

## 7 Adam Smith as civic moralist\*

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In this paper I present Adam Smith as a practical moralist who thought that his account of the principles of morals and social organization would be of use to responsibly-minded men of middling rank, living in a modern, commercial society. In this account Smith will appear as a philosopher who was concerned with the principles of propriety as well as with those of virtue and valued the spirit of independence and sense of ego of commercial man rather than the libertarian civic virtues of the classical republican. He will, above all, appear as the philosopher who saw the province as the true source of the opulence, freedom and political wisdom that was needed to maintain the fabric of a commercial polity in a modern age.

### I

It is now customary to think of the Scottish social philosophers as moral philosophers who were anxious to introduce the methods of the natural into the moral sciences.<sup>1</sup> As an intellectual historian, I prefer to think of them as practical moralists who had developed a formidable and complex casuistical armoury to instruct young men of middling rank in their duties as men and as citizens of a modern commercial polity. Hutcheson, Smith, Ferguson, Reid and Stewart were professors of moral philosophy who saw their curricula as devices to teach their pupils to 'adorn your souls with every virtue, prepare yourselves for every honourable office in life and quench that manly and laudable thirst you should have after knowledge'.<sup>2</sup> Hume and Kames preferred

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, G. Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1945); L. Schneider, *The Scottish Moralists on Human Nature and Society* (Chicago, 1967); R. L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976), chs. 1 and 4; A. S. Skinner, *A System of Social Science: Papers relating to Adam Smith* (Oxford, 1979); A. Swingewood, 'Origins of Sociology: The Case of the Scottish Enlightenment', *British Journal of Sociology*, 21 (1970), 164–80.

<sup>2</sup> F. Hutcheson, *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Glasgow, 1747), p. iv.

to use the polite Addisonian essay which, in Hume's hands, developed as a sophisticated and flexible mode of moral discourse, capable of attracting an intelligent salon and coffee-house readership as well as philosophers and men of letters. And both agreed with Robertson, Smith, Ferguson and Millar that philosophical history was an instrument which could be used to teach men to understand the origins of their ideas of morality, justice and politics so that they could better understand their roles as citizens and legislators of a commercial polity. Taken together, the purpose of this moralistic armoury was to instruct men in the principles of practical morality which Dugald Stewart usefully defined as

... all those rules of conduct which profess to point out the proper ends of human pursuit, and the most effectual means of attaining them; to which we may add all those literary compositions, whatever be their particular form, which have for their aim to fortify and animate our good dispositions, by delineations of the beauty, of the dignity, or of the utility of Virtue.<sup>3</sup>

Not much notice has been taken of the casuistical framework of Scottish philosophy, although it is true that Smith scholars – notably Joseph Cropsey and Ralph Lindgren – have been more sensitive to its existence than most.<sup>4</sup> But it is one which we would do well to recognize. It was as practical moralists that the Scottish philosophers presented themselves to their contemporaries and received, in return, the distinctively pre-eminent civic status that they enjoyed in contemporary polite Scottish society.<sup>5</sup> It was as such that they acquired a Shaftesburian distrust for those inquiries about the science of man that seemed to be irrelevant or positively harmful to the principles of practical morality. It was this, for example, that encouraged Hume to turn away from systematic philosophizing in the manner of the *Treatise* to essay-writing in the manner of Addison. For this seemed to be a more appropriate vehicle for discussing the principles of politics and civic morality in a way which would be of use to ordinary citizens.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, the same concern led Reid and the Aberdonian philosophers to develop that critique of Humean scepticism

<sup>3</sup> Dugald Stewart, 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith LL.D.', in Smith, *EPS*, p. 278.

<sup>4</sup> J. Cropsey, *Polity and Political Economy: An Interpretation of the Principles of Adam Smith* (The Hague, 1957); J. R. Lindgren, *The Social Philosophy of Adam Smith* (The Hague, 1973). Notwithstanding our different approaches to Smith, I must acknowledge my debt to Ralph Lindgren's meticulous and perceptive study.

<sup>5</sup> See Phillipson, 'Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment', in P. Fritz and D. Williams (eds.), *City and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 125–47; 'Culture and Society in the 18th Century Province: The Case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment', in L. Stone (ed.), *The University in Society*, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1974), ii, pp. 407–48; 'The Scottish Enlightenment', in R. Porter and M. Teich (eds.), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 19–40.

<sup>6</sup> Phillipson, 'Hume as Moralist: A Social Historian's Perspective', in S. C. Brown (ed.), *The Philosophers of the Enlightenment*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, xii (Hassocks, Sussex, 1979), pp. 140–61.

which was to play so important a part in shaping higher education in America and France at the turn of the eighteenth century. And it was because Reid himself was felt to be too abstruse and unsystematic a critic of Hume that Beattie and Stewart were led to reformulate and extend his principles in order to suit the casuistical needs of a modern age.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is impossible to understand Smith's approach to the principles of practical morality without taking into account the revolution which Hume had brought about in the understanding of the principles themselves. By demonstrating that moral distinctions are matters of sentiment, Hume had, at a single stroke, undermined the credibility of the entire casuistical tradition in the ancient and modern world. Hitherto, casuists had thought of virtuous conduct as the pursuit of universal goals. They had described the faculties of human nature on which their achievement had rested and prescribed the moral exercises necessary to cultivate them. But no matter how attractive the prescriptions of these casuists might be – and, as far as Stewart was concerned, it was a matter of some historical interest that many of them had been universally admired throughout the ages – in a post-Humean world they seemed to be arbitrary and dependent on the whims of their authors rather than on a just appreciation of the principles of human nature.<sup>8</sup> Hume's revolutionary insight was an injunction to serious moralists to shift their attention from the study of ends to the study of means; to the principles which explain how we acquire moral sentiments and ideas of virtue and to the lessons which a virtuously-minded agent could hope to draw from a study of his own moral history and that of mankind in general.

This taught moralists to think of the moral wisdom men acquire in the course of ordinary life as the rock upon which a life of virtue must be founded. This concern with the relationship between wisdom and virtue, framed by a renewed interest in Cicero and Stoic morality in general, was to play an increasingly important part in shaping the Scottish philosophers' understanding of the principles of morals, politics and history. Certainly, as I shall try to show here, it was of integral importance to Smith. Indeed I propose to show why Smith thought that stupidity made a man more contemptible than cowardice in a civilized society.<sup>9</sup> In commercial civilization wisdom rather than the classic martial and political virtues was the true touchstone of virtue.<sup>10</sup>

## II

Smith's theory of morals was founded on his theory of sympathy and I want to review his treatment of this subject in order to show how closely casuistry

<sup>7</sup> Phillipson, 'James Beattie and the Defence of Common Sense', in B. Fabian (ed.), *Festschrift für Rainer Gruenter* (Heidelberg, 1978), pp. 145–54.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart, 'Account of Smith', *EPS*, p. 279; *TMS* VII.iv.6.

<sup>9</sup> *WN* V.i.f.61.

<sup>10</sup> Compare *TMS* I.iii.3.1–3.

and moral science were interwoven and to demonstrate the force of Dugald Stewart's remark that in his early work Smith 'aimed more professedly at the advancement of human improvement and happiness'.<sup>11</sup> I shall also want to suggest that his theory is best seen, not as a general theory of morals, but as an account of the process by which men living in a commercial society acquire moral ideas and may be taught how to improve them. This is not simply to say that Smith preferred modern examples to those drawn from the experience of primitive societies or that he reserved some of his most subtle discussion for a consideration of the effect of wealth and poverty on the formation of moral sentiments. It is simply that his theory is redundant outside the context of a commercial society with a complex division of labour.

