Adam Smith: Skeptical Newtonianism, Disenchanted Republicanism, and the Birth of Social Science

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Ethics, Economics, Politics, and History of Science in the Works of Adam Smith

The prevailing image of the work of Adam Smith has far a long time been that of a blend of Deism, Natural Law philosophy, and mechanistic science, a deductivist and aprioristic metaphysics of society. *Das Adam Smith Problem* originated within this framework: it was the problem of the difficult cohabitation of two different metaphysics of man, one based on the principle of self-love and the other based on the opposing principle of benevolence (Raphael and Macfie 1976: 20-25). In the 1930s and 1940s a rescue operation took place: Adam Smith's economic work, to begin with, and later on his ethical work too, were held to be free from dogmatic metaphysical implications; for the puzzling words "nature" and "natural" a graceful translation was found in the words "ordinary' and "average" (WN I.vii.3), and his ethical theory was twisted into a value-free sociology of ethical behavior (Viner 1927; Bittermann 1940; Campbell 1971; for an overview see Lindgren 1973: 1-3).

Only after the full "empiricization" of Adam Smith had been carried out, some attention was paid to his writings in the area of philosophy of science, and it was suggested that the possible influence of his philosophy of science on his economic theory deserved to be explored (Becker 1961; Thompson 1965; Lindgren 1973: eh. 1). These first attempts were the victims of a high degree of anachronism, and Smith was dressed up as a follower of Hempel, Popper, or Peter Winch. The rediscovery of Smith's epistemological writings was nonetheless laudable. and some other contributions were able to place these writings within their appropriate context, that is, within the several trends of eighteenth-century Newtonianism (Moscovici 1956; Skinner 1974; Megill 1975),

The next step was to develop a balanced reconstruction of the relationship between Smith's version of Newtonian methodology and his political economy, viewed against the background of the wider Humean project of a Newtonian science of human nature (Cremaschi 1981; Cremaschi 1982; Hetherington 1983; Cremaschi 1984). The main theses put forth in these contributions are as follows: (1) the central feature of the epistemological background of *The Wealth of Nations* is the Newtonian thesis of the 'intermediate' character of the principles of the theory, between the phenomena and the principles of reality in itself; (2) political economy becomes a comparatively autonomous discipline, precisely because of this intermediate character of its principles: (3) even if its principles are no longer identical with the principles of Natural Law, political economy is still inherently part of the wider body of a "moral science" along with ethics and natural jurisprudence:

the difference between it and the seventeenth-century attitude lies in the fact that the "science of natural law" or "moral science" ceases to be a unitary deductive system.

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Within the framework of these theses, it may prove useful to re-examine Smith's political economy alongside his political theory, A parallel development in Smith's scholarship during the past decade has destroyed the myth of the "liberal" Smith, the proponent of a theory of the minimal state (Winch 1978: 6 ff.). The discovery of a new set of notes from his *Lectures on jurisprudence* has contributed much to a fuller appreciation of what his projected "history and theory of law and government" was meant to be (Meek, Raphael, and Stein 1977: 33-35), and several other important contributions have highlighted his place in the "skeptical Whig" tradition, in the "civic humanist" tradition, and the prosecution of Hume's project of a "theory of justice" (Forbes 1954; Pocock 1975: 468-505; Winch 1978; Haakonssen 1981), As a result, we are now able to see the contours of a typical Scottish and Smithian doctrine, the part of Smith's system of ideas most similar to political theory in the present sense. This peculiar discipline, named natural jurisprudence, is worlds apart from nineteenth-century liberal political theories, but it also has important differences from seventeenth-century Natural Law philosophy, As a further result we are also able to appreciate how Smith's political economy – notwithstanding its recent autonomy – is still embedded in a political theory, with all the implied differences from later classical economists. In this chapter, I shall try to take advantage of this renewed image of Smith's politics as a starting point for an exploration of the connection between these doctrines and his epistemology. The connection to be explored will be rather intricate: rather than a direct link between an image of science and an image of politics, it is a devious path leading from a theory of the principles of the mind to a reconstruction of the history of natural science, and a parallel, even more twisted, path leading from the theory of the mind to a

general theory of human society and of its evolution, and further on to theories of moral judgments, government, moral rules, and of the market.

In more detail, I will argue that: (1) the epistemological doctrines of Smith are led to a stalemate by the opposition between an eventually still shared essentialist ideal of knowledge and a pragmatist and instrumentalist approach to the history of science; (2) the political doctrines of Smith are still intended to serve the goal of providing a foundation to a Natural Law; (3) a weaker foundation is found in 'nature' rather than in 'reason' in order to avoid the paradoxes of rationalistic Natural Law theories: (4) as a consequence, the legitimation of several partial social orders is introduced, which may be the objects of inquiry of several specialized social sciences; (5) as a parallel consequence, we are led into a stalemate, similar to the one faced by Smith's epistemology, by the need to bring about an impossible reconciliation between the ultimate order of society and the several partial empirical orders.

Descartes and Newton

I shall begin with a brief reconstruction of the content of Smith's writings on the history of science, His masterpiece in this field, "The History of Astronomy,"[1] starts with a section illustrating the "principles" of the mind that lead to the construction of "philosophical systems." This opening section is followed by a reconstruction of the history of the astronomical systems, which followed each other, starting from ancient times and concluding with Descartes's theory of vortexes and Newton's theory of universal gravitation. The essay is unfinished, and it is worth noting that it stops at the open question of the real significance of the Newtonian system (HA IV.76). The need to formulate philosophical systems and later on to substitute one system for another, sterns from a few basic laws of the mind. The mind perceives a kind of gap every time it faces a phenomenon different from the one it was used to finding in a given sequence. Wonder, an uneasy feeling, originates in the mind as a result. The imagination tries to provide a remedy for this uneasy feeling by creating an imaginary chain to link the disconnected phenomena. The renewed perception of some kind of continuity between phenomena restores the imagination to a condition of ease (HA II.8-12).

It is important to note that the view of the principles of the mind or human nature sketched in "The History of Astronomy" and presented in more detail in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS I.i.1.3-

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[1] "The History of Astronomy" was never published during the author's lifetime. The essay is a part of a wider collection along with two shorter and possibly less elaborated essays on "The History of Ancient Physics" and "The History of Ancient Logics and Metaphysics," under the general heading: "The Principles which lead and direct Philosophical Enquiries."

8; ED 19; 88; TMS III.3.3; HA I-III) is basically identical with the "science of human nature" dealt with in Hume's Treatise (THN Introduction; II.i.5; II.iii.9; III.i.2). Its basic features are atomism, association of ideas, "imagination" understood as the principle that combines different ideas, custom, and sympathy. The role of sympathy, as shown later, is primary in social interaction, whereas when man is faced with nature, it is imagination that plays a prime role (Cremaschi 1984: 34-42; 87-89; Raphael and Skinner 1980: 17-21).

Smith states that theories are like "imaginary machines," or chains of ideas built by the imagination between two disjoined phenomena, The imaginary machine is supposed to link the observed phenomena while remaining out of sight behind the scenes of nature, like theatrical machinery, The best imaginary machines are chosen according to the criteria of 'simplicity' and 'familiarity: of the principles employed, of the 'coherence' produced in the domain of phenomena explained, and of the comprehensiveness of the domain the theory unifies. The succession of systems is ruled by these four criteria: a system is accepted as a substitute for the preceding one when it is able to connect phenomena that the preceding one could not connect, or when it is able to build the chain by means of more familiar principles, or when it is able to unify to a greater extent the given domain of phenomena. According to these criteria, the succession of the Copernican system to the Ptolemaic system is explained: the latter had grown so complicated while endeavoring to account for new phenomena that it had become useless to the imagination as a guide for understanding reality. The Copernican system was then accepted as a substitute because it explained the same phenomena in a much simpler way (HA IV.27-32).

