

Adam Smith, the Concept of Leisure, and the Division of Labor

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Introduction

The 1776 publication of Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* heralded the beginning of a new commercial age. It overturned the assumptions of mercantilism and helped undermine the justification for empire. It helped accomplish these through the understanding that specialization through the division of labor is a crucial means by which society increases its wealth. The *Wealth of Nations* also implicitly attacks the presuppositions of classical political thought regarding the role of leisure as the basis for high culture and the necessary component for citizenship and political participation.

Quite often today, many assume that because Smith lauded the opulence and invention that result from an advanced division of labor, he ignored its darker side. Not without cause, critics of modernity such as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber claim that the division of labor results in some form of personal alienation, a greater narrowness of individual and collective understanding, and an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and honors in the society that fosters it. However, associating Smith with an unequivocal endorsement of either the division of labor or the opulent commercial society that results from it is a grave misunderstanding, for as Donald Winch observes, the story Smith tells us about the rise of commercial society "is certainly told with a detachment that frequently borders on cynicism" (1978, 70-71).

This essay argues that while Smith holds the division of labor to be a destabilizing force

in society, he nevertheless hoped commercial society could cultivate an intellectual and political class suitable to guide it. What makes this vision possible is Smith's understanding that people often subordinate their material self-interest to their overriding need for sympathy and recognition. First, I outline Smith's recognition of the problems and possibilities inherent in the division of labor and the ways in which both Hannah Arendt and Josef Pieper challenge Smith's account. Second, through a discussion of "*das Adam Smith Problem*" and Smith's account of the motivations involved in choosing a profession, I develop the ways he defies easy characterization as a proponent of "economic man." Third, I note Smith's hopeful ambivalence about the division of labor and identify the characteristics in human nature and institutions he hoped could tame the dangers of a perfectly free market. Fourth, I discuss the two classes most crucial to his theory—politicians and men of letters—and the ways in which Smith thought they could support one another in guiding a decent commercial society. By way of conclusion, I mention some of the ways Smith's account of leisure and the division of labor has enjoyed lasting influence, before noting some lingering problems in his thinking and limitations of his vision.

Between the Creation of Wealth and the Degradation of Intellect

The division of labor is central to Smith's political economy and social theory as a whole. The result of "a certain propensity in human nature...to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another," in due course it becomes the cause of "[t]he greatest improvement in the productive powers of labor, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is any where directed, or applied" (Smith 1981, 13, 25). For example, Smith notes that through specialization, pin manufacturers find their productivity multiplied by many thousands over, and "so far as it can be introduced" into other industries, the division of labor "occasions, in every art, a proportionable increase of the productive powers of labor," so that eventually, "[i]n every

improved society, the farmer is generally nothing but a farmer; the manufacturer, nothing but a manufacturer” (Smith 1981, 15-16).

Against the period’s common desire for intentionally-created political and social institutions, Smith argues that the division of labor is a largely unintentional process, “not originally the effect of any human wisdom,” but one that nevertheless betrays a certain tacit rationality (Smith 1981, 25). By this understanding, our intellectual capacities are far too limited and society too complex for purposive action to bear much fruit in creating such a division’s social foundations. That is, Smith suggests that once political authorities establish some basic provision for civic order, often repeated interactions among neighbors and businesses suggest a beneficial way of conducting social life that no authority could easily have imagined, much less imposed.

While he does not deny the importance of individual or collective activities directed toward a conscious end, Smith is careful to note their limits. Unlike much of Europe, it was Britain’s good fortune to “grow” institutions conducive to the commercial age (Dwyer 2005, 669-72). Accordingly, Smith denigrates the role of genius in the development of society, comparing philosophers to street porters and noting that there is less difference between them than there is among the various dog breeds. This illustrates Smith’s point that we are more creatures of our upbringing, habits, education, and employment than we would often like to imagine (Smith 1981, 28-30; Tenger and Trolander 1994, 179-80).

However, Smith is no determinist. On his account, legislators, businessmen, and individual laborers apply their insights and experiences, over time refining the division of labor; aggregated together, the individual needs and actions of each moment slowly drive society along. Smith delineates four stages of human socioeconomic life and ties each to a particular mode of

living. These stages are hunting, pasturage, farming, and commerce (Smith 1982a, 14-16, 459). In every case, societies develop folkways and rules of order reflecting their basic activities. That is, how the market and society divide labor at each stage dictates in part the social arrangements and mode of living each society develops. Smith notes that the economic changes in each stage necessitate increasing political freedom, for it is only when individuals are free that they become most inventive and productive (Smith 1981, 386-89; Smith 1982a, 526). However, he also observes that the effects of the division of labor are not entirely salutary.

Smith argues that the division of labor's beneficial effects result from three principal changes in each worker's habits: First, performing the same operation or set of them causes an increase in dexterity so much greater than that of unspecialized labor that "[t]he rapidity with which some of the operations of those manufactures...exceeds what the human hand could, by those who had never seen them, be supposed capable of acquiring." Second, the absence of transitions from one type of work to the next saves time by discouraging the laziness and sloth Smith imagined normal among country workers. Third, individual laborers specializing in one form of employment are "much more likely to discover easier and readier methods of attaining...that single object" on which they work (Smith 1981, 18-19). This enhanced propensity to both invent new methods of production and the machinery to bolster it fosters enormous and focused creativity that helps address the pressing problems of the day. Because of these three related effects,

[e]very workman has a great quantity of his own work to dispose of beyond what he himself has occasion for; and every other workman being in exactly in the same situation, he is enabled to exchange.... He supplies them abundantly with what they have occasion for, and they accommodate him as amply with what he has occasion for, and a general plenty diffuses itself through all the different ranks of society. (Smith 1981, 22)

Nevertheless, these benefits come at a potentially steep price.

