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ADAM SMITH AND THE SOCIOLOGY
OF MORALS

Thomas D. Campbell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at the University
of Glasgow

1969

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BOOKS, ESSAYS and REPORTED LECTURES OF ADAM SMITH

with

Abbreviations and Notes on those Editions which are referred to in the Text.

- (1) The Theory of Moral Sentiments, (1st ed., 1759), 6th ed., with considerable additions and corrections, 2 vols., London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, and W. Creech and J. Bell and Co., 1790.
Short title: Moral Sentiments.
Abbreviations used in footnotes: T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.1) is an abbreviation for Moral Sentiments, 6th ed., Part one, section one, chapter one (volume one, page one).
- (2) An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, (1st ed., 1776), 5th ed., (1789), 2 vols., ed. by Edwin Cannan (1904), London: Methuen, 1961.
Short title: Wealth of Nations.
Abbreviations: W.N., I.x.1 (I.112) is an abbreviation for Wealth of Nations, 5th edition, Book one, chapter ten, part one (volume one, page one hundred and twelve).
- (3) Essays on Philosophical Subjects, ed. by Dugald Stewart, London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, and W. Creech, 1795.
Short title: Essays.
Abbreviations: (a) E.P.S. is an abbreviation for Essays.
(b) "Account" is an abbreviation for "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.", an essay by Dugald Stewart published in the Essays.
(c) H.A. is an abbreviation for "The Principles which lead and direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy".

(d) H.A.P. is an abbreviation for "The Principles which lead and direct Philosophical Enquiries; illustrated by the History of Ancient Physics".

(e) H.A.L. & M. is an abbreviation for "The Principles which lead and direct Philosophical Enquiries; illustrated by the History of Ancient Logics and Metaphysics".

(4) "Dissertation on the Origin of Languages", appended to the 3rd and subsequent editions of the Moral Sentiments.

(5) Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms, delivered in the University of Glasgow, reported by a student in 1763 and edited with an introduction and notes by Edwin Cannan, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896.

Short title: Lectures on Jurisprudence.

Abbreviation: L.J.

N.B. Another, somewhat fuller, version of these lectures, also based on students' notes, was discovered, by Professor J.M. Lothian, in 1958, and is in the possession of the University of Glasgow. I have been permitted to read a typescript of these lectures but not to quote specific passages from them.

(6) Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, a copy of students' notes taken down in 1762-3, edited with an introduction and notes by John H. Lothian, Great Britain; Nelson, 1963.

Short title: Lectures on Rhetoric.

Abbreviation: J.R.B.L.

Table of Contents

Preface		1
<u>Part I: Philosophy or Science?</u>		
Chapter 1.	Philosophy and Science in Adam Smith	13
"	2. Social Science or Social Philosophy?	45
"	3. Smith's Sociological Theory	83
<u>Part II: Smith's Moral Theory</u>		
"	4. Approval and Sympathy	120
"	5. The Principle of Approbation	146
"	6. The Impartial Spectator	173
"	7. Conscience	198
"	8. Virtues and Vices	225
"	9. Justice	253
"	10. Politics and Principles	280
"	11. Conclusion	303
Appendix:	Motives as Causes	326

SUMMARY

Many criticisms of Adam Smith's Moral Sentiments assume that this book was intended to be a contribution to normative moral philosophy. Its true significance can be appreciated only if it is seen to be an early example of social science. Analyses of the Lectures on Rhetoric and the Essays on Philosophical Subjects show that Smith was aware of the nature of modern science and, in particular, realized the importance of combining imaginative theorising with detailed empirical tests.

In spite of Smith's intense interest in practical affairs it is clear that the Wealth of Nations and, even more, the Moral Sentiments are primarily attempts to apply his understanding of Newtonian scientific methods to the study of society. Much that seems obscure or irrelevant in the Moral Sentiments falls into place when this book is regarded as an explanation of the social origin and function of moral rules. In the process of giving the explanation Smith outlines theories of action and social development which, while they make certain fundamental assumptions about human nature, take into account the importance of the social environment in determining human behaviour; Smith also provides theistic teleological explanations based on his observations of the unintended beneficial consequences of human action. These have certain similarities to modern functionalist theories.

The core of Smith's moral theory is the hypothesis that men approve of the behaviour of others when they "agree with", or share, their sentiments, and disapprove when they do not share these sentiments. The key concept of sympathy, which is often wrongly thought of as a species of benevolence, has to do with the ways in which men come to be aware that they either do,

or do not, share the sentiments of persons in situations different from their own. The ability to sympathize with, or share, the sentiments of others, is greatly affected by the workings of the imagination and Smith presents several empirical generalizations concerning the operation of the imagination which he uses to explain many normal and some anomalous or "irregular" facts about the moral judgments which prevail in different types of society. The sociological nature of Smith's theory is apparent in the importance which he places on every man's desire to win approval and avoid the disapproval of other men. He uses this fact to explain why, in each society, there evolves an agreed standard of morality. Smith expounds this in terms of the "impartial spectator", an empirical concept which has little in common with modern "Ideal Observer" theories. The spectator represents the attitudes which are common to all ordinary persons when they are in the position of observing the behaviour of those with whom they have no special relationship. Smith describes how conscience originates in man's desire to please others and sometimes comes to acquire a limited degree of independence.

Smith's theory assumes that, given certain facts about man's "natural" (pre-moral) desires and a knowledge of the mechanism of sympathy, it is possible to build up a picture of the development of moral rules within a society, and explain the emergence of conscience in each individual, without invoking any special "moral sense" or rational apprehension of moral truths. The theory is tested by observing how far it can account for the basic similarities in, and minor variations between, the moral codes of different types of society and social groups. In particular he considers that it can explain the differences between the moralities of primitive and commercial societies, and between the moralities of inferior and superior

social classes. His theory accords with the fact that men in general approve of prudence as well as benevolence and Smith claims that he is able to account for the particularly stringent obligations connected with the rules of justice embodied in the civil and criminal law of all nations. Some examples of this are to be found in the Lectures on Jurisprudence. The same principles are used to explain economic motivation and social stratification.

Despite Smith's frequent attacks on the view that moral rules originate in man's awareness of their utility, his own moral presuppositions are shown to involve a form of utilitarianism. This comes out clearly in his political theory and can also be seen in his statements of final causation. The ultimate justification for his own moral principles depends on his belief in a benevolent Deity, which, in turn, rests primarily on the argument from Design. The Moral Sentiments, by demonstrating the intricate workings of the social mechanism, supports this belief.

Interpreted in this way the Moral Sentiments represents a considerable intellectual achievement, although Smith fails to demonstrate that its hypotheses can be adequately tested by detailed empirical observations.

PREFACE

Adam Smith is renowned as an economist. To those who take specialisation for granted Smith's importance as the author of the Wealth of Nations implies that he is unlikely to be very competent in, or concerned with, other subjects. This is a common view of Adam Smith. The same polite comments are made about his other work as are used to acknowledge a great scientist's excursion into the realm of philosophy or a famous conductor's efforts as an instrumentalist: in view of the maestro's great work his other activities are treated with good humoured but unenthusiastic respect. In this way Smith's economic theory is frequently given the place of honour while his lesser known moral and legal theories are quietly passed over.¹

From a general historical point of view this is quite justified. The Wealth of Nations has had a practical influence unsurpassed by any other book of modern times with the possible exception of Das Kapital. Its extraordinary historical significance marks it off quite distinctly from the rest of Smith's work. But, unless influence is equated with truth, this does not imply that it is equally superior as a contribution to knowledge. The Wealth of Nations was adopted as the ideology of early liberal capitalism and its popularity might have had more to do with the way in which it accords with the economic and political prejudices of the emergent bourgeoisie than its intrinsic merits as a scholarly

¹ Cf. J. Bonar, The Moral Sense (New York, 1930), p. 168: "It has needed all the fame of the second (The Wealth of Nations) to keep alive the memory of the first (The Moral Sentiments)"; and R. D. Haldane, Life of Adam Smith (London, 1887), p. 151: "It is as an economist that Adam Smith will be remembered... he was also a writer on Ethics... His contribution to Ethics was, as we shall see, unimportant."

work. That it has such merits is not in doubt; it is one of the very first systematic studies in political economy; but the relative historical insignificance of Smith's other work has perhaps detracted from a fair assessment of its quality. Yet for some years before the Wealth of Nations appeared, in 1776, Smith had enjoyed international fame as the author of The Theory of Moral Sentiments. This book was a development of lectures which he delivered as professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Glasgow, an appointment he held from 1752 to 1764 after a short spell as professor of Logic and Rhetoric in the same university. This work has not continued to receive general acclaim. Very often it is mentioned as an aid to the interpretation of the Wealth of Nations, but it is infrequently given much consideration in its own right. Yet Adam Smith himself is reported to have considered it superior to the Wealth of Nations² and took the trouble to expand and improve it for a 6th edition which was published in 1790, the year of his death.

There is no doubt that the Theory of Moral Sentiments is important for the understanding of the Wealth of Nations for it presents a broader picture of Smith's social theory, of which the work on economics is only a specialised part. Regarding the matter in the light of this logical relationship between the two books it would be more justified to consider the Moral Sentiments in isolation from the Wealth of Nations rather than the more usual practice of giving exclusive attention to the later work. However both of his main works have to be looked at in the perspective of a programme of research which Smith drew up for himself but never completed. For large as were Adam Smith's achievements, they fell far short of his aspirations. His published

² Sir Samuel Romilly, Memoirs, Vol. 1, p. 405; quoted in J. Rae, Life of Adam Smith (London, 1895), p. 456.

work represents only a part of his intended writings. At his own insistence sixteen volumes of manuscripts were destroyed shortly before his death.³ He is reported to have expressed regret that "he had done so little", and the destroyed manuscripts must have contained the "materials in my papers, of which I could have made a great deal", mentioned in Dugald Stewart's "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D."⁴ The manuscripts which survived are contained in the posthumous collection Essays on Philosophical Subjects and his literary executors, Messrs. Joseph Black and James Hutton, declared these to be a part of a larger collection of material designed to fulfil "a plan he once had formed, for giving a connected history of the liberal sciences and elegant arts".⁵ This project probably grew out of his lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres, which were delivered in the first place at Edinburgh in 1748-9 and elaborated in his Glasgow lectures as professor of Logic and Rhetoric. For a long time it was thought that all trace of these lectures had been lost when Smith's manuscripts were destroyed, but recently a copy of student's notes taken down in 1762-3 has been discovered and added valuable, if not entirely reliable, evidence as to their content.⁶

This "connected history of the liberal sciences and elegant arts" does not, however, represent Smith's main projected work. He

³ Ibid., Life of Adam Smith, p. 434.

⁴ E.P.S., p. lxxviii. This was read by Dugald Stewart to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in January and March 1793 and published in Essays on Philosophical Subjects, in 1795.

⁵ E.P.S., ("Account"), p. 111.

⁶ Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by John M. Lothian (Great Britain, 1963).

himself described his unfulfilled plans in a letter to the Duke de la Rochefoucauld, in these words:

I have likewise two other great works upon the anvil; the one is a sort of Philosophical History of all the different branches of Literature, of Philosophy, Poetry and Eloquence; the other is a sort of theory and History of Law and Government.⁷

The second and more important scheme which Smith failed to complete was this systematic work on politics, jurisprudence and sociology. At the end of the first edition of the Moral Sentiments, published in 1759, he wrote:

I shall in another discourse endeavour to give an account of the general principles of law and government, and of the different revolutions they have undergone in the different ages and periods of society, not only in what concerns justice but in what concerns police, revenue and arms, and whatever else is the object of law.⁸

In the Advertisement to the 6th Edition, published in 1790, he expanded on this:

In the Enquiry concerning the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, I have partly executed this promise; at least so far as concerns police, revenue, and arms. What remains, the theory of jurisprudence, which I have long projected, I have hitherto been hindered from executing, by the same occupations which had till now prevented me from revising the present work. Though my very advanced age leaves me, I acknowledge, very little expectation of ever being able to execute this great work to my own satisfaction.⁹

⁷First published in the Athenaeum, December 20, 1895, and reprinted in The Economic Journal, VI, (1896), pp. 165f.

⁸T.M.S. (1st ed.), p. 551. Cf. T.M.S. (6th ed.) VII.iv (II.399).

⁹T.M.S., (I.vii).

The missing section of this work, dealing with justice, has not, however, been entirely lost to us since it appears in outline, together with some material which later found a place in the Wealth of Nations, in Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue, and Arms. These lectures exist in the form of a copy of notes taken down by a student, probably in 1762-3 or 1763-4.¹⁰

To assist in relating Smith's two main works and the Lectures on Jurisprudence we have an important summary of the content of Smith's moral philosophy lectures provided by John Millar and quoted by Dugald Stewart in his "Account".¹¹ By comparing this with the content of the three sources we can reconstruct the lectures roughly as follows:

- (1) Natural Theology. No record of this survives but Millar reports that in it "he considered the proofs of the being and attributes of God, and those principles of the human mind upon which religion is founded".
- (2) Ethics. This covers Smith's general theory of morality and an introduction to justice as a part of this theory. This was published as the Moral Sentiments.
- (3) Jurisprudence. Millar wrote that "In the third part, he treated at more length of that branch of morality which relates to justice". This represents the projected work in jurisprudence parts of which are outlined in those sections of the Lectures on Jurisprudence dealing with Justice, and the Laws of Nations.
- (4) Economics. Millar reported this to be in substance the work

¹⁰ Edited by Edwin Cannan, Oxford, 1896. Another, somewhat fuller version of these lectures, taken down in 1762-3, was found by John Lothian in 1958, but has yet to be published.

¹¹ E.P.S. ("Account"), pp. xvi-xix.

he published as the Wealth of Nations, which means that it is the same as those parts of the Lectures on Jurisprudence which do not feature as part of Jurisprudence, namely the sections on Police (that is "Cleanliness and Security" and "Cheapness or Plenty"), Revenue, and Arms.

From this it can be seen that the progress from the Moral Sentiments to the Wealth of Nations is partly one of increasing specialisation and partly a change of emphasis from morality to economics. The Lectures on Jurisprudence form a bridge between the two main works; they connect with the Moral Sentiments in that justice is part of morality, and they connect with the Wealth of Nations not only because this latter work is summarised in the lectures but also because Smith considered economic matters to be included in "the four great objects of law", which are given as "justice, police, revenue, and arms".¹²

The aim of this study is to examine the ethical and, to a lesser extent, the legal theories of Adam Smith as contributions to the scientific study of morals and law. Attention will therefore be focused on those parts of his work which deal with moral and legal rather than economic theory, but the systematic unity of his work will be assumed and reference will be made to all his writings.¹³ In practice this means that the Moral Sentiments, and those parts of the Lectures on Jurisprudence which deal with justice as such, will be subjected to detailed analysis, while the Wealth of Nations, the Essays on Philosophical Subjects and

¹² L.J., p. 3.

¹³ This unity has often been called in question; the alleged incompatibility between the Moral Sentiments and the Wealth of Nations has become known as "the Adam Smith problem", (cf. A. Oncken, "The Consistency of Adam Smith", The Economic Journal, VII, (1897), pp. 443-450). Instead of attempting a general discussion of what I regard as a largely unnecessary controversy I shall deal with specific issues within the general debate as they become relevant.

the Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres will feature less directly, and the "Dissertation on the Origin of Languages", which was appended to the 3rd and subsequent editions of the Moral Sentiments, hardly at all. The justification for approaching Smith's moral and legal studies as works of science rather than of philosophy is purely exogetical. This is the way in which they can best be understood because, in terms of twentieth century categories, this is how Smith himself regarded them. Purely, therefore, as an aid to enlightened interpretation, it is better to regard Smith as presenting a sociological and psychological but not a philosophical theory of morals and law. Nothing but confusion arises from assuming a close similarity of approach and method between Smith's "moral philosophy" and contemporary moral philosophy. If comparisons are to be made it is between Smith and those of today who concern themselves with the psychology and sociology of morals and law. Despite the normative framework of all his studies which can be summed up as "giving advice to statesmen", his basic pre-occupation is with the correct description of social facts and the explanation of human behaviour by relating these facts to general laws and scientific theories. While he raises and deals with philosophical questions of logic, epistemology and metaphysics as he goes along, his chief concern is with causal and not with logical relationships, with the origins and function and not the validity of moral judgments. Philosophical presuppositions about the moral value of natural processes and the epistemological foundations of knowledge he certainly has, but the bulk of his work has the logic of a science and can be properly understood only as such.

In this connection it is interesting to note that the most damning criticisms of the Moral Sentiments have come from those who consider that Smith failed to provide an answer to the most pressing philosophical problem of eighteenth century ethics: the

need to find a non-theological method of justifying moral judgments. This can be called a problem of normative epistemology. For instance Leslie Stephen lists Adam Smith amongst those who tried to answer the question: "How...should morality survive theology?"¹⁴ and then goes on to deliver the patronising judgment that, when reading the Moral Sentiments, "we are not listening to a thinker really grappling with a difficult problem, so much as ^{to} an ambitious professor who found an excellent opportunity for displaying his command of language, and making brilliant lectures".¹⁵ This is a criticism which is also found in Jouffroy,¹⁶ Thomas Brown,¹⁷ James McCosh,¹⁸ and Henry Laurie,¹⁹ all of whom assume that Smith is trying to justify moral convictions. Having shown that Smith failed to deal adequately with a problem with which he himself had little immediate concern these critics join the number of those professors who use the Moral Sentiments "as a subject on which to exercise the critical acumen of their pupils",²⁰ a tradition which has been recently endorsed by A. N. Prior who classes Adam Smith amongst those who have provided the

¹⁴ History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (London, 1876), ix.2.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, ix.80.

¹⁶ Cf. Jouffroy's Ethics, Translated by W. H. Channing (Boston, 1841), vol. 2, p. 167.

¹⁷ Lectures on Ethics (Edinburgh, 1846). On p. 143 he accuses Smith of "appearing to fix morality on a basis that is not sufficiently firm".

¹⁸ The Scottish Philosophy (London, 1875), p. 170: "the fabric is left without a secure foundation".

¹⁹ Scottish Philosophy (Glasgow, 1902), p. 120f.

²⁰ McCosh, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

logician with fallacious arguments on which to exercise his skills.²¹

In contrast to these criticisms, those who interpret Adam Smith as offering sociological and psychological analyses and explanations of the moral consciousness of the ordinary man tend to take him more seriously and consider, like Selby-Bigge, that the Moral Sentiments, "deserves more attention than it has ^{recently} received from the sociologist, the psychologist, and the moralist".²² Sidgwick's ambivalent judgment that the quality of Smith's work declines when "he passes from psychological analysis to ethical construction" does at least imply praise of his contribution to the psychology of morals, although he also criticises Smith for failing to "provide a criterion or standard of right conduct".²³ Less qualified praise comes from those whose chief interests lie in the social sciences. Edward Westermarck called it "the most important contribution to moral psychology made by any British thinker";²⁴ William McDougall regarded Smith as an important predecessor,²⁵ and Frank Ciddings cites Smith as a pioneer in

²¹ Logic and the Basis of Ethics (Oxford, 1949), p. xi. Not all modern moral philosophers take such a view however; cf. Dorothy Emmet, Rules, Roles and Relations (London, 1966), p. 71ff., and D. D. Raphael, Moral Judgement (London, 1955), p. 9.

²² British Moralists (Oxford, 1879), p. lxii; cf. p. xvii and p. lix.

²³ History of Ethics (6th ed., London, 1931), p. 223.

²⁴ Ethical Relativity (London, 1932), p. 70. Cf. p. 76 with T.M.S., I.ii.3 (I.76) as an example of Smith's influence on Westermarck.

²⁵ Social Psychology (London, 1906), p. 220.

demonstrating the social origin of moral qualities.²⁶ These assessments are supported by modern historians of ideas who have found it illuminating to regard the work of Adam Smith, including the Moral Sentiments, as part of and not simply a prelude to modern social science.²⁷

Some of the criticisms of Smith's Moral Sentiments are directed at its diffuse style: H. W. Schneider, for instance, comments that it is "not a work of moral philosophy but a literary work in which he exhibits his rhetorical skill".²⁸ This is an extreme form of Professor Macfie's remark that the tone of the Moral Sentiments owes much to its origin as a course of lectures to teenage students.²⁹ Certainly there is some repetition, looseness of terminology and imprecision of statement, but I shall argue that those who, like McCosh, find that the book "wanders like a river amidst luxuriant banks" so that "it is not easy to define its course"³⁰ have usually failed to see the unifying scientific purpose which determines the course of the work.

²⁶ The Principles of Sociology (New York, 1896), p. 122.

²⁷ A. Small, Adam Smith and Modern Sociology (Chicago, 1907); A. W. Coates, "Adam Smith, Modern Re-appraisal", Renaissance and Modern Studies, VI, (1962), p. 25; A. Salomon, "Adam Smith as a Sociologist", Social Research, XII, (1945); D. Forbes, "'Scientific' Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar", Cambridge Journal, VIII, (1955), p. 643; G. R. Morrow, The Ethical and Economic Theories of Adam Smith (New York, 1922).

²⁸ Adam Smith's Moral and Political Philosophy (Chicago, 1967), p. xvi.

²⁹ A. L. Macfie, The Individual in Society (London, 1967), p. 42.

³⁰ J. McCosh, The Scottish Philosophy (London, 1875), p. 168.

Other critics complain of its lack of originality,³¹ a criticism which is also levelled at the Wealth of Nations but this overlooks Smith's ability to use the work of others as a basis for a systematic theory which transcends the individual parts of which it is made up. Again, the interpretation of the Moral Sentiments as a scientific treatise will do much to counter this criticism. But the bulk of unfavourable reaction to Smith's first book is misdirected simply because it fails to assess the work according to its own purpose. I shall therefore spend some time enquiring into this purpose as it is of fundamental importance for the just assessment as well as the correct interpretation of the book that it be approached as an empirical rather than a normative work.

The present study does not seek to deal with historical questions of dependence and influence except in so far as they have a bearing on the interpretation of Smith's theories. The aim is to understand the theory in itself and not to determine its origins or effects. Reference to Smith's forerunners, contemporaries and followers and to the general context of his work will only be made where it is necessary to carry out the prior aim of analysing and clarifying Smith's own theories of morals and law. Questions of dependence and influence will be considered only if they are of importance in the interpretation of his own works.

This is not to imply that historical interest in Smith's moral and legal theories would be misplaced. Whatever its wider historical significance, the Moral Sentiments has considerable

³¹L. Stephen, *op. cit.*, ix, 80. Cf. L. Strauss and J. Cropsey (editors), History of Political Philosophy (Chicago, 1963), p. 550: "His moral philosophy as he himself in effect admits, is a refinement upon Hume's which differs from it in respects that, although very significant, are not decisive."

historical significance within the context of eighteenth century Scotland. This period of intense scholarly activity in Scotland has often been noted for its anticipations of modern social science³² and, in this respect Smith's work on moral and legal theory was a contribution to the objective study of the function of morality and law in society and the explanation of their nature and content based on acute observation of individual behaviour and the interactions of individuals in society. It is in this latter aspect that Smith made his most distinctive addition to eighteenth century moral and legal theory since he stands out from his more individualistically oriented contemporaries and goes some way to rectifying the inadequacies of their methodological assumptions. The present study may therefore make an indirect contribution toward the thesis that eighteenth century Scotland saw a beginning of the idea and practice of social science and indicate the part which Smith's moral and legal theories played in this development.

³²Cf. G. E. Dryson, Man and Society (Princeton, 1945) and Roy Pascal, "Property and Society", The Modern Quarterly, 1938-9, pp. 167-179.

Part One

Philosophy or Science?

Chapter OnePHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE IN ADAM SMITH

Two hundred years is not a long period in the history of human thought and the eighteenth century mind, particularly in its most oritonal and urbane manifestations, does not seem alien to the modern reader. The key terms of the eighteenth century may not be so dominant today but, for the most part, they are still current and readily understood. A straightforward summary of Adam Smith's writings, without any translation into twentieth century idioms of thought, would not, therefore, be met by the incomprehension of the general reader. Yet such a procedure would only result in a superficial understanding of Smith's work, and, in some cases, might lead to serious misunderstanding. For, although most eighteenth century terminology has an accepted place in our own vocabulary, the actual concepts represented by these familiar terms are often significantly different from those with which we operate today. A trivial example to illustrate this difficulty is the eighteenth century use of the word "commonwealth" to refer to the polity of particular states or nations,¹ rather than to some form of association between independent states. Both uses still occur but the latter is now the generally accepted connotation of the word. Of more importance for the present discussion is the fact that, in the eighteenth century, the terms "philosophy" and "science" had a more general significance than they do today: they were used interchangeably of any systematic attempt to understand the world and man's place in it.² Nowadays they tend to be taken as denoting

¹T.M.S., II.ii.1 (I.201).

²Thus, for Smith, optics is "the philosophy of vision", cf. T.M.S., III.3 (I.332), and metaphysics is a branch of "science", cf. WN, V.1.3 (II.292).

mutually exclusive types of study with quite distinct aims and methods.

To ask of any piece of work "is this philosophy or science?" is thus a question which would have been unintelligible in the eighteenth century. Yet, if the modern distinction has any validity, it is a question which must be asked, whenever the issue is in doubt, before any work can be correctly interpreted and critically assessed. Taking science to be a descriptive and explanatory discipline designed to test verifiable generalisations about the world and philosophy as an activity which asserts and seeks to justify normative conclusions about the nature of rational belief, valid argument and justified moral standards, then any study of morality, for instance, may either be philosophical in purpose, aiming to justify a particular set of moral principles or discuss the truth value of moral principles in general, or else scientific, in which case it will attempt to make causal generalisations about the moral beliefs of particular types of person or group. While a theory of morality may include both descriptive and normative aspects it is necessary to know whether any particular part of the study is one thing or the other. In the absence of this knowledge its meaning cannot be clarified, for description and evaluation are different types of activity. Moreover it is not possible to know whether the arguments presented are relevant to the conclusions drawn, since arguments that demonstrate that a particular type of behaviour is right or wrong do nothing to show that anyone believes it to be right or wrong, and conversely, evidence which shows that certain moral beliefs are held does not demonstrate that they are justified. This applies with particular force to eighteenth century texts in "moral philosophy" which embody the traditions from which the social sciences as well as modern moral philosophy have developed.

To determine whether Adam Smith's work falls into the category of philosophy or that of science, it is useful to begin

by considering his own writings about the nature of these two activities. For the reasons we have been discussing it is not possible to do this by studying his use of the terms "philosophy" and "science". Instead we must employ the modern distinction, between philosophy and science, and see if there is a comparable distinction in the writings of Smith. For instance we get no nearer an answer to our question by discovering that Smith regarded himself as a "philosopher" since this is a name he applied to Newton and other founders of modern science. When Smith does distinguish these terms it is to make philosophy the more abstract or theoretical activity and science the more practical and immediately useful one; something like the modern distinction between pure and applied science.³ However this does not mean that he, and other eighteenth century writers, were unconscious of the modern contrast between philosophy and science, but only that they did not use these labels to mark this particular conceptual distinction. This can be demonstrated from Smith's own writings.

In the Wealth of Nations Smith notes with approval the Greek division of "philosophy" or "science" into "physics, or natural philosophy; ethics, or moral philosophy; and logic".⁴ It is therefore tempting to think that, in modern terms, he should be understood to mean that natural philosophy is science and moral philosophy together with logic go to make up philosophy. Yet this is too simple a solution: at a time when the social sciences had made a beginning, but had not yet separated themselves from their philosophical origins, moral philosophy and logic embraced economics, sociology, political science and psychology as well as

³P.M.S., VII.iii.Introd., (II.325); VII.iii.1 (II.326f.); VII.iv (II.363f.); and W.N., I.1 (I.14).

⁴W.N., V.i.3.art. 2 (II.290).

the normative logical and epistemological issues of modern philosophy. The boundary between science and philosophy is therefore to be found within eighteenth century moral philosophy and logic and not between these subjects and natural philosophy. In fact I shall argue that, in Adam Smith's case, moral philosophy is largely of a scientific nature and that he was well aware of this himself. Before supporting this contention by an analysis of the Moral Sentiments, it will be as well to look at Smith's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, and his Essays on Philosophical Subjects. Seen together these two works provide important guide lines for the analysis of the remainder of Smith's work.⁵ The Lectures on Rhetoric outline the different types of discourse and the style of presentation most appropriate to each of them and the Essays discuss in detail the development of a few examples of one of these types of discourse, the scientific one. In particular the essay which deals with the history of astronomy is important because it shows Smith's acute insight into the advances which had been made up to that time in a subject which was, even then, undisputedly scientific in the modern sense. An examination of this work indicates that it is quite wrong to suggest that, even if Smith was scientific in his method, he did not have the explicit awareness of the nature of science which is necessary to produce a systematic scientific treatise.⁶

⁵Cf. O. H. Taylor, "Economics and the Idea of Jus Naturale", Quarterly Journal of Economics, XLIV, (1929), pp. 205-241, especially p. 228. Taylor recognises the significance of the Essays and points out that A. Comte praised them.

⁶This is the contention of Jacob D. Hollander, in an essay "The Dawn of Science" in Adam Smith, 1776-1926, ed. Jacob Viner, (Chicago, 1928), p. 15: "In so far as Adam Smith wrote a scientific treatise, it was like the prose which Molière's bourgeois spoke".

The unifying theme of the Lectures on Rhetoric is the need to adapt the style of writing to the intentions of the author:

the perfection of style consists in express[ing] in the most concise, proper, and precise manner the thought of the author, and that in the manner which best conveys the sentiment, passion, or affection with which it affects - or he pretends it does affect - him, and which he designs to communicate to his reader.⁷

These different intentions show themselves in different types of discourse. Smith classifies these by means of two important distinctions. The first is between historical narrative and what could be called "reasoned discourse": historical narrative confines itself to relating particular facts of interest and importance and placing these in a temporal or causal sequence. What I have called reasoned discourse argues to a conclusion or conclusions. The second important distinction is within reasoned discourse. On the one hand there is the objective type of discourse which presents arguments for and against a conclusion and discusses their relative weight: this Smith calls didactic discourse.⁸ On the other hand, if the argument is one sided and aims at persuasion rather than critical assessment which seeks to arrive at the truth, then this is called rhetoric:

Every discourse proposes either barely to relate some fact or to prove some proposition. The first is the kind of discourse called a narrative one; the latter is the foundation of two sorts of discourses, the didactic and the rhetorical. The former proposes to put before us the arguments on both sides of the question in their true light, giving each its proper degree of influence, and has it in view to persuade no further than the arguments themselves appear convincing. The rhetorical, again, endeavours by all means to persuade us, and for this purpose it magnifies

⁷L.R.B.L., p. 51.

⁸This should not be confused with the modern concept of normative.

all the arguments on ^{the} one side, and diminishes or conceals those that might be brought on the ~~other~~ side contrary to that which it is designed that we should favour.⁹

Philosophy and science are both didactic. History may also be didactic if it presents conflicting arguments about the accuracy and truth of alleged historical facts.¹⁰ In this case the distinction between philosophy and science on the one hand and history on the other is that history deals with particular events while philosophy and science deal with types of event.¹¹ The Lectures on Rhetoric do not help us to distinguish between science and philosophy, either in their modern or eighteenth century connotations, but they do have something to say about the style of presentation suited to didactic discourse and thus to both science and philosophy. Smith considers that such discourses may either start by presenting a collection of facts about different specific subjects and proceed to explain these facts by reference to separate principles, or begin with a few general principles and go on to illustrate and prove these in different areas:

Either, first, we lay down one or a very few principles by which we explain the several rules or phenomena, connecting one with the other in a natural order; or else we begin with telling that we are to explain such and such things, and for each advance a principle either different or the same with those which went before.¹²

The former Smith calls the "Newtonian method". He declares it

⁹L.R.B.L., p. 58.

¹⁰L.R.B.L., p. 84ff.

¹¹E.P.S. (N.A.L.&M.), p. 117: "In every case, therefore, Species, or Universals, and not Individuals, are the objects of Philosophy."

¹²L.R.B.L., p. 139.

to be the "more philosophical" if we, "like Newton," lay down certain principles, primary or proved, in the beginning, from whence we account for ^{the} several phenomena, connecting all together by the same chain",¹³ and adds that "in every science, whether of Morals or Natural Philosophy" this method is "vastly more ingenious". But this does not mean that he restricts it to science in the modern sense. The "Newtonian method" applies to all didactic discourse and this includes the a priori methods of Descartes as well as the empirical ones of Newton; it is a method of presentation which is appropriate to any objective argument which sets out to establish the truth of a proposition, whether scientific or otherwise. It would appear to have been the method at which he aims in the Moral Sentiments which begins with a statement of the principle or principles of sympathy which he then goes on to apply to different areas of social life. The Wealth of Nations is nearer to the alternative method which Smith calls "Aristotelian".

Smith took more from Newton than his form of presentation; he also saw what it was about his general method that made his approach particularly important. It is in the Essays that we can see just how far Smith saw empirical science as a distinct species of didactic discourse. These essays are primarily an attempt to give a scientific explanation for the progress of science by reference to the psychological needs and the social environment which prompt and permit men to undertake scientific investigations. However, in the course of his discussion, Smith arrives at an interpretation of the nature of science which corresponds closely to what is now called the hypothetico-deductive model of the nature of scientific inquiry. This theory holds that

¹³ E.R.B.L., p. 140.

science progresses through testing hypothetical generalisations about the connections between observed events. A proposition is scientific if it is possible to deduce from it other propositions which state under what conditions a particular observable event will take place;¹⁴ if, given the conditions, the event does occur then the proposition is corroborated; if it does not occur as predicted, then the proposition is falsified; if no predictions can be deduced from the proposition, or the predictions, like those of the astrologer, are so vague as to be compatible with any combination of observable events, then it is not a scientific proposition at all. This is usually presented as a logical thesis, designed to bring out what is distinctive and central to the scientific method of proof,¹⁵ but Smith incorporates it in a psychological and sociological explanation of the development of science.

"The clew that is most capable of conducting us through all the labyrinths of philosophical history" Smith wrote in the "History of Astronomy", is that all generally accepted scientific theories have owed their success to their ability to "sooth the imagination".¹⁶ Unfamiliar and unexpected objects and events disturb the imagination; "What is new and singular, excites that sentiment which, in strict propriety, is called Wonder;

¹⁴In a stronger sense of "science" these predictions must be part of a system of propositions which have actually been corroborated.

¹⁵cf. K. Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery (London, 1959).

¹⁶E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 21.

what is unexpected, Surprise".¹⁷ Both these emotions are unpleasant and even, on occasion, painful to the extent of manifesting themselves in alarming physical symptoms.¹⁸ In seeking to free themselves from these disturbing mental states men try to find explanations for the phenomena those appearances have caused them distress. The function of an explanation is to restore the imagination to its usual smooth and tranquil state.¹⁹ Further, if the explanation is sufficiently comprehensive, it will give rise to the pleasing emotion of admiration, which is aroused by contemplation of "what is great or beautiful".¹⁷ These sentiments of wonder, surprise and admiration combine to provide the psychological motivation for scientific research.²⁰ Wonder and surprise trouble the imagination and develop scientific curiosity; scientific theories serve to quieten the imagination; and the whole enterprise is crowned with the pleasing sentiment of admiration.

These psychological spurs to scientific endeavour do not

¹⁷E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 2.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 12: "It is this fluctuation and vain recollection, together with the emotion or movement of the spirits that they excite, which constitute the sentiment ^{properly} called Wonder, and which occasion that staring, and sometimes ^{that} rolling of the eyes, that suspension of the breath, and that swelling of the heart, which we may all observe, both in ourselves and others, when wondering at some new object, and which are the natural symptoms of uncertain and undetermined thought".

¹⁹Ibid., p. 20: Tranquillity, as we shall see, is an important psychological state in Smith's theory. The influence here is probably Locke's; cf. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), II.xxi.Sec. 33f.

²⁰Ibid., p. 26: "Wonder, therefore, and not any expectation of advantage from its discoveries, is the first principle which prompts mankind to the study of Philosophy".

bear fruit unless the social conditions are suitable. To account for the emergence of science at particular times and places Smith adds to his theory of the psychology of science, the sociological theory that scientific progress cannot take place "before the establishment of law, order, and security".²¹ In the "first stages of society" and in disturbed periods such as that which followed the fall of the Roman empire²² men did not have that combination of physical security, leisure and wealth, which are required to provide a suitable environment for scientific work. More pressing and obvious distresses overshadowed the uneasy sensations of wonder and surprise while "Those more magnificent irregularities, whose grandeur he (the savage) cannot overlook" impel him to suppose "that they proceed from some intelligent, though invisible causes"²¹ rather than to speculate scientifically. Benign events give rise to a belief in favourable deities and terrifying ones to a belief in evil spirits. Thus the same emotions of wonder and surprise that stimulate scientific reasoning in more settled and prosperous times, account for the prevalence of polytheism in primitive societies. It was not until the political and economic conditions which were attained in "Greece, and the Greek colonies in Sicily, Italy and ^{the} Lesser Asia"²³ that the scientific outlook could flourish, and it is from this era that Smith begins his historical survey of astronomical and physical theories.

²¹ E.P.S. (H.A.), p. 23. A similar precondition is given for the development of commerce, cf. W.N., IV.vii.2. (II.76).

²² E.P.S. (H.A.), p. 46.

²³ E.P.S. (H.A.), p. 26.

In the course of this survey Smith expounds an interesting version of the familiarity theory of explanation, namely that an event is explained when it has been classified as or compared to something with which we are familiar. This turns out to be a psychological version of the regularity or covering-law theory. This latter theory states that an event has been explained when it has been shown to be an instance of a general law; or, expressing this in the terms of the hypothetico-deductive theory, which is a type of covering-law theory, an event is explained if its occurrence could have been deduced from an established empirical hypothesis which states under what conditions such events take place. What is familiar, Smith points out, does not require an explanation; it is accepted as being in the nature of things.²⁴ To explain the novel and uncommon phenomena which excite wonder and surprise it is necessary, therefore, to relate them to something that is familiar. Men "naturally explained things to themselves by principles that were familiar to themselves".²⁵ This is why classification helps to explain things, for "it is evident that the mind takes pleasure in observing the resemblances that are discoverable betwixt different objects".²⁶ Even although such classifications add nothing to our knowledge of the objects concerned "yet we are apt to fancy that by being able to do so, we show ourselves to be better acquainted with it, and to have a more thorough insight into its nature".²⁷ Just as the uneasy wonder aroused by the appearance of an unfamiliar object is allayed

²⁴E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 19.

²⁵E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 22.

²⁶E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 10.

²⁷E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 11.

by the discovery that it is similar to a more familiar object, so the surprise which is occasioned by an event which, however familiar in itself, does not fit into a common sequence of events, requires to be mollified by showing that it is part of a sequence of events similar to ones with which we are familiar.

Both these tendencies, the tendency to classify and the tendency to relate one object to another in a familiar type of sequence, are explained by the theory of the association of ideas. Smith includes amongst the fundamental principles of the human mind the tendency for the imagination to pass from one idea to another similar idea or to one which has been frequently presented to the senses in close temporal and spatial proximity to the first idea. This latter "habit of the imagination" is strengthened by the constant repetition of the sequence of events and, when it is established, takes place without effort or mental disturbance.²⁶ This is the condition of tranquillity: a state of smooth operation rather than rest. Because the speed of this operation is greater than that of the succession of external objects, the perception of the first object leads, by the smooth operation of the imagination, to the anticipation of its successors. We might say that the association of ideas involves the imagination in the subconscious prediction of the immediate future. It is only when these expectations cannot continue because some unknown object presents itself to the senses or the anticipated events do not take place because events present themselves in an unusual order, that the

²⁶ E.P.S. (H.A.), p. 14. In a passage in which Smith comes closest to Hume's theory of the association of ideas he writes: "When two objects, however unlike, have often been observed to follow each other, and have constantly presented themselves to the senses in that order, they come to be so connected together in the fancy, that the idea of the one seems, of its own accord, to call up and introduce that of the other."

flow of ideas is halted and the mind seeks for some explanation which will return the imagination to its normal course.

In presenting this familiarity theory of the nature of scientific explanation Smith does not claim that scientific explanations are straightforward expressions of the truth. His intention is to explain why science is explanatory, that is, why the mind is satisfied with scientific explanations: this is a psychological question and Smith provides a logically appropriate type of answer: "philosophy", he declares, is "one of those arts which address themselves to the imagination".²⁹ He does not, therefore, claim any ultimate metaphysical validity for the established hypotheses of science, any more than, in his essay "Of the External Senses" he claims that sense perception is to be trusted beyond its usefulness in the practical affairs of life.³⁰ Yet despite this stress on the causal explanation of scientific progress and his relative indifference to the truth value of science, Smith's theory turns out to be paralleled, in most respects, by logical theories of the nature of science. For instance, Smith notes the psychological tendency to anticipate familiar sequences of events and the irritation that results if we cannot do this. Science steps in to help, when common sense fails to aid the imagination, by relating the unfamiliar to the familiar: for this reason he defines "philosophy" as "the science of the connecting principles of nature".²⁹ Translated into

²⁹E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 20.

³⁰One of the essays contained in the posthumous collection entitled Essays on Philosophical Subjects. On p. 227 Smith writes, on the lines of Berkeley's New Theory of Vision: "As, in common language, the words or sounds bear no resemblance to the things which they denote, so, in this other language, the visible objects bear no sort of resemblance to the tangible object which they represent."

logical terms this is identical to the view that science establishes general statements of the form "If a then b" where a is one type of event or set of events, and b is another type of event or set of events. Thus, instead of the psychological law that, when the mind perceives a, the imagination passes to the idea of b, we have a generalisation of the form "if a, then b" from which it is possible to predict when b will occur, but instead of saying that the occurrence of b is explained if the sequence "whenever a then b" is a familiar one, the covering-law theory requires that the generalisation has been tested and shown to be true. Since this involves the observation of many instances of a being followed by b and no instances in which a has not been followed by b this amounts to very much the same thing as saying that the sequence must be a familiar one. We may say, therefore, that the regularity theory and the familiarity theory adopted by Smith complement each other, the former giving the logical requirements of a scientific explanation and the latter giving the psychological reasons why scientific explanations are accepted.

In making the everyday activities of classification and generalisation the initial steps in scientific thinking Smith does full justice to the continuity of scientific and common sense explanations. Moreover this shows that he was conscious of the place which inductive procedures have at this elementary level in science. The association of ideas leads men to believe that if b has followed a in the past it will do so in the future, that is, it accounts for the fact that men who have observed that on many occasions b had followed a, tend to conclude that a is always followed by b. In logical terms this psychological process becomes the inductive procedure of arguing from the some to all, a procedure which is justified by inductive logic, and called simple enumeration, because it consists of the accumulation

of many observations which confirm a generalisation. Smith assumes that inductive procedures of this sort are one of the normal operations of reason³¹ and are the basic method by which we learn from experience.³² However, while induction enables men to escape from the particular to the general and to make limited predictions about the future from experience of the past, the explanatory power of such generalisations is limited. To explain that this piece of wood floats in water because all pieces of wood float in water, merely leads on to the next question; why does wood float? Another source of dissatisfaction with low-level generalisations of this sort is that they are not connected together, but seem haphazard and fragmentary. Everyday inductive procedures are therefore insufficient to provide the "connecting principles" which are required to explain common sense generalisations.

Smith shows his dissatisfaction with simple inductive procedures by suggesting that the scientist is not content with a sequence of observed events if, however familiar that sequence is in itself, it is not similar to other observed sequences. The example he gives is that of the piece of iron which moves along the table towards a loadstone.³³ Familiarity

³¹T.M.S., VII.iii.2 (II.337): "The general maxims of morality are formed, like all other general maxims, from experience and induction. We observe in a great variety of particular cases what pleases or displeases our moral faculties, what these approve or disapprove of, and, by induction from this experience, we establish those general rules. But induction is always regarded as one of the operations of reason."

³²H.P.S., p. 229ff. discusses the role of observation and experience in the co-ordination of perceptions in infants.

³³H.P.S.(H.A.), p. 15.

with this happening does not fully overcome the difficulty which the imagination feels in passing from the idea of a magnet being placed on a table to the idea of the movement of a piece of iron towards it: the movement may be expected but it is not fully explained. The imagination is not able to relate this phenomenon to others with which it is even more familiar; in order to do this science has to leave behind the method of simple induction and resort to a hypothesis which will explain this phenomenon by suggesting how it is related to others. In terms of the covering-law theory it is necessary to explain scientific facts, which state regularities observed to hold between observable events, by establishing a more general connection between phenomena from which this particular fact can be deduced;³⁴ it is necessary to move from the level of describing facts to formulating laws, which are at once more abstract and more general.

The move to a higher level of abstraction and generalisation is, for Smith, a move from placing an event in sequence with another event, to comparing sequences of events themselves. In order to do this the scientist has to go beyond relating observed phenomena and suggest hypotheses about the unobserved connections between events. Returning to the example of the loadstone, a scientific hypothesis is one which connects the two ideas, that of the loadstone and that of the movement of the iron towards it, by suggesting an invisible chain of events which act as a bridge over which the imagination can pass. To be effective as a bridge the hypothesis must suggest an invisible sequence of events which is comparable to a visible sequence of events with which we are

³⁴ Smith expresses the matter in this way in W.N., V.1.3.art. 2 (II.291) in comparing the aims of moral philosophy and physics where he says of ancient moral philosophy that it tended "to multiply the number of those maxims of prudence and morality, without even attempting...to connect them together by one or more general principles, from which they were all deducible, like effects from their natural causes."

very familiar; in this way the strange sequence of events is explained by being shown to be an instance of a more common and more general type of connection;

when, with Des Cartes, we imagine certain invisible effluvia to circulate round one of them, and by their repeated impulses to impel the other, both to move towards it, and to follow its motion, we fill up the interval betwixt them, we join them together by a sort of bridge, and thus take off that hesitation and difficulty which the imagination felt in passing from ^{the} one to the other. That the iron should move after the loadstone seems, upon this hypothesis, in some measure according to the ordinary course of things. Motion after impulse is an order of succession with which of all things we are the most familiar.³⁵

A good hypothesis thus "fills the gap" between seemingly unconnected events. A series of related hypotheses constitutes a "system" because they enable us to connect a large number of disparate events and reduce them to some sort of coherence. This shows that Smith knew the importance of theorising in science, that is the ability to go beyond the recording of observable relations to suggest a model from which a wide variety of observable events can be deduced.³⁶ Smith describes how, in astronomy, the "system" or theory of concentric spheres, taught in Italy before the time of Aristotle, held that the sun, the moon, the five planets and the remainder of the stars each had a solid sphere to which they were attached. The virtue of this theory was that "Though rude and inartificial, it is capable of connecting together, in the imagination, the grandest and ^{the} most seemingly

³⁵ E.P.S. (H.A.), p. 16.

³⁶ Of. The economic theory of the Wealth of Nations enables him to counter the simple minded mercantilist argument that because prosperity has followed the introduction of mercantilist laws that these laws must be the cause of the prosperity. W.N., IV.v (II.50).

disjointed appearances in the heavens."³⁷ By providing "a connecting chain of intermediate events"³⁸ between observed phenomena, the imagination can find a satisfactory connection between the movements of the heavenly bodies, and by positing unobserved mechanisms and chains of invisible connections which are "the more inventions of the imagination",³⁹ it goes far beyond the compilation of observed connections between events. This is the creative element in scientific progress. It calls for the "bold ideas, unjustified anticipations and speculative thought" which Popper believes to be "our only way for interpreting nature".⁴⁰

Smith's history of astronomical theories demonstrates that he considers one theory to be superior to another if it is more successful in soothing the imagination. But he also sees that it must accord more exactly with observed phenomena than any alternative theory. In the end this last condition is the decisive one, but all theories must go some way towards pleasing the imagination, and, other things being equal, the theory which pleases the imagination most is preferred. As far as the psychological criteria are concerned the basic test of a theory is whether it connects as large as possible a number of observed events in the simplest and most familiar way. The first criterion of a good scientific theory is therefore that it

³⁷ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 31f.

³⁸ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 16.

³⁹ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 93, cf. p. 44 "A system is an imaginary machine invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed".

⁴⁰ The Logic of Scientific Discovery, p. 260.

connects or renders more coherent a large number of apparently dissimilar phenomena. On this score the "system of concentric, and that of eccentric spheres" which suggested that some of the spheres did not have the earth for their centre, and thus explained many of the motions of the planets which were "irregular" in that they did not fit in with the original theory of concentric spheres, was preferred to that of Cleanthes and the Stoics who were "at a loss to connect together the peculiarities that are observed in the motions of the other heavenly bodies".⁴¹ At a later time the theory of Copernicus replaced that of Ptolemy partly because "this new account of things render(ed) the appearances of the heavens more completely coherent than had been done by any of the former systems".⁴²

The second criterion is that a hypothesis or system must be simple. Since the whole purpose of science is to reduce the complexities of nature to a few familiar principles, any theory which becomes so complex that the imagination no longer finds it of any assistance has to be abandoned in favour of a more simple theory. A good theory, like a new machine, may start off being fairly complex but, as it improves it should become more streamlined.⁴³ But if, on the other hand, a simple theory has to be subjected to many modifications then this creates the need for a new theory. The theory of concentric spheres started as a simple theory, but, in order to fit in with the appearances of the heavens, the number of spheres had to be increased to seventy two, and the attractiveness of the theory was reduced until it could be simplified again by the introduction of the

⁴¹E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 42.

⁴²E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 54.

⁴³E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 44.

hypothesis of eccentric spheres.⁴⁴ Similarly the theory of Copernicus which made the earth move round the sun, not only accounted for more observed facts than previous theories but "It did this, too, by a more simple and intelligible, as well as more beautiful machinery".⁴⁵

Thirdly, a theory which is to be acceptable to the imagination must suggest a simple hypothesis of a type which is familiar; the invisible chains which it uses to bind events together must be of a sort which have common visible counterparts. In practice this is a demand that all scientific theories must suggest some mechanical analogy, an invisible machine behind the scenes whose workings result in the motions of visible objects.⁴⁶ This is the criterion which Smith stresses most when he is explaining the psychological causes of the acceptance and rejection of theories: "no system, how well soever in other respects supported, has ever been able to gain any general credit in the world, whose connecting principles were not such as were familiar to all mankind".⁴⁷ He attributes the failure of chemistry to its inability to discover such connection principles.⁴⁷ And, again, the theory of Copernicus was rejected for a long time because it seemed to go against many of the familiar evidences of the senses which imply that the world is at rest.⁴⁸ It was not until Galileo related the

⁴⁴E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 36: "This system had now become as intricate and complex as those appearances themselves, which it had been invented to render uniform and coherent".

⁴⁵E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 54.

⁴⁶E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 44f.

⁴⁷E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 21.

⁴⁸E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 64.

theory to familiar examples of objects moving relative to the earth but not to each other that it gained wide acceptance.⁴⁹

By insisting that all scientific theories must stick to familiar mechanisms of nature Smith was encouraged by the success of Newton's system and the extreme familiarity of the phenomenon of gravity. Like many thinkers of the period he assumed that this would be the model for all scientific theories. This enabled him to avoid addressing himself to the major problem of the familiarity theory of explanation, namely the difficulty it has in accounting for the emergence of new types of explanatory theory. For Smith a new theory is explanatory only if it is based on an analogy with a familiar mechanism. The progress of science has demonstrated that this is too constricting a requirement, and in particular that the demand that all theories should be a type of mechanical analogy became in the end a sterile methodological principle. However it should be noted that Smith emphasised the familiarity criterion most in the context of explaining the popularity of scientific theories and that it drops into the background when he discusses the experts' attitude to their investigations.⁵⁰

The "Essay on the History of Astronomy" does not confine itself to stressing the qualities which a scientific theory must have in order to appeal to the imagination. This, in itself, would leave the field open for uncontrolled speculations

⁴⁹E.P.S.(R.A.), p. 65.

⁵⁰E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 83: "When the observations of Cassini had established the authority of those laws, which Kepler had first discovered in the system, the philosophy of Des Cartes, which could afford no reason, why such particular laws should be observed, might continue to amuse the learned in other sciences, but could no longer satisfy those that were skilled in Astronomy".

which, because of their subjective nature,⁵¹ would result in extensive and incorrigible disagreements. But Smith notes that, however well a theory satisfies imaginative and therefore aesthetic criteria, it is rejected if it does not fit the observed facts. The creative aspect of scientific endeavour, suggesting hypotheses and formulating theories, is rigidly controlled by the ability of the scientist to demonstrate that his intellectual inventions can be used to describe and predict the real world, the world of sense perceptions. Imaginative appeal is necessary for a theory, but it is by no means sufficient.

The close relationship Smith builds up between theory and observation begins with the assertion that it is on account of the wonder and surprise aroused by the visible and tangible world that scientific explanations are sought in the first place. The purpose of theory is to explain the appearances of nature. In the first stages of science the curiosity which is aroused by unusual phenomena and the desire to find unnoticed regularities in nature, leads to much closer scrutiny of phenomena. This, in turn, results in the observation of more irregularities and surprises. The scientist comes to wonder at and be surprised by things which the casual observer takes for granted. The botanist sees more differences as well as more similarities between plants.⁵² The astronomer notices that the planets do not move in perfect circles and other "irregularities" of the heavens.⁵³ "A philosopher, who has spent his whole life in the study of the connecting principles of nature, will often feel an

⁵¹ E.P.S. (H.A.), p. 10: "such orders of succession are familiar to ^{one} one, and strange to the other".

⁵² E.P.S. (H.A.), p. 11.

⁵³ E.P.S. (H.A.), p. 62f.

interval betwixt two objects, which, to more careless observers, seem very strictly conjoined".⁵⁴ These detailed observations are challenges to further scientific thinking; they are one cause of the creative stage of hypothesis formation.

However the observation of natural processes is not merely the beginning of scientific theorising, it is also its logical conclusion. Scientific theories are tested by their power to predict observed events. The more numerous and accurate their predictions, the more satisfactory the theory. As Smith develops the history of astronomy from its common sense beginnings to its most sophisticated achievements this requirement comes to the fore. Thus the early form of the system of concentric spheres could not account for the motions of the sun and moon which are "such as cannot be discovered but by the most attentive observation", and, after extensive modifications to accommodate the theory to these observations, it had to be abandoned.⁵⁵ Similarly the tables of Ptolemy "having, upon account of the inaccuracy of the observations upon which they were founded, become altogether wide of the real situation of the heavenly bodies", became useless.⁵⁶ The system of Copernicus was not only more simple than its predecessors, it also coincided with the observed irregular movements of the planets.⁵⁷ Smith showed that he was aware of the advances made in science by the development of new and more precise instruments of observation,⁵⁸ and by the ability to discover

⁵⁴R.P.S.(H.A.), p. 20.

⁵⁵R.P.S.(H.A.), p. 34. Smith realised that theories are not often falsified by a single observation but suffer death from a thousand modifications.

⁵⁶R.P.S.(H.A.), p. 49.

⁵⁷R.P.S.(H.A.), p. 54.

⁵⁸R.P.S.(H.A.), p. 47; cf. p. 79, 93 & 66: "His (Copernicus') telescopes rendered the phases of Venus quite sensible".

numerical relationships between observed events and so enable more precision to be introduced into hypotheses and predictions.

Astronomy is not, or at least was not until the advent of man-made satellites, a subject which lends itself to experiment in the sense of the creation of a controlled situation for the purposes of observing what will happen or for testing hypotheses. Yet it has its logical equivalents in the practices of making observations from different places on the earth's surface and in predicting uncommon appearances in the heavens. Smith stresses several important examples of this sort of "experiment". He notes, for instance, that "the observations of Astronomers at Lapland and Peru have fully confirmed Sir Isaac's system",⁵⁹ and discusses the prediction, advanced from theory, that since Venus and Mercury revolved round the sun they would show the same phases as the moon, which was confirmed by the observations of Galileo.⁶⁰ Similarly the mathematical relations which Kepler suggested might hold between the periodic times of the planets and their distance from the sun, although they had little appeal for the imagination, were nevertheless established by the observations which confirmed them.⁶¹ In another interesting example which shows that Smith realised the extent to which accurate prediction is more important than facile imaginative satisfaction, he describes how the yearning of the imagination for nature to conform to perfect circles, which supported the system of Descartes, was overruled by observations which showed that the circles of the planets were irregular: this confirmed the system of Copernicus from which these irregularities

⁵⁹ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 88.

⁶⁰ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 66.

⁶¹ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 68.

could be deduced.⁶²

Like Popper, Smith saw that science was "imaginative and bold conjectures or anticipations...carefully and soberly controlled by systematic tests".⁶³ His history of astronomy which illustrates the combined dialectic between imaginative hypotheses and observations of irregularities, concludes with an outline of the superiority of Newton's system over all previous ones. In this he shows that Newton's theory had all the virtues which attract the imagination: simplicity, comprehensiveness, and familiarity. Newton is said to have made "the greatest, and most admirable improvement in philosophy, when he discovered that he could join together the movements of the planets by so familiar a principle of connection, which completely removed all the difficulties the imagination had hitherto felt in attending to them";⁶⁴ the principle was, of course, "the simple and familiar fact of gravitation". But the superiority of Newton's system lay even more in the precision with which the appearances of the heavens could be deduced from the invisible mechanism which he suggested: "Sir Isaac Newton computed the difference of the forces, with which the Moon and the Earth ought, in all those different situations, according to his theory, to be impelled towards one another; and found, that the different degrees of their approaches, as they had been observed by Astronomers, corresponded exactly to his computations".⁶⁵ These different forces are in precise mathematical

⁶²E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 82: Descartes "had never himself observed the Heavens with any particular application", and while his theory connected the motions of the planets "in the gross; but did not apply to them, when they were regarded in detail".

⁶³K. Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery, p. 279.

⁶⁴E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 83f

⁶⁵E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 86.

terms and the deduction of the appearances from the principles are not "general and loose" but are "the most precise and particular that can be imagined".⁶⁶ They have frequently been confirmed and Smith notes that, at the time of writing, astronomers are waiting to see if the predicted appearances of a comet actually take place; a later footnote is inserted to report "that the return of the comet happened agreeably to the prediction".⁶⁷

Smith's admiration for Newton's theory draws from him the admission that, in this case at least, a scientific theory may be describing "the real chains which Nature makes use of to bind together her several operations".⁶⁸ This seems to follow from its power to make detailed and accurate astronomical predictions. There are other places in the essay where he hints that, while psychological laws determine if a theory will receive popular acceptance, it is the extent to which a theory accords with observed facts that determines its truth. In explaining that Chemistry has been "disregarded by the generality of mankind" because of the unfamiliarity of its principles, he does not suggest that these are not "agreeable with experience".⁶⁹ Again, while the mathematical connections between planetary movements suggested by Kepler were for a long time too "intricate and difficult to ^{be} comprehended" and this delayed their acceptance, Smith relates how observation eventually showed them to be true.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 92.

