

# Adam Smith: Anthropology and Moral Philosophy

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*Adam Smith was a moral philosopher. His economic and legal thought can't be separated from his moral psychology which frames his anthropological and social proposal. Experimental Newtonian methodology and Hume's empiricism feed his approximation to the reality of human being. In this new context the traditional categories of society are defined and combined in a new way. In this paper I try to argue that the assumed optimism which sometimes is attributed to Smith about the proper functioning of a commercial society, it isn't so clear if we pay attention to his vision of human being from the experimental methodology which he uses. In addition, the hard-working man, once embarked in commercial society, experiences that the division of labor undermines his intellectual and moral capacities. The whole leads me to check his idea of work and to try to think an alternative solution to the questions that he poses.*

**Keywords:** Adam Smith, Empiricism, Moral Judgment, Virtue, Commercial Society, Work.

*Adam Smith se consideraba a sí mismo un filósofo moral. Su doctrina económica y jurídica no se puede apartar de la psicología moral que enmarca su propuesta antropológica y societaria. La metodología experimental newtoniana y la epistemología humeana alimentan su acercamiento a la realidad del hombre. Desde ahí las categorías tradicionales de la sociedad quedan definidas y articuladas de un modo nuevo. En este artículo se pretende argumentar que el supuesto optimismo que a veces se atribuye a Smith acerca del buen funcionamiento de la sociedad comercial, no está tan justificado atendiendo a su visión del hombre desde la metodología experimental que emplea. Además, una vez embarcado en la sociedad comercial, el hombre trabajador experimenta que la división del trabajo mina sus capacidades intelectuales y morales. Todo ello me lleva a revisar la noción de trabajo que se desprende de su pensamiento y a ensayar una posible solución alternativa a la luz de los problemas que plantea.*

**Palabras clave:** Adam Smith, Epistemología, Juicio moral, Virtud, Sociedad comercial, Trabajo.

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## 146 Introduction

Although Adam Smith's name is usually cited in discussions about economics, Smith regarded himself as a moral philosopher. Economics was only one of the topics he felt compelled to respond to as a moral thinker. The moral encompasses two fields: ethics and jurisprudence. Smith addressed ethics in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and explored the law, finance, government, etc., in *Lectures of Jurisprudence* and *Wealth of Nations*. His position on economics cannot be separated from his reflections on moral psychology; the latter is the primary and most refined framework in which the former may be understood.

Given that Smith himself regarded his different works as parts of a single, wider philosophical project, only a reading of the works as a whole discloses a true picture of Smith's thought. This methodological approach lays the groundwork for a wide-ranging response to the issue on which this paper centres: the anthropological bases of Smith's writings. Smith's moral psychology and social project articulate in new ways the fundamental categories of man's existence in society: economics, the law, politics, ethics and religion. In this context, Smith's very distinct *idea of man* ought to be taken into account in any balanced account of his thought.

Adam Smith's thinking has sometimes been characterized as a philosophy of optimism and unlimited progress. My argument is that Smith's writings, read as a whole, present an intellectually coherent vision which does little to endorse such anthropological optimism; rather, Smith's philosophy defers to a dual understanding of man and, as a consequence, of society –a double vision that undermines his so-called optimism. Furthermore, the starting-point for Smith's thought is a certain degree of anthropological pessimism –human imperfection–, whose practical effects in experience prompt him to revise the prevailing moral systems of his time. The purpose of his revision was to find a moral framework congruent with human nature as it really is –that is, as it is reflected in the behaviour of most



ADAM SMITH: ANTHROPOLOGY AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

human beings, of which Smith was an attentive observer. The new moral system of propriety and sympathy is, to Smith's mind, both response and solution to the anthropological questions he framed on the basis of his observation of social behaviour. Smith's aim was to provide a moral framework for ordinary people actively engaged in the world, who harboured neither grand ambitions nor heroic dreams.

Having taken into account the regularities of human nature, and drawing on his close observation of men and societies, Smith defined his idea of man. The nature of human being is to act, and the most important motives for action are the many human passions. Smith sought to understand how a moral corrective might be designed on the basis of the passions; far from being contemptible or necessarily evil, such passions may play a vital role in social harmony when (and only when) they allow for the possibility of virtue. Without some form of moral propriety, society might disintegrate, and man along with it. Society must be preserved for the sake of individual.

The process of anthropological observation on which Smith's thinking draws led him to conclude that all men desire peace. Human nature is marked by tendencies which facilitate man's striving for peace. Thus, the pre-eminent concern is how social harmony is to be realised in practice. Smith's response to this question (and many pages of his writings) centre on two very significant virtues in this regard: justice and benevolence.

Smith acknowledged the significant roles played by both politics and religion throughout history in the shaping of social peace. However, historical events in Europe from the second half of the 16th century onwards –the decline in religious unity, the emergence of different forms of political absolutism– implied that neither religion nor politics (as a form of absolute power) on their own could guarantee the longed-for social harmony. As a result, Smith takes a different approach: the correct moral behaviour of men is the



**148** ground of social peace; in so far as they foment moral conduct, politics and religion play a subsidiary role. Economics is of pre-eminent significance in Smith's argument; given the passions and natural liberty of each human being, economics, as part of the moral dimension, in a commercial society may facilitate the peaceful exchange among all of the goods necessary for life. Nevertheless, Smith portrays most people's minimal integrity with a realism bordering on pessimism. Still, he realizes that society requires a judicial system with laws that guarantee justice as objectively as possible, since justice is the necessary condition for social harmony. Smith's approach prompts further questions, of which he was aware and to which he sought to provide possible answers—a project which has been inherited by those who come after him.

### I. Adam Smith's vision of man and society

Adam Smith is perhaps one of the authors who has contributed most to the organisation of society as we know it today. He has been regarded by many as the father of capitalism<sup>1</sup>; and yet for Smith, capitalism is not just an economic system, but rather a viable form of social organization which takes account of the way that most people behave<sup>2</sup>.

Dazzled by Newton's physics, he took upon himself the task of writing a physics of the social world. Newton had begun, in his scientific method, by observing natural phenomena, registering their regularity, and discovering a few general laws which explained the movement of these different phenomena<sup>3</sup>. Smith too hoped to

1 However, we should point out that there are many types of capitalism. See Weber, M. (1959), pp. 1-5.

2 I shall develop the following ideas along the lines explored in my book: Lázaro, R. (2002).

3 See Cremaschi, S. (1981); Montes, L. (2004).



ADAM SMITH: ANTHROPOLOGY AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

observe social phenomena, notice their regularity, and discover the few principles which might explain how people moved in their social activities. Smith incorporates elements of Newtonian methodology and Humean epistemology into his thought.