The most interesting part of the essay is to be found in the last pages, dealing with Descartes and Newton: Descartes's theory of vortexes and Newton's theory of universal gravitation are two different attempts to complete the Copernican system, making it more comprehensive and more familiar by providing a cause for the motions of the planets. The Cartesian system of vortexes had the great merit of being able to render the rapid motions of the enormous bodies of the planets familiar to the imagination, although the idea contrasts with the habits acquired by the imagination. The very familiar idea of impulse was used to reach this result. The main difficulty in the Cartesian system derived from the fact that it accounted only for the fundamental motions of the heavenly bodies and could not explain irregularities in their motions. Far from accommodating his system to all the minute irregularities which Kepler had ascertained in the motions of the planets, Descartes "contented himself with observing that perfect uniformity could not be expected in their motions" (HA IV.66). In this way, he thought he could avoid the need to take the astronomers' empirical observations into account. This Cartesian systems inability to explain observed phenomena paved the way for the Newtonian system. Newton "first attempted to give a physical account of the motions of the Planets, which should accommodate itself to all the constant irregularities which

astronomers had ever observed in their motions" (HA IV.67). The advantage of the Newtonian system lies in the introduction of a now-familiar notion, the idea of gravitation, as a hypothesis to explain the motions of the heavenly bodies. This single hypothesis accounts for all the phenomena, terrestrial and heavenly. The same hypothesis also covers observed irregularities in the heavenly motions. As a result, the Newtonian system complied more closely with the requirements of the imagination, so that Smith himself states that he has "insensibly been drawn in, to make use of language expressing the connecting principles of this one, as if they were the real chains which Nature makes use of to bind together her several operations" (HA IV.76). The imagination feels as if it had penetrated deeper into reality by replacing one theory by another that complies better with its requirements. Yet, in fact, every theory, the Newtonian included, is an "invention of the imagination." What we can properly say is that a theory serves the purpose, in a better or worse way, of establishing a direction amid the chaos of phenomena.

There are, however, no grounds for stating that a theory that satisfies the four criteria better is a better reproduction of the essence of reality. The manuscript of "The History of Astronomy" stops amid the discussion of the Newtonian system. An editorial note warns us that, according to the notes left by Adam Smith, the part on Newton was to be considered "imperfect, and needing several additions" (HA IV.76). We are entitled, from a statement by Smith himself, to assume that he did not publish the essay precisely because he considered it imperfect, but not primarily on stylistic grounds (Corr: Letter 137). Conceivably the source of Smith's dissatisfaction was the contrast between the need felt by the imagination to believe in the real existence of principles connecting phenomena, on the one hand, and the compulsory conclusion reached on rational reflection, that it is impossible to know what "real chains" Nature uses to bind phenomena and that the explanatory principles have a conventional character, on the other hand (Moscovici 1956: 10; Cremaschi 1981; Hetherington 1983; Cremaschi 1984: ch. 1). To sum up: Smith acknowledges that we are under the pull of two opposite views of science. The first is based on the idea of an internal criterion of truth (that can be used, but is at the same time "irrational," depending only on our imagination's needs): the second view is based on a "correspondence" or-rather-a "copy" theory of truth (one that cannot be given up if science is not a mere fancy, myth, or artistic creation, but at the same time one that cannot be used in practice).

Grotius and Montesquieu

Adam Smith's Politics: An Overview

Smith was not able during his lifetime to fulfil the promise he had made to publish a "theory and history of law and government" or "an account of the general principles of law and government"

(TMS VII.iv.37). We know, however that in the last years of his life he had not "altogether abandoned the design" (TMS Advertisement 2). We cannot know exactly how relevant to this project were the papers that Smith, when he was on his death bed, ordered burned. Nonetheless, we are sure he considered *The Wealth of Nations* as a partial execution of this project (TMS Advertisement 2). The discovery of the notes from the *Lectures on jurisprudence* enables us to compare the partial execution with what can be taken as the general scheme of the wider project: The Wealth of Nations covers the second part of the lectures, dedicated to "justice." Our understanding of the original content of the lectures has been greatly improved by the discovery of a second set of lecture notes, less complete in coverage than the one edited by E. Cannan, but more accurate, and of another fragment of notes[2].

The whole of Smith's work is, however, a complex, like a set of Russian dolls. As *The Wealth of Nations* is embedded in the Lectures on Jurisprudence, so the *Lectures* are embedded in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Section 2 of the latter work covers the area that the *Lectures on jurisprudence* explore in a much more analytical way. As the corresponding part of the Lectures is less analytical than the treatment of the same topics in The Wealth of Nations, but gives more hints about the ultimate foundation in the science of human nature of the principles put to work in the theory, so *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* goes one step further toward that central area of Smith's system of ideas, the science of human nature, to which no single work was dedicated. As I shall argue later, the theory of human nature is a point on which both lines of Smith's work, the social theory and the theory of language, art, and science, converge.

Faced with a set of works embedded in each other, in order to reconstruct the contours of Adam Smith's "politics," it may prove useful to inspect carefully the joints connecting the parts. Smith has been held for a long time to be the proponent of a "minimal state" view, one emptying the domain of the political in favor of the bordering domain of economics (see Cropsey 1963; for the opposite view see Winch 1978: 6 ff.). The traditional view is clearly based on an anachronism: the configuration in Smith of the overall social domain, with its ethical, political, and economic subdomains, is very different from the eighteenth-century view, being much nearer to a liberalized or "decentralized" version of the seventeenth-century view of the "practical science," which covered ethics, law, and politics (Cremaschi 1982).

A preliminary terminological clarification is required: Smith describes his doctrines by the terms "natural jurisprudence." "science of a legislator," "political economy," "justice," and "police." "Natural jurisprudence" is the general term that indicates Smith's political doctrines. It is a part of moral philosophy, as explicitly stated in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where natural

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[2] See Meek, Raphael, and Stein 1977: 32-35. The two main sets of notes are published together in Lectures on jurisprudence.

jurisprudence is said to be "of all the sciences by far the most important, but hitherto, perhaps, the least cultivated" (TMS VI.ii Introduction 2). It is "the theory of the rules by which civil governments ought to be directed" (LJ(A) i.1), or the theory of "the general principles which ought to be the foundation of the laws of all nations" (LJ(B) 1; see also TMS VII.iv.37).

Natural jurisprudence is identical with "the science of a legislator" (TMS VI.ii, Introduction 1), that is, a figure opposed to that of the "politician": the legislator is a wise and prudent man inspired by a desire to ameliorate the conditions of his country and is directed by prudence and by well-founded principles (TMS VI.ii.2.16-18). Smith talks of the "science of a legislator, whose deliberations ought to be governed by general principles which are always the same" (WN IV.ii.39). Natural jurisprudence is divided into two parts: the first, or the theory of "justice," concerns rights of the individual. It is not a deductive legal theory but a theory of the "originall or foundation" of rights, and it performs this task by an explication, like the one given by grammar for language, of that "natural justice" dictated to us by our "natural sentiments" (TMS III.6.11; LJ (A) 1.24). In this sense, natural justice is included in the theory of moral sentiments, and yet it is distinguished from a "system of moralls" (LJ(A) L15).

The second part is the doctrine of "police,' which concerns the "inferior parts" of the science of a legislator. Its main object is "cheapness or plenty." It differs markedly from the first part of natural jurisprudence, being based not only on considerations of justice but also on considerations of "expediency." "Political economy" is identical with the second part of natural jurisprudence, or with "police," and it may accordingly be "considered as a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator" (WN IV.a.1).

