

Rereading the ‘Adam Smith problem’

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I

The so-called ‘Adam Smith problem’ is concerned with the relation between the two works of Adam Smith that were published in his lifetime: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1st edn 1759, 6th edn 1790) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1st edn. 1776).¹ Are these works to be regarded as parts of one seamless and unified oeuvre, so that Smith’s moral philosophy and economics are complementary or even overlapping analyses of human life? Or are they inconsistent or contradictory works with irreconcilable assumptions about human action and motivation? If the former is the case, what is the larger intellectual project that provides the unifying set of assumptions for both of Smith’s works? And if the latter, what are the inconsistencies between the two works and why did Smith come to hold incompatible positions about human nature?

These are just some of the questions that scholars have discussed concerning the relation between the *Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*. There was a time when some scholars argued that the two works were fundamentally inconsistent in that the former was governed by altruism or sympathy and the latter by egoism or self-interest.² Explanation of this alleged inconsistency was sought in terms of Smith’s biography: that over the years Smith came to change his mind, with the *Moral Sentiments* expressing the idealism of a young man and the *Wealth of Nations* expressing the realism of a mature man; or that Smith’s visit to France in the 1760s and his meetings with many *philosophes* there fundamentally affected his thinking. These biographical explanations have been challenged over the years by the discovery of student notes of Smith’s lectures on jurisprudence³ delivered at the University of Glasgow before he travelled to France and which are seen as providing the groundwork for parts of the later *Wealth of Nations*. Scholars have also come to realise that Smith was working on new editions of both books throughout his later years so that both works engaged and reflect his mature thinking.

The philosophical characterisation of the two works in terms of altruism/sympathy and egoism/self-interest has also been challenged by more careful readings of the works. A renewed interest in Smith’s moral philosophy and wider philosophical system, following the publication of the definitive Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith (1976-83), has led many philosophers and historians to the view that there are no inconsistencies between the two works in their assumptions concerning human action and motivation. As the editors of the Glasgow Edition of the *Moral Sentiments* put it in their influential Introduction to the volume: ‘The so-called “Adam Smith problem” was a pseudo-problem based on ignorance and misunderstanding’, and ‘the same man’ wrote both works (Raphael and Macfie 1976, p. 20). Smith’s statement in the Advertisement to the sixth edition of the *Moral Sentiments* that in the *Wealth of Nations* he had ‘partly executed’ his promise, made in the concluding paragraph of the work, to write a discourse on the general principles of law and government, is taken by them as ‘the best evidence against the idea that there is a conflict between his two works’ in that ‘clearly therefore he [Smith] regards WN

¹ Citations are from the Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, TMS (1976a) and WN (1976b).

² For the origins of the Adam Smith problem see Tribe (2002) and Montes (2004) ch. 2.

³ *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1978).

as continuing the sequence of thought set out in TMS' (p. 24). Macfie also claims that as 'Adam Smith was a man of stable integrated character, not subject to deep intellectual doubts or fissures. It is quite unlikely that such a man would write two books over the same period' that are inconsistent (Macfie 1967, p. 76).

Yet, in spite of declarations that the Adam Smith problem is no more, scholars have continued to be fascinated by the relation between the *Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*. Although few would subscribe to the view that the two works are simply inconsistent or contradictory, the relation between them still elicits some fundamental questions. This might be seen as a new stage of debate—the 'modern' Adam Smith problem, as opposed to the older and now discredited version of it.⁴ This modern version of the problem concerns questions such as: What is the relation between Smith's moral philosophy and economics, and how might this have relevance for the twenty-first century? How can we understand Smith's theorisation of human agency in his moral philosophy and in his economic analysis? Do Smith's posthumously published lectures on jurisprudence provide a conceptual or theoretical bridge between the *Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*, or was Smith's intended yet unrealised project of providing a theory of jurisprudence incapable in principle of being completed? In this essay I shall address some aspects of this 'modern' version of the Adam Smith problem.

II

There are a number of issues at stake in discussion of this modern version of the Adam Smith problem, both methodological and substantive.

The methodological issues concern questions of interpretation—how to read Smith's texts or how to reread them in the light of questions of the relation between them. Much of the argument that there really are no unresolved issues to be discussed about the relation between the *Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations* concerns what are taken to be Smith's unified intentions in writing the two books. Scholars have argued that as Smith intended the two books as constituent part of his larger oeuvre, this predisposes to the view that the two works are not inconsistent. But this defence by reference to Smith's alleged intentions encounters problems.

Smith's intentions in writing these works – whatever they were – can't be held to be definitive of what he actually achieved. Even if Smith had or took himself to have an overall unified vision which he intended to present across his different works, this doesn't by itself establish that his intentions either were or could be successfully fulfilled. In addition, citing Smith's intention in the final paragraph of the *Moral Sentiments* – an unfulfilled intention, as it turned out – does not by itself provide evidence about the actual relation between the two works.⁵

⁴ Contributions to the debate, in addition to those listed in n. 2, include: Brown (1991, 1994a, 1997a, 2009), Dickey (1986), Dupuy, J.-P. (1993), Dwyer (2005), Griswold (1999, esp. pp. 29-39, 260-1, 310, 366-8), Evensky (2005, esp. pp. 20-3), Fleischacker (2004, esp. chs 4, 5), Macfie (1967), Nieli (1986), Oncken (1897, 2000 [1898]), Otteson (2002, ch. 4), Peters-Fransen (2001), Raphael (1992; 2007, ch. 13), A.S. Skinner (1996, ch. 3), Young (1997, esp. pp. 2-26). A brief summary of the debate in the mid-1990s may be found in Brown (1997b, pp. 296-300).

⁵ Cf. TMS Advertisement 2; VII.iv.37. See Griswold (2006) and Ross (2006) for discussion on the possibility in principle of the completion of Smith's system.