Smith insists there are intellectual and psychological costs to the division of labor, particularly in its manual, repetitive forms. Specialization is a process where individuals focus their attention on one or a few matters to the exclusion of all else. Labor inevitably shapes the mind of the worker. The habits of thought workers acquire on the job are important because they define their outlook on life. However strong the foundations of human nature may be, in repetitious employment men might lose the practice of judgment other, more varied work requires: “[t]he objects with which men in the different professions and states of life are conversant, being very different, and habituating them to very different passions, naturally form in them very different characters and manners” (Smith 1984, 200-201). Smith’s concern is that a narrow intellectual horizon at work will result in equally limited capacities elsewhere:

The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations...has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.... His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. (Smith 1981, 782)

While some few individuals might still work in intellectually varied occupations and maintain habits conducive to political judgment, the vast majority’s mode of life precludes this. Unused to joining with others to achieve his own ends, the worker becomes passive. Rarely facing real uncertainty and hardship, industrial labor might render him incapable of defending his nation in war. Thus, laborers might overcome the poverty and difficulty of life in rude society only at the expense of “all the nobler parts of human character” (Smith 1981, 783-84).

Despite Smith’s worried account of how the division of labor might create dangerous

social instabilities, some contemporary readers find his critique insufficient because he fails to realize just how deep the changes to social order actually are in a commercial polity. For Hannah Arendt, whenever the division of labor and the concept of specialization in one field become conceptually indistinguishable, we gravely misunderstand what making a living means. She attempts to draw a distinction between the two ideas by noting that

while specialization of work is essentially guided by the finished product itself, whose nature it is to require different skills which then are pooled and organized together, division of labor, on the contrary, presupposes the qualitative equivalence of all single activities for which no special skill is required, but actually represent only certain amounts of labor power which are added together in a purely quantitative way. (Arendt 1998, 123)

Arendt argues that people need conscious purpose for all their actions and that our rationality should find application in something better than the other-determined, instrumental ends of the workplace. One of the main difficulties of the market is its redefinition of employment from work to labor: where work implies a self-directed end, labor is merely a commodity bought and sold like any other (Arendt 1998, 126).

Having sacrificed stability, permanence, and durability for the ephemeral world of consumption, Arendt fears that the overriding social activity of labor and its simple goal of “making a living” will erase any robust notion of leisure. It erases the old cycle she (perhaps nostalgically) envisions where individuals alternate between periods of meaningful and complete work, fulfilling leisure time, and relaxation. In replacing work, the commodity of labor has become the dominant mode of understanding human activity, and this is a real problem because “[f]rom the standpoint of ‘making a living,’ every activity unconnected with labor becomes a ‘hobby’” rather than a form of necessary human activity (Arendt 1998, 128; Huizinga 1955, 173-94). Indeed, Arendt envisions having a sense of self-mastery, the need particularly in work for “a

definite beginning and a definite, predictable end,” as one of the important things which fall out in a commercially driven society. Such work “has neither a beginning nor an end,” leaving those who engage in it drained and lethargic. Because of their lack of leisured reflection, individuals in this society can develop no capacity for intentional, deliberate action, let alone a sense of their own futility. They are lost and never even realize it (Arendt 1998, 135, 143-44; Schwartz 1982).

Although the weight of his critique falls on the twentieth century’s rising totalitarianisms, Josef Pieper’s attack on the mechanization of life also calls the division of labor into question. Specifically, Pieper concerns himself with the way in which moderns fail to appreciate the roles leisure, contemplation, and intellectual activity play in the maintenance of culture. Because of this gap in understanding, moderns stand in very real danger of losing the things that give their lives meaning. For the ancients, he notes, the very notion of an “intellectual worker” would be nonsensical because intellectual activity was a “privileged sphere...in which one did not need to work” in order to maintain himself. Modern society forgets that we should work in order to have leisure, not live for the sake of work. What Pieper calls the “world of total work” replaces this vision with a mode of living where people subordinate their entire lives to other-directed, social ends (1998, 2, 6-7).

For Pieper, characterizing the life of the mind as just another form of work is problematic because it obscures crucial facts about intellectual activity. He acknowledges that “[k]nowledge in general, and more especially philosophical knowledge, is certainly quite impossible without” the necessary work of discursive thought and careful examination of ideas. However, he also argues that the notion that the acquisition of knowledge is *only* a form of work is a conceit:

it expresses a claim *on* man and a claim *by* man. If you want to know something then you must work; in philosophy ‘the law is that reason acquires its possessions through work’ that is the claim on man. But there is another, subtler claim...in the statement, the claim made by man: if to know

is to work, then knowledge is the fruit of our own unaided effort and activity; then knowledge includes nothing which is not due to the effort of man, and there is nothing *gratuitous* about it, nothing 'in-spired,' nothing 'given' about it. (Pieper 1998, 11)

The vision of “total work” fails to understand that no matter how much preparatory effort it takes a scholar to reach deep understanding, knowledge often comes to individuals as “sudden illumination, a stroke of genius, true contemplation” and simply seems to appear “effortlessly and without trouble” (Pieper 1998, 16). Put another way, Pieper fears that defining the intellectual life as just another type of work will rob it of its divine character.