⁶⁷ E.F.S.(H.A.), p. 90.

⁶⁸ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 93.

⁶⁹ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 20.

⁷⁰ E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 72f.

The imaginative criteria, while necessary to the advance of science, can be positively misleading in that they encourage men to assume that the world is more regular and simple than it really is.⁷¹ Examples like this show that when Smith moved from causal explanations for the popular progress of scientific theories to an assessment of the reasons for their acceptance by scientists, he stressed the importance of the correspondence between the deductive consequences of theories and the observation of the phenomena they purport to explain. This does not mean that he thought that science could ever leave behind the need for creative theorising but only that those theories which satisfy the imagination must also accord with the observed facts if they are to gain acceptance by scientists.

The repeated stress Smith puts on the criterion of familiarity, and the connection of this with the doctrine of the association of ideas are the main ways in which his account of science diverges from the consensus of modern philosophy of science. Simplicity and comprehensiveness are still frequently mentioned as features of a good scientific theory, but the requirement that an explanation be in terms of what is familiar is usually confined to explications of the nature of common sense explanations and is more characteristic of popularisations of science than of sophisticated scientific theorising. Nevertheless I have shown that much of what Smith puts in terms of "familiarity" can be translated into the logical terms of the covering-law theory. Where this is not the case, as with Smith's insistence that all scientific theories must consist of mechanical analogies drawn from everyday experience, it has to

⁷¹ E.P.S. (H.A.P.), p. 99.

be admitted that his imaginative foresight into the nature of future scientific theories was, understandably, limited. This does not affect his basic insight into the rôle of theorising as a link between the observations which provoke scientific explanations and those that confirm them. Even if we might want to say that science appeals to the intellect more than to the imagination,⁷² Smith's analysis of the nature of science is sufficiently modern for us to say that he had an explicit awareness of the logic of scientific method.

It is less easy to determine whether Smith had a clear idea of philosophy, in the modern sense, as a study logically distinct from science. This is, in itself, hardly surprising since agreed definitions of philosophy are much harder to arrive at than are definitions of science. What constitutes a philosophical question is a disputed issue within philosophy; such consensus as exists at the present time on this matter is largely on the negative description of philosophy which defines it as being concerned with general questions about the world and man's place in it which cannot be answered by the methods of science. As more and more subjects break away from their philosophical origins and establish their independence, philosophy has become a residual category which continues to deal with those issues which remain beyond the scope of particular sciences. Classifying these issues, in a summary and dogmatic way, we can say that they consist, on the one hand, of speculations about the nature of the world of a quasi-factual type which science either cannot yet deal with or cannot deal with in principle; and, on the other

⁷²N. Campbell, What is Science? (London, 1921), p.158: Campbell argues that the "primary object of science is to satisfy intellectual desires".

hand, various normative issues which are logically inappropriate for the methods of science. The first we may call metaphysics: this contains speculations about matters of fact for which satisfactory scientific evidence is not at present available, and discusses general issues about the nature of the world arising out of the agreed results of scientific research. In its enquiry into the general nature of reality it takes into account all areas of human experience which might be thought to provide information about the world; it therefore discusses the implications of religious and artistic experience. One particular sort of metaphysical speculation which seeks to interpret human experience in terms of the possible existence and purpose of a god or gods, is theology.

Normative philosophy, which is relevant to but not identical with metaphysics, makes and seeks to support evaluative judgments about correct standards of reasoning (logic), reliable sources of knowledge (epistemology), acceptable moral rules and ideals (moral philosophy) and standards of artistic appreciation (aesthetics). For those who deny the possibility of such normative disciplines these departments of philosophy may be reinterpreted as part of the process of logical clarification which seeks to elucidate what is involved in making normative judgments of these different sorts without actually adopting any particular evaluative judgment. However it is better to stick to a more positively normative interpretation of these branches of philosophy since logical clarification is also part of science, especially of social science, and its use therefore provides no clear demarcation between philosophy and science.

There is some evidence to suggest that Smith would not have found these distinctions between science and the various sorts of philosophy unfamiliar. His discussions of metaphysics are largely historical in character and represent it as a forerunner

and a rival to science as much as a distinct type of study. He classifies Plato's theory of Ideas, an example of a theory of Universals, as metaphysics, and criticises it for its a priori method of searching for knowledge about the world:

Thus science, which is conversant about Universals, is derived from memory; and to instruct any person concerning the general nature of any subject, is no more than to awaken in him the remembrance of what he formerly knew about it. This both Plato and Socrates imagined they could still further confirm, by the fallacious experiment, which shewed, that a person might be led to discover himself, without any information, any general truth, of which he was before ignorant, merely by being asked a number of properly arranged and connected questions concerning it.⁷³

This amounts to a rejection of a priori methods in science and a criticism of metaphysics, which uses such methods, for stepping outside its proper sphere. A similar point is made, not about metaphysics as such, but about excessive concentration on metaphysics, in the Wealth of Nations where he discusses the content of university education. There he defines metaphysics or "Pneumatics" as the study of the human soul and the deity, although "Ontology" which attempts to relate Pneumatics and Physics is "likewise sometimes called Metaphysics".⁷⁴ Here there seems to be some distinction between metaphysics as the study of invisible things and science or physics as the study of visible objects or "bodies". Smith's criticism is that the study of bodies which is "The proper subject of experiment and observation, a subject in which a careful attention is capable of making so many useful discoveries", had been "almost entirely neglected". And "the subject in which, after a few very simple and almost obvious truths, the most careful attention can discover

⁷³ E.P.S. (H.A.L. & N.), p. 123.

⁷⁴ W.N., V. i. 3. art. 2. (II, 292-3).

nothing but obscurity and uncertainty, and can consequently produce nothing but subtleties and sophisms", was being "greatly cultivated".⁷⁵ We can conclude from this that Smith did not object to all metaphysics but considered that it has a small and relatively unimportant place in comparison with science. This accords with his general view of theology as a part of metaphysics. We have seen that his lectures on Natural Theology are reported to have contained a discussion of "the proofs of the being and attributes of God, and those principles of the human mind upon which religion is founded".⁷⁶ This latter part sounds as if it were roughly the same sort of enquiry as his investigation of the causes for the progress of science, namely a psychological and sociological study. Hints as to his views on this matter can be gleaned from the essay on astronomy where he suggests that polytheistic beliefs arise in primitive cultures which have no developed science, and theism is a consequence of the advance of science; by demonstrating the unity and harmony of phenomena, science suggests that there is a unitary purpose and will behind the appearances of nature:

The unity of the system, which, according to this ancient philosophy, is most perfect, suggested the idea of the unity of that principle, by whose act it was formed; and thus, as ignorance beget superstition, science gave birth to the first theism that arose among those nations, who were not enlightened by divine Revelation.⁷⁷

This seems to assimilate the natural as opposed to the revealed causes of theistic belief to the admiration which arises out of the scientific study of the world, which fits in with Smith's

⁷⁵W.N., V.1.3.11 (II.293).

⁷⁶cf. p. 5.

⁷⁷B.P.S.(H.A.P.), p. 107; cf. T.H.S., III.5 (I.408ff.)

obvious sympathy with the argument from Design as a proof for the existence of God.⁷⁸ From this we may conclude that, for Smith, theology proper, as distinct from the psychology and sociology of religion, was a study which was a logical consequence of science but, as part of metaphysics, was distinct from science.

As regards the other branches of philosophy, Smith seems to have been in no doubt that logic is "the science of the general principles of good and bad reasoning",⁷⁹ a normative study to determine which types of argument are valid and which fallacious, although he does not appear to have thought that there was a great deal which needed to be said on this subject. Moral philosophy is ambiguously defined both as a quasi-normative discipline which asks "wherein lies the happiness and perfection of a man"⁸⁰ and as a descriptive account of moral beliefs in which "the maxims of common life were arranged in some methodical order, and connected together by a few common principles, in the same manner as they had attempted to arrange and connect the phenomena of nature".⁸¹ We shall return to this when discussing whether Smith's "moral philosophy" is normative or scientific, but the definitions of moral philosophy which he gives are sufficient to show that he was aware that both normative and factual questions can be asked in a study of morality and that the two are distinct.

⁷⁸Cf. p. 318f.

⁷⁹W.N., V.1.3.art.2 (II.292). Ancient Logic is classified as a part of metaphysics, cf. E.P.S. (H.A.L. & M.), p. 117.

⁸⁰W.N., V.1.3.art.2 (II.293). This is given as a description of "ancient moral philosophy".

⁸¹W.N., V.1.3.art.2 (II.291).

Chapter TwoSOCIAL SCIENCE OR SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY?

Adequate evidence has now been presented to justify the view that Adam Smith was sufficiently aware of the modern distinction between philosophy and science to make it reasonable to ask whether he saw his own work as (social) science or (social) philosophy, or as a combination of the two. Did he regard himself as applying the descriptive-explanatory methods of the natural sciences to the study of society, making only such modifications as are required by important differences between the type of phenomena concerned, or should he be interpreted as engaged in a radically different type of study designed to set forth the ideals and practices appropriate to the best form of society? Part of my intention in this work is to ask such questions with particular respect to the Moral Sentiments and final answers must therefore wait upon the analysis of the content of that book. However, since I assume a basic unity of purpose and method to lie behind all Smith's work, a preliminary survey needs to be made of his complete writings with a view to gaining an over all impression of his work.

Smith makes few explicit statements about his aims and methods and the main burden of evidence concerning the logical status of his theories must, therefore, come from an examination of his actual practice. Yet there are some important passages in which he reveals his hand and gives us a direct insight into his methodological presuppositions. By and large these appear, at first sight, to imply a normative purpose for his studies in morality, law and economics. But there are other passages which indicate a more scientific approach and, in any case, I shall argue that his stated aims are often misleading descriptions of the actual

content of his work and, at best, give only a partial picture of its scope.

Dugald Stewart, noting Smith's early interest in mathematics and natural science, infers that he came to prefer the study of society as a result of his desire to be of practical assistance with human problems. "The study of ^{human} nature", Stewart wrote, "gratified his ruling passion, of contributing to the happiness and ^{the} improvement of society".¹ This fits well with Smith's often stated preference for studies of practical import. For instance he was very much aware of the need to involve universities in practical affairs and considered it of great importance that an academic study should be able to prove its usefulness to society. It was for this reason that he passed quickly over the traditional study of ancient logic and metaphysics in his early Glasgow lectures² and, probably with his experience of Oxford in mind, castigated the universities in general for failing to prepare their students for "the real business of the world".³ In general he is strongly opposed to "abstract speculative reasonings which perhaps tend ^{to} a very little to the bettering ^{of} our practice".⁴

The "more interesting and useful" matters to which Smith turned his attention in his Logic lectures were rhetoric and belles lettres. The analysis of the different types of discourse which these contain has already been outlined,⁵ but it should be stressed, in this context, that the purpose of this analysis is the practical one of determining which mode of expression is

¹E.P.S. ("Account"), p. xii.

²This is John Millar's report: E.P.S. ("Account"), p. xvi.

³W.N., V.i.3.art. 2 (II.295).

⁴L.R.B.L., p. 37.

⁵Cf. p. 16ff.

most appropriate to each type of discourse, whether historical, scientific or poetic. The lectures contain guidance on how to present a balanced or a persuasive argument and how to describe and stimulate emotions. It is thus a psychological study of the means of communication approached from the point of view of the person who wishes to communicate his thoughts or sentiments. This is of a piece with parts of the other available material which was to make up his "sort of Philosophical History of all the different branches of Literature, of Philosophy, Poetry and Eloquence", namely the Essays on Philosophical Subjects, where Smith advises on the most effective way of presenting scientific theories. In so far as these essays are historical, tracing the development of science, they may be said to conform to the practical sort of history which Smith commends in the Lectures on Rhetoric where he argues that the purpose of historical writing is to enable men to learn from experience and so conduct their affairs better; Thucydides is praised for adopting this method in his history of the Peloponnesian war since, "by recording in the truest manner the various incidents of that war, and the causes that produced (it), posterity may learn how to produce the like events or shun others, and know what is to be expected from such and such circumstances".⁶

The same prejudice in favour of the practical emerges in some of Smith's explicit remarks about the nature of moral philosophy. At the end of the Moral Sentiments he wrote that "the two useful parts of moral philosophy" are "Ethics and Jurisprudence",⁷ with the implication that these are the only proper objects of study in this field. In the context of this

⁶L.R.B.L., p. 102.

⁷T.M.S., VII.iv (II.394).

particular statement the contrast is with casuistry which, he argues, while it may have a practical aim, is useless in helping men to decide specific moral questions. The mistake of the casuist is to think that the practice of virtue can be taught in detailed rules which cover all circumstances. As this is only possible in the case of rules of justice "books of casuistry... are generally as useless as they are commonly tiresome".⁸ They never cover all the necessary cases and fail to "animate us ~~to~~ what is generous and noble" but rather "teach us to chicanery with our own consciences", and "are"incapable of exciting in the heart any of those emotions which it is the principal use of books of morality to excite".⁹ Their existence is due to the confessional, and is part of the general deterioration of moral philosophy from the ancients to the time of theological domination when "casuistry and ascetic morality made up the greater part of the moral philosophy of the schools".¹⁰ In the wider context Smith is contrasting the utility of ethics and jurisprudence with the non-utility of theories about the nature of the moral faculty, a question which, he thinks, is interesting but of no practical significance.¹¹ The usefulness which Smith attributes to the study of Ethics lies in its descriptions of virtue and vice, and their natural rewards, which "inflame our natural love of virtue, and increase our abhorrence of vice" and so help to "correct and to ascertain our

⁸T.M.S., VII.iv. (II.392).

⁹T.M.S., VII.iv (II.393-4).

¹⁰W.N., V.I.3.art.2 (II.294). Smith goes on to complain of "a debased system of moral philosophy, which was considered as immediately connected with the doctrines of Pneumatology, with the immortality of the human soul, and with the rewards and punishments which, from the justice of the Deity, were to be expected in a life to come".

¹¹T.M.S., VII.iii.Intro. (II.324f.).

natural sentiments with regard to the propriety of conduct, and suggesting many nice and delicate attentions, form us to a more exact justness of behaviour, than what, without such instruction, we should have been apt to think of".¹² The "science which is properly called Ethics" gives a general picture of virtue and vice, and so accomplishes "Whatever precept and exhortation can do to animate us to the practice of virtue".¹³ The examples he cites are the Offices of Cicero which direct us to practise the four cardinal virtues and the practical part of Aristotle's ethics where he "points out to us the different habits by which he would have us regulate our behaviour".¹⁴

The second "useful part of moral philosophy" is jurisprudence whose purpose is to provide a "theory of the general principles which ought to run through and be the foundation of the laws of all nations".⁽¹⁵⁾ A large part of these laws are the rules of justice mentioned in the Moral Sentiments as being of sufficient precision and importance to be embodied in positive law and outlined in some detail in the Lectures on Jurisprudence. This would seem to betoken a normative purpose in the tradition of those natural law theorists who seek to establish a base from which to criticise positive law. Finally, the division between moral philosophy and economics comes when Smith passes, in Miller's words,¹⁶ from justice to expediency, from considering what laws

¹²T.M.S., VII.iv (II.364).

¹³T.M.S., VII.iv (II.365).

¹⁴T.M.S., VII.iv (II.363).

¹⁵T.M.S., VII.iv (II.398); my italics; cf. L.J., p. 1.

¹⁶E.P.S.("Account"), p. xviii.

a state ought to enforce in order to maintain justice, to an enquiry into the content of those laws which are most beneficial to the advancement of a country's wealth, for "Political economy, considered as a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator, proposes two distinct objects...to enrich both the people and the sovereign".¹⁷

By considering these descriptions which Smith gives of his own work and taking into account his professed and reported preoccupation with practical concerns, it is easy to present a picture of his work very far removed from that of the detached observing scientist, seeking to explain but not to evaluate, and to agree with Eli Ginzberg that Smith "was first and foremost a moralist",¹⁸ although a moralist as much concerned with means as with ends. The Moral Sentiments might, therefore, be expected to provide a general outline of virtue and vice designed to encourage the one and condemn the other; we should then proceed to the "science of the statesman" for a consideration of the moral content of the law, under the heading of "justice", followed by further recommendations designed to increase the prosperity and security of the nation. This would provide a coherent and logical system of moral and prudential recommendations, a normative and practical study which aims to tell us what is virtuous, just and desirable, and how to achieve these ends in practice.

Yet consideration of the actual content of Smith's work, and of other passages in which he outlines his method, gives a very different impression. At the beginning of part seven of the Moral Sentiments he says that there are two questions to be considered in treating of the principles of morals:

¹⁷W.W., IV.(Introd.) (I.449).

¹⁸The House of Adam Smith (New York, 1933), p. 242.

First, wherein does virtue consist? Or what is the tone of temper, and tenour of conduct, which constitutes the excellent and praise-worthy character, the character which is the natural object of esteem, honour, and approbation? And, secondly, by what power or faculty in the mind is it, that this character, whatever it be, is recommended to us? Or in other words, how and by what means does it come to pass, that the mind prefers one tenour of conduct to another; denominates the one right and the other wrong; considers the one as the object of approbation, honour, and reward, and the other of blame, censure, and punishment?¹⁹

The first part of this outline could be taken to cover the general picture of virtue and vice which constitutes "the science which is properly called Ethics", but the second part does not fit the description he has given of the useful purpose of moral philosophy. In fact he admits that:

the determination of this second question, though of the greatest importance in speculation, is of none in practice. The question concerning the nature of virtue necessarily has some influence upon our notions of right and wrong in many particular cases. That concerning the principle of approbation can possibly have no such effect. To examine from what contrivance or mechanism within, these different notions or sentiments arise, is a mere matter of philosophical curiosity.²⁰

This would lead us to expect a secondary and subordinate investigation appended to a vivid description of virtue and vice, but this is not borne out by an examination of the actual content of the Moral Sentiments. The "mechanism" by which we come to make judgments of approval and disapproval is, in fact, the main theme of the book; the "contrivance" of sympathy, with

¹⁹T.M.S., VII.i (II.196f.).

²⁰T.M.S., VII.iii.Introd. (II.324f.).

all its ramifications, is the chief subject of study.²¹ Further the outline of men's opinions concerning virtue and vice is mainly used to test the theory that all moral distinctions are derived from sympathy, and the concept of sympathy, as we shall see, is given a purely empirical content. It turns out, therefore, that the practical aspect of his moral philosophy is incidental to its main aim which is theoretical and scientific. In this it follows the programme given in the Wealth of Nations where Smith dates the origin of moral philosophy at the time when "The maxims of common life were arranged in some methodical order, and connected together by a few common principles, in the same manner as they had attempted to arrange and connect the phenomena of nature", and adds that "the science which pretends to investigate and explain those connecting principles, is what is properly called moral philosophy".²² I consider this to be Smith's most accurate statement of the relationship between the two parts of his ethical theory, the first part describing and classifying opinions concerning the content of virtuous and wicked behaviour, and the second explaining these opinions by reference to the constitution of human nature and the process by which men come to make judgments of approval and disapproval. It argues for a scientific rather than a normative purpose for the book. Support for this view of Smith's moral philosophy is to be found in an important footnote at the end of part II of the Moral Sentiments where Smith answers the complaint that

²¹W. R. Sorley, Ethics of Naturalism (London, 1885), makes this point: p. 85: "Especially among the later English Moralists - Adam Smith, for instance - the question of the end or the standard came almost to drop out of sight in the midst of the controversy regarding the nature of the 'moral sense' or 'moral faculty'".

²²W.N., V.1.3.art.2 (II.291).

his analysis of the sense of ill-desert in terms of resentment is a degradation of that sense, by asserting:

Let it be considered too, that the present inquiry is not concerning a matter of right, if I may say so, but concerning a matter of fact. We are not at present examining upon what principles a perfect being would approve of the punishment of bad actions; but upon what principles so weak and imperfect a creature as man actually and in fact approves of it.²³

Coming, as this does, in the middle of the main exposition of Smith's moral theory, it is a comment which provides justification for strengthening W. G. Swabey's tentative conclusion that "it is possible to interpret Adam Smith as making no ethical statements at all, that is, solely as a moral psychologist engaged in analysing and explaining acts of approval and disapproval"²⁴ and to say that this is the correct interpretation of the Moral Sentiments (provided that the term "psychologist" is not taken to exclude a sociological approach).

A similar contrast between stated aims and actual practice is to be found in the Lectures on Jurisprudence. Although Jurisprudence is introduced to us as the study of the rules by which civil government ought to be directed, in practice the subject is treated almost entirely descriptively, and in the case of justice, we are provided with a summary of the rights which applied in eighteenth century Britain, with an account of the development of justice through different types of society, and explanations of its less obvious benefits. This fits his promise, at the end of the Moral Sentiments, to "give an account of the general principles of law and government, and of the different revolutions they have undergone in the different ages

²³T.M.S., II.1.5 (I.189).

²⁴Ethical Theory from Hobbes to Kant (London, 1961), p. 179.

and periods of society".²⁵ The Wealth of Nations is an expansion of part of the Lectures on Jurisprudence and, despite its more frequent pleas for alterations to the law in accordance with the system of "natural liberty", it contains the same abundance of descriptive detail together with historical and sociological explanation. It deals primarily with the causes and effects of the division of labour and the development of economic production and only secondarily with criticisms of those institutions which retard this progress. For the most part Smith is explaining what had to happen and what will happen however misguided legislators have been in the past and, regrettably, will be in the future.²⁶ Similarly, in the Essays on Philosophical Subjects, it is possible to ignore Smith's passing comments on the advantages to be gained by different methods of presentation, and see him as a detached observer explaining why science and theology have progressed to their present state. Here, as elsewhere, Smith's interests are more scientific and theoretical than he is sometimes prepared to admit.

Nevertheless there does seem to be an inconsistency or at any rate an ambivalence in Smith's stated purposes. I have indicated that the actual content of his work would lead us to attach more weight to those places where he puts a straightforward scientific and non-normative interpretation on his writings. In some measure we can reconcile this with his insistence that all studies should have practical uses by likening his studies

²⁵ T.M.S., VII.iv (II.399); cf. p. 4.

²⁶ Cf. O. H. Taylor, "Economics and the Idea of Jus Naturale", The Quarterly Journal of Economics, XLIV (1929), p. 251: "Smith's theory of the natural economic order differed from that of the Physiocrats in being less a theory of an ideal order to be achieved by a rational plan of reform than a theory of an existing order among economic events". Also J. Viner, "Adam Smith and Laissez-Faire", Journal of Political Economy, XXXV (1927), p. 198, and even W. Bagehot, Economic Studies (ed. by R. H. Hutton, 1953), p. 107.

to applied science concerned with means rather than ends. This fits much of the Wealth of Nations where he bases his recommendations for free trade on the facts of economic behaviour as he sees them, taking for granted the desirability of high individual consumption. Such advice, as is the case with all recommendations suggested by applied science, is hypothetical: if you wish to increase the prosperity of the citizens and the sovereign, he suggests, then you must free industry and commerce from certain legal restrictions. But even in the Wealth of Nations there is a great deal of material which describes and explains processes which have taken place and will continue in the future, without reference to the "science of a statesman", since statesmen are powerless to change them; and in the Moral Sentiments, as we shall see, there is even less practical advice to be found, and even more explanation of unalterable social processes.

Some commentators have assumed that the Moral Sentiments is more evaluative than the Wealth of Nations because it established the system of values which the Wealth of Nations takes for granted.²⁷ This would mean that with the assistance of the Moral Sentiments, the hypothetical imperatives of the Wealth of Nations could be turned into categorical obligations. But in fact the Moral Sentiments explains why men make the moral judgments they do, and this is logically quite distinct from providing a moral justification of values. The Moral Sentiments tells us a good deal about Smith's theory of human behaviour which helps with the interpretation of the Wealth of Nations but those who expect

²⁷ A. Small, Adam Smith and Modern Sociology (Chicago, 1907), pp. 18 & 40ff. Small suggests that the Moral Sentiments evaluates the economic aspect of society by putting persons at the centre of life, and so provides "a theory of ends which the means should serve" and embodies "the discovery of a standard of life to which economic technology must be conformed".

to find in it a moral justification for the economic system described in the Wealth of Nations will be disappointed.

There remains, therefore, especially in the case of Ethics and Jurisprudence, a discrepancy between the contrasting statements by Smith about the nature of his work, some of them preparing us for straightforward hortatory evaluations and others suggesting a science of society as detached as Newton's theory of motion. Even if we consider that Smith's practice is modelled more on the latter than the former approach, there is still a need to account for the coexistence of these apparently contradictory purposes in Smith's mind. The explanation is, perhaps, to be found in his view of the relation between what is and what ought to be. Broadly speaking, the position he adopts is that, for the most part, whatever in the long term is, is right. Human choices may, to some extent and for some time, lead to changes and delays in the inevitable course of events, but the underlying, average and long term tendencies are as inescapable as the movements of the planets. Men may either go along with or resist these processes; they are not, therefore, absolutely powerless. Nevertheless the modifications which they can bring about in their own behaviour and in the development of society are neither far-reaching nor prolonged. Their actions are governed by the forces of instinct, and environmental necessities almost as surely as material objects are subject to the law of gravity.

The concept which holds together the factual and the ideal world is that of "nature". Nature was, for Smith as for most eighteenth century theorists, both an object to be studied and an ideal to be brought into existence. This is an ambiguity which goes back to classical times and can be found in Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics as well as in Roman law and mediaeval theories of natural law; it is associated with the concept of the law of nature as a term used to denote both factual generalisations

and moral or legal imperatives. The resuscitation of natural law theory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was part of an attempt to establish a theology which was independent of revelation and a morality which was independent of religion. As such it tended to draw more on pre-Christian concepts of nature than on mediaeval theory and to take up those elements of natural law which originated in Greek thought and became embodied in Roman and hence European law. Smith was part of this movement of thought and had a particular admiration for the Stoics.²⁸ Sometimes it is thought that to admit this is to accuse him of confusing the normative and the factual and find him guilty of relying on a priori methods in all his work.²⁹ Yet the classical tradition is itself extremely complex,³⁰ and cannot simply be assumed to be incompatible with empirical science. At the risk of extreme over simplification we may distinguish, within it, a Platonic or rationalist school of thought, and an Aristotelian or empirical one. The former is typified by Plato's theory of "Forms" which states that the essential nature of things is to

²⁸This is well brought out in A. L. Macfie, The Individual in Society (London, 1967).

²⁹T. H. C. Leslie, Essays in Political and Moral Philosophy (London, 1879), p. 149: Leslie says that Smith combined two systems of his time, the 'Code of Nature' and the inductive system of Montesquieu, "the former speculating a priori about 'Nature' and seeking to develop from a particular hypothesis the 'Natural' order of things; the latter investigating in history the phenomena of the actual world, the different states of society and their antecedent causes - or, in short, the real as contrasted with the ideal, order of things". Similar mistakes are made in J. K. Ingram, History of Political Economy (Edinburgh, 1888), p. 90f. and W. D. Grampp, "Adam Smith and the Economic Man", Journal of Political Economy, LVI, (1948), pp. 315-336.

³⁰A. O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity (New York, 1965), p. 447ff., give a multitude of meanings for the term "natural" in classical thought.

be discovered by an intellectual apprehension of the "Forms" that can be achieved independently of empirical observation of their sensory manifestations. In modern times this model of thought is associated with Descartes and his attempt to base all knowledge on deduction from simple, self-evident axioms: the method of geometry. In eighteenth century moral philosophy it is evident in the rationalist theories which carried on Locke's view that moral rules can be known by reason, such as those of Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) and William Wollaston (1659-1724).³¹ Some commentators, in describing Smith as a natural law theorist, have assumed that this is to attribute to him views of this sort and consequently present him as someone who follows the Cartesian method of dividing a problem into its ultimate elements, clearly and distinctly perceived, from which he then goes on to deduce truths about the world and prescriptions for human action.³²

But the natural law tradition has always had an empirical element within it. We can, for instance, contrast Plato's theory with Aristotle's concept of nature as the sum of things which have the power of spontaneous movement.³³ At the risk of anachronism this may be said to be a fundamentally empirical concept, for by "nature" he meant the observable behaviour of things in so far as they are not caused or moved from without and in the realm of human affairs he opposed that which is

³¹ Cf. D. D. Raphael, British Moralists (Oxford, 1969), §§224-261 and 272-302. Slightly nearer Smith's time is Thomas Morgan, The Moral Philosopher (1737), vol. 1, p. 25: "The law of Nature as originally written upon the heart; or that universal, eternal and immutable wisdom, Reason, Moral Truth or Righteousness, which being objectively proposed to the Understanding, must be the same Rule or Measure of Action to every intelligent Being alike".

³² Cf. H. T. Buckle, History of Civilisation in England (Oxford, 1904), Vol. III, p. 305ff.

³³ Physics, 192b-193b.

according to nature ($\varphi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$) to the artificial or conventional ($\nu\omicron\mu\omicron\varsigma$).³⁴ True he tended to identify the natural with the idea of the perfect goal towards which each particular type of entity could potentially develop³⁵ but this is only to say that he considered nature to be a process of growth and development, (" $\varphi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ " initially meant origin). For Aristotle nature is known through its appearances and this can be seen in his empirical approach to biology as well as in his studies of society,³⁶ and it is to Aristotle that we can trace those theories of natural law which deduce the laws of natural justice from factual statements about the nature of man. This is at least a quasi-empirical method since it is based on the observation of some fundamental human characteristics, such as sociableness, although it is often unscientific enough to dismiss other characteristic human qualities because they do not accord with some preconceived notion of man's "real" nature. I shall argue that Adam Smith is in this tradition and, indeed, that he may be said to have turned Aristotle's semi-empirical method into a thoroughly empirical one.

Since the discovery, in 1895, of the Lectures on Jurisprudence - a copy of a student's lecture notes taken down in 1762-3, a year before Smith's visit to France when he is alleged to have come under the influence of the Physiocrats - which has

³⁴N Ethics, 191a: "There is such a thing as natural as well as conventional justice".

³⁵Politics, 1254a: "If we would know what is natural, we ought to search for it in those subjects in which nature appears most perfect".

³⁶Politics, 1252a: "As in other matters, so also in politics, it is by considering the growth of things from their beginning that one will obtain the clearest understanding of them".

greatly weakened the argument that he modelled the Wealth of Nations on the semi-rationalist methods of some of his French contemporaries, those who classify Smith as an a priori natural law theorist have tended to concentrate most of their attack on the Moral Sentiments³⁷ where the concept of "nature" is most evident. To some extent these critics are misled by Smith's method of presentation. We have seen from the Lectures on Rhetoric that Smith admired the Newtonian method of laying out a theory as a deductive system and it is clear that he followed this model in the Moral Sentiments, starting with his analysis of sympathy and going on to demonstrate its operation in various social phenomena. But we have also seen, from the Essays, that he was fully aware of the place of observation and induction in the formation and testing of hypotheses, and a close reading of the Moral Sentiments makes it equally clear that the procedure by which Smith reached and tested his conclusions was essentially an empirical one. He makes numerous appeals to "observation"³⁸ as he goes along and obviously regards himself as engaged in a detailed examination of certain aspects of human behaviour of the sort that he described in the Essays. At each stage he bases his generalisations on an appeal to common experience, sometimes

³⁷Cf. J. Viner, Adam Smith, 1776-1926, (Chicago, 1928), p. 136: "In the Theory of Moral Sentiments Smith started out with a few general propositions about the nature of the universe which any educated Scotchman of his day would have vouched for as self-evident truths; and following them wherever they led him, he picked up en route a few more self-evident truths about the nature of human nature". Viner takes a very different view of the Wealth of Nations: cf. Thorstein Veblen, The Place of Science in Modern Civilization, 1919, (New York, 1961), p. 116.

³⁸T.M.S., I.1.1 (I.4) et passim.

insisting that "no instance is necessary" to establish the presence or effect of some disposition or instinct, and, where there is doubt, appealing to a wide variety of supporting evidence:

Examine the records of history, recollect what has happened in the circle of your own experience, consider with attention what has been the conduct of almost all the greatly unfortunate, either in private or public life, whom you may have either read^{of} or hear of, or remember.³⁹

Smith no doubt relied too much on second hand accounts and tales from classical literature, and his use of introspection and everyday casual observation may seem subjective, unsystematic and lacking in the required rigour, but this is only to say that we demand higher standards of empirical evidence today and it does not alter the fact that, for his own time, he was rightly regarded as "a man of uncommon observation".⁴⁰ He himself thought that the observation of human behaviour was open to less error than the studies of natural science because of the greater familiarity of the material to be observed:

A system of natural philosophy may appear very plausible, and be for a long time very generally received in the world, and yet have no foundation in nature, nor any sort of resemblance to the truth...But it is otherwise with systems of moral philosophy...When a traveller gives an account of some distant country, he may impose upon our credulity the most groundless and absurd fictions as the most certain matters of fact. But when a person pretends to inform us of what passes in our neighbourhood, and of the affairs of the very parish we live in...he may deceive us in many respects, yet the greatest falsehoods^{which} he imposes upon us must bear some resemblance to the truth.⁴¹

³⁹T.M.S., III.3. (I.370).

⁴⁰E. Burke, in Annual Register, 1776, p. 485.

⁴¹T.M.S., VII.11.4 (II.319f.). Note the parallels implied as well as the contrast drawn between the two types of "philosophy".

Others have seen this proximity of subject matter as a disadvantage because it makes for over-confidence and unshakable preconceptions,⁴² however Smith's optimism does not go so far as to make him think that it is unnecessary to gather and present a great deal of supporting empirical evidence for his generalisations about human societies. The illustrations which he gives go beyond what is required for clarifying his meaning and are intended to be samples of the sort of evidence on which he relies and on which he can call. They may often seem imprecise,⁴³ and anecdotal, but they are intended as realistic illustrations and are seldom fanciful.⁴⁴ His ability to provide apt examples has often been noted,⁴⁵ but critics who have mistaken his purpose find much of the material in the Moral Sentiments irrelevant and talk of his examples as "embellishments".⁴⁶ This is particularly true of Smith's discussions of the "irregularities" and "corruptions" of the moral sentiments. To dismiss these as interesting irrelevances⁴⁷ is to miss the importance which Smith attached to the power of a scientific theory to account for "irregular" phenomena in the sense of unexpected departures from an even pattern of events. In his Essays he noted the superiority of these astronomical theories which could account for small variations

⁴²E. Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method (1895). However Smith realises that there are things about themselves which "nobody is willing to acknowledge", cf. T.M.S., II.iii.Intro. (I.233).

⁴³R. B. Haldane, Life of Adam Smith (London, 1887), p. 63.

⁴⁴E. Roll, History of Economic Thought (London, 1936), p. 147.

⁴⁵L. Stephen, English Thought in the Eighteenth Century, ix.73, and J. Rae, Life of Adam Smith, p. 141.

⁴⁶J. Donar, The Moral Sense (New York, 1930), p. 175 and J. Viner, Adam Smith, 1776-1926, p. 116.

⁴⁷Cf. J. A. Farrer, Adam Smith (London, 1881), p. 18f.

in the regular movements of the stars, and he regards it as an important factor in favour of his own theory that it can explain certain aspects of the moral sentiments which are unexpectedly different from the normal run of moral judgments.⁴⁸ Far from being irrelevant these "irregularities" are, for Smith, crucial tests for his theory, and the more of them he can explain the more secure he regards its empirical basis. This is one instance in which Smith's writings on science can help us interpret the Moral Sentiments. It is also useful to realise the importance which Smith attached to simplicity and familiarity in a scientific theory⁴⁹ since this explains his effort to present his conclusions in terms of uncomplicated and well known phenomena; in this there are direct parallels between his use of sympathy, self-interest and even, to some extent, following Hutcheson, benevolence and the place of gravity in Newton's system.⁵⁰ This may seem to lay him open to Viner's charge that "in his earlier work Smith was a purely speculative philosopher, reasoning from notions masquerading as self-evident verities"⁵¹ since a familiar and simple empirical truth may often appear "self-evident", but this is, on the whole, an unfair charge and certainly mistakes Smith's own purpose. It may, however, be true, as Stewart alleged, that Smith does tend to oversimplify in his effort to attain the

⁴⁸ Cf. p. 36.

⁴⁹ Cf. p. 31f.

⁵⁰ Cf. E. Halévy, The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism Tr. by Mary Morris (London, 1928), p. 100. Millar described Smith as the Newton of the study of civil society (Historical View of English Government (1812), II, pp. 429f.). Hutcheson's view was that "universal benevolence towards all men, we may compare to that principle of gravitation" (cf. D. D. Raphael, British Moralists, 8343).

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 136.

Newtonian ideal,⁵² although he himself is aware of this danger.⁵³

To pursue this further it is necessary to take a closer look at Smith's use of the term "nature" and the related idea of natural law. It would be difficult to find many pages in the Moral Sentiments on which the words "nature" or "naturally" do not occur; on most pages they appear several times and the same is true, to a lesser extent, of all Smith's works. This gross over-working of the concept leads to many ambiguities and obscurities. But it is possible to bring out one logical characteristic common to nearly all its uses and to indicate Smith's most typical uses of these terms.⁵⁴ The "natural" course of events is that which normally takes place or would take place in the absence of the operation of some distinctively human factor. The term is thus logically incomplete, and each occurrence of it requires to be interpreted according to the particular factor in question. Most typically it is some exercise of human will following on a process of reflection. For instance, in discussing the nature of sympathy, Smith points out that "my companion does not naturally look upon the misfortune that has befallen me, or the injury that has been done me, from the same point of view in which I consider them", and notes that in such cases "the spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation

⁵²E.P.S.("Account"), p. xxxviii.

⁵³E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 69. Cf. p. 34.

⁵⁴I shall reserve until the next chapter Smith's Stoical concept of "Nature" - in the sense of the sum of all phenomena - as one great system or harmoniously functioning machine.

of the other".⁵⁵ The idea of human effort opposing what, in modern terms, comes naturally, is frequently contrasted to the natural process. However such efforts, if repeated, can eventually result in a change of spontaneous or "instinctive" behaviour. In this case what is natural, in the sense of "untaught" and "undisciplined" is contrasted with what becomes natural, in the sense of spontaneous, as a result of "habit, custom and education".⁵⁶ Smith talks of man's "natural, ^{his} untaught and undisciplined feelings"⁵⁷ without implying that teaching and discipline produce unnatural behaviour, or tying the term to some original state of nature. He does use the word with this latter connotation when he is making the contrast between men before and after the development of government or civilisation,⁵⁸ but such cases do not establish the use of the term in any absolute manner, for the behaviour of civilised, educated and disciplined men may also be spontaneous for them and therefore normal and natural. What is "natural" is also opposed to behaviour which is influenced by religion,⁵⁹ extensive utilitarian reflection,⁶⁰ or "violence and artifice" from a source external to the individuals concerned.⁶¹ Its meaning is always relative, requiring explanation by reference to the particular contrast Smith has in mind

⁵⁵T.M.S., I.i.4 (I.35f. & 37f.); cf. T.M.S., I.ii.3 (I.75); III.3 (I.361) and II.ii.3 (I.227).

⁵⁶W.N., I.ii (I.19f.).

⁵⁷T.M.S., III.3. (I.364).

⁵⁸T.M.S., III.1 (I.277f.); II.ii.1 (I.199); VII.iii.2 (II.334); W.N., I.viii (I.72) and V.i.2 (II.232).

⁵⁹T.M.S., III.6 (I.444).

⁶⁰T.M.S., II.i.2 (I.172) and IV.2 (I.487).

⁶¹W.N., I.xi.3 (I.256).

in that context, and if, on most occasions, it can be translated as "spontaneous" or "instinctive" this does not mean that what is spontaneous and instinctive in one stage or type of society will be so in another.⁶² Spontaneous and "instinctive" behaviour is, for Smith, "natural" primarily because it is "normal". He believes that, for the most part, whatever factor inhibits the natural processes can only do so temporarily and partially. "Natural sympathy", for instance, is not only "immediate and instinctive", it is also "necessary" because it always influences behaviour.⁶³ Similarly in the Wealth of Nations the "natural price" is a consequence of the "ordinary and average rates (which) may be called rates of wages, profit and rent at the time and place in which they commonly prevail", so that "the natural price...is, as it were, the central price, to which the prices of all commodities are continually gravitating".⁶⁴ It is almost always possible to render Smith's use of "natural" by the word "actual" provided it is realised that he means what is normally the case. Laughter is "natural" when it is caused by something which we would normally find amusing, even although our mood or some other factor may prevent us seeing the joke on a particular occasion.⁶⁵ The natural passions are those which normally occur.⁶⁶ Happiness is the "natural and ordinary" state of mankind because it is the condition to which men all gravitate in the absence of unusual distressing

⁶² Vide the discussion in the Wealth of Nations, Book V, on the expenses of defence and the administration of justice.

⁶³ T.M.S., II.i.2 (I.172); cf. VII.ii.1 (II.264), III.3 (I.364) and W.N., V.i.3.art. 3 (II.324).

⁶⁴ W.N., I.vii (I.65). Note the Newtonian metaphor.

⁶⁵ T.M.S., I.i.3 (I.26).

⁶⁶ T.M.S., III.2 (I.284).

disturbances,⁶⁷ just as tranquillity is the state of mind which reasserts itself after some unexpected or unusual event has disturbed it.⁶⁸ Wealth and greatness are the "natural" objects of respect because they "almost constantly obtain it".⁶⁹ The assumption that what is common, normal or universal in human behaviour is "according to nature" reflects Smith's conviction that men everywhere act, feel and think in the same basic way because they all have the same human nature and all come under the sway of the same fundamental propensities. This gives an empirical content to the idea of "nature" and when we read, for instance, that he is endeavouring to discover what "is naturally approved and disapproved of" there is little distortion of meaning in saying that he is seeking to establish which is actually approved and disapproved of by most people; the sentiments to which he appeals are those of "the bulk of mankind" and not the reflective opinions of an élite. Smith may be said to combine two of the three meanings of "nature" Hume discusses in A Treatise of Human Nature (III.1.2), namely the senses in which natural is opposed to what is unusual and what is artificial, that is "performed with a certain design and intention".

In the Wealth of Nations Smith is more prepared to admit that the "natural" course of events may be quite different from the normal; for instance Book III illustrates how, in Europe, the natural precedence of agriculture in the process of economic development has been reversed by laws which favoured the towns. In parts of the book it sometimes appears that the all important system of "natural liberty" is a potential ideal system not

⁶⁷T.M.S., I.iii.1 (I.107) & III.2 (I.305).

⁶⁸E.P.S.(H.A.), p. 20.

⁶⁹T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.149).

actualised in any real state, the deviations from the natural course of events being due to inappropriate institutions and laws. In such cases the natural course of events is what would happen in the absence of restraints. To this extent the system of natural liberty is hypothetical but it is not unempirical, for it rests on the claim that certain economic forces are operative even if they are being thwarted in certain respects. Yet, on the whole, Smith does believe that the economic system of natural liberty is largely in operation: its main features can never be obliterated and only in minor respects can it be hindered over a long period of time. A typical conclusion of the Wealth of Nations is one concerning the development of wealth; Smith writes that "though the profusion of government must, undoubtedly, have retarded the natural progress of England towards wealth and improvement, it has not been able to stop it".⁷⁰ And even the marginal effects which government can have on an economic system are less pronounced in the case of morality and justice.

Attempts to place Smith in the a priori natural law tradition make some of their strongest points in relation to his jurisprudence with its explicit premise that the laws which ought to be contained in the law codes of all countries can be known and stated with the precision of grammar.⁷¹ In particular it is noted that he admired Grotius as the person who first attempted to establish a system of "natural jurisprudence"

⁷⁰W.N., II.iii (I.367); cf. IV.v (II.49): "The natural effort of every individual to better his own condition, when suffered to exert itself with freedom and security, is so powerful a principle, that it is alone, and without any assistance, not only capable of carrying on the society to wealth and prosperity, but of surmounting a hundred impertinent obstructions with which the folly of human laws too often incumbers its operations".

⁷¹T.M.S., III.6 (I.442f.).

"without regard to the particular institutions of any one nation".⁷² Grotius describes the law of nature as "a dictate of right reason, which points out that an act, as it is or is not in conformity with rational nature, has in it a quality of moral baseness or moral necessity; and that in consequence such an act is either forbidden or enjoined by the author of nature, God."⁷³ In his appeal to "right reason", his use of the analogy between knowledge of the laws of nature and of the axioms of geometry, and in his seeming indifference to particular features of positive law⁷⁴ Grotius would not appear to have freed himself from the a priori natural law school, and if Smith is to be regarded as his disciple then his jurisprudence at least would have to be interpreted accordingly.

Yet Grotius himself is far from being a pure rationalist and Smith is a long way from being an unreserved admirer of his work;⁷⁵ indeed if identity of views is proved by expressed admiration there is more reason to say that Smith followed Hume

⁷² P.M.S., VII.iv (II.398); cf. L.J., p. 1.

⁷³ De Jure Belli ac Pacis, I.1.10, The Classics of International Law (ed. J. B. Scott, London, 1925), p. 38.

⁷⁴ Ibid., Prolegomena, 30, p. 21: "For the principles of the law of nature, since they are always the same, can easily be brought into a systematic form; but the elements of positive law, since they often undergo change and are different in different places, are outside the domain of systematic treatment, just as other notions of particular things are".

⁷⁵ Cf. L. J., p. 1: "His treatise On the Laws of War and Peace, with all its imperfections, is perhaps at this day the most complete work on this subject". (My italics). Dugald Stewart says that Smith had Grotius and Puffendorf in mind when he attacked the universities of his day for remaining sanctuaries for "exploded systems": Dissertations on the Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical and Political Philosophy, in Stewart, Collected Works (Ed. by Sir W. Hamilton) I.178.

in his attack on the natural law tradition.⁷⁶ Grotius deduces his laws of nature from his observations of the nature of man, and in particular from the fact of man's sociableness.⁷⁷ Moreover he accepts as evidence as to the content of the law of nature the consensus gentium as it is found in the writings of philosophers and lawyers through the ages, on the grounds that, "when many at different times, and in different places, affirm the same things as certain that ought to be referred to a universal cause", namely that such beliefs are in accordance with man's nature.⁷⁸ There is therefore an empirical element in Grotius' systematisation of the laws of different nations. He accurately sums up his own method as a rather loose combination of deductive and inductive method:

In two ways men are wont to prove that something is according to the law of nature, from that which is antecedent and from that which is consequent. Of the two lines of proof the former is more subtle, the latter more familiar.

Proof a priori consists in demonstrating the necessary agreement and disagreement of anything in a rational and social nature; proof a posteriori, in concluding, if not with absolute assurance, at least with every probability, that that is according to the law of nature which is believed to be such among all nations, or among all those that are more advanced in civilization.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Cf. H. J. Bittermann, "Adam Smith's Empiricism and the Law of Nature", The Journal of Political Economy, XLVIII, (1940), pp. 487-520 and 703-734.

⁷⁷ De Jure Belli ac Pacis, Prolegomena, sec. 6, Classics of International Law (Ed. J. B. Scott, London, 1929), p. 11: "amongst the traits characteristic of man is an impelling desire for society", and sec. 16, p. 15: "the very nature of man... is the mother of the law of nature".

⁷⁸ Ibid. Prolegomena, sec. 40, p. 23.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Book I, chap. 1, sec. 12.1, p. 42.

This a posteriori approach, in support of which he quotes Smith's two favourites Cicero and Aristotle, is characteristic of Smith's own jurisprudence although Smith relies less on the opinions of experts and more on his knowledge of the views of the ordinary man and the content of positive law, and puts much less emphasis on men's rational nature.

Similar points can be made about Adam Smith's dependence upon Puffendorf. The latter, coming under the influence of Descartes and Hobbes, is perhaps even more rationalistic than Grotius; he stresses the method of deduction from simple and clear axioms known to the "light of reason",⁸⁰ but he also insists that "what is the character of natural law, what its necessity, and of what precepts it consists in the present state of mankind, are most clearly seen, after one has thoroughly examined the nature and the disposition of man",⁸¹ Besides, even if Grotius and Puffendorf are considered to be Cartesians, we should remember Smith's explicit rejection of the Cartesian method,⁸² and the scorn with which he treats concepts such as the "social contract" which are fundamental to Grotius, Puffendorf and Hobbes. For instance he denies that reason plays a central part in human behaviour in general and moral judgment in particular, whereas the rationalist natural law theorists stress the view

⁸⁰ De Officio Hominis et Civis Juxta Legem Naturalem, Book I, chap. 3, sec. 12. (Classics of International Law, Ed. J. B. Scott, Trans. Moore, 1927), p. 20.

⁸¹ Ibid. III.1. of. for a similar position, Bishop Cumberland, a copy of whose work, De Legibus Naturae, was in Adam Smith's Library: Bonar, A Catalogue of the Library of Adam Smith, p. 52. In this respect Hobbes too is emphatical.

⁸² L.R.B.L., p. 140.

that man, through his rational nature, is able to understand and see the necessity of self-evident moral rules. Smith's whole theory of morality is designed to support the view that reason plays only a small part in determining moral judgments. This shows in his rejection of casuistry,⁸³ his argument against utility as the ground of approbation,⁸⁴ and his insistence that reason cannot provide a basis for moral judgments.⁸⁵ Again, he moves beyond the individualism of his contemporary natural law theorists by stressing, by means of the theory of sympathy, that morality is a social product;⁸⁶ this goes with his rejection of the state of nature and the common practice of deducing the laws of nature from some imaginary primitive condition of mankind. Although Smith had read and admired Rousseau's Discourse on the Origin of Inequality he shows no signs of either accepting or idealising some imaginary pre-social age.⁸⁷ It is in discussing the work of Puffendorf, Grotius and Hobbes that he writes that "it in reality serves no purpose to treat of the laws which would take place in a state of nature, or by what means succession to property was carried on, as there is no such state existing".⁸⁸ And although he does say that "amongst hunters there is no regular government, they live according to the laws of nature"⁸⁹ this is exceptional, and it is certainly not an idealised condition. His main interest lies in analysing

⁸³T.M.S., VII.iv (II.391).

⁸⁴T.M.S., IV, passim.

⁸⁵T.M.S., VII.iii.2 (II. 332ff.).

⁸⁶This point is stressed in G. R. Morrow, The Ethical and Economic Theories of Adam Smith (New York, 1921).

⁸⁷Smith reviews this essay in the Edinburgh Review, July, 1755, p. 73.

⁸⁸L.J., p. 2.

⁸⁹L.J., p. 15

the content of positive law and explaining its origin and development. In so far as this is carrying on the tradition of ius gentium it does so in the most empirical meaning of this concept, and when he contrasts laws which are in accordance with nature to those which depart from this "norm" he simply means that they do not accord with the consensus of moral opinions in that type of society.

The fact that when Smith uses the idea of natural law in his jurisprudence he does not identify it with what ought to be the case, but with what men in general believe ought to be the case, does not mean that he muddled up the idea of a prescriptive and a descriptive law; he knew that his primary task was to establish descriptive generalisations about human behaviour, what he calls nature's "unalterable laws".⁹⁰ More often he talks of principles: men move according to "principles of motion" of their own,⁹¹ which are similar to the "laws of motion" which govern the movement of physical bodies.⁹² All of these generalisations he also calls commands of God; they describe behaviour because they are the laws which God has decreed and which nature must, therefore, follow. But, again, Smith does not claim any a priori method of discovering what these laws are; the commands of God must be discovered by empirical observation: what God decrees is discovered by seeing what happens. This is as much the case with the laws that men follow as with the laws of motion. But in the former case there is a complication; it is possible to generalise both about what

⁹⁰ T.M.S., III.3 (I.364).

⁹¹ T.M.S., VI.ii.2 (II.110).

⁹² T.M.S., III.5 (I.413), L.J., p. 83.

men do and about what they think they ought to do, and these need not be the same. With generalisations about actual behaviour there is no difficulty: universal patterns of behaviour are ascribed to instincts and universal human experiences which prompt men to act in certain ways and so may be called the "voice" or "the teaching of nature".⁹³ In so far as men's beliefs about how they ought to behave are just as much facts as their actual behaviour, generalisations about these beliefs can also be explained by reference to universal human propensities, cited as instances of the teaching of nature,⁹⁴ and identified with the system of natural jurisprudence or morality. But the mere introduction of the idea of what ought to be done, but is not necessarily done, as an example of a law or command of God, brings in a logically distinct concept of a law as a proscription which remains a law whether or not it is followed. In an important passage Smith admits that such laws are more properly regarded as laws than ordinary generalisations about phenomena which are all, in a weaker sense, commands of God:

All general rules are commonly denominated laws: thus the general rules which bodies observe in the communication of motion, are called the laws of motion. But those general rules which our moral faculties observe in approving or condemning whatever sentiment or action is subjected to their examination, may much more justly be denominated such. They have a much greater resemblance to what are properly called laws, those general rules which the sovereign lays down to direct the conduct of his subjects. Like them they are rules to direct the free actions of men: they are prescribed most surely by a lawful superior, and are attended too with the sanction of rewards and punishments.⁹⁵

⁹³T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.9) etc.

⁹⁴T.M.S., III.1 (I.276f.).

⁹⁵T.M.S., III.5 (I.412f.).

For the sake of clarity this passage would encourage us to distinguish descriptive laws and prescriptive laws even although Smith wishes to argue that both are in the end prescriptive, since both are the commands of God. The difference would be that in the case of descriptive laws the law would not remain a law if it were not followed, while in the case of prescriptive law, its efficacy in determining behaviour is not decisive for its status as law. Such a distinction is what Smith has in mind when he contrasts the laws of motion with the laws which men as free agents follow, or not, according to their choices. This opens the logical possibility that, in his explicit or implicit idea of the law of nature, Smith is having recourse to a system of rules which men ought to follow but do not in fact obey, and this would suggest that he is abandoning the empirical study of human behaviour for the normative task of discerning how they ought to behave. But this is not the case. He uses the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive law only to separate out that part of human behaviour which he intends to study, namely the prescriptions which they actually apply to their own and other people's behaviour in praise and blame, although they may on occasions fail to follow these prescriptions themselves. In so far as he does go beyond a description of what men believe ought to be the case, to say what really ought to be the case, that is, when he advances a system of natural law as an ethical imperative which holds irrespective of what men do or think, it is to separate out those moral and legal convictions which are normally held from those which are deviations from this empirical norm; that is he provides an empirical distinction between positive law and natural law, a distinction he would justify by

saying that the most universal moral and legal opinions are the result of the general propensities and social life of men, while the abnormalities represent temporary and partial departures caused by the sporadic intervention of unusual factors.

Smith's acceptance of the view that the laws of nature are the commands of God takes us to the last important line of argument: in the attack on his empirical method, namely that his belief in natural religion provided him with an a priori source of knowledge which overcame his openness to factual evidence. There is no question here of Smith accepting revelation or miracles. The disputed passage on the atonement is an aside which should be seen as an attempt to show the psychological need for this doctrine.⁹⁶ Elsewhere Smith points out the harmony between the teaching of revealed religion and natural instincts, as in the case of the belief in a life after death,⁹⁷ but he nowhere relies on revealed religion to support his theories. Rather he is inclined to treat Christianity as one religion amongst others for which sociological and psychological explanations can be given.

The basis of Smith's natural theology is his acceptance of the argument from design; his work tended to confirm him in the view that society and the whole of nature is one vast machine and from this he drew the conclusion that the machine had a maker. This belief was supported by his own investigations into unexpected mechanical contrivances which showed that the whole of nature and human society was a closely interacting system, and by his observations that "nature has not given us" any

⁹⁶ T.M.S., 1st edition, II.ii.3.p. 205f. This passage was withdrawn in the 6th edition. Cf. T.M.S., II.iii.3 (I.270). Cf. p. 312f.

⁹⁷ T.M.S., II.ii.3 (I.228f.).

principle which is wholly evil".⁹⁸ He both admired the complex mechanisms of nature and judged that the results of these contrivances are, on the whole good. The Moral Sentiments especially is full of what has struck many people as typical eighteenth century "complacent optimism".⁹⁹ He quotes with approval the Stoical view that as "the world was governed by the all-ruling providence of a wise, powerful, and good God, every single event ought to be regarded, as making a necessary part of the plan of the universe, and as tending to promote the general order and happiness of the whole",¹⁰⁰ and he explicitly states that his own studies demonstrate that "every part of nature, when attentively surveyed, equally demonstrates the providential care of its Author, and we may admire the wisdom and goodness of God even in the weakness and folly of men".¹⁰¹

This belief in an all-wise Author of nature was an important presupposition of Smith's thought. It led him to look for systematic aspects in society¹⁰² and to adopt, as we shall see, a method of explanation similar to modern functionalist theory.¹⁰³ But, as he indicates in the Essays, he regarded the belief in God as an outcome rather than a logical presupposition of scientific study. It is admiration, the emotion which follows on a scientific

⁹⁸T.M.S., II.i.5 (I.189).

⁹⁹Cf. Charles Vereker, Eighteenth-century Optimism (Liverpool, 1967), p. 72.

¹⁰⁰T.M.S., I.ii.3 (I.80); cf. VII.iii.1 (II.327).

¹⁰¹T.M.S., II.iii.3 (I.267).

¹⁰²The same is true, in their own fields, of natural scientists like Newton (cf. E. Mach, The Science of Mechanics) and Harvey (cf. Boyle's Works, IV, 517ff.). Cf. B. Willey, Eighteenth Century Background (London, 1946), chap. 1.

