

Relational History: Adam Smith's Types of Human History

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Abstract: Adam Smith writes history to teach people how a plurality of forces informs our moral and economic actions. He employs the stadial theory—prevalent in his day—to explore four different states, or kinds of society, but he does not intend to use these to write a simple, linear history of the ‘stages’ of human progress. This article employs Smith’s typological method for writing history to create a four-fold typology of how contemporary scholars have interpreted Smith’s use of history. By using an approach, drawn from Smith’s historiography, to understand his later interpreters, this article demonstrates that Smith’s approach to history is about telling a story that embraces plurality, holds differences in tension, and resists simplification.

Keywords: Adam Smith, historiography, stadial theory, civic humanism, natural jurisprudence

JEL Classification: A110, B120, B310, B410

I. INTRODUCTION

Adam Smith forms an approach to moral and economic practices that takes history seriously. He shows that the way humans act as moral and economic agents depends on how we understand the story of human history. He sees that this story develops using the same tools of imagination and sympathy that help build moral judgment and form the basis of economic exchange. He writes history to persuade us to see ourselves in a particular kind of world, and his work commends to us a world that must continually mediate tensions and contradictions.

Smith’s historiography captures the variety and dynamics of human life in different places and times. He uses a four-fold typology to capture these dynamics: the social types of hunter/gatherer, herding, agricultural,

and commercial life. In a similar manner, this article uses Smith's methodology to develop a four-fold typology for the ways in which contemporary scholars have interpreted Smith's view of history. I argue that Smith believes all four of his historical types are vital to his argument about who humans are, and, similarly, I argue all four types of Smithian interpretation are vital. By using the term 'types', I am suggesting general heuristic categories with permeable boundaries that capture different approaches without being limited by any particular historical example. I will also argue that what scholars have typically understood as Smith's 'stages' of historical progress are better understood as 'states', which can, but do not have to, be analyzed in historical sequence.

By using Smith's typological approach, drawn from his historiography, to understand his later interpreters, this article makes evident that Smith's approach to history is about telling a story that embraces plurality, holds differences in tension, and resists simplification. Rather than seeing any of the four types of later Smithian interpretation as fundamentally flawed or his project as inescapably vague or contradictory, scholars should recognize the tensions in his narration of history as reflective of his historiography and of the tensions in the world that people must understand in order to be prudent moral and economic actors.

II. SMITH'S APPROACH TO HISTORY

In order to speak of 'history' as a singular concept, one has to have a way to bring the multiplicity of past events into a contemporary unity. Some thinkers tie events together with a notion of spirit. Others speak of history as singular because they believe they can—through God or philosophy—gain a perspective on the whole of human life. For other thinkers, history is a way to speak of how the material forces of the past have led us to where we are. A return to Smith's writing shows that he understood the imagination as the tool that helps tie together the individual events of the past. History for Smith is a work of the imagination. That is not to say that he simply makes it up, but he uses the imagination to unite past events into a new whole that is better aligned with experience and offers meaning to current events. As Smith writes in *The History of Astronomy*:¹

¹ This and all subsequent references to *The History of Astronomy*, abbreviated as 'HA', will be to the Glasgow edition (Smith [1790] 1982c). References include, in this order, section (in upper case Roman numerals), and paragraph (in Arabic numerals).

While we have been endeavouring to represent all philosophical systems as mere inventions of the imagination, to connect together the otherwise disjointed and discordant phaenomena of nature, have insensibly been drawn in, to make use of language expressing the connecting principles of this one, as if they were the real chains which Nature makes use of to bind together several operations. (IV.76)

Like philosophy, history employs the imagination to transform the chaos of reality into a coherent story of linkages that gains the approval of the people who hear it. The particular kind of history Smith writes uses a constructive cycle of imagination, sympathy, and the writing of history. That is, imaginative history helps people understand the situations of others so we can better sympathize with them, and it is through such sympathy that we are able to enter past events and give them more appropriate meaning.

III. Relational History: Imagination and Sympathy

Smith engages in the study of history through two concepts that are also vital to his understanding of moral and economic action: the imagination and sympathy. He uses these concepts to describe how human beings connect with other people, how we understand the values that structure our lives, and how we build a narrative that fits empirical data and nurtures the development of character.