Moreover, how do we ascertain what it was that Smith intended with respect to the place of the *Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations* as part of his overall oeuvre? How do we ascertain what he intended for each of his works? It might be thought that we know Smith's intentions by reading his works. That is to say, to interpret someone's writing *is* to understand what they intended to say. This is a commonplace assumption in much of the history of philosophy, the history of economics and intellectual history. Yet such an assumption implies that interpreting Smith's works and discovering his intentions are not independent activities, since interpreting his works and understanding his intentions are part and parcel of the same interpretative activity. Furthermore, if every interpretation involves a rendering of the author's intention, then there could be as many accounts of Smith's intentions as there are interpretations of his works. This suggests that there is no additional interest in claiming for an interpretation that it yields the author's intention, since every interpretation yields its own inferred intention. It also implies that it is not possible to judge the success or veracity of an interpretation by assessing the extent to which it recreates or illuminates Smith's intentions, since that would presuppose that we have independent knowledge of those intentions. In interpreting what Smith wrote and how his two main works are related, therefore, there is no independent court of appeal to his purported intentions. And if there is no independent court of appeal to assess the extent to which any proposed interpretation does convey his intentions, what is the value of claiming to have done so? Does it amount to any more than a 'mere' rhetorical flourish to buttress an interpretation.⁶

It might be argued against this scepticism that interpreting Smith's works within their historical context can provide a means of overcoming the problem. Although there may be other ways of reading texts from the past, recovery of Smith's intentions is a *historical* exercise, this argument goes, because Smith as author was an historical figure writing at a particular moment in time. Some scholarship on Smith has been influenced by this position, in particular by the arguments of Quentin Skinner that intellectual history involves recovering the intentions an author had at the time in writing a work.⁷ This raises issues of whether historical interest in a work is restricted to attempting to reclaim those purported historical intentions or whether there are other modes of historical interpretation. Yet the same interpretative problem remains: inferences about Smith's historical intentions are part and parcel of the interpretative activity itself and so do not constitute independent evidence for an interpretation.⁸

These considerations suggest that appeals to recovering or reconstructing Smith's intentions are really of little help in trying to understand the relation between his two major works. This explains why the Adam Smith problem is an issue of how we *read* or *reread* Smith's texts: it is an issue of interpretation, not an issue of Adam Smith's mental states in the eighteenth century. Smith's texts touch on a number of discourses including philosophy, history of philosophy, money and trade, history, jurisprudence, aesthetics, history of science, language and literature, and so on. The Scottish Enlightenment was an intellectually vibrant period and Smith's texts show evidence of a number of influential discourses at the time, such as ancient philosophy, Hellenistic stoicism, natural law, civic humanism, natural theology, moral

⁶ These arguments are further developed in Brown (1994a, 1994b, 2002, 2003, 2007).

⁷ Cf. Q. Skinner (2002) and Montes (2004).

⁸ This is further argued in Brown (2003, 2007).

sentimentalism, post-Newtonian science, mercantilism, physiocracy and the writings of the French Encyclopédie, as well as fine writing and literature of many genres, including ancient Greek and contemporary French drama. The intellectual milieu within which Smith lived included not only Scotland, England and France, but hugely influential figures of the time such as David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire. How to read Smith's texts as products of such a complex intellectual kaleidoscope is thus something that is open to judgment and interpretation, especially for scholars of the modern academy whose disciplinary boundaries are so far removed from the intellectual practices of the eighteenth century.

The substantive issues involved in the modern version of the Adam Smith problem relate to some large questions involving ethics and economics, and these in turn relate to issues of interpretation concerning the 'economics' of the *Wealth of Nations*. A history of different interpretations of the *Wealth of Nations* is beyond the scope of this essay, as is a consideration of the extent to which this capacious volume includes material beyond what is now understood as 'economic analysis' *per se*. It's probably true to say, however, that the neo-liberal shift of the latter decades of the twentieth century was accompanied by a renewed popular view of Adam Smith as a defender of laissez-faire capitalism and hence as an early champion of the liberal free-market policies that were being espoused during those decades. Yet much scholarly work on Smith has challenged fundamental aspects of this view: it has challenged the view that Smith was primarily an economist by emphasizing that in Smith's time it was as a moral philosopher that his reputation was first established; it has challenged the view of Smith as a champion of laissez-faire capitalism by arguing that this is an anachronistic caricature involving a selective reading of just one of Smith's works; and it has challenged the view that economics is – or perhaps ever was – an independent discipline divorced from ethical and social issues.

Smith's wisdom as moral philosopher has thus come to be seen by some scholars as permeating his wisdom as economist, such that by the early years of the twenty-first century some philosophers and economists were returning to Smith to try to find answers to pressing questions of the moral basis of markets and market-based conceptions of morality. Interpretative questions of Smith's works have thus for some scholars become enjoined with current debates about economics and ethics, and about the appraisal of modern capitalism and free-market ideologies; indeed some interpretations explicitly take this as part of their brief.⁹ The Adam Smith problem in its modern guise is thus seen by some scholars not only as a problem for our time, rather than solely or primarily as an interpretative issue for intellectual history, but also as one whose resolution or perhaps dissolution might provide answers to pressing modern problems. Scholars who see a seamless continuity across the *Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations* tend to see Smith's works as providing solutions to modern problems concerning the relation between economics and ethics; again, reference to Smith's mental states are often seen as buttressing a unified view of moral philosophy and economics.¹⁰ By contrast, scholars who see tensions or

⁹ Cf. 'it seems that the *Problem* continues to attract interest, not only for its historical and philosophical appeal, but also perhaps for its implications for the current economics and ethics debate', Montes (2004) p. 14.

