



University  
of Glasgow

Smith, C. (2013) Adam Smith's 'collateral' inquiry: fashion and morality in the theory of moral sentiments and the wealth of nations. *History of Political Economy* . ISSN 0018-2702

Copyright © 2013 Duke University Press

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

The content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/74589>

Deposited on: 26 March 2013

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

## **Adam Smith's 'Collateral' Inquiry: Fashion and Morality in The Theory of Moral Sentiments and the Wealth of Nations**

### **Abstract**

In his *Life of Adam Smith* Dugald Stewart notes that Smith was, 'always disposed to ascribe to custom and fashion their full share in regulating the opinions of mankind with respect to beauty' (Stewart 1980, 305). Indeed Stewart refers to this as a 'collateral' inquiry within *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Stewart 1980, 291). This paper examines what Smith has to say about fashion and attempts to identify in what sense it is 'collateral' to the main inquiry of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As we proceed it will become clear that Smith does indeed advance a well-developed analysis of fashion as a social and economic phenomenon, and that this analysis fits neatly within the boundaries set by his examination of morality in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the political economy of the *Wealth of Nations* and *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. Moreover, the paper will argue that examination of this aspect of Smith's thought reveals a key step in his attempt to distance his moral theory from crude forms of conventionalism.

## **Adam Smith's 'Collateral' Inquiry: Fashion and Morality in The Theory of Moral Sentiments and the Wealth of Nations**

### **Introduction**

Anecdotal evidence passed down to us on Adam Smith's character suggests that he might well have conformed to the stereotype of the absent-minded professor. A man untroubled and even careless about his appearance he is often depicted as delighting in moving in fashionable circles but remaining more than a little removed from the vanity concerning appearance that

affected many in this social milieu (Phillipson 2010, 260). We also have the evidence of Smith, on his appointment as controller of customs, proceeding to burn many of the fashionable items that he did possess when he discovered that he had not paid the correct taxation on them. Smith then was no slave to fashion in his person, but as an intellectual he displays a deep interest in the phenomenon and its economic and social effects. In his *Life of Adam Smith* Dugald Stewart notes that Smith was, ‘always disposed to ascribe to custom and fashion their full share in regulating the opinions of mankind with respect to beauty’ (Stewart 1980, 305). Indeed Stewart refers to this as a ‘collateral’ inquiry within *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Stewart 1980, 291). This paper will examine what Smith has to say about fashion and relate his analysis of the phenomenon to the wider argument in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in an attempt to identify the sense in which it is a ‘collateral’ inquiry.

Previous discussion of Smith’s views on fashion has focussed on the economic function of the ‘deception’ of our admiration for the wealthy or upon the possible generation of moral corruption which arises from pursuit of fashion in preference to virtue.<sup>1</sup> In both of these approaches we tend to see fashion as inimical to morality, but Stewart’s suggestion that the inquiry into fashion is ‘collateral’ to that into morals points us towards a different potential relationship between the two phenomena. I will argue that a clear identification of the relationship between the analysis of fashion and that of morality in Smith’s work gives us new insight into Smith’s attempts to distance his descriptive analysis of moral experience from a form of conventionalism.

Our attempt to identify the sense in which the inquiry into fashion is collateral to the main inquiry of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* faces its first obstacle in the fact that the term

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a wide literature on Smith’s deception argument [See, inter alia Winch (1978, 168) Reisman (1976, 106-8) and Young (1997, 47-9)] but no one, so far as I am aware, has sought to conduct an analysis of the particular role of fashion in this connection.

collateral had (and has) several related meanings. Aside from the contemporary legal usage as a security for a loan and the scientific usage in anatomy, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists four potential eighteenth century meanings for the word as an adjective. It can be taken to mean: running side by side or parallel; accompanying or attendant; lying aside from the main subject or descended from the same stock, but in a different line. If we take the first three definitions we might view Stewart's comment as referring to a parallel inquiry that runs alongside the main theme of TMS without intersecting with it. Stewart appears to suggest the former, referring to the collateral inquiries as 'of equal importance' but resting on separate hypotheses 'formed concerning the foundation of morals' (Stewart 1980, 291). This suggests that custom and fashion are considered as alternative accounts of morality and then rejected. However if we take the final understanding, that the inquiry is descended from the same stock but in a different line, then the two inquiries intersect at some point. They may differ in subject matter but not in the nature of the inquiry, or they may trace the subjects under investigation to a shared ancestor principle. This reading is supported by the fact that Part V of TMS is specifically titled 'Of the Influence of Custom and Fashion upon the Moral Sentiments of Approbation and Disapprobation'. So the inquiry into fashion and the main inquiry do intersect and this might lead us to wonder in what the relationship between these two inquiries consists.