Smith begins *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*² with the argument that though humans are not always motivated by selfishness, we “have no immediate experience of what other men feel” (I.i.1.2). Because Smith believes that the happiness of others is necessary for our own happiness, he must provide some way to experience others’ feelings of happiness. He offers the imagination as just such a tool. As embodied creatures, Smith does not believe that we can leave our bodies to understand the sensations in someone else’s body. Our “experience is essentially private”, in James Otteson’s (2002, 20) words, and the only way to transcend our private experience is through the imagination. Smith’s moral theory thus rests on the imagination because it is only through the imagination that we can understand others and form our actions in relation to them.

² This and all subsequent references to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, abbreviated as ‘TMS’, will be to the Glasgow edition (Smith [1759, 1790] 1982a). References include, in this order, part (in upper case Roman numerals), section (in lower case Roman numerals), chapter, and paragraph (in Arabic numerals).

Smith argues that moral action most broadly conceived must be action that issues from sympathy with other humans. But because we cannot immediately experience what others feel or know, sympathy itself must be a function of the imagination. Though as Charles Griswold (1999, 85) notes, “not every act of imagination is an instance of sympathy”. Imagination is the larger category. It allows us to enter other’s lives, to judge works of art against what we imagine to be perfection, to come up with explanations for the natural universe, and to re-conceive the symbolic universe that governs the meaning people ascribe to events (*TMS*, I.i.5.10; *HA*, IV.76).

Sympathy, in Smith’s technical sense of the word, is a work of the imagination (Otteson 2002, 18). Smith does at times use sympathy to speak of a ‘fellow-feeling’, often one of ‘pity or compassion’, but when he uses sympathy in its moral sense, he means the harmony of passions between people.³ Because we cannot actually enter the bodies of others or know their feelings, Smith believes that the imagination places us into the other person’s context. Our ability to sympathize with another arises not so much from observing the other person as from putting ourselves into the other’s context: “Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it” (*TMS*, I.i.1.10). It is no easy task, however, to understand another’s context. To be able to sympathize with another person, one has to be able to see the world as the other sees it, to understand her material conditions, to know the pressures and conditions working on her, and to understand the traditions that guide her life—to embody her experience of history.

Though history in Smith’s work is a function of the imagination, it is not mere fancy. He uses the imagination to unite the diverse empirical events he studies and to render that diversity of information meaningful. His use of history, though, does not just set the stage in which moral judgments and actions occur. Doing history demands moral judgment; it depends on sympathy. When, for instance, he writes approvingly about the origin of money in the *Wealth of Nations*,⁴ he sympathizes with people in the past and perceives that he too would have done as they did in their situation (I.iv; Fleischacker 2004, 49–50). But when he imagines his way

³ The meaning of sympathy is highly contested in Smith. See, for example, Otteson (2002, 17–18), Raynor (2006, 239), Raphael and Macfie (1982, 20–21), and Montes (2004, 45).

⁴ This and all subsequent references to the *Wealth of Nations*, abbreviated as ‘WN’, will be to the Glasgow edition (Smith [1776] 1982b). References include, in this order, book (in upper case Roman numerals), chapter (in lower case Roman numerals), part (if applicable), and paragraph (in Arabic numerals).

into the European transition from agricultural to commercial life and sees that the transition was driven by the cities over and against the countryside, he cannot sympathize with the situation (*WN*, III.iii.7). Because Smith cannot sympathize with either the situation itself or the outcome it produces, he disapproves and finds demerit in the trajectory of commercial development in Europe, calling it “an unnatural and retrograde order” (*WN*, III.i.9). The point is that when the imagination unites diverse empirical events, it does so with the aid of sympathy in order to render a normatively meaningful history. As we increase our ability to sympathize with others, we increase our ability to judge and imagine history. And a more robust view of history increases our ability to understand the context of others and to enter into sympathy with them. The cycle should be self-reinforcing so that better history leads to better sympathy and, eventually, to better history.

A problem arises with all such cycles because they can also be mutually destructive. Bad history can lead to worse moral judgments and so on down. Smith recognizes that the main threat to his history and moral theory is the personal biases that cloud our imagination and sympathy. He believes, however, that we naturally correct for such bias by using our imaginations to enter what he calls ‘the impartial spectator’. Smith believes that we turn to the impartial spectator to help us see the situations of others and of ourselves more clearly. Smith writes, “it is only by consulting this judge within, that we can ever see what relates to ourselves in its proper shape and dimensions; or that we can ever make any proper comparison between our own interests and those of other people” (*TMS*, III.3.1). He describes the impartial spectator as a tool that enables a relational view of moral action because it helps us see how we are *related* to others and it helps us form ‘proper comparisons’ with others. We imagine our way into the impartial spectator in order to better situate ourselves amidst the conflicts and complexities of history (Garrett and Hanley 2015, 249).

