoint (TMS, III.3.2-3, 134-135; see also Smith’s “Of the External Senses,” ¶43ff, 54-6). At TMS, I.i.4.3, 20, and
“Impartial Spectator” is a product of our imagination because our own senses can never “carry us beyond our own person,” TMS, I.i.1.2, 9; cf. TMS, VI.ii.i.1, 219, and see also I.I3.10, 19: “Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another.” For it explains how individuals have internalized — through various means of socialization and education — an idealized version, perhaps, of the values and expectations of the communities they belong to. In some exceptional cases the actor or “the wise and just man … almost identifies himself with, almost becomes himself that Impartial Spectator” (TMS, III.3.25, 146-7). If one is a member of a community with fairly exact and clear standards and one’s actions accord with those values the need for overt public approval diminishes because one feels a sense of self-approval and security in one’s behavior; one knows, as Smith thought “possible” of Newton, that one is praiseworthy even in the absence of public praise — the mind is tranquil. Smith’s adopts the Stoic and Epicurean doctrine that a tranquil mind is necessary for happiness (see, e.g., TMS, 149-152, III.3.30-33, 296, VII.1.7, and I.ii.3.7, 37). But that is not his whole position. As he writes at TMS, 41, I.ii.5.1: “the chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved” and Smith adds that we also want to feel that we deserve to be beloved
The powerful pull of the Impartial Spectator is, for instance, how Smith explains secret acts of kindness of religious people, who are, of course, also still “under the eye, and exposed to the punishment of God, the great avenger of injustice” (TMS, III.5.12, 170); in this case self-approval, a feeling of praiseworthiness, matches God’s presumed approval.

Evidently, Smith believes — not unreasonably — that success in mathematics and natural philosophy admits “either of clear demonstration, or very satisfactory proof.” At TMS, IV.2.7, 189, Smith also writes, “It is in the abstruser sciences, particularly in the higher parts of mathematics, that the greatest and most admired exertions of human reason have been displayed.” (Perhaps he had Hume’s judgment about Newton and Galileo in mind? See “Of the Middle Station of Life,” 550, EMPL.) Once mathematicians and natural philosophers have internalized the criteria and methods of “clear demonstration, or very satisfactory proof” valued by their disciplines, they need not worry about public opinion—because they have already adopted the perspective of the Impartial Spectator. This Smith contrasts with, e.g., poetry and other arts “in which the degree of excellence can be determined only by a certain nicety of taste, of which the decisions, however, appear always, in some measure, uncertain” (TMS, III.2.18, 123; see also VI.i.7, 213-4; Hume makes no such distinction among the standards of perfection of mathematicians, musicians, painters and mechanics at Treatise, I.ii.4.24). Notice that I am not claiming that Smith thinks that

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42See also TMS, I.iii.I.7, 45: “what can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience?” (Cf. Turgot [1770] 1889, §IX and §XIII.) For more discussion, see chapter six of my dissertation.

43In the First Enquiry, Section VII, Part I, 60, Hume gives the following reason for this: “The Great advantage of the mathematical sciences above the moral consist in this, that the ideas of the former, being sensible, are always clear and determinate, the smallest distinction between them is immediately perceptible, and the same terms are still expressive of the same ideas, without ambiguity or variation.”

44Mossner 1954, 257-258, attributes a claim in the preface to a volume of papers read to the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh (1754) to Hume that is worth quoting: “[in
mathematicians or natural philosophers are better at internalizing norms than others; I am arguing that there are clearer standards available in these fields. So an important possible topic of investigation would be to investigate what counts as a satisfactory proof or a clear demonstration in a particular community and what criteria are relied on; what is needed is an historically informed “science of Man” bearing on science.

For instance, in the “Astronomy” Smith points out that Copernicus’ system was accepted by “astronomers only” but that the “learned in all other sciences, continued to regard it with the same contempt as the vulgar” (IV¶36, 77). Smith thinks that “the coherence, which it bestowed upon the celestial appearances, the simplicity and uniformity which it introduced into the real directions and velocities of the Planets” attracted the astronomers to the Copernican system that “thus connected so happily, the most disjointed of those objects that chiefly occupied their thoughts,” while philosophers concerned with local terrestrial motion dreamed up objections against it (IV¶35, 76-7). Smith thinks this delayed the adoption of the Copernican hypothesis. So, a focus on different domains of study can lead different groups of experts to embrace different systems. But it is not just different domains of study that are important. Smith is quite aware that there can also be national differences in scientific styles and prejudices; Smith claims that in modern times the English invent, while the French methodize.46

45Skinner 1996, 44. The “prejudices” of the vulgar, while “natural,” can even corrupt the thinking of Aristotle, the most “renowned philosopher” (“Ancient Physics” ¶10, 116).

46See Smith’s proto-Duhemian discussion in “Letter to the Edinburgh Review,” from 1756 reprinted in EPS, 244-245, ¶5: “In natural philosophy, the science which in modern times has been most happily cultivated, almost all the great discoveries, which have not come from Italy or Germany, have been made in England. France has scarce produced any thing very considerable in that way. When that science was first revived in Europe, a fanciful, an ingenious and elegant, tho’ fallacious, system was generally embraced in that
I want to end this section with a minor methodological comment. One may think that by applying the Impartial Spectator to Epistemology I have not merely offered an interpretation of Smith, but extended Smith’s program beyond his own views. Yet, as we have seen, several passages I have cited, e.g., TMS, III.2.20-22, 124-5; I.i.4.3-5, 20-1, etc., either explicitly mention mathematicians and natural philosophers or appear to discuss philosophy where the context makes clear he is also thinking about what we would call science; as we have seen, he does the latter quite casually in the “Astronomy” at II¶12, 45 and II¶9, 43.47 Below, I will quote and cite more such passages from TMS. So, while it is true that I am filling in some gaps in Smith’s account, I believe Smith’s own text calls attention to his interest in the kinds of issues I am discussing here.

IV.D: The Creativity of the Imagination

Of course, in the texts I have quoted, Smith is ignoring the situation in which natural philosophers, such as Descartes or Newton, attempt to change or legislate new criteria for a country: nor can we with reason wonder that it was so. It may well be said of the Cartesian philosophy, now when it is almost universally exploded, that, in simplicity, precision and perspicuity of its principles and conclusions, it had the same superiority over the Peripatetic system, which the Newtonian philosophy has over it. A philosophy, which, upon its first appearance, had so many advantages over its rival system, was regarded by the French with peculiar fondness and admiration, when they considered it as the production of their own countrymen, whose renown added new glory to their nation; and their attachment to it seems among them to have retarded and incumbered the real advancement of the science of nature. They seem now however to be pretty generally disengaged from the enchantment of that illusive philosophy … It seems to be the peculiar talent of the French nation, to arrange every subject in that natural and simple order, which carries the attention, without any effort, along with it. The English seem to have employed themselves entirely in inventing, and to have disdained the more inglorious but not less useful labour of arranging and methodizing their discoveries, and of expressing them in the most simple and natural manner.” (For national differences in “morals, metaphysics, and part of the abstract sciences,” see also ¶10, 249-250.) For further discussion, see Skinner 1966, 26-27.

47In “Languages,” Smith explains that another “Newton” had become a way of designating another “philosopher” (¶1, 204, LRBL).
scientific community. There is no doubt, however, that Smith was mindful of the existence of those scientific legislators:

For approbation heightened by wonder and surprise, constitutes the sentiment which is properly called admiration, and of which applause is the natural expression. It is the acute and delicate discernment of the man of taste, who distinguishes the minute, and scarce perceptible difference of beauty and deformity; it is the comprehensive accuracy of the experienced mathematician, who unravels, with ease the most intricate and perplexed proportions; it is the great leader in science and taste, the man who directs and conducts our own sentiments, the extent and superior justness of whose talents astonish us with wonder and surprise, who excites our admiration, and seems to deserve our applause: and upon this foundation is grounded the greater part of the praise which is bestowed upon what are called the intellectual virtues (TMS, I.i.4.3, 20; emphasis added).

Note, first, that in this passage, Smith employs the language of wonder, admiration and surprise, again suggesting a life-long continuity of thinking on these subjects. While it is not clear to me to what either the repeated “it is” or “this foundation” refer, it is crucial for my general argument that Smith indicates he is concerned with the “intellectual virtues” in TMS from the start. Moreover, in the passage, Smith ties together the scientific legislator’s ability to solve problems, introduce criteria and gain admiration from others. The “great leader in science” is no mere problem solver or theory constructor; he understands existing norms in a fundamental way. Smith also implies (“the leader … who directs and conducts our own sentiments”) that he also sets standards by which others will try to emulate him.48

Smith was not unaware of the fact that some great scientists did not merely confirm to existing values, but could introduce new standards. In the last section (V.D), I show that Smith tacitly supposes this, and this allows us to make sense of a very subtle argument of Smith on the proper reasons for adopting Copernicanism.

48No doubt I am offering a contentious reading here. But according to the OED, in Smith’s time “direct” can mean to “guide/lead with advice” or to “give authoritative instructions.”
I have, nevertheless, not found evidence that Smith believed he could give a satisfactory account of the mind’s creativity. Smith probably agreed with Hume that the imagination is “a kind of magical faculty in the soul, which tho’ it be always most perfect in the greatest genius, and is properly what we call a genius, is however inexplicable by the utmost efforts of human understanding” (Treatise, I.i.VII). Hume thought that the source of creativity or innovation was ultimately mysterious: “what depends upon a few persons is, in great measure, to be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes” (“The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” EMPL, 112). Fontenelle implied the same thing in his account of Newton’s youthful and momentous discoveries. Smith never expressed an opinion on the mechanism of innovation and creativity in the human soul in his published works, and it is one of the most vexing issues in Smith’s philosophy. Smith did say things about the character of the philosophic innovators and legislators, and how we should judge them, e.g., TMS, VI.iii.28, 250, where he described them as “splendid characters, the men who have performed the most illustrious actions, who have brought about the greatest

49Griswold 1999, 343.

50In LRBL Smith expressed skepticism: “in no case is the proof of facts from the causes more uncertain than in that of Human actions. The causes of Human actions are motives; And so far is Certain that no one ever acts without a motive … In proving therefore an action to have happened by proving that its causes subsisted, we must not only prove that one had a motive to commit such an action, but also that it was one that suited his character, and that he had an opportunity to do so. But even when all this is done it does by no means amount to a proof of the action. The character of man is a thing so fluctuating that no proof which depends on it can be altogether conclusive” (Lecture 28, ii. 191-192, 171).

51It is hard to see how Smith could account for this if Cropsey’s (1957) deterministic understanding of Smith’s view, in which passion precedes action, is correct (12-17). See Griswold 1999, 114-29, 202-10, and 336-44, for a conflicting view, but it lacks textual evidence. At TMS, II.i.i.5, 79-80, Smith does talk, in an isolated instance, about the “freedom of our own wills” but he never explains what he means by this and it is possible he is merely reporting (a sophisticated version, perhaps) of common understanding here. For useful comments on the fact that Smith’s psychology lacks discussion of the internal mechanism of the mind, see also Morrow 1923, 69.
revolutions, both in situations and opinions of mankind.” But Smith did not provide a compelling account of the imagination’s creativity, and, given what he said about other aspects of the mind’s operations, it is unlikely he thought that any would be forthcoming. See, for example, his inability in WN, on being able to describe the “original principles in human nature” (WN, I.ii.2, p 25) or the following quote from “Of the External Senses:”

In the Sensations of Taste … though the exciting body presses upon the organ of sensation, this pressure is not supposed to be the immediate cause of the Sensation of Taste. Certain juices of the exciting body are supposed to enter the pores of the palate, and to excite, in the irritable and sensible fibres of that organ, certain motions or vibrations, which produce there the Sensations of Taste. But how those juices should excite such motions, or how such motions should produce, either in the organ, the Sensation of Taste; or a Sensation, which not only does not bear the smallest resemblance to any motion, but which itself seems incapable of all motion, no philosopher has yet attempted, nor probably ever will attempt to explain to us (¶37, 146; for similar thoughts, see ¶42, 147-8. This observation becomes, without mentioning Smith, the cornerstone of Thomas Reid’s rejection of the “impressions and ideas” picture of the mind in An Inquiry. cf. Hume’s Treatise, I.ii.V, although Hume is more willing to employ “imaginary dissection” of the brain).53

Smith clearly underestimated the ambition of later philosophers, but even today there is hardly any consensus that there is an adequate theory of qualitative sensations or what the physical constitution of such a theory would look like. Perhaps, it is progress that, nowadays, nobody thinks that such a theory would be stated in terms of motion of particles

52 At TMS, III.2.35, 134, Smith praises, in contrast to monks and friars, statesmen, lawgivers, poets, philosophers and “all those who have invented, improved, or excelled in the arts which contribute to the subsistence, to the conveniency, or to the ornament of human life.” But Smith is adamant that “the most sublime speculation of the contemplative philosopher can scarce compensate the neglect of the smallest active duty” (TMS, VI.ii.3.6, 237). This is not, as Cropsey 1957, 7, claims, a rejection of the contemplative life as the highest human possibility; it merely claims that the contemplative life cannot be lived to the exclusion of other duties.

53 I think the only place where Smith gives an explicitly physiological account of a sentiment — in terms of the movement of “spirits” — is, in fact, in his account of wonder in the “Astronomy” at II¶4, 39.
and juices? In Chapter 4, III.A, I explain how Smith attempted to create a “science of Man” anyway.

Hence, Smith’s story can account only for the standpoint of the spectator, but not for the actor; or to put it in modern terms: Smith seems only to explain theory acceptance but not what became known as the context of discovery. (See, for instance, Smith on the early acceptance by astronomers of the Copernican hypothesis for which there was initially no new empirical support, “Astronomy,” IV.33ff., 75ff.) But, although Smith was silent about the process of discovery, he did provide tools to explain aspects of the behavior of the scientific actor. First, when a natural philosopher contemplates his own results, this involves reference to the norms of his community: the Impartial Spectator within anticipates how a scientist’s (perhaps idealized) audience will judge a new theory, and provides “self-approbation” (TMS, III.2.3, 114); this self-approval, if warranted, accounts in Smith’s view for the relative tranquility of the scientist’s mind (“Astronomy,” IV.13, 61, and recall TMS, III.2.20-22, 124-5; see also TMS, VI.i.49, 294, although that is a different context). Second, when presenting results, the natural philosopher will attempt to follow the norms of the discipline he belongs to (cf. LRBL, Lecture 24, ii. 133-134, 145-146).

Of course, when a natural philosopher proposes changes in the standards of a community, then such a tranquility can only be expected if one imagines that the Impartial Spectator will eventually approve of one’s improvements; sometimes one’s imagination will project such approbation onto posterity (TMS, I.iii.1.14, 48-49, and VI.i.5, 238-239; see Chapter 6, III.A, for discussion of this). Moreover, there are two kinds of standards by which one will judge one’s efforts:

54 Nothing in Smith’s writing suggests he would have been opposed to empirical research into the workings of the imagination.

55 Griswold 1999, 134.
The one is the idea of exact propriety and perfection, so far as we are each of us capable of comprehending that idea. The other is that degree of approximation to this idea which is commonly attained in the world, and which the greater part of our friends and companions, of our rivals and competitors, may have actually arrived at. We very seldom (I am disposed to think, we never) attempt to judge of ourselves without giving more or less attention to both these different standards ... In all the liberal and ingenious arts, in painting, in poetry, in music, in eloquence, in philosophy, the greatest artist feels always the real imperfection of his own best works, and is more sensible than any man how much they fall short of that ideal perfection of which he has some conception, which he imitates as well as he can, but which he despairs of ever equalling ... no great man was ever completely satisfied with his own works (TMS, VI.iii.23-26, 247-249).

My argument presupposes that, for Smith, here astronomy and the other sciences are subsumed under philosophy or the ingenious arts (see “Astronomy,” II¶12, 46, quoted at length in section V.A below, that this is indeed so in Smith’s œuvre). Hence, on Smith’s account the great scientist can only be satisfied when he (momentarily) compares his own work to that of his peers, that is, when he directs his attention toward the second standard.

It is, nevertheless, a serious omission in Smith’s theory that he does not tell us what the source of this “idea of exact propriety and perfection” is; he merely assumes that all individuals, or the sub-cultures they belong to, have access to some such a notion. He may have thought the problem was solved in Hume’s Treatise, I.ii.4.24-25, which shows how “imaginary” standards of perfection can “naturally” be constructed by individuals, 56 or in Hume’s essay, “Of the Dignity or the Meanness of Human Nature,” which contains a discussion of several sources for notions of perfection (EMPL, 80-86; of course, at Treatise, I.ii.4.29, Hume qualifies the extent of this perfection considerably). But his claim that we sometimes judge our own and other people’s efforts by a standard of exact propriety and perfection is a powerful idea, not sufficiently appreciated by those who may worry where in Smith’s moral psychology or epistemology a critical stance can be developed.57 For Smith, “real imperfection” is likely to be present in all of Man’s works,

56See Frasca-Spada 1998, 44-45, for more discussion.

57I suspect this worry is responsible for the relative lack of genuine excitement about Smith’s moral philosophy on the part of contemporary moral theorists.
so there will always be room for criticism. (Smith had no doubt that man was imperfect, see TMS, I.i.5.8, 25.) Here, I am going to ignore how, in Smith’s thought, one might develop such a critical stance.\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{V: Revolutions in Science, Relativism, and Wonder}

\textbf{V.A: Smith on Scientific Revolutions}

By attempting to expose nature’s “connection principles” and to represent “the invisible chains which bind together all these disjointed objects” natural philosophy has, then, in Smith's view its origin in an appeal to, and calming of, people's imagination (“Astronomy,” II¶12, 45-46).\textsuperscript{59} As Smith himself wrote,

Let us to endeavour to trace it \[i.e.,\] philosophy, from its first origin, up to that summit of perfection to which it is at present supposed to have arrived, and to which, indeed, it has equally been supposed to have arrived in almost all former times. It is the most sublime of all the agreeable arts, and its \textit{revolutions} have been the greatest, the most frequent, and the most distinguished of all those that have happened in the literary world. Its history, therefore, must upon all accounts, be the most entertaining and the most instructive. Let us examine, therefore, all the different systems of nature, which, in these western parts of the world … have successively been adopted by the learned and ingenious; and \textit{without regarding their absurdity or probability, their agreement with truth and reality}, let us consider them only in that particular point of view which belongs to our subject; and content ourselves with inquiring how far each of them was fitted to soothe the imagination, and to render the theatre of nature more coherent, and therefore a more magnificent spectacle, than otherwise it would have appeared to be. According as they have failed or succeeded in this, they have constantly failed or succeeded \textit{in gaining reputation} and renown to their authors; and this will be found to be the clew that is most capable of conducting us through all the labyrinths of philosophical history. For, in the mean time, it will serve to confirm what has gone before, and to throw light upon what is to come after, that we observe, in general, that no system, how well soever in other respects supported, has ever been

\textsuperscript{58}It is a very important issue for Smith; see his Letter No. 40 to Sir Gilbert Elliot (Correspondence, 49). Brubaker 2002b provides an excellent discussion.

\textsuperscript{59}It is worth pointing out that for Smith explanation often seems to consist in the proving of the existence of a connecting chain from some unusual event, e.g. an eclipse, “\textit{to the ordinary course of things}” (“Astronomy,” II¶9, 43). Of course, the scientific theories that manage to knot together unusual events with the ordinary course of things may themselves be counterintuitive (“Astronomy,” IV¶33, 75; for a more detailed discussion see chapter four).
able to gain any general credit on the world, whose connecting principles were not such as were familiar to all mankind (“Astronomy,” I¶12, 46; emphasis added).

I return to elements of this passage throughout the remainder of this chapter. But I want to make four main observations about this text. First, these last few lines betray a methodological commitment derived from Hume. The habitualized familiarity of the connecting principles, be they implicit or explicit, is a corner stone of Hume’s philosophy (e.g., “Of the Causes of Belief” in Treatise, I.iii.VIII). So in Smith’s otherwise critical account of the Cartesian system – and this will be important below — he points out that vortices that we can witness, e.g., those created when fish swim in water, helped people accept, albeit temporarily, Descartes’ vortex theory (IV¶64, 65). But this is not to say that Smith accepts Hume’s anti-theoretical stance on behalf of a properly reinterpreted common life. (In fact, in section IV.D, I argue that Smith sees what counts as common life as evolving.) He is, instead, proposing what we would call a social-psychological explanation of widespread acceptance of a theory. But in doing so, it is crucial to Smith that he can maintain a distinction between what is approved and what ought to be approved.

Second, in the previously quoted remarks on Copernicus, Smith acknowledges that sometimes the better theory need not gain such acceptance among non-specialists and the “vulgar” (IV¶35-8, 76-78); note especially how he talks about the “prejudice of mankind” and the “prejudice of sense, confirmed by education” against Copernicanism. While Smith may merely represent Copernicus’ views on this, later (especially at IV¶38, 78) he seems to be expressing his own. It is, hence, useful to realize that while Smith claims that he is not going to talk about the theories’ “agreement with truth and reality” this need not prevent him from making claims about relative merits of a theory. Smith has, for instance, no doubt that the Prutenic Tables, based on Copernican principles, “corresponded more exactly with the heavens” than Tables of Alphonsus based on Ptolemy (IV¶35, 76).^60

^60Smith rightly points out that that all this relative success of these tables shows is that Copernicus was a more diligent and accurate observer of the heavens, not that his theory of
My third observation about this long quote is historiographic; it concerns Smith’s view that the “systems of nature” are successively adopted. In the quote above Smith explicitly calls these changes “revolutions.” It is surprising to see Smith use the word “revolutions” to describe this succession. He uses the plural quite casually and without further explanation. Now we learn from I.B. Cohen’s book on Scientific Revolutions, which does not mention the “Astronomy,” that around the time that Smith wrote the “Astronomy,” it was not unusual, although certainly infrequent, to insist that a revolution in natural philosophy had recently taken place. But I believe Smith is among the first to see regular and successive revolutions in the history of astronomy and, perhaps, sciences and other forms of inquiry more broadly. On this last point, it is remarkable that in the long the heavens was better than Ptolemy’s because the theories are observationally equivalent on the motions of the planets.

Skinner 1996, 35, notes that Smith attempts to expose the causal links that might explain the sequence.

There are, of course, political echoes (e.g., the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688). Near the end of TMS, Smith writes, “I shall in another discourse endeavour to give an account of the general principles of law and government, and of the different revolutions they have undergone in the different ages and periods of society, not only what concerns injustice, but in what concerns justice, but in what concerns police, revenue, and arms, and whatever else is the object of law. I shall not, therefore, at present enter into any further detail concerning the history of jurisprudence” (emphasis added; VII, iv. 37, 342).

In fact, there are several examples of this in d’Alembert’s Preliminary Discourse. For more on all of this, see Cohen 1985, although he does not mention Adam Smith. Since then, Cohen has certainly read Smith’s “History of Astronomy” because he comments favorably on it in Cohen 1994, 62, and he has been kind of enough to share a draft essay on Adam Smith with me.

OED cites Johnson’s Rambler (1751) as follows, “The changes which the mind of man has suffered from the various revolutions of knowledge.” Maclaurin’s 1748, 39, may contain an earlier usage: “It is not worth while, nor of use for our purpose, to trace the history of learning thro’ its various revolutions in the later ages, when philosophy and philosophers fell into contempt.” Hume’s letter to Henry Home, 13 February 1739, may be the earliest instance of all. (See also Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste,” EMPL, 242.)

One reader suggested that Smith's use of “revolutions” in the passage (II¶12) need not be understood in the way I am proposing. Smith could still be thinking in terms of (astronomical) revolutions of planets where the orbits go full cycle and return to their original
quote Smith call such revolutions “the most frequent” in the history of the “literary world.” It reminds us that the perceived relative stability of scientific knowledge, vis à vis, for example, the reigning fashions popular in the Humanities, is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Smith’s account makes clear that the development and evolution of all such systems have a fairly predictable sequence: a system is constructed with the aid of the imagination to provide coherence to the appearances. As time passes, irregularities are discovered, and successive, gradual modifications are introduced into the system, leading toward more complexity; eventually, new requirements are put on the system or new phenomena are discovered which lead to conflicting accounts or dissatisfaction. This makes it likely that the system will be replaced by a new system, and so the cycle starts anew. Of course, this picture does not address the situation in which no satisfactory system has been created at all. For instance, Smith explicitly bemoaned the lack of progress and “obscurity” in the “chemical philosophy” (“Astronomy,” II¶12, 46).

position. After all, Smith uses the word “revolution” in precisely this latter sense in the “Astronomy” at IV ¶13, 62—a passage I will discuss below for different reasons. Certainly, this seems to be the use that Turgot employs in the first section of his “A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind,” first presented to the Sorbonne on 11 December 1750 (in Meek 1973). But it is not the point of “Astronomy” II ¶12, 46 to claim that after some changes the theories return to the same place. Instead, Smith is describing how theories get abandoned for new ones. So I believe Smith can be using the word “revolutions” in two different ways in the same work.

Cf. Hume’s NHR, chapter 3, where Hume speaks of a “propensity in human nature, which leads into a system, that gives them some satisfaction.”

See Skinner 1979, 26-9, for a more detailed account of this. In his account of the transition from Descartes to Newton, Turgot describes something like this in his (posthumously published in 1808-11) “On Universal History,” in the translation of Meek 1973, 95. Turgot, unlike Smith, calls attention to the importance of Richer’s findings in this.
Contemporary readers can be familiar with this picture of scientific change because it resembles the one Thomas Kuhn presents in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Not unlike Kuhn, Smith also emphasizes the importance of aesthetic criteria in theory acceptance; see for instance his discussion of the adoption of Ptolemy’s system:

Those philosophers transported themselves, in fancy, to the centres of these imaginary Circles, and took pleasure in surveying from thence, all those fantastical motions, arranged, according to harmony and order, which had been the end of all their researches to bestow upon them. Here, at last, they enjoyed that tranquility and repose which they had pursued through all the mazes of this intricate hypothesis; and here they beheld this, the most beautiful and magnificent part of the great theatre of nature, so disposed and constructed, that they could attend, with ease and delight, to all the revolutions and changes that occurred in it (IV§13, 62).

Note that the aesthetic pleasure of the astronomers is achieved through the workings of the imagination; by seeing the world theoretically, or in “constructed” fashion, the astronomers achieve tranquility of mind. This makes it seem as if the practice of astronomy is a kind of escapism.

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68See Lindgren 1973, 18, and Skinner 1979, 35. Their comparisons between Smith and Kuhn are by no means exhaustive, but a detailed study will have to wait for another occasion. Skinner 1979, 40-44, also makes some useful comparisons to Shackle 1957 and Popper 1959. I think Polanyi 1958, with its emphasis on the importance of “intellectual passions” should be added to this list.

69For a more thorough investigation of the role aesthetic criteria play in Smith’s theory of inquiry, see Lindgren 1969, especially 902-907, where comprehensiveness, coherence, familiarity, and beauty are suggested as necessary and sufficient conditions for the successful completion of inquiry. Lindgren’s approach is notable because it draws also upon Smith’s essay, “Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes place in what are called the Imitative Arts.” (See also Smith’s comments at, for instance, WN, V.i.f.25, 768-769.) For further discussion of the important role aesthetic appreciation plays in Smith’s general theorizing, see Griswold 1999, 311-54. Griswold notes, too, with reference to the ethical discussion in TMS, VII.ii.2.14, that Smith realized that too much attention to the beauty of a system and too little to the phenomena can have distorting effects (335).
V.B: Skepticism in Smith I

Hence, a realist would wince, and this is my fourth main observation about the passage quoted from II¶12, 46, of course, at Smith’s apparent unwillingness to judge these theories with respect to their truth or probability. This is the most important bit of evidence for the claim that Smith was a skeptic. I do not find this very compelling because Smith does not deny the possibility and legitimacy of judging a theory with respect to their truth. Nevertheless, let us accept it as an argument for the claim that Smith was a skeptic; Smith could seem to be advancing down the road of the dreaded “epistemological nihilism” that, for instance, Quine bemoans, perhaps unfairly, in Kuhn and others.70

We are not very guilty of anachronism here in raising this issue, since it seems present in a passage in Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste:” “nothing has been experienced more liable to the revolutions of chance and fashion than these pretended decisions of science” (242; of course, here Hume has in mind “abstract philosophy” and “systems of profound theology” not natural philosophy, I think). Smith was also undoubtedly familiar with an explicit example of extreme epistemological relativism from Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels.71 In Chapter VIII of Voyage III Gulliver meets the ghost of Aristotle:

[Aristotle’s ghost] freely acknowledged his own mistakes in natural philosophy, because he proceeded in many things upon conjecture, as all men must do; and he found that Gassendi, who had made the doctrine of Epicurus as palatable as he could, and the vortices of Descartes, were equally exploded. He predicted the same fate to attraction, whereof the present learned are such zealous asserters. He said, that new systems of nature were but new fashions, which would vary in every age; even those

70Quine 1969, 88.

71In his “Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres” at the University of Glasgow, as reported by a student in 1762-2, and elsewhere, Smith mentioned Swift quite frequently and often with high praise (“remarkable for his propriety and precision,” Lecture 8, i.100, 41, see also Lecture 9, i.125, 51). In Lecture 10, i.127, 52, there seems to be an allusion to the passage I cite: “[Lucian] would not … put a Ludicrous speech into the mouths of a dead man or a god) or from throwing out such bitter sarcasms in his own person as Swift often does [sic].” Smith owned Swift’s Works in 10 volumes (Yanaihara 1966, 91).
who pretend to demonstrate them from mathematical principles would flourish but a short period of time, and be out of vogue when that was determined” (emphasis in original). 72

Did Adam Smith believe that “new systems of nature” are merely “new fashions”? 73

In “Ancient Logics,” Smith even seems, in the context of laying out Greek and Roman thought concerning the essences of things, to diagnose something very close to the phenomenon of Kuhn’s notion of incommensurability: “As this doctrine of specific Essences seems naturally enough to have arisen from that ancient system of Physics … and which is, by no means devoid of probability, so many of the doctrines of that system, which seem to us, who have been long accustomed to another, the most incomprehensible” (¶10, 128). But it is clear that while Smith may be describing something akin to the experience of incommensurability (an alternative theory can appear to “us … the most incomprehensible” even when not “devoid of probability”), Smith is quite confident that as a historian he has done justice to the views of the old Pythagoreans, the Academics, Peripatetic and Stoic sects. Smith’s practice suggests that he has no doubt that the imagination has enough resources to allow us to understand theories that, while largely incomprehensible to contemporary minds, seemed probable to theorists from very different epochs.

In what follows, I show that despite some cautious tendencies in Smith’s philosophy, Smith was not only willing to make distinctions between relative merits of systems but also to endorse some scientific claims. 74 Moreover, I believe that his tacit

72 One of my students, Margaret Smith, has argued in an unpublished essay that Swift could have derived his view from Bacon’s description of one of “the idols of the mind” in the New Organon, see especially section 44 on the “idols of the theatre” or the “various dogmas of philosophies;” sections 38-46 are all relevant. I am not sure why Swift would put such relativistic words in the mouth of Aristotle’s ghost, but that should be examined elsewhere.

73 Forbes 1975b, 186, ascribes various forms relativism to Smith. Unfortunately, he does not provide evidence for this claim with respect to Smith’s philosophy of science.

74 Wightman 1975, 60.
assumptions about why it is reasonable to do so that can be inferred from his account are pretty sophisticated.

Let me start with a long quote from “Of the External Senses.” (I am quoting the full passage to give a flavor of Smith’s sense of the state of affairs in natural philosophy/metaphysics.)

The hardness or softness of bodies, or the greater or smaller force with which they resist any change of shape, seems to depend altogether upon the stronger or weaker degree of cohesion with which their parts are mutually attracted to one another. The greater or smaller force with which they resist compression may, upon many occasions, be owing partly to the same cause: but it may likewise be owing to the greater or smaller proportion of empty space comprehended within their dimensions, or intermixed with the solid parts which compose them. A body which comprehended no empty space within its dimensions, which, through all its parts, was completely filled with the resisting substance, we are naturally disposed to conceive as something which would be absolutely incompressible, and which would resist, with unconquerable force, every attempt to reduce it within narrower dimensions. If the solid and resisting substance, without moving out of its place, should admit into the same place another solid and resisting substance, it would from that moment, in our apprehension, cease to be a solid and resisting substance, and would no longer appear to possess that quality by which alone it is made known to us, and which we therefore consider as constituent its nature and essence, and as altogether inseparable from it. Hence our notion of what has been called impenetrability of matter; or of the absolute impossibility that two solid resisting substances should occupy the same place at the same time. This doctrine, which is as old as Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus, was in the last century revived by Gassendi, and has since been adopted by Newton and the far greatest part of his followers. It may at present be considered as the established system, or as the system that is most in fashion, and most approved of by the greater part of the philosophers of Europe. Though it has been opposed by several puzzling arguments, drawn from that species of metaphysics which confounds every thing and explains nothing, it seems upon the whole to be the most simple, the most distinct, and the most comprehensible account that has yet been given of the phænomena which are meant to be explained by it (EPS ¶17-8, 139-140; emphasis added).

In this passage Smith’s description of the “doctrine” of the impenetrability of matter as the one “most in fashion” echoes the language of the ghost of Aristotle in Gulliver’s Travels.

Yet, Smith also claims, “it may be at present be considered as the established system,”

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75Recall that in the First Enquiry, Section IV, Part 1, 30, Hume writes, “Elasticity, gravity, cohesion of parts, communication of motion by impulse; these are probably the ultimate causes and principles which we shall ever discover in nature.”
while it is only opposed by “puzzling” arguments. It is worth pointing out that although Smith does not speak of truth in the quote above, he does give reasons\(^\text{76}\) (i.e., simplicity, \(^\text{77}\) distinctness, comprehensibility, lack of reasonable competitors and accounting for the phenomena)\(^\text{78}\) that are not merely sociological in nature for why the doctrine can be considered as the “established” system (see also his comments on the reasons for the lack of popularity of the Stoic cosmology at “Astronomy,” IV¶15, 63-4). The focus on reasons is not an accident. Elsewhere, in “Of the External Senses,” Smith writes as follows:

Philosophy teaches us, (and by reasons too to which it is scarcely possible to refuse our assent,) that the earth itself, and bodies much larger than the earth, are not only moveable, but are at all times actually in motion, and continually altering their situation, in respect to other surrounding bodies, with a rapidity that almost passes all human comprehension. In the system of the universe, at least according to the imperfect notions which we have hitherto been able to attain concerning it, the great difficulty seems to be, not to find the most enormous masses in motion, but to find the smallest particle of matter that is perfectly at rest, with regard to all other

\(^\text{76}\)See also Wightman 1975, 61.

\(^\text{77}\)The presence of simplicity contradicts Lindgren’s claim that Smith’s attack on “men of system” rested exclusively on their “propensity to account for all appearances from as few principles as possible,” see Lindgren 1973, 4 n.4; Lundgren has in mind TMS, VII.ii.4.14, 313-314 In these passages Smith is not — pace Lindgren — attacking simplicity as a reason for accepting a theory, but instead he is attacking reductionism in social science. Smith thinks that is a perfectly sensible strategy in natural philosophy, but not in moral philosophy. It is a bit puzzling that Lindgren 1973, 16, is blind to this because he is aware that Smith takes Hume to task (at TMS, IV, 179-193; see also Smith’s warnings against the “man of system” at VI.ii.2.17-18, 233-234) for relying on a notion of utility that abstracts away from people’s actual preferences. For similar warnings against abstraction in moral philosophy, see also TMS, II.iii.intro.5, 93. (Hume himself was well aware, of course, of the dangers of parties based on abstract principles, see “Of Parties in General,” EMPL, 54-63.)

My comments reflect ideas I have digested from Brubaker 2002b, but Brubaker errs in representing Smith as an exclusive enemy of the abstract study of human nature. We have already presented contrary evidence from WN, but see also, e.g., TMS, III.3.2-3, 134-135, and VII.iii.2.4, 319, where Smith seems to imply, while criticizing Hobbes, that (recent) advances in the abstract science of human nature have enabled a more accurate understanding of, say, the relationship between virtue and the faculties of the mind. See also, Haakonssen 1981, 149.

\(^\text{78}\)I believe Quine offers a similar list, but I have been unable to locate it.
surrounding bodies (¶12, 137; emphasis added; note that Smith has adopted the Newtonian language of “masses” in his description). Here, I want to emphasize that Smith’s attention to reasons implies that he did not think that theory acceptance in natural philosophy is driven merely by arbitrary appeals to the passions and sentiments. After all, the members of a society of natural philosophers will rely, in different degrees, on the judgments of their “Impartial Spectators” to come to limit the role of their passions. Now it is true that Smith does not mention the Impartial Spectator in either the “Astronomy” or “Of the External Senses.” But the epistemological importance of the social nature of science is still an important theme. (Recall the long quote from the “Astronomy,” ¶12, 46: “According as they have failed or succeeded in this, they have constantly failed or succeeded in gaining reputation and renown to their authors; and this will be found to be the clew that is most capable of conducting us through all the labyrinths of philosophical history.”) For Smith science is a social enterprise in which the participants use reasons to gain each other’s, and their own, approval. It is interesting that at Treatise, I.iv.1.2, Hume pointed out that it is the approbation of friends and the “universal assents and applauses of the learned world” that increases confidence of mathematicians in their proofs.

I have shown that the social nature of science is an important theme for Smith even when he does not explicitly bring up the “Impartial Spectator” in the “Astronomy.” The

79I have to admit that I am puzzled by Smith’s description of what “the great difficulty seems to be;” as far as I can tell Newton’s theory is not at all committed to positing the smallest particle of matter that is perfectly at rest, with regard to all other surrounding bodies.” In fact, in De Gravitatione, a text unavailable to Smith, Newton denies this explicitly (see Newton 1962). Perhaps, Smith was confused; it is true that if Newton is correct, one could say of one body, in an otherwise empty universe, whether it is rotating or not (Di Salle 2002, 43). I want to thank Howard Stein for helpful discussion.

80For a similar conclusion, but with a different argument, see Skinner 1996, 41.

81Hume also thought of “the approbation of the public … as the greatest reward of [his] labours; but [he is] determin’d to regard its judgment, whatever it be, as [his] best instruction.” See the “Advertisement” to the Treatise.
emphasis on the social nature of science is an important part of Smith’s reorientation away
from Hume (although *Treatise*, I.iv.1.2, may have been a source of inspiration for Smith); it also provides, as my repeated cross-references attempt to demonstrate, a unity to Smith’s reflections on natural philosophy in TMS, WN and EPS.

Note also that in the quote from “Of the External Senses” Smith emphasizes (“a rapidity that almost passes all human comprehension”) how far removed from common sense the contents of a highly successful scientific theories can be. It is, thus, not insignificant that in the “Astronomy” Smith distinguishes how different subgroups of the learned and the “vulgar” can react to theories (recall TMS, III.2.20-22, 124-5) can provide one with public reasons to reject the assumptions of every day life. In discussing the relative merits of moral theories, the expert may propose to reject common sense, but the cost (in persecution, disbelief, rejection, satire, etc.) in doing so may be high. At Smith claims, “the author who should assign, as the cause of any natural sentiment, some principle which neither had any connexion with it, nor resembled any other principle which had some such connexion, would appear absurd and ridiculous to the most injudicious and unexperienced reader” (TMS, VII.i.4.14, 314-5). The context suggests that Smith can imagine that an account could be dreamed up by a judicious and experienced reader that would explain human behavior in terms that are

82 Moreover, Frasca-Spada 1998, 187-193, points out that Hume injects a social component early into the *Treatise* (e.g., I.i.7.14-15) by focusing on the fact that abstract ideas are the subject of conversation. The mystery of the first Book of the *Treatise* is why Hume lets the narrator stop interacting with others and end up inside his study.

83 See my second chapter and Livingston 1984 for more discussion.
unfamiliar to people. Yet, such an account would receive a hostile reception. I think Smith is suggesting that while theories of natural philosophy can create “another constitution of things … contrary to common opinion” (see the next quote) this is not easily the case in moral philosophy. On the other hand, an account of moral life that is phrased in familiar terms can gain approval as long as it has some truth to it.

Simplicity, distinctness, comprehensibility, lack of reasonable competitors and accounting for the phenomena do not exhaust the reasons for accepting a theory. In the “Astronomy,” Smith wrote,

For, though it is the end of Philosophy, to allay that wonder, which either the unusual or seemingly disjointed appearances of nature excite, yet she never triumphs so much, as when, in order to connect together a few, in themselves, perhaps, inconsiderable objects, she has, if I may so, created another constitution of things, more easily attended to, but more new, more contrary to common opinion and expectation, than any of those appearances themselves (IV§33, 75).

Smith seems to be claiming that it is, in fact, a mark of a successful theory that it is unexpected, even surprising. (See also Smith’s comments on Reamur’s History of Insects in his “Letter to Edinburgh Review,” ¶9, 249, EPS.) While Hume had castigated the greedy embrace by philosophers, who are, thereby, distancing themselves from the “unprejudiced notions of mankind,” of theories that have “the air of a paradox” (Treatise, I.ii.1.1), Smith is apparently willing to welcome these “triumphs.” Such a theory, almost “another constitution of things,” itself will almost certainly create a feeling of wonder and surprise. The sheer strangeness of these theories, a point emphasized by Smith, may eventually induce reflections on the metaphysical or conceptual foundations of such a system, and,

84“[A]n appeal to general opinion may justly, in the speculative sciences of metaphysics, natural philosophy, astronomy, be deemed unfair and inconclusive, yet in all questions with regard to morals, as well as criticism, there is really no other standard, by which any controversy can be decided” (Hume’s “Of the Original Contract,” 486, EMPL). On the latter point Hume seems to contradict his own view in “Of the Standard of Taste” where an ideal, perhaps, “true judge” is postulated (see EMPL, 241).

perhaps, spur on the development of new theories. Interestingly, for Hume these theories would produce “surprise [sic] and admiration” and, thus, produce “satisfaction to the mind;” this Hume then turns into an explanation of how philosophic “sects” come into being (*Treatise*, I.ii.1.1).

Whatever the sources, and durability, of the reasons that members of a scientific community appeal to when judging a (new) theory, the attention to reasons suggests that theory acceptance need not be an irrational activity. Smith is assuming that natural philosophy is an ongoing conversation with appeals to the intellectual judgments of the participants. Of course, Smith’s focus on the role reasons play in theory acceptance does not commit him, or the astronomers he discusses, to realism about these theories. All it shows is that theory acceptance in astronomy can be more rational than mere fashion. Of course, some of the reasons he calls attention to, especially lack of reasonable competitors, accounting for the phenomena, and successful predictions, would figure prominently in a realist understanding of a theory. But I will only establish that Smith is a realist in V.D. For now, I only claim that Smith is not a traveler down the road of “epistemological nihilism.”

Nevertheless, despite Smith’s awareness of the role of reasons in soliciting assent to theories, nagging doubts about Smith’s stance toward truth may persist. It is not just that here he speaks of the “imperfect notions … concerning” a perfectible system of philosophy, but recall, also, Smith’s phrasing in “Of the External Senses,” ¶18, 140: “It

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86 Fleischacker 1999 emphasizes the importance of judgment in Smith’s philosophy.

87 In conversation, Harro Maas has offered me a constructivist interpretation of the lines from “Astronomy,” IV¶33, 75 (and certainly the passage quoted from IV¶13, 62 in Section V.A above could also be cited). According to Maas, Smith seems to be implying that, by creating radically new theories, the scientists are creating another “constitution of things” in either experience (in the Kantian sense) or out there (in the strong Edinburgh school sense). This would make Smith a forerunner of Kuhn in yet another respect. I do not think this reading of Smith is the most plausible for reasons that should be clear by the end of this essay, but I think Smith says too little to settle the issue.
may at present be considered as the established system, or as the system that is most in fashion.” Although Smith’s caution is excusable, his wording is slippery. One could be tempted to claim that because all systems are products of our imagination they are “only … theoretical” constructs. How did Smith view the systems of natural philosophy and, more important, how did he understand his own theoretical activity? In the next two parts of this section I, first, look at Smith’s attitude toward causation and, after that, I return to Smith’s views on skepticism and truth.

V.C: Smith on Causation

Without expecting to settle this issue for good, I want to call attention to the full (Aristotelian sounding) title of Adam Smith’s WN: An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. (Recall how the “Astronomy” was described as an “inquiry into the nature and causes of these sentiments” at Intro.¶7, 34) Even a cursory glance shows that WN is not presented as a skeptical book; Smith freely discussed causes. The first book of WN, is sub-titled, “Of the Causes of Improvement in the Productive Powers of Labour, and of the Order according to which its produce is naturally distributed among the different Ranks of People.” Throughout WN, Smith gives what he takes to be accurate, albeit at times probable, explanations of the causes of many historical developments. In Chapter 4 below, I argue that Smith’s method is designed to uncover a difference between real and apparent causes that operate in history (WN, I.xi.n.1, 255-256).

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88 Pack 1991, 114, seems to imply this. See also the references in note 1 above.

89 It is important to pay attention to full titles of Early Modern books, see Haakonssen 1981, 139.

90 In LRBL, Lecture 17, ii. 19, 91, Smith distinguished between “immediate” and “remoter” causes. But this seems only to pertain to nearness in time.
Despite Smith use of causes in WN, it should have become clear from my description of the “Astronomy” that Smith did not follow Hume’s strategy of using an account of causality to provide the epistemological framework for all reasoning concerning matters of fact (see Chapter 2, III.A above). It would have been nice if Smith had seen the difficulties with Hume’s account that I detailed in the previous chapter of this dissertation. I have no direct evidence he did one way or another. But it would have been extremely surprising if he had not because Smith was aware that Newton’s theory implied universal, mutual, simultaneous attraction among the planets and the Sun (“Astronomy,” IV§67-76, 98-104). Smith realized that the “Moon may be conceived as constantly falling towards the Earth,” and he freely talked about the “mutual attraction of the Planets” (“Astronomy,” IV§67-68, 99). There is no evidence that Smith was trying to avoid discussing Newton’s action-at-a-distance.91 And, although we will never know if Smith was thinking of the Pre-Newtonian or Newtonian sense of “mechanism” when he used the phrase “his [i.e., Newton’s] mechanical principle of gravity” (IV§74, 103), there is little reason to suppose he was confused, given all the sensible things he does say about Newton’s physics and its 18th century reception.93 (In a different context at TMS, II.iii.intro.6, 93, Smith seems to have wanted to divert our attention away from Newton’s action-at-a-distance. Not only does Mirowski quote two passages out of context (in which there is no mention of Newton at all), but he also fails to address the passages in which Smith does discuss Newton’s principles! For instance, one would never know from Mirowski’s account that, besides the passages quoted in the text, Smith also writes (“Astronomy,” IV§67), “He [Newton] demonstrated, that, if the Planets were supposed to gravitate towards the Sun, and to one another.” Mirowski cites Foley 1976, which is speculative, enthusiastic, and stimulating, as a source. Foley’s work contains pioneering, and not fully appreciated, research on the Sophistic and Ancient Greek atomistic sources for social theorizing in the Scottish Enlightenment, but his evidence for insisting that Smith was a disguised Vortex theorist is extremely thin (see also my discussion of TMS, VII.ii.4.14, 313 and “Astronomy” IV§61-6, 92-7 below).