Smith's theory of sympathy was designed to explain why we derive intense pleasure from what he calls 'mutual sympathy' and distress from discord. It was what Hume called 'the hinge of your system' and Smith summed it up like this:

Whatever may be the cause of sympathy, or however it may be excited, nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary.<sup>12</sup>

Tactically, he seems to have decided to proceed in this discussion by presenting his readers (like the audience of fourteen- and fifteen-year-old students who had originally heard his lectures) with a large number of examples to remind them of the pleasure and pain which different types of social encounter could cause. These 'illustrations' as Burke called them<sup>13</sup> were homely and literary in character and rooted in the social experience of a commercial civilization. Many of them also belonged to the common stock of moral data about which contemporary Addisonian moralists were accustomed to philosophize; no doubt that is exactly why Smith chose them. Here is an example.

When we have read a book or poem so often that we can no longer find any amusement in reading it by ourselves, we can still take pleasure in reading it to a companion. To him it has all the graces of novelty; we enter into the surprise and admiration which it naturally excites in him, but which it is no longer capable of exciting in us; we consider

<sup>11</sup> Stewart, 'Account of Smith', *EPS*, p. 314. There are useful discussions of the theory of sympathy in T. D. Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals* (London, 1971), esp. chs. 4–5; Lindgren, *Adam Smith*, chs. 2–3. The best introduction is still that given in Stewart's 'Account of Smith'.

<sup>12</sup> *TMS* I.i.2.1. Hume was uneasy about Smith's treatment of this central point and regretted that he had not 'more particularly and fully prov'd that *all kinds of Sympathy are necessarily Agreeable* [my italics]. This is the Hinge of your system, & yet you only Mention the Matter cursorily on p. 20.' That was indeed Smith's contention and it is interesting that he regarded his collection of homely Addisonian illustrations as a strong enough foundation on which to raise this central argument. Hume to Smith, 28 July 1759, in *Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932), i, p. 313. See also Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*, pp. 103–6.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Burke to Smith, 10 September 1759, in Smith, *Correspondence*, p. 46.

all the ideas which it presents rather in the light in which they appear to him, than in that in which they appear to ourselves, and we are amused by sympathy with his amusement which thus enlivens our own. On the contrary, we should be vexed if he did not seem to be entertained with it, and we could no longer take any pleasure in reading it to him.<sup>14</sup>

These examples were designed to show that encounters which end in the pleasure of experiencing mutual sympathy could be found in most of the ordinary areas of everyday life and the rhetoric suggests that Smith was anxious to legitimize the pleasure that such an experience brought by encouraging his readers to cultivate the social skills that were necessary to produce them.<sup>15</sup>

As far as Smith was concerned, the search for mutual sympathy was a complex and demanding activity. He believed that human beings were naturally curious about each others' behaviour and that they were naturally disposed to interpret it in the only way they knew – by imaginatively conceiving 'what we ourselves should feel in the like situation'.<sup>16</sup> Now what is curious and distinctive about Smith's theory is that he does not think that we simply put ourselves in another man's shoes in order to see whether, were we him, we would approve of what he was doing. That would have introduced an element of egotism into the theory which he was particularly anxious to avoid.<sup>17</sup> In his account we exercise our imaginative curiosity quite hard in order to achieve what we judge to be a genuinely critical detachment in our understanding of another man's behaviour. Thus, to take a particularly graphic Smithian example, a man does not ask what he would suffer if he were a woman in labour; he tries to imagine what it would be like to be a woman in labour.<sup>18</sup> Only after we have undergone this demanding imaginative and critical exercise and acquired what we feel is a satisfactory degree of detachment, do we decide whether or not to bring the encounter to a close by offering our sympathetic approval of the other man's behaviour. For it is a cardinal principle of Smith's theory that

To approve of the passions of another . . . as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *TMS* I.i.2.2.

<sup>15</sup> Thus, 'Mankind, however, more readily sympathize with those smaller joys which flow from less important causes. It is decent to be humble amidst great prosperity; but we can scarce express too much satisfaction in all the little occurrences of common life, in the company with which we spent the evening last night, in the entertainment that was set before us, in what was said and what was done, in all the little incidents of the present conversation, and in all those frivolous nothings which fill up the void of human life. Nothing is more graceful than habitual cheerfulness which is always founded upon a particular relish for all the little pleasures which common occurrences afford. We readily sympathize with it: it inspires us with the same joy, and makes every trifle turn up to us in the same agreeable aspect in which it presents itself to the person endowed with this happy disposition.' (*TMS* I.ii.5.2.)

<sup>16</sup> *TMS* I.i.i.2.

<sup>17</sup> *TMS* VII.iii.i.4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *TMS* I.i.3.1.

Of course this process is likely to become a reciprocal one and recognizing the fact structures the encounter. Smith used a vivid musical metaphor to describe it. Each actor sharpens or flattens the pitch of his natural response to the other in order eventually to reach a ‘concord’ of sentiments.<sup>20</sup> It is a concord which terminates an encounter set in motion by actors who are anxious to experience, once again, the pleasures of mutual sympathy. The encounter has been hedged around by an apprehension of the pain that is felt when it is impossible to offer sympathetic approval of another’s actions. It has ended because each actor has come to believe that his imaginative and critical understanding of the behaviour of the other is sufficiently informed and objective to allow him to offer that sympathetic approval he is now pretty sure will be returned. As Smith puts it, ‘though they will never be unisons, they may be concords, and this is all that is wanted or required’.<sup>21</sup> Putting it less metaphorically and in Smith’s own technical language, the stern capacity for self-command and the more generous and sentimental capacity for humanity have been brought into play in order to allow the two actors to reach a state of mutual sympathy which appeals to their sense of propriety and gives them pleasure because it does so.

And hence it is, that to feel much for others and little for ourselves, that to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature; and can alone produce among mankind that harmony of sentiments and passions in which consists their whole grace and propriety. As to love our neighbour as we love ourselves is the great law of Christianity, so it is the great precept of nature to love ourselves only as we love our neighbour, or what comes to the same thing, as our neighbour is capable of loving us.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most striking features of Smith’s account of sympathy is that while he allows that our natural, or as we would say spontaneous, instincts always incline us to seek the approval of others and to offer our own in return if we possibly can, our imaginative and critical faculties often seem to intervene, holding them in check in order to allow a complex evaluative process to take place before approval is offered. In this respect, the pleasure we get from mutual sympathy smacks as much of the relief we feel when the anxieties generated by the encounter are over as of disinterested or spontaneous pleasure. Smith’s discussion of the principles of sympathy in the first part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is devoted exclusively to an examination of this demanding and self-conscious mode of interaction and is designed to highlight the psychological demands that the search for critical understanding and detachment places on men who are nevertheless naturally sociable. His theory takes no account at all of those forms of interaction which are, so to speak, spontaneous and

<sup>20</sup> *TMS* I.i.4.7.