### **Smith's Use of Fashion**

Smith frequently uses the term fashion as a descriptor for the social phenomena characteristic of changing notions of taste. In addition to his use of the term in connection with clothing, gardens, art, literature and housing we see it extended and used in connection with a number of changing social institutions including educational practices [where there are 'fashionable sciences.' (Smith 1976, 777)] and intellectual systems. ['like almost all those of the philosophy in fashion during his time' (Smith 1980, 91); 'the system that is most in fashion'

(Smith 1980, 140); ‘a history of the astronomical systems that were successively in fashion down to the time of Des Cartes’ (Smith 1987, 168)]. Smith also uses the term fashion in relation to manners and moral beliefs. For example in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*: ‘Cato, who was a man of the most severe virtue and the strictest observer of the morall rules then in fashion’ (Smith 1978, 181). Though as we will see the relationship between fashion and morality is an intricate one in Smith’s thought.<sup>2</sup>

Smith traces the origins of fashion to the same root as morality: the natural sociability upon which he grounds his explanation of much of human experience thus acts as the common stock from which both inquiries are derived. The desire for approbation and the desire to please others are extensions of our natural sociability and motivate a great deal of our social activity.<sup>3</sup> For Smith this desire to please includes a desire to appear pleasing to others and it is this that leads us to become concerned with the superficialities of appearance. This facet of human behaviour leads individuals to pursue that which they regard as giving them an attractive appearance. Smith famously notes that we use society as a ‘mirror’ (1976b, 110), through which to judge ourselves. Our sensitivity to the reactions of others serves as a guide through which we assess ourselves. ‘Bring him into society’, Smith says, ‘and all his own passions will immediately become the causes of new passions’ (1976b, 111). Smith famously moves us from consideration of ourselves in actual mirrors to his psychological model of imaginative spectators who internalise the process of judgment that we recognise as conscience. What distinguishes Smith’s analysis from that of contemporaries such as Hume is that the internalisation process is not one of pure imitation but, through the distinction

---

<sup>2</sup> One obvious reason for Smith’s interest in and use of the term fashion was its close relationship to notions of taste. Smith was clearly influenced by the sentimentalism and aestheticism of Hutcheson and Shaftesbury and he wrote in a period where the interest in polite culture was a significant feature of much intellectual discourse. Smith is drawing on a tradition that saw moral virtue as ‘beautiful’ and thus amenable to discussion in the language of taste (like fashion) but our purpose here is to examine the nature of the relationship between his theory of fashion and his wider theory of morality rather than to contextualise both of these in wider eighteenth century discussions.

<sup>3</sup> See Smith (1976b, 84, 116) and the discussion in Paganelli (2009).

between praise and praiseworthiness, becomes in some sense an exercise of reflective judgment. Through the imaginative model of the impartial spectator Smith seeks to distance his moral psychology from crude conventionalism. However the problem remains that the content of the moral attitudes of the supposed impartial spectator is itself drawn from the imagination of an individual socialised into the practices of his community.

Smith's account of fashion is developed alongside his moral psychology and feeds into his consideration of the relationship between the rich and poor and the generation of social rank. One notable permutation of this argument is that Smith believes we are more attracted to wealth than poverty. His thoughts on this matter are more complex than the notion that we admire the rich because we have something to gain from them. As Smith puts it 'our obsequiousness to our superiors more frequently arises from our admiration for the advantages of their situation, than from any private expectations of benefit from their goodwill.' (1976b, 52).<sup>4</sup> That is to say that we flatter the rich not in the expectation of our own advantage, but in some sense because we genuinely admire their situation. Smith's point here is subtle. It is not the rich that we admire but rather their situation – and only them by extension. The analysis of fashion is an analysis of appearances – it depends on what is seen and what the imagination builds upon this.

Furthermore the observation and admiration of the wealthy is reflected back in our assessment of our own status and condition. Smith observes that we are 'mortified' (1976b, 51) if no one pays us attention and ashamed if our poverty is discovered. More seriously we pay little

---

<sup>4</sup>In this Smith is following the analysis in Hume's *Treatise* (Hume 1978, 357-8). Hume's analysis of the admiration of the wealthy and the pursuit of riches is couched in terms of sympathy and vanity (1978, 365) and draws on his discussion in the chapter 'Of the love of fame'. Here Hume sets out to account for the obvious 'fact' that we admire the rich and shun the poor and along the way he introduces the notion of interpersonal comparison and its relationship to vanity.