¹⁰ The professor of moral philosophy and the pioneer economist did not, in fact, lead a life of spectacular schizophrenia. Indeed, it is precisely the narrowing of the broad Smithian view of human beings, in modern economies, that can be seen as one of the major deficiencies of contemporary

different emphases either between the two works, or between the moral philosophy and economics, tend perhaps to see Smith's works as symptomatic of the unresolved complexity of the issues relating to market society and morality, rather than as a solution.

III

In exploring the relation between the *Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations I* I have found it helpful to draw on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.¹¹ In his theory of the novel, Bakhtin identified the interplay of voices in a text as the characteristic feature of what he termed 'novelistic discourse' (Bakhtin 1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1986, 1990). Analysing European literary and philosophical materials from classical Greece through to the twentieth-century, although with a special interest in the works of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin argued that this play of voices served to displace the authorial voice as the centre of the work, producing a dialogic form of discourse characterised by multivocality and heterodoxy: 'The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even a diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized' (1981, p. 262). A non-fictional example that Bakhtin provides of dialogic discourse is ethical discourse involving cases of conscience, confession and repentance, where the agent is engaged in inner debate and dialogue. From Antiquity the importance of inner debate or soliloquy had been recognised, but Bakhtin emphasises the dialogic nature of such debate: 'A dialogic relationship to one's own self defines the genre of the soliloquy. It is a discussion with oneself' such that an 'active dialogic approach to one's own self' destroys 'that naïve wholeness of one's notions about the self that lies at the heart of the lyric, epic, and tragic image of man' (1984a, p. 120; cf. 1981, pp. 144-5). Bakhtin's interest also concerned the ways in which literary representations of such inner debate predispose towards a dialogic style where 'elements of an artistic representation of another's word are possible, especially in the ethical realm: for example, a representation of the struggle waged by the voice of conscience with other voices that sound in a man, the internal dialogism leading to repentance and so forth' (1981, p. 350). As instances of this, Bakhtin also includes reference to stoic philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, whose works are cited at length in the *Moral Sentiments*, as well as to the Christian convert St Augustine (1981, pp.144-5, 350; 1984a, p. 120).

Bakhtin contrasts the dialogic form of discourse to its other, a monologic form of discourse where a single unitary voice of authority or tradition dominates or controls the text. These discourses Bakhtin characterises as the epic form or scientific discourse (1981, p. 351; 1984a, pp. 79-85, 203-4). At times, Bakhtin seems to be counterposing the dialogic and the monologic in an absolute way; but he also stressed that no utterance can be entirely closed in that all utterances, being socially and historically active, have 'dialogic overtones' in being a response to what has already been said and as such are open to new interpretations or re-accentuations in spite of the impression of unity provided by the dominance of the authorial voice (1986a, pp. 92; 1986b, 110, 124-5). This suggests that all utterances are open to 'intertextuality', as it is sometimes called, so that the distinction between dialogic and monologic is relative rather than absolute.

economic theory. This impoverishment is closely related to the distancing of economics from ethics', Sen (1987) p. 28.

¹¹ This section relies on Brown (1991; 1994a, chs 2-3; 1997a).

The *Moral Sentiments* bears many of the characteristics of Bakhtin's dialogic or novelistic discourse. There is a range of characters presented to the reader, characters from history, literature and everyday life, whose diverse personality traits and various moral qualities are integrated into the narrative of the text. The text also works in terms of an interplay of different 'voices', such as 'we', 'you', 'I', as well as the detached didactic authorial voice of the moral philosopher whose text this is. Switches between these different voices are a characteristic feature of the mode of argument and are indicative of the different moral positionings being represented. For example, although the first-person plural of 'we' and 'our' sometimes refer to mankind generally, including both author and reader, representing everyday taken-for-granted values which the didactic voice of the text reaffirms or corroborates, this is not always the case. Sometimes there are occasions when the first-person plural voice of generalised humanity is challenged or undermined by the detached didactic voice. In the third sentence of the *Moral Sentiments*, the statement 'That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact ...' (TMS I.1.i.1) is followed by the explanatory observation, delivered in the didactic voice, that the sentiment of sorrow is not confined to the virtuous and humane but is shared to some degree even by ruffians and criminals. Here the didactic voice corroborates the first-person plural voice of ordinary humanity. In other places, however, the didactic voice undermines the view presented as the opinion of ordinary humanity. In such cases the didactic voice intervenes to mark the moral inadequacy of conventional *mores*, thus transforming the first-person plural voice from being representative of a humane and sympathetic approach to which both reader and author subscribe, to being indicative of the degeneracy of conventional *mores* from which the authorial voice is distancing itself.¹² For example, the much-cited passage on 'bettering our condition' is expressed in terms of the shared voice of ordinary humanity: 'what are the advantages which we propose by that great purpose of human life we call bettering our condition? To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it' (TMS I.iii.2.1). The conclusion to this long paragraph, however, which is delivered in the detached didactic voice, provides an ironic counterpoint and is entirely sceptical as to whether the purpose of 'bettering our condition' and the achievement of greatness are worth it. Thus although 'our' emotion in the first example is endorsed by the didactic voice, in the second example 'our' estimation of the advantages of the attempt to better 'our' condition is scorned by the didactic voice. The subtleties of interplay between different voices in the text thus register ethical nuances of tone and argument that are intrinsic to it, and make for a complex reading experience. Ignoring this interplay is liable to lead to an uncritical acceptance of those conventional *mores* that are being held up for derogation by the didactic voice. These interplays between different voices also provide a vehicle for Smith's irony which itself furnishes another

¹² 'This "common language" – usually the average norm of spoken and written language for a given social group – is taken by the author precisely as the *common view*, as the verbal approach to people and things normal for a given sphere of society, as the *going point of view* and the *going value*. To one degree or another, the author distances himself from this common language, he steps back and objectifies it, forcing his own intentions to refract and diffuse themselves through the medium of this common view that has become embodied in language (a view that is always superficial and frequently hypocritical)', Bakhtin (1981) pp. 301-2, original emphasis.