<sup>22</sup> *TMS* I.i.5.5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Compare this with *TMS* VII.iv.28.

non-reflective, in which approval is sought and given uncritically without the interruption that the attempt to acquire an imaginative understanding of the situation involves. Indeed, Smith took some trouble to demonstrate that there was scarcely any place for such responses in ordinary social intercourse. For every human passion about which ancient and modern philosophers had philosophized could be regulated by the principles of sympathy. And it is particularly striking that he avoids any discussion of relationships within the family or in simpler and more primitive forms of social organization which might be thought to be activated by less sophisticated principles.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, one of the most striking differences between the social thought of Smith and Adam Ferguson is that the latter continually returns to these simpler and less sophisticated forms of social bonding in an attempt to criticize a theory which he feared would weaken the moral fabric of society and expose it to the forces of luxury and despotism.<sup>24</sup> Ralph Lindgren, using the word in a slightly different context, calls this simpler and unsophisticated form of interaction *empathy* and I shall do the same.<sup>25</sup> As we shall see, the distinction between sympathy and empathy which is implicit in the first part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* surfaces in Smith's discussion of commercial versus pre-commercial civilization in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* and the *Wealth of Nations*. However, the force of the distinction becomes sharper in the later sections of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in which Smith sets out to show how the external circumstances of ordinary life in commercial society teach us the hard way to value the warier principles of sympathy more than the simpler principles of empathy. Indeed, Smith's theory is designed to show that the happiness and prosperity that accompany a life of propriety and virtue can only come to those who have managed to escape from a world of empathy by cultivating an understanding of the principles of sympathy.

This becomes clear from Smith's discussion of the impartial spectator which Professor Raphael has suggested may well have been developed some years

<sup>23</sup> Smith's only extended discussions of savage morality deal with the remarkable capacity of savage people for stoic forbearance in the face of hideous torture: *TMSV*.2.9–15; VII.ii.1.34–5.

<sup>24</sup> Ferguson's critique of Smith is implicit rather than explicit, and directed towards his discussion of propriety. Ferguson does not deny that spectators and considerations of propriety are of great importance in shaping men's moral sentiments in a commercial age. It is simply that there is more to explaining the principles of social action and morality than this. In his view, moralists like Smith could be criticized for defining happiness in terms of the absence of pain and social anxiety. Ferguson thought that men were capable of experiencing a higher form of happiness which was generated by their aggressive instincts, their love of conflict and their restless search for perfection. This higher and purer form of pleasure could only be fully experienced when it was fully realized that it was an activity which leads men to identify their interests with those of 'groupes', 'communities', 'nations', etc. And it is in experiencing the pure pleasure of empathetic relationships in such groups that men become capable of virtue. On which, see Duncan Forbes's introduction to Ferguson's *History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1966), and D. Kettler, *The Social and Political Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Ohio, 1965), esp. ch. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Lindgren, *Adam Smith*, pp. 21–6.



after the theory of sympathy had first been formulated.<sup>26</sup> His theory is founded on the premise that ‘the chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved’ and it is designed to consider the paradox that ‘we desire both to be respectable and to be respected’, ‘not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or that thing which is the natural and proper object of love’.<sup>27</sup> And it is Smith’s leading contention that while we cannot ever be absolutely sure of winning the approbation of others, we can certainly learn to behave in such a way that we feel we are worthy of it.<sup>28</sup> The desire to be praiseworthy is an acquired, not an innate, need. It is an extension of our desire to achieve an imaginative detachment in our understanding of our own actions as well as those of others.<sup>29</sup> The impartial spectator is a mental construct we invent in order to help us to achieve detachment and understanding in complex social situations which present us with a potentially bewildering variety of possibly conflicting sentiments. At a simple level, impartial spectator is a title we confer on an actual person in an actual situation. Such a man is ‘the attentive spectator’, ‘every reasonable man’, ‘every impartial bystander’, and we deem his approval of our behaviour to be worth all the pain that the disapproval of other spectators will cause us.<sup>30</sup> At a more complex and ambiguous level the impartial spectator seems to lie more within the breast than in the real world – he is ‘the real or supposed spectator of our conduct’.<sup>31</sup> At the most complex level of all, he is completely internalized, ‘the abstract and ideal spectator’,<sup>32</sup> the man, the tribunal or even ‘the demi-god within the breast’,<sup>33</sup> an ideal spectator whose approval is worth more than the disapproval of every real spectator, whose authority is underwritten by a lively conscience and a system of punishments that is so severe that we prefer the most terrible physical and social torments to the wrath of these ‘avenging furies’.<sup>34</sup> For the sake of clarity, I shall call this curious device the man within the breast. He is an *alter ego*, called into existence in response to the rigours of a complex social life. Smith writes of him like this:

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 in a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>26</sup> D. D. Raphael, ‘The Impartial Spectator’, in A. S. Skinner and T. Wilson (eds.), *Essays on Adam Smith* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 87–8. See also Campbell, *Adam Smith’s Science of Morals*, ch. 6.

<sup>27</sup> *TMS* I.ii.5.1; I.iii.3.2; III.ii.1.

<sup>28</sup> *TMS* III.2.7–8.

<sup>29</sup> *TMS* II.ii.1; III.i.1–7.

<sup>30</sup> *TMS* I.i.1.4; II.i.2.3; II.i.2.2.

<sup>31</sup> *TMS* III.3.20.

<sup>32</sup> *TMS* III.3.38.

<sup>33</sup> *TMS* III.2.31 (note); III.2.33; III.3.4.

<sup>34</sup> *TMS* III.2.9; I.iii.2.10–12.

<sup>35</sup> *TMS* III.1.6. Cf. Smith’s characterization of the austere, stoic qualities that the truly virtuous man will possess: ‘The man of real constancy and firmness, the wise and just man who has been thoroughly bred in the great school of self-command, in the bustle and business of the



In this carefully-worded metaphor, there is no distinction at all between the socialized and the selfish self. One is as real as the other, each acting as a natural check on the other, each performing that most basic of services 'to keep [us] out of harm's way'.<sup>36</sup>

At this point I would like to consider what I take to be the central assumption of Smith's theory. It is that men's social experience is complex and potentially demanding, requiring specific skills which have to be cultivated and refined in order to maximize the chance of happiness and minimize the chance of the pain a disordered social existence can cause. What is more, according to Smith's theory, it is in the process of acquiring that moral knowledge that we acquire a sense of moral identity. It is the character of that moral world and Smith's concern with the quality of that moral identity that concern me here. As Dugald Stewart first noticed, the theory of the impartial spectator is designed to explain the moral behaviour of those who have learned the hard way that they cannot live happily simply by seeking the approval of actual spectators.<sup>37</sup> No doubt when we are members of tightly-knit familial groups we can be pretty confident that there will never be any serious conflict between our own values and those of the others, and so we are unlikely to think much about the opinions of an impartial spectator. But it is more difficult to know how to act in looser, more complex situations when we are exposed to the company of those we don't know, those whose moral education has been acquired in very different circumstances to our own, and those who may even want to sow the seeds of discord.<sup>38</sup> Such situations encourage us to turn to an impartial spectator for help. Smith never discusses systematically when and how we acquire our moral education. He tells us that it is in the family that we first become aware that we are the objects of attention and learn that self-command is a useful habit to acquire in the search for approval, but he only deals in passing with the social experience we undergo thereafter.<sup>39</sup> However, his language is suggestive;

world, exposed, perhaps, to the violence and injustice of faction, and to the hardships and hazards of war, maintains this control of his passive feelings upon all occasions; and whether in solitude or in society, wears nearly the same countenance, and is affected very nearly in the same manner. In success and in disappointment, in prosperity and in adversity, before friends and before enemies, he has often been under the necessity of supporting this manhood. He has never dared to forget for one moment the judgement which the impartial spectator would pass upon his sentiments and conduct. He has never dared to suffer the man within the breast to be absent one moment from his intention. With the eyes of this great inmate he has always been accustomed to regard whatever relates to himself. This habit has become perfectly familiar to him. He has been in the constant practice, and, indeed, under the constant necessity, of modelling, or of endeavouring to model, not only his outward conduct and behaviour, but, as much as he can, even his inward sentiments and feelings, according to those of this awful and respectable judge. He does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel.' (*TMS* III.3.25.)