Both Arendt and Pieper fear that when a proper understanding of work, one imbued with conscious ends and deeper meaning, falls away, this will leave society with only the transitory pursuit of assigned labor and the destruction of all inner life that accompanies it. Instead of philosophers and artists left to pursue their work for its own sake, the modern commercial society replaces them with trained, specialized laborers. The life of the mind loses all its special qualities. Because of this, the men of letters, a class of workers necessary to teach, to enlighten, and remind humanity of its proper place, will take their place in the division of labor and eventually become “harnessed to the social system” as functionaries in a world of total work (Arendt 1998, 167-74; Pieper 1998, 15-19).

Arendt and Pieper each argue in different ways that once total work subsumes everyday life, the loss of leisure as a forum for renewal, celebration, and faith is incalculable. Without a tie to these crucial activities, life inevitably loses meaning. While many have demonstrated that Smith is not an advocate of some crude economic man or without reservations about some aspects of the division of labor, deeper critics of modernity rarely imagine he has answers to their criticisms, and tend to ignore the non-economic motivations Smith himself provides as the central justification for his theory. Smith’s modern critics have a very particular conception of

human motivation, one which privileges the need for self-mastery and deep understanding (Grampp 1948; Lamb 1973, 1974; Teichgraeber 1981; Hont and Ignatieff 1983; Dwyer 2005). This makes it necessary to address Smith's conception of what motivates individuals in seeking employment, and it is to this subject I now turn.

Human Motivation in the Sympathetic Society

Over the course of his career, one of Smith's central and recurring concerns was the concept of justice and its maintenance in a commercial society (Hont and Ignatieff 1983, 2). Modern scholars tend to occlude that fact in favor of the convenient caricature of Smith as a proponent of self-interest, rational calculation, and a division of labor as extensive and complete as possible without any concern for possible social consequences. In order to demonstrate the inadequacy of such views, this section discusses Smith's notion of sympathy and how it connects with his broader social theory, before tracing out its implications for human motivation.

At first glance, Smith would seem to have had a radical change of heart between the 1759 publication of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and 1776, when *Wealth of Nations* went to press (Teichgraeber 1981, 106-8). However, the tension between these works can be resolved in part by noting the way in which Smith claims that the need for sympathy is the foundation for all human interaction. He argues that “[h]owever selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it” (Smith 1984, 9). Human beings desire nothing more deeply than approbation from their fellows and their own consciences. In properly habituated individuals, this fundamental need guides human action between both close relations and strangers.

However, Smith also notes that in society “[e]very man is, no doubt, by nature, first and

principally recommended to his own care” (Smith 1984, 83-84). Because of this, we usually constrain our approbation, attention, and sympathies to those we are in closest contact with—that is, to our friends, family, and neighbors. He acknowledges that a society so closely interrelated that people act entirely from feelings of mutual affection would be a very happy one. However, it is probably only in family life that such interaction is possible, for where in any time has an entire civic community been founded on such principles (Smith 1984, 85-86)?

Smith claims that the needs of pre-commercial society are such that people without tightly woven community and bonds of sympathy cannot long survive:

In pastoral countries, and in all countries where the authority of law is not alone sufficient to give perfect security, all the different branches of the same family commonly chuse to live in the neighbourhood of one another. Their association is frequently necessary for their common defense.... Their concord strengthens their necessary association; their discord always weakens, and might destroy it. (Smith 1984, 222)

On the other hand, absent some habitual contact or need, people in commercial society lose this impulse for association in direct proportion with the state’s increasing provision for order and stability:

where the authority of law is always perfectly sufficient...the descendants of the same family, having no such motive for keeping together, naturally disperse, as interest or inclination may direct. They soon cease to be of importance to one another. (Smith 1984, 223)

Despite the persistence of mutual recognition in the neighborhood and household, when individuals move beyond family and friendships to interactions with their communities and the country as a whole, feelings of mutual affection fade while the human hope for approbation and need for sympathy remain constant.

Scholars usually pass over the way in which Smith begins from the need for sympathy and fellow feeling, notes its relative weakness in dealing with strangers, and only then invokes

appeals to self-interest, all the while emphasizing the primacy of humanity's need for approbation. In commercial societies, there is a strange divergence of necessities: it is harder to engage the sympathies of strangers, yet at the same time people stand in ever greater need of assistance from others they do not personally know. Standing in "almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren," the individual in commercial society must find another way to engage their attention. It quickly becomes clear that "[h]e will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favor, and shew them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them" (Smith 1981, 26). While the turn to self-interest would seem to confirm the suspicions of Smith's critics, Smith himself characterizes this as the result of psychological need as much as it is a matter of material necessity.