means of attacking the shallow and self-seeking *mores* of an ambitious and emulative society.¹³

Crucially, this stylistic feature of dialogism also characterises the model of moral judgment presented in the *Moral Sentiments*. The style and figuration of the text thus epitomise the substantive philosophical arguments being advanced. The model of moral judgment presented in the *Moral Sentiments* is essentially dialogic in that it involves engaging with the ‘impartial spectator’ who is an agent’s imagined spectator to himself. The moral agent places himself, in the imagination, in the position of one who is impartial and disinterested, and from that vantage point he makes moral judgments about himself. This provides a model of moral judgment that is applied to others as well as to oneself, in that judgments about others are made by being spectators to them and their actions. The metaphor of the impartial spectator is both spectatorial and auditory, however, as the agent both observes with the impartiality of the spectator and listens to his ‘voice’: ‘It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it ...’ (TMS III.3.4). Moral judgment is thus a dialogic relation between the moral agent and the impartial spectator; the moral agent listens not only to his own voice and the voices around him, but most importantly he listens to the voice of the impartial spectator. This is the core of Smith’s model of moral judgment since the impartial spectator is a metaphor for the dialogic process of inner debate and the workings of conscience that characterise reflexive moral judgment: ‘When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of’ (TMS III.1 6). This dialogic understanding of moral judgment thus challenges the naïve view of the agent’s wholeness and unity, as the passage goes on to conclude: ‘But that the judge should, in every respect, be the same with the person judged of, is as impossible, as that the cause should, in every case, be the same with the effect’ (TMS III.1.6). It is within this space of the dialogic interplay of the moral agent’s inner debate, and the complexity of human agency which it evinces, that the philosophical core of the *Moral Sentiments* is to be found.

The dialogism of Smith’s account of conscience, and the impartial spectator as a figurative representation of conscience, is thus of a piece with the dialogic accounts of inner debate and conscience that Bakhtin highlights in the writings of earlier philosophers, including the stoic philosophers Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus who are cited in the *Moral Sentiments*. Yet stoicism involves a monist psychology according to which reason and nature, *logos* and *physis*, are as one. In their philosophical ruminations, these philosophers illustrate just how difficult it is in practice to achieve the *apatheia* of stoicism, where a man’s reason is governed by Right Reason, the

¹³ Sometimes switches in voice are achieved without grammatical markers, providing examples of what Bakhtin terms ‘a hybrid construction’, which is ‘an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages”, two semantic and axiological belief systems’, Bakhtin (1981) p. 304.

controlling force in the universe. In the *Moral Sentiments* this stoic aspiration is rejected as incompatible with mankind's nature; mankind has been formed by Nature to be creatures of sentiment and so a monistic psychology is never assumed in engaging with the impartial spectator. This dialogism of inner debate thus constitutes a formal rejection of the monism of stoic philosophy, even though the model of the impartial spectator is derived analogously with that of the stoic divine Being. As the wise stoic imagines how the divine Being observes him and the events of his life, and hence strives to see himself as but an atom, a mere particle, so the moral agent in the *Moral Sentiments* analogously enters into the imagined feelings of the impartial spectator and attempts to view himself in a more detached light. But whereas the wise stoic strains after *apatheia*, Smith avers that this is entirely unnatural since Nature has decreed that human beings will feel more for the events that affect them directly in their own lives. In spite of the pervasive influence of the stoic philosophy, its core tenets are rejected by Smith, even though the impartial spectator is analogous to the divine Being in providing a reconciliation of mankind's natural feelings with the moral claims of disinterested impartiality (TMS VII.ii.1.39-47).

This account of the dialogic nature of moral judgment has important implications for the designation of the virtues. It means that only those virtues that are subject to this dialogic process are truly moral virtues, the other virtues being of a lower order even though they are necessary for the safety and good order of society. In the account of the virtues in the *Moral Sentiments* it is self-command and beneficence that qualify as the truly moral virtues whereas the practice of justice (that is, just behaviour) and prudence are designated as lower order virtues.

The virtue of self-command is quintessentially a dialogic one where the moral agent listens to the voice of the impartial spectator. It is also the virtue that has the strongest parallels with stoic doctrine. Here the 'man of real constancy and firmness, the wise and just man who has been thoroughly bred in the great school of self-command ... has never dared to forget for one moment the judgment which the impartial spectator would pass upon his sentiments and conduct'. It is therefore with the 'eyes of this great inmate' that he views his own outward conduct and inward sentiment (TMS III.3.25). In Part VI it is argued that 'the real man of virtue, the only real and proper object of love, respect, and admiration' is he who 'governs his whole behaviour and conduct according to those restrained and corrected emotions which the great inmate, the great demi-god within the breast prescribes and approves of' (TMS VI.iii.18). Here, crucially, the impartial spectator both 'prescribes and approves'. The impartial spectator 'prescribes' corrected emotions because he is the source of moral guidance: he stands as a metaphor for the dialogic process that defines the making of moral judgments. The impartial spectator also 'approves', however, and it is this approval that provides the foundation for the lower virtues that don't require the operation of the impartial spectator in order to ascertain what it is right to do. This distinction is an important one for understanding the hierarchy of virtues in the TMS because although all the virtues are underwritten by the moral force of the impartial spectator's approval, they are not all dependent on dialogic engagement with the impartial spectator in making judgments about what is the right course of action for an individual agent.