¹⁰³Cf. pp. 96-110.

explanation, that prompts belief in God, and it is the advanced study of nature, which shows it to be one immense machine, that confirms this faith. Belief in a god, even when based on the argument from design, is certainly an extra-empirical faith, but of all the arguments for God's existence, that from design is most dependent on the assessment of empirical evidence; if nature cannot be shown to exhibit a systematic plan or have beneficial consequences then the argument fails, although, as Hume showed, it need not succeed even if these facts and their consequent moral evaluation are accepted.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, while we may admit that Smith's theology led him to expect nature to exhibit the signs of a creator we should regard his faith as a consequence and not a cause of his study of nature. This is not an assertion about the sources of Smith's religious belief but about the arguments he uses to support it and more importantly the place it holds in his reasonings: he does not deduce facts from his theology but makes theological statements on the basis of facts independently ascertained.¹⁰⁵

Whatever the basis of his general theological assumptions Smith is a thoroughgoing deist in that he considers the source of our knowledge of the content of God's will to be experience of the world which is his creation. Knowledge of what is "natural" is the same as knowledge of God's will. Frequently "nature" is personified, and in such cases the intention of nature and the will of God are identical;¹⁰⁶ all I have said about the empirical content of Smith's idea of nature also applies

¹⁰⁴ Dialogues concerning Natural Religion.

¹⁰⁵ This is discussed more fully in the conclusion.

¹⁰⁶ T.N.S., I.iii (I.9); I.iii.3 (I.83); I.iii.1 (I.113) etc.

to the commands of God. There is no suggestion of arguing from prior knowledge of God's will to conclusions concerning what is natural. The voice of God is known in the spontaneous behaviour of men simply because this is the source of their normal behaviour. The natural law theorists held that man, through his rational nature, could apprehend the will of God and therefore submit their wills to his. To some extent Smith would agree that the observing scientist, by seeing the general tendencies of human behaviour, can help men to co-operate with the will of God by adapting themselves to these tendencies, but he denies direct rational insight into the will of God. In the case of ordinary human beings, they are denied even this knowledge of God's will but co-operate with him unknowingly by following the instincts which he has implanted in their nature: "by acting according to the dictates of our moral faculties, we necessarily pursue the most effectual means for promoting the happiness of mankind, and may therefore be said, in some sense, to co-operate with the Deity, and to advance as far as in our power the plan of Providence".¹⁰⁷ This is the case even where our immediate impulses are those of self-interest.¹⁰⁸ Many commentators have been misled by the two passages in which Smith mentions the "invisible hand"¹⁰⁹ into thinking that this represents some direct intervention into the course of events by the Deity, but Smith uses it only to summarise his conclusion that the consequences of the mechanism of nature are, on the whole, beneficial, even where these benefits are not intended by men. The "invisible hand" is no capricious intervener in the natural course of events but is simply a metaphor to suggest

¹⁰⁷ T.M.S., III.5 (I.414).

¹⁰⁸ This is one of the main themes of the Wealth of Nations.

¹⁰⁹ W.N., IV.8 (I.477) and T.M.S., IV.1 (I.464).

that the total operations of nature betoken the ultimate planning of a benevolent God. It involves no suggestion of a deus ex machina brought in to establish the principle of the harmony of interests. The total "economy of nature" which has this result, an economy which demonstrates utility but a utility which is of God's design and not the result of the scheming of men. The analogy is explicitly drawn between the universe and a watch: the working of blind causes produces a result of which the parts of the mechanism are unaware.¹¹⁰ The invisible hand makes the watch but does not intervene in its operation.

Smith frequently emphasises the error of mixing up final and efficient causes:

But though, in accounting for the operations of bodies, we never fail to distinguish in this manner the efficient from the final cause, in accounting for those of the mind we are very apt to confound these two different things with one another. When by natural principles we are led to advance those ends, which a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us, we are very apt to impute to that reason, as to their efficient cause, the sentiments and actions by which we advance those ends, and to imagine that to be the wisdom of man, which in reality is the wisdom of God.¹¹¹

This is in line with his general tendency to play down the place of reason in human conduct and to emphasise that human behaviour is subject to general laws in the same way as other phenomena. It also stresses that these general laws must be discovered and explained in terms of efficient causes conceived in terms of constant conjunction; explanations in terms of the will of God have no place in determining the efficient causes of behaviour but enter at a later stage once the scientific investigation is completed. In fact it is possible to remove the theological

¹¹⁰T.M.S., II.ii.3 (I.217).

¹¹¹T.M.S., II.ii.3 (I.218).

terminology and Smith's reflections about a benevolent Deity and not affect the empirical content of his work.¹¹²

It is more difficult to reconcile Smith's deism with his normative than with his scientific aims. If he has conducted an empirical investigation to discover what are the consequences of human action, or the "ends of nature" and concludes that these are the ends of a benevolent deity, then is he not precluded from suggesting improvements in the behaviour of individuals and states? Even if he is not guilty of theological naturalism, and has not simply assumed that the ends of nature must be good but has made an independent valuation of their worth, he would seem to be debarred from recommending any tampering with such a well designed mechanism. However our analysis of his concept of nature has shown that his judgment that the intentions of "Nature" are benevolent need only mean that on the whole the normal course of events show a benevolent intention, and, in particular, it enables him to discount those events which are consequences of human intervention in what would otherwise have resulted had the immediate impulses of human nature been permitted to achieve their objects. His argument from design therefore only commits him to the view that, when human will does not change the spontaneous behaviour of men in society, the usual consequences of such behaviour are beneficial to most members of that society. This leaves him scope for encouraging spontaneous behaviour and even suggesting that men improve on the economy

¹¹² There is some evidence that his theological enthusiasms waned in later life but although this led to alterations in some of his more dogmatic deistic statements and perhaps in the withdrawal of the atonement passage this did not lead him to revise the substance of the Moral Sentiments in the last edition of the work. Cf. pp. 311ff.

of nature by remedying some of the defects of a system that is on the whole good, but may have incongruous and unhappy consequences on occasion.

Chapter Three

SMITH'S SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Whatever "useful" purposes Smith was anxious to ascribe to his economic and moral theories must be regarded as secondary to their essential nature as scientific theories dealing with the causes of opulence¹ and the origin of the moral sentiments.² If these theories are true then they may prove useful, as all knowledge can be useful, by increasing our control over events. In the case of the Wealth of Nations the practical implications for those whose task it is to aid the increase of wealth are spelt out in Smith's attack of the ideas of mercantilists and his encouragement for the system of "natural liberty". In the Moral Sentiments the advice is less clear but perhaps it amounts to saying that we ought to hold fast to those moral rules which seem obvious and instinctive when we reflect on the conduct of others. The soundness of such advice depends partly on our agreement with Smith's evaluative presuppositions, namely that economic prosperity measured in terms of per capita consumption and harmonious human relationships are essential to human happiness and are therefore the priority goals for individual and social action; and partly on a scientific assessment of the causal analyses on which he bases his practical advice. This requires us to examine his sociological theory, that is his attempt to provide a verifiable system of generalisations about the behaviour of men in their relationships with each other. Having seen that Smith was aware of the distinction between

¹Cf. the full title of Smith's economic work "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations".

²T.M.S., VII.1 (II.195).

science and philosophy and that there are grounds for saying that his approach to the study of society was primarily scientific, it is now time to take a look at his sociological theory itself.

Smith's science of society makes no sharp distinction between psychological and sociological explanation; there are certain things that can be said about human nature which do not relate to man's social existence, and there are some facts about societies which are of little psychological significance but, on the whole, he regards the psychology of the individual as inseparable from the study of the society of which the individual is a constituent part. When he talks of the "abstract science of human nature" which examines "the distinct offices and powers of the human mind"³ this certainly includes a large measure of pure psychology, but to think of Smith primarily as a psychologist is to miss the way in which he transcended the outlook of the contemporary individualism. We might say that his perspective is that of a social psychologist,⁴ except that he is interested in studying societies as mechanisms or organisms as well as understanding the behaviour of individuals as subsidiary mechanisms within the larger system; he is a sociological functionalist as well as a social psychologist. It might be better to say that Smith is a psychological sociologist, although this is really to say no more than that he is a practitioner of that sort of sociology which stresses the theory of action as an essential part of his conceptual framework, but it is not a psychology which ignores social facts or sociological explanation.

Because the Moral Sentiments is about men's attitudes of approval and disapproval concerning human conduct, it inevitably

³T.M.S., VII.iii.2 (II.335).

⁴O. H. Taylor, A History of Economic Thought (New York, 1960), p. 8.

contains a working theory of action. And although Smith is more concerned to explain acts which express approval and disapproval than with the whole range of human behaviour, he does indicate, as part of his moral theory, what he considers an action to be, and the work includes an outline of normal human behaviour which emerges in the course of his analysis of the evaluation of conduct. His theory of action depends on the analysis of an act into (1) its cause or occasion, (2) its sentiment, passion or motive, (3) its intention and its actual effects, and (4) the various processes of perception, imagination and reason which play a part in connecting cause to motive, motive to intention, and intention to effects. Actions, according to Smith, are principally determined by the passions or sentiments, these are the motives in the sense of the motive powers which lie behind all behaviour and are its fundamental causes; they are not however the sufficient causes of behaviour; the complete causal analysis of an act requires reference to the situation or occasion which arouses the motive, and Smith often refers to this as the "cause" of the action. There are also the processes of perception, imagination and reason which play a part in arousing the motive and relating it to the aim or intention of the act. Once these facts are known the explanation proceeds by showing how they can be subsumed under causal generalisations concerning the normal relationships between types of situation and the relevant sentiments and intentions. Further explanations can then be brought in to account for the agent's perception of the situation, his formulation of the intention, and the presence and strength of this particular motive over against alternative motives which were or might have been present and causally efficacious. The individual's response to a situation depends, in part, on the mechanisms of perception, imagination and reason which enter into the ways in which he formulates his intentions and Smith has much to say about these human "faculties".

especially their rôle in the processes of learning. He takes account of the fact that these learning processes occur within a social environment that is in some respects always the same and in other respects varies as between different ages and countries and the particular situation of different types of individuals within their own society, and shows how these circumstances result in fundamental similarities and a variety of differences in the actions and the attitudes of classes of individuals.

This general theory of action emerges, almost by the way, in the form of an outline of the aspects of behaviour which are the object of moral appraisal:

The sentiment or affection of the heart from which any action proceeds, and upon which its whole virtue or vice must ultimately depend, may be considered under two different aspects, or in two different relations; first, in relation to the cause which excites it, or the motive which gives occasion to it; and secondly, in relation to the end which it proposes, or the effect which it tends to produce.⁵

This is an exceedingly tantalising, if not confused summary. In the first place we really want to know if the "sentiment or affection" has "two different aspects" in that it is to be analysed into intention and motive, ^{or} whether it is to be distinguished from both, so that the cause gives rise to the sentiment which results in the intention. Secondly does Smith mean to imply that "motive" is synonymous with, or an alternative to the "cause" of an act, and similarly, is "the effect which it tends to produce" simply another way of saying "the end which it proposes"? To this last question we can answer that Smith is clearly aware of the distinction between the intended and unintended effects of action, since he devotes considerable attention to this for the purpose

⁵T.M.S., I.i.3 (I.26).

of describing moral judgments and explaining the functioning of society.⁶ When analysing moral judgments he thinks that intended consequences are most important, while in his general social theory he is more taken up with demonstrating the unintended consequences of action. In this context, where he is discussing the concept of merit, it seems reasonably clear that he identifies the intended consequences of an action with the immediate effects which normally follow from intentions of this sort. But in the wider context of the analysis of his theory of action as a whole we may say that all actions have ends or goals of which the actor is to some degree aware and usually manages to achieve, although these are far from being the only effects of action which Smith considers to be of sociological significance. A discussion of the implications of, and difficulties in, regarding motives as causes is contained in an appendix.

But can we say that the intention is part of the sentiment or is it simply its consequence? Although Smith does sometimes write of "the intention or affection of the heart" as if they were the same thing⁷ there seems no doubt that he considered the two to be separate, the first describing what the action is, and the second indicating why it was done, by showing that the end in question was something the agent desired. It is part of his mechanistic outlook to say that the passions cause the action and this requires a distinction between the state of feeling or emotion which explains why an act was done and the description of that act in terms of its intention. But if the sentiment is the cause of the action, what then of the distinction he makes between the sentiment and "the cause which excites it"? There is, of course, no need to deny the ascription "cause" to one part of the action process if it is given to another, for both can be part of a causal

⁶cf. p. 97f.

⁷T.M.S., II.iii.Introd. (I.232).

chain of events, and this is, in fact, Smith's position. The situation which gives rise to a sentiment is the cause of action, but so is the sentiment itself; thus the cause of anger may be a stone hitting the agent⁸ and the cause of grief a bereavement,⁹ but equally anger may cause the agent to kick the stone and grief may cause the bereaved person to weep; it is sentiments and passions of this sort which Smith refers to as the motives which influence conduct¹⁰ and it is as well therefore to distinguish motives as a particular stage in the causal process to be distinguished from the stimuli which are the causes of the motives of action.

Intentions arise out of sentiments and sentiments are occasioned by stimuli: the causal explanation of behaviour is provided by the relevant generalisations about these connections. But this requires reference not only to the general nature of human sentiments and their usual stimuli and effects, but also to the various human faculties involved in the perception of stimuli, and the formation of intentions. On occasions the relationship between stimulus, sentiment and intention is said to be "immediate" or "instinctive" but the ways in which the faculties enter into this process can become exceedingly complex. "Faculties" is one of those words which Smith uses freely and loosely: it covers the faculty of sight, the "faculty" of sympathy, or reason, or, indeed any operation of the human body or mind. These faculties may be grouped under the headings of sense, emotion, imagination and reason, and as they all play a part in the process of behaviour they are all, at one time or another, referred to as the causes of human behaviour.

⁸T.M.S., II.iii.1 (I.234).

⁹T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.9).

¹⁰T.M.S., I.ii.4 (I.160); I.iii.5 (I.185) and III.1 (I.277).

Smith has no developed theory of perception but it is clear that he does not think of perception as blindly mechanical, but assumes that it includes a certain amount of cognition or awareness that something is the case, which presupposes some degree of thought. Thus actions may be caused by the awareness that someone else is in pain or disapproves of a certain type of behaviour, as well as by physical blows or bodily circumstances. The perceptions which Smith regards as one of the causes of behaviour are not isolated sense impressions, but the perceptions of men capable of using general words and perceiving things as belonging to particular classes of objects.¹¹ This fact opens up the possibility of a more complex relationship between perception and action than simply response to physical stimuli.

The second group of faculties are those connected with the imagination. Imagination, by reproducing copies of impressions, frees the agent from being able to respond only to present impressions. These ideas or sensations are "weaker in degree", but "not altogether unlike"¹² the original impressions. They enable the agent to act with the intention of obtaining something not immediately presented to the senses, and they make it possible for one individual to have some idea of what impressions are experienced by another individual, a fact which is of fundamental importance for morals. The faculty of imagination brings new complexities to the relationship between the causes and effects of behaviour, since it is possible for the agent to respond to ideas as well as to impressions, and to frame actions in relation to imagined future situations, but since the imagination works

¹¹The process by which this comes about is described in his "Dissertation on the Origin of Languages".

¹²T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.3ff.); cf. (I.6): "an analogous emotion".

according to certain principles of laws, the total process can still be analysed in causal terms.

The third faculty is that of reason. The chief task of reason in human action is in the formation of rules. Reason enables men to profit by experience and form, by induction, rules about what means will best lead to the satisfaction of the passions; it also enables us to know when a particular situation is an appropriate one in which to apply a particular rule. Thus the general maxims of morality are formed by reason, but only in the sense that, by induction, men learn what their moral faculties approve and disapprove of in particular cases, and as "induction is always regarded as one of the operations of reason... From reason, therefore, we are very properly said to derive all those general maxims and ideas".¹³ As it is possible, out of a sense of prudence or duty, to follow these rules instead of the immediate prompting of instinctive passions, the operations of reason introduce considerable complexity into the relationship between the passions which are the basic causes of behaviour and the resulting behaviour itself; it enables men to adopt effective means to the ends which they consider will satisfy their passions, and to compare and choose between the long and the short term consequences of acts. It is therefore an important aspect of economic action. Men are able to learn what benefits their material welfare and act accordingly. But even such economically important motives as the propensity to "truck and barter" are not explained by saying that men foresee the beneficial results of such actions, although once having entered into trading contracts, they find them to their advantage.¹⁴ Reason does not, of itself, produce any new motives for action; it simply helps men to obtain

¹³T.M.S., VII.iii.2 (II.337).

¹⁴W.N., I.ii (I.19f.).

the ends they desire, whether that end be a full stomach or a clear conscience. Smith considers it absurd that reason should be thought to have any influence on conduct not derived from the emotions: it helps men to learn from experience, nothing more:

Reason may show that this object is the means of obtaining some other which is naturally either pleasing or displeasing, and in this manner may render it either agreeable or disagreeable for the sake of something else. But nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling.¹⁵

"Pleasure and pain are the great objects of desire and aversion":¹⁶ and the fundamental causes of human behaviour are therefore the sentiments or passions. These are conceived on the analogy of physical forces and are the principles of movement in the human constitution; whatever the operations of sense, imagination and reason, the passions provide the impulse to seek certain ends. Smith makes a distinction between "original" and "secondary" passions. The original passions are those which cannot be "derived from" other passions; they are the raw material or basic human nature from which other passions are developed through individual and social experience, and are therefore present in all human beings to much the same degree.¹⁷ These passions are the 'unalterable principles of human nature' which "though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted".¹⁸ They

¹⁵T.M.S., VII.iii.2 (II.330); cf. T.M.S., VII.iii.2 (II.339). Smith acknowledges Hutcheson as the first person to clearly delineate the powers of reason and sentiment (cf. II.340) but he is also restating Hume's position (Treatise of Human Nature, Book III, Part I).

¹⁶T.M.S., VII.iii.2 (II.339).

¹⁷T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.16).

¹⁸T.M.S., V.2 (II.19).

include basic bodily desires¹⁹ but also essentially social desires such as the wish for approval, the fear of disapproval and the desire for company. They are contrasted with secondary desires which arise from the operations of the imagination and the processes of learning; these include the fear, hope and despair often associated with the attempt to satisfy the original desires. Society itself is the cause of secondary passions, for "Bring him (a solitary man) into society, and all his own passions will immediately become the causes of new passions".²⁰ In society a man learns what is approved and disapproved of, and, because he has an original desire to please others, he will strive to do those things which gain their approval and this leads to a multitude of secondary passions. Similarly men's ability to imagine what it would be like to be in some situation different from their actual condition at a particular time, gives rise to other secondary passions; these "imaginative" passions although less violent in their immediate influence than bodily passions can be persistent and pervasive in their effect on behaviour. One of the most important secondary passions derived from the imagination is the desire for wealth which manifests itself in the "uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition",²¹ which gets its force from the imagined, not the actual, pleasures of wealth.

Smith also distinguishes between unsocial, social and selfish passions.²² These distinctions are again made primarily to elucidate the workings of sympathy, but are informative concerning the relative importance Smith attaches to the different

¹⁹T.M.S., II.i.5 (I.191): these include "hunger, thirst, the passion which unites the sexes, the love of pleasure, the dread of pain".

²⁰T.M.S., III.1 (I.279).

²¹W.N., II.iii (I.364).

²²T.M.S., I.ii.3, 4 and 5 (I.74ff.).

types of passion. The unsocial passions, which chiefly derive from the imagination, are directed against other human beings: hatred, anger, resentment and envy are the chief examples given.²³ The social passions include "all social and benevolent affections" such as "generosity, kindness, compassion, mutual friendship and esteem" and "the sentiment of love".²⁴ The selfish passions are those "conceived upon account of our own private good or bad fortune" whether these are thought of in terms of bodily or "imaginative" needs. Smith relates all these passions in what may be classified as a pleasure-pain theory of behaviour, for he believes that the key to understanding and explaining human action lies in discovering what it is that men find agreeable and disagreeable. Without saying that pleasure and pain are always the direct aims of action, the causal explanation of behaviour requires us to discover operative motives which can be interpreted as instances of the desire to escape discomfort or pain, to maintain a pleasant state of body or mind, or to seek something which is believed to be pleasant. Not only are the objectives which the passions prompt men to seek pleasurable or painful, but the passions themselves have hedonic qualities: it is painful to experience hunger or resentment, but pleasurable to experience joy or benevolence. One of the chief causes of happiness is the continuous functioning of a set pattern of activity, and conversely pain arises from the frustration of interrupted action, but, on the other hand, rest is also pleasant while work, which involves effort, is not. The bodily passions or natural appetites connected with food, drink and sex impel men to act in the most

²³T.M.S., I.ii.3 (I.77,82,84).

²⁴T.M.S., I.ii.4 (I.88ff.) and 5 (I.93).

literal sense; these "immediate instincts"²⁵ are strong but spasmodic, as are unsocial passions like envy, malice and resentment;²⁶ more persistent are the desires for ease and comfort. But happiness, in Smith's view, is more a mental than a bodily state²⁷ and the mental condition which tends to establish itself and which men seek to maintain is one of "tranquillity": this is partly a condition of rest but also of smooth functioning.²⁸ It is always pleasant, but it can be upset by feeling oneself the object of disapprobation or the uneasiness of a guilty conscience. Smith, as we shall see, stresses both the desire to obtain approval and avoid disapproval and the influence of conscience in controlling men's motives, encouraging some and discouraging others. Social passions more readily gain the approval both of men and of conscience than do selfish passions, and selfish passions more so than unsocial ones. But this does not mean that this is their order of importance in determining action. Benevolence comes into play only when men's basic needs are satisfied, and even then the benevolent affections are strong only in the case of close friends and relations and rarely extend beyond a man's compatriots.²⁹ Interpersonal attitudes are determined in most cases by the resentment and gratitude which are aroused by receiving injury or benefit at the hands of others and the need to obtain their approval and avoid their disapproval. Within the limitations imposed by these motives the dominant

²⁵T.M.S., II.1.5 (I.191).

²⁶V.N., V.1.2 (II.231).

²⁷V.N., V.1.3.art.2 (II.308).

²⁸H.P.S.(H.A.), p. 20; T.M.S., III.4 (I.400) & III.3 (I.365).

²⁹T.M.S., VI.11 (II.66ff.).

human passions are those of self-interest: "Every man...is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man".³⁰ Yet because his own happiness is bound up with the approval and disapproval of others ambition to receive their approbation is one of the chief motives of action once immediate bodily needs have been satisfied.³¹ Avarice is a subsidiary element within this ambition since wealth is one of the known methods of obtaining approval. Ambition and avarice, hatred of labour and love of ease, are steady and universal passions but when they lead to direct harm to other men they are subject to the veto of conscience which, as we shall see, is a form of social disapproval.

Those who find a contradiction between the doctrines of the Moral Sentiments and the Wealth of Nations often argue that in the former Smith gives pride of place to the social passions while in the latter he assumed that self-interest is the dominant motive. This is true only to the extent that Smith argues in the Moral Sentiments that social passions are approved and applauded more than selfish ones, but he never says that selfish passions are not, in their proper degree, approved, and, more importantly, he does not deny that they are the dominant motives. By arguing, for instance, that benevolence is of superior moral worth Smith is not committed to saying that it is the chief motive for action. The fact that men are primarily concerned with their own affairs is accepted as a matter of fact, and one which calls forth neither strong approval or disapproval. What does produce strong disapproval are the unsocial affections and

³⁰T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.205); cf. VI.ii.4 (II.69) and W.N., I.ii (I.18) and II.iii (I.371).

³¹T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.120ff.); cf. W.N., V.1 (II.231).

men have to avoid injuring others if they are to ward off this disapprobation; in this case disapproval does have an immense effect on action and in both the Moral Sentiments and the Wealth of Nations Smith accepts that the pursuit of self-interest is restricted by the need to avoid inflicting injury on others. It should also be noted that the selfish passions are not selfish in that they always aim at the welfare of the self at the expense of others. The operations of sympathy, which will be described later, make it possible for a man to feel something for the good of others, and desire their happiness as part of his own. By making the pleasures of sharing the happiness of others and obtaining their approval two of the chief ingredients of human happiness, Smith ensures that there is nothing essentially anti-social in "selfish" behaviour.

Smith's complete explanatory scheme goes beyond giving the "efficient" causes of human behaviour to an investigation of the consequences of certain patterns of action and thus to explanations in terms of "final" causes. Part II, section iii of the Moral Sentiments deals with the tendency of men to make their moral judgments in view of the actual consequences of an action rather than its intended consequences. Smith's explanation of this phenomenon is typical of his general approach and is conveniently summarised at the beginning of the section:

This irregularity of sentiment, which every body feels, which scarce any body is sufficiently aware of, and which nobody is willing to acknowledge, I proceed now to explain; and I shall consider, first, the cause which gives occasion to it, or the mechanism by which nature produces it; secondly, the extent of its influence; and, last of all, the end which it answers, or the purpose which the Author of nature seems to have intended by it.³²

³²T.M.S., II.iii.Intro. (I.235f.).

This scheme combines the strict curtailment of explanations in terms of human purposes and intentions with the introduction of a different level of teleological explanation in terms of the purposes and intentions of Nature or God. This teleological explanation is offered, not as a substitute for causal explanation, but as supplementary to it. Once the causal pattern of events has been exhibited, the end result or state towards which the pattern tends is alleged to have some benefit which was not foreseen by any human agent on account of which it is intelligible and explanatory to say that the whole process exhibits a plan and therefore implies a planner. I have considered Smith's use of this line of argument when it is used as an argument for the existence of God. But, if God's existence is taken for granted, then His intentions can be used within "final" explanations of causal processes. This is not to introduce the operation of the divine will into the causal process but to add to the causal explanation of events a different type of explanation, a teleological one. The last part of Smith's explanatory scheme is not, therefore, independent or self-sufficient but is supervenient upon his prior causal analysis.

The position of Smith's teleological explanations as logically sequential upon his causal explanations does not mean that they play an unimportant part in his sociological theory. It is a recurring theme in all his works that men are an unwitting part of a larger system and that the unintended consequences of their acts have, mainly beneficial, consequences for themselves, for other people, and for the order, stability and prosperity of their society. This "economy of nature"³³ is, for Smith, a constant source of wonder, and its discovery represents the climax of his scientific endeavours.³⁴ He takes

³³W.M.S., II.1.5 (I.190).

³⁴cf. p. 21.

particular satisfaction in demonstrating the inter-relationships of morality, law, religion and economic life, and in pointing to unsuspected connections between patterns of individual behaviour and the welfare of society as a whole, especially when these patterns seem "irregular", pointless or even harmful. This represents a development of the idea of a "system" as applied to societies with which he would be familiar from the writings of Shaftesbury,³⁵ Hutcheson,³⁶ and Butler,³⁷ with particular emphasis on Mandeville's favourite theme, the unintended beneficial consequences of self-interested behaviour.

The most famous examples of this are to be found in the Wealth of Nations which demonstrates how the self-interested actions of individuals serve the economic interests of society as a whole. It is in this context that we come across the only mention of the invisible hand in the book; while discussing the activity of the capitalist Smith writes:

He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases,

³⁵Cf. An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit, (1699). In D. D. Raphael, British Moralists (Oxford, 1969), #195: "How hard it is to give the least account of a particular part, without a competent knowledge of the whole".

³⁶Cf. Concerning Moral Good and Evil, (4th ed. 1730). In Raphael, op. cit., especially #332.

³⁷Cf. Fifteen Sermons, (1726). In Raphael, op. cit., #376: "the idea of a system, economy or constitution of any particular nature, or particular anything...it is an one or a whole made up of several parts".

led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.³⁸

The other "invisible hand" passage occurs in the Moral Sentiments where he goes even further by suggesting that economic activity is motivated not simply by self-interest but by mistaken self-interest in that men have a false idea of the pleasure to be derived from wealth and greatness yet "it is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind".³⁹ Thus the landlord strives to increase the productivity of his land but "the capacity of his stomach bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires" and he is forced to distribute what he produces above his own needs around him:

They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of ^{the} society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.⁴⁰

Smith's motive in pointing out these causal connections is not in the first instance to promote a free-trade economic policy, but to offer an explanation of the economic system. The phrase "invisible hand" is an unfortunate one in that it suggests that God intervenes in a course of events that, left to itself, would have unfortunate consequences, but the hand in question is the designer and creator of the total system not the mechanic who comes to the rescue when the machine goes wrong. The metaphor

³⁸ W.N., IV.ii (I.477f.).

³⁹ T.M.S., IV.1 (I.464).

⁴⁰ T.M.S., IV.1 (I.466).

of the "invisible hand" is brought in to cap a causal explanation with a teleological one, not to introduce an unverifiable intervention by a dous ex machina designed to bolster up a shaky causal explanation.⁴¹

The Moral Sentiments contains many other examples of the same reasoning. When men judge by the consequences rather than the intentions of actions they prevent unfulfilled evil intentions from provoking hostile reactions and they are encouraged to put their good intentions into deeds: this is a demonstration of "the wisdom and goodness of God even in the weakness and folly of men".⁴² Or, again, the disposition men have to admire the rich and the great which results from their imaginative identification with the pleasures of the great, is said to be "necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and ^{the} order of society",⁴³ and this ensures the maintenance of justice which in turn promotes commerce.⁴⁴ It is a presupposition of Smith's whole theory that when men act under the direction of their immediate and short sighted impulses, this works out to their own benefit, to the benefit of others and in the interests of the whole structure of society. To show this is the crowning aim of his explanatory endeavours.

It might be thought that to stress the theological idea of God's purpose as one of the central organising principles

⁴¹ Cf. D. Emmet, Function, Purpose and Powers (London, 1958), p. 90: "it (the invisible hand) is a metaphor to express his sense of how remarkable it was that individual forces ^{in society} should balance one another".

⁴² T.M.S., II.iii.3 (I.267).

⁴³ T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.146).

⁴⁴ W.N., IV.vii.2 (II.76).

of Smith's social theory is to remove it from the realm of science and to subordinate his scientific generalisations to unverifiable theological presuppositions. Yet many of Smith's statements about final causation have a remarkable similarity to modern functionalist theories and this should make us hesitate before dismissing them as irrelevant to social science. Smith's concern to exhibit "unintended consequences" has much in common with the search for "latent functions" in the modern study of society.⁴⁵ Such theories assume, as does Smith, that society is a bounded system, not unlike an animal organism, with complex inter-relations between its parts, so that each makes a contribution to the other or to the system as a whole. Such theorists talk of the social system instead of an "immense machine",⁴⁶ but the idea is the same, the organisation of parts in a whole which is more than an aggregate because each part contributes something distinctive to the operation of the whole. This is the theme of the entire Wealth of Nations which outlines the economic system which results from men's short sighted desire to look after their own interests, and produces results which no "human wisdom" could achieve.⁴⁷

Can we then select from Smith's statement of his explanatory scheme the assertion that he is seeking, in his teleological explanations, to show "the end which it answers" and ignore the alternative formulation "the purpose which the author of nature seems to have intended by it" and thereby turn it into a respectable sociological method? This might seem to be anachronistic but

⁴⁵ Cf. R. K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (New York, 1949), chap. 1.

⁴⁶ Smith also writes of "one immense and connected system", T.N.S., VII.ii (II.253).

⁴⁷ W.N., IV.ix (II.209).

it is justifiable if it helps us to see what can be salvaged from Smith's efforts to demonstrate the economy of nature once the theological framework is removed.^{4B} We are supported in this by Smith's repeated insistence that final causes must not be substituted for efficient causes, and his rejection of a priori methods of discovering God's will, in favour of identifying^{the} purposes of God with the observed outcome of natural processes. But this reinterpretation is not entirely satisfactory unless we can show that functional theories are themselves explanatory and do not rely on undisclosed theological assumptions. If we cannot presuppose the existence of God, we must ask whether Smith's final explanations are of a kind with those functional explanations which are agnostic and yet still explanatory.

Functional explanations are often criticised as logically inadequate. They are said to be inappropriate for sociological explanation because the conditions which make them explanatory in the biological sciences do not hold in the social sciences. A society, it is said, is not like an organism; it does not have any clear boundaries, it does not come into existence and die, and its parts have an independence of the whole which is absent in biological organisms. In part these objections beg the important questions, but they do show that it is necessary for a functional explanation to do more than demonstrate a beneficial connection between different types of social behaviour. This may be sufficient if it is assumed that all unintended beneficial consequences are the manifestation of God's will. But, if this assumption is dropped, then something else is required to make functional explanations explanatory. In biology this is provided by the fact of random genetic mutations and the whole theory of natural selection, which enables us to reinterpret teleologically

^{4B} For a similar attempt in the case of Newton, cf. E. Mach, The Science of Mechanics (1903).

worded functional explanations as generalisations about the relationship between survival and organic structures and functions which are the consequence of random variations. It can therefore be assumed that each part of an organism has a function to play in ensuring the survival of the whole.

Assimilating functional explanations to this model we can say that it is necessary to show that an organism will die if a certain function is not fulfilled so that the existence of a part of the organism which fulfils this function is explained by showing that without it the organism could not survive. The effect does not explain the cause unless the effect is a necessary condition of the continued existence of a whole of which the cause is a part. Even this will still not be a complete explanation since it is necessary to show why the cause exists in the first place, but, granted this, it can explain the survival of the organism by contrasting it with organisms which have ceased to exist because they lacked something necessary to their existence. In principle there is no reason why explanations of this sort cannot be used in sociology if it can be shown that there are certain necessary conditions for the existence of a society.

It is possible to interpret the most important "final cause" explanations in the Moral Sentiments according to this model. Again and again Smith argues that justice and to a lesser extent social stratification are necessary to the existence of society. Certain aspects of religion are also functional: for instance, the fear of death, "while it afflicts and mortifies the individual, guards and protects society" by making men fear the consequences of their injustices.⁴⁹ The "law of retaliation",

⁴⁹T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.14).

based on the immediate instinct for revenge, is "sacred and necessary" because "the very existence of society requires that unmerited and unprovoked malice should be restrained by proper punishments"⁵⁰, for society "cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another".⁵¹ These assertions are the clearest examples in the Moral Sentiments of the belief that certain patterns of behaviour are necessary for the existence of society. They do not provide a complete explanation of these patterns of behaviour, but Smith does not pretend that they do, since they are appended to psychological accounts of such behaviour. But by showing that justice is a necessary condition of existence for any society he has contributed to its explanation within the bounds of science.

Further questions need to be asked: when does society cease to exist? When its members are "dissipated and scattered abroad"⁵² Why do societies exist at all? Because they are necessary for the survival of man?⁵³ If some further explanation for society's existence is required Smith must retreat into his belief that all things work towards the "two" favourite ends of nature", "self-preservation and the propagation of the species".⁵³ For Smith this is ultimately explanatory because of his theological beliefs, but as these have been replaced in the science of biology by the theory of natural selection, a similar step can be made in the science of society. If it is at all plausible to suggest that human groups have gone through a process of natural selection in the early history of human

⁵⁰T.M.S., II.i.3 (I.172).

⁵¹T.M.S., II.ii.3 (I.214).

⁵²T.M.S., II.ii.3 (I.214).

⁵³T.M.S., II.i.5 (I.190 & 191).

society it is possible not only to see a continuity between Smith's explanation of revenge as a motive necessary to the survival of man in society and modern functional theory, but to give some sort of justification for this type of theory as a whole.

However not all functional explanations involve a reference to the necessary conditions of existence for the system concerned. If, in the place of mere survival, there is posited some normal state of the system which tends to re-establish itself whenever it is disrupted, then parts of the system are said to be functional to the extent that they contribute to the attainment or continuity of this normal state. It is a common feature of many biological organisms and some machines that they have such states of equilibrium, which are associated with various "feed-back" mechanisms whereby any deviance from the equilibrium is corrected. The most common examples are the bodily mechanisms which maintain an even blood temperature in animals, or the ball-cock on a water tank which ensures that the level of water in the tank remains constant. Some of these homeostatic controls are necessary conditions for the existence of organisms but others are functional for a normal state which is only very indirectly related to survival. The random movements of animals which cease only when they reach a "comfortable" resting place certainly help to keep them within an environment conducive to survival but in higher animals it persists to a degree far beyond what is necessary to achieve this end.

It would be too much to suggest that Smith had any clear idea of this sort of functionalism, yet we may still compare parts of his explanatory scheme with modern equilibrium theory. Many of his functional statements can be taken as referring to homeostatic ends which go beyond the necessary conditions for the survival either of individuals or of society. Hunger is an

instinct which is clearly functional for the survival of the individual, as sex is functional for the survival of the species,⁵⁴ but in addition to these primary ends Smith believed that nature "intended the happiness and perfection of the species".⁵⁵ Justice is necessary to society but the moral sentiments are concerned with more than mere justice; they encourage the exercise of benevolence and mutual kindness which is conducive to the harmony of social relationships.⁵⁶ for instance, mutual kindness is necessary for happiness, therefore our moral sentiments approve of rewarding kindness with kindness.⁵⁷ Or, again, to judge actions by their consequences, not their intentions, has as its final cause the happiness of the species.⁵⁸ As we shall see Smith's whole moral system is designed to show how the moral sentiments arise out of the mutual adjustment of sentiments sufficient for the harmony of society. Since this harmony is necessary for the happiness of individuals we may say that the ultimate end which all morality tends to establish is the happiness of mankind:

Nature, indeed, seems to have so happily adjusted our sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, to the conveniency both of the individual and of the society, that after the strictest examination it will be found, I believe, that this is universally the case.⁵⁹

Functional explanations of this sort can be tied in with Smith's hedonistic motivational theory to provide an explanation for the

⁵⁴T.M.S., II.i.5 (I.191).

⁵⁵T.M.S., II.iii.3 (I.265).

⁵⁶T.M.S., I.iii.1 (I.113).

⁵⁷T.M.S., VI.ii.1 (II.68).

⁵⁸T.M.S., II.iii.3 (I.270).

⁵⁹T.M.S., IV.2 (I.476).

congruence between human nature and social life in the same way as homeostatic functional relations explain the adaptive relations of part to whole in maintaining a state of equilibrium in animal organisms. The explanatory force of such functional explanations rests on empirical generalisations which describe the state of equilibrium to be found in particular species of organism and a description of the mechanisms by which this state is maintained. One homeostatic condition which Smith regards as holding for human societies is the state of harmony,⁶⁰ defined in terms of the absence of conflict and the presence of mutual friendliness. The mechanism which maintains this state is that of sympathy which will be analysed in detail in later chapters. However Smith does not take the analogy between society and organism all the way since he realises that harmony in society has, as its purpose, the happiness of individuals within society. This gives us a clue as to how the mechanism of sympathy can establish harmony in society. Just as protozoa will move randomly round a tank of water until they reach water of the right temperature, so human beings reach content only when they have achieved a state of happiness. We have seen that Smith regards this as a state of tranquillity, or the absence of irritation; not necessarily a state of inactivity but of smooth operation. Those actions which tend to produce such a state are reinforced while others are left behind or not repeated. This does not imply any conscious forethought on men's part any more than in the random behaviour of animals. For although men are able to reflect on this

⁶⁰ T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.40).

functional utility and admire it, Smith never admits that this is the explanation for its existence and maintenance.

Functional explanations in terms of a homeostatic state of happiness not essential to survival are not so rigorous as those which state the necessary conditions for the existence of a system since we cannot appeal to the theory of natural selection to explain the existence of such functional relationships, but they can be incorporated into a causal theory of human behaviour of the mechanistic type which explains goal seeking behaviour by reference to states of discomfort which precede and provoke the behaviour which eventually results in tranquillity and an end to the discomfort. While it is somewhat artificial to interpret Smith's teleological explanations in terms of the concept of homeostasis, it does help us to see similarities between eighteenth and twentieth century social science and to show that, despite the decline in theological teleicism, it is possible to see some continuity between Smith's approach and more radically secular post-Darwinian social science.

In partial justification of applying the concepts of equilibrium and homeostasis to the analysis of the Moral Sentiments we can point to the many examples in the Wealth of Nations of the idea that the economy tends to establish a natural or normal level of wages or prices or interest and so on.⁶¹ For instance there is the tendency of the natural price of a commodity to establish itself after it has been artificially disturbed,⁶² or, more strikingly, the way in which the profitability of different trades, professions and employments tend to become equalised: all this is described and explained by showing how the functional

⁶¹Of. p. 66.

⁶²W.N., I.iv (I.33).

inter-relations of prices, wages, rents, profits, interest rates and so on are maintained by the persistence of men's economic motivations which prompt them to employ their labour and capital where they offer the greatest reward for the least effort.⁶³ The economic system is likened to a human body which is normally able to recover from sickness and return to its usual healthy state of its own accord.⁶⁴ Although it may be hindered by bad laws, the natural system of liberty "establishes itself".⁶⁵ Of Quesnai Smith argues that "he does not seem to have considered that ⁱⁿ the political body, the natural effort which every man is continually making to better his own condition, is a principle of preservation capable of preventing and correcting, in many respects, the bad effects of a political economy, in some degree both partial and oppressive". And again: "In the political body, however, the wisdom of nature has fortunately made ample provision for remedying many of the bad effects of the folly and injustice of man; in the same manner as it has done in the natural body, for remedying those of his sloth and intemperance".⁶⁶ The use of this analogy shows that the idea of a state of equilibrium maintained by a homeostatic mechanism was part of his way of thinking and inseparable from

⁶³ W.N., I.vii (I.64f.); cf. I.x (I.111): "The whole of the advantages and disadvantages of the different employments of labour and stock must, in the same neighbourhood, be either perfectly equal or continually tending to equality".

⁶⁴ W.N., IV.v (II.49) and W.N., II.iii (I.364).

⁶⁵ W.N., IV.ix (II.208).

⁶⁶ W.N., IV.ix (II.194f.).

his conception of an economic and social system.⁶⁷ The idea crops up in discussing the relation of infant mortality to population and the means of subsistence,⁶⁸ it is part and parcel of the entire theory of the Wealth of Nations, and it is not, therefore, too far fetched to see that it affected his approach to the study of morality.

As a final part of this discussion of Smith's sociological method it is interesting to consider to what extent this can be called genetic or historical. The answer is, I think, very little if this is thought to involve tracing the development of particular historical events or even general facts about societies to specific dated historical occurrences. The "origins" he has in mind, in the Moral Sentiments, are not dated events but the raw materials of human nature and the basic types of social situation in which these raw materials developed, partly in the life of each individual and partly in the development of society itself. Nor in the Moral Sentiments is his method historical in tracing a series of specific events in order to present an intelligible picture of the past. In general his method is historical first in the broad sense that it is empirical, and, secondly, because it stresses that the laws of social science include many laws of development which explain how, given the basic propensities of human nature, individuals come to behave as they do as a result of a complex process of social adjustment and societal development. These generalisations provide the

⁶⁷Max Blaug, Economic Theory in Retrospect (Illinois, 1962). Blaug writes that the so-called spontaneous harmony of interests and the "obvious and simple system of natural liberty" is "identical with the concept of perfect competition; the invisible hand is nothing more than the automatic equilibrating mechanism of the competitive market".

⁶⁸W.M., I.viii(1.89).

necessary link between the analysis of human nature and the explanation of specific types of human behaviour: they show how that human nature develops and manifests itself in the process of social interaction and social change. Thus man's "original" desire to please his fellows leads him to adopt a manner of behaviour which obtains their approval. This is a process of mutual adjustment and reciprocity which is described at length in the Moral Sentiments. An analysis of this work will show how Smith allows for the fact that different behaviour will often obtain approval in different societies, or from different types of persons in the same society. In this way the general desire to please becomes a set of specific desires for those things which are found to elicit approval. Similarly self-interest manifests itself in the desire to obtain particular material objects. What these objects are will depend on the processes of learning whereby the individual discovers which of the available objects gives him most pleasure. The particular motives of human action therefore depend not only on the raw material of human nature, the stage of development and experience of the individual concerned, but also on the type of society of which he is a member, and societies, like individuals, go through certain developmental stages.

Smith's main use of history is, therefore, to establish and illustrate his general laws of individual and social development; this should not be confused with what he calls "narrative history",⁶⁹ a method which consists of relating a series of facts in chronological order. There is something of this in the Wealth of Nations⁷⁰ but very little in the Moral Sentiments.

⁶⁹L.R.B.L., p. 84ff.

⁷⁰Even so there is little stress on the significance of particular events, except perhaps the discovery of America and the rounding of Cape Horn, cf. W.N., IV.vii(II.141).

The important difference between the two methods is that Smith as a social scientist is interested in particular historical events as evidence for historical generalisations, while the narrative historian assumes developmental laws in the selection and discussion of actual historical incidents which he considers to be explanatory:

Should one lay down certain principles which he afterwards confirmed by examples, this work would have the same end as a history, but the means would be different: it would be, not a narrative, but a didactic writing.⁷¹

The end which didactic and narrative discourse have in common is that they both enable men to learn from history how they may best achieve certain results; the difference is that didactic discourse attempts to establish generalisations about historical processes, while narration sets out particular sequences of events which may or may not be instances of historical generalisations. By stressing his interest in didactic history Smith shows that he thinks that those historians who put great emphasis on individual men and particular events miss the more fundamental facts about history, namely the laws without whose operation such individual acts and events would have no causal significance.⁷² The best examples of this are to be found in the Essays.

It is wrong to say, as Dugald Stewart does, that Smith indulges much in what, after Stewart, has come to be called "conjectural" or "theoretical" history.⁷³ This is an historical method which consists of reconstructing the probable course of unrecorded history from a knowledge of human nature and the laws of historical development. A sample is provided by Smith's own

⁷¹L.R.B.L., p. 85f.

⁷²L.R.B.L., p. 86ff.

⁷³E.P.S. ("Account"), p. xlii; cf. p. xlii: "~~how things may have happened based on the known principles of human nature~~".

"Dissertation on the Origin of Languages", in which he speculated about the stages through which language developed by considering what would be the most essential and least difficult aspects of language in the earliest stage of society:

Two savages, who had never been taught to speak, but had been bred up remote from the societies of men, would naturally begin to form that language by which they would endeavour to make their mutual wants intelligible to each other.⁷⁴

On this basis, and taking into account the essential logical features of all languages, he suggests the stages through which all languages must have passed, the results of their interaction with each other, how they resulted in the classical languages of Greece and Rome, and how these in turn, developed into modern languages. For these latter stages he quotes such evidence as was available to him but the earlier part is purely conjectural.

Historical conjecture is also used to some extent in the Moral Sentiments in those parts where Smith considers the effect which entry into a social group would have on a person who had been hitherto outside society;⁷⁵ this device is central to the distinction he draws between the original passions which men, as it were, bring with them into society, and the secondary passions, which arise out of social interaction. But Smith does not place significance on the historical likelihood of such a series of events, it is rather that he is attempting, by reference to such a conjectural situation, to analyse the effects of a social process which is going on all the time, and does not need to be tested by reference to some long past and unrecorded events. It is important to emphasise therefore that Smith employs realistic

⁷⁴T.M.S., ("Dissertation"), (II.403).

⁷⁵T.M.S., IV.1 (I.277f.).

illustrations and attempts to establish verifiable hypotheses; in so far as he can use these hypotheses, once established on other grounds, to provide a convincing reconstruction of unrecorded history this is something additional to his main purpose. For instance in the case of establishing his laws of the operation of sympathy he uses as evidence the operations of sympathy he observes in non-moral situations and then shows how these can be used to account for the development and continuation of moral sentiments: to some extent this does involve a "reconstruction" of the past but only in order to point to certain processes which are still being repeated in society both in the everyday interaction of adult members of society, and in the process of socialisation whereby children learn to adapt themselves to their social environment.⁷⁶ This is equivalent in method to the analytical parts of the Wealth of Nations, especially Book I.

The Wealth of Nations contains some conjectural history in the sense of speculations about earliest stages of societal development and the origins of aspects of economic life, such as the use of money, just as the Essays contain conjectures about the unrecorded first steps in the emergence of science and religion. But this approach is abandoned as soon as Smith can lay his hands on any hard facts or even travellers' tales. One does not get the impression that Smith is greatly interested in these speculations for their own sake, but they clearly add to the plausibility of his theory by filling in the "gaps" in the outline of social progress which he is presenting, and, in the case of his descriptions of possible early stages of society, he is provided with some basis for comparisons between different types of society. Stewart himself, in coining the term "conjectural history"

⁷⁶ T.M.S., III.3 (I.355).

emphasises that, in Smith's case at least, it is a second best to the history for which there is "direct evidence".⁷⁷ The essence of conjectural history is that, starting from assumed generalisations about human nature and early conditions of society, it deduces what might or must have happened in order for a certain known state of affairs to have developed into its present condition. From Smith's point of view it is important to show that he can demonstrate a plausible account of these unknown events, but only to show that such a development is possible on his theory; there is no need for him to demonstrate that this is the actual course of events, only that a course of events compatible with his theory, is possible. His main interest in history remains, however, to develop the generalisations which are taken for granted in the case of conjectural history; this latter is not, therefore, his typical historical method but an added embellishment which, by showing that his theories are compatible with a possible course of events in unrecorded history, adds something to the explanatory value and general probability of his theories.

The Moral Sentiments accepts as a fact, but does not dwell upon, Smith's most specifically historical presupposition, the belief in progress.⁷⁸ The development of societies from barbarism to civilisation is an integral part of the Essays, the Lectures on Jurisprudence and the Wealth of Nations.⁷⁹ In describing the

⁷⁷ Cf. M.P.S., ("Account"), p. xii-iii.

⁷⁸ Duncan Forbes, "Scientific Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar", Cambridge Journal, VIII (1955), pp. 643-670. Forbes attempts to show that the idea of progress is the central and unifying theme of all Smith's work but this is inadequately demonstrated with respect to the Moral Sentiments.

⁷⁹ This is a characteristic theme of the Scottish enlightenment. Cf. A. S. Skinner, "Economics and the Problem of Method: An Eighteenth Century View", Scottish Journal of Political Economy, XII, (1965), pp. 267-280.

earliest stages of society there is an element of conjectural history but Smith quickly gets on to documenting the progress of mankind from such evidences as were available to him. By "civilization" Smith means settled agricultural and commercial society and progress is measured in terms of economic development.⁸⁰ Each type of society is defined according to its basic means of production, starting with the society of hunters, then pastoral society, followed by the society of farmers which gradually develops into commercial society that is dominated by artificers and merchants. Because Smith never accomplished his plan of emulating Montesquieu⁸¹ by writing a complete history of the development of society, this historical schema is presented, almost by the way, in the Wealth of Nations, as it is relevant to Smith's discussion of the expenses of government, with the important exception that he deals in great detail with the causes of the division of labour which is the foundation of the development of commercial society. By concentrating on this part of Smith's work it is easy to accept that he is a forerunner of Marx's historical materialism: not only is each stage of society defined by its economic system, but economic change takes place in response to the "propensity to truck and barter"⁸² in conjunction with man's desire for material wealth, and reaches whatever level is made possible by "material" factors such as the extent of the market, ease of communications, the use of money and so forth.⁸³ Moreover,

⁸⁰This is not an ultimate moral assessment on Smith's part. He knows that economic development can bring unfortunate consequences for human personality and intellectual development, cf. W.N., V.1.3. art.2 (II.303f.).

⁸¹E.P.S. ("Account"), p. xvii.

⁸²W.N., I.ii (I.16).

⁸³Cf. R. L. Meek, "The Scottish Contribution to Marxist Sociology", Economics and Ideology (London, 1967), p. 34.

Smith describes, especially in the Lectures on Jurisprudence, how changes in the means of production give rise to new social ranks or classes which in turn affect the method of government.⁸⁴ The development of religion is likewise affected by economic change,⁸⁵ and, as we shall see, morality also changes from age to age and varies between the different orders within each society. There is also evidence that Smith saw that intellectual systems and economic doctrines were the result of economic class interest, mercantilism being the class morality of the merchants.⁸⁶ But this over-simplifies Smith's theory of social change. There are elements within men's ideas about justice which limit economic development and are not affected by it. The proper administration of justice, which is a precondition of the development of commerce,⁸⁷ does depend on a sufficient economic basis for its finance, but its central prohibition against harming others is not an economic imperative. Religion also affects the content of law.⁸⁸ But, of more importance than this is the complex inter-relationship between the economic basis of society and the governmental function of defence. It is not simply a case of the wealthiest group in society holding political power since political power is to some extent dependent on the ability to become wealthy by extra-economic methods such as raising taxes. This ability depends partly on the citizens' sense of the utility of government in maintaining peace and security, and partly on the "principle of authority"⁸⁹ which refers to the fact that age, long possession of power and

⁸⁴Cf. chap. 10.

⁸⁵W.N., V.1.3.art.3 (II.309ff.).

⁸⁶W.N., IV.iii.2 (I.519).

⁸⁷W.N., IV.vii.2 (II.76) and V.1.2 (II.232).

⁸⁸W.N., IV.v (II.48)

⁸⁹L.J., p. 9.

physical and mental abilities as well as wealth are qualities which receive admiration and obedience. Wealth alone is not sufficient, especially if it is not spent in maintaining dependants who are willing to form an army when necessary. The actual course of societal development is therefore a matter of the complex inter-relationships of economic, military, political, religious, moral and legal factors; social institutions grow up and change in response to a wide variety of factors even although the economic one is perhaps the most decisive one. But this is not a process which occurs without resistance; custom and habit as well as the vested interests of the declining economic and political groups can maintain institutions after the causes which produced them have ceased to operate. This enables Smith to hold both that institutions are the natural result of the man's interaction with his environment, and that the particular institutions at a particular time are a hindrance to natural liberty, for natural liberty is not an absence of institutional restraints but presupposes the operation of those institutions which allow spontaneous human behaviour to manifest itself in a manner appropriate to each stage of societal development.

Many points in this outline of Smith's social theory will become clearer once we have examined those important elements of the theory which are contained in the Moral Sentiments. For the moment it is enough to note that Smith had a theory of social change which was primarily but not entirely based on his economics. But it must always be remembered that the economic motive is more a desire for rank and reputation than for the accumulation of material wealth for its own sake. It is within this context that we have to see Smith's explanation of the more static forces of morality and justice which provide the framework within which economic change takes place. On the other hand this economic

background does affect the form and content of moral and legal rules, and it is part of Smith's achievement, which will be illustrated throughout the coming chapters, that he was able not only to allow for this, but to offer explanations for it.

Chapter Four

APPROVAL AND SYMPATHY

The terms "moral" and "morality" may be used to refer to certain types of conduct which are judged to be good or bad, right or wrong, or to the processes of forming, making, or being disposed to make moral judgments; to describe a person's "morals" may thus involve either giving a report on his conduct or on his beliefs about what is morally good and bad. A theory of morality may, likewise, be a theory about moral conduct or about moral judgments. Smith's theory is mainly of the latter sort: the "moral sentiments" to which he refers are those involved in making moral judgments rather than the sentiments embodied in the behaviour which these moral judgments assess. Since moral judgments are judgments on conduct, and since conduct is effected by moral judgments, there can be no sharp distinction between a theory of moral behaviour and a theory of moral judgment, but Smith's primary interest is in the latter phenomenon, the sentiments involved in moral evaluations, or, in the words of the explanatory sub-title introduced in the 4th edition of the Moral Sentiments, "the Principles by which Men naturally judge concerning the Conduct and Character, first of their Neighbours, and afterwards of themselves".¹

Any study of morality, whether it be scientific or philosophical, requires to be clear about what is to count as "morality", if only to delimit the area to be investigated. For a theory of moral judgment this means indicating what is to count as a "moral" judgment. On this point Smith would agree with those modern philosophers who describe moral judgments as expressions

¹T.M.S., Sub-title, (I.iii).

of approval and disapproval concerning human conduct. However, while approval or disapproval may feature in all moral judgments, they are also present or implied in non-moral evaluations and prescriptions. Smith himself mentions that we approve and disapprove of men's literary and mathematical ability and of their aesthetic taste and good judgment.² Nor is it sufficient to say, as Smith does, that moral approval and disapproval are directed towards "conduct and character",³ since this includes the assessment of behaviour according to standards of skill, usefulness and beauty, which are not, in themselves, moral standards. And we are not greatly helped by being told that moral judgments concern virtue and vice since Smith counts intellectual abilities as a type of virtue,⁴ and in any case this merely transfers the burden of definition to these terms. However he does provide us with sufficient synonyms for judgments concerning virtue and vice, in their moral connotations, to enable us to see what sort of judgments of approval and disapproval he has in mind. Virtue and vice are qualities ascribed to "the sentiment or affection of the heart from which any action proceeds"⁴ and in assessing virtue "the mind prefers one tenour of conduct to another, denominates the one right and the other wrong; considers the one as the object of approbation, honour, and reward, and the other of blame, censure, and punishment".⁵ Or, again, "what is agreeable to our moral faculties, is fit, and right, and proper to be done; the contrary wrong, unfit, and improper".⁶

²T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.32 & 34).

³T.M.S., Sub-title, (I.iii).

⁴T.M.S., I.1.3 (I.28).

⁵T.M.S., VII.1 (II.197).

⁶T.M.S., III.5 (I.412).

As we shall see, Smith divides moral judgments into judgments of propriety and judgments of merit. "Propriety" is Smith's term for rightness or fitness and is the quality of deserving approval or praise while impropriety deserves disapproval or blame. An action has merit if it is proper to reward it and demerit if it is proper to punish it. This is exceedingly general, particularly in the case of propriety, which is a standard he sometimes applies to what would normally be considered non-moral conduct; for instance, he writes that "we may often approve of a jest, and think the laughter of the company quite just and proper".⁷ The use of the words "just" and "proper" in this context raises doubts about the adequacy of Smith's definition of morality, and it is often said that he failed to distinguish between morality proper and non-moral judgments such as those concerning social convention or expressing admiration for human skills. Smith certainly did not set out, as many present day philosophers do, with a narrow definition of morality, singling out, for instance, a particular type of over-riding obligation or universalisable imperative, or the self-conscious choice of ultimate goals. On the contrary he tends to take in a wide variety of inter-personal attitudes in so far as they express preferences for one type of conduct over another; indeed he concentrates as much on what is called customary morality and unthinking assessments of conduct as on the types of judgments which are usually singled out as characteristically moral ones.

There is no such thing as a "correct" definition of morality and suggested definitions ought to be assessed by their appropriateness to the purpose which they are intended to serve. Smith's broad interpretation of the term is suited to his purpose of

⁷T.N.S., I.1.3 (I.26).

explaining as wide as possible a variety of social phenomena using the minimum number of explanatory principles. The unity of the Moral Sentiments, therefore, does not lie in an initial definition of morality but springs from the fundamental scientific generalisations on the basis of which Smith builds up his "moral" theory. It is in fact the concept of sympathy which provides the unifying theme that gives the work its coherence. Smith believed that he could explain all the judgments which we should normally call moral ones by reference to the various operations of sympathy, but his interest in this latter phenomenon leads him to attempt explanations of many social attitudes which, on most definitions of "morality", would not be considered as instances of moral judgments. In this chapter I shall analyse Smith's concept of sympathy, indicate why he considered it to be such an important factor in society, and outline the main generalisations which he makes about its operation.

