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Adam Smith's Rebuke of the Slave Trade, 1759

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Interest in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*, Smith [1759] 1976b) has soared during the past thirty-five years. Long eclipsed by *The Wealth of Nations* (*WN*, Smith [1776] 1976a), *TMS* now has a popular estimation more in line with Smith's own estimation. Shortly after Smith's death in 1790, a friend reported that Smith always considered *TMS* "a much superior work to [*WN*]" (Romilly 1840, 1: 404).

The wonder and mystery of *TMS* is open-ended, but here we consider specifically two sentences, perhaps the most powerful passage in *TMS*. It comes in part V, titled "Of the Influence of Custom and Fashion upon the Sentiments of Moral Approbation and Disapprobation." The part is curiously meandering and enigmatic; the passage is the key to the whole part. Once the passage is fully appreciated, the whole part achieves cogency and power. It is quite clear that the two sentences, appearing in the original edition of 1759 and maintained thereafter, were an inspiration to the early antislavery movement.

Smith says that from the regularities of experience and practice "the imagination acquires a habit" and that such regularities—*custom* among the society in general, *fashion* among those "of a high rank, or character" (*TMS* 194.3)—may cause "many irregular and discordant opinions which prevail in different ages and nations concerning what is blamable or praise-worthy" (194.1).¹ The part consists of two chapters. The first

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1. The citation 194.1 means page 194, paragraph 1, of the referenced edition of *TMS* (Smith [1759] 1976b); subsequent citations to *TMS* give only these page and paragraph references unless the book abbreviation is needed for to clarify the source.

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considers clothing, furniture, architecture, and other such inanimate objects and argues that, here, custom and fashion play a large role.

The second chapter turns to the influence of custom and fashion “upon Moral Sentiments”—that is, sentiments about the beauty or deformity of human conduct and character. Since the title of the entire part speaks only of “Moral Approbation and Disapprobation,” we may regard the first chapter, treating inanimate objects (or objects of nonmoral sentiment) as a warmup.

Less malleable, these: the moral sentiments, “though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted,” for they “are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature” (200.1). To the extent that moral standards do vary, they vary with circumstances. The variations follow different professions, different stages of life—young versus old—and different stages of society—barbarism versus civilization and refinement.

Among “civilized nations,” people cultivate especially the soft, amiable virtues, whereas in “rude and barbarous nations” people cultivate especially the respectable virtues of self-command. Smith employs the distinction between the amiable and the respectable virtues (23–26.1–10).

In a mammoth paragraph of 957 words,² Smith opens an extended, engrossing description of the “savages in North America,” whose “magnanimity and self-command, in this respect, are almost beyond the conception of Europeans” (206.9). He embarks on a remarkable account of how they behave under great adversity and duress, including capture by their enemies and protracted torture. The description is delivered calmly, but it produces a bracing and sobering effect on the reader, inspiring a sense of awe. Smith continues the mammoth paragraph telling of their “song of death”:

Every savage is said to prepare himself, from his earliest youth, for this dreadful end: he composes for this purpose what they call the song of death, a song which he is to sing when he has fallen into the hands of his enemies, and is expiring under the tortures which they inflict upon him. It consists of insults upon his tormentors, and expresses the highest contempt of death and pain. He sings this song upon all extraordinary occasions; when he goes out to war, when he meets his enemies in the field, or whenever he has a mind to shew that he has familiarized his imagination to the most dreadful misfortunes, and that no human event can daunt his resolution or alter his purpose. (206.9)

At this point, Smith turns the scene away from the native communities of North America: “The same contempt of death and torture prevails among all other savage nations.”

2. The paragraph is the second longest when length is counted in terms of characters. When length is counted in terms of words, the paragraph is the third longest.

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. (206–7.9)

After these two sentences, appearing at the end of the mammoth paragraph, Smith continues his original theme, as though nothing has happened. But something has, and we must pause to reflect on them.