In the case of beneficence, the other truly moral virtue, the impartial spectator again provides a means of ascertaining what to do. In such cases there are no precise rules

that could be followed, so agents must engage with the impartial spectator to decide what they should do. One aspect of the dialogic nature of such judgments is their ‘openness’; if moral judgments are the outcome of a dialogic process then they cannot be predetermined or rule-bound. The essence of moral judgment involves taking account of the fine distinctions pertaining to the circumstances of the case, with its own contingencies and private motivations. The impartial spectator is ideally placed to do this as his location with respect to the moral agent provides impartiality, whilst his knowledge of the circumstances of the case enables him to make an informed judgment. But his judgments are never a foregone conclusion; if that were so then the impartial spectator would no longer need to prescribe for individual cases and moral behaviour could be rule-governed. Given the nicety of any moral situation, the process of judging involves attention to the delicate details of the case, and it was for this reason that moral judgments are not predetermined or rule-bound in the strict sense, but must be open: ‘When those different beneficent affections happen to draw different ways, to determine by any precise rules in what cases we ought to comply with the one, and in what with the other, is, perhaps, altogether impossible. In what cases friendship ought to yield to gratitude, or gratitude to friendship; [... all such cases] must be left altogether to the decision of the man within the breast, the supposed impartial spectator, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. If we place ourselves completely in his situation, if we really view ourselves with his eyes, and as he views us, and listen with diligent and reverential attention to what he suggests to us, his voice will never deceive us’ (TMS VI.ii.1.22). This also applies to the difficult case of moral dilemmas where there are countervailing moral arguments for action.¹⁴

This indeterminacy or openness is an analytical feature of moral judgment and underlies the need for the impartial spectator. If precise rules could be laid down, then virtuous behaviour could simply consist of living by those rules, but it is the inadequacy of such fixed rules that necessitates engagement with the impartial spectator as the only way in which moral judgments may be made in the myriad complexity of social life. Thus the account of the origin and use of general rules of morality at TMS III.4-5 shows that these rules are a substitute for, not a form of, moral judgment for those (of ‘coarse clay’) who are not capable of making such judgments themselves. These general rules are essential for the maintenance of human society by providing guidelines for decent behaviour for those incapable of making moral judgments and by helping to correct the misrepresentations of self-love, but their observance does not require the making of moral judgments.

Significantly it is the regard to these general rules of morality that is designated as a sense of duty, not moral judgment proper; following from their dialogic nature, moral judgments proper are freely subscribed to and freely acted upon. As participation in a process of open dialogue is freely entered into and as commitment to agreement or consensus is freely given, so moral discourse and moral commitment are free, not coerced. Moral discourse is the discourse of the free; moral virtue is not an obligation which can be enforced, but is left to the freedom of agents’ wills. This freedom is epitomised by the dialogic nature of moral judgment and moral discourse which are non-deterministic, open and voluntarily entered into. Their powers and attractions are

¹⁴ Brown (2005) considers moral dilemmas in the context of Smith’s allusion to Voltaire’s *L’Orphelin de la Chine*, at TMS VI.ii.1.22, and in his ‘Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*’, in Smith (1980) pp. 242-56). Brown (1995) presents a parallel analysis of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

those of persuasion, argument, the love of approbation and human sociability. Moral discourse is part of social discourse; it is learnt as part of social life and it partakes of the same motivations and forms of persuasion that constitute the socialised communication of everyday life.

This openness of the *Moral Sentiments*, an openness portrayed figuratively by the metaphor of the impartial spectator, is rendered stylistically in its multivocal dialogism. By comparison, the *Wealth of Nations* stands as a largely single-voiced or monologic text which ‘contains only *one cognitive subject*, all else being merely *objects* of its cognition’ (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 71). The text of the *Wealth of Nations* is expressed in a voice representing this one cognitive subject, corresponding to that of the didactic philosopher, and the tone is mostly detached and dispassionate. There is some limited use of ‘I’ and ‘we’, but these do not represent different cognitive or ethical viewpoints (Brown 1994a, pp. 44-5). As Bakhtin remarks, ‘Any intensification of others’ intonations in a certain discourse or a certain section of the work is only a game, which the author permits so that his own direct or refracted word might ring out all the more energetically’ (Bakhtin 1984a, pp. 203-4). The monologic style is the style that Bakhtin identified as the one used in scientific treatises, texts where a single unified voice determined the text and its story. It was especially used, according to Bakhtin, whenever the arguments represented a powerful tradition of ideas that brooked no heterodox challenges to itself, or wherever the pursuit of scientific understanding excluded the presentation of alternative views that would challenge the main argument (Bakhtin 1981, p. 351). This is the style of the *Wealth of Nations* as a scientific treatise explaining the system of natural liberty. This doesn’t imply that there are no dialogic overtones or that the *Wealth of Nations* excludes any rhetorical dimensions (Brown 1994, pp. 162-4, 191-7). As noted above, the distinction between monologic and dialogic is not absolute. Nevertheless, the ethical dialogism that characterises the *Moral Sentiments* is absent from the *Wealth of Nations*.

It is not only the model of the impartial spectator that is absent from the pages of the *Wealth of Nations*; sympathy and the imaginative change of places are also absent. It has been remarked that the self-interested behaviour of the *Wealth of Nations* may be understood as ‘non-tuism’ in the sense that an economic agent does not consider the other agent, the ‘you’, of an economic transaction.¹⁵ The behaviour of agents in the *Moral Sentiments* is located with reference to others as spectators. Even a person’s sense of self is constituted by the ‘mirror’ that society holds up to each person, so that without the spectatorial dimension of society a human being’s sense of self would be undeveloped (TMS III.1.3-5). By contrast, the non-tuism of the *Wealth of Nations* excludes both sympathy and the presence of other voices apart from that of the author/philosopher. As commercial exchange involves a reciprocity of relations where there would always be present the other of the exchange, this absence is striking. It is sometimes argued that market relations in the *Wealth of Nations* presuppose anonymity,¹⁶ but one of the few passages where different characters – ‘you’ and ‘I’ – enter the text and deal directly with each other is the much-quoted one introducing market exchange: ‘Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do

¹⁵ Commenting on sympathy and self-interest in Adam Smith’s work, T. Wilson refers to Wicksteed’s emphasis on non-tuism rather than egoism in economic transactions: “‘Non-tuism’ is necessary if the market is to work satisfactorily just as ‘non-tuism’ is necessary for a decent game of football or of chess. Without ‘non-tuism’ the game will be spoiled’, Wilson (1976) p.81.