Whatever difficulty there may be in determining exactly what Smith considered to be the defining characteristics of a moral judgment, there is no doubt about the broad category to which he assigns it: a moral judgment is a judgment of approval or disapproval. His entire moral theory is built on certain assumptions about the conditions under which men approve and disapprove, not only of the behaviour, but also the perceptions, reasonings, feelings, opinions and beliefs of their fellows. He argues firstly that men judge the opinions, perceptions or sentiments of each other by comparing them with their own; if they "agree", that is, if one man perceives that he shares the opinion, perception or feeling of another, then he judges them to be correct:

Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by

my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them.⁸

Not only is judgment based on the "perception of this coincidence",⁹ or lack of it, but approval and disapproval are claimed to be necessary consequences of perceiving that one shares or does not share the opinions or sentiments of another:

To approve of another man's opinions is to adopt those opinions, and to adopt them is to approve of them. If the same arguments which convince you convince me likewise, I necessarily approve of your conviction; and if they do not, I necessarily disapprove of it; neither can I possibly conceive that I should do the one without the other. To approve or disapprove therefore, of the opinions of others is acknowledged, by every body, to mean no more than to observe their agreement or disagreement with our own. But this is equally the case with regard to our approbation or disapprobation of the sentiments or passions of others.¹⁰

This seems to assert that there is some sort of necessary connection between the perception of agreement, in the sense of seeing that one shares the opinion or sentiment of another, and the approval of the opinion or sentiment. "Approval" here, for Smith, means not only judging an opinion or sentiment to be correct, but also commending the person for having this opinion or sentiment. The quotation I have given concentrates on the agreement and disagreement of opinions, but Smith makes the same point about admiring the same picture or poem, laughing at the same joke, feeling the same emotions, and perceiving the same objects.¹¹

⁸T.M.S., I.1.3 (I.30f.).

⁹T.M.S., I.1.3 (I.26).

¹⁰T.M.S., I.1.3 (I.25).

¹¹T.M.S., I.1.3 (I.24).

The multiplicity of examples which he gives are all designed to support the argument, which is crucial for the Moral Sentiments, that one man approves of the sentiments of another when he shares these sentiments, and disapproves of his sentiments if he does not share them. He wants to argue that approbation simply is the perception of the coincidence of sentiments, and talks of "that perfect harmony and correspondence of sentiments which constitutes approbation".¹² This point, which seemed so evident to Smith, has been disputed by others. Jouffroy points out that "I share a thousand emotions without morally approving them or disapproving them. I condemn many emotions I share and approve many things which are not emotions...I approve emotions which are displeasing".¹³ Here Jouffroy is wide of the mark in thinking that Smith did not allow that men approve of things other than emotions, or that there is any difficulty about approving of displeasing emotions, since it is just as possible to share displeasing emotions as pleasing ones. But the assertion that it is possible to share emotions without approving of them and to approve of emotions without sharing them is more to the point. It is an argument which has been repeated by those who say that Smith consistently confuses "fellow-feeling" or sharing emotions, with approval or praise.¹⁴ As we shall see,

¹² W.M.S., I.iii.1 (I.103).

¹³ Jouffroy's Ethics, Translated by W. H. Channing, (Boston, 1841), p. 146.

¹⁴ Cf. Thomas Brown, Lectures on Ethics (Edinburgh, 1846), p. 165: "It (sympathy) is generally employed, ^{added} to signify a mere participation of the feelings of others; but it is also frequently used as significant of approbation itself", and J. A. Farrer, Adam Smith (London, 1881), p. 196f.: "It is difficult to read Adam Smith's account of the identification of sympathy and approbation, without feeling that throughout his argument there is an unconscious play upon words, and that an equivocal use of the word 'sympathy' lends all its speciousness to the theory he expounds...The first meaning is fellow-feeling, the second praise or approval; he begins with the first and ends with the second; but they are totally different, the one being a state of feeling and the other a judgment of reason".

Smith's theory of the impartial spectator takes into account the fact that approval and agreement do not in every instance coincide, but it must be allowed that Smith has been, to some extent, misled by failing to see that "approval" can mean either "judging to be correct" or "expressing favourable attitudes", and also by thinking of "agreement" both as "the perception of coincidence" and as "the expression of favourable attitudes". These confusions led him to say, on occasions, that to share a sentiment is the same thing as to approve of it, and this must surely be a mistake. But it is not a simple linguistic error: he does have arguments to back up his identification of agreement and approval. His first argument is an epistemological one: it is only possible, he says, to judge one person's "faculty" by comparing it with one's own. The second argument, which he states as if it were a logical one, asserts that it is impossible to share an opinion or sentiment without approving of that opinion or sentiment. The first or epistemological argument is most convincing when it is the accuracy of a perception, or the correctness of an argument that is being assessed, for while it is true that there are many "external" tests by which perceptions and arguments can be examined, in the end these do involve some reference to one's own perceptual or intellectual faculties to check the processes of perception or argument which are being assessed. But unfortunately for Smith the parallel with sentiments does not seem to hold: there is no immediate equivalent, in the case of sentiment, to checking the accuracy of a perception or the validity of an argument: sentiments, in themselves, are not judged by this sort of standard; they cannot be said to be accurate or valid; it is not, therefore, clear what is being assessed when I compare my sentiments with those of another person. If Smith is intending to say that the assessment must be one of moral approbation or disapprobation, then the parallel

seems a weak one, for there seems to be no reason why, just because I usually judge the accuracy of a perception by reference to my own perceptions, I must make moral judgments by comparing the sentiments of others with my own; and similarly, in the case of reasoning, the standards of correctness which apply to arguments, do not apply to sentiments, and therefore there is no reason why the method of testing which is suitable for the one should apply to the other. It may be more plausible to say that I assess the moral judgments of another by comparing them with my own, but Smith cannot be said to have established anything about the assessment of sentiments in general by the epistemological parallels he draws between the judgment of perceptions and reasonings on the one hand and the "judgment" of sentiments on the other. Perhaps, in this instance, he had not entirely freed himself from the analogy he thought to be implied in Hutcheson's phrase the "moral sense".¹⁵

The analogy between opinions and sentiments is also misleading as it occurs in the second part of Smith's argument, which states it to be a necessary fact that a person approves of opinions and therefore also of sentiments with which he agrees. It does seem odd to say that I approve of an opinion with which I disagree, but this is because, in this context, approve usually means "agree with" or "think to be correct". But if by "approval" and "disapproval" we mean holding "pro" or "con" attitudes then it is often the case that we agree or disagree with the opinions of others without approving or disapproving of them. Such attitudes are not always appropriate. Indeed we may disapprove of someone expressing an opinion with which we agree in the sense that we think it to be true, since that opinion may not be favourable to our interests. Smith is, therefore, mistaken in making the

¹⁵cf. p. 305.

logical point that, where adopting an opinion and approving of it are concerned, "I cannot possibly conceive that I should do the one without the other".¹⁶ However, if his logical argument is reinterpreted as a psychological one, then it becomes more plausible. There may be grounds for saying, as an empirical generalisation, that men do approve of opinions which they share, and, in so far as men hold opinions which they believe to be true and approve of others believing what is true, this generalisation will be valid. In the same way we may interpret Smith as saying, in the case of sentiments, that it is a contingent fact that men approve of sentiments which they share and disapprove of sentiments which they do not share. But this is not as plausible in the case of sentiments as in the case of opinions since men would appear to disapprove of their own sentiments in a way in which they do not disapprove of their own opinions. This point is underlined by pointing out that it is logically necessary for men to "approve" of their own opinions in the restricted sense of "think them to be correct", but there is no equivalent logical necessity in the case of sentiments since sentiments, per se, cannot be said to be correct or incorrect, true or false.¹⁷

In depriving Smith of the support of these two arguments by denying the parallels he suggests between opinions and perceptions on the one hand, and sentiments on the other, we have not necessarily destroyed the basis of his theory, since it might still be true to say that, even in the case of sentiments, approval and disapproval are normally consequent upon the perception of agreement or disagreement. It becomes apparent that Smith is making an empirical claim when he comes to argue his case against the utilitarians, for he then admits that, while we can judge a

¹⁶T.M.S., I, i. 3 (I. 25).

¹⁷A similar point is made in A. N. Prior, Logic and the Basis of Ethics, p. 66f.

sentiment by its utility, this is not the usual method. In fact, throughout the Moral Sentiments he takes pains to explain many of the apparent exceptions to the constant conjunction of agreement and approval of sentiments. His theory of the impartial spectator is designed to show that, if we wish to understand the origins and causes of moral judgments, then we must start from the assumption that the fundamental causes of approval and disapproval are perceptions of the agreement and disagreement of sentiments. This does not, however, mean, as we shall see, that every moral judgment must be accompanied by such a perception. To deny that there is a necessary epistemological relationship between agreement and approval does make Smith's theory more open to question. His explanatory system can only have as much validity as the suggested causal relationship between agreement and approval, and it may, therefore, be more limited in its scope than Smith thought it to be.

"Sympathy" is Smith's word for agreement, coincidence or harmony of sentiments, or "our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever".¹⁸ This fellow-feeling involves awareness, on the part of the person sympathising, that he shares the feelings of another; "mutual" sympathy exists when both persons are aware that their sentiments coincide. Smith uses the term as a "success" word, that is he says that two people sympathise when they are aware that their sentiments are in harmony, or at least when one person thinks that his sentiments coincide with those of another person. But he is just as concerned with men's awareness of the absence of sympathy, or the lack of coincidence between their sentiments, since, although sympathy explains judgments of approbation, it is the lack of sympathy which is required to account for judgments of disapprobation, and much of the Moral

¹⁸ T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.6).

Sentiments is taken up with explaining why men fail to sympathise with each other. Sympathy, or the agreement of sentiments, is fundamental to Smith's theory, simply because it is that particular form of agreement on which approval of sentiments is founded.

It cannot be said that Smith's concept of sympathy accords with the normal meaning of the term, even in his own day, and, as a result, it is not uncommon to find it misrepresented and his theory consequently distorted. Despite the opening paragraph of the Moral Sentiments, which points out the obvious fact that men feel pity and compassion for each other, sympathy is not to be identified with these sentiments.¹⁹ It may give rise to sentiments like pity and benevolence but it is not itself a sentiment; it is a correspondence between sentiments. For Smith fellow-feeling is a matter of sharing feelings and is essentially feeling with someone although it does give rise to fellow-feeling in the sense of feeling for another; but, in order to understand his theory correctly, it is necessary to realise that this latter feeling is a consequence of the former; sympathy should not be identified with the feelings to which it gives rise. Smith's concept of sympathy must not, therefore, be confused with that used by philosophers like Shaftesbury, who regarded it as one of the natural affections.²⁰ It is this confusion which leads some interpreters to say, as Lange does, that "sympathy and interest were with him (Smith) the two great springs of human action",²¹ as if sympathy were equivalent to benevolence. The desire for sympathy, as we have seen, is an important motive in Smith's theory of action, but sympathy is not itself a sentiment and it is certainly not to be equated with benevolence or pity.²²

¹⁹Cf. E. Westermarck, Ethical Relativity, p. 97. Westermarck thought Smith's sympathy was "a conative influence to promote the welfare of others".

²⁰Cf. Characteristics, edition of 1723, Vol. II, p. 99.

²¹F. A. Lange, History of Materialism (London, 1881), p. 234.

²²Cf. A. B. Macfie, The Individual in Society, p. 63. Macfie is doubly mistaken in saying that Smith regarded sympathy as "an emotion, and an unselfish emotion".

Another erroneous exposition of Smith's concept of sympathy presents it as being something similar to empathy or any process by which the feelings of one person are transferred to another: what Scheler calls "emotional infection".²³ This is Hume's meaning of the term, and Smith's originality is often obscured by those who equate their concepts of sympathy.²⁴ Hume held that to sympathise was to "receive by communication their (other people's) inclinations and sentiments, however different from or contrary to our own",²⁵ and Hutcheson, Smith's teacher, said that sympathy was "a sort of contagion or infection";²⁶ Smith does not deny that such transference of emotion does take place and that it can result in sympathy, but it is unusual and even when it does occur it is not to be equated with sympathy. As we will often have to emphasise in expounding Smith's theory "Sympathy does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it".²⁷ Smith wants

²³M. Scheler, The Nature of Sympathy (1913), Translated by P. Heath (London, 1954), p. 14.

²⁴Cr. W. G. Swabey, Ethical Theory from Hobbes to Kant, p. 180: Swabey describes Smith's idea of sympathy as "a passing of any sort of feeling or desire from one person to another"; and G. R. Morrow, "The Significance of the Doctrine of Sympathy in Hume and Adam Smith", The Philosophical Review, Vol. XXXII (1923), p. 69, footnote: "Adam Smith's statement of the principle of sympathy differed but little from that of Hume in the Treatise". The same mistake is made by J. Cropsey, Polity and Economy (The Hague, 1957), p. 16.

²⁵Treatise of Human Nature, edited by Selby-Bigge, Book II, Part I, section xi, p. 316.

²⁶A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy (4th edition, 1772), Vol. 1, p. 15. Smith's concept of sympathy can be traced to Hutcheson's "public sense"; this gave rise to such emotions as pity by means of "the imagination of real pain felt by the spectator"; British Moralists, edited by Selby-Bigge, §. 433; cf. T.M.S. VII.iii.3 (II, 345).

²⁷T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.10). Selby-Bigge is near the mark in saying that Smith "established sympathy on the basis of thought", British Moralists, p. lix.

to make the sympathetic feelings in one person the standard by which he judges the feelings of another. If sympathetic feelings were feelings communicated from that other person then they would invariably coincide with the feelings being assessed and there would be no absence of sympathy on which to base judgments of disapproval.

Smith is particularly interested in that type of sympathy in which the coincidence of sentiments is brought about by one or both of the persons concerned undergoing an imaginary change of situation. I will call the process by which this comes about, imaginative sympathy; it is the cause of what Smith calls sympathetic feelings: the feelings which arise within us when we conceive of ourselves in a situation other than our present one.²⁸ If two people are in the same situation there is no need for this imaginary change of position in order to sympathise with each other, but when two people are in different situations and therefore feel different emotions, one cannot sympathise with the other unless he imagines himself as being in the other's place. The two different situations which Smith has chiefly in mind are those of the spectator on the one hand and the agent, or "the person who is principally interested in any event"²⁹ on the other. The spectator is the person who tries to sympathise with the agent by conceiving himself to be in the agent's position and comparing his own sympathetic feelings with the real feelings of the agent. It is this process which Smith considers crucial for the understanding of the moral sentiments, and he even tends to write as if the ability to feel sympathetic emotions is the meaning of the term "sympathy".³⁰ We may say that Smith has a general meaning

²⁸T.M.S., I.1.3 (I.21), cf. L.R.B.L., p. 85. They are what M. Scheler calls "vicarious visualised feelings", The Nature of Sympathy, p. 14.

²⁹T.M.S., I.1.3 (I.21).

³⁰T.M.S., VII.111 (II.342) and I.1.4 (I.32).

for "sympathy", namely the perception of the coincidence of sentiments, and a specific meaning, the capacity to achieve such coincidence through the imaginary change of one's point of view; I have called this latter imaginative sympathy. In this specific meaning sympathy is not a success word in that the sympathetic feelings need not coincide with the actual feelings of another person for it to be said to have taken place; thus it is possible to "sympathize ^{even} with the dead"³¹ by conceiving what it would be like to be in their position, even although they have no feelings which we can share, and, even with the living, "we sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems altogether incapable".²⁷

Smith begins his discussion of the place of imaginative sympathy in moral judgments by asserting the essential privacy of individual experience: "we have no immediate experience of what other men feel", for our senses "never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person", and, in consequence, "we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation".³² This is the work of the imagination which uses copies of our own sense impressions to build up a picture of what we should feel were we in another's place; he cites as an example, the situation of one person watching another on the rack:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.²⁸

³¹T.M.S., I.1.1. (I.12).

³²T.M.S., I.1.1. (I.2).

³³T.M.S., I.1.1 (I.3).

Without these operations of the imagination men would be unable to judge whether they "agree" with the sentiments of those in situations different from their own, and moral judgments could not be made on the conduct of such persons. The activity of comparing sympathetic and real sentiments does assume that we can have some awareness of the sentiments of others otherwise we could never know the actual feelings of others in order to compare them with our own feelings. Smith says little about how we can discover the real feelings of others, but we must simply assume that it is possible to get some idea of the sentiments of others by drawing inferences from their overt behaviour and verbal reports without imagining ourselves in their position. Smith does go into this to some extent in the Lectures on Rhetoric where he suggests that knowledge of "internal (facts), to wit, the thoughts and sentiments or designs of men which pass in their minds"³⁴ can be "well described only by their effects".³⁵ If this implies that they can only be known by their effects, then it would seem that the spectator infers what must be the sentiments of the agent from the latter's observable behaviour, relying on experience of his own sentiments and their manifestations to know the sort of external effects that are associated with the various sorts of "internal" facts.

Although the sentiments of the spectator and the agent may, on occasions, be said to "correspond", Smith does not think that it is ever possible for the spectator to feel sympathetic sentiments as strongly as the agent feels his "real" sentiments; sympathetic emotions are only "similar to" the sentiments of the agent.³⁶ All sympathetic feelings are "weaker in degree"³³ than

³⁴L.R.B.L., p. 59.

³⁵L.R.D.L., p. 70, cf. T.H.S., VII, iv (II.363).

³⁶T.H.S., I.i.4 (I.40).

the originals, but some feelings are much more difficult to imagine than others. The spectator's ability to sympathise with an agent therefore varies with the situation and the feelings of the agent. Smith presents a series of empirical generalisations about the extent to which the imagination can reproduce different types of feeling, and therefore the degree to which the spectator can "enter into" the sentiments of the agent. It is by means of these generalisations, which I shall call the laws of sympathy, that he attempts to explain the large variety of social, and in particular, moral phenomena described in the Moral Sentiments. A brief summary of the laws of sympathy will be helpful at this stage:

less easy to enter into than those which take their origin from^{te}
less easy to enter into than those which take their origin from
the imagination. Although some of the passions, like hunger and sex, which "arise from a certain situation or disposition of the body"³⁷ are among the strongest that occur, they are amongst the most difficult passions with which to sympathise, for, when our bodily state is of one sort, it is extremely difficult to imagine what it is like for it to be otherwise. The man with a full stomach finds it hard to imagine himself hungry; in the absence of bodily pain it is difficult to imagine anything approaching an actual pain. The imagination is, Smith argues by means of many examples, severely limited in relation to bodily feelings; for instance,

Nothing is so soon forgot as pain. The moment it is gone the whole agony of it is over, and the thought of it can no longer give us any sort of disturbance.³⁸

He notes that our difficulty in feeling imaginative sympathy with bodily passions is modified slightly when the passion is connected

³⁷T.N.S., I.ii.1 (I.55).

³⁸T.N.S., I.ii.1 (I.61).

with an injury which has visible manifestations, although we soon get used to the sight of bodily suffering; on the other hand internal injuries like "gout and the tooth-ach, though exquisitely painful, excite very little sympathy".³⁹

These facts are used by Smith to explain why tragedies are rarely about physical injuries: "What a tragedy would that be of which the distress consisted in a colic!"⁴⁰ In contrast "those passions which take their origin from the imagination" by which he means from the agent's view of his own situation in its psychological and social aspects, are easily reproduced by the imagination:

The frame of my body can be but little effected by the alterations which are brought about upon that of my companion: but my imagination is more ductile, and more readily assumes, if I may say so, the shape and configuration of the imaginations of those with whom I am familiar. A disappointment in love, or ambition, will, upon this account, call forth more sympathy than the greatest bodily evil.⁴¹

These psychological facts about the operations of sympathy are used by Smith to explain why it is necessary for the bodily passions of the agent to be held strictly in check if they are to be shared by the spectator: this control of bodily passions is the virtue of temperance. The approved standard for bodily passions is not, therefore, a matter of their normal felt strength but of the level with which a spectator, who does not feel such a passion, can "go along with": thus "The little sympathy which we feel with bodily pain is the foundation of the propriety of constancy and patience in enduring it".⁴²

³⁹T.M.S., I.ii.1 (I.62).

⁴⁰T.M.S., I.ii.1 (I.64).

⁴¹T.M.S., I.ii.1 (I.59f.).

⁴²T.M.S., I.ii.1 (I.64).

(2) It is difficult to sympathise with those "passions which take their origin from a particular turn or habit of the Imagination".⁴³ By this Smith simply means that a person who has developed some particular interest or passion which is not shared by other people cannot expect to find that they readily sympathise with him. The chief example Smith has of this limitation on the scope of imaginative feeling is that of love between the sexes in so far as this love has a particular person as its object; a lover feels a passion for his love which is not shared by others and they cannot enter into by conceiving themselves in his situation for, unless they are in love with the same person, it will always be the case that "The passion appears to every body, but the man who feels it, entirely disproportioned to the value of the object; and love, though it is pardoned in a certain age because we know it is natural, is always laughed at, because we cannot enter into it".⁴⁴ What we can sympathise with are the "secondary passions", which arise out of being in love: the fear for the lover's safety, hope for a happy future, and it is these rather, than love itself which are, therefore, portrayed in the theatre.⁴⁵

This is not perhaps the best illustration of Smith's general point since love is a passion closely associated with a bodily appetite, but he adds a second example:

It is for a reason of the same kind, that a certain reserve is necessary when we talk of our own friends, our own studies, our own professions. All these are objects which we cannot expect should interest our companions in

⁴³T.M.S., I.ii.2 (I.66).

⁴⁴T.M.S., I.ii.2 (I.67).

⁴⁵T.M.S., I.ii.2 (I.71).

the same degree in which they interest us. And it is for want of this reserve, that ^{the}one half of mankind make bad company to the other. A philosopher is company to a philosopher only; the member of a club, to his own little knot of companions.⁴⁶

Smith is making a rather wider point here than is strictly relevant to his observations on the operation of sympathy, but it does serve to illustrate the generalisation that men sympathise more easily with interests and emotions which they share with the agent because they have experience of the same interests and emotions in their own lives; other things being equal this means that the more common or widespread a sentiment may be the more likely it is to find sympathy and, therefore, approbation. Moreover it has important repercussions in comparing the moral judgments of different social groups: those that have similar experiences are more likely to approve of each other's conduct than those who do not: there will, therefore, be a general tendency to approve more of those who are similar to oneself than those who are different. It is this law of sympathy which explains such a tendency.

(3) It is easy to sympathise with pleasant emotions, difficult to sympathise with unpleasant ones. This is probably the most important law of sympathy. It follows from the general principle that men choose pleasure rather than pain. Sympathy with agreeable emotions like joy, therefore, comes easily, while sympathy with painful ones, like grief, does not:

our propensity to sympathise with joy is much stronger than our propensity to sympathise with sorrow; and our fellow-feeling for the agreeable emotion approaches much more nearly to the vivacity of what is naturally felt by the persons principally concerned, than that which we conceive for the painful one.⁴⁷

⁴⁶T.M.S., I.ii.2 (I.73).

⁴⁷T.M.S., I.iii.1 (I.105).

The fact that agreeable sympathetic emotions approach much closer to the original than disagreeable ones is true, in Smith's opinion, despite the fact that pain is "a more pungent sensation than pleasure, and our sympathy with pain, though it falls greatly short of what is naturally felt by the sufferer, is generally a more lively and distinct perception than our sympathy with pleasure".⁴⁸ This is one of a series of arguments Smith uses to show that pleasure and pain are not simple opposites, for he has to account for the fact that men are more indulgent to excessive manifestations of pain than of pleasure; in addition to saying that this is due to the differences between pleasure and pain in their nature as sensations, Smith adds that we make allowances for the fact that it is more difficult to control joy than grief.

(4) Passions which are closer to the natural, that is to the normal state of the person sympathising, are easier to enter into than those which are far removed from it. Smith might have argued that our tendency to have a livelier sympathy with pain than with pleasure despite the unpleasantness of sympathetic pain follows from the fact that men are normally unhappy. But, in fact, it is one of his optimistic beliefs that happiness "is the normal condition of most men", and, in conjunction with this fourth law of sympathy, he concludes that "The greater part of men, therefore, cannot find any great difficulty in elevating themselves to all the joy which any accession to this situation can well excite in their companion".⁴⁹ Misery is disapproved of not only because it is unpleasant but also because it is unusual.

It is important to stress that all these laws should be interpreted in the context of Smith's assumption that, by and large, the spectator accurately imagines the kind of sentiments

⁴⁸T.M.S., I.iii.1 (I.104).

⁴⁹T.M.S., I.iii.1 (I.107).

he would feel in the agent's situation, although he does not feel them to be as strong as they would, in fact, be. This means that he judges the sentiments of an agent by comparing them to a mild reproduction of the sentiments he would actually feel were he in the agent's place. The laws simply modify this basic fact. But the modifications are given more emphasis than they might seem to merit because they are used to explain "irregularities" amongst moral judgments, that is those moral judgments which seem out of line with the normal run of moral evaluations. It is because he thinks he can account for these quirks of the moral life that Smith is confident of the superiority of his scientific explanation of morality in terms of sympathetic feelings and intentions.

For some judgments of the sentiments of others no imaginary change of situation is necessary; if two people are affected in the same way by an event, or are both observing some object which has "no peculiar relationship to either", then they can make an immediate comparison of their sentiments. Smith does not consider this to be the most important sort of sympathy for explaining moral judgments and he does not pay a great deal of attention to it in the Moral Sentiments, but it features in his account of the appraisals which we make of the judgments of others, as when we attribute to them "qualities of taste and good judgment":

The beauty of a plain, the greatness of a mountain, the ornaments of a building, the expression of a picture, the composition of a discourse, the conduct of a third person, the proportions of different quantities and numbers, the various appearances which the great machine of the universe is perpetually exhibiting, with the secret wheels and springs which produce them; all the general subjects of science and taste, are what we and our companions regard as having no peculiar relation to either of us. We both look

at them from the same point of view, and we have no occasion for sympathy, or for that imaginary change of situations from which it arises, in order to produce with regard to these, the most perfect harmony of sentiments and affections.⁵⁰

Smith then goes on to point out the similarities between judging the aesthetic taste of other people and assessing their intellectual capacities. It is not clear whether by mentioning "the conduct of a third person" as one of the objects which can affect both the judge and the person judged in the same way he is thinking of their aesthetic or their moral appreciation of the conduct of this person; if it is the latter then Smith is classifying the approval or disapproval of the moral judgments of others as one of the instances which do not require an imaginary change of situation. However it would appear that he considers all judgments of the actions,^{and} most judgments of the feelings of others, to involve imaginative sympathy. He says that to achieve mutual sympathy in this way is at once more difficult and "vastly more important".⁵¹ It is more difficult because the exercise of the imagination requires a certain amount of effort and, in any case, it is never completely successful in reproducing the sentiments men actually feel in various situations. It is more important because men's feelings are more intimately and deeply involved when they are either the actors in a situation or the persons particularly affected by any object or event. Smith relies on imaginative sympathy to explain how members of a society, who occupy different positions and have conflicting interests, are able to evolve agreed standards of conduct. Imaginative sympathy is the only possible means whereby people in different situations can make any judgments whatever on each other's behaviour; it is, moreover, the key activity which Smith attributes

⁵⁰ T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.32).

⁵¹ T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.35).

to the spectator; indeed the spectator who is, by definition, someone who is not acting, is the only person who is able to feel sympathetic emotions. In the moment of action it is not possible for anyone to exercise imaginative sympathy. The spectator, therefore, represents the social position which Smith believes to be fundamental to the understanding and explanation of moral judgments. The spectator, or every man in his moments of reflection on the conduct of others, occupies the vantage point from which men are able to reach some sort of agreement in their attitudes towards different types of conduct; as agents men tend to disagree because their aims conflict with each other and their attitudes are determined by their immediate discordant interests. As spectators they have no conflicting interests and their attitudes tend to coincide. Virtue and vice are therefore terms which, according to Smith, get their significance from the attitudes of spectators towards the conduct of agents. Imaginative sympathy derives its importance, for Smith's theory, from the fact that it is the only method whereby the spectator can assess the conduct of agents. He therefore considers it to be the social phenomenon which has the most important part to play in the explanation of moral judgments. The entire Moral Sentiments is an attempt to justify this view.

The laws of sympathy explain the extent to which men are able to sympathise with the feelings of others, but Smith requires to demonstrate why they should wish to sympathise with each other at all. What is the motive for comparing our own sentiments with those of others, especially when this involves the effort of an imaginary change of situation? Smith's answer is to say that mutual sympathy, the awareness of sharing sentiments with others, is one of the chief pleasures of human life, whereas to be aware of a lack of sympathy with our own feelings is

extremely unpleasant:

nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ^{ever} so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary.⁵²

This provides the motive for adopting the standpoint of the observer and seeking to establish harmony of sentiments on the basis of an imaginary change of place. When Smith calls sympathy an unselfish principle he means that the pleasure of mutual sympathy is spontaneous and does not depend on one person's calculation that he will obtain the assistance of those who share his feelings. He also denies that this pleasure arises from the additional vivacity which mutual sympathy imparts to the emotions;⁵³ he points out that although sympathy increases our pleasure, it also alleviates our griefs. This illustrates his disagreement with Hume, who, in a letter written to Smith when the latter was working on the 2nd edition of the Moral Sentiments, picks on the alleged pleasure of mutual sympathy as the dubious point of the whole system:

I wish that you had more particularly and fully prov'd, that all kinds of Sympathy are necessarily Agreeable. This is the Hinge of your System, & yet you only mention the Matter cursorily in p. 20. Now it woud appear that there is a disagreeable Sympathy as well as an agreeable: And indeed, as the Sympathetic Passion is a reflex Image of the principal, it must partake of its Qualities, & be painful where that is so. Indeed, when we converse with a man with whom we can entirely sympathize, that is, where there is a warm & intimate Friendship, the cordial openness of such a Commerce overpowers the Pain of a disagreeable Sympathy, and renders the whole Movement agreeable. But in ordinary Cases this cannot have place; a man tir'd & disgusted with every thing, always ennuie;

⁵²T.M.S., I.i.2 (I.15).

⁵³Cf. Hume's Treatise, ed. by Selby-Diggo, II.i.11, p. 317.

sickly, complaining, embarrass'd; such a one throws an evident Damp on Company, which I suppose wou'd be accounted for by Sympathy; and yet it is disagreeable.

It is always thought a difficult Problem to account for the Pleasure, receiv'd from the Tears & Grief & Sympathy of Tragedy; which wou'd not be the Case if all Sympathy were agreeable. An Hospital would be a more entertaining Place than a Ball. I am afraid that in p. 99 and 111 this Proposition has escaped you, or rather is interwove with your Reasonings in that place. You say expressly, it is painful to go along with Grief & we always enter into it with Reluctance. It will probably be requisite for you to modify or explain this sentiment, & reconcile it to your System.⁵⁴

Smith did take this objection seriously enough to add, for the 2nd and subsequent editions, the following footnote to one of the passages which Hume had mentioned in his letter:

It has been objected to me that as I found the sentiment of approbation, which is always agreeable, upon sympathy, it is inconsistent with my system to admit any disagreeable sympathy. I answer, that in the sentiment of approbation there are two things to be taken notice of; first, the sympathetic passion of the spectator; and, secondly, the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned. This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful. The other may be either agreeable or disagreeable, according to the nature of the original passion, whose features it must always, in some measure, retain.⁵⁵

This does not add anything new to what can be found in the 1st edition but it does bring out quite clearly that Smith and Hume mean different things by the term "sympathy", the former using

⁵⁴The Letters of David Hume, ed. by J. Y. F. Greig, (Oxford, 1932), Vol. I, p. 313.

⁵⁵T.N.S., I.iii.1 (I.109).

it for the agreement of sentiments and the latter for the communication of sentiments. However Hume was justified in writing to Smith that the alleged pleasures of mutual sympathy are "the hinge of your system". For even if it is true that the spectator standpoint represents the situation from which men are best able to reach agreement concerning their judgments on conduct, it still has to be shown why they make the effort to adopt this standpoint and exercise their imaginative faculties in order to see if they can sympathise with the sentiments and feelings of those in quite different situations from their own.⁵⁶ Smith thinks that the pleasures of mutual sympathy are sufficient to account for the fact that they do so. The points made in Hume's letter count against this view, but, on the other hand, Smith allows for the fact that the pleasure of mutual sympathy may be outweighed by the unpleasantness of the sympathetic emotions. In such cases it is the agent who, seeking relief for his painful emotions, has a stronger desire for mutual sympathy than the spectator. To prove the theory that moral judgments are based on the comparison of the real sentiments men have as agents and the imagined sentiments which they have as spectators Smith attempts to show that the nature and content of these judgments can be deduced from men's desire for mutual sympathy and the laws of imaginative sympathy. To see how he attempts to do this it will be necessary for us to look further at his analysis of the "principle of approbation".

⁵⁶ Hume himself had a similar problem in explaining why men adopt the general point of view represented by moral language; cf. An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. by Selby-Bigge, §186.

Chapter FiveTHE PRINCIPLE OF APPROBATION

Smith's theory "concerning the nature and origin of our moral sentiments"¹ is an attempt to show that all moral judgments can be explained by demonstrating that they are the consequences of one or other, or some combination, of the laws of sympathy. The development of moral rules involves the exercise of other human faculties, such as reason, but immediate imaginative sympathy is the key to the whole process. For Smith this has the attraction of using a familiar phenomenon to account for a wide variety of apparently dissimilar social facts, so that it conforms to one of his requirements for a good scientific theory:²

Nature...acts here, as in all other cases, with the strictest economy, and produces a multitude of effects from one and the same cause; and sympathy, a power which has always been taken notice of, and with which the mind is manifestly endowed, is... sufficient to account for all the effects ascribed to this peculiar faculty.³

The theory he propounds is not one which is primarily intended to analyse the moral sentiments as they are actually felt, but attempts to trace the origin of these sentiments to their sources in the operations of sympathy. He assumes, however, that these sources or origins are not simply left behind for he considers that they exercise a continuing influence in the maintenance and development of moral codes. He separates out four distinct elements as representing the four sources of moral

¹T.N.S., VII.1 (II.195).

²Cf. p. 30.

³T.N.S., VII.1113(II.341). By "peculiar faculty" Smith means a "moral sense".

judgments:

When we approve of any character or action, the sentiments which we feel, are, according to the foregoing system, derived from four sources, which are in some respects different from one another. First, we sympathize with the motives of the agent; secondly, we enter into the gratitude of those who receive the benefit of his actions; thirdly, we observe that his conduct has been agreeable to the general rules by which those two sympathies generally act; and, last of all, when we consider such actions as ^{making a} part of a system of behaviour which tends to promote the happiness either of the individual or of the society, they appear to derive a beauty from this utility, not unlike that which we ascribe to any well-contrived machine.⁴

Since the last source is an "after-thought" and not really part of the origin of moral judgments, and the third is derived from the first two sources, the basic distinction is between the first two: one being connected with judgments of propriety and the other with judgments of merit. So far it has been shown that, for Smith, a moral judgment is an expression of approval or disapproval based on the perception of the agreement or disagreement of sympathetic and real sentiments, however:

The sentiment or affection of the heart from which any action proceeds, and upon which its whole virtue or vice must ultimately depend, may be considered under two different aspects, or in two different relations; first, in relation to the cause which excites it, or the motive which gives occasion to it; and secondly, in relation to the end which it proposes, or the effect which it tends to produce.⁵

It is this distinction between the backward look to the origin of the act and the forward look to its probable consequences, that

⁴T.M.S., VII.1113(II.355f.).

⁵T.M.S., I.1.3 (I.28), cf. Appendix , p. 326.

Smith makes the basis of the distinction between judgments of propriety and judgments of merit:

In the suitableness or unsuitableness, in the proportion or disproportion which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it, consists the propriety or impropriety, the decency or ungracefulness of the consequent action.

In the beneficial or hurtful nature of the effects which the affection aims at, or tends to produce, consists the merit or demerit of the action, the qualities by which it is entitled to reward, or is deserving of punishment.⁶

The test of propriety is whether or not the spectator can sympathize with the agent's motive when he conceives himself in the agent's situation and regards the circumstances which led to the agent's act. Whether or not this sympathy is forthcoming depends on the laws of sympathy, so that to know these laws is to know why men judge some actions to be proper and others to be improper, for "if we consider all the different passions of human nature, we shall find that they are regarded as decent, or indecent, just in proportion as mankind are more or less disposed to sympathize with them".⁷ For every passion there is a degree of "mediocrity" which gains the sympathy of the spectator. For instance, on the basis of his observation that men tend to sympathize more readily with agreeable than with disagreeable sentiments,⁸ Smith formulates a "general rule", which "admits not of a single exception":

the passions which the spectator is most disposed to sympathize with, and in which, upon that account, the point of propriety may be said to stand high, are those of which the immediate feeling or sensation is more or less agreeable to the person principally concerned: and that, on the contrary, the passions with which the spectator is least disposed to sympathize with, and in which, upon that account, the point of

⁶T.M.S., I.i.3 (I.28f.).

⁷T.M.S., I.ii.Introd. (I.54).

⁸The third law of sympathy, cf. p.138f.

propriety may be said to stand low, are those of which the immediate feeling or sensation is more or less disagreeable, or even painful, to the person principally concerned.⁹

Amongst the many examples he uses to "demonstrate the truth" of this rule are some which point out that men are indulgent towards strong manifestations of "affections which tend to unite men in society" but not towards those which tend to "drive men from one another".¹⁰

The least complex judgments of propriety concern the assessment of self-regarding behaviour: the agent must control his self-regarding passions to the degree of that passion which the spectator can "enter into". The bodily passions must be controlled more strictly than the imaginative ones, the painful ones more than the pleasant ones, the unusual and extreme ones more than the familiar and normal ones. But in the case of the unsocial and social passions, which are directed at the ill or good of persons other than the agent, there is an additional complicating factor. These passions prompt the spectator to consider the situation of the person who is affected by the action: the agent's resentment leads the spectator to sympathise with the fear of the person who is the object of this passion, while the benevolence of an agent prompts the spectator to share the pleasure of the recipient. The spectator is liable to sympathise with all persons involved in a situation. This results in what Smith calls a "divided sympathy" which increases the spectator's difficulty in entering into the unpleasant emotion of resentment and a "doubled sympathy" which increases his ability to sympathise with the pleasing emotion of benevolence, and so

⁹T.M.S., VI.iii (II.134).

¹⁰T.M.S., VI.iii (II.135f.).

for all unsocial and social affections. With the unsocial passions:

our sympathy is divided between the person who feels them, and the person who is the object of them. The interests of these two are directly opposite. What our sympathy with the person who feels them would prompt us to wish for, our fellow-feeling with the other would lead us to fear. As they are both men, we are concerned for both, and our fear for what the one may suffer, damps our resentment for what the other has suffered.¹¹

Smith assumes that the spectator, in sympathising with any sentiment, shares the hopes and fears that are associated with that sentiment. Because he cannot, at the same time, both hope and fear that the same thing will happen, his ability to enter into unsocial sentiments is reduced. This would not be the case unless the spectator wished to attain mutual sympathy with all those involved in a situation which he is observing. For this reason, Smith talks of the "impartial spectator", although he admits that actual spectators vary in the extent of their impartiality.¹²

The fact of divided sympathy makes men unwilling to sympathise with the unsocial passions until they have considered the situation which gave rise to the passion. If the spectator judges that he himself would have felt such a passion in this situation then he accepts that there has been provocation and enters into the passion, although only to a limited extent. If there has been no provocation then there is no sympathy and the act is judged to have been improper. This does not involve the calculation of the long term consequences of the act (for frequently unsocial emotions have beneficial long term consequences); it is based solely on the unpleasant nature of the passion and its immediate effects. For even if men are convinced, as were some Stoics,

¹¹T.M.S., I.ii.3 (I.74f.).

¹²Cf. Chapter 6, pp. 183-185.

that evil eventually leads to good "No speculation of this kind, however ^{how} deeply soever it might be rooted in the mind, could diminish our natural abhorrence for vice, whose immediate effects are so destructive, and whose remote ones are too distant to be traced by the imagination". The combined effect of these curbs on our general tendency to sympathise with all emotions is such that the proper degree of the expression of unsocial emotions is much lower than the level to which they spontaneously spring up in the agent; strong control of these passions is therefore required if they are to gain approval. Yet it is possible for them to fall below the level of feeling which seems proper to the spectator:

A person becomes contemptible who tamely sits still, and submits to insults, without attempting either to repel or to revenge them. We cannot enter into his indifference and insensibility: we call his behaviour mean-spiritedness, and are as really provoked by it as by the insolence of his adversary.¹⁴

The consequences of the fact that a person other than the agent is the object of the social passions has the opposite effect in their case, and instead of a divided sympathy reducing men's ability to sympathise with hatred and resentment, there is a doubled sympathy with the social passions:

His (the spectator's) sympathy with the person who feels those passions, exactly coincides with his concern for the person who is the object of them. The interest, which, as a man, he is obliged to take in the happiness of this last, enlivens his fellow-feeling with the sentiments of the other.¹⁵

As there is no obstacle to the spectator's full sympathy with the

¹³T.H.S., I.11.3 (I.61).

¹⁴T.H.S., I.11.3 (I.76), cf. (I.85f.).

¹⁵T.H.S., I.11.4 (I.88).

benevolent act it is rarely, if ever, that he feels the level of the social affections to be excessive.

Smith's analysis of propriety constitutes the core of his moral theory, but it covers only one element of virtue, merit or desert being the other. Propriety depends on the suitableness of an act to its cause and judgments of propriety are based on the spectator's assessment of how he would behave in the circumstances which prompted the action, but merit depends on the results which an action tends to produce and judgments of merit arise out of the spectator's assessment of how he would feel if he were affected by such an act, and in particular whether he would feel gratitude or resentment. We have just seen how, in assessing the propriety of unsocial and social passions the spectator takes account of their effects on the people who are affected by the action. In the analysis of merit and demerit it is the emotions of such persons that come to the fore, and, in particular, it is their feelings of gratitude and resentment that are the basis of judgments of merit and demerit.

Gratitude and resentment, Smith argues, are the sentiments which prompt men to give pleasure and pain to others, in the shape of rewards and punishments;¹⁶ and the proper degree of these retributive emotions is determined by the sympathetic gratitude and resentment of the spectator. He tends towards a rather narrow definition of merit and demerit as having to do only with the qualities of deserving reward and punishment, especially when he develops the relationship between demerit and justice,¹⁷ but he also seems prepared, on many occasions, to include, as lesser degrees of merit and demerit, the qualities of deserving praise and blame.

¹⁶T.M.S., II.i.1 (I.162f.).

¹⁷cf. p. 259ff.

The laws of sympathy affect the spectator's ability to sympathize with the emotions of resentment and gratitude: the latter is a pleasant feeling, the former unpleasant: men are therefore more ready to enter into the gratitude of others than into their resentment.¹⁸ This effect is reinforced by the fact that gratitude is felt by those who have been benefited by an act and resentment by those who have been harmed:

When we see one man assisted, protected, relieved by another, our sympathy with the joy of the person who receives the benefit serves only to animate our fellow-feeling with his gratitude towards him who bestows it,¹⁹

but, on the other hand:

as we sympathize with the sorrow of our fellow-creature whenever we see his distress, so we likewise enter into his abhorrence and aversion for whatever has given occasion to it.²⁰

Both these reactions are also affected by the spectator's general antipathy for unpleasant passions and his liking for agreeable ones. There is, in addition, a further complication regarding our sympathy with resentment and gratitude. We do not sympathize with these passions without first approving as proper the action which calls forth gratitude or disapproving as improper the action which calls forth resentment. Smith expresses this by saying that sympathetic gratitude and resentment are compound sentiments which include but go beyond judgments of propriety:

As we cannot indeed enter thoroughly into the gratitude of the person who receives the benefit, unless we before hand approve of the motives of the benefactor, so, upon this account, the sense of merit seems to be a compound sentiment, and to be made up of two distinct emotions; a direct

¹⁸This follows from the third law of sympathy, cf. p. 138f.

¹⁹T.M.S., II.i.2 (I.169).

²⁰T.M.S., II.i.2 (I.170).

sympathy with the sentiments of the agent, and an indirect sympathy with the gratitude of those who receive the benefit of his actions.²¹

Thus the gifts of the prodigal and the spendthrift do not produce a sympathetic gratitude on a level with those of the more judicious gifts of worthier patrons.²² And, similarly there is no sympathy with resentment when the act is considered to be a perfectly proper infliction of injury. Both points Smith illustrates fully with examples drawn largely from classical history.²³

Gratitude and resentment are themselves greatly dependent on the awareness which the person affected by an act has of the agent's feelings and intentions. These retributive emotions arise spontaneously within the person who receives a benefit or injury, but they are not sustained unless he sees that the cause was a responsible agent who intended the benefit or harm,²⁴ and who can become aware that he is being made to feel pleasure or pain on account of his past actions.²⁵ Gratitude and resentment are therefore closely related to assessments of the agent's motive, and since Smith also declares that the spectator, in assessing merit and demerit, takes into consideration the propriety or impropriety of the agent's behaviour, there is a very close relationship between judgments of merit and judgments of propriety.²⁶

²¹T.M.S., II.1.5 (I.182).

²²T.M.S., II.1.3 (I.175).

²³T.M.S., II.1.5 (I.183ff.).

²⁴T.M.S., II.iii.1 (I.241): "it must have produced them (pleasure or pain) from design, and from a design that is approved of in the one case and disapproved of in the other".

²⁵T.M.S., II.iii.1 (I.236): "Before any thing can be the proper object of gratitude or resentment, it must not only be the cause of pleasure or pain, it must likewise be capable of feeling them".

²⁶T. Brown is quite wrong in attributing to Smith the view that we can "conceive the demerit of the voluntary agent, without any notion of the impropriety of his action", Lectures on Ethics, p. 148.

The former include but go beyond the latter. Smith does note an "irregularity" in this respect, in that there is a tendency for people to feel a measure of gratitude and resentment towards anything which causes them pleasure or pain, including inanimate objects and animals; a particular form of this irregularity is the tendency for the merit of acts to be assessed by their actual and not their intended consequences.²⁷ He explains this by saying that the spontaneous gratitude and resentment felt towards the causes of pleasure and pain never entirely fade in the light of later reflection concerning the nature of the cause. If the effects of an action are those which are normally the consequence of a particular type of behaviour then the agent concerned is held responsible and rewarded or punished accordingly; but if, through good or ill fortune, abnormal and unintended benefits or injuries result from an action, then the retributive emotions fade away, but there still remains a "shadow" of gratitude or resentment which affects men's judgments of merit and demerit and this is reflected in the laws of negligence.²⁸ This is the sort of inconsistency in moral judgments that Smith is delighted to be able to account for, since he regards such "irregularities" as a challenge and a test for his theory. However these examples are exceptional and it is Smith's view that judgments of merit usually presuppose, and are governed by, judgments of propriety.

Even if these laws concerning the operations of sympathy are accepted as rough approximations, and their influence on judgments of propriety and merit is accepted, there are immediate objections which spring to mind about this part of Smith's moral theory. In the first place, it might be said that, since to talk of propriety and merit is to speak of standards, rules or norms

²⁷T.M.S., II.iii.1 passim (I.230-275).

²⁸T.M.S., II.iii.2 (I.243-263). This is discussed more fully in chapter 9, pp. 262-264.

of behaviour which are relatively fixed and invariable over a period of time in any particular society, it is implausible to explain these in terms of the capacity of one person to sympathise with another, since such sympathy is essentially fleeting, uncertain and unpredictable. Dependent, as it is, on every variation of mood and experience between person and person and even between different moments in the life of any single individual, sympathy might be regarded as too subjective and irregular a phenomenon from which to derive the relatively stable and enduring standards of moral propriety and merit.²⁹ To understand Smith's answer to this objection it is necessary to consider the third source of approbation which builds on, but modifies, the first two sources: the spectator's observation that an agent's "conduct has been agreeable to the general rules by which those two sympathies generally act".³⁰

Smith accepts the fact that the spectator's feelings vary from time to time and that they may not always accord with the feelings of other spectators, but he argues that in every society moral rules are developed which reflect the normal feelings of most people. Thus each individual, through the exercise of his reason, is able to form generalisations about the sentiments with which he can normally sympathise and those with which he cannot sympathise:

Our continual observations upon the conduct of others, insensibly lead us to form to ourselves certain general rules concerning what is fit and proper either to be done or to be avoided.³¹

This explains how stable standards of propriety are developed in

²⁹ Cf. the criticism of Thomas Brown, Lectures on Ethics, p. 146: "our sympathy, is, in degree at least, one of the most irregular and seemingly capricious of principles in the constitution of the mind; and on this very account, therefore, not very likely to be the commensurable test or standard of feelings so regular, upon the whole, as our general estimates of right and wrong".

³⁰ T.M.S., VII.iii3(II.356).

³¹ T.M.S., III.4 (I.393).

spite of variations in the individual's moods, and because the individual usually makes his moral judgments by reference to these rules, it also explains why sympathy does not accompany most moral judgments. But Smith insists that the origin of these general rules is to be traced to sympathy and their content cannot be understood without seeing that this is so. This does not mean that Smith considered that each individual developed his own moral rules in isolation from his fellows: he accounts for the tendency to uniformity between men in their moral standards in much the same way as he shows how it develops within the life of a single individual. Most men do not themselves exercise their sympathy to any degree, indeed "Many men behave very decently...who yet, perhaps, never felt the sentiment upon the propriety of which we found our approbation of their conduct, but acted merely from a regard to what they saw were the established rules of behaviour".³² Custom, the desire to win approval, the fear of punishment, whether human or divine, and the difficulty of sympathising with unusual emotions, all combine to make the average person adopt the general rules current in their society. This does not imply that different societies will adopt the same rules, but only that the same society and the same social group will tend to establish an agreed set of moral rules. Nor does Smith wish to deny that variations between individuals in the same society or social group will exist. On the contrary, he uses his general theory to explain why men differ in their moral judgments: some are explained by straightforward psychological differences, such as variations in imaginative powers, but others are more sociological in that the variations are due to the style of life of the person concerned: there are "different degrees of attention, which our different habits of life allow us" as well as "different degrees of natural acuteness

³²T.M.S., III.5 (I.402).

in the faculty of ^{the} mind to which they (the objects being viewed) are addressed".³³

The fourth and final source of moral approbation is the consideration of utility. "Utility" is a recurring theme throughout the Moral Sentiments; it crops up wherever Smith thinks that other theorists, and in particular David Hume, have given excessive importance to utility in the analysis and explanation of moral judgments. Right from the beginning, in his account of sympathy, Smith denies that considerations of utility have a fundamental effect on judgments of approval and disapproval, although they may be used to justify moral judgments arrived at on other grounds. In moral judgments as well as judgments of beauty and taste "the idea of the utility of all qualities of this kind, is plainly an after-thought, and not what first recommends them to our approbation".³⁴ To admit otherwise would be to allow that the perception of agreement and disagreement was not the primary and fundamental cause of all expressions of approval and disapproval. Smith devotes a whole part of the Moral Sentiments to considering "the Effect of Utility upon the Sentiments of Approbation".³⁵ In it he agrees that the perception of utility does have some influence on judgments of propriety, and accepts Hume's analysis that "The utility of any object, according to him, pleases the master by perpetually suggesting to him the pleasure or conveniency which it is fitted to promote".³⁶ His own contribution to this line of thought is to suggest that men also find pleasure in contemplating the fitness or suitability of means to ends quite independently of their feelings about the end, and that this pleasure often

³³T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.32f.); cf. W.N., I.ii (I.19f.).

³⁴T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.35).

³⁵T.M.S., IV. passim (I.451-488).

³⁶T.M.S., IV.1 (I.452).

supersedes the first so that we take more pleasure in seeing a machine or system which exhibits a nice adjustment of means to ends than in the thought of the ends themselves. Smith is rightly proud of this observation and considers it something of a discovery:

that this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended; and that the exact adjustment of the means for attaining any conveniency or pleasure, should frequently be more regarded, than ~~that~~ very conveniency or pleasure, in the attainment of which their whole merit would seem to consist, has not, so far as I know, been yet taken notice of by anybody. That this however is frequently the case, may be observed in a thousand instances, both in the most frivolous and in the most important concerns of human life.³⁷

The frivolous instances he cites to illustrate this "love of system" include the passion which some men have to acquire a device such as a watch which is accurate far beyond their requirements, and the important illustrations consist of examples of men's preoccupations with the mechanics of gaining wealth and prestige, the great households and estates which take up the labour of a lifetime to erect and maintain, so that their organisation takes precedence over the actual enjoyment of the conveniences they promote:

The pleasures of wealth and greatness, when considered in this complex view, strike the imagination as something grand and beautiful and noble, of which the attainment is well worth all the toil and anxiety which we are so apt to bestow upon it.³⁸

Utility, so viewed, Smith allows to be a most powerful motive to human action, and, allied to the other causes which he gives for

³⁷T.M.S., IV.1 (I.453f.).

³⁸T.M.S., IV.1 (I.464).

men's admiration for wealth and greatness,³⁹ he counts it as a "deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind".⁴⁰ It is therefore central to the understanding of Smith's later economic theory, for it explains why men erect great productive systems which yield results far beyond that which they need for themselves and so provide support for others who receive the benefits of this over-production.⁴¹

In the case of judgments of propriety Smith considers that the same principles hold, but to a much smaller extent: when we see that a particular type of character is well suited to promote or hinder the happiness of a man or his fellows then we are pleased by the appropriateness of the means to the end. But he firmly denies that this is an important consideration for any but a few abstract thinkers, and therefore disagrees with the quoted views of Hume that "no qualities of mind...are approved of as virtuous, but such as are useful or agreeable either to the person himself or to others",⁴² if this is taken to imply that this is why men approve of them. Using his parallel between the approval of utility in the case of machines on the one hand and of character on the other, he argues:

it seems impossible that the approbation of virtue should be a sentiment of the same kind with that by which we approve of a convenient and well-contrived building; or that we should have no other reason for praising a man than that for which we commend a chest of drawers.⁴³

³⁹T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.120ff.), cf. W.N., I.xi.2 (I.192).

⁴⁰T.M.S., IV.1 (I.464), cf. p. 232f.

⁴¹T.M.S., IV.1 (I.466). This is the context in which Smith talks of the "invisible hand".

⁴²T.M.S., IV.2 (I.476).

⁴³T.M.S., IV.2 (I.476f).

In this way he points to the very different "feel" which moral judgments have from everyday judgments of utility, a difference he is willing to explain in terms of the complex of sympathetic emotions that are involved in the one but not the other. This attack is rather unfair on Hume who does not rely on the perception of the nice adjustment of means to end to provide his explanation of the appeal which utility has for the sentiments of mankind. In fact Smith is somewhat misleading in the way in which he draws a sharp contrast between his views and those of Hume. For although Smith denies that calculation of long term effects features in the formation and reinforcement of moral judgments he does include the immediate effects of action in the assessment of propriety and merit; this may be regarded as the observation or imagination of effects rather than a process of rational calculation, but it does show that, whenever an act affects persons other than the agent, it is the immediate utility of the act which has a very substantial influence of the moral sentiments even on Smith's own view. Moreover Smith agrees with Hume that no aspect of conduct and character is considered virtuous unless it "is in fact" useful or agreeable, ^{either} to the person himself or to others".⁴² The only difference between them is that Smith considers this to be the result of nature's plan and not man's calculation. "Abstract and philosophical study" will show how "that system which places virtue in utility, coincides too with that which makes it consist in propriety" since "every affection is useful when it is confined to a certain degree of moderation; and every affection is disadvantageous when it exceeds the proper bounds".⁴⁴ But although utility is the principle used by God it is immediate sense and feeling that are the causes of moral approbation in man.

⁴⁴T.M.S., VII.ii.1 (II.299f.).

Smith uses two different and somewhat conflicting arguments to show that strong sentiments of approval and disapproval are not based on utility. For the first he draws on examples of judgments made about acts which are useful but whose utility has never been present to the minds of those making the judgment; for the second he points to instances when men approve of what is not useful and disapprove of what is useful, as when they disapprove less of the wickedness of great persons than of ordinary people, although it is the great who cause most harm by their actions.⁴⁵ The latter instances seem to conflict with his view that propriety and utility coincide, while the former can be answered by drawing on Smith's own belief that the factors which are decisive in the origin of moral judgments may not be operative in habitual moral judgments; Hume might use many of Smith's own arguments to show that custom, habit and the use of general rules may account for the average moral judgment but that the origin of these moral rules must be traced back to considerations of utility. The main argument on Smith's side is that there is no evidence that in the past men were more rational in their judgments than they are now, and that utility plays so small a part in moral reflection in every day life as to make it implausible to suggest that some men in the past have established general rules on the basis of calculations of utility. Moreover, even if the origin of moral rules can be explained in this way, it is still necessary to show how they persist, and Smith is certainly able to present a more convincing picture of how moral rules are reinforced and re-established from generation to generation, since the operations of sympathy he describes are more pervasive elements in the average moral judgment than the

⁴⁵T.M.S., VI.i (II.64); this passage is not in the first five editions and perhaps reflects Smith's declining optimism.

calculations of utility on which Hume relies. Nevertheless Smith himself seems to have been in two minds over the place which the assessment of utility has in some moral judgments, as we shall see when we come to consider his views on justice.⁴⁶

A common objection to Smith's moral theory is that its plausibility comes from the fact that he is able to smuggle covert moral evaluations into the very factor, namely sympathy, which is meant to explain the moral sentiments. For example, it is said that the spectator, in deciding whether or not to sympathise with the behaviour of the agent, draws upon his own moral ideas as to what is right and proper in such a situation. His approval is based, therefore, not on what he considers he would feel in this situation, but on what he considers he ought to feel. Again the objection is lucidly put by Thomas Brown who writes that the essential error of Smith's system is "no less than the assumption, in every case, of those very moral feelings which are supposed to flow from sympathy, the assumption of them as necessarily existing before that very sympathy in which they are said to originate."⁴⁷

This objection holds most forcibly if we are considering the analysis of sympathy as it actually occurs in moral judgments. An individual modifies his conduct according to his own standards of right and wrong and he will therefore take account of these standards when he is considering how he would act in a certain situation and he will only sympathise with an agent who acts in accordance with the moral rules by which he, the spectator, usually governs his conduct. On such grounds as these Sidgwick says that Smith's analysis of the moral sentiments errs "in

⁴⁶ Cf. pp. 273-279.