91Mirowski 1989, 164, while widely read, is highly misleading when suggesting that Smith wanted to divert our attention away from Newton’s action-at-a-distance. Not only does Mirowski quote two passages out of context (in which there is no mention of Newton at all), but he also fails to address the passages in which Smith does discuss Newton’s principles! For instance, one would never know from Mirowski’s account that, besides the passages quoted in the text, Smith also writes (“Astronomy,” IV§67), “He [Newton] demonstrated, that, if the Planets were supposed to gravitate towards the Sun, and to one another.” Mirowski cites Foley 1976, which is speculative, enthusiastic, and stimulating, as a source. Foley’s work contains pioneering, and not fully appreciated, research on the Sophistic and Ancient Greek atomistic sources for social theorizing in the Scottish Enlightenment, but his evidence for insisting that Smith was a disguised Vortex theorist is extremely thin (see also my discussion of TMS, VII.ii.4.14, 313 and “Astronomy” IV§61-6, 92-7 below).

92See chapter two, II, for discussion.

93The social context is never very far from Smith’s mind: “the improvements which, in modern times, have been made in several different branches of philosophy, have not, the greater part of them, been made in universities; though some have” (WN, V.i.f.34, 772).
identify moral causes with mechanisms.) Be that as it may, Smith’s account gives a reason for believing that no “foundation” is possible of the sort that Hume tried to provide (see my second chapter, III.C, for an account). For an individual natural philosopher carries, through the mechanism of the Impartial Spectator, the norms of a community within when he is proposing or judging knowledge claims, but those norms themselves are corrected by the knowledge derived from and secured by natural philosophy, in turn scrutinized by individuals with the aid of the Impartial Spectator, and so on. Moreover, as I demonstrate below, Smith gives an explicit example of this in the “Astronomy.” Smith’s open-ended epistemology cannot provide a “foundation.”

But I do not want to rest the matter with this. From the (1762-3) student reports of Smith’s “Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres” (not intended for publication) we know that Smith thought, “There is no connection with which we are so much interested as this of cause and effect” (Lecture 18, ii.32, 98). We should be careful in trusting these reports, but it seems Smith did not think, pace Hume, that all matters of fact are alike: “our objects are of two classes, intellectuall and corporeal, the one of which we perceive by our mind only and the other by our bodily senses” (Lecture 6, i.64-65, 29). In another lecture, he elaborated thus: “There are two different Sorts of facts, one externall, consisting of the transactions that pass without us, and the other internall, to wit the thoughts [and] sentiments or designs of men, which pass in their minds” (Lecture 12, i.150, 64). It is the role of history to compound these two facts (Lecture 12, i.151ff., 64ff.; see also the distinction

94“Corporeal objects are, again, either Naturall or Artificial. Natural objects may be considered as of two Sorts. Either 1st Such as exist completely at the same time, or 2nd Such as subsist in a succession of incidents” (Lecture 14, i. 176, 73). And: “Artificial objects are either entire the contrivance of men or they are made in imitation of the works of nature” (Lecture 14, i. 180, 74).

95“Internal objects as passions and affections can be well described only by their effects; these again either internall or externall” (Lecture 14, i. 181-182, 75).
between “internall” and “externall” objects in Lecture 16, ii.1, 85 and, especially, Lecture 17, ii. 12-30, 89-94). For Smith an event can be created by two sorts of causes:

Either [by] the externall causes which directly produced it, or [by] the internall ones, that is those causes that tho’ they no way affected the event yet had an influence on the minds of the chief actors so as to alter their conduct from what it would otherwise have been … (Lecture 17, ii.v.20, 93; see also Lecture 27, ii. 181, 166).96

Unfortunately, the student notes do not show if Smith ever fully developed these insights in his lectures (although Smith is recorded as pointing to various historians as exemplars who “dwelled” on either cause).

If we only had these student reports, then we could doubt that Smith really rejected Hume’s belief that all matters of fact are alike, especially because Smith’s lectures do not deal with what we would now call epistemology or philosophy of science. But there are some passages in TMS that may provide a principled reason97 that could account for, and, thus, provide evidence for the existence of, Smith’s distinction between internal and external facts/objects/causes. For instance, at TMS, I.ii.10, 30, Smith claims that “we conceive in a much more lively and distinct manner the pain which proceeds from an external cause, than we do that which arises from an internal disorder.” I am not sure how compelling Smith’s phenomenology is here. Smith’s reason for this distinction is that external pains are caused by relatively “novel” events.

96Does the counterfactual suggest that Smith was thinking of causes in terms of a necessary connection?

97In LRBL, Lecture 17, ii.v.18-19, Smith tells us that certain externall phaenomena (“thunder and lightning” and “Coelestial Motions”) can create more of an impression, and hence create more curiosity into their causes and relations, than those things (e.g., “the association of our ideas” and “the progress and origin of our Passions”) that pass within us. But this is merely a difference in degree.
He is more interesting elsewhere in TMS. In the middle of a frequently-partially-quoted discussion of the perceived social nature of humans, Smith notes that

In every part of the universe we observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce; and in the mechanism of a plant, or animal body, admire how every thing is contrived for advancing the two great purposes of nature, the support of the individual, and the propagation of the species. But in these, and in all such objects, we still distinguish the efficient from the final cause of their several motions and organizations. The digestion of the food, the circulation of the blood, and the secretion of the several juices which are drawn from it, are operations all of them necessary for the great purposes of animal life. Yet we never endeavour to account for them from those purposes as from their efficient causes (TMS, II.ii.3.5, 87).

Some caution should be exercised in interpreting this passage. This quote and, in fact, the whole first two parts of TMS, are written (with a few notable exceptions) in the first person plural; in these two parts Smith seems to adopt the perspective of ordinary life. Yet, given that he makes clear that our common point of view often rests on delusions caused, for instance, by our tendency to “admire, and almost worship, the rich and powerful … the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” (TMS, I.iii.3.1, 61; for more discussion see Chapter 6 below), we cannot always attribute to Smith a position he ascribes to the common point of view. Many have seen in the passage from TMS II.ii.3.5, 87, and the one immediately following it quoted below, as Smith’s description of divine providence, although I think the passage never quite claims this. Now, it is not impossible that Smith believed in Divine providence (Smith always remained

98In what follows, I am partially indebted to Haakonssen 1981, 77-79, although Haakonssen does not link his discussion of teleology with Smith’s distinction between internal and external events, let alone a rejection of Hume's epistemological strategy.

99Griswold 1999, 48-63. However, Griswold, thinks that in this passage Smith’s “we” may be the rare instance where Smith is talking from the “theoretical” level of the detached philosopher in first person plural (51).

100There are some passages in TMS, that appear to suggest that Smith believed in some notion of providence (III.5.9, 168 is perhaps the strongest), but many of these are quite ambiguous. For useful discussion on this issue, see Lauren Brubaker 2002b. In my dissertation nothing turns on this.
very tightlipped about his religious beliefs), 101 but I want to focus attention on another oft-ignored aspect of this passage. Smith is claiming, I think, that although we are often tempted to use and distinguish between efficient and final causes in our description of the phenomena of nature, and it is often quite natural to do so, we (moderns) know we can account for them with efficient causes. By contrast, things are a bit different when we deal with the mind:

But though, in accounting for the operations of bodies, we never fail to distinguish in this manner the efficient from the final cause, in accounting for those of the mind we are very apt to confound these two different things with one another. When by natural principles we are led to advance those ends, which a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us, we are very apt to impute to that reason, as to their efficient cause, the sentiments and actions by which we advance those ends, and to imagine that to be the wisdom of man, which in reality is the wisdom of God. Upon a superficial view, this cause seems sufficient to produce the effects which are described to it; and the system of human nature seems to be more simple and agreeable when all its different operations are in this manner deduced from a single principle (TMS, II.i.3.5, 87).

When we contemplate human action we find it much more difficult to distinguish between efficient and formal causation. This fact leads even those with “refined and enlightened reason” to employ final causes in their explanations.102 Now, I am not suggesting that Smith endorses the use of final causes here. All I am claiming is that Smith takes it as an empirical fact that when we try to describe human agency we are apt to talk about means and ends; it is almost inhuman to distinguish between efficient and final causes when describing

101 While commenting on this passage, Fitzgibbons 1995, 76, claims, without supporting evidence, that for Smith “every system of natural laws had a higher purpose.” It does not inspire confidence that Fitzgibbons writes in the same sentence, “Smith differentiated between ‘efficient causes’ (the desire to know the time) and ‘final causes’ (the moving wheels of the watch.)” See Darwall 1999, for judicious comments on Fitzgibbons.

102 In private correspondence, Sam Fleischacker has suggested to me that here Smith has in mind Hume’s attempt to account for justice in terms of its final cause — social stability — in mind. It is an intriguing proposal, although I don’t think there is enough textual evidence to decide the matter.
human affairs.\textsuperscript{103} (We should not be surprised, then, that shortly hereafter TMS has a chapter entitled, “Of the Final Cause of this Irregularity of Sentiments.”) In fact, the passage above seems to suggest that “reason” (and appeals to it) itself functions as an efficient cause in human psychology, that is, as a motivating factor.\textsuperscript{104} (See, also, Hume’s \textit{Treatise}, I.iv.1.1, where reason is described as “a kind of cause” and the First \textit{Enquiry}, Section V, Part I, 43, where “habit” is described as a “cause.”) This datum alone makes it difficult, even “superficial,” to subsume all matters of fact under a single analysis.\textsuperscript{105} I think the thrust of Smith’s position suggests that Hume’s claim that all “matters of fact” are in a sense alike does injustice to human experience. Of course, this is no refutation. But it would provide a principled reason to reject Hume’s framework in his version of the “science of Man.” In the next chapter, I indicate what conception of causation Smith used in WN.

Finally, I think the evidence we collected suggests that Smith was, p\textsuperscript{ace} Cropsey, \textsuperscript{106} not only skeptical about the explanatory power of a mechanical (in the Pre-Newtonian sense) account of the mind as can, for example, be found in Hobbes (recall especially from “Of the External Senses,” ¶37, 146: “how such motions should produce, either in the

\textsuperscript{103} But maybe Smith is most worried about the corrosive effects of restricting explanations of social phenomena to efficient causes. The very next paragraph (II.ii.3.6, 87) starts in the following way: “As Society cannot subsist unless the laws of justice are tolerably observed, as no social intercourse can take place among men who do not generally abstain from injuring one another; the consideration of this necessity, it has been thought, was the ground upon which we approved of the enforcement of the laws of justice by the punishment of those who violated them.” I am, however, very puzzled by the order and content of Smith’s discussion in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{104} Recall the quote above from the student lecture notes: “The causes of Human actions are motives” (Lecture 28, ii. 191-192, 171).

\textsuperscript{105} My analysis of TMS, II.ii.3.5, 87, has greatly benefited from discussion with Lauren Brubaker and Ian Mueller.

\textsuperscript{106} Cropsey 1957, 1-5, starts by connecting Smith’s doctrines of self-preservation and the propagation of the species to Hobbes’ and Spinoza’s mechanistic conceptions of matter in motion.
organ, the Sensation of Taste; or a Sensation, which not only does not bear the smallest resemblance to any motion, but which itself seems incapable of all motion, no philosopher has yet attempted … to explain to us”), but also that Smith thought such an account would be alienating to human beings. But, just because Smith rejects Pre-Newtonian mechanisms as the standard for a proper explanation, that does not mean he rejects Hume’s ”science of Man” based on observation and experiment (see, for instance, TMS, II.1.5.10, 77 and WN, Vi.f.28, 771). Smith’s own account of moral psychology is largely built around an analysis of the workings of sentiments and passions (although he does not rule out a further, more reductive account in terms of liquid “spirits” and bodies in motion of which he gives a brief example at the start of the “Astronomy”). Any account in terms of sentiments and passions of human beings will necessarily involve some reference to teleology. In moral psychology we should not, perhaps for reasons of prudence, attempt a systematic translation of the language of reasons into the language of colliding bodies or the forces of nature.

V.D: Skepticism and Truth in Smith II: soothing the mind

As we have seen, Smith’s epistemology has some skeptical tendencies, although I think they tend to be over-emphasized. These raise, nevertheless, the question whether his epistemology and his own attempts at science (of political economy) are inconsistent. (In the next chapter of this dissertation I provide a detailed analysis of how Smith’s method

107See Bittermann 1940.

108In chapter 2, II, I give evidence for understanding the technical term “spirit” as a particular kind of fluid in this context.

109Smith was very skeptical about self-knowledge at TMS, III.2.15, 122: “perhaps, scarce any man can know perfectly what he himself is capable of doing. What the peculiar constitution of his own mind may or may not admit of is, perhaps, more or less a matter of doubt to every man.” See also, TMS, III. 2.24 and III.2.26, 126.
allows him to distinguish between real and apparent causes.) Smith is aware that when one is confronted by a beautiful and magnificent system, such as Newton’s in his day, even “the most skeptical cannot avoid feeling” that its principles have a “degree of firmness and solidity” that make it seem senseless to look for another system.\textsuperscript{110} Smith feels this is the case during every period that he has mentioned. But that does not mean such systems are true, as he writes in TMS:

A system of natural philosophy may appear very plausible, and be for a long time very generally received in the world, and yet have no foundation in nature, nor any sort of resemblance to the truth. The vortices of Des Cartes were regarded by a very ingenious nation, for a near century together, as a most satisfactory account of the revolutions of the heavenly bodies. Yet it has been demonstrated, to the conviction of all mankind, that these pretended causes of those wonderful effects, not only do not actually exist, but are utterly impossible, and if they did exist, could produce no such effects as are described to them (TMS, VII.ii.4.14, 313; on Descartes’ vortices see also the “Astronomy,” IV§61-6, 92-7).\textsuperscript{111}

Whatever the source of Smith’s judgment is, Smith clearly had assimilated Newton’s devastating critiques of the inconsistency and empirical inadequacies of Descartes’ system.\textsuperscript{112} Note also that in his judgment of Descartes, Smith is not shy about invoking the

\textsuperscript{110}As many other commentators (i.e., Amadae, Griswold, Lindgren, Skinner, etc.) have noted Smith claims that the systems of philosophers “in many respects resemble machines … A system is an imaginary machine” (see “Astronomy,” IV§19, 66). In the division of labor that Smith diagnoses, systems are among the products of the philosopher’s labour, see WN, I.1.9, 21-22 and V.i.f.26-34, 769-773. For my views on Smith’s use of the machine metaphor, see chapter four, IV.A, below.

\textsuperscript{111}TMS, VII.ii.4.14 and the sentence immediately following it (“it is otherwise with systems of moral philosophy; and an author who pretends to account for the origin of our moral sentiments, cannot deceive us so grossly, nor depart so very far from all resemblance to truth.”) have been discussed by A.M. Diamond Jr. 1986; he claims that the phrasing of ‘grossly deceive’ and ‘resemblance to the truth’ are “not consistent with the tone and substance of ‘The History of Astronomy.’” On Diamond’s reading these phrases betray a “naïve realist [view] of older times.” For Diamond Kuhn (with whom he compares Smith’s “Astronomy”) represents the “sophisticated” modern view. Anyway, Diamond does not consider the evidence that Smith thought that theory acceptance was a reasons-driven enterprise.

language of “actual existence;” he also appears to believe that it is not meaningless to talk of a system of natural philosophy to have a “foundation in nature.” In fact, in passing we have quoted texts by Smith in which he talks in his description of the adoption of Copernicanism, for instance, of “the real directions and velocities of the Planets” (“Astronomy” IV¶35, 76-77; emphasis). Moreover, he has no doubt that “truth” exists in mathematics (recall, TMS, III.2.20-22, 124-5). While he is not as adamant about works of natural philosophers, the quote from TMS, III.2.20-22, 124-5, implies that natural philosophers can come near to truth. It would help, of course, if we had an explicitly stated definition or criterion of truth in Smith’s work. Alas, that is lacking. What does it mean, for Smith, to say that a system has a “foundation in nature?” We can, however, infer from the quote from TMS, VII.ii.4.14, 313, that for Smith truth involves an existence claim and some notion of correspondence or “resemblance” between a system and nature. Smith is not afraid to use the language of truth: at TMS, VII.ii.4.14, for instance, he says of Mandeville’s theory that it “in some respects bordered upon the truth.” (See also his judgment of the Physiocrats at WN, IV.ix.38, 678-9, which I quote in full in Chapter 4.)

In the last lines of Smith’s “Astronomy,” considerations about the psychological compulsion to speak the language of truth are addressed, ¹¹³ as Smith notes,

And even we, while we have been endeavouring to represent all philosophical systems as mere inventions of the imagination, to connect together otherwise disjointed and discordant phenomena of nature, have insensibly been drawn in, to make use of language expressing the connecting principles of this one, as if they were the real chains which Nature makes use of to bind together her several operations. Can we wonder then, that it should have gained the general and complete approbation of mankind, and that it should be considered, not as an attempt to connect in the imagination the phenomena of the Heavens, but as the greatest discovery that ever was made by man, the discovery of an immense chain of the most important and sublime

¹¹³In another context, Smith provided this observation on the motivation of truth seeking: “Historical truths are now much greater request than they ever were in the ancient times. One thing that has contributed to the increase of this curiosity is that there are now severall sects in Religion and political disputes which are greatly dependent on the truth of certain facts” (LRBL, Lecture 18, ii. 40, 102).
truths, all closely connected together, by one capital fact, of the reality of which we have daily experience (see, IV¶76, 105).

Smith realizes that when one is confronted with a magnificent system, such as Newton’s in his time, one’s language insensibly draws one into talking as if the system is true.

It is interesting that in the “Astronomy” Smith is willing to distinguish between the aim of philosophers throughout history, that is, to achieve “coherence” (see II¶9, 43, II¶12, 46 and IV¶35, 76-7) and truth (recall the long quote from II¶12, 46; cf. Hume’s Treatise, I.iv.2.19-21). Of course, Smith does not rule out that truth and coherence can be linked. But the crucial point about “Astronomy,” IV¶76 is that for Smith we cannot avoid using the language of truth and reality.

But I think Smith is not merely making a claim about language. I believe there is no inconsistency in considering the reigning scientific theory “either exactly or very nearly true,” to quote Newton’s 4th Rule of Reasoning, while holding a historically and psychologically sensitive theory about the development and acceptance of scientific theories.

In the earlier sections of this chapter (especially IV.B), we have seen that Smith accepts that there can be solid reasons to accept a theory. I think there should be no doubt Smith believed that a fundamental understanding of nature was achieved by Newton’s system. Smith singled out Newton’s ability to calculate the weights and densities of the Sun and planets for special praise (“Astronomy,” IV¶75, 103). And at IV¶68, 99, he comments on Newton’s amazing prediction that a mutual attraction between Jupiter and Saturn would be strong enough to perturb their orbits when near conjunction. Moreover, Smith was aware

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114Cf. Hume: “[W]e might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop'd for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination” (Treatise, I.iv.VII). See also “The Rise and Progress of Arts and Sciences” where Hume claims that after undergoing the “severest scrutiny” of the French Newton’s theory “will probably go down triumphant to the latest posterity” (EMPL, 121-122).
that throughout the 18th century evidence accumulated to support commitment to Newton’s theory. Smith took the predicted return of Halley’s comet in 1758 as crucial evidence for it (“Astronomy,” IV.74, 103). Smith also reports that the “Observations of Astronomers at Lapland and Peru have fully confirmed Sir Isaac’s system” (“Astronomy,” IV.72, 101; Smith received a collection of Maupertuis’ works in 1762, see Letter No. 63). Now what is at stake here is, of course, what Smith means by confirmation.

I want to present one final argument for the claim that Smith is a realist about Newton’s theory (and not a Humean, mitigated skeptic). Smith’s appreciation of Newton’s theory is by no means superficial. Smith thinks that Newton’s theory was qualitatively superior to earlier systems, so much so, that it fully licenses his judgment when discussing Copernicanism (quoted before) about the “real” directions and velocities of the motions of the planets. In fact, once we reflect on Smith’s position on the status of Newton’s theory, we can discern that Smith is interested in something more than merely analyzing to what degree theories in astronomy were fitted to soothe the imaginations of the astronomical community and the learned public at largee (recall “Astronomy,” II.12, 46).

In the “Astronomy,” Smith makes a heretofore overlooked, albeit extremely insightful, set of remarks on the adoption of the Copernican system. I am going to quote at length because Smith’s argument is quite subtle.

[Cassini] first discovered, that the secondary planets of Jupiter and Saturn revolved around their primary ones, according to the same laws which Kepler had observed in the revolutions of the primary ones round the Sun, and that of the Moon round the earth; that each of them described equal areas in equal times, and that the squares of their periodic times were as the cubes of their distance. When these two last abstruse analogies, which, when Kepler had at first observed them, were little regarded, had

115It is not clear how aware Smith was of other developments in natural philosophy. But late in life Smith made a concerted effort to obtain back issues of Transactions of the Royal Society (see Letters No.: 239, 276, 294). Smith’s collection covered the years 1766-88 (see editors’ note to Letter No. 239); Smith became a member of the Royal Society in 1767. In LRBL, Lecture 11, i.140-141, 57, Smith criticizes Shaftesbury for not keeping up with natural philosophy, and in the “Astronomy,” Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch are named as authors who were largely ignorant of the science of their own time (IV.18, 65-6).
been thus found to take place in the revolutions of the Four Satellites of Jupiter, and in those of the Five of Saturn, *they were now thought not only to confirm the doctrine of Kepler, but to add a new probability to the Copernican hypothesis*. The observations of Cassini *seem* to establish it as a law of the system, that, when one body revolved round another, it described equal areas in equal times; and that, when several revolved round the same body, the squares of the periodic times were as the cubes of their distances. If the Earth and the Five planets were supposed to revolve round the Sun, these laws, it was said, would take place universally. But if, according to the system of Ptolemy, the Sun, Moon, and Five Planets were supposed to revolve round the Earth, the periodical motions of the Sun and Moon would, indeed, observe the first of these laws … but they would not observe the second … and the revolutions of the Five Planets would observe neither one law nor the other. [Smith then describes the very similar argument against Tycho Brahe’s system.] The analogy of nature, therefore, could be preserved completely, according to no other system but that of Copernicus, which, upon that account, must be the true one. This argument is regarded by Voltaire, and the Cardinal of Polignac, as an irrefragable demonstration; even McLaurin [sic], who was more capable of judging; nay Newton, himself seems to mention it as one of the principal evidences for the truth of that hypothesis (IV§58, 90-1; emphasis added).

So far so good: Smith is explaining how Cassini’s observations were regarded by most astronomers and natural philosophers as decisive proof to accept the Copernican hypothesis. This was done by appeal to the preservation of the “analogy of nature” (that is, an appeal to the similarity between the orbits of the planets around the Sun, on the one hand, and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn around these respective planets, on the other hand). But note that Smith is very careful *not* to endorse the line of argument adhered to by Voltaire, MacLaurin and others. For he goes on to write: “Yet, an analogy of this kind, it would seem, far from a demonstration, could afford, at most, but the shadow of a probability.” Smith explicitly *denies* that Cassini’s observations provided much evidence for the Copernican theory. At best Cassini’s observations only raise the probability of the thesis, and then only in an extremely limited fashion! Now it may appear that, in contrast to what I promised about this argument, Smith is following Hume in this. After all, it is Hume’s position that when it comes to reasoning about matters of fact observations can only raise probabilities. Demonstrations are left for reasoning about relations of ideas, or quantity and number (First *Enquiry*, Section IV, Part II, 35 and Section XII, Part III, 163).
In criticizing Voltaire’s argument, Smith appears to be adopting Hume’s skeptical stance. Even if Smith is right about his assessment of the import of Cassini’s observations this could hardly be said to be an argument in favor of my claim that he was a realist. Moreover, by criticizing the community wide opinion in accepting Cassini’s observations as demonstrations of the Copernican hypothesis, he seems to deviate from his stated intentions for the “Astronomy,” that is, to describe how theories are accepted by communities not if they were correct in doing so and, in doing so, Smith seems to undercut the epistemology I reconstructed on his behalf in this chapter. On what basis can Smith criticize the community of natural philosophers of the previous century? Is there, then, a tension between the different elements of Smith's epistemology? I return to this question below, but first I need to show that while Smith may have agreed that demonstrations of matters of fact were impossible, he thinks that observations inspired by Newton’s theory had provided confirmations, and not mere shadow of probabilities, of Copernicus’ theory. Smith’s willingness to distinguish between a confirmation and a raising of a probability is significant; I believe he thinks the former warrants realism about a theory. Let me explain this by returning to Smith’s analysis of Cassini’s observations.

Now, I think that Smith is very insightful in his criticism of Voltaire and the 17th and 18th century astronomers and philosophers. For Cassini’s observations do not provide a principled physical explanation that can serve as a demonstration of why all the orbits in the planetary systems act like the planetary orbits in the solar system. This requires what Smith calls, Newton’s “physical account” (IV¶67, 97-8), that is, something more than an appeal to aesthetic considerations. As he writes about Newton:

The superior genius and sagacity of Sir Isaac Newton, therefore, made the most happy, and we may now say, the greatest and most admirable improvement that was ever made in philosophy, when he discovered, that he could join together the movements of the Planets by so familiar a principle of connection, which completely removed all the difficulties the imagination had hitherto felt in attending to them. He demonstrated, that, if the Planets were supposed to gravitate towards the Sun, and to one another, and at the same to had a projecting force originally impressed upon
them, the primary ones might all describe ellipses in one foci of which that great luminary was places; and the secondary ones might describe figures of the same kind round their respective primaries, without being disturbed by the continual motion of the centers of their revolutions. That if the force, which retained each of them in their orbits, was like that of gravity, and directed towards the Sun, they would, each of them, describe equal areas in equal times. That if this attractive power of the Sun, like all other qualities which are diffused in rays from a center, diminished in the same proportion as the squares of the distances increased, their motions would be swiftest nearest the Sun, and slowest when farthest from him, in the same proportion in which, by observation, they are discovered to be; and that, upon the same supposition, of this gradual diminution of their respective gravities, their periodic times would bear the same proportion to their distances, which Kepler and Cassini has established betwixt them. Having thus shown that gravity might me the connecting principle which joined together the movements of the Planets, he endeavoured next to prove that it actually was so (IV¶67, 98; emphasis added).

Smith recognizes that the demonstrative part of Newton’s exposition concerns the conditional, if-then, relationship between the nature of the force and the planetary orbits. But Smith stresses that Newton did not rest with this. Smith goes on (IV¶67-75, 98-104) to describe how the Moon-test, Newton’s amazing prediction that a mutual attraction between Jupiter and Saturn would be strong enough to perturb their orbits when near conjunction, Newton’s treatment of the Lunar orbit, Newton’s account of the shape of the Earth, Comets, and many other observations “fully confirmed Sir Isaac's System” (IV¶72, 101). Smith lists, thus, a number of different, and independent, kinds of evidence for accepting Newton’s theory.

Note that, in his exposition of Newton’s system, Smith explicitly returns to the status of Cassini’s observations. For Smith, Newton’s physical account provides what is missing in the original discussion about Cassini’s observations. According to Smith, Newton managed to unify and reduce many apparently disconnected planetary phenomena to a “familiar principle of connection,” that is, universal gravity. As Smith sums up his discussion of Newton: “Allow his principle, the universality of gravity, and that it decreases as the squares of the distance increase, and all the appearances, which he joins together by it,

116Cf. George E. Smith 2002a, 142-143.
necessarily follow … It is every where the most precise and particular that can be imagined, and ascertains the time, the place, the quantity, the duration of each individual phaenomenon, to be exactly such, by observation, they have been determined to be” (Astronomy, IV¶76, 104). According to Smith, Newton’s theory is not merely a more accurate and beautiful device for predicting known and previously unknown phenomena. It is also a tool to engage in further, and fundamentally qualitatively improved kinds of inquiry. I discuss this element of Smith’s thinking further in the next chapter. Here I want to emphasize that for Smith Newton provides a principled — we would say dynamic — account of why the relative motions appear a certain way, and that this account is fully confirmed by the phenomena.117 That is, Smith endorses Newton’s attempts “to prove [Sir Isaac’s theory] really was so.”

Now we can return to Smith’s argument with Voltaire (whom he admired), and the community of natural philosophers more generally, about how to understand Cassini’s observations in relationship to the Copernican hypothesis. Only from the vantage point of Newton’s theory can Cassini’s observations be seen to provide evidence for a principled physical, as opposed to a mere aesthetic, reasons to accept the Copernican hypothesis. Smith writes, for instance, about the advantages of Newton’s System that “it assigned a reason, why the centers of the revolutions of the Planets were not precisely in the center of the Sun, but in the common center of gravity of the Sun and the Planets. From the mutual attraction of the Planets, it gave a reason for some other irregularities in their motions; irregularities, which are quite sensible in those of Jupiter and Saturn, when those Planets are nearly in conjunction with one another” (IV¶68, 99; emphasis added). What matters to me here is not merely to present Smith as a sophisticated reader of Newton, but also to show how this reflects on Smith’s epistemological practice and assumptions. Evidently, Smith is

117I am overstating a bit here. Although Smith clearly (and rightfully) thinks that Newton provides principled, physical reasons for accepting Copernicus, it is not entirely clear what he means by this. For an excellent, accessible treatment of Newton’s argument on this issue, see Di Salle 2002, 49-51.
willing to reject the standards of theory acceptance of the Cardinal of Polignac, Voltaire and MacLaurin; he believes that Newton has, as a kind of scientific legislator, introduced far stronger criteria that, when applied in his “System of the World,” provided genuine, explanatory reasons for the motions and their irregularities (for discussion of this term, see Chapter 4, II.C) of the planets. It is important to realize that Smith is not uncritically adopting Newton’s positions. In “Astronomy” IV¶58, 90-1, Smith shows an explicit willingness to criticize Newton for considering what he takes to be a bad argument. And this is not the only such an instance. Recall the puzzling passage from “Of the External Senses” (¶12, 137, discussed in section V.D above), where we saw that Smith, on the one hand, tacitly adopted Newton’s theoretical framework in talking of “masses in motion,” while, on the other hand, offering a distinction between those teachings of philosophy “to which it is scarcely possible to refuse our assent,” i.e., the truth of Copernicanism, which stated that the Earth was a body moving “with a rapidity that almost passes all human comprehension, and those “imperfect notions” in Newton’s “system of the universe,” i.e., that it is possible to find a “particle of matter that is perfectly at rest, with regard to all other surrounding bodies.”

Incidentally, Smith’s comments on the evidential status of Cassini’s observations for the purpose of defending Copernicanism is not the only such case in the “Astronomy,” in which he tacitly adopts criteria from within the Newtonian framework in order to criticize earlier arguments of philosophers and astronomers. For instance, in the next chapter, I discuss at length Smith’s criticism of Descartes’ unwillingness to provide a useful, systematic account for how empirical observations can deviate from predictions.118

118“So far, therefore, from accommodating his [i.e., Descartes’s] system to all the minute irregularities, which Kepler has ascertained in the movements of the Planets; or from shewing, particularly, how these irregularities, and no other, should arise from it, he contented himself with observing, that perfect uniformity could not be expected in their motions, from the nature of the causes which produced them; that certain irregularities might take place in them, for a great number of successive revolutions, and afterwards give way to others of a
Once it is clear that, in his exposition, Smith has tacitly adopted Newtonian criteria of evaluation, it is no surprise that Smith is even willing to criticize Newton if it can be shown that Newton also endorsed the analogy of nature argument. (Smith’s formulation is careful not to claim that Newton had endorsed this argument.) That is to say, in the “Astronomy,” Smith tacitly accepts that once Newton has come onto the scene we, or our Impartial Spectators, have been given a new, and improved, set of criteria by which we can evaluate the arguments of the prior community of natural philosophers, even if it can be shown that Newton himself was still sometimes willing to use arguments that appealed to the old set of norms. Although Smith never mentions the Impartial Spectator in the “Astronomy,” he does adopt something like a stance of an Impartial Spectator from the moment he starts discussing the impact of Copernicus. He is willing to appeal to criteria that Newton introduced into the practice of theorizing about astronomy that were not yet accepted by earlier generations of astronomers. In doing so, Smith is, perhaps, not only going against the stated purpose of his essay, but also being fundamentally unfair (anachronistic, a-historical, etc.) to the thinkers he discusses. I do not think this is the case for three reasons. First, Smith is not being viciously anachronistic because he is not distorting the viewpoints of these earlier astronomers. Second, Smith is still explaining how theories get accepted by community of astronomers and more widely the world of learning. What his narrative tacitly brings out is that the norms of acceptance of a theory within the astronomical community can evolve and diverge from the wider public; it is not that by the end of his narrative coherence, predictive power, and beauty disappear from the list, but that,

different kind: a remark which, happily, relieved him from the necessity of applying his system to the observations of Kepler, and the other Astronomers” (IV¶66, 97). Here, Smith is explicitly criticizing Descartes’ standards that were widely accepted in the 17th century, even by Huygens and Newton prior to writing the *Principia* (although not by Kepler). Newton’s achievements showed that one need not and ought not rest contented with Descartes’ criteria.

If Smith had included the exchange between Huygens and Newton he could have brought this out more fully.
sometimes in the course of successive revolutions of systems, more is expected from astronomical theories. (Even before his discussion of Copernicus, Smith had already made clear that criteria of theory acceptance can change when he pointed out that Regiomantus and Purbach tried to combine Aristotelian physics with Ptolemaic astronomy; “Astronomy,” ¶25-26, 69-71.) Third, Smith may have thought that, even though some norms may not have been invented, one can imagine that an earlier generation ought to have accepted them if given the opportunity, and if their Impartial Spectators are not corrupted; at minimum Smith seems to be thinking that the historian’s impartiality is not impaired if he provides approbation or disapproval to characters from the past. (At TMS, V.ii.15, 210, Smith takes Plato and Aristotle to task for sharing in their epoch’s prejudice in condoning infanticide.)

Let me conclude my main argument against the skeptical interpretation of Smith with one final consideration. Reflection on Smith’s understanding of how Newton’s efforts fundamentally altered how we should understand the status and importance of Cassini’s observations puts his own comment that “the most skeptical cannot avoid feeling this” in a different light. He is not signaling to the discerning reader that he is a skeptic, but instead he is pointing out that even a skeptic cannot avoid talking about and experiencing Newton’s theory as if it were true. The Pyrrhonian Skeptic is, of course, not argued against. It may, again, seem as if Smith was merely adopting Hume’s position. After all, Hume was willing to grant that, on the level of feelings, even a skeptic had to remain a realist. But Hume had attempted to restrict the domain of this assent to experiences of common life (see Chapter 2, III.A); on my reading of Hume’s philosophy, Hume’s “mitigated skeptic” can remain skeptical about adopting the theories of the natural philosophers when they attempt to go beyond common life by, for instance, introducing abstract entities. The force of Smith’s insight is that once one truly understands the arguments and evidential force of Newton’s theory (that is, one can experience the world through it), it, too, must be felt to be true; it
becomes part of common sense. Once one adopts the standpoint of Impartial Spectator, Newton has made gravity into a “familiar principle of connection.” Even common sense is not immune to change\textsuperscript{120} (Cf. TMS, Vii.iii.intro.3, 315 and TMS, III.3.2, 135). As an informed judge, Smith cannot avoid adopting Newton’s framework when evaluating the claims of earlier generations of astronomers and philosophers, especially those of the 17th century.\textsuperscript{121} In doing so, Smith goes beyond his stated intention that he would discuss the theories of the astronomers, “without regarding their absurdity or probability, their agreement with truth and reality” (II§12, 46).

There is, thus, no doubt Smith is in awe of the scope and predictive success of Newton’s principled, physically plausible, beautiful, consistent, empirically adequate and coherent theory. Smith added the passage (III.2.20-1) with his high praise about Newton’s tranquility of mind to the sixth edition of TMS The imagination can be soothed, albeit temporarily sometimes.\textsuperscript{122} In this, a scientific theory is not unlike “the effect of an opera” that “soothes the ear by its melody and harmony,” (“Imitative Arts,” II§27, 202; on soothing, see also II§21-22, 197-8). It is no coincidence that Smith uses the same “soothing” terminology. He explicitly compares Music with Science:

It is not by imitation, therefore, that instrumental music supports and enforces the imitations of the other arts; but it is by producing upon the mind, in consequence of other powers, the same sort of effect which the most exact imitation of nature, which the most perfect observation of probability, could produce ... In the contemplation of that immense variety of agreeable and melodious sounds, arranged and digested, both in their coincidence and in their succession, into so complete and regular a system, the

\textsuperscript{120}There is an alternative, perhaps complementary, reading of Smith here. One could see Smith as arguing that the “familiar principle of connection” explains why Newton’s theory was widely accepted.

\textsuperscript{121}It may be that Smith is able to be a less judgmental historian of pre-Copernican astronomy because he can conceive of it in an instrumentalist way.

\textsuperscript{122}It is, of course, a question if this is true of the individual natural philosophers Smith describes. Was Newton’s imagination soothed? Did Newton conceive of his own activity in this way? Given the biographical evidence available to Smith (i.e., Fontenelle’s Éloge), Smith’s judgement was not implausible.
mind in reality enjoys not only a very great sensual, but a very high intellectual, pleasure not unlike that which it derives from the contemplation of a great system in any other science ("Imitative Arts," II¶28 and II¶30, 202-5; on systems in music, see also II¶2, 187; at TMS, I.i.4.5, 21, Smith explicitly compares "a picture … a poem … a system of philosophy").

But, while Music can sooth the mind, Smith realizes, in contrast to Hume, 123 that Newton's account, or an account like it, need not be the last word (even d'Alembert, 96, thought it possible that Newtonianism could be overthrown); according to Smith's own psychology, informed by his historical research, once people are accustomed to Newton's theory there will always be the possibility that flaws or irregularities will be found in its connecting principles by a suitably sensitive inquirer or that people's inquisitive ambition and vanity will lead them to discover new phenomena. 124 It is not a finished system with unalterable principles (as Descartes' system promised), but an important step in an ongoing research project (recall the remaining "imperfection notions" in the "system of the universe" discussed above). Smith's views are very Newtonian. In the Principia, Newton had already expressed the hope that "the principles set down here will shed some light on either this mode of philosophizing or some truer one" ("Author's Preface to the Reader;" emphasis added). The potential open-ended nature of inquiry stands in contrast to, for example, d'Alembert's hope for a distant, albeit possible, "ultimate perfection." 125 This, together with the fact that new or better observations can be made (due to, for instance, developments

123See "The Rise and Progress of Arts and Sciences" where Hume claims that after undergoing the "severest scrutiny" of the French Newton's theory "will probably go down triumphant to the latest posterity" (EMPL, 121-122; Treatise, I.iv.VII).

124Cropsey 1957, 46.

125D'Alembert [1963] 1995, 127. Cf. p. 96, where d'Alembert seems to be implying that geometry, astronomy, and mechanics are never-ending due to "their nature."
in technology)\textsuperscript{126} that expose new irregularities, implies that “Newton’s empire” need not last forever—there could be new reasons for wonder.\textsuperscript{127}

\textit{VI: Conclusion}

Once the “science of Man” has at least partially exposed the secret springs of the workings of our imagination and the role our language plays in it then one can become immune, as it were, to the ontological temptations of language.\textsuperscript{128} At the very least, the “instruction” at the heart of the “Astronomy” enables the philosophic reader to be vigilant in avoiding these temptations. Yet, we have also shown that for Smith these temptations are sometimes entirely reasonable. Just because one allows for further revision this does not rule out the possible justification for one’s present doctrines. Investigation of the grounds and methods one has used to arrive at past and present accepted doctrines will often raise the scepter of skepticism, but it is not an over-determined end-result of such an inquiry.\textsuperscript{129}

So, at first sight it would seem, then (and the modern editors of Smith’s collected works have no doubt this is indeed the case), that Smith agrees with Aristotle’s conception

\textsuperscript{126}Smith does not mention technology, although it is implicit in the “Astronomy,” see, for instance, his claim that the Eudoxan system of Concentric spheres might “have stood the examination of all ages, and have gone down triumphant to the remotest posterity” had there been “no other bodies discoverable in heaven,” (IV§4, 56). Note, too, that Smith appears to adopt a realist position regarding the theory-independent existence of bodies in the heavens.

\textsuperscript{127}Daston and Park 1998 miss this about Smith’s account. Skinner 1979, 24, points out that Smith’s psychology entails that philosophers will not be reassured by a generally acceptable solution to a problem.

\textsuperscript{128}In “Of the External Senses” Smith gives several examples of how “the ambiguity of language” can confuse our “ordinary and careless way of thinking”—even leading those philosophers astray that focus exclusively on our way of speaking about things (§21-23). The ontological danger of language was a commonplace, see, e.g., Berkeley, sections 51-6 of \textit{Principles of Human Knowledge}.

\textsuperscript{129}Of course, the arguments of a Pyrrhonian skeptic are not refuted.
that philosophy starts in wonder and ends in the opposite state.\textsuperscript{130} Indeed, Smith’s exposition suggests that Aristotle’s view captures a major aim of inquiry for philosophers—they want their minds to be tranquil. Smith teaches that true philosophers will find this goal elusive; the open-ended nature of inquiry means that every theory at the end of an inquiry can also be the beginning of a new inquiry. But then for Smith philosophy can be an open-ended enterprise. In the next chapter, I look at how he incorporated this insight into his own “science of Man.” But here we end by observing that more extensive reflection on Smith’s positions suggests that he agrees with Plato,\textsuperscript{131} believing that philosophy begins in wonder and due to its open-ended nature also ends, despite a deepening of one’s understanding, not in “Humean despair,”\textsuperscript{132} but in wonder.

\textsuperscript{130}The editors of EPS point to Plato’s \textit{Theaetetus} (155D) and Aristotle’s \textit{Metaphysics}, A (982b11-24).

\textsuperscript{131}Stein 1990 and Stein’s (ms.) “How does physics bear upon metaphysics; and why did Plato hold that philosophy cannot be written down?” For a rich (albeit not exhaustive) account of the Platonic element in Smith, see Griswold, passim.

\textsuperscript{132}See “Epistemology Naturalized” in Quine 1969.
CHAPTER 4

SOME PRINCIPLES OF ADAM SMITH’S “NEWTONIAN” METHODS IN THE WEALTH OF NATIONS¹

I: Summary and Introductory Remarks

In this chapter, I give an account of important aspects of Smith’s methods in An Inquiry Concerning the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (WN). I reinterpret Smith’s distinction between natural and market prices, by focusing on Smith’s account of the causes of the discrepancies of market prices from natural prices. I argue that Smith postulates a “natural course” of events in order to stimulate research into institutions that cause real events to deviate from it. Smith’s employment of the fiction of a natural price should, thus, not be seen as an instance of general or partial equilibrium analysis, but, instead, as part of a theoretical framework that will enable observed deviations from expected regularities to improve his theory. That is, for Smith theory is a research tool that allows for a potentially open-ended process of successive approximation. These are the Newtonian elements in Smith. I provide evidence from Smith’s Essays on Philosophical Subjects (EPS) that this accords with Smith’s views on methodology. By way of illumination, I contrast Smith’s explanation of the introduction of commerce in Europe with that of Hume as presented in “Of Commerce.” I argue that Smith’s treatment is

¹Independently of my research, Leonidas Montes arrived at a parallel understanding of Adam Smith’s relationship to Newton. Montes 2003, provides me with generous comments and recognition.
methodologically superior. Nevertheless, I suggest that one of Hume’s essay may have inspired Smith to develop his method.

At the start of WN, Adam Smith observes, “Those theories [of political economy] have a considerable influence, not only upon the opinions of men of learning, but upon the public conduct of princes and sovereign states” (“Introduction and Plan of the Work,” 8, 11). That is, theories not only attempt to explain and predict economic behavior, but through the actions of rulers also deliberately or unintentionally influence it. Thus, they run the risk, for instance, of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Smith’s remark reveals considerable methodological self-awareness and sophistication. Smith is also signaling, I suspect, a contrast between the private opinions of the “men of learning” and the public conduct of “princes.” In this chapter, I am mostly concerned with a topic of interest only to a narrow segment of these “men of learning.”

WN is a very long treatise—about a thousand pages. Despite the remark just quoted, there are, nevertheless, very few methodological statements in the book, especially when we compare it to other Early Modern treatises that often contain important statements on method or rules of reasoning. Instead we find many elaborate descriptions and homely examples; Smith clearly did not want to limit the appeal of his book to “men of learning.” Sometimes Smith is even apologetic for being “obscure” and “extremely abstracted” (see, e.g., WN, I.iv.43, 46; toward the end of WN Smith refers to it as “a speculative work,” V.iii.68, 934). Smith leaves it to the careful reader to figure out his methods. In what

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3This chapter is not designed to be a general introduction to WN. I have found Blaug 1997, Hollander 1973, and Skinner 1996 most useful. Schumpeter 1954, is also worth a look in light of his very critical stance on Adam Smith.

