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ADAM SMITH ON SLAVERY

Jack Russell Weinstein for AdamSmithWorks



May 15, 2019

There were two types of slaves in Scotland during [Adam Smith's](#) lifetime. The first were chattel slaves of African descent. This is what most people envision today when they think about slavery—people who are regarded solely as property with no recourse or relief, even in the face of the most torturous conditions. The second were coalminers (colliers) and salters, Scots who retained many of the “rights” of citizenship but were forced into servitude because of legal loopholes and political pressures.

Smith did not think that sympathy would lead to masters sympathizing with their slaves, but he seemed to have faith that it could motivate abolitionists to push for change. He did not think politics or religion could end slavery, but had enough faith in economic persuasion that he dedicated time to the problem in his classes. He knew that he was educating the next generation of Scottish leaders and lamented, to them, that he doubted economic motivation would be sufficient for masters to liberate those under their yoke: “It is indeed almost impossible that it should ever be totally or generally abolished,” even in “a republican government” (LJ(B) 102).

What, then, could the abolitionist hope for? The answer may be only the uneven progress of history. As John W. Danford writes, “It appears, on Smith’s understanding, that historical progress has been a story not only of the spread of general opulence, but also of a gradual transformation in the prevailing moral texture of societies” ([Danford 1980, p. 686](#)).

An Inevitable Evil?

Smith was pessimistic about the future of abolition. He argued that slavery was both ubiquitous and inevitable: “Slavery takes place in all societies at their beginning, and proceeds from that tyranic

disposition which may almost be said to be natural to mankind...It is indeed all-most impossible that is should ever be totally or generally abolished” (LJ(B) 134, 102). Smith saw the increasing wealth of nations as conducive to *more* slavery, not less—a rich society can afford to have more slaves than a poor one, and domination is something that he believed people value. In fact, “the greater freedom of the free, the more intollerable is the slavery of the slaves” (LJ(B) iii.111).

Nor did he expect politics or religion to help much. Monarchs will not free slaves—slaves were, after all, present in Scotland. And “we are not to imagine the temper of the Christian religion is necessarily contrary to slavery” (LJ(B) iii.128)—many Christian countries, again including Scotland, allowed slavery. Not even republican governments could be counted on to end slavery because “the persons who make all the laws in that country are persons who have slaves themselves. These will never make any laws mitigating their usage; whatever laws are made with regard to slaves are intended to strengthen the authority of the masters and reduce the slaves to a more absolute subjection” (LJ(b) iii.102).

Smith offered an *economic* argument against slavery because he did not believe that monarchy (or freedom from it), wealth, or religion can be trusted to convince people to free their slaves. People are too invested in their power and the status quo to give up their slaves. He thought that if he could show them it is in their material interest to abolish slavery, if he could show they will have ever more money and more power without slaves than with them, then there would be more of a chance that he could sway them, at least in the long run.

But of course, being strategic is not the same as being moral, and modern readers will want to know whether Smith was opposed to slavery in and of itself. He was, in no uncertain terms, but he saved his most explicit comments to condemn chattel slavery, not coal and salt work:

“Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished” (TMS, V.2.9).

Smith observed “what a miserable life the slaves must have led; their life and their property intirely at the mercy of another, and their liberty, if they could be said to have any, at his disposall also” (LJ(B) iii.94). He also observes that “It is evident that the state of slavery must be very unhappy to the slave himself. This I need hardly to prove” (LJ(b) iii.112). However, these are not arguments against slavery, they are just polemic statements (however true they may be). Smith requires something more positive and explanatory as to why slavery is immoral. He offers it in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS).

A Sentimental Path to Abolition?

TMS, Smith’s first book, provides a moral psychology, not a positive ethics. While Smith makes moral claims, they are interwoven with an account of how moral judgments work. The moral *what* is subservient to the moral *how*. In TMS, his comments on the immorality of slavery are included within his comments about the general connectedness of all people and the ways each of us enter into individual perspectives.

The key concept in TMS is sympathy, the capacity Smith claims we all have for fellow-feeling. It allows us to use our imagination to enter into the perspective of others and to judge the propriety of their moral sentiments.

Smith defines moral sentiments as “moral observations” (*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, i.144). They encompass our judgments about and reactions to other people’s judgments and actions. So, for example, if we see someone stub their toe and they start cursing profusely, we make a sympathetic determination whether their reaction is appropriate. If it is, Smith would claim we sympathize with them and thereby approve of their actions. If we think their reaction is too extreme, our lack of sympathy tells them to moderate the pitch of their response.