attention to the poor man and shun his company as his situation makes us uneasy.<sup>5</sup> Smith's observation that we parade our riches and hide our poverty is one of the clearest descriptive passages in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Drawing on Rousseau's psychological study in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Smith points out that the consequences of this human propensity are wide-ranging in terms of the social relationships that develop.<sup>6</sup> The distinction of ranks emerges when interpersonal comparison comes to be practiced and weighted with social meaning. As Smith argues:

'With the greater part of rich people, the chief enjoyment of riches consists in the parade of riches, which in their eyes is never so complete as when they appear to possess those decisive marks of opulence which nobody can possess but themselves. In their eyes the merit of an object which is in any degree either useful or beautiful, is greatly enhanced by its scarcity, or by the great labour which it requires to collect any considerable quantity of it, a labour which nobody can afford to pay but themselves.'

(1976, 190).

Wealth produces the outward symbols of success that can allow us to engage in social one-upmanship.<sup>7</sup> These goods have their fashion value from their scarcity, and when they lose this scarcity as they are copied by others, they lose their value as status symbols. In Smith's theory we strive for wealth and follow the fashion not in order to conform, but rather in order to distinguish ourselves from the mass and identify ourselves with the fashionable. We pursue

---

<sup>5</sup> There is a practical element to Smith's thought on this matter that relates to his very Scottish concern with prudence. The man of fashion can afford a dissipated lifestyle, but this is not open to those of lower ranks, for whom one period of extravagance can be ruinous (Smith 1976, 794). See also: 'The profligacy of a man of fashion is looked upon with much less contempt and aversion, than that of a man of meaner condition.' (1976b, 63). We let the rich away with more than we let the poor away with. This suggests that Smith is providing an account of distinct moral codes holding in different classes.

<sup>6</sup> Smith explicitly discusses Rousseau's views in connection to those of Mandeville in the *Letter to the Edinburgh Review* (Smith 1980, 250-54). There is an increasing body of material on the relationship between Smith and Rousseau. See Rasmussen (2008) and Hanley (2008).

<sup>7</sup> See also the *Essay on the Imitative Arts* where 'cheapness' detracts from 'lustre' of even 'very agreeable objects' (Smith 1980, 183).

wealth because of its perceived social meaning and not because of any real material convenience that arises from the fashionable goods.

### **Ornament and Utility**

One theoretical consequence of this was that Smith was particularly keen to introduce a meaningful distinction between the useful and the ornamental. In the *Wealth of Nations* he distinguishes between goods that are sought for ‘ornament’ and those that are sought for ‘use’ (1976, 192-3). Goods sought for use are subject to different patterns of consumption from goods sought for ornament but both are expressions of universal propensities in human nature.<sup>8</sup> Smith seems to view at least part of this distinction as being the result of a sort of universal utility enjoyed by some goods. ‘Manufactures for which the demand arises altogether from fashion and fancy, are continually changing, and seldom last long enough to be considered as old established manufactures. Those, on the contrary, for which the demand arises chiefly from use or necessity, are less liable to change, and the same form or fabric may continue in demand for whole centuries together.’ (Smith 1976, 131). Ornamental items are more fully under the sway of fashion than more utilitarian goods and this accounts for the different production and consumption patterns.<sup>9</sup> Reinforcing this is the wider observation that Smith makes that the desire for the necessities of life (like the rich man’s stomach) is finite, while the desire for ornamental goods or ‘conveniencies’ is potentially infinite.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> C.J. Berry notes a similar distinction in Ferguson’s writings, but stresses that the propensities to ornament and use are coeval with humanity. (2009, 146).

<sup>9</sup> Smith also discusses the relationship between ornamental and utilitarian goods in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* where he connects it more explicitly to his theory of Taste. ‘Man is the only animal who is [possessed of such a nicety that the very colour of an object hurts him.’ (1978, 488). This natural aesthetic tendency inspires human attempts at ‘improvement’ beyond mere necessity.

<sup>10</sup> A point noted by Peter Minowitz (1993, 67).



Smith's stress on the social meaning of fashion strongly suggests that he was aware that in the pursuit of fashion an item's utility was always a secondary concern.<sup>11</sup> Instead: 'To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it [parading wealth]. It is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us.' (1976b, 50).<sup>12</sup> The 'trinkets of frivolous utility' (1976b, 180) that he describes have their value not in their utility, but rather in their being more 'observable' (1976b, 181).