¹⁶ See, for example, Nieli (1986).

this. Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest' (WN I.ii.2). Interpretations of this passage tend to emphasise the demotion of benevolence, but a significant feature of this relationship which is entirely absent from the *Moral Sentiments* is the symmetry of the exchange relation: when an offer of this sort is made it is matched by a mirror-image reciprocal offer, since both parties to the exchange are saying 'give me what I want and you shall have what you want'. In this symmetric exchange there is no need for an imaginary change of places or for sympathy, because all know that the other is in the same position as themselves; being a symmetrical relation, the exchange relation provides its own mirror and has no need of spectator mechanisms to achieve reflection.

In the *Moral Sentiments* it is argued that in the case of the subjects of 'science and taste' it is their conformity with what is right, accurate and 'agreeable to truth and reality' that first recommends them (TMS I.i.4.4) and that sympathy is inoperative here as 'We both look at them from the same point of view, and have no occasion for sympathy, or for that imaginary change of situations from which it arises, in order to produce, with regard to these, the most perfect harmony of sentiments and affections' (TMS I.i.4.2). The monologic style of the *Wealth of Nations* is thus entirely in accord with the scientific standing attributed to science and systems of public police in the *Moral Sentiments* without reference to either sympathy or an imaginary change of places. In the *Wealth of Nations* there is no place for the moral discourse of the *Moral Sentiments* and, for this reason, multivocality and the spectatorial sympathy are redundant, replaced by the more overly didactic and detached style that characterises its monologism.

This is not to say that none of the virtues described in the *Moral Sentiments* are to be found in the *Wealth of Nations*. A crucial point, however, is that the virtue of prudence is treated differently in the *Moral Sentiments* from the higher moral virtues of beneficence and self-command, the true objects of moral discourse as defined by the structure of the argument there, and it is this differential treatment that signals a different moral status for the *Wealth of Nations*, a difference epitomised by the absence of the impartial spectator from its pages. The distinction between the character of virtue and the principle of approbation (TMS VII.i) is a crucial one, underlying the central argument that a moral judgment is made when virtue is identified by way of the impartial spectator mechanism. But this means that only beneficence and self-command are recognised according to moral judgments according to the dialogic model of moral judgment. The status of the other two virtues in the *Moral Sentiments*, justice and prudence, is thus of a lower order; although clearly denominated as virtues, they nonetheless stand outside the discourse marked by moral judgment.

One important distinction between justice and beneficence relies upon the contrast between the freely donated character of the moral virtue of beneficence and the obligation attaching to the virtue of justice: 'There is, however, another virtue, of which the observance is not left to the freedom of our own wills, which may be extorted by force, and of which the violation exposes to resentment, and consequently

to punishment. This virtue is justice: the violation of justice is injury' (TMS II.ii.1 5). In this case virtue is not free but may be extorted by force; for this reason too the impartial spectator is not necessary for the enforcement of justice because compulsion is provided by the law. Justice is also unlike beneficence in that it is rule-determined (TMS III.6.10). To act justly does not require the making of moral or legal judgments but to obey the rules and abstain from harming others, and this can be achieved without reference to the impartial spectator. Mere justice is even a 'negative virtue' in that it can be achieved by sitting still and doing nothing (TMS II.ii.1.9). A crucial distinction is thus between acting justly and making judgments of justice, since the former does not require judgments of justice which involve engagement with the impartial spectator. This may be illustrated by the 'perfectly innocent and just man' (TMS VI.ii.intro.2) for whom the positive laws are morally redundant because his behaviour is always governed by the impartial spectator. Most people live justly according to the rules; it is only those such as the perfectly innocent and just man whose behaviour is always governed by engagement with the impartial spectator.

Prudence is the other virtue discussed in the *Moral Sentiments* which is seen as especially appropriate to the economic domain of the *Wealth of Nations*. As a broad inclusive category prudence combines care of the health, fortune, rank and reputation, with economic self-interest generally regarded as falling within its ambit as long as it is restrained by the rules of justice. In the assessment of the virtue of prudence in Part IV, 'superior reason and understanding' and 'self-command' are the two qualities which comprise it (TMS IV.2.6-8). The first quality (reason/understanding) is approved of as right or accurate according to the approval of any subject that comes under science or taste (TMS I.i.4.4) and therefore lies outside moral judgment. The second quality, self-command, is approved of under propriety and utility, but it is the deferment of pleasure and the physical and mental labour that are approved, rather than the seeking after material wealth (TMS IV.2.8). It is thus the firmness and perseverance, not the acquisition of fortune, that is approved by the spectator; indeed the text refers rather contemptuously to the ultimate purpose of the self-denial ('though directed to no other purpose than the acquisition of fortune'), underlining the point that it is the perseverance and the self-denial, not the economic orientation of the behaviour or the motivation, that is admired.