4For a different, albeit stimulating, approach, see Redman 1997, chapter 5, especially 212-215. I will occasionally present criticism of Redman’s views in my footnotes, but I do not do justice to the richness of her work.
follows, I give an account of an overlooked, albeit important, strain of Smith’s method in WN. I do not claim that I am offering a complete account of all of Smith’s methods in WN. Yet, my approach allows many parts of WN to be unified. My reading was first provoked by reflection on Smith’s posthumously published, “The History of Astronomy” (“Astronomy”), in EPS (1795), but I present my argument not in the order of discovery.5

The argument of this chapter has three major components. In the first and most substantial one (presented in part II), I look at Smith’s distinction between natural and market prices. I focus on Smith’s account of the causes of the deviations of market prices from natural prices. By offering a detailed case-study, I argue that Smith postulates a “natural course” of events in order to stimulate research into institutions that cause real events to deviate from it. Smith’s employment of the fiction of a natural price should, thus, not be seen as an instance of general or partial equilibrium analysis, but, instead, as being part of a theoretical framework that will enable observed deviations from expected regularities to aid in improving his theory. In order to forestall possible misinterpretation, I should point out that my claim entails that Smith is committed to two, mutually reinforcing, elements of one evidential strategy: i) to use deviations from expected regularities to uncover the causes at work in political economy (very broadly conceived), and ii) to enable discovery of these causes to generate successive improvements in the theoretical idealization (or model) that was used to generate predictions. This method I attribute to Newton.6 I provide some evidence that Smith was aware of the method; I focus on a very insightful passage in the “Astronomy” in which Smith takes Descartes to task for trying to explain away deviations from general rules instead of explaining them.

5 All my quotes are from Adam Smith’s Essays on Philosophical Subjects, (EPS). Edited by W.P.D. Wightman and J.C. Bryce.

6 My understanding of Newton has been shaped by the writings of and discussion with I.Bernard Cohen, Howard Stein, and George E. Smith (to be cited below).
In part III, I provide further, albeit much more schematic, evidence from WN for my reading of Smith. I focus on Book III of WN, where Smith postulates a “natural” development of societies from hunting, to pasturage, to agriculture, to commerce. I show that Smith’s employment of a 4-stage theory is also designed to allow deviations from the natural course to provide a refined, causal explanation of historical events. By way of illumination, I contrast Smith’s explanation of the introduction of commerce in Europe with that of his friend and forerunner David Hume. I indicate why I think that Smith’s treatment is methodologically more sophisticated. I suggest, however, that Hume’s essay (1750-51), “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations” (“Ancient Nations”),7 may have inspired Smith to develop his method.

In part IV, I show that my reading of the method of WN is in accord with Smith’s methodological views on science as revealed by the “Astronomy.” I explain Smith’s views on the nature of scientific theories—or “machines.” It turns out that for Smith theories are tools for further research. This may seem an obvious use for a theory, but if one takes this idea seriously, it creates a shift in perspective; it makes one ask: how does this theory allow one to find and analyze data that can be turned into evidence? What kind of research can one do to improve the theory? (By contrast, the questions, “how well does this theory explain?” and “what does this theory explain?” become, while not ruled out, a bit less important.) After that, I suggest that Smith is committed to something akin to a process of successive approximation.

II: Natural and Market Prices

In this part, I propose a novel explanation for the contrast that Smith draws between natural and market prices. I provide a rather detailed case study on behalf of my general

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7All my references to and quotes from essays by David Hume are to Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary (EMPL), revised edition. Edited by Eugene F. Miller.
methodological theses. The detail is necessary not only because of the intricacy and subtlety of Smith’s thought, but also because it is widely agreed that Smith’s account of natural price is one of the crucial elements of the analytic/theoretical core of WN. Hence, this is quite rightly seen as a crucial test-case of any account that is offered as an interpretation of substantive parts of the methodology or theory of WN.

II.A: The Natural Price

At the start of chapter vii of Book I, Smith writes,

When the price of any commodity is neither more nor less than what is sufficient to pay the rent of the land, the wages of the labour, and the profits of the stock employed in raising, preparing, and bringing it to market, according to their natural rates, the commodity is then sold for what may be called its natural price. The commodity is then sold precisely for what it is worth, or for what it really costs the person who brings it to market; for though in common language what is called the prime cost of any commodity does not comprehend the profit of the person who is to sell it again, yet if he sells it at a price which does not allow him the ordinary rate of profit in his neighbourhood, he is evidently a loser by the trade; since by employing his stock in some other way he might have made that profit. His profit, besides, is his revenue, the proper fund of his subsistence … Though the price, therefore, which leaves him this profit is not always the lowest at which a dealer may sometimes sell his goods, it is the lowest at which he is likely to sell them for any considerable time; at least where there is perfect liberty, or where he may change his trade as often as he pleases. The actual price at which any commodity is commonly sold is called its market price. It may either be above, or below, or exactly the same with its natural price (WN, I.vii.4-7, 72-73).

There is a lot to unpack here. I want to focus on the purpose of the distinction between natural and market prices, and how one would go about measuring the natural price. First, I need to explain a few things about Smith's framework. For Smith, the price of a commodity is a composite of rents, wages, and profits. What is true for a single commodity is also true

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8The notion of a natural rate looks circular here. I will discuss this below.

9This is an oversimplification. Strictly speaking it is a composite of rents, wages, profits, and the cost of raw materials and instruments used up but the latter resolves itself (“immediately or ultimately”) into one of the three component parts. Smith explicitly rejects the idea that there is a fourth part to the natural rate (WN, I.vi.11, 68).
for the “whole annual produce of a society, or what comes to the same thing, the whole price of that annual produce.” Thus, these three components correspond to the three great classes in society: landowners, workers, and merchants (I.vi.17-19, 69-70 and I.xi.p.7, 265). Now Smith assumes that in “every society or neighbourhood” there will be “an ordinary or average” rate of wages, profits, and rents. These average rates will be called the natural rates (for wages and so on) “at the time and place in which they commonly prevail” (I.vii.1-3, 72). If one knows these average rates one can then estimate the natural price. For simplicity’s sake, I am assuming that Smith’s concept of a “society or neighbourhood” is not problematic.

Before I investigate how Smith suggests one can do this calculation, it is worth stressing that the price is only said to be “natural” in a situation of what Smith calls “perfect liberty,” that is, when the labor and commodity markets, especially, are competitive and free (I.vii.27,78). Although capital markets were also not free (in many countries the exportation of gold was forbidden and interest rates were regulated), Smith often seems to assume, following Hume, that the regulations against the movement of capital are much more ineffective than other economic statutes (II.iii.23, 340). The “natural price” is, then, the hypothetical, localized, price of a good if there were not all kinds of obstacles preventing the free movement of capital, labor, and goods. That is to say, it comes down to what the

10Smith wrote in a time when the service part of the economy was not very developed yet, although it is surprising he does not mention it in the early chapters of WN (since he later devotes considerable space to banking, insurance, education, and law). For useful comments on the relationship, if any, between “annual produce” and a modern conception of “national income,” see O'Donnell 1990, 30ff.

11Many commentators note the indebtedness of Smith to the Physiocrats. Yet neither their Le prix véritable nor Le prix mitoyen conforms to Smith’s understanding of natural price; see Turgot [1770] 1889, §XXXI and §XXXII. Turgot’s notion of Le Prix fondamental (see his letter to Hume, March 25, 1767) comes very close because it includes the wages and profits (but no rent). But Turgot views it as a minimum price below which the market price cannot fall. Hume also employs the phrase “natural price” in “Of Taxes” (345) but does so in a casual fashion.
world would be like if there were no impediments to the mobility of resources.\footnote{12} Since this situation did not exist in Smith’s time (or ours), the natural price can, at best, only be estimated.\footnote{13}

I am not claiming, however, that a situation of perfect liberty is a necessary condition for the price of a commodity to be or reach its natural price. Even if there were no complete mobility of resources in an economy, fluctuations in short-run market prices may, for whatever reason, make a commodity occasionally reach its natural price. Smith is clear that except when an economy operates in perfect liberty this is unlikely to happen very often or last very long; “what is sufficient to pay the rent of the land, the wages of the labour, and the profits of the stock employed in raising, preparing, and bringing it to market,” is in most non-perfect-liberty-conditions almost always going to be different from and usually more than what is said to be the natural price of commodity (I.vii.30, 79).

But how does one go about estimating the natural price of a good? How does one discover what the average rates of rent, wages, and profit are? Moreover, how does one go about figuring out what they would be in non-existing circumstances? Now, it is worth pointing out, to put it crudely, that for Smith, rent and wages rise with the increasing prosperity of society (for explicit statements on wages see I.viii.21-22, 86-87, and on rents see: I.xi.p.1, 264). By contrast, Smith thinks that in rich societies the rate of profit was low (I.ix.20, 113), while in poor societies it would be high, and “it is always highest in countries which are going fastest to ruin” (I.xi.p.10, 266). Smith claims that in prosperous countries, that is, those in which capital had already been accumulated, “mutual competition” among merchants, who have abundant sources of capital, would drive down profit rates (I.ix.2,

\footnote{12}I want to thank Nathan Rosenberg for helping me formulate this.

\footnote{13}One might think that that there were natural prices for some goods in Smith’s time. But even if there were free markets in a particular commodity, the factors of production would still be influenced by the obstacles in other markets. For the systemic element in Smith’s understanding see references to Skinner 1979 or 1996, and my discussion below.
while poor and declining countries would scare off merchants, thus increasing potential profit for the adventurous few. For Smith high wages and high profits do not tend to go together; he did recognize an exception to this general rule in “the peculiar circumstances of new colonies,” where profits, due to relative lack of stock, and wages, due to high growth, could both be high (I.ix.11, 109). Let me note that all this implies that in Smith’s opinion there is, except in new colonies, an inherent conflict over resources between the wage-earning laborers and the profit-oriented merchants (I.viii.11, 83 and I.xi.p.8-10, 265-267; I discuss the implications of this in my chapter five below).

The high or low rates of land-rent are the effect of high or low prices (I.xi.a.8, 162). That is, rents shadow prices. For Smith the rates of rent are the result of haggling between landowners and farmers, influenced by their relative power due to supply and demand. (Of course, Smith repeatedly points out that the legal structure influences the types of leases and land-ownership. I am also ignoring mine and house rents for the sake of brevity.) Wages, however, are not only set by the demand and supply of labor (and the effort, skill, security,

Cf. Turgot [1770] 1889, §XC, where competition is absent.

One may be tempted to claim that Smith thought that the rate of growth determines the rate of profit, but it is important to see that Smith thought that the unusual circumstance of the American colonies (abundant fertile land, unusually low prices for land, etc.) was an exception that proved the rule. Of course, the rate of growth can influence the rate of profit for Smith.

In fact, Smith claims that the political backwardness of the lower classes and the landed classes vis à vis the merchant-class is due to their inability to understand their own interests in the context of the State as a whole even though theirs better coincide with it (WN, I.xi.p.7-10, 265-267; much of WN is one big lament on how the merchants and tradesmen have hijacked the economic instruments of State to their own advantage.) The causes for the failure of the workers and the landholders to properly understand their own interests and how they are affected by regulations are not identical. Smith thinks that the former often lack basic education and are too overworked to gather and properly analyze the necessary information; Smith speaks of “the torpor of mind” of the common laborer that the division of labor will engender (V.i.f.50, 781). The latter are often spoiled by luxury which makes their minds “incapable of that application … which is necessary in order to foresee and understand the consequences of any publick regulation” (I.xi.p.8, 265; see also I.xi.a.1, 223 and V.ii.c.13, 831).
public esteem, and probability of success involved, see I.x.b.1-33, 116-128), but they are also influenced by guild policies, fixed wage scales, and various regulations that benefit the merchants and tradesmen at the expense of the workers, who were denied attempts to combine.\(^{17}\) For Smith wages would be a cause of high or low prices (I.xi.a.8, 162), that is, high wages, a sign of a growing economy, would lead to higher prices, unless, of course, productivity would grow at the same rate (I.xi.o.1, 260). Apparently, Smith does not think that it would be difficult to estimate the average rent. I assume he is confident because the information on rents was (for tax purposes) a matter of public record published in registries (V.ii.c.1-d.9, 828-840, although V.ii.c.21, 834, shows awareness of incentives for fraud on part of lessor and lessee).\(^{18}\) Smith admits, however, that “[I]t is not easy … to ascertain what are the average wages of a labourer even in a particular place, and at a particular time” (I.ix.3, 105; see also the important discussion at I.viii.34, 93-95). At best one can determine what usual (a phrase Smith uses as well) wages are. This does not seem to worry him much. Generally, when Smith makes claims about wages he keeps his sources of information obscure (with a few exceptions, e.g., historical documents at I.viii.34, 94-95, and personal conversation at I.x.b.50, 134).\(^{19}\)

Figuring out the average rate of profits was even more difficult. For competitive reasons, merchants had a strong incentive to hide their profits (I.vii.21, 77). Moreover, due to price changes and chance (sinking of ships, fires in storehouses, etc.) the rate of “profits

\(^{17}\)There were probably very few regulations that would aid the workers. As he writes, “Whenever the legislature attempts to regulate the differences between masters and their workmen, its counsellors are always the masters. When the regulation, therefore, is in favour of the workmen, it is always just and equitable; but it is sometimes otherwise when in favour of the masters” (WN, I.x.c.61, 157-158; emphasis added). See Pack 1991, 18 and 39, and my fifth chapter for more discussion.

\(^{18}\)Jen Boobar has suggested that Smith’s relative optimism on this score may also be due to the fact that many rents were paid in corn, thus, standardizing measurement.

\(^{19}\)Sam Fleischacker called my attention to these examples; see also his forthcoming book on more detailed discussion of Smith’s sources.
of stock” for an individual merchant could fluctuate wildly, “not only from year to year, but
from day to day, and almost from hour to hour. To ascertain what is the average profit of all
the different trades carried on in a great kingdom, must be much more difficult; and to judge
of what it may have been formerly, or in remote periods of time, with any degree of
precision, must be altogether impossible” (I.xi.3, p 11). There can be, thus, no doubt that
Smith was acutely conscious of the limited accuracy of data available to him. (See his
remark on the “somewhat uncertain” quality of “information” at I.xi.o.5, 261.) Smith
noted the near-total absence of reliable data and the fudging of the contemporary
practitioners of “Political Arithmetick” (roughly, the 18th century version of social science
statistics,20 see WN, IV.v.b.30, 534-5 and Letter No. 249 to George Chalmers, 10
November 1758; see also Hume’s “Of the Balance of Trade,” 310).21 (I return to this
issue below and again in chapter five.)

Before I turn to Smith’s heuristic device to measure the rate of profit, I must first
point out a potential confusion in Smith. When one subtracts wages and rent from the
natural price of a commodity, “profit” seems to refer to the margin left over that accrues to
manufacturer or trader. (This is an understanding of profit that in modern terms is described
as the ratio of flow profits to flow costs, or profit margin.) But sometimes, as in the quote

20See Redman 1997, 142-151 for an introduction to the ideas of Petty, King, and
Davenant, especially. See also her account of Smith’s views on Political Arithmetic (230-
233).

21In a complex commercial society it is difficult to calculate “real” prices directly
without solid data: “the current prices of labour at distant times and places can scarce ever be
known with any degrees of exactness.” Contrast this with the “exact measure” that nominal
prices provide at a given time and place at I.v.19,55. Smith chose the price of corn (the 18th
century word for edible seeds) as a second-best way of measuring the real price of things:
“Those [prices] of corn, though they have in few places been regularly recorded are in
general better known and have been more frequently taken notice of by historians and other
writers. We must generally, therefore, content ourselves with them, not as being always exactly
in the same proportion as the current prices of labour, but as being the nearest approximation
which can commonly be had to that proportion” (WN, I.v.22, 56). For more on Smith’s
employment of corn as a measure of welfare, see chapter five below.
from I.ix.3, 105, Smith seems to be referring to what moderns call the ratio of flow profits to capital stock, or return on investment. The modern conceptual apparatus assumes a distinction between flow and stock. Smith probably assumed that profit margins and rate of profit on stock are connected. It appears he thought that an increase of stock would stimulate competition and increase wages, and drive down profits (WN, I.ix.2, 105). He seems not to have envisioned the possibility that one could have a low margin on an individual commodity, yet still have high rate of return on one’s investment or high margins with low returns on investment. Nevertheless, in what follows, I pretend to accept Smith’s argument at face value. I treat him as saying that profits on stock and profit margins are tightly related.

Inspired, I think, by David Hume, who called interest the “barometer” of the state, and Turgot, who called it the “thermometer,” Smith proposes measuring interest rates to indirectly measure the average rate of profit. For Smith, the rate of profit influences the rate of interest: “wherever a great deal can be made by the use of money, a great deal will commonly be given for the use of it; and … wherever little can be made by it, less will commonly be given for it” (I.ix.4, 105). In the definition, but not elsewhere, Smith ignores the effects of government borrowing (V.iii, 907-947). Smith thought that in his own time

22See Mirowski 1982, 116, where he cites Tucker 1960, chapters 4-5.

23There is another problem in Smith: when he writes about “the profit of stock” he sometimes means the rate of profit and not the total amount of profit. (See Mirowski 1982, footnote 10, where G.S.L. Tucker is cited.) In general, the context makes it clear what he means.

24Cf. Hume’s “Of Interest,” 303: “And thus, if we consider the whole connexion of causes and effects, interest is the barometer of the state, and its lowness a sign almost infallible of the flourishing condition of a people.”

25Turgot [1770] 1889, §LXXXIX.

26Smith does not have to worry about the role interest rates play in maintaining currency exchange rates.
interest rates were about half profit rates. It is only a rough indicator, however, because “The proportion which the usual market rate of interest ought to be to the ordinary rate of clear profit, necessarily varies as profit rises or falls.” Smith thinks interest is made up of two components: “insurance” against loss of the capital and “sufficient recompence for the trouble of employing the stock” (I.ix.22, 114). In risky or very stable countries either component may have a different weighting. Of course, various governments have attempted to fix the rate of interest, so Smith warns the reader to focus on market rates, although sometimes those are secret. In general, he thinks that in all countries there are “several very safe and easy methods of evading the law” (I.ix.9, 107). This would make figuring out the exact market rates of interest not a simple task. Nevertheless, Smith thinks that, in general, the fixed rates often “follow” the market rates of interest (I.ix.5, 106), so the problem should not be exaggerated.

Moreover, even if the movement of capital were free, the rate of profit is influenced by the existence of monopolies and market barriers that can artificially inflate or lower the rate. So, even if one used market interest rates to get at average profit rates, one is not

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27Mirowski’s 1982 empirical research into the accounting ledgers of 19 British firms of the period lends support for this assertion.

28I don’t think Smith is contradicting himself by claiming, on the one hand, that short term interest rates are determined by the supply and demand of money, while, on the other hand claiming, interest rates themselves can be analyzed into two different components. Cf. Turgot [1770] 1889, §LXXIII, where he insists that interest is a form of compensation for opportunities (of profit or revenue) foregone.

29Incidentally, at II.iv.17, 358, we learn that the rate of interest influences the price of land, so indirectly, at least, interest rates will influence the size of the rent (IV.vii.c.58, 611), and so on. I can only give a glimpse of the interconnected relationship of all factors in Smith's system. See Skinner 1979 and 1996 for more details.

30Part of Smith’s argument against the Colonial monopolies is that it raises the rate of profit in one sector and advances its interests at the expense of all other sectors by hurting their rate of profit (IV.vii.c.60, 612). Some critics have been puzzled by an element of Smith’s argument. For though he clearly shows that other sectors — and consumers in general — are hurt by the monopoly trade, it could be the case that the exorbitant profits from the colonial trade raise the general rate of profit. Smith ought not have any trouble
measuring the natural rate of profit.\textsuperscript{31} Finally, Smith notes about the natural rate of profit, rent, and wages that “in every society this rate varies according to their circumstances, according to their riches or poverty, their advancing, stationary, or declining condition” (WN, I.vii.33, 80).\textsuperscript{32} No wonder Smith never attempts to calculate a natural price in the whole of WN!\textsuperscript{33}

So what does Smith want to do with this notion of a natural price? Why would he risk the criticism of his close friend, Hume, who upon reading of WN claimed that “I cannot think, that the rents of Farms makes any part of the Price of the Produce, but that the price is determined altogether by the Quantity and the Demand”? (Correspondence, Hume’s Letter No. 150 to Smith, 1 April 1776, 186.)\textsuperscript{34} Smith agrees that this was indeed the case for short run market prices (WN, I.vii.8, 73).\textsuperscript{35} If even Hume cannot see any use for a natural price, why would Smith introduce this abstract and hard to measure concept?

Let us grant on behalf of Smith that the natural price is a kind of useful fiction.\textsuperscript{36} Can we say more about it on conceptual grounds? For instance, the (average) market price of a good can be below, at, or above the natural price. Smith thinks, however, that most

\textsuperscript{31}Marx 1963, Part II, 229, complains about this.

\textsuperscript{32}This implies that the natural price of a commodity only changes when the circumstances of a society change, see O’Donnell 1990, 90 and 96.

\textsuperscript{33}Cf. O’ Donnell 1990, 10ff., 85, 157, 214-8. O’Donnell accepts Marx’s indictment of Smith on this score. The following paragraphs are supposed to give a response.

\textsuperscript{34}Ricardo would echo this criticism.

\textsuperscript{35}O’Donnell 1990, 89-90 claims that in Smith the market price is the short period, while the natural price is the long period (WN, I.vii.4-7, 72-73).

\textsuperscript{36}Here I am not going to worry about the metaphysical status of this fiction, but I.vii.20, 77 (to be quoted below) makes it tempting to view it something more akin to a center of gravity in physics and less akin to, say, a unicorn.
market prices are (well) above the natural price. For if the market price of a good were below the natural price then either the workers would starve (and ultimately reduce the availability of labor) or the farmers and merchants would move into more profitable areas (e.g., I.xi.b.23, 168). Smith assumes that, in general, market prices will be more frequently above natural prices (“the market price of any particular commodity, though it may continue long above, can seldom continue long below its natural price,” I.vii.30, 79). Smith does not discuss examples where the market price of a good is below a natural price. For Smith prices are nearly always seen falling to the natural rate (e.g., I.xi.g.21-22, 219-220). Smith says in a famous passage:

[B]ut though the market price of every particular commodity is in this manner continually gravitating, if one may say so, towards the natural price, yet sometimes particular accidents, sometimes natural causes, and sometimes particular regulations of police [i.e., public administration], may, in many commodities keep up the market price, for a long time together, a good deal above the natural price (WN, I.vii.20, 77). 39

This passage is central to debates about the degree to which Smith anticipated modern equilibrium theories. Here, I am not interested in that debate because I think the debate misses the reasons why Smith developed his conceptual apparatus and fails to properly

37 Smith does not think this is merely a hypothetical situation (I.viii.40, 98 and IV.ii.k.7-8, 872-3; for a discussion of other causes of famine see, IV.v.b.6-9, 526-8). A declining populace would shrink demand and this, in turn (setting off a vicious cycle), would shrink the division of labor, etc. For a contextual discussion of Smith’s views on famine, see Rothschild 2001, 73-86.

38 Of course, changes in technology and productivity or supply factors can alter the natural price; see O’ Donnell 1990, 255 n. 26.

39 A reader suggested that Smith’s repeated use of “sometimes” indicated that Smith did not believe that in general the market prices will be more frequently above the natural price than below it. It is true that Smith never claims this explicitly. But we should note that in the immediate context of this passage Smith focuses on systematically discussing causes that raise the market price above the natural price, while he largely ignores those that lower it.

understand the logic of Smith’s enterprise. Before I turn to that, I should note that, because of Smith’s use of “gravitating,” one could be tempted to hear an echo of Newton’s theory of universal gravity in this passage, but the comparison is misleading if only because the natural price is not also gravitating toward the market price, that is, the gravitation is not mutual. Yet, Smith was aware that Newton’s theory implied universal, mutual, simultaneous attraction (“Astronomy,” IV§67-76, 98-104. For instance, Smith writes about the “mutual attraction of the Planets” at “Astronomy” IV§67and68, 99.) Instead, I want to emphasize that for Smith the natural price is “the price of free competition” (WN, I.vii.27, 78; see also I.vii.6, 73; I.vii.30, 79), and, without it, the market price will almost always deviate from it.

While Smith uses imagery that is often suggestive of an equilibrium model, his only explicit mention of the word “equilibrium” is in the context of an attack on the Mercantilist (or “Commercial”) system (IV.iii.c.2, 489; I want to thank Leonidas Montes for reminding me of this passage). It is by no means clear that he means to endorse an equilibrium conception of the economy there. (My own view is that Smith would have been excited to learn of dynamic dis-equilibrium theories.)

Undoubtedly Smith was influenced by Turgot [1770] 1889 §LXXXVIII and §LXXXIX to employ the language of “gravity;” unlike Turgot he does not mention “equilibrium” explicitly. See Rothschild 2001, 76ff., for useful comments on the contrast between Turgot and Smith on general equilibrium.

Mirowski 1989, 164, while widely read, is highly misleading when suggesting that Smith wanted to divert our attention away from Newton's action-at-a-distance. Not only does Mirowski quote two passages out of context (in which there is no mention of Newton at all), but he also fails to address the passages in which Smith does discuss Newton's principles! One would never know from Mirowski’s account that Smith realized that the “Moon may be conceived as constantly falling towards the Earth” and that at IV§67 he wrote, “He [Newton] demonstrated, that, if the Planets were supposed to gravitate towards the Sun, and to one another.” Moreover, Smith singled out Newton’s ability to calculate the weights and densities of the Sun and planets for special praise (“Astronomy,” IV§75, 103). And at IV§68, 99, he comments on Newton’s amazing prediction that a mutual attraction between Jupiter and Saturn would be strong enough to perturb their orbits when near conjunction.

For useful discussion, see O’ Donnell 1990, 58-61 and 93-96.

Of course, most of WN is a lament about the absence of competition; see T.W. Hutchison 1978, 20 n. 27. Hollander 1973, 126, points out that Smith’s understanding
For my argument it is crucial that Smith informs his readers that there are three types of *reasons* for “*deviations*, whether occasional or permanent, of the market price of commodities from the natural price” (I.vii.32, 80; emphasis added): 1) when regardless of high prices supply is limited due to natural causes (Smith suggests as an example the vineyards of particular soils in France, I.vii.24, 78); 2) the existence of legal monopolies that keep the market “under-stocked, by never supplying the effectual demand” (I.vii.26, 78); 3) various trade and labor regulations that lower “competition [in a trade] to a smaller number than might otherwise go into them” (I.vii.28, 79). Smith makes it clear that these circumstances can “endure for many centuries” (I.vii.31, 79). For Smith, the difference between the latter two types of cause is just a matter of degree; trade and labor regulations are “a sort of enlarged monopolies” (I.vii.28, 79).

Note that in the quote (I.vii.28, 79) from the third type of reason that Smith offers, on why a market price may deviate from the natural price, he uses counterfactual language. The natural path is one that would happen if it were not for obstacles to competition. I want to suggest, then, that the discussion of the natural prices is designed to promote the following question: what cause or reasons prevent the market price from falling to the natural price? And the natural response is that, except for a few goods whose supply cannot be increased, human institutions, policies, laws, etc. prevent market prices from falling to natural prices. The discrepancies between market prices and estimated natural prices are caused by human intervention.46

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46This is not how Smith’s discussion of natural price seems to have been understood by successive generations of economists. It seems what happened was that economists made determining the natural rates of wages, profit, and rent the object of analysis of economic theory (O’ Donnell 1990, 55). Instead of having general validity such theories must assume constant background conditions. It is as if a species would try to infer from within its local niche at a point in space and time the general laws of evolution without looking at other species.
Now, a large part of the take-home message of Smith’s argument in Books I and II of WN is that the natural price is not only the most efficient, but also the fairest price. It is easy to see part of the argument: not only do existing regulations cause market prices to favor the well-connected few and to raise the price of all goods for all consumers hence lowering their welfare, they also provide false signals; from the vantage point of “equity” (WN, I.viii.36, 96) they distort investment decisions. In a way, Smith provides an argument for Montesquieu’s claim that “it is competition that puts a just price on goods” (The Spirit of the Laws, part 4, book 20, chapter 9; for mention of Montesquieu in WN, see, I.ix.17, 112-113; II.iv.9, 353’ IV.ix.47, 684; and V.i.f.40, 775), and a whole host of earlier writers in the (Scholastic) just price tradition. But by avoiding “just price” terminology (with its Scholastic connotations) Smith can ignore the intellectual baggage associated with it.

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47 I do not think Smith foresaw the possibility (first pointed out to me by Jen Boobar) that there could be a negative trade-off between efficiency and welfare. In Smith’s time most inefficiencies were also welfare-reducing. See Rothschild 2001, chapter 4, for a detailed discussion of some passages that show how for Smith efficiency and fairness are often connected.

48 On the importance of justice in WN, see Brubaker 2002b and Werhane 1991. The best account of Smith’s commitment to natural equality is still Cropsey 1957. See also my fifth chapter five and Fleischacker forthcoming.

49 I quote from Montesquieu 1989. Sam Fleischacker has called my attention to a remark by one of Smith’s more prominent students, John Millar: “The great Montesquieu pointed out the road. He was the Lord Bacon in this branch of philosophy. Dr Smith is the Newton” (quoted, from Millar, Historical View of English Government, 1812 edition, volume II, 429-30). Montesquieu’s influence on Smith has yet to be explored in depth.

50 For an ingenious argument to this effect, and with further references, see Young 1986. Young seems to have been unaware of the Montesquieu’s statement.

51 To see the advantage of Smith’s method let me give an example: one could estimate (hypothetical) natural prices for various goods by combining the average market rates of rent, wages, and profits for each individual good. A procedure like this would show the different discrepancies between the market price and the natural price among various commodities; it could call attention to especially distorted markets. (In this example I don’t mean to impute any normative status to the contrast between so-called “free” and “distorted” markets.) This would be a procedure for uncovering the existence of otherwise hidden causes.
So, I agree with Deborah Redman when she claims that Smith “abstracts from the real world to determine a typical — what he terms natural — representation of the facts.” But I think this abstraction, which Smith presents in an extremely gentle fashion to his readers, is only the first step. By specifying in advance what could be a cause for a deviation of the natural price, Smith allows the “men of learning” among his readers to quantify and exploit discrepancies from these idealizations to improve his theory. Here I mean by the term “idealization” a situation that would hold exactly in certain specifiable circumstances. Smith tells us to expect a gap between his theory (the natural price) and the facts (the market price); it is an invitation not only to determine the nature of and causal role human institutions play in economic life, but also to improve on his theory, if necessary.

II.B: Newton’s Fourth Rule of Reasoning

Smith’s thinking is in accord with a very important feature of Newton’s methodology: empirical exceptions to general rules, even minor ones, should be investigated.

The suggestion in the previous paragraph is not to be found in Adam Smith, and may appear arbitrary. But it does provide insight into a Smithian response against Mirowski’s 1982 empirical findings that, contrary to what Smith seems to predict, profit rates did not fall in Britain in the 18th century even though it is fairly likely stock increased. Confronted by these facts, two questions present themselves to a Smithian analysis: 1) did capital stock increase enough to cover the expansion of the market? (If not that would cause a shortage of capital, which would drive interest rates higher, which in turn would drive out lower profit industries/enterprises.) 2) If increase in the capital stock did keep pace with expansion of market/output – and this is a very reasonable assumption — then rising profits (even in the market as a whole!) are a sign of anti-competitive marketplaces; Smith is explicit about this at: WN, IV.vii.c.19 (595), 25 (598), and 58-59 (611). So, when faced with Mirowski’s findings one ought to ask: what kind of competitive circumstances does one find in the industries one is analyzing? Oddly enough, Mirowski did not explore the latter question before claiming that Smith was mistaken in his assessment that profit rates were falling in Britain after the Navigation act.


53This section abbreviates much of my discussion in chapter two, IV.
because they open up either the possibility of discovering interesting refinements to general rules or the possibility of formulating a more sophisticated new theory. As Newton wrote:

In experimental philosophy, propositions gathered from phenomena by induction should be considered either exactly or very nearly true notwithstanding any contrary hypotheses, until yet other phenomena make such propositions either more exact or liable to exceptions (*Principia*, Book III, Rule IV).

The Rule says that we should treat well-confirmed propositions as true (or nearly true) until there are deviations that promote new research, which, in turn, will lead us to refine our original propositions or reject them for new ones. That is, Newton accepts that physical inquiry may be open-ended. As he writes in the “Preface” to the *Principia*, “the principles set down here will shed some light on either this mode of philosophizing or some truer one” (emphasis added).\(^ {54} \) Rule IV is a proposal of how to treat Newton’s system, that is, as true until proven otherwise, and as an encouragement to find and exploit deviations from the regularities he has established.

Newton recognizes in the last three words of the Rule that regularities can have exceptions.\(^ {55} \) But we should not stress this too much. All he is saying in the Rule is that one must not be distracted by possible differing explanations for the found regularities until one has empirical reason to do so.

II.C: Smith on Descartes’ neglect of Deviations

I have no direct evidence that Smith found his method by reading Newton, but it is not unlikely.\(^ {56} \) In V.D of the previous chapter, I showed that Smith was a very astute reader

\(^ {54} \)For a more elaborate defense of this point see, George E. Smith 2002a and Stein 2002.

\(^ {55} \)Newton is also clear about this in the next to last paragraph of the final Query of the *Opticks*.

\(^ {56} \)One might think that to pay attention to empirical exceptions is just obviously sound methodology, and not especially Newtonian. But this methodology is an achievement of Newton’s; in chapter two, IV, I point out that Hume and many natural philosophers before
of Newton. Nevertheless, in the “Astronomy,” Smith’s treatment of Newton is not exhaustive (as his editors recognized). One could reasonably doubt that Smith learned to think about the evidential import of deviations from regularities by reading Newton. I admit I do not have conclusive evidence on this question. But this does not mean there is no evidence at all. For, in this section, I want to present Smith’s criticism of Descartes’ methodology. Reflection on this will show conclusively that Smith was aware of the methodology that I ascribe to him, regardless of its source.

To show the significance, for science — in Smith’s philosophy of science — of discrepancies between scientific theories and data, it is useful to remind us of his psychological account of how science works. We learn from the “Astronomy” that for Smith there are two related species of wonder. First, “single and individual objects … excite our Wonder when, by their uncommon qualities they make us uncertain to what species of things we ought to refer them” (“Astronomy,” 40, II¶5). Second, “Wonder arises from an unusual succession of things. The stop which is thereby given to the career of the imagination, the difficulty which it finds in passing along such disjointed objects, and the feeling of something like a gap or interval betwixt them, constitute the whole essence of this emotion” (“Astronomy,” II¶9, 42). Both species of wonder have in common that, to an expert, there is a deviation from a pattern we would expect (“Astronomy,” II¶11, 45).

him — including Descartes and his followers and prominent members in the Royal Society such as Boyle — provided arguments that allowed one to dismiss/ignore certain kinds of exceptions to generalization.

57The next two paragraphs overlap a bit with, and elaborate on, discussion in chapter three, III.

58This is an important issue in Smith’s WN, I.i.6-9, 19-22 and I.ii.4, 28-9, where the division of labor causes and enhances different talents among different peoples and trades (including philosophers). On such differing skills, see also “Imitative Arts” Annexe, 5, 211-2, and “Of the External Senses,” ¶52, 151-2. Cf. Turgot’s (posthumously published in 1808-11) “On Universal History,” in translation of Meek 1973, 89.
Now, “new and singular” events (“Astronomy,” II¶3, 39) or unusual relations (II¶6, 40) excite wonder in people’s imagination and make the mind’s customary procession between connecting principles falter; this causes “uncertainty and anxious curiosity” (II¶4, 40) even “discomfort” and “tumult” in the “imagination” (II¶12, 45-6). The discomfort caused by the appearance(s) of exceptions to general order first motivates inquiry.59 It is a validation of my general strategy, of connecting remarks in the “Astronomy” with WN, that Smith provides a very similar account in WN (V.i.f.24, 767-8, although, there, the emphasis on discomfort is entirely absent), thus suggesting considerable continuity between the two works.

Here, I call special attention to a striking and heretofore overlooked passage in the “Astronomy.” Smith explains the downfall of the Cartesian system in terms of its inability and unwillingness to deal with the “detailed motions and all the minute irregularities” of the heavenly bodies. In the “Astronomy,” Smith points out that Descartes’ theory does not explain these deviations from general rules, but attempts to explain them away:

So far, therefore, from accommodating his [i.e., Descartes’] system to all the minute irregularities, which Kepler has ascertained in the movements of the Planets; or from shewing, particularly, how these irregularities, and no other, should arise from it, he contented himself with observing, that perfect uniformity could not be expected in their motions, from the nature of the causes which produced them; that certain irregularities might take place in them, for a great number of successive revolutions, and afterwards give way to others of a different kind: a remark which, happily, relieved him from the necessity of applying his system to the observations of Kepler, and the other Astronomers (IV¶66, 97).

Now one may think that what Smith says here about Kepler is a bit strange because what Kepler had “ascertained” were mostly regularities—which regularities Descartes ignored (or rather, he denied that regularities could exist in this domain), contenting himself with irregularities instead. But, recall that Kepler’s regularities were irregularities from the

59Redman 1997, 222 n. 36, points out that Smith’s view can be traced back to Hutcheson as presented in A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy. See also Wightman 1975, 55-57, who comments on the relationship to Descartes’ account of the passions.
dominant view among astronomers when Kepler wrote; Kepler pointed to elliptical rather than to circular orbits of planets. Nevertheless, the passage clearly shows that Smith is aware of the importance of pursuing empirical accuracy and exactitude in judging systems. Elsewhere, he criticizes Descartes for claiming that it was not necessary “to suppose, that they [the orbits of the planets] described with geometrical accuracy, or even that they described always precisely the same figure. It rarely happens, that nature can be mathematically exact with regard to figure of the objects she produces” (IV¶64, 95). Of course, the need to accommodate one’s theory “to all the minute irregularities” is akin to what we would call careful curve-fitting, but what Smith has in mind is not merely curve-fitting. The passage from IV¶66, 97, also shows he thinks that it is a legitimate requirement on a system that it should provide a systematic account of how discrepancies from regularities can arise within it. I think he means by this that a theory should both explain what would count as evidence for or against it, and what type of deviations from regularities one could expect and explain with it. One of the things that Smith implies about Cartesian style theorizing is that it does not have a feedback mechanism to allow empirical failures to improve one’s theory.

Hence, it is not surprising that, in the “Astronomy,” Smith calls attention to how deviations from, for instance, Ptolemy’s, Almamon’s, and the Alphonsine tables, inspired corrections to Ptolemy’s system (IV¶26, 70-1). Moreover, he emphasizes how inquiry gets started in response to perceived “gaps” in chains of events (e.g., II¶8-9, 41-3, IV¶7, 58, and IV¶60, 91). What Smith is trying to get at, I think, is how the search for discrepancies from expected and clearly specified regularities can lead to refinement of existing or development

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60 Lauren Brubaker has suggested (in conversation) that Smith’s use of “irregularity” may deserve special scrutiny. For in Smith’s moral theory, Smith seems to suggest that an irregularity is a regular deviation from the expectations of Reason. See the footnote below in which a quote from “Astronomy,” IV¶68, 99, seems to support this observation. Comments by Howard Stein and Nathan Rosenberg helped me think about this issue.
of new theory. This is very Newtonian. A good theory may even lead to not only a qualitative change in the questions asked, but also to fundamentally different kinds of questions and criteria by which they are judged.

It is useful to draw a contrast with Smith’s celebrated contemporary, d’Alembert. (We know that Smith read and personally knew d’Alembert.) In the famous Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia (1751), d’Alembert also advocated that unusual events, or “monsters” (146), required special attention. He even thought they ought to be the topic of a special branch of natural history: “Errors or deviations of nature.” But, in the Preliminary Discourse d’Alembert was blind to the idea that they could be useful in refining the regularities found in nature. (In fact, the only use d’Alembert saw for “monsters” was “to pass from the prodigies of nature’s deviations to the marvels of art,” at 146.) So, while d’Alembert emphasized the importance of exactitude in science (95), he missed one of the most important benefits to be derived from it. If the empirical world cooperates, precision and exactitude allow one to get ever more rigorous about deviant data in order to marshal such data as potential evidence for better theories.

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63On monsters, see also Daston and Park 1998.

64Cf. Berkeley, A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge: “exceptions from the general rules of Nature are proper to surprise and awe men into an acknowledgment of the Divine Being” (§63).
III: Positing a “Natural Course” of Events: Institutions and Human Nature.

III.A: The Role of Institutions (1)

On my account, the theoretical fiction of a “natural price” not only calls attention to the distorting influences of human institutions, but it also points to an approach that can make evident the causes of the wealth of nations. Adam Smith’s science postulates the existence of the natural price and, more broadly, the natural course of economic development. Invoking the language of nature is obviously partly done for rhetorical purposes; to many 18th century readers, deviations from nature will have seemed corrupt and flawed. But discrepancies from the natural course of things also put the spotlight on the causes of wealth formation and retardation: human institutions (recall my discussion above of I.vii.24-31, 78-80). As Smith writes at the start of Book III:

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. If human institutions had never thwarted those natural inclinations, the towns could nowhere have increased beyond what the improvement and cultivation of the territory in which they were situated could support; till such time, at least, as the whole of that territory was completely cultivated and improved (WN, III.i.3, 377; emphasis added; cf. III.i.4, 378).

Notice, again, that Smith uses counterfactual language to make his point. In this case, Smith explains that it is the workings of institutions that prevent the natural course of things from taking place. Now, even a casual glance at the chapter heading in Book V “Of the Publick Works and Institutions for facilitating Commerce of the Society,” suggests that Smith used the term “Institution” rather widely. As far as I can tell, for Smith human institutions include roads, bridges, canals, harbors, companies, schools, universities, religious

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65Leon Montes reminded me of a lovely, hyperbolic passage in Becker 1932, 63: “Obviously the disciples of the Newtonian philosophy had not ceased to worship. They had given another form and a new name to the object of worship: having denatured God, they deified nature.”
orders/ministries, the monarchy, the armed forces, slavery, taxation policies, and legal arrangements (especially on land and inheritance of property).  

In Book III of WN, Smith lays out what he takes the natural, albeit not inevitable, course of civilizations to be. Note that in the quote from III.i.3, 377, necessity only works its course “in general.” Smith is also adamant that “the manners and customs” that a government introduces can also cause an “unnatural and retrograde order” even long after the government has changed (III.i.9, 380). Smith’s wording carefully maintains a certain amount of ambiguity; it is unclear to what degree he thinks this is a bad thing.

III.B: Human Nature

In III.i.3, 377, Smith also speaks of the “natural inclinations of man.” It is important to realize how weak Smith’s assumptions about human nature are that drive his account. Let us take a brief detour to look at them. People have, according to Smith, a “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” (WN, I.ii.1, 25; in TMS, Smith calls attention to many other propensities, see, e.g., I.11.2.5, 33; I.ii.5.2, 42; I.iii.1.4, 44, and IV.2.11, 192). Smith officially remains agnostic whether this propensity is the “necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech” or something more fundamental to human nature. And this agnosticism is defended because “it belongs not to

66See Redman 1997, 125. It is tempting to graft Hume’s distinction between the “natural” and “artificial” onto Smith’s approach to institutions (Treatise, III.i.II.9). For Hume education (I.iii.IX.19), property, honor, custom, civil laws (II.i.X.1), justice (III.iii.VI.4), and, perhaps, all goal-directed human actions (III.i.II.9 and III.ii.VI.6) are “artificial.” If Smith thought of “artificial” institutions as deflecting the “natural” course of things then his conception harks back to the traditional (pre-Cartesian) understanding of mechanics, which studied how human artifices changed the course of nature. Smith’s own understanding of nature is quite ambivalent (e.g., TMS, III.5.7ff,166); see, Brubaker 200b for useful comments.

67Lauren Brubaker’s dissertation (2000b) shows how for Smith human nature is a composite, sometimes an uneasy one, of biological and social factors (both of which are presented as “natural”).
our present subject to enquire."\(^{68}\) That is to say, Smith wants the reader to accept certain aspects of human nature as unobjectionable. One of those things is, for instance, that in a (large) commercial society a person must usually appeal through speech and other behavior to the self-interest of many strangers to get anything done (I.ii.2, 25-27). To accept this much, Smith believes, one need not argue about anything as complex as human nature, about the inner workings of which the science of his time was still largely ignorant.\(^{69}\) I believe Smith thought human individual nature was not stable enough to be a foundation for, to use Hume’s phrase, a “Science of Man.”\(^{70}\) (See also Smith’s mention of the “levity and inconstancy of human nature” at I.viii.31, 93.)\(^{71}\)

All Smith needs, then, is to find a steady propensity (or set of propensities) that will average out over most people during the course of time. Smith finds this in the propensity to barter, for instance, in the service of “bettering one’s condition” (see, e.g., II.iii.28, 341).\(^{72}\)

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\(^{68}\)Rothbard 1995, 442, ignores this while criticizing Smith.

\(^{69}\)Recall the quote from “Of the External Senses,” ¶37, 146, EPS (see also ¶42, 147-8), discussed in chapter three, IV.D.

\(^{70}\)We also find evidence in Smith’s students’ lecture-notes that he taught: “in no case is the proof of facts from the causes more uncertain than in that of Human actions. The causes of Human actions are motives; And so far is Certain that no one ever acts without a motive … In proving therefore an action to have happened by proving that its causes subsisted, we must not only prove that one had a motive to commit such an action, but also that it was one that suited his character, and that he had an opportunity to do so. But even when all this is done it does by no means amount to a proof of the action. The character of man is a thing so fluctuating that no proof which depends on it can be altogether conclusive” (Lecture 28, ii. 191-192, 171, LRBL).

\(^{71}\)Cf. Hume’s essay “Of Commerce”: “Man is a very variable being, and susceptible of many different opinions, principles, and rules of conduct” (and also “A Dialogue” in the Second Enquiry).

\(^{72}\)But the principle which prompts to save is the desire of bettering our condition, a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate, comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave. In the whole interval which separates those two moments, there is scarce perhaps a single instant in which any man is so perfectly and completely satisfied with his situation as to be without any wish of alteration or improvement of any kind. An augmentation of fortune is the means by which the greater part of men propose and wish to better their condition. It is the means the most vulgar and the most
In economic affairs, when we address ourselves to, say, bakers and butchers, we appeal not to their “humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk of our own necessities but of their advantages” (I.ii.2, 27).