'Though it is in order to supply the necessities and conveniencies of the body, that the advantages of external fortune are originally recommended to us, yet we cannot live long in the world without perceiving that the respect of our equals, our credit and rank in the society we live in, depend very much upon the degree in which we possess, or are supposed to possess, those advantages. The desire of becoming the proper objects of this respect, of deserving and obtaining this credit and rank among our equals, is, perhaps, the strongest of all our desires, and our anxiety to obtain the advantages of fortune is accordingly much more excited and irritated by this desire, than by that of supplying all the necessities and conveniencies of the body, which are always very easily supplied.' (1976b, 212-13).

Those who are believed to be in possession of wealth or greatness become the object of public fascination: 'The man of rank and distinction...is observed by all the world. Every body is eager to look at him, and to conceive, at least by sympathy, that joy and exultation with which

---

<sup>11</sup> There is a clear connection to Smith's wider consideration of value here, most notably perhaps to the water / diamond paradox.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly Mary Wollstonecraft (1995, 133) takes up this part of Smith's analysis and makes it part of her own analysis in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, where she notes that it is particularly true of the social experience of women.

his circumstances naturally inspire him. His actions are the objects of the public care. Scarce a word, scarce a gesture, can fall from him that is altogether neglected.’ (1976b, 51).<sup>13</sup> Smith notes that the fame enjoyed by the fashionable man can lead to a loss of freedom despite the supposed advantages. The young nobleman learns that his behaviour is constantly observed and so he studies to control his actions in order to live up to the image associated with his rank.<sup>14</sup> Under constant observation, such a man is forced to assume a constant guard over his actions and appearance, in reality becoming a ‘victim’ of fashion.

We imagine the ‘condition’ of the rich and great in ‘delusive colours’ (1976b, 51) and it is this that is the source of the origin of ranks in society. It is striking that Smith both recognises the propensity to admire the rich and constantly undercuts the idea that wealth has any real connection to happiness or human fulfilment. In reality our pursuit of wealth is a consequence of our desire to appear wealthy to others – it concerns ornament rather than utility. As Smith argues: ‘The rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world, and that mankind are disposed to go along with him in all the agreeable emotions with which the advantages of his situation so readily inspire him.’ (1976b, 50-51). This keen appreciation of the place of the superficial in social life helps to reveal a division between Smith the moralist, who disapproves of it, and Smith the nascent social scientist, who recognises its universality, that we will return to below. For the moment let us hold the thought that however connected the collateral inquiries are for Smith they are evidently not so connected as to prevent him from expressing moral judgment of superficial fashion.

---

<sup>13</sup> Smith argues that there can even be a fashion for the dissolute manners displayed by the rich because ‘To superficial minds, the vices of the great seem to be at all times agreeable.’ (1976b, 201).

<sup>14</sup> See also Smith (1976b, 53).

## **Incentives and Moral Corruption**

Smith's most famous discussion of the delusive nature of fashion is the secular parable of the poor man's son (1976b, 181) who strives all his life to gain the advantages enjoyed by the great and wealthy. In the end, once he has attained them, he finds that wealth and greatness have little to do with the real pleasures of human life. Smith ends by comparing a beggar sunning himself to the prince in terms of security of what really matters for generating human happiness. The consumer trappings of wealth are but 'enormous and operose machines contrived to produce a few trifling conveniences to the body' (1976b, 182). What makes the difference again is that the trinkets are more 'observable' (1976b, 182). Smith is arguing that it is not the pleasure enjoyed by the wealthy that provokes admiration so much as it is an attraction to the goods themselves that exist to facilitate this ease. As he puts it:

'If we examine, however, why the spectator distinguishes with such admiration the condition of the rich and the great, we shall find that it is not so much upon account of the superior ease or pleasure which they are supposed to enjoy, as of the numberless, artificial and elegant contrivances for promoting this ease or pleasure.' (1976b, 182).

Smith refers to this gap between the observable goods and the reality of the convenience generated by them as the 'deception' that rouses industry (1976b, 183). But before we head off with the idea that Smith is siding with the opponents of luxury we should note that he quickly adds, that we only see through this deception when in 'low spirits' (1976b, 182). Most of the time most people are more than content to go along with the deception and the ambition that results has a social utility through its positive unintended consequences. Smith is no Mandeville, but he is also determined to avoid any sort of po-faced moralising about luxury. Wealth may not generate genuine happiness, but neither for that matter, does poverty. While

wealth and rank multiply our concerns, they do so in a way that is inevitable and not trivial for Smith.

‘Of such mighty importance does it appear to be, in the imaginations of men, to stand in that situation which sets them most in the view of general sympathy and attention. And thus, place, that great object which divides the wives of aldermen, is the end of half the labours of human life; and is the cause of all the tumult and bustle, all the rapine and injustice, which avarice and ambition have introduced into this world.’ (1976b, 57).