⁴⁷ Lectures on Ethics, p. 147; cf. A. Small, Adam Smith and Modern Sociology, p. 48, and W. C. Swabey, Ethical Theory from Hobbes to Kant, p. 185.

underrating the complexity of the moral sentiments, and in not recognising that, however these sentiments may have originated, they are now, as introspectively examined, different from mere sympathy with the feelings and impulses of others; they are compounds ~~which~~ cannot be ^{directly} analysed into the simple element of sympathy, however complicated and combined".⁴⁸

The simple answer to this criticism is to say that it rests, as do so many similar criticisms, on a mistaken idea of the nature of Smith's theory. He is not concerned to analyse moral judgments as they actually occur in order to present an accurate phenomenological description of them. He aims to explain their existence and content by presenting an analytical model from which the facts to be explained can be deduced; in this it partakes of the nature of a genetic explanation, outlining the various features of human nature so far as is necessary to explain how men could have developed a system of moral judgments. Smith's appeal to sympathy is to a series of generalisations by means of which we can understand how the moral sentiments have been derived; he does not claim that, as actually experienced, moral judgments can be analysed without remainder into the operations of sympathy. The process he describes is a cumulative one in which the continual functioning of sympathy modifies the moral rules which its previous operations have established. Smith goes all the way with his objectors in saying that most actual cases of sympathy are influenced by moral presuppositions, but he concentrates on what may be called non-moral cases of sympathy, where this influence is not present, to establish his generalisations about the workings of sympathy. Having formulated the laws of sympathy by reference to these non-moral cases he can

⁴⁸H. Sidgwick, Outlines of the History of Ethics (1886) 6th edition 1931, p. 216.

then go on to show how they can be used to explain moral judgments even although the element of sympathy in such judgments is not free from the influence of the prior moral assumptions of the spectator. The plausibility of this theory depends on his ability to outline a convincing analysis of how "non-moral" sympathy develops into the complex moral judgments which occur in fully socialised human beings. The test of this theory is not whether moral judgments, as experienced, can be dissected into various strands of sympathy, but whether the model he erects can be used to provide developmental explanations of the form and content of moral codes. Even if his theory is, in the end, rejected or drastically modified, it is wrong to prejudge this issue and dismiss it out of hand simply because most instances of sympathetic feelings are affected by the moral assumptions of the person in question: it might be the case that such moral assumptions are the effect of previous workings of sympathy in the development of that individual and his society.

The obverse of this objection is the criticism that sympathy is inadequate to explain moral judgments because it lacks moral relevance. On this view, approval based on sympathy alone is not moral approval. In part this is the old objection that I may agree without approving, in which case it amounts to saying that I may sympathise without approving, but the variation of this criticism with which I am here concerned, is the one which argues that, when approval is based on sympathy alone, then my approval and disapproval are not moral. Thus Laurie says that "an appeal to what ought to be, rather than to what is, forces us beyond the facts of sympathetic feeling"; and "it must be objected that the imperative command of duty cannot be resolved into sympathetic feeling. My sympathy with the feelings of another contains in itself no moral approbation; and his sympathy with me,

real or supposed, entails no moral obligation".⁴⁹ A more specific form of this criticism is to say that the variations in the operation of sympathy to which Smith points have no moral relevance: for instance, it may be true that I sympathise less with painful emotions than with pleasurable ones, but ought this to be the case, and ought men to base their moral judgments upon such an accidental fact about human nature?

This objection brings together several lines of thought which cause us some disquiet at Smith's easy transition from sympathy to propriety. For one thing, many of the examples which he gives, such as sympathising with grief, do not seem to be about the sort of behaviour which we regard in moral terms. How then can the fact that imaginative sympathy is operative in a judgment be sufficient to make it a moral judgment? Our doubts on this score are partly a matter of the correct definition of morality, and this has already been discussed.⁵⁰ Smith chooses to bracket approval and disapproval of conduct which we might want to regard as being solely the business of the agent himself, with approval and disapproval of conduct which takes place in an inter-personal context and affects the interest of persons other than the agent. His justification for this is a scientific one, since he wishes to demonstrate that sympathy is causally operative in the assessment of both types of behaviour. We may wish to limit the sphere of moral judgments to exclude the assessment of what Smith calls selfish passions. Nothing fundamental to the theory is at stake here and if we like to argue that the exercise of imaginative sympathy can result in non-moral as well as moral judgments this at least has the advantage of showing that Smith wishes to explain moral judgments

⁴⁹H. Laurie, Scottish Philosophy, (1902), p. 120.

⁵⁰Cf. p. 120ff.

by reference to a conjunction of generalisations about human behaviour, not all of which are unique to moral phenomena.

But this may be thought to admit too much. It might be said that, if some judgments involving imaginative sympathy are non-moral how can we explain the distinctive nature of moral judgments by means of sympathy? At one level the answer to this question requires the complete exposition of his theory, especially its explanation of conscience, which has yet to come.⁵¹ But in so far as the question implies that the theory is attempting to perform an impossible task, it can be answered immediately. For instance, it can be argued that, even if Smith does show that sympathy affects some moral judgments, he has done nothing to show that it ought to. This is to accuse him of committing the naturalistic fallacy because he is arguing that something ought to be the case simply because it is the case. But, again, such a criticism mistakes the nature of Smith's theory: it presupposes that he is seeking to provide a normative theory to select and justify true or correct moral judgments. This is not so, and the objection, therefore, fails; Smith is presenting a scientific theory and if he can show that the moral judgments which are observed to occur in different societies can be deduced from the laws of sympathy, then his theory is successful in its own terms. It cannot be argued, a priori, that it is impossible for moral judgments to develop out of the operations of sympathy because the laws of sympathy do not appear to offer sufficient grounds for drawing normative conclusions. This is not their function; Smith uses them to explain the development of moral judgments, not to justify them.

I have indicated that we have yet to bring into the discussion all those features of Smith's theory which are necessary for the

⁵¹ Cf. Chapter 7, pp. 198-224.

assessment of its scientific worth, but it might be useful to deal now with another common criticism which is particularly relevant to his theory of propriety. This criticism, which draws much of its plausibility from the modern use of the term "propriety" to denote etiquette or the petty conventional morality of polite society, argues that, while sympathy may explain the social conventions of a respectable eighteenth century club, it cannot account for the morality of the individual conscience as exemplified in the Kantian categorical imperative. Many of Smith's examples of sympathy do assume the context of an eighteenth century drawing room or meeting place, where the sociable nature of the gathering puts a premium on agreeableness and concord. For instance, in expounding the pleasure of mutual sympathy Smith remarks:

A man is mortified when, after having endeavoured to divert the company, he looks round and sees that nobody laughs at his jest but himself. On the contrary, the mirth of the company is highly agreeable to him, and he regards this correspondence of their sentiments with his own as the greatest applause.⁵²

When he then goes on to say that such harmony of sentiments is the test of moral propriety it seems that he is setting up the conventions of the cocktail party as the touchstone of morality. Moreover he frequently stresses the need to control the strong expression of emotions if the approval of one's companions is to be obtained; for instance he holds that "Such is our aversion for all the appetites which take their origin from the body: all strong expressions of them are loathsome and disagreeable."⁵³ With such examples it is clearly the strong expression of such emotions in company rather than in private that he has in mind,

⁵²T.M.S., I.i.2 (I.16).

⁵³T.M.S., I.ii.1 (I.57).

and it would appear that what is important to him is how we conduct ourselves in public, by which he has in mind the polite society of his day. Again, in illustrating our greater sympathy with small joys which do not arouse envy than with greater ones, he writes:

It is decent to be humble amidst great prosperity; but we can scarce express too much satisfaction in all the little occurrences of common life, in the company with which we spent the evening last night, in the entertainment that was set before us, in what was said and what was done, in all the little incidents of the present conversation, and in all those frivolous nothings which fill up the void of human life. Nothing is more graceful than habitual cheerfulness, which is always founded upon a peculiar relish for all the little pleasures which common occurrences afford.⁵⁴

Not only does he sometimes make the sympathy of a convivial gathering the test of propriety, he also seems to indicate that the attainment of such social harmony is the aim of moral conduct, the goal of all acts which receive moral approval. This criticism is voiced in more general terms by one critic who says that Smith does not make it clear whether sympathy is the test or the aim of propriety.⁵⁵ In this particular context we might want to say that the propriety of the drawing room and the pursuit of conviviality are hardly appropriate either as standards or goals appropriate to conduct in other situations. It is then argued that Smith's theory may account for the virtues of respectability and conviviality but not those of morality proper.

It is perfectly true that Smith dwells on the moral significance both of the agent controlling his passions and maintaining them at a level with which the spectator can sympathise, and of the spectator making the effort to enter into the feelings

⁵⁴ *T.M.S.*, I.ii.5 (I.96).

⁵⁵ V. G. Swabey, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

of the agent; the former he calls self-control, the latter sensibility;⁵⁶ to this extent mutual sympathy is the aim of virtuous conduct:

Upon these two different efforts, upon that of the spectator to enter into the sentiments of the person principally concerned, and upon that of the person principally concerned, to bring down his emotions to what the spectator can go along with, are founded two different sets of virtues. The soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues, the virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity, are founded upon the one; the great, the awful and respectable, the virtues of self-denial, of self-government, of that command of the passions which subjects all the movements of nature to what our own dignity and honour, and the propriety of our own conduct require, take their origin from the other.⁵⁷

These two efforts are not identified with the amiable and respectable virtues but are their "foundation" or "origin" by which Smith appears to mean that they are the means whereby men, desiring mutual sympathy, are able to feel that type and degree of sentiment which makes the spectator appear amiable and enables the agent to obtain approval. These virtues of sensibility and self-command have in common the fact that they have as their aim the attainment of mutual sympathy and in this they are to be contrasted with other virtues, which, while they are assessed by whether or not they obtain sympathy, do not have this as their aim. In this respect the virtues of sensibility and self-command, especially the latter, are similar to the virtue of moral goodness, that is the effort of doing what one believes to be right. Like moral goodness they are most valued when they involve a great deal of effort in the face of strong temptation, and, again like moral goodness they are valued because of the contribution they make

⁵⁶T.N.S., I.i.v (I.43).

⁵⁷T.N.S., I.i.v (I.44).

towards the attainment of other moral standards.⁵⁸ They are not therefore to be taken as typical of Smith's view of propriety. Other types of conduct are assessed by the spectator comparing the agent's conduct with how he, the spectator, imagines that he would behave in such a situation, not by the spectator observing whether the agent has made a strenuous effort to make himself pleasing company. The spectator does not judge by seeing if the agent's emotions harmonize with his own feelings at that moment, but with the emotions he considers that he would feel in the agent's situation. The mutual sympathy which is the test of propriety is not, therefore, to be equated with the conviviality of a social gathering where the stress is on amusement and decorum. It is true that the spectator wishes to sympathize, especially with agreeable emotions, but the prior requirement that the emotions concerned accord with his sympathetic feelings should not be lost sight of. To say that the virtues of sensibility and self-command are untypical in this respect does not mean that they are unimportant; as Smith says, sensibility is the basis of the amiable emotions, presumably because sympathy with another person is the source of many social affections, and self-command is the usual means whereby the agent is able to conform to the standards of propriety. Moreover the desire for mutual sympathy may often be the motive for the exercise of the virtues of sensibility and self-command, and it has, therefore, an important causal rôle in leading men to conform to moral rules; but this does not mean that these moral rules have the purpose of establishing conviviality. The impression that Smith is more concerned with good manners than with good conduct arises in part from his practice of using non-moral examples to illustrate his laws of

⁵⁸ Cf. T.M.S., VI.iii, passim (II.120-186): "Of self-command". This is discussed further in Chapter 8, pp. 227-229.

sympathy, but a close analysis of what he says about the relationship between spectator and agent will show that the attainment of mutual sympathy is, typically, the test and not the aim of the moral virtues. This does not, of course, prove his analysis correct, but it clears him of the charge of thinking that he had explained moral judgments because he could explain the conventions of polite society. It still remains to be seen how he actually accounts for the categorical obligations associated with those moral judgments which feel more authoritative than the "proprieties" of a social gathering.

Chapter Six

THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR

Smith's moral theory is best known for the concept of the "impartial spectator". The "spectator" is a familiar figure in eighteenth century moral philosophy; he appears, for instance, in the writings of Smith's teacher Hutcheson,¹ and also in those of his friend Hume.² In Smith's own theory the spectator is given a central place because he represents the point of view from which moral judgments are made: that is to say, it is not possible to understand how moral judgments are derived from sympathy unless the sympathetic sentiments concerned are taken to be those of a spectator. We have seen, in our analysis of Smith's theory of moral approbation, that the spectator manifests the normal reactions of the ordinary person when he is in the position of observing other people's behaviour. He does not therefore embody the reactions of any particular person, but is an empirical ideal type who may be said to represent all those aspects of human nature which are brought into play in the development of moral judgments. This interpretation of the "impartial spectator" conflicts with that put forward by those who see Smith as using the idea of a spectator who is ideal in the sense of representing certain normative standards which go beyond those to be found in the average spectator. Smith sometimes describes his spectator as impartial and well-informed, and, it is argued, ordinary spectators do not conform to these standards. The impartial spectator is therefore taken to embody the reactions of a morally ideal observer of behaviour who stands above and

¹D. D. Raphael, British Moralists, 8314.

²Treatise (edited by Selby-Digge), III.iii.1, p. 576.

criticises the moral judgments of ordinary men.³ This is the understanding of Smith's theory which is found in modern proponents of what is called the "Ideal Observer" theory of ethics, which claims to trace its origin back to Smith's impartial spectator.⁴ It is interesting to compare these modern theories with Smith's own moral theory in order to see just how different they are. It is also important to distinguish them because there are some very cogent objections to the Ideal Observer theory which are assumed to apply to Smith's theory also. In the next two chapters I shall argue that this is not so, and that to present Smith's theory as a form of Ideal Observer theory is a mistake.

The Ideal Observer theory is an attempt to analyse the meaning of moral statements by reference to the dispositional reactions of an "ideal observer". I shall use as my example Roderick Firth's article "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer".⁴ Firth writes:

Using the term "ideal observer", then, the kind of analysis which I shall examine in this paper is the kind which would construe statements of the form "x is P", in which P is some particular ethical predicate, to be identical in meaning with statements of the form: "Any ideal observer would react to x in such and such a way under such and such conditions".⁵

The reactions in question are those of approval and disapproval.

³ Cf. Jouffroy's Ethics, p. 137: "this abstract spectator, imagined by Smith, is nothing else than reason, judging, in the name of order, and of the immutable nature of things, the mutable and blind decisions of men".

⁴ Cf. William Kneale, "Objectivity in Morals", Philosophy, Vol. XXV (1950), pp. 149-166; Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. XII (1952), pp. 317-345; R. B. Brandt, Ethical Theory (Englewood Cliffs, 1959); Jonathan Harrison, "Some Comments on Professor Firth's Ideal Observer Theory", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. XVII (1956-7), pp. 256-262, and Dorothy Emmet, "Universalisability and Moral Judgment", Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. XIII (1963), pp. 214-228.

⁵ Ibid., p. 321.

or the experience of "apparent requiredness". In this way Firth hopes to be able to translate ethical statements into non-ethical ones and so provide what is called a naturalistic definition. The description of the ideal observer must not, therefore, include any ethical characteristics. On the other hand he hopes to avoid the difficulty which naturalistic theories of ethics have in justifying "absolutism", by which he means the view that moral statements are "true or false, and consistent or inconsistent with one another, without special reference to the people who happen to be asserting them".⁶ The attraction of such an analysis for Firth is that it makes practical moral problems empirically solvable since the ethically significant reactions of the ideal observer may, in principle, be observed, and it therefore avoids the epistemological problems of most absolutist theories.

A preliminary definition of the ideal observer describes him as a person characterised by the possession of certain non-moral characteristics to a certain, usually an extreme, degree. Firth reaches his conclusions as to what these characteristics are (or would be since the adjective 'ideal' is used here "in approximately the same sense in which we speak of a perfect vacuum or a frictionless machine")⁵ by asking what we consider to make one person a better moral judge than another. His method of argument is to present a series of assertions of the form: "We sometimes disqualify ourselves as judges of particular ethical questions on the ground that we are not sufficiently a, b or c, and we regard one person as a better moral judge than another if, other things being equal, the one is more a, b or c than the other".⁷ On this basis he characterises the ideal observer as (1) Omniscient with respect to non-ethical facts.⁷ Lack of

⁶ Ibid., p. 319.

⁷ Ibid., p. 333; of. p. 335.

knowledge about the facts of a case disqualifies a person as a moral judge of that case, and since it is not possible to say that the ideal observer needs to know only the relevant moral facts without introducing moral presuppositions as to what is relevant, it is necessary, if he is to be defined in non-moral terms, to describe him as omniscient.

(2) Omniscient: that is possessing such a vivid imagination that he is able "simultaneously to visualize all actual facts, and the consequences of all possible acts in any given situation, just as vividly as he would if he were actually perceiving them all".⁸

(3) Disinterested, or impartial. A perfect moral judge is not influenced by any particular interests, that is any interests "directed toward a particular person or thing but not toward other persons or things of the same kind".⁹

(4) Dispassionate. He must not be affected by any particular emotions, and perhaps not by any emotions at all, since emotions make a person less detached, and "an impartial judge, as ordinarily conceived is...unaffected...by his emotions".¹⁰

(5) In other respects the ideal observer must be "normal", by which he means lacking "none of the determinable properties of human beings",¹¹ about which, he admits, it is difficult to be precise.

If we are to know what to make of this theory it is imperative to bring out what Firth considers to be involved in the analysis. The appeal to our awareness of the criteria we

⁸Ibid., p. 335.

⁹Ibid., p. 337.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 340.

¹¹Ibid., p. 344.

employ for determining who is a well qualified moral judge seems to indicate that he is involved in reporting the criteria actually used by ourselves and others when we engage in such an activity. In his reply to R. D. Brandt's discussion of his original paper he indicates that this is so: "This analysis", he says, "is intended to exhibit the meaning of ethical statements as they occur in ordinary language".¹² This presupposes empirical knowledge of ordinary language and in particular of the criteria embodied in it when it is used to discriminate between potential moral judges. Firth's method is simply to appeal to our own experience of such matters rather than to do the empirical research which would be necessary to back up his impressions of normal linguistic behaviour. Such a method leaves the analysis open to objections based on empirical reports that criteria other than those he mentions are used in the actual discourse of particular persons or groups. At this point it is open to him, as a philosopher, although not as a social scientist, to discount such instances because they involve the introduction of morally irrelevant criteria. This is presumably how he would deal with those who require that membership of a particular religious hierarchy or the attainment of a mature age is an important qualification for a moral judge. To reject such requirements out of hand, and not on empirical grounds, implies some sort of stipulation on his part, in which case some reason for the stipulation should be given. One possible reason is that such a meaning represents his own "moral" choice, as would be the case if he endowed the observer with qualities he admires, or qualities which he thinks to be causally or logically related to the disposition to make the sort of moral judgments of which he

¹² Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. XV (1955), p. 416.

approves. In this case he would not be defining the meaning of a moral statement in a morally neutral way, that is he would not be giving the meaning of "moral" as opposed to "non-moral" but of "moral" as opposed to "immoral". It seems likely that he would wish to deny that this is his method of analysis, since he is aiming to produce a naturalistic definition of a moral judgment and stresses the importance of excluding moral predicates from his definition of the ideal observer. In the absence of any other justification for his exclusion of comparative analyses we are left with the assumption that he is attempting to report on the criteria which are actually employed by most persons in assessing the worth of a person as a moral judge. In this case it is inadmissible for him to extract from his theory any normative conclusions concerning the validity of certain types of moral argument or the acceptability of certain moral statements. And yet this is what he wishes to do, for, later on in the same discussion note he concludes that "If an ideal observer analysis is correct we shall be in a position to say that ethical beliefs (or attitudes) can be supported by arguments which are valid because of the very meaning of ethical statements",¹³ and this is in line with his tendency in the original article to use the ideal observer not just as the concept by which to explicate the meaning of the term "moral" but to test moral statements and decide which are true and which false.¹⁴ It would seem, therefore, that by deducing normative conclusions from what is alleged to be a morally neutral description of an "ideal observer" Firth commits the naturalistic fallacy.

This criticism can be developed in several different ways.

¹³Ibid., p. 421.

¹⁴"Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer", p. 329.

The characteristics of the ideal observer have been stated in such general terms that they might seem to be non-controversial. But this is not the case. There has been doubt over whether we should include the attribute of consistency;¹⁵ Firth's only reply to this is that, given his other attributes, the ideal observer would be consistent as well.¹⁶ Or there could be argument about identifying the moral point of view with impartiality, since it might be the case that one person ought to sacrifice his own interests to those of his family, or indeed any other person, and not accept the compromise balance of interests which an impartial observer might approve. However the particular quality that I shall discuss is that of the observer's dispassionate state. Might we not disqualify a moral judge as unfeeling who did not possess a benevolent and kind disposition towards those whom he judges? Even if omnipotence includes the ability to know how other people feel (something approaching to Smith's sympathy) is this sufficient if the judge lacks a feeling for the persons concerned or does not exhibit an active concern for their welfare? Firth is inclined to minimise the importance of discussions like these by saying that they are mere refinements of his theory and not an objection to it as such. He is quite willing to admit the emotional virtues such as love and compassion provided that we include them, not because they are virtues, but because of "their relationship to certain ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer".¹⁷ But even if we accept this distinction how can we say what are ethically significant reactions without intruding our own moral presuppositions about the content

¹⁵ Brant, Ethical Theory, p. 412.

¹⁶ Firth, *op. cit.*, p. 341ff.

¹⁷ Firth, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

of true moral judgments as our only way of testing which ethically significant reactions are trustworthy? These difficulties reveal that it is not possible to specify the ethically significant emotions which an ideal observer must have without begging moral questions and thus involving the analysis in circularity. Contrary to what Firth says it is not solely a psychological question to ask for a definition of "ethically-significant reactions". He has a similar problem over the attempt to say what is ethically significant knowledge but was able to evade this issue by saying that the observer must be omniscient. This escape route is not open to him in the case of the emotional state of the ideal observer since, even if it were possible to conceive of a person who felt all possible human emotions, we would wish to say that certain emotions such as boredom or envy, positively disqualify a moral judge. Harrison points out that "if you allow an ideal observer to have passions, you are faced with the problem of specifying which of his passions may affect his moral reactions."¹⁸ Why love and not hate? There seems to be nothing in a non-moral ideal which allows one more than the other. If Firth retreats into his final qualification of "normality" he might say that the ideal observer must feel only those emotions which are normal, but it might quickly be objected that it is not at all clear that we should accept some sort of average emotional state as sufficient for a moral judge, since we might feel that, in his case, the more benevolence the better. Relating this circularity criticism to the more general one against the unspecific nature of Firth's type of analysis, we can say that, in reporting ordinary language we can discover that many different criteria are used to disqualify and commend moral judges, and that it is not possible to make a selection between these without drawing on our own moral

¹⁸ Jonathan Harrison, "Some Comments upon Professor Firth's Ideal Observer Theory", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. XVII (1956-7), p. 260.

presuppositions from which we may deduce the sort of person we should consider a well qualified moral judge. That is only by making it a normative analysis can we give any good reason to prefer one putative set of qualifications to another. I suggest, therefore, that Firth introduces his own moral standards into an analysis of meaning which he alleges to be normatively neutral. This is an instance of the "normative fallacy" which is the name I suggest for fallacious reasoning in which a person draws on his opinions as to what ought to be the case, in order to back up statements which assert that something actually is the case. One commits the naturalistic fallacy by arguing from "is" to "ought". One commits the normative fallacy if one reasons from "ought" to "is".¹⁹

In his attempts to avoid the criticisms that he is arguing in a circle Firth is led to characterise the Ideal Observer in a way which renders him so different from any actual human being as to be more in the nature of a god than a man. No human being is dispassionate, omniscient, omnipotent or even disinterested. These are all qualities they may approach to some degree but to extrapolate them to their logical limits and predicate them of a person is to describe a being of whom we have no experience. The difficulty of trying to reconcile normality with such characteristics is a problem concerning which much might be learned from an examination of most early and some modern attempts to formulate a Christology. Using the terms of Christian doctrine Firth is guilty of docetism, a heresy which gives Christ the appearance but not the real attributes of a man.²⁰ In other words Firth

¹⁹I have developed this in an article, "The Normative Fallacy", to be published in the Philosophical Quarterly.

²⁰Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, 2nd Ed. (London, 1960) Ch. 6, p. 141f.

has lauded us with at least some of the characteristics of the deity²¹ and by so doing has removed the judge of human conduct from the comprehension of ordinary, normal persons. It is to make the reaction which we are told is the basis of moral statements into something too far removed from human experience for us to know what it would be like and whether we would accept its authority in the sphere of morality.

Heresy or not, Firth's doctism makes it impossible for him to answer certain key questions. How can we know that two different ideal observers would not disagree in their reactions? Brandt argues, I think rightly, that "the facts of ethnology and psychological theory suggest that there could (causally) be two persons, both 'Ideal Observers' in Firth's sense, who could have different or even opposed reactions of approval (or experience of apparent requiredness) with respect to the same act, say on account of past conditioning, or different systems of desires, etc."²² Firth's only reply is to say that we cannot know that two ideal observers will disagree. But this means that we cannot know they will agree which is precisely my point. Or, secondly, why should we accept the reactions of the ideal observer as morally relevant? The difficulty of knowing what such reactions would be like makes a decision on this point impossible. Firth does not feel that it is a matter of great importance to give an accurate preliminary phenomenological analysis of the feelings of approval and disapproval.

²¹ Cf. D. Emmet, "Universalisability and Moral Judgment", Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. XIII (1963), p. 223: "It is easy to point out that an Ideal Observer who knew all the facts and the consequences of all possible alternatives and was completely impartial could only be God"; and W. K. Frankona, "The Concept of Social Justice" in Social Justice, ed. by R. B. Brandt (Englewood Cliffs, 1962), p. 16.

²² "Discussion of an 'Ideal Observer' theory in ethics", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. XV (1955), p. 408.

which are part of any moral judgment, but our almost total inability to characterize the reactions of his ideal observer make it impossible to know if reactions of such an observer would bear any resemblance to what we would recognise as a moral judgment. For a naturalistic analysis of moral judgments the lack of a convincing psychological analysis of moral judgments must always be a serious drawback; the strength of naturalistic theories usually lies in their ability to give a psychologically intelligible account of moral judgments which is often lacking in non-naturalistic theories. In this case the drawbacks are compounded since we are no longer sure that the reactions of an ideal observer would bear any phenomenological similarity to our own.

The most obvious ways in which Smith's impartial spectator differs from the ideal observer, relate to the characteristics which are ascribed to the spectator. What Firth outlines is an abstraction distinguished by many super-human qualities. It is an abstraction with which Smith's spectator has little in common. For Smith the spectator represents, in the first instance, the average, or normal or ordinary man. This can be seen from the many synonyms which Smith uses for the term: he speaks, interchangeably, of the "spectator",²³ "spectators",²⁴ "bystander",²⁵ "a third person",²⁶ "every attentive spectator",²⁵ "every indifferent bystander",²⁷ "every impartial spectator",²⁸ "every indifferent person",²⁹ "another man",³⁰ "other men",³¹ "society",³² and, most frequently of all, "mankind".³³ It seems a matter of indifference

²³T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.11).

²⁴T.M.S., I.i.4 (I.41).

²⁵T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.6).

²⁶T.M.S., I.ii.2 (I.67).

²⁷T.M.S., IV.2 (I.404).

²⁸T.M.S., II.i.2 (I.167).

²⁹T.M.S., I.i.5 (I.47).

³⁰T.M.S., III.1 (I.276).

³¹T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.207).

³²T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.210).

³³T.M.S., I.i.4 (I.38),
I.iii.Intro. (I.54),
I.ii.3 (I.75), II.ii.1
(I.197).

to him whether the singular or the plural forms are used; when he uses the plural it is usually to refer to what "every" spectator would feel, but this sometimes becomes "the bulk of mankind" or "the greater part of mankind". Add to this the fact that he often talks of what "we" do or do not sympathise with in the same contexts as he refers to what the spectator feels, and it will be apparent that in Smith's mind, the impartial spectator is very much a creature of flesh and blood whose characteristics are to be seen in the behaviour of each and every human person; there is no suggestion that he has any characteristics not present "in every human heart".

What distinguishes the impartial spectator from anyone else is not his special qualities but his particular view point: he represents the reactions of the ordinary person when he is in the position of a non-involved spectator. We have already seen that the spectator is defined in contrast to the agent or "the person principally concerned"³⁴ as any person who is observing behaviour in a situation which does not affect him personally; the objects which excite the emotions of the agent have no particular reference to him and the effects of the agent's acts do not touch him.³⁵ This is the primary meaning of "impartial" and "indifferent" when applied by Smith to the spectator. The spectator is "indifferent" relative to the sufferings of a person in pain because he does not feel this pain himself, this also makes him "impartial" even when there is only one person principally concerned. To consider a situation in a "candid and impartial light" is to regard it from the point of view of the spectator,³⁶ which is the position of "everybody, but the man who feels it".³⁷

³⁴T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.37), cf. p. 132.

³⁵cf. T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.31).

³⁶T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.41).

³⁷T.M.S., I.1.2 (I.67).

In cases of social and unsocial acts, when the behaviour of an agent affects others, those persons are also "principally concerned" and the spectator is then often described as the "third person". The impartial spectator is in the positionⁱⁿ which a jurymen is intended to be: an ordinary person assessing a case the outcome of which is of no personal consequence to himself in that he stands to gain or lose nothing which any other person would not gain or lose. He is "impartial" as between persons involved in the situation because he has no special reason for preferring the one to the other. He is indifferent because he himself is not affected either by the causes or the consequences of the agent's action. He is literally a bystander; observing but taking no part in the course of events. He represents the multitude of third persons in whose presence human actions take place.

He is not, however, "indifferent" in the sense of being without emotions; he has all the normal feelings characteristic of human nature. If he is "cool" it is only in the sense that he does not directly feel the passions of those involved in a particular situation, he does not possess the feelings of the persons principally concerned;³⁸ On the contrary he has the "virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity" in so far as these are normal to persons in the place of a spectator,³⁹ and, most important of all, he has the same desires to obtain pleasure and avoid pain as any ordinary man, desires which, for someone in his situation, lead him to seek for harmony or concord of sentiment with those whom he is observing.⁴⁰

³⁸T.M.S., I.1.1 (I.2f.).

³⁹T.M.S., I.1.5 (I.44).

⁴⁰T.M.S., I.1.2 (I.21).

Nor is the spectator omniscient, although he is, for the most part "well-informed",⁴¹ in that he knows the facts of the case and he does not make judgments in matters of which he has inadequate knowledge.⁴² But he has no trouble in deciding whether or not he knows the relevant facts since these are those which would be important to him were he in the situation of the agent or that of the person affected by the agent's behaviour. Smith never attributes to the spectator knowledge beyond that which it is usually possible to obtain, and which is normally considered necessary before an observer can decide whether or not he sympathises with the agent concerned. Limitations of his knowledge in regard to the outcome of acts and the remote causes of behaviour are taken for granted.

And he is certainly not omnipercipient, that is "able to visualize all the alternative sets of acts and their consequences as vividly as if he were actually perceiving them",⁴³ although Smith sometimes talks of him as "attentive".⁴⁴ The laws of sympathy apply in toto to the ability of the impartial spectator to imagine the feelings of others. This means that he can never reproduce the original feelings of the agent in their full strength, and there are some feelings into which he can enter to a small degree only. In this he is at one with "all mankind", the phrase which recurs most frequently in Smith's exposition of the laws of sympathy.

In consequence of his "humanity" the impartial spectator is subject to all the feelings or irregularities which alter the usual operations of the moral sentiments. He feels the "irregularity"

⁴¹T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.151).

⁴²T.M.S., I.ii.3 (I.81).

⁴³Of. p. 176.

⁴⁴T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.6).

of sentiments due to the influence of fortune",⁴⁵ and enters into the "fallacious sense of guilt"⁴⁶ associated with such cases. He too is "blinded by success"⁴⁷ and shares in "the admiration of the mass of mankind for wealth and greatness".⁴⁸ Far from always representing the judgments of "cool reason"⁴⁹ he embodies "the principle by which a weak and imperfect being actually does approve and disapprove of actions".⁵⁰ There is, therefore, nothing doctetic in Smith's image of the impartial spectator: all his characteristics are fully human ones, and he possesses these only to the degree which is common in the average person.⁵¹ The contrast with Firth's ideal observer arises from the different method used to determine the spectator's characteristics. Smith is not enquiring into the qualities of a perfect moral judge; he certainly does not appeal to self-conscious and sophisticated moral arguments which he considers camouflage the real sources of moral judgments which it is his purpose to discover.

Smith's impartial spectator does represent a relatively stable standard of moral judgment and this has misled commentators into assuming that this stability is due to some rational principle, beyond the workings of sympathy, which gives the impartial spectator

⁴⁵T.M.S., II.iii.2 (I.259): "the indignation, even of the spectator, is apt to be animated by the actual consequences of the action"; and (I.263): "did not even the impartial spectator feel some indulgence for what may be regarded as the unjust resentment of that other"; cf. (I.246).

⁴⁶T.M.S., II.iii.3 (I.272f.).

⁴⁷T.M.S., VI.iii (II.159f.).

⁴⁸T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.120).

⁴⁹T.M.S., II.iii.3 (I.266).

⁵⁰T.M.S., II.i.5 Footnote (I.189).

⁵¹He criticises the Stoics for recommending men "to enter into the views of the great Superintendent of the universe" in order to make moral judgments, T.M.S., VII.ii.1 (II.255-65).

a privileged position as a moral judge, able to stand above and assess the judgments of ordinary men. The spectator does embody a norm but it is a norm only in the sense of an average standard which emerges from the inter-play of the reactions of ordinary spectators; the spectator personifies the results of a process of interaction whereby an agreed set of moral principles are evolved. The spectator is not an "invention",⁵² nor a "fiction"⁵³ to whom appeal is made in moral argument; he is much nearer to what Small calls "the ongoing social process"⁵⁴ in that he represents the judgments which result from the harmonising of attitudes towards conduct. Smith accounts for this process by which some sort of moral consensus is achieved, of a loose sort within each society and a somewhat tighter form in the case of each social group within a society, by showing how men's ability to generalise about their own and other people's morally relevant feelings, together with the universal desire of men to agree with their fellows and so obtain their approval, leads to an ironing out of moral disagreement. This is the sort of process with which modern students of small group behaviour have made us familiar.⁵⁵ The spectator standpoint is the common denominator which holds men together because it is when they are in the position of non-involved spectators that they tend to agree most readily. This process, which will be analysed in more detail in the next chapter, together with Smith's assumption that all human beings have basically similar

⁵²L. Stephen, History of English Thought, ix.77.

⁵³Jouffroy's Ethics, p. 137.

⁵⁴A. Small, Adam Smith and Modern Sociology, p. 39.

⁵⁵Cf. Michael S. Olmsted, The Small Group (New York, 1959), chap. V, pp. 65ff.

emotional reactions, explains why he thinks he is justified in talking of the impartial spectator. The objectivity which attaches to such a spectator's moral judgments is the sort of objectivity which arises out of agreement and not that which implies an external standard known through the exercise of some rational faculty which transcends the normal sources of moral judgments. It is therefore wrong to say, as Bonar does, that "every man can reason is the impartial spectator",⁵⁶ or, as Swabey does, that the impartial spectator represents "impersonal reason".⁵⁷ Smith consistently denies that reason plays any part in moral judgments except in the formation of general moral rules by induction from particular moral judgments. He does not depart from this position when he introduces the term "impartial spectator". In his discussion of conscience, Smith does talk about the "supposed impartial and well-informed spectator...the man within the breast"⁵⁸ in a way which appears to place him above the failings of the average spectator. But we shall see in the next chapter, that the "ideal man within"⁵⁹ is derived from the "man without" and that his superiority in some directions is offset by his own particular failings.⁶⁰

One way of demonstrating that Smith's spectator is an empirical concept referring to the development of moral consensus in a society, is to show that he is prepared to allow for differences in moral attitudes between spectators in different societies

⁵⁶J. Bonar, The Moral Sense, p. 180.

⁵⁷W. C. Swabey, Ethical Theory from Hobbes to Kant, p. 182. Cf. G. R. Morrow, "The Significance of the Doctrine of Sympathy in Hume and Adam Smith", Philosophical Review, XXXII, (1923), p. 72: "the impartial spectator is the personification of that which is permanent, universal, rational, and natural in the phenomena of sympathy".

⁵⁸T.M.S., III.2 (I.321).

⁵⁹T.M.S., III.3 (I.364).

⁶⁰Cf. pp. 210-216.

and in different social groups. For although he does assume that similar societies will develop similar moral codes, he is perfectly prepared to allow for the diversity of codes between different types of society and social groups; he would not be concerned to uphold the "absolutist" position of the Ideal Observer theories. Many examples of this will be given when we come to discuss Smith's explanation for the actual content of moral codes, but the general point can be illustrated by reference to Smith's description of the part which custom plays in determining moral standards.

Custom is one of those influences Smith opposes to "nature". He describes its operation as follows:

When two objects have frequently been seen together, the imagination acquires a habit of passing easily from the one to the other. If the first appear, we lay our account that the second is to follow. Of their own accord they put us in mind of one another, and the attention glides easily along them.⁶¹

This is the Humean idea of the relation between our ideas of a cause and an effect: two objects or qualities which we are accustomed to seeing or experiencing together become so associated in the mind that their conjunction seems "proper" and their separation "improper". The presence of the one leads us to expect the presence of the other and if this latter is absent then we feel unease and disappointment:

The one we think is awkward when it appears without its usual companion. We miss something which we expect to find, and the habitual arrangement of our ideas is disturbed by the disappointment.⁶¹

This operation of the imagination, which unites two ideas for no other reason than that they constantly appear together, is

⁶¹ T.M.S., V.1, (II.2). Vide Smith's explanation of the origins of science, cf. p. 20ff.

contrasted with natural propriety, by which he means the propriety felt as a result of the more basic principles of the human mind such as reason and sympathy, as when, for instance, we approve of a mathematical solution or of an expression of grief.

Smith exhibits the influence of custom largely by reference to artistic and literary taste, going into considerable detail to show how our perception of beauty is influenced by what we are accustomed to see:

Can any reason, for example, be assigned why the Doric capital should be appropriated to a pillar, whose height is equal to eight diameters; the Ionic volute to one of nine; and the Corinthian foliage to one of ten?⁶²

or, again

According to the ancient rhetoricians, a certain measure of verse was by nature appropriated to each particular species of writing, as being naturally expressive of that character, sentiment, or passion, which ought to predominate in it. One verse, they said, was fit for grave and another for gay works, which could not, they thought, be interchanged without the greatest impropriety. The experience of modern times, however, seems to contradict this principle, though in itself it would appear to be extremely probable. What is the burlesque verse in English, is the heroic verse in French.⁶³

He argues against the view that our ideas of beauty are entirely due to custom, that is based on our experience of what is normal in nature, for, although this helps to explain how nations living in one part of the world develop different ideas of beauty from those living in dissimilar parts, it does not provide a sufficient explanation of our ideas of beauty:

⁶²T.H.S., V.1 (II.7).

⁶³T.H.S., V.1 (II.9).

The utility of any form, its fitness for the useful purposes for which it was intended, evidently recommends it, and renders it ^{more} agreeable to us, independent of custom. Certain colours are more agreeable than others, and give more delight to the eye the first time it ever beholds them. A smooth surface is more pleasing than a rough one. Variety is more pleasing than a tedious undiversified uniformity.⁶⁴

This is the sort of thing he means by a natural sense of beauty. He considers that custom may emphasise or diminish it, but never entirely replace it. He then goes on to show that custom has the same sort of limited influence on the natural moral sentiments.

If we look at the way in which Smith uses the idea of custom to explain some of the diversities which exist between the moral sentiments of one group, nation, or age and another, we will see how he adapts the concept of the impartial spectator to these facts, and this will demonstrate the empirical character of the concept. The variations Smith considers are divided into those affecting "the general style and character of behaviour" and those which are to do with "particular usages or practices". An example of the former includes "the difference between the degrees of self-command which are required in civilized and in barbarous nations"⁶⁵ and of the latter the practice of exposing new born infants in ancient Greece.⁶⁶ Smith says that these examples show the influence of custom on moral sentiments and that custom can explain many of these "irregularities", by which he means inconsistencies, within and between groups. This influence is not so pronounced as it is in matters of taste,

⁶⁴T.M.S., V.1 (II.16f.).

⁶⁵T.M.S., V.2 (II.37ff.).

⁶⁶T.M.S., V.2 (II.45ff.).

since the moral sentiments are made up of some of "the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature"⁶⁷ and cannot, therefore, be changed very far from their natural state. The influence is least apparent with the general style and character of behaviour, although it can be seen in the tendency of those who have been brought up surrounded by examples of virtuous behaviour to be more shocked by vice than those who "have been familiarized with it from their infancy".⁶⁸

This does not mean that Smith denies that fairly extensive variations in the approved style of life do not exist. He notes that different conduct is expected of those who are at different stages of life or are members of particular professions and ranks and that different general ideas of good and evil have been adhered to in different places and times:

We expect in old age, that gravity and sedateness which its infirmities, its long experience, and its worn-out sensibility seem to render both natural and respectable; and we lay our account to find in youth that sensibility, that gaiety and sprightly vivacity which experience teaches us to expect.⁶⁹

Or; We cannot expect the same sensibility to the gay pleasures and amusements of life in a clergyman, which we lay our account with in an officer.⁷⁰

To some degree he puts these variations down to custom. In the past we have seen the old grave and the young vivacious, we have come to associate solemnity with the clergyman and gaiety with the soldier, but there is a deeper explanation for these variations.

⁶⁷T.M.S., V.2 (II.19).

⁶⁸T.M.S., V.2 (II.20); cf. VI.ii.1 (II.84-5).

⁶⁹T.M.S., V.2 (II.22f.).

⁷⁰T.M.S., V.2 (II.25f.).

which is uncovered by asking why these different types of person come to adopt different manners and styles of life. The explanation is that the general style and character of behaviour which is most suited to a particular type of person becomes the normal behaviour of such persons, and the impartial spectator therefore judges it to be appropriate to their circumstances:

The propriety of a person's behaviour, depends not upon its suitability to any one circumstance of his situation, but to all the circumstances, which, when we bring his case home to ourselves, we feel, should naturally call upon his attention.⁷¹

The spectator thus judges behaviour to be proper in one category of person which would not be proper in another; propriety consists in the suitability of an action to its situation, and one important feature of the situation is the age, rank and profession of the person who is the agent; the spectator approves if the behaviour is in accord with the way in which he imagines he would behave if he were a person of this type in the same situation, and his ideas about this will be affected by his knowledge about what is normal behaviour for this type of person; this is a matter of custom if he judges simply on the basis of the association of ideas, but it is a matter of natural propriety if his judgment is based on an imaginary change of situation in which he visualises himself as being a person of this type. For instance we judge that the task of a clergyman, which Smith takes to be a matter of keeping "the world in mind of that awful futurity which awaits them, who is to accounce what may be the fatal consequences of every deviation from the rules of duty"⁷² is suited to a grave and austere and abstracted severity. We know that we would be

⁷¹T.M.S., V.2 (II.24).

⁷²T.M.S., V.2 (II.26).

solemn if this was our job and therefore approve of solemnity in those whose task it is. The example of the officer is, on the other hand, more a case of custom. Gaiety does not seem appropriate to a man about to face danger in battle; the explanation for such behaviour is to be found in the need for men in this situation to avoid thinking of the risks they incur, and so they develop the care-free attitudes which we associate with a soldier without having any sense of their natural propriety.⁷³

Because men are influenced by the constant associations presented to them in their past experience, a spectator brought up in one group or nation will be marginally different from one brought up in another group or nation. But, of more importance in explaining general variations in moral values, is the fact that the spectator takes into account the different situations of those whose behaviour he is assessing. Smith illustrates this by contrasting barbaric and civilised moralities; this he does, not by arguing that one is superior to the other, but by showing that each is suited to the circumstances of barbarous and civilised ages:

Among civilized nations, the virtues which are founded upon humanity, are more cultivated than those which are founded upon self-denial and the command of the passions. Among rude and barbarous nations, it is quite otherwise, the virtues of self-denial are more cultivated than those of humanity.⁷⁴

This is not on account of differences in their nature, nor is it due to inconsistency between the impartial spectators in one society and those in another, but it is explained solely by the difference between the situations of the spectators. It is

⁷³T.M.S., V.2 (II.27f.).

⁷⁴T.M.S., V.2 (II.51).

because of "the necessity of his situation"⁷⁵ that the savage is inured to every hardship and must control the expression of his many distresses. The effects of this hard and dangerous life are felt by the spectator as well as by the agent, and this is why self-control is expected and admired in such societies. Smith observes that "before we can feel much for others, we must in some measure be at ease ourselves". Since the spectator in savage society does not enjoy such ease, a member of the society "expects no sympathy from those about him".⁷⁶

This may be accounted for by "natural" (pre-customary) moral sentiments, but an admiration for strict self-control may outlast the situation which gave rise to it; this is due to the influence of custom. Similarly the exposure of infants in Sparta may have been necessary at one time for the survival of the group, but familiarity with the practice means that it persists long after this necessity has gone.⁷⁷ This is a tendency which Smith frequently notes in his study of the relationship between economics and law.⁷⁸

These examples show that Smith was not only prepared to admit that there are many impartial spectators but considered that he could explain why this should be so. Each spectator is the product of a particular society, in which, through his training and experience, he has come to regard as normal the behaviour which is, or, in some cases, which was, suited to the circumstances,

⁷⁵T.M.S., V.2 (II.32).

⁷⁶T.M.S., V.2 (II.33).

⁷⁷T.M.S., V.2 (II.47).

⁷⁸W.N., III.ii (I.408): "Laws frequently continue in force long after the circumstances, which first gave occasion to them, and which alone could render them reasonable, are no more"; cf. W.N., V.i.2.art.2 (II.289).

usually the economic circumstances, of that society. This is only to some extent explained by custom; recourse has to be had to the deeper causes of behaviour, which have been discussed in chapter three, to explain why a form of behaviour is normal in a certain type of society. The many different spectators are basically similar in that the laws of sympathy apply to them all, but these laws are such as to allow for the effects of their different situations on their moral judgments. Some laws apply only when spectators have sufficient leisure. Others have written into them variables which are a function of the past experience of the spectator. For instance law three, which deals with the difficulty or ease of entering into unpleasant and pleasant emotions, allows for variations in the things which minister to men's pleasures or cause them pain in different societies. And law four, which states that men sympathise most easily with feelings which are closest to their normal state, obviously leaves open the possibility that what is normal in one society will not be in another. There are, therefore, many impartial spectators, similar in their main characteristics, but different in many respects. The impartial spectator takes on a variety of guises in different societies and in different groups within the same society. To talk of the impartial spectator is simply a short-hand way of referring to the normal reaction of a member of a particular social group or of a whole society, when he is in the position of observing the conduct of his fellows. This is a sociological concept far removed from the abstract speculations of the Ideal Observer theory.

Chapter Seven

CONSCIENCE

Smith's account of the moral sentiments concentrates on the spectator standpoint because he considers that it is by examining the nature of the spectator's reactions that we can best understand and explain these sentiments; in his view, they simply are the sentiments of the spectator; to understand these is to understand morality. An approach of this sort is open to the objection that the fundamental function of morality is to guide conduct and not to pass judgments on the behaviour of others. Such judgments, it is true, may affect the actions of agents in so far as agents value the approval of the spectator, but a moral judgment, it may be said, commits the spectator himself to pursue what he conceives to be good and avoid what he regards as evil, and it places the judge himself under the most immediate and obvious obligation. So far Smith has shown how the spectator might be prompted to reward the person whom he considers meritorious and punish those who have caused justified resentment to others, but he has not explained how the spectator judges himself and comes to regard himself as being under an obligation to obey the standards which he sets for others. A crucial part of the theory, therefore, consists in an explanation of how the detached approval of the spectator becomes the authoritative imperative to which the individual feels he ought to conform.

Smith takes all this into his theory with deceptive ease. He argues that there is no difference in principle between judging our own and other people's conduct: both are a matter of comparing one set of sentiments with another, and approving if they agree or disapproving if they disagree. When I, as spectator, judge the

behaviour of another I compare his sentiments with those I imagine I would feel were I in his place, but when I judge my own behaviour I compare the sentiments I actually feel with those I imagine I would feel were I a spectator judging my own behaviour:

We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them. Whatever judgment we can form concerning them, accordingly, must always bear some secret reference, either to what are, or to what, upon a certain condition, would be, or to what, we imagine, ought to be the judgments of others. We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it.¹

This general idea has been introduced already to explain how an agent modifies his passions so as to reduce them to a level with which a spectator can sympathise, the virtue of self-command; self-command presupposes the ability of the agent to regard his own behaviour from the standpoint of others, and it is this ability which Smith draws upon to explain "our Judgments concerning our own Sentiments and Conduct, and...the Sense of Duty".² All the elements of this aspect of his theory are present in the 1st edition of the Moral Sentiments,³ but it is developed further

¹T.M.S., III.i (I.276f.), cf. (1st edition) III.ii (p. 257) and III.i (p. 248f.).

²T.M.S., III.title (I.275).

³cf. T.M.S., (1st edition) III.passim (p. 245-316), especially pp. 283 and 296 and VI.ii (p. 478).

both in the 2nd edition and, more extensively, in the 6th edition; in its completed form it provides a detailed theory of the origins and operations of conscience. Smith describes how each individual comes to guide his own conduct by internalising the judgments which he knows, or imagines, that other people pass on his conduct, and fitting these in with his own judgments on the conduct of others which he learns to apply to his own behaviour.

Conscience, then, is the mechanism whereby the individual comes to adopt the standpoint of the spectator in order to assess and guide his own conduct, and so gain the approbation of actual spectators, including his own approbation in those moments when he is reflecting on his own conduct. Conscience opposes the "natural" (spontaneous and pre-moral) preference which each man has for his own pleasure, and encourages the practice of such mild forms of altruism as exist in unsocialised man:

Independent of any regard either to what are, or what ought to be, or to what upon a certain condition would be, the sentiments of other people, the first of these three virtues (prudence) is originally recommended to us by our selfish, the other two (justice and benevolence) by our benevolent affections. Regard to the sentiments of other people, however, comes afterwards both to enforce and direct the practice of all those virtues; and no man...ever trod steadily and uniformly in the paths of prudence, of justice, or of proper beneficence, whose conduct was not principally directed by a regard to the sentiments of the supposed impartial spectator, of the great inmate of the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct.⁴

⁴T.M.S., VI. Conclusion (II.187f.).

The most important task of conscience is to curb the natural preference which each man has for his own happiness⁵ for without the growth of conscience men would pay little regard to the happiness of others. By saying that man is naturally selfish Smith means that, if the controls of conscience and public opinion were removed, men would unthinkingly harm others in order to gain their own ends; since conscience is a social product, this amounts to saying that pre-social man, that is man considered in abstraction from the social relationships which produce conscience, would normally act with partiality towards himself. However, since men do grow up within society, it becomes a matter of habit to regard their own conduct from the point of view of the spectator, and moral conduct becomes natural (spontaneous, pre-reflective) to them, although the natural (pre-social) sentiments remain in the form of temptations to behave selfishly:

Here, too, habit and experience have taught us to do this so easily and so readily, that we are scarce sensible that we do it; and it requires, in this case too, some degree of reflection, and even of philosophy, to convince us, how little interest we should take in the greatest concerns of our neighbour, how little we should be affected by whatever relates to him, if the sense of propriety and justice did not correct the otherwise natural inequality of our sentiments.⁶

Smith argues his case by offering the outline of a developmental hypothesis of a type which is familiar in present day social psychology. He imagines what life would be like outside society, and the transformation which would take over a solitary unsocialised

⁵T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.205f.): "Every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care"; cf. T.M.S., III.4 (I.393).

⁶T.M.S., III.3 (I.333-4).

Individual were he to be brought into society:

Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. All these are objects which he cannot easily see, which naturally he does not look at, and with regard to which he is provided with no mirror which can present them to his view. Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind.⁷

This account is easily transposed into a description of the means whereby an infant learns to guide his behaviour in such a way as to gain the approval of those who care for it. In Smith's words:

Bring him into society, and all his ^{own} passions will immediately become the causes of new passions. He will observe that mankind approve of some of them, and are disgusted by others. He will be elevated in the one case, and cast down in the other.⁸

Smith's basic theory of conscience is, therefore, that because men desire the approval and dread the disapproval of others they

⁷T.M.S., III.1 (I.277f.). This might appear to be an example of conjectural history, but there is no suggestion that he is representing an actual or even a possible sequence of events. He is really building up a model of those forces at work in society which create and maintain individual consciences.

⁸T.M.S., III.1 (I.279).

learn to judge their own conduct and model their behaviour according to the patterns which gain approval and avoid disapproval. This is of a piece with modern psychological and sociological theories of the development of the super-ego, of self-consciousness and the whole process of socialisation. He himself has his own view on the various stages in this process:

A very young child has no self-command; but, whatever are its emotions, whether fear, or grief, or anger, it endeavours always, by the violence of its outcries, to alarm, as much as it can, the attention of its nurse, or of its parents. While it remains under the custody of such partial protectors, its anger is the first, and, perhaps, the only passion which it is taught to moderate. By noise and threatening, they are, for their own ease, often obliged to frighten it into good temper; and the passion which incites it to attack, is restrained by that which teaches it to attend to its own safety. When it is old enough to go to school, or to mix with its equals, it soon finds that they have no such indulgent partiality. It naturally wishes to gain their favour, and to avoid their hatred or contempt. Regard even to its own safety teaches it to do so; and it soon finds that it can do so in no other way than by moderating, not only its anger, but all its other passions, to the degree which its play-fellows and companions are likely to be pleased with.⁹

Because he wishes to insist that self-judgments are impossible unless they are preceded by judgments on the conduct of others, Smith sometimes puts his theory of the development of conscience in a temporal sequence which may seem to conflict with modern developmental theories:

our first moral criticisms are exercised upon the characters and conduct of other people; and we are all very forward to observe how each of these affects us. But we soon learn, that

⁹T.M.S., III.3 (I.555).

other people are equally frank with regard to our own. We become anxious to know how far we deserve their censure or applause... We begin, upon this account, to examine our own passions and conduct...¹⁰

This may well be a fair picture of a certain stage of adolescent self-awareness, but it is clear that children learn to control their own behaviour in the light of their parents' attitudes as soon as, if not before, they make criticisms of others. However Smith is well aware of this¹¹ and he would probably not attribute this early form of self-control to conscience which requires the child to make the imaginative leap of regarding his own behaviour through the eyes of others. In any case it is not a major problem for Smith's theory since he can preserve the causal primacy of the spectator's judgments over judgments of self-criticism, by saying that the judgments in question need not be made by the same person, and that it is on account of the approval and disapproval of other people that small children learn to approve and disapprove of their own conduct. There is thus no necessity for Smith to insist on a rigid temporal priority, in each individual, of judgments passed on the conduct of others over judgments passed on his own behaviour.

To understand the workings of Smith's conscience it is important to note that, in the development of conscience, the individual is split into two distinct halves: the self as agent and the self as spectator of the self as agent:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct,
when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it,
and either to approve or condemn it, it is
evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself,
as it were, into two persons: and that I, the

¹⁰ T.M.S., III.1 (I.201).

¹¹ L.J., p. 74: "children have so long a dependence upon their parents, to bring down their passions to theirs, and thus be trained up at length to become useful members of society".

the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of a spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion.¹²

The "proper" self is the agent, the spectator is in some sense the artificial presence of society within the individual. The conflict between desire and conscience is interpreted by Smith in terms of a conflict between the unsocialised impulses of the individual and the constraining influence of an internalised social imperative.

This internal voice representing the attitudes of the impartial spectator achieves, in its developed form, a certain autonomy and independence of the real spectators without. It comes to possess an authority which makes it natural to speak of it as being a "higher tribunal"¹³ than the opinions of mankind, and to regard its dictates as the "vicegerents of God within us".¹⁴ Smith attains his pinnacle of rhetoric in describing its character:

It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbitrator of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become

¹²T.M.S., III.1 (I.282-3).

¹³T.M.S., III.2 (I.321f.).

¹⁴T.M.S., III.5 (I.413).

the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration.¹⁵

The origin of conscience is accounted for by the effect which the approbation and disapprobation of other people have upon the individual. In the first place every man wishes to be liked and fears to be disliked. He therefore takes heed of the views of the spectators; he learns to see his conduct from their point of view, and so to feel something of the emotions they manifest towards himself; as spectator of his own actions he feels sympathetic approval and disapproval, gratitude and resentment, and it becomes impossible for him to act on selfish principles and continue "to look mankind in the face".¹⁶ In the beginning this involves a straightforward dislike of being the object of disapproval and a wish to enjoy the approval of his fellows, but as he succeeds in actually looking at his own conduct as they see it he begins to feel something of the same emotions as they do towards himself, as agent. And when he shares, for instance, their disapproval, he "feels all the agonies of shame, of horror, and consternation".¹⁷ Remorse and shame are the consequence of the self-condemnation which follows from the agent imaginatively adopting the standpoint of the spectator. When a person has committed a grave injustice, not only is he unable to "look mankind in the face", he cannot, in his rôle as spectator, look himself in the face: this is the

¹⁵T.M.S., III.3 (I.336-7). This echoes Butler's view of conscience (*Fifteen Sermons*, (1726) Preface), and shows that Findley is wrong in saying that Smith's concept of conscience lacks authority, cf. J. W. Findley, Values and Intentions (London, 1961), p. 210.

¹⁶T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.206).

