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# The *Tao* Exposes Slavers to Contempt

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**A**dam Smith is more often referenced than read in academic political economy. When Smith is referenced, it is sometimes suggested that he was advancing a narrow economic idea associated with the expression *invisible hand*. But a cursory reading of Smith's work quickly reveals that he saw human existence in fundamentally moral terms, and that his aim was to improve our morals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, human chattel slavery was the institution most antithetical to Smith's worldview. In fact, even the first (1759) edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—hereafter *TMS* (Smith [1790] 1976)—contains a passage condemning slavery. The second sentence zeroes in on the slave trade:

There is not a negro from the coast of Africa who does not, in this respect, possess a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his sordid master is too often scarce capable of conceiving. Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished. (*TMS*, 206–7)

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The passage takes for granted self-ownership—the soul’s ownership of its person—which, as Hume ([1740] 1978, 488–90) indicated, constitutes the most native ownership and forms the template of the ownership principle. Smith, in his jurisprudence, spoke of how that principle gets “extended” to other objects (Smith [1763] 1982, 10, 16, 19–23, 27, 34, 38, 39, 207, 308, 309, 432, 434, 460, 466, 467, 468).

I have written in *The Independent Review* about the slave-trade passage in relation to the surrounding text (Klein 2020; see also Klein and Asher 2022). Smith leads British readers into identifying with the respectable persons shackled by slavers from Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Smith indicates that “[n]o society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men’s conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice” of slavery (*TMS*, 211).

Here, I leave aside the surrounding text and treat the words within the passage itself.

The first sentence moves the scene from the Americas to Africa, to illustrate anew the contrast between polished and “savage” cultures. The interaction taken up is a practice, Hume noted in 1752, “which has been abolished for some centuries throughout the greater part of Europe” (1985, 383). Slavery had been largely abolished in Western Christendom, only to be reintroduced in the colonies in the Americas.

The first sentence sets up the second sentence. But there is a word in the first sentence that quietly moves toward the sublime, and that word is *soul*. Smith speaks of “the soul of his sordid master.”

In the first chapter of *TMS*, Smith also uses *soul*. When we look upon the dead we lodge “our own living souls in their inanimated bodies” (13). But Smith uses *soul* only in a handful of other instances throughout the remainder of the book, and several of those come in his presentation of ancient thought. Yet Smith’s affirmation of the soul should not be in doubt.

By lodging our soul in the inanimate, we may discover the sublime. Hear again the second sentence:

Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished. (*TMS*, 206–7)

The sentence stands out for its animisms. First, there is Fortune—*Fortuna*—which exerts her empire. She subjects heroes to being vanquished. Moreover, she does so “cruelly.” In *TMS*, Smith is not shy to animate the inanimate, but imbuing the animistic spirit with a mien such as cruelty is striking. It makes one think of the

start of Smith's famous parable of the poor man's son, "whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition" (*TMS*, 181.8). Heaven is angry, and *Fortuna* is cruel.

The end of the sentence takes animism yet higher. The slavers' levity, brutality, and baseness expose them to the contempt of the vanquished, and "so justly."

In pondering *justly*, I had once thought in terms of the vanquished individuals' estimation of the slavers: their contempt was estimatively just.

But rather than the contempt of certain humans, perhaps it is an animistic spirit that acts justly. Levity, brutality, and baseness expose the slavers to contempt. Such moral operations are actively sustained by the moral order. In *The Abolition of Man*, originally published in 1944, C. S. Lewis (2002, 701) called this order the *Tao*. And in sustaining such operations the *Tao* acts justly. The sort of justice here is distributive: The *Tao* makes a becoming use of what is its own. The *Tao* exposes justly. C. S. Lewis wrote another book, *Miracles* whose twelfth chapter is "The Propriety of Miracles." The *Tao* is proprietous; its decisions and actions are proper.

Thus, the passage contains two animisms, Fortune, which exerts her empire cruelly, and the *Tao*, which exposes justly.

And notice a difference in verb tense. Fortune "exerted" and it "subjected" (past tense), whereas the elements of the *Tao* "expose" (present tense). Fortune acts in history; the *Tao* acts in eternity. The slavers continue to be exposed to the contempt of the vanquished. Those trepanned and shackled are vanquished in their bodies—but not in their souls.

The contempt rings in eternity, but also it is rung anew again and again, perennially, today and in all future days. A new ally of the vanquished is born each day.

The *Tao* will continue to expose its enemies to contempt. Smith told tyrants: Your levity, brutality, and baseness justly expose you to contempt. You, beyond reasonable call, control people, take their stuff, restrict their liberty, rather than leaving them to act peaceably of their own accord, to pursue their own interests their own way. But you shall not escape the contempt that your levity, brutality, and baseness so richly earn you.

Again, in *TMS*'s very first chapter, Smith speaks of viewing the inanimated body of someone now deceased as a powerful prompt to the contemplation of death: We lodge "our own living souls in their inanimated bodies" (13).

Even if we regard the world as an inanimate entity, we find larger meaning in it only by sacrilizing larger animisms, whether theistic or allegorical. Smith speaks of how men ascribe "all their own sentiments and passions" "to those mysterious beings . . . which happen, in any country, to be the objects of religious fear" (*TMS* 163–164.4).

We have seen that Smith does likewise. The animisms in Smith—*Fortuna*, the *Tao*, "heaven," the "invisible hand"—"must necessarily be formed with some sort of resemblance to those intelligences of which [we] have experience" (*TMS* 164.4). Such animisms are not mere ornaments or flourishes. They are how the entities in question take on larger and sacred meaning.

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