In the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Smith observes that the deeply ingrained human inclination to truck and barter is itself founded on an even deeper impulse to persuade others:

If we should inquire into the principle in the human mind on which this disposition of trucking is founded, it is clearly the naturall [*sic*] inclination every one has to persuade. The offering of a schilling, which appears to us to have so plain and simple a meaning, is in reality offering an argument to persuade one to do so and so as it is for his interest.

Wealth is an enticement to engage others in one's life, so much so that "in this manner every one is practising oratory on others thro the whole of his life" (Smith 1982a, 352). For Smith, the use of money and goods in trade is an extension of rhetoric that intertwines sympathy and self-interest in a complex fashion. Smith implies that sympathetic persuasion is the method of first resort; the appeal to others' self-interest usually comes later, or when it is obvious persuasion alone will not suffice (Lamb 1974, 678-80; Cohen 1989, 61-62). As we will see, this holds major consequences for human motivation in commercial society.

Commerce allows people to satisfy their basic needs, but once they meet these needs, the

desire for approbation leads people to seek greater wealth and status. Where communal and pastoral societies frown on self-interested behavior, in commercial society those who manage their business tend to earn others' approbation, while failures face scorn and ridicule. Greed does not drive men to succeed in the marketplace. Rather it is the desire for approbation and fear of pity: "It is because mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than our sorrow, that we make parade of our riches, and conceal our poverty.... [I]t is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind that we pursue riches and avoid poverty." Moreover, Smith argues the principal aim of bettering the human condition is not the satiation of material desires. Instead, above all we want "[t]o be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation" (Smith 1984, 50). Indeed, it is this desire that Smith ranks as a major cause of the spreading opulence in commercial society (Lamb 1974, 678; Winch 1978, 91-93). The deception that wealth will lead them to happiness results in ever-greater striving, and the people who engage in it

are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions, and...without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species. (Smith 1984, 183-85)

Opulence, then, becomes the unintended consequence of man's need for social approval.

Notions of sympathy and care run throughout Smith's writings, and if we examine such ideas as they operate in the division of labor and employment, an interesting picture of human motivation emerges. The deepest human motivations incline us to garner approbation and esteem. In turn, the acquisition of wealth is a major means to that end. However, it is by no means the only path toward such recognition. A brief digression illustrates this. While Smith notes that only beggars would imagine relying on benevolence for their whole subsistence

(Smith 1981, 26-27; 1982a, 493), he nevertheless ranks acts of benevolence and charity as some of the most praiseworthy: “to feel much for others and little for ourselves...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.” Since it is a virtue “uncommonly great and beautiful” rising far above the norm, true benevolence is both a rare and remarkable phenomenon that naturally engages the sympathies of others (Smith 1984, 25-26). Normal men value wealth for the esteem it can afford them, but those willing to sacrifice and care for their neighbors find compensation in social and personal approbation (Winch 1974, 168-69).

Although for the purposes of his analysis Smith divides labor into both productive and unproductive varieties, he notes that both are crucial for the preservation of a well-ordered society. They are also morally indistinguishable, for the difference between them is that productive labor creates some “particular subject or vendible commodity,” where other professions do not. Because of this, he chastises his Physiocrat contemporaries for the “impropriety” of representing unproductive labor as somehow barren or useless (Smith 1981, 330-32, 330n, 673-74). Smith argues that the material benefits of a given profession should be commensurate with the hardships involved, the expense of learning the trade, the regularity of employment, the level of trust we place in the practitioner, and the probability of a successful career in it. At the outset of his discussion of wages, he also notes that “[h]onour makes a great part of the reward of all honourable professions” (Smith 1981, 116-17). By so arguing, Smith makes clear that in his vision not all labor is equivalent in character or esteem. He argues it is the social status of the work as much as the recompense involved that determines its desirability. Understood in this way, it becomes much easier to comprehend why individuals choose an

occupation and what motivates them to continue their labors. Two examples he uses will clarify what Smith has in mind.

First, Smith argues that those entering the martial professions abandon their material self-interest in favor of an exuberant contempt for risk combined with hopes of acquiring honor and fame. He notes that “young volunteers never enlist so readily as at the beginning of a new war,” filled with dreams which rarely come to fruition, and that “[t]hese romantick hopes make the whole price of their blood” (Smith 1981, 126). Yet what makes the soldier extraordinary is that once his enthusiasm fades in the face of battle, his courage in facing death “ennobles the profession...and bestows upon it, in the natural apprehensions of mankind, a rank and dignity superior to that of any other” (Smith 1984, 239). Since it is principally the desire for recognition and not pure self-interest that motivates men, “[t]he distant prospect of hazards, from which we can hope to extricate ourselves by courage and address, is not disagreeable to us,” and interestingly, “does not raise the wages of labour in any employment” (Smith 1981, 127). The hope for honor and lasting glory is to some degree the soldier’s real reward.

Second, Smith points to the professions involving arts and letters as another case defying the ordinary expectations of self-interested, economic man. While he indicates that some natural philosophers (or “men of speculation”) can make a fortune engaged in inventing expedients that help business, he notes for the most part those employed in the liberal arts do so more for “the respect, credit, and eminence it gives one than the profit of it” (Smith 1981, 21-22; 1982a, 354-55). Smith observes there are no pleasures more natural than those we derive from music or dance; indeed, high art such as that of the concerto provides “the mind...not only a very great sensual, but a very high intellectual pleasure, not unlike that which it derives from the contemplation of a great system in any other science” (Smith 1982b, 187, 204-5). Instead of the

soldier's glory, those who pursue the arts often do so for the simple joy and beauty of the profession.