<sup>36</sup> *TMS* VI.i.1.

<sup>38</sup> *TMS* I.ii.4.1.

<sup>37</sup> Stewart, 'Account of Smith', *EPS*, pp. 287–9.

<sup>39</sup> *TMS* III.3.22; *LJ(A)* iii.5.

outside the family, the capacity for self-command and the rarer capacity for humanity is acquired in 'societies', 'associations', 'companies', 'clubs'. It is the product of the 'ordinary commerce of the world',<sup>40</sup> in which we seek 'the wise security of *friendship*'<sup>41</sup> by means of 'conversation' which helps us to acquire ideas of 'independence' and even of 'liberty'. I shall have more to say about the voluntarist associations of this terminology in due course. Here it is instructive to compare it with its opposite, as it appears in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* and the *Wealth of Nations*. There, the sociable world of friendship is contrasted with that of the 'tribe', 'clan', 'family' and 'nation'.<sup>42</sup> It is associated with ideas of patriarchal authority and 'dependence' and with the servile values of feudal civilization, of which Smith remarks in a classic aside:

Nothing tends so much to corrupt and enervate and debase the mind as dependency and nothing gives such noble and generous notions of probity as freedom and independency. Commerce is one great preventative of this custom. The manufacturers give the poorer sort better wages than any master can afford; besides it gives the rich an opportunity of spending their fortunes with fewer servants, which they never fail of embracing. Hence it is that the common people of England who are altogether free and independent are the honestest of their rank anywhere to be met with.<sup>43</sup>

In remarks like these Smith was, of course, contrasting the value system of a commercial and a feudal age. But he was also contrasting a system of social bonding which was based on sympathy with one which was based on empathy, recommending one at the expense of the other. If the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is seen in this perspective, it appears not simply as an account of moral behaviour in general but as an account of the peculiar moral constraints which are placed on the citizens of a commercial society, and it was offered in the belief that it would help them to learn how to turn their social experience to their advantage as moral agents who were anxious to maximize their happiness and preserve their sense of self-respect.

This is to place Smith's discussion of the principles of sympathy in the context of a discussion about the principles of practical morality which had begun with Addison and Steele's *Tatler* and *Spectator*. Nothing is more characteristic of Addison and Steele's teaching than their recognition that commercial society was bewilderingly complex and potentially disconcerting for ordinary citizens who were simply anxious to know how to lead useful, happy and virtuous lives.<sup>44</sup> In Mr Spectator's world, sociability was a skill to be cultivated and

<sup>40</sup> *TMS* III.3.8.

<sup>41</sup> *TMS* VI.ii.18.

<sup>42</sup> *LJ(A)* ii.1; iii.6–7; iv.9; iv.63–5; iv.112–14.

<sup>43</sup> *LJ(A)* vi.6–7. Smith is at pains to insist on the importance of feelings of equality in generating sympathetic relationships: 'The farmer . . . considers his servant as almost on an equal with himself [*sic*], and is therefore the more capable of feeling with him' (*LJ(A)* iii.109).

<sup>44</sup> Addison's moral writing has received surprisingly little attention. But see D. F. Bond's introduction to his edition of *The Spectator*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965); and also E. A. and L. D. Bloom, *Joseph Addison's Sociable Animal: In the Market Place, on the Hustings, in the Pulpit*

valued for the sake of the ease and sense of ego it could provide. In a commercial age men's appetites were constantly aroused by the bewildering variety of objects that were placed before them. They were constantly in danger of becoming prisoners of fashion and prejudice, creatures of fantasy rather than reason. Mr Spectator taught the absurdity of trying to escape from this world by adopting an austere life of stoic virtue. That was advice fit only for the saint, hero and eccentric; it was of no practical help to the ordinary citizen. He showed that in a commercial society men could only live virtuously by constructing a social world which lay outside the family and away from the world of fashion and affairs. In the coffee-houses, taverns and salons, men from different walks of life confronted each other as friends and equals and learned that conversation which was the instrument that forged the bonds of friendship. By cultivating the arts of conversation and friendship they would learn to value tolerance, detachment, moderation and a respect for the value of consensus as a means of maintaining the bonds of society.

Hume once called Addison's essays 'trifling' and although he owed more to Addison than historians have been accustomed to admit, it is not hard to see why.<sup>45</sup> For one thing, Addison had no developed theory of morals, politics aesthetics or religion. For another he could be accused, quite properly, of confusing the lofty idea of virtue with the more modest idea of propriety. Viewed with Smithian hindsight, Addison could be said to have done little more than admit that men found it surprisingly easy to internalize the values of the world in which they lived, thinking of them as values that they had chosen freely. Like Hume, Smith thought that it was quite improper to think of this as virtue. There was, he wrote, 'a considerable difference between virtue and mere propriety; between those qualities and actions which deserve to be admired and celebrated, and those which simply deserve to be approved of'.<sup>46</sup> In Smithian terms, Addison had merely written about men whose actions were directed by the impartial spectator and not by the man within the breast. No doubt a life lived according to such principles allowed men to acquire ideas of self-respect and independence which were necessary and desirable for the conduct of ordinary life. Indeed, as we shall see, Smith was to argue that one of the principal glories of life in commercial society was that it enabled artisans,

(Providence, Rhode Island, 1971). My discussion of Addison has some affinity with the general interpretation of the history of manners offered by N. Elias in *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (Basle, 1939), recently translated under the title *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford, 1978). Elias rather surprisingly ignores Addison.

<sup>45</sup> Hume to William Strahan, 7 February 1772, *Letters of David Hume*, ii, p. 257. See also Phillipson, 'Hume as Moralist: A Social Historian's Perspective'. James Moore's important essay, 'The Social Background of Hume's Science of Human Nature', in D. F. Norton, N. Capaldi and W. L. Robison (eds.), *McGill Hume Studies* (San Diego, Calif., 1979), also deals with Hume's concern with politeness. Moore does not tackle the Addisonian dimension of the question but his analysis is of the greatest relevance to it.

<sup>46</sup> *TMS* I.i.5.7.

shopkeepers and servants as well as men of rank, property and education to live decently according to the principles of propriety. But he was under no illusions about the limitations of a life lived according to the principles of propriety, and he never failed to be struck by the ease with which men could internalize even the most horrible social values, like child-murder, slavery and, more insidiously, an uncritical reverence for wealth and power. This last, 'though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments'.<sup>47</sup> More important, he was struck, as Hume had been, by the ease with which men were able to adopt the values of the class or profession, 'the different orders and societies', to which they belonged.<sup>48</sup> Thus while a careful study of the principles of propriety could transform our understanding of morality, justice, economic and political behaviour, and while they could help men to live happier and more decent lives, it was self-evident that men still possessed ideas of virtue which were, qualitatively, quite different from those of propriety. As Smith put it:

To act according to the dictates of prudence, of justice, and proper beneficence, seems to have no great merit where there is no temptation to do otherwise. But to act with cool deliberation in the midst of the greatest dangers and difficulties; to observe religiously the sacred rules of justice in spite both of the greatest interests which might tempt, and the greatest injuries which might provoke us to violate them; never to suffer the benevolence to our temper to be damped or discouraged by the malignity and ingratitude of the individuals towards whom it may have been exercised; is the character of the most exalted wisdom and virtue.<sup>49</sup>

This was to raise the question of the meaning of virtue and its relation to propriety. If I understand Smith's theory of virtue properly, it was men's capacity to admire 'those qualities and actions which deserve to be admired and celebrated', those astonishing displays of self-command and humanity of which few are capable, that allowed them to check the hold which the principles of propriety exercised over their conduct.<sup>50</sup> The imaginative understanding that was necessary to comprehend the behaviour of those whose lives were directed by the man within the breast; the anxious effort that was involved in acting so as to earn the sympathetic approval of such remarkable men was, Smith thought, the necessary condition to encourage men to convert the moral knowledge they had painstakingly acquired in ordinary life into a moral wisdom. This moral wisdom would stem from a recognition of the limitations of a life lived according to the rules of propriety and an appreciation of the pleasure that was to be derived from a stoic

<sup>47</sup> *TMS* I.iii.1 and 3; V.2.15–16; *LJ(A)* iii.100–1.