¹⁷T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.209).

feeling of guilt, which Smith describes in vivid detail.¹⁸

But although he insists that the approval and disapproval of actual spectators is the origin of conscience,¹⁹ Smith notes that the latter develops an autonomy which enables the individual to think that he acts with moral propriety even when the real spectators condemn his behaviour. The supposed impartial spectator within begins to take on a higher authority than the actual spectator without:

Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love. He naturally dreads, not only to be hated, but to be hateful; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of hatred. He desires, not only praise, but praise-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise. He dreads, not only blame but blame-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be blamed by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of blame.²⁰

There are therefore two distinct passions of human nature, which are "original" in the sense that they cannot be reduced to a combination of other passions,²¹ a desire to be loved, and a desire to be worthy of love; conscience, originating in man's accommodation to the former desire, comes to serve the latter, and instructs men as to how they may become worthy of praise rather than simply how they may obtain it.²²

¹⁸T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.211).

¹⁹This theory is echoed by Edward Westermarck, Ethical Relativity, p. 111: "Public disapproval is the prototype of moral disapproval".

²⁰T.M.S., III.2 (I.284).

²¹T.M.S., III.2 (I.292); cf. p. 91.

²²T.M.S., III.2 (I.295ff.).

This element of Smith's theory has been thought by most critics to destroy its whole basis, since it seems to indicate that Smith thought that, via conscience, the individual has the ability to know what is good and evil, right and wrong, independently of the empirically determinable judgments of the impartial spectator, an unaccountable new factor having entered into the analysis. It is said that through the "love of praise-worthiness" Smith is able to smuggle in a normative standard which he uses to pass moral judgment upon the sort of impartial spectator with whom he started, a spectator who represents the attitudes of the normal person.²³ Thus Stephen says that the appeal to the " demi-god" within, as Smith calls the voice of conscience, is "ultimately to an inaccessible tribunal" which reveals the incompleteness of his analysis built up on the basis of the approval of actual spectators and the effects of sympathy.²⁴ Swabey agrees that the appeal to the ideal spectator within concedes the moral inadequacy of the praise of actual spectators and "comes close to admitting that praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness are indefinable terms", and he backs up this criticism by pointing out Smith's description of some moral sentiments as "corrupt" which shows that he "claims an ability to distinguish between authentic and unauthentic moral judgments".²⁵ This is the sort of consideration that leads Cropsey to say that, for Smith, "conscience is the innate means by which every human being, as human, has direct, if imperfect knowledge, of the natural rights of all others",²⁶ and it is the main argument in

²³Cf. A. Small, Adam Smith and Modern Sociology, p. 48.

²⁴L. Stephen, History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century, ix.78.

²⁵W. C. Swabey, Ethical Theory from Hobbes to Kant, p. 182f.

²⁶J. Cropsey, Polity and Economy, p. 20.

favour of those who attribute a supra-empirical character to Smith's impartial spectator.

It is certainly true that, in discussing conscience and the love of praise-worthiness, Smith does talk of the spectator in apparently non-empirical terms which are similar to some of the adjectives applied to the ideal observer. He refers, for instance, to "the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator... the man within the breast, the great ^{judge and} arbiter of their conduct",²⁷ "the ideal man within the breast"²⁸ and "the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct",²⁹ but these terms all get their meaning either from man's ability to build up a picture of the conduct he approves and disapproves of from his experience of the attitudes of normal spectators, which he can then, on occasions, use to oppose the judgments of particular spectators, or from his ability to become the (supposed) spectator of his own conduct. Many critics misconceive the distinction which Smith is making between the desire for praise and the desire for praise-worthiness. It is true that he regards these two desires as "distinct and independent of one another"³⁰ in that they are different desires, and to this extent we can accept that Smith is introducing a new factor into the analysis. But it is not true that this new factor is some rational, innate or non-sensory awareness of good and evil not derived from the attitudes of actual spectators. The contrast he is making is between the praise of actual spectators and the praise which the self as spectator gives to the self as agent and to other people. These may not coincide for when the individual imagines how he would

²⁷T.M.S., III.2 (I.321).

²⁸T.M.S., III.3 (I.364).

²⁹T.M.S., III.3 (I.380).

³⁰T.M.S., III.2 (I.285).

regard his behaviour were he observing it, he may come to adopt an attitude towards himself which is different from that which he perceives the actual spectators to adopt. If his "sympathetic spectator emotions", if I may call them that, disagree with those of the real spectator, then he will judge the emotions of the real spectator to be wrong. If his sympathetic spectator emotions agree with his emotions as agent, then he will approve of his own behaviour, and, Smith insists, he desires this self-approval as well as the approval of others. In the mature adult, conscience, or the "man within", becomes the mechanism whereby the individual as spectator judges himself as agent, something he is only able to do because of his past experience of being the object of the approval and disapproval of other men. This "man within" usually agrees with the judgments of the actual spectator, but on occasions he may not. Sometimes this is because the "man within" does not take an impartial enough viewpoint and is too far removed from the position of the real spectator, so that:

The man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be awakened and put in mind of his duty, by the preference of the real spectator.³¹

Men are apt to be too kind to themselves when they observe their own conduct. For although they are able to scrutinise their own conduct:

Unfortunately this moral looking-glass is not always a very good one. Common looking-glasses, it is said, are extremely deceitful, and by the glare which they throw over the face, conceal from the partial eyes of the person many deformities which are obvious to every body besides.³²

³¹T.M.S., III.3 (I.300).

³²T.M.S. (1st edition), III.ii (p. 260f.).

On other occasions the "man without" may be partial and, therefore, unrepresentative of the normal response of non-involved third persons, or he may be ill-informed; in these cases the individual may give more importance to the internal approbation of conscience than the approval of the real spectators:

If the man without should applaud us, either for actions which we have not performed, or for motives which had no influence upon us; the man within can immediately humble all ^{that} pride and elevation of mind which such groundless acclamations might otherwise occasion, by telling us, that as we know that we do not deserve them, we render ourselves despicable by accepting them.³³

In such instances the man within, being better informed as to the nature of the act in question, knows that if the real spectators had similar information they would withdraw their praise. And very often the man within has superior information to the real spectators and this enables the individual to regard him as a higher tribunal, but this higher tribunal is no more nor less than an appeal to the attitudes which the real spectators would have had they had the information which is available to the agent, for he knows that such an attitude is the "natural and ordinary effect of such conduct".³⁴ This is what he means by saying that we sometimes judge ourselves by "what ought"³⁵ to be the judgments of others.

This degree of independence Smith is willing to grant to the individual conscience, but he leaves us in no doubt that there are very strict limits to the extent to which the man within can break free from the "clamour of the man without":

³³T.H.S., III.2 (I.322); cf. T.H.S. (1st edition), III.1 (p. 248f.).

³⁴T.H.S., III.2 (I.291).

³⁵T.H.S., III.2 (I.277).

Very few men can be satisfied with their own private consciousness that they have attained those qualities, or performed those actions, which they admire and think praise-worthy in other people; unless it is, at the same time, generally acknowledged that they possess the one, or have performed the other; or, in other words, unless they have actually obtained that praise which they think due both to the one and to the other.³⁶

Not only is a man not satisfied with praise-worthiness without actual praise, but his judgment as to what is praise-worthy cannot stand against the constant opposition of the real spectators even if he judges that they are "ignorant and weak" and therefore wrong:

He may think himself very confident and that their unfavourable judgment is wrong; but this confidence can seldom be so great as to hinder that judgment from making some impression upon him.³⁷

The degree to which individuals and groups have confidence in their own judgments is an empirical variable which Smith notes and makes some attempt to explain. Some men are more readily satisfied with actual praise in the absence of deserved or self-praise than others. Those, he says, "are the most frivolous and superficial of mankind only who can be much delighted with that praise which they themselves know to be altogether unmerited",³⁸ that is praise which they know would be withdrawn if other men knew as much as the agents concerned. On the other hand a man of "sensibility" is more inclined to pay attention to praise-worthiness.³⁹ Smith leaves this variation between men largely

³⁶T.M.S., III.2 (I.318f.).

³⁷T.M.S., III.2 (I.308).

³⁸T.M.S., III.2 (I.299).

³⁹T.M.S., III.2 (I.305).

unexplained, but he does indicate a few general tendencies. The less clear cut our judgments of self-assessment the more we are swayed by the judgment of others:

The agreement or disagreement both of the sentiments and judgments of other people with our own, is, in all cases, it must be observed, of more or less importance to us, exactly in proportion as we ourselves are more or less uncertain about the propriety of our own sentiments, about the accuracy of our own judgments.⁴⁰

Secondly, the stronger the feelings of the agent the less he is able to worry about the opinions of the spectators.⁴¹ Some differences relate to the style of life of the persons involved. Royalty, and others who are perpetually surrounded by those who stand to gain by flattery and who come across relatively few impartial spectators of their behaviour tend to be more susceptible than most to the "man without".⁴² Persons who are habituated to evil doing are not so troubled by false accusations as those who are innocent not only in this particular case but in the general tenor of their behaviour.⁴³ Men who are attached to warring factions in any walk of life tend to reduce their susceptibility to the mass of impartial spectators around them.⁴⁴ Those whose professions have to do with matters on which it is difficult to be certain, such as literature and art, have a particular tendency to form cabals and to seek for actual praise rather than praise-worthiness, while those who are more accustomed to dealing in matters which are amenable to rational solution

⁴⁰T.N.S., III.2 (I.308). This is a typical example of Smith's attempts to formulate his generalisations in quasi-mathematical terms.

⁴¹T.N.S., III.3 (I.364).

⁴²T.N.S., III.2 (I.327f.).

⁴³T.N.S., III.2 (I.304).

⁴⁴T.N.S., III.3 (I.364ff.).

such as mathematics, tend, in morals as well, to be more independent in judgment and therefore attach less importance to the clamour of the "man without".⁴⁵ Men of "rank and fortune" who live in the public eye and depend on public respect pay greater attention to the opinions of others than men of "low condition", especially when these latter leave their small village communities and enter the anonymity of a great city.⁴⁶ These tentative hypotheses illustrate the potential sociological fruitfulness of Smith's theory of conscience in suggesting possible explanations of individual and group variations with respect to the dependence of the individual conscience on the opinions of actual spectators.

Smith does not always seem consistent in the amount of independence he is, on average, prepared to allow to the individual conscience. Sometimes he says that it is powerless before the clamour of actual spectators; at other times he seems to insist that the inner tranquillity of a quiet conscience is desired even more than the praise of other men. The real spectators have more to counter than individualistic consciences; they are, as we have seen, also necessary to hold in check the partiality of the individual towards himself. Smith seems in no doubt that it is social pressure rather than inward conscience that corrects this partiality:

Such, it seems, is the natural insolence of man, that he almost always disdains to use the good instrument, except when he cannot or dare not use the bad one.⁴⁷

It is particularly in the moment of action, when he is unable to reflect on his own conduct, that the agent is indulgent towards himself. The distinction between the self as agent and the

⁴⁵W.M.S., III.2 (I.310ff.).

⁴⁶W.N., V.1.3.art.3 (II.317).

⁴⁷W.N., V.1.3.art.3 (II.321).

self as spectator of the self as agent is often a temporal one. In reflective moments the spectator dominates and the individual is relatively impartial in the assessment of his own behaviour, but:

When we are about to act, the eagerness of passion will seldom allow us to consider what we are doing, with the candour of an indifferent person. The violent emotions which at that time agitate us, discolour our views of things, even when we are endeavouring to place ourselves in the situation of another, and to regard the objects that interest us in the light in which they will naturally appear to him. The fury of our own passions constantly calls us back to our own place, where every thing appears magnified and misrepresented by self-love.⁴⁸

In order to counter this "self-deceit" which is "the source of half the disorders of human life"⁴⁹ men learn to use moral rules to guide their actions in the knowledge that, if they depart from these rules, they will condemn themselves in their moments of reflection. We have noted how Smith explains the origin of general rules by arguing that they result from inductive reasoning based on the experience of particular moral judgments; this explanation is completed by showing that these rules are needed, not only to render moral assessments habitual, but to fulfil the vital function of enabling men to follow the line of duty when they least desire to do so. Smith defines the sense of duty as obedience to these general moral rules and says that:

Those general rules of conduct, when they have been fixed in our mind by habitual reflection, are of great use in correcting the misrepresentations of self-love concerning what is fit and proper to be done in our particular situation.⁵⁰

⁴⁸T.M.S., III.4 (I.389).

⁴⁹T.M.S., III.4 (I.393).

⁵⁰T.M.S., III.4 (I.398).

Because of their function in the moral life moral rules become endowed with something of the authority of individual moral judgments; this is enhanced by the fact that they represent the agreed standards of a particular society, so that they appear to have an even greater authority than the judgments from which they originate, and the ordinary person accepts that they "are to be regarded as the commands and laws of the Deity, promulgated by those vicegerents which he has set up within us"⁵¹ thus adding even further to their de facto authority:

It is in this manner that religion enforces the natural sense of duty: and hence it is, that mankind are generally disposed to place great confidence in the probity of those who seem deeply impressed with religious sentiments.⁵²

There does seem to be some tension in Smith's theory between the average spectator and the ideal one; the tension is partly between the impartial spectator as representing the general moral rules which emerge in every society on the one hand, and, on the other, individual spectators who may be partial, inattentive and ill-informed, but it is also a contrast between the average spectator who embodies the ordinary rules of propriety, and the supposed spectator within each man who is not only often better-informed and more attentive (although usually less impartial) than the average spectator, but is able to go beyond the established moral rules of his society and build up, through observing his own and other people's behaviour, an abstract picture of an ideal standard of virtue. Each individual is capable, not only of internalising the general rules of morality, but of improving on these rules by asking himself what sort of behaviour he, as a spectator, approves of most strongly:

⁵¹T.M.S., III.5 (I.412).

⁵²T.M.S., III.5 (I.426).

The wise and virtuous man directs his principal attention to the first standard; the idea of exact propriety and perfection. There exists in ^{the mind of} every man, an idea of this kind, gradually formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other people. It is the slow, gradual, progressive work of the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct.⁵³

However this contrast between the average spectator without and the ideal one within indicates not so much a contradiction in Smith's thought as a familiar fact of moral experience. Nor does it represent a peculiar difficulty for Smith's theory since he believes that every individual is capable of inductive reasoning and therefore, as a spectator, is able to generalise about his feelings concerning the behaviour of others, and, once society has forced him to observe his own behaviour, concerning this as well.

It is true that Smith does not offer any explanation for the fact that men desire the approval of this ideal spectator within, but if we can accept that this, like men's desire for the approval of their fellows, is an irreducible fact about human nature, then he can be credited with explaining the processes whereby the individual conscience is built up, and achieves a limited independence.

Conscience, for Smith, provides not only the sense of duty which enables men to follow the ordinary moral rules of their society in their moments of action, but, especially in its more ideal forms, it acts as a court of appeal against the moral judgments of partial and ill-informed spectators:

In order to defend ourselves from such partial judgments, we soon learn to set up in our own minds a judge between ourselves and those we live with. We conceive ourselves as acting in

⁵³T.N.S., VI.iii (II.147).

the presence of a person quite candid and equitable, of one who has no particular relation either to ourselves, or to those whose interests are affected by our conduct, who is neither father, nor brother, nor friend either to them or to us, but is merely a man in general, an impartial spectator, who considers our conduct with the same indifference with which we regard that of other people.⁵⁴

If we develop this line of thought and consider the dynamic process of moral argument in which each person tries to get the other to adopt what he considers to be the impartial viewpoint in order to reach some form of agreement, then we will see one way in which Smith's abstract and ideal picture of an impartial spectator can be related to the normal attitudes of the average spectator.⁵⁵

The idea that moral argument is, at least in part, an effort to reach a common attitude of approval or disapproval towards particular instances of different types of behaviour, fits in easily with Smith's belief that the desire for mutual sympathy is a powerful human motive. Adopting this interpretation of moral argument and taking it to be an essential part of the development of moral consensus in any society, it is possible to regard the impartial spectator in his more ideal form as being identified not only with individuals' moral reflections on their own conduct, but also as an indication of the point of view to which appeal is made in those moral arguments which succeed in bringing some measure of agreement into moral disputes. Given the situation that Smith imagines: an agent with a tendency to selfish behaviour seeking to obtain the approval of a spectator,

⁵⁴T.M.S. (2nd edition), III.2 (p. 207f.).

⁵⁵The relationship between impartiality and argumentation is briefly discussed by J. D. Bailiff "Some Comments on The 'Ideal Observer'", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. XXIV (1963-1964), pp. 423-428.

and a spectator who cannot enter into the selfish motives of the agent and yet who wishes to approve of his behaviour if this is possible, then we can see how both might appeal to what I will call the "ideal impartial spectator viewpoint", as the best means to reach a compromise agreement. For instance a child who is suffering the disapproval of its mother for hitting his little sister, might argue that the mother was unaware of the provocation he had received and so hope to change the mother's attitude by making her better informed, and similarly he would hope to change the attitude of any third person who was not aware of all the facts of the case as he saw them; the mother in reply, might say that the child did not take into account the suffering of his little sister and argue that, if the son looked at the matter from the sister's point of view he would see how wrong he was, and that this would be the judgment of anyone else whom she told the facts of the case. The son could counter this by saying that the daughter was the mother's favourite, and that other people would therefore not agree but would accept that he had received sufficient provocation to justify his action. If either can be shown to be partial in this way then he must give way or else forfeit the approval of all those third persons whom they also wish to please. Moreover this gives both disputants a reason for modifying their attitudes when they are shown to be partial or ill-informed, and thus the standpoint of the impartial well-informed spectator emerges as the court of appeal. Since the agent is usually better informed about his act than anyone else this means that conscience is a court of appeal beyond the opinions of the actual spectators; it is "higher" in the sense that appeal is made to it after and against the views of real spectators, and because it is usually better informed. On the other hand its weakness is partiality and although the immediate

spectator will often be partial as well, both will have a tendency to appeal to third persons who are less likely to be partial as they are not immediately involved in the same situation. Thus the innumerable third persons to whom appeal may be made will correct the partiality of agent and immediate spectator, and in so far as the agent realises this, his conscience may help him as a guide to the feelings of these third persons which can be used to counter the immediate spectators of his behaviour.

There are many loose ends to this model of a typical moral argument, but if it has any validity whatsoever, it may help us to see how Smith's impartial spectator, at first identified in his mind with the average spectator, comes to take on certain "ideal" qualities such as being "well-informed" and completely "impartial" which may not correctly characterise the average spectator. My suggestion is that this latter concept of the ideal impartial spectator represents both the inner tribunal of conscience and the point of view towards which moral argument leads in its attempt to achieve harmony of sentiments, and as such it is to be identified with the point of view to which any ordinary person may be led by a process of argument, in contrast to the point of view which a casual observer naturally adopts. This fits with Smith's statement that while nature has made mankind the immediate judge of human behaviour conscience is a court of appeal against the actual opinions of mankind, for we can take this to mean that the agent's knowledge of his own actions and his accumulated knowledge about the usual reactions of spectators enable him to present arguments to justify his behaviour which not only satisfy himself but also permit him to make some headway in convincing partial and ill-informed spectators of the rightness of his conduct.

Smith presents us with an analogy which may help us to see why it is that the impartial viewpoint gives most chance of reaching

agreement, and is therefore the point towards which moral argument tends. The analogy is between the moral judgment and visual judgments in so far as these take account of perspective:

As to the eye of the body, objects appear great or small, not so much according to their real dimensions, as according to the nearness or distance of their situation; so do they likewise to what may be called the natural eye of the mind: and we remedy the defects of both these organs pretty much in the same manner.⁵⁶

He indicates that we naturally build up in our mind an image of the world which abstracts from the fact that we, as individuals, are located in any one place, and in this way we judge of the size of objects relative to each other, and ignore the effect which the fact of nearness or distance to our particular position has on our perception of their size. In this way it is clear that men can agree on a picture or map of the world and so reach agreement on its dimensions. They do so by ignoring the perceptual effects of their own particular position at a particular time. Smith then applies this analogy to moral judgment and indicates that conscience enables us to make a similar abstraction from our individual viewpoint and see ourselves and the things near to us "in proportion" which means looking on ourselves as but one of a multitude and no more significant than any other. The suggestion is that such a picture of the world, which corresponds to no actual person's vision, is nevertheless the only one which can make for agreement amongst men. Similarly the moral point of view, which abstracts from the individual's own self-regarding desires, according to which the most trifling discomfort of our own appears of more significance than the death of thousands of persons whom we do not know, is to be identified with that

⁵⁶ T.M.S., III.3 (I.331f.).

view of human conduct which emphasises the respects in which the world of conduct and character seems the same to us as to everyone else.⁵⁷ Thus although individual spectators, as well as individual agents, may be partial, their partial views do not coincide with each other or with the partial views of others; but if all imagine the situation in the absence of those factors which relate particularly to themselves, then they reach an image of the situation which coincides with that of everyone else. The impartial spectator thus represents what is common to the reaction of actual spectators rather than that which divides them. It will therefore not be identical with their average reaction since some will be partial and others will be ill-informed, but these factors will tend to produce disagreement and will therefore cancel each other out. In so far as men wish to obtain the agreement and so the approval of their fellows they will tend towards an impartial and well-informed viewpoint which will be productive of such agreement. It is not a viewpoint which will correspond to the actual outlook of a spectator who is particularly partial or ignorant, but it will represent what is common to most actual spectators and it can therefore serve as a basis of agreement between them. It does not, however, represent an ideal viewpoint in the sense of one to which no-one can readily attain. There may be situations in which all the spectators are partial and ill-informed,⁵⁸ but in normal instances most spectators participate, to some extent, in the impartial and informed attitude. Men are least inclined to adopt the impartial standpoint when they are judging the conduct of their own family,

⁵⁷Cf. P.M.S., II.11.2 (I.206): "Though every man may, according to the proverb, be the whole world to himself, to the rest of mankind he is a most insignificant part of it".

⁵⁸Cf. L.J., p. 94. Smith suggests that this is the position with domestic servants.

friends or country, since, in these cases, all those whose agreement one seeks are as partial as oneself towards one's own country; the absence of real impartial spectators leads us to approve of conduct on the part of our country to other countries which we would never approve in the conduct of one individual in our society to another.⁵⁹ This is presumably because Smith believes, that, within a society, in any particular case which is up for moral assessment, the majority of persons are in a relatively impartial position, in that they have no reason to prefer the interests of one involved person to those of another.

While this is to move some way in the direction of granting that Smith's impartial spectator is an "ideal" being with no real instantiation, it is a long way yet from attributing to the spectator attributes of omniscience, omnipresence and emotional indifference. If the function of the ideal spectator is to facilitate agreement about standards of behaviour then the characteristics it possesses cannot exceed the sum of those which the real agents and spectators can bring into the process. "Well-informed" means possessing such knowledge as agent and spectator together can contribute; perception is limited to the degree of imaginative insight to which the average person can be led by his more sensitive fellows, which is strictly limited by the laws of sympathy; finally "emotional indifference" means no more than the absence of those particular emotions which affect the immediate participants in any situation.

Smith's discussion of conscience shows that he was far from underestimating the fact that one important function of moral standards is to guide the choices of the person whose standards they are. Despite his concentration on the spectator standpoint it is in many ways the agent's situation and the agent's

⁵⁹T.H.S., VI.ii (II.96ff.).

moral decisions which are at the centre of his theory. After all, the spectator, in making his judgments, imagines himself as being in the place of an agent, and when the agent adopts the spectator standpoint it is in order to reflect on his own conduct as an agent. The importance of the spectator lies in the fact that he is the person whom the agent is trying to please. In the first instance this spectator is the man without, the multitude of third persons in whose presence men's every day activities are performed, but, in time, the agent is able to substitute his own reflective approval for the approval of other persons. Far from minimising this aspect of conscience Smith lays great stress upon it. He certainly did not feel that to emphasise the relative independence of the mature conscience contradicted his theory of its social origin. The final answer to those who, like Scheler, argue that on Smith's view "a man unjustly condemned and universally considered to be guilty should also acknowledge his guilt himself"⁶⁰ must be to say that this ignores the genetic nature of Smith's theory: his view that from the judgments of the "man without" the "man within" can build up his own picture of virtue and vice which comes to have its own authority. The possibility of this happening should not be so difficult to accept in post-Freudian times. As far as Smith is concerned the evidence for such a theory consists of pointing to the effect which the opinions of a man's peers have on his own attitudes, and showing that the actual content of the moral rules which are dictated to a man by his conscience can be shown to exemplify either the "natural", that is the normal attitudes of the non-involved spectators of his conduct, or the attitudes of especially careful and sensitive observers of human behaviour. This takes us on to consider Smith's answer to his "first" question in moral philosophy: "wherein does virtue consist?"⁶¹

⁶⁰N. Scheler, The Nature of Sympathy, p. 6.

⁶¹T.N.S., VII.1 (II.196).

Chapter Eight

VIRTUES AND VICES

While the main interest of Smith's moral theory lies in his attempt to erect a causal theory of moral approbation and disapprobation around the concept of "the impartial and well-informed spectator",¹ he himself regarded this as only one part of moral philosophy, the other being an answer to the question: "wherein does virtue consist?"² His own reply to this question is clear enough: virtue is that which is approved of by the self same spectator. The attempt to show that this squares with the facts about the content of moral judgments constitutes one of the main tests of his theory. If, by systematic deduction from the behavioural laws which are embodied in the concept of the impartial spectator, he is able to determine, and in principle to predict, the nature and content of the moral principles which exist in different types of society, then this is the firmest possible confirmation of his theory. Unfortunately there are so many variables involved and some of the laws are so open-ended that any decisive test of his theory is exceptionally difficult, if not impossible to conduct. However, it remains true that the persuasiveness of his theory must depend to a large extent on how far he can explain the manner and content of actual systems of morality by means of the empirical model of an impartial spectator. He must be able to provide a convincing relationship between his answer to the question "wherein does virtue consist?" and his answer to the question "by what power or faculty is the

¹T.M.S., VII.ii.1 (II.266).

²T.M.S., VII.i (II.196).

mind is it, that this character, whatever it be, is recommended to us?".³

In accordance with the idea that morality is a social phenomenon, originating in and being sustained by social interaction, Smith defines virtue and vice by reference to the reactions of persons other than the agent, or, in other words, of the impartial spectator. Virtue is what the spectator loves and rewards, vice that which he finds odious and feels impelled to punish:

Virtue is not said to be amiable, or to be meritorious, because it is the object of its own love, or of its own gratitude; but because it excites those sentiments in other men.⁴

There are two basic types of variable which Smith explores in his considerations of virtue and vice: the first is the precise type and intensity of attitude felt by the spectator, what may be called the quality and degree of the moral judgment, and the second relates to the sort of behaviour which is the object of this attitude: the content of the moral judgment. The latter is his main concern but he does go into some detail concerning the former: moral approval may amount to no more than the absence of disapproval or a mild "pro" attitude or it can be strong enough to express itself in praise and, in cases where merit is involved, in reward; similarly with disapproval, there are variations in the degree of disapproval from the simple absence of approval to strong antipathy, the latter being associated with the desire to blame and, in cases of demerit, to punish.⁵ These are explained by saying that they follow from the extent to which the agent's

³T.N.S., VII.1 (II.197).

⁴T.N.S., III.1 (I.285).

⁵cf. p. 148ff.

motives do or do not coincide with the spectator's sympathetic feelings, and the degree of gratitude or resentment involved in judgments of merit. Smith develops the idea that while some actions are merely not disapproved of, others are greatly admired and praised, in order to contrast two different moral standards. He argues that:

Virtue is excellence, something uncommonly great and beautiful, which rises far above what is vulgar and ordinary.

and concludes:

There is, in this respect, a considerable difference between virtue and mere propriety; between those qualities and actions which deserve to be admired and celebrated, and those which simply deserve to be approved of.⁶

This means that there are always, in effect, two standards of morality current in any society, an exceptional one which obtains the admiration of the spectator and an average one which obtains his mild approval; the former is the standard which the wise and virtuous man applies to his own conduct and the latter is that which is expected of every man.⁷ We have already seen how Smith takes this into account in his theory of conscience.⁸ In his discussion of virtue and vice in general he tends to stick to the ordinary standards of propriety, but with respect to the virtues of sensibility and self-command, he indicates that it is only when these qualities are manifested in an extreme degree that they are called virtues at all; in particular the virtue of self-command "astonishes by its amazing superiority over the most ungovernable passions of human nature".⁶ Smith's admiration for the Stoics shows itself in the attention he devotes to the

⁶T.M.S., I.1.5 (I.48f.).

⁷Cf. T.M.S., VI.iii (II.146).

⁸Cf. pp. 216-218.

virtue of self-command; its importance lies in enabling men to act in accordance with other moral standards;⁹ it is therefore closely allied to the sense of duty.¹⁰ Smith gives many examples of men's admiration for self-command, either over transient passions like fear and anger (the virtue of fortitude) or over the less fierce but more persistent emotions such as the love of pleasure (the virtue of temperance). These virtues only come into play when there is some form of temptation, and Smith goes so far as to say that:

To act according to the dictates of prudence, of justice, and of proper beneficence, seems to have no great merit where there is no temptation to do otherwise.¹¹

Because self-command is the virtue which enables men to achieve the ordinary standards of virtue it is almost denominated the virtue, since "from it all ^{the} other virtues seem to derive their principal lustre".¹² Yet, for all this, there is a sense in which self-command is not a moral virtue at all since men may exercise it in the pursuit of evil ends.¹² Admiration for self-command is more a species of wonder than anything else, and is of a kind with admiration for that which is exceptional which, Smith argues, is a stimulus to scientific endeavour;¹³ it is also similar to admiration for the intellectual virtues:

The man who directs and conducts our own sentiments, the extent and superior justness of whose talents astonish us with wonder and surprise, who excites our admiration, and seem to deserve our applause.¹⁴

Another similar non-moral attitude is admiration for the ostentatious

⁹T.M.S., VI.iii (II.120).

¹⁰T.M.S., VI.Conclusion (II.189).

¹¹T.M.S., VI.iii (II.129).

¹²T.M.S., VI.iii (II.130).

¹³cf. p. 21.

¹⁴T.M.S., I.1.4 (I.34).

ways adopted by men of wealth and rank.¹⁵ Self-command is not, therefore, a moral virtue as such, but it is closely connected with those virtues since, without it, men do not have the will to conform to the standards of propriety. Smith relates the "virtue" of self-command to his general outline of virtues and vices by saying that the degree of self-command which is necessary to gain the admiration of the spectator varies according to the effort which is required to bring down the different types of passion to the proper level. He believed that the point of propriety which "is different in different passions"¹⁶ could be precisely determined by the sympathetic emotions of the spectator; this is the main contention which Smith wishes to prove concerning the content of moral standards.

On the whole it is the ordinary standard of virtue rather than the exceptional one which Smith uses to test his theory; he believed that the content of the ordinary moral rules in each society is the outcome of the interplay of the laws of sympathy, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the patterns of behaviour which would be normal for men if sympathy were not a factor in the situation; the judgments of the spectator reflect his knowledge of the normal behaviour of the average person in his society modified by the effects of the laws of sympathy. To predict the content of moral judgments it is necessary to know, therefore, not only the laws of sympathy, but also the behaviour which would normally occur in abstraction from the operations of sympathy. Unfortunately it is very hard to discover what this "normal" behaviour is, since, in all actual societies, behaviour is modified by the moral standards which result from the interaction of sympathetic

¹⁵Cf. p.235.

¹⁶P.M.S., I.ii.Intro. (I.54); cf. T.M.S., VI.iii (II.134).

and real sentiments. To test Smith's theories properly it would be necessary to know what would be usual behaviour in the absence of sympathetic emotions, combine this with generalisations about the variability of sympathy with the different passions, and so deduce the content of moral standards in actual societies. This almost puts Smith's theory in the category of untestable hypotheses, but a clue to "normal" behaviour can probably be found in observing what men wish to do but feel they ought not to do: the impulses which they continually modify in the light of the reactions of the impartial spectator and which are never entirely eradicated by the socialisation and internalisation processes. Whatever difficulties there are in determining what "normal" behaviour would be, the fact that this features as an element within the general theory from which Smith attempts to deduce particular moral judgments, means that he is, in principle, able to account for variations between the moral standards of different societies, since what is "normal" will vary according to the circumstances of the group or nation in question:

The different situations of different ages and countries are apt... to give different characters to the generality of those who live in them, and their sentiments concerning the particular degree of each quality, that is either blamable or praise-worthy, vary, according to that degree which is usual in their own country and in their own times.¹⁷

In practice it is very difficult to complete detailed explanations of such variations and Smith is rarely able to do more than indicate ways in which the different circumstances of each society can affect the way in which men's spontaneous impulses work themselves out. Moreover we have already referred to the oblique way in which Smith has to approach the phenomena from

¹⁷T.N.S., V.2 (II.30).

which he builds up his laws of sympathy.¹⁸ This is necessary because most actual cases of sympathetic emotions are affected by prior moral standards, which means that it is difficult to assess the empirical justification of these laws. The combination of these drawbacks together with the grand scale on which Smith operates makes it difficult to relate, with precision, his general moral theory to the assertions he makes concerning the content of moral standards. It is, therefore, unlikely that we can share Smith's certainty that his theory is a great advance on those of his contemporaries because of its greater precision:

None of these systems either give, or even pretend to give, any precise or distinct measure by which this fitness or propriety of affection can be ascertained or judged of. That precise and distinct measure can be found nowhere but in the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator.¹⁹

Yet it is important to note that it is Smith's intention to achieve this precision. It is, of course, an intention which arose out of his admiration for the scientific ideal of providing detailed explanations for a variety of apparently unconnected phenomena by reference to a few familiar principles. If he fails in his aim it is largely because the principles he propounds are too vague and open-ended. But even the effort to achieve precision is interesting and many of Smith's hypotheses prove suggestive even if they can rarely be tested with sufficient rigour. Before going on to consider some examples of the manner in which he accounts for the content of moral judgments, it will be useful to prepare the way by considering some of the other phenomena which Smith explains by way of the laws of sympathy. This will help us to see the width of his explanatory endeavours which illustrates another aspect of his desire to conform to the

¹⁸ Cf. p. 164ff.

¹⁹ T.M.S., VII.ii.1 (II.266).

Newtonian ideal. It is also a necessary preliminary if we are to understand how he develops his theory of class morality. The particular law of sympathy in question, law three, states that "it is easy to sympathise with pleasant emotions, difficult to sympathise with unpleasant ones",²⁰ and the specific pleasant and unpleasant emotions concerned are those connected with the situation of the rich and powerful in contrast to that of the poor and the weak. Smith writes that:

When we consider the condition of the great, in those delusive colours in which the imagination is apt to paint it, it seems to be almost the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state.²¹

He does not believe that the great are in fact happier than the lowly but it is enough that men consider them to be so for law three to apply and for Smith to be able to use it to explain the tendency to sympathise eagerly with all the passions of those who enjoy wealth and power.

On the basis of these generalisations about men's sympathy with the supposed happiness of the wealthy and great, and the consequent pleasure of mutual sympathy enjoyed by them in their rôle as agents, Smith proceeds to explain three distinct but related social phenomena. The first is the nature of the ambition which leads men to strive to improve their material situation:

it is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches and avoid poverty. For to what purposes, all the toil and bustle of this world? what is the end of avarice and ambition, of the pursuit of wealth, of power, and of preheminnence? ...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. It is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us.²²

²⁰ Cf. p. 138f.

²¹ T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.125).

²² T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.120 & 122).

To back up this hypothesis Smith provides many vivid illustrations of the way in which men focus their attention on every detail in the lives of rich and powerful men, share their supposed enjoyments and grieve with them when their fortunes decline. For instance, he notes how it appears to the ordinary person that "to disturb, or to put an end to such perfect enjoyment, seems to be the most atrocious of all injuries".²³ Although those excluded from the pleasures of wealth and power may be mistaken about the enjoyments of those advantages, the very attention they pay to these "fortunate" persons constitutes the real enjoyment which they bring to their possessors. Riches and power together with "rank, distinction, pre-eminence" are all valued by men because they enable them to "stand in that situation which sets them most in the view of general sympathy and attention", and this "is the end of half the labours of human life".²⁴ It is this theory of human ambition and avarice which lies behind Smith's belief that each man constantly strives to improve his own material circumstances and underpins the entire doctrine of the Wealth of Nations.²⁵ This shows how mistaken it is to identify sympathy with benevolence and oppose it to self-interest,²⁶ for we see in this explanation of worldly ambition that sympathy can give rise to selfish as well as to unselfish forms of behaviour.

The second social phenomenon which Smith explains by means of the same set of observations is the obedience and deference shown by the lower ranks of society to those above them. It has often been pointed out that Smith frequently assumes the

²³T.N.S., I.iii.2 (I.126).

²⁴T.N.S., I.iii.2 (I.140f.); cf. (I.122).

²⁵Cf. W.N., I.x.1 (I.119) and I.xi.2 (I.192).

²⁶Cf. p. 130f.

essential equality of man. In the Wealth of Nations, for instance, everyone is considered to have an equal right to participate in economic life and a certain measure of equality in the distribution of wealth is regarded as just and desirable;²⁷ this seems to stem from Smith's belief that all men have roughly the same potential; a belief which is manifested in his well-known remark that it is only because of the difference between their occupations that a philosopher comes to possess more abilities than a porter.²⁸ In the Moral Sentiments Smith expounds on the nature of sympathy as something which operates between all men; it will be remembered that in explaining the fact of divided sympathy with unsocial passions he argued that "As they are both men, we are concerned for both".²⁹ Yet, despite the fundamental equality implied in the idea of sympathy it is this same sympathy which furnishes the cause of the stability of unequal social divisions, for:

Upon this disposition of mankind, to go along with all the passions of the rich and the powerful, is founded the distinction of ranks, and the order of society.³⁰

This can be seen, for instance, in the fact that, although reasoning may lead us to the conclusion that kings are the servants of the people, the natural instincts associated with sympathy "teach us to submit to them for their own sake, to tremble and bow down before their exalted station, to regard their smile as a reward sufficient to compensate any services, and to dread their displeasure, though no other evil were to follow from it, as the severest of all mortifications".³¹ Smith, as we shall see,

²⁷ *W.N.*, IV.ix (II.183) and I.viii (I.88).

²⁸ *W.N.*, I.ii (I.19).

²⁹ *T.M.S.*, I.ii.3 (I.74). By italics. Cf. p. 150f.

³⁰ *T.M.S.*, I.iii.2 (I.127).

³¹ *T.M.S.*, I.iii.2 (I.128).

does not assume that this motive is always sufficient to ensure obedience to governmental authority since he also recognizes that the envy and indignation felt by the poor against the rich may overcome men's deference, but the existence of inequalities of wealth is, in the Moral Sentiments, stressed as a cause of obedience and not of rebellion.³²

The third social phenomenon Smith explains by means of men's sympathy with the great and the wealthy is that of fashion. Of such men he writes:

Their dress is the fashionable dress; the language of their conversation, the fashionable style; their air and deportment, the fashionable behaviour. Even their vices and follies are fashionable; and the greater part of men are proud to imitate and resemble them in the very qualities which dishonour and degrade them.³³

This is hardly a complete explanation of fashion, but it does contribute an interesting hypothesis concerning the causes which make a particular social group the leaders of fashion, and it should be seen alongside the explanations Smith gives concerning the reasons why the rich and the powerful adopt an ostentatious style of life.³⁴

These examples indicate how Smith uses the laws of sympathy to account for some judgments of approval and disapproval which we might not consider to be moral ones. In the case of admiration for the rich and the powerful he himself admits that we are not dealing with moral approbation but with something that is, in large measure, opposed to it. In the 6th edition of the Moral Sentiments a chapter is devoted to "the corruption of our moral sentiments, which is occasioned by this disposition to admire the rich and the

³²cf. p. 283f.

³³T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.155).

³⁴cf. p. 237.

great, and to despise or neglect persons of poor and mean condition".³⁵ In it he displays an interesting uncertainty about whether or not to regard admiration for the rich as in some way "natural" and therefore, proper. Admiration for wealth and admiration for virtue are both based on the comparisons of real and sympathetic emotions; the distinction between them seems to depend only on the fact that the pleasure to be found in sympathizing with the rich and the powerful is due, in large measure, to an erroneous assessment of their happiness. Trying to have it both ways he writes that:

It is scarce agreeable to good morals, or even to good language, perhaps, to say, that mere wealth and greatness, abstracted from merit and virtue, deserve our respect. We must acknowledge, however, that they almost constantly obtain it; and that they may, therefore, be considered as, in some respects, the natural objects of it.³⁶

Whether, on his principles, he is able to draw this distinction between admiration for virtue and admiration for wealth, and so between the proper and the corrupt form of our moral sentiments, we shall discuss later. Here we should simply note his remark that:

The respect which we feel for wisdom and virtue is, no doubt, different from that which we conceive for wealth and greatness; and it requires no very nice discernment to distinguish the difference.³⁷

This indicates that we must look for some phenomenological difference between moral and non-moral approbation. It is not clear how he can account for this, especially as he complicates the matter by linking admiration for wisdom with admiration for virtue.

³⁵T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.146).

³⁶T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.149).

³⁷T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.148).

What is most interesting from the sociological point of view is the way in which he uses the distinction between the two types of respect to build up a picture of two different sets of "virtues" or moralities, the first of which is connected with men's admiration for the rich and the powerful, and the second with the ordinary man's admiration for outstanding men of his own rank. What emerges is a theory of class morality in which he contrasts the moral qualities associated with persons of "middling and inferior stations of life"³⁸ on the one hand, with those associated with men of rank and fashion on the other. Since the latter have "an easy empire over the affections of mankind"³⁹ they cultivate "proud ambition and ostentatious avidity"⁴⁰. Because they have everybody's attention their behaviour is "gaudy and glittering in colour", marked by meticulous attention to small proprieties; describing a young nobleman, Smith writes:

As he is conscious how much he is observed, and how much mankind are disposed to favour all his inclinations, he acts, upon the most indifferent occasions, with that freedom and elevation which the thought of this naturally inspires. His air, his manner, his deportment, all mark that elegant and graceful sense of his own superiority, which those who are born to inferior stations can hardly ever arrive at. These are the arts by which he proposes to make mankind more easily submit to his authority, and to govern their inclinations according to his own pleasure; and in this he is seldom disappointed.⁴¹

In order to obtain the approval and admiration of the lower strata

³⁸T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.150).

³⁹T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.137).

⁴⁰T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.146).

⁴¹T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.130).

of society the man of rank develops such behaviour as his way "to deserve, to acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind".⁴² Nor is this simply a matter of obtaining the approval of those beneath him, for even his equals are prepared to tolerate and even admire behaviour which, in the common people, would be considered immoral:

In every civilized society, in every society where the distinction of ranks has once been completely established, there have been always two different schemes or systems of morality current at the same time; of which the one may be called the strict or austere; the other the liberal, or, if you will, the loose system. The former is generally admired and revered by the common people; the latter is commonly more esteemed and adopted by what are called people of fashion. The degree of disapprobation with which we ought to mark the vices of levity, the vices which are apt to arise from great prosperity, and from the excess of gaiety and good humour, seems to constitute the principal distinction between those two opposite schemes or systems.⁴³

This tendency for persons of the same class to develop their own standards of behaviour follows in part from the different ways which are open to them for obtaining the admiration and respect of mankind, but also, presumably, because of the fact that they will judge their fellows, whom they resemble in situation and character, by imagining their own behaviour in similar circumstances.

A man in the lower ranks of society, who does not so easily obtain the attention and admiration of other men, and who would

⁴²T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.147).

⁴³W.N., V.i.3.art.3 (II.315).

be ruined by behaviour common to those in the higher ranks of society, has to pursue a different route to such respect and fortune as he can hope to obtain; he must tread the path of "humble modesty and equitable justice"⁴⁴ and obtain the approbation of mankind "by industry, by patience, by self-denial".⁴⁵ If he ever hopes to distinguish himself "he must acquire superior knowledge in his profession, and superior industry in the exercise of it. He must be patient in labour, resolute in danger, and firm in distress...probity and prudence, generosity and frankness, must characterize his behaviour".⁴⁶ Mere propriety is not sufficient to obtain the attention of other men; this he can achieve only by extraordinary virtue and wisdom. And so he adheres to the "austere" morality, as it is called in the Wealth of Nations; this is the same as the "uncorrupted" morality which is Smith's main subject in the Moral Sentiments. It is the morality of those whose dominant motive is the desire for wealth and the status which it brings; rich men are able to give way to the love of ease and develop a different style of life and different social norms:

A man of large revenue, whatever may be his profession, thinks he ought to live like other men of large revenues; and to spend a great part of his time in festivity, in vanity, and in dissipation.⁴⁷

This way of achieving the attention of their fellows is not open to the average person.

The existence of these two moralities raises the question: which did Smith consider to be the correct or truly moral one?

⁴⁴T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.148).

⁴⁵T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.130f.).

⁴⁶T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.134).

⁴⁷W.N., V.i.3.art.3 (II.338).

On the surface the answer is clear: by saying that austere morality is concerned with virtue and wisdom while the liberal morality takes an easy view of vice, and by calling men's disposition to admire the great a "corruption" of their moral sentiments, he seems to be favouring the former against the latter. This has led to many accusations that he cannot make such a distinction without going beyond the bounds of his own moral theory, for he must be assuming some standard not based on sympathy, to choose between the two moralities. This need not, however, be admitted; at least, not yet. Smith defends his designation of austere morality as the morality, primarily on linguistic grounds: this is what is usually talked of in "moral" terms, that is using the terminology of virtue and vice, good and evil, right and wrong. Moreover the two "moralities" can be distinguished in other ways; we have seen that he believes them to be phenomenologically different, although he does not go into an analysis of this difference between admiration for virtue and admiration for wealth. A hint of how this could be developed occurs in his discussion of the shame and remorse sometimes felt by a powerful man who fails to gain the respect and esteem of his equals,⁴⁸ which seems to indicate that we might hope for some analysis of the difference between moral and non-moral approbation when we come to the discussion of conscience and guilt. For the moment it is worth noting that he associates the emotions of shame and remorse with the admiration and esteem, or lack of it, of one's equals; it would appear that there is an important empirical difference between the factors which determine attitudes of approval and disapproval between equals and those which operate between different social ranks or classes.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.150).

⁴⁹ T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.151).

Smith also comments on variations in the moral standards of different groups which are not connected with their relative social status. These result from the fact that "normal" behaviour varies with the type of environmental opportunities which are available to different groups of people. Different economic circumstances produce different patterns of behaviour, and hence different ideas about what constitutes normal or expected conduct. For instance the austere morality reflects the fact that hard work is the only means for attaining security for those in the "middling and inferior stations of life":

The success of such people, too, almost always depends upon the favour and good opinion of their neighbours and equals; and without a tolerably regular conduct these can very seldom be obtained. The good old proverb, therefore, That honesty is the best policy, holds, in such situations, almost always perfectly true. In such situations, therefore, we may generally expect a considerable degree of virtue; and, fortunately for the good morals of society, these are the situations of by far the greater part of mankind.⁵⁰

This passage suggests the idea that austere morality obtains the approval of one's equals in a situation where this approval is necessary both to obtain any sympathy whatever, and to make a living. Together these needs for mutual sympathy and material welfare help to explain why the standards of austere morality evolve and why they are adhered to. It also suggests an important line of thought about the relationship between moral and economic behaviour which has caused so much controversy amongst interpreters of Smith. In this chapter Smith declares that it is only "a small party, who are the real and steady admirers of human wisdom and virtue" and that "The great mob of mankind are the admirers

⁵⁰T.M.S., I.iii.3 (I.151).

and worshippers, and, what may seem more extraordinary, most frequently the disinterested admirers and worshippers, of wealth and greatness".⁵¹ That is to say virtue gains but little attention and, in itself, would have little effect on behaviour if it did not happen to coincide with the means by which most of mankind are best able to reach comparative wealth and reputation. This in itself is enough to show that Smith does not say, in the Moral Sentiments, either that sympathy leads exclusively to unselfish conduct, or that self-interest is not the ruling passion in human behaviour.

While taking more than a passing interest in the existence of a distinct morality typical of the wealthy and powerful class in any society, Smith concentrates most of his attention on the austere morality of the ordinary citizen; the man who has to work hard for the approval of his equals. Apart from the virtue of self-control, the main types of virtue and vice in this morality are divided into those concerning prudence, benevolence and justice.⁵² I shall deal with the first two of these in the remainder of this chapter and leave the more complex virtue of justice until the next chapter. This will provide us with sufficient examples of how Smith shows moral rules to be the outcome of the inter-action of "normal", instinctive behaviour and the laws of sympathy.

The virtue of prudence derives, in the first place, from the fact that "The preservation and healthful state of the body seems to be the objects which Nature first recommends to the care of every individual".⁵³ He justifies this statement by pointing to the appetites of hunger and thirst, bodily pleasure and pain,

⁵¹T.N.S., I.iii.3 (I.146).

⁵²T.N.S., VI.Concl. (II.188).

⁵³T.N.S., VI.I (II.50).

heat and cold; they are all "lessons delivered by the voice of Nature herself, directing him (man) what he ought to chuse, and what he ought to avoid".⁵³ Nature's lessons are repeated by early training during which children are urged to take care of themselves; this is something they also learn to do as a consequence of their own experience that some things are pleasant and others painful. As a result the normal person comes to pay great attention to "what is called his external fortune".⁵⁴

One of these early lessons teaches men that the advantages of external fortune not only satisfy their bodily wants but also receive the respect and admiration of other men, consequently,

The desire of becoming the proper objects of ^{our} respect, of deserving and obtaining this credit and rank among our equals, is, perhaps, the strongest of all our desires.⁵⁵

The attitude of the spectator thus reinforces man's natural desire to improve his own material condition, and especially in commercial society, this results in the fact that:

The care of the health, of the fortune, of the rank and reputation of the individual, the objects upon which his comfort and happiness in this life are supposed principally to depend, is considered as the proper business of that virtue which is commonly called Prudence.⁵⁶

Moreover, because greater suffering is caused by a fall from fortune than simply by its absence, men fear for the future, and are constantly searching for security. Smith outlines the qualities of person required to obtain this security in his own type of society: competence, hard-work, sincerity, reserve, caution and common sense.⁵⁷ These are all qualities which call

⁵⁴T.M.S., VI.i (II.51).

⁵⁵T.M.S., VI.i (II.51).

⁵⁶T.M.S., VI.i (II.52).

⁵⁷T.M.S., VI.i (II.53ff.), cf. VII.ii.3 (II.294): "The habits of economy, discretion, attention, and application of thought".

for a certain amount of fore-sight, but this is an ability that does not come naturally to men, who all tend to be under the sway of immediate impulses. However the spectator, being free from these impulses, feels as much concern for the future as for the present condition of the agent. In order to obtain the spectator's approval the agent attempts to control his natural impulse for immediate gratification and act in his own long-term interests. The virtue of prudence, therefore, requires the discipline of spontaneous self-regarding impulses and the sacrifice of present to future self-interest.⁵⁸

As regards the self-regarding passions in general, the laws of sympathy apply to them in the normal way. It is easier for the spectator to sympathise with an individual's joy at his own good fortune than with the sorrow caused by his ill-fortune; although the spectator, being human, may feel envious of extreme good fortune. On the other hand, great griefs stir the imagination more than small personal misfortunes which, to the spectator, usually appear tiresome.⁵⁹

To make this more convincing Smith would have to show more clearly that differences in the internal and external environmental circumstances of individuals and groups affected their estimation of prudential conduct. Hints of this approach do appear when he asserts that in countries such as 16th century Italy, where arrest for criminal offences is much less than certain, it is not considered imprudent to commit crimes, and adds a note to the effect that, while injustice perpetrated by ordinary people may be considered imprudent it may not be so when done by wealthy and powerful men like Caesar Borgia who can escape the consequences of their acts.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ T.M.S., VI.1 (II.50).

⁵⁹ T.M.S., I.11.5 (I.93-101).

⁶⁰ T.M.S., VI.1 (II.63f.).

These examples are scarcely sufficient to establish his theory but they help to see the lines of empirical investigation which are relevant.

An important point for Smith's general moral theory emerges in his attempt to account for the fact that prudence, even when exhibited to the extreme degree which a wise and judicious man attains, "is regarded as a most respectable, and even, in some degree, as an amiable and agreeable quality, yet it never is considered as one, either of the most endearing, or of the most ennobling of the virtues. It commands a certain cold esteem, but seems not entitled to any very ardent love or admiration".⁶¹ This can be explained, on Smith's theory, by the fact that, since prudential acts only affect the individual himself, they do not awake any response of gratitude in a third person, and there is, therefore, no sympathetic gratitude and no tendency to ascribe merit and reward to prudential behaviour. Similarly the lack of prudence excites no sympathetic resentment, and so "Mere imprudence, or the mere want of the capacity to take care of one's-self, is, with the generous and humane, the object of compassion; with those of less delicate sentiments, of neglect, or, at worst, of contempt, but never of hatred or indignation".⁶² It is only when prudence is combined with other virtues, and the ability to calculate for one's own benefit is turned to the pursuit of the good of others, that it becomes fully admired, praised and rewarded. This is the reason why it is sometimes not regarded as a virtue at all.

By arguing that prudence normally obtains the cool approbation of the spectator Smith has also presented his main argument against the view that virtue consists solely of benevolence, a

⁶¹T.M.S., VI.i (II.60f.); cf. III.6 (I.436).

⁶²T.M.S., VI.i (II.62).

view he attributes to Hutcheson. Smith agrees with Hutcheson to the extent that he acknowledges benevolence to have a particularly important place amongst the virtues; it easily obtains not only approbation but warm praise and enthusiastic reward.⁶³ This, of course, he can explain by means of the double sympathy which it arouses, both by its own hedonic tone, for benevolence is always amiable and pleasant, and by the pleasure it affords to its recipients:

Generosity, humanity, kindness, compassion, mutual friendship and esteem, all the social and benevolent affections, when expressed in the countenance or the behaviour...please the indifferent spectator upon almost every occasion.⁶⁴

The spectator therefore reinforces men's natural benevolent impulses.⁶⁵ However Smith argues that there can be excess of benevolence which the spectator, although he is indulgent towards such a rare phenomenon, cannot wholly go along with.⁶⁶ Hutcheson is therefore accused of inadequate empirical observation, for although the view "that virtue consists in benevolence is a notion supported by many appearances in human nature"⁶⁷ it is not consistent with the fact that men approve of prudence, or the fact that they consider that there can be an excess of benevolence as well as a deficiency, and, neither does it account for the fact that men approve of a greater degree of benevolence being shown towards those who stand in special relationships to the agent than to those who have no particular relationship to him. Smith explains

⁶³T.M.S., VII.ii.3 (II.287).

⁶⁴T.M.S., I.ii.4 (I.86).

⁶⁵T.M.S., VI.iii.2 (II.134) and VI.Concl. (II.187).

⁶⁶T.M.S., VII.ii.3 (II.296) and I.ii.4 (I.91).

⁶⁷T.M.S., VII.ii.3 (II.286).

Hutcheson's failure to observe these facts by saying that he has been misled by his erroneous deduction from the belief that the deity is motivated solely by benevolence to the conclusion that men ought, in imitation, to base their own actions entirely on this principle. He shows this to be unacceptable theological naturalism which ignores the difference in situation between a self-sufficient perfect being on the one hand and "so imperfect a creature as man" on the other.⁶⁸ Observation shows that men must act on selfish motives for much of the time and Smith humanely concludes that:

The condition of human nature were peculiarly hard, if those affections, which, by the very nature of our being, ought frequently to influence our conduct, could upon no occasion appear virtuous, or deserve esteem and commendation from any body.⁶⁸

Smith's positive analysis of what men believe to be the proper degree of benevolent action can be approached, as with prudence, by considering first what he considers are the natural and instinctive benevolent motives which guide normal behaviour, and secondly how the impartial spectator views these motives after they have passed through his scrutiny. Of the latter we have already said enough. Benevolence is agreeable both to the agent and those affected by his behaviour, and is therefore readily sympathised with and encouraged by the spectator;⁶⁹ there is thus little or no need for the agent to control his benevolent impulses and bring them into line with what the spectator can approve of since this approval will be forthcoming for all the normal instinctive expressions of benevolence. The chief part of his analysis of benevolence therefore consists in a discussion of the order in which individuals and groups are

⁶⁸T.M.S., VII.ii.3 (II.297).

⁶⁹T.M.S., I.ii.4 (I.90).

"recommended by Nature to our care and attention"⁷⁰ by the benevolent instincts, which exist independently of the approbation of the impartial spectator.

Smith notes that:

After himself, the members of his own family, those who usually live in the same house with him, his parents, his children, his brothers and sisters, are naturally the objects of his warmest affections.⁷⁰

To explain this he introduces an important expansion of his laws about the operations of sympathy by saying that a man feels most benevolence towards his family because "he is more habituated to sympathize with them".⁷¹ By this he means that frequent close contact with others increases a man's ability to imagine himself in their position, for "He knows better how every thing is likely to affect them, and his sympathy with them is more precise and determinate, than it can be with the greater part of other people. It approaches nearer, in short, to what he feels for himself".⁷¹ This does not prove that a person will feel more benevolent towards those with whom he lives and works since the increased ability to enter into their feelings may reveal more disagreement than agreement, and Smith shows that he is aware of the extreme discord that can exist amongst families.⁷² Yet, although gaps are missing in the argument we can rescue Smith to some extent by saying that intimate knowledge of another person may remove some barriers towards mutual sympathy and therefore it is likely to be the case that the agent in such a situation will not have to moderate his passions to the same degree as is necessary with strangers because the family spectator can take more account of how he feels as an individual with his

⁷⁰T.M.S., VI.ii.1 (II.69).

⁷¹T.M.S., VI.ii.1 (II.70).

⁷²T.M.S., II.ii.4 (I.91).

own particular peculiarities of behaviour. Smith also argues that benevolence can arise out of sympathy, particularly in the case of pity,⁷³ and this is in accordance with what he says about frequency of contact increasing benevolent affections. But it must be said that he seems to have overlooked the possibility that such intimate relations will produce more hatred than love.

Despite this there is much to be said for his argument that the "natural affection" of the family is based on prolonged close contact than upon any instinct which follows from common ancestry. He conceives "Natural affection as more the effect of the moral than the supposed physical connection between parent and child",⁷⁴ although, in this particular relationship, there is some ground for assuming a natural instinct to protect children. "Habitual sympathy" also explains the fact that all groups of people who are exposed to any large degree of face to face contact develop an affection for each other:

Colleagues in office, partners in trade, call one another brothers, and frequently feel towards one another as if they really were so.⁷⁵

This applies also to those who live in the same neighbourhood since "we respect the face of a man whom we see every day, provided he has never offended us".⁷⁵ Other natural objects of our benevolent affections are those who have shown us kindness, those with whom we have a great deal in common and choose as our

⁷³T.M.S., I.I.1 (I.4).