As a product of the imagination, Smith’s use of history remains open to the same flaws as his concept of sympathy, but he shows that when practiced together history and sympathy can reinforce one another and improve their work.⁵ And when personal biases threaten the cycle, Smith believes that the impartial spectator can help people do history and sym-

⁵ For more on the connections between sympathy, the impartial spectator, and the narrative of history that Smith develops, see Weinstein (2013, 230).

pathy more objectively. He casts the imaginative work of history as a necessary first step in our ability to sympathize with others, but he also shows that we use our ability to sympathize in order to construe a compelling and meaningful view of history that informs our moral actions. Together history and sympathy rely on and broaden the powers of the imagination. And they contribute to a relational view of moral action that seeks to understand difference, to hold together the tensions that comprise the whole, and to form ever new responses in the form of acts that others both approve of, because of their own motives, and consider meritorious because of the consequences of these acts.

II.II. Smith's Way of Writing History

Smith writes history to teach a particular way of seeing the world that demands moral action be fitting action—action that mediates the differences in a situation and reacts to them with ‘propriety’. In the student notes that remain from his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*,⁶ he discusses his views on the art of writing history, science, and oratory. He contends that every act of writing intends either to relate a fact or to prove a proposition. Among the forms of writing that convey facts, Smith includes history or narration (*LR*, i.149). He writes that the task of the historian is “to relate the remarkable transactions that pass in different nations, and the designs, motives and views of the most remarkable men in those times, so far as they are necessary to explain the great changes and revolutions of states which it is intended to relate” (*LR*, i.150–151). History describes not only the visible facts, but also invisible facts, like human character, by relaying the effects of such invisible forces. Smith contends that a good historical argument is impartial to both sides and does not “leave any chasm or Gap in the thread of narration” (*LR*, ii.70, ii.36–37). He calls the historian “an impartial narrator of facts” (*LR*, i.82–83). Good history is a narrative of carefully supported causes and effects (*LR*, ii.19, ii.32).

Dugald Stewart (1982) coined the term ‘conjectural history’ to describe Smith’s method of connecting known historical events together, despite their often invisible bonds, to show how progress occurs from one stage of life to another (Evnine 1993, 589–90; Evensky 2015, 23). While many Smith scholars from Stewart to Christopher Berry (2013) have

⁶ This and all subsequent references to the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, abbreviated as ‘*LR*’, will be to the Glasgow edition (Smith [1963] 1985). References include, in this order, volume (in lower case Roman numerals), and paragraph (in Arabic numerals).

read Smith's history in this light, this is not the full story on how Smith wrote history. "Conjectural history", in Höpfl's (1978, 23) words, "did not conform to *philosophe* paradigms, and the Scots' explicit doctrine of history did not adequately describe any of the sorts of history that they wrote". Smith always seeks to prove a point when he writes history, not just to connect events. He tells the history of European development so he can show that in the end it has "been, in many respects, entirely inverted" (*WN*, III.i.9). He writes history to imagine the world in a particular way that shows people how we should act in it. As Nathaniel Wolloch (2017, 79) puts it, "Smith did not write historical works in the strict sense". Describing origins and progress was important to Smith, but as Garrett and Hanley (2015, 259) point out, he also wanted to teach how we can implement policies or plans for better future outcomes.

The way Smith writes about history must then fall under one of the two forms of writing that seek to prove a proposition: oratory or didactic. His work is not an oratory that seeks to persuade people at all costs because he pays close attention to empirical events, so it must be an exercise in didactic writing. Though he allows that the didactic writer will slip into oratory at times—which Smith surely does—the goal of didactic writing is to teach. The didactic writer first lays down a proposition and then proceeds to support it with evidence (*LR*, ii.125–126). The writer wants to be persuasive, but no more so than the evidence allows (*LR*, i.150). Smith uses this didactic form of writing in each of his major works (Griswold 1999, 79; Otteson 2002, 13). The first sentence of *TMS*, for example, states the proposition that the rest of the text develops (I.i.1.3). *WN* begins with the role of the division of labor in the increase of opulence, which is a claim developed throughout the text. Even particular sections of *WN* often begin with propositions. For instance, Book I, Chapter II begins with the basic proposition that humans have a natural propensity to "truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another" (*WN*, I.ii.1). In most all of Smith's writing, "his historical discussions", in Wolloch's (2017, 85) words, "are almost always directly connected with prescriptive recommendations regarding contemporaneous governmental policies". By using the didactic form, Smith shows that he intends to teach a particular understanding of history and moral action so as to offer a more beautiful and complete system.