*Reality* is only knowable as a regular succession of phenomena that are received and associated by imagination<sup>4</sup>. There are no Smithian texts which indicate that the phenomena allow us to attain the essences of things. None of his texts leave open the possibility of considering an internal order or specific form capable of being known. Rather, it is thanks to imagination's task of representing impressions in a regular, connected temporal sequence that we can acquire knowledge of things from phenomena that we observe. Thus, although it may be *probable* that the *order* which is *established* by our imagination is similar to the order truly found in reality, we cannot know reality itself<sup>5</sup>. This order is not an ontological category found in reality, but rather an epistemological category situated at a psychological level. Scottish empiricism inherited from Newtonian science the notion that we can know nothing about the inner substances of things. Thus, knowledge of thing's essences lies beyond the horizon of that which can be investigated, unless one, leaving aside Newton, were to attempt to make up arbitrary hypothesis. Seeking to know without both beginning with and being confirmed by phenomenal experience, but rather starting from an internal order belonging to the things themselves, would be a pure hypothesis, stemming from a rationalistic *a priori* of a Cartesian stripe, according to which knowledge: "It does not perhaps contain a word of truth"<sup>6</sup>. For both Newton and Smith, one can know the properties, but not the essences, of things, based on the phenomena. Knowing

4 See Carrión, G. (2008), p. 52.

5 See Fitzgibbons, A. (1995), p. 83.

6 LRBL p. 146.



**150** man or human nature follows the same method: one gains access to human-related phenomena according to a certain order and regularity, which bring out the unity within the variety of behaviors and tendencies.

In empirical philosophy, that which is probable is true insofar as an explanation is *confirmed a posteriori* by the phenomena, and not insofar it is inferred by reason *a priori*, independently of the phenomena. Only by observing similar properties in different bodies can one infer that other bodies possess those same properties. In other words, empirical observation, and not *a priori* reason, is the starting point of philosophy. Only new experiences and observations can cause the laws, principles, or explanations of phenomena to change. Based on Newton's premises, every theory always remains subject to revision. Nonetheless, the natural world's phenomenal variety ceases to be chaotic when studied according to Newton's method and his guidelines for philosophizing. Newtonian method provided the eighteenth century with its scientific paradigm. Thus, in the future, every science should proceed according to the method of Newtonian experimental philosophy.

One of Smith's principal, determinant concerns is how to make society function as a coherent whole and a harmonious system, similar to the functioning of the natural machinery that makes up the universe. This entails investigating what properties belong to humans, and what principles ought to govern society so as to create a coherence between the sequence of societal events and their [underlying] principles. Thus, the overall social picture can engender tranquility of mind, without presuming to discover the social system's conformity to an alleged ultimate reality, situated beyond those social phenomena which we find more visible, familiar, and obvious. In Smith's case, the fact that man is considered more from a psychological than from a spiritual viewpoint does not entail relativism or a lack of objectivity. Rather, it stems from restricting the assessment of human action to the study of human sentimental and



ADAM SMITH: ANTHROPOLOGY AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

emotional conduct, which can be universally judged as *objectively* correct. Due to this stressing of psychological factors, human happiness is reduced to a kind of psychological tranquility. Happiness deals with finding a source of pleasure which can be a real and attainable goal for the majority.

Smith's attempt to emulate Newtonian science in the social arena begins with a study of human nature as related to morality. One should begin with the observation of *moral phenomena*: first, *sentiments*, which follow upon every action and conduct; second, *passions*, which move men to action; and, third, *judgements*, which men make regarding their own actions. Life in society is what causes man, when acting, to take into account the sentiments and judgements of others. Were it otherwise, humans would repress their selfishness and lower passions, and know themselves, only with difficulty; nor would they take into account society's judgements on their acts; all of which is contradicted by common experience. Still, how can one know whether human sentiments, passions, and judgements are correct? What criteria determine whether this is the case?

It is necessary that each member of society attempt to act morally, that is, in a correct way, a way that those with whom one lives can approve of. In society at large, this translates into a *harmony of sentiments and passions* among the citizens that is indispensable to social life. Only a society wherein such a harmony is found to a greater or lesser degree can be considered to be proportionally happy. For Smith, the ordering of phenomena found in the natural world is synonymous with regularity and coherence; in social life, this regularity and coherence is called "*harmony*." The order of social life is a harmony of sentiments and passions among those who make up society, and the principle by virtue of which it can be constructed is *sympathy*. The sympathetic bystander makes an effort to identify himself with the sentiments of the person who is principally affected; while the protagonist makes the effort of attenuating his emotions to the point at which the spectator may accompany him. This



**152** mutual effort carried out by the members of society morally unites them. In order for society to function properly, this reciprocal correspondence of sentiments is necessary.

*Sympathizing* allows us to put out communication lines to others, for no man can live in isolation. Nevertheless, sympathizing does not mean leaving behind one's own individuality so as to take upon oneself that of the other, but rather *bringing home to oneself* the other's situation so as to judge it by our own faculty<sup>7</sup>. Sympathizing has an *analogous function of reciprocity*: each person knows himself, in a certain way, by knowing how someone else is affected; that is, he knows his own sentiments and passions. Without the mirror that each person finds in other members of society, this principle of our nature would have no occasion for being exercised. It suffices to pay attention to others, who are spectators of our own conduct, to discover what approbation or disapprobation our conduct merits, since others are always a reference point for us<sup>8</sup>; nonetheless, this is always the second step, since the first thing that we judge is not our own conduct, but that of others.

The imagination is what allows the sympathetic principle to come into act. Moral judgement implies sympathizing, or not sympathizing, with another's sentiments; this is equivalent to approving or not approving of another's conduct, which in turn has as its necessary condition feeling-with-the-other, bringing his objective situation before one's own imagination. The *particular feeling is objective* because it is analogously proportional; it is so, given that it is derived from a *situation* that is *common* to the protagonist and to the spectator. The conduct following on the situation, due to its awake-

<sup>7</sup> Charles L. Griswold has addressed the paradox that follows from Smith's sympathetic system: an ego that seems centered on itself, even when it brings home to itself the other's situation. See Griswold, C. (2006), pp. 22-56.

<sup>8</sup> Evensky, J. (1993), p. 399.





ning of sentiments in the protagonist, can be mediated by a judgement of proportion and conformity. Such is the moral judgement.

The judgement's objectivity is assured because man is a social being, which means that the moral judgements formed by each individual's imagination can be modified when they are contrasted with the judgements made by *others*. Society is *effective* because it can help modify and correct moral judgements. The fact that man is a social being has *moral efficacy*. There is a reciprocal influence among individuals in a given society by virtue of the sympathetic principle, in a manner similar to that in which particles in physical space influence each other by their mutual attraction: the judgements of some influence the judgements of others.

Yet, how can one know whether the others' judgement on the protagonist's conduct is correct? Also: how can one be objective in judging, on the one hand, oneself, and, on the other, an agent and a sufferer, since one's sympathy seems to be split in two by taking both situations into account? For Adam Smith, the existence of *impartial spectators* and *general rules* gives some confidence in, though not a complete guarantee of, the moral judgement's objective certainty. Moral judgements can be modified by taking new evidence into account, i.e., further elements relevant to the judgement. The spectator is the imaginary construct which represents a third party's impartiality of judgement. Smith insists that the spectator be well-informed.

