



Issue 3
Volume 1

Warwick Performance and Politics Network

working papers



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

The Warwick Performance and Politics Network Working Paper Series contributes to the development of 'politics and performance' as an emergent area of interdisciplinary research, by creating a space for the rapid publication and discussion of works in progress.

The papers published in the series reflect cutting-edge work in this field and will become a point of reference for the growing interdisciplinary community of researchers addressing performative governance and the intersections between politics and performance.

Published by The University of Warwick
ISSN: ISSN 2051-1213 (Online)
November 1st, 2012

Editor: Claire Blencowe

Volume 1 (2012)

Issue 1: Shirin M. Rai, *Political Performance: Reading Parliamentary Politics*

Issue 2: Claire Peta Blencowe, *Biopolitical Authority*

Issue 3: Matthew Watson, *The Aesthetic Dimension of Performance of Self in Mid Eighteenth Century Economic Thought*

The Aesthetic Dimension of the Performance of the Self in Mid Eighteenth Century Economic Thought¹

Matthew Watson, University of Warwick

Abstract

*There is a tendency to view the turn towards aesthetics in political economy as something distinctly new, as a move made in opposition to the contemporary strength of economists' assumptions about culturally-abstracted utility-maximising rationality. However, in this paper I present a rather different position on the issue by exploring the role that the aesthetic dimension took at the birth of what we today call economics in the mid eighteenth century work of Adam Smith. These origins are to be found in Smith's 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments* rather than his better known and more obviously economic 1776 *Wealth of Nations*. He used the earlier book to enter the debate between Mandeville and Rousseau on the nature of luxury to argue that the aesthetic traits which allow the market economy to flourish have regrettable social consequences when it comes to the constitution of the individual as an autonomous moral agent. Indeed, in the strongest version of his commentary on these dynamics, the demands placed upon individuals to submit themselves to the spectacles associated with commercial society are so pronounced that the performance of the self which emerges from that experience is necessarily morally corrupted. Smith could not bring himself to be an outright critic of consumerism because the unintended economic consequences of its enactment led, in his way of thinking, to potential escape routes from poverty. Yet he remained a cultural critic of consumerism right up until the last edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1790. In that edition he highlighted even more strongly than before the possibility that the link between aesthetic performance of the self and individual moral decay results in a generic tension between the needs of a self-perpetuating market economy and the needs of a self-sustaining market society. His work therefore stands as the culmination of an eighteenth-century tradition in which the aesthetic dimension of acquisitive individualism was often seen as a source of instability within market life and, as a consequence, it was often treated as an unfortunate manifestation of modern existence.*

Key Words: Aesthetics; Adam Smith; luxury; Mandeville; Rousseau; self-love; consumption; self-delusion

¹ The original paper from which this one arises was written with the financial assistance of a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (number RES-000-22-2198). I gratefully acknowledge the ESRC's support of my research.

Introduction

For some time now, economics has been frequently denounced by those who operate beyond its orthodox boundaries for attempts to colonise other forms of social scientific knowledge production via claims about the presumed universality of its methodology (Hodgson 1994; Amariglio and Ruccio 1999; Fine 1999). Even more cuttingly, that method has been said to be grounded in a technical abstraction which singularly fails to capture the essence of the economic relations in which real people could ever hope to be involved (Robinson 1964; Tabb 1999; Keen 2001). In particular, orthodox economists are accused of completely ignoring the socialising dynamics of economic life and the way in which economic relations reflect the production of aesthetic norms caused by leading life within a particular social setting. The de-socialisation of economics has been a conscious process linked to the professionalisation of the discipline and to efforts to create out of it a credible science (Weintraub 1985; Bernstein 2003). It is for this reason that the turn to an aesthetic political economy is often associated with the embrace of a post-disciplinary mode of analysis.

In order to sustain such a link, though, it is necessary to be working with a particular reading of the history of economic thought. All claims to be practicing post-disciplinarity tend to have a linear conception of how the discipline that they are trying to transcend came to embody the analytical shortcomings that only a move beyond established disciplinary boundaries can ever hope to rectify. In other words, they have an originating narrative designed to enforce the impression of two alternatives: choose the disciplinary route and remain boxed in by the analytical assumptions which lend that discipline internal coherence, or choose the post-disciplinary route which enables a far greater sense of methodological pluralism. However, the excavation of historical roots *also* reveals a methodological pluralism which pays appropriate regard to the aesthetic dimension within political economy. The only difference is that this takes us into the realm of pre-disciplinarity rather than post-disciplinarity.

If the social, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of economic enquiry are missing today from economics – which, in the case of those practicing the subject field from an orthodox perspective, they most certainly are – then this is because there has been a conscious choice on the part of economists to remove them. Their absence was not structurally inscribed into the logic of economics from its earliest manifestation in the age of commercial society. In fact, pre-disciplinary political economy is criticised most vehemently by advocates of modern economics precisely because it was rooted in an understanding of the social, cultural and aesthetic norms that influence economic activity rather than as a reflection of abstract economising behaviour (Schumpeter 1994 [1954]). That is, it was the presence of these dimensions in the originating moments of modern economics which led to their subsequent exclusion, rather than the fact that they were always missing.

In this paper I focus on the aesthetic dimension in particular to show how it provided animating purpose to the work of Adam Smith, the person who today's economists still routinely refer to as the 'father' of their discipline. Smith held a complex position on the relationship between the social and the economic orders associated with the commercial way of life. Understandably in this respect much debate has ensued in the

specialist history of thought literature about which aspect of his thinking on that relationship should be emphasised the most. A few provisional points might usefully be made in trying to distil the essence of that literature. After much back-and-forth within his own argument Smith eventually appears to have settled on the view that the commercial society should be tolerated, because the economic progress with which it is associated provides hope that all basic needs might be met and that poverty might thus be alleviated. The commercial society also held open the prospect for Smith that all remaining vestiges of feudal servitude might be broken and that the individuals populating that society might therefore gain in autonomous control over their own lives. Equally, though, that autonomy should not be overstated, because he also believed that it was only ever possible to swap the direct bondage to the landlord in pre-commercial society for the indirect bondage to fashionable opinion within commercial society. It was the aesthetic dimension of such opinion which particularly exercised Smith's mind and which seems to have caused his general ambivalence to the state of economic progress.

In order to make this argument, the paper proceeds in three stages. In section one, I argue that Smith entered an established realm of scholarship and, at the time of his entry, the most important aesthetic issue under discussion was that relating to luxury. In particular, there was a dispute – with Rousseau the figurehead on one side and Mandeville on the other – over the potentially corrupting effects of the pursuit of aesthetic markers of social standing when purchasing luxury goods. The mid eighteenth-century individual who was forced to come to terms with the new opportunities for consumption within commercial society was therefore often faced with the temptation of performing the self in morally dubious ways. In section two, I show that Smith was a direct participant in the debate on the luxury question and that this formed the background for his discussion and ultimate rejection of simplistic characterisations of the eighteenth-century 'selfish hypothesis'. This was Smith at his most Rousseauian, although at the same time his work when read as a whole never quite managed to break completely free of Mandevillian influence. In section three, I deepen the focus on Smith's critique of the way in which a socially-regressive aesthetic of the commercial way of life threatened to impose itself in the mid eighteenth century upon everyday structures of interpersonal engagement. The suggestion from Smith's work is one of a generic contradiction between the basic elements of a dynamic market economy and the basic elements of a flourishing market society: the individual character traits associated with the former require a very different model of virtue and a very different underlying aesthetic to the individual character traits associated with the latter. I turn briefly in the conclusion to the implications of this finding for exploring today the aesthetic dimension of the performance of the self.

The Eighteenth Century Debate About Luxury

The Smithian tradition of pre-disciplinary political economy was, in Smith's own words, an attack on the received policy wisdom of mercantilism (Arrow 1979). He set himself against "that exclusive corporation spirit" which typified the "original inventors of those restraints upon the importation of foreign goods, which secure to them the monopoly of the home-market" (Smith 1982 [1776/1884]: IV.ii.21). In a much quoted

passage from *The Wealth of Nations* he denounced the fact that: “People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the publick, or in some contrivance to raise prices” (Smith 1982 [1776/1784]: I.x.c.27). The core mercantilist contention was that the national well-being depended on the ability to secure a suitable flow of precious metals into the country. Accordingly, production should be set within a regulatory system that was organised to maximise the sale of home-produced goods abroad relative to the prevailing level of imports. Within this schema, the production of luxury goods was actively promoted insofar as they were associated with a healthy balance of trade position. Many of the authors of key seventeenth century mercantilist tracts advocated luxury goods as a means of opening up new commercial routes for other products in the wake of trading luxuries with overseas’ aristocrats (Mun 1987 [1664]; Barbon 1905 [1690]). The aim was to use luxury goods as a pathfinder for deriving subsequent trade surpluses (Staum 1996: 205).

Smith, however, rejected the mercantilists’ founding proposition about how countries become rich and, as a result, he rejected their consequentialist defence of luxury. “That wealth consists in money, or in gold and silver, is a popular notion”, he wrote, before noting that “In consequence [of it], all the different nations of Europe have studied, though to little purpose, every possible means of accumulating gold and silver in their respective countries” (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: IV.i.1, IV.i.3). Smith began instead from a position that was based on a much more dynamic conception of the interaction between production and consumption and the place of that interaction as a support structure for the existing social order. “Consumption”, he argued, “is the sole end and purpose of all production” (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: IV.viii.49). Yet this does not mean that he believed consumption to be a socially autonomous sphere of economic activity. Mercantilist policies to export luxury items tended to be introduced alongside sumptuary laws at home restricting the scope of consumption beyond subsistence to all but the most privileged of social classes (Kroen 2004: 713). Sumptuary laws were a way of using asymmetric access to consumption to reproduce a strictly hierarchical social order based on aristocracy. Smith denounced the economic inefficiency of such an order (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: V.ii.k.7). He associated it with artificial restrictions on the scope of the market and, in turn, similar restrictions on incorporating the division of labour into the underlying structures of the economy. As he considered the latter to be the real source of what made countries rich, he positioned himself decisively against the mercantilists’ consequentialist defence of luxury on the grounds that it did little for the economy other than to cement the aristocracy’s position at its social apex.

By the time that Smith was writing, he was also required to take a stance on the moral debate about luxury that had recently sprung up. Much of this debate had developed in France, and Smith was already familiar with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s contribution to the debate before he left for his period travelling on the continent as a tutor between writing *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* (see, for example Smith 1982a). That trip exposed him to many more commentaries on the question of luxury then in circulation within French philosophy (Force 2003: 208). His own position subsequently developed from a synthesis of his views on Rousseau and Bernard Mandeville, both of whose work he adapted for his own purposes by simultaneously developing and critiquing it. Before I begin to outline Smith’s position, though, it is important to first provide a sense of the debate on which he was building and how its foundations rested on the aesthetic dimension of the performance of the self.

The word 'luxe' entered the French language 170 years before Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, and its original meaning was 'superfluity'. This in itself does not tell us too much, as superfluity can have two distinct meanings: one a qualitative measure synonymous with 'beyond necessity' and the other a normative comment synonymous with 'too much'. As Jeremy Jennings has shown, however, shortly after Thomas Mun's publication of the classic late seventeenth-century mercantilist text, *England's Treasure by Forraign Trade*, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* had settled on the latter meaning. Its aim was to transpose onto the very use of the word "an implied note of moral condemnation" (Jennings 2007: 82). This did not go without challenge and, in the 1730s, Jean-François Melon argued that the word 'luxe' should be cast out from the language of public administration so that the full economic effects of the *practices* of luxury could be openly debated vis-à-vis the national interest (Jennings 2007: 80). Nonetheless, the general preoccupation with issues of luxury up until the middle of the eighteenth century was to impute negative connotations onto its practices.

The principal issue in this regard was the association of luxury with the rather gratuitous culture of courtly consumption and its associations with both the ethic and aesthetic of excess. The eighteenth-century appeal to the concept of luxury was part of the first sustained attempt to specify theoretically the relationship between consumption and democracy. In countries still organised socially around the principles of absolutism the issue of luxury generated lively political outpourings; in countries where the monarchy was already held partially in check by the will of parliament it caused less controversy. The very word 'luxury' was used to drive home the sense of difference between those who were incorporated into court circles and those who were excluded from such rarefied company. In Sheryl Kroen's evocative phrase (2004: 715), the juxtaposition of conspicuous courtly consumption and deliberately constrained consumption for families of middling means "renarrates the story of the bourgeois revolution from a cultural perspective". In this respect, it was relatively easy to assume that the source of luxury was located in political institutions rather than in wealth itself (Shovlin 2006: 7-8). Where concerns about luxury were at their highest, political institutions were complicit in facilitating a socially polarising culture of display. Elsewhere, luxury was in effect a political non-issue.

A proper *debate* about luxury, one with protagonists from both sides arguing on the basis of a common starting point, did not arise until Rousseau engaged directly with a re-issued version of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. The two men both adopted a method of conjectural history, whereby observed changes in behavioural traits made possible by changes to the economic structure of society were redescribed in terms of the evolution of human nature. It is an irreducibly secular account of human life, insofar as the core feature underpinning the enquiry is the observation of sociability. The question that interested them both is what happens to the human capacity to want when individuals are taken out of the state of nature described by seventeenth-century philosophers and then subjected instead to socialisation pressures merely through living with their peers. Within the commercial spaces of mid eighteenth-century towns, that life had begun to revolve ever more around "an ethic of self-display" (Hundert 2003: 34). Through this means, commerce had transformed both the progress of the arts and sciences and also what the resource-rich individual could hope to gain from that progress. The individual was subjected to more and more pressures for self-awareness during the course of the eighteenth century, with those pressures arising from other people's capacity to adorn themselves and their homes with possessions. This added the sense of a public dimension

to their consumption, even if they rarely invited anyone other than their most intimate circle of friends into their houses. Luxury spending therefore came to play a role in social structuring, as it became a relatively easy shortcut to generating the feelings of self-esteem that had increasingly become the cultural touchstone of modern life. Consumption thus shifted from being a purely economic act typically associated with subsistence to a social, cultural and, perhaps above all else, an aesthetic act associated with establishing an individual's sense of place within societal hierarchies.

The similarity of narrative – in which contemporary conditions were historicised through appeal to the evolution of human nature within an increasingly social state – provided the potential for a genuine debate about the nature of luxury. That potential was magnified by the fact that the content of the historical account remains remarkably similar. For both Mandeville and Rousseau, the socialisation to which eighteenth-century economic subjects were exposed was rooted in an essential foundational moment in which property rights were first established and where the subsequent desire to defend the material gains embedded in property rights equated society-building with self-love (Mandeville 1997 [1723]: 37; Rousseau 2003 [1755]: 109). The debate about luxury then ensued because it was at this point that Rousseau insisted on departing from Mandeville's historical account of the foundations of modern commercial life.

Moreover, the departure could hardly have been more complete. For Mandeville, the equation of society-building with self-love was a civilising phenomenon, as it pointed clearly to the possibility of harnessing the progression of the arts and the sciences in order to explore full human potentials (Hundert 1994: 108). That progression was animated by the way in which a world of material possessions puts a more exacting acquisitive definition on what it takes for one to feel fulfilled, and economic improvement is thus triggered in order to allow such fulfilment to be satisfied (Mandeville 1997 [1723]: 91). For Rousseau, however, the same process frustrated human potentials because it bred inequalities and promoted the selfish passions that were necessary to legitimise those inequalities (Rousseau 2003 [1755]: 112). Human sociability led to curiously anti-social outcomes in which individuals were more concerned about the personal benefits of aesthetically-pleasing consumption than about the living conditions of their fellows (Marso 1999). Depending on which of these two commentaries is followed, luxury spending was therefore either a symbol of everything that was right about the modern world or of everything that was wrong with it (Berry 1994: 140). Smith's published review of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* focused precisely on the way in which Rousseau had shared Mandeville's starting point but then turned his argument on its head to develop a critique rather than a celebration of commercial society (Smith 1982a: 11-15). The whole of Smith's subsequent work can be read as an attempt to derive some sort of synthesis between Mandeville's and Rousseau's divergent commentaries.

The difference between the two commentaries can be understood in terms of the difference between the principles of civic and commercial humanism. Mandeville attempted to resuscitate a late fifteenth-century Italian tradition of claiming for merchants the same sort of virtue as was normally reserved for nobility, even if the latter was associated with restraint and the former with excess (Clark 1998: 424). The virtue in question for commercial humanism was activated in the public sphere, and it linked merchant activity with the national esteem that emerged from material enrichment (Najemy 2000: 78). As such, commercial

success could be imbued with moral qualities, thus negating the usual moral critique of luxury according to its gratuitous nature (Shovlin 2006: 19). Commercial humanism attempts to de-moralise the issue of luxury insofar as it treats it as a means rather than as an end (Berry 1994: 101-25). The usual moral critique concentrated on the lack of social value contained in the act of luxury consumption, where the act itself was designed simply for the purpose of social differentiation and the public display of perceived social rank. Mandeville's commercial humanism instead emphasised the way in which a world that encouraged luxuries must first have devised methods of production which allow people to be lifted out of poverty (Mandeville 1997 [1723]: 67). To the extent that this can be understood as an ethical priority for the state, the very fact of being able to observe the consumption of luxuries should not in itself, he argued, be seen as a moral problem (Mandeville 1997 [1723]: 149).

By contrast, Rousseau placed much more emphasis on the fact of luxury consumption, because he read into that fact a number of adverse implications about the moral character of the individual engaged in that type of consumption (Rousseau 2003 [1755]: 115). Rousseau's position therefore represents a retrenchment of the civic humanist tradition, which has been described as the prevailing ideology of the day (Baron 1988). Whereas Mandeville argued that the virtue preached by civic humanists was an impediment to individuals creating economic structures in which human life could flourish, Rousseau stated that human life was increasingly not worth living if it was not to be grounded in both the ethic and the aesthetic of civic humanism. The combination of the two suggests that the virtue of the individual is all, and certainly more important than the efficiency of the economic structure in which the individual is located (Hörnqvist 2000: 127). A deliberately restrained form of living was to be advocated, because it was only through this simplicity of lifestyle that the mind could be focused on protecting one's public persona from the temptations of conspicuous displays of self-love (Goldsmith 1990: 227). The consumption of luxuries is an obvious temptation along these lines, and the emphasis on display in that consumption distracts the individual from the virtues of temperance and self-control.

There is consequently an important dimension of classical republicanism in Rousseau's critique of luxury. Such themes continued to pervade the debate about luxury for the rest of the eighteenth century all the way through to the French Revolution. The Revolution itself was predicated on concerted opposition to aristocratic idleness within the context of consumption excess and the juxtaposition of such behaviour with the political ideal of active service to the nation (Staum 1996: 205-6). This ideal had been narrated in philosophical tracts for the previous hundred years through intimations of the noble restraint of Ancient Sparta and the associated vitality of its public sphere and success of its military endeavours. The obvious classical comparator was the fall of Rome amidst increasing decadence and the elevation of the importance of personal possessions as against the protection of public virtue. Mandeville would not entertain the notion that the acquisitions with which individuals adorned themselves in a wealthy society were harmful to the preservation of both political community and the state, but Rousseau followed the classical republican tradition in asserting that it most definitely was.

Within this tradition, an important political distinction was drawn between the citizen and the consumer. The citizen was ascribed ascetic characteristics and was praised for adopting a simple way of life, particularly

so when the individual's financial capabilities allowed for rather greater extravagance amidst the embrace of an aesthetic of excess. By contrast, consumers were accused of giving in to extravagance at almost every available opportunity (Kroen 2004: 720). However, the distinction between the citizen and the consumer reveals something of a tension in Rousseau's work. It is clear that Rousseau had an admiration for individuals who orient their lifestyles to the demands of being a citizen and a community of such individuals was his political preference (Rousseau 2003 [1758]). Yet, to be a citizen in the first place requires an advanced state of sociability which Rousseau believed to be intrinsically corrupting. The citizen may well elicit Rousseau's approval through the self-denial of affordable luxuries. But the availability of luxuries was itself the product of a commercial structure that had exactly the same origins in human sociability as the practice of citizenship. Rousseau's thesis was not only that the conspicuous aspects of luxury were morally corrupting, but also that all human sociability beyond the very simplest forms of communal living had the potential to be so (Rousseau 2003 [1750]: 24-5). It was a very exacting demand, then, to expect individuals both to act like citizens but also to be completely unaffected by the temptations of the environment that makes it meaningful to be a citizen in the first place.

This is all quite different to Mandeville's approach to the question of luxury. Mandeville's argument was to deny that the focus on luxury – especially when phrased using the language of moral condemnation – was justified in the first place (Mandeville 1997 [1723]: 65). He attempted to remove the negative connotations associated with luxury goods by arguing that there was no intrinsic difference between luxuries and other classes of goods. All aimed to provide the individual with sources of pleasure and, as the derivation of pleasure was the major impetus of human existence for Mandeville (1997 [1723]: 87-9), luxuries were functional to what made life worth living. David Hume summarised Mandeville's position as an attempt to substitute the politics of virtue with the politics of happiness (Hume 1975 [1777]). In such a world, the cultivation of virtue disappears from view unless it can be a source of happiness. However, Rousseau's classical republican account of virtue emphasised temperance and restraint, which cannot be reconciled with Mandeville's notion of pleasure-seeking (Goldsmith 1990: 243).

Mandeville's most basic conception of political economy is captured in what has come to be known as the 'petticoat thesis'. This arises from his tale of the poorest labourer's wife who cedes to the impulse of emulation in order to ensure that she can be provided with the best possible dress and petticoat to be seen in when out in public. The opportunity cost of this overt act of display might well be the malnourishment of herself and her husband, but this is considered a worthwhile sacrifice so long as she is not required to be seen in company wearing "a strong wholsom Frize" (Mandeville 1997 [1723]: 76). Mandeville read into the act of consumption the possibility that every person would strive to give the appearance that they were of a more elevated station than they actually were: so, an aesthetic of aspiration would come to be conjoined with an aesthetic of excess. The way in which a person dressed was extremely important in these imitation role plays, because copying the latest fashion could blur the distinction between one class of person and another. Thus, from Mandeville's perspective, luxuries might well be a crucial attractor for emulation, and the consequences of an economic psychology captivated by the possibility of living symbolically above one's station – as if in the guise of another person – was a constant spur to commerce and subsequent national enrichment. The cycle of economic activity begins with the initial demand for socially demarcating goods, and it was this that allowed Mandeville to reach the controversial conclusion that the feckless rich who

glorified in their idle decadence were perhaps “the greatest and most immediate Benefactors to Human Society” (cited in Goldsmith 1990: 248). The exercise of virtue via restraint was therefore, and somewhat counter-intuitively perhaps, *detrimental* to the interests of society, even when it was performed with social harmony uppermost in mind.

According to Mandeville, an important psychological distinction exists between being and appearing, and this is a crucial aspect of public life because it has economically beneficial consequences (Hundert 2003: 29). He identified this distinction as the unique feature differentiating the commercial society from all preceding societal forms. Commercial society subsequently imposes itself on the moral constitution of the individual, moreover in such a way that Mandeville denied that it could be understood using the prevailing moral tradition. Instead, he emphasised the dynamic properties of the emulative faculties and how these activated a new morality founded on envy. The challenge to philosophers in this respect was to begin to think through the practical implications of living within social parameters bounded by envy without being constrained by the conventional wisdom that envy was necessarily a moral bad (Berg 2005: 32). By opening up moral discourse to considerations of envy, Mandeville asked other philosophers to reflect on the possibility that human wants are boundless (Goldsmith 1990: 245). What is more, if that is the case then there is nothing intrinsically harmful to the human psyche about luxury.

In Edward Hundert’s conception, Mandeville imagined society to have been “transformed into [a] market for marks of esteem” (Hundert 2003: 36). Within such a society, individuals traded the symbolic value of tokens of status that could enhance their appearance as a person. The aim of their activity was to exploit consumption possibilities for purely instrumental purposes. Possessions were therefore both the regulator of social order and the key to the instinctive understandings that individuals would develop about their place within that order. The luxury debate was thus not only about luxury per se. Especially in the hands of its main protagonists, Rousseau and Mandeville, it was about nothing less than the dominant vision of human beings and the conception of the relationship between the individual, the economy and society (Jennings 2007: 81). The middle of the eighteenth century was in any case a period in which developments in technology and industrial capacity created new opportunities for and new threats to the autonomy of the individual arising from the economy. But these were greatly magnified by the rhetorical force of the luxury debate. It is within this context that Adam Smith developed his ideas, so it is against this backdrop that his work should be understood.

Smith on Luxury and Vanity

The fact that Smith should attempt to work with both Rousseau’s and Mandeville’s positions on luxury – even though they were entirely incompatible – was typical of his style of argumentation. Smith drew on classical themes to derive much of the content of his philosophy (Vivenza 2001), but the influence of the classics is also evident in the way in which he put his arguments together. As the *Lectures on Rhetoric and*

Belles Lettres make clear, Smith's method of argumentation rested on processes of verisimilitude, where the art of appearing to speak the truth begins by arguing both sides of the case to see what must be rejected in those positions before then attempting to derive a synthesis of what was left (Smith 1985: 28.ii.197). So it was with his efforts to operate in the interstices between Mandeville's wholesale embrace of the selfish hypothesis and Rousseau's desire to cling to classical republican notions of virtue in the face of the corrupting influences of commercial society.

By trying to tread such a thin line between two such clearly opposed positions, Smith dealt in a complexity of argument that is often lost upon those in the secondary literature who have attempted to claim him for one modern political camp or another. In practice he endorsed few positions without both reservation and qualification, and he worked with elements of other people's arguments and reinvented them for his own purposes rather than working with their arguments as a whole. As an example of this, there would have been no need to explore what lay between Rousseau's and Mandeville's position had Smith either accepted uncritically or rejected decisively the civic humanist critique of commercial society. Yet, he did neither.

Rousseau's civic humanist denunciation of commercial society was that it became a breeding ground for individuals to live in the reflection of other people's opinions. This is little more than rehearsing Mandeville's distinction between being and appearing, albeit with a very different tone of commentary attached. Rousseau's concern was that other people's opinions had necessarily become tainted under the influence of commercial society by the pursuit of personal acquisitiveness and its associated aesthetic (Barber 1978: 79). He instead had an ideal in mind drawn from the noblest of the classical figures of public life, asserting that this was the vision of proper behaviour to which ordinary people should aspire (Rousseau 2003 [1750]: 11). Smith never did fully divest his work of similar intimations of the good life to be found in classical virtues of self-command (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: VI.concl.2). Yet on many occasions he also hinted strongly at the unintended benefits that might arise from lifting the restrictions of moral disapprobation from self-interested behaviour (Levy 1995). To the extent that he flirted with the development of a fully providentialist account of those benefits (Skinner 1979), this is often seen as a direct response to the civic humanist tradition.

There is consequently no easy way to categorise Smith's approach to the question of luxury and of to which aesthetic eighteenth-century economic subjects should have oriented their consumption. At the very least, his work does not fit simply into any acknowledged school of thought so much as criss-crossing the boundaries between different schools. For Smith, it was necessary to treat luxury simultaneously as a historical, psychological and moral issue and, moreover, to view each of these separate aspects of the debate through the prism of the central political economy question of the mid eighteenth century: namely, how to build a prosperous society capable of providing dignified conditions of existence for its inhabitants. In many ways, then, in Smith's hands luxury was to be seen as three issues rather than as one. Insofar as these three could be treated as distinct from one another, Smith's style of argumentation did not avail itself to the type of totalising narrative favoured by both Rousseau and Mandeville.

In just one of the three dimensions of his discussion of luxury does Smith's own narrative point unequivocally in only one direction. By far the most straightforward aspect of his account is his treatment of the subject matter as an historical issue. Here, he integrated the rise of luxury into his 'four stages' theory of history and considered it to be a positive influence on the demise of feudalism (Winch 1996). The certainty with which he stated this relationship goes against much of the caution which typically attends his arguments. But as there are no discernible qualifications to his position then no more needs to be said on the matter for now.

For the purposes of this paper and its investigation of the aesthetic premises on which political economy following Smith was formed, his treatments of luxury as a psychological and a moral issue are much more interesting. Starting with the psychological, Smith picked up on other eighteenth-century authors' identification of a sense of bewilderment and displacement that accompanied ordinary people's first experiences of the commodity culture of commercial society (Montes 2003: 725). Yet, true to form, he retold this story in his own way. His emphasis was on the flipside that always accompanies sensations of bewilderment and displacement: those of wonder and awe. Here, he brought his analysis of the psychology of consumption into line with his analysis of scientific progress, citing common foundations for both. He opened his account of scientific progress in the *History of Astronomy* with the observation that the human mind responds first to the experience of the unfamiliar with wonderment (Smith 1982b: Intro.1-3). The unknown consequently sparks the desire to know, even if this is at the expense of reducing the initial feelings of wonderment to something much more sedate. Smith argued that the essence of human psychology is to both be disturbed by the unfamiliar but also to try to cure those initial intuitions of displacement by being able to connect the unfamiliar with something that is already known, thus providing a means of explaining the former through reference to the workings of the latter. This is the task of science (Smith 1982b: II.3): to be able to draw those connections so that the human mind no longer stands in wonder but also no longer feels the bewilderment that wonder elicits.

It is remarkable just how closely his analysis of the psychology of consumption follows this more general style of exposition. Once again, the account starts with the phenomenon of wonder, this time at both the nature and the scale of seemingly exotic possessions that new production techniques had made possible. Smith departed from Mandeville's argument that these products were demanded because possessions are an end in themselves. Instead, he suggested that they were given value due to the craftsmanship embedded within them (Berg 2005: 39). In turn, the attraction of craftsmanship to eighteenth-century consumers was that if they could begin to understand how the objects of their possession worked they could also prevent their initial feelings of wonderment from turning into the much more psychologically disturbing sensation of bewilderment. The ostentation of luxury items is not what made them popular, he suggested, so much as the secrets they held inside them as to how the age of commercial society was developing. Smith noted in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* the fascination he had observed amongst his acquaintances for the inner workings of luxury items rather than for the mere fact of their possession (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: IV.1.5). This stands at odds with Mandeville's attempt to integrate an aesthetic of aspiration with an aesthetic of excess in his justification of luxury. For Smith, the issue was whether an aesthetic of knowledge, with its attendant positive connotations, could ever outweigh the moral negatives of the aesthetic of excess. In his view, the possession of luxury goods brought psychological comfort to nobody except those living in the

most crudely self-regarding societies, yet knowing how those goods were put together did provide the comfort of being able to connect their workings with something that was much more familiar. This allowed the individual to be surrounded by the ongoing material changes of the commercial society without feeling psychologically displaced within those surroundings.

Whilst this begins to show the nuances contained within Smith's analysis of luxury, the discussion becomes more complex still when we turn to the moral dimension of the related issues. Up until this point Smith provides us with little reason to query the advocacy of luxury, but his moral critique takes us onto different political terrain. He began with an acknowledgement that the interests of society would not be served by regulating against luxuries, because this would amount to self-imposed constraints on economic progress (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: II.iii.36). However, economic progress was not such a superordinate goal that it eliminated all other concerns, as was shown by his unwillingness to simply write off Rousseau's contention that inculcation into a life of idle luxury threatened to undermine the 'manners' appropriate to social life (Rousseau 2003 [1750]). 'Manners' is the translation of *moeurs* from Rousseau's original, which today would have a meaning close to moral habits in English (Shovlin 2006: 22). Rousseau thought that habits of sobriety, industriousness and economy protected trading nations from moral decay, and Smith was not prepared to distance himself decisively from such a view. Economic progress should therefore always be balanced by a concern for maintaining moral standards in attempts to understand his work. It consequently became difficult for Smith to take a definitive stance within the luxury debate, because the issue of luxury appears on both sides of this particular equation.

Perhaps typically for Smith's style of argumentation, he allowed both positions to exist side-by-side within his work. The concept of luxury was subsequently divided into two separate practices: forms of consumption related to items which required productive labour to be put to work in their manufacture, as against forms of consumption which had their roots in unproductive labour (De Marchi 1999: 21). The former had a clear economic advantage for society as a whole. They provided further impetus for extending both the division of labour and the scope of the market, which he in turn linked to the source of the wealth of nations (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: I.iii). He also managed to generate a moral defence of this situation, suggesting that individuals' incorporation into a structured division of labour helps them to learn the morally agreeable principles of self-command (Smith [1776/1784]: I.viii.27; see also Boyden Lamb 1974: 675). However, his commentary on luxury expenditures sustaining only unproductive labour is very different. In this situation, there are neither economic nor moral benefits associated with the consumption of luxuries, and whatever benefits do ensue are internalised solely in the vanity of the consumer. The aesthetic of excess appears always in Smith's work in relation to vanity.

But even here things are not as straightforward in Smith's account as they might at first appear. For Smith, vanity was not necessarily a moral bad in all situations (Raphael and Macfie 1982: 9), which means that it is first essential to contextualise the circumstances leading to the display of vanity before moral judgement can be passed on the individual concerned. Smithian vanity is often found in the same context as Mandevillian emulation, and it is tempting to see them as being two interpretations of the same observation. According to Mandeville emulation arises from one person's attempt to present their social station as being equivalent

to that of others who would generally be seen to enjoy more favourable material conditions of existence (Mandeville 1997 [1723]: 77). In much the same way, according to Smith vanity is present when the human disposition is to sympathise more readily with the rich than with the poor (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: I.iii.3.7; see also Haakonssen 1981: 83; Khalil 1998: 222; Weinstein 2006: 18).

Sympathy is a key constituent of social action for Smith (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: I.i.2). It is triggered by the human desire for the approbation of fellow members of society for the content of the sentiments that they display when faced with a certain set of circumstances. In particular it is the search for approval that one's moral sentiments are pitched at an appropriate level (West 1976: 100-1; Skinner 1979: 55-6; Peil 1999: 167; Verburg 2000: 37). There is nothing existentially set in stone about such levels. Rather, they are culturally produced – Rousseau's *moeurs* – in line with the prevailing moral habits of a given time and place, thus being manifested, *inter alia*, in the peer pressure an individual might feel to endorse a particular aesthetic principle and not others. For Smith, it was only with the advancement of commercial society that vanity became infused with individuals' willingness to respect the pride that the rich will show in their ability to display their wealth through possessions, and by extension it was also therefore only with the advancement of commercial society that vanity was linked to the desire to also be able to demonstrate one's acquisition of possessions. Smith went to considerable lengths in *The Wealth of Nations* to show that this display of vanity led to new swathes of British manufacturing being founded on copying the style of craftsmanship in exclusive luxury items, albeit making the ensuing products available at a cost that was sufficiently affordable as to allow others to emulate the consumption of the rich (Berg 2005: 23; Uglow 2003: 149). The act of identifying with the selfish sentiment of pride in possessions was a cause of moral regret for Smith (1982 [1759/1790]: VI.iii.37). However, he could not bring himself to issue outright moral condemnation of the vanity to be found in commercial society because it in turn led to the gainful employment of larger numbers of people, thus providing many workers with a route out of poverty (Smith [1759/1790]: IV.1.9).

The commercial society differed from those that had preceded it as its focus on consumption offered much greater opportunities to attach vanity to pleasure-seeking and its accompanying aesthetic displays. This, of course, lay at the heart of Rousseau's objections to commercial society. Rousseau's concern was that commercial society confronted the ancient instinct for dutiful citizenship and instead incentivised the purely self-seeking pursuit of wealth (Griswold 1999: 96-7). This was the core contradiction of the civilised state: the progress of civilisation encouraged human interaction with commerce, but that interaction simultaneously encouraged individuals to break the bonds of society by acting selfishly upon the impulse towards acquisitiveness (Force 2003: 41-2). In J.G.A. Pocock's words, there was a dual tendency in evidence in commercial society, through which "society humanized man and by the same process distracted and alienated him again" (Pocock 1975: 504).

Both Rousseau and Smith held the view that the modern individual seeks meaning for their life through the opinion of others, but Smith did not follow Rousseau in arguing that this takes the individual somehow out of society. Rousseau had in mind in this contention the image of ancient society, whereas Smith was eager to emphasise instead the modern society that he witnessed around him (Berry 1994: 184). In this latter respect, living through the opinion of others and aligning one's instincts to their *moeurs* was precisely what

situated individuals *within* society, not what took them out of it. Living socially was not a case for Smith, as it was for Rousseau, of choosing between the pursuit of wealth and the pursuit of virtue. It was more the case of promoting the good sense out of which political institutions could be created to ensure that the pursuit of wealth was undertaken responsibly and with at least one eye on the need to defend reasonable parameters of virtue. Smith's pragmatism is often in evidence in his encouragement of 'middling' moral virtues, those which retain the intrinsic sense of being virtuous but which stand one stage removed from the idealisation of perfectly pure morality (Taylor 1989: 123).

Pleasure-seeking enters directly as an economic good into this depiction of middling morality. It is heightened demand that, for Smith, resulted in the advantageous outcome of extending the market (Smith 1981 [1776]: I.iii). However, increases in demand emerged most readily in the early years of commercial society from what Charles Griswold, summarising Smith, has called the "disinterested pleasure in the purposeless purposiveness of things" (Griswold 1999: 331). In other words, Smithian individuals feel good about themselves knowing that they are now in possession of products that would once have been out of their reach, even if it is unclear in their own minds how the products represent a functional increase in their quality of life. What matters more is that the act of displaying the acquisition proves both to themselves and to other people that they have been capable of bettering their condition (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: II.iii.28). For Smith, the esteem that could be derived from the sense that one had been able to elevate oneself within society meant that "regard to our private happiness [should] appear upon many occasions very laudable principles of action" (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: VII.ii.3.16). However, the qualification 'upon many occasions' is important, because self-esteem of this nature is founded upon vanity, and care had to be taken to ensure that the exercise of vanity did not affront middling moral virtues.

Due to the intervening influence of vanity, Smith doubted that consumption was driven merely by the desire for immediate gratification. Instead, it was constituted as a means to the more important social end of deriving praise from fellow members of society (Smith 1982a: 15). Yet the love of praise is decisively different to praiseworthiness in Smith's moral system. To act in a praiseworthy manner should be the goal of middling moral virtues. All too often, though, he suggested, praiseworthiness can be confused with the distorting influence of the love of praise, which is what he describes as vanity (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: III.2.27). This is especially so in commercial society, in which the praise that can be received for surrounding oneself with the trappings of a consumer lifestyle can lead individuals to assume – falsely – that they *deserve* to be praised (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: I.iii.2.1). We might struggle to work hard and to better our condition, and Smith implied that this is an almost certainly praiseworthy means to a wider end. However, that end is the satisfaction of the vanity arising from assuming that we are now in a position in which others will admire us, and this crudely deferential relationship to self-regard cannot be praiseworthy irrespective of how much it elicits actual praise. The reason for withholding praiseworthiness is that luxury items are almost uniformly "frivolous and useless" (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: III.iv.10), based as they are solely on satisfying the desire for self-regard. For Smith, how we respond to the constant temptation to allow vanity to play itself out unchecked is what defines us morally. Human life within commercial society might therefore be seen as the necessity of walking the tightrope of self-regard: to what extent must self-interest be advocated for the sake of economic progress but restrained for the sake of preserving the basis of society within virtue? The paper's final section now explores the implications of Smith's answer to this question.

Smith, the Delusion of Consumption and the Implied Contradiction of Market Life

For Smith, the pursuit of wealth and the pursuit of virtue are grounded in the same human faculty. Both proceed from acts of the imagination and the ability to tutor the mind to reconstruct what we presume the subjects of our vision will feel in the circumstances in which we observe them negotiating their everyday lives. As Smith put it, the degree of fellow-feeling one experiences “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it” (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: I.i.1.10). The mind is capable of what Robert Heilbroner (1986: 58) has called ‘psychic projection’ in its capacity for distilling the likely emotional response of other people in the circumstances with which they are faced before then replaying those sentiments internally (see also Fitzgibbons 1995: 63; Boltanski 1999: 36). This lived sense of fellow-feeling applies just as readily to trying to copy in the imagination what it must be like to be rich as what it must be like to suffer life’s inconveniences. The mechanism of reconstruction is the same, even though Smith insisted that there is a tendency for any individual who understands the self-esteem that arises from the acquisition of material possessions to place their minds more easily in accord with the sentiments of the rich than with those of the poor (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: I.iii.3.7; see also Campbell and Skinner 1982: 105; Verburg 2000: 39; Fleischacker 2004: 155).

Such accord provides the basis of Smithian sympathy (Boyden Lamb 1974: 675; Rizvi 2002: 246), meaning that it is possible to sympathise equally with situations in which wealth is on display as with situations in which virtue is on display. Competing displays thus provide very different aesthetics vying for endorsement. However, the more finely tuned the imaginative faculty through experience and reflection, the greater is the likelihood for Smith of instances in which the observer emits perfect approbation of the sentiments displayed by the observed and the observed reciprocates having witnessed the emotional response of the observer. This corresponds to instances of mutual sympathy (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: I.i.2). Yet the mind does not always offer a perfect reconstruction of the sentiments that it tries to replicate, because it can always be corrupted by desire. Smith suggested that it would be unusual for any individual to desire to suffer, which often produced a psychological barrier preventing the perfect accord between the reciprocated sentiments of observer and sufferer. By contrast, the imagination is not only capable of reconstructing what it must be like to be rich, there is also a psychological trigger for it to act in this way, because living a life of material comfort is typically a desired state within commercial society. The pursuit of wealth and its associated aesthetic of excess is therefore primarily a psychological phenomenon according to Smith.

Rousseau had a similar account of the fundamental economic foundation of commercial society. He associated the pursuit of wealth with the dynamics of self-regard, and he was eager to show that these dynamics were a feature unique to commercial society (Rousseau 2003 [1755]: 105). As a matter of culturally specific observation rather than as an existential claim, he argued that most people had learnt by the mid eighteenth century that they could flourish in commercial society only to the extent that they thought solely of themselves. In other words, he historicised the selfish hypothesis to locate it at a particular

point in the evolution of human society (De Man 1982). Smith did not disagree, but he added a twist to Rousseau's account. In Rousseau's hands the elevation of self-regard to a cultural norm is a symbol of human society gone wrong (Hicks 2004: 94), but in Smith's hands it is simply a sign that individuals might always succumb to self-deception (Griswold 1999: 16). Self-regard is historically produced but also often only plays to the capacity for self-delusion.

The process of self-delusion has two stages, which need to be explained in turn. The explanation begins with the answer to why people should feel particularly able to sympathise with the rich even though they might not yet hold that station within society. For Smith, sympathy with the rich is understandable insofar as most people imaginatively reconstruct the psychological state of the rich to be one of contentment to match their material comfort. As a consequence, the sense that most people have of what it must be like to be rich means that they believe that they too will be content once they acquire that status (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: IV.1.8). There is an aesthetic quality to our admiration of the rich, then, but this is not all that it might seem. The intrinsic beauty of luxury items is what we admire. However, once we are in a position in which we are surrounded by such objects of our own possession we find that they have a rather different effect on us than that which we were expecting. They are the outcome of much hard work but, once acquired, they do not bring the tranquillity of mind that had originally been imagined. Instead, they merely propagate further restlessness stimulated by a heightened desire for acquisitiveness. When discussing the psychological implications of the pursuit of wealth, Smith appears to have said that it is better to travel than to arrive.

In order to capture this sense, he provided a cautionary tale for his readers in the shape of the 'poor man's son'. Smith narrated this tale with his own sympathetic capacities very much activated, for he clearly approved of the poor man's son's determination to better his condition and of the industriousness that he is required to demonstrate in order to do so. At the same time, though, Smith was sufficiently pragmatic to argue that this was necessarily at the expense of disabling the virtuous aspects of the impartial spectator. The way to better one's condition in commercial society is to lose one's virtuous self within the superficiality of possessions, so the imaginative faculties must be educated to respond less favourably to the pursuit of virtue than to the pursuit of wealth. It is only in the absence of the morally pristine impartial spectator that: "He [the poor man's son] is enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity [i.e., the aesthetic contentment derived from luxury consumption] ... It appears like the life of some superior rank of beings, and, in order to arrive at it, he devotes himself for ever to the pursuit of wealth" (Smith 1982 [1759]: IV.1.8).

In time, however, the poor man's son must come to question whether it would have been better to remain poor, at least insofar as he realises that his efforts bear false rewards. It requires sacrifice: of the body – through a life of toil devoted to someone else's advantage (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: V.i.f.50); of the spirit – through the subjection of the self to the "mental mutilation" of the division of labour (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: V.i.f.60); and of the mind – through subordinating virtue to the desire to be rich (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: VI.i.3). Yet the material goods that come into the possession of the poor man's son for all this sacrifice are finally revealed to him as "mere trinkets". "He thinks [before he embarks on his pursuit of wealth] if he had attained all these, he would sit still contentedly, and be quiet, enjoying himself in the

thought of the happiness and tranquillity of his situation” (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: IV.1.8). The pursuit of wealth is a process that the poor man’s son begins thinking that it has an endpoint, and it is only once he has passed where he assumed the endpoint would be that he realises that there is no stopping the acquisitive passions after they have been unleashed. The vanity that caused the poor man’s son to prioritise acquisitive behaviour in the first place can therefore all too easily degenerate into a purely hedonistic lifestyle.

Even though their historicisation of human nature in the modern age once again overlaps, however, still Smith did not join Rousseau in outright condemnation of commercial society. This is where the second element of the process of self-delusion kicks in, this time with the imagination repairing some of the damage it earlier inflicted on the human psyche by assuming the promise of tranquillity that never transpires. Knowing that this damage has occurred, it might seem that modern individuals would withdraw their consent from commercial society and retreat instead to earlier societal forms. However, Smith would have none of this suggestion: the pragmatist within him would not sanction impoverishment in the name of preserving noble virtues. Instead, he appealed to the Stoic method that the value of a system results from the ease of the relationship between the whole and its parts rather than from its observed consequences (Force 2003: 107), and he then applied this line of reasoning to explain why individuals admire an economic system that rewards their most earnest endeavours with ‘mere trinkets’.

To surround oneself with luxury items is more trouble than it is worth, but this is not the final judgement to be passed on the economic system of commercial society. Irrespective of the damage imposed upon the individual’s psyche by that system, the imagination only allows people to understand themselves as a single part of the whole system. Moreover, in recognising that the system coordinates the activities of all its unit parts, the imagination overrides the self-regard to the individual’s own inconvenience in order to acknowledge the aesthetic beauty of the economy as a whole. “If we consider the real satisfaction which all these things are capable of affording, by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling. But we ... naturally confound it in our imagination with the order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine or œconomy by means of which it is produced ... [These] strike the imagination as something grand and beautiful and noble” (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: IV.1.9).

The consumption of luxuries can never rise above being an intrinsically worthless symbolic act designed only to flatter the consumer about their station in life. But underpinning this vanity Smith identified a defensible admiration of a system that provided employment and imposed sociability upon individuals’ lives. The economy was to be admired both for its integrative capacity and for its ability to coordinate activities and, as such, it appears to the imagination to be an aesthetic phenomenon. The self-delusion that encourages people to work hard in the search for the peace of mind that is not forthcoming in acquisitive behaviour comes back to persuade them that the integral beauty of a functioning economy is worth their approbation even if it provides them with only the false promise of a life of contentment. For Smith, the explanation of the wealth of nations lies within this process of self-delusion (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: III.i.1). If individuals only saw the economy as a means of incorporating their efforts but with no tangible reward other than trinkets, then they would be unlikely to submit themselves to circumstances that appear to harm them for

merely transient satisfaction. It is only because they treat the economy as an aesthetic phenomenon that they will accept this as a pay-off for helping to drive economic improvement.

However, this is still not the end of the story. The process of sympathy can convince the modern individual to imagine within commercial society a favourable endpoint of contentment that in fact remains out of reach. However, the imagination is simultaneously involved in producing sympathetic impulses in the pursuit of virtue. As Smith put it at the very start of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others ... The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it” (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: I.i.1.1). Sympathetic sensations can thus be shaped in decisive ways by one’s experience of the economy. Yet the economy can never be the sole influence on the content of an individual’s sympathy, because moral questions will always infringe upon that content: this is simply a fact of living life within society (ibid: III.i.3; IV.2.12).

The suggestion, then, is one of an intrinsic tension between the market economy and market society. Smith is nowhere explicit in spelling out the manifestation of the tension, but it can be constructed out of what he says for himself at various points in his work. The tension itself relates specifically to the impact of spectatorial dynamics on the constitution of the individual economic agent as a moral being. It stresses the possibility that the type of individual who provides the dynamism for a flourishing realm of commerce is the same type of person who finds it difficult to exercise the restraint that forms the moral basis of a stable modern society. Socialisation to a world of possessive individualism comes about due to the ability to construct one’s identity through commodity consumption. The demand for luxury items drives the economic dynamism of commercial society and the aesthetic of excess becomes a means to that end. However, individuals who prioritise such demand so as to display through possessions their presumed station in life are people who give in too easily to the flattery of their peers: they are primarily the subjects of vanity. Yet vanity (for Smith, the love of praise) is a self-regarding passion that sits uneasily alongside the foundations of a society built on mutual recognition of claims to just treatment.

All emphasis on self-regard is not necessarily bad, according to Smith. In this regard, though, there are clearly two notions of self-regard running through his work. One results from the instinctive reason that is activated in order to ensure continued survival, whereas the other results from the culturally-approved reason within commercial society of wanting to appear as having bettered other people (Force 2003: 27-33). The former is reflected in Smith’s observation that every person “is first and principally recommended to his own care” (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: VI.ii.1.1). The self is the most compelling of what Russell Nieli (1986: 620) calls Smith’s ‘spheres of human intimacy’, because all social possibilities within human life follow only after the individual has secured self-preservation. The performance of the self in this instance is all about ensuring the basic reproduction of the ability to live. By contrast, commercial society created the conditions for individuals to focus on delayed gratification via the accumulation of wealth and the subsequent display of the trappings of wealth. Smith referred to this as the “augmentation of fortune” (Smith 1981 [1776/1784]: II.iii.28), and the satisfaction of vanity contained within the process emphasised what he saw as something that had the potential to be much more socially destructive than the instinctive reason which leads only to

survival activities. The performance of the self in this latter instance revolves around the desire for social demarcation. The self therefore looks to be in danger of being performed in two mutually incompatible ways at the same time.

Smith used his famous mirror metaphor in order to suggest that the self remains inadequately developed other than within the context of society: a person knows little about themselves except through observing other people's responses to their actions (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: III.1.3). The individual therefore requires the presence of others to recognise the moral make-up of the self (Peil 1999: 86). The desire for approbation from fellow members of society suffices to encourage the individual to pursue moral refinement. In Jack Russell Weinstein's formulation (2006: 4), Smith posited the existence of an irreducibly "relational self". From this he developed his explanation of social harmony. Society only has the ability to hold together when the sentiments of observers exist in perfect accord with the sentiments of those whose circumstances are being observed. This corresponds to the situation of mutual sympathy discussed previously (Smith 1982 [1759/1790]: I.i.2). To arrive at that situation, the imagination must call forth an ideal spectator incorporated within the intuitions of the observer to the exclusion of any partial spectator in order to impose moral content on the observation just undertaken (Boltanski 1999: 41). Mutual sympathy arises when observers are sufficiently self-tutored in restraint as to allow their responses to observations to be regulated solely by the impartial spectator. Such responses provide the moral basis of a functioning society.

Yet if a market economy is to flourish then the moral constitution of the individual must proceed in a very different manner. The individual has the capacity to develop the self only in the context of spectatorial dynamics which draw one person into direct interaction with another. The spectatorial dynamics associated with luxury consumption, however, do not take such a clearly inter-subjective form. For luxury consumption to become part of the norm of society, the imagination must be educated in such a way that its immediate impulse is not to follow the virtuous path by projecting fellow-feeling outwards. This path is opened up when an individual observes an event, tries to understand what sensations one would feel had one the capacity to physically swap places with the person principally concerned, before then deciding whether that person's conduct as the event unfolded deserves approbation. The process of sympathy arises in this way and, as long as the observer's moral decision-making is guided by the promptings of an ideal spectator, mutual sympathy ensues.

By contrast, the spectatorial dynamics associated with luxury consumption are predicated on constructing a sense of fellow-feeling that can then be projected inwards: i.e., it is internalised rather than externalised. The act of consumption entails only a fleeting public moment of purchase and, once that moment has passed, items that are bought for the home are not seen in public again. For Smith, the desire to possess such items results from vanity, but the esteem that serves to satisfy vanity will usually only be an act of the imagination by the individual concerned in the absence of direct public observation of those items. The consumers of luxury items have possessions to observe rather than events. To allow themselves to consider their vanity justified, they must construct sensations of admiration and respect in the mind of an imagined other, where such sensations are what they would expect of the imagined other were the latter to physically

witness the luxury with which they have surrounded themselves. There is no process of sympathy in operation here, let alone an outcome of mutual sympathy, because the imagined other is precisely that rather than an active member of society. What emerges instead is a contrived rationalisation for acting out of the latter type of self-regard.

The spectatorial dynamics in these two instances are entirely different. One prepares the individual for life lived within a functioning society, whereas the other prepares the individual for life lived within a flourishing market economy. Significantly, these would appear to be two distinct ways of constituting the individual as a moral being – or two distinct ways of performing the self in response to competing aesthetics – rather than two parts of the same process. The person who tries to construct the self on the basis of both sets of spectatorial dynamics at the same time is likely to experience a considerable degree of moral discomfort arising from their basic incompatibility. At the level of the moral constitution of the individual, then, Smith's reflections on the luxury question invite us to wonder whether there is a fundamental tension between market society and the market economy.

Conclusion

Reading Smith today, it is difficult not to be struck by his style of argumentation. With the development of disciplinary specialisations and the subsequent founding of distinct schools of thought within disciplines, we have become accustomed to interventions in debates being on one side or the other. Within contemporary frameworks of exposition, progress tends to involve adding greater theoretical depth to existing positions rather than trying to move beyond them: existing positions thus become more deeply entrenched as time goes by. Smith's style of argumentation instead involved attempts to synthesise what was already there as a means of creating something quite distinct out of them. This, he believed, was the best way to resolve disputes. Smith used his normal style of argumentation to guide his entrance into the debate about luxury, but it would be difficult to say that this led him to its resolution.

Smith's discussion of luxury raises as many questions as it provides answers. It demonstrates that there are more points of contact between Rousseau's and Mandeville's positions than had previously been admitted, and it also shows that there is much worth retaining in both men's work despite their very different conclusions. But further complications are uncovered due to the way in which Smith accepted Mandeville's contention that economic progress should not be condemned solely on the grounds of idealising classical virtue, but then followed Rousseau's insistence on historicising the behavioural traits of commercial society and associating them with a cultural disposition towards vanity. As outlined in the paper, this leads to the possibility that, at the level of the moral constitution of the individual, a generic tension exists between a flourishing market economy and a functioning market society. Such a possibility can certainly be read back in to Smith's writings as he tried to explain the impact of luxury consumption on moral instincts and the implications for the economic system as a whole of creating people who think and act in that way.

For Smith, the prevailing moral sentiments that help to define the norms of society are always culturally produced. They are rooted in the interaction between individuals and by what one person finds to admire in another. This will be specific to particular times and places. In commercial society, it will also be mediated by material goods: what might be admired in another person can easily be conflated with what might be admired in their possessions. Commercial society thus is likely to be a breeding ground for vanity and, according to Smith, the more the love of praise is considered desirable the less effort is likely to be made to act in a genuinely praiseworthy manner. A world of luxury is morally corrupting, then, and it is the aesthetic quality of the possessions which symbolise luxury that leads to such corruption. When a consciously morally degraded performance of the self is embraced in the interests of personal acquisitiveness, the sympathetic links between individuals are likely to be eroded because the spectatorial capacities have simply not been tutored to foster them. The history of the period since Smith was writing has shown us that the refusal to prohibit luxury consumption has been economically advantageous. However, if Smith was anywhere near correct in his analysis of moral sentiments, then economic progress has had a distinct human cost in the form of constrained ease of social interaction. There remains much scope for contemporary political economists to specify the ways in which the antagonistic relationship between the individual, the economy and society manifests itself today.

References

- Amariglio, Jack and Ruccio, David (1999) 'The Transgressive Knowledge of "Ersatz" Economics', in Robert Garnett (ed) *What Do Economists Know? New Economics of Knowledge*, London: Routledge.
- Arrow, Kenneth (1979) 'The Division of Labor in the Economy, the Polity, and Society', in Gerald O'Driscoll (ed) *Adam Smith and Modern Political Economy: Bicentennial Essays on The Wealth of Nations*, Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Barber, Benjamin (1978) 'Rousseau and the Paradoxes of the Dramatic Imagination', *Daedalus*, 107 (3), 79-92.
- Barbon, Nicholas (1905 [1690]) *A Discourse of Trade*, Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Baron, Hors (1988) *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Political Thought, Volume 1*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Berg, Maxine (2005) *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bernstein, Michael (2003) 'American Economists and the 'Marginalist Revolution': Notes on the Intellectual and Social Contexts of Professionalization', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 16 (1), 135-180.
- Berry, Christopher (1994) *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Boltanski, Luc (1999) *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, translated by Graham Burchell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boyden Lamb, Robert (1974) 'Adam Smith's System: Sympathy not Self-Interest', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 35 (4), 671-682.
- Campbell, Roy Hucheson and Skinner, Andrew (1982) *Adam Smith*, London: Croom Helm.
- Clark, Henry (1998) 'Commerce, the Virtues, and the Public Sphere in Early Seventeenth-Century France', *French Historical Studies*, 21 (3), 415-440.
- De Man, Paul (1982) *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- De Marchi, Neil (1999) 'Adam Smith's Accommodation of "Altogether Endless" Desires', in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (eds) *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650-1850*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Fine, Ben (1999) 'A Question of Economics: Is it Colonising the Social Sciences?', *Economy and Society*, 28 (3), 403-425.
- Fitzgibbons, Athol (1995) *Adam Smith's System of Liberty, Wealth, and Virtue: The Moral and Political Foundations of The Wealth of Nations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fleischacker, Samuel (2004) *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Force, Pierre (2003) *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldsmith, M.M. (1990) 'Liberty, Luxury and the Pursuit of Happiness', in Anthony Pagden (ed) *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, paperback edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Griswold, Charles (1999) *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haakonssen, Knud (1981) *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heilbroner, Robert (1986) *The Essential Adam Smith*, London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Hicks, Stephen (2004) *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*, Tempe, AZ: Scholargy Publishing.
- Hodgson, Geoffrey (1994) 'Some Remarks on "Economic Imperialism" and International Political Economy', *Review of International Political Economy*, 1 (1), 21-28.
- Hörnqvist, Mikael (2000) 'The Two Myths of Civic Humanism', in James Hankins (eds) *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Hume, David (1975 [1777]) *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, reprinted from the posthumous edition of 1777, third edition, with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hundert, Edward (1994) *The Enlightenment's Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hundert, Edward (2003) 'Mandeville, Rousseau and the Political Economy of Fantasy', in Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds) *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jennings, Jeremy (2007) 'The Debate about Luxury in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68 (1), 79-105.
- Jessop, Bob and Sum, Ngai-Ling (2001) 'Pre-Disciplinary and Post-Disciplinary Perspectives', *New Political Economy*, 6 (1), 89-101.
- Keen, Steve (2001) *Debunking Economics: The Naked Emperor of the Social Sciences*, London: Pluto.
- Khalil, Elias (1998) 'Is Justice the Primary Feature of the State? Adam Smith's Critique of Social Contract Theory', *European Journal of Law and Economics*, 6 (3), 215-230.
- Kroen, Sylvia (2004) 'A Political History of the Consumer', *The Historical Journal*, 47 (3), 709-736.
- Levy, David (1995) 'The Partial Spectator in the *Wealth of Nations*: A Robust Utilitarianism', *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 2 (2), 299-326.
- Mandeville, Bernard (1997 [1723]) 'Selections from *The Fable of the Bees, Volume 1*', in idem *The Fable of the Bees and Other Writings*, abridged and edited by Edward Hundert, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Marso, Lori Jo (1999) *(Un)Manly Citizens: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and Germaine de Staël's Subversive Women*, Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Montes, Leonidas (2003) 'Smith and Newton: Some Methodological Issues Concerning General Economic Equilibrium Theory', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 27 (5), 723-747.
- Mun, Thomas (1987 [1664]) *England's Treasure by Forraign Trade*, New York: Augustus Kelley.
- Najemy, John (2000) 'Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics', in James Hankins (ed) *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nieli, Russell (1986) 'Spheres of Intimacy and the Adam Smith Problem', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 47 (4), 611-624.
- Peil, Jan (1999) *Adam Smith and Economic Science: A Methodological Reinterpretation*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Pocock, J.G.A. (1975) *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Raphael, D.D. and Macfie, A.L. (1982) 'Introduction', in Adam Smith 1982 [1759/1790] *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, edited by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie from the collected text of all seven editions of the original, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.
- Rizvi, S. Abu Turab (2002) 'Adam Smith's Sympathy: Towards a Normative Economics', in Edward Fullbrook (ed) *Intersubjectivity in Economics: Agents and Structures*, London: Routledge.
- Robinson, Joan (1964) *Economic Philosophy*, second edition, Harmondsworth: Pelican.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (2003 [1750]) 'A discourse which won the prize at the Academy of Dijon in 1750, on this question proposed by the Academy: Has the restoration of the arts and sciences had a purifying effect upon morals?', in idem *The Social Contract and Discourses*, translated and introduced by G.D.H. Cole, reprinted edition, London: Everyman.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (2003 [1755]) 'A discourse on a subject proposed by the Academy of Dijon: What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?', in idem *The Social Contract and Discourses*, translated and introduced by G.D.H. Cole, reprinted edition, London: Everyman.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (2003 [1758]) 'A Discourse on Political Economy', in idem *The Social Contract and Discourses*, translated and introduced by G.D.H. Cole, reprinted edition, London: Everyman.
- Schumpeter, Joseph (1994 [1954]) *History of Economic Analysis*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shovlin, John (2006) *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Skinner, Andrew (1979) *A System of Social Science: Papers Relating to Adam Smith*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Smith, Adam (1981 [1776/1784]) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, edited by R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.
- Smith, Adam (1982 [1759/1790]) *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, edited by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie from the collected text of all seven editions of the original, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.
- Smith, Adam (1982a) 'A Letter to the Authors of the *Edinburgh Review*', reprinted in idem *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, edited by J. C. Bryce, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press.
- Smith, Adam (1982b) 'The History of Astronomy', reprinted in idem *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, edited by W.P.D. Wightman, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press.
- Smith, Adam (1985) *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, edited by J.C. Bryce, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.
- Staum, Martin (1996) *Minerva's Message: Stabilizing the French Revolution*, London: McGill-Queen's University Press.

- Tabb, William (1999) *Reconstructing Political Economy: The Great Divide in Economic Thought*, London: Routledge.
- Taylor, Charles (1989) *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Uglow, Jenny (2003) *The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the Future, 1730-1810*, paperback edition, London: Faber and Faber.
- Verburg, Rudi (2000) 'Adam Smith's Growing Concern on the Issue of Distributive Justice', *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 7 (1), 23-44.
- Vivenza, Gloria (2001) *Adam Smith and the Classics: The Classical Heritage in Adam Smith's Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weinstein, Jack Russell (2006) 'Sympathy, Difference, and Education: Social Unity in the Work of Adam Smith', *Economics and Philosophy*, 22 (1), 1-33.
- Weintraub, Roy (1985) *General Equilibrium Analysis: Studies in Appraisal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- West, Edwin (1976) *Adam Smith: The Man and His Works*, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.
- Winch, Donald (1996) *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.