Smith's historical writing strives to satisfy both empirical and normative criteria. "So far from conceiving of history as a descriptive enter-

prise”, write Garrett and Hanley (2015, 252), “Smith regarded it as valuable chiefly for its normative implications”. Smith wrote history to conform to known empirical realities and the experiences people have of the world, and he wanted it to teach a way of construing the world that would receive the moral approbation of its hearers. Just as an individual act is approved of when those who perceive it can bring the situation of the agent home to themselves and concur with the actions, so too a version of history is ‘good’ when people are able to sympathize with it and approve of the way it depicts the world (*TMS*, VII.ii.4.14). Smith’s view of history has a dynamic relationship with morality. The way we understand history affects the way we act, and our ability to sympathize with others also shapes our perception of history.

Smith’s method uses the imagination to develop typologies that make meaning out of the diversity of human life. His most significant typology is the one he forms to deal with the diversity of social forms. He uses the four social types of hunter/gatherer, herding, agricultural, and commercial life. These four states of human society should be understood not as ontological categories or universal laws, but as ideal types that capture the dynamics of different social forms. “The aim in establishing historical generalizations” like Smith’s types of society, according to Quentin Skinner (1966, 200), “seems not to be the statement of general laws but rather the illumination of particular facts or events”.

Smith’s “loose sequence of stages, gives [the four states of society] an air of an ideal type”, for Gavin Kennedy (2005, 91), “rather than a dated historical sequence”. Or as Berry (2013, 49) puts it, “It functions, in a manner akin to what is later called an ‘ideal-typical’ way”. If we look back at Smith’s introduction of the four social states in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*,⁷ we see that he begins the analysis with a story:

If we should suppose 10 or 12 persons of different sexes settled in an uninhabited island, the first method they would fall upon for their sustenance would be to support themselves by the wild fruits and wild animals which the country afforded. (*LJ(A)*, i.27)

⁷ This and all subsequent references to the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* will be to the Glasgow edition (Smith 1982d). The *Lectures* are abbreviated as ‘*LJ(A)*’ if the reference is to the report of 1762–1763, and as ‘*LJ(B)*’ if the reference is to the report dated 1766. References to *LJ(A)* include, in this order, volume (in lower case Roman numerals), and paragraph (in Arabic numerals). References to *LJ(B)* include the respective paragraph in Arabic numerals.

From there people learn to domesticate animals, do agriculture, and start trading. Each type, though named after a mode of subsistence, brackets a particular instance of human experience in order to understand its dynamics. Like the kind of didactic history Smith sees himself writing, the types are not empirical statements. They are heuristic devices that synthesize empirical material culled from history with normative claims about how societies work.⁸

In fact, Jerry Muller points out that the diversity of life in Scotland during Smith's life facilitated the study of all these different types at the same time: "Within Scotland there were regions at very different stages of social and economic development, creating what one scholar has described as a 'social museum at Edinburgh's back door'" (1993, 22). The four types help Smith craft a symbolic universe that sees all of the types—and the tensions between them—as part of present Scottish life. The types can be historical in sequence, and Smith uses them to illustrate differences in the kinds of society in different "ages". But the four types are not only about linear historical progress, and calling them 'stages' (which Smith rarely does) would limit readers' perception of how the types are used. Hollander (1998, 89) goes so far as to describe Smith's reference to the "hunting stage" as a "fiction for analytical purposes". Smith is telling a story, crafting a way of seeing the world. He forms a philosophical system that in its effort to connect together a few events ends up creating "another constitution of things, more natural indeed, and such as the imagination can more easily attend to, but more new, more contrary to common opinion and expectation, than any of those appearances themselves" (*HA*, IV.33, IV.76). The perfection of such a 'constitution of things' is that it no longer appears as a product of the imagination, but becomes the assumed framework for all daily experience. The degree to which some Smith scholars read his 'stages' as real history—and not his imaginative production—is, therefore, a testament to the enduring quality of his imaginative history to appear real to his audience.