<sup>48</sup> *TMS* V.2; Hume, 'Of National Characters', *Philosophical Works*, iii, pp. 244–5.

<sup>49</sup> *TMS* VI.iii.11.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Lindgren, *Adam Smith*, pp. 48–50, and D. A. Reisman, *Adam Smith's Sociological Economics* (London, 1976), p. 79.

understanding of the moral framework of the social universe. What is more, without such wisdom there could be no virtue.

A disposition to admire and cultivate wisdom and virtue was doubtless admirable and natural even if it was, regrettably, rare.<sup>51</sup> But of what consequence was it to society at large? Was it possible to conceive of a commercial society which was regulated by the principles of propriety alone? This question troubled Smith. His discussion of propriety and virtue in the first and last editions of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* suggests that he was alert to the problem in 1759, and that it remained with him at the end of his life. But he reserved his consideration of the political dimension of the problem for the *Wealth of Nations*.

### III

Smith's thinking about the social structure of commercial society was governed by two principles. The first was contained in his understanding of the economic mechanisms which governed the progress of the division of labour. The second was his belief in the moral value of the process of 'higgling and bargaining' which took place in the market places of a free commercial society. For this was the best means of generating the opulence, freedom and sense of independence and self-respect that men possess when they live their lives according to the principles of propriety.<sup>52</sup> His thinking about social structure rested on his understanding of land, labour and capital, 'the three great, original and constituent orders of every civilized society from whose revenue that of every other order is ultimately derived'.<sup>53</sup> Like Hume, he took it for granted that 'the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments',<sup>54</sup> and he thought it absurd to expect ordinary men to see 'that the prosperity and preservation of the state required any diminution of the powers, privileges and immunities of [their] own particular order or society'.<sup>55</sup> Such political wisdom could only be expected from the few. The question was whether the three constituent orders of society could reasonably be expected to generate the wisdom necessary to preserve the fabric of a modern commercial polity. Put technically, it was a matter of discovering which men could be expected to have the imaginative and moral resources to be guided by the man within the breast rather than by the impartial spectator.

<sup>51</sup> *TMS* I.iii.3.2.

<sup>52</sup> *WN* I.v.4–6; II.iii.36; III.iv.1–4. Smith had already insisted on this point in passing in *LJ(A)* vi.4–7 and 56–7. There is an excellent summary of his views on persuading and the moral education which can be thus acquired in *TMS* VII.iv.25–8. And his views on the political, moral and cultural consequences of this education are sharply characterized in *LJ(A)* vi.16–24.

<sup>53</sup> *WN* I.xi.p.7.

<sup>54</sup> *WN* V.i.f.50. Cf. *TMS* VI.ii.2.7 – added in 1790. The sentiment is Humean; cf. 'Of National Characters', *Philosophical Works*, iii, pp. 244–58.

<sup>55</sup> *TMS* VI.ii.10.

Characteristically, Smith did not deal at length with the *mentalités* of the three ‘great, original and constituent orders’. Nevertheless, it was a subject to which he continually returned in all his writing and always with the problem of identifying those groups with a capacity for political wisdom in mind. In his discussion of the landowners in the *Wealth of Nations*, he distinguished between the nobility and the gentry. He wrote of the former with lofty contempt. They were the descendants of a feudal baronage that had even survived the modern age in Scotland.<sup>56</sup> They had maintained a social system in a state of servile dependence and had eventually frittered away their power in luxury.<sup>57</sup> Nowadays, although their true interest, like that of all landowners, ‘is strictly and inseparably connected with the general interest of society’, their wealth, their rank, their deplorable education and the deference they commanded had rendered them indolent, uninterested in agricultural improvement and incapable of understanding the relationship the interest their order bore to that of society at large. What was worse, they had no idea at all how best to preserve it.<sup>58</sup> Smith was less contemptuous of the gentry. Although they necessarily shared many of the vices of the great, their limited wealth and modest rank had made them more gregarious, communicative and industrious.<sup>59</sup> Indeed ‘a small proprietor... who knows every part of his little territory, who views it with all the affection which property, especially small property, naturally inspires, and who upon that account takes pleasure not only in cultivating but in adorning it, is generally of all improvers the most industrious, the most intelligent and the most successful’.<sup>60</sup> As we shall see, limited wealth, the intelligent husbanding of resources, hard work and sociability marked out the gentry as a class which could be expected to stock part of that ‘natural aristocracy’ of men of middling rank which was capable of acquiring political wisdom.

Smith also believed that it was impossible for the interests of labour to be at odds with those of society at large, for the wages paid to labour depended upon its economic performance. Nevertheless, he was struck by the labourer’s limited understanding of his own interest and that of society at large. ‘[His] condition leaves him no time to receive the necessary education and his education and habits are commonly such as to render him unfit to judge even though he was fully informed’.<sup>61</sup> Some of the labourers who appear in the *Wealth of Nations* were, however, at least capable of living according to the rules of propriety. Such men were skilled labourers, journeymen and servants,<sup>62</sup> frugal, industrious, God-fearing and literate; if they were lucky, they had also been educated at a Scottish parish school. The rest, however, were, or might

<sup>56</sup> *WN* V.iii.89.

<sup>57</sup> *WN* III.iv.5–9. But a new *locus classicus* will surely prove to be *LJ(A)* iv.164–6. Cf. *ibid.*, i.130–2.

<sup>58</sup> *WN* I.xi.p.8.

<sup>59</sup> *WN* IV.ii.21.

<sup>60</sup> *WN* III.iv.19. Cf. III.ii.7 and III.ii.20.

<sup>61</sup> *WN* I.xi.p.9.

<sup>62</sup> *WN* I.viii.36–43.

soon become, brutalized by the excessive division of labour. Their poverty and the nature of their employment rendered them 'stupid' and 'benumbed' and they had even lost the capacity for sympathy.<sup>63</sup> They were lost to the world of sympathy and could only look forward to lives which were governed by the principles of empathy and dependence.