This account of the sources of approbation in prudent behaviour is repeated in Part VI where the parallel treatment of the three virtues allows a direct comparison of the ways in which the virtues are described and commended. In the chapter considering prudence, the approbation of the impartial spectator is called upon only once with respect to industry and frugality, but it is not the economic pursuit of wealth as such that is approved of, but the self-command which 'industry and frugality' are thought to imply (TMS VI.i.11). This passage shows that the object of the impartial spectator's approval, even applause, is the self-command which enables economic agents to act as if their present and their future affected them to the same degree that it affected him. It is thus the powers of self-command that are applauded, not the pursuit of economic activities as such, the same self-command that was earlier identified in Book IV as the one aspect of prudence that the impartial spectator could approve of. Thus the impartial spectator's approval of prudence in the *Moral Sentiments* is limited to the present denial of economic pleasures, rather than the pursuit of economic pleasures. It is but a 'certain cold esteem' not 'any very ardent love or admiration' (TMS VI.i.14). This restricted spectatorial endorsement stands in sharp contrast to the

abundance of references to sympathy and the spectator's approval in the discussions of the moral virtues of beneficence and self-command in sections ii and iii of Part VI.

Thus economic agents occupy a shadowy, twilight space in the moral universe, somewhat outside the site of moral discourse proper where the resplendent moral virtues shine in the approving light of the impartial spectator's eye. The inclusion of economic behaviour within the domain of the virtues follows not from the particular character of economic activity or material objectives, but almost in spite of them. The prudent man of industry and frugality is virtuous in so far as he works hard, does not break the law, and denies present pleasures. It is his self-denial that earns the approval of the impartial spectator, and little else, but this is not sufficient to earn his keep in the company of truly moral men practising the moral virtues. The prudent man of course lives according to the rules of justice, although his acting justly does not itself require of him that he makes judgments of justice.

IV

This suggests that in comparison with the *Moral Sentiments* and its dialogic model of moral judgment, the *Wealth of Nations* is a largely 'amoral' work¹⁷ in that it stands somewhat outside of and is independent of the distinctively moral processes portrayed in the *Moral Sentiments*. The *Wealth of Nations* lies on a different register, morally speaking. This can be understood with reference to the stoic system which provides a conceptual structure for much of the argument of the *Moral Sentiments* even though some central tenets of stoicism are formally rejected there.¹⁸

According to the stoic moral philosophy, there is a moral hierarchy such that the highest good (*agathon*) relates to the inner state of mind as the moral agent seeks to achieve that dispassionate view of his situation which the divine Being has of it. The truly virtuous moral agent aspires to a life in which reason and nature are as one, and all the virtues are present as a unity. This person is the truly wise man, the stoic sage. The actions of such a person are 'perfectly right moral acts' (*katorthomata*); they are both appropriate acts in themselves and are chosen for the right reason. For most people, this ultimate state of wisdom is either not possible at all, or else it is something that is still being worked towards. For such people 'appropriate acts' or proper functions (*kathekonta*) are feasible and are to be preferred, even though as they are not accompanied by the right moral attitude of mind they don't qualify as *katorthomata*. In choosing these appropriate acts people are guided by what is reasonable as well as by basic precepts or rules of behaviour which provide guidance for those who aren't able to aspire to the *katorthomata*: 'In *kathekonta* these rules are laid down for the use of the agent for the attainment of a certain object, but do not apply to his attitude of mind in the performance of the act. The agent accepts the rules, like the opinions of a legal expert, but does not form them or think out the situation for himself' (Kidd 1971, p. 156). Thus the distinction between *katorthomata* for the few and *kathekonta* for the many derives from a moral hierarchy where the life of a stoic sage is achieved only by a few; but it also provides a practical reconciliation

¹⁷ Not 'immoral' work.

¹⁸ This section relies on Brown (1994a) ch. 4.

of the unworldly aspirations of stoicism as a moral philosophy with the demands for a viable code of behaviour for people living in society.¹⁹

This distinction between perfectly moral right acts and appropriate acts provides one version of a moral hierarchy that structures the distinction between the dialogism of the *Moral Sentiments* and the monologism of the *Wealth of Nations*.²⁰ Of all the voices in the *Moral Sentiments*, it is typically the detached didactic voice that speaks for and on behalf of the highest moral virtue and in alignment with the impartial spectator model of moral judgment. This is in contrast with what is sometimes given as the voice of a common humanity, or the coarse clay of mankind, that can achieve only appropriate acts and a form of rule-following in living according to the general rules of morality. By living according to these general rules of morality and the laws of the land, people may live a life of ‘tolerable decency’ and ‘avoid any considerable degree of blame’ (TMS III.4.6-12). Thus in spite of the rejection of central tenets of stoicism, the *Moral Sentiments* is still operating within a moral hierarchy that derives from it and its distinction between *katorthomata* and *kathekonta*.²¹ This distinction has implications for the *Wealth of Nations* since the virtues that are applicable there are those of the latter category not the former.

This is reflected in the absence of an interplay of voices in the *Wealth of Nations* together with the analytic and scientific, rather than moral, tone of the didactic voice of the text. Here the didactic voice does not set itself in criticism of the mores of ordinary humanity or the common failings of the ‘great mob of mankind’. Within the zone of the matters indifferent, the desire to better one’s condition is accepted as natural without any of the derogation that attended it in the *Moral Sentiments* (WN IV.v.b.43, IV.ix.28; TMS I.iii.2-3, IV.1.8). Furthermore, the improvement in living standards, particularly for the poor, is accepted as beneficial for society; references to the ‘trinkets’ and ‘toys’ of consumer society are replaced by the value of having the lower ranks of the people well fed, clothed and lodged (TMS IV.1.6; WN I.viii.36). The didactic voice engages in criticism of particular economic practices and particular orders of men who pursue their economic interest at the expense of others or the wider interest of society. For example, it is critical of merchants and master manufacturers in so far as their interests are opposed the general interest of society, so that in following their own economic interest they are acting against the general interest (WN I.xi.p.10). But, in terms of the conception of ‘agency’ – the conception of economic agency in contrast to moral agency – there is a marked shift. The virtues that specifically apply to economic behaviours are the virtues of justice and prudence, not the virtues of self-command and beneficence associated with the impartial spectator. Market exchanges are non-tuistic so that sympathy and spectatorial mechanisms are not relevant for economic agency which is involved only with the pursuit of self-interest within the bounds of the law of the country. Justice and prudence are essential for the safety and prosperity of society, but, morally speaking, they are not the highest human achievements. To extend Smith’s metaphor a little, they are ‘the foundation which supports the building’, not ‘the ornament which

¹⁹ This is in line with the interpretation provided in Cicero’s *De Officiis*, which provided a Latin vocabulary for the Greek concepts with *recte facta* for *katorthomata* and *officia* for *kathekonta* (TMS VII.ii.1.42).