Recall from my discussion in chapter three, III, that a crucial assumption of Smith in his account of the development of the “Impartial Spectator” is the fundamental uncertainty that each of us has about our own judgments (TMS, III.2.24 & III.2.28, 126-127; cf “Astronomy,” II¶4, 40). This inner uncertainty is matched by the uncertainty of the theorist; I believe it is recognition of the inconstancy of human nature that drives Smith’s vision (cf. the student notes collected in LRBL, Lecture 28, ii. 191-192, 171). For the theorists’ fundamental uncertainty about human behavior underlies Smith’s system of natural liberty in which “[T]he sovereign is completely discharged from a duty, in the attempting to perform which he must always be exposed to innumerable delusions, and for the proper performance of which no human wisdom or knowledge could ever be sufficient; the duty of superintending the industry of private people and of directing it towards the employments most suitable to the interest of society.” (WN, IV.ix.51, 687; emphasis added.) Moreover, the causes driving individual human actions are too diverse (and stubborn!) to be directed from above. As he writes in TMS: “[I]n the great chess-board of obvious; and the most likely way of augmenting their fortune is to save and accumulate some part of what they acquire, either regularly and annually, or upon some extraordinary occasions. Though the principle of expense, therefore, prevails in almost all men upon some occasions, and in some men upon almost all occasions, yet in the greater part of men, taking the whole course of their life at an average, the principle of frugality seems not only to predominate, but to predominate very greatly” (II.iii.28, 341; see the editors’ footnotes for references). Smith avoids making claims about individual human behavior at any given time; all he needs is an average propensity. Note also that Smith calls – pace those that view him as a crass defender of wealth – an augmentation of fortune “the most vulgar and most obvious” way of bettering one’s condition; I want to thank Lauren Brubaker for first calling my attention to this passage.

Smith’s famous example may have been inspired by Turgot [1770] 1889, §LXXIII and §LXXIV. Self-interested behavior in Smith consists of an interplay between a “passion for present enjoyment” and a “desire for bettering our condition,” see for discussion O’Donnell 1990, 58-9.
human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it” (TMS, VI.ii.2.17-8, 234). Hence, I suspect that Smith saw that the problem of state direction of the economy is not only computationally intractable (as suggested by WN, IV.ix.51, 687), but the legislator also has no reliable source of information about the diverse preferences of individuals (as implied by TMS, VI.ii.2.17-8, 234). Therefore, for Smith, “[T]he law ought always trust people with the care of their own, Interest, as in their local situations they must generally be able to judge better of it than the legislator can do” (WN, IV.v.b, 531; for similar comments: V.ii.c.18, 833). This shows that one reason for Smith's argument in favor of relatively unregulated markets is epistemic: individuals will have better knowledge of their own circumstances than the ruler will. The epistemic weakness of the rulers shows up in other places as well. When in Book V of WN Smith discusses efficient and just ways to collect taxes, he often notes that reliable information is not available, and that it would require an “inquisition” on the part of the magistrate to obtain it (V.ii.f.5-9, 848-50; V.ii.g.4, 853; V.ii.j.2, 867).

74Redman 1997, 212, claims — without a single citation from Smith’s works! — that Smith assumed d’Holbach’s Theory of Motion. Just because Smith owned a copy of a book by Holbach doesn’t mean he has adopted his views.

75The argument in TMS is not only, and maybe not even largely, epistemic; moral and political considerations also enter into Smith's reasoning. The quote in the text is lifted from a passage where Smith worries about “fanaticism” caused by the “spirit of system” or “faction” in turn influenced by the enthusiasm of the masses, see VI.ii.2.15, 232-3.

76Smith’s argument against state direction of the economy is not exclusively epistemic; he also stresses the political dangers of state tyranny, see, for instance, WN, IV.ii.10, 456.

77For Smith transactions in the “system of natural liberty” are subject to the “laws of justice” and the Sovereign must protect his sovereigns from “injustice or oppression” (WN, IV.ix.51, 687). Smith also has many recommendations on particular policies.

78I thank Gordon Sollars for calling my attention to this feature of WN.
An important source of information, that individuals will rely on, is, the market. (It is not the only source because Smith also talks about the importance of knowing the characters of participants in the marketplace as well; see, e.g., II.ii.62, 305-306.) Only the market can, given the right circumstances, provide, to use a modern phrase, an effective signaling system (e.g., IV.v.b.24-25, 533-534).\(^{79}\) However, Smith does not attribute any magical powers to “the haggling and bargaining of the market,” because he notes that it only works “according to that sort of rough equality which, though not exact, is sufficient for carrying on the business of common life” (WN, I.v.4, 49). I want to make an important observation about this quote that connects with the wider theme in this chapter. Notice that here Smith is fairly explicitly relying on a distinction between common life and another more exact realm—presumably (mathematical) science. Smith is, in fact, pointing out that markets are good enough for the business of common life, but that the data they provide are insufficient for a more exact enterprise. The concern with exactitude shows up again shortly thereafter: “[A]t the same time and place, therefore, money is the exact measure of the real exchangeable value of all commodities. It is so, however, at the same time and place only” (I.v.19, 55; for more discussion of this passage see, chapter five, II.B). Smith is aware that the prices provided by market exchange only offer exactitude in a very limited sense. All of this suggests that the “men of learning” of his time, with an interest in constructing an exact science, should not focus exclusively on markets. What is unclear is if Smith thought that this was due to some principled reason about the nature of markets or if this was exclusively due to the limited character of the data provided by the markets in his day. Either way, I see in this another reason to think, that in the context of developing a system to account for the phenomena, Smith’s focus was not solely on markets but also on other institutions.

\(^{79}\)Cf. Hayek 1945.
The individual actors of WN are themselves deceived or largely ignorant actors whose views of the whole are blocked (e.g., the very first example of WN, in which the division of labor puts different branches of work in different workhouses; I.i.2-3, 14). Often, ordinary folks, do not have an adequate grasp of “abstract” economic notions (I.v.5, 49). Just as in Smith’s moral theory people are often self-deceived and partial to themselves (TMS, III.iv.), in WN, people tend to overestimate their own luck and make decisions on incomplete information (e.g., WN, I.x.b.26, 124ff.). Moreover, they are open to peer-pressure and bouts of vanity; this is how Smith explains, for instance, the maintenance of cartels among employers (WN, I.viii.13, 84; see also WN, V.i.f.4, 759-760). Yet, for Smith, people are not just a collection of dunces; in his theory individuals also make sound economic decisions based on their realization that they have limited capacity to track capital and goods.

Earlier I said that Smith claims that the causes driving individual human actions are very diverse. It is tempting to read TMS as an account of what those causes are; it provides

80For Smith only the philosopher can attempt a view of the whole, yet, “their great abilities, though honourable to themselves, may contribute very little to the good government or happiness of their society” (WN, V.i.f.51, 783). This passage is ignored by Redman 1997, 230; cf. Fleischacker 1999, 174. For more on this, see chapter six.

81In a series of articles, Levy 1999a and 1999b, David Levy has been emphasizing a) the social nature of Adam Smith’s vision of economics, and b) Smith’s realization that economic actors can systematically misperceive their own interests, that is, they don’t have perfect information. Smith’s assumptions were, as Levy points out, not shared by most of the founders of modern neoclassical economics (who followed Ricardo); see also Levy 1995. For a contrasting view, see Redman 1997, 213 and 245, where it is claimed that the basic component in Smith is the individual.

82Smith thinks that the ability to see one’s capital explains why the home trade is more preferable to foreign trade (WN, IV.ii.6, 454-455), and why “upon equal, or nearly equal profits, most men will choose to employ their capitals rather in the improvement and cultivation of land than either in manufactures or in foreign trade” (III.i.3, 377-378; see also, III.i.7, 379 and III.iv.19, 423). For other examples that emphasize the ability to observe capital and human beings, see II.ii.62, 305-306. Herbert Simon’s work on bounded rationality can be seen as an important descendant of Smith.
a rich phenomenology of the roles sympathy, ambition, vanity, benevolence, custom, fashion, self-approbation, justice, remorse, etc. play in human life.\footnote{Many scholars have tried to reconcile TMS and WN—creating a huge industry around the “Adam Smith problem.” That is not my project here. The source of this problem is the idea (first propounded by German scholars at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century) that the actors in WN are self-interested (in a very narrow sense) and the actors of TMS are driven by sympathy (mistakenly understood as benevolence). This understanding of the problem is now dismissed. If only, as Charles Larmore first pointed out to me, because the act of sympathy, that is, imagining oneself in another’s position, is crucial to self-interest, particularly in the pursuit of wealth, where we pursue what we think others desires or envy. This is not to say no discrepancies between WN and TMS can be found. See, Otteson 2002, for an effort to revive the Adam Smith problem.}

III.C: The Role of Institutions (2)

Let us return to my main argument. Induced from the “natural inclinations of man” (III.1.3, 377), Smith provides an idealized picture of how societies “naturally” develop.\footnote{Bowles 1986, 15, calls this is an a priori picture, but that is only accurate if one could show that Smith’s picture of the “natural inclinations of man” is also a priori. Bowles is very critical of Smith because he thinks Smith’s approach to history is unempirical. My approach defends Smith from this charge.} Stock must first be saved in a hunting or shepherding society, before it can be directed to agriculture, then afterwards to manufactures, and finally to foreign commerce (III.i.8, 380).\footnote{Redman 1997, 125 n.48, usefully employs the (Weberian?) language of “ideal states.”} The rest of Book III is an exploration of why and how this natural path was not followed in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire.\footnote{D’Alembert’s \textit{Preliminary Discourse} also has the structure of postulating a natural development of the arts and sciences through the use of Memory, Reason, and Imagination (in Greek and Roman times), while having to explain that since the Renaissance the order of Enlightenment was Memory (scholarship), Imagination (belles-lettres), and Reason (philosophy).} In doing this, Smith is put in a position to provide a subtle picture of how wealth is created given certain fairly stable background conditions (location, climate, geography, etc.). The core of Book III is an account of legal frameworks and political arrangements that retard or encourage the natural
course of things.\footnote{Redman 1997, 249.} Once one pays attention one sees these themes present in Books I-II, also. See, for instance, Smith’s remark that “China seems to have been long stationary, and had probably long ago acquired that full complement of riches which is consistent with the nature of its laws and institutions. But this complement may be much inferior to what, with other laws and institutions, the nature of its soil, climate, and situation might admit of” (I.ix.15, 111-112; I.viii.24, 89 and IV.ix.40, 679-80).

So, instead of being merely a curious historical/sociological side-show that illustrates Smith's wide range of interests, Book III is on my reading central to the science that Smith attempts to found. It is only a first stab at providing explanations of the comparative and historical performances of various European countries. In Book V, he takes the lessons he has learned, including the law of unintended consequences, and applies them in his proposed design for many institutions.

My reading offers, thus, indirect evidence for Nathan Rosenberg’s old and oddly ignored thesis about the systematic vision underlying Smith’s policy recommendations: to provide “an exact, detailed specification of an optimal institutional structure,” so that market forces could operate in a beneficent fashion. Rosenberg had argued that, throughout WN, Smith provides “details of the institutional structure, which will best harmonize the individual’s pursuit of his selfish interests with the broader interests of society.”\footnote{Rosenberg 1960, 570 and 559. I know of only one work on Adam Smith that has taken up and systematically developed Rosenberg’s insights: Muller 1993. Hollander 1973, 311, remarks on the importance of Rosenberg’s 1960 paper in a footnote without incorporating it into the framework of his discussion of Smith.} In chapter five, I discuss the political aims of WN.
III.D: Model, Cause and Process

I found Smith’s discussion at WN, I.vii.20-32, 77-80 (quoted before) striking because after sketching an abstract “natural” model, Smith systematically laid out what causes could create “deviations, whether occasional or permanent, of the market price of commodities from the natural price” (I.vii.32, 80). Future researchers are in the position to do empirical work on measuring the extent of these causes. Down the road this research can stimulate revision, if necessary, to the ideal model. A small scale revision would be the discovery of causes other than institutions; this would be welcome, for it would not require wholesale change to the theoretical structure. It could be accommodated by merely adding the nature and extent, permanent or occasional, of this newly discovered cause to the list of possible deviations. One circumstance in which larger-scale revision would happen is if it turned out that Smith has ignored dominant causes that need to be accounted for, not merely as causes for deviation, but as elements of the “natural” model; one could imagine this to be the case if serious empirical flaws were found in his theory of human nature or if, say, the nature of exchange changed dramatically in technologically advanced societies.

But even if we ignore the most abstract level of Smith’s theory, the theoretical structure of Smith’s theory, i.e., postulate a “natural” course and systematically stipulate causes that can make it deviate, is recapitulated on the component level (wages, rents, profits, etc.) of his natural price analysis (WN, I.viii-xi.d, 82-193). For instance, after presenting a quick account of the origin of wage-labor (I.viii.1-10, 82-83), Smith provides a general model of the nature of property-wage relationships and how the circumstances of society effect price of labor (I.viii.11-57, 83-103). The crucial point is that the “money price of labor is necessarily regulated by two circumstances; the demand for labour, and the price of

89 That is not all he does. WN, I.viii contains some of Smith’s most explicit comments about how important it is to improve welfare of “Servants, labourers and workmen of different kinds, [which] make up the the far greater part of every great political society” (I.viii.36, 96). For discussion see chapter five.
the necessaries and conveniences of life” (I.viii.52, 103; the latter circumstance acts as a kind of constraint on the former). But shortly hereafter, Smith explains, employing counterfactual language, that the model he had just provided is an idealized one; it only “would be the case in a society where things were left to follow their natural course, where there was perfect liberty, and where every man was perfectly free both to choose what occupation he thought proper, and to change it as often as he thought proper” (I.x.1, 116).

But Smith recognizes two different kinds of causes that can produce deviations from the natural course of things: 1) those “arising from the Nature of the Employments themselves” (I.x.b, 116-135) and more importantly, 2) those “occasioned by the policy [i.e., administrative rules] of Europe” (I.x.c, 135-159). Each kind of cause gets, in turn, subdivided in particular causes all of which receive extensive treatment.

As I argued in chapter three, IV.C, Smith appears to have a realistic understanding of causes. I also claimed that, unlike Hume, he probably also recognized different kinds of causes, e.g., efficient and final ones. Now, we are in a better position to understand what at least one type of cause is in Smith’s thought: it is the institution or process that can push the natural course of things from its path. Identifying the operation of such courses is crucial to Smith’s enterprise. There is no reason to presuppose that such causes must be in strict accord with Hume’s definition (i.e., contiguity of cause and effect, priority of cause over effect, and constant conjunction of cause and event; see chapter two for discussion). In fact, I think it is likely that the processes that push the natural course of things from its normal path can operate across space and time and even in a simultaneous fashion. For instance, Smith believes that “Commerce and manufactures can seldom flourish long in any state which does not enjoy a regular administration of justice, in which the people do not feel themselves secure in the possession of their property, in which the faith of contracts is not supported by law, and in which the authority of the state is not supposed to be regularly employed in enforcing the payment of debts from all those who are able to pay” (WN,
V.iii.9, 910). So, while commerce leads to good order, some order is necessary for commerce to flourish. Smith’s “solution” to this problem is to insist that the growth of commerce is a “gradual” and a “slow and uncertain” process during the course of centuries (III.iv.10-23, 418-26). He does not say so, but he implies that the growth of commerce and the rule of law are a concomitant process.90

To briefly summarize: on my reading, Smith offers a) a “natural” model (based on certain assumptions of human nature, historical change, etc.) of what would be the case under ideal circumstances with b) a list of factors (stipulated in advance) that will cause deviations from the idealization in order to c) stimulate research on a part of his readers, both to d) investigate the nature and extent of these causes, and if they do not turn out to be exhaustive, to what degree there are e) new causes that need to be incorporated in the model, which, in extremis, f) may be revised. Smith is starting, then, an open-ended process. At the same time, Smith’s detailed presentation of his idealizations provide a richly layered, systematic structure to help organize, interpret, and understand the phenomena under scrutiny. Smith helps the majority of his readers to make sense of the world they live in, while trying to prevent the rulers from doing inadvertent harm to the societies they govern.

III.E: A comparison: Hume and Smith on the Introduction of Commerce

By way of contrast to Smith’s method, it is worth calling attention to Hume’s historical treatment of the origins of commercial society in his essay “Of Commerce.” There, Hume suggests we should “consult history” to explain the growth of foreign commerce. He claims it is an empirical fact that in Europe “foreign trade has preceded any

90Turgot writes: “the spirit of commerce presupposes a property in goods which is independent of every power other than that of the laws” (“On Universal History,” Turgot 1973, 73). Although in the main body of the text I emphasize the differences with Hume, Smith’s historical narrative is heavily influenced by Hume; see Hayek 1967, 113, and Rothschild 2001, 10, for references. See also Rosenberg 1975, 384ff.
refinement in home manufactures.” He goes on to suggest that natural endowments such as “soil or climate” influence what commodity gets exchanged. For Hume, the actual historical record suggests, that in most nations, foreign commerce is prior to the expansion of local manufacturing (“Of Commerce,” 263-4; recall that for Smith, in the natural course of events, foreign commerce comes after the development of local manufacturing). But he provides no explanatory strategy for thinking that this observation is not merely a contingent fact. Moreover, he does not and, as far as I can tell, cannot try to explain how foreign commerce became important in the very first nations to experience it. Hume provides no theoretical structure for analyzing alternative historical paths. It is for these reasons that I rate Smith’s approach as methodologically superior. In general, Hume thought, “it is the chief business of philosophers to regard the general course of things” and not worry too much about “exceptions” (“Of Commerce,” 254-255). Whenever Hume did find a general rule or some law-like relationship it could either be only stated in very vague terms or exceptions to it must be granted immediately. In Hume’s theorizing the exceptions to such general rules could not itself provide further evidence in the development of theory; what they pointed to was the contingent nature of human history or the existence of many intervening causes that were not open to systematic investigation.

Nevertheless, I do not want to give the impression that Hume was a casual Empiricist in interpreting history. For Hume let his understanding of human nature constrain his interpretations of the historical record. So, for instance, before he introduces his discussion of the historical record regarding the relationship between foreign commerce

91I think my analysis here provides an explanation for the difference in causal explanatory power that Tieffenbach forthcoming has noted between Hume’s and Smith’s respective theories.

92For more on this, see chapter 2, IV, for my discussion of Newton’s 4th Rule of Reasoning in the context of Hume’s Missing Shade of Blue example.
and local manufacture, he points out “Every thing in the world is purchased by labour; and
our passions are the only causes of labour,” (“Of Commerce,” 261.)93

III.F: Hume’s natural rate of propagation
and Smith’s Digression on Silver

Not unlike Smith, Hume is quite serious about taking the institutional framework
and “habits and manners” of a society into account when interpreting the historical record
(“Of Interest,” EMPL, 298, and, especially, “Ancient Nations,” EMPL, 381ff.). It is worth
looking at one of Hume’s most sustained efforts at doing so. In his essay “Ancient
Nations,” Hume points out that, when facts are uncertain, it is appropriate to “intermingle
the enquiry concerning the causes with that concerning facts” (381). In this essay, Hume
postulates a natural94 rate of propagation, a doubling in every generation, or about 25 years,
of the human species. Hume stipulates that “everything else being equal” (vegetation,
climate, etc.) this rate can only be achieved under “wise, just, and mild government” with
the “wisest institutions” (382). The natural rate is, thus, for Hume an optimal rate. Hume
infers what would be the case based on empirical observations of what is the case in, say, the
American colonies and the quick rebound in population after plagues as well on facts about
human nature (381; as supplied by, for instance, Hume’s Treatise, which had been based on
“experiment and observation”). In “Ancient Nations,” Hume uses this natural rate to
reason from facts to causes as well as from causes to facts. So, for instance, if there is
reliable information that population is or was increasing in some locale, this is evidence for a

93In “Of Interest” Hume writes: “There is no craving or demand of the human mind
more constant and insatiable than that for exercise and employment; and this seems the
foundation of most of our passions and pursuits” (300). See also Hume’s invocation of the
potent and infallible moral attraction of the interests and passions of men at “Of the Balance
of Trade” (313). For more on the role that human nature plays in Hume’s economic and
historical thinking, see Rotwein 1954 for excellent discussion.

94Strictly speaking Hume does not call it a “natural rate” (381), although a page
later he says, the rate “seems natural to expect.”
mild government with sound economic policy, while he will infer the converse, too. Positing
the natural rate, then, allows Hume inferences about the past and present. Acceptance of the
relationship between the nature of government and population also provides Hume with an
important constraint on accepting the facts provided by various literary and political texts.
(Alas, Hume does not allow historical facts to help him improve or refute the rule that he
employs to interpret history with.) Hume is, thus, self-consciously offering a principled
evidential strategy to deal with a situation in which only limited data are available.

In Section II.A, while discussing WN, I.ix.3, p 105 and I.xi.o.5, 261, I made a point
of claiming that Smith was acutely conscious of the limited accuracy of data available to
him. It is no surprise, then, that we find Smith employing Hume’s technique — of moving
from facts to causes and visa versa — in at least one prominent place in WN.95 In his very
long “DIGRESSIONS CONCERNING THE VARIATIONS IN THE VALUE OF
SILVER DURING THE COURSE OF THE FOUR LAST CENTURIES” at the end of
the first Book of WN, Smith ingeniously employs his theory about the relationship among
increase in supply (the result of increase in agricultural output, in turn, the effect of
improved technology and cultivation), the price of corn (the 18th century word for edible
seeds),96 and the value of silver. Smith assumes that an increase in supply caused by
 technological improvement will cause the value of items that always produce rent to decrease
in proportion to the value of items that may or may not afford some rent. That is to say,
“materials of cloathing and lodging, the useful fossils and minerals of earth, the precious
metals and the precious stones should gradually become dearer and dearer” (I.xi.d.1, 193;

95What follows here bears close affinity to the detailed treatment of Hoover and
Dowell 2001. In their discussion, they show that Smith’s method in the Digression can be
understood in terms of J.S. Mill’s method of residues. Their conclusions are not very
different from those defended here, but my approach avoids this particular anachronism. I
want to thank Harro Maas for calling my attention to this piece.

96The price of corn is Smith’s major approximation to measure the welfare of the
working poor. See chapter five for a defense of this claim.
Smith recognizes that changes in supply and demand can alter this relationship). Based on this relationship, Smith can exhaustively state (in WN, I.xi.d.4-6, 194) all “possible combinations of events which happen in the progress of improvement” (I.xi.d.7, 194) as they pertain to the relative prices of silver and corn. With this theoretical framework in place, and the availability of relatively reliable long-running data on the price of corn, Smith is able to impute the value of silver over a long period of time. This, in turn, allows him to make the causal claims against the Mercantilists in the “conclusion” of his digression:

As the wealth of Europe, indeed, has increased greatly since the discovery of the mines of America, so the value of gold and silver has gradually diminished. This diminution of their value, however, has not been owing to the increase of the real wealth of Europe, of the annual produce of its land and labour, but to the accidental discovery of more abundant mines than any that were known before. The increase of the quantity of gold and silver in Europe, and the increase of its manufactures and agriculture, are two events which, though they have happened nearly about the same time, yet have arisen from very different causes, and have scarce any natural connection with one another. The one has arisen from a mere accident, in which neither prudence nor policy either had or could have any share. The other from the fall of the feudal system, and from the establishment of a government which afforded to industry the only encouragement which it requires, some tolerable security that it shall enjoy the fruits of its own labour (WN, I.xi.n.1, 255-256).

Smith clearly thinks that his method has enabled him to distinguish apparent from real causes and to differentiate between natural connections and mere coincidences. Hence, some

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97See also I.xi.i.3, 234. It is important for Smith’s analysis that a silver-mine always allow rent; that the demand for silver is a worldwide phenomenon (I.xi.d.2-3, 193-194).

98Smith’s analysis is focused on long-ter, prices. Short-term fluctuations indicate supply shocks most frequent in “turbulent and disorderly societies” (I.xi.e.23, 204; Smith has in mind Feudalism here). Smith must also assume that improvements in the efficiency of producing corn are “counter-balanced” by other costs (such as the price of cattle, “the principal instruments of agriculture;” I.xi.e.28, 206).

99O’Donnell 1990, 77-81. O’Donnell is especially clear how this procedure — and added assumptions about the long-run price movements and trade-offs among different commodities see WN, I.xi.i-m, 234-255 — enabled Smith to infer “with a degree of probability that approaches almost to certainty” from relative “real” prices of different commodities (i.e., cattle, corn, vegetables, and manufacturers) at what stage of improvement an economy was (I.xi.n.3, 257). I explain Smith’s concept of a “real price” in chapter five, II.B.
of his conclusions are offered “with a degree of probability that approaches almost to
certainty (I.xi.n.3, 257), while other opinions “scarce, perhaps, deserve the name of belief”
(I.xi.h.11, 233). Smith can produce counterfactual arguments because he has an abstract
theory about the natural course of events; it is supplemented by crucial assumptions about
the relative prices of goods and the “gradual” nature by which certain causes are said to
operate in the course of development (e.g., I.xi.g.19, 218). The latter act as constraints on
his interpretation of the historical data. In “Ancient Nations,” Hume has shown the way to
this method to interpret the historical record. It is no coincidence, I suspect, that the
constraint that is employed on interpreting historical data is of the same kind that, for Smith,
enables real growth in wealth: a stable institutional framework that ensures a minimal
protection for income earned from labor.100

III.G: Some Objections

One could object that the connection between the natural price of Book I and the
natural course of things in Book III is tenuous at best. Even if one were to grant that Smith
postulated both to stress the importance of institutions and with an eye toward allowing
discrepancies from them to provide evidence toward developing better theories, they are not
identical situations. After all, the factors that make up a “natural” price, i.e., wages, rent, and
profit, only exist in certain economic arrangements or stages of economic development.
Specifically, there is no rent in a hunting society (V.i.b.2, 709), and many shepherd societies
may not have stable property arrangements. In fact, Smith thinks that civil government is
only founded in certain advanced shepherd societies (V.i.b.12, 715). So, the theory being
described and defended in Books I-II of WN is only applicable in a limited domain, i.e.,
societies with property and ones that have at least some freemen — for if all the labor were

100In chapter five, I examine Smith’s views on justice, redistribution, and property
rights.
performed by slaves there would be no wages — and merchants. By contrast, the natural
course of things in Book III covers several such domains. (This is not to say that certain
aspects of the theory as developed in Books I-II cannot be extended or adapted to cover
other periods or levels of development.) The extent of this domain is constrained by features
of, say, the legal structure of the society under analysis, as it is in this case of the theory of
Book I. But one can imagine that other human institutions — e.g., the existence of different
modes of production or the establishment of new categories of income — will structure the
contents of the possible generalizations. Because Smith’s theory in Books I-II is so context
sensitive to the laws and institutions of a society,\textsuperscript{101} this may explain why there are, despite
many broad qualitative generalizations, no general laws or axioms in WN.\textsuperscript{102} This aspect of
Smith’s theorizing has not been appreciated sufficiently, at least in part, because Smith does
not emphasize the context dependent nature of his work.\textsuperscript{103} Moreover, Smith’s theory is
sufficiently broad and abstract that it can be applied to many different kinds of societies.

Two further objections present themselves to the reading proposed here. First I
cannot provide compelling textual support from WN that my reconstruction of Smith’s
strategy is accurate. It could be the case that I am ascribing intentions to Smith’s theorizing
he did not have. That would devalue the historical significance of my reading, especially if

\textsuperscript{101}Here’s an example from Smith’s discussion on price: “[T]hough pecuniary wages
and profit are very different in the different employments of labour and stock; yet a certain
proportion seems \textit{commonly} to \textit{take place} between both the pecuniary wages in all the
different employments of labour, and the pecuniary profits in all the different employment
of stock. This proportion, it will appear hereafter, depends partly upon the nature of the
different employments, and partly upon the \textit{different laws and policy of the society in which
they are carried on}. But though in many respects dependent upon the laws and policy, this
proportion seems to be little affected by the riches or poverty of that society; by its
advancing, stationary, or declining condition; but to remain the same or very nearly the same
in all those different states” (I.vii.36, 80; emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{102}See Hutchison 1978, 10. He points out (7) that economists following Smith
assumed a fairly stable social and political environment.

\textsuperscript{103}Redman 1997, 219-220, remarks that Smith’s approach is evolutionary, and that
the main focus of the 4-stage theory of development is the evolution of institutions.
none of Smith’s contemporaries or successors saw things this way. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that, if one wants to learn about evidential strategies in what we call the social sciences, WN is not a bad place to start.

Finally, one could object to my reading that the distinction between natural and market prices is already present in the student notes we have from his “Lectures on Jurisprudence.” These provide no evidence that the interpretation I am offering was on Smith’s mind then. But this objection is not that worrisome. After all, in his lectures, Smith was not presenting his theory to “men of learning,” but to young pupils. Moreover, it would not be the only time that, when it came to the material on prices, Smith changed his mind on important issues between presenting the “Lectures” and publishing WN.  

It is a virtue of my reading that I can not only avoid making Smith look confused about something that had been a life-long interest, but also show how Smith can be seen as forward-looking. On my view whole chunks of WN become part of his science and not just interesting asides.

**IV: Smith’s Philosophy of Science**

In this part, I demonstrate that my interpretation of WN, Is in the spirit of Smith’s views on “science.” I rely largely on the essays presented in EPS. These texts show that Smith thought: *that scientific theories were in an important sense, research tools; that scientific theorizing was an open-ended enterprise of successive approximations.* I will not repeat the argument (presented in chapter three) that for Smith science is an open-ended

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104For examples see Brown 1994, 147-175; O’Donnell 1990, 176 and 250, n. 10; Rothbard 1995, 460-461. Given that Smith’s work on “real” prices involved a conceptual innovation (see for more, chapter five, II.B) there is no reason why he could not have realized that his early work on natural prices also lend itself to evidential exploitation.

105Much of what bears on this section is presented in chapter three.
process. If I can prove this, then I hope my reconstruction of Smith's strategy in WN gains some credibility. I discuss these claims in two different sections.

IV.A: Machines

For Smith, “philosophy is the science of the connecting principles of nature” (“Astronomy,” II¶12, 45); or, as he put it slightly differently elsewhere in the “Astronomy”: philosophy should “give some coherence to the appearances of nature” (II¶9, 43).\textsuperscript{106} It does this by proposing theories that appeal to the imagination. Smith’s “Astronomy” is an examination of what psychological factors play an important role in this process.\textsuperscript{107}

In the “Astronomy,” Smith claims that the systems of philosophers “in many respects resemble machines … A system is an imaginary machine” (IV¶19, 66).\textsuperscript{108} In the

\textsuperscript{106}I don’t understand why Redman 1997, 114, infers from this Smith’s approach to human mind was “atomistic.”

\textsuperscript{107}Although it emphasizes psychological factors, other (social, cultural, political, etc.) factors are not ignored. See chapter three for my details on this.

\textsuperscript{108}In contrast to other commentators, I doubt that Smith ever claimed that nature itself is like a machine. One of the most insightful readers of Smith, Skinner 1979, 11, erroneously refers to TMS, II.ii.3.5, 87, where Smith uses a watch as an example to explicate the difference between efficient and final causation, but where he does not himself claim that the universe is a “great machine.” (I treat this passage in chapter three, V.C.) There are other places that are often cited when the world is a machine view is attributed to Smith: at TMS, VII.ii.1.38, 289, Smith talks of the “whole [deterministic] machine of the world;” here he is explicitly summarizing Stoic and not his own doctrines. Second, at TMS, VI.ii.3.4, 236, Smith uses the phrase, “the immense machine of the universe,” but he does so while explaining what idea is the “most sublime” object of “human contemplation,” (i.e., the Divine Being who produces the greatest possible quantity of happiness); he does not claim that this idea is true. Only once (TMS, I.i.4.2, 19) does Smith talk of the “various appearances which the great machine of the universe is perpetually exhibiting.” It may well be that Smith took this description of the universe literally (and would be, thus, the only such instance in the whole of Smith’s works). However, as Brown 1994 has demonstrated it is important to pay attention to the rhetorical element in Smith’s presentation. In this section, Smith is presenting the common point of view not his own; he is not describing how the “men of learning” judge. Nowhere in WN does Smith describe the world or universe as a machine; this idea played no meaningful role in his economic theorizing. Cf. Redman 1997, 218-220.
division of labor that Smith diagnoses, systems are (perhaps, among other things) the products of the philosopher’s labour (WN, I.1.9, 21-22, and V.i.f.26-34, 769-773). The comparison between machines and the systems of philosophers pertains in Smith’s use to their similar pattern of development, that is, that there is a trade-off between simplicity of principles and expansion of application. It is important to note that, for Smith, this relates to the development of an accepted theory. The replacement of one theory with the next, a “revolution” in his own language, is motivated, among other things, by the fact that the new theory has simpler principles and a wider application (of predictions, etc.; “Astronomy,” IV¶18-19).

The idea that scientific theories can be compared to machines goes back at least to Bacon, for whom they were, among other things, instruments that guide research. Smith’s own usage was probably inspired by Bishop Berkeley, whom, given the attention Smith lavishes on him in “Of the External Senses;” Smith apparently had read carefully.

Following Berkeley (section 65 of Principles), we can say that the machine metaphor emphasizes two things: i) the constructed nature of philosophic systems—they are inventions that change over time, and this is, in fact, one of the major themes of the “Astronomy.” Smith also intends the comparison among machines, systems, and

\[\text{109}\] See Lundgren 1969, 909-910, for useful references to “Considerations Concerning the first Formation of Languages” (hereafter “Languages”). For Smith on language, see also Levy 1997.

\[\text{110}\] I do not understand why Redman 1997, 85 and 214ff. n.19, seems to agree with Dugald Stewart’s claim that Smith ignored the importance of predictions. See, by contrast, Smith’s comments on the predictions concerning Halley’s comet (“Astronomy,” IV¶74, 103). For more on the role of predictions in Smith’s understanding of science, see chapter 3, V.D.

\[\text{111}\] Redman 1997, 226, connects Smith’s “Astronomy” with Bacon’s Idols in a very interesting way. Hobbes, too, may have been an influence on Smith here; see Cropsey 1957, for an attempt to link Smith to Hobbes.

\[\text{112}\] “[P]hilosophy] is the most sublime of all the agreeable arts, and its revolutions have been the greatest, the most frequent, and the most distinguished of all those that have
languages to imply that the pattern of development is a *gradual* affair, at least until a revolution takes place (223-4 of Adam Smith’s “Languages”). ii) Systems are effective ways to convey abundant information—they provide efficient explanatory accounts. By attempting to expose nature’s “connection principles” and to represent “the invisible chains which bind together all these disjointed objects,” natural philosophy is, in Smith’s view, designed to appeal to, and calm, people’s imagination (“Astronomy,” II ¶12, 45-46).

For Smith, explanation that gains widespread acceptance often seems to consist in proving the existence of a connecting chain from some unusual event, say an eclipse, “to the ordinary course of things,” see II ¶9, 43, of “Astronomy.” Of course, the scientific theories that manage to knot together unusual events with the ordinary course of things may themselves be counterintuitive:

> For, though it is the end of Philosophy, to allay that wonder, which either the unusual or seemingly disjointed appearances of nature excite, yet she never triumphs so much, as when, in order to connect together a few, in themselves, perhaps, inconsiderable objects, she has, if I may so, created another constitution of things, more easily attended to, but more new, more contrary to common opinion and expectation, than any of those appearances themselves (“Astronomy,” IV ¶33, 75).

Smith seems to be claiming that it can be a mark of a successful theory that it is unexpected, even surprising. Such a theory, “another constitution of things,” itself will almost certainly create a feeling of wonder and surprise. Among “men of learning” this can induce a new round of reflections on the metaphysical or conceptual foundations of such a system. Finally, we can add a third feature that the machine metaphor brings out, harking back to Bacon’s use: systems are *tools* to engage in further research.

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113 See Skinner 1996, 38. It is worth pointing out that Smith’s psychological account applies to theory creation and acceptance. For more details, see my third chapter.

114 Redman 1997, 223, has a very different account of why Smith invokes the “machine” metaphor: “it demonstrates how society, like a machine, can be taken apart and...
IV.B: Successive Approximations

Smith’s account in the “Astronomy” of the successive adoptions of various systems of nature makes clear that the development of all such systems has a fairly predictable sequence: a system is designed by the imagination to provide coherence to the appearances, thus soothing the imagination. As time passes, either irregularities are discovered, and successive, gradual modifications are introduced into the system leading toward more complexity (eventually, new requirements are put on the system) or new phenomena are discovered which lead to conflicting accounts or dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction, combined with the ambition (vanity, etc.) of the philosophers, makes it likely that the system will be replaced by a new system, and so the cycle starts anew.\(^{115}\)

There is some evidence that Smith viewed his own relationship to previous contributions to political economy as a closer approximation to the truth. In WN, in the process of an extensive, critical discussion of the Physiocratic system, popular in France, he was led to remark:

This system, however, with all its imperfections is, perhaps, the nearest approximation to the truth that has been yet published upon the subject of political oeconomy, and is upon that account well worth the consideration of every man who wishes to examine with attention the principles of that very important science (WN, IV.ix.38, 678-679, emphasis added).

Smith greatly admired the Physiocrats; according to Dugald Stewart, Smith’s first biographer, Smith would have dedicated WN to Quesnay, “the very ingenious and profound author of this [physiocratic] system” (WN, IV.ix.27, 672), if the French explained and shows how it is governed by law.” This is not an improbable suggestion. But she admits she does not have a clear statement from Smith to offer as evidence. She does quote an interesting passage from Hume’s writings. But her presentation fails to make clear that she is quoting Cleanthes in the Dialogues concerning Natural Religion! It is by no means obvious that we should attribute his views to Hume, let alone Smith. I do think it is a view that can be safely attributed to Turgot, see his letter to Hume, March 25, 1767.

\(^{115}\)See Skinner 1979, 26-9, for a more detailed account of this.
physician had lived).\textsuperscript{116} There is no doubt, however, that he thought he had advanced beyond the Physiocrats (WN, IV.ix.50, 687).\textsuperscript{117}

Perhaps Smith thought that he had achieved the truth, and no mere approximation to truth, about political economy.\textsuperscript{118} WN, Is obviously written in a confident tone—recall how Smith was willing to assert his views “with a degree of probability that approaches almost to certainty” at I.xi.n.3, 257. Nevertheless, I hope to have demonstrated above that the estimation of a “natural price” itself can, upon reflection, only be achieved through a sort of process of successive approximation. Again, this is very Newtonian. For instance, one first employs market prices of wages and rents and interest rates to figure out what the natural price would be in a given set of circumstances. Then, one must imagine how removal or reform of various institutions would effect the profit, wage, and rent rates, etc.

\textit{V: Conclusion}

If I am right, then Smith must have hoped that future generations of “men of learning” would see that discrepancies from his postulated natural course of things, themselves could provide evidence for the construction of better theories. Although the principles of his theory are derived from some broad empirical generalizations and ingenious use of counterfactual reasoning, the theory itself can be improved through

\textsuperscript{116} Steward, “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, L.L.D.,” §III¶12, 304, EPS.

\textsuperscript{117} For Smith’s relationship to the Physiocrats, see Skinner 1996, 123-142. Smith calls the Physiocrats a “sect” the members of which have an admiration of Quesnay, their leader, not inferior “to that of any of the antient philosophers for the founders of their respective systems” (WN, IV.ix.38, 679).

\textsuperscript{118} The language of approximation also shows up in Smith’s discussion of prices: “[W]e must generally, therefore, content ourselves with them, not as being always exactly in the same proportion as the current prices of labour, but as being the nearest approximation which can commonly be had to that proportion” (I.v.22, 56; emphasis added). But in context this is not a claim about successive approximation.
empirical and historical research. Smith even points to the empirical tools that should make this research possible, even if he himself only partially executes this. His system is not the last word, but the foundation for an ambitious program of research. Meanwhile, it provides grounds for economic reform to benefit the working poor, but that is the subject of the next chapter.

There is no denying the scope of Smith's ambitions. Upon the book's publication several commentators explicitly compared his achievement to Newton's.\textsuperscript{119} It is not impossible of course that Smith himself thought he had achieved this. (Smith was modest in public.) Without wishing to downplay Smith's achievements as an empirical researcher and theorist, I believe that Smith knows his work was only a start of a new line of research; he expects his theory to be refined by better and more focused empirical data. If my thesis is correct then Smith explicitly designed his theory with this goal in mind. Admittedly, I have read my thesis into the WN in order to make it coherent; I have drawn on many apparently disparate elements in the book to do so. I hope others will give my reconstruction careful scrutiny and use it as a starting point for their research into the methods of WN. This chapter has only provided a broad sketch; much can be said in a more precise way about the logical, conceptual, and evidential structure(s) of WN. I hope to have shown that even in our historicist, contextual age, this is an interesting and entertaining approach.

I think the reason the methodological and evidential strategies I have discussed, or any others, are not explicitly stated in WN is that, if Smith had heavily advertised to the "men of learning" the provisional aspect of his project that I have focused on, he could have been fearful that would undermine the political and economic proposals he advocated. What the aim of these proposals are is the subject of the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{119}See, for instance, Governor Thomas Pownall's (1776) \textit{Letter to Adam Smith, being an Examination of Several Points of Doctrine laid down, in his Inquiry} (reprinted in the Correspondence, Appendix A, 337-376) or Montes 2003.
Here, I want to end by noting that, despite having all of his notebooks burned, Smith made sure that his EPS, which present his most explicit thoughts on scientific method, would be published.\textsuperscript{120} As far as I can tell these essays were ignored by later theorists of political economy.\textsuperscript{121} Even so, I think that even without EPS, a careful reading of WN can help us figure out what Smith was trying to achieve. We cannot fault Smith that his successors chose not to focus on his strategy to build a science. And, given Smith’s interest in posthumous fame (see chapter six below), he may have found it entertaining that whatever fame he has achieved it was not for the principles I have tried to point to here.

\textsuperscript{120}Amazingly, Redman 1997, 187-8, claims that Smith’s method was “ambivalent” and “to a casual reader … proof of contradiction,” and quotes a passage from TMS (VII.iii.2.6, 319) without making clear that Smith is discussing Hobbes and Cudworth. (Redman invokes the same passage at 209.)

\textsuperscript{121}Redman 1997, 227, offers some evidence to qualify this assertion a bit. Also, Laura Snyder called my attention to the following letter from Whewell to Richard Jones, 23 September 1822 to be found in the Whewell Papers Add.ms.c.51 f.15: “I still meditate doing something about the History of the Metaphysics of Mechanics though as yet it is only intention. Something like Smith's History of Astronomy but with more historical facts.”
CHAPTER 5

REDISTRIBUTION AND “SACRED AND INVOLABLE PROPERTY” IN LOCKE, HUME, AND SMITH

“The professed object of Dr Adam Smith’s inquiry is the nature and causes of the wealth of nations. There is another inquiry, however, perhaps still more interesting, which he occasionally mixes with it, I mean an inquiry into the causes which affect the happiness of nations or the happiness and comfort of the lower orders of society, which is the most numerous class in every nation.” — An Essay on the Principle of Population (1798) by Thomas Malthus.1

I: Introduction and Summary

In this chapter, I explain the political aims of Smith’s An Inquiry into Nature and Causes of Wealth of Nations (WN). I argue that Adam Smith was an Incremental Redistributionist (IR). Most of my evidence comes from oft-neglected passages in WN, although I also draw on The Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS). Moreover, I cast doubt on one of the strongest possible political counter-arguments against the position that he was an IR and defender of the poor by showing that Smith’s defense of property rights was far less absolute than a casual reading of WN would suggest. As part of my argument, I look at some of Locke’s and Hume’s ideas on property rights.

1David M. Levy called my attention to this remark. Cf. Rothschild 2001, 89: “There is a “double nature” or “twofold character” of Smith’s work, [Beatrice] Webb wrote, in which he is both a theorist who seeks to discover (and put to practical use) the laws of production, and at the same time a “reformer of social abuses.”
While the methods of WN, the topic of the previous chapter, are of interest only to “men of learning,” the political aims of WN, which are the subject of this chapter, concern the happiness of the working poor, the greatest part of mankind in Smith’s time. It is by no means obvious that Adam Smith was an advocate of the poor and favored policies that would enable redistribution of income from the very rich to the laboring poor. The idea that Smith was an unreserved advocate of what has come to be known as “laissez-faire Capitalism” has been decisively rejected in the scholarly literature of the last three decades. Nevertheless, he is still often presented as the defender of, say, the 18th century landed aristocracy, the spokesperson of the merchant class, and, despite his awareness of some aspects of the problem of alienation, as an enemy of the working class. By bringing together passages from WN, I prove that Adam Smith is a redistributionist. Moreover, I cast doubt on one of the strongest counter-arguments against the position that he was a redistributionist by showing that Smith’s defense of property rights is far less absolute than a casual reading of WN would suggest.

The main argument of this chapter is divided in four parts. First, I explain my thesis (II.A). I provide a compilation of a number of reasons, mostly from WN, for thinking that the thrust of Smith’s beliefs on political reform, and the values that guide his theorizing on economic affairs, are humane, equitable, and in aid of the working poor (II.B). In part III, I present and discuss a ‘Libertarian’ argument against the claim that Smith was a redistributionist: that for political reasons Smith was strongly committed to protecting

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3Gallagher 1999.


5Perelman 2000, 49.
property rights and the inequality they entail. Third, I look at Hume’s ideas on property rights (IV). I suggest that he provides a philosophic framework that can reconcile the apparent contradiction in Smith’s thinking on property rights. Yet, this reconciliation cannot account for the extent of the redistributionist streak diagnosed in WN, especially the progressive tax policies and the reforms of society’s institutions proposed in Book V. Moreover, I analyze what Smith says about property rights in WN (V). I show that reflection on Smith’s historical understanding of property rights shows that he believes that property rights are by no means absolute, which undercuts the argument outlined in part III. I conclude by diagnosing a new problem in Smith’s enterprise; Smith’s repeated appeals to “humanity” in WN appear without justification (VI).

II: Redistribution in Smith

II.A: Incremental Redistributionism

I call the position I attribute to Smith: Incremental Redistributionism (IR). I claim that, in historical context, Smith was committed to policies that over time would ameliorate gross inequalities of income distribution. I want to distinguish this position from a closely related one that would have as an ultimate aim perfect equality: Incremental Egalitarianism (IE). In this section, I provide evidence for thinking that Smith was no egalitarian about income distribution, and when he advocated reform he was committed to slow, incremental change.