It was the third order, that of the merchants and manufacturers, which was responsible for debasing the moral condition of the labouring poor. Its interest, Smith thought, could never be exactly the same as that of society at large, for the capitalists' stock was, by its very nature, moveable. As he once remarked, merchants were not citizens of any particular country.<sup>64</sup> It was the capitalists' intelligence that seemed to strike Smith most and his remarks about their order are periodically sharpened by the indignation he felt at high intelligence used to pervert the public interest.<sup>65</sup> To be sure, some merchants were genuinely capable of wisdom; such men had invested their profits in land and turned themselves into country gentlemen, tempering their natural spirit of enterprise with the natural caution of the landowner. As Smith observed from the vantage point of his Glasgow years, 'whoever has had the fortune to live in a mercantile town, situated in an unimproved country, must have frequently observed how much more spirited the operations of merchants were in this way than those of mere country gentlemen'.<sup>66</sup> But these only received passing attention. The rest, animated by 'the wretched spirit of monopoly', sought to exploit the gullibility of government and the landed classes and the vulnerability of the poor to construct a commercial system which interrupted the free flow of labour and capital, distorted the natural price of labour and commodities and even threatened to unsettle the very foundations of commercial society itself. These 'tribes' of monopolists 'like an overgrown standing army' had become formidable to government and Parliament.<sup>67</sup> Even when they had been placed in charge of government, as had happened in India, the spirit of monopoly had been unchallenged by any sense of the interests of Indian society at large.<sup>68</sup> As Smith observed in a celebrated passage,

The proposal of any new law or regulation of commerce which comes from this order, ought always to be listened to with great precaution, and ought never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, the most suspicious attention. It comes from an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *WN* V.i.f.50–1.

<sup>64</sup> *WN* III.iv.24.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, the critique of the East India Company, *WN* IV.vii.c.

<sup>66</sup> *WN* III.iv.3.

<sup>67</sup> *WN* IV.ii.43.

<sup>68</sup> *WN* IV.vii.c.103; IV.vii.b.11.

<sup>69</sup> *WN* I.xi.10.



Smith's critique of the capitalist and the spirit of monopoly was animated by a desire to legitimize a particular conception of a commercial polity. Its structure was never formally defined but the language Smith used suggests that the values it embodied had some status in the political *mentalité* of his readers. Ralph Lindgren has come nearest to identifying the structure of this model, and what follows owes much to his discussion.<sup>70</sup> Smith's discussion of the progress of opulence hinged on the story of the rise of towns. But it was designed to demonstrate the origins of a set of loosely defined regional economic systems each of which was founded on a dynamic economic, political and cultural relationship between town and country.

The great commerce of every civilized society, is that carried on between the inhabitants of the town and those of the country. It consists in the exchange of rude for manufactured produce, either immediately, or by the intervention of money, or of some sort of paper which represents money. The country supplies the town with the means of subsistence, and the materials of manufacture. The town repays this supply by sending back a part of the manufactured produce to the inhabitants of the country.<sup>71</sup>

In this model the town serves primarily as 'a continual fair or market' for the region, as a source of investment for the surplus wealth of its inhabitants and, most important of all, as a source of order, government

and with them, the liberty and security of individuals, among the inhabitants of the country, who had before lived almost in a continual state of war with their neighbours, and of servile dependency upon their superiors. This, though it has been the least observed, is by far the most important of all their effects. Mr Hume is the only writer who, so far as I know, has hitherto taken notice of it.<sup>72</sup>

Smith was studiously vague in his choice of terminology to describe this regional structure. Significantly he avoided words with narrowly political associations like 'province' or 'country'; the former was reserved almost exclusively for American colonies, Scotland, Ireland and Holland and the regions of France and Spain. The latter was not used at all. 'Country', 'nation' and occasionally 'society' were generally used synonymously with polity. As a rule, however, Smith chose 'society' or, interestingly, 'neighbourhood'. The first carried voluntarist associations and indicated a community regulated by the principles of sympathy. The second recognized the interaction between town and country on which Smith's conception of regionality depended, and was fluid enough to contain the problem of defining the extent of the market system on which its economic life depended. For example, 'there is in every society or neighbourhood an ordinary or average rate both of wages and profit in every different employment of labour or stock'. Or, 'the town, indeed may

<sup>70</sup> Lindgren, *Adam Smith*, chs. 5–6, esp. pp. 125–8. Cf. P. J. McNulty, 'Adam Smith's Concept of Alienation', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34 (1973), 365.

<sup>71</sup> *WN* III.i.1.

<sup>72</sup> *WN* III.iv.4.

not always derive its whole substance from the country in its neighbourhood, or even from the territory to which it belongs, but from very distant countries and this... has considerable variations in the progress of opulence in different ages and nations'.<sup>73</sup>

Smith's failure to develop a precise vocabulary to discuss regionalism is interesting. He was understandably anxious not to use terms which had political associations. He was clearly anxious to reserve space in his discussion for the sort of region whose economic life depended upon activity which extended beyond the frontiers of its immediate geographical neighbourhood. And, as he demonstrated in his discussion of the corn trade, he knew perfectly well that, in the case of this commodity at least, market mechanisms could only be properly discussed in national rather than in regional terms. Nevertheless, Smith clearly believed that market relationships operating within a regional framework had a significance which was of consequence to the modern civic moralist. As Lindgren has noticed, he assumed that the process of 'higgling and bargaining' that took place within these neighbourhoods would stimulate the sympathetic capacities of men of all ranks, strengthening the sense of independence and deference upon which the stability, opulence and happiness of the nation as well as the neighbourhood depended.<sup>74</sup> Smith's desire to think of a region as more than a market and less than a province raises the question of the exact political meaning he attached to a form of organization which could not be defined in constitutional terms but nevertheless formed the foundation stone upon which the opulence and happiness of ordinary people depended. As we have seen, Smith's regions had no constitutional identity. Nevertheless, his account of the rise of the towns out of which the regions had grown was designed to emphasize their power and their success in establishing and preserving their 'independence'. In the struggle for power between the king and barons the towns '[had arrived] at liberty and independence much earlier than the occupants of land in the country'.<sup>75</sup> In Italy and Switzerland they 'generally became independent republics'.<sup>76</sup> In France and England, although they never became 'entirely independent', they were so 'considerable' that they were untaxable without their consent.<sup>77</sup> In the modern age, the values of the town had penetrated the country, creating a society with a coherent identity based on these principles. And, as we shall see, it was out of such societies that Smith hoped that a class of citizen would emerge which was capable of acquiring political wisdom and exercising it so as to preserve the liberties of a free commercial polity.

There are echoes, no more, no less, in Smith's remarks about regionality which recall the work of Smith's two most influential Scottish predecessors in the field of political writing, Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun and David Hume.

<sup>73</sup> *WN* I.vii.1; III.i.2. Cf. I.xi.b.5 and 11.

<sup>75</sup> *WN* III.iii.3.

<sup>76</sup> *WN* III.iii.10.

<sup>74</sup> See Lindgren, *Adam Smith*, pp. 125–8.

<sup>77</sup> *WN* III.iii.11.

Both writers had bypassed traditional ideas of regionalism based on the parish and county and had presented new models of commercial society which recognized the importance of local power and the interests of local communities in preserving liberty and happiness. Fletcher thought of modern Britain as a country divided into four or five huge militia camps which would be instruments for limiting the power of the crown and releasing the virtue of a citizen class.<sup>78</sup> These camps would be ‘the true mothers of cities’, to use Hume’s important phrase.<sup>79</sup> Their capital cities would become centres of law, government and culture and, according to some of Fletcher’s disciples, trade. And they would form the keystone of a ‘happy union’ between the regions and government.<sup>80</sup> Hume, for his part, had always been anxious to emphasize the necessary ‘wonderful mixture of manners and characters in the same nations speaking the same language and subject to the same government’.<sup>81</sup> And his model of a perfect commonwealth insisted on the importance of local communities in the creation of a constitution which would flourish ‘for many ages’. It was to this end that he proposed remodelling the institutions of central and local government in order to ensure that ‘the counties...are not so independent of each other, nor do they form separate bodies’.<sup>82</sup>

Fletcher and Hume saw the region as a *zoon* in which men could live happily and even acquire a certain sense of virtue by learning how to preserve its independence. It seems not unlikely that Smith, whose debt to Hume’s political thought was considerable, conceived of regionality in much the same way. The progress of opulence had created regions which could be defined in market terms but could offer their citizens the chance of living their lives according to the principles of sympathy. No doubt the ideas of justice and the institutions upon which this social system depended were informal in constitutional terms. Nevertheless, their existence could be explained in terms of natural principles and it was only by respecting the sense of regional independence which they aroused that the opulence and happiness of the subject and the liberty of the state could be preserved.