The best starting point for a reconstruction of the complex system of ethical-political-economic doctrines, as well as of Smiths political theory in a strict sense, is the *pars destruens* of his undertaking, His main critical targets are utilitarianism in ethics and artificialism in politics. The views he wants to criticize are primarily those of Hobbes and Locke, and secondly those of the "rationalist" Natural Law philosophers Grotius and Pufendorf and the "moral sense" Natural Law philosopher Hutcheson. He wants to take over Hume's attempt at finding an alternative "foundation' to Natural Law, other than reason or moral sense, but he adds to Hume's solution a powerful dose of Montesquieu's genetic account of law and of the Scottish evolutionary theory of society.

Hume's attempt had been to avoid recognition of any supernatural origin of natural law or of its origin in any explicit deliberation by human beings while avoiding complete relativism. He had tried to reconstruct the genesis of a set of general rules of justice as a result of pure1y "natural" causes, i.e., individual human actions, though not as an intended result of such actions (THN III.ii.6.5-6). So justice is seen to originate as an unforeseeable result of numberless individual judgments as human beings are "powerfully addicted to general rules" (THN III.ii.9.3), and the rules of justice play the role

of the traditional idea of a Natural Law: "tho' the rules of justice be artificial, they are not arbitrary. Nor is the expression improper to call them Laws of Nature" (THN Ill.ii.1.19).

The difficulty that Smith may have felt with Hume's approach, even if he was highly sympathetic with Hume's project, stems from the dichotomy between an abstract system of general rules and the individual judgments governed by sympathy, The lack of concrete content of the rules of justice seems to make Hume fall back from time to time into a rationalistic view of how the sympathy mechanisms work (Haakonssen 1981: 36).

In Hume's account, a third category between "natural" and "artificial" seems to be required (Haakonssen: 21-26). That is why Hume's "theory of justice" is integrated by Smith with an evolutionary theory of the genesis of government and of law that follows the inspiration of Montesquieu's attempt at discovering the "spirit of laws" and that tries to provide precisely that third intermediate element. Smith's attempt is based on a much more sophisticated theory than Montesquieu's "climatic factors theory." that is, on the four-stage theory that makes the forms of government dependent upon the modes of subsistence (LJ(A) iv.4-55; LJ(B) 19-30). In contrast with Hume's approach, Smith should be able to accomplish the following: to show how, through a continuous process of adaptation, our sympathetic moral judgments continuously select, vis-à-vis changing situations, basic standards of evaluation (applying both lo rules of "justice" and to other virtues) that tend to approximate an ideal standard. These standards can in a sense transcend given customs and laws (TMS VII.iv.36), and they are approximately convergent with this ideal standard because the laws of the functioning and of the evolution of human societies make virtue, and particularly justice, a precondition for the survival of society (TMS IL2.4; II.5.S; VII.iii.l.2; VII.ii.2.13).

The evolution of custom and of moral codes and, most interesting for the present discussion, the institutions of government and systems of law are dependent upon social evolution plus sympathetic judgments. Government did not originate from an original contract, nor was it created in some "state of nature," "as there is no such state existing" (LJ(B) 3; LJ(A) v.114-119; 127-129).

There has been indeed a state of society, the "age of hunters" or "the rude and early state," where society existed with "very little government of any sort" (LJ(A) iv.4). Government arose "naturally" as, in the subsequent ages of history, society grew more and more complex: its sources were the authority spontaneously accorded to older, wiser, more valiant people, the need to protect the property of the rich against the poor, and the direct influence over other people carried by wealth in pre-commercial societies (LJ(A) iv.7-12; iv.22-23).

The origin of law is more recent than the origin of government. The first forms of government, in the age of the shepherds, included only the executive power; later, in the more complex agricultural societies, judicial power was required. Only after the institution of a judicial power did a body of laws gradually come into being (LJ(A) v.122).

The general framework that has been sketched depends on two elements: the ways in which societies function and evolve and the ways in which sympathetic "natural sentiments" are regulated. I shall present first the background social theory presupposed by Smith. In this theory, two dimensions can be distinguished: the first may be qualified as a kind of "proto-functionalism."[3] Society is often presented in functionalist terms, stressing the interdependence of the several social domains and the ability of societies to self-regulate and self-correct their internal processes. In these terms, a "contextual" explanation of the several elements of any given society is available. Such an approach comes to the fore every time Smith adopts the Stoic or Deistic attitude that has been qualified as "contemplative utilitarianism" (Campbell 1977: 528). The importance of the contemplative utilitarian attitude in Smith's system of ideas can hardly be over-estimated, though there is abundant evidence refuting Campbell's view, according to which contemplative utilitarianism is the only alternative to a value-free descriptive attitude Smith is supposed to adopt (Campbell 1971: 51). I shall argue later that the possibility of a third way between the two attitudes is essential to Smith.

According to the proto-functionalist vision, all aspects of human reality – the unintended results of individual actions, the spontaneous self-correction of our natural sentiments, the operation of the mechanisms of political and legal institutions, and a number of other human institutions such as language and exchange – interact with each other and readjust themselves in a continuous selection of appropriate behaviors (TMS I.i.3.6; I.i.4.7; V.2.l0; LJ(B) 326-327; LJ(A) iv.4-55; Languages; LJ(A) vi.44-55; Haakonssen 1981: 54-61). Smith makes the assumption that the interacting elements of the social system cooperate in the long run and in a rough way leading to the prosperity of mankind: "No society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men's conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice l have just now mentioned" (TMS V.2.16; see also TMS II.3.5-6; IIII.2.6-7).

As an obvious consequence of the unintended character of this continuous process of readjustment, the extent to which conscious human action can influence what happens is limited. On the one hand, human beings can become aware of the utility of virtue: virtue contributes to the smoother functioning of the social machine by adding "beneficence" to "justice." The latter, being

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[3] Obviously enough, I am referring to the sociological notion of functionalism, According to its founding father, Malinowski, it is "explanation of ... facts ... by the part they play within the integral system of culture, by the manner in which they are related to each other within the system, and by the manner in which this system is related to the physical surroundings" (quoted by Emmet 1967). The classification of Smith's background social theory as "functionalist" has been made in Campbell (1977: 528). The qualifier "proto," which I have added, is meant to convey the idea that Smiths background social theory, while very far from being a methodologically self-aware statement of such a view, is however a first step in this direction, providing an overall picture of the social system as a multi-level! system of interactions.

4. Such a reactionary move has already been made by Robertson (see Robertson 1983: 482). To my taste he goes a little too far in this direction.

indispensable to the survival of society, is primarily recommended by our natural sentiments, while beneficence, being less indispensable, is suggested to us by "reason and philosophy" (TMS lI.ii.6.1O; VUi.1,1-2). On the other hand, conscious human intervention can achieve cautious reforms of artificial human institutions, such as would not hinder but rather ease the attainment of those goals that Nature would, in the long run, more or less unfailingly reach (TMS VLii.2.16-17). But the role of the "man of government" will be discussed in detail later.

The second dimension of the background social theory is evolutionary. This dimension comes to the fore in the well-known four-stage theory (Meek 1976; Skinner 1982), according to which the forms of government are determined by the "mode of subsistence" of a given society: hunting, stock raising, agriculture, commerce. The political institutions evolve through several stages, thanks to the unintended results of human action. Mankind's natural sentiments, which give origin to the standards of justice accepted in a particular society, evolve according to what it is reasonable to expect from fellow human beings in the circumstances (TMS V.2.7-9).

The primary spring of evolution is a kind of Vicoesque "heterogenesis of ends," or the principle of unintended results, according to which events originate from human action though not from human design (Forbes 1954: 661; Forbes 1977a; Cremaschi 1982: 242-243). Not only can a "natural" functioning of the social whole be acknowledged at any given moment, but also a "natural course of things," i.e., a path of evolution that is roughly unavoidable and that is – or has been up to the present time – a way toward happiness and perfection of mankind (even though a rather transverse way to that end, as the discussion that follows will show).

