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ANDREAS ORTMANN - BENOÎT WALRAEVENS, *Adam Smith's System. A Re-Interpretation Inspired by Smith's Lectures on Rhetoric, Game Theory, and Conjectural History*, Cham (SW), Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. xiv + 254. ISBN: 978-3-030-99703-8 e-book ISBN: 978-3-030-99704-5

The authors want to offer a 'new interpretation of Adam Smith's system of thought'. Furthermore, they intend to prove the coherence of such a system by uncovering its 'deep structure' consisting of 'three reasoning routines and a meta-reasoning routine' which emerged 'in Smith's early research on the principles of the human mind'.

Let us start with chapter 2, the book's best chapter. It develops persuasively the suggestion advanced by Pack and Fleischacker that *WN* is at once a 'treatise and a tract', that it includes parts where the author deployed didactic discourse and parts where he followed one of the two methods of oratorical persuasion: the Socratic method, by which to lead a hostile audience step by step to undesired conclusions starting with premises shared by the audience, as far as possible from the main point the speaker wants to make. The chapter insists on the leading role of Book V, traditionally disparaged by commentators with an economic background as somewhat extraneous to the exposition of the economic theory carried out in the other four books, a theory most of the time *forerunning*, one step away from reaching the achievements of neo-classical economics. The point successfully argued is that the attack on the mercantile system is the main aim of the work, and the author placed on purpose the solution to the American colonies' controversy at its very end. At the due place within the mentioned overall rhetorical strategy, Smith practices 'didactic discourse'. He does so by opting for the 'Newtonian method' where the teacher enunciates one principle and then proves that consequences follow. He practises this 'method' extensively in the first three books and briefly at a decisive point of book V: how the 'system of natural liberty' establishes itself once false systems have been refuted.

The remark is unavoidable here that any discussion of the fallout of Smith's lectures on rhetoric in isolation from the *Principles which lead and direct Philosophical Enquiries* unavoidably misses half of the *WN*'s intellectual backstage. The meaning of the phrases 'didactic method' and 'Newtonian method' is not self-evident. Indeed, an epoch-making controversy between Cartesians and Newtonians left its mark on eighteenth-century Scottish Philosophy from Hume to Reid. Oddly enough, reference to scraps from this discussion shows up somewhere in chapter 7, discussed in what follows,

Chapter 6 is a paper by Walraevens published in this journal in 2010. It is strictly related to chapter 2 but overlaps with it to such an extent that the decision to reprint it appears rather dubious. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 – on self-command, the rationale of incentives to work in higher education and the Church, and the role of government – are exercises in 'rational reconstruction', indeed high-quality exercises. Nonetheless, their positioning is unclear in a book on Adam Smith's system – if we are to take the title seriously – and, in case we decide that the title should not be taken seriously, with no relationship with the focus of chapter 2, rhetoric, and a remote one with the focus of chapter 7, reasoning routines. These chapters adopt game theory as a key to reconstructing Adam Smith's argument. The result is quite convincing, for example, in chapter 3 on the emergence of self-command as a result of an individual rational choice exercised in games of varying complexity. The question to ask is how much of Adam Smith is still there in the result of the exercise. The authors have a response in mind, illustrated in the preface: the 'intensive approach' to the history of economic thought, where old statements 'can produce new statements, thus renewing our present knowledge' (p. viii; see also the Introduction at pp. 3-4). In 1980, Mary Hesse complained of the post-Kuhnian fashion for philosophy-

cum-history of science, arguing that philosophy would benefit from keeping a border between itself and history. In a specular vein, the present reviewer feels that intellectual history would benefit from keeping some borderline visible between inter-disciplinary intellectual history applied to past 'intellectual figures' rather than to 'past economists' and philosophy of and positive economic theory: Adam Smith's works 'belong more to the literature of philosophy and the history of political thought than to that of economics' (Waterman 2017, p. 179).

Chapter 7, on Adam Smith's reasoning routines, is the best after chapter 2. Let us review its valuable suggestions first. It is a revised version of a draft that Ortmann and Steve Meardon presented at conferences. They set out to identify the presence in Adam Smith of an item studied by modern neurosciences, reasoning routines, or 'the stable motoric, cognitive, and behavioural process we all develop'. They argue that very early in his career, Smith developed reasoning routines that he employed as a moral philosopher and an economist. The reader may expect some exercise in psychohistory, an attempt at simmering out of Adam Smith's biography some events and factors that could have moulded his frame of mind, say, a presbyterian education, the early loss of his father, a strict relationship with his mother or other similar factors. The authors instead set out to identify a sort of 'methodology' in Smith's early writings and then try to identify its application, Smith's 'method' put to work in *TMS* and *WN*. The remark is not out of place that a researcher may fall prey to self-deception while trying to clarify his practised method by recourse to meta-scientific reflection. Besides, he may lay down rules for research he has learned from a tradition of thought, but while carrying out fieldwork, though discovering something in the end thanks to or despite the rules adopted, he may be sometimes helped and sometimes hindered by his *regulae philosophandi*. Umberto Eco's William of Baskerville is an excellent example of such a situation. Leaving these doubts as alive as ever, let us proceed to describe Ortmann and Meardon's reasoning routines. They are, first, a meta-routine, the Wonder-Surprise-Admiration sequence; then the three following: i) the conceptualization of the world as a machine that followed specific invisible laws of motion, the 'Newtonian, or deductive view of the world'; ii) an understanding of the strategic nature of all things rhetorical, moral, physical, and economic; iii) a 'belief in the evolutionary, or inductive, nature of many systems, be they social or other' (p. 171). Thus, having first constructed his 'conceptual lens' in his early writings, particularly the *Considerations on languages*, he gradually discovered that he could fruitfully apply the same scheme to morality and the economic life – and the present reviewer would add: to politics, law, religion, the arts and natural science.