Similarly, if we learn that someone has slaves and is not working to liberate them, we naturally ask whether this lack of action is appropriate or not. If we would have the same reaction—if we would keep the slaves in bondage—then we can be said to sympathize with the slave owner and approve of their actions, while if we do not share their judgment, we expect them to change.

Smith argued that as we mature morally, we can turn the mirror of sympathy upon ourselves, imagining an impartial spectator who acts as our conscience. We can look to others to judge our action or we can create an impartial spectator who serves in their stead. The impartial spectator is the product of negotiation between our experience, our culture, history, and others’ experience. It can be aligned with the community, but it can also rebel against the status quo. Scottish philosophers saw the slavery in the world and understood that their and other communities approved of it, but their impartial spectator told them it was wrong, and they wrote accordingly.

Smith was explicit that it is easier to sympathize with people whom we are close to, both geographically and culturally. The easier we can imagine others’ contexts and causes, the more likely it is that we can sympathize with them. This means that the more we have in common with others, the more likely we are to approve of their moral judgment, and the less we have in common, the more likely we are to disregard their moral claims. This is the key element in Smith’s moral condemnation of slavery. Historically, slavery has taken different forms. Some masters work side by side in the same conditions as their slaves. In those instances, the masters were generous and kind, and often thought of their slaves as faithful friends. But as society got richer and more prosperous, the divide between the slaves’ day-to-day experiences and their masters’ widened, until there was no way for those in charge to conceive of the tortures of slavery. The masters stopped both sympathizing with the slaves and even conceiving of them as human.

Smith emphasized that when we sympathize with others who experience a wrongdoing, we adopt their resentment against the cause of that wrong. In the case of the slave, the cause is the master. This leads to a problem: for the masters to free their slaves they must first sympathize with them to understand their suffering. In doing so, they must adopt resentment towards the cause of their pain—that is to say, themselves. Thus, accepting that slavery is wrong involves adopting self-resentment or self-hatred. Slave masters must therefore learn to hate themselves at the very moment they mature enough to decide to end slavery and this is precisely what they don’t want to do. If they were to respond with emancipation, they

would love themselves again. For Smith, self-acceptance is akin to moral self-approval, but feeling as though one needs to change necessarily involves disapproving of oneself, but

“He is a bold surgeon, they say, whose hand does not tremble when he performs an operation upon his own person; and he is often equally bold who does not hesitate to pull off the mysterious veil of self-delusion, which covers from his view the deformities of his own conduct. Rather than see our own behaviour under so disagreeable an aspect, we too often, foolishly and weakly, endeavour to exasperate anew those unjust passions which had formerly misled us; we endeavour by artifice to awaken our old hatreds, and irritate afresh our almost forgotten resentments: we even exert ourselves for this miserable purpose, and thus persevere in injustice, merely because we once were unjust, and because we are ashamed and afraid to see that we were so” (TMS, III.4.4).

Unfortunately, digging in one’s heels is as much a form of psychological self-protection as economic irrationality, even if it is indefensible in the long run. This helps to explain why the slave culture constructed a worldview that justified slavery, biblical quotations that implied racial inferiority, economic systems that rewarded domination, and literature and art that continually reinforced the status quo. These are the same tools that can be used to undermine slavery—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* comes to mind as an example of an abolitionist polemic designed to inspire sympathy rather than interfere with it. As I argue in my book *Adam Smith’s Pluralism*, in Smith’s moral psychology, the very things that unite us can divide us, and vice-versa (Weinstein 2013). These mixed messages help explain why Smith argued that slavery is most likely inevitable.

This reveals an irony. Despite Smith’s faith in the ability to sympathize with those closer to us, he showed more empathy to the African chattel slaves than the colliers. He had a harder time acknowledging the suffering of his countrymen than he did those whose culture and history were remote to him. In this, his experience foreshadows our own. Contemporary debates about servitude involve garment workers and migrants, none of whom are slaves by name, but many of whom live in conditions similar to the ones the colliers eventually overcame. Whether the servitude of Indian nationals in Saudi Arabia or child laborers in Bangladesh are inheritors of the coal and salt worker legacy is an unsettled matter. It is, however, a debate Smith would recognize[JW7].

Of Colliers and Salters

Today’s readers may be excused for not knowing about the slavery of colliers and salters. Smith is oblique, at best, about Scotland’s role in the slave trade and completely silent about the fact that he might, in any given day, interact with peers who profited by of the servitude of others. He was not alone in this sin of omission—many of the Scottish literati took strong moral positions against slavery without acknowledging their connection to its daily existence. As the historian Duncan Rice puts it, “Scotland was a society whose intellectual and religious leaders had turned against slavery, without developing the slightest conception that anything should be done about it” (Rice 1983).