What helps make this quasi-optimistic vision flexible enough to escape from apriorism is the supplementary idea of the "animal principle": nature will find its own way through the obstacles created by imperfect human institutions and will not wait until they have been removed or perfect human institutions have been established (WN IV.ix.28; II.iii.31).

Both the functionalist dimension and the evolutionary dimension of the theory of society rely, as an ultimate basis, on the very same Humean theory of human nature on which Smith's theory of natural science was based. On the basis of the laws of the mind it is possible to account for phenomena such as the evolution of language, the desire for goods that go beyond the basic necessities also common to animals, the desire to better our condition, the distinction of ranks, the propensity to "truck and barter," the desire to be considered praiseworthy, and finally respect for every institution that is established and old (Languages 41; LJ(A) vi.13; TMS I.iii.2.1; LJ(A) vi.44-157; LJ(A) vi.45; TMS V.1). While imagination plays a primary role in organizing our perception of natural phenomena and also plays an important role in social life, the more complex mechanism of sympathy (nevertheless rooted in imagination, being based on the ability to make an imaginary switch of situations) rules over social interaction. That may explain why the construction of systems in natural philosophy has

been a necessity felt from the very beginning by the mind, in order to overcome apparent disorder (HA IV.8-12; WN V.i.f.25), while disorder in social life has always been felt on a small scale and has been tackled through sympathetic readjustments of moral sentiments.

Systems in moral philosophy come only at a later stage (TM5 VII.ii.4.14; WN V.i.f.25; Haakonssen 1981: 79-82). A proviso should be made: as natural philosophy is ultimately dependent on the principles of the mind, but this dependence is limited by the unbridgeable gap between the principles of the mind and the real principles of nature, so the dependence of "moral philosophy" on the principles of the mind is limited by the gap between the conscious aims of human beings and the unintended results they unconsciously produce.

Mention has been made of the fact that natural jurisprudence consists of two parts: "justice" and "police." The part on justice can be viewed as directly belonging to the theory of moral sentiments; it is the part of the theory ·of moral sentiments that deals with a virtue more necessary than any other to the existence of society that can be treated in a much more exact way. Justice is sharply contrasted with benevolence: the former may subsist between rational egoists (TMS ll.ii.3.2). At the root of justice lies resentment (TMS II.ii.1.4), which may in several instances be the principle regulating the proper use of violence (TMS II.ii.1.8-9). "Natural justice" is accordingly a standard not derived from reason but dictated by natural sentiments. Its basic character for social life is dependent on the importance of negative, as contrasted with positive, virtues, Pain and misery are felt more pungently than pleasure and happiness: sympathy with these negative feelings is accordingly much stronger (TMS I.iii; III.2.15). The role of resentment in founding the sense of justice is derived from this characteristic of sympathy (LJ(A) ii.89-90; TMS II.ii.1-9). The whole doctrine of justice is accordingly an explication and systematization of criteria dictated by our "natural sentiments." The criteria of justice are not derived from reason in any of the possible senses: neither by deduction from a cosmic *lex aeterna*, nor by contractualistic fiction, nor by utilitarian considerations.

Utilitarian considerations of a sort are admissible more for speculative than for practical purposes and are the business of philosophers, not of men of action, or they may be appealed to in some cases for rhetorical or didactic purposes, as a partial remedy for the tearing of the natural sense of justice. Human beings may approve of a certain institution also because of its utility in view of the happiness and perfection of human life, but only post factum, once the institution has been accepted and approved by the passions and sentiments of men (LJ(A) v.119-122; Campbell 1977: 528- 529; Haakonssen 1981: 73). "Natural justice," as a consequence, is clearly for Smith a form of Natural Law, that is, a theory of "the general principles which ought to run through and be the foundation of the laws of all nations" (TMS VII.iv.37). The normative function of natural jurisprudence is beyond any doubt; its difference from seventeenth-century Natural Law lies rather

in its non-rationalistic foundation, Smith rules out an original law of nature as a fixed legal code that could be deduced by reason or learned by experience. In different societies positive laws are judged against the standard provided by "natural justice" or by the "natural sentiments" of mankind, These sentiments, regulated by sympathy and by the impartial spectator, are not completely universal and metahistorical (LJ(A) i.24; ii.75; ii.162; i.36; HA3; TMS l.i.1). This is a central feature that cannot be given up in the economy of Smith's system, But the troubles it causes to the system have been often underestimated (as by Haakonssen 1981: 101-102). The variability of natural sentiments is necessary to avoid an aprioristic and ahistorical approach; they recognize human actions as appropriate in different ways according to the historical context, but they may be "corrupted" by fashion and by a few innate tendencies of human imagination (TMS V.ii). While the normative content of Smith's theory of justice can be ascribed, in terms of the history of the climates of opinion, to the "skeptical Whig" and to the "civic humanist" traditions, it fits nonetheless significantly into the theoretical framework provided by Smiths peculiar version of Natural Law. The basic value for Smith seems to be "personal liberty":

The great source of both the misery and disorders of human life, seems to arise from over-rating the difference between one permanent situation and another, Avarice over-rates the differences between poverty and riches. Except the frivolous pleasures of vanity and superiority, we may find, in the most humble station, where there is only personal liberty every other which the most exalted can afford. (TMS llL3.31).

The predominance of "personal liberty" seems to be related to a Stoical underrating of the possibilities of human happiness; the real differences between the happiness that can be afforded by the different "stations" in life is greatly emphasized by the imagination. The condition of the beggar and that of the king are not greatly different (TMS IV1.10; I.iii.2.2). The primary object of the "science of a legislator" is accordingly not so much happiness, but rather "justice" or "rights." Security is a precondition for making justice possible. If, on the one hand, the promotion of happiness cannot be the real task of a legislator, on the other, the primary aim of personal freedom must not be mistaken for the different target of "political freedom."

This last term refers to the participation of citizens in the government of the commonwealth. Smith holds "political freedom" to be highly desirable, but he stresses that personal freedom may be independent of it: "civilized monarchies," where law and order rule, can afford a high degree of personal freedom (WN V.iii.a.15-16; III.iv.4). Conversely, the two kinds of freedom may be in conflict, as the case of slavery shows; the lot of a slave is generally better under despotic governments, where the sovereign can interfere with the affairs of the slave owners, than under

republican governments, where the holders of political power are the very same citizens who own slaves (Forbes 1977a; Winch 1978: ch.2).

The decisive factor in giving priority to the more limited aim of "personal liberty" over the more ambitious aim of "political liberty," and in declaring the most ambitious aim of "public happiness" almost totally delusory, is the primacy of negative virtues as foundations of rights and justice, as stated earlier. From this priority, the typically liberal distinction is between the public sphere, the proper object of political and legal regulations, and the sphere of the conscience, which must be safeguarded against interference from a public authority (TMS II.iii.3.2). Some positive tasks are unavoidable for the "civil magistrate": "he may prescribe rules... which not only prohibit mutual injuries among fellow-citizens but command mutual good offices to a certain degree" (TMS II.ii.1.8). But in prescribing these very rules, he must be as careful as possible not to infringe upon the liberty of individuals (TMS II.ii.1.8).