From Hume’s writings and his own study of history, one can see that Smith was familiar with two concrete examples of wealth egalitarianism: the ancient Spartan regime and

6Of course, not all Libertarians will find redistribution objectionable. I will comment on this below.
the 17th century Levellers. For Hume the Levellers were too “fanatical” and ignored the “self-conceit of each individual” (Section III, Part II, An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals (Second Enquiry), 193; see also “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” EMPL, 77). For Hume, the Spartan regime was unacceptable because it was only made possible by slavery (Second Enquiry, Section III, Part II, 194 and “Populousness of Ancient Nations,” EMPL, 383-384) Moreover, he thought that Sparta was a historical anomaly or “prodigy” and “were the testimony of history less positive … such a government would appear a mere philosophical whim or fiction, and impossible ever to be reduced to practice” (“Of Commerce,” EMPL, 259).

There is no doubt that Smith would have rejected the Spartan regime—founded on slavery and refusing commerce with the world. I have been unable to find any explicit rejections of the Levellers’ project in Smith’s writings. Smith was far more tolerant than Hume of religious “enthusiasts.” Smith outlined a system of many religious sects mutually competing with each other. He hoped this would lead them toward moderation, even a “pure and rational religion,” or at least mutual suspicion (WN, V.i.g.8, 792-793).

Smith was, despite far-reaching goals, clearly adverse to “the spirit of innovation” and too sudden changes in practices of society (TMS, VI.i.2.10, 231). He worried about the

7It seems Hume may have employed ‘Levellers’ a bit indiscriminately. He appears actually to be describing the Diggers when he writes about the doctrines of the Levellers. The Diggers were a radical, religious subset of the Levellers. Levellers did subscribe to political equality, but not to equality of property, while the Diggers appeared to adopt communistic principles as to land. I want to thank Sam Fleischacker for calling my attention to this. See MacPherson 1962, chapter 3, and a website with useful primary sources, see http://www.bilderberg.org/land/. In the body of my text, I will follow Hume’s usage.

8Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary (EMPL). Edited by Eugene F. Miller; all my quotes from Hume’s essays are from EMPL unless otherwise noted

9Smith is an avowed enemy of slavery, see, especially, WN, IV.vii.b.53-62, 586-589 and III.i.10, 388; see also, TMS, VII.i.1.28, 282. For useful discussion with extensive references to student notes on Smith’s “Lectures on Jurisprudence,” see Haakonssen 1981, 140-141.
bloody consequences of revolutions (TMS, VI 2.16, 233). It is extremely unlikely he would have been attracted to the Levellers, even if he had shared their goals, or any other forms of Revolutionary Egalitarianism because he hated “fanaticism” in the form of “popular superstition and enthusiasm” (WN, V.i.g.8, 793). Even in his advocacy of free trade, Smith was cautious about pushing through changes:

The case in which it may sometimes be a matter of deliberation, how far, or in what manner, it is proper to restore the free importation of foreign goods, after it has been for some time interrupted, is, when particular manufactures, by means of high duties or prohibitions upon all foreign goods which can come into competition with them, have been so far extended as to employ a great multitude of hands. *Humanity* may in this case require that the freedom of trade should be restored only by *slow gradations*, and with a good deal of *reserve* and *circumspection*. Were those high duties and prohibitions taken away all at once, cheaper foreign goods of the same kind might be poured so fast into the home market as to deprive all at once many thousands of our people of their ordinary employment and means of subsistence. The *disorder* which this would occasion might no doubt be very considerable. (WN, IV.ii.40, 469; emphasis added.)

Note that Smith has two motivations for advocating slow change: the requirements of *humanity* (see also I.viii.44, 100), and fear of disorders. Of course, it is not obvious if Smith separated these two motivations. The implication of the passage seems to be that the inhumane dislocation of thousands of (mostly poor) people would itself be a terrible “disorder.” Of course, Smith goes on to say that the dislocations from the freeing up of trade is “much less than is commonly imagined” (IV.ii.40, 469; IV.ii.41-44, 469-472 are all relevant). Moreover, we can quote another passage from WN to illustrate Smith’s commitment to incremental change: “[I]n what manner, therefore, the colony trade ought gradually to be opened; what are the restraints which ought first, and what are those which ought last to be taken away; or in what manner the natural system of perfect liberty and justice ought *gradually* to be restored, we must leave to the wisdom of future statesmen and legislators to determine” (IV.vii.c.44, 606; emphasis added; see also IV.ii.44, 471).10 Smith

10It is a bit strange to see Smith talk about “restoring” the “natural system of perfect liberty and justice” because he provides no evidence that it ever existed.
is too aware that sudden changes can be extremely hurtful to existing interests. So, we have ample evidence from WN that Smith favors incremental change.

Smith is no egalitarian. He thinks that political authority requires the existence of different ranks in society: “Upon this disposition of mankind, to go along with all the passions of the rich and the powerful, is founded the distinction of ranks, and the order of society” (TMS, I.iii.2.3, 52; see also WN, V.i.b.3, 710: “Civil government supposes a certain subordination”). This is not an innocent observation on Smith’s part; he is providing some psychological content for Hume’s claim that “Perfect equality of possessions, destroying all subordination, weakens extremely the authority of magistracy, and must reduce all power nearly to a level, as well as property” (Second Enquiry, Section3, Part II, 194; see also “Of Public Credit,” 358). When Smith returns to the distinction among the ranks at WN, V.i.g.10-12, 794-5, he does not mention the benefits to the order of society. Instead he recommends public education for the inferior ranks to promote public order (WN, V.i.f.53-61, 784-788). I have no doubt that, from the status quo circa 1776, Smith thought great strides toward equality could be made before authority of government would run into trouble. Let us turn to evidence that he was an IR.

II.B: Reasons for thinking that Smith was an Incremental Redistributionist

In this section, I provide seven broad reasons for substantiating that Smith was an IR. I do not expect this list to convince all doubters, and I am aware that some of my

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11Levy 1995 first made me take seriously my hunch that Smith was not interested in mere aggregate happiness (see also Levy 2001). Sam Fleischacker was kind enough to let me attend his seminar at UIC while I was working through the ideas in this chapter; I have no doubt that many ideas that I present as my own were first discussed in his class. I must thank Mark Blaug for calling my attention to Pack 1991; Pack’s book is curiously ignored in the scholarly literature on Adam Smith’s politics, but deserves wider recognition. Rothschild 2001, chapter 2, although not generous in acknowledging other scholars, is especially useful for helping to understand why and how the themes I highlight in this chapter came to be largely ignored in the two centuries following the French Revolution.
readings are quite contentious. But as a group, these seven reasons should motivate serious consideration of the claim that Smith was an IR in aid of the poor.

1) My first reason requires lengthy exposition, and my account here will not do full justice to all the intricacies involved. Although it does not provide the strongest argument in favor of my claim, it is the one that made me notice the importance of Smith’s concern for the poor in WN. It has the benefit of arising out of reflection on the implications of a prominent part of WN.

Let us look at one of the key components in the analytical core of his theory: Smith’s notion of a “real price” (WN, I.v, especially, I.v.22, 56). In his discussion of exchange value, Smith draws the following important distinctions: the difference between “natural” and nominal or market prices, and the difference between absolute or “real” and nominal/market prices. (This list is not exhaustive.) In Chapter 4, I scrutinized the former distinction. In what follows, I explore Smith’s distinction between real and nominal prices. I argue that Smith’s introduction of this distinction is designed, among other things, to measure the welfare of the poor across time and place.

Let me provide a simple modern example to illuminate what the distinction is driving at. When somebody’s paycheck increases by 5% we call that a nominal increase. But we need the inflation number, say, 3%, before we can judge the real increase of the salary, which is a little under 2%. For Smith, the nominal price of the wage-earner is the number on the check, or as he says “the quantity of money,” whereas the real price is constituted by the “necessaries and conveniencies of life which are given [in return] for” this quantity of money (WN, I.v.9, 51), or, to put it differently: the labour “commanded” or “purchased” (I.v.19, 55).

Two initial points need to be made here: first, the nominal price of things can only be measured at any given time: “[A]t the same time and place, therefore, money is the exact measure of the real exchangeable value of all commodities. It is so, however, at the same
time and place only” (I.v.19, 55; emphasis added). There is, thus, no relevant distinction between real and nominal prices at a single location in time. That is, for most practical purposes — “the business of common life” of I.v.4 — and, in the absence of hyperinflation, nominal prices are all that matters; the price mechanism provides merchants and laborers with the information they need (WN, I.v.20, 55; for more on this passage see, Chapter 4, III.B).

Second, in my wage earner example, I am implicitly assuming some familiarity with the notion of purchasing power.12 The ability to command labor is not obviously the same as purchasing power (in contemporary thought this involves a weighted basket of goods). I think Smith introduces real prices in order to measure something akin to what we would call welfare.13 Smith clearly feels that work, or labor, can be irksome and that everybody wants to save “toil and trouble” (I.v.2, 47)14 and command other people’s labour (embodied in their products and services). He goes on to claim that “Labor … never varying in its own value, is alone the ultimate and real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared” (WN, I.v.7, 51). For my purposes, the

12“The power which that possession immediately and directly conveys to him, is the power of purchasing; a certain command over all the labour, or over all the produce of labour which is then in the market” (WN, I.v.3, 48). This is not exactly the same as the modern concept, but it is not very far removed either.

13See Blaug 1954 and Hollander 1973. But O’Donnell 1990, 64-65, claims it was effectively a measure of productivity. (Of course, a measure of productivity could be a proxy for measuring welfare). Baroni forthcoming offers strong arguments against reading the language of modern subjective utility theory into Smith. For the purposes of my argument in this chapter, I can remain agnostic to what degree welfare is subjective or objective in Smith.

14For Smith people naturally want to save labor, while Hume thinks “[T]here is no craving or demand of the human mind more constant and insatiable than that for exercize and employment” (“Of Interest” EMPL, 200).
importance of this quote is to illustrate why Smith cares about an ultimate and “real” standard. Before I get to that, I must forestall a potential misinterpretation.

The phrase ‘real price’ has often served as an encouragement to emphasize the ontological aspects of Smith’s approach—labor as an ultimate and real standard of value. Many readers forget, however, that Smith only introduces a notion of a ‘real price’ as a measure of “value in exchange” (I.iv.15, 15), which he distinguishes from “value in use” (WN, I.iv.13-18, 44-46). Whatever else the distinction between “value in use” and “value in exchange” is supposed to do for Smith, there can be no doubt that Smith thinks any given commodity can have at least two kinds of values, use and exchange. Real prices measure only one kind of value: exchange. Moreover, Smith indicates that he not only knows quite well that some jobs are more enjoyable than others (even if they require same amount of labor), but also that the value we put on the same job necessarily varies from one society to another or even within society depending on one’s social rank (e.g., I.x.b.2-3, 117-118). So, for Smith, a ‘real price’ can never measure some entity most fundamental in ontology.

Yet, even if we were to grant that Smith did want to call attention to some ontological element, a focus on ontology misses the purpose: Smith wants to be able to compare the (economic) welfare of people in different times and places. As he writes, “In such a work

15 There is confusion stemming from this quote: the word “Labor” can be (and was) interpreted in two ways: 1) as a number of man hours, and 2) (to use modern-terminology) as units of disutility, that is, the psychological and social cost of work to the individual, the “toil and trouble” mentioned before (Blaug 1962, 49). If all work has the same character, that is man-hours and units of disutility are somehow related, then these two interpretations coincide (as Smith thinks they do in a hunting economy). Many commentators note that that Smith switches between different types of economies in WN, I.v; see O’Donnell 1990, 63ff and 236 n.1, for further references.

16 Somebody may worry that I am using ‘ontological’ in an anachronistic way. But OED lists Smith as one of the first to use ‘ontology’ in English in the modern sense (the science treating the qualities and attributes common to metaphysics and physics), see WN, V.i.f.29, 771.
as this, however, it may sometimes be of use to compare the different real values of a particular commodity at different times and places, or the different degrees of power over labour of other people which it may, upon different occasions, have given to those who possessed it” (I.v.22, 55; emphasis added). Incidentally, the idea of a ‘real price’ seems to be absent from Smith’s Lectures. It appears to be a conceptual innovation designed for WN.17

Here I have not done justice to the intricacies of Smith’s exposition. But, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that a criterion of welfare has been established. The question remains, whose welfare is being measured?18 To get a grip on that we need to analyze the method of measurement that Smith advocates; this reveals his purpose.

If one wants to compare the wealth of different locales at the same time or people’s welfare at different times, one cannot simply compare the nominal (money) prices of goods. The value of gold and silver is not invariant across time, and not even across place.19 In a complex commercial society it is impossible to calculate real prices directly without solid data: “the current prices of labour at distant times and places can scarce ever be known with any degrees of exactness” (I.v.22, 55). The nominal wages of labor are uninformative if we do not know what they buy. Even if one thinks that one ought to measure the “toil and

17Sam Fleischacker has suggested that an important reason for Smith to be able to measure welfare is to rebut the Mercantilist case on the relationship between the discovery of gold and silver mines and the growth of wealth in Europe.

18Of course, a fuller discussion must distinguish between a measure of 1) general purchasing power; 2) the purchasing power of individual commodities or incomes; and 3) a price index to measure welfare. See, O’Donnell 1990, 73ff. for criticism.

19See also, Turgot [1770] 1889, §XLVI. One would think, as Turgot claims, that in a global economy at any given time (at least in the long run) gold would have the same value everywhere. But Smith shows that the transportation costs of shipping gold and silver would have to be very low and that there needs to be trade between the different areas for that to be true. In Smith’s time there were in effect, despite the existence of a single international currency, specie, different regional, relatively autonomous, monetary zones: Europe, the Americas, India, China, and the East Indies (WN, I.v.20, 55, and I.xi.g.25-28, 220-225).
trouble” of work, how does one go about doing this across many centuries? Smith chose the price of corn (the 18th century word for edible seeds) as a second-best way of measuring the real price of things:

Those [prices] of corn, though they have in few places been regularly recorded are in general better known and have been more frequently taken notice of by historians and other writers. We must generally, therefore, content ourselves with them, not as being always exactly in the same proportion as the current prices of labour, but as being the nearest approximation which can commonly be had to that proportion (I.v.22, 56).

Smith chose corn for four reasons. i) Relatively reliable and long-running data were available to him (see the quote above), especially because rents were often paid in corn.\(^{21}\) ii) Although there are many short-term fluctuations in the price of corn (due to fluctuations in harvests and political conditions), its long-run prices are relatively stable due to near constant cost of production\(^{22}\) (I.xi.e.28, 206, and I.v.16-17, 53-54). There are many complications. For instance, since the price of corn is tabulated in nominal prices Smith needs to figure out how to compare coinages of different periods. This is not an exact science, and throughout WN Smith returns to it (e.g., I.iv.9-10, 41-44; I.xi.e-i, 195-234). Also, when a society moves from one technological stage of development to another the corn wage may change (I.v.15, 53). iii) Smith thought that “[T]he desire of food is limited in every man by the narrow capacity of the human stomach.” He probably thought that demand for bread would not increase very much with an increase in a standard of living. He specifically contrasts the limited demand for corn with demand for “the conveniences and ornaments of building, dress, equipage, and household furniture, seems to have no limit or

\(^{20}\)Hollander 1973, 129ff. n. 46.

\(^{21}\)Smith discusses the quality and sources of these data at I.xi.e.16-38, 200-210.

\(^{22}\)This is emphasized by O’Donnell 1990, 67ff. O’Donnell also points out that Smith had to assume that the corn wage of common labour is relatively constant across long periods of time (WN, I.v.15, 53; note that Smith claims that “even equal quantities of corn will not do … exactly”).
certain boundary” (I.xi.c.7, 181). iv) It was a most useful yardstick, given his interest in advancing the interests of the working poor. For, “Corn, besides, or whatever else is the common and favourite vegetable food of the people, constitutes in every civilized country, the principal part of the subsistence of the labourer” (I.xi.e.29, 206, emphasis added; cf. I.v.15, p 53). The price of corn is only a useful measure of the purchasing power of poor people because it makes up most of their subsistence.23 The price of corn, however, is less significant as such a measure for rich folks for whom the part of the budget devoted to subsistence is insignificant, although Smith thinks that as a basic staple corn will “regulate” the price of all other things (I.xi.b.34-35, 175).24 In Smith’s time, the poor make up the vast majority of the people: “for one very rich man, there must be at least five hundred poor” (V.i.b.2, 710; see also, I.viii.36, 496, to be quoted below); his measure will capture the welfare of most. Smith does not seem to be bothered that his measure may not capture total welfare. Smith’s choice of measure, then, is at once practical and equitable. It is clear that this was not the only reason that Smith chose corn. The rest of my list suggests it is no accident that Smith’s measure is concerned with equity.

2) Smith’s tax policies reveal a progressive bias.25 I believe the extent of this bias has not been sufficiently appreciated by scholars concerned with Smith’s

23Thus, “[I]n Europe, corn is the principal produce of land which serves immediately for human food. Except in particular situations, therefore, the rent of corn land regulates in Europe that of all other cultivated land.” (I.xi.b.35, 175, see also I.xi.l.12 p. 245 and I.xi.b.9, 165 I.xi.b.14, 167.)

24Of course, corn is not the staple everywhere. In China, for instance, the workers’ staple is rice and in other places it will be potatoes (I.xi.b.36-40, 175-177). Comparing the absolute prices in economies with different staples can only be a qualitative affair. By contrast, in economies with the same staple the price of that staple can be used to compare welfare across time. Smith’s long “Digression” at the end of Book I (pp. 195-267) exploits that possibility with a careful analysis of the price of corn based on data covering more than 500 years. This is a reminder that because corn is a staple it also increases the probability that long-running consistent data will be available. Smith’s data start in 1205, although he also uses ancient sources going back to Roman times.

political aims in WN. Smith’s tax policies, as proposed in Book V of WN, are designed with the following maxim (one of four) in mind:

The Subject of every state ought to contribute towards the support of the government, 1) as nearly as possible, in proportion to their respective abilities; that is, 2) in proportion to the revenue which they respectively enjoy under the protection of the state. The expense of government to the individuals of a great nation is like the expense of management to the joint tenants of a great estate, who are 3) all obliged to contribute in proportion to their respective interests in the estate (WN, V.ii.b.3, 825 [the division in three points has been added to facilitate discussion]).

The main point of this maxim is to ensure fairness in taxation. Of course, what this means is quite ambiguous. 1, 2, and 3 could all be given a progressive slant. While it may seem that 2 advocates a flat tax-rate (not exactly progressive), all it requires is that the richer one is, the more one is taxed; it doesn’t say anything, one way or another, about exact rates of taxation. If, say, according to Smith (by 3), the rich have a disproportionate interest in the State — they benefit far more from the defense of property than the poor — then they should pay higher taxes, especially if one assumes that the poorest members have less ability to give up a part of their income. This may not be the only reasonable reading of the passage, but several of Smith’s proposals reveal a progressive bias. These provide the relevant context for interpreting the maxim. Let me provide several examples of Smith’s progressive tax recommendations. First, when discussing the advantages of a tax on house-rents, Smith writes:

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26I have no doubt this is why Rothbard 1979, 25-26, singles out Smith’s approach to taxes for critical treatment. In context, Rothbard is attacking the idea that there is any wertfrei science, and he claims that equality is often taken for granted. But we’ll see that Smith is quite explicit about his values. (Moreover, even Rothbard dares not claim that Smith, himself, was an advocate of wertfrei science.)

27See Stigler 1975, 243, for a critical analysis of Smith’s four maxims of taxation.

28Rothbard 1979, 25-26, and 1985, 470, insists that the maxim advocates proportionate taxation, but he is aware that Smith’s wording is vague. Oddly, Rothbard 1985, 467, claims, without evidence, that Smith “advocated the soak-the-rich policy of progressive income taxation!” As I will discuss below, Smith did not advocate income taxes at all.
The luxuries and vanities of life occasion the principal expense of the rich; and a magnificent house embellishes and sets off to the best advantage all the other luxuries and vanities which they possess. A tax upon house-rents, therefore, would in general fall heaviest upon the rich; and in this sort of inequality there would not, perhaps, be anything very unreasonable. *It is not very unreasonable that the rich should contribute to the public expense, not only in proportion to their revenue, but something more than in that proportion* (WN, V.ii.e.6, 842; emphasis added).

Here, Smith is explicitly rejecting the flat-tax reading of his own maxim in favor of a (mildly) progressive tax policy. Second, while discussing ways to pay for public works (roads, canals, etc.) that facilitate commerce, Smith advocates that “When the toll upon carriages of luxury upon coaches, post-chaises, etc., is made somewhat higher in proportion to their weight than upon carriages of necessary use, such as carts, waggons etc., the *indolence and vanity of the rich is made to contribute* in a very easy manner to the *relief of the poor*, by rendering cheaper the transportation of heavy goods to all the different parts of the country” (V.i.d, 5; emphasis added). In both cases Smith is not only arguing that the rich should pay more in proportion than the poor, but that in doing so the poor are benefited. Once one pays attention, one can find similar comments elsewhere in WN. Note, for instance, Smith’s criticism of the window-tax: “the principal objection to all such taxes is their inequality, an inequality of the worst kind, as they frequently fall much heavier upon the poor than upon the rich” (V.ii.e.19, 846). He also invokes “equity” and “justice” to argue in favor of taxes on “brew or distill for private use” that will fall on the rich (V.ii.k.45, 888-889 and V.ii.k.55, 893). It is no argument against my claim that he did not propose an income tax (that Libertarian shibboleth) that would have allowed for even greater progressivity. The arguments he gives against the income tax are practical: in Smith’s time it was hard to know what people’s incomes were and it would have been difficult to collect in a just way (V.ii.k.1, 869). Moreover, he is only against estate taxes on children who live with their father and rely on his income. The inheritance of financially independent children may...
“without more inconveniency than what attends all duties of this kind, be liable to some
tax” (WN, V.ii.h.4, 859).  

3) Smith rejects the widespread 18th century notion that the poor should be kept poor in order to ensure economic growth. Smith, by contrast, dismisses the idea that the poor will be more inclined to work if they are kept poor (through, say, maximum wage legislation or heavy taxation of goods they are likely to consume). For Smith, paying higher wages “increases the industry of the common people” (WN, I.viii.44, 99; throughout I.viii.40-43, 98-100, higher wages are advocated). While he never explicitly says that the increasing wealth of the working poor leads to higher demand and hence more economic growth, there are several passages that imply it (I.viii.40-43, 98-100; I.viii.27, 91, and IV.vii.b.2, 565). In rich, but stagnating societies (he mentions China as an example), the poor will be badly off because their labor is not scarce (I.viii.24, 89-90). More important for my purposes here is that Smith also rejects the poor-should-be-kept-poor view not only on grounds of faulty economic reasoning, but also on grounds of “equity:”

Servants, labourers, and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconveniency to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should

30Fleischacker forthcoming notes that several followers of Adam Smith, including Tom Paine and John Millar, both proposed estate tax schemes that are consistent with Smith’s principles.

31Fleischacker 1999, 164. See Rosenberg 1975, 379, for references to Arthur Young, William Temple, and scholarly literature.

32Turgot [1770] 1889, §VI, thought that competition will lower wages to subsistence level.
have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged (I.viii.36, 96).33

4) Smith attacks various laws that prevent the “free circulation of labour” (WN, I.x.c.41, 151ff.), including apprenticeships, corporation, and the Settlement Laws. Clearly, part of his attack is motivated by efficiency considerations. But he is also concerned with fairness.34 For instance, he points out that it is “every-where much easier for a wealthy merchant to obtain the privilege of trading in a town corporate, than for a poor artificer to obtain that of working in it” (I.x.c.44, 152). The settlement laws, which prevent poor people from entering a parish, come in for special criticism: “to remove a man who has committed no misdemeanour from the parish where he chuses to reside, is an evident violation of natural liberty and justice … There is scarce a poor man in England of forty years of age, I will venture to say, who has not in some part of his life felt himself most cruelly oppressed by this ill-contrived law of settlements” (I.x.c.59, 157).

Smith’s advocacy of free markets is a reaction to, among other things, the monopolies, apprenticeship laws, duties on imports, bounties on exports, fixed low salaries for labor, guild practices, etc. that attempt to favor privileged merchant classes and landowners at the expense of the poor. As he writes: “Whenever the legislature attempts to regulate the differences between masters and their workmen, its counsellors are always the masters.” This is not surprising, given the property requirements on voting eligibility for the House of Commons then. Smith goes on to write, “When the regulation, therefore, is in favour of the workmen, it is always just and equitable; but it is sometimes otherwise when

33For a rich discussion of Smith’s emphasis on “equity,” see Rothschild 2001, 88ff.

34See Rothschild 2001, chapter 4, for an exemplary discussion of these themes.
in favour of the masters” (I.x.c.61, 157-158; emphasis added). Smith makes these comments while critically discussing laws that regulate wages and prevent workers’ efforts to combine. Smith’s sympathies are not on the side of the masters; he writes, “All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the *vile* maxim of the masters of mankind” (III.iv.10, 418; emphasis added). Finally, in I.x.c.61, Smith appears to be tolerant of some wage regulation as long as it helps workers.

5) One of Smith’s striking claims is that, due to faulty understanding of economic theory landowners often do not understand their own interests, which are, paradoxically, closely aligned with those of the poor (WN, I.xi.p.7-10, 265-267). So, Smith’s program is designed to remove barriers to proper market functioning that would eliminate preferences for the influential merchant classes, and aid the landed interests, while giving the poor more opportunities for profitable work and, as consumers, cheaper goods.

In free markets, commodities would reach their “natural price” (WN, I.vii.4-7, 72-73; the moral nature of the natural price is clear at: WN, IV.vii.c.87, 629; cf. IV.ix.17, 669, where perfect justice, perfect liberty, and perfect equality are linked). Smith is following in

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35 See Pack 1991, 18 and 39, for discussion.


37 In fact, Smith claims that the political backwardness of the lower classes and the landed classes vis à vis the merchants is due to their inability to understand their own interests in the context of the State as a whole even though their interests better coincide with it (WN, I.xi.p.7-10, 265-267; much of WN is one big lament on how the merchants and tradesmen have hijacked the economic instruments of State to their own advantage). The reasons for the failure of the workers and the landholders to properly understand their own interests and how they are affected by regulations are not identical. Smith thinks that the former often lack basic education and are too overworked to gather and properly analyze the necessary information; Smith speaks of “the torpor of mind” of the common laborer that the division of labor will engender (V.i.f.50, 781). The latter are often spoiled by luxury, which makes their minds “incapable of that application … which is necessary in order to foresee and understand the consequences of any publick regulation” (I.xi.p.8, 265; cf. I.xi.a.1, 223, and V.ii.c.13, 831).
the footsteps of Montesquieu, who claimed: “it is competition that puts a just price on goods” (*The Spirit of the Laws*, part 4, book 20, chapter 9), and a whole host of earlier writers in the (Scholastic) just price tradition.38 The ingenuity of Smith’s approach is that he attacks the special interests that hurt the poor most by appealing to the humanity of some of his readers and, more frequently, to those interested in national greatness and wealth, the landed gentry and Whigs in power,39 who would have to implement reforms and who would, hence, help the income potential and buying power of the poor (without, perhaps, fully intending it). He cannot be faulted for not foreseeing that improvements in efficiency and equity are not always correlated. Nevertheless, I believe Smith does not propose a single change in policy that he thinks would have hurt the poor of his day.

6) It is worth stressing that all the reasons for thinking that Smith was an IR mentioned above are derived from a reading of WN. Nevertheless, his other main book, *The Theory of Morals* (TMS), provides additional evidence.40 In the section “Of Justice and Beneficence,” Smith writes:

A superior may, indeed, sometimes, with universal approbation, oblige those under his jurisdiction to behave, in this respect, with a certain degree of propriety to one another. The laws of all civilized nations oblige parents to maintain their children, and children to maintain their parents, and impose upon men many other duties of beneficence. The civil magistrate is entrusted with the power not only of preserving the public peace by restraining injustice, but of promoting the prosperity of the commonwealth, by establishing good discipline, and by discouraging every sort of vice and impropriety; he may prescribe rules, therefore, which not only prohibit mutual injuries among fellow-citizens, but command mutual good offices to a certain degree (TMS, II.i.8, 81).

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38I quote from the 1989 translation. For mention of Montesquieu in WN see: I.ix.17, 112-113, II.iv.9, 353, IV.ix.47, 684, and V.i.f.40, 775. For Smith’s relationship to just price tradition, see Young 1986.


40I am indebted to Sam Fleischacker for calling my attention to the following example.
The executive should not only enforce the laws to prevent mutual harm (a classic Liberal position) but he can also demand, by commanding “mutual good offices” (see also TMS, II.iii.1, 85ff.), that people help each other (the principle of solidarity beloved by European Social and Christian Democrats). This is reinforced by his claim that the “laws of all civilized nations … impose upon men many other duties of beneficence.” This is important in that he does not rule out state intervention to ensure that citizens support each other. Towards this end the civil magistrate need not be motivated by humanity or equity; a Bismarckian desire for “public peace” (e.g., to prevent revolutions or riots) may encourage the magistrate to enforce duties of beneficence. Unfortunately, Smith is exceedingly vague and cautious about how this ought to be brought about in practice.41

7) We know from a draft of the opening chapters of WN, the so-called “Early Draft” (ED), that Smith originally intended to call attention in a forceful fashion to issues of humanity:

The Artizan, again, tho’ he works generally under cover, protected from the injuries of the weather, at his ease and assisted by the conveniency of innumerable machines, enjoys a much greater share than the poor labourer who has the soil and seasons to struggle with, and who, while he affords the materials for supplying the luxury of all the other members of the common wealth, and bears, as it were, upon his shoulders the whole fabric of human society, seems himself to be pressed down below ground by the weight, and to be buried out of sight in the lowest foundations of the building (ED 5).42

In the same paragraph, Smith goes on to speak of his society as an “oppressive inequality.”

III: The Sacred and Inviolable Right to

41Pack 1991 notes (and is disturbed by) the absence of proposals on Smith’s part on implementing distributive justice. But Pack seems to be unaware of this passage in TMS that would allow for it.

42See also: “The rent which goes to support the vanity of the slothful landlord is all earned by the industry of the peasant” (ED 4) and “those who labour most get least” (ED 5).
Property in Wealth of Nations

Grant me, for the sake of argument, that, in his age, Adam Smith is an IR. In this part, I present a political objection to this interpretation of Adam Smith. Libertarians often present a version of this objection to me in response to my work on WN. Nevertheless, I have been unable to find a version of it in the literature. Much to my initial surprise, it is stronger than I previously imagined. In my reformulation, it will be seen to rely on Smith’s understanding of the nature of political authority.

Smith appears to be committed to “sacred and inviolable” property rights. For instance, in the context of a critical discussion on attempts to prevent competition, i.e., guild and apprenticeship laws, etc., Smith writes:

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. It is a manifest encroachment upon the just liberty both of the workman and of those who might be disposed to employ him. As it hinders the one from working at what he thinks proper, so it hinders the others from employing whom they think proper. To judge whether he is fit to be employed may surely be trusted to the discretion of the employers whose interest it so much concerns. The affected anxiety of the law-giver lest they should employ an improper person is evidently as impertinent as it is oppressive (WN, I.x.c.12, 138).

On a casual reading, this passage seems extremely clear-cut: property rights are “sacred and inviolable.” Smith calls property rights “sacred” once more in Book I at I.xi.c.27, 188 and less clearly at Book IV.vii.b.44, 582. Let us assume that Smith means by this

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43When discussing property rights, Libertarian scholars do not treat Smith as one of their intellectual heroes/ancestors (unlike, say, Locke), presumably because they are aware of the issues discussed in Section II.B. Rothbard 1995, for instance, is extremely critical of Smith.

44Haakonssen 1981, 106, correctly points out that Smith does not use the word “rights” here.

45Oddly, Haakonssen ignores this passage where Smith does talk of “rights.”
something to the effect that property rights are, or ought to be, absolute (except, perhaps, when the survival of State is in danger) and take preference over other rights such as redistribution. Perhaps, he also thinks these rights have divine dispensation or that they are sanctified by us. (Smith is aware that a person, an institution, or a practice can be made to appear sacred in the eyes of the people even when it is not, see, WN, V.i.g.6, 791 and V.i.g.22-23, 802.) But maybe he just means that it should be exclusively appropriated to the owner of the property.

In the passage, not all property is called “sacred and inviolable.” Rather, “the property which every man has in his own labour” is called “the most sacred and inviolable.” This is noteworthy because it implies that different kinds of property may have differing range of protection accorded to them. Moreover, Smith’s conception, with its emphasis on the work performed by a person’s hands, is quite narrow; even Turgot, who held a similar view, has a broader understanding. Surprisingly enough, perhaps, for those that tend to think of Rousseau as one of the intellectual fathers of the French Revolution and, more broadly, different strands of modern radicalism, Rousseau has a much wider conception.

46At WN, IV.ix.7-8, 665-666, Smith makes the point that if a higher power demands income in the form of rent (exacted by the landlord) or taxes on that rent (levied by the king or the church) that would prevent the continuation of farming-operations then this action will merely be self-defeating in the long run. In order to avoid this bad outcome some part of farming income ought to be regarded as “sacred and inviolable.” Note that this is not a claim about the sacred nature of property rights, but merely sound advice to various powers to prevent abusive and self-destructive policies.

47Rothschild 2001, 84-5, quotes Turgot as advocating “respect for the most sacred of all property … the property of man in the fruit of his labor.” (See also Rothschild, 102.) The protection of the “fruits of labor” is broader than focusing on protecting the body that produces these fruits.

48See Discourse on Political Economy (DPE): “[I]t is certain that the right of property is the most sacred of all the rights of citizens, and more important in some respects than freedom itself; either because it bears more directly on the preservation of life; or because, goods, being easier to usurp and more difficult to defend than persons, greater
In the text just quoted from WN, property rights are linked to free markets. The point of the passage is not protection of property, but freedom of choice for workers and employers. In fact, in this passage, Smith is explicitly talking about the patrimony of a “poor man.” Two arguments in favor of free markets are hinted in it: an epistemic one—Smith disputes the ability of outside parties (i.e., the State) “to judge” how economic agents should arrange their affairs; and a moral one—by invoking “just liberty.” Moreover, the passage seems to promote an understanding of property in which a person’s labor and the body itself are central; the other forms are derivative of it.

All of this recalls the language of Locke’s *Second Treatise*, where, in the discussion of property, the hands are also singled out (V §27; note, too, the language of WN, IV.ii.40, 469). For Locke property rights are “fundamental” (XI §140, hence, taxes require consent of citizens), but I have been unable to locate a passage in the *Treatises* where he called property rights “sacred.” Locke does call the fundamental law of self-preservation, which motivates individuals to contract into society, “sacred” (*Second Treatise*, XIII, § 149), and respect ought to be accorded to what can more easily be seized; or finally, because property is the true foundation of civil society, and the true guarantee of the citizens’ commitments: for if goods were not in accord with person nothing would be so easy as to elude one’s duties and scoff at the laws. (DPE 42 [“Il est certain que le droit de propriété est le plus sacré de tous les droits des citoyens, et plus important à certains égards que la liberté même; soit parce qu’il tient de plus près à la conservation de la vie; soit parce que les biens étant plus faciles à usurper et plus pénibles à défendre que la personne, on doit plus respecter ce qui se peut ravir plus aisément; soit enfin parce que la propriété est le vrai fondement de la société civile, et le vrai garant des engagements des citoyens: car si les biens ne répondraient pas des personnes, rien ne serait si facile que d’éluder ses devoirs et de se moquer des lois.” OC III 264]; I have consulted and slightly modified V. Gourevitch’s 1997 translation.) DPE is a crucial, and curiously neglected, source for understanding Smith’s aims in WN, but a detailed study must await another occasion.

At WN, I.x.c.27, 188, Smith invokes “sacred” private property rights to argue against efforts by the sovereign to promote economic development of mines (a tax on which would be a source of revenue to the sovereign) when the landlord is unwilling to do so. Nothing about the example suggests that Smith would oppose a tax on the income from the mine if the landlord were willingly developing it.

For more on this point, see Fleischacker 1999, chapter 6.
he also designates the authority of the Legislative power to make binding laws for the community in such way (XI, §69). But I may be quibbling about words because Locke’s definition of the right to property includes “mutual preservation of … lives, liberties and estates” (IX, §123). So, if self-preservation is a form of property, and the law of self-preservation is sacred, then at least some property is “sacred.” Fair enough.

Locke, of course, has a well-known ingenious argument for showing how, after the initial contract, the near equality that obtained in the state of nature is justly transformed, by people’s labor and the invention of money into unequal possessions (Second Treatise, chapter V).51 By contrast, in the works he published, Smith does not worry about giving an argument for the justness of property rights. He assumes, as a duty of the sovereign “that of protecting, as far as possible, every member of society from the injustice or oppression of every member of it, or the duty of establishing an exact administration of justice” (WN, V.i.b.1, 708-9). He does insist that the enforcement of justice benefits the rich (who are a small minority); they are protected from the potential “envy, malice, or resentment,” “want” and “indignation” of the far more numerous poor (V.i.b.2, 709-10). Smith is very aware of — and forthright about! — the fact that enforcement of property rights will ensure inequalities. As he writes,

It is only under the shelter of the civil magistrate that the owner of that valuable property, which is acquired by the labour of many years, or perhaps of many successive generations, can sleep a single night in security. He is at all times surrounded by unknown enemies, whom, though he never provoked, he can never appease, and from whose injustice he can be protected only by the powerful arm of the civil magistrate continually held up to chastise it. The acquisition of valuable and extensive property, therefore, necessarily requires the establishment of civil government. Where there is no property, or at least none that exceeds the value of two or three days' labour, civil government is not so necessary … But as the necessity of civil government gradually grows up with the acquisition of valuable property, so the

51 For useful comments on Locke’s account, see C.B. Macpherson’s introductory comment in Locke [1690] 1980. Even if we grant Locke’s argument, I do not understand why he thought it would also justify a) unlimited inequality, and b) a right to inheritance.
principal causes which naturally introduce subordination gradually grow up with the growth of that valuable property (V.i.b.2-3, 710).

Thus, the argument against Incremental Redistributionism is clear and succinct. Premise 1: Smith is committed to “sacred and inviolable” property rights (WN, I.x.c.12, 138 and I.xi.c.27, 188). Premise 2: the origin of property rights can be traced to inequality, that is, in order to defend the rich from the poor (WN, V.i.b.12, 715; to be discussed in Section V.B below). Premise 3: Continued enforcement of property rights will ensure substantial inequalities (WN, V.i.b.2-3, 710). Premise 4: Smith is aware of and forthright about P.2-3. Premise 5: inequality is a good thing because the authority of government depends on it (recall my discussion of TMS, I.iii.2.3, 52 and WN, V.ib.3, 710, in Section II.A above); inequality is, evidently, in Smith’s view, not an inequity; for the wealthy man (at V.i.b.2-3, 710) is said to need protection from the injustice of his “unknown enemies.” Premise 6: This inequality is not an obviously transitory phase; as the economy grows – it is the aim of WN to teach policies that can accomplish this — property becomes more valuable, and the need for protection will increase (V.b.2-3, 710). Conclusion: Smith cannot want to be a Redistributionist if that means a sustained attempt to push distribution of income toward equality (assuming Smith’s views are coherent). Let us call this the Libertarian interpretation of Smith on property, although WN, V.i.b.2-3, 710, implies — and it is not an isolated instance — that rich countries need bigger governments (not something most Libertarians like to admit). It is clear that there is no obvious reason why all Libertarians would subscribe to the objection I have just sketched. One can distinguish, for instance, between Rights-based and Consequentialist Libertarians; the latter may include egalitarian-inclined Libertarians (Milton Friedman springs to mind). When I speak of “Libertarians,” I only mean Rights-based ones, who would find various forms of forced redistribution objectionable. In contemporary American political culture, this is not an insignificant force.

52 Smith’s contemporary, Turgot [1770] 1898, §XII, lists four sources of inequality that resemble Smith’s observations, but he fails to note that law perpetuates inequality.
I regard the Libertarian interpretation of Smith’s views on property as significant because it highlights (via Premises 2 and 5) Smith’s assumptions about the nature of political authority. For the moment (until section V.A below), I ignore an obvious way to reconcile Libertarianism with Redistributionism.

In what follows, I provide evidence for the claim that, even in his published writings, Smith’s views on property were more subtle than the Libertarian interpretation admits. Before I examine more fully Smith’s political reasons for taking his talk of the “sacred and inviolable” nature of property rights with a grain of salt, let us turn to David Hume’s account of property.

IV: Hume’s account of the conventional nature of Property rights

IV.A: Hume’s critique of Locke’s Contract theory

In this section, I examine important elements of Hume’s account of property. I show that he maintains that property rights are a matter of convention, and instituted to serve the needs of society. Property rights should be respected because, and as long as, they serve the use of society. Utility and not liberty underpins this account. Nevertheless, Hume indicates that property rights can be viewed as “sacred,” too.

Let us start discussion of Hume’s views on property by quoting his assessment of the influence of the hand of nature:

Few enjoyments are given us from the open and liberal hand of nature; by art, labour, and industry we can extract them in great abundance. Hence the ideas of property become necessary in all civil society: Hence justice derives its usefulness to the public:

53Hume’s account of property rights is not much discussed (compared to the focus on, say, Locke or Hegel and Kant). Waldron 1988 only mentions Hume in passing. This is especially surprising in the American context given the important link Adair 1957 tried to establish between Hume’s views and Madison’s as expressed in Federalist 10. For a brief introduction, see Hayek 1967, 106-132. For excellent treatments, see Forbes 1975, chapter 1; Whelan 1985, chapter 5-6; Haakonssen 1981, and the chapter on “Property Rights” in Fleischacker forthcoming.
And hence alone arises its merit and moral obligation (Second Enquiry, Section 3, Part I, 188).  

Although Locke’s description of the operation of the “hand of nature” (at Second Treatise, V §26) and Hume’s may appear similar, there are subtle differences between their views. First, Hume omits talk of a contract that institutes civil society. Hume was no avowed contract theorist. I do not want to give the impression that Hume’s rejection of contract theories was absolute, as he wrote in “Of the Original Contract:”

My intention here is not to exclude the consent of the people from being one just foundation of government where it has place. It is surely the best and most sacred [sic!] of any. I only pretend, that it has very seldom had place in any degree, and never almost in its full extent. And that therefore some other foundation of government must also be admitted (EMPL, 474).

Hume’s critique of contract theorists was not confined to the observation that contracts rarely take place; he also rejected the idea that only governments founded on contracts were legitimate. He thought this was a pernicious doctrine: “Let not the establishment at the [Glorious] Revolution deceive us, or make us so much in love with a philosophical origin to government, as to imagine all others monstrous and irregular.”

Second, unlike Locke, Hume doesn’t think that the invention of a convention regarding money plays an important role in the increase of property. Of course, Hume recognizes how the introduction of money can produce efficiencies, but he does not think it plays a constitutive role in the production of property. He thinks that, given human nature,

54 In “Of Public Credit,” 358 Hume talks of the “hand of nature” that instituted “several ranks of men, which form a kind of independent magistracy in a state.”

55 “And tho’ all the fruits it naturally produces, and beasts it feeds, belong to mankind in common, as they are produced by the spontaneous hand of nature …”

56 I am using “Of the Original Contract” to present Hume’s doctrines because it provides juicy, concise quotable material. Hume’s arguments in the Treatise (III.ii.VII) are more thoroughgoing and substantial.

57 Hume’s narrative in the History of England show that whatever else one can say about the Glorious Revolution it was not a compact between all the citizens of Great Britain and their new sovereign.
scarcity is the source of property: “[W]herever any benefit is bestowed by nature in an unlimited abundance, we leave it always in common among the whole human race, and make no subdivisions of right and property” (Second Enquiry, Section 3, Part I, 184). If human beings had an “enlarged” and generous mind then property rights would not be needed (Second Enquiry, Section 3, Part I, 184-185).

Third, Hume insists that the moral obligation that justice can command is derived from its utility to society: “the rules of equity and justice depend entirely on the particular state and condition, in which men are placed, and owe their origin and existence to that utility, which results to the public from their strict and regular observance” (Second Enquiry, Section 3, Part I, 188). Of course, Locke, too, thought that property rights were very useful. But, for Locke, property rights were derived from a law of reason (Second Treatise, V §30) and not utility. For Locke, to say something is a law of reason (i.e. a principle of action) is, I think, to say it agrees with (the law of) nature.

Hume’s attack on Locke’s views contains two important elements: property rights are not natural, but conventional; and reason is a dangerous and false foundation for legitimizing political arrangements. When Hume says that property rights are “conventional” he presupposes, “a sense of common interest; which sense each man feels in his own breast, which he remarks in his fellows, and which carries him, in concurrence

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58Lurking in the background is the debate about the proper characterization of money: whether or not money is merely an instrument of commerce (as Hume maintained in “Of Money,” EMPL, 281) or whether it is responsible for allowing the creation of scarcity, and, hence, the need for commerce (as Locke seems to claim in the Second Treatise, V §37 and §46-9).

59Nevertheless, Sam Fleischacker has called my attention to several passages in the Essay that seem to push Locke into an opposite direction. Locke lets the aptness to produce pleasure be called “good” and an object that tends to produce pain “vice” (Essay, II.xxi.43 and II.xxviii.5-8). This suggests that utilitarian considerations cannot be far removed from Locke’s thought.

60Locke seems to use the two terms almost interchangeably in the Second Treatise; see also his Essays on the Law of Nature, 111.
with others, into a general plan or system of actions, which tends to public utility … in this sense, justice arises from human convention” (Second Enquiry, Appendix III, 306). Hume goes out of his way to make clear that because property follows the establishment of society and the invention of justice, it is an “artificial” construct as opposed to something “natural” (Second Enquiry, Apendix III, note 2, 307-308). But, although the establishment of a right to property involves the use of reason, it is founded on sentiment.