²⁰ Cf. TMS I.i.5.6-10; VI.iii.23.

²¹ ‘The wise man does not need *praecepta*, since he does not act by external rules, but by his internal *logos*, therefore it is superfluous to give rules to one who knows’, Kidd (1971) p. 164.

embellishes' it (TMS II.ii.3.4); and indeed it is fortuitous that it is so, because the security of society is too important to be left to the uncertain performance of human moral excellence.

Thus, the relation between the *Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations* can be understood in terms of an overarching moral hierarchy, owing much to the stoics in spite of Smith's formal rejection of central tenets of stoicism, within which each of the works is differently positioned. The two works are characterised by different core conceptions of 'agent' – as 'moral agent' and 'economic agent' – conceptions which are crucial for the central theoretical arguments and innovations of the two works, and these different conceptions of agency are registered in the style and voice of the two texts.

This may also be seen in terms of conceptions of human freedom of action. As outlined above, the conception of moral agent in the *Moral Sentiments* involves a notion of freedom of action. Yet, in the *Wealth of Nations* there is clear evidence of a causal approach to the analysis of economic relations. This is intimated in the full title of the work and in an abundance of references to causal relations. For example, 'The liberal reward of labour, therefore, as it is the effect of increasing wealth, so it is the cause of increasing population. To complain of it is to lament over the necessary effect and cause of the greatest publick prosperity' (WN I.viii.42); 'the high price of the wine seems to be, not so much the effect, as the cause of this careful cultivation' (I.xi.b.31); 'The carrying trade is the natural effect and symptom of great national wealth: but it does not seem to be the natural cause of it' (WN II.v.35); and 'It is thus that through the greater part of Europe the commerce and manufactures of cities, instead of being the effect, have been the cause and occasion of the improvement and cultivation of the country' (WN III.iv.18). A core objective of the economics of the *Wealth of Nations* is a reconceptualisation of the 'annual produce' (or the exchangeable value of the annual produce of the land and labour of a country), and an analytic account of how this annual produce is determined. This notion of 'determination' is analytic; it refers to causal relations between economic variables as specified within the system or model. By specifying causal relations between economic variables of the system, the *Wealth of Nations* thus constructs the concept of 'economic agency' that is required for such an economic system. Economic agency is thus not so much construed in terms of empirical persons who are, in general, motivated by self-interest in their economic dealings, but is rather a conceptual construction whose characteristics are given analytically by the properties of the economic system.²² Empirically-given economic agents may be influenced in their actions and responses by a range of motivations, including self-interest, as well as by ignorance, vanity and opportunism. But what is significant for understanding the system of causal relations that is its analytic core, is that the *Wealth of Nations* constructs the concept of economic agency that is required by these causal relations.²³

Much of the debate about the Adam Smith problem has been posed in terms of whether the same assumptions about human nature and human motivation are held to apply in both works. But if conceptions of 'agent' are constructed according to the requirements of the theoretical system under consideration, then conceptions of

²² This suggests that the prudent man of TMS VI.i is *not* simply the frugal man of WN II.iii (cf. Raphael and Macfie, 1976, p. 18). See also Brown (1994a) ch. 4, section 4.

²³ This argument is developed in Brown (2009 forthcoming).

‘moral agent’ and ‘economic agent’ are constructed according to the theoretical requirements of the different discourses of moral philosophy and economics. This suggests that it is a mistake to seek for an underlying or essentialist conception of human nature across both works and that to do so results in overlooking important differences between them.

V

In this essay I’ve outlined some ways in which drawing upon Bakhtin’s distinction between dialogic and monologic discourses has helped to highlight some systematic differences in the conceptualisation of ‘agency’ in Adam Smith’s *Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*. Attentiveness to issues of style and figuration has thus assisted in probing some foundational issues concerning the theorisation of agency in the two works. This is not to suggest that all the content of the two works can be subsumed under these two different approaches to agency, but it is to propose that these conceptions of moral agent and economic agent are crucial for the central theoretical arguments of the two works.

What are the implications of this interpretation for the modern stage of debate about the Adam Smith problem? One implication is that what is at issue is not so much the question of what constitutes some essentialist notion of human nature or human motivation and whether such a notion is treated consistently across the two works; rather the question is how different discourses or academic investigations conduce to different theorisations of human agency. This isn’t really a question of whether Smith was consistent across the two works. As argued above, both conceptions of agency can be understood in terms of a meta-framework deriving from aspects of the stoic philosophy, even though central tenets of that philosophy are formally rejected in the *Moral Sentiments*.

This has implications for understanding the wider question concerning the relation between ethics and economics, a question that has motivated much of the recent debate. In identifying different notions of agency at work in the two texts, the interpretation advanced here suggests some insights into what is perhaps a theoretical disjuncture between ethics and economics. Part of the difficulty in trying to work out ethical solutions to economic problems is that it rubs up against different theoretical conceptions of agency. This suggests that reducing the distance between morals and markets – if such is possible – involves theoretical issues and not only motivational ones.

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