Even though Smith adheres to "republicanism" on principle (Forbes 1977a; Winch 1978: ch.2), the extent to which he commits himself to the practicability of republican principles is limited by the negative sympathetic foundation of rights and justice. He contrasts the "Whig" principle of "utility" as a foundation of government with the "Tory" principle of "authority," making the prevalence of one principle dependent on historical circumstances of a given society (LJ(A) v.119-124; v. 129-132). It is impossible to base the legitimacy of governments solely on utility, Le" on the teachings of "Reason and Philosophy" (TMS I.iii.2.3) because of the sentimentalist foundation of moral judgments, including judgments on justice, In the same line of argument is the refusal of utopias (WN V.iii.68; IV.ii.43), the refusal of attempts to achieve perfect systems of social reform by "imperial and royal reformers" (TMS VI.ii.12-18), and the refusal of seeing perfect happiness as a feasible aim of government (TMS VI.ii.2.17). "Republicanism" in principle – apart from questions about the evolution of Smith's ideas, which will be dealt with later – is some kind of ultimate standard that is however considered to be of limited use in practice.

What institution of government could tend so much to promote the happiness of mankind as the general prevalence of wisdom and virtue? All government is but an imperfect remedy for the deficiency of these (TMS IV.ii.1).

The problems of politics are to be stated primarily in terms of constitutional machinery precisely because there are too few reasons to lay one's bet on moral progress. The scope of Smith's pessimism is a central point, requiring careful examination.

Coming to Smith's diagnosis of the historical moment, his main concern can be acknowledged to be the relation between the progress of civilization and the progress of liberty. His diagnosis is that the course of European history has led to a highly contingent and precarious correspondence between

the progress of "opulence" and the progress of "liberty" both in "republican" governments (such as England) and in "civilized monarchies" (such as France) (WN III.iii.9: III.iv.4; II.i.3; III.iii.5; Forbes 1977a; Winch 1978: ch.4). The last point that needs a mention in this overview is the nature and scope of political action and discourse. The science of a legislator is wider in scope than just "justice": it includes political economy and other parts based on the principle of "expediency," such as "security". Yet the only normative basis for the science of a legislator lies in "natural justice" (Haakonssen 1981: 96-97). As both Utopianism and a Rousseauvian kind of democracy are discarded, the remainder of the science of CI legislator can only be based on a prudent calculus (where "prudence" is understood in much poorer terms than in the Aristotelian tradition).

The action of the "man of government" (not of the individual citizen. who is left, after all, to his everyday business, regulated by self-interest and natural justice) may be directed mainly at smoothing the natural course of things; not even the plain and evident "system of natural liberty," dictated in political economy by the natural sense of justice and confirmed by utilitarian considerations, should be applied without some Imitation (WN IV.ii.43). Apart from leaving the spontaneous market mechanisms reasonably free in their domain, the man of government can imitate the results of market mechanisms in other domains such as defence, justice, and education (WN V; Robertson 1983: 70). Last of all, the man of government should be aware of the unexpected counter-effects a highly artificial intervention may provoke, and needs to act carefully, to take into account existing conditions, rooted traditions and institutions, and even to come to terms with prejudice when he cannot overcome it, thus avoiding the loss of the second best while trying too hard to obtain the best (TMS Vl.ii.2.16).

The Epicenters of Society

The peculiar theoretical framework outlined gives two main results in Smith's work. The first is a decentralization of the political order that gives origin to several partial orders: the first specialized social science, namely political economy, wins autonomy from the political discourse, The second result is a weakening of the normative strength of the order: the several partially autonomous orders all have a "weak" kind of normativity.

Let us start with the first of these results. Smith owes much of his fame to the discovery of the principle of unintended results. Ironically, his main theoretical achievement might be described as a highly unintended result: Smith started with the intention of radically reforming the "science of natural law," and ended as the founder of a "new science." Recent contributions in the history of ideas have revised the standard image of Smith as the turning point of the deflection of classical political philosophy into economic science (for this image see Cropsey 1963), and have tried to restore a balanced relationship between natural jurisprudence and political economy (Winch 1978: 6 ff.). However, as long as the main results of this restoration are not questioned, namely, that

political economy for Smith is inherently a part of natural jurisprudence, and that Book V of The Wealth of Nations is not a mere addendum to that work, a few words may be said against the currently fashionable image of Smith as a contemporary of Machiavelli and a very remote ancestor of Ricardo.! Smith is acknowledged as having realized that the characteristics of modern society need to be dealt with on several levels (Dippel 1981: 99-100). I stress that it would be extremely naive to describe this achievement in terms of a discovery of the effects of social differentiation in progress; Smith describes and makes sense of a number of aspects of complex modern society precisely because he is in a position to make a theoretical move toward a subdivision-reaggregation of the social whole, resulting in a description of a cluster of phenomena as a new unified domain: the national economy. Not arbitrarily, Smith's achievement in The Wealth of Nations can be compared with the ancient proponents of the system of epicentres as reconstructed in "The History of Astronomy":

by supposing, that in the solidity of the Sphere of each of the Five Planets there was formed another little Sphere, called an Epicycle … in the same manner as we might suppose a little wheel enclosed within the outer circle of a great wheel … Those philosophers transported themselves, in fancy, to the centres of these imaginary Circles, and took pleasure in surveying from thence, all those fantastical motions, arranged, according to that harmony and order, which it had been the end of all their researches to bestow upon them. (HA IV.10-13)

The author of "The History of Astronomy" may have finally come to terms with the apparent disorder of social lite that the highly unified order of the rationalistic Natural Law was not able to reduce lo order, by supposing a little wheel, that is, the order of the market, enclosed within the outer circle of the great wheel of social order.

The theory presented in *The Wealth of Nations* relates to a domain whose borders are not identical with those of the domains to which it is the heir, It includes a value theory like the Lockean theory of property, a theory of equilibrium mechanisms like the Mercantilist theories of foreign trade, a theory of a natural order of production, a theory of circulation, and a theory of productive and unproductive labor like the Physiocrats' theory of the *ordre naturel des sociétés*. Most interesting, it includes a theory of gravitation like that of Newton's natural philosophy. The difference with the previous cases is that the domain of phenomena to which the theoretical mechanism applies is altogether different (Jensen 1976; Worland 1976; Lowry 1974; Cremaschi 1981).

A thesis that I have discussed extensively in earlier works is that the case of the transfer of one theoretical entity from natural to moral philosophy is not radically different in its nature from cases where the transfer is from a more limited (and partially not overlapping) domain to a newly defined domain (Cremaschi 1981; Cremaschi 1984: ch.4). Smith's theoretical revolution thus produces the new notion of "national economy," a notion that includes more than any of the definitions of the domains of ancestor-discourses (the right to property and the just price, commerce, the natural physical and moral order of societies): at the same time it includes less than any of these definitions,

as it discards characteristics that turn out to be irrelevant, and severs or loosens links with other parts of the social whole (Cremaschi 1986).

A second, parallel feature of Smith's revolution is the shift in the understanding of the "laws" included in the theory. This can be described as a shift from a deductively normative concept of laws to a quasi-empirical and weakly normative concept of laws, It is this shift that gives to Smith's theory- as contrasted with the Physiocrats' discovery of a natural and essential order of societies-e-the character of a scientific Galilean theory. On the other hand, these are not the purely descriptive laws of the logical empiricist reading of Smith (e.g., Bittermann 1940). A central feature of the Classical paradigm, up to the time of the Marginalist revolution, will be the immediately applied and normative consequences of its pure scientific laws (Cremaschi 1986).

The most powerful enabling factor behind this twofold revolution is the "Galilean break" made by Smith: he understands moral philosophy, in the spirit of Hume's "Moral Newtonianism,' as a theoretical enterprise aimed not at establishing definitions of essences, but rather at introducing non- ultimate hypotheses to "save the phenomena" (THN I Introduction: Cremaschi 1981; Cremaschi 1984: ch.3). It is the Galilean break that makes it possible to conceive of several coexisting partial orders (versus the unitary order of rationalistic Natural Law), and it is this break that allows for an understanding of these several orders as weakly normative.