Implicit in Hume’s discussion is a distinction between reason and nature. Interestingly enough, Adam Smith makes explicit this distinction in TMS:

Our obsequiousness to our superiors [i.e., kings and princes] more frequently arises from our admiration for the advantages of their situation, than from any private expectations of benefit from their good-will … Neither is our deference to their inclinations founded chiefly, or altogether, upon a regard to the utility of such submission, and to the order of society, which is best supported by it. Even when the order of society seems to require that we should oppose them, we can hardly bring ourselves to do it. That kings are the servants of the people, to be obeyed, resisted, deposed, or punished, as the public conveniency may require, is the doctrine of reason and philosophy; but it is not the doctrine of Nature (I.iii.3, 52-3).

This is a complicated passage, and I cannot do justice to all the important nuances contained in it. Nevertheless, the last few lines are an attempt, by providing an (empirical?) appeal to human nature, to undermine Locke’s Contractualist political philosophy, which allowed for the doctrine of active resistance on the part of the citizenry when the executive attacked property rights (e.g., Second Treatise, chapter XIII, §149 and §155.). Smith claims that Locke’s philosophy is supported by reason (and he makes no attempt to refute Locke’s arguments), but not by (human) nature. Yet, Smith does not wholeheartedly agree with Hume either. For, he dismisses the idea that an appreciation of the utility of our whole system of laws, and the order they provide, can, as Hume thinks, be the whole or chief source for the origin of our acceptance of authority. In fact, Smith devotes the whole of Part IV of TMS to an attack on Hume’s views, which he thinks more suitable to “men of
reflection and speculation” (TMS, IV.2.12, 192)—note the irony in Smith taking Hume’s explanation to task for being too philosophical and not naturalistic enough! For Smith, political authority is founded more on the natural deference to superiors by most people, due to admiration of the rich and powerful and the sympathetic process described in TMS, than on a calculation or expectation by the governed of any benefits to be derived from continuing obedience.

As mentioned before, Hume also aims to show that an appeal to reason is not a way to go about supporting property rights. He makes two main points. First, empirically it is simply not true that reason is often the foundation of property rights.

When natural reason, therefore, points out no fixed view of public utility, by which a controversy of property can be decided, positive laws are often framed to supply its place, and direct the procedure of all courts of judiciary. Where these too fail, as often happens, precedents are called for; and a former decision, though given itself without any sufficient reason, justly becomes a sufficient reason for a new decision (Second Enquiry, Appendix III, 308).62

Hume is claiming that if we dig long enough into the source of our laws we are likely to discover a great deal of arbitrariness as opposed to reason.63 By insisting on reason as a source for the conventions of property a Lockean invites historical inquiry and risks empirical refutation.64 In fact, Locke had set himself up for such a refutation by appealing to historical examples (e.g., Second Treatise, XIV §165). Second, Hume thinks it is very difficult to stop reason’s chain of arguments once it starts analyzing property relations. Echoing the great skeptical themes of Book I of the Treatise, Hume claims reason easily gets caught up in a “too abstracted reflection” and, when it does so, it starts comparing

62Hume’s point will be appreciated by anybody who reads the various opinions of the courts in the aftermath of the November, 2000, U.S. Presidential Election.

63Hume’s Histories are replete with examples where in order to justify present political arrangements false claims are made about the origin of things (the British Constitution, the Glorious Revolution, the Party system, the rights of Parliament, etc.).

64Hence, Hume’s project of writing a History of England becomes a significant philosophic act.
property rights to religious “superstitions” (Second Enquiry, Section 3, Part II, 198-199). For when reason abstracts from circumstance, “all regards to right and property … [can] seem entirely without foundation, as much as the grossest and most vulgar superstition” (Second Enquiry, Section 3, Part II, 199).

I want to make one final observation about Hume’s idea that property rights are conventional. For Hume, property rights are derived from the utility they provide in society. This view entails that once their use has passed, the rights connected with them ought to vanish or be suspended. We find him endorsing this position:

But where the society is ready to perish from extreme necessity, no greater evil can be dreaded from violence and injustice; and every man may now provide for himself by all the means, by which prudence can dictate, or humanity permit. The public, even in less urgent necessities, opens granaries, without the consent of proprietors; as justly supposing, that the authority of magistracy may, consistent with equity, extend so far. But were any number of men to assemble, without the tye of laws or civil jurisdiction; would an equal partition of bread in a famine, though effected by power and even violence, be regarded as criminal or injurious? (Second Enquiry, Section 3, Part I, 186-187).

I do not mean to imply that Hume thought that common people did not think of property rights as sacred. He taught either that they thought there was a sacred exception to the sacred property rights in times of great need, or that they thought they had a PROPERTY RIGHT in the granaries in times of famine (the so-called “right of necessity”). But, if property rights can indeed outlive their usefulness in certain circumstances, this means that Hume thought that liberty did not always take precedence. Indeed, in the quote he admits that during famines equality trumps property rights.

IV.B: The Sacred Nature of Custom

In this section, I want to investigate Hume’s motivation for calling property rights “sacred” and “inviolable.” For Hume, property rights, established by convention, should

65I want to thank Sam Fleischacker for helpful discussion.
be maintained as long as they are useful. In the previous section, we have seen that Hume did not think that liberty always take precedence among various rights. This view seems to contradict the claim that property rights should be considered as sacred. There are circumstances in which equality trumps justice. Given that Hume also claims that property rights are matters of convention, and may even find their origin in arbitrary decisions, it would be surprising if property rights were sacred in Hume’s philosophy. Nevertheless, Hume, too, calls property rights “sacred” and “inviolable:”

These reflections are far from weakening the obligations of justice, or diminishing any thing from the most sacred attention to property … For what stronger foundation can be desired or conceived for any duty, than to observe, that human society, or even human nature could not subsist, without the establishment of it; and will still arrive at greater degrees of happiness and perfection, the more inviolable the regard is, which is paid to that duty? (Second Enquiry, Section 3, Part II, 200-201).

So, Hume is capable of combining a view that recognizes that property is a useful convention about whose human origin we should not inquire too deeply with calling it “sacred” and “inviolable.” Hume could be thinking that his audience ought to consider property rights as sacred, while realizing that no philosophic justification could be given for this position. Of course, in the quote “inviolable” modifies “the regard” and not “duty,” while “sacred” modifies “attention” and not “property.” To be precise: Hume thinks that attention to property is to be considered a sacred duty. It could be that such obligations are only among the “sacred” things, and do not exhaust them.

In one of his books on Hume, Donald Livingston claims it is the authority of the customs of conventions of common life that achieve the status of the “sacred.”66 Livingston invokes Hume’s discussion of the performative use of language in the section “Of the obligation of promises” in the part on “Justice and Injustice” of the Treatise, where Hume explains how the imagination has a tendency to spiritualize important conventions of life. Livingston’s interpretation of the importance of customs in Hume’s

political philosophy is plausible, and certainly in the spirit of Hume’s overall philosophy, but none of the many references to Hume’s oeuvre that he provides nail down the point exactly. It would have helped Livingston’s case if he could have found in Hume (especially in the account of property) a specific reference to the effect that the authority of custom(s) becomes “sacred” over time.

I think one perhaps ought, in considering Hume’s views, to distinguish between the questions: first, what ‘naturally’ comes to pass, historically? Secondly, what ‘reasonably’ is to be, as it were, sanctioned or applauded by the philosopher; or (perhaps more seriously for Hume the advocate of subjugating reason to the interest of the passions) what ought to be sanctioned, or respected, by the “speculative politicians” (see, “Of Money,” 285) who are in a position to push reform or to help to conserve an institution? In this case, the “sacredness” or “inviolability” of attention to property in the passage above may mean, or may have as one meaning, an appeal to the legislator that (right of) property, however it may have arisen historically, deserves to be treated with respect and infringed upon with caution. Note that I do not say never infringed upon, as “inviolable” suggests because Hume’s phrase, “the more inviolable [etc.],” implies that he does not mean inviolability to be absolute, but a matter of degree. This fits in well with Hume’s world-view in general, and his support of the American Revolution in particular.

Surprisingly enough, we do find such a specific statement, linking tradition to the sacred, albeit in a grudging fashion, in Locke’s Second Treatise (VII, §94):

[Y]et, when time, giving authority, and as (some men would persuade us) sacredness of customs, which the negligent and unforeseeing innocence of the first ages began, had brought in successors of another stamp, the people finding their properties not secure under the government, as it then was, (whereas government has no end but the

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67See also, Whelan 1985, 318-22, and the references to Hume’s works provided there.

68The first paragraph of “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth” (pp. 512-513) comes very close.

69I am indebted to Jen Boobar and Howard Stein for discussion.
preservation of property) could never be safe nor at rest, *nor think themselves in civil society*, till the legislature was placed in collective bodies of men, call them senate, parliament, or what you please.

Locke does not want to push this doctrine – of the sacredness of custom – too far because he wants to argue against it when, for instance, he attacks royalist claims about the ancient tradition of the Prerogative (*Second Treatise*, XIV). More importantly, the argument of the *Second Treatise* is designed to convince the reader to allow the critical authority of reason to trump tradition.

Smith, too, is at least aware of the idea that custom can turn things sacred. In his lectures on Jurisprudence, he teaches the point unequivocally and succinctly to his Glasgow students: “What shocks at first will soon become easy from custom, which sanctifies every thing” (*LJ(B)*, 321, 536). It is easy to imagine how the first part of Smith’s formulation is derived from Hume’s account of the association of ideas: habit familiarizes and becomes the origin of belief (*Treatise*, I.iii.VIII).

When one is trying to interpret Adam Smith, it is often useful to have a sense of what David Hume wrote about the same topic. For instance, Smith shares Hume’s distrust of contract theories that justify property rights (see the quote from TMS, I.iii.3, 52-3). They use similar language in describing how inequality is an important source of authority. Even Smith’s *ad hominem* rejection of Hume’s insistence on utility as the source of our sense of justice in TMS fits this picture; Smith is attacking Hume with Hume’s own principles. They both can imagine circumstances in which property rights are not absolute.

Nevertheless, Smith and Hume do not agree entirely on the importance of redistribution. Hume was, despite his reputation as Tory historian, no enemy of a certain level of equality. In “Of Commerce,” for instance, he wrote,

> Every person, if possible, ought to enjoy the fruits of his labour, in a full possession of all the necessaries, and many of the conveniencies of life. No one can doubt, but

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70Cf. the extensive arguments in *LJ(B)* 15-18, 402-404 and *LJ(A)*, V.111-139 pp. 314-325.
such an equality is most suitable to human nature, and diminishes much less from the happiness of the rich than it adds to that of the poor” (EMPL, 265; Second Enquiry, Section III, Part II, 194).

Yet, Hume only gave such equality a qualified endorsement: something worth considering in theory – a noble sentiment — but foolish and dangerous to pursue with too much diligence in practice (recall his comment on the Levellers in Second Enquiry). Hume shows sporadic concern for the poor and worries about monetary, trade, and tax polices that can worsen their plight (e.g., “Of Interest,” 303; “Of Taxes,” 345ff.; “Of Public Credit,” 361), but he did not propose progressive taxation. There are no redistributionist proposals in his works. Moreover, I have been unable to find a place in Hume which expresses outrage over, say, the pretenses of the merchants and their tendencies to create cartels or the oppression of workers, of the sort we find in Smith’s WN (e.g., I.viii.13, 84; I.x.c.61, 158; IV.iii.c.9, 493). Moreover, Hume’s advice to “speculative politicians” (“Of Money,” 285) seems to be informed by considerations of prudence and not humanity or equity. Even in “Of Commerce,” 265, he introduces the discussion of equality quoted just before with the prudential, albeit politically significant, remark: “a too great disproportion among the citizens weakens any state.”

**V: Smith on “sacred” property rights in WN, revisited**

So far, I have provided evidence for thinking that the importance of property rights in WN undermines any redistribution tendencies Smith may have had. In what follows, I am going to present evidence for an alternative approach. In order to accomplish this, I show that Smith’s understanding of the nature of property is subtler than the Libertarian reading allows. Through an analysis of Smith's comments on the development and nature of property, I argue that we should take his talk about the sacred nature of property rights with a grain of salt; that is to say, they have never been absolute and cannot be. I argue that
Smith’s rhetoric on the sacred nature of property is explicitly designed to people’s prejudices.

V.A: From a Spontaneous to an Invisible Hand

Let us return to Locke. In his chapter, “Of Property,” he writes that:

And tho’ all the fruits it naturally produces, and beasts it feeds, belong to mankind in common, as they are produced by the spontaneous hand of nature; and no body has originally a private dominion, exclusive of the rest of mankind, in any of them, as they are thus in their natural state: yet being given for the use of men, there must of necessity be means to appropriate them some way or other, before they can be of any use, or at all beneficial to any particular man (Second Treatise, V §26).

Locke goes on to argue that people’s labor confers a right to claiming ownership of particular fruits of the earth as long as it is not to the detriment of others. This will introduce inevitable inequality, of course, but Locke does not want to dwell on that.71 As we have seen, Smith is more forthright about this consequence. Moreover, Smith thought that the policies of government in his day magnified these inequalities. It has been little commented on72 that when Smith introduces the invisible hand metaphor in TMS, he does so by asserting its equalizing effect:

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 conveniency, 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 (IV.i.10, 184-5).

71Hume is (without mentioning Locke) explicit about this in “Of Interest,” EMPL, 297-8.

72But, see Bronk 1999, 92-3. Bronk points out that this passage is the intellectual ancestor of “trickle-down” economics. Of course, most trickle-down advocates would reject progressive taxation.
There are several classic Smithian themes here: selfish behavior by individuals can produce beneficial consequences for society (not that far removed from Mandeville’s “private vices, public benefits”); people’s actions have different consequences than they may intend; social causes are often invisible to social actors, etc. It is also worth remarking that Smith is not glorifying the rich: they are vain, insatiable, and rapacious. Nevertheless, for my purposes here, it is crucial that Smith claims that if the markets are left to themselves, no doubt in the context of an “exact administration of justice,” (WN V.ib.1, 708-709) the rich will spend their money in such a way that possessions will be almost equalized. In TMS, Smith is claiming that the invisible hand — a cause produced by the combined efforts of legal institutions protecting property, enforcement of contracts, and the establishment of market competition (by preventing monopolies, etc.), i.e., when there is “fair play” (TMS, II.ii.2.1, 83)\(^73\) — can almost replicate the results of Locke’s “spontaneous hand” in the “state of nature.” (Of course, Locke doesn’t say that the spontaneous hand will distribute things exactly equally.) A wise legislator can make conventions of society conform closely to the workings of Locke's state of nature.\(^74\)

None of this needs to be seen as a decisive refutation of the Libertarian objection against IR. One could be tempted to salvage the Libertarian reading in the following way: property is sacred, and, as it happens, free markets will produce some amelioration of gross inequality. Let us call this the Happy Libertarian reading. It is not very different from IR, although the Happy Libertarian reading insists on the priority of property rights over equality, while IR balances the two. It should be pointed out, however, that in the quote from TMS, IV.i.10, 184-5, Smith talks of the invisible hand equalizing only the “necessaries” of life. Since Smith, following Hume (“Of Commerce,” 265; “Of Taxes,” 343ff. and “Of

\(^{73}\)Griswold 1999, 230-236.

\(^{74}\)For insightful discussion of Smith’s Invisible Hand metaphor, see Rothschild 2001, chapter 5.
Public Credit,” 355-6), accepts a distinction between the necessaries and conveniencies (also described as luxuries) of life (WN, V.i.i.k, 2-3, 869-871), it is clear that he thinks that free markets would only equalize the basic necessities of life. So, if Smith is an IR, he cannot expect to rely on the invisible hand alone to achieve the desired outcome. My main reason for rejecting the Happy Libertarian reading of WN is the existence of Smith’s proposals for progressive taxation and the comments that express concern for “equity” and “humanity” by which they are accompanied. Smith’s insistence on nearly free state-funded primary education (WN, V.i.i.53-61, 784-788) also causes problems for the Happy Libertarian approach. In TMS, Smith expects the Invisible Hand to equalize necessaries of life; cautious progressive taxation would help provide some redistribution of the conveniences of life. There is no mention of equalization in the famous invisible hand passage of WN (IV.i.i.9, 456), but it does not rule it out either.

One may think that the quoted passage in which Smith advocated, “a toll upon carriages of luxury” so that the “indolence and vanity of the rich is made to contribute in a very easy manner to the relief of the poor” (V.i.d, 5; emphasis added), suggests that, in the society of Smith’s day, the invisible hand does not equalize the necessaries; here progressive taxation appears to be designed to help the poor get some of the necessaries of life. Fair enough. But, the reason why the poor need relief is according to Smith due to bad economic policy. As I have made clear in my discussion of Smith’s opposition to the Settlement Laws above, I think the thrust of Smith’s argument is that the prevailing “violation of natural liberty and justice” oppresses the “poor man in England” (I.x.c59, 157) and prevents the Invisible Hand from doing its equalizing job. Perhaps, there would not be any need for progressive taxation if the necessaries were equalized? I believe Smith is

75The distinction is assumed in the tax policies I discuss above. See Hollander 1973 for more details.
silent on this issue. Yet, what this discussion indicates is that WN is in this respect considerably less hopeful than TMS.\textsuperscript{76}

Nevertheless, I want to call attention to Smith’s attack on the practice of entails in WN. An ‘entail’ is the restriction of property by limiting its inheritance to the owner’s lineal descendants or to a particular class thereof usually the first-born male. In his account of the development of property rights in Europe, Smith writes:

They are founded upon the most absurd of all suppositions, the supposition that every successive generation of men have not an equal right to the earth, and to all that it possesses; but that the property of the present generation should be restrained and regulated according to the fancy of those who died perhaps five hundred years ago. Entails, however, are still respected through the greater part of Europe in those countries particularly in which noble birth is a necessary qualification for the enjoyment either of civil or military honours (WN, III.ii.6, 384).

The main point of this passage is that the dead have no hold over the living.\textsuperscript{77} Nevertheless, this statement can suggest that Smith was not only in favor of equality, calling the denial of equal right to property in every generation the most absurd supposition, but that he also thought that market interference (in this case preventing normal buying and selling of any division of property) is preventing equality coming about, while providing an instance of the absurdity of absolute property rights.\textsuperscript{78} Of course, somebody could object by claiming that a more natural reading of the passage is that “equal right” only modifies “every generation” and that he says nothing of an equal right to property of members of every generation. But if one accepts this reading then the argument against entails loses much of

\textsuperscript{76}See Fleischacker forthcoming for more on this.

\textsuperscript{77}See Fleischacker’s forthcoming discussion of Smith’s approach to wills in LJ. One is reminded of Jefferson’s famous quip about the need for a revolution in every generation.

\textsuperscript{78}A Consequentialist Libertarian would almost certainly support an attack on entails. Most Rights based Libertarians would probably also support such an argument. For entails can be understood as a limitation on the right to exchange property rights.
its force.\textsuperscript{79} This is obviously not a very compelling reason to the proponent of the Libertarian objection to accept my argument. It is reflection on the historical discussion of property that provides the most subtle political reason to reject any Libertarian interpretation of Smith.

V.B: A Historical Understanding of Property

In this section, I provide evidence that Smith’s understanding of history not only suggests that in his view property rights have neither a religious origin nor one in reason and have never been absolute, but also that they \textit{cannot}, and hence \textit{ought not}, be absolute. While discussing the expense involved with and nature of the military defense of a society, Smith distinguishes among four stages of civilization: those based on hunting, herding, agriculture, and manufacture (WN, V.1.a, 689-708).\textsuperscript{80} Smith thought that “progress” from one stage to the next was the “natural course of things.” On the whole, Smith thought it was better to advance to a higher stage, but he was aware that important moral qualities (magnanimity, courage, self-command, etc.) could be lost in the transition. And he vigorously combated the idea, promoted by Hume, that advanced societies always exhibit more “humanity” (TMS, V.2.9, 205-210). Smith did not believe that it was inevitable that one moved from one stage to the next nor that all stages needed to be passed through.\textsuperscript{81} Each stage is distinguished by a predominant form of economic organization. Smith’s view is that legal institutions will grow up to facilitate the needs of society in each stage. Of

\textsuperscript{79}It follows from my reading, that in order to be consistent, Smith has to be skeptical about the right to bequest. In his published works, Smith does not say much about this topic; as I indicated in Section II.B, by referring to WN, V.ii.h.4, 859, Smith certainly does not oppose inheritance taxes. Fleischacker forthcoming will present a reading of Smith’s Lectures on Jurisprudence, especially LJ(A)63-69, that provides evidence for the idea that Smith was less than enthusiastic about the right to bequest.

\textsuperscript{80}For an account and intellectual context of the (Marxist) reception of Smith’s four-stage theory, see Meek 1977 or Skinner 1979.

\textsuperscript{81}See, my discussion of WN, III.i.3, 377, in chapter four, III.A.
course, as society changes, the needs of society will change, too. Nevertheless, “[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, III.ii.4, 383). There is, thus, considerable inertia, or, to use Bill Wimsatt’s phrase, generative entrenchment, in the institutions of society.

In a hunting society, where there “is no property, or at least none that exceeds the value of two or three days labour, civil government is not so necessary” (WN, V.i.b.2, 710). Where there is no property, people can “injure one another only in their persons or reputations.” Property rights are an invention of societies that have property, especially when there is great inequality. In societies where there is relative equality “men may live together … with some tolerable degree of security, though there is no civil magistrate to protect them from the injustice of those passions [i.e., “envy, malice, or resentment”]” (V.i.b.2, 709). It follows from this, that if the Invisible Hand could equalize possession property rights would be unnecessary or would not require an authority to enforce them.

In shepherd, agricultural, and manufacturing societies property will be accumulated by some people. People with property will invent property rights and set up institutions to protect and enforce them. Smith is clear that “Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all” (WN, V.i.b.12, 715).

Nowhere in WN does Smith suggest that property rights have, say, their origin in religion, exist because of religious actions or are founded on some law of reason. Instead, property rights exist to serve the needs of the rich and powerful from the shepherd stage onward. But, in shepherd and agricultural societies, justice was quite arbitrary. For instance,

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82Cf. The last few lines of Hume’s “Of Commerce:” “the fewer goods or possessions people enjoy, the fewer quarrels are likely to arise amongst them, and the less necessary will there be for a settled police or regular authority to protect and defend them from foreign enemies, or from each other” (EMPL, 267).
in feudal times, the countryside was ravaged, while the cities and burghs only became the scene of order after the King decided to ally himself with them against the Barons (WN, III.iii.11-12, 404-405). For Smith, only in a commercial society can property rights become secure:

> Commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals, among the inhabitants of the country, who had before lived almost in a continual state of war with their neighbours and of servile dependency upon their superiors. This, though it has been the least observed, is by far the most important of all their effects. Mr. Hume is the only writer who, so far as I know, has hitherto taken notice of it (III.iv.4, 412).  

Smith thinks that in countries without commerce, surplus from land, or cattle in a shepherding society, would be used by the rich to maintain idle retainers. Such retainers were a source of military power and, thus, because of their ambition, disorder. Only when the rich had the option to spend their surplus on vanity satisfying goods, and the number of retainers decrease, while the power of the king would grow, could this disorder start to decrease (WN, III.iv). Of course, there is a little bit of a chicken and egg problem here. For,

> Commerce and manufactures can seldom flourish long in any state which does not enjoy a regular administration of justice, in which the people do not feel themselves secure in the possession of their property, in which the faith of contracts is not supported by law, and in which the authority of the state is not supposed to be regularly employed in enforcing the payment of debts from all those who are able to pay. Commerce and manufactures, in short, can seldom flourish in any state in which there is not a certain degree of confidence in the justice of government (WN, V.iii.9, 910).

So, on the one hand commerce leads to good order, yet some order is necessary for commerce to flourish. Smith’s “solution” to this problem is to insist that the growth of commerce is a “gradual” and a “slow and uncertain” process during the course of

83 Here the editors of WN cite Hume’s essay “Of Commerce.” In the History of England, Hume also stresses the importance of the rediscovery of Justinian's law-code and the self-interest of the clergy to promote the rule of (Roman) law. The clergy were teachers of Latin and law, and owned great tracts of land.
centuries (III.iv.10-23, 418-26). He does not say so, but he implies that the growth of commerce and the rule of law are a concomitant process.84

In Hume’s and Smith’s Great Britain, property rights have come to be experienced as “sacred” and “inviolable” because they have been around for a long time and they have had a long-standing parliament and competing law-courts jealous to keep guard however imperfectly, over their safety. They were, however, only a late development in the history of Western Europe. In the past property rights were precarious and uncertain.

Of course, somebody who claims that property rights are “sacred and inviolable” probably merely means that they ought to be respected and defended at all cost. Yet, Hume, who was such a person, pointed out in Second Enquiry (Section 3, Part I, 187-188) that, during famines, property rights may be suspended. As he indicated, it was quite common in the 18th century for the public to force open “granaries, without the consent of proprietors” (Second Enquiry, Section 3, Part I, 186). Smith, too, thought, that in the case of corn, protecting property rights was less than “sacred” in practice:

The laws concerning corn may everywhere be compared to the laws concerning religion. The people feel themselves so much interested in what relates either to their subsistence in this life, or to their happiness in a life to come, that government must yield to their prejudices, and, in order to preserve the public tranquillity, establish that system which they approve of. It is upon this account, perhaps, that we so seldom find a reasonable system established with regard to either of those two capital objects (WN, IV.v.b.40, 539).85

84Smith is clearly following Hume here; see Hayek 1967, 113, and Rothschild 2001, 10. See also Rosenberg 1975, 384ff. Turgot (1973) writes in his (posthumous) “On Universal History:” “the spirit of commerce presupposes a property in goods which is independent of every power other than that of the laws.”

85Forbes 1975, 183, thinks this passage is evidence of Smith’s “distrust of the people’s judgment, or anti-democratic sentiment” in WN, but this is not obvious. Whether or not Smith was a democrat is irrelevant to this passage (see for modest pro-democratic sentiment WN, III.i.14, 392). There is no doubt that Smith thought people were often faulty judges of their own interests, nevertheless he thought they were better judges than the Ruler: “[T]he law ought always trust people with the care of their own interest, as in their local situations they must generally be able to judge better of it than the legislator can do” (WN, IV.v.b, 531; for similar comments: V.ii.c.18, 833).
This is a crucial passage in my attempt to refute the Libertarian. Smith thinks that whatever institutional arrangements are made they must, in the sense of: cannot avoid, account for the prejudices of the people when dealing with important matters such as food and religion. Hume teaches us that the people did not consider property rights sacred in the 18th century. Moreover, Smith thinks the laws of England, which at one point prevented middlemen from dealing in corn, encouraged the people’s prejudices in the wrong way (WN, V.v.b.21-26, 532-534). Hence, one reason to instruct the political elite in true political economy is to encourage them to design laws that, while still placating the prejudices of the members of the polity, prevent an encouragement of these prejudices.86

Even though Smith explicitly teaches the natural system of perfect liberty, he was aware it needed to accommodate the prejudices of his times. If the people believe that in times of famine grain granaries must be opened to all comers, then the laws, or at least the wise magistrate, need to take that into account. However, in order to facilitate the growth of commerce, which will enable amelioration of gross income inequality, property rights, especially of the working poor, ought to be considered “sacred” in general. The problem with the Libertarian argument is not that it fails to do justice to the content of Smith’s claims, although it ignores important subtleties and Smith’s appeals to his readers’ “humanity.” Rather, the Libertarians ignore the political spirit, and reflexive sensitivity to historical context, in which Smith’s claims about the “sacred” nature of property rights are offered. Smith realizes that when people’s prejudices and the economic circumstances of society change so must the rhetoric of political economy.

86For more on this point see Fleischacker 1999, 176-177.
Smith’s views on property rights are subtler than a casual reading would suggest. Although Smith is very indebted to Hume, he goes well beyond Hume's framework by calling for progressive taxes. I agree with Spencer Pack, who claimed that Smith “is proworker in his sympathies and sentiments” and, one may add, in his policy recommendations. It would be nice to believe that the two elements of IR, the “natural system of perfect liberty and justice” (e.g., WN, I.x.c.59, 157 and IV.vii.c.44, 606), and the “reasonable” and “humane” desire for “equity” (e.g., WN, V.ii.e.6, 842 and I.viii.36, 96, etc.), cohere with each other. Yet, while one can be skeptical about the empirical soundness of Smith’s assumptions, that is, that efficiency and equity necessarily tend to be correlated, I am more bothered by the fact that he did not provide an argument for the “reasonableness” of his “humane” streak we have diagnosed in WN. In WN he does not, for instance, invoke the Impartial Spectator (see my discussion in Chapter 3) on the side of “equity,” “humanity,” and “reason” (also not at WN, I.viii.44, 100; oddly, Smith’s appeals to “reason” make him more Lockean than Humean).

Once one pays attention to it, it is fairly obvious that Smith clearly has the desire to use reason as a critical faculty to oppose complacency about the economic and political situation of his day. Smith is aware that too many people are led by their natural sentiments to willful ignorance of the bad conditions of the poor (TMS, IV.2.10-11, 190-192). His rhetorical invocation of what he calls the “feminine” virtue of “humanity” in WN is an attempt to shake up people’s perceptions. For Smith, the virtue of humanity consists of “exquisite fellow-feeling” (TMS, IV.2.10, 190). Smith does not want to provide a value-neutral political economy; not only are his policy proposals designed to create a path for IR, but WN’s rhetoric is, as we have seen, itself also quite charged at times. But within WN, the

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87See Pack 1992, 142.
appeal to humanity appears to me as question begging. The best we can say for it is that it tacitly presupposes the arguments from TMS, especially those that claim that “polished” and “civilized” nations tend to be more humane (TMS, V.2.13, 209). Undoubtedly, this is one of the reasons why Smith, himself, presented his works as part of a system. Fair enough.

But there is a deeper problem. Why should we, given Smith’s account of human nature (see my discussion in Chapter 4), expect anyone other than the rare virtuous person to systematically pay attention to either the voice of human reason or appeals to her humanity when her interests in the organization of society are at stake? (Cf. WN, I.ii.2, 27). In an odd way, I am rediscovering a version of “the Adam Smith problem,” the now refuted claim that there is a tension between the so-called “sympathy” (misread as “benevolence”) of TMS and the “self-interest” of WN, within WN. While TMS makes clear that “humanity” is an important element of our moral psychology, it is not clear that the prudent men of commercial society will heed the call of humanity. This open Smith up against Rousseau’s charge that a prudent man lacks humanity (Second Discourse, Part I, ¶37, OC III, 155-156). In the next chapter, I will look at Smith’s response to this objection. But here I will end by noting that, in WN, Smith has provided not only no argument that allows him to make a claim on behalf of “humanity,” but also no reason for thinking this will be successful. Sadly, the history of the reception of WN has fully borne out this latter worry.88

88 It also appears to have been quite ineffective. Rothschild 2001 discusses extensively how later political economists attempted to separate Smith’s political program from his political economy.
CHAPTER 6

THE OBITUARY OF A VAIN PHILOSOPHER: SMITH’S REFLECTIONS ON HUME’S LIFE

“A single, and as, I thought a very harmless Sheet of paper, which I happened to write concerning the death of our late friend Mr Hume, brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain.” — Adam Smith to Andreas Holt, October 26, 1780.

I: Summary

In this chapter, I investigate what the purpose and rewards of doing philosophy in a commercial society are for Adam Smith. I draw, of course, on Smith’s explicit comments about the nature of philosophy in The Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS) and the Wealth of Nations (WN), but I focus mostly on Adam Smith’s written response to David Hume’s death, “Letter from Adam Smith, LL.D. to William Strahan, ESQ” (hereafter “Letter to Strahan”), published jointly with Hume’s brief autobiography, “My Own Life” (hereafter “Life”) in 1777.¹

First, I sketch the background to and describe Hume’s “Life” (part II). Hume’s autobiography shows that the philosopher can thrive in a commercial society. In parts III-IV, I provide a detailed reading of Smith’s “Letter to Strahan.” I argue that Smith’s sketch of Hume’s last days is designed as a subtle response to Hume’s self-portrait, and that it provides insight into Smith’s understanding of the aims of philosophy. While agreeing with

¹Conveniently, Strahan was the publisher of both Hume’s and Smith’s works; see footnote 2 to Hume’s Letter No. 168 in Correspondence of Adam Smith (Correspondence), edited by Ernest Campbell Mosner and Ian Simpson Ross, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 208.
the substance of Hume’s picture in Hume’s “Life,” Smith thought that philosophers could enjoy the rewards of friendship in this life and immortality after their death if they attempted to be benefactors to humanity. I argue that friendship among equals is the most valuable goal; this is within every one’s reach when a minimum level of security within society is guaranteed. I foreground the urgency of these issues for Smith by reflecting on Smith’s understanding of Rousseau’s challenge to the value of commercial life.

II: The Commercial Philosopher

This part is divided in three sections. I describe the circumstances of the publication of Hume’s “Life;” I call special attention to Smith’s involvement with it, while simultaneously attempting to distance himself from Hume’s *The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Dialogues). After that, I describe the major points of Hume’s “Life.” In the final section, I discuss the important role that vanity plays in Hume’s narrative.

II.A: Historical Background

David Hume wrote a brief autobiography: “My Own Life.” It ends on April 18, 1776 about four months before his death (on August 25). He intended to have it published as the opening essay in the projected posthumous republication of all of Hume’s works (Correspondence, Letter No. 157 from Hume, 196) together with some material that Hume had suppressed earlier in his career, including “Of Suicide,” “Of the Immortality of the Soul,” and, most famously, Dialogues. Hume had requested that Adam Smith, his longtime close friend, arrange publication of the Dialogues, but Smith had been unwilling to do so. Even after Smith’s initial demurral, Hume wanted Smith to ensure the piece’s survival, leaving it to Smith’s discretion when to publish it (Correspondence, Letters No. 2Correspondence, Letter No. 165, to Hume, 205, editors’ footnote. Oddly, in Letter No. 172, 211, Smith omits mention of “Of Suicide” and “Of Immortality of the Soul.”)

2Correspondence, Letter No. 165, to Hume, 205, editors’ footnote. Oddly, in Letter No. 172, 211, Smith omits mention of “Of Suicide” and “Of Immortality of the Soul.”
156 and 157, 194-6). Although Smith was eager to care for the Dialogues, and thought it “finely written,” he confided to Strahan after Hume’s death that he was willing to communicate the manuscript “only to a few people. When you read [Dialogues] you will see my reasons” (Letter No. 172, to Strahan, 211). This was not Smith’s finest hour. Hume realized that Smith would never let it appear in print. Hume was aware of Smith’s caution about being involved with publication of the Dialogues: “I have become sensible, that, both on account of the Nature of the Work, and of your Situation, it may be improper to hurry on that Publication” (Letter No. 157, from Hume, 196). Nevertheless, he assured Smith about the Dialogues, “that nothing can be more cautiously and artfully written” (Letter No. 165, from Hume, 205). Even so, we know that, after Hume’s death, Smith was “still uneasy about the clamour which I foresee they will excite” (Letter No. 177A, unsent draft to Strahan, 216; see also, Letter No. 177B, 217). Hume had decided to leave the Dialogues to his nephew to ensure that it would be published after his death (Letter No. 3A few months after Hume’s death Smith tried to dissuade Strahan from publishing some of Hume’s letters with Hume’s “Life” and Smith’s “Letter to Strahan;” see, Letter No. 181, to Strahan, 223. It is a bit ironic that in doing so Smith appeals to Hume’s will: “what in this case ought to be considered is the will of the Dead. Mr Humes [sic] constant injunction was to burn all his Papers, except the Dialogues and the account of his life. This injunction was even inserted in the body of his will.” If Smith felt so strongly about honoring the will of the dead, Hume could have simply left his last will as is. But Hume undoubtedly realized that Smith was not committed to treating last wills as sacrosanct. For further treatment of Smith’s views on the right of bequest, see my discussion in chapter 5 or Fleischacker forthcoming.

4It’s not clear to me what concern Hume and Smith had about Smith’s situation. At the time, Smith was not employed; he was living off the royalties of TMS, the then recently published WN, and most of all on the annuity of three hundred pounds a year provided to him by the Duke of Buccleugh (whom Smith had tutored after he resigned his post in Glasgow), see Correspondence, Letter No. 106, 130, and Letter No. 76 from Charles Townshend, 95. Cf. TMS, IV.2.10, 191: “We never are generous except when in some respect we prefer some other person to ourselves, and sacrifice some great and important interest of our own to an equal interest of a friend or of a superior.”

5From the letter it’s clear that Hume revised the Dialogues just before his death; he asserts he had not touched the manuscript in about 15 years.
168, from Hume, 208). Despite Smith’s qualms, publication of the Dialogues did not incite much public outcry. As the quote at the head of this chapter indicates, the same could not be said for the reaction to Smith’s brief comments on Hume’s death in “Letter to Strahan.”

This was not the first time that Smith chose to exercise caution in dealing with Hume. When Smith was still a professor, he made little effort on his behalf when Hume attempted to secure an appointment at the University of Glasgow (in 1751): “I should prefer David Hume to any man for a colleague; but I am afraid the public would not be of my opinion; and the interest of the society will oblige us to have some regard to the opinion of the public” (Letter No. 10 to William Cullen, 5). Hume’s university appointment at Glasgow (and earlier at Edinburgh) never materialized.

While Smith was inclined not to be associated with the publication of Hume’s Dialogues, he took a great deal of interest in his “Life.” On August 22, 1776, a few days before Hume’s death, Smith wrote Hume requesting permission to “add a few lines to your account, in my own name, of your behavior in this illness, if, contrary to my hopes, it should provide your last … You have in a declining state of health, under an exhausting disease, for more than two years together, now looked at the approach, or what you believed to be the approach of Death with a steady cheerfulness such as very few men have been able to maintain for a few hours, tho’ otherwise in the most perfect Health” (Letter No. 166, 206; I have omitted Smith’s description of a conversation with Hume about Hume’s imaginary dialogue with Charon because I will deal with it below). In his last letter to Smith, Hume gave the requested permission (Letter No. 168, 208). Shortly after his death, Smith circulated a draft of his continuation of his “Life” to Hume’s brother and others.6 He incorporated some minor changes (see, his exchange of Letters No. 171, 175, and 176 with John Home of Ninewells, 210 and 214-215) and was able to send Strahan a finished draft

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before the end of the year (Letter No. 178, to Strahan, November 9, 1776, 217-221).

Smith explicitly intended his short piece to be published jointly with Hume’s autobiography and, more important, as a separate publication from the Dialogues, although together with Hume’s other works (Letter No. 172, to Strahan, 211). In two (probably unsent) draft cover letters to Strahan, Smith talks of the “quiet” that his continuation of Hume’s “Life” may cause in his own mind (Letters No. 177A and 177B to Strahan, 216). Nevertheless, I do not think that Smith was only trying to relieve his stress over Hume’s death or his guilty conscience over his refusal to publish the Dialogues. We have seen that, in his letter to Hume, Smith makes clear that he intends to portray his behavior in his last few years as an example of cheerfulness in the face of death. He wanted to make Hume into an example. As Smith remarked eleven days before Hume’s death in a letter to Alexander Wedderburn, “Poor David Hume is dying very fast, but with great cheerfulness and good humour and with more real resignation to the necessary course of things, than any Whining Christian ever dyed with pretended resignation to the will of God” (Letter No. 163, 203).

Smith’s public discussion of Hume’s private conduct is especially surprising, because Smith is not only extremely guarded about keeping details of his own life from the public view, burning manuscripts on his deathbed, but when he writes Strahan to

7 In a copy of an unsent draft letter to Strahan (Correspondence, Letter No. 177B, 216) Smith claimed that he had not started writing his comments on Hume’s life not until a few weeks after Hume’s death. It is, nevertheless, clear that he started thinking about it before Hume’s death.

8 Mossner 1954, 605. At TMS, III.3.32, 151, Smith writes, “In the irreparable misfortunes occasioned by the death of children, or of friends and relations, even a wise man may for some time indulge himself in some degree of moderated sorrow.”

9 The letter to Wedderburn continues with discussion of some of Smith’s conversations with Hume, including description of Hume’s reading of Lucian’s Dialogues of the Death and Hume’s exchange with Charon. The letter to Wedderburn is very similar to Smith’s published “Letter to Strahan,” although Smith omits the comment about the “whining Christian.”

discourage him from publishing a collection of Hume’s Letters, he not only appeals to the contents of Hume’s will, but also claims, “Many things would be published not fit to see the light to the great mortification of all those who wish well to his memory” (Letter No. 18, 223-224). Some light, perhaps, is shed on Smith’s course of action once we realize that Smith undoubtedly knew about James Boswell’s visit to Hume on July 7, 1776. While Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* was only published in 1791, his *Account of Corsica* had appeared in 1768. Although there is only one brief letter from Boswell to Smith extant (Letter No. 122, 156), Boswell was well known to Smith, his college teacher at Glasgow in 1759-1760. From Boswell’s diaries, we know that, despite the antipathy between Johnson and Smith, Boswell met Smith in London on several occasions, even going out of his way to visit him. Boswell was convinced that Smith was an “infidel.” Since Smith knew of Boswell’s religiosity, I speculate that Smith wanted to preempt a possibly hostile account by Boswell of Hume’s attitude toward death. This is not entirely groundless: on the day of Hume’s burial, Boswell inspected the open grave, and was seen following the corpse to the


12 Ross 1995, 133-134.

13 See, for instance, Boswell’s diary entries for April 2, 1775, 115, and 16 March, 1776, Boswell 1963, 257-8. On 13 April 1776, Boswell records Johnson as saying “Adam Smith was as dull a dog as he had ever met with” (Boswell 1963, 337); interestingly, Boswell responds, “it was strange to me to find my old professor in London, a professed infidel with a bag-wig.”

14 See Boswell 1963, 337, quoted in the previous footnote. In another entry Boswell describes teasing Smith about being Commissioner of Customs at a March 1781 meeting with Burke, Gibbon and others; when Gibbon defends Smith, Boswell remarks he does so “because he is a brother infidel” Boswell 1991, 321.

15 If this is so there would be an interesting parallel with Hume’s attempt to preempt the impact of Rousseau’s publication of his memoirs.
grave. In the final lines of his “Life,” Hume boasts that, “My friends never had occasion to vindicate any one circumstance of my character and conduct: not but that the zealots, we may well suppose, would have been glad to invent and propagate any story to my disadvantage, but they could never find any which they thought would wear the face of probability” (xlii). It is, nevertheless, striking that not only Smith, but also one of Hume’s other friends, John Home the playwright (e.g., Douglas), decided to write an account of Hume’s dying days and to comment on his character.

Smith’s account of Hume’s final days accords well, despite some minor discrepancies, with the other available evidence; this includes not only Hume’s and Smith’s correspondence (and that of their friends), but also with memoirs written by Boswell and Home. In a separate letter to Strahan, Smith insisted that his description of Hume’s dying days was “very well authenticated” (Correspondence, Letter No. 172, 211). Whatever Smith’s motives for writing his “Letter to Strahan,” I will treat it less as a historical record, interesting as it is, and more as a literary effort to fix the public’s “memory” of Hume as the model of a genuine philosopher in life and in the face of death. For Smith ends his brief “Letter to Strahan” with the following characterization: “Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit” (EMPL, xlix).

Smith’s “Letter to Strahan” occasionally echoes Plato’s description of

16Mossner 1954, 605-606.

17All my quotes from Hume’s “Life” are from David Hume revised edition, Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary, (EMPL), edited by Eugene W. Miller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

18John Home A Sketch of the character of Mr. Hume and Diary of a Journey from Morpeth to Bath, 23 April-1 May, 1776. Neither the diary nor the sketch was published in his lifetime.

19All my quotes from Smith’s “Letter to Strahan” are from the version published in Hume’s EMPL because I believe it is more widely available than Smith’s Correspondence.
Socrates’ death in the *Phaedo*.\(^{20}\) Finally, it is worth remembering that the details of Hume’s death attracted widespread interest because he was thought to be an atheist by many, who wanted to know how somebody, who certainly did not believe in the afterlife, would face death. This is illustrated by Boswell’s account, where some ambiguity, perhaps, is maintained over the exact details of Hume’s views on the existence and nature of God, but where Hume continues to deny an afterlife for his soul.\(^{21}\)

II.B: Hume’s “My Own Life”

The opening lines of Hume’s “Life” announce the ostensible aim of his piece:

It is difficult for a man to speak long of himself without vanity; therefore, I shall be short. It may be thought an instance of vanity that I pretend at all to write of my life; but this Narrative shall contain little more than the History of my Writings; as, indeed, almost all my life has been spent in literary pursuits and occupations. The first success of most of my writings was not such as to be an object of vanity (xxxi).

At first glance, Hume’s “history” of his writings includes little more than the publication dates and reception of most his works. We learn little about their contents or how Hume understood the relationship among them.\(^{22}\) Not only does he omit mention of several pamphlets, satires, and his involvement with the publication of the *Transactions of the Edinburgh Society for Encouraging Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture in*

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\(^{20}\)Ross 1995, 304. Not unlike Plato’s absence from Socrates’ death, Smith was not present for Hume’s.

\(^{21}\)Boswell writes, “I had a strong curiosity to be satisfied if [Hume] persisted in disbelieving a future state even when had death before his eyes. I was persuaded from what he now said, and from the manner of saying it, that he did persist” (Boswell 1991, 248ff.). See also, “Of the Immortality of the Soul” (EMPL, 590-598), where Hume makes clear that only divine revelation can sustain belief in the afterlife.

\(^{22}\)The only exception is some description of the *History of England*; Hume emphasizes his impartiality and the unexpected (to him) fury his account of the death of Charles I evoked in the book’s audience. Hume notes, however, with amusement, that only the Primates of England and Ireland had written him not to be discouraged (xxxvi-xxxviii). There are also some tantalizing, metaphorical remarks on the *Treatise*’s relationship with later works; see Christensen 1987, 45-52, for discussion.
Scotland, but in his “Life,” Hume also completely ignores what was among the most famous of his writings in his life-time, that is, his published record and narrative of his dealings with Rousseau about their very public falling out. I am not sure what to make of this oversight. There is no reason to doubt Hume’s self-assessment; all available evidence suggests he was “a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions” (xl). Yet, Rousseau’s behavior, and the private accusations directed at Hume, did provoke in Hume a strong reaction. A fearful Hume, worried about what might flow from Rousseau’s mighty pen in forthcoming memoirs (e.g., Hume’s Letters, Volume 2, Letter No. 351, to Turgot, 92), ignored the wise council of Smith and let d’Alembert publish Hume’s version of the events between Rousseau and Hume in Exposé Succinct de la contestation, qui s’est élevée entre M. Hume et M. Rousseau (Exposé). The events with Rousseau undermine Hume’s boast that “My friends never had occasion to vindicate any one circumstance of my character and conduct.”