Many Scots owned or worked in jobs that connected them to the slave trade in the West Indies. Young Scots would travel there to buy, trade, or invest in slaves, or ended up in professional positions for

employers who did, and Scotland profited by the tobacco and sugar industries. Their circumstances may have not felt as urgent to Smith as they might have to an abolitionist in the American colonies. There were likely fewer than 100 African slaves in Scotland at any given time in Smith's life, while slaves made up close to 25 percent of the colonies' population.

In contrast to the small number of chattel slaves, there were many colliers and salters in Scotland. While some scholars and historians refer to them as serfs, they were not. The Act of 1606 placed already employed coal miners and salters into a state of permanent bondage, making it illegal to offer them new employment without a testimonial from their employer. This meant that as long as their employer refused to offer such a testimonial, the worker was bound to them and a six-day work week. That same employer could bind a worker's children in exchange for a token gift, indicating lifelong employment. While there was no presumption that colliers and salters were property in the way that Black slaves were, the outcomes were quite similar.

Smith struggled with this awareness. He referred to colliers as "the only vestiges of slavery which remain amongst us," which both avoids calling them slaves and ignores the other vestige of slavery, the Africans who were still in Scotland. Rather than advocate for them, he picked nits to differentiate between their circumstance and slavery, being generous to their masters. The master, said Smith, could not kill a worker for pleasure or take their property, and the workers must be paid for their labor: "They can be sold, it is true, but then it is only in a certain manner. When the work is sold all the colliers or salters which belong to it are sold along with it... So that they are no way restricted more than other men, excepting that they are bound to exercise a certain business and in a certain place" (LJ(b) iii.128).

Smith's argument here is ironic in the context of the rest of his work. His point, that the circumstances of the colliers and salters are better off than many previous slaves, is certainly true, but his implication that they are not really slaves because they are only bound to their profession is discordant with much of what he would write later. Smith's central focus in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (hereafter *Wealth of Nations* or WN) is the creation of "perfect liberty" for labourers. He defines it as the state under which someone has the opportunity to "change his trade as often as he pleases" (WN I.vii.6, I.x.a.1). This is the one liberty the colliers and salters are guaranteed not to have. Smith offers no condemnation of the kind of slavery affecting colliers and salters in either of his published books. His only critical comments can be found in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (LJ), which he didn't publish himself, but come from student notes from Smith's courses.

Smith is explicit in WN about the requirements of apprenticeships, which were more akin to servitude than school. They were, for Smith, "the epitome of the restrictions of the principles of competition and liberty." It is unjust, he argues, that "during the continuance of the apprenticeship, the whole labour of the apprentice belongs to his master" (WN I.x.b.8). By prohibiting the apprentice from bringing his skills to market (in Smith's time, apprentices were always male), the master took away the student's ability to negotiate for better wages, conditions, or other terms of employment. Readers of the *Wealth of Nations* can justly anticipate what his objections to the plight of colliers and salters would have been from his comments about apprenticeships, which closely approximated many of the conditions the colliers and salters faced, though they were less extreme.

There is every reason to think that Smith should have condemned the bondage of colliers and salters in *Wealth of Nations*. He was, after all, penning a “very violent attack... upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain” (Corr. 208). He should also have been less circumspect in his lectures. Scottish culture had become so heavily abolitionist, at least in word, that his students would have understood the moral message implicit in Smith’s associating coal and salt work with slavery. At the same time, Smith was teaching young, well-to-do Scots at Glasgow College; they would have been accustomed to the conditions in the miners. Calling the colliers slaves would have required an argument in and of itself and would probably have been interpreted as an overt political act which would have urged students to sympathize with the workers and therefore resent the coal masters. Smith was famously cautious about political provocation.

And yet, in describing new workers’ reluctance to enter into contracts with the coal masters, Smith ends up referring to colliers as slaves three quarters of the way through the same paragraph in which he called them the last vestiges (LJ(b) iii.130). This is evidence of Smith’s internal conflict regarding how to speak about them. Notice also that Smith made a claim about human nature—not only about market forces. His macroeconomic discussions were not simply concerned with political economy, but were elements of the larger project outlined in TMS, the first edition of which was published three years before the date of the lecture notes. Smith, like all Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, saw himself as contributing to what David Hume referred to as “the science of man,” a project built on the understanding that all sciences are subordinate to human nature because “they lie under the cognizance of men, and are judged of by their powers and faculties” (Hume 1739). Exceptions for specific instances undermine such a project.