Where the arts provide aesthetic joy, another universal tendency often sparks the pursuit of letters or philosophy, that of wonder (Smith 1985, 65):

We wonder at all extraordinary and uncommon objects, at all the rarer phaenomena of nature...and at every thing, in short, with which we have before been either little or not at all acquainted; and we still wonder, though forewarned of what we are to see. (Smith 1982b, 33)

Simple wonder is also responsible for all the progress of the human mind, for it,

and not any expectation of advantage from its discoveries is the first principle which prompts mankind to the study of Philosophy, of that science which pretends to lay open the concealed connections that unite the various appearances of nature.... The pleasing wonder of ignorance is accompanied with the still more pleasing satisfaction of science. We wonder and are amazed at the effect; and we are pleased ourselves, and happy to find that we can comprehend, in some measure, how that wonderful effect is produced. (Smith, 1982b, 51, 185)

At its best, Smith claims philosophy can provide those who pursue it with a sort of “tranquility and repose” in their pursuit of nature’s mysteries and philosophical truths (Smith 1982b, 62). Some types of natural philosophy eventually branch off into the applied acts of invention mentioned above, but all who undertake philosophical inquiry should become more than simple laborers. Philosophers must to some extent “pursue this study for its own sake, as an original pleasure or good in itself, without regarding its tendency to procure them the means of many other pleasures” (Smith 1982b, 51). Thus, passion for the endeavor itself becomes more important than any notion of self-interest or pecuniary gain.

Smith treats the clergy much the same as he does the men of letters. Having identified religion as the sole source of “effectual comfort” for those who face difficulty or injustice in this life, he then notes that while the journeyman of common trade and the curate or chaplain might

be paid the same wage, it “would be indecent, no doubt” to make a comparison between the quality and sort of work they actually do (Smith 1984, 120-21; 1981, 146). Regardless of their precise endeavor, men of arts and letters should turn their attention to things of lasting importance, and attempt to share the fruits of their wonder with the rest of the world (Smith 1982b, 242-54).

Smith’s account of the motivations driving human activity in the marketplace or a chosen profession contains far more nuance than a cursory study would indicate. Because Smith frames sympathy, persuasion, and care as the driving forces that guide self-interest and make it comprehensible, “[t]he more closely one reads Smith, it seems, the less one finds *homo economicus*” (Cohen 1989, 61n). However, despite the fact that at various points Smith remarks on the persistent tendencies in commercial society toward honor, adventure, wonder, and philosophy, it is not clear that these ideals can persist in the face of an advanced division of labor. We must place Smith’s claims regarding these non-material motivations in tension with his earlier fears about moral degradation through specialized manual labor. Perhaps too optimistically, Smith hopes civic and political institutions might ameliorate these problems and help cultivate the higher motives toward honor and wonder. It is to these notions I now turn.

A Whig Sociology

Throughout his discussions of the market and morality, Smith points to a series of lasting—perhaps permanent—tendencies in human nature that society can harness to tame the deleterious effects of specialization and the rapid change of the commercial age. In particular, Smith argues that both political institutions and the church have a vital role to play in the maintenance of a decent commercial polity. It is also worth noting that Smith implicitly refers to the idea of civil society through his discussion of the need for sympathy. Working in concert,

these three forces can militate against the dangers of the division of labor and help maintain the foundations of good social order.

Smith suggests the state needs to perform three essential functions in an age of commerce: civic defense, the provision of justice, and public works (Smith 1981, 689-723). Of the three, only Smith's notion of public works is particularly important to this essay, as this is where he discusses the problems of alienation and degradation stemming from the division of labor. The state should establish public institutions for all those things which

though they may be in the highest degree advantageous to a great society, are, however, of such a nature, that the profit could never repay the expense to any individual or small number of individuals, and which it, therefore, cannot be expected...should erect or maintain. (Smith 1981, 723)

Aside from the provision of rules and support for commerce, civic defense, and law enforcement, the most crucial role the state can play is educating the populace. Because of Smith's concerns about the loss of moral character and intellect through labor, he holds that both children and adults can benefit from some provision for education.

On the teaching of youth, Smith observes two major problems: the sad state of elite learning and the utter lack of a more basic educational provision for the bulk of society. Smith notes that private schools and universities treated the wealthy to a scholastic education, a form which had remained largely unchanged for centuries. Using the remnants of a curriculum initially created to train priests, students in Smith's day were often taught a "few unconnected shreds and parcels" of that old course in a series of institutions whose principal purpose, it seemed to him, was to support the intellectual laziness of the masters. Such an education provided little for gentlemen and the would-be leaders of business and society (Smith 1981, 764-73). This was a danger because it is the wealthy, educated elite who "being attached to no

particular occupation themselves, have leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people.” Smith fears that if they were unprepared or simply not guided into “some very particular situations, their great abilities, though honorable to themselves, may contribute very little to the good government or happiness of their society” (Smith 1981, 783).