The justification of moral judgements and of Smithian moral theory is not to be found in Humean utilitarian reasoning<sup>9</sup>; nor is it rooted in the Hobbesian view of a wicked and selfish human nature; rather, it is based on reasoning about society. The constructing and preser-

<sup>9</sup> TMS I.i.4.4. One can see how, in this respect, Smith is critical of his friend Hume.



**154** vation of the happiest society possible is the original reason for moral behavior. Still, Smith holds that man acts principally due to his passions, and most principally out of self-interest. His moral solution seeks to find out how self-interest can be [made] virtuous.

The possibility of someone living apart from society would only be admitted by Smith as a hypothesis, since all the facts contradict it<sup>10</sup>. Outside of society, one would only find a complete ignorance of man. Smith does not hold to an atomistic ontology of singular particles with essential properties. The properties and principles attributed to humans as *universal* are based on observation of human behavior *within* society; and society is always a historical phenomenon.

The goal of human moral behavior is social order. The establishment of social harmony is the necessary condition that allows one to speak of a society that is happy, at least to some degree. Just as in the world of physical Nature each particle and movement is ordered in such a way that its proper functioning attains its end, likewise, to achieve societal harmony in social life, each individual must *function morally* in the right way. Man attains knowledge of the social world in a way analogous to that in which one knows the order in the natural world: as something known after the fact. The principles found in the natural world, most notably the principle of universal gravitation, are what make the order of natural phenomena possible, an order which we know *a posteriori*. Similarly, in the social sphere, it is the principle of sympathy that principally renders the *a posteriori* moral order possible.

Smith soon discovered that there were two types of people: the great majority, the mainstream of society, who were not remarkable for being particularly good or bad; and the rest, a small minority, who were outstanding for their wisdom and virtue. The latter were

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<sup>10</sup> TMS III.1.3.



ADAM SMITH: ANTHROPOLOGY AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

moved by values such as heroism, disinterested altruism, the desire for perfection, and they sought to acquire virtue and come to resemble the divinity, because the hallmark of divinity is perfection. The other group of people, the vast majority, were mainly moved by their own interests, self-interest being their main driving force, and took others into account, but not to the extent that they would put aside their own interests or accept some kind of moral duty to take responsibility for them, that is, do them good, rather than limiting themselves to not harming them. This is the virtue of justice in a negative sense.

Smith points out that if the wise and virtuous were in the majority in a society, there would be no need for civil government or laws, because wisdom and virtue would make people live in a happy society, quite free of conflicts. However, Smith considers that the model of human being which stands out most in the social ambience is the one of the man seeking his own interests –and this is the objective truth– which makes it relatively easy for conflicts to flare up. The question, therefore, is this: How can we live in social harmony, if people are all pursuing their own interests?

Smith's response is clear: the passion which spurs most people's actions has to be used to generate harmony. That is, there has to be an exchange of self-interest, so that people give to receive, and vice versa. If each person give to the other what the other hopes to receive, and each person receives what he expects from the other, we shall no longer live in the desolate landscape that Hobbes had proposed some years before: all-out war, everyone against everyone else, because everyone is bent on seeking his own interests. Against this vision, Smith thinks that each person should seek his or her own interests without necessarily going to war: it is enough to look at the other and calculate what kind of interest he or she expects from me, and what I expect from him or her. That is the economy, this is the social organization in a commercial society.



**156** Our author asserts that this will bring about a new law in society which is different from that proposed by Christianity. Christians are supposed to love others as themselves, that is, without limits, and with genuine interest and care, because this is how we are supposed to love ourselves, and this is the means that has to be employed with others. Smith, on the other hand, says that the new law is that of reciprocity: love others only as they love us, that is, ‘*give only to the extent that you will receive*’ The law which is derived from acting only in humanity’s current, depraved state<sup>11</sup>, is formulated elsewhere as follows: “As every man doth, so shall it be done to him, and the retaliation seems to be the great law which is dictated to us by Nature”<sup>12</sup>. One may add that behaving thus is *that which is just*, i.e., that which is essential for the existence of *some* social harmony. Love in its absolute form, as unconditional and selfless, is replaced by reciprocity in giving and receiving.

The law of reciprocity is how a society of merchants functions, and Smith understands that the person in the current historical state of society is mainly this: an individual who trades with his/her material property to reach a certain security and independence, and who pays scant attention to the notion of spiritual property in the form of virtue and wisdom.

The person –in the Smithian view– is an individual who relates to others in an objective way, and so for him or her, others are not unique beings with whom he or she can have relationships and whom he or she can perceive dialogically in order to find out what his or her moral duties towards them are. Instead, others are more or less seen as possible objects for one’s own interest, and this is even more so in a trading society with a high degree of autonomy. In the commercial society men are between them *anonymous*.

<sup>11</sup> TMS II.i.5.8.

<sup>12</sup> TMS II.ii.1.10.



This way of understanding the person and society presents a social panorama in which what is most important is also most visible and quantitative, as opposed to invisible and qualitative. What gives security is material property –the fortune, the rank and the social status–, and so civil forms of government have to be established in order to protect the property of the rich from the poor by the application of the law. What is important, therefore, is not so much politics, which is suspect because of corruption, since Machiavelli had separated ethics from politics, as the legal sphere, that is, the existence of a set of laws which ensure respect for individual property. Peace and social harmony are reduced to being understood as having one's own property ensured by the law, which justifies the creation of new laws and strong power which can apply the corresponding punishment to anyone who violates these laws.

With this world view, Smith stands midway between the heroic, perfectionist vision of the Stoics and the Christians, and the egotism of Hobbes. It is not a matter of being a hero, or aspiring to the virtue which improves us as people and makes us grow, let alone aspiring to an ideal of perfection in which man comes to be like God. In Smith's view, God takes care of the universe which he created, but society is the affair of man, a man who has not been improved or perfected or rescued from his egotism by any kind of divine aid or by his own moral effort, a man who is like the vast majority, who prefers to live a comfortable life, without debts, with good health, without excessive worries, with material security, with a job and a certain social status, that is, it is enough to have the social recognition which goes with our profession and wealth.

Having a religion –one of the dimensions of the spiritual world as opposed to the material one proposed by Smith– may be a consolation, or even something to be recommended to ensure that society maintains certain moral behaviour, but it is not essential for man in society, nor is it a social category which has something to do with peace, as was once the case with the Church. In the pre-modern age,



**158** the Church was the guarantor of peace, in that it dispensed the supernatural gifts which enabled people to live in peace with their fellows, because we have to have peace inside in order to give peace to others outside<sup>13</sup>. On the other hand, in Smith there is no place for categories of a supernatural order, and so the only function of religion is to provide a certain guarantee of social morality. People are alone with their self-interest, and these people have to build society, which means that their self-interest will have to be managed in such a way that it does not disturb the life of the community, achieving a certain balance between individual interests without entirely eliminating or overcoming them.