The two sentences condemn slavery in general but aim especially at what was surely the most vicious “usage” that was being practiced by some of the British readers’ fellow Britons at the time and voyaging from British ports: the slave trade. The first sentence speaks of “the soul of his sordid master,” but the signification is vague, and it seems doubtful that Smith, sensitive to the compromising positions that the status quo often places people in,³ would accuse every slaveholder of being sordid. The passage appears as Smith writes of people of “rude and barbarous nations” (205.8). He speaks of “a negro from the coast of Africa.” Most of the slaves in the American colonies in Smith’s time were born and raised in the Americas.⁴ To them, Smith’s assumptions would not pertain. I regard the first sentence as an overture to the more definite condemnation in the second. What Smith means by “the refuse of the jails of Europe[,] . . . wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to,” are the slave traders, who show the virtues neither of England and other European countries which they come from (notably, the amiable virtues) nor of the African nations which they go to (notably, the respectable virtues of self-command)—wretches whose actions “so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished.”

Smith continues on with the theme into which the two sentences are inserted. He explains that “in civilized societies” people are more animated, expressive, amiable, as with “the French and the Italians”: “An Italian, says the abbot Dû Bos, expresses more emotion on being condemned in a fine of twenty shillings, than an Englishman on

3. “[T]here is often some unobserved circumstance which, if it was attended to, would show us, that, independent of custom, there was a propriety in the character which custom had taught us to allot to each profession” (209.13). Smith’s discussion of slavery in *Lectures on Jurisprudence* shows that he saw dilemmas involved in undoing slavery: “a generall insurrection would ensue,” the slaves being “the naturall enemies of the governing part” (Smith 1982, 187, 188).

4. Between 1711 and 1760, the number of African slaves who survived the Middle Passage and disembarked on mainland North America was 175,789 (“Voyages” n.d.), and the number of slaves who ended up in North America after disembarking elsewhere would add perhaps a few tens of thousands of the slaves of 1760. Meanwhile, the U.S. slave population in 1790 was 694,280 (“1790 United States Census” n.d.). When Smith published his sentences in 1759, less than 35 percent had been born in Africa.

receiving the sentence of death” (207.10). As for “animated eloquence,” Smith says that it has been long practiced “both in France and Italy . . . but just beginning to be introduced into England. So wide is the difference between the degrees of self-command which are required in civilized and in barbarous nations” (208.10).

Notice what Smith does: He exalts the self-command of the “savages” of North America and Africa. Next he draws a contrast between the French/Italians and the English, with the English inferior in the amiable but superior in the respectable or “awful” virtues (*awful* meant “awesome” in Smith’s day). The English retain a “rude” excellence in self-command. Smith arouses the Englishman’s invidious pride against the French, enabling that contrast to extend itself backward to the engrossing mammoth paragraph that directly precedes the invidious European contrast. If the Englishman feels superior to the French, for superior English self-command, then vastly superior yet are the vanquished Africans, “those nations of heroes.” Smith uses English pride to arouse their sense of the sublime and to induce them to *look up to* the Africans, including those vanquished by European refuse.

And if the Englishman feels shame in his “rude” state of amiability, in that respect he may feel a sympathy with the deeper backwardness of those same vanquished souls. Smith induces all readers of the English-speaking world to identify with, to sympathize with, those over whom fortune never exerted her empire more cruelly.

After concluding his comparative discussion, Smith—87 percent of the way into part V—comes, *finally*, to a much more definite claim: “All these effects of custom and fashion, however, upon the moral sentiments of mankind, are inconsiderable, in comparison of those which they give occasion to in some other cases; and it is not concerning the general style of character and behaviour, that those principles produce the greatest perversion of judgment, but concerning the propriety or impropriety of particular usages” (209.12).

Custom and fashion have less effect on conduct in general than on particular usages. “Usage” here means a particular practice, no matter how peculiar to outsiders, and stands in contrast to “the general style of character and behaviour” in society. In the matter of society’s general style of behavior, Smith goes on to say: “We expect truth and justice from an old man as well as from a young, from a clergyman as well as from an officer” (209.13). The rules of truth and justice are firm. Indeed, one of the major themes of *TMS* is “that remarkable distinction” (80.6) between commutative justice and all other virtues: commutative justice—that is, “abstaining from what is another’s” (269.10) or not messing with other people’s stuff—is the only virtue whose rules are “precise and accurate” as opposed to “loose, vague, and indeterminate,” thereby making the rules of commutative justice like those of grammar, whereas the rules of the other virtues are like the pointers and guidelines of aesthetic criticism (175.11, 327.1). Understand that in all this Smith is focusing on jural relationships “among equals” (80.7) and not on the governor–governed relationship.