23Mossner 1954, 257-258.

24See Christensen 1987, 51-52, and chapter 7 for details.

25It is no doubt intentional; after publishing his version of the events with Rousseau, Hume had written in a letter, “my affair with Rousseau is now finally and totally at an end, at least on my part: for I never surely shall publish another line on that subject. It was with infinite reluctance I consented to the last publication. I lay my account that many people will condemn me for it: but if I had not published, many people would have condemned me as a calumniator, and as a treacherous and false friend” (See Hume’s Letters, Volume 2, Letter No. 366, 114).


27“[L]et me beg of you not to publish anything to the world upon the very great impertinence which he has been guilty of to you … expose his brutal letter, but without giving it out of your own hand so that it may never be printed, and if you can, laugh at yourself, and I shall pawn my life that before three weeks are at an end, this little affair, which at present gives you so much uneasiness, shall be understood to do you as much honor any thing has ever happened to you” (Correspondence, Letter No. 93, to Hume, 112-113).

Anyone aware of the details of Hume’s life must recognize in the “Life” an attempt to ignore his one dishonorable, albeit fully understandable, act of publishing, without permission, Rousseau’s private letter embedded in his narrative of the Exposé.\textsuperscript{29} In my discussion of Smith’s “Letter to Strahan,” I return to this episode because Smith is complicit in Hume’s silence in a very interesting way.\textsuperscript{30} One of the main goals of Hume’s “Life,” then, appears to be his attempt to fix the cannon of his writings worth writing about.

While not providing much detail of the content of his works, Hume’s “Life” focuses on his material rewards for his literary output and related activities. After noting his “very slender fortune” at the start of his literary career in the 1730s, Hume provides many details of his ever increasing material prosperity, e.g., the “considerable accession to [his] small fortune” (xxxiv). By the time of the publication of the first few volumes of Hume’s \textit{History of England}, he could happily reminisce: “notwithstanding this variety of winds and seasons, to which my writings had been exposed, they had still been making such advances, that the copy-money given me by the booksellers, much exceeded any thing formerly known in England; I was become not only independent, but opulent” (xxxviii). Moreover, Hume makes sure that his reader is aware of the fame and public recognition he experienced during, say, his stay in Paris, while never loosing sight of the fact that his public service as military officer, as secretary to the embassy in Paris, and later as under-secretary of State, left him with “much more money, and a much larger income” than before and “very opulent … with a revenue of 1000 £ a year” (xxxix-xl).

\textsuperscript{29}Moreover, in the Exposé, Hume published Walpole’s letter about the affair, dissuading Hume from publication of the Exposé, only in a truncated form (Christensen 1987, 256 and 263).

\textsuperscript{30}Of course, arguments from silence can never be very compelling. For instance, as David Levy pointed out to me, neither Hume nor Smith mentions their interest in the controversy surrounding Ossian in the pieces that I discuss. I doubt this silence is very significant, but I cannot give a principled reason for this.
The main point, then, of “My own Life” seems to be that a man of letters can maintain his “independency,” while associating with the rich and powerful (xxxiv and xxxv). Hume achieved literary fame, his “ruling passion” (xl), and material success through “studious disposition … sobriety … industry” (xxxiii).31 Even though Hume admits that he was from “a good family, both by father and mother,” and received a solid education, as the younger son, his “patrimony … was of course very slender;” most of his achievements are the product of his own effort (xxxii).

It is important to emphasize that, while Hume sometimes distinguishes “philosophy” from “literature” (xxxvi), for him “literature” does not have the narrow connotation (i.e., works of fiction) as it often does for us; for Hume and his contemporaries, it generally means “the pursuits of philosophy and general learning” (xl; cf. Smith’s “Astronomy,” II¶12, 46).32 That is to say, Hume’s life serves as an example of how the values of commercial society, as defended in his own essays, especially “Of Commerce” and “Of Refinement in the Arts,” are fully compatible with and, in fact, enable a life of philosophy.33 For Hume, economic, social, and intellectual commerce reinforce each other: “The spirit of the age affects all the arts … The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become … They flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge … industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain” (“Of Refinement in the Arts,” 271, EMPL; emphasis in original). On the surface, at least,

31 Hanley 2002 points out that Hume also emphasizes his methodical, single-minded focus on worldly success.

32 See Buckle 1999, 7-8, for more extensive discussion and further examples from Hume’s oeuvre.

33 I agree with Hanley 2002 that Hume intends to serve – by appealing to interests and values of his reader — as a role-model to be emulated; Hanley’s references to Hume’s reflections on Plutarch’s Lives are especially useful. But I think Hanley overlooks the fact that Hume’s non-philosophical readers are reminded that Hume’s way to wealth is as a Man of Letters.
Hume’s “Life” is a vindication of the Enlightenment project: the various kinds of commerce and exchange, including those of the sentiments, the foundation of his ethical thought, have a politically civilizing function; the philosopher can remain independent while thriving in the new cosmopolitan world of global trade in goods and ideas. Interestingly enough, while Hume is not shy about mentioning adversity, recounting numerous disappointments (we learn, for instance, that the great defender of commercial life turned out to be “totally unsuitable” for work with some “eminent” Bristol “merchants,” at xxxiii). He omits mention of his inability to obtain a university appointment. Apparently, Hume does not want to call attention to all the opposition he has faced.

Notice that Hume’s insistence on “independence” does not mean he considered himself as self-sufficient. Philosophic independence is achieved through commerce and exchange of ideas by the constant application of the virtues of sobriety, frugality, and industry. Self-sufficiency, by contrast, I will identify with a withdrawal from a state of society. Hume’s “Life” glorifies perseverance in the face of adversity, not a retreat from the modern world. There is almost no sense in Hume’s autobiography that the rewards of

34For an important effort to put Hume in appropriate intellectual context, see Hirschmann 1977.

35Hume’s political and economic philosophy is largely anti-Utopian: “To tamper … or try experiments merely upon the credit of supposed argument and philosophy, can never be the part of a wise magistrate, who will bear a reverence to what carries the marks of age; and though he may attempts some improvements for the public good, yet will he adjusts his innovations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric, and preserve entire the chief pillars and supports of the constitution” (“Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” 512-513). See also his comments about the “sensible knave” in Second Enquiry, 215ff. and “Of the Independence of Parliament” (in EMPL) that inspired public choice theory. Unlike some of the French philosophes, Hume is unwilling to advocate wholesale top-down political reform.

36In “Of Essay-Writing” Hume adopts the diplomatic metaphor of being an “Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation,” but he quickly switches to a more commercial vocabulary, maintaining a “Balance of Trade” in the “commerce” between both sides (EMPL, 535).
doing philosophy are any different from those available in other occupations; philosophy appears to be just one part of the division of labor.

There is, however, a minor hint toward the end of the “Life” that, for Hume, the best part of life is not exclusively focused on commerce of various kinds:

I now reckon upon speedy dissolution ... and what is more strange, have, notwithstanding the great decline of my person, never suffered a moment’s abatement of my spirits; insomuch, that were I name the period of my life, which I should most choose to pass over again, I might be tempted to point to this later period. I possess the same ardour as ever in study, and the same gaiety in company. I consider, besides, that a man of sixty-five, by dying cuts off only a few years of infirmities; and though I see many symptoms of my literary reputation’s breaking out at last with additional luster, I knew that I could have but few years to enjoy it. It is difficult to be more detached from life than I am at present” (lx).

Despite his passion for literary fame, and his strong affirmation of commercial society and a life of worldly activity, Hume would, if forced to choose the part of life he could live again, pick the period in which he is most detached from life, that is, in which he spends his time studying and socializing. It is the time of his life in which Hume can write about his character as if he were a dead man, that is, in the past tense “for that is the style I must now use in speaking of myself, which emboldens me the more to speak my sentiments” (xl). When one is detached from one’s life, worldly reputation and financial rewards mean less than study and gay conversation with the right companions. As a much younger man, Hume once wrote,

One that has well digested his knowledge both of books and men, has little enjoyment but in the company of a few select companions. He feels too sensibly, how much all the rest of mankind fall short of the notions which he has entertained. And, his affection being thus confined within a narrow circle, no wonder he carries them further, than if they were more general and undistinguished. The gaiety and frolic of a bottle companion improves with him into solid friendship: And the ardours of a youthful appetite become an elegant passion (“Delicacy of Taste,” EMPL, 7-8).

We can discern, then, in the advocate of commercial life a passionate elitism. (See also Hume’s entertaining letter No. 31 to Smith, Correspondence, 33-36)37

37This private elitism is entirely compatible with a wide variety of political positions.
But one ought not dramatize Hume’s choice; he is not rejecting the rewards of commercial life and worldly fame outright as unworthy of pursuit.38 His phrasing, “I might be tempted,” is extremely weak. Moreover, I suspect that for Hume the temptation of turning one’s back on the world is itself only made possible by two important conditions: the achievement of worldly success and security, and awareness of the impending dissolution of his body.

II.C: Hume’s Vanity

As quoted above, Hume starts his “Life” by raising the specter of vanity; he mentions it twice more in the first paragraph. In the closing line of the piece, he returns to it: “I cannot say there is no vanity in making this funeral oration of myself, but I hope it is not a misplaced one; and this is a matter of fact which is easily cleared and ascertained” (xli). Hume does not deny the possibility that he is a vain man; all he hopes is that his vanity is not misplaced. From his earliest writings, Hume tried to combat the bad reputation of vanity (in a Christian world): “Vanity is rather to be esteemed a social passion, and a bond of union among men” (Treatise, III.ii.2.12).39 In the closing paragraph of his essay “Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature,” in the context of an attack on Hobbes and Mandeville, who had claimed that selfishness was the sole animating principle of humankind, Hume had given a powerful defense of the positive instrumental role of vanity:

38I take this to be the nub of Hanley 2002.

39I know of only one place in Hume’s writings where vanity seems to be criticized: in the Second Enquiry vanity is contrasted unfavorably with a desire for fame; he writes of vanity that it “is so justly regarded as a fault or imperfection,” (Section VIII, 266). Nevertheless, in context Hume has in mind, I think, only the “secret” forms that vanity can take. For later in Second Enquiry, Hume points out that the existence of vanity in a person is a necessary condition for the delight in praise (Appendix II, 301). Since Hume insists that a “desire of fame … is so far from being blameable, that it seems inseparable from virtue, genius, capacity, and a generous or noble disposition” (Section VIII, 265), it would be strange, if not inconsistent, if the vanity that enables the existence of this desire of fame would be entirely a fault.
It has always been found, that the virtuous are far from indifferent to praise; and therefore they had been represented as a set of vain-glorious men, who had nothing in view but the applauds of others. But this … is a fallacy … The case is not the same with vanity as with the other passions … vanity is so closely allied to virtue, and to love of the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake, that these passions are more capable of mixture, than any other kinds of affection; and it is almost impossible to have the latter without some degree of the former. Accordingly, we find, that this passion for glory is always warped and varied according to the particular taste or disposition of the mind on which it falls … To love the glory of the virtuous deeds is a sure proof of the love of virtue (EMPL, 86).

For Hume, some vanity can be extremely useful in promoting virtue. Regardless, if one agrees with Hume’s defense of the right kind of vanity, that is, one that motivates the performance, and revels in the glory of virtuous deeds, there can be no doubt that, in the closing lines of his “Life,” Hume intends to have it claimed on his behalf that, if he is vain at all, he has the right kind of vanity. That is to say, he is inviting the reader to judge whether or not the vanity evident in his eulogy is misplaced. What Hume cannot do, within the norms of propriety, even in the vain context of imagining his own funeral oration, is to supply evidence of his virtuous deeds.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, I am reading Hume as if he is affirming that he is vain, and as if the only point of contention is for his reader to decide whether or not his vanity is appropriate. One could be tempted to argue that, in the “Life,” Hume never claims to be vain. It is true he never admits that he is vain. In fact, he tells us from the start that the brevity of the “Life” is designed to avoid being thought vain. But he is equally explicit in being unable to deny that he is not vain (“I cannot say there is no vanity”) in telling the story of his own life. And his admission of vanity is implicitly suggested in his already quoted remark at the start of his essay that the lack of success of his earliest writings could not be the “object of vanity,” that is to say, that the tremendous success of his later writings would be appropriate objects of vanity. So, given that he repeatedly raises the issue of

40I want to thank Percival Matthews for helping me formulate this point.
vanity, I think that, on balance, it is likely that Hume thinks himself vain. The issue is, as he says, whether or not it is misplaced.

Hume insists that, whether or not his vanity is proper for him, it is a matter of fact; it is not just any matter of fact, but one that “is easily cleared and ascertained.” Since the worth of his vanity is, by his lights, a question that may have a definitive answer (as all questions about matters of fact have in principle in Hume’s epistemology; see Chapter 2, III.A), the question is: who will supply it? It would have to be someone that knows the relevant facts of Hume’s life and one who, at a minimum, shares enough of his conception of what a virtuous action is. What is required, then, is an impartial spectator of Hume’s life, who can, so to speak, settle the question in an authoritative fashion. It is no surprise that Adam Smith, the theorist of impartial spectatorship (recall Chapter 3, IV.B), takes up the challenge in the “Letter to Strahan;” he does so in a very artful way.

III: Smith’s “Letter of Strahan”

In this part, I am going to construe Smith’s “Letter to Strahan” as a defense of the appropriateness of Hume’s vanity. In the first section, I argue that, while Smith certainly does not think that vanity was unqualifiedly a virtue, he did think it could be useful and appropriate in certain circumstances. In the second section, I call attention to Smith’s response to Rousseau’s criticism of commercial life in *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (Second Discourse)*, namely, that it not only fosters a bad kind of vanity but also causes unhappiness. I suggest that Rousseau’s challenge allows us to properly understand the importance of Smith’s defense of Hume. In the next two sections, I investigate two lines of defense of Hume’s vanity that can be unearthed in Smith’s “Letter to Strahan.” I first, briefly, consider to what degree Hume’s private acts of charity suffice as a defense. But the main focus is on an interpretation of Smith’s report of
Hume’s imaginary dialogue with Charon. This provides insight into Smith’s understanding of Hume’s public acts of generosity.

In what follows, I take for granted the two obvious messages of Smith’s piece when read on its own: that Hume faced death in a cheerful manner, and that his character was very balanced. My approach should not be understood as a denial of the presence or importance of these two issues, which are both crucial in Smith’s attempt to fix for posthumous memory of his friend in a Christian world.

III.A: Smith on Vanity

Before turning to details of Smith’s “Letter to Strahan,” I must briefly explain the complicated role that vanity plays in Smith’s thinking. Smith is less willing than Hume to defend vanity. In fact, a casual reading of TMS may leave the impression that Smith is an enemy of vanity. He states, for instance, “The words vain and vanity are never taken in a good sense” (TMS, VI.iii.43, 258; emphasis in original). And elsewhere he writes: “To be pleased with … groundless applause is a proof of the most superficial levity and weakness. It is what is properly called vanity, and it is the foundation of the most ridiculous and contemptible vices, the vices of affectation and common lying; follies which, if experience did not teach us how common they are, on should imagine the least spark of common sense would save us from” (TMS, III.2.4, 115). Now, it is important to realize that, in neither passage, Smith claims that being vain, as opposed to being called or thought of as being vain, is always bad thing. Of course, he is aware that sometimes vanity can lead to the most contemptible vices, but he does not say it always does. In fact, one could read him as claiming that, if common sense were more common, then more people would be able to
prevent their vanity from being the foundation of various vices. Vanity is not the problem, but the widespread lack of common sense.41

Now, it is true that Smith thinks the vanity is caused by “so gross an illusion of the imagination, that it is difficult to conceive how any rational creature should be imposed upon it.” Yet, vanity is, in fact, widespread and often prevents us, and our impartial spectators within, from seeing ourselves in the proper light (TMS, III.2.4-5, 115-116). There is no doubt that for Smith, “Vanity is very frequently no more than an attempt prematurely to usurp that glory before it is due” (TMS, VI.iii.46, 259). It is, however, only “very frequently” so, and not always.

Nevertheless, Smith also claims,

[t]he desire of doing what is honourable and noble, of rendering ourselves the proper objects of esteem and approbation, cannot with any propriety be called vanity. Even the love of well-grounded fame and reputation, the desire of acquiring esteem by what is really estimable, does not deserve that name (TMS, VII.ii.4.8, 209).

These lines are more problematic for my argument that Smith’s “Letter to Strahan” is an attempt to justify the appropriateness of Hume’s *vanity*. For, even if Smith agreed that Hume wanted the right kind of desire for fame, one motivated by acquiring esteem for doing really estimable things, Smith clearly would not want to call this vanity. Yet, Smith’s wording is extremely careful. He does not deny that vanity plays no role here. All he is committed to is that virtuous motives do not “deserve” to be called vain because he is aware, as we have seen, that vanity is never taken in a good sense. *Propriety* demands that we refrain from using the word ‘vanity’ when describing virtuous motives. Smith has a powerful reason for his restraint. According to Smith, Mandeville almost succeeded in denying the reality of the virtues by exploiting an ambiguity of *common* language.

41Smith’s willingness to admit that common sense is not so common and that many people do not act as rational creatures has ramifications for understanding his moral theory, but that subject cannot be pursued here. In Chapter 3, V.D, I call attention to this issue in discussing Smith’s epistemology.
combined with “popular ascetic doctrines,” in order to label all virtuous actions as vain (TMS, VII.ii.4.11-12, 311-313). Yet, none of this means that somebody who acts from the desire of doing what is honorable in order to be esteemed cannot be vain for justified reasons. It is almost as if Smith is saying that one cannot in good conscience say of somebody that he is vain in a good way but that one could show it. I admit that Smith never says this, but my reading has the benefit that it accounts for Smith’s wording. Of course, my reading would be entirely implausible if Smith does not see any positive elements to virtue. But this is not the case.

While, for Smith, vanity is often a “vice” in individuals (TMS, VI.iii.33-47, 255-259), Smith thinks it more “foolish” (TMS, VI.iii.37, 256) than pernicious: “The worst falsehoods of vanity are all what we call white lies” (TMS, VI.iii.41, 257; Smith is explicitly distinguishing vanity from pride here). For Smith, “vanity” is in some people connected “with many amiable [virtues]; with humanity, with politeness, with a desire to oblige in all little matters, and sometimes with a real generosity” (TMS, VI.iii.42, 258). So, for Smith, vanity can have negative and positive effects on people’s behavior.

Moreover, vanity can be a crucial, potentially beneficial sentiment for society; in his theorizing, it is one of the linchpins on which all social and economic commerce thrives. As he writes in TMS: “What are the advantages which we propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition? To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation … It is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us.” In context, Smith’s immediate point is that what we desire in pursuing wealth and greatness is the sympathy and approbation of mankind.

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42Smith calls attention to the importance of his criticism of Mandeville in his letter to Sir Gilbert Elliot (Correspondence, Letter No. 40, 49); see Brubaker 2002b for detailed discussion of this letter.
and not simply the “necessities of nature” (I.iii.2.1, 50). Again, for Smith much of our
vanity is misplaced and can lead to self-deception, inflated self-conception, and willful
ignorance of the bad conditions of the poor; that is, by distorting our sentiments, it can
undermine our humanity or our impartial spectators (e.g., TMS, I.iii.3.7, 64; III.3-4, 134-
161 and VI.III.22, 246). Moreover, the maintenance of cartels among employers, not a good
thing for Smith, is explained by the susceptibility to peer-pressure of merchants and their
bouts of vanity (WN, I.viii.13, 84 and WN, V.i.f.4, 759-760). Yet, while vanity can be
“natural” in us (TMS, VI.iii.47, 259), there is also room for the proper use of vanity: “The
great secret of education is to direct vanity to proper objects … do not discourage [the
student’s] pretensions to those [accomplishments] that are of real importance.” That is to
say, vanity can be cultivated into a force for positive change; the right kind of vanity, namely,
“the real love of true glory” can make people want to be virtuous (TMS, VI.iii.46, 259; cf.
VII.ii.4.8-10, 309-311; III.2.8, 177). To understand Smith’s positive appraisal of properly
directed vanity, we must make a brief detour through Smith’s reflections on Rousseau. For
Rousseau’s philosophy offers Smith the most important challenge to viewing Hume’s
embrace of commercial life in a positive light.

III.B: Smith’s “Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review”

Smith’s earliest (1755/1756) publication, “Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review”
(“Edinburgh Review”), is a review of European intellectual achievements, about a

43I am indebted to Lauren Brubaker in my discussion of this passage. See also my
discussion in Chapter five of my dissertation of the following passage from the tax-proposals
of WN: “When the toll upon carriages of luxury upon coaches, post-chaises, etc., is made
somewhat higher in proportion to their weight than upon carriages of necessary use, such as
carts, waggons [sic], etc., the indolence and vanity of the rich is made to contribute in a very
easy manner to the relief of the poor, by rendering cheaper the transportation of heavy goods
to all the different parts of the country” (WN, V.i.d, 725; cf. ED 4); emphasis added. See, for
a detailed treatment of the role vanity plays in Smith’s philosophy, Lerner 1999 and
Fleischacker forthcoming.
third of which is devoted to Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, then recently published. Smith translates generously from Rousseau and praises his eloquence, but refrains from giving an analysis of his arguments because he claims that is impossible of a work “which consists almost entirely of rhetoric and description.”⁴⁴ In what follows I am largely concerned with how Smith may have understood Rousseau, although occasionally I will offer a different interpretation of Rousseau.⁴⁵

In “Edinburgh Review,” Smith included translations of three lengthy passages of Rousseau’s work (¶13-15, 251-254). In the first of these passages, Rousseau discusses the “healthful, humane, and happy” condition of men in their “rustic habitations.” Rousseau then goes on to describe how from the moment the division of labor was introduced and when one person could see the advantage of having provisions for two (or more) people, “equality disappeared, property was introduced, labour became necessary … the world beheld slavery and wretchedness begin to grow up and blossom with the harvest (¶13, 251-252).⁴⁶

In the second passage, Rousseau describes how, after the development of property and inequality, and the start of commerce more generally, men must only *appear* advantageous to each other. The new needs stimulated by “insatiable ambition” and secret jealousy cause people to “often assumes masks to each other.” While in the state of nature, man is “free;” civilized man is a “slave” to nature, and “above all his fellow creatures.”

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⁴⁴See, Adam Smith’s *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (EPS), edited By W.P.D. Wightman, Indiana: Liberty Fund, (1982), especially ¶12, 251. It is not clear to me if Rousseau was aware made aware of Smith’s comments. In *Confessions* VIII, Rousseau writes about the reception of the Second Discourse that “in all of Europe [it] found only a very few readers who understood it, and of those none wished to talk about it” (OC I, 388).

⁴⁵Pack 2002 is an excellent treatment of Smith’s relationship to Rousseau,

⁴⁶Cf. *Second Discourse*, Part II, ¶19, OC III, 171. Pack 2002, 52 n. 25, points out that Rousseau is more concerned about physical effects of division of labor while Smith is more worried about psychological effects.
Rousseau emphasizes the falseness of commercial life: “To be and to appear to be, became two things very different” (¶14, 252-253). 47

In the third and longest passage, Rousseau contrasts the “liberty and repose,” even beyond the “ataraxia of the Stoic,” of the self-sufficient savage who “lives in himself” in the state of nature with the never-ending hurtful efforts of “employments” for the “citizen” in society, who is also engaged in demeaning flattery to his superiors. Civilized man desires “power and reputation” because he “lives in the opinion of others,” but he ends up with a “deceitful and frivolous exterior.” Commercial society encourages the discovery of “being vain” (¶15, 253). It is incompatible with true virtue, wisdom, and happiness (¶15, 254). 48

It is not immediately obvious why Smith chooses these three particular passages. It is clear that Smith finds Rousseau’s description of life in the state of nature one-sided: “Mr. Rousseau, intending to paint savage life as the happiest of any, presents only the indolent side to view.” According to Smith, Rousseau leaves out the “most dangerous and extravagant adventures” (¶12, 251). 49 While, strictly speaking, this may be accurate, Smith’s criticism strikes me as a bit unfair. Smith ignores that, for Rousseau, it is the dangers and obstacles that man is exposed to in the state of nature that start the chain of events that not only lead men to discover the benefits of technology and comforts of clothing but also create the circumstances that first produce pride in men (Second Discourse, Part II, ¶3-6, OC III, 165-166).

Smith praises Rousseau’s rhetorical abilities: “tho’ laboured and studiously elegant … [Rousseau’s prose is] every where sufficiently nervous, and sometimes even sublime

47 Cf. Second Discourse, Part II, ¶27, OC III, 174-175.


49 Smith’s main criticism of other moral philosophers is precisely that their systems are also “derived from a partial and imperfect view of nature” (TMS, VI.i.1, 265).
and pathetic,” (¶12, 251). Elsewhere, by contrast, Mandeville’s “eloquence” is described as “lively and humorous, though coarse and rustic” (TMS, VII.ii.4.6, 308; and also VII.ii.4.11, 312: “The ingenious sophistry of [Mandeville’s] reasoning, is … covered by the ambiguity of language). Smith taught a regular class on rhetoric while he was a professor at Glasgow; he is aware of its power. As a way of containing Rousseau’s ideas, Smith produced his own rhetorical summary: “It is by the help of this style, together with a little philosophic chemistry, that the principles and ideas of the profligate Mandeville seem to have the purity and sublimity of the morals of Plato, and to be only the true spirit of a republican carried a little too far” (“Edinburgh Review,” ¶12, 251). Smith charges that Rousseau is not only somewhat of an extremist in his political convictions (notice that “little too far”!), but also that, despite contrary appearances (Smith’s “seem”), Rousseau is at bottom in the same boat as the “profligate” Mandeville—an ad hominem attempt to convict Rousseau through guilt by association! In an ironic twist, Smith attacks Rousseau for his false appearances!

In Smith’s diagnosis, Rousseau and Mandeville share four important features. First, both suppose “that there is in man no powerful instinct which necessarily determines him to seek society for its own sake.” Second, both suppose the “same slow progress and gradual developments of all the talents, habits, and arts which fit men to live together in

50Smith is clearly using “pathetic” in the traditional sense of “exciting the passions or affections; moving, stirring, affecting,” while by “nervousness” he probably means something close to “vigorous, powerful, forcible” (OED).


52Having said that, Smith commends Rousseau’s dedication to the “republic of Geneva” as a “just panegyric” (“Edinburgh Review,” ¶16, 254). Smith leaves it unclear if the justness is due to the fact that Rousseau is a “citizen,” indicating that Smith believes that proper expression of patriotism is an important (prudent!) virtue in a philosopher, or that Smith is endorsing republicanism here. Rousseau's dedication is — pace Pack 2000, 44 — actually extremely subtle, but a study of its influence on Smith will have to await another occasion.
society, and they both describe [it] … in the same manner.” Moreover, according to both “those laws of justice, which maintain the present inequality amongst mankind, were originally the inventions of the cunning and the powerful, in order to maintain or to acquire an unnatural and unjust superiority over the rest of their fellow-creatures.” Finally, they both agree that pity “is possessed by savaged and by the most profligate of the vulgar, in a greater degree of perfection than by those of the most polished and cultivated manners” (¶11, 250-251). As a reading of the *Second Discourse* and Mandeville this list does not strike me as silly. Smith does not gloss over their differences; he recognizes that Rousseau is a fierce critic of Mandeville. Smith singles out the importance, for Rousseau, of pity in producing the virtues. This strikes me as perceptive, given how important pity will be in Rousseau’s later works.\(^5^3\) It is, however, unclear from *Edinburgh Review* where Smith stands on the items on this list.\(^5^4\) Here it would lead too far astray to investigate this topic. Unfortunately, it would be almost the last time that Smith ever commented on Rousseau in print; elsewhere he discusses Rousseau’s views on language in his “Considerations Concerning the First Formations of Languages,” (¶2, 205 of LRBL; see also Lecture 3 of LRBL).\(^5^5\)

All three passages that Smith translates from the *Second Discourse* resonate with themes that Smith was going to pursue in his published works later in his life. Recall, for instance, the following fragment from the first of these translated passages: “‘from the instant in which one man had occasion for the assistance of another, from the moment that he perceived that it could be advantageous to a single person to have provisions for two,

\(^5^3\)See Dent 1988, chapter 4, for extensive discussion.

\(^5^4\)Pack 2002, 46-47 and 55, believes that Smith’s use of sympathy is a generalization of Rousseau’s use of pity; Pack cites TMS, I.i.1.5, 10. I read this passage as a warning not to conflate pity and sympathy. While there is something to Pack’s suggestion, he overlooks, however, that, for Smith, sympathy is not merely a fellow-feeling, as pity is, but also an imaginative activity (I.i.1.10, 12).

\(^5^5\)Pack 2002, 48.
equality disappeared, property was introduced, labour became necessary, and the vast forests of nature were changed into agreeable plains, which must be watered with the sweat of mankind, and in which the world beheld slavery and wretchedness begin to grow up and blossom with the harvest” (¶13, 252). As the editors of TMS, following a suggestion by H.B. Acton, pointed out, this is echoed in the lines leading up to the invisible hand passage in TMS:

We are then charmed with the beauty of that accommodation which reigns in the palaces and oeconomy of the great; and admire how every thing is adapted to promote their ease, to prevent their wants, to gratify their wishes, and to amuse and entertain their most frivolous desires. If we consider the real satisfaction which all these things are capable of affording, by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling. But we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light. We naturally confound it in our imagination with the order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine or oeconomy by means of which it is produced. The pleasures of wealth and greatness, when considered in this complex view, strike the imagination as something grand and beautiful and noble, of which the attainment is well worth all the toil and anxiety which we are so apt to bestow upon it.

And 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; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth (TMS, IV.1.9-10, 183-4).

I have quoted at length not merely to show that Smith may have echoed a few words (forests are changed into plains) of Rousseau just before he introduced the invisible hand metaphor in TMS.56 After all, in an important sense, Smith is agreeing with Rousseau that from a certain vantage point civilization is a “contemptible and trifling … deception,” that is, the product of the vain desires of our imagination. But according to Smith, “this abstract and philosophic light” is not likely to tempt us in a state of health; we are more likely to be overcome by this “spleenetic philosophy … in time of sickness or low spirits” (TMS, 56Rousseau even mentions an “invisible hand” in his own Note VI, OC III, 200, but the context is very different from the use Adam Smith gives that famous phrase.
IV.i.9, 183; at III.2.27, 127, Smith also uses the phrase “spleenetic philosophers” and is almost certainly referring to Mandeville).

Somebody with more than a passing familiarity of the Second Discourse, may be surprised that, on behalf of Smith, I attribute to Rousseau an “abstract and philosophic” point of view. After all, even in the Second Discourse, Rousseau often takes the side of our natural passions against the facile, even vanity producing, abstract reasoning of philosophers (e.g., Part I§37-38, OC III, 156-157, where Rousseau is discussing Mandeville, and Note XVI§1, OC III, 220); such passages read very much like Smith’s philosophy. In fact, one such occurrence takes place just before the third long passage that Smith quoted from the Second Discourse! But the same passage goes on to say that the “attentive reader” will explain why “Society no longer affords to the eyes of the wise man anything but an assemblage of artificial men and factitious passion which are the product of all these new relationships, and have no true foundation in Nature” (Part II§57, OC III, 192). It would not be strange, thus, that Smith identifies the splenetic and abstract philosophic light, the view that society is a mere assemblage of artificial men, with Rousseau’s writings.57

Smith thinks the rejection by most people of the detached and abstract view is a good thing most of the time. For Smith, this rejection is caused by the way our natures allow ourselves to be deceived by our imagination.58 Smith thinks that some of the achievements of civilization, i.e., the arts and sciences, “ennoble” our lives (see also his defense of luxury producing “refinement in the arts” at VII.ii.4.12, 313).59 So, we can see that not only does Smith think that Rousseau does not give a balanced enough view of the life of the savage by omitting the dangers he faces, but Smith also believes that there are

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57 Of course, Smith never says he has Rousseau in mind here; maybe he is just thinking of Stoicism. Moreover, Rousseau’s relationship to abstract philosophy is extremely complicated.

58 I believe that for Rousseau the ‘voice of nature’ can never lie.

59 In Smith’s time, ‘arts’ and ‘sciences’ had wider connotations than in ours.
elements of civilization, the arts and sciences, that are worth defending. For our present purposes it is not important to what degree Rousseau rejected, all things considered, the arts and sciences; Smith is combating Rousseau’s rhetoric, which certainly seems to reject not merely commercial life, but also its ennobling byproducts.

Nevertheless, Smith and Rousseau do agree that wealth alone never leads to “real satisfaction,” (TMS, IV.1.8, 181 and Second Discourse, Note IX, ¶3, OC III, 203). Rousseau and Smith are both aware that once our desires our stimulated and cultivated they can become limitless. Throughout TMS, Smith insists that, while we may prefer to be rich in order to be admired (I.iii.2.1, 50ff.), wealth does not lead to happiness, instead: “the chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved” (I.ii.5.1, 41; at TMS, III.i.7, 113, Smith adds that we also want to feel that we deserve to be beloved). Rousseau would not disagree with this, but he would claim that the need for being beloved only arises once man has moved out of the state of nature, and “cannot live but in the opinion of others” (“Edinburgh Review,” ¶15, 253; Second Discourse, Part II ¶57, OC III, 193). So, while Smith can claim that “what can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience” (TMS, I.iii.I.7, 45), Rousseau writes, while speaking about a man in state of nature, “what kind of misery” can there be “for a free being, whose heart is at peace, and body in health” (Second Discourse, Part I, ¶33, OC III, 152). The focus on debt makes it clear that Smith is only speaking of man as found in a society in which commercial relations have already been developed. But in such a

60 In Observation by Jean-Jacques Rousseau of Geneva On the Answer made to his Discourse, a response to criticism of the First Discourse, Rousseau wrote: “Science in itself is very good, that is obvious; and one would have to have taken leave of good sense, to maintain the contrary” (¶7, OC III, 36).

61 See also TMS, I.iii.I.7, 45: “what can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience?” Cf. Rousseau, while speaking about a man in state of nature: “what kind of misery” can there be “for a free being, whose heart is at peace, and body in health” (Second Discourse, Part I, ¶33, OC III, 152).
society genuine freedom, as Rousseau understands it in the Second Discourse, i.e., what I call ‘self-sufficiency,’ which is supposed to be different from ‘independence,’ is impossible; it is no surprise, then, that Smith makes no mention of it.\textsuperscript{62}

To conclude, Smith disagrees importantly with Rousseau’s claims in the passages from the Second Discourse that Smith translated in at least three ways. First, Rousseau thinks that tranquility is only available in the state of nature; he upholds the ideal of a self-subsisting, authentic man. Admittedly, Rousseau does not use the term ‘authenticity,’ but, as we have seen, he criticizes (in Smith’s translation) the “false and artificial” appearances of civilized man. Smith, however, thinks that various forms of tranquility are available in society to prudent men (TMS, VI.i.11-13, 215-6),\textsuperscript{63} and, especially, mathematicians and (natural) philosophers (TMS, III.2.20, 124). Smith believes the former can be tranquil because they live within their means and avoid upheaval. Smith thinks the latter can become tranquil because they are not dependent on “public opinion;” they are not withdrawn from the world, but experience the satisfaction of knowing that their success in it is justified (by the norms validated by their Impartial Spectators). Of course, not everybody in society can achieve tranquility; in TMS, Smith talks of the “vain splendour of successful ambition” (VI.i.13, 216) that cause men to elude tranquility, while in WN “the mean rapacity … of

\textsuperscript{62}Rousseau’s positive views about what is desirable and good for modern man are not clear in Second Discourse. It is unfortunate that we do not have reliable information on how Smith responded to Emile or Social Contract.

\textsuperscript{63}“The man who lives within his income, is naturally contented with his situation, which, by continual, though small accumulations, is growing better and better every day. He is enabled gradually to relax, both in the rigour of his parsimony and in the severity of his application; and he feels with double satisfaction this gradual increase of ease and enjoyment, from having felt before the hardship which attended the want of them. He has no anxiety to change so comfortable a situation, and does not go in quest of new enterprises and adventures, which might endanger, but could not well increase, the secure tranquility which he actually enjoys. If he enters into any new projects or enterprises, they are likely to be well concerted and well prepared. He can never be hurried or drove into them by any necessity, but has always time and leisure to deliberate soberly and coolly concerning what are likely to be their consequences” (TMS, i.12, 215; see, on tranquility as a source of happiness, III.3.30-33, 149-152; III.5.6, 166; I.ii.3.7, 37).
merchants and manufacturers” is singled out for such failure. However, for Smith the
beauty and pleasures of country-life only promise tranquility; in contrast to Rousseau’s
rhetoric, Smith does not even tempt the reader with a return to nature. Incidentally, Hume
was even more adamant about the benefits of urban life to philosophy; he remarked in his
“Life” that, “I removed from the country to the town, the true scene for a man of letters”
(xxxvi; see also his comments in “Of Refinement in the Arts,” EMPL, 271).

Second, for Smith, the invisible hand can be a force for some equalization (in TMS
at least). So Smith disagrees with Rousseau that the invention of property inevitably must
lead to (vast) inequality (see, for discussion, Chapter 5, II.B).

Third, in the passage leading up to the invisible hand metaphor in TMS, Smith
implies that a Rousseauian view, that civilized life is a “contemptible and trifling …
deception,” is only true in an “abstract and philosophical light” (see also TMS, I.iii.3, 52-3).
Against Rousseau, Smith seems to be siding with nature’s deception: “it is well that

64“I am afraid, the nature of human affairs can scarce admit of a remedy. But the
mean rapacity, the monopolizing spirit of merchants and manufacturers, who neither are, nor
ought to be, the rulers of mankind, though it cannot perhaps be corrected may very easily be
prevented from disturbing the tranquility of any body but themselves” (WN, IV.iii.c.9, 493).
Mirowski (1989), 161, ignores this, and other such comments, when he implies that Smith
reflects the biases of his readership of merchants and manufacturers.

65Smith appears to thinks that by nature’s telos man is a farmer: “The beauty of the
country besides, the pleasures of a country life, the tranquillity of mind which it promises, and
wherever the injustice of human laws does not disturb it, the independency which it really
affords, have charms that more or less attract every body; and as to cultivate the ground was
the original destination of man, so in every stage of his existence he seems to retain a
predilection for this primitive employment” (WN, III.i.3, 378). Note that under politically
stable conditions “independency” is “really” available in the countryside for Smith. Certain
parts of the Emile read as if Rousseau is advocating a rural republicanism.

It is true that in WN no examples are given of folks that actually achieve tranquility;
this could tempt somebody to argue that TMS and WN contradict each other on this point.
But as this quote and the one from IV.iii.c.9, 493 show Smith still recognizes it as the aim in
life, and nothing he says suggests he has changed his mind on those occupations that do
achieve tranquility. Moreover, the prudent, “sober and cool” values celebrated at TMS,
VI.i.12, 215 are still supported in WN. On this last point see the Editors’ “Introduction” to
TMS, 18.
nature imposes upon us in this manner."

Note that Smith does not conflate our frivolous desires with the noble ones. It is nature’s deception that first makes possible the noble and finer things in life; our frivolous and vain desires enable the creation of more noble things!

Now we are in a better position to judge what turns on Smith’s attempt to vindicate Hume’s vain character. Hume was not merely an advocate of commercial life; his life was also a model of how a Man of Letters can thrive in commercial society. For Smith, philosophy, “like every other employment,” appears to be just one form the division of labor can take (WN, I.i.9, 21): there is no principled difference between “a philosopher and a common street porter;” all differences are largely effects from the division of labor. Only a philosopher’s “vanity” can cause him to be unwilling to acknowledge “scarce any resemblance” (WN, I.ii.4, 28-29). In Smith’s scheme, “philosophers or men of speculation,” have an assigned role; their trade “is not to do anything, but to observe everything; and who, upon that account, are often capable of combining together the powers of the most distant and dissimilar objects” (WN, I.i.9, 21).

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66 Pack 2002, 49-50, cites Rousseau’s Note IX, OC III, 202, to suggest that Rousseau, too, endorses the deception, but I believe the passage expresses the contrary assertion.

67 It is not the only deception that Smith endorses. Pack 2002, 51, quite properly calls attention to TMS I.i.13, 13, where in a very Hobbesian fashion the fear of death causes “the great restraint upon the injustice of mankind.”

68 Hume makes a sharp distinction between private and public life in “Of Refinement in the Arts,” 269ff., EMPL. Nevertheless, it is striking that he seems to think that his private acts must be revealed to the public.

69 Smith’s egalitarianism on this score is even stronger than Rousseau’s. For the latter, education and socialization increase already existing (minor) natural differences (e.g., Second Discourse, Part I, §48, OC III, 160-161). Rothbard 1995 is, while criticizing Smith, most adamant about exposing Smith’s “extreme” egalitarianism; in substance, he is following Schumpeter 1954, 186.

70 Smith points out that, in the modern world, philosophy, too, can be divided in sub-disciplines (WN, I.i.9, 21-21).
the commercial values of perseverance, hard work, and frugality, suggests that the philosophic life need not be incompatible with commercial society.

Commercial life, then, is not just compatible with the philosophic life, but, by enabling the conditions that allow for independence and the genuine possibility to be tempted by the detached view on life, also a means to it. Yet, from his earliest writings, Smith saw that Rousseau provided a rhetorical challenge to the worth of commercial society; Rousseau indicted commercial life for fostering falseness and masking, while suggesting that self-sufficiency was to be preferred over independence.

Moreover, by raising the topic of his own vanity, Hume makes the rhetorical strategy of justifying commercial society more difficult for Smith. From the vantage point of Rousseau, who diagnosed and attacked how civilization would breed bad amour propre (Second Discourse, Part I, ¶35, OC III, 154, and Note XV, OC III, 219), Hume’s vanity is, to exaggerate a bit, a form of self-incrimination. Smith’s rhetorical dilemma is increased by the fact that he cannot rely on Rousseau’s (post Second Discourse) distinction between excessive and moderate amour propre; Smith feels, as we have seen, constrained by the fact that ‘vanity’ has such a bad connotation in English, which is why I suspect he used the “real love of true glory” in TMS.

From the vantage point of Smith, Hume’s confrontation with Rousseau was, then, more than just a spat in the Republic of Letters. In a letter to Smith, Hume had no doubt that if Rousseau’s character would be exposed this would “blast his Writings at the same time. For as these [Rousseau’s writings] have been exalted much above their Merit, when his personal Character falls, they would of Course fall below their Merit” (Correspondence,

71It is, of course, not the only society compatible with the existence of philosophy. In Smith’s “The History of Astronomy” (especially ¶3-5, 50-2 in EPS), Smith discusses the social, geographic, and political conditions that allow for philosophy to get started. For an account of Smith’s views see the second chapter of my dissertation.

72For more on this distinction, see Dent 1998, 59-64.
Letter No. 96, 118). Now, Smith agreed that Rousseau was a “hypocritical Pedant.” But he urged Hume not to attempt to “unmask” him “before the Public,” suggesting that Hume ran the risk “of disturbing the tranquility of [his] whole life” (Correspondence, Letter No. 93, 113; note Smith’s emphasis on tranquility). It is striking that, in private correspondence, Smith is attempting to persuade Hume not to be like Rousseau, for whom “unmasking” was such an important activity (recall the second passage that Smith translated from the Second Discourse at “Edinburgh Review,” ¶14, 253). Hume’s silence on Rousseau in his “Life” may or may not have been deliberate, but only by showing that Hume’s vain character was virtuous, properly understood, could Rousseau’s challenge, at least in part, be met.

III.C: Smith on Hume’s charity

Is Hume’s vanity appropriate? Smith never explicitly touches upon the topic in the “Letter to Strahan.” And, perhaps, this was not his highest priority. Now, because the word “vanity” is never mentioned in the “Letter to Strahan,” one may be inclined to think that this issue was of no concern to him. I cannot prove this view is mistaken. All I can offer is a reconstruction that makes sense of the details of his “Letter to Strahan” in light of Hume’s and Smith’s other works in the biographical and historical context I have sketched. Moreover, there is an obvious reason why Smith does not attempt to vindicate directly the appropriateness of Hume’s vanity; as we have seen in the society he inhabited, “The words vain and vanity are never taken in a good sense” (TMS, VI.iii.43, 258). Now, I read this as a claim about language. Smith could not have been ignorant of Hume’s attempts (outlined above) to give vanity a more favorable connotation; Smith’s statement is only true if seen as


74The context I sketch is certainly not the only one; Hanley 2002 has very usefully compared Hume’s autobiography to Benjamin Franklin’s.
an empirical description of common sense, that is, 18th century Christian moral language. Since Smith’s general strategy is to work, when possible, from within the language of common morality, it would have been very strange if he had explicitly defended Hume’s vanity in the “Letter to Strahan.” But, in order to let a discerning reader judge whether or not Hume’s vanity is appropriate, all he needs to provide is evidence of Hume’s virtuous acts. In his “Letter to Strahan,” Smith mentions Hume’s private and public generosity. I want to turn to both the kinds of evidence that Smith provides.

In the “Letter to Strahan,” Smith writes that “concerning [Hume’s] philosophic opinions men will, no doubt judge variously, every one approving, or condemning them, according as they happen to coincide or disagree with his own” (xlviii). Smith seems to be admitting that there is no matter of fact that will settle one’s views of Hume’s philosophy. The same is not the case “concerning [Hume’s] character and conduct” about which “there can scarce be a difference of opinion.” So what does Smith say about Hume’s character?

His temper, indeed, seemed more happily balanced, if I may be allowed such an expression, than that perhaps of any other man I have ever known. Even in the lowest state of his fortune, his great and necessary frugality never hindered him from exercising, upon proper occasions, acts both of charity and generosity. It was a frugality founded, not upon avarice, but the love of independency (xlviii).

The main point of this passage is, of course, Hume’s balanced temper. But Smith also calls attention to the fact that Hume was not always rich. Not surprisingly for the man who encourages frugality, Smith attributes it to Hume, as Hume explicitly had done in his

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75I cannot substantiate this claim here. This topic has received surprising little attention. See, for suggestive remarks, Griswold 1999, 44ff.; Brubaker 2002; Motooka 1998, chapter 6, and Fleischacker forthcoming.