Smith saw an even greater threat in the fact that the ordinary laborers normally acquired whatever small amount of education they could on their own, without aid from the community. Instead of Latin and a debased version of the old scholastic liberal arts education, he argues a program in reading and writing, along with “the elementary parts of geometry and mechanicks,” could do great good, because for Smith even a rudimentary practical education could significantly aid the understandings of the populace, and spur further invention and social improvement. By providing some small premiums as rewards for achievement, this could perhaps open the door to higher education for a few talented youth. He also suggests that establishing a militia or some form of martial exercise might mitigate the moral effects of the division of labor as well (Smith 1981, 785-86). Together, these forces could help curb the deleterious intellectual effects stemming from the division of labor. Yet for Smith, education alone could not make men moral.

Instead of schools, Smith believes that churches would accomplish most of the instruction in manners and morals. As noted earlier, for the faithful religion provides both a consolation and “a species of instruction of which the object is not so much to render men good citizens in this world”—though he thinks it does that as well—“as to prepare them for another and better world in a life to come” (Smith 1981, 788). Smith understands religion as a strong counterweight to the moral and intellectual degradation occasioned by the division of labor. Once they were taught to read through his proposed state education and able to understand the

tenets of faith themselves, Smith thought the public would find it much easier to resist “the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders” (Smith 1981, 788).

So long as churches avoid politics and the state shows little or no preference for any specific faith, a wide variety of denominations can healthily proliferate. In polite society, interactions among them would result in a sort of “philosophical good temper and moderation” in their members (Smith 1981, 793-94). Because of the moral instruction provided by churches and the salutary habits of faith, Smith notes that even in a large center of commerce, an individual can find a place and a home. In contrast to the easy “profligacy and vice” of solitary city life,

[h]e never emerges so effectually from this obscurity, his conduct never excites so much the attention of any respectable society, as by his becoming the member of a small religious sect. He from that moment acquires a degree of consideration which he never had before. (Smith 1981, 795-96)

And while the rules of these communities may be harsh, they provide the meaning in life which isolated laborers might previously have lacked.

Finally, Smith’s reliance on a theory of sympathetic interaction constitutes a rudimentary theory of civil society. He argued that when men come together and observe one another’s actions, they can have a salutary moral effect on one another. Without this social check, men quite easily turn beastly. This sense of fellow feeling provides the impetus for a set of mutual good offices which individuals cannot normally find in the marketplace, but naturally expect in fellowship with one another (Smith 1984, 13-16; 1981, 27). This intimation of civic associations is especially apparent in Smith’s discussion of neighbors:

Even the trifling circumstance of living in the same neighborhood, has some effect [of fellow feeling]. We respect the face of a man whom we see every day, provided he has never offended us. Neighbors can be very convenient, and they can be very troublesome, to one another.... There are

certain good offices, accordingly, which are universally allowed to be due to a neighbor in preference to any other person who has such a connection. (Smith 1984, 224)

For good or ill, mutual contact and action for specific purposes creates a series of “contagious effects” that transmit habits of behavior through entire social groups, and these folkways either teach and multiply the capacity for combining, or ruin it entirely.

While at times he examines both religion and education from a purely functionalist perspective, Smith also notes the ways in which a passionate faith or sense of wonder is necessary for both churches and schools to do their work. Having proposed two major social institutions that utilize the innate propensities men have toward imagination and approbation, Smith points to the means which could stem some of the deleterious effects of the division of labor. However, as his worries about elite education indicate, these institutions require leadership and common sense. This is the subject of my next section.

An Unstable Balance: Politicians and the Men of Letters

Smith never sets out a systematic or well-developed theory of who should rule; this may have something to do with the fact that none of his works are strictly political in nature. While in the *Wealth of Nations* he presents a detailed sketch of the institutions he thought were necessary for the persistence of a decent commercial society, he says very little about just who is to lead and counsel such a polity. Just as the division of labor unleashes many potential difficulties, it is through the cultivation of a specialized political and educated class that he hopes to attenuate these difficulties. While he places his greatest hopes in liberal political institutions, Smith nevertheless intimates they are not enough for a truly good polity (Winch 1978, 177-83). Thus, “[t]he superior wisdom of the good and knowing man” should play some important part in directing the affairs of state (Smith 1982a, 338).

However, Smith’s best political teaching flows from his skepticism toward grand,

totalizing schemes applied to government. It is striking that through the course of Smith's exposition we learn more regarding who should not be trusted with political power than we do about the sort of people in which a commercial polity can place their faith. Just as the state should not prefer one form of religion over another, it is clear that clergy should not attempt to rule. Noting that "[t]imes of religious controversy have generally been times of equally violent political faction," Smith observes that struggling political factions often try to capitalize on this by enlisting the aid of one church's leadership (Smith 1981, 791). English history provides a cautionary tale:

The clergy of this particular sect having thus become complete masters of the field, and their influence and authority with the great body of the people being in its highest vigour, they were powerful enough to over-awe the chiefs and leaders of their own party, and to oblige the civil magistrate to respect their opinions and inclinations. Their first demand was generally, that he should silence and subdue all their adversaries; and their second...that they should have some share in the spoil [of victory]. (Smith 1981, 792)

In no small part because of England's experience with ecclesiastical institutions, Smith is wary of blending church and state power. While religion is a necessary component of any well-ordered society, the political demands of an empowered clergy can be quite dangerous. He suggests that if conscience and not force governed religious belief, "it would probably...have been productive of the most philosophical good temper and moderation with regard to every sort of religious principle" (Smith 1981, 793).