However, Smith is saying that even such grammarlike rules can be grossly violated in “particular usages” or peculiar institutions. He now introduces an illustration from a

much earlier era, discussed at length in another sizeable paragraph (528 words): infanticide in ancient Greece—"a practice allowed of in almost all the states of Greece, even among the polite and civilized Athenians," indeed, then the proud pinnacle of civilization. "This practice had, probably, begun in times of the most savage barbarity," but "[i]n the latter ages of Greece . . . the same thing was permitted from views of remote interest or conveniency, which could by no means excuse it" (210.15). "Uninterrupted custom had by this time so thoroughly authorized the practice, that not only the loose maxims of the world tolerated this barbarous prerogative, but even the doctrine of philosophers, which ought to have been more just and accurate, was led away by the established custom; and upon this, as upon many other occasions, instead of censuring, supported the horrible abuse by far-fetched considerations of public utility" (210.15). Smith here uses an intertemporal, as opposed to the previous cross-sectional, comparison to play upon his reader's pride, who may now be looking down on ancient Athens for its horrible practice. But how will future generations regard the horrible blots upon our own current civilization? With what contempt will they regard our "far-fetched considerations of public utility"?

Part V's next and final paragraph says that though justice might be trampled in particular usages, it cannot be trampled in general by the citizens of a society (as opposed to by its governors), for "an obvious reason." The final paragraph is strikingly brief and, given the profound significance of the "obvious reason," ironic in its brevity: "There is an obvious reason why custom should never pervert our sentiments with regard to the general style and character of conduct and behaviour, in the same degree as with regard to the propriety or unlawfulness of particular usages. There never can be any such custom. No society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men's conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice I have just now mentioned" (211.16). The "obvious reason" is natural selection. A general respect among equals for commutative justice is "indispensable" (175.11; see also 86.3–4), but when trampling is confined to particular usages, society can persist, as "with the horrible practice I have just now mentioned."

Well, the practice that Smith *just* now mentioned was infanticide in ancient Greece, a usage that under certain ancient circumstances Smith even seems willing to excuse (210.15; see also *Letters on Jurisprudence* [Smith 1982 172–75, 449]) and that, as David Hume notes, was made legitimate by Solon (1987, 399), whom Smith takes as symbol of wise statesmanship (*TMS* 233.16; *WN* 543.53).

Indeed, the long paragraph on infanticide ends with the following words: "When custom can give sanction to so dreadful a violation of humanity, we may well imagine that there is scarce any particular practice so gross which it cannot authorize. Such a thing, we hear men every day saying, is commonly done, and they seem to think this a sufficient apology for what, in itself, is the most unjust and unreasonable conduct" (*TMS* 210.15). Just three pages earlier, however, another horrible practice is mentioned, a "usage" that 365 days a year, day and night, visibly violated commutative justice and was for Smith's readers going on *right now*, voyaging from their own ports:

the slave trade—a usage that “we hear men every day saying, is commonly done, and they seem to think this a sufficient apology.” That was the horrible practice truly relevant—truly urgent.

Smith rebukes the slave trade not only when telling of slave traders being so justly exposed to the contempt of the vanquished but also when saying in the part’s concluding words that no society could “subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men’s conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice I have just now mentioned.” Indeed, Smith suggests that the perpetrators tend toward criminality, describing them as the “refuse of the jails of Europe.” Heightening the intensity of the condemnation is the fact that it is the first time and nearly the only time in *TMS* that the reader finds Smith addressing a specific issue of current policy and declaiming upon it (Smith also rejects the illegality of suicide [287.34]).