Humans are exercised by their concern with appearances and the resulting judgments of their peers develop into customary standards of taste and opinion. This helps to explain the social psychology of subordination which can only ever be based on opinion formed through inter-subjective comparison.

Smith was clear however that the pursuit of wealth was not without its moral dangers.<sup>15</sup> He observes: ‘This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.’ (1976b, 61). The ‘great mob of mankind’ (1976b, 62) follow riches and not virtue and this is potentially disastrous for society. To the extent that fashion fuels this process it is implicated in the corruption of moral sentiments. It may lead to a situation where a great part of mankind would rather be famous than righteous. Smith the moralist is willing to accept the universality of the social phenomenon that he has identified and to countenance the social utility of fashion and

---

<sup>15</sup> See Berry (1997) and the papers collected in Hont and Ignatieff (1983) for a discussion of the wealth and virtue debate.

rank, but draws the line at extending moral approbation to these self-regarding attributes of the human character. We are beginning to get some sense of the way in which the two collateral inquiries are related. They share a common original stock, in human sociability, and they share a methodology of inquiry (empirical observation of sentimental psychology), yet Smith's approach views them as distinct in some important sense. But before we move on to a closer examination of their intersection and the nature of this distinction, let's pause to examine what Part V of TMS has to say about changes in fashion.

### **Changing Fashions**

We have already noted that in WN ornamental goods are subject to a more rapid cycle of fashion than utilitarian goods and Smith goes on to extend this analysis into the fashion for particular types of good. Changes in

‘Dress and Furniture are allowed by all the world to be entirely under the dominion of custom and fashion. The influence of those principles, however, is by no means confined to so narrow a sphere, but extends itself to whatever is in any respect the object of taste, to music, to poetry, to architecture. The modes of dress and furniture are continually changing, and that fashion appearing ridiculous to-day which was admired five years ago, we are experimentally convinced that it owed its vogue chiefly or entirely to custom and fashion.’ (1976b, 195).

‘A well-fancied coat’ (1976b, 195) is ‘done in a twelve-month’. While more lasting items such as furniture remain in fashion over a period of 5 or 6 years. In other arts fashions are more lasting and a man may be lucky to see an entire change in fashion during his lifetime. ‘A well-contrived building may endure many centuries’ (1976b, 195). This observation, while accurate, is also interesting for our purposes because it suggests a criterion that affects the

influence of fashion in such a way as to slow its cyclical process of change. The more disposable material items have a shorter fashion shelf-life than those requiring greater investment. Clothes last a season, furniture a few years, buildings much longer and intellectual systems potentially longer still. We'll return to this point later, but for the moment let us move on to consider how Smith develops a political economy of fashion.

In many respects Smith's account of the economic effects of fashion have been well considered by the work done on the Luxury debates of the Eighteenth Century.<sup>16</sup> Broadly speaking Smith, along with Hume, stands against the civic humanist or republican view that luxury is necessarily effeminizing or productive of moral corruption.<sup>17</sup> Instead the focus in the *Wealth of Nations* is upon what has come to be known vulgarly as the trickle-down theory of wealth. By showing how what were once luxury goods enjoyed only by the rich are now enjoyed by what are regarded as ordinary people (1976, 96) Smith hopes to explain a genuine phenomenon while demonstrating its advantages for the population as a whole. As he puts it: 'All the severall arts and businesses in life tend to render the conveniences and necessities of life more attainable.' (1978, 338) and the long-run result of this is that the King's marriage bed passes from the height of fashion, to the ornament of an alehouse (1976, 347). This is a side-effect of the restless human desire for 'improvement' that Smith catalogues so well (1976, 341). This development, and the division of labour upon which it depends, is limited by the extent of market. Smith is alive to the fact that mass fashion is only possible in a developed market where the division of labour provides the productive forces needed to generate the mass consumer goods and a public with the wherewithal to purchase them (1976, 181-2). He also comes close to arguing that in commercial societies where subsistence is

---

<sup>16</sup> For example see Berry (1994).