⁷⁴T.M.S., VI.II.1 (II.82). ^{(4(T-78))} Smith uses this argument to observe that "The education of boys at distant great schools, of young men at distant colleges, of young ladies in distant nurseries and boarding-schools, seems, in the higher ranks of life, to have hurt most essentially the domestic morals, and consequently the domestic happiness, both of France and England."

⁷⁵T.M.S., VI.II.1 (II.83-92).

friends, and those whom we respect because of their greatness and power, or feel deep pity for due to their unfortunate circumstances.⁷⁵ As well as these individual categories of men Smith goes on to explain patriotism by means of the same principle: we love our own country more than others primarily because, after our family and friends, our countrymen are those for whom we have most habitual sympathy. Moreover our own interests as well as those of our family and friends are bound up with the fate of our country, therefore prudence as well as benevolence prompt us to patriotism as well as to hatred of those neighbouring nations which threaten our own country.⁷⁶

These examples indicate how Smith uses the fact that a particular type of behaviour is normal to explain why it is considered morally virtuous. Normal behaviour is what the impartial spectator expects; it is how he would behave himself, and unless some peculiarities of the working of sympathy affect his judgments (which they rarely do in the case of benevolence) this is the behaviour with which he agrees and, therefore, of which he approves. Illustrating this by reference to family affection Smith writes:

Relations being usually placed in situations which naturally create this habitual sympathy, it is expected that a suitable degree of affection should take place among them. We generally find that it actually does take place; we therefore naturally expect that it should; and we are, upon that account, more shocked when, upon any occasion, we find that it does not. The general rule is established, that persons related to one another in a certain degree, ought always to be affected towards one another in a certain manner, and that there is always the highest impropriety, and sometimes even a sort of impiety, in their being affected in a different manner.⁷⁷

⁷⁶T.N.S., VI.ii.2 (II.93-112).

⁷⁷T.N.S., VI.ii.1 (II.73).

It is in the observation and reporting of these facts and the explanation of them in terms of habitual sympathy that Smith provides the answer to those who say that universal benevolence is an important motive in human affairs; although he agrees that "we cannot form the idea of any innocent and sensible being, whose happiness we should not desire",⁷⁸ in practice, as he observes, we are affected by the immediate presence of family, friends, neighbours, fellow workers and countrymen, and exhibit more benevolence towards them than towards men in general. Indeed such universal benevolence is an extension of benevolence felt for particular persons and is not the motive from which we exercise our benevolent affections in particular cases.

Smith's analysis of benevolence and his explanation of the content of the relevant moral rules fits well with his general theory. It ties together many aspects of the theory in a consistent manner and accords with the observed facts to a tolerable degree. Of particular interest are the comments he makes concerning the variable content of these moral rules, especially the contrast between the morality of pastoral and commercial countries which foreshadows the later sociological contrast between community and association. In pastoral countries where security depends on the defence of local neighbourhoods men "have more intercourse with one another than with the members of any other tribe" and a strong affectional relationship between members of the extended family is developed which often includes whole clans or tribes. He comments that:

It is not many years ago that, in the Highlands of Scotland, the Chieftain used to consider the poorest man of his clan, as his cousin and relation. The same extensive regard to kindred is said to take place among the Tartars, the

⁷⁸T.M.S., VI.ii.3 (II.113).

Arabs, the Turkomans, and, I believe, among all other nations who are nearly in the same state of society in which the Scots Highlanders were about the beginning of the present century.⁷⁹

It is the need for mutual protection that keeps these extended families together, but in commercial societies this is no longer necessary, and "they soon cease to be of importance to one another; and, in a few generations, not only lose all care about one another, but all remembrance of their common origin".⁸⁰ This is a trend "longer and more completely established in England than in Scotland". Smith also argues that there is, on the whole, more benevolence in commercial societies than in primitive ones since, although benevolence is always highly esteemed, it is not the normal expected behaviour amongst those whose individual needs are not tolerably satisfied. These are interesting examples of the way in which he is able to show that the laws of sympathy lead to different types of normal expected behaviour and therefore to variations between moral standards in different types of society.

⁷⁹T.N.S., VI.ii.1 (II.80).

⁸⁰T.N.S., VI.ii.1 (II.81).

Chapter Nine

JUSTICE

Justice is the main topic which provides a common factor for the Moral Sentiments, the Lectures on Jurisprudence and the Wealth of Nations. In this last book the aspect of justice which features most prominently is the form and expense of the administration of law; the Lectures contain a good deal of material on the history of the various functions of government, amongst which the maintenance of justice is the most fundamental, but, in itself, it contains no more than hints of Smith's theory of justice. It is only in the Moral Sentiments that any real attempt is made to provide a theory to explain the existence and content of the rules of justice. In some ways this represents the climax of the whole work. Smith thought that he had something new to say about the nature of justice. He also considered it to be the most important virtue; and continually emphasised both that a sound system of justice is necessary for the development of commercial society and that some degree of justice is essential for the very existence of any type of society:

Society may subsist, though not in the most comfortable state, without beneficence; but the prevalence of injustice must utterly destroy it.¹

But at the same time he rather side-steps a full discussion of the topic by saying that it is to be the subject of another work: his projected study of law and government. The Moral Sentiments is intended to lead up to this study of "natural jurisprudence; concerning which it belongs not to our present

¹T.M.S., II.ii.3 (I.215).

subject to enter into any detail".² This may account for the relatively large number of loose ends and the occasional failure to fit this virtue into his general theory which mark his writings in this field. Nevertheless the contents of the Lectures on Jurisprudence would suggest that Smith's projected work would have taken for granted that the Moral Sentiments had provided a sufficient analysis of the main facts about human nature and society which are necessary to explain the most important features of justice, leaving him free to go on and show how these led both to basic similarities and to predictable variations in the systems of law which exist or have existed in different societies.³ Read in the light of the Moral Sentiments, the Lectures on Jurisprudence give us some idea as to how he would have set about this task, and it is, therefore, possible to get some indication of the way in which Smith's theory of morality can be applied and tested in the sphere of justice as well as of morality in general.

From the stand-point of moral theory the initial difficulty to be overcome in order to appreciate Smith's theory of justice is the fact that he takes it to be a purely legal concept: the rules of justice either are, or ought to be, laws. By this I do not mean that he excludes it from the sphere of morality; there is never any doubt that justice is a moral virtue, but that he does not consider its non-legal applications and restricts his consideration of justice to the moral content of the law. Smith realises that this requires justification and, in fact, he takes more care over his definition of justice than over any other of his principal concepts. He distinguishes three meanings which he has come across in different languages and

²T.M.S., VI,ii.Introd. (II.67).

³Cf. L.J., p. 152 and p. 9.

which he, therefore, considers must have some "natural affinity". The first meaning, which he equates, after Aristotle, with "commutative justice", is the one he adopts:

In one sense we are said to do justice to our neighbour when we abstain from doing him any positive harm, and do not directly hurt him, either in his person, or in his estate, or in his reputation.⁴

He rejects, probably on the grounds that they are too broad and do not represent "what is peculiar to justice",⁵ two other meanings:

In another sense we are said not to do justice to our neighbour unless we conceive for him all that love, respect, and esteem, which his character, his situation, and his connexion with ourselves, render suitable and proper for us to feel, and unless we act accordingly.⁶

This he calls distributive justice and argues that, since it amounts to giving praise, reward and assistance to every person to whom it is due, it encompasses all the social virtues, including benevolence; it can only, therefore, be a metaphorical use of the term. And, thirdly, he distinguishes and rejects another meaning of "justice", attributed to Plato, in which it is equivalent to the sum of all virtues; in this sense justice is the same as his own concept of propriety and has to do with proper government of all the affections.⁷ The definition he adopts is much more specific and, as he says, essentially negative: the just act is the act which causes no injury to a person other than the agent and therefore, in contrast to benevolence, "does no real positive good":

⁴T.M.S., VII.ii.1 (II.207).

⁵T.M.S., II.ii.1 (I.203); cf. VII.ii.1 (II.209).

⁶T.M.S., VII.ii.1 (II.207f.).

⁷T.M.S., VII.ii.1 (II. 207 & 209f.).

Mere justice is, upon most occasions, but a negative virtue, and only hinders us from hurting our neighbour.⁸

It is not so much that justice is a virtue, for justice, in itself, gains little approbation and inspires no reward,⁹ as that injustice is a serious vice. The unjust act causes positive harm to definite individuals.¹⁰ The rules of justice, therefore, consist of a series of prohibitions, laying down the things a person may not do to others either in the pursuit of his own self-interest or in order to benefit a third party.¹¹

Smith is right to try and restrict the term "justice" to its distinctive meaning, so that to call an act just is to assess it in relation to one but not all moral standards. But, unfortunately, the meaning he adopts is out of line with the general consensus of present day philosophy which regards justice as roughly synonymous with fairness, especially in relation to the distribution of those things which men wish either to avoid or to receive. On this view justice gives rise to rights to receive certain things as well as rights not to be injured. But Smith considered that the obligation to be fair in distributing benefits was nothing like so strict as the obligation to avoid injuring others, and it was because of this stricter obligation that he wished to mark off the latter from the former. That he then gave it the title of justice can be explained from his legal background and interests which led him to assume that justice "proper" was a legal concept. Since, as a lawyer, he saw that

⁸T.M.S., II.ii.1 (I.202f.).

⁹Cf. T.M.S., II.ii.1 (I.203).

¹⁰Cf. T.M.S., II.ii.1 (I.196f.).

¹¹Cf. T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.207).

"the end of justice is to secure from injury"¹² and so preserve the peace of society, his negative definition of justice suited him well. The tradition here is that of Grotius and Puffendorf, coming through Hutcheson: Smith is dealing with what they called "perfect rights", which correspond to duties the performance of which may justifiably be compelled, as distinct from "imperfect rights" which may not be compelled.¹³ The former concern jurisprudence, for, as Smith says, "Those who write upon the principles of jurisprudence, consider only what the person to whom the obligation is due, ought to think himself entitled to exact by force",¹⁴ These he considers to be rights in the true sense, whereas the latter belong only to morals and are rights in a metaphorical sense; they lack the stricter obligation which he credits Hume with having noticed attaches to legal rights, that is rights which ought to be, and, Smith assumes, for the most part are, safeguarded by law.¹⁵ Distributive justice, which, for Smith, deals only with the allocation of benefits, lacks this strict obligation; it is a species of beneficence, and

Beneficence is always free, it cannot be extorted by force, the mere want of it exposes to no punishment,¹⁶

but,

There is however another virtue, of which the observance is not left to the freedom of our own wills, which may be extorted by force, and of which the violation exposes to resentment,

¹²L.J., p. 5.

¹³Of. Hutcheson, An Inquiry Concerning the Original of our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good (1725), in D. D. Raphael, British Moralists, #355.

¹⁴T.M.S., VII.iv (II.366).

¹⁵T.M.S., VII.iv (II.397): "In no country do the decisions of positive law coincide exactly, in every case, with the rules which the natural sense of justice would dictate". (My italics.)

¹⁶T.M.S., II.ii.1 (I.194).

and consequently to punishment. This virtue is justice: the violation of justice is injury: it does real and positive hurt to some particular persons, from motives which are naturally disapproved of.¹⁷

This constitutes Smith's first main contention regarding justice: it concerns those duties which may be exacted by force, and the violation of which may rightfully be punished; taken together with the assertion that all such duties are duties not to injure other people, this amounts to the bold generalisation that all proper duties, embodied in the civil and criminal law, are duties to refrain from injuring others. This proposition is one which he sets out to prove, from the content of actual laws, in the Lectures on Jurisprudence.

Smith's legal preoccupations also help us to understand why he made his second important generalisation about justice; he alleges that the laws of justice can be determined with complete precision. In general he believed that no precise moral rules could be laid down in advance, but:

The rules of justice are accurate in the highest degree, and admit of no exceptions or modifications, but such as may be ascertained as accurately as the rules themselves.¹⁸

In the case of other virtues the agent has to adapt moral rules to particular circumstances and exercise his own judgment as to the proper course of action. But not only can the rules of justice be stated with precision, it is actually wrong for a person to attempt to modify these rules in accordance with his estimation of each situation and so adapt them to the peculiar circumstances of each particular act: the laws of justice are not only exact, they admit of no exceptions. Smith draws the

¹⁷ T.M.S., II.1111 (I.196f.).

¹⁸ T.M.S., III.6 (I.439).

analogy between the laws of justice and the rules of grammar: both can be stated precisely, and must be followed in detail in all cases, but, on the other hand, they represent only the essential preliminary requirements of good literature in the one case and proper conduct on the other.¹⁹ The example he gives is that of a debt: its amount, and usually its duration, are precisely and rigidly determined.²⁰ Plausible as this particular example, and others relating to contracts, may be, Smith does not succeed in showing how it applies to all other laws, and it would be difficult to see how he could do so; in determining what is to count as an injury, for instance, it is hard indeed to know how to make a precise assessment of harm done to someone's reputation or the "injury" involved in restricting someone's economic freedom. When considering the law in general Smith's confidence that the precise content and application of the law can be determined with precision represents more a feature of an ideal legal system than a legal reality.

The explanation for these views, which Smith hoped that he would eventually be able to justify in full, takes us back to his doctrine of merit, and in particular to the view that demerit is judged by the spectator's indirect sympathy with the resentment of a person affected by the action of another.²¹ Resentment is the key emotion in Smith's analysis of justice. It is the emotion felt by a person towards the object, usually another person, which causes him to suffer; it is an emotion which urges men to retaliate, to "return evil for evil":

¹⁹T.M.S., VII.1v (II.359).

²⁰T.M.S., III.6 (I.440).

²¹Cf. p. 152f.

It prompts us to beat off the mischief which is attempted to be done to us, and to retaliate that which is already done.²²

The uniting theme in Smith's discussion of justice is the attempt to trace all laws back to the various causes of resentment in society and to explain these laws by reference to this resentment in the modified form in which it is felt by the impartial spectator. Prior to all morality and law men naturally resent certain things being done to them; the spectator sympathises with this resentment if it is reduced to a level into which he can enter. This reduction is necessary because resentment is an unpleasant emotion and because the spectator fears for the safety of the person who is its object; moreover the spectator does not sympathise unless he disapproves of the motive of the agent and this disapproval is not forthcoming if the agent has been provoked by an injury which has been done to him and for which he is making retaliation:

Proper resentment for injustice attempted, or actually committed, is the only motive which, in the eyes of the impartial spectator, can justify our hurting or disturbing in any respect the happiness of our neighbour...The wisdom of every state or commonwealth endeavours, as well as it can, to employ the force of the society to restrain those who are subject to its authority, from hurting or disturbing the happiness of one another. The rules which it establishes for this purpose, constitute the civil or criminal law of each particular state or country. The principles upon which these rules either are, or ought to be founded, are the subject of a particular science, of all sciences by far the most important, but hitherto, perhaps, the least cultivated, that of natural jurisprudence.²³

Because resentment incites men to be the direct cause of harm to those who have injured others, it is the passion which prompts

²² T.M.S., II.ii.1 (I.196).

²³ T.M.S., VI.ii (II.66f.).

punishment. If the resentment is shared by the spectator then the punishment is justified.²⁴ The spectator approves of this immediately, without any calculation of its utility, merely by considering the injury which has been inflicted. Because resentment is rarely aroused except by observing or imagining an actual injury, this explains why the law forbids the infliction of injury but does not require positive acts which benefit others, for while failure to act may result in grievous harm it does not arouse the resentment which is forthcoming when the agent is seen to bring about that injury.

The difficulties which arise in connection with this theory of justice are similar to those we have already noted in assessing the empirical usefulness of the concept of the impartial spectator. How is it possible to discover what men "naturally" resent since in all actual cases the resentment men feel is affected by their knowledge of their legal rights and duties? Swabey puts this objection in an extreme form by saying that "Resentment...presupposes a notion of rights which have been violated".²⁵ But while it is certainly true that men sometimes resent injuries purely because they infringe their acknowledged rights it is surely wrong to say that they always resent injuries simply because they are violations of their rights; they also resent the injury itself. The idea of a right which has been broken is not part of the meaning of "resentment" and although the two ideas are closely related in practice, it is possible to conceive of

²⁴L.J., p. 136: "Injury naturally excites the resentment of the spectator, and the punishment of the offender is reasonable as far as the indifferent spectator can go along with it. This is the natural measure of punishment".

²⁵W.C. Swabey, Ethical Theory from Hobbes to Kant, p. 105.

resentment, although not of the justification of resentment, in the absence of any rights or duties. The real difficulty is to know what that resentment would be. Smith simply has to assume that immediate and strong reactions normally felt by most people when they are affected by the actions of others, are a guide to "natural" that is pre-moral and pre-legal resentment. But the difficulties in tracing all laws back to this simple form of resentment might well have been one of the reasons that his jurisprudence never reached its completed state.

In the Moral Sentiments the example into which Smith goes at most length in order to demonstrate the connection between resentment and the law, concerns the "Influence of Fortune upon the Sentiments of Mankind".²⁶ He argues that, although most people, when considering the matter in the abstract, will agree that only the intended consequences of acts should be punished, nevertheless the law of negligence does take account of the actual consequences which normally result from the intention in question. For instance gross negligence, as "if a person should throw a large stone over a wall into a public street", because it is the sort of action which could be expected to cause injury, is punished even if no injury results, but it is punished much more severely if someone is actually injured.²⁷ Similarly if, through an unlucky chance, an action which would normally be considered blameless, results in injury, then, although no punishment is exacted, compensation may be required.²⁸ He illustrates this with many examples drawn from classical history and the laws of different countries. The

²⁶ T.M.S., II.iii (I.230ff.). This is also mentioned briefly in the L.J., p. 152; cf. p. 155.

²⁷ T.M.S., II.iii.2 (I.250ff.).

²⁸ T.M.S., II.iii.2 (I.260).

explanation for the existence of these laws is an "irregularity" of sentiment which affects all judgments of merit and demerit, an irregularity which arises from the fact that gratitude and resentment are immediate reactions in those who receive or observe someone else receiving benefits or injuries.²⁹ These feelings are aroused even when the cause of the benefits or injuries is inanimate, but they quickly diminish if it is seen that the cause was not a responsible agent who was aware of the consequences of his actions. Although gratitude and resentment are immediate responses they develop into complex feelings which include the desire that the cause of the benefit or injury should be capable of feeling the pleasures of reward and the pains of punishment and of knowing that he enjoys or suffers them upon account of his past conduct. While a person may, therefore, feel a "shadow of resentment" towards a stone over which he has stumbled, experience leads him to know that there is little satisfaction to be found in expressing such resentment and, on reflection, the feeling fades away, although, due to its initial strength, it never entirely loses its force.³⁰ The same is true, to a lesser extent, when the cause of the injury is another person's minor carelessness: resentment still occurs, even though it is modified on reflection, although no resentment would have been felt had no injury resulted from the act; in such cases some "atonement" is felt to be necessary. This is one example of the way Smith fulfils his object of explaining a certain feature of the law by showing that it follows from a fact about resentment. The "irregularity" in question accounts for the pervasiveness of similar laws of negligence in different countries, and it can

²⁹T.M.S., II.iii.Intro. (I.233).

³⁰T.M.S., II.iii.1 (I.234ff.); cf. L.J., p. 153, where he describes resentment as "a very indiscriminate principle".

also explain certain variations between different types of society: for instance, it is in barbarous societies, where there is little opportunity for reflection, that spontaneous resentment is least checked and the laws of negligence are consequently severe with respect to unintended consequences.³¹

The Lectures on Jurisprudence set out to be more systematic in their treatment of justice, but they begin from the doctrine of the Moral Sentiments that the gravity of the crime depends on the extent of the resentment naturally felt by the person affected, modified by the various laws of sympathy as they apply to an observer. The various types of perfect right correspond, therefore, to the ways in which one man may injure another:

As the greater and more irreparable the evil that is done, the resentment of the sufferer runs naturally higher; so does likewise the sympathetic indignation of the spectator, as well as the sense of guilt in the agent.³²

Smith deals first with those rights which every person has simply "as a man", which are subdivided according to whether the injuries are to (1) his body, (2) his reputation or (3) his estate. A man may suffer injuries "in his body by wounding, maiming, murdering, or by infringing his liberty".³³ The degree of bodily injury determines the degree of the crime:

Death is the greatest evil which one man can inflict upon another, and excites the highest degree of resentment in those who are immediately connected with the slain. Murder, therefore, is the most atrocious of all crimes which affect individuals only.³²

The sympathetic resentment here is, of course, with the imagined

³¹T.M.S., II.iii.2 (I.253).

³²T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.208); cf. L.J., P. 137.

³³L.J., P. 5.

resentment of the slain,³⁴ in lesser injuries the resentment caused may actually be observed. Smith thinks that these rights are obviously based on resentment and require no lengthy explanation³⁵ and certainly it is not difficult to draw up a list of bodily injuries in ascending order of gravity, but how is it possible to make precise comparisons between those injuries and, for instance, restrictions on liberty, especially when this is taken to include freedom to participate in economic activities without governmental restrictions?³⁶ This is the sort of difficulty with which Smith simply does not deal.

Secondly, a man may be injured "in his reputation, either by falsely representing him as a proper object of resentment or punishment, as by calling him a thief or a robber, or by depreciating his real worth and endeavouring to degrade him below the level of his profession".³⁷ Smith explains this by bringing in the supposition, which is fundamental to his theory of sympathy, that an essential element in human happiness is the praise, attention and respect of one's fellow men; an attack on a person's reputation endangers this respect and is, therefore, deeply resented. Moreover, it will be remembered that the spectator sympathises more with imaginative than with bodily pains³⁸ and, since a person's reputation is closely bound up with what he imagines that other people think about him, the spectator's sympathetic resentment is, in this case, almost as high as the original feeling of the person who has been insulted. As a particular

³⁴W.M.S., II.i.2 (I.172).

³⁵L.J., p. 8.

³⁶Cf. W.M., IV.ix (II.208).

³⁷L.J., p. 5.

³⁸Cf. p. 135ff.

example of this Smith points out that, while lying is not a crime, the law protects the person who is falsely accused of lying. Men are naturally credulous and desire to be told the truth, and they resent it when they discover that they have been told a lie.³⁹ But they have an even stronger desire to be respected and, if possible, to become leaders within their society; as this is not possible if they are thought to be liars, the resentment they feel when they are accused of this practice is exceptionally strong. If such a charge is believed it has dire consequences for the man accused, since he is cut off, not only from leadership, but from "any sort of ease, comfort, or satisfaction in the society of his equals".⁴⁰ Mere lying is not therefore considered a crime, but an accusation of lying, if untrue, may render a man liable to the criminal law since it is an important injury to a person's reputation.

However, when the expectations set up by verbal communication are very strong even honesty may be a legal duty, and this is the basis for the law of contract: "The foundation of contract is the reasonable expectation, which the person who promises raises in the person to whom he binds himself; of which the satisfaction may be extorted by force".⁴¹ Similarly

That obligation to performance which arises from contract is founded on the reasonable expectation produced by a promise, which considerably differs from a mere declaration of intention. Though I say I have a mind to do such a thing for you, yet on account of some occurrences do not do it, I am not guilty of a breach of promise. A promise is a declaration of your desire that the person for whom you promise should depend on you for the

³⁹T.M.S., VII.iv (II.382).

⁴⁰T.M.S., VII.iv (II.385).

⁴¹L.J., p. 7.

performance of it. Of consequence the promise produces an obligation, and the breach of it is an injury.⁴²

Resentment, Smith argues, varies according to the degree of damage done by non-performance of a contract, and the "reasonableness" of the expectation that it would be kept: by this he means the degree of doubt there is concerning the commitment of the person who promised; thus to break a solemn oath, or a promise in writing is more binding than a more casual verbal promise; he shows this to be reflected in both English and Roman law.

The law of contract is, in fact, part of Smith's third division within those rights which the individual possesses "as a man"; it relates to the ways in which a man can be injured "in his estate". Estate covers "real rights" to do with property and "personal" rights, "such as are all debts and contracts, the payment or performance of which can be demanded only from one person".⁴³ The right to property is in many ways the most important of all since it is the one which is most likely to be violated in a commercial society and its defence is, therefore, the main function of government.⁴⁴ Smith explains the right to property by pointing to the natural resentment that all men feel when they are deprived of things which they are accustomed to having the exclusive use of. Actual possession produces the expectation of continued possession, and since the spectator goes along with this expectation he also shares the resentment which arises in the person whose expectations are thwarted through the intervention of some other person. "To be deprived of that

⁴²L.J., p. 130f.

⁴³L.J., p. 6.

⁴⁴cf. W.N., V.1.2 (II.231).

which we are possessed of, is a greater evil than to be disappointed of what we have only the expectation";⁴⁵ actual possession, therefore, especially when this possession has taken time and trouble, builds up in the possessor what Smith calls a "reasonable expectation",⁴⁶ (by which he means an expectation which is shared by the spectator) that he will continue to possess it. The main ways of acquiring property are by "occupation, or the taking possession of what formerly belonged to nobody", and "prescription, which is a right to a thing belonging to another arising from long and uninterrupted possession."⁴⁷ Expectation which is strong enough to be the basis of a right to property is also built up by "accession, when a man has a right to one thing in consequence of another, as of a horse's shoes along with the horse",⁴⁷ and "succession" or inheritance, which he explains by reducing it to a form of acquisition by prescription and occupation;⁴⁸ and, finally, property may also be acquired by "voluntary transference" which requires "first a declaration of the intention both of the person who transfers, and of him to whom it is transferred: second, the actual delivery of the thing".⁴⁹ Smith assumes that the natural expectations built up in these various ways account for the laws of property which can be observed to exist in all but the earliest forms of society. But he emphasises that his theory can also account for the variations between the property laws of different societies, and the Lectures on Jurisprudence, especially in the fuller report recently discovered by Professor Lothian, contain

⁴⁵ T.M.S., II.ii.2 (I.208).

⁴⁶ L.J., p. 108.

⁴⁷ L.J., p. 107.

⁴⁸ L.J., p. 113ff.

⁴⁹ L.J., p. 125.

many illustrations of the different ways of acquiring property in different types of society.⁵⁰ In a society of hunters there are no settled habitations and no need for such in the way of property, but the continued possession of animals by those who have killed them in the hunt, a form of occupation, would be expected; a hunter does not need to fence off and cultivate a piece of land and therefore he has no occasion for resentment at not being able to do so, but with the development of agriculture it became natural for each to cultivate the land nearest to his habitation and so by occupation and accession acquire the exclusive use of that land for himself: the longer possession continues, and the more work the labourer puts in on that piece of land, the greater his expectation of keeping it for himself. With the emergence of crafts, together with the division of labour, new expectations are created and in commercial society there develops a vast complex of property laws corresponding to these expectations.

Any complete explanation of the laws which hold in particular countries requires reference, therefore, to the economy of that country; the impartial spectator is affected by his knowledge of what it is like to live under a particular economic system; his assessment of reasonable resentment includes, it will be remembered, the consideration of how he would react in such a situation, and this can only be known to him if he understands the economic forces at work in the situation; he cannot, for instance, know if resentment is proportional to the degree of theft unless he knows the value of the object stolen, and this requires familiarity with the economy of that particular country, since what is valued under one system may not be under another. This means that Smith's discussion of justice is open-ended, in

⁵⁰ *Of. L.J.*, p. 107-153.

that, if he is to fill out his generalisations about sympathetic resentment and show how they explain the laws of different societies, he has to give an account of the basic economy of each country. Much of the Lectures on Jurisprudence are therefore taken up with tracing the development of societies from one sort of economy to another and demonstrating the corresponding changes in their law. Of particular importance here is the fact that the various orders and ranks of a society are determined by or at least vary according to the type of economy which exists in a particular society. The Moral Sentiments explains the distinction of ranks by reference to man's tendency to admire the rich and the powerful, but it is necessary to go beyond this and show, by reference to the source of wealth in each society, why there is a particular system of ranks in each society. This in turn, affects what type of government establishes itself in each society which influences both the content of the law and the way in which it is administered. This aspect of justice is dealt with in the Wealth of Nations.⁵¹

Many variations between the laws of different countries can be explained by showing how Smith's analysis of the moral sentiments would lead us to expect different laws in different economic and political systems as being quite "natural". Other variations are accounted for by giving a special reason why the system of natural jurisprudence has not been fully implemented in a particular country. Smith assumes that the alleged connections between resentment and the law are, in fact, only tendencies, which may be thwarted and, consequently, sometimes remain unfulfilled. For instance he admits that the laws of natural jurisprudence will exist only "in all well-governed states".⁵²

⁵¹ Cf. W.N., III.iv (I.435f.) and V.1.2 (II.231ff.).

⁵² M.S., VII.iv (II.396).

The standpoint of the impartial spectator will not prevail where there is no effective legislature or no judges to execute the law. Even when governments are established they are often unable to repress powerful sectional interests and tend to ignore the rules of justice when they conflict with their interests as governors:

Sometimes what is called the constitution of the state, that is, the interest of the government; sometimes the interest of particular orders of men who tyrannize the government, warp the positive laws of the country from what natural justice would prescribe.⁵²

This seems to come near to the admission that it is only in a society of equals that the rules of natural justice will emerge, and Smith explicitly denies that such a society is possible. However he indicates that even a tyrant has an interest in maintaining order and knows that this is best done by administering the law in accordance with the sentiments of the people, which means in accordance with the attitudes of the impartial spectator.⁵³

The lack of a good system of government is not the only thing which can prevent the full implementation of natural justice. It is also affected by the "rudeness and barbarism of the people". We have already discussed the meaning of these terms in connection with ordinary moral rules;⁵⁴ the characterisation is largely an economic one; barbarians are hunters and shepherds, commercial society is "civilized". But here the important factor is the influence which these different ways of life have upon the sensibility of those involved in them. In barbaric society men are not so capable of refined emotions and this of course affects the reactions of the spectator in this society, and so:

⁵³ Cf. L.J., p. 31.

⁵⁴ Cf. p. 195f.

In some countries, the rudeness and barbarism of the people hinder the natural sentiments of justice from arriving at that accuracy and precision which, in more civilized nations, they naturally attain to.⁵⁵

An interesting example of this occurs in Smith's explanation of some variations in domestic law connected with marriage. The duty of fidelity on the part of a wife to her husband, and to a lesser degree, of husband to wife, is based, according to Smith, on jealousy. Whatever its utility in caring for children, the institution of marriage is directly supported by the fact that the spectator sympathises with the husband's feelings of jealousy.⁵⁶ Jealousy, however, depends on the sentiment of love, which is not an emotion that can be felt by barbarians. This means that "in those countries where the manners of the people are rude and uncultivated, there is no such thing as jealousy",⁵⁷ and consequently, there are no laws which enforce monogamous marriage.

Sometimes Smith contrasts men's "natural rights" to the protection of body and reputation with the "acquired rights" of estate, in order to bring out that the right to a particular piece of property has to be explained by reference to the manner in which it was acquired.⁵⁸ More often he talks of "natural rights" as those which belong to a person simply "as a man", including the right to estate, in contrast with "adventitious rights" which, following Puffendorf, are those which belong to a man in virtue of some special relationship he has as a member of a family or a state.⁵⁹ However all rights are natural in the sense that they are to be traced back to resentments which

⁵⁵ *T.N.S.*, VII.iv (II.396).

⁵⁶ *cf.* *L.J.*, p. 73ff.

⁵⁷ *L.J.*, p. 75.

⁵⁸ *L.J.*, p. 107.

⁵⁹ This is clearly brought out in the report of lectures delivered in 1762-3.

are not themselves explained by reference to the law, and are therefore "antecedent to the institution of civil government".⁶⁰ In a few cases laws are the consequence of arbitrary decisions of law-makers (Smith gives as an example the rules of affinity in blood relations⁶¹) but, on the whole, law is a consequence and not a cause of "natural" rights and duties. The laws which relate to man as a member of a state will be considered in the next chapter. As regards domestic law, the Lectures on Jurisprudence contain a good deal of material but much of it is no more than a classification and history of the laws of classical and eighteenth century societies, without any persistent effort to trace them back to natural resentment and the laws of sympathy. However some interesting comments are made as he goes along which indicate how he might have developed this aspect of his study of law. For instance he explains why laws of adultery are more severe when the offender is the wife than when the husband is at fault, by pointing out that it is men who make the laws.⁶² This is further evidence of his awareness that the standpoint of the legislator is not always entirely impartial. On the same theme he indicates that church law is less biased in this respect because the clergy are more impartial as between man and wife;⁶³ a similar point is made about the laws concerning slaves which are made by slave-owners.⁶⁴

Hume contrasted the "natural" with the "artificial" in order to argue that justice is an artificial virtue in the sense

⁶⁰ T.H.S., II.ii.1 (I.199), of. L.J., p. 15.

⁶¹ L.J., p. 88.

⁶² L.J., p. 74ff.

⁶³ L.J., p. 78.

⁶⁴ L.J., p. 96 and p. 102.

that it is founded on men's reflections concerning its utility.⁶⁵ Smith is adamant that justice is, on Hume's definition, a natural virtue. Throughout his discussion of legal rules he is anxious to show not only that their origin and continued existence can be explained by the spectator's sympathetic resentment, but that this renders irrelevant and misconceived all attempts to account for such rules by their utility. He denies that men administer punishment because they are aware of its usefulness in deterring crime, reforming the wrongdoer and reducing the criminal's opportunities for repeating the offence;⁶⁶ on the contrary "resentment seems best to account for the punishment of crimes!"⁶⁷ Similarly he denies that contracts are binding or that property is sacrosanct because men acknowledge their usefulness. Appeals to utility are nearly always rationalisations of practices which are caused by spontaneous feelings. His main argument against Hume is simply to reiterate his conviction that his own explanation is quite sufficient to account, in detail, for the wide variety of positive laws that have been enacted in different countries. In addition he points out that all men have a deep sense of injustice in particular cases but few of them are aware of its general utility; moreover exceptions to the laws of justice are not permitted even when they are shown to be useful; so far, he says, are ordinary people from basing their regard for justice on calculations of its utility for society, that they believe injustice will be punished in an after-life which, he considers, can have no effect on social utility.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Treatise, (ed. by Selby-Diigo), III.ii.1 (p. 484).

⁶⁶ T.N.S., II.ii.3 (I.213ff.).

⁶⁷ L.J., p. 152.

⁶⁸ T.N.S., II.ii.3 (I.220f.).

Smith does not deny that justice is useful both for the individual concerned in particular instances and for society in general; we have already seen how he alleges that propriety and utility coincide and justice is the supreme example of this; it is the most useful of all virtues and the punishment of injustice has all the beneficial consequences which are attributed to it. But this utility, he submits, while it may provide the basis for a final explanation, is not one of the efficient causes of justice.⁶⁹

Yet there is a certain ambivalence in Smith's statements about the relationship between justice and utility; in some places he seems to imply that considerations of utility do affect the content and application of the rules of justice. It is not only that arguments based on an appeal to beneficial consequences have some effect in bolstering up the natural sense of justice; he also asserts that it is because men are aware of the utility of punishments that they carry out, long after the crime has passed and the resentment it provoked has died down, punishments which were initially determined by fierce resentment. This would not take place were it not for "consideration of the general interests of society".⁷⁰ Moreover, as we shall see, awareness of the public utility of justice is one of the factors which influence men to obey their governments.⁷¹ Very often, too, in the Lectures on Jurisprudence Smith's appeal to what is "reasonable" in particular circumstances has the appearance of an explanation in terms of the conscious efforts of men to safeguard the general interests of society.⁷² It almost seems that he was in two

⁶⁹ Cf. Chapter 10, especially pp. 273-279.

⁷⁰ T.M.S., II.ii.3 (I.221).

⁷¹ Cf. p. 285ff.

⁷² Cf. L.J., p. 58.

minds about the relationship of utility and justice, suggesting that while, on the whole, utilitarian reflection simply confirms the natural sentiments of justice, on occasions it may result in laws which are in conflict with these sentiments. A similar clash appears, although in a somewhat different form, in the opposition of immediate moral sentiments and those which are based on reflection about the past; we have already noted that the immediate "animal resentment" of men requires compensation to be paid by men who unwittingly and unluckily injure others; Smith notes that "This task would surely never be imposed upon him, did not even the impartial spectator feel some indulgence for what may be regarded as the unjust resentment of that other".⁷³ He hedges here by saying that such a sentiment may be regarded as unjust, and with similar hesitation he talks of the "fallacious sense of guilt, if I may call it so", felt by the person who has caused unintended harm to another;⁷⁴ he also speaks, less equivocally, of the "natural, though no doubt most unjust resentment" of the injured person.⁷⁵ This is not itself a clash between natural sentiments and utility, but it illustrates how Smith was prepared to admit that reflection does modify those spontaneous feelings of resentment on which he usually relies for his explanations of the law. But even here he does not allow that reflection has much influence on the content of law. In this same discussion of the law of negligence he points out that while public utility would suggest that punishment for gross negligence, which does not result in injury, should be just as severe as when actual harm is caused by such negligence, this is

⁷³T.N.S., II.iii.2 (I.263).

⁷⁴T.N.S., II.iii.3 (I.272).

⁷⁵T.N.S., II.iii.3 (I.271).

not in fact the case.⁷⁶ This is because resentment is roused only by the sight of harm being inflicted and the law is consequently lenient with regard to carelessness which, by good fortune, harms nobody. Reflection on what might have happened has, therefore, very little effect on the content of the law and, on the whole, the same is true in the case of reflection about the actual and possible future consequences of action. However, in this latter case he is more ready to allow exceptions.

Upon some occasions, indeed, we both punish and approve of punishment, merely from a view to the general interest of society, which, we imagine, cannot otherwise be secured. Of this kind are all the punishments inflicted for breaches of what is called either civil police, or military discipline. Such crimes do not immediately or directly hurt any particular person; but their remote consequences, it is supposed, do produce, or might produce, either a considerable inconvenience, or a great disorder in the society.⁷⁷

He takes as his example the case of a sentinel who falls asleep at his post and endangers a whole army. Smith seems unable to make up his mind whether the severe punishments inflicted for such offences are unjust or not. "The natural atrocity of the crime seems to be so little" and yet "This severity may, upon many occasions, appear necessary, and, for that reason, just and proper. When the preservation of an individual is inconsistent with the safety of a multitude, nothing can be more just than that the many should be preferred to the one".⁷⁷ The interesting thing here is not simply that he is unsure whether such punishments should be called just, but that he is prepared to admit that utilitarian reflection does have an important influence on the

⁷⁶ L.J., p. 152.

⁷⁷ T.H.E., II.ii.3 (I.226f.). Cf. L.J., p. 136.

content of the law in such instances. He tries to turn this to his own advantage by saying that not only are such instances rare, but that, when they do occur, we approve of the punishment with reluctance, and regard the sentinel, for instance, as "an unfortunate victim, who, indeed, must, and ought to be, devoted to the safety of numbers".⁷⁸ This contrasts with the enthusiastic approval that accompanies the execution of a murderer.

Smith admits more than he need do in this discussion of the laws of military discipline. There is no necessity for him to say that the sentinel's punishment is just because men approve of it. Justice is only one standard by reference to which laws may be assessed. In this case it would be possible for him to say that the sentinel's punishment is expedient but not just, and that the expedience is so great that it outweighs the requirements of justice. This is in line with the often noted fact that the requirements of public utility often conflict with the duty of treating individuals justly. It is utility, not justice, which entails that one man should be sacrificed in the interests of the many. This point was probably obscured for Smith by his assumption that justice is the legal virtue as far as the criminal law goes; expediency he reserves for the economic functions of the state. To admit that this is not the case would mean, of course, that he would have to give up his claim that he is able to explain all civil and criminal laws by tracing them back to sympathetic resentment, but it might have made his conclusions about justice less paradoxical and uncertain. Professor Raphael suggests that it was the same dubiety about the justice of the sentinel's punishment that led him to drop an argument he used in a lecture delivered prior to the publication

⁷⁸T.M.S., II.ii.3 (1.228).

of the Moral Sentiments which stated that "punishment...which exceeds the demerit of the crime is an injury to the criminal".⁷⁹ This argument coincides with the doctrines of the Moral Sentiments that the only justification for injuring another person is retaliation for the injuries committed by that person, and that the degree of the spectator's resentment is the measure of the severity with which crimes are punished. It is an argument which would have provided more useful ammunition in favour of his retributive theory of punishment. But, Professor Raphael points out, that, since Smith considered the sentinel's punishment to be just, he would have had to admit that, in this instance, a "just" punishment was also an injury and therefore deserved punishment in return. He would have been able to avoid this contradictory conclusion if he had been prepared to say that the sentinel's punishment is approved on the grounds of its expediency and not because it is just. Despite these loose ends in Smith's theory of justice it is still clear that he was prepared to admit that utilitarian reflection has some effect in determining the content of the law, and it would seem that he himself welcomes the fact that immediate resentment is occasionally subordinated to considerations of utility. This will become even more evident when we have discussed the principles which lie at the basis of his political philosophy.

⁷⁹D. D. Raphael, "Adam Smith and 'The Infection of David Hume's Society'", Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. XXX, No. 2 (1969), p. 240.

Chapter TenPOLITICS AND PRINCIPLES

The argument that Smith's theory of morality is essentially a scientific one should not be taken to imply that he does not endorse any moral and political principles of his own. By and large he accepts, as morally justified, the norms which it is his main purpose to explain. His own moral convictions can be seen in the arguments which he uses to justify his confidence in the judgments of the impartial spectator. These convictions are also apparent in the moral assumptions he brings to bear on the political issues of his day and in the recommendations he makes concerning the general conduct of politics. This is not to say that the arguments which he uses to justify his moral and political principles are the same as those which he uses to explain why certain principles are generally accepted. At least they are not the same as the efficient causes of moral and political principles; although, as we shall see, they do often correspond to the final causes of such principles, or, in other words, to the purposes which are unwittingly served by these efficient causes. Despite all that he has to say against utility as the explanation for the ordinary person's moral and political attitudes, his own normative moral and political philosophy turns out to be, in the end, a form of utilitarianism. It is because men, by following their spontaneous moral sentiments, play their part in a total system which is conducive to the happiness of mankind, that Smith recommends that these moral sentiments should serve as guides for conduct. They find their justification in the fact that they are a means towards the production of general happiness. Similarly, when it comes to giving political advice, he relies on the principle of utility to provide the basis from which political decisions ought

to be taken. For the most part utility dictates that politicians should leave well alone, but this is by no means always the case. On occasions it is necessary for them to intervene in the natural social processes for the benefit of human happiness. Utility, or the production of happiness, is thus the principle by reference to which he judges that both the natural moral sentiments and the system of natural liberty are desirable. It is also the principle behind his suggestions for refining these sentiments and correcting such defects as remain even when the condition of natural liberty has been established. We may, therefore, say that, with respect to his own normative philosophy, utility is his supreme moral and political principle.

Smith's theory of government is the meeting place for his scientific theory of society and his own practical recommendations; it is, therefore, a good point from which to start a consideration of the normative and metaphysical beliefs which lie behind his science of society. The four functions which Smith allocates to government are "justice, police, revenue and arms"; "The object of justice is security from injury, and it is the foundation of civil government. The objects of police are the cheapness of commodities, public security and cleanliness"; revenue concerns taxes raised to defray the expenses of government, and the fourth purpose of government is to maintain an army for external defence.¹ The powers of government are legislative, judicial and federal (the power of making war and peace);² its main method of operation is, therefore, the law, which Smith defines as the command of the sovereign.³ He had a deep interest in the development of different types of government in different societies which he explained partly

¹L.J., p. 3f.

²L.J., p. 17.

³T.N.S., III.5 (I.413).

by economic and partly by military factors.⁴ He himself favoured a type of mixed government, corresponding to the constitution of Britain in his own day, which combined a representative legislature, on a limited franchise, with a hereditary monarchy. The descriptions which he gives of the development of government in its various functions are of great sociological interest in themselves, but, from the point of view of the discussion of the relationship between his sociological theory and his normative philosophy, they are only a background for his analysis of political obligation. It is in his discussion of the reasons why men do or ought to obey their governments that we see his own political philosophy coming to the fore.

Government exists where there is law; a law is a commandment whose observance can be enforced; whenever one person or group of persons can successfully get their decisions accepted as law, then they constitute a government.⁵ Smith sees that this makes the question of the citizens' obligation to obey the commands of the sovereign central to the study of politics, and, in order to answer this question, he finds it necessary to discuss the duties of the sovereign towards the subject. When Smith asks why men "enter into" civil society, he is still primarily asking a scientific question; he wants to know what "induces men to obey"⁶ their government. Because it is basically a factual question which he is asking he has no difficulty in rejecting the theory that men obey because of some contract entered into either by themselves or their forebears, for, as he says, (1) men obey where the contract is unknown, (2) they do not give the contract as the reason why they obey, (3) they are not aware of giving their consent, and (4) in those instances where there is a contract, as in the case

⁴L.J., pp. 14-55.

⁵L.J., p. 15.

⁶L.J., p. 9f.

of resident aliens, this does not result in any trust being placed in the persons who have made the contract to obey.⁷ It becomes clear that it is not only a factual question which he is asking when he includes amongst the objections to the contract theory the moral argument that a person ought not to be bound by a promise made by his ancestors: he goes on to ridicule the notion of tacit consent by saying that most people have no real chance to leave their country and:

To say that by staying in a country a man agrees to a contract of obedience to government is just the same with carrying a man into a ship and after he is at a distance from land to tell him that by being in the ship he has contracted to obey the master.⁸

In concluding, therefore, that "the foundation of a duty cannot be a principle with which mankind is entirely unacquainted"⁸ Smith appears to be making the psychological point that we cannot have a motive of which we are totally unaware, and the moral point that a man cannot be obliged to obey a contract into which he did not explicitly enter.

His own theory of political obligation is, likewise, a mixture of descriptive and normative theory. Men obey, he argues, because of "the principles of authority and utility",⁹ the first relates to those characteristics of men which make others accept them as superior and worthy of being obeyed, and the second to the subjects' awareness of the private and public utility of the functions of government. It is the principle of authority which has most in common with the doctrine of the Moral Sentiments where Smith tends to play down the importance of utility and rely

⁷L.J., p. 11ff.

⁸L.J., p. 12.

⁹L.J., p. 9; cf. W.N., V.I.I (II.232ff.).

on the laws of social psychology to explain men's behaviour. The four characteristics which give authority are age, long possession of power, wealth, and mental or physical abilities. The first is explained by arguing that the imagination connects the ideas of age with those of wisdom and experience which, to some extent, makes age as effective as the possession of ability in obtaining authority. In so far as these qualities are admired in themselves rather than as means to fulfilling the useful functions of government they come under the principle of authority. But of more importance than either is the long possession of power; this is explained by the association of ideas, and in particular by relating it to the expectations and resentments of mankind: we have seen how many rights, especially property rights, arise out of the expectations which an established practice or possession establishes in men's minds and the consequent resentment which is aroused by the frustration of these expectations; this is applied to the possession of political power; men are prepared to accept the commands of those who have always given them orders but will reject those of the "upstart". But, most important of all, as a basis of authority, is the rôle of wealth: this we have already examined in detail when considering the "origin and distinction of ranks",¹⁰ and it is necessary, here, only to add that Smith considers the possession of wealth to be the main characteristic which gives men respect and attention in society and to remind ourselves that this is not primarily a matter of the subject's economic dependance on the rich but on the ability of the rich to obtain the admiration and sympathy of the poor because of the ease with which men sympathise with the imagined pleasures of wealth. This source of authority alone is, according to Smith, "upon ordinary occasions, sufficient to govern the world".¹¹

¹⁰ Cf. p. 233ff.

¹¹ *Q.M.S.*, I.iii.2 (I.131).

If the principle of authority is what leads men to obey rulers without question, then that of utility induces them to obey because they appreciate the purposes which government serves, and in particular its rôle in maintaining justice and peace in society, for not only does government protect the rich against the poor, but "by civil institutions the poorest may get redress of injuries from the wealthiest and most powerful".¹² This is not primarily a sense of private or individual utility since political obligation may oblige men to act against their own interests:

It is the sense of public utility, more than of private, which influences men to obedience. It may sometimes be for my interest to disobey, and to wish government overturned, but I am sensible that other men are of a different opinion from me, and would not assist me in the enterprise. I therefore submit to its decision for the good of the whole.¹²

This does not, in fact, contradict Smith's view of the minor place which benevolence holds in the pantheon of motives, since he hints that private utility would hold more sway if the individual was in a position to conduct an individual rebellion.

The principle of utility is on a par with that of authority as an explanation for obedience; it may act as a further support to the principle of authority and may, indeed, incorporate the principle of authority in so far as men become aware of the utility of blind obedience to rulers.¹³ Smith even suggests some sociological generalisations about the relative weight of the two principles in different types of civil society:

In all governments both these principles take place in some degree, but in a monarchy the

¹²L.J., p. 10.

¹³T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.127).

principle of authority prevails, and in a democracy that of utility. In Britain, which is a mixed government, the factions formed some time ago, under the names of Whig and Tory, were influenced by these principles, the former submitted to government on account of its utility and the advantages which they derived from it, while the latter pretended that it was of divine institution, and to offend against it was equally criminal as for a child to rebel against its parent.¹⁴

But, from the philosophical point of view, the principles are not on the same level, since the principle of utility is used to evaluate the principle of authority. It is clear that Smith considers that the principle of authority is not self-justifying. He notes, for instance, that it is irrational since it depends on an illusion, created by the imagination, which runs counter to our ordinary moral judgments:

That kings are the servants of the people, to be obeyed, resisted, deposed, or punished, as the public conveniency may require, is the doctrine of reason and philosophy; but it is not the doctrine of Nature. Nature would teach us to submit to them for their own sake, to tremble and bow down before their exalted station, to regard their smile as a reward sufficient to compensate any services, and to dread their displeasure, though no other evil were to follow from it, as the severest of all mortifications.¹⁵

On the other hand he points out the usefulness of the principle of authority in promoting the stability and hence the happiness of society. It would appear, therefore, that Smith elevates the principle of utility into the principle of his normative theory of political obligation: the reason why men ought to obey their rulers is because of the effectiveness of government in

¹⁴L.J., p. 11. This quotation reveals Smith's preferences both for Whigs against Tories and for utility against authority.

¹⁵T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.128).

producing public happiness by sustaining the internal and external peace of a country. And, in the end, this is the standard by which all governments must be judged. Such a principle, of course, entails that when a government fails to fulfil these purposes it should cease to command men's obedience (although the principle of authority may still produce de facto obedience), and Smith is willing to allow that "Whatever be the principle of allegiance, a right of resistance must undoubtedly be lawful, because no authority is altogether unlimited",¹⁶ However this right of rebellion is severely limited as frequent rebellions lead to instabilities which make it difficult to re-establish de facto authority, presumably because it makes it impossible to rely on the principle of long possession. Therefore, on the basis of the principle of utility itself, Smith concludes that, while "no government is quite perfect", nevertheless "it is better to submit to some inconveniences than make attempts against it".¹⁷ However the right to rebel does exist, and Smith argues unequivocally for the justice of the Revolution against James II on the grounds that he ignored the rights of Parliament. But even in this case he is primarily concerned to explain why the Revolution occurred, namely because James aroused "the most furious passions, fear, hatred, and resentment",¹⁵ "plainly showing his intention to change the religion of the country, which is the most difficult thing in the world"¹⁸ so that men overcame their "habitual sense of deference"¹⁵ and rose in rebellion.

The principle of utility does not only determine the limits of obligatory obedience to political authority, it is

¹⁶ L.J., p. 68. Here the word "authority" is clearly used in a de jure sense.

¹⁷ L.J., p. 69.

¹⁸ L.J., p. 71.

also the principle which Smith uses, in conjunction with his sociological theory, to guide the decisions of statesmen. They ought to rule so as to secure the happiness of their citizens. It seems to have been Smith's own conviction that "All constitutions of government...are valued only in proportion as they tend to promote the happiness of those who live under them".¹⁹ This may be demonstrated by looking, in turn, at what he has to say about the four purposes of government. The most important function of government is to enforce the rules of natural justice. The burden of chapter nine was to establish that Smith does not consider that men in general seek justice for its utility. But it was noted in that chapter that Smith does not deny that justice has utility. In his final explanation of the sentiments on which the sense of justice is based, Smith emphasizes that justice is essential to the security and thus to the happiness of society:

Justice...is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society, that fabric which to raise and support seems in this world, if I may say so, to have been the peculiar and darling care of Nature, must in a moment crumble into atoms. In order to enforce the observation of justice, therefore, Nature has implanted in the human breast that consciousness of ill-desert, those terrors of merited punishment which attend upon its violation, as the great safeguards of the association of mankind, to protect the weak, to curb the violent, and to chastise the guilty.²⁰

For instance resentment is useful because it accomplishes "all the political ends of punishment; the correction of the criminal, and the example to the public".²¹ Smith's definition of justice is particularly suited to utilitarian interpretations (especially the negative formulation of utilitarianism which advocates the

¹⁹T.M.S., IV.1 (I.468).

²⁰T.M.S., II.11.3 (I.215f.).

²¹T.M.S., II.1.1 (I.166).

minimisation of pain), since it is to do with the prevention of harm or injury, and it is clear that, for all he has to say against utility as the immediate ground of the sentiments of justice, he regards the government's duty to enforce justice as a particular case of its duty to promote the happiness, or at least ward off the unhappiness, of its subjects:

The wisdom of every state or commonwealth endeavours, as well as it can, to employ the force of ^{the} society to restrain those who are subject to its authority, from hurting or disturbing the happiness of one another.²²

Smith expects that, even in the case of politicians, it will always be immediate resentment against injustice which leads men to support the laws of justice, but in so far as it becomes a matter of debate as to whether or not the state should enforce the rules of natural justice, it is to the principle of utility that Smith considers that all men, and especially statesmen, will have recourse. We have seen, in the last chapter, that in certain aspects of justice, such as the infliction of punishment after due judicial processes²³ and the enforcement of laws of military discipline,²⁴ Smith notes, probably with approval, that considerations of utility have a place. When it comes to the general philosophical justification of all sentiments of justice this appeal to the production of happiness and the prevention of pain is used to validate all the rules of natural justice. Apart from the immediate injuries which the administration of justice prevents, it has other, less direct but extremely important, consequences. It is indicated, in the Wealth of Nations, that justice is useful in promoting prosperity; indeed it is an essential

²² T.M.S., VI.ii (II.66f.).

²³ Cf. p. 275.

²⁴ Cf. p. 277ff.

requirement for the development of commercial society:

Commerce and manufactures can seldom flourish long in any state which does not enjoy a regular administration of justice, in which the people do not feel themselves secure in the possession of their property, in which the faith of contracts is not supported by law, and in which the authority of the state is not supposed to be regularly employed in enforcing the payment of debts from all those who are able to pay.²⁵

It is, therefore, the principle of utility that is behind Smith's recommendation that all governments should enforce the laws of natural justice. And the same principle explains his willingness to allow that, under certain circumstances, it is even right for the government to compel acts of positive benevolence; in some cases, if it is necessary for "promoting the prosperity of the commonwealth",²⁶ the magistrate may make laws concerning conduct which was neither right nor wrong before these laws were made. The function of government, with respect to justice is not, however, to enforce all the rules of customary morality concerning justice, since it is part of his theory of social change that certain laws which were necessary at a particular stage of society, may remain after they have become harmful to society. When this happens it is the task of the wise statesman to bring the law up to date.²⁷

It is less clear whether Smith thought that justice, in the sense of fairness, could conflict with utility in the sense of the maximisation of happiness and the minimisation of pain. The immediate moral sentiments prompt men to feel resentment at injuries being inflicted on anyone, which seems to imply that

²⁵W.N., V.111 (II.445).

²⁶T.M.S., II.11.1 (I.201).

²⁷W.N., III.11 (I.408).

justice protects the happiness of all men equally.²⁸ Apart from the sentinel example Smith does not consider clashes between fairness and utility; he tends to assume that there is no conflict between the two: the sovereign owes "justice and equality of treatment" to "all the different orders of his subjects",²⁹ but there is no suggestion that this equality is incompatible with the useful consequences of enforcing the rules of justice. Although his arguments in favour of aristocracies would seem to suggest that he considers that the few should be preferred to the many, it should be remembered that he justified the division of society into ranks because this contributes to the stability of society³⁰ and thus to the happiness of all its members. Moreover we have seen that Smith does not believe that prosperity does bring great happiness, whatever men's imaginations may indicate to the contrary. He seems to believe that the essential requirements of a happy life are open to all and clearly approves that this should be so.³¹ On the other hand, while he accepts a certain equality of distribution as inevitable and desirable,³² he is more concerned with equality of opportunity, the removal of restrictions on the individual's chances to make the most of his own abilities and virtues.³³ In this process considerations

²⁸Cf. pp. 149-155.

²⁹W.N., IV.viii (II.171).

³⁰T.M.S., I.iii.2 (I.127).

³¹T.M.S., III.3 (I.369): "In the most glittering and exalted situation that our idle fancy can hold out to us, the pleasures from which we propose to derive our real happiness, are almost always the same with those which, in our actual, though humble station, we have at all times at hand, and in our power".

³²W.N., I.viii (I.80).

³³Cf. W.N., I.x.2 (I.136) and IV.ix (II.208).

of merit and demerit lead to justified inequalities. This is part of justice in so far as a person rightly resents being deprived of the fruits of his labours. It is possible, therefore, to argue that Smith would put considerations of fairness above the production of greater quantities of happiness as such, but he himself did not feel that he had to choose between these two goals.

The second function of government, namely police, is mainly concerned with the "cheapness of commodities", and is the central topic of the Wealth of Nations. It is, of course, Smith's most famous doctrine that all governments should allow the natural workings of the economy to operate without state intervention. This thesis is partly supported by saying that restrictions on the economic liberty of the subject are unjust, but Smith's main argument is along the lines that government inaction, outside the sphere of justice, is the best means to promote high consumption and therefore the general happiness.³⁴ For, although Smith realised that in some ways commercial society reduced men's opportunities for self-development,³⁵ he is in no doubt that, on the whole, it is greatly beneficial. His advocacy of the system of natural liberty is ultimately based on an assessment of its utility in increasing per capita consumption. The fact that this is so can be seen in his willingness to consider exceptions to the policy of non-intervention.³⁶ On the whole he distrusted governments as inefficient and self-interested, but he saw that in certain matters some government

³⁴cf. W.N., IV.ii (I.478).