It is pointless lo recall how such an attitude enabled Smith's political economy to gain much more empirical content than its ancestor-discourses. It is important instead to suggest that this Galilean break was directly influenced by, or at least very similar to, the image of Newtonian natural science offered by "The History of Astronomy." The central feature of the Newtonian epistemology, Le" the separation of the ultimate principles of reality from the intermediate principles of the theory, lies at the core of Smith's revolution in political economy, This central feature was actually a sore point, but in political economy it was also the pivotal point around which a powerful new theoretical system revolved.

Natural Justice, Prejudice, and corruption

The Galilean break – with all its unresolved epistemological dilemmas – proved highly productive in the construction of the first specialized social science. This break was at the core of Smith's attempt at formulating a weaker system of Natural Law. In this attempt, the dilemmas of the Galilean break come more urgently to the fore and can be held eventually responsible for Smith's political disenchantment, for a hopelessly pessimistic diagnosis of the development of civilization, for a discouraging appreciation of the limits of political l action and – most important – for the admission of an unbreakable circular connection between "natural sentiments" and the "natural course of

things" that leaves no appeal against evil in history and that leads to a reluctant but resigned surrender to prejudice, oppression, and injustice.

A few words are in order about the development of Smith's attitude. An established result of Smith's scholarship is the acknowledgement of a progressive shift of the hub of Smith's "skeptical Whiggism" from the "Whig" term to the "skeptical" term (Mizuta 1975; Forbes 1977a: 181-182). Thus, the young lecturer who incidentally still talks of "natural reason" (LJ(A) LI; ii.29; i.24; i.54; i.26; ii.32) as a basis for valuation raises his voice much louder against "so much oppressive inequality" (ED 5) of commercial society than the old writer of the additions to the sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Along the same line, confidence in the goodness of "natural sentiments" vanished as the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was replaced by subsequent editions (TMS III.2.30 ff.: I.iii.3; Mizuta 1975: 127-129). It was not merely a matter of individual psychology but rather of the general climate of ideas. But the direction of Smith's evolution, even if viewed against the background of the course of development of this climate of ideas, still appears as some sort of compelled outcome of some basic aporias of his system of ideas. It is on these aporias rather than on the changing opinions that I will focus on.

Highly valuable reconstructions have been made in the recent literature of Smith's partially pessimistic diagnosis concerning the evolution of modern British society, of his concern with "corruption" or with the decadence of "virtue," of his partly cyc1ical vision of the history of political institutions, of his concern – even though with partially different conclusions from Hume's – with the risks of standing armies and even more of growing public debt (Salvucci 1966: ch. 1: Pocock 1975: 504-505; Winch 1978: chs. 4 and 6). An even more important aspect that has been highlighted is his concern about the losses implied by civilization: the division of labor carries with it mental mutilation of the workers, and a loss of martial virtue and of civic spirit is consequent, The urbanization of growing masses carries with it the severing of the links that grant social control over individuals and consequently good morals, The damages of the division of labor and of urbanization carry with them that splenetic spirit that may favor "enthusiasm" (Cropsey 1957: 96 ff.; Cropsey 1963: 88-93; Reisman 1976: 63 ff.; Winch 1978: 97- 99; 113-120). In terms of political doctrines, such developments render impossible any recourse to civic spirit, understood in the civic humanist tradition: the merchants are the only group able to understand the interests of society, but this group is the only one whose interests are contrary to those of the whole (Robertson 1983: 460-465). Derived from the above diagnosis is Smith's choice of constitutional engineering, understood as a choice of the second best if contrasted with the hope of preserving civic virtue from corruption. The thesis I argue for is that the general framework of the diagnosis and the chosen strategy are determined not only by a crude description of "facts," but to a high degree by Smith's theoretical premises on unintended results, natural sentiments, self-interest, and passions.

A second question that may bring us closer to the central question concerns the limits Smith poses to political discourse. In its stricter sense (as contrasted with the overall background social theory) political discourse has a rather limited scope in comparison with the scope of the seventeenth-century Natural Law "politics" or with Rousseau's "democratic" understanding of politics. Natural jurisprudence is primarily concerned with "natural justice," a negative virtue, and when it is concerned with "police" it is limited to a strategy of the second-best, exactly because the big job is done-s-if not in the best way, at least better than any way available to us- by functionalist readjustments of the social whole and by historical evolution, The action of the "man of government" in the complex commercial society may help solve problems of social integration on some of the several levels of this complex society (defence, justice, education) in a highly artificial way, very far from an unduly extended laissez-faire attitude, but imitating solutions that are already naturally offered by the development of commercial society, such as division of labor and market mechanisms (Robertson 1984: 469-471). The "legislator," Smith's figure of ideal politician, is very different from the mythical figures of founding fathers that enchanted Rousseau: the legislator may be inspired by the principle of "utility" to better the institutions of his country, but his leading principle must be prudence, understood in very non-Aristotelian terms. The figure of the legislator is described in the sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in highly Burkean terms:

He may re-establish and improve the constitution, and from the very doubtful and ambiguous character of the leader of a party, he may assume the greatest and noblest of all characters, that of the reformer and legislator of a great state; and, by the wisdom of his institutions, secure the internal tranquility and happiness of his fellow citizens for many succeeding generations . . . though he should consider some of them [the established powers and privileges] 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 ... 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. (TMS VI.ii.2.14-16)

The biggest danger in politics seems to be the "spirit of system," displayed by reformers who produce every kind of unforeseeable result while trying to achieve an abstract rational order (TMS VI.ii.2.17).

The two preceding points could not be the final proof of any kind of aporia in Smith's system of ideas. The hypothesis could be put forth at most of an "elective affinity" between such diagnoses and some latent stalemate of Smiths thinking. The third point I shall develop is what I would like to name the predicament of nature. While adding a few elements to the general picture of Smith's

pessimistic attitude, it brings to the fore the latent aporias of his political] thought and reveals how they are closely linked with the Galilean break.

The ultimate regulative criterion came to Smith from contemplative utilitarianism, the attitude suggested by Reason and philosophy, the one that may encourage the pursuit of virtue and wisdom in every case in which the uninstructed natural sentiments are not enough. It is important to recall that contemplative utilitarianism is not some kind of attitude for Sundays, to be contrasted with an empirical survey of actual behaviors, to which we should have recourse on weekdays (as suggested by Campbell 1971: 51-52; 219). The "natural sentiments" provide a second and more effective basis for normativity, and there is a constant interaction between the first and the second basis, The second basis holds to the extent that it is a more or less truthful approximation of the first (Cremaschi 1984: ch. 2: Haakonssen 1981: 135-153). Smith's project of a natural jurisprudence is precisely the project of a renewed Natural Law free of the main shortcomings of its rationalistic versions, primarily the lack of empirical content.

Within this context, the notion of nature to which this natural law refers is different from the seventeenth-century notion of nature: a typical feature of the eighteenth-century notion, present in Smith, is the opposition between Reason and nature. The eighteenth-century notion of nature has long been mocked as lacking in consistency, or it has been considered too vague and too obscure to be of any interest to philosophers. What has been overlooked, however, is the meaningfulness this idea recovers when put into the context of the intellectual strategy of eighteenth-century philosophers such as Smith (Preti 1957: 37-43). The idea of nature seems necessary for Smith to formulate a research program-it is the bridge between two poles, the individual mind and reality-in-itself, The following discussion will try to show how this research strategy is essential both for natural science and for political theory, Within the framework of the project of a weaker Natural Law, Smith discovers mechanisms of selection of behaviors useful to the preservation of society (Haakonssen 1981: 67-74). It is important to stress that the individual mechanisms do not fit into a general functionalist empirical theory of society, but that their discovery helps in the foundation of such a normative-empirical discourse as the part on "justice" of natural jurisprudence. A general functionalist view of society emerges only at a different level, i.e., of that "dogmatic" pre-comprehension of social reality offered to the contemplative utilitarian. It is this difference from twentieth-century sociology that makes the use of a term such as "proto-functionalism" appropriate. It is precisely because "natural justice" is a standard of judgment that needs to be explicated by a "grammar" of justice, i.e., by "natural jurisprudence" (TMS III.6.11), rather than the subject matter of a sociological explanation, that a number of shortcomings cannot be carelessly dealt with as mere diagnoses, made by Smith, of what is going on, since they are decisive difficulties in which his own system of ideas is caught.