What are the consequences of thinking this way after years? If we truly believe that the principal driving force of human action is the individual's self-interest, then we will go for individualism, for pursuit of individual interests of a kind that sooner or later gives rise to mistrust, because we do not contemplate others with care and attention unless we need them or find them useful for our own ends. In other words, rather than living well, people just survive, and rather than achieving peace, they reach a precarious balance of interests. The security and trust which come from the invisible spiritual sphere, from religion and morality, are replaced by the security and trust provided by the law, and buy the purchasing power which we may have. Put another way, we exchange inner security deriving from our own virtue and spirituality, for external security that depends on our material property, and on the law, when what is desirable would be to know what place each of us has in our life within society, our life as relational beings.

Although, for Smith, self-interest is not the only passion found in humans, it is the one most powerfully at work in most of them. *Justice* is the virtue which stems from the attempt to correct those

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<sup>13</sup> See Alvira, R. (1988).



self-interested inclinations which may concretely result in ill effects on others. On the other hand, humans also experience the inclination to see others receive benefits by their good graces, and the virtue which springs from this inclination is *benevolence*.

To positively do good to another is to act as a benefactor. Still, such actions cannot be imposed by means of legal coercion, nor by the threat of some punishment regulated by law: “Beneficence is always free, it cannot be extorted by force, the mere want of it exposes to no punishment; because the mere want of beneficence tends to do no real positive evil. It may disappoint of the good which might reasonably have been expected, and upon that account it may justly excite dislike and disapprobation: it cannot, however, provoke any resentment which mankind will go along with<sup>14</sup>. The one who does not perform beneficent actions fails to do a good which would have been approved by others. If a society is characterized by beneficent relationships among its members, thanks to which they mutually are recipients of acts that positively promote the good mediated by love, gratitude, friendship, and respect, such a society can be said to “flourish and to be happy”<sup>15</sup>. Nonetheless, “Society may subsist, though not in the most comfortable state, without beneficence; but the prevalence of injustice must utterly destroy it”<sup>16</sup>.

An harmonious society in a state of perfect happiness and comfort is possible, namely, when beneficence and justice reign therein. Harmony can also be achieved in a less comfortable and happy society, because “but though the necessary assistance should not be afforded from such generous and disinterested motives, though among the different members of the society there should be no mutual love and affection, the society, though less happy and agre-

14 TMS II.ii.1.3.

15 TMS II.ii.3.1.

16 TMS II.ii.3.3



**160** able, will not necessarily be dissolved. Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love and affection”<sup>17</sup>. This model is that of the commerce-based society described in the WN, but which was already outlined in the TMS.

Justice is the virtue that is *essential* for society to prevail. Smith observes that a society with justice alone does not subsist under the best conditions. Despite this, it is possible that at least some harmony exist in it, the harmony that comes from the utility of the citizens’ correct behavior, which seeks to avoid limiting others’ rights. Justice, in a negative sense, is a way of assuring the minimal<sup>18</sup> social conditions that humans need to live with their neighbors; therefore, this virtue can be required. Precisely because justice is essential for social life, any attack on what is just merits punishment; hence, justice is legislated by laws which it would be impossible to apply to beneficence. Smith divides what had been one single virtue in the Thomistic tradition into two separate virtues. Formerly, justice had two parts: on one hand, to *not harm* the other; on the other, to render him *the good due to him*. Thus, the other constituted the ground for a positive moral obligation on my part: the moral obligation to do good to him was not just a matter of custom. With Smith, and for those who follow the tradition of Grotius and Pufendorf, this is no longer the case.

In a commerce-based society, man often practices *prudence*: he takes care of his own interests. He necessarily practices *justice*, since he harms no one. And he practices *benevolence* in moderation by doing good to his neighbours.

<sup>17</sup> TMS II.ii.3.2.

<sup>18</sup> Haakonssen, K. (1989), p. 87.





## II. The commercial Society<sup>19</sup>

Human history has gone through different stages: hunters, shepherds, farmers and commerce-based society. The manner of obtaining property and the means of safeguarding it explain the passage from one stage to the next. Humans remain the same: their actions are based on their passions, passions which can be regulated by moral judgement. Still, Smith knows that virtue, which is more than mere correctness, is rare among men, and that few seek it outright, since men are easily deceived by imagination and thus choose fortune-seeking rather than virtue as the path to attain happiness. What happens in a commerce-based society?

According to Adam Smith, the division of labour brings about an increase in productivity, an argument he articulates in the first chapter of WN. The division of labour makes wealth available to all sectors of society, even to those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Thus, the poverty of many may be alleviated by the division of labour.

The existence of a vast number of poor people was a cause of great concern to Adam Smith and prompted his determination to find a way of solving the problem of poverty. How might a form of wealth accessible to all be found? To Smith's mind, the movement of wealth and its spread formed part of the very definition of wealth itself. He saw the accumulation of money as a sterile activity in itself, which adds nothing to the comforts of living; the wealth of nations does not consist in the amount of money moving in commercial circles, but in the abundance of the necessities and conveniences of life. As *Lectures on Jurisprudence* makes clear, Smith regarded accumulated riches as "opulence" –that is, an abundant and inexpensive supply of the goods necessary for life, a wide range and number of goods that may be easily exchanged.

<sup>19</sup> There is a spanish version of section 3, 4 and 5.



**162** Exchange is a tendency of human nature. Smith set himself the task of discovering how such exchange might be carried out in a way that made the necessities of life available to all. The division of labour plays a vital role in this process.

Smith argued that only an advanced society, a developed state, in which the individual cannot acquire life's necessities by dint of his own efforts alone, could provide the conditions in which the division of labour becomes possible. The existence of such a society is, in turn, dependent on two further conditions: the appropriation of land and the accumulation of capital. Both of these conditions facilitate industrial growth and, as a consequence, the amount of work available. Competence, skill and managerial wisdom put the amount of work available within reach of the highest levels of productivity.

That the division of labour brings about an increase in productivity may be attributed to three factors:

1. Task specialization refines the *skills of workers*. Repeatedly carrying out the same task over and over again makes the worker more skilful. The worker is not responsible for the job as a whole; his activity in the task assigned to him is one part of the production process. A task carried out with greater skill, on the basis of repetition, is a task done with greater speed. Smith's line of argument draws on the manufacturing process: in the context of the division of labour, the hand, usually regarded as a non-specialized part of the human body and as a sign of human intelligence, becomes 'specialized' in function. In carrying out his task, the worker's intelligence is not engaged at every hand's turn; the hand itself has become *competent* in the performance of certain functions. The hand is divested of intelligence, and become an effective and efficient tool.

2. The division of labour *saves a considerable amount of time*. Before the advent of such division, the individual worker had to switch from one task to another in the production process. With the division of labour, each worker is focused on a single task; the time pre-



viously wasted in switching from one task to another is saved. The pace of the production process picks up.