But the wretched spirit of monopoly threatened this pleasing prospect at every level. Monopoly capitalism, by tampering with natural patterns of competition, necessarily threatened the equilibrium of this regional market system. The price of labour and commodities, being determined by forces which lay outside the control of the regional market system, would begin to seem

<sup>78</sup> See his ‘A Discourse of Government with Relation to Militias’ and ‘Speeches by a Member of the Parliament which began at Edinburgh the 6th of May, 1703’, in Andrew Fletcher, *Selected Writings*, ed. David Daiches (Edinburgh, 1979), pp. 1–26, 67–103.

<sup>79</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 540–1.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Happy Union’ was the invention of one of Fletcher’s disciples: J. Hodges, *The Rights and Interests of the Two British Monarchies Inquir’d into, and Clear’d with a Special Respect to An United or Separate State* (London, 1703), preface.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Of National Characters’, *Philosophical Works*, iii, p. 251.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 490–1, 493.

arbitrary and contrary to the ideas of fair play and justice upon which sympathetic relationships within a community ultimately depended. Only in the particular case of the corn trade, where the workings of the market discouraged and even prevented the growth of monopoly, could there be any real security that its baneful spirit would be held in check by natural forces.<sup>83</sup>

Smith's problem was whether such a society, whose three natural orders were confined by ideas of propriety, could generate enough political wisdom to preserve its liberty. As we have seen, Smith thought that the imaginative understanding out of which wisdom was born was to be found only among those who had unusual opportunities to exercise their powers of self-command and humanity. In ordinary life that was only to be expected from those who had lived their lives on the margin of different sorts of social existence, for this was the only sort of experience which could teach men the advantage of relying on the man within the breast rather than the impartial spectator. The 'natural aristocracy' which Smith believed had a natural capacity for wisdom were just such men. They were the ambitious, marginally-minded men, educated in the middling and inferior ranks of society, who had been carried forward by their own abilities and industry 'into the highest office' and had presumably escaped the misfortune of becoming dependent on the great.<sup>84</sup> The most significant members of this group were the merchants who had become landed proprietors and were 'the least subject to the wretched spirit of monopoly'.<sup>85</sup>

Given the social and political realities of modern Britain, this meant that Smith pinned what hopes he had for the survival of a free society upon the intelligent and commercially-minded gentry whose very circumstances ensured that they would be responsible to a model of a commercial polity whose regions were far enough from the capital, from 'the great seat of scramble of faction and ambition', to be 'more indifferent and impartial spectators of the conduct of all'.<sup>86</sup> Seen in this perspective, the regions of Britain appear in Smith's model as the impartial spectators of a body politic which was animated by the class-based pursuit of opulence.

<sup>83</sup> *WN* IV.v.b.3–4.

<sup>84</sup> *TMS* I.iii.2.5.

<sup>85</sup> *WN* IV.ii.21.

<sup>86</sup> *WN* V.iii.90. It must be stressed that Smith's use of 'province' to imply regions as well as the colonies, Scotland and Ireland is momentary. Its relevance for this discussion takes its stand on Smith's obvious recollection of Hume's discussion of the problem of controlling the disruptive force of political faction in large and small states and his observation that provinces, remote from centres of power, have an important role in stabilizing large and regionally complex polities. Hume develops this point in 'That Politics may be reduced to a Science' and 'Idea of a perfect Commonwealth'. For a fascinating discussion of the importance of these essays in shaping American political thinking, and that of Madison in particular, see D. Adair, "'That Politics may be reduced to a Science': David Hume, James Madison and the Tenth Federalist", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 20 (1956–7), 343–60. If my own suggestions are tenable, it is interesting to reflect that these two essays serve as sources for Smithian and Madisonian discussions about the structure of a unitary British polity and a federal American polity.

## IV

Smith's moral and political writing could be said to be a discourse on the social and ethical significance of face-to-face relationships between independently-minded individuals. His analysis was designed to show how such relationships could be cultivated and how they enabled men to acquire moral sentiments, a sense of justice, a sense of political obligation and even a sense of personal identity. His discussion of commercial society shows how deeply he distrusted social and economic organizations which were too large to be able to support the sense of identity of those who belonged to them. But the face-to-face relationships he admired were the product of sympathy, not empathy, and were sustained by the curiously self-conscious pattern of interaction that the theory of sympathy embodied. As I have already pointed out, sympathetic relationships implied the existence of a system of voluntary relationships which could be described by terms like 'society', 'association', 'club' and so on, rather than by the terminology Smith reserved for the involuntary relationships which governed the life of pre-commercial society. Indeed, Smith's interest in voluntarist terminology recalls Hume's remark that there was no reason why we should not use the club as a model for the moral history of society itself.

But why, in the greater society or confederation of mankind, should not the case be the same as in particular clubs and companies.<sup>87</sup>

The language of eighteenth-century voluntarism has never received the attention it deserves, and my own understanding of it is confined by my Scottish interests.<sup>88</sup> But it is clear that Addison and Steele played a crucial part in its formation. Before the Seven Years' War, that great watershed in eighteenth-century British history, the most popular voluntary institution must have been the sort of club which was modelled on Addison and Steele's Spectator Club. These clubs, which met in the taverns and coffee-houses of countless provincial towns and cities, were small, semi-formal institutions, drawing their members from the ranks of the middling classes of these local communities. Historically, the function of these clubs was to transmit the culture of the metropolis to the provinces, adapting it to local needs and ensuring that it would support and not threaten the sense of identity of increasingly prosperous provincial communities. As such, the Spectator Club was to become an important mechanism in establishing a consensual relationship between court and country to replace the adversary relationships which had soured and unsettled the political life of seventeenth-century Britain. At a

<sup>87</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edn, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), p. 281.

<sup>88</sup> The concluding section of this paper is based on my essays 'Culture and Society in the 18th Century Province: The Case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment' and 'The Scottish Enlightenment'.

surface level, these clubs were concerned with the niceties of taste and deportment. However, as we have shown, they can also be seen as instruments designed to establish a framework of social relationships governed by the principles of friendship and propriety. As such, they would provide their members with a sense of moral autonomy and a capacity, for what Addison so misleadingly called virtue. To put it another way, the pursuit of propriety had become an alternative to the pursuit of virtue, and the voluntary society and the coffee-house had emerged as an alternative to the *polis* in this world of provincial morality.