The difficulties, well known to Smith scholars, are the following. First, the natural sense of justice is unavoidably blended with prejudice: the wealthier and more powerful people command our sympathy: we feel much more strongly about the smallest inconvenience to ourselves and our closest relations than about the biggest disaster that may happen to very distant people; and most of all, custom rules to such an extent over our natural sentiments that every law and institution that is old commands respect regardless of whether it is just (TMS ll.ii.3-4; VI.iL3.6; ry.2.14; Vl.ii.2.11-18).

Second, human rapacity and oppressive inequality are "natural" in a sense that it is difficult to distinguish from the sense in which natural sentiments are "natural." There is a "natural wish to dominate" that belongs among the basic human passions, As a consequence, such institutions as slavery still represent, in Smith's eyes, more the norm than the exception (LJ(A) iii.130; WN III.ii.10; IV.vii.b.53-56).

Third, solutions outlive their usefulness. The most striking case was the survival of infanticide in classic societies, when the hardship was over that could have justified such a cruel practice in primitive societies (TMS II.2.14- 16).

Given the last difficulty, the thesis of the generally beneficial character of the mechanisms of selection of appropriate behavior is scant comfort and can hardly guarantee goodness of our unreflected valuations, as it still could for a confident Deist such as 'Smith's teacher Hutcheson. The acknowledgement of these difficulties is much more than a description of contradictions existing in reality: it constitutes a stalemate of Smiths thinking. The term "nature," in the exertion of providing a weaker and non-vacuous basis for normativity, is so twisted that a misplaced circular path arises between "natural sentiments" and "the natural course of things." The gap between the ultimate order and the Machiavellian *verità effettuale* cannot be solidly filled by our variable and corruptible "natural sentiments" (Preti 1957: 171-172).

To sum up: Smith tries to keep the main idea of Natural Law philosophy, namely the idea of a law preceding positive law, while trying to abandon the aprioristic approach of Natural Law philosophers, He departs from them, accepting the Galilean break made by Montesquieu, not to deduce the right system of law, but rather to reconstruct the genesis of the several systems of law. Within the framework provided by this approach, the possibility of natural law is rescued via Hutcheson's and Hume's idea of moral sentiment, The "natural sentiments" of mankind should pave a midway between the ideal order of reality of the contemplative utilitarian attitude and the purely factual order of the "natural course of things." Natural sentiments, or natural justice, are the tool in a desperate attempt to stop the run from Natural Law to Historicism at some intermediate point. The attempt is doomed to failure because, in the exertion of gaining enough empirical content not

to fall back into the nature of rationalistic Natural Law philosophy, what is natural for Smith ends up with appearing as prejudice and whim, as arbitrary as the positive laws it was called forth to judge. The recognition of some kind of unbridgeable gap between an ever farther off ultimate order and the order according to which human beings actually feel and behave would have probably been the last word of Smiths unwritten work on natural jurisprudence.

The great judge of the world, has, for the wisest reasons, thought proper to interpose, between the weak eye of human reason, and the throne of his eternal justice, a degree of obscurity and darkness.... If those infinite rewards and punishments, which the Almighty has prepared for those who obey or transgress his will, were perceived as distinctly as we foresee the frivolous and temporary retaliations which we may expect from one another, the weakness of human nature... could no longer attend to the little affairs of this world; and it is absolutely impossible that the business of society could have been carried out, (TMS (2nd ed.) III.2.31).

Truth, Virtue, and the Unbridgeable Gap

It was a long time ago that the seventeenth century was believed to be the age of a self-confident and incurably optimistic Enlightenment. The importance of historical pessimism in seventeenth-century thought is now universally acknowledged (Günther 1984). I would like to establish a link between this pessimistic climate of opinion and the topic of the crisis of knowledge recognizable in Hume's Treatise and Smith's "History of Astronomy." As for Hume, the suggestion has been made that the topic of the crisis of knowledge plays a central role in the *Treatise*, a role that anticipates Husserl's *Krisis* (Davie 1977: 71). I shall suggest that Smith not only shows the same awareness of the crisis of the original promises of the "new science," but also that this awareness is connected with the feeling of the crisis of a civilization, to be acknowledged both in the history of science and in the history of civil society that has carried along "free governments." The factors felt as conflicting in the two fields are, I think, analogous in an important sense. In both domains, Smith's thinking is under the spell of Cartesian presuppositions that it cannot ful1y overcome. How do these presuppositions generate the conflict in the two domains?

Adam Smith, in his reconstruction of the history of astronomy, concludes that we are irresistibly drawn to view the Newtonian system as the discovery of truth concerning reality. This seems to stem from an ineluctable tendency of the imagination. The needs of our imagination compel us to take for granted the possibility of theoretical progress, i.e., of a greater "truth" or closer correspondence to reality for each successive theory. They compel us to take for granted that theory change is rational, that it does not depend on pure fashion. Strictly speaking, the criteria according to which a theory is judged better than another one cannot provide any guarantee regarding its

truth as *adaequatio*. The best theory connects the phenomena in a better way (but that implies only that it is an ingenious device, not that it reflects reality) or extends a hypothesis from a familiar domain to a new one (but that may be merely the result of an arbitrary demand of our imagination, and the choice of the hypothesis to be used can depend entirely on custom).

Smith is consequently forced to state that the only possible conclusion of a critical examination of our theories on nature is that even the Newtonian system is an imaginary machine: this imaginary machine satisfies to the utmost degree the requirements of the human mind, but that is no guarantee that the theory represents the "real chains used by Nature to connect the phenomena." The criteria of simplicity, familiarity, coherence, and comprehensiveness are not strictly criteria of truth of the theories or criteria of the rationality of theory change. These criteria are, in a sense, arbitrary, as they depend on some laws of the mind that have nothing in common with the laws of reality.

The general metaphysical presuppositions of Humean thought, shared by Smith, are the eventual reason for this aporetic status of the criteria of truth and of theoretical progress. In the critical literature on Hume it is generally accepted that Hume's main unchallenged presuppositions, which determine his skeptical-naturalistic outcome, are basically identical with the presuppositions shared by the mainstream of modern thought, and first of all, by Descartes: the presupposed separation of *res cogitans* from *res extensa*, the absolute distinction between the order of ideas and the order of reality, the atomistic nature of reality and of ideas, and possibly solipsism (N. K. Smith 1941: 559; Dal Pra 1967: 78-88). The historian of science Adam Smith, while leaving his "History of Astronomy" unfinished, apparently felt – two centuries before the crisis of the "standard view" – that it was impossible to account for the historical phenomenon "science" as pre-comprehended by our culture, so far as the Cartesian presuppositions are accepted, The separation of the order of ideas from the order of things and the atomistic nature of phenomena (which makes the individual phenomenon unintelligible) are presuppositions that make it impossible to acknowledge any kind of rationality in the history of science, or to formulate an idea of the truth of scientific theories that makes sense (Bernstein 1983: 51-58).