3. The division of labour prompted *the invention of machines* which made the performance of certain tasks easier and faster. Once again, time saved and an increase in production speed are key elements of the division of labour.

Exchange or commerce, the social movement of what has been produced, follows from the increase in productivity brought about by the division of labour: “Every workman has a great quantity of his own work to dispose of beyond what he himself has occasion for; and every other workman being exactly in the same situation, he is enabled to exchange a great quantity of his own goods for a great quantity, or, what comes to the same thing, for the price of a great quantity of theirs”<sup>20</sup>. Each individual has an abundant supply of a certain type of goods, which is exchanged with others so that all may obtain what they need. In line with the normal tendency of human nature, the individual becomes a *commercial man*, a process that begins not only with the product of his work, but by offering his work itself in exchange for a salary, by which he obtains the products and goods that comprise life’s necessities. By the sale of his work, the worker obtains the material means that can give him a degree of independence in life.

In short, the division of labour makes a great amount of work available, too great an amount to be carried out by an individual worker alone:

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20 WN I.i.10. Trade derives, above all, from the existence of riches and goods, and prompts the emergence of a commercial society conditioned by an efficient and rational division of labour, given that: “Les richesses accumulées par les puissants, prisonniers de l’infini de leur désir, n’ont aucune commune mesure avec leurs besoins réels. Le surplus ne peut donc qu’être redistribué à la masse des pauvres, dont le sort est ainsi rendu autrement agréable que s’il leur fallait compter sur la justice ou l’humanité des plus riches”. Dupuy, J-P. (1992), p. 104.



- 164
- A. *one person* reflects on the job as a whole;
  - B. *the vast majority* of workers carry out the tasks of which the job is comprised;
  - C. *others* design and build the machines that make the production process easier and faster;
  - D. *all* become traders and consumers of the products and goods of all, so that “the accommodation of a European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant”<sup>21</sup>.

Given that each performs a different function within the same production process, the division of tasks prompted more or less fluent communication amongst workers, a development that was both logical and necessary. *Difference*, or differentiation, leads either to separation or communication; a number of 18th century writers argued that the division of labour, as well as being a necessary development in the process of production, was a source of social cohesion<sup>22</sup>. However, the structure of companies in 1776 was vertical and pyramidal; ‘communications groups’, the office ‘intranet’ and ‘horizontal management’ were ideas for a distant future. While the division of labour encompasses all aspects of human work (bodily strength, technical skill, refined intelligence, and the services offered by traders)<sup>23</sup>, these elements are drawn together in the production process rather than the activity of an individual; this argument holds true for Smith’s time and in the present-day commitment to different types of assembly-line production.

For Smith, therefore, work is in practice a more or less mechanical process; salaries and profits are derived from over-production and

21 WN I.i.11.

22 See West, E.G. (1975), p. 546.

23 See Martínez-Echevarría, M.A. (2004), p. 108.



facilitate commerce, by which all obtain the necessities of life<sup>24</sup>; it follows that work as an activity in itself be defined as a *necessary condition of subsistence* and, as a consequence, that any shift from material scarcity to abundance should prompt the question: why work? In WN, Smith frames the issue in the following terms: labour was not difficult to find in a time of scarcity (the year 1740, for example); in times of abundance, however, labour *was* difficult to find because people were less inclined to work. Moreover, Smith argues, men act on instinct and passion, and there are two pre-dominant passions among the poor: hatred of work and the desire for a quiet life. He concludes that *only in so far as the poor experience and suffer material scarcity will they turn to work as the solution to their difficulties* –rather than theft, the other means of obtaining the necessities of life.

The natural principle of the division of labour is not wholly fulfilled by an increase in production or productivity; it extends to encompass commerce<sup>25</sup> and consumption, which prompts a further question: is the experience of lack or scarcity the sole origin of commerce and consumption? Smith explains that the basic necessities of life<sup>26</sup> are finite: the human stomach is not unlimited. Nevertheless, human intelligence is capable of inventing “infinite needs” –that is, once the basic necessities of life have been satisfied, one may trade and consume other superfluous and luxury goods, etc.

It is at this point that the vanity and extravagance of the rich may turn the natural order of things on its head. The poor use the salary

24 Economic progress is primarily a result of the division of labour. See Schumpeter, J.A. (1954), p. 187.

25 See West, E.G. (1975), p. 543.

26 Food, clothing and housing comprise the basic necessities of life, as was argued –before Smith– by B. de Mandeville and P. de Boisguilbert. See Facarello, G. (1999).



**166** they earn by their work to buy what they need to live<sup>27</sup>; however, the trade and consumption of goods that are not absolutely necessary for life respond to a different interest: the wish to get better the own condition in life, which is also likewise a tendency of human nature. The individual may pursue the fulfilment of this desire by choosing between two possible paths: the way of virtue or that of fortune.

*Imagination* may betray the man in general, and the poor in particular, who constitute the vast majority of people in society; in looking to the rich, those who stand out in society because of their fortune and position, they may draw the conclusion that to be happy is to possess as much as the wealthy do<sup>28</sup>. Thus, in so far as the limits of their salary allow, they may spend and consume those goods that pique the extravagant vanity and luxury of the rich, turning away in the process from the path of virtue.

That man seeks *to live on the basis of his capital*, rather than by his work, is a conclusion that may be drawn from the discussion above; this is a far cry from the original understanding of work, as articulated in the book of Genesis.

Only those who do not have enough capital work to obtain it; those who have enough capital make others work to increase it, given that: “It is the interest of every man to live as much at his ease as he can; and if his emoluments are to be precisely the same, whether he does or does not perform some very laborious duty, it is certainly his interest ... to neglect it altogether”<sup>29</sup>. The purpose of work, there-

<sup>27</sup> Smith argues for high, rather than merely subsistence, salaries; salaries motivate workers and make them more diligent.

<sup>28</sup> This idea had already been reflected in the thinking of P. de Boisguilbert: delusions of grandeur deceived most those who possessed least real wealth. This line of argument may be significant for an analysis of the influence of Jansenist thought on Adam Smith’s anthropological, moral and economic philosophy. See Facarello, G. (1999), p. 113.

<sup>29</sup> WN V.i.



fore, is to generate capital, not to build up or serve or improve society by conscious effort. These latter goals are only conceivable in the context of an understanding of work that goes beyond a concern with technical competence and a commitment to profit-making; work, rather, that is open to the absolute and carried out in a virtuous way.

In suffering lack or scarcity, the poor are driven by need or by envy of the capital possessed by the rich. Whatever the immediate motive, the work carried out by the poor is a form of manual labour, which may be more or less mechanized or facilitated by technology. The work of the rich is management work, which is conditioned by the two passions which most drive the wealthy: ambition and avarice. Although they may not be aware of the fact, the work of the poor responds directly to the needs of society. In contrast, the work of the wealthy runs in opposition to social need: each seeks to satisfy his own personal interest. Nevertheless, by investing capital, the work of the rich may be of benefit to the poor, and thus of society as a whole.