<sup>17</sup> Smith is not wholly sanguine about the moral effects of wealth, nor is he averse to the odd comment about its effeminizing influence. See the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* where he links 'luxury and effeminacy' to the diffusion of wealth (1978, 202).

secure, it is actually fashions in ornamental consumer goods, particularly the less durable goods such as clothing, that drive much economic activity (1976, 193, 420).<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the social benefits linked to the development of mass commercial societies alter the nature of fashion itself. In an interesting aside Smith discusses the claim that the level of economic development increases variety in clothing. He writes:

‘In the dress of the people of fashion of both sexes, there seems to have been much less variety, it is observed by Doctor Arbuthnot, in antient than in modern times; and the very little variety which we find in that of the antient statues confirms this observation. He infers from this, that their dress must upon the whole have been cheaper than ours: but the conclusion does not seem to follow. When the expence of fashionable dress is very great, the variety must be very small. But when, by the improvements in the productive powers of manufacturing art and industry, the expence of any one dress comes to be very moderate, the variety will naturally be very great. The rich not being able to distinguish themselves by the expence of any one dress, will naturally endeavour to do so by the multitude and variety of their dresses. (1976, 685-686).

Again the idea is of fashion as a means of distinguishing the individual from the mass of mankind. Fashion also plays a significant role in another of his famous accounts of social change. Smith’s explanation of the decline of Feudalism places the development of consumer goods at the heart of the dissipation of the landed estates that underwrote the social order of the medieval period. It is the desire to expend wealth on personal ornament such as diamond buckles (1976, 419), that ends the power of the feudal lords. The desire for ‘trinkets and

---

<sup>18</sup> See also Smith (1978, 50).

baubles, fitter to be the play-things of children than the serious pursuits of men' (1976, 421) drives the change through a process of unintended consequences. This is a theory where social change is the result of the 'childish vanity' (1976, 422) that drives fashion.

### **The Collateral Inquiries**

At this point we might begin to consider what the relationship is between this model of social change driven by fashion and the distinctive moral sphere that Smith supposes in his moralistic asides condemning fashion. In the *Moral Sentiments* Smith's discussion of fashion takes place during his assessment of the influence of fashion and custom on judgments of beauty. He argues that fashion is a subset of custom:

'Fashion is different from custom, or rather is a particular species of it. That is not the fashion which every body wears, but which those wear who are of a high rank, or character. The graceful, the easy, and commanding manners of the great, joined to the usual richness and magnificence of their dress, give a grace to the very form which they happen to bestow upon it. As long as they continue to use this form, it is connected in our imagination with the idea of something that is genteel and magnificent, and though itself it should be indifferent, it seems, on account of this relation, to have something about it that is genteel and magnificent too. As soon as they drop it, it loses all the grace, which it had appeared to possess before, and being now used only by the inferior ranks of people, seems to have something of their meanness and awkwardness.' (1976b, 194-5).

Fashion is a more ephemeral manifestation of the same sort of social phenomenon as custom. It is generated and changes in the same manner as custom, but with a more rapid cycle. This view is further underlined in the *Wealth of Nations* where Smith makes use of an interesting



formulation. He states, in connection with the spread of merchant behaviour, that 'custom every where regulates fashion.' (1976, 111). Here we see the idea that fashion is under the broader influence of custom so that its cycles are constrained within the bounds of custom. So, for example, custom dictates trousers and fashion comes up with bell bottoms.

Under this model the 'man of fashion' (1976b, 63) is able to influence the fashion, but his area of discretion is constrained by the bounds of a more durable set of beliefs embodied in custom. Variety is possible at the superficial level, but conformity is reinforced at the level of custom.

Smith's observation of the influence of fashion and custom upon aesthetic judgment is interesting from another point of view: he recognises that we are loath to admit that our judgment on such matters as art and architecture could be lead by something as transitory as fashion rather than something more solid like reason. Fashion is irrational and it is seldom the case that we are comfortable admitting that we are, to a certain degree, enslaved by fashion.

'Few men therefore are willing to allow, that custom or fashion have much influence upon their judgments concerning what is beautiful, or otherwise, in the productions of any of those arts; but imagine, that all the rules, which they think ought to be observed in each of them, are founded upon reason and nature, not upon habit or prejudice. A very little attention, however, may convince them of the contrary, and satisfy them, that the influence of custom and fashion over dress and furniture, is not more absolute than over architecture, poetry, and music.' (1976b, 195)<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> As J.C. Bryce points out Smith's view that poetry lay under the sway of fashion attracted the particular ire of Wordsworth who regarded him as the worst of critics on account of it (Bryce 1985, 31-32).

If we compare Smith's view here with our earlier point about fashion itself being subject to different cyclical speeds we have an interesting window into his understanding of social change. The speed at which fashion changes alters in line with the capital expenditure involved (coats in a year, furniture in five years, buildings in a century). This also applies to intellectual and artistic systems, though these have lifecycles that are potentially longer than buildings. We thus have a sort of linear model of the rapidity of social change leading from the superficial material of clothing to the intellectual content of art.