One contentious assertion is that there is 'evidence that Smith originally assumed that evolutionary processes would uncover the optimal design of the social machine, which he saw as going through distinct stages and moving towards some divine or providential design. Later, Smith seems to have become increasingly aware that outcomes in social systems were much less pre-determined than those in nature' (p. 172). Since the reader waits in vain for such evidence, he may have the impression that the assertion combines two opposite clichés in a diachronic framework: the Panglossian optimist Smith and the atheist Smith.

Another too categorical statement is that 'Smith was deeply involved in the Scottish Enlightenment's project of founding a new "science of man" based on the "experimental method" borrowed from natural sciences and inherited from Bacon' (p. 173). Again, this is true, but with qualifications. The first is that a new 'science of human nature' was the project announced by Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* and tacitly abandoned in his later writings. Adam Smith had it clear in mind that he would have never embarked on such an enterprise because it was still too Cartesian and foundationalist and, besides that, Hume took his scepticism too seriously because he took the Cartesian doubt literally. The science of man and natural theology were indeed the two submerged

parts of Smith's system of ideas, two unwritten doctrines not unlike Plato's. Besides, the circumstance that Smith never finished two of his three projected works, namely the History and Theory of Law and Government and the Philosophical History of the Arts and Sciences, was no mere biographical circumstance: it also depended on growing awareness of essential tensions that made his prospected oeuvre unstable, the same tensions that made him rewrite in depth his ethical theory in the third and sixth edition and, in politics, made him fall back on a practical work, a tract on British commercial policies, instead of an unfeasible treatise.

The second qualification is that 'experimental philosophy' is no more a self-explanatory phrase than 'didactic method'. In eighteenth-century Scottish jargon, the term designated the Royal Society tradition, understood as opposed to the Cartesian aprioristic and essentialist tradition and as culminating in Newton's work. Another name for 'experimental philosophy' was 'the Newtonian philosophy', designating an anti-essentialist epistemology turning around the ideas of the unknowability of essences and causes and the possibility to account for the phenomena by establishing deductive links from 'principles' or general laws assumed to be sufficiently compatible with observed phenomena though not to mirror the essence of things.

By way of conclusion, the book is an assembly of self-contained essays whose authorship is variously distributed among three authors: chapter 3 is co-authored by Ortmann and Stephen Meardon; chapter 5 by Ortmann, Meardon and Walraevens; chapter 4 by Ortmann; chapter 6 by Walraevens; chapter 7 by Ortmann, Walraevens and Meardon (p. ix). Meardon allowed the two authors 'to draw on pieces he co-authored […] and for which he helped to lay the groundwork' (p. ix) but apparently chose not to appear as co-author of the book. The two focuses in the 'book' are rhetoric and reasoning routines; game theory surfaces in chapter 5 and chapter 3 but scarcely interfaces with the two main focuses but coexists with unease with the declared intellectual-historical aim of the 'book'. The scholarly discussion of Smith's rhetoric is left somehow an orphan without a parallel discussion of his epistemology, or better, his unwritten Philosophical History of the Arts and Sciences, where language and rhetoric should have been a decisive chapter.

The first final pedantic remark is that the choice of items to include in the gargantuan bibliographies seems left to chance. If we were to take the title 'Adam Smith's System' seriously, John Lindgren's *The Social Philosophy of Adam Smith* (1973), Jean Mathiot's *Adam Smith. Philosophie et économie* (1990), Knud Haakonnsen's *The Science of a Legislator* 1981 should appear in the bibliography, and Eric Schliesser's *Adam Smith'System* should have been discussed in the body of the book rather than dispatched in the Introduction. The circumstance that in the Name Index Haakonnsen and Mathiot fail to show up and Lindgren scores just one citation is a symptom that something has gone wrong. Besides, the discussion made in passing on pp. 178-180 of Smith's epistemology suffers from a lack of familiarity with the relevant bibliography. The reader would expect to meet Serge Moscovici, Allan Megill, Stephen Worland, Gideon Freudenthal, Stefano Fiori and perhaps one or two more who are missing. Also Christopher Berry's 'Smith and Science' (2006) could have been mentioned. Lindgren's article should have been dated 1969, not 1967, or cited as ch. 1 of his book, a landmark in the Adam Smith revival from Glasgow Edition's times.

The second pedantic remark reflects perhaps more on the publisher than the authors. The seven papers have been reprinted in the book keeping the list of Adam Smith's works repeated in seven bibliographies without even standardising bibliographic systems: in most chapters the reader meets the abbreviations *TMS* and *WN*, but chapters 2 and 3 follow the author-date system (opting for 'Smith 1982' instead of 'Smith 1759'). In chapter 3, at the beginning of the bibliography, there is an acknowledgement to Oxford University Press for permission to cite from its edition of *TMS*. No such

permission is necessary, but, in case, the acknowledgement could have been placed at the beginning of the book. Similarly, within the last chapter's bibliography (p. 223), the following information is given: 'In our reference to Smith's works, we follow what has emerged as standard convention…', a piece of information that could also have been placed at the beginning of the book. The same announcement shows up within the bibliography of chapter 2, with the variant that the authors here refer instead 'to the Liberty version of the Glasgow Edition' (p. 64 fn).

References

Waterman, A.M.C. 2017, Review of Leonidas Montes and Eric Schliesser (eds), *New Voices on Adam Smith*, with a foreword by Knud Haakonssen, *History of Economic Ideas*, vol. 15 (2007), no. 2, pp. 178-181.

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