### III. Disadvantages of the division of labour

The division of labour is time-saving and produces both necessary and superfluous goods. The question articulated by Ortega y Gasset may be pertinent in this regard: on what should the time saved through technical progress and task specialization be spent? The wisest answer would appear to be that such time be spent on leisure activities that enrich human experience and existence. However, this is not the answer that the question receives in the commercial society described by Adam Smith.

In his renowned work, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Daniel Bell has noted that “mass man” –the man of the masses in a



**168** capitalist society— seeks entertainment, not culture; entertainment is supplied as one more product for consumption<sup>30</sup>. Rather than devote his free time to the search for fundamental and essential truths, “mass man” seeks out the endless distraction of *television* and the *realities shows* that —sometimes— add nothing real to his life; indeed, they merely dull his spirit and whet his appetite for pleasure in ways that obviate his rational nature. Hence the reason why study —a rounded humanist and philosophical education, the reading of books and essays, specialist courses at university, the education programmes offered to young people, adults and the elderly, the choice of good cinema and television programming, etc.— should have such importance in the free time that is available. Time devoted to the sacred should also be recovered. The present-day *knowledge society* has begun to take note of and respond to these needs.

Thus far, the focus has been on the advantages of the division of labour; the most striking disadvantage will now be addressed: *the dehumanization of the worker*.

Smith’s view of man and society is not a very optimistic one. A number of recent studies have reflected on this fact<sup>31</sup>. By nature, man is driven by passions between them also self-interest and ambition, and the moral propriety in only like a *minimum* moral for social harmony; this is especially true of the wealthy. Given that the majority of people lack the necessary knowledge or education, this ambition is not harmful in social terms: knowledge fires ambition; a lack of knowledge, which is the case in general, keeps ambition in check.

30 See Bell, D. (1996), p. 56.

31 See Coase, R.H. (1994), p. 82 and p. 115; Infantino, L. (1998), p. 29; and Gallagher, S.E. (1998), pp. 79, 80, 82 and 90. See also Alvey, J.E. (2003). Alvey’s study of the question leads him to conclude that Smith is more optimistic than pessimistic; nevertheless, the clarity with which he details the more pessimistic elements in the Scottish thinker’s work is of significant interest and value.





ADAM SMITH: ANTHROPOLOGY AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

According to Smith, the interests of those who live within the limits imposed by the reach of their salary are congruent with the interests of society; normally, however, such people lack the education and knowledge necessary to discern these parallel interests. They contribute to the wealth of the nation by their work, but they remain unaware of the significance of their contribution. In contrast, the social class that lives off the profits generated by work is detached from general social needs. They seek to expand markets and sharpen competition in order to maximize the profits they may make. In spite of these cross purposes, society as a whole may still benefit and progress as a result of this situation: through the untrammelled ambition of a few (the rich), the vast majority may enjoy the social movement of wealth in the form of merchandise, as such products become available even to those who belong to the lowest classes on the social scale.

In *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Smith holds that *opulence* and *freedom* are the two greatest social goods; at the same time, however, he argues that neither is compatible with the greater happiness of the majority of people in society. In developed societies, the following axiom is observed: the greater the freedom of the free, the greater the slavery of the enslaved. In other words, if the division of labour makes wealth –an abundance of life’s necessities and relatively inexpensive merchandise– available to the greatest possible number of people in a society, their new-found wealth will be paid for at a cost to their freedom. One can only be free outside the field of work, never within it; or, at least, such freedom –a form of independence– could be read as little more than a certain degree of material well-being. The reason why this should be the case is that, in a system of divided labour, the worker is nothing more than one more interlocking element in the production process; neither his spirit nor his intelligence are engaged by the process of production. Without the active role of his higher powers, it is difficult to see how the individual might be described as truly free. The following question arises



**170** in this context: what purpose is there in accumulating wealth or material well-being if the genuinely human freedom required to appropriate to oneself, dispose of, use and enjoy it is lacking?<sup>32</sup>.

As Professor Martínez-Echevarría has pointed out, in a system structured by the division of labour, the individual is the *executor*, but not the *designer*, of his work. Design or planning belongs to the moral and political fields because it defers to end purposes and encompasses the potential to go beyond the power of the individual; the ‘execution’ of tasks, on the other hand, “appears to be related to strength and to what has been established in advance; it is determined by technical ability, and cannot extend beyond the individual who carries it out”<sup>33</sup>. The radical separation of execution from design means that the worker can do nothing to improve the plan he follows in his work: the design is a given<sup>34</sup>. Given that the design cannot be refined and the worker has no reason to engage his intelligence in the task entrusted to him, no unfinished task may be improved; rather, there is only a final product in relation to which the role of the worker is merely one more part in the machinery of production.

Smith himself was aware of the consequences for the worker of task specialization brought about by the division of labour: “The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a

32 Lázaro, R. (2003), chapter 7, pp. 55-68.

33 See Martínez-Echevarría, M.A. (1999).

34 See Martínez-Echevarría, M.A. (2004), p. 93.



human creature to become”<sup>35</sup>. In the type of system that Smith describes, the skills required for a particular task are acquired at the expense of intellectual, social and martial virtues, as specialization also erodes the courage of the human spirit and its heroic potential. Smith suggests that the State take steps to attenuate this risk. In the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* he notes that human potential is impoverished by the spirit of commerce; it makes man incapable of going beyond himself, narrowing his perspective and the span of his attention; thus, he concludes, *the remedy of these deficiencies is an issue worthy of serious reflection*. To Smith’s mind, the provision of this remedy is the responsibility of the State; given that no-one is prepared to invest in something that will not return a profit in material terms, the State is responsible for the education of its citizens<sup>36</sup>.

The State should provide basic education. Nevertheless, people have relatively little free time to dedicate to education: parents work to support their children, and as soon as they are mature, the children, in turn, look for work that makes little or no demand on their intelligence; moreover, “at the same time, their labour is both so constant and so severe, that it leaves them little leisure and less inclination to apply to, or even to think of, anything else”<sup>37</sup>.

Another approach to remedying the inadequate education of the poor would be to instil in them a set of religious principles, which would also ground the moral principles that make peaceful social co-existence possible. Smith’s view is that religion prepares people for the next life, whereas his interest lies in this world; his admiration for ancient moral philosophy derives from its concern with the education of good citizens. Both TMS and WN address this issue: how to ensure that the greatest possible number of people may survive

35 WN V. 1.

36 Lázaro, R. (2003).

37 WN V. 1.



**172** and live well in society, in spite of the fact that the vast majority are lacking in virtue, wisdom and wealth, and yet must still learn to be good citizens.

In their free time, most people do not engage in activities that enrich the spirit; rather, they distract themselves through different forms of entertainment. Only the few, says Smith, cultivate reason.