An Insufficient Economic Case

Smith probably did not say much about the injustices suffered by colliers and salters in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* because the class was on a different topic. He was not making a moral argument against slavery; he was making an economic one. As detailed in the student notes on jurisprudence, Smith outlined how much more expensive bound workers and slaves are than free labor would be. It would be easier to recruit colliers as free laborers, he argued, because potential employees “are now deterred from ever entering into one as it is a rule that one who works a year and day in the coal pit becomes a slave as the rest and may be claimed by the owner” (LJ(b) iii.128—this is where he inadvertently calls them selves). Free laborers were avoiding the original trap that enslaved their predecessors.

Smith made similar observations about the economic irrationality of slavery fourteen years later in *Wealth of Nations*. First, he argued, slave labor is the most expensive of all labor and even then “can be squeezed out” the slave “by violence only, and not by any interest of his own” (WN III.ii.9). Second, slave labor is more expensive because its cost must be borne solely by the master and not defrayed by the workers: “...tenants, being freemen, are capable of acquiring property...they have a plain interest that the whole produce should be as great as possible... A slave, on the contrary, who can acquire nothing but his maintenance, consults his own ease by making the land produce as little as possible over and above that maintenance” (WN III.ii.12). In addition, the more competition there is for jobs, the lower workers’ salaries will be, a point he does not repeat from his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (LJ(b) 111.130), but is implicit in his comment that the only reason why there are sugar slaves is the planation owners “can afford the expence of slave-cultivation” (WN III.ii.10).

Smith continued, “the wear and tear of a slave...is at the expence of his master, but that of a free servant at his own expense” (WN I.viii.41) and specifies that when it comes to slaves you need more labor “to execute the same quantity of work than in those carried out by freemen” (WN IV.ix). His justification here is the same as in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*: “The pride of man makes him love to domineer... wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen.” (WN III.ii.10). The bottom line for Smith was that, “avarice and injustice are always short-sighted.” Slave masters’ myopic desire for power does not allow them to “foresee how much this regulation must obstruct improvement, and thereby hurt in the long-run the real interest of the [them and the] landlord” (WN III.ii.16).

For Smith, the central economic problem with slavery is that lack of personal motivation makes the slave lazy, recalcitrant, and uninvested in labor. This is consistent with Smith’s overall conception of human beings. He was not arguing that Africans are inherently inferior, as Hume does in footnote 10 of his essay “Of National Character.” Nor is he commenting negatively on the working class—Smith thinks very highly of their ability to innovate. Instead, he implicitly reinforced his claim that all human beings are endowed with “the uniform, constant, and uninterrupted” motivation to better our own conditions, “a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate, comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave” (WN II.iii.31, 28). A person who can accumulate property and savings is motivated to work efficiently and profitably, but a slave, whose only goal is to find rest and disappear into the background, will never contribute productively to someone else’s advancement.

In short, Smith believed that slavery is not as profitable as free labor and that forced servitude takes away economic agents’ motivation to succeed. It takes away their ability to better their own condition. Instead, they are motivated to make life easier for themselves in the short term, which transfers costs that would normally be borne by the worker to the master.

But the desire for higher profits were not enough to move “the masters of coal works” to liberate their bound employees. Smith was arguing for slavery to be seen as a bad economic decision, but he was also illustrating how the natural desire for human domination can make people blind to their other interests. Those with dominion over bound workers or slaves are held firm by a less rational motivation, a natural “love of domination and authority over others” that exploits “the pleasure it gives one to have some persons whom he can order to do his work rather than be obliged to persuade others to bargain with him” (LJ(b) iii.128).

The Slow Road to Abolition

As Smith may have expected, it was the slow, messy progress of history rather than any single, knock-down argument that brought slavery to an end. Scotland’s progression towards abolition of chattel slavery was reasonably quick after *Wealth of Nations* was published in 1776. The owning of personal slaves was prohibited in Scotland in 1778; their trade became illegal in the British Colonies in 1807, and chattel slavery was abolished in 1822.

As for the colliers and salters, a law declaring them free laborers passed in 1775, while Smith was finishing *Wealth of Nations*, but complete emancipation didn't happen until 1799. The practice remained in effect in Northern England until 1872, seven years after the American civil war ended, a much more violent resolution to the scourge of black slavery. There are, of course, still people who argue both that slavery was a positive institution for the black slaves and that the Africans didn't really suffer. These people however, constitute the vast minority and are generally regarded as crackpots. Adam Smith would not sympathize.