III. FOUR TYPES: SMITH'S STATES AND LATER INTERPRETERS OF SMITH

Some scholars have turned Adam Smith's story of history into one of inevitable progress, leading from barbarous peoples to civilized nations, from paucity to prosperity, from hunters, to herders, to husbandmen, to hucksters. Others see it as a story of failure, reversals, downfalls, and as

⁸ Wolloch (2017, 76) claims that the "four stages theory, metamorphosed in Smith's work from a historiographical outlook into a distinctly political-economic one".

a story that sometimes repeats itself. Ecem Okan (2017, 1248–1249) argues that Smith uses history in different ways throughout his corpus. I argue that the complexity of Smith’s story of history is best seen when—using a typological approach from Smith’s own historiographic toolkit—scholars sympathize with the breadth of Smithian interpretations, hold them in tension, and explore what the dynamics in each interpretation say about the human condition.

The following sections demonstrate the plurality of values in Smith’s construal of history as the sections sympathize with four types of interpreting him, discern the central values in each, and name the tensions the types bring to light. Scholars influenced by Marx read in Smith a kind of determinism in economic modes of subsistence, so I refer to them here as *Economic Materialists*. Liberal economists, on the other hand, typically believe that Smith depicts history as a record of how a stable human nature adapts to different circumstances. Because they assume that human beings have consistent economic behavior, I label such liberal economists *Economic Behaviorists*.⁹ The *Civic Humanist* type emphasizes the cycles of virtue and corruption that are present in Smith’s view of history. And, finally, the *Natural Jurisprudence* type emphasizes the role of law in Smith and the diversity of influences in each of the states of society. Each of these types grasps at an ideal presentation of a particular approach to Smith, though none of the types exists in any pure form. They are all imaginative productions.

A full account of Smith’s history embraces the tensions that come to light in the midst of these four types, including the tensions between freedom and determinism, between historical particularities and universals, and between individuals and communities. If one does not recognize the tensions in Smith’s construal of history, one eradicates difference, which for Smith is the very thing that draws us to imagine, sympathize, and build our historical and moral worlds. Smith, like the “plain man” style of writing he praised, “is not at all ruffled by contradiction” because we live and act in a world filled with it (*LR*, i.85–91).

III.I. Economic Materialists

The *Economic Materialist* type emphasizes the natural progress human beings make toward the commercial state of society. This type focuses on

⁹ I do not intend the term to be confused with behavioral economics. I owe my use of ‘behaviorist’ in part to Gibson Winter’s description of economics, see Winter (1966, 41, 175–181, 236–238).

those places where Smith speaks about how different modes of subsistence characterize and drive human history. It is scarcely concerned with how much liberty human beings possess or if human beings can pursue their needs and desires uninhibited. Rather, it studies how the economic prerequisites of life determine social and political forms.

Economic Materialists often group Smith with Adam Ferguson, John Millar, Lord Kames, and William Robertson as part of the Scottish Historical School. As Roy Pascal put it in his pivotal 1938 article, these men developed a “new science of civil society” (169). It was a science that employed what Dugald Stewart referred to as “theoretical or conjectural” history and what Andrew Skinner renames philosophical history (Skinner 1975, 154). As *Economic Materialists* like Pascal, Ronald Meek, Skinner, and Nathaniel Wolloch see it, Smith developed a scientific approach to history in which he first laid out some basic principles and then used those principles to account for the different revolutions in human history.

According to Meek (1977, 19), Smith’s four “stages” constitute “*a*, if not *the*, materialist conception of history”. Instead of seeing the states as ideal types, *Economic Materialists* believe that the four types describe how changes in the ways human beings make a living cause subsequent changes to political and social arrangements (Skinner 1996, 80). *Economic Materialists* see through the four stages that Smith develops the dynamics of authority and dependence and a proto-Marxist theory of classes. Skinner (1967, 43–44), for example, argues the stages “explain the whole pattern of social change itself”. But he knows Smith is no vulgar Marxist who insists that all change results from economic factors. Smith, rather, “would appear to come close to Engel’s general position in arguing that the economic finally asserts itself as the ‘ultimate’, rather than as the sole, determining factor” (Skinner 1975, 175).