The problem that Smith touches on is—in the terms used by Simone Weil— that *man has become alienated from his work*. The task(s) he performs do not have a conscious influence on his personal and existential development. Human work has no contemplative dimension; it has been divested of the human spirit. Moreover, the service and social contribution that the individual provides through his work are reduced to the generation of profits capable of satisfying his own self-interest.

Smith pays scant attention to the subjective dimension of work—that is, the human dignity of the worker and the idea of work as a form of service. His argument centres on the most material aspects of work, but the “spiritual poverty” of work seen from the perspective of the individual worker is a question left unanswered. In any case, the basic principles that Smith holds to limit any comprehensive or innovative theory of work. If man’s primary motive for action is to satisfy his own *self-interest*, conditioned to a greater or lesser degree by ambition, little room remains for concern for others, which may be regarded as the primary purpose of education. It is far more difficult to educate than it is to distract and entertain. The benevolence is scarce.

If the poor have no higher aspiration than to imitate the rich in terms of material possessions, then no complete solution to the problem of wealth or poverty may be found. Authentic self-development and improvement must encompass both dimensions: the spiritual and the material. Spiritual improvement is synonymous with virtue and a level of education that goes beyond basic knowledge and



skills. On the basis of the principles deferred to by Adam Smith, however, virtue and education<sup>38</sup> are incompatible with one another in the lives of most men.

#### IV. Reconciling work and virtue

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Smith had a keen awareness of the difficulties outlined above; hence, perhaps, his intellectual affection for agricultural societies, rather than large commercial towns. A commitment to saving and relatively low earnings –in a word, frugality– are the characteristic values of agriculture. Agriculture does not allow for the division of labour into specific tasks to the same degree as the manufacturing industry does. Moreover, agricultural capital is a more immediate personal possession; he who tills the land is independent of the rest of the world, he is his own lord and master. In fact, Smith argues that, if human institutions had not tampered with the natural order of things, the most stable mode of development and progressive growth in wealth, at no real cost to one's freedom, would be "the cultivation and improvement of [its] lands"<sup>39</sup>. Social order is a function of the positions adopted by the people who constitute it: the ambition of the rich, their preference for the superfluous products and luxuries that may be bought through external commerce over the low earnings and savings that characterize life in the countryside, subvert that order<sup>40</sup>. A significant question arises in this context:

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38 In the article referred to above, West addresses the issue in exactly those terms: "Education is the necessary antidote to the culturally unpromising environment of the division of labour". West, E.G. (1975), p. 546.

39 West, E.G. (1975), p. 485.

40 Moreover, the nation as a whole benefits from the agricultural sector, whereas commercial man is a citizen of no country: if his capital does not make a profit in one place, he may move it to another. Hence Smith's argument: "The capital, however, that is acquired to any country by commerce and manufactures is all a very precarious and uncertain possession till some part of it has been secured and realized in the cultivation and improvement of its lands". WN III. 4.



**174** might the human tendency to covet material abundance be channelled into a passion for spiritual perfection?

In *Meditación de la Técnica*, referred to above, Ortega y Gasset holds that the individual seeks to satisfy life's necessities in order to be free of them, free to focus his efforts on what is truly important in life. There are certain *primary and basic needs* that must be met. Technical skills and scientific knowledge are paramount in this context; they are not, however, fundamental in an absolute sense, just as the needs they serve are not absolutely fundamental in themselves but the conditions that make the satisfaction of higher needs and interests possible. At the same time, given that man is a unity of body and spirit, such skills and knowledge also have a spiritual dimension.

Action is the essence of every living being; if he were to do nothing, man could not be said to be fully human. Work is the activity that gives shape to his life. All types of work nowadays require the use of some technical skills and a certain degree of practical knowledge, but what might this situation imply? "The demands of a specific task are reduced to a certain extent by the use of [a technical skill or practice]... the desire to save effort at work prompts further technical enquiry... The issue is not one of remote interest; it pertains to the essence of the technical method itself, which cannot be wholly understood if analysis stops short at the idea of saving effort and fails to ask to what the effort thus saved might then be turned"<sup>41</sup>. While physical strength is part of the natural order of things, the powers of intellect and will are the determining features of human being; thus, the time and effort saved by means of the use of technical skills must be understood as saved for the purposes of devoting more time and effort to specifically human activity: *to shape the project of our lives, which is not alien to the project of our working lives*. The first point is

<sup>41</sup> See Ortega y Gasset, J. (1957), p. 32.



Ortega's; the second, Grimaldi's: together they constitute *the most fundamental need* of human life.

The Spanish philosopher wrote that: "For man, to exist means more than to exist as the man he is; rather, to exist refers only to the possibility of existence and the struggle to shape it... Unlike all other living beings, therefore, the existence of man is the effort to shape his existence... Hence the view of human life as endless work, a series of tasks that may not be shirked"<sup>42</sup>. Each individual must shape "the narrative of his own life"<sup>43</sup>. Self-determination is a substantial feature of personal existence. Grimaldi rounds out this perspective by adding that the narrative of personal life encompasses work since all work is *formative*<sup>44</sup>; the best of human life and the history of personal existence is reflected in work; the finest narrative of existence is forged in the workplace.

Certain types of work –the repetitive and mechanical– undermine the meaning and value of personal life. Time becomes cyclical, circling endlessly in the eternal present of repetition; nothing seems new, and the startling contingency of the future, which prompts correction and new plans based on past action, is wholly absent. Some kinds of mechanical work dull the human spirit, and may even crush it. They may also call into question the self-determination that lies at the heart of personal existence: the life of a crushed spirit, a spirit that is not *actively present*, is either pure repetition and boredom<sup>45</sup> –time passes and nothing ever happens; or pure dissipation, in which the passions respond to every different external stimulus and man distracts himself through a variety of activities that offer him no sense of unity. In both cases, man is stripped of his spirit,

<sup>42</sup> Ortega y Gasset, J. (1957), 43.

<sup>43</sup> Ortega y Gasset, J. (1957), p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> See Grimaldi, N. (1998), p. 69.

<sup>45</sup> See Alvira, R. (1999).



**176** loses control of his actions, and wastes his time and his life. Repetitive and mechanical work denatures human life: such work is not human. As Simone Weil pointed out<sup>46</sup>, the activity of work cannot be deprived of the human spirit.

Grimaldi notes that to insist on the importance of the human spirit in work implies an idea of “spiritual work”. When work is understood as a form of *mediation* by which what was *possible* is brought to existence in reality, a purely internal principle is rendered external<sup>47</sup>; this process of externalization leads the individual to communicate with others, to go beyond his own singularity and enter into a communion with all humankind, specifically through his contact with the direct beneficiaries of his work. To cook a roast chicken, for example, is an external act, to bring something new into existence and to offer it to others. The ‘roast chicken’ –as a task– reflects who the worker is: the time spent in preparation, culinary knowledge and skills, a grandmother’s secret ingredient, etc. The same might be said for any other task or form of work: teaching a class, attending to the needs of a customer, governing a country, etc.