The chapter 'Of the Influence of Custom and Fashion upon Moral Sentiments' is one of the most interesting in *TMS* as it is where we see Smith's clearest attempt to bring together his collateral inquiries and his twin roles of scientist and moralist. Smith approaches the question by noting a difference between the influence of fashion on the judgment of the beauty of 'external objects' (1976b, 200), which he has already argued is extensive, and its influence on our judgment of the 'beauty' of conduct. His conclusion is that such an influence exists: judgment of the beauty of conduct cannot be 'entirely exempted' from the influence of fashion, but that the influence is 'much less than it is every where else' (1976b, 200). Sentiments of moral approbation are 'founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted.' (1976b, 200). We need to be careful in unpacking this passage. Note that Smith does not say that there is a qualitative difference between the two phenomena – the influence of fashion is 'perfectly similar' (1976b, 200) in morality as in other areas. Instead the influence of general principles of human nature is brought in to account for the diminished influence of custom and fashion. Indeed he highlights this when he goes on to note that: 'When custom and fashion coincide with the natural principles of right and wrong, they heighten the delicacy of our sentiments.' (1976b, 200). There is a degree of contextual influence on the experience of the moral sentiments. Not the least part of this is the company that one has been in the custom

of keeping. It is possible that certain of our moral sentiments can be shaped by our interaction with our peers. Thus the individual brought up in ‘violence’ or ‘licentiousness’ (1976b, 200) will tolerate a greater degree of such behaviour than one who has not had the same upbringing. But such warping is never entire.

Fashion, or something very like it, can have some effect on the manners that prevail in a society.<sup>20</sup> Moreover it can be brought to bear on the explanation of why a certain type of character prevails in different professions and trades (1976b, 201). Smith’s argument here is largely contextual – we associate particular forms of character with particular professions, and these are also often the result of the circumstances of the profession dictating the form of manners. We might consider custom and fashion as influencing many of the superficial aspects of our manners, while the deeper principles of morality and our consideration of more serious matters is more influenced by universal principles of human nature.<sup>21</sup>

The crux of this discussion occurs when Smith tries to work through the implications of his argument for the status of moral judgments.

‘All of these effects of custom and fashion, however, upon the moral sentiments of mankind, are inconsiderable, in comparison of those which they give occasion to in some other cases; and it is not concerning the general style of character and behaviour, that those principles produce the greatest perversion of judgment, but concerning the propriety or impropriety of particular usages.’ (1976b, 209).

---

<sup>20</sup> See Smith’s application of the term in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*: ‘Cato, who was a man of the most severe virtue and the strictest observer of the morall rules then in fashion’ (1978, 181).

<sup>21</sup> James Otteson notes that Smith appears to restrict the influence of fashion to ‘less important, marginal concerns of moral judgment, but not the central concerns’ (Otteson 2002, 218). The distinction that he draws is based on reading Smith as asserting a greater role for the ‘principles of human nature’ (Otteson 2002, 217) in moral judgment than in matters of small behavioural importance. Forms of politeness and peripheral moral issues display variety, but the core aspects of morality remain constant. This is not quite the same observation as that made by Henry Clark (1992), who quite rightly notes that Smith’s work is focussed on the everyday or ‘moderate’ virtues rather than the extraordinary or ‘heroic’ virtues.

Smith's distinction between general style, particular usages and natural propriety seems geared to ensure that moral beliefs remain outside, or perhaps above might be better, the influence of fashion. Smith follows this with an extended discussion of infanticide as if to underline his point that fashion and custom can account for what he regarded as aberrations, but that nature will hold sway of the general character of our moral beliefs. Custom and fashion can only affect the particular usage (infanticide) and not the general style (a society that regards infants as disposable) in such a way as to divert it from the 'natural' course of our care for infants. Smith is quite clearly attempting to explain how his scientific, descriptive account of fashion can be reconciled with the collateral inquiry into the generation of morality.

This attempt allows us to extend our linear model. Fashion is to be understood as a regulatory mechanism in matters of small moment: 'A man would be ridiculous who should appear in public with a suit of clothes quite different from those which are commonly worn' (1976b, 196). It is allowed to regulate these matters of 'ornament' even in cases where something of greater 'utility' emerges. But the seriousness of moral beliefs seems to warrant them being regarded as distinct from the fashion and largely immune even to the force of custom. This allows us to regard the moral as acting like a restriction on the customary in a similar way to that in which the customary regulates the fashionable.