An understanding of *TMS* should inform our reading of *WN*, and, specifically, Smith’s rebuke in 1759 should inform our understanding of *WN*’s discussion of slavery in 1776. There, Smith expositis slavery’s economic inefficiency, but he never fulminates against its injustice.⁵ But in 1759 Smith had announced (*TMS* 342.37) that he would augment his system with a work such as *WN*; readers should understand that *WN* lives under the ethical umbrella of *TMS*. In *TMS*, Smith introduces the illustration of infanticide as follows: “Can there be a greater barbarity, for example, than to hurt an infant?” (209.15). Perhaps there can—and Smith had spoken of it three pages earlier. Perhaps Smith felt that the sublimity of his rebuke in 1759 would have been diminished by any new fulminations in *WN* about slavery being a great barbarity against natural liberty. In 1790, the year of Smith’s death, in material added to the sixth and final edition of *TMS* Smith speaks of domestic slavery as “the vilest of all states” and in the same paragraph speaks once again of how “an American savage prepares his death-song, and considers how he should act when he has fallen into the hands of his enemies, and is by them put to death in the most lingering tortures, and midst the insults and derision of all the spectators” (282.28; see also 288.35).

Coming twenty-eight years before the famed formation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, Smith’s rebuke was not lost on his contemporaries. In 1764, an anonymous antislavery pamphlet published in London quotes in full—and twice—Smith’s two sentences.⁶ Thomas Clarkson quotes that pamphlet in his classic two-volume account *The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-trade, by the British Parliament* (1808, 1:56–57)—the abolition act having been passed a year earlier, in 1807. Clarkson writes that Adam Smith, one who “promoted the cause of the injured Africans . . . [,] had, so

5. Smith discusses slavery in *WN* particularly at pages 98, 386–90, 587, 683–84, as well as extensively in *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Smith 1982); for analysis, see Weingast 2016.

6. The pamphlet *An Essay in Vindication of the Continental Colonies of America, from a Censure of Mr Adam Smith, in His “Theory of Moral Sentiments”* (1764) has been attributed to Arthur Lee. I have investigated the matter at considerable length, however, and have serious doubts about the attribution.

early as the year 1759, held them up in an honorable, and their tyrants in a degrading light” and then quotes in full the two sentences of Smith’s rebuke (1:85–86). Clarkson then adds: “And . . . in 1776, in his *Wealth of Nations*, he showed in a forcible manner (for he appealed to the interest of those concerned) the dearness of African labor, or the impolicy of employing slaves” (1:86). Also quoted in Clarkson’s extensive honor roll are Francis Hutcheson (1:49) and John Millar (1:86–87). Millar plainly echoes Smith: “Fortune perhaps never produced a situation more calculated to ridicule a liberal hypothesis” ([1778] 2006, 278–79). Clarkson writes: “It is a great honour to the university of Glasgow, that it should have produced, before any public agitation of this question, three professors, all of whom bore their public testimony against the continuance of the cruel trade” (1808, 1:87). In fact, the Glasgow line opposing slavery extends back also to Hutcheson’s teacher Gershom Carmichael (2002, 140–45), making it four generations. Another Scottish professor honored and quoted by Clarkson is William Robertson of Edinburgh University (1808, 1:87–88). Also noticed by Clarkson is Benjamin Rush (1:186), who in a pamphlet published in Philadelphia in 1773 also quotes in full Smith’s two sentences ([Rush] 1773, 16–17, second pamphlet; see also 25). It is quite clear, then, that Smith’s rebuke of 1759 was an inspiration to the early movement against slavery and the slave trade. As for William Wilberforce, he admired Smith (though he disliked the Hume memorial; see Wilberforce 1797, 387) and quotes both of Smith’s major works (Wilberforce 1797, 105, 260, 262, 286; 1823, 2, 44, 48), though we find no reference to Smith’s rebuke in particular.⁷

From moral theory and natural jurisprudence emerged liberal political economy. Its “liberal plan of equality, liberty, and justice” (WN 664.3) implied the emancipation of slaves and the undoing of privilege and caste generally, prompting Thomas Carlyle to dub political economy “the dismal science” (Levy and Peart 2001).

The anonymous pamphlet of 1764 concludes with the following words about Adam Smith: “*How had he bless’d mankind, and rescu’d me!*”

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7. Also, Charles Sumner quotes Smith’s two sentences in a speech to the U.S. Congress (1860, 2595). I thank Glory Lui for bringing this to my attention.

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