76This raises questions about how Smith thought differences of philosophic opinion are settled throughout history. See the second chapter of my dissertation for more discussion.

77WN, II.iii.28, 341, reads: “But the principle which prompts to save is the desire of bettering our condition, a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate, comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave. In the whole interval which
“Life” (xxxiv-xxxv; see also Hume’s Second *Enquiry*, Section VI, Part 1, 237). Smith defends Hume’s frugality as a virtue, because it is motivated by his laudable love of independency. But he also insists that Hume was, at times, a generous and charitable person. In his “Letter to Strahan,” Smith does not offer examples of Hume’s charity. It is quite possible that Smith remembered some particular acts of generosity by Hume toward him or others; he claims that, even when Hume was poor, he helped others. Nevertheless, Smith also provides evidence of the fact that Hume died a very wealthy man (xlv)—not exactly overwhelming evidence of large amounts of charity. This is in contrast, for instance, with the evidence that Dugald Stewart’s provides of the situation at the end of Smith’s life in his “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.” (“Account of Smith): “the state of [Smith’s] funds at the time of his death, compared with his very moderate establishment, confirmed, beyond a doubt, what his intimate acquaintances had often suspected, that a large proportion of his annual savings was allotted to offices of secret charity” (§V¶4, 325-326, EPS).

separates those two moments, there is scarce perhaps a single instant in which any man is so perfectly and completely satisfied with his situation as to be without any wish of alteration or improvement of any kind. An augmentation of fortune is the means by which the greater part of men propose and wish to better their condition. It is the means the most vulgar and the most obvious; and the most likely way of augmenting their fortune is to save and accumulate some part of what they acquire, either regularly and annually, or upon some extraordinary occasions. Though the principle of expense, therefore, prevails in almost all men upon some occasions, and in some men upon almost all occasions, yet in the greater part of men, taking the whole course of their life at an average, the principle of frugality seems not only to predominate, but to predominate very greatly.” I want to note three things about this passage: 1) Smith’s avoids making claims about individual human behavior at any given time; all he needs is an average propensity. 2) Smith calls — pace those that view him as a crass defender of wealth — an augmentation of fortune “the most vulgar and most obvious” way of bettering one’s condition. 3) Though Smith thinks that an augmentation of fortune as a means of satisfying the desire to better one’s condition is vulgar, there is no evidence that Smith thought frugality itself was vulgar; only in certain contexts it can become vulgar. Smith thinks it, and the other “sober” virtues, appropriate for the greater part of mankind, although he thought it could be taken too far (e.g., in Holland) when it was favored to the detriment of other virtues (e.g, TMS, V.2.13, p 209). I want to thank Lauren Brubaker for first calling my attention to this passage and Ralph Lerner for pressing objections that forced me to clarify my views.
But, what is important for my point here is that all we have to go on, in the absence of further evidence, is the testimony of Smith on the character of Hume. As any student of Hume’s chapter “Of Miracles” (in the first *Enquiry*) will realize, the merits of this testimony can only be judged in the light of Smith’s character, his varied interests in preserving the reputation and memory of Hume’s character, and the plausibility and verifiability of the nature of the evidence that he provides (etc.), counterweighed by the probability of opposing evidence. Perhaps Smith had so much confidence in his own reputation that he refrained from mentioning an obvious and widely known example of Hume’s generosity: his efforts on Rousseau’s behalf.78

Regardless of what stance one takes on this, I do not think that a defense of the appropriateness of Hume’s vanity turns on his private acts of generosity. His “Life” was a literary autobiography because, according to Hume, “almost all my life has been spent in literary pursuits and occupations.” A genuinely Humean defense of the propriety of Hume’s vanity must turn on a proper assessment of his career in writing, that is, his *public* acts of generosity.

III.D: Hume’s exchange with Charon

In the letter to Hume in which Smith requested permission to add a few lines to his “Life,” Smith is particularly eager to be allowed to report on a conversation about an imaginary exchange between Hume and Charon (Correspondence, Letter No. 166, 206). Smith describes this exchange first in the letter to Alexander Wedderburn, in the context of

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78 Hume’s efforts consisted mostly in obtaining a pension for Rousseau from the English King; although Hume put his reputation on the line, it’s always easier to be charitable with other people’s money.
contrasting Hume to the “Whining Christians,” quoted before.\textsuperscript{79} The version presented in the “Letter to Strahan” is the most detailed:

[W]hen [Hume] was reading a few days before, Lucian’s \textit{Dialogues} of the Dead, among all the excuses which are alleged to Charon [that is, the ferryman who conveyed the dead to Hades] for not entering readily into his boat, he could not find one that fitted him; he had no house to finish, he had no daughter to provide for, he had no enemies upon whom he wished to revenge himself. “I could not well imagine,” said he, “what excuse I could make to Charon in order to obtain a little delay. I have done every thing of consequence which I ever meant to do, and I could at no time expect to leave my relations and friends in a better situation than that in which I am now likely to leave them; I, therefore, have all reason to die contented.” He then diverted himself with inventing several jocular excuses, which he supposed he might make to Charon, and with imagining the very surly answers which it might suit the character of Charon to return to them. “Upon further consideration,” said he, “I thought I may say to him, Good Charon, I have been correcting my works for a new edition. Allow me a little time, that I may see how the Public receives the alterations.” But Charon would answer, “When you have seen the effect of these, you will be for making other alterations. There will be no end of such excuses; so, honest friend, please step into the boat.” But I might still urge, “Have a little patience, Good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the Public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition.” But Charon would then lose all temper and decency. “You loitering rogue, that will not happen these many hundred years. Do you fancy I will grant you a lease for so long a term? Get into the boat this instant,” (“Letter to Strahan,” xlv-xlvi).\textsuperscript{80}

I want to make a number of comments about this charming exchange. Smith included the exchange to illustrate that Hume “approached dissolution” with “great cheerfulness”

\textsuperscript{79}Smith was not the only one struck by it: Dr. Cullen wrote a letter to Dr. Hunter about the exchange; see Mossner 1954, 601.

\textsuperscript{80}The version in the letter to Alexander Wedderburn is different enough to be quoted in full as well. Smith quotes Hume as follows: “I was lately reading the \textit{Dialogues} of Lucian in which he represents one Ghost as pleading for a short delay till he should marry a young daughter, another till he should finish a house he had begun, a third till he had provided a portion for two or three young Children, I began to think of what Excuse I could allledge to Charon in order to procure a short delay, and as I have now done everything that I ever intended to do, I acknowledge that for some time, no tolerable one occurred; at last I thought I might say, Good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of people; have a little patience only till I have the pleasure of seeing the churches shut up, and the Clergy sent about their business; but Charon would reply, O you loitering rogue; that won’t happen these two hundred; do you fancy I will give you a lease for so long a time? Get into the boat this instant” (Correspondence, Letter No. 164, 203-204).
Hume is shown to have tranquility of mind and “magnanimity” without making “any parade” of it (xlvi). For Smith, this kind of magnanimity is a great achievement because death “is the king of terrors” (TMS, VI.iii.6, p 239; see also TMS, VI.iii.17, 244). This was hard to believe; Dr. Johnson, for instance, had no doubt that Hume “lied” about facing death calmly. Johnson thought Hume “had a vanity in being thought easy.” Smith’s account implicitly insists that Hume’s vanity is not misplaced.

It is extremely important that Hume is portrayed as reading the ancient satirist Lucian and not, say, the Bible or some other pious work. Hume and Smith have a high opinion of Lucian. Lucian was “though licentious with regard to pleasure,” in Hume’s opinion, “yet, in other respects, a very moral writer” (Second Enquiry, Section VI, 242). I

81 In Letter No. 166 to Hume (the one in which Smith asks permission for his addition), Smith refers to the “steady cheerfulness” of Hume (Correspondence, 206).

82 According to Smith “War is the great school both for acquiring and exercising this species of magnanimity” (TMS, VI.iii.6, p 239); Hume had been a soldier.

83 Quoted from Boswell’s diary in Mossner 1954, 605-606.

84 Recall Letter No. 163, to Wedderburn: As Smith wrote to Alexander Wedderburn, “Poor David Hume is dying very fast … with more real resignation to the necessary course of things, than any Whining Christian ever dyed with pretended resignation to the will of God” (Correspondence, 203).

85 Lucian gets high literary praise from Hume in “Of The Rise and Progress of Arts and Sciences,” 134, EMPL. When Adam Smith lectured on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres he only had the highest literary and moral praise for Lucian (and Swift): “By the different ends that Swift and Lucian have had in view, they have formed a complete system of ridicule … But both together form a System of morality from whence more sound and just rules of life for all the various characters of men may be drawn than from most set systems of Morality.” Lecture 9, i.124-125, 50-51, edited by J.C. Bryce, Indianapolis, 1985 (hereafter LRBL); see also Lectures 10-11. I could only find one reference to Lucian in Rousseau’s writings. He seems to express a low opinion of Lucian; see the footnote to ¶39 of “Observations made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau of Geneva On the Answer made to his [first] Discourse” (OC III, 46); oddly enough this is a footnote in which Rousseau explains the doctrine of esoteric/exoteric writing among the ancients. He ends the note by stating: “philosophy will always defy reason, truth, and time itself, because it has its source in human pride, stronger than all these things” (I have used Gourevitch’s 1997 translation.)
believe it is clear from the context of these remarks that Hume thinks that Lucian was “a
very moral writer” because of his public spirit. Elsewhere in Hume’s oeuvre, Lucian gets
praised for performing the “good office” of entirely opening the “eyes of mankind” by
exposing the false prophet Alexander of Paphlagonia (First *Enquiry*, Section X, Part II, 120-
121). For Hume, Lucian was, I submit, a kindred Enlightenment spirit—not the least
because they were under no illusions about human nature.

The comparison with Smith’s letter to Wedderburn also reveals that, in his “Letter
to Strahan,” Smith significantly toned down the anti-Christian and anti-clerical elements in
both Hume’s imaginary exchange with Charon *and in his own remarks* on Hume’s
conduct. In the “Letter to Strahan,” Hume is only waiting to see “the downfall of some of
the prevailing systems of superstition,” while, in the version to Wedderburn, Hume wants to
see “the churches shut up, and the Clergy sent about their business.” Incidentally, it is
worth noting that Smith’s careful prudence in this respect is further evidence against the
view that he wrote the “Letter to Strahan” under deep emotional stress.

Now, somebody might (impatiently) say that Hume’s imaginary exchange with
Charon does not reveal at all that Hume’s vanity is justified. Instead, it shows Hume at his
most selfish. After all, Hume is pleading with Charon to be allowed to live longer in order to

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86 I have juggled the quotes around a bit, but I do not think I have changed Hume’s
intent here. In “Of Populousness of Ancient Nations” Hume implies in his own footnote on
p. 463 that Lucian is, together with Cicero, the least superstitious among ancient philosophers.
It is remarkable how little attention has been given to Hume’s life-long interest in Lucian. He
mentions Lucian again in *The Natural History of Religion*, Chapter XI.

87 Dr Cullen’s version is much closer to the version given in the letter to Wedderburn:
“Hume thought he might say he had been very busily employed in making countrymen
wiser and particularly in delivering them from the Christian superstition, but that he had not
yet completed that great work.” Quoted in Mossner 1954, 601.

88 Mossner 1954, 605. It also suggests that Smith’s “Letter to Strahan” was less
“courageous” than Mossner seems to think it was; I think Smith was genuinely surprised by
the vehemence of the reaction to it. For some references on these attacks, see Mossner 1954,
620, and Mossner 1950.
experience the downfall of superstition with “satisfaction;” Hume merely wants to increase
his own pleasure. Before I comment on how Hume’s exchange with Charon reveals his
generosity, we need to remind ourselves of Hume’s discussion of vanity in “Of the Dignity
or Meanness of Human Nature:” “The case is not the same with vanity as with the other
passions … vanity is so closely allied to virtue, and to love the fame of laudable actions
approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake, that these passions are
more capable of mixture, than any other kinds of affection; and it is almost impossible to
have the latter without some degree of the former.” That is to say, just because Hume gets
some satisfaction from witnessing the effects of his deeds, this is not enough to judge them
lacking in virtue. His desire of fame for laudable actions, and the pleasures these bring, can
be an instance of the love virtue. As he writes in the Second Enquiry, “A desire of fame,
reputation, or character with others, is so far from being blameable, that it seems inseparable
from virtue, genius, capacity, and a generous or noble disposition” (Section VIII, 265; see
also Hume’s discussion in Section IX, Part 1, 276: “love of fame … rules, with such
uncontrolled authority, in all generous minds”).

Recall that Hume’s remarks in “Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature” were made in the context of criticizing the
systems of Hobbes and Mandeville. Both of them are guilty in the eyes of Hume and Smith
of reducing the complexity of our moral lives to a single a dominant principle: self-love (see,
e.g., Hume’s Second Enquiry, Section IX, 271 and “Appendix 2;” TMS, VII.iii.1-9, 315-321). Moreover, Smith is quite adamant, while discussing Mandeville’s work, that “self-
love may frequently be a virtuous motive of action (TMS, VII.i.4.8, 309). For Hume and
Smith, it is a mistake to think that virtue is incompatible with self-love and that it can never
be pleasurable.

89 See Buckle 1999, 9-11, for discussion.

90 On Smith’s critique of Mandeville and Hobbes, see Griswold 1999, 53-54.
It is important for my argument — that in the eyes of Smith, Hume’s vanity is justified because of the virtuous nature of Hume’s actions — that Hume wants to live longer because, through his books, he has “been endeavouring to open the eyes of the Public.” What Smith’s “Letter to Strahan” makes us see is that when, in his “Life,” Hume writes, “almost all my life has been spent in literary pursuits and occupations,” it needs to be emphasized that these pursuits are part of an Enlightenment project in order to aid the Public.91 For Hume, “no qualities are more entitled to the general good-will and approbation of mankind, than beneficence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit, or whatever proceeds from a tender sympathy with others, and a generous concern for our kind and species” (Second Enquiry, Section II, 178). Hume’s life of letters, devoted to public enlightenment, has been, in the footsteps of Lucian, a form of public generosity. By reporting the imaginary exchange with Charon, Smith shows us Hume’s benevolence and a generous concern for mankind. In the context of Hume’s very human desire to live longer and with his imaginative abilities on display (he’s creating a dialogue with a character from Lucian),92 the conceit works because Hume’s vanity is shown to be an instance of public spirit. Hume’s advocacy of public enlightenment and the values of commercial life, of which he benefited materially, find their source not only in Hume’s pleasure, but also in his love of virtue or of humanity.93 For Hume, the presence of

91Hanley 2002 makes many fine observations on this issue without drawing on Smith’s “Letter to Strahan.” I ignore the very interesting question to what degree Hume’s writing are designed to imagine or create a “Public” that, in turn, can judge him. In the ‘Advertisement’ to the Treatise Hume makes mention of his desire to “try the taste of the public.” He goes on to claim that he considers the “approbation of the public” to be his “greatest reward” and, regardless of its judgment, his “best instruction.” Cf. Buckle 1999, 11, for more on this issue.

92In “The Skeptic” Hume included Lucian among the “entertaining moralists,” and singles out for praise his “imagination;” (EMPL, 179).

93I think Plato is the only philosopher that’s called “humane” by Smith; his writings are said to seem to be animated with “love of mankind” (TMS, V.2.15, 210).
self-interest is no reason to reject the virtues displayed. For Smith, too, we do not need to insist on absolute purity of motives, as Mandeville and Rousseau in different ways attempted, in order to recognize virtuous actions. Hume’s writings are a form of public generosity in the battle against superstitions. Hence, Hume’s vanity is justified.

For Hume, “superstition” is associated with any religious system that includes “ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices, presents … in any practice, however absurd or frivolous, which either folly or knavery recommends to a blind and terrified credulity. Weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of SUPERSTITION” (“Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” EMPL, 74; in Hume’s suppressed essay, “Of Suicide,” he claimed that “when sound philosophy has once gained possession of the mind, superstition is effectually excluded” EMPL, 579). The exchange with Charon makes clear, however, that Hume was aware that the project of Enlightenment against “the prevailing systems of superstition” (plural!) was not guaranteed success. In Smith’s narrative, Hume is presented as realizing that many centuries will pass before we can expect to see only “some” of the systems of superstition defeated; this suggests that, by the end of his life, Hume was a pessimistic Enlightenment thinker. It is an implication of Smith’s report that the reception of Hume’s works had taught him the limited impact of his words on most people’s beliefs (cf. TMS, 3.5.10, 168, quoted at the top of Chapter 1). So, while Hume’s life and character show how a philosophic life can be lived in a commercial society, it also shows that most people will resist living a life without superstition.

94 For Smith, we judge an action by the actor’s motives and the (foreseeable) consequences of this action (TMS III, Introduction, 5-6, 93).

95 Smith certainly did not approve of all of Hume’s actions. He detested the monument that Hume had designed to be built after his death: “I do not like that monument. It is the greatest piece of vanity I ever saw in my friend Hume.” Ross 1985, 302, cites the second edition of Mossner’s biography of Hume, 591.
While Smith also advocated public enlightenment, he shared Hume’s pessimism. It should be noted, for instance, that Smith realized that the division of labor in modern commercial society could cause common laborers to lack basic education and to be so overworked as to make them suffer “the torpor of mind” (WN, V.i.f.50, 781). Smith is a much less optimistic thinker about the benefits of commercial development than Hume’s: “industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain.” He thought, hence, that a wise legislator must create and enforce various incentives to stimulate mandatory education in philosophy (WN V.i.9.14,796 and V.i.f.50-56, 781-6). And, while Smith hoped that education would lend genuine stability to government (WN, V.f.61, 788), he also recommended public “diversions” (e.g., “painting, poetry, musick, dancing” and “all sorts of dramatic representations and exhibitions”) to “amuse” people’s minds and make (political and religious) fanatics the objects of “ridicule” (WN, V.i.g.15, 796-797).

Somebody could argue that I have made entirely too much of Smith’s report of Hume’s imaginary exchange with Charon; all this “jocular” conversation really is meant to show is that Hume faced death with “great cheerfulness” (xlvi). Now, this is one of the main points of Smith’s piece; I emphasized it in the second part of this chapter where I called attention to the interest of the public in the death of a heterodox thinker. But I think it would be a mistake to focus exclusively on the relevance of Hume’s unorthodox religious beliefs, e.g., his denial of the existence an after-life. This would underestimate the importance of the portrait of Hume reading Lucian’s Dialogues of the Dead; it is too easy to think that this anecdote shows he merely “diverted himself.” Smith is showing that part of Hume’s wisdom consists in his ability to entertain himself with “amusements” (xliv; see

96Smith believed that the “study of science and philosophy” can have a social utility in suppressing “enthusiasm and superstition;” this is why he advocates mandatory exams in them for anybody who wants to practice a profession (WN, V.i.9.14,796, see also V.i.f.50-56, 781-6). Smith thought that an educated populace was necessary to maintain freedom, public accountability and order in a modern society (WN, V.i.f.61, 788).
also Hume’s “gaiety in company” on p. xl of “Life”) and serious topics (see Hume’s “ardour … in study,” p. xl of “Life”)—sometimes these can be the same, of course (for a nice example, see Hume’s letter No. 31, Correspondence, 33-36, occasioned by the reception of TMS). That is to say, in Smith’s portrayal, Hume is following Plato’s suggestion for old men to combine play with high-minded seriousness (Laws 685AB; Menexenus 236C; also Laws 803BE).

IV: Wisdom and Happiness

In the final part of this essay, I investigate what Smith considers to be the rewards of doing philosophy. Hume’s “Life” suggests that these rewards are largely material. While Smith does not deny this, he emphasizes, instead, the possibility of posthumous fame and

97Let me bring out what I have in mind with a little flight of fancy. What is about to follow will seem extremely far-fetched, except if one keeps in mind that Hume and Smith were both steeped in classical literature and enjoyed Lucian’s sense of humor. Recall that in the “Life” Hume calls his own little autobiography a “funeral oration” (xli). This mock-seriousness recalls the famous funeral orations of the Ancient world. Now Plato’s Menexenus—one of the most famous of these orations—is, in fact, a dialogue between the dead. Menexenus is a conversation between an aged Socrates (234A) and Menexenus (the name of one of his sons). In the Menexenus, Socrates not only reports a speech by Aspasia (the foreign-born mistress of Pericles), who died long before many of the events she recounts in her oration memorized by Socrates, as well as the speech of the deceased fathers (246Cff.), but the narrated events go beyond Socrates’ own death! Plato never mentions this explicitly, but Socrates is a kind of ghost in the dialogue. Now, in it, Socrates admits to being worried that at his advanced age he still seems “to be playing like a child” (236C). What Socrates may have in mind we can glean from the Laws (a dialogue among an aged Athenian, an elderly Spartan, and an old Cretan). There we learn that “the affairs of human beings are not worthy of great seriousness; yet it is necessary to be serious about them … Every man and woman should spend life in this way, playing the noblest possible games” (803B; cf. 685AB).

98Hume seems to refer to the Menexenus at Second Enquiry, Section VII, 259; Smith explicitly comments on the style of the dialogue in his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, ii.124, 141. The importance of the Laws on Hume and Smith has not been appreciated. For instance, Hume refers to the Laws in “Of Civil Liberty” (EMPL, 88), The Natural History of Religion, Chapter IV; Smith refers to the Laws at TMS, VII.iv.37, 341, and, indirectly, at WN III.ii.9, 388. Book III of the Laws is a form of conjectural history that became quite popular in the Scottish Enlightenment.
the pleasures of a genuine friendship in this life. In explaining Smith’s views on friendship, a proper understanding is achieved of his defense of the philosopher’s role in commercial life against Rousseau’s charge.

IV.A: Posthumous Rewards

On the issue of fame, Smith agrees with Hume: “The love of just fame, of true glory, even for its own sake, and independent of any advantage which he can derive from it, is not unworthy even of a wise man” (TMS, III.2.8, 117; see also TMS, III.2.29, 127). But somebody might be tempted to ask: what if no fame is forthcoming? What are the genuine rewards, for the philosopher, of a commitment to opening up the eyes of the public, especially if this is can be a very futile enterprise? (So many centuries have passed since Lucian’s time!) Moreover, although Hume’s “Life” ultimately is a triumphant account of increasing material rewards and public recognition, there is no sense of inevitability. As Dugald Stewart, commenting on the fate of Smith’s works, observed: “It is not often that a disinterested zeal for truth has so soon met with its just reward” (“Account of Smith,” §IV¶29,323). In WN, Smith remarked that, “Before the invention of the art of printing, a scholar and a beggar seem to have been terms very nearly synonymous” (WN, I.x.c.38, 149). Even after the invention of the printing press, Hume’s experience was quite unusual: “The copy-money given me by the booksellers,” Hume bragged, “much exceeded any thing formerly known in England” (xxxviii). Few Men of Letters could claim to be “independent” let alone “opulent;” surely, Hume’s achievement does not contain enough instances to generalize from? If anything, all it shows is that Hume is a winner of an imperfect “lottery” (WN, I.x.b.22, 123 and I.x.c.37, 148). So what kind of rewards could motivate somebody, who desired independence in commercial society, to go down the uncertain path of a career in letters, especially if he knows the game is rigged? It would be strange that two philosophers, who thought so deeply about how incentives and interests
structure our actions, did not have a response to this. It is true that, according to Smith’s economic theorizing, people tend to overestimate their own luck and future pay-offs when making decisions (e.g., WN, I.x.b.26, 124 ff). So aspiring philosophers may be just as deluded as other people. And it fits this model that, for Smith, some philosophers contribute to the division of labor by putting their “ingenuity” to work and produce useful inventions or machines (WN, I.i.9, 21). But there is no promise they receive much in reward for this. In fact, according to Smith the scant rewards available to teachers and educators of mankind is, by making education affordable, “surely an advantage” to the “publick” at large (I.x.c.40, 151).

Yet, when Smith turns to the question of what motivates somebody to become a philosopher, he does not discuss monetary incentives or possible technological applications at all. In fact, he explicitly denies that the origin of philosophy should be seen in the desire to create a useful application. Instead, he agrees with Plato that some people are gripped by the sensation of wonder when they confront the world of appearances. By trying to create a coherent picture of the world they attempt to alleviate this painful sentiment of wonder (e.g., “History of Astronomy,” II.9, 42-43 of EPS; cf. WN, V.if.24-26, 767-770). This desire for tranquility of mind, and not material gain or public spirit, originally motivated intellectual inquiry! And, as we have seen above, Smith assures us that some

99The remarks in the following paragraph draw on my extensive discussion in the third chapter of my dissertation.

100See also his rejection of a Baconian, technological view of science; for Smith philosophers only got drawn into talking about the utility of their enterprise in defense of the reproach from people that did not understand their interest in “sublime discoveries” (TMS, IV.2.7, 189).

101As I show in Chapter 3, III, Smith believes wonder is an unpleasant sensation; it is not clear that Plato thought this.
philosophers, especially mathematicians, can attain it. Nevertheless, this response is not very satisfying if one thinks that philosophers, also, need some rewards to keep them going.

A more interesting clue, perhaps, can be found in the last paragraph of Smith’s “Letter to Strahan.” It begin as follows: “Thus died our most excellent, and never to be forgotten friend; concerning whose philosophical opinions men will, no doubt judge variously” (xlviii). I think Smith deliberately uses the phrase, “never to be forgotten.” We know of one other instance where he uses it; in a letter to the Principal of Glasgow University, Archibald Davidson, he remembered his old teacher, Francis Hutcheson, with the same locution (Correspondence, Letter No. 274, 309). As Smith writes in TMS: “Men of letters, though, after their death, they are frequently more talked of than the greatest princes or statesmen of their times, are generally, during their life, so obscure and insignificant that their adventures are seldom recorded by cotemporary historians” (VII.i.1.31, 285; contrast this with WN, I.x.c.39, 149-150).

Now, in TMS, Smith draws a distinction between the qualities of generosity and humanity. For Smith, the virtue of humanity consists of “exquisite fellow-feeling,” while the virtue of generosity consists of acts that include self-denial, self-command, sacrifice, and, often, public spirit. For Smith, the generosity of public spirit often involves magnanimity (TMS, IV.2.10-11, 190-192). Magnanimity is one of the most impressive virtues for Smith: “magnanimity amidst great distress appears always so divinely grateful” (TMS, 

102Since there are fairly robust and attainable criteria of success in mathematics and natural philosophy their practitioners can reasonably expect to be worthy of approval sometimes and, hence, achieve tranquility of mind; see the third chapter of my dissertation for more discussion.

103Levy 1999a presents a nice treatment of this issue within Smith’s framework.

104Smith makes the following disconcerting move in explaining the distinction: “Humanity is the virtue of a woman, generosity of a man.” Yet, in WN many appeals are made to our humanity; see Chapter 5 of my dissertation for discussion.
I.i.iii.13, 47); one of the examples that Smith goes on to provide is the scene surrounding Socrates’ death in which he can imagine posthumous approval for his disposition!\textsuperscript{105} It is, therefore, important, that in his “Letter to Strahan,” Smith attributes, besides generosity, also “magnanimity” to Hume on several occasions (xlv-xlvi).\textsuperscript{106} Smith thought that if the public knew the magnanimous man better, “they would esteem and love him.” As Smith argues, “there is an affinity … between the love of virtue and the love of true glory.” The magnanimous man may despise existing public opinion, but “he has the highest value for those [views] which ought to be entertained of him” (TMS, VII.ii.4.10, 310-311). The

\textsuperscript{105}“Whenever we meet, in common life, with any examples of such heroic magnanimity, we are always extremely affected … The friends of Socrates all wept when he drank the last potion, while he himself expressed the gayest and most cheerful tranquillity … He is obliged, as much as possible, to turn away his eyes from whatever is either naturally terrible or disagreeable in his situation. Too serious an attention to those circumstances, he fears, might make so violent an impression upon him, that he could no longer keep within the bounds of moderation, or render himself the object of the complete sympathy and approbation of the spectators. He fixes his thoughts, therefore, upon those only which are agreeable, the applause and admiration which he is about to deserve by the heroic magnanimity of his behaviour. To feel that he is capable of so noble and generous an effort, to feel that in this dreadful situation he can still act as he would desire to act, animates and transports him with joy, and enables him to support that triumphant gaiety which seems to exult in the victory he thus gains over his misfortunes” (TMS, I.i.iii.1.14, 48-49; despite his admiration for Socrates, Smith takes Socrates to task for thinking that he had contact with an invisible and divine being at TMS, VI.i.iii.5, 238-239). Smith’s account is a psychologically more satisfying extension of the observation (by Cerberus) in Lucian’s \emph{Dialogue of the Death} (421): “since [Socrates] could see [death] was inescapable, he put on a bold front, pretending he would be glad to accept what was quite inevitable, all to win the admiration of the onlookers” (Quoted from M.D. Macleod’s translation; Loeb Classical Library, 21)

\textsuperscript{106}In context, Smith is praising Hume’s ability to remain cheerful in the face of death during his friends’ visits. It is tempting to see Smith’s praise of Hume’s magnanimity as an instance of what Hume often calls “greatness of mind” (Smith uses the phrase “greatness of mind” rarely – the two instances I have been able to find are confined to TMS, III — and then quite casually.) Kate Abramson has taught me about the important role “greatness of mind” plays in Hume’s moral philosophy.
reward, such as it is, for a philosopher qua philosopher does not generally come in this life, but in fame after death.\textsuperscript{107}

There is, of course, ample evidence that Hume cared deeply about the opinions of his posthumous public on his character and ideas; Smith points out that, until the very end, Hume kept “correcting his own works for a new edition” (xliv). The fact that he composed his “Life” in order to be prefixed to the new edition suggests he wanted the memory of \textit{who} he was to be conjoined to the memory of \textit{what} he produced. In reporting the exchange with Charon, Smith shows Hume’s concern about the impact of his works; Hume’s detachment from life does not mean he does not care about his effect on the world. Even during his detachment, he would like to imagine that he will be remembered as a benefactor.

Smith’s “Letter to Strahan” is, thus, an attempt to secure the appropriate basis for Hume’s posthumous “memory”\textsuperscript{108}—one that is not based on the notoriety of the posthumous Dialogues, but rather on a proper understanding of Hume’s “acts of charity and generosity” to mankind. It also shows how Hume “submitted [to the inevitability of death] with the utmost cheerfulness, and the most perfect complacency and resignation” (xliv). Note, however, that there is no talk of divine providence, and the consolation reflection on it can provide, in Smith’s account of Hume’s death. Hume’s apparent tranquility of mind and cheerfulness was a magnanimous act from a man whose vanity was not only justified by his public generosity but also by his ability to lead a happy life.

\textsuperscript{107}Dugald Stewart wrote in his “Account of Smith”: “Philosophers (to use an expression of Lord Bacon’s) are the ‘servants of posterity’; and most of those who have devoted their talents to the best interests of mankind, have been oblighe, like Bacon, to ‘bequeath their fame’ to a race yet unborn, and to console themselves with the idea of sowing what another generation was to reap” (IV¶29, 323 in EPS).

\textsuperscript{108}The importance of this is not only signaled in the “Letter to Strahan;” at the start of TMS, we learn that most people think “It is miserable, we think ….to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations” (TMS, I.i.I.13, 12).
IV.B: Friendship, Sincerity and Real Happiness


I have already quoted Smith’s view that Hume approached “nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit.” So far, I have focused mostly on Hume’s generosity to explain why Smith would have thought that Hume was virtuous. It would be tempting to think that Hume’s wisdom consists, for Smith, of his prudent way in expressing his public spirit.109 Certainly, this would fit Smith’s generally cautious approach to public life. Nevertheless, this is not the approach I want to defend here.

In Section II.B above, I argued that, once Hume’s material desires and need for public recognition were fulfilled, he could be tempted to prefer study and the “enjoyment … in the company of a few select companions,” not the least of which was Adam Smith. “It was a friendship on both sides founded on the admiration of genius,” Dugald Stewart remarked, “and the love of simplicity; and, which forms an interesting circumstance in the history of each of these eminent men, from the ambition which both have shewn to record it to posterity” (“Account of Smith,” §I¶13, 273). I want to focus on Smith’s desire to make a public declaration of his friendship with Hume.

Once Hume resigned himself to death, “he continued to divert himself, as usual,” Smith reported, “with correcting his own works for a new edition, with reading books of amusement, with the conversation of his friends; and, sometimes, in the evening, with a party at his favourite game of whist” (xlv). Friendship is the most important theme in the “Letter to Strahan.” Smith starts by promising “some account of the behaviour of our late excellent friend, David Hume” (xlv; Hume’s “friends” are invoked in the next paragraph, too). And the last paragraph of the piece begins as follows: “Thus died our most excellent, 109This seems to be Ryan Hanley’s view.
and never to be forgotten friend” (xlviii). Smith also mentions Hume’s unnamed “most affectionate friends” (xlv), his “most intimate friends” (xlvi), and the frequent visits of Hume’s friends to his deathbed (xlvi).\textsuperscript{110} Smith goes out of his way to quote (quite selectively)\textsuperscript{111} from Hume’s last letter to him; it starts with Hume calling Smith, “MY DEAREST FRIEND” (xlvii). “Letter to Strahan” is a very short piece. But there are at least ten instances where Smith talks about Hume’s friends and their friendship for Hume and Hume’s friendship for them. Now, it is quite possible that Smith is overdoing all this talk of friendship. After all, Hume teaches us in “Of Tragedy”: “Nothing endears so much a friend as sorrow for his death. The pleasure of his company has not so powerful an influence” (EMPL, 222).

Yet, I think Smith’s focus on friendship should not be neglected because it connects with wider themes in Hume and Smith.\textsuperscript{112} They are both adamant that commercial life, its middle-class virtues, and friendship are compatible with each other and a life of philosophy. Hume brings these themes together in an essay he later withdrew, “Of the Middle Station of Life.” Let me quote a few passages: “These [middle-class men] form most numerous Rank of men, that can be suppos’d susceptible of philosophy; and therefore, all Discourses of Morality ought principally to be address’d to them” (EMPL, 546); “the middle Station of Life, that is the most favourable to the acquiring of Wisdom and Ability as well as of Virtue;” and “there is another Virtue, that seems principally to ly [sic] among Equals, and is, for that Reason, chiefly calculated for the middle Station of Life. This Virtue is FRIENDSHIP” (547). One interesting feature is that, for Hume, middle-class friends can

\textsuperscript{110}The playwright John Home (who attended to Hume on his last trip to England, “with that care and attention which might be expected from a temper so perfectly friendly and affectionate; see xlv), Colonel Edmonstone (xlv-xlv), and Strahan are named as friends. Dr. Black, Hume’s physician, is also mentioned.

\textsuperscript{111}Smith omits to quote Hume’s references to the status of the Dialogues.

\textsuperscript{112}For an excellent, recent treatment, see, Brubaker 2000a; cf. Douglas den Uyl and Charles Griswold 1994; Griswold 1999.
be most confident of their mutual sincerity. This sincerity is not to due to the absence of exchange; in fact, it is “commerce” and mutual “Obligations” that secure genuine friendship (547; for more on his views on friendship, “Of Polygamy and Divorces, EMPL, 189). Smith explains this position as follows: “Colleagues in office, partners in trade, call one another brothers; and frequently feel towards one another as if they really were so. Their good agreement is an advantage to all; and, if they are tolerably reasonable people, they are naturally disposed to agree. We expect that they should do so; and their disagreement is a sort of a small scandal” (TMS, VI.ii.i.15, 223-224). Commercial life can bring people together so that they can become mutually advantageous friends. Because the benefits of such friendships are mutual, it can be sincere.

For Smith, a friendship born of necessity is not merely compatible with prudence. It is crucial for him that “the prudent man … is always very capable of friendship” (TMS, VI.i.9, 214). Now, prudence is the virtue most associated with middle-class values of hard work and industry (TMS, VI.i.11, 215; the prudent man reappears in WN I.iv.2, 37; I.v.21, 55, etc.). The reason why this is important is that friendship, and not wealth, is the source of true happiness for Smith: “there is a satisfaction in the consciousness of being beloved, which, to a person of delicacy and sensibility, is of more to importance to happiness, than all the advantage which he can expect to derive from it. What character is so detestable as that of one who takes pleasure to sow dissension among friends” (TMS, L.li.4.1, 39; that wealth is not the source of true happiness is also mentioned in WN: “because happiness and

113When Smith lectured on Lucian in his course on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Glasgow he provides further evidence of why Hume may have been attracted to Lucian: “[Lucian] was of a merry gay and jovial temper with no inconsiderable portion of levity. He was a follower of the Epicuriean or rather of the Cyrenaic Sect; his principles are all adapted to that scheme of life where the chief thing is to pass it easily and happily, and with as much pleasure as we possibly can. And as Life is short and transitory he lays it down as a maxim that we ought not to omit any present happiness in expectation of a greater to come butt lay hold of the present opportunity. Friendship and the exercise of the sociall [sic] affections are in his opinion the chief fund for enjoyment and consequently chiefly to be cultivated” (LRBL, Lecture 9, 1.121, 49; these are reported by a student.)
misery, which reside altogether in the mind, must necessarily depend more upon the healthful or unhealthful, the mutilated or entire state of the mind, than upon that of the body” WN V.i.f.60, 787). If being prudent is a sufficient condition for being capable of friendship, and friendship is the major source of happiness, then real happiness is within reach of most people: “In the most glittering and exalted situation that our idle fancy can hold out to us, the pleasures from which propose to derive our real happiness, are almost always the same with those which, in our actual, though humble stations, we have at all times at hand, and in our power.” In TMS, Smith illuminates this insight with an anecdote:

[W]hat the favourite of the king of Epirus said to his master, may be applied to men in all the ordinary situations of human life. When the King had recounted to him, in their proper order, all the conquests which he proposed to make, and had come to the last of them; And what does your Majesty propose to do then? said the Favourite.—I propose then, said the King, to enjoy myself with my friends, and endeavour to be good company over a bottle.—And what hinders your Majesty from doing so now? replied the Favourite (TMS, III.3.31, 150).

I believe Smith thinks that Hume was wise because he was able to keep his material gains in perspective and continue to value the company of his true friends. I do not merely mean that Hume balanced friendship with public spirit. But in order to fully understand what Smith has in mind, we must reflect on Smith’s response to Rousseau one more time.

IV.C: Philosophic Friendship

Recall that one of Rousseau’s charges was that, in commercial society, man could not be honest. In the previous section, I showed that, for Hume and Smith, sincere friendship is only possible when there is an equitable exchange of needs and gifts. Hume and Smith associate this largely with the prudential middle class that commercial societies are producing. Rousseau, of course, is scathing about prudence in the Second Discourse; he

114 “[A] man, who is only susceptible to friendship, without public spirit, or a regard to the community, is deficient in the most material part of virtue” (“That Politics May be Reduced to a Science,” EMPL, 27).
associates it with the cowardly and unfeeling “tranquil slumber” of the philosopher that prevents him from caring about the needs of others; a prudent man lacks humanity (Part I, ¶37, OC III, 155-156).

By contrast, Smith claims that in “civilized nation, the virtues … are founded upon humanity” (TMS, V.2.8, 204) and he insists that sincerity itself is an achievement of commercial civilization: “A polished people being accustomed to give way, in some measure, to the movements of nature, become frank, open, and sincere.” The further one is removed from the state of nature, the more possible sincerity becomes (V.2.11, 208). Finally, in the stage of commercial society the prudent man “is always sincere” (TMS, VI.i.8, 214). One might think that in WN Smith qualifies this claim a bit by distinguishing between nations that consist “in a great measure of proprietors and cultivators” that grow wealthy through “industry and enjoyment” and nations “composed chiefly of merchants, artificers, and manufacturers” that can grow rich only through parsimony and privation.” On in the former do “liberality, frankness and good fellowship naturally make a part of that common character” in the latter “narrowness, meanness, and a selfish disposition, averse to all social pleasure and enjoyment” (WN, IV.ix.13, 668). But, given the context, it is quite likely that Smith is merely summarizing Physiocrats here. Either way, by claiming that frankness is made possible by certain kinds of commercial societies, Smith makes his sharpest break from Rousseau.

Nevertheless, Smith points out that the prudent man “is not always frank and open; and though he never tells any thing but the truth, he does not always think himself bound, when not properly called upon, to tell the whole truth” (TMS, VI.i.8, 214). It is quite clear that, while prudent friends may be sincere with each other, they would be foolish to tell each other the whole truth all the time. Presumably, excessive truth telling can often cause feelings to be hurt and mutual irritation; it can be very bad for business. Even Hume tells us that only when he is detached from life and speaks in the past tense is he “emboldened” to
speak “more” of his “sentiments” (xl), but even then Hume does not promise to speak the whole truth.\(^{115}\) That is to say, complete frankness gets reserved for special occasion. But nowhere in TMS or WN does Smith tell us when this is the case.

In fact, only in “Letter to Strahan,” does Smith provide an example of somebody speaking the whole truth. According to Smith, Hume’s “magnanimity” enabled “frankness” between Hume and his friends. This frankness consisted, at minimum, of Hume’s friends being able to talk about Hume’s death in his presence and with Hume; that is, they could speak the whole truth about Hume’s situation. Smith claims that this frankness “pleased and flattered” Hume (xlv-xlvi).

But, because Smith calls special attention to Hume’s magnanimity, it is clear that Hume is not serving as the model of the prudent man; the portrayal of “magnanimous” Hume in the “Letter to Strahan” is not merely another example of Smith’s defense of commercial society and typical prudent men in it.\(^{116}\) For Smith thought that a prudent man is incapable of “performing the greatest and most magnanimous actions” (TMS, VI.1.13, 216); those alone produce “real and solid glory.” Hence, for Smith, Hume must be more than a mere prudent man. In fact, in TMS, Smith distinguishes between inferior prudence and the superior kind; commercial society’s emblematic prudential man exhibits prudence of the inferior kind. Superior prudence, however, when directed “to greater and nobler purposes than the care of health, the fortune, the rank, and reputation” involves the additional virtues of valor, extensive benevolence, sacred regard for justice, and proper self-

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\(^{115}\) This astonishing statement by Hume has to my knowledge received very little attention in the scholarly literature.

\(^{116}\) In his letter to Sir Gilbert Elliot (Correspondence, Letter No. 40, 49), Smith suggests that his moral philosophy is designed to show that “real magnanimity and conscious virtue can support itsele under the disapprobation of mankind.” One could say, then, that Smith’s moral philosophy is designed to show how Hume’s life is possible.
This kind of superior prudence is reserved for generals, statesmen, legislators, and, when “carried to highest degree of perfection” philosophers. Superior prudence “supposes the utmost perfection of all the intellectual and moral virtues. It is the best head joined to the best heart. It is the most perfect wisdom combined with the most perfect virtue” (TMS, VI.i.15, 216).

Hume fits the profile of being one of the few people that possess the superior prudence that enabled that rare combination of public spiritedness and magnanimity; for Smith, only somebody like Hume could experience the kind friendship in which the complete truth is said. In TMS, Smith signaled the possibility and nature of such a friendship in the most passionate terms:

But of all attachments to an individual, that which is founded altogether upon the esteem and approbation of his good conduct and behaviour, confirmed by much experience and long acquaintance, is, by far, the most respectable. Such friendships, arising not from a constrained sympathy, not from a sympathy which has been assumed and rendered habitual for the sake of convenience an accommodation; but from a natural sympathy, from an involuntary feeling that the persons to whom we attach ourselves are the natural and proper objects of esteem and approbation; can exist only among men of virtue. Men of virtue only can feel that entire confidence in the conduct and behaviour of one another, which can, at all times, assure them that they can never either offend or be offended by one another … The attachment which is founded upon the love of virtue, as it is certainly, of all attachments, the most virtuous; so it is likewise the happiest, as well as the most permanent and secure. Such friendships need not be confined to a single person, but may safely embrace all the wise and virtuous, with whom we have been long and intimately acquainted, and upon whose wisdom and virtue we can, upon that account, entirely depend. They who would confine friendship to two persons, seem to confound the wise security of friendship with the jealousy and folly of love. The hasty, fond, and foolish intimacies of young people, founded, commonly, upon some slight similarity of character, altogether unconnected with good conduct, upon a taste, perhaps, for the same studies, the same amusements, or upon their agreement in some singular principle or opinion, not commonly adopted; those intimacies which a freak begins, and which a freak puts an end to, how agreeable soever they may appear while they last, can by no means deserve the sacred and venerable name of friendship (TMS, VI.ii.1.18, 224-225).

Leon Montes has reminded me that self-command is the most important virtue for Smith; it is what adds “luster” to the other virtues. See Montes’ dissertation (Cambridge, 2002) for more on the role of self-command in Smith’s theory of the virtues, and also Werhane 1991.
This long paragraph makes clear that, for Smith, the friendship between the wise and the virtuous is of an entirely different kind than that between men of inferior prudence, whose friendship is the product of necessity or habit. This philosophic friendship, I submit, is the only certain reward for a philosopher in this life, if he is lucky to be in the vicinity of a fellow philosopher. This kind of friendship is also founded on equality; it is one based on mutual recognition of wisdom and virtue. This will be quite rare because only the “most studious and careful observer” can discern the wise and virtuous; Smith has no doubt that there is just “small party, who are the real and steady admirers of wisdom and virtue” (TMS, I.iii.3.2, 62 and VI.ii.I.20, 226; Cf. Correspondence, Letter No. 31, from Hume, 33-36). Smith endorses, then, Hume’s passionate elitism.

But, while Smith provides examples or anecdotes for just about any claim he makes in TMS, he sketches no instance of sacred and venerable friendship among the wise and virtuous, let alone one that safely embraces all the wise and virtuous. It is only in the “Letter to Strahan” that we are pointed to an instance of genuine philosophic friendship, that is, between Hume and his closest intimates. But, even in the “Letter to Strahan,” we are told very little about the contents of their friendship. We learn very little about the truths philosophers speak to each other. This secrecy should not surprise us. As Smith writes:

[a] certain reserve is necessary when we talk of our own friends, our own studies, our own professions. All these are objects which we cannot expect should interest our companions in the same degree in which they interest us. And it is for want of this reserve, that the one half of mankind make bad company to the other. A philosopher is company to a philosopher only; the member of a club, to his own little knot of companions (TMS, I.ii.2.6, 34; cf. TMS, VI.iii.31, 253!).
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