Economic Materialists tend to slide from seeing Smith’s modes of subsistence as characterizing different *states* of society to seeing them as modes of production that drive the transition between *stages* of society. Though Smith is certainly interested in progress and talks about the different ages of society, he rarely speculates on the transitions between states, usually just noting that shifts from hunting to shepherding and from shepherding to agricultural are driven by population growth.¹⁰ While the stadial theory is prevalent in this era, Smith does not really talk about ‘stages’. There is one instance in *LJ(B)* in which the student records Smith

¹⁰ On population growth as a driver of change between states, see *LJ(A)* (i.28, i.30) and *WN* (V.i.a.5).

referring to the four states as “stages”, but, as student notes, it is difficult to know what word Smith specifically used (*LJ(B)*, 149). Berry, like other *Economic Materialists*, continually assumes that Smith is talking about “stages” like the other scholars of his day, but when Berry quotes Smith, Smith’s quotes speak of “states” or “periods of society”, which is how Smith refers to these ideas—not as “states” (Berry 2013, 42, 44, 47). Furthermore, when it comes to economic analysis, Smith uses the states, as types, to create a “static comparison” between the “early and rude state” and advanced societies, showing how capital accumulation and the division of labor create wealth (Okan 2017, 1271). After Meek’s (1976) formative study of Smith and Scottish history promoted the “four stages”, many scholars have accepted this framework for viewing Smith. Unreflective references to his ‘stages’ show the implicit bias that these scholars bring to Smith’s history. These are valuable readings, but they are not the only valuable readings.

III.II. Economic Behaviorists

In a sentiment echoed by many liberal economists, Eric Roll (1954, 150) refers to Smith as the “apostle of economic liberalism”. *Economic Behaviorists* believe that Smith develops an economic system that shows how giving human beings the greatest amount of freedom from coercion that is possible within the law leads us to act in such a way as to bring about the greatest amount of economic growth. Joseph Schumpeter (1954, 572) calls the classical system of economics developed out of Smith by John Stuart Mill and Jean-Baptiste Say “hitchless”. There are never “obstructions” to the system of savings, investment, and capital growth as long as freedom is not unnecessarily surrendered. As long as there is sufficient freedom, our natural human inclinations toward self-interest will drive us to the intended end of opulence. As Justman (1993, 128) writes, “Smith uses a linear model of the progress of human society from the hunting stage to the commercial stage”. The “Author of Nature” seems to intend such an end of progress for humans (*TMS*, III.v.7).

When one sympathizes with the *Economic Behaviorists* type, one finds ample textual support for their view of Smith, especially in *WN*.¹¹ Smith shows how natural inclinations drive economic history. In an often-cited passage, he describes how the division of labor that drives a commercial society is the product of human nature:

¹¹ Alvey (2003) does a particularly exceptional job of developing the liberal—or *Economic Materialist*—reading of Smith on history and progress.

[The division of labor] is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another. (*WN*, I.ii.1)

It is in our nature to persuade others to trade with us, and as we do so, Smith argues that we should not appeal to their benevolence or good natures—we should appeal to their self-interest. Because human nature is basically stable, *Economic Behaviorists* see that human beings are interchangeable exchange partners. Though Smith shows the differences between human societies throughout history, *Economic Behaviorists* focus on what they see as the two constants of human behavior that facilitate anonymous exchange: sociability and self-interestedness (what Smith calls the “desire to better our condition” [*WN*, II.iii.28–36]). Samuel Hollander believes that these two assumptions are all one needs for a capitalist system of exchange to work. He argues that Smith’s historical analysis may show that human sociability and self-interestedness exist, but once this conclusion is reached, history itself is inconsequential to economic analysis. Hollander (1979, 77) writes, “once the basic framework relevant for a capitalist exchange system had been constructed, the historical scaffold was no longer formally essential and could be removed”. Thus, *Economic Behaviorists* do not dwell for long (or at all) on the historical aspects of Smith’s work.

Economic Behaviorists open up several aspects of Smith’s work. They suggest that Smith sees an underlying consistency in human nature. They show a strong tendency toward progress in his work. They highlight his advocacy of freedom. And they suggest that though Smith may have a moral theory in *TMS*, he sees economic exchange as anonymous and amoral. “In his economic analysis”, writes Jacob Viner (1972, 82), “Smith operates from the categorical premise that the economic relations between men are in effect fundamentally impersonal, anonymous, infinitely ‘distant,’ so that the sentiments, with the one exception of ‘justice,’ remain dormant, are not aroused into action”. Though other types see the moral system of *TMS