Smith saves his harshest rhetoric for the mixing of commerce and politics. He presents the problem rather starkly: businessmen cannot help but engage in conspiracy against the public whenever they meet (Smith 1981, 145). In his systematic demolition of the mercantilist system, Smith observes that even when businessmen conquer whole nations, they "are, it seems,

incapable of considering themselves as sovereigns, even after they have become such” (Smith 1981, 637). Even if men of commerce are not directly involved in politics, Smith notes that caution is in order:

The interest of the dealers, however, in any particular branch of trade or manufactures, is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the publick.... 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, but with the most suspicious attention. It comes from an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who generally have an interest to deceive and even to oppress. (Smith 1981, 267)

Given their difficulty with distinguishing between public and private, proper and improper activity, active businessmen should be disqualified from politics because their potential for corruption is simply too great (Winch 1978, 98-99).

While those currently engaged in the work of business or religion should remain apart from the political world, Smith indicates that other presumptively wiser and more public-spirited men of affairs should lead. In the context of a longer discussion of how Greece and Rome educated their citizens for rule (Smith 1981, 771-81), he suggests these would not be philosophers, but rather those well-educated gentlemen who decide to apply their talents “in good earnest to the real business of the world” (773). Who might these people be and what would motivate them to enter into public life? Smith is not clear on the former point. However, given the rest of his discussion of these subjects and strong reticence to include men of commerce or establish a truly ecclesiastical government, it is easy to imagine Smith endorsing some variation on the Burkean natural aristocracy where a mix of leisured nobility and self-made men guide society (see Addendum).

As for the motivations of these public-spirited men, recall that Smith is clear that material

self-interest is not the only force driving the division of labor and choice of employment. Noting his claim that “[h]onour makes a great part of the reward of all honourable professions,” and tying it to the notion that our most fundamental desire is to seek approbation and avoid disapprobation, we can infer that the public servant’s motivations lay primarily with the honor and esteem their offices confer (Smith 1981, 116-17). While in a discussion of great leaders, Smith refers to the sort of “man whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence,” for the most part he recognizes that a mix of selfish and charitable feelings guide men to seek public service (Smith 1984, 232-34). Following this reasoning, if they are not motivated strictly by benevolence, the glory and attention which political power brings those wielding it would be more than sufficient to attract many to public office. The language with which Smith abuses those who mix public office with private business and state with religion informs us that he was well aware of the dangerous temptations of government authority and very concerned that the state place checks on them (Smith 1981, 637, 792-94).

Smith also suggests that once “placed in some very particular situations,” philosophers and men of letters, as people with broad and deep understandings of a wide variety of affairs, could contribute to “good government or happiness of their society” (Smith 1981, 783). While both the politicians and men of letters possess the sort of unifying minds which society stands in perpetual need of, each group specializes to a degree in either action or contemplation. In such a situation, these “dissimilar geniuses” can divide the labor of rule and counsel, guiding society’s affairs justly through the cultivation of salutary habits and refined moral sentiments (Smith 1981, 30; Rosenberg 1965, 134; Cohen 1989, 69-70).

Given a proper elite education reformed somewhat to deal with modern rather than scholastic concerns, Smith suggests that in concert with other social institutions such as religion

and civil society, politicians and men of letters could justly lead society through the commercial age. However, particularly in times of civil unrest or crisis, a danger emerges from this arrangement. Philosophers and their followers are forever at risk of falling prey to an excessive love of their own ideas, and desire to turn them into reality regardless of the practical costs. A good statesman knows that not all ideas are fit to become policy. Again, here one of Smith's principal virtues as a social thinker lay in his cautionary note regarding our tendency to subordinate the rights and lives of human beings to naked abstractions. Instead of striving for the impossible, "when he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavor to establish the best the people can bear" (Smith 1984, 233).

Nevertheless, this is a tenuous position to maintain. Government employs men of speculation and letters to refine the understanding of those in power, but as proponents of ideas about what the state should do, the great danger is that an advisor grows into a mere "man of system," an ideologue

apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is so often enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. He goes on to establish it completely and in all its parts He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. (Smith 1984, 234)

It is not the pretension to theoretical advice that damns the men of system, for all politics requires some theoretical notions of what is possible, and more importantly, good. Rather it is their single-minded imperviousness toward the practical matters of policy:

Some general, and even systematical, idea of the perfection of policy and law, may no doubt be necessary for directing the views of the statesman. But to insist upon establishing, and establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, every thing which that idea may seem to require, must often be the highest degree of arrogance. (Smith 1984, 234)

Implicitly, then, we can see how Smith would applaud a reformed elite education designed to humble potential men of system and convince them of the true limits of the human mind.