<u>1 Year</u>		<u>100 Years</u>		<u>1000 Years??</u>
<b>Fashion</b>	<regulates	<b>Custom</b>	<regulates	<b>Nature</b>
<b>Fashionable</b>	<regulates	<b>Customary</b>	<regulates	<b>Moral</b>

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to identify and reconstruct Smith's theoretical consideration of fashion. We are left with a number of interesting observations about Smith's collateral inquiry. The first of these is that it is embedded within and consistent with his views on morality, aesthetics, the history of philosophy and political economy. The second is that it is absolutely central to his theories of rank and social change. Third, for material goods the rate of the fashion cycle is determined by the ornamental or utilitarian nature of the good and by the level of capital expenditure involved. Moreover the cyclical speed is also affected by the extent of the market as fashion trickles-down in a parallel manoeuvre to wealth in general. Fourth, intellectual goods are subject to similar, though longer, cycles of fashion. And finally, that custom regulates fashion and is in turn regulated by nature in matters such as morality. It seems clear that Smith does indeed attempt to undertake a detailed analysis of fashion and to take seriously its economic, sociological and philosophical effects. It also seems clear that this collateral inquiry into fashion is not parallel and detached from the wider inquiry into moral sentiments. Rather it nestles within in it and gives us insight into how Smith understands the relationship between moral experience and other forms of social interaction.

What all this offers us is insight not only into Smith's general mode of inquiry into social phenomena, but more importantly it suggests to us that he was engaged in a project that sought to make systematic use of a universally applicable theory of social interaction to account for the generation and operation of fashion, custom and morality. In so doing he wished to avoid the charge of conventionalism by nesting his account of custom and fashion within a wider and more universalised account of human moral beliefs as in some sense 'natural'. While the impartial spectator gave Smith a reflective element to his moral psychology, and the distinction between praise and praiseworthiness further distanced his

thought from conventionalism, it is the relationship between the collateral inquiry into fashion and the main inquiry into morality that provides a third and more successful step in Smith's response to conventionalism. This is because, while it employs the same methodology and can accommodate the theory of fashion and custom, it also recognises and invokes natural or universal principles in a way that the other approaches do not – and it is this that is the vital step in distancing Smith's moral theory from conventionalism. With this in mind Smith is able to reconcile the two inquiries and to account for the apparent contradictions between his scientist's descriptive account of the operation of fashion and his moralist's negative assessment of some of the moral effects of fashion.

## **Bibliography**

- Berry, C.J.** (1994) *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2009) 'But Art Itself is Natural to Man': Ferguson and the Principle of Simultaneity' in V. Merolle & E. Heath (eds.) *Adam Ferguson, Philosophy, Politics and Society*, London: Pickering & Chatto, pp. 143-153.
- Bryce, J. C.** (1983) 'Introduction' *Adam Smith's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J.C. Bryce, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, Henry C.** (1992) 'Conversation and Moderate Virtue in Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments', *Review of Politics* Vol. 54, pp. 185-210.
- Ferguson, Adam** (1973) *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, 2 Vols. New York: AMS Press.
- Hanley, Ryan P.** (2008) 'Commerce and Corruption: Rousseau's Diagnosis and Adam Smith's Cure', *European Journal of Political Theory* April 2008 vol. 7 no. 2 137-158.
- Hont, Istvan and Ignatieff, Michael** (eds.) (1983) *Wealth and Virtue: the Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Hume, David** (1978) [1739] *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon.

**Minowitz, Peter** (1993) *Profits, Priests, and Princes: Adam Smith's Emancipation of Economics from Politics and Religion*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

**Otteson, James, R.** (2002) *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Paganelli, Maria Pia** (2009) 'Approbation and the Desire to Better One's Condition in Adam Smith', *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, Vol. 31, No. 1, March, pp. 79-92.

**Phillipson, Nicholas** (2010) *Adam Smith An Enlightened Life*, London: Allen Lane.

**Rasmussen, Dennis C.** (2008) *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

**Reisman, D.A.** (1976) *Adam Smith's Sociological Economics*, London: Routledge.

**Smith, Adam** (1976) [1776] *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner & W.B. Todd, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

-- (1976b) [1759] *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael & A.L. Macfie, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

-- (1978) *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael & P.G. Stein, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

-- (1980) [1795] *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W.P.D. Wightman, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

-- (1983) *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J.C. Bryce, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

-- (1987) *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. Ernest Campbell Mossner & Ian Simpson Ross, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

**Stewart, Dugald** (1980) [1793] 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith LL.D.' in

*Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W.P.D. Wightman, Oxford: Oxford University Press  
pp. 269-351.

**Young, Jeffrey T.** (1997) *Economics as Moral science: The Political Economy of Adam Smith*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

**Winch, Donald** (1978) *Adam Smith's Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Wollstonecraft, Mary** (1995) [1792] 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Man and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 65-294.