Grimaldi writes: “My work presupposes the general existence of a cultural community, if not of humankind as whole... [In carrying out a task] my interior disposition is to respond to the hopes, needs and desires [of others], which I must [first] be able to understand (and, above all, to share) if I am to satisfy them. (...) The life of humanity may be said to go on through the pain, patience, perseverance and innovative skill of each person in so far as each individual takes on the whole history of humanity (its discoveries, technical practices, its culture) in his work”<sup>48</sup>. In other words, the relationship between work and humanity mirrors that between mother and child:

<sup>46</sup> See Weil, S. (1995).

<sup>47</sup> See Grimaldi, N. (1998), p. 123.

<sup>48</sup> See Grimaldi, N. (1998), p. 128.





as the child owes his education and culture to his mother, so all human beings to the activity of work. Work is marked by a sense of *creativity* and *gift* to the degree that it is done as a service in response to the needs of others; work is a creative act of the worker when his capacity to carry out *work well done* is put at the service of others. Work reflects the nature of the worker, just as an art-work reflects and reveals the artist. Work can perfect our nature because it provides us with an opportunity to practise virtue.

Work also opens the worker to all those who may benefit from his work; to attend to them, to serve their needs, is the primary and essential way of taking care of others. The greatest form of work is *disinterested work*; thus, the existential task of human being must encompass the activity of work: the individual shapes the narrative of his existence by going beyond himself, orienting his life in line with noble and absolute ends. The absolute is *the only truly fundamental need*; God and man are the two absolutes. *The absolute is contemplated from within*; the external demands made on the individual, which draw him out of himself, can only be received, made his own and attended to from the spirit, mediating between the interior and the external, and not merely by taking care of what is immediately present and pressing.

Time spent at work is personal time because it is part of the existential task that encompasses *the fundamental need* of human life: the absolute nature of the worker and of the beneficiaries of his labour. Once the union of action and contemplation in the activity of work is understood, work may be carried out in an idle way, as the subjective experience of the task includes an awareness of *the presence of the absolute*; this point holds true, too, for manual labour.

To shape one's own life is an ethical project, a good purpose that we may freely choose to pursue. If work is part of this project, as has been argued above, then work too must be governed by ethical values. The question remains as to how the ethics of work might be framed.



**178** The use of technical skills produces more or less immediate quantifiable results; but no technical method can be neutral or indifferent, least of all in the field of professional activity where the narrative of human existence is primarily shaped. The technical must be grounded in an ethical context that gives work real substance and humanizes it. The ethical, unlike the technical, is a long-term project; it defers to *what is given* and to *what is not yet given*—that is, what man acts on and designs and invents from in order to carry out what is good. Technical practices save only time and effort; they do not necessarily humanize work. Ethics, in contrast, encompasses the whole of human life: the organization of what should be saved and spent, the investment of time, and putting into practice what is good—that is, the practise of virtue.

Work is made *ethically real* by virtue of the difficulties that are encountered in the process; difficulties disrupt the pattern of routine knowledge and response and prompt the spirit to come up with new solutions. Ethics is the long-term result of this experience; it draws on the confidence that the individual places in his ability to improve in spiritual terms and to correct past action. Ethics is not synonymous with success, but with correction and improvement<sup>49</sup>. When work forms part of the shaping of personal existence and defers to an awareness of the presence of the absolute, situations are foreseen, solutions planned, and responsibility taken. Foresight, planning and responsibility are basic principles of a long-term project, and thus elements of ethics.

If the ethical project is characterized by correction based on the use of right reason, then the existence of a margin of error or failure must be acknowledged. No work can be carried out well without some deference to the ethical, less still by ignoring ethics altogether. Man, on the other hand, may fail to give the ethical the attention it

<sup>49</sup> See Llano, A. (2002).



is due. The human capacity for failure and to mend one's way is continuously tested through work, but it requires the active presence and awareness of the spirit. Work is not framed solely in terms of self-interest and material reward; it is structured from the perspective of the spirit, which draws together personal interests and the interests of others, and the spiritual reward of human perfection.

To speak of ethics is to speak of virtue, and in this way now for virtue consists of doing what is good and is a way of saving time. The virtuous man is lord and master of his activity because virtue tunes human tendencies towards their proper ends and enables the individual to take possession of them. Virtue, therefore, is an habit. The time saved by habitual behaviour discloses that every action contains a past, present and future: past, because habits develop on the basis of repeated actions that have been done before and become part of the individual's way of being; present, because habits predispose us towards new actions in the here and now; and future, because the potential to continue doing what is good is always open and real.

The past is always present as a *necessary given*: in general, the individual acts on the basis of what has been learnt from past experience. The ontological significance of the past is that it is *what is given*; thus, if *human nature* is a given, to bind oneself to it constitutes the best possible way of responding in an ethically real sense to the situations that may arise in life –in the present and the future. To bind oneself to human nature in this way is to commit to a dynamic, not a static, project: nature is a dynamic principle of action, which can be perfected through action. But it is to go away from Smith.

The rejection of any idea of a fixed, ontologically-real past –the past as a given– is characteristic of a great deal of modern thought; human activity, it is argued, takes place in the present moment, without any reference to what has gone before. This position involves abandoning the only stable ground on which the narrative of existence might be shaped, even in spite of the risk of failure. In



**180** other words, only if there is *some truly stable given past* can man be ethical, formulating and re-formulating new plans for the future on the basis of present action, in spite of and, indeed, often because of failure.

Contemporary society is often forgetful of the past; free time is seen as an occasion for entertainment and distraction, rather than contemplation. Real self-knowledge is almost impossible without some awareness of the past; without this awareness, the attitude of the individual tends to be one of absolute self-reliance. In contrast, the response to the past as what is given, what is received, comprises gratitude, a sense of indebtedness and responsibility. Two extreme reactions may be prompted by the idea that there is no past, that only the present is: a radical self-sufficiency that derives from the joy of early success, or deep sorrow at the experience of failure. If only the present truly *is*, the weight of action falls wholly on the individual's shoulders; sooner or later, so absolute a sense of self-sufficiency will have to defer to *the remedies of self-esteem* because an eternal present, the absence of the past, radically isolates the self from all others.

The individual is drawn out of himself only through his regard for the absolute reality of the other<sup>50</sup>, a shift in attitude which deprives *self-interest* of its pre-eminent status as the driving force of human activity, allows the worker to humanize himself through his work, and contributes to the material and spiritual wealth of nations. Granted, I have gone beyond Smithian methodology and psychology, but this reworking of his ideas was a viable possibility, one opened up by Smith's own principles. This possibility is what I have sought to investigate in the final section of this paper.

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<sup>50</sup> MacIntyre, too, appears to make a similar point in his discussion of both independent and dependent forms of virtue. See MacIntyre, A. (1999).



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181

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ADAM SMITH: ANTHROPOLOGY AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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183

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