There is no doubt that Smith's estimation of the intellect—even that of a genius—was far less optimistic than many of his contemporaries'. His suggestion in the second volume of *Wealth of Nations* that properly educated intellectuals can be of enormous help to the commonwealth if allowed to advise the powerful recognizes society's need of men able to compare and combine observations, facts, and ideals, rendering their "understandings, in an extraordinary degree, both acute and comprehensive" (Smith 1981, 783). For those who already have a tendency to be enamored with their philosophy, this is a weighty responsibility. Thus, society needs to guard its intellectuals carefully. Precisely because of their potential to do great good but also much harm, elsewhere Smith emphasizes the extraordinary weakness of human reason.

Smith goes to great lengths to point out our mental limitations by proving that the intentional power of genius did not create the division of labor, the progress of national opulence, or many of the best institutions of the state (Tenger and Trolander 1994, 178-84). Rather, these were products of slow social change, and only much later improved or refined through the application of conscious human intelligence (Smith 1981, 25). Intellectuals are not very different from ordinary people in raw ability: "[t]he difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education" (Smith 1981, 28-29). It is only over time and with divergence of employment that "[t]he difference of talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance" (Smith 1981, 28). Intellectuals always stand in need of reminders about the limitations of reason's capacity to transform human affairs. Noting the

necessity of bold and combining minds, we must remember that “[s]mart people are uniquely capable of producing noxious ideas” (Lagerfeld 2004, 29).

As it argues for institutions which would help to maintain good qualities in the populace and higher virtues in the political and intellectual elite, Smith’s teaching is guardedly hopeful about the possibility for checking the extreme tendencies inherent in any commercial society. The delicate balance he thought necessary between public-spirited rulers and men of letters without “system” indicates he did not see the existence of good government as a normal state of affairs; his focus on who should not rule suggests that Smith places his confidence more in the manners and morals of the people at large. For the most part, society can muddle through as it always has.

Conclusion

Smith is quite clear that in an advanced commercial society, autonomous, self-directed political action, such as Arendt hoped for would be the province of the very few, if it is granted to any at all. It is also obvious that his philosophy does not contain a single vision of the public good. Insofar as critics of modernity view either of these as a requirement of any well-constituted polity, they are right to assault Smith’s ideas. His is a liberal theory where many purposes, plans, and intentions coexist and collide in economic, civic, and political spheres—and it is a vision in which the state has a fairly limited, strictly delineated set of roles.

Moreover, Smith provides answers to at least two other criticisms levied by Pieper and Arendt. Smith fuses political economy with his social and moral philosophy, meaning his concern is as much with what the best constituted polity looks like as it is with whether such a vision is practically possible. In a world without the ignoble practice of slavery, there can be no class of citizens entirely freed from concerns of making a living. Pieper and Arendt’s shared

belief that the various forms of human expression must remain fully privileged spheres may be unrealistic in a world without an entirely leisured class (Smith 1982a, 410-11). In a free, commercial society, leisure either falls away or is redefined entirely; such a social order almost precludes the concept of an autonomous leisured class. Smith hopes to encourage the next best thing in a cultivated political and intellectual class that might help guide society without reverting to a classical notion of leisure and the fully servile class required to support the leisured citizenry.

Arendt fears that the conceptual blending of work with labor would homogenize all forms of human effort into a simple commodity with no greater value than that provided for in the marketplace. Yet Smith is quite adamant that not all labor is functionally—much less morally—equivalent, and devotes some effort to thinking about what institutions could guard against this. Smith's compromise is to point to the complexity of human motivation and, ultimately, to the basic human propensity to wonder and our deep need for approbation—two passions which often incline men to less economically rewarding but more fulfilling employment. However, the notion that honorable professions are in large part their own reward must be set against their capacity to support those who choose to pursue them. Even if this means people only rarely join professions *entirely* for their own sake, the reward for noble forms of employment is still, nevertheless, more than merely pecuniary (Smith 1981, 116-28, 330-32; 1982a, 354-55).

Pressed to its logical limit, though, Pieper rightly notes the division of labor will lead to a destruction of classical leisure and a subordination of all higher things to some social end. While Smith clearly appreciates the danger that his commercial polity might succumb to an untrammelled division of labor, he deals with these problems only sporadically throughout his writings, and in today's post-industrial world his suggestions for how to overcome them often

seem woefully inadequate to the task. Sixty years after Smith published *Wealth of Nations*, Alexis de Tocqueville would most successfully draw out the hopeful ideals of a vital commercial society latent in Smith's writing and transcend them. While Smith also acknowledges the ultimate possibility of a death of civic vitality through the fragmentation of communities into alienated laborers, he notes that the human condition points us toward ultimate questions and drives us to wonder—things which no form of labor can eradicate entirely.

Addendum

Burke writes (1992, 168), “A true natural aristocracy is not a separate interest in the state, or separable from it.... It is formed out of a class of legitimate presumptions, which, taken as generalities, must be admitted for actual truths.” Among the traits of this class, Burke counts the following: “To stand upon such elevated ground as to be enabled to take a large view of the wide-spread and infinitely diversified combination of men and affairs in a large society; To have leisure to read, to reflect, to converse.... To be led to a guarded and regulated conduct, from a sense that you are considered as an instructor of your fellow-citizens in their highest concerns, and that you act as a reconciler between God and man.... To be a professor of a high science, or of liberal and ingenious art—To be amongst rich traders, who from their success are presumed to have sharp and vigorous understandings, and to possess the virtues of diligence, order, constancy, and regularity.”

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