Let us compare now the crisis of science with the crisis of politics. All the main modern thinkers started as defenders of the rights of the individual and ended with a vindication of the rights of the collective, of the state, and of realpolitik over the individual. That may be the case for Smith as well: the biographical pattern, moving in the direction of an increasingly skeptical and decreasingly whiggish attitude, may serve as a parable for logical developments of ideas, and the inability to write the "history and theory of law and government" may be the symptom of a deeply felt trouble, like the inability to write a conclusion to the "History of Astronomy." The case of Adam Smith's natural

jurisprudence may be considered an example of the failure of modern liberal political thought to fulfil the task it had assigned himself (Unger 1975: 83-100).

At the core of the predicament of Smith's political I thought is the contradiction between the need he feels to keep a gap between the ultimate order of reality and the weaker order of "natural sentiments." and the need to postulate a convergence between the two orders that can be asserted only dogmatically. Any of the available solutions to the contradiction would make the self-imposed task impossible: it would lead back to rationalistic Natural Law if the gap were filled, or it would head toward Historicism, Legal Positivism, and "Political Science" if the mysterious convergence between the two orders were wiped out. In no case would natural jurisprudence or the science of the principles upon which civil governments ought to be directed, still be possible. The object of modern rationalistic Natural Law, namely a universal basis for rights, could not be provided in non-vacuous terms by Rationalism. The opposite attempt, carried out by Smith in sentimentalist terms, was unable to provide that basis in universal and necessary terms.

Smith's attempt was .doomed to failure because of the logical, anthropological, and ontological presuppositions he shared with Rationalism: a sharp distinction between essence and phenomena, which leaves the gap open between the ultimate order and the actual course of things; atomism, which makes the social wholes totally heterogeneous from individuals: an understanding of reason in analytic-instrumental terms, which makes practical rationality impossible in principle and leaves the natural sentiments in the condition of an empirical fact, called on to fulfil the impossible task of providing a basis for normativity.

It appears that in Smith's system of ideas, the main element common to science and politics is the "crisis." In both domains, the source of the antinomies seems to be the set of basic Cartesian presuppositions shared by the mainstream of modern thought. The antinomies cannot be adequately explored because of the inability of Smith and of eighteenth-century thought to focus on this common background of hidden premises.

An important part of twentieth-century thought, ranging from the Pragmatist thinkers to the later Wittgenstein, to Hermeneutics, and to the Frankfurt School, can be interpreted as a massive critique of Cartesianism, Questions of radical redefinition of both scientific and political rationality are on the agenda (Bernstein 1983: 16-20). The exploration of one chapter of the vicissitudes of Cartesianism in science and in politics may prove useful to the present discussion.

The Crisis of Cartesian Reason

To start with, it can be suggested that there is indeed a link between Smith's political theory and his epistemology, The link can be described as a direct influence of the image of the right method –

presented in "The History of Astronomy," that is, the image of Newtonian natural science, or of what seemed to be the best performance of human reason up to Smith's time – on his theorizing in the field of natural jurisprudence. The consequences of this methodological influence are twofold: first, Smith fights the "spirit of system," trying to develop a political l theory free from that apriorism typical of the theories of Locke, Hobbes, Grotius, and Pufendorf. Second, Smith dismisses a unitary (descriptive and normative) order of society and brings in several different coexisting orders: his main achievement in this direction is the discovery of the (relatively) autonomous self-regulating order of the market.

A second and more interesting suggestion is based on the answer to a somewhat different question: besides the direct link between epistemology and politics, is there some kind of analogical relationship between Smith's image of science and his image of politics? Smith's account of science is forced to maintain two contradictory views of scientific truth, namely an internal psychological criterion, and an external "copy" criterion of truth. In a strikingly similar way, Smith's politics cannot give up two contradictory demands, namely the need to appeal to some kind of natural law, preceding the several positive laws and based on the natural sentiments of mankind, and the acknowledgement that the natural sentiments are not metahistorical and universal, but are dependent on social circumstances, on innate tendencies of human imagination, on deeply rooted traditions, on ignorance and prejudice. In both fields, the human mind is the victim of an unavoidable, but at the same time necessary, deception. I think that what happens behind the scenes, and is responsible for this similarity, is that Smith is facing one and the same challenge in both fields, namely, he is trying to limit the consequences of the acknowledged impossibility to grasp the "order of reality" or "reason in itself," as the Rationalists still felt able to do. The substitute Smith offers is the postulate of an "order in the mind" as far as the knowledge of nature is concerned and the postulate of a reasonable (as contrasted with rational) "order of Nature" as far as social reality is concerned. These two orders are somehow of a "weaker" kind, being supposed to portray the ultimate order approximately, in a rather mysterious way. It is possible to make sense of this double move by Smith only if it is viewed as a way of dealing with the crisis of the solution that Rationalism had provided for the tasks or explaining reality and of giving a foundation to norms.

Here it must be stressed once more – against all attempts to modernize Smith through a radical translation of his theories into contemporary terms – that the idea of nature is, in this context, more essential than ever: it provides a buffer between Reason in reality and Reason in the mind, The notion of nature is appealed to in order to fulfil the dual tasks of formulating explanations and of establishing norms. This dependency on the laws of human nature or on the laws of the mind seems to confer on our theories on nature something more than purely instrumental value and to

the valuations dictated by natural sentiments a status different from that of mere facts to be explained by sociological theory.

I have already suggested that the eighteenth-century idea of nature needs to be appreciated in terms of the intellectual strategies it was called forth to serve. Both in politics and natural science "nature" seems for Smith a possible bridge between two poles, the individual mind and the ultimate order of reality, Seventeenth-century Rationalism felt no need for a bridge or buffer, as there was an apparent continuity between reason in the individual mind and Reason with which reality is informed or that is the essence of reality. The idea of nature, in its typical eighteenth-century connotation, is indispensable for Smith to formulate his research program, one that might possibly find a third way for natural science between aprioristic essentialism and instrumentalism, and a third way for politics between a deductivist Natural Law philosophy and a Hobbesian or Mandevillian cynical attitude (Forbes 1977b: 43-44; Preti 1957: 37-43).

The continuation of the story, after Smith, is well known: in nineteenth-century politics, the idea of nature was to be replaced by the apparently much more self-evident idea of history or – on the opposite front – an Archimedean point would be sought in a noumenal realm of values, sharply contrasted with the empirical realm of facts. In nineteenth-century natural science, "Humean" positivism was to establish itself, resting on skeptical foundations in the theory of knowledge, but at the same time able to overlook these foundations while appealing to the undoubted success of science in the predictive control of facts, The destinies of science and of politics were to move further and further apart as the nice dual seventeenth-century framework (natural philosophy vs moral philosophy) was replaced by an increasingly complex map of knowledge.

The crisis of reason of the eighteenth century, appearing in a striking way in Hume's Treatise, and developed in some of its consequences in Smith's writings, raises a number of questions that twentieth-century thought is still trying to answer. This is the crisis of unitary Cartesian Reason. Its two aspects, namely the crisis of natural science and the crisis of politics, appear as parallel exactly because they are one stage of a run that, starting from the unitary Reason of Rationalism, leads to the present proliferation of "reasons." In the culture of the twentieth century, characterized by a proliferation of different languages, bodies of knowledge, and practices, each with its own epistemological status, it would be hard to find one science to be contrasted with one politics.

The task still to be carried out, beyond the contributions of the later Wittgenstein, of Pragmatism, of Hermeneutics, and of the Frankfurt School, is both highly destructive and creative: it is the task of eliminating the last vestiges of Cartesianism that still hinder an adequate self-understanding of the markedly differentiated forms of rational practice of our culture (Bernstein 1983: 16-27). Science and politics will appear then as two out of several rational practices, and the problem of the relationship between science and politics will be solved, or rather dissolved.

Acknowledgments

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