³⁵cf. W.N., V.i.3.art.2 (II.303).

³⁶Many examples of this are given by Jacob Viner in an article entitled "Adam Smith and Laissez-Faire" in Adam Smith, 1776-1926, edited by Jacob Viner (Chicago, 1928), pp. 130-154.

action is necessary for the general welfare; for instance, every government has "the duty of erecting and maintaining certain public works and certain public institutions, which it can never forsake the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals, to erect and maintain".³⁷ He is prepared to consider each case for government intervention in economic life on its own merits; in discussing certain regulations concerning banking, for example, he concludes that:

Such regulations may, no doubt, be considered as in some respect a violation of natural liberty. But those exertions of the natural liberty of a few individuals, which might endanger the security of the whole society, are, and ought to be, restrained by the laws of all governments; of the most free as well as the most despotic.³⁸

In fact the system of natural liberty is not so much an absence of all state supported institutions as the presence of those institutions which are best adapted to make the self-interested actions of individual men work to the advantages of all.³⁹ Laws which prevent the self-interest of particular groups, such as merchants, from thwarting the checks and balances of open competition are justified.⁴⁰ Some state aid for education⁴¹ and control over religion⁴² are deemed advisable to counter the adverse effects of the division of labour and religious fanaticism. Despite the difficulties inherent in such a task the statesman has the duty of doing everything that a government can do to

³⁷Cf. W.N., IV.ix (II.209).

³⁸W.N., II.ii (I.344f.).

³⁹Cf. Nathan Rosenberg "Some Institutional Aspects of the Wealth of Nations", Journal of Political Economy, Vol. XLVIII, pp. 557-570.

⁴⁰Cf. W.N., I.xi (I.278).

⁴¹Cf. W.N., V.1.3.art.2 (II.302).

⁴²Cf. W.N., V.1.3.art.3 (II.317).

promote the prosperity of the nation. In particular he has to keep laws relating to economics up to date. Restrictions and practices which were useful in their day, such as monopolies and inheritance according to the rules of primogeniture, had, in Smith's time, ceased to fit the changed economic conditions and he therefore recommends their abolition.⁴³

The third function of government, the collection of revenue, is subordinate to its other functions in that the revenue is required in order that these other activities can be carried on. But even here utility comes in since he recommends that taxes be gathered in such a way as to raise the maximum revenue while doing as little harm as possible to the economic life of the nation.⁴⁴ Although he also stresses that taxes should be "equal", by which he means a proportional equality according to which those who have most at stake in the successful functioning of government, that is those with most property, should pay most.⁴⁵ The final purpose of government is that of seeing to external defence by the provision of an army. This is an end to which Smith was prepared to sacrifice economic freedoms⁴⁶ as he considered it to be a necessary condition of all justice and prosperity that each country should be secure from invasion and defeat in war.

It is not difficult to draw up a list of the many different ways in which Smith's advice to statesmen is governed by his utilitarian presuppositions. In addition to the clear tasks

⁴³cf. W.N., III.ii (I.408).

⁴⁴cf. W.N., V.ii.2 (II.351).

⁴⁵cf. W.N., V.ii.2 (II.350).

⁴⁶cf. W.N., IV.ii (I.404).

of administering justice and seeing to the security of the nation, there are numerous instances where he is anxious to see governments act in order to correct the defects of the natural order. Yet it should still be remembered that Smith sets strict limitations on the extent to which far-sighted human action can "turn away the arrow which is aimed at the head of the righteous".⁴⁷ Many of the malfunctionings which he mentions are not such as can be remedied. In the case of government action there is, in addition, the danger that attempts to improve the lot of mankind may lead to disaster because statesmen do not realize the intricacy of the mechanism with which they are dealing. Smith comes out strongly against what he calls the "spirit of system" which leads men to change the constitution and laws of society according to some elaborate plan of their own; he realizes the constant temptation for politicians to hold out schemes for the dramatic improvement of society:

The leaders of the discontented party seldom fail to hold out some plausible plan of reformation which, they pretend, will not only remove the inconveniences and relieve the distresses immediately complained of, but will prevent, in all time coming, any return of ^{the} like inconveniences and distresses.⁴⁸

Moreover,

The great body of the party are commonly intoxicated with the imaginary beauty of this ideal system, of which they have no experience.⁴⁸

Such plans, Smith believes, always under-rate the natural forces at work in society and over-estimate the power of government to alter the natural course of events. In contrast to the man

⁴⁷T.N.S., III.5 (I.421).

⁴⁸T.N.S., VI.ii.2 (II.107).

of system he sets out a picture of the wise statesman which is an eloquent and balanced statement of Burkoan conservatism, and shows that Smith's alleged complacent optimism is sometimes mixed with more than a tinge of pessimism:

The man whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence, will respect the established powers and privileges even of individuals, and still more those of the great orders and societies, into which the state is divided. Though he should consider some of them as in some measure abusive, he will content himself with moderating, what he often cannot annihilate without great violence. When he cannot conquer the rooted prejudices of the people by reason and persuasion, he will not attempt to subdue them by force. He will accommodate, as well as he can, his public arrangements to the confirmed habits and prejudices of the people; and will remedy as well as he can, the inconveniences which may flow from the want of those regulations which the people are averse to submit to. When he cannot establish the right, he will not disdain to ameliorate the wrong; but like Solon, when he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavour to establish the best that the people can bear.⁴⁹

This is not to say that statesmen are never to make radical changes in the law or even in the constitution of the state. In normal times the loyal support of the constitution is the best means to make "our fellow-citizens as safe, respectable and happy as we can", but in disturbed times:

even a wise man may be disposed to think some alteration necessary in that constitution or form of government, which, in its actual condition, appears plainly unable to maintain the public tranquillity. In such cases, however, it often requires, perhaps, the highest effort of political wisdom to determine

⁴⁹T.H.S., VI.ii.2 (II.108ff.).

when a real patriot ought to support and endeavour to re-establish the authority of the old system, and when he ought to give way to the more daring, but often dangerous spirit of innovation.⁵⁰

The ordinary politician cannot be expected to rise to these heights and act purely with regard to the general interest of society. Men's desire for power and selfish interest together with normal human short-sightedness make them unable to act effectively from humanity and benevolence. However Smith thinks that there is one motive which may indirectly lead men to promote the general welfare. This takes us back to his own peculiar theory of utility, namely that men are fascinated by any machine or system which shows a nice adjustment of means to ends; in the realm of politics it is possible to interest men in great political and administrative tasks by arousing their interest in intricate means rather than beneficial ends. (This motive accounts for a good deal of the useful acts of politicians.)⁵¹

Even if it is admitted that in the sphere of politics utility is Smith's over-riding moral principle this does not automatically establish that this is so in non-political matters. But the whole weight of his discussion of final causation would suggest that in all matters of individual and social morality, utility is the ultimate ground on which he approves of the ordinary moral sentiments. Justice, of course, is part of morality, and this we have already discussed. Prudence is a virtue which clearly promotes the happiness of the individual, and given that each person is best suited to look after his own interests, the practice of prudential behaviour throughout

⁵⁰T.M.S., VI.1.11.2 (II.104f.).

⁵¹OE. W.N., IV.1 (I.469ff.).

a society would undoubtedly promote the general happiness.⁵² Smith makes a point of stressing that benevolence is naturally felt most strongly for those whom we are best able to help and gets weaker and weaker as the persons concerned become more and more remote from our sphere of influence.⁵³ The restricted nature of the benevolent affections which are approved of by the impartial spectator is ultimately justified by the fact that society is benefited most by each endeavouring to promote the welfare of those whom he is in the position of being able to help. Here, as elsewhere, Smith notes, and approves, the fact that "Nature" intends the happiness of mankind.⁵⁴ Because Smith's statements about final causation reveal his own moral principles this does not imply that he did not regard these statements as assertions of final causation; he clearly regarded it as explanatory to say that a particular causal process exhibits the purpose of God. But, having demonstrated this, he took a certain satisfaction in being able to sit back and admire the handiwork of God, and this admiration includes approval of the principle on which God is seen to act; it is because God is a utilitarian⁵⁵ that we can say that Smith's own moral presuppositions are utilitarian.

To argue that Smith is a utilitarian seems paradoxical in view of his recurrent criticism of utilitarianism. But these criticisms are all directed at those who argue that utility can explain the origin of moral judgments or that it ought to be the principle by which men make their day to day moral choices.

⁵²Cf. pp. 242-245.

⁵³Cf. pp. 245-252.

⁵⁴Cf. T.M.S. VI.ii.Intro. (II.68).

⁵⁵T.M.S., VI.ii.3 (II.118): "The administration of the great system of the universe...the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God".

Those who fail to distinguish between Smith's theory of the causes of moral judgments and his practical advice to the ordinary moral agent on the one hand, and his own normative philosophy on the other, inevitably misrepresent his ultimate moral principles.⁵⁶ It is true that he did not think that utility is the basis of every day moral judgments; for while those judgments take into account the immediate consequences of acts, even this is secondary to the assessment of the appropriateness of an act to its situation. Nor did he think that utility ought to be the conscious basis of ordinary moral judgments; men's calculations concerning future consequences are too inaccurate, and they would tend, especially where their own interests are involved, to use considerations of utility as excuses to make exceptions in their own favour. Sometimes it does appear that Smith commends a form of rule-utilitarianism, in that, although particular acts are to be judged by whether or not they conform to the appropriate moral rules, the rules themselves are to be assessed according to their consequences. For instance he says that, in assessing the utility of justice, we should consider the consequences of a certain type of behaviour becoming general throughout a society.⁵⁷ But he considers that the origin of general rules is to be found in judgments concerning particular acts and that appeal to such judgments is a more effective way of justifying these rules than by presenting calculations about their utility. Such calculations may provide ultimate justification for moral rules but they are uncertain.

⁵⁶ Cf. A. L. Macfie, The Individual in Society, pp. 45-48. Macfie, having pointed out that Smith criticises Hume's theory of utility concludes that "Utility for him (Smith) was not basic".

⁵⁷ T.M.S., II.11.3 (I.223).

every day supports for these rules. Utility is, however, the principle which is necessary for the guidance of those who have to consider the total system of society, whether as scientists, philosophers, or statesmen.⁵⁸ It is the principle which provides many final explanations, and which enables us to make ultimate assessments concerning the soundness of ordinary moral judgments and the value of the whole mechanism of society; it is also the principle according to which political reforms ought to be conducted, and the citizen ought to base his decisions about political obligation, when this is in doubt. Utility is, therefore, very much the meta-principle for Smith. It is to be found at the basis of his whole moral outlook, but it operates most typically at the level of contemplation, when men adopt a God's-eye-view of society, enter into His universal benevolence and feel admiration and approval for what they observe. At this level of reflection utility provides the key to the interpretation of God's creation. For, as we have seen, Smith considers God to be a utilitarian;⁵⁹ probably a rule-utilitarian. He considers the general consequences of types of conduct and arranges it so that men habitually act in such a way as to maximise the general happiness. But, of course, He is a utilitarian whose situation is so unlike that of men that it is difficult to compare His utilitarianism with that of human beings. For instance God does not, presumably, have to choose between His own happiness and that of other beings,

⁵⁸It is because the ordinary person is unable to make accurate utilitarian calculations that Smith considers politics to be a specialist occupation and does not favour a universal franchise.

⁵⁹Cf. T.M.S., III.5 (I.413f.): "The happiness of mankind, as well as of all other rational creatures, seems to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of Nature".

and therefore many of the problems of justice versus utility, or private versus public utility, do not arise. But we can ask whether it is only happiness that He wishes for men? Here the relevant quotations are equally divided between those that speak of the "happiness and perfection of the species", and those that simply mention human happiness.⁶⁰ It seems, therefore, that there is some hint of ideal utilitarianism creeping into what is dominantly a hedonistic utilitarian theory: "perfection" may simply mean the multiplication of the species, but it is much more likely to refer to the Stoic idea of man's place in the total system of the universe; in which case the perfection of the human species is to become completely adapted to the workings of the larger mechanism which God has created, and perhaps, come to the position of being able to appreciate and admire this system for themselves. Whatever it was that Smith had in mind it is clear that he did not consider it to be in any way opposed to the happiness of the species.

It will be remembered that Smith's analysis of utility includes the aesthetic appreciation of a well-functioning machine in which more attention is paid to means than to ends.⁶¹ This applies to man's appreciation of God's human creation:

When we consider such actions as making^R part of a system of behaviour which tends to promote the happiness either of the individual or of^{the} society, they appear to derive a beauty from this utility, not unlike that of a well-contrived machine.⁶²

⁶⁰Cf. T.M.S., II.iii.3 (I.267): "Man was made...to promote ...the happiness of all"; T.M.S., III.5 (I.421): "The same great end, the order of the world, and the perfection and happiness of human nature"; and T.M.S., II.iii.3 (I.265).

⁶¹Cf. p. 159.

⁶²T.M.S., VII.iii (II.356).

This brings out the extent to which Smith regarded utility as a principle for directing contemplation rather than an immediate moral guide; it involves an aesthetic appreciation of the design as well as approval of the product. In practical terms it may involve making small improvements in the machine, thus rendering it even more pleasing to behold, and beneficial to mankind, but, for most people, its logical implications are that they should concern themselves with their own affairs and adopt an attitude of detachment, even resignation, with respect to the wider world. It certainly does not mean that they should be utilitarians in the manner in which God is a utilitarian, acting in order to achieve the happiness of all men; it is the lot of relatively weak and powerless human beings to look to their own happiness and that of a few close friends and relations; by so doing they promote God's plan for the general happiness in the manner for which they are best equipped. As politicians, and occasionally as subjects, they may be called upon to transcend this limited outlook and act according to their estimation of the happiness of a whole nation. But to consider the happiness of all mankind put together is something that should almost always be reserved for the social scientist, and the philosopher.

Chapter ElevenCONCLUSION

Whatever the precise nature of Smith's own moral principles, the fact that he brings any at all into his discussion of morality raises the issue of their philosophical justification. What arguments does he deploy to establish their validity? It is at this point that those critics of Smith who complain that he does not provide an adequate basis for morality come into their own; as long as he was only describing and explaining, in a scientific manner, how men come to hold their moral opinions, then these criticisms could be ignored because they are irrelevant; but when Smith passes, as he does occasionally, from explanation to recommendation, such criticisms become apposite. Unfortunately Smith seems largely unaware that he has this problem on his hands; he appears to have felt little need to justify what was, to him, the obvious legitimate authority of most moral rules. It would be wrong to criticise him too severely for this; he had other problems to tackle which were quite sufficient to keep him fully occupied. And it is not so much that he was blind to problems of philosophical justification as that he thought that doubts about the authenticity of ordinary moral rules could be easily allayed; they arose, he thought, from mistaken explanatory theories and misleading half-truths. It is also clear that he considered his own studies of morality vindicated, rather than undermined, the authority of normal moral standards. If we can discover why he believed that his own moral convictions, and, by implication, the moral judgments of the ordinary person, were strengthened by his empirical theory, then this will bring to light the grounds of his confidence, both in the moral judgments of his own society, and in his own reflective moral principles.

We cannot say that, at the end of the day, Smith brings in some intuitive type of reason, or a superior type of moral faculty, which has been held in reserve to provide the ultimate justification of the moral principles he accepts as binding. Being, by temperament and occupation, a reflective person, he assumes that moral judgments based on reflection are superior to the unthinking responses of the ordinary person, although he rarely admits any conflict between them. But reflection is simply a further deployment of the human faculties which feature in, and help to explain, the development of all moral judgments. Even when he says that some people are able to adopt the most ideal of all spectator standpoints and take, as it were, a God's-eye-view of human life, and so feel something of the universal benevolence which he attributes to the Deity,¹ Smith does not think that this is achieved by means of some special access to knowledge of good and evil. It is simply a wider application of the same feelings that are present in the ordinary spectator when he is contemplating the welfare of any innocent person. Similarly, we have seen in his analysis of conscience, that, while he accepts that some obligations feel more authoritative than others, even the most authoritative of them do not emanate from a source different in kind from that which explains every other moral obligation: the same laws of sympathy and spontaneous behaviour account for the whole range of moral experience. This means that Smith is open to the objection that, by tracing all moral duties back to their source in some modification of sympathetic feelings, he deprives these duties of the authority they would require to have if they were to be the source of binding obligations. Feelings themselves, it is said,

¹T.N.S., VI.ii.3 (II.114), of. p. 247.

have no authority, they simply exist. These feelings may compel men to act, but they cannot oblige them. It would seem that Smith's scientific explanation of the ordinary moral consciousness makes the task of philosophical justification extremely difficult.

The Moral Sentiments demonstrates little real concern for such justification. When Smith considers other moral theories he regards them as rival scientific theories which call in doubt his own theory of morality. His criticisms of alternative theories concentrate on showing them to be inaccurate or unnecessary as scientific explanations. Thus Hutcheson's moral sense theory which, Smith says, asserted that "the principle of approbation is founded on a peculiar power of perception, somewhat analogous to the external senses" is dismissed, because it cannot explain the fact that men morally approve and disapprove of the moral judgments of others, and also because it is unnecessary to invent a new "sense" to explain what can be shown to result from a combination of familiar faculties. After summarizing his own theory he throws out a challenge:

I should be glad to know what remains, and I shall freely allow this overplus to be ascribed to a moral sense, or to any other peculiar faculty, provided anybody will ascertain precisely what this overplus is.²

This confidence in the completeness of his own scientific theory seems to have prevented him from seeing the need for a philosophical justification of moral rules.

But Smith does realize that there are philosophers who deny that there is any "real" distinction between right and wrong, and who argue that men are mistaken when they regard themselves to be under binding moral obligations, that is obligations which they cannot justifiably get out of simply by repudiating them.

²T.M.S., VII.iii.3 (II.356).

For instance he attacks Mandeville for reducing all morality to self-love, and cites him as the chief exponent of "licentious systems" which do not "suppose that there is any real and essential distinction between vice and virtue".³ Smith retorts that Mandeville confused vanity with "the desire of doing what is honourable and noble"⁴ and says that he has been misled by the fact that "there are some of our passions which have no other names except those which mark the disagreeable and offensive degree"⁵ into thinking that any action is selfish if it involves any degree whatsoever of a passion which is selfish when present to an extreme degree. It is "the great fallacy of Dr. Mandeville's book to represent every passion as wholly vicious, which is so in any degree and in any direction"⁶ and it is on account of this fallacy that he is able to argue with some plausibility that there is no "real virtue".⁷ However convincing such a reply may be to a theory which says that there is no difference in experience between selfishness and altruism, or between proper and improper degrees of the passions, Smith has done nothing in this rejoinder beyond reiterating that there are moral rules which govern human conduct and that these are felt to have an authority different in kind from the authority of selfish desires. Mandeville's position may not be compatible with ordinary moral language, but to show this is not to provide a philosophical justification for this moral language. While Smith was aware that theories such as those of Hobbes and Mandeville provide a problem for

³T.M.S., VII.ii.4 (II.300).

⁴T.M.S., VII.ii.4 (II.308).

⁵T.M.S., VII.ii.4 (II.316).

⁶T.M.S., VII.ii.4 (II.317).

⁷T.M.S., VII.ii.4 (II.319).

those who wish to uphold the moral standards of their society, he did not see the inadequacy of his own theory in this respect. Because he saw no problem in declaring sentiment to be the basis of all moral judgments, he assumed that philosophers, like Cudworth, who argued that men derive their knowledge of right and wrong from reason, were simply mistaken about the function of that faculty which, it will be remembered, Smith equates with the ability to reason inductively.

Nevertheless there are some elements of philosophical justification in the Moral Sentiments. There are a few appeals to the fact that the de jure authority of moral rules is "obvious", which could be interpreted as an appeal to self-evidence or common sense, but these are usually associated with an assertion of the alleged function of moral sentiment in controlling other sentiments which, in turn, is related to the theological argument that the rules of morality are the commandments of God: all of these arguments owe a good deal to Butler, and Smith also reflects Butler's view that the obvious authority of moral rules is a fact which is independent of any particular analysis of the moral faculty:

Upon whatever we suppose that our moral faculties are founded, whether upon a certain modification of reason, upon an original instinct, called a moral sense, or upon some other principle of our nature, it cannot be doubted, that they were given us for the direction of our conduct in this life. They carry along with them the most evident badges of this authority, which denote that they were set up within us to be the supreme arbiters of all our actions, to superintend all our senses, passions, and appetites, and to judge how far each of them was either to be indulged or restrained.⁶

This quotation contains all the strands of his argument concerning

⁶T.M.S., III.5 (I.410).

the authority of moral rules: in the first place there is the appeal to what "cannot be doubted". But this is not an ultimate appeal to some rational intuition, for it is linked to the assertion that the moral faculty does in fact arbitrate within and between all other faculties, which is itself vindicated by the claim that this is the function which the Deity intended it to fulfil. Smith assumes that the world is a unified mechanism and that the justification of its constituent parts consists in demonstrating their place within the whole. This cannot be a very satisfactory argument unless the goodness of the mechanism is itself established and how can this be done except by calling on the very moral principles which he is required to justify?

It is exceedingly difficult to unravel the inter-connections between Smith's moral theory and his theological beliefs, but some attempt at this is required if we are to be able to indicate in what sense Smith's normative moral theory is dependent on his theistic metaphysics. Smith writes that there is "an opinion which is first impressed by nature, and afterwards confirmed by reasoning and philosophy, that those important rules of morality are the commands and laws of the Deity, who will finally reward the obedient, and punish the transgressors of their duty",² which makes it look as if he thought that men's motives for acting with propriety are a prudential fear of divine punishment and the hope of rewards in a life-to-come. But, in fact, this belief is simply an "enhancement" of a respect for the rules of duty which is originally rooted in men's experience of the pangs and rewards of conscience. It is "those vice-generals of God within us" who "never fail to punish the violation of them (moral rules), by the torments of inward shame, and self-condemnation; and, on the contrary, always reward obedience with tranquillity

²T.M.S., III.5 (1.407).

of mind, with contentment, and self-satisfaction".¹⁰ Smith argues that belief in a life-after-death is largely based on the expectations which arise from these operations of conscience, which give rise to the hope that goodness will receive the reward and evil the punishment which they so often fail to obtain in this world. Moral rules thus have a "natural" (pre-theological) authority of their own in the sense that men's motive for obeying moral rules is not a prudential regard to a future life but the rewards and punishments of conscience itself. In discussing the situation of a person who has a guilty conscience on account of an undiscovered crime, Smith asserts that "though he could be assured that no man was ever to know of it, and could even bring himself to believe that there was no God to revenge it, he would still feel enough of both these sentiments (horror and remorse) to embitter the whole of his life".¹¹ But if theological considerations do not explain men's submission to the authority of conscience, did Smith regard them as fundamental for the philosophical defence of ordinary moral sentiments? I doubt it, simply because it is not clear whether or not Smith believed in a life-after-death. He argues forcibly that it is natural for men to hold such a belief, and suggests that it is only because some religious persons have suggested such bizarre criteria for attaining future rewards that it could have been exposed to ridicule.¹² He considers it to be a natural belief for several reasons: it is prompted by the weakness of men who fear their approaching death; it is suggested by man's conception of the dignity of human life, and it offers comfort to those who are

¹⁰T.M.S., III.5 (I.413).

¹¹T.M.S., III.2 (I.297).

¹²T.M.S., III.2 (I.327-30).

suffering difficulties and disappointments in this life;¹³ but most of all, as we have seen, it is a natural implication of moral experience: it comforts those who themselves feel something of the Deity's benevolence but lack his power to aid their fellow-men,¹⁴ and, more fundamentally, it is a necessary postulate if men are to reconcile their ideas of justice with the actual distribution of rewards and punishments which they perceive in this life:

Nature teaches us to hope, and religion, we suppose, authorises us to expect, that it (injustice) will be punished, even in a life to come...The justice of God, however, we think,...requires that he should hereafter avenge the injuries of the widow and the fatherless, who are here so often insulted with impunity.¹⁵

But did Smith himself accept the teaching of nature and religion? As far as the latter is concerned we can say that he places no weight on revealed religion. In an age when at least the outward form of Christianity was a prudent garb for anyone with a modicum of worldly ambition, a man's religious affirmations did not always reveal his true beliefs, and it is to be expected that commentators should speculate about the extent to which the friend and admirer of David Hume should share the latter's agnosticism. In the atmosphere of his time Smith's silence on matters of revealed religion is strong evidence that he was less than enthusiastic on its behalf. On the other hand his occasional references to

¹³T.M.S., III.2 (I.325): "a hope and expectation deeply rooted in human nature; which can alone support its lofty ideas of its own dignity; can alone illumine the dreary prospect of its continually approaching mortality, and maintain its cheerfulness under all the heaviest calamities to which, from the disorders of this life, it may sometimes be exposed".

¹⁴Of. T.M.S., VI.ii.3 (II.114).

¹⁵T.M.S., II.ii.3 (I.226f.). N.B. "We suppose" occurs in the 3rd and subsequent editions, instead of "we think" in the 1st and 2nd editions (1st ed., p. 202).

orthodox religious belief have led some to claim that he was, at least in his early days, an orthodox Christian believer. The arguments, on both sides, draw partly on somewhat scanty and inconclusive biographical evidence, but mainly on the overt references to religion found in his works; for instance, it is pointed out that some passages in the first edition of the Moral Sentiments seem to accept the doctrines of revealed religion, but these are often toned down in later editions by the addition of such qualifying phrases as "we suppose" or "we think". The only contribution which I wish to make to this debate is to suggest that these later modifications, and the withdrawal in the 6th edition of a passage on the atonement which appears to endorse a specifically Christian belief, might well have been the result of Smith's desire to correct misinterpretation of the original passages rather than any change of belief on his part. We have already seen Smith's interest in explaining religious doctrines, and it is possible to interpret all his references to revealed religion as attempts to explain its causes and not to draw on revelation for supporting evidence. Like many natural theologians he was always pleased to point out where his beliefs agreed with the tenets of orthodox religion, but his over-riding aim was to show that his theories could explain the doctrines of revealed religion, and so demonstrate the variety of phenomena to which his hypotheses are relevant. It is possible that, when he discovered that these attempts at explanation had been misinterpreted and taken as affirmations of "sound" religious doctrine, he decided to modify their wording in such a way as to bring out more clearly his purpose in mentioning the religious doctrines in question; but at the same time he would make sure that he could not be accused of attacking these doctrines; this would account for the addition of phrases like "we suppose" or "we imagine", to his original statements. The few uses he makes of orthodox terminology, as when he speaks

of "the great law of Christianity",¹⁶ "our Saviour",¹⁷ and "the inspired writers"¹⁸ are also to be found in contexts where he is explaining and not affirming religious belief. Similarly the passage on the atonement, withdrawn in the 6th edition of the Moral Sentiments, was probably intended as an attempt to explain a religious belief by tracing it to a fact about the moral sentiments, in this case the sense of demerit; Smith writes that:

If we consult our natural sentiments, we are apt to fear, lest before the holiness of God, vice should appear more worthy of punishment than the weakness and imperfection of human virtue can ever seem to be of reward.¹⁹

He then shows how this natural sense of unworthiness leads man to feel the need for a forgiveness he does not deserve:

He...naturally fears, lest the wisdom of God should not, like the weakness of man, be prevailed upon to spare the crime, by the most importunate lamentations of the criminal. Some other intercession, some other sacrifice, some other atonement, he imagines, must be made for him, beyond what he himself is capable of making, before the purity of the divine justice can be reconciled to his manifold offences. The doctrines of revelations coincide, in every respect, with those original anticipations of nature; and, as they teach us how little we can depend on the imperfections of our own virtue, so they show us, at the same time, that the most powerful intercession has been made, and that the most dreadful atonement has been paid for our manifold transgressions and iniquities.²⁰

This passage is the chief evidence for those who regard Smith as a backsliding orthodox believer. But it is interesting to

¹⁶T.M.S., I.i.5 (I.47).

¹⁷T.M.S., III.6 (I.448).

¹⁸T.M.S., II.i.5 (I.189).

¹⁹T.M.S., (1st edition), II.ii.3 (p. 204).

²⁰T.M.S., (1st edition), II.ii.3 (p. 205f.).

note that Smith's hypothetical penitent "imagines" that some atonement must be made. This seems to indicate a psychological necessity which Smith feels that he is able to account for, an interpretation which is supported by another passage, not withdrawn in the 6th edition, which mentions the idea of atonement in relation to the attitude of criminals to their punishment:

By acknowledging their guilt, by submitting themselves to the resentment of their offended fellow-citizens, and, thus, by satiating that vengeance of which they were sensible that they had become the proper objects, they hoped, by their death to reconcile themselves, at least in their own imagination, to the natural sentiments of mankind; to be able to consider themselves as less worthy of hatred and resentment; to atone, in some measure, for their crimes.²¹

If Smith was not concerned to endorse the doctrine of the atonement in the first place, then we cannot say that he withdrew the passage because his belief had waned. Nor, on my view, can we argue that it was withdrawn because, as he is reported to have said, it was "unnecessary and misplaced",²² since, as an apt illustration of his theory it is certainly not misplaced, although it may not, perhaps, be strictly necessary. It could be that he objected to the fact that a passage which he had intended to be an explanation of religious belief should have been interpreted as an affirmation of it. This fits with his other references to religion, in the Essays on Philosophical Subjects, where he traces the origin of religion to fear and scarcity, and, as we have seen, indicates that monotheism is a natural consequence of the development of science.²³ Again Millar's report of the content of his natural theology lectures would lead us to suppose

²¹P.M.S., III.2 (I.298).

²²Rev. John Sinclair, Memoirs of the Life and Works of Sir John Sinclair, Vol. II, p. 40.

²³Of. p. 22 and p. 43f.

that he paid at least as much attention to explaining as to evaluating religious doctrines, for he is said to have "considered the proofs of the being and the attributes of God, and those principles of the human mind upon which religion is founded".²⁴

These comments on Smith's attitude towards orthodox religion are intended to justify the view that he did not rely on revealed religion to provide a justification for the authority of moral rules. There is no reason, for instance, to think that he accepted the belief in a benevolent and just god and the doctrine of an after-life on the authority of Christian doctrine, and then used these beliefs to underpin moral obligations. Indeed I have argued that it is likely he had reservations about the doctrine of a life-after-death. In one passage Smith mentions that "the virtuous man who has the misfortune to doubt of it (a life-after-death), cannot possibly avoid wishing most earnestly and anxiously to believe it".²⁵ This would not seem to square with Hume's reported attitude but it can, perhaps, be taken as an indication of Smith's own ambivalent position. In this case he would appear to have been more certain about the binding nature of moral duties than about the prospect of a Day of Judgment, in which case he would not wish to press the idea that moral obligation finds its ultimate justification in the prudential obligation to prepare for such an event. He is happy to explain orthodox belief and to show how it is functional for the individual and society, but it cannot be said that he is prepared to allow it philosophical currency.

However the idea of a life-after-death may not be the religious belief which is crucial for the support of morality. It is possible that a limited natural theology, accepting only

²⁴ Cf. p. 5.

²⁵ T.H.S., III.2 (I.326).

the existence of a benevolent creator, is sufficient for this purpose. Smith shows his awareness of this possibility when he outlines two types of answer to the question: why ought we to obey the will of the Deity?

It must either be said that we ought to obey the will of the Deity because he is a Being of infinite power, who will reward us eternally if we do so, and punish us eternally if we do otherwise: or it must be said, that independent of any regard to our ^{own} happiness, or to rewards and punishments of any kind, there is a congruity and fitness that a creature should obey his creator, that a limited and imperfect being should submit to one of infinite and incomprehensible perfections.²⁶

The first answer, he says, would make virtue consist in prudence, the second would make it a species of propriety, "since the ground of our obligation ^{to obedience} is the suitableness or congruity of the sentiments of humility and submission to the superiority of the object which excites them".²⁷ This latter could be interpreted as Smith's own view, although he is more interested in classifying it as a theory of virtue than with accepting or rejecting it as an argument. But would it serve his purpose? If the duty to obey the Deity is based on an apprehension of the propriety of such obedience, then we cannot rely on this argument to justify judgments of propriety in general, since the argument would then be circular. Moreover Smith's belief in the existence of God depends, to some extent, on inferences from moral experience. Moral rules are commands therefore, he assumes, there must be a commander; the world produces morally desirable phenomena, therefore, it is argued, there must be a benevolent God who has created it.

It would seem that, both in his arguments for the existence of God, and in the arguments he uses which might indicate why he considered that God should be obeyed, Smith draws on those very

²⁶T.M.S., VII.ii (II.298).

²⁷T.M.S., VII.ii (II.299).

moral sentiments for which we are seeking a philosophical justification. It would be possible to compromise at this point and defend Smith by arguing that, at this level of metaphysical argument it is wrong to expect any straightforward uni-directional inference from premises to conclusions; rather we should be prepared to consider a set of mutually supporting affirmations which together provide a convincing theory. Thus, it could be said, that although one cannot rigorously argue either from moral experience to theistic belief, or from the premise that God exists to the conclusion that moral rules should be obeyed as His commands, nevertheless the facts of the moral life readily fit into a theistic interpretation of the world and a belief in God underpins men's most firmly held moral beliefs, so that together morality and religion can provide a coherent and satisfying view of the human condition. This may well be how it appeared to Smith. Yet to gain a proper appreciation of his position it is necessary to realise that Smith's main argument for God's existence is not a moral one. His theism is largely based on the argument from design; this argument enabled him to arrive, without circularity, at the view that moral rules are the commands of God; he thought that he had grounds for believing in God which did not depend on the authenticity of these same moral rules. It is true that the argument from design can presuppose morality in so far as it stresses that the mechanism of nature produces the sort of results we would expect from a benevolent God, and Smith does frequently point out, in his analyses of final causes, that God, or Nature, does intend the happiness of mankind. But the main foundation for the argument from design is simply the intricate workings of the machine itself. It will be remembered that in his interpretation of "why utility pleases" Smith emphasises that utility is valued not only because of the results it produces, but because of the nice adjustment of means to ends which is

exhibited in its operation.²⁸ This seems to have been the semi-aesthetic appreciation which Smith felt with regard to the workings of nature, and he considered that, in demonstrating the hidden mechanisms at work in society, he had added to our knowledge of the intricate interconnections to be found in just one aspect of the creation, and so reinforced the conclusion that:

In every part of the universe we observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce.²⁹

This is the manner in which science, including the science of morals, supports the non-moral form of the argument from design, simply by demonstrating, in ever increasing detail, the fact that there is order and unity to be found throughout the universe. Science displays the design for our wonder and contemplation, and from this contemplation arises the conviction that such artifice implies an artificer, and that the nice adjustment of means to ends is the product of the wisdom of God.³⁰ Even the argument that men ought to obey the Deity because it is fitting that they should do so can be interpreted, not as a point about moral propriety, although it is at least that, but also an expression of the desire that men should co-operate with the plan of the universe, and, by obeying the creator, make their own contribution to the harmonious workings of the total system.

One common objection to the argument from design is its unverifiable nature. It is not possible, it is argued, to say what a disordered world would be like and therefore there is no conceivable observable circumstance which could disprove the existence of God. Smith would not agree with this, since he

²⁸ Cf. pp. 158ff.

²⁹ T.N.S., II.ii.3 (1.216).

³⁰ Cf. p. 43 and pp. 76ff.

does not argue from the fact of any order, but from the assertion of the sort of order which scientific research exhibits, namely one in which the operations of a great variety of phenomena can all be traced to the workings of a few simple principles, for as he says "the system of human nature seems to be more simple and agreeable when all its different operations are in this manner deduced from a single principle".⁵¹ Most of the Moral Sentiments is taken up with exhibiting the laws of sympathy as one such unifying factor. Thus while he might accept that any order implies a creator, he would insist that the implication becomes more compelling as the order is shown to be more comprehensive and complex, and the extent to which this is the case is a matter to which empirical evidence is relevant. No doubt the inference still remains problematical but this must be so if it is a metaphysical conclusion which is being drawn: that is a conclusion about science rather than within it.

Smith certainly accepted the argument from design, if only in the sense that his mind worked within its general presuppositions. He shared, though not in its most extreme forms, the Stoical vision of a harmonious universe in which everything has its place and its part to play. We cannot say what he thought of the arguments of Hume's Dialogue concerning Natural Religion, for he never seems to have come to grips with its attack on the analogy between the world and an artefact, upon which the argument from design is based. As a result he was shielded from any real uncertainty about the desirability of following the dictates of reflective conscience, and he shows no signs of radical doubt concerning the soundness of the ordinary person's spontaneous moral judgments. It is possible to over-emphasise his confidence in "the economy of nature"; in terms of the hopes and fears of

⁵¹ P.N.S., II.ii.3 (I.218).

individual human beings, his attitude is one of resignation rather than jubilation. He seldom glories in the human lot, although he considers it more than bearable. But those anxieties and doubts about human destiny do not shake his general conviction that the world as a whole exhibits a design and an order which rightly evokes man's wonder and admiration. It is this conviction which lies behind his confidence in the authority of moral rules and explains his lack of concern with the details of the philosophical justification of his own moral principles.

Even if we find it difficult to accept the inference from the postulate of an ordered universe, to the conclusion that there must be an Author of Nature, we may accept that, if the argument has any validity, then Smith was correct in his belief that the more detailed and intricate the "design" the more convincing the argument becomes. Can we also accept that he made a reliable and useful contribution to our knowledge of human society as one part of nature's "immense machine"? This question has interest and importance even if we reject Smith's theological assumptions, for if he did succeed in demonstrating that society is a type of system and that sympathy is the key to the understanding of that system, then he has made an impressive contribution to sociology. There is no reason why Smith's social science should not be separated from his natural theology in this way; and if this is done then primacy must go to the former, since this is where his own original work is to be found.

Our study of the Moral Sentiments and its relationship to Smith's other writings and to his reported lectures has put us in the position of being able to make some sort of assessment of his attempt to approach the science of society through the study of morality. As his own analysis of sound scientific method is remarkably modern there is no reason why this assessment should not be made by reference to his own standards of scientific

merit. His first criterion of a good scientific theory is that it should connect, or render more coherent, a large number of apparently dissimilar phenomena. Smith must certainly be commended for the width of his endeavours in this direction. He uses the concept of sympathy to explain, not only ordinary moral judgments, but the respect for authority which lies at the roots of political obedience, the motives which explain men's efforts to achieve wealth and power beyond the requirements of bodily comfort and safety, the basis of family affection and patriotism, and the entire content of the civil and criminal law. Many of these phenomena, especially insatiable worldly ambition and the acceptance of social inequalities, although very familiar, are such as may strike a reflective person as being rather odd, and in need of explanation. Smith's attempt to provide a unified explanation for all of them constitutes in itself a considerable intellectual achievement. It is, perhaps, the strongest point in favour of his theory of sympathy that it not only allows for, but actively suggests, connections between many different aspects of social behaviour; for instance the desire for recognition explains not only economic motivation but the limits which the rules of justice place on worldly ambition: men only admire the wealthy if they have no resentment concerning the way that wealth was obtained, so that the ambitious man is defeating his own purposes if he commits detectable injustices. Similarly Smith explores the relations between economics and morality, between morality and law, between economics and politics, between morality and religion, between science and economics; and all this is within an historical framework which allows for, and to some extent explains, social change and development. Of particular interest are his exploration of the relationships between social class and morality and his study of the effects of custom on morality and law. These demonstrate both the wide ranging scope

and the unifying potential of his theory of imaginative sympathy.

Smith's second and third criteria of a good scientific theory are that it should be simple and that it should employ a mechanism which is familiar. Sympathy would seem to meet both these requirements. However the rather unusual concept of sympathy which Smith uses in his theory and the complexities which he introduces in its exposition make it rather less simple and familiar than it might have been. In fact the simple principle of sympathy turns out to be a good deal less than straightforward. It is not an emotion and therefore cannot be easily compared to the force of gravity in the science of astronomy. The desire for harmony of sentiment is a standing motive in Smith's account of human behaviour, but the processes by which men are able or fail to achieve this harmony break down into a multiplicity of activities. There is thus no one single force of attraction which unites men in society in the way that the planets are held in their orbits by the force of gravity. Sympathy, that "power with which the mind is manifestly endowed" turns out to be described by a variety of different laws connected with man's imaginative faculties which are by no means all simple. Smith adds to them as he goes along and there is no reason why more should not be introduced to account for any further phenomena that appear to require explanation. However, although the early simplicity of his theory is rather overshadowed by its later complexities, he does not have recourse to any principles which are not reasonably familiar. The requirement that a theory should not introduce mysterious causal forces or unfamiliar explanatory principles probably makes more sense in the social than in the natural sciences, and it is one of the merits of Smith's theory that he does not appeal to problematical mental processes or occult social forces. His originality comes in the way in which he uses a relatively small number of generalisations

about human nature and human society to build up his picture of the manner in which agreed moral standards develop. Beginning with the premise that human experience is, in an important sense, essentially private, he goes on to show how individuals come to partake in a social reality which appears to them to have order and stability and which provides the basis for social cohesion.

The need for a theory to fit the observed facts is Smith's final criterion by which to evaluate a scientific theory. It is at this point that our most serious doubts must be expressed. It is not that his generalisations are manifestly false, for many of them are reasonably convincing. But it is very difficult to see how they could be rigorously tested; they are not sufficiently open to falsification. Despite the many examples he uses to justify his generalisations they are far from adequate. Individually they depend, too often, on a particular interpretation of ambiguous social phenomena, and together they have more the appearance of a random collection of anecdotes than of a systematic attempt to examine counter as well as confirming instances of his empirical hypotheses. Smith failed to live up to his own high standards of precision. Despite his attempts to formulate the laws of sympathy in the mathematical terms made familiar by the science of physics, these laws cannot, in fact, be stated in precise, measurable terms. For instance, the claim that men can sympathise more with those who are normally near to them and least with those farthest removed from them may indicate a general tendency but not a precise proportional relationship. It may seem rather unfair to press this point in view of the little progress that social scientists have made in this respect up to the present time. But these are his own standards and, as he rightly emphasised, the claim that one theory is to be preferred to another on scientific grounds is closely tied to its power of

providing precise, testable predictions.

This deficiency is particularly noticeable in his concept of "nature", which has been discussed at length. In spite of its fundamentally empirical orientation it is given too many different applications, some of which cannot be used with any precision in empirical observation. When it simply means "normal" or "average" then this is acceptable and useful provided it is made clear to which groups of people he is referring. But when it means "pre-moral", "pre-legal", or "pre-social", then it often leads to unverifiable propositions about features of human nature which are not now observable and which probably never did exist in their "original" form. Too much of Smith's theory rests on assertions about the raw material of human nature which becomes shaped by individual and social experience. A certain amount of this is necessary in any social theory which takes individual and social development seriously. But one difficulty with genetic social models is that they often refer to processes which cannot be repeated. In the case of the development of individuals a certain amount of repetition can be observed but we cannot start with the isolated ingredients of pre-social man and reconstruct, in practice as well as theory, the course of human history. Smith thought that the "natural" propensities of man could still be observed in spontaneous decisions, and in temptations to act against the dictates of the impartial spectator, but, sometimes he has recourse to speculations about the fundamental or "original" ingredients of human nature. Again, it is hardly fair to blame Smith for those difficulties, which are still with us. But it must be emphasized that he was, by modern standards, over confident in his conviction that he had discovered the essential nature of man and society.

Even if we are left with some suggestive and interesting hypotheses rather than a tested and comprehensive theory it is

impossible not to admire the observation, the insight, and the sheer industry and perseverance which are displayed in Smith's theory of morality. The task he set himself was an impossibly large one. To study the morality of a society is not to study an isolated phenomenon but rather to investigate the substance and inter-connections of all aspects of social life; it is not, therefore, an easily delineated subject-matter, and it is to Smith's credit that he attempted to follow out his theories into so many different areas. But this makes for an unmanageably large undertaking and inevitably leaves him with too many over-simplified generalisations and tantalising loose ends. In his attempt to be comprehensive he often becomes vague and over-extended. Present day criticisms of Smith's standing as a social scientist partly reflect changes in the expected standards of empirical evidence, but, to a large extent, they simply demonstrate the difficulties inherent in any attempt to create a science of society. For its time the Moral Sentiments must be regarded as a considerable achievement; it is a great advance on the over-individualistic approach of many of his contemporaries: Smith had a strong grasp of the importance of attending to the social environment in the explanation of human behaviour; his theory of conscience, for instance, is a brave attempt to combine psychological and sociological explanation. The Moral Sentiments is certainly a much more important book than is realised by those who dismiss it on the grounds that it is philosophically uninteresting. The more it is read and pondered as a work of social science, the more its true worth will be accepted. It remains a model in its theoretical intentions, even if it falls short in the execution; and even in its execution it is often plausible and nearly always interesting. Many modern works in social science spend too much time expounding their methodological approach and too little time doing anything

significant with it. Smith's mistake was to take his method for granted. He did not lack a methodological framework, but he did fail to make it explicit, and he has suffered misinterpretation and neglect in consequence. Properly understood, the Moral Sentiments deserves greater attention than it has received, not least by those who wish to study the Wealth of Nations. Far from going back on the ideas he had worked out in the Moral Sentiments Smith's more famous work takes these ideas for granted. We can discover Smith's basic explanation of economic motivation and the social framework within which economic activity takes place only by a correct analysis of the Moral Sentiments. But, quite apart from its significance for the understanding of the Wealth of Nations, the Moral Sentiments is able to stand on its own as an impressive and important book of which Adam Smith was rightly proud.

Appendix

MOTIVES AS CAUSES

To insist, as I do, that Smith regarded motives as causes, is immediately to expose him to the criticism of many philosophers who insist that motives are logically distinct from causes, and that the attempt to explain human behaviour in terms of causes is therefore misconceived.¹ No doubt, it is said, there are some necessary conditions of human action, and some bodily movements which can be shown to be causally determined, but human action, interpreted as it must be in terms of the purposes and intentions of men who make choices and act in accordance with rules, cannot be subsumed under causal generalisations without it ceasing to be action. A variety of arguments are used to reach this conclusion, some of which simply beg the question at issue, and others of which can be shown to be inconclusive, especially if they are interpreted as a priori vetoes on the attempt to find causal explanations for human action. By considering these arguments it is possible to go further into some of the obscurities and problems of Smith's sociological theory.

One of the preliminary points often made by those who stress that social scientists must try to understand behaviour rather than give causal explanations of it, is that actions cannot be directly observed since they cannot be described in terms of any particular set of physical and therefore observable movements; the same bodily movements may serve for a number of quite different acts, and it is not possible to know which sort of act is taking place unless we understand the act from the point of view of the

¹Gf. P. Winch, The Idea of a Social Science (London, 1958), and R. S. Peters, The Concept of Motivation (London, 1958).

agent, know his intention and purpose, and the setting of acceptable means and ends in the context of which he makes his choice. In other words we have to grasp the meaning which the act has for the agent and this cannot be directly observed. Smith himself makes this point about the subjective aspect of every action when he is discussing whether men blame each other for their bodily movements or their intentions and affections:

The external action or movement of the body is often the same in the most innocent and the most blameable actions. He who shoots a bird, and he who shoots a man, both of them perform the same external movement: each of them draws the trigger of a gun.²

And, he might have added, the same set of external movements can be part of a wider variety of acts, such as making a sign, or expressing a feeling. Moreover his whole discussion of sympathy, as we have seen, rests on the assumption that it is not possible for one person to have direct access to the minds of others, so that, in order to share a person's understanding of his act, we have to conceive ourselves as being in his situation.

Yet this need not imply that we have no way of knowing the motives and intentions of other people; some emotions have visible manifestations, as Smith notes,³ and, since men usually succeed in carrying out their intentions, a fair degree of certainty can be achieved by inferring intentions from the results of action; if, in both cases it is also necessary to draw on our own experience of performing similar acts in similar circumstances, this must be admitted to introduce a degree of uncertainty into the observation of actions which is not present in the observation of purely physical events, but it is an

²T.M.S., II.iii.Intro. (I.251)

³T.M.S., I.i.1 (I.7).

uncertainty whose limits can be checked by means of verbal communication and the predictive value of explanations reached on the basis of such "observations". This process does, however, put a great deal of weight on the ability of the social scientist to reflect on his own actions and accurately distinguish his own motives and intentions; Smith himself frequently appeals to his readers to consider their own experience in order to understand and corroborate his psychological propositions.

The difficulty is particularly acute in the case of observing motives since these are states of feeling which can be associated with a variety of intentions and the same intention can be associated with a variety of motives. Very often the evidence for the existence of a motive rests solely on verbal communication, and inferences from its manifestations or effects, based on our own experience. Smith, in discussing "all the different modifications of passion as they show themselves within", makes the point that "There is no other way of marking and distinguishing them one from another, but by describing the effects which they produce without, the alterations which they occasion in the countenance, in the air and external behaviour, the resolutions they suggest, the actions they prompt to".⁴ If this is the case then not only is there great difficulty in "observing" the passions but any explanation which makes the action a consequence of the passion is in danger of circularity, since the existence of the passion which is said to explain the action is inferred from the observation of the action. This means that in many cases to attribute a motive to an agent is a hypothetical device which completes an explanation by suggesting that an unobserved motive was operative; in Smith's terms this is to supply a missing link in the chain of familiar events and so by providing "a connected chain of

⁴E.M.S., VII.iv (II.363).

intermediate events"⁵ between the situation in which the action takes place and the action itself, suggest a satisfactory connection between the two. However it would be going too far to suggest that motives are theoretical entities for Smith; in particular cases they may provide the missing link between two more readily observable events, but he does believe in their real existence in that he asserts that the agent does experience his motive, a belief which ultimately rests on experience of his own motives. For Smith this is simply an obvious fact which everyone can verify for himself.

This defence of Smith's method would not satisfy those who, while admitting that there are certain states of feeling which can be thought of as motives in Smith's sense, such as feelings of hunger or pain, wish to argue that motives do not accompany all acts, and that, very often, to talk of a motive is nothing more than to say that a person has a disposition to seek certain ends, without implying that there are any "ghostly thrusts" which impel them to seek such ends. This applies most obviously to habitual behaviour and there is no reason to think that Smith would be greatly perturbed to have it pointed out to him that in habitual action the agent's perception of a situation leads directly to his action without arousing any felt degree of emotional motivation, since, as he says of mental habits, "when two objects have frequently been seen together, the imagination acquires a habit of passing easily from the one to the other".⁶ He would however insist both that the agent could become aware of his motive, indeed that he would be aware of it if his habitual behaviour were thwarted, and that the habit can be accounted for by reference to the motive which was necessary to establish it in the first

⁵H.P.S., (H.A.), p. 16.

⁶H.M.S., V.1 (II.2).

place. He thus combines an explanation of habit in terms of the association of ideas, and the pleasant hedonic quality of the smooth and regular functioning of the faculties which reinforces habitual behaviour, with genetic explanations of the origins of habits and this enables him to present a causal motive explanation even of those acts where there is no overt felt motive.

Even where motives can be shown to occur other objections are used to deny their status as causes. It is said, for instance, that motives cannot be felt or described except in conjunction with the actions with which they are associated. For example, when Smith talks of the motive to seek rank and reputation, it would be argued that such a motive is neither experienced nor describable except in conjunction with the intentions of the actions which are said to be caused by such a motive; thus the desire for applause which is said to impel men to act in such a way as to achieve applause cannot be described, and perhaps is not even felt, without bringing in the concept of applause which is also part of the description of the intention. Therefore, the objection continues, the motive does not have an existence independent of the intention, and, as a cause it does not have the contingent relation to the effect which is an essential feature of all truly causal explanations. Here Smith would, I think, be happy to accept the proposition that it is often difficult to know what a person desires except by seeing what he does,⁴ but he would hold not only that motives and intentions can be distinguished, but that motives may occur which do not result in any action; for instance he stresses the rôle of self-command in inhibiting action from motives which are, in the circumstances, improper. He would say, therefore, that the normal association of motive and intention was a contingent and non-universal proposition, fully accounted for by the fact that most motives do result in action. As for the second part of

the argument, that motives can only be described in terms which include a reference to the goal which is the object of the resultant intention, this he would have to accept as an accurate description of many motives: for instance in talking of the motive of resentment he says that "The object, on the contrary, which resentment is chiefly intent upon, is not so much to make our enemy feel pain in his turn, as to make him conscious that he feels it upon account of his past conduct".⁷ And he frequently appeals to an act as being the natural, in the sense of spontaneous, expression of a particular motive. This clearly makes motives different from what is normally assumed to be the Humean concept of a cause as a distinct and independent event contingently related by constant conjunction with another immediately succeeding event, but there is no a priori reason why all causes should conform to this causal model; it might well be that, provided the occurrence of a cause or an effect can be separately described, without thereby also implying that the other has ^{occurred} or will occur, the two are sufficiently distinct to feature as separate terms in a causal statement. In this case it would be perfectly possible to say, as Smith does, that, for instance, the desire for recognition causes actions which aim to obtain that recognition, since it is in principle a testable generalisation to say that the former is a necessary condition for the occurrence of the latter.

Those who argue that motives cannot be causes are up against all the difficulties of proving a negative case. On their side they have the paucity of established generalisations about human behaviour which approximate to the theoretical requirements of causal explanation, but, on the other hand, there are many vaguely couched generalisations which seem to have a great deal of empirical evidence to support them, and it is

⁷T.H.S., II.iii.1 (I.239).

always open to the would be positivist to claim that the relevant causal connections have still to be discovered. Faced with the fact that many intelligible patterns of behaviour are sufficiently widespread and regular to give rise to reasonably confident predictions about a limited sphere of human behaviour, some philosophers have claimed that these regularities can be explained by the rational character of human behaviour, and, moreover, that when human action is analysed according to the rational, rule-following model it is possible to show that, even if the preceding objections to motives as causes do not hold, causal explanation is logically inappropriate to human action. It is said that all human action involves following rules, and in order to follow a rule it is necessary that the agent should understand the rule and know what counts as correct and incorrect behaviour in relation to this rule. It would be argued, for instance, that when Smith allows that reason can formulate rules which the agent is able to follow and by which he is able to judge his own and other people's behaviour, he is introducing an activity which cannot be explained in causal terms. Now it is certainly true to say that, in order to understand what it is to follow a rule, it is not necessary to give a causal explanation of this process, and it is also true that, at present, there seems to be no way of giving a causal explanation of such intelligent processes, but it is possible (as Smith does) simply to accept these as facts, and to fit them into the total action process which is analysed in basically causal terms; thus, accepting that men are able to understand what it is to follow a rule, this can be accommodated in the analysis by positing a desire to follow rules; the recognition of the rule's requirements is in this way an element in the agent's motive, and it is explanatory to show that an agent is following a rule if this is due to his desire to follow the rule for its own sake or for its known consequences. We have

seen how Smith attempts to do this in the case of the sense of duty, the motive which impels men to follow the rules of morality. Some of the rules in question are generalisations about the most efficient means to achieve certain ends, in which case, given the desire for the end, and the generalisation that, ceteris paribus, men do what they believe will achieve their ends, the rule following element in human action can at least be brought into a working relationship with the causal elements; it may not be possible to give a causal explanation of what men believe, perhaps in principle, perhaps just in the present state of knowledge, but this only limits the scope of causal explanation, it does not rule it out of order altogether. Other rules which are appealed to in the non-causal explanation of behaviour are those of morality and convention; a detailed discussion of how these might be subsumed in a causal pattern of explanation is not immediately in place since the entire Moral Sentiments is one such attempt to do just this, but these types of norms take us on to a consideration of certain logical points that are made concerning action, especially in contexts of moral choice, which are said to establish that actions cannot properly be said to be caused. It is argued that to explain an act by reference to its motive or reason cannot be the same as to give it a causal explanation, since to give a reason for acting in one way does not imply that one had no choice in the matter. A reason is neither a necessary nor a sufficient explanation of action; I could have the same motive in the same circumstances and not act in the same way, or act in the same way for a different reason. To say that person A did act X because of reason Y is simply to say that Y was the consideration that led A to decide to do X, not that Y caused or forced A to do X. This can be seen, it is said, by analysing the concept of choice; all actions involve choices because, if I could not have done other than I did, then I cannot be said to have intended to do it, and

similarly to give a reason for doing something implies that I was not forced to do it, that I could have done otherwise had I chosen to do so. Smith seems quite happy to admit that human beings are different from physical objects in this respect: the laws they follow are such as are appropriate to "direct the free actions of men"⁸ and men are able to conform to these laws by an act of will; they can choose whether to follow the immediate impulses of passion or the less violent but more continuous desires of pride, ambition, benevolence and so forth; this is compatible with his belief that men are open to exhortation and can be blamed for their failure to conform to moral rules.

Such a line of argument can be answered, in part, by saying that Smith does not regard reasons, in the sense used here, as motives. A reason is given for an act X when the agent says that he did it "in order to obtain Y", that is because he saw it as a means towards some further end, but, for Smith the motive for such an act would be the desire for Y, and "the reason" only comes into the explanation to show that A thought that X was an efficient means to a desired end. To show that the motive is not a cause of action it would be necessary therefore to show that the agent could choose not to have this motive or, having it, not to act on the basis of it; thus, if it is said that agents can choose their motives and can choose from which motive they will act, then it would appear that motives can neither be causally explained nor can they causally explain actions. However to assert that agents can do this is to beg the question against the causal theory which holds that choices are determined by the strongest desire and that to say that an agent could have acted otherwise is only to say that he could have acted otherwise had his motivational state been different. At this point the argument

⁸T.M.S., III.5 (I.413)

divides the disputants into those who hold that this negates human action and those who think this is the only thing that saves it from being arbitrary. From the social scientist's point of view the important thing is to ask whether it is possible to identify the strongest desire other than by saying that it is the desire which is in fact followed. If this can not be done then it is tautologous, and therefore scientifically useless, to say that actions are caused by the strongest desire. This is basically a technical question which cannot be settled a priori but has to await the outcome of particular researches. Adam Smith does attempt to say, roughly, which passions are the strongest, just as he attempts to show how a few fundamental passions lead, through a process of individual learning and social interaction, to a variety of different types of behaviour. He may have failed to do this but it cannot be said that he was confused even to try.

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