This is to suggest that the Addisonian perspective that I have already referred to in the discussion of Smith's moral theory can be extended still further to Smith's moral and political writing as a whole. For he appears as a philosopher who was anxious to inquire into the basis of moral preoccupations which were of consuming interest to many of his contemporaries. At the same time he explored the principles of political economy which underlay the provincial world of spectatorial morality, showing that it was by 'higgling and bargaining' in regional market places, rather than by participating in the activities of voluntary societies that men's ideas of independence were formed. And he was able to show that such activity strengthened the economic as well as the moral fabric of commercial society at large. To put it another way, Smith had substituted a language of political economy for a language of politics and framed it with a new voluntarist language of provincial morality.

Nowhere did the language of eighteenth-century voluntarism take deeper root than in Scotland. The *Tatler* and *Spectator* essays were reprinted in Edinburgh immediately after they had appeared in London, and they were to be discussed and imitated throughout the century by local moralists. Indeed, it is not without significance that the last great exercise in Addisonian moralizing, Henry Mackenzie's *Mirror* and *Lounger*, and the style of moral journalism that was to replace it, Francis Jeffrey's *Edinburgh Review*, were the work of Edinburgh men. Voluntary societies proliferated in the city throughout the century, creating a complex network of sympathetic relationships which extended from an aristocratic social elite through the professions to the population of young, upwardly mobile men of humbler origins which every centre of government and politics necessarily attracts. Some of Edinburgh's clubs and societies were devoted to the improvement of manners *tout court*. But others were devoted to economic engineering and to the pursuit of polite letters. Some, like the Easy Club (1712–16), were small, informal *Spectator* clubs composed of young men of relatively humble rank. Others, like the Honourable the Society for the Improvement in the Knowledge of Agriculture (1723–45) and the Select Society (1754–64) of which Smith was a founder member, were highly formal societies attracting men of rank, property and position in public life. As I have shown elsewhere, the political and intellectual life of enlightened



Scotland was tightly meshed into this voluntarist social system and it is interesting to notice that its activities were deeply penetrated by a patriotic language as well as by the language of Addisonian voluntarism. For club after club seemed anxious to insist on its importance in preserving the independence of Scotland and releasing the civic virtue of its governing elite in a post-Union world.

In fact this association between the moral language of Addison and a political language which insisted upon the importance of preserving Scottish independence is of some significance. For it marks an important stage in the evolution of a distinctive and curious political language whose structure is of considerable interest to a historian who is anxious to locate Smith's moral and civic discourse in a peculiarly Scottish context. This language has been completely ignored by historians and its history can only be touched on here.<sup>89</sup> It was a variant of a language of virtue and corruption associated with Harrington and the militia controversialists of the 1690s. Its most distinctive characteristic was that the idea of virtue and corruption had, so to speak, been eased apart from its political frame and relocated in a framework of social relationships that were defined in social, economic and cultural terms. And for this, an underdeveloped constitution, an intractable economy and a long history of uncertain Anglo-Scottish relations were responsible. By the time of the Union, Scottish political discourse was more concerned with 'independence' than with 'liberty', and Scotsmen feared 'dependence' on the English more than 'despotism'. Indeed, it was taken for granted that in the modern age, a kingdom without independent provinces could not possibly be said to be free. Independence was an idea with a long history. Its roots lay in the Wars of Independence, the Declaration of Arbroath and the belief that the act of resisting the English by force was enough to release the virtue of the patriotic Scot. By 1707, however, no one wanted to fight the English and no one believed that Scottish 'independence' could possibly be preserved simply by participating in a political process whose structure was defined by an undeveloped and perilously insecure constitution. At the same time it was recognized that Scotland's independence was embodied in a pattern of social relationships

<sup>89</sup> As the essays in this volume demonstrate, there is a lack of agreement about the precise structure of the civic language used by the Scots to discuss the principles of morals, politics and history. My debts to John Pocock and Donald Winch, pioneers in this treacherous field, will be obvious. My approach differs from theirs mainly (although not exclusively) because I see Scottish civic language as a *variant* of the language of virtue and corruption on which their analysis depends. I think that the Scots' concern with politeness and the 'civic potential' of Addisonian moral discourse was the principal instrument employed in resolving the problems contained in the political language they employed to debate the Union question. My disagreement with John Robertson is that although I am in broad sympathy with his understanding of the purely political structure of the Scottish language of virtue and corruption, I do not think his model takes enough account of those modes of economic and cultural activity which the Scots believed were instrumental in shaping the civic personality and determining the structure of a commercial polity in a modern age.



which was better defined in economic and moral than political terms. The conclusions were obvious, if unusual. Scotland's independence could best be preserved by strengthening the economic and moral bonds of Scottish society. And the act of participating in such a process would be sufficient to release the virtue of the patriot.

To discuss Scottish politics in these terms was to suggest a question of profound importance. For it did not necessarily follow that a civilized society was one which had to be defined in terms of its constitution. Nor did it mean that civic virtue need necessarily be defined in terms of participating in a political process. What forced this question into the centre of debate was the offer by the English of what contemporaries called an Incorporating Union which was based on the principle of exchanging Scotland's free political institutions for the right of free access to English markets at home and abroad. This, it was hoped, would stimulate economic growth in Scotland and so help to preserve the country's independence. But what would Scotland's place in such a polity be? And how exactly would her independence be preserved? Political writers had no difficulty in agreeing on the general principles on which this polity should be founded. It would be a limited monarchy which was no more than the sum of the nations which composed it. But while it was assumed that a largely English Parliament would remain the custodian of its laws and liberties, it was nevertheless taken for granted that such an arrangement would only work if law was made and administered on the principle of respecting the political, economic and cultural integrity of its constituent nations. But how could that integrity be guaranteed? For traditionalists like Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun it went without saying that an independent province without a free parliament was a contradiction in terms. Others were less sure. William Seton of Pitmedden and Daniel Defoe, two of the most articulate and intelligent of contemporary writers, saw no reason why Scotland should not remain independent without a parliament providing her governing elite had enough virtue to discover new ways of preserving the economic and moral fabric to guarantee her independence. The astonishing proliferation of voluntary societies devoted to economic engineering and to polite letters was evidence that they were not alone in sharing this view. For these societies appear as spontaneous, pragmatic attempts by virtuously-minded Scotsmen to find para-political alternatives to the old Scots Parliament to undertake the work of preserving Scotland's independence and release their own virtue.

The curious history of this political language suggests that the Scots, in their search for an understanding of the principles of civic morality which was appropriate to their age and circumstances, had been obliged to recognize that the structure of a commercial polity was more complex than conventional political wisdom allowed. But if they had managed to ease virtue from its political base, they had also succeeded in relocating it in a framework of moral

and economic relationships. At the same time, their understanding of the moral and economic framework of commercial society was framed by an understanding of the principles of morality which flowed from the voluntaristic principles of Addison. In the process, they had laid the foundations of a language of civic morality which was of peculiar interest to those provincial communities which had sprung up in the commercial age.

When his thought is seen in this context, Smith appears as a moralist who philosophized about a pattern of social relationships and ideas of civic virtue which were deeply embedded in the political language of his own society. No doubt this language was related to that of metropolitan England, but it was subtly different from it, and it was intellectually provocative in a way that the 'vulgar' language of contemporary English politics was not.<sup>90</sup> And if Smith employed it to analyse the foundations of commercial civilization and of civilization itself with a devastating clarity, it is worth remembering, too, that he was also able to employ it as a moralist who was anxious to remind the political community at large that provincial propriety was embodied in a *mentalité* on which the opulence, liberty, wisdom and virtue of commercial civilization might depend.

<sup>90</sup> I use Duncan Forbes's excellent phrase. D. Forbes, 'Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce and Liberty', in Skinner and Wilson, *Essays on Adam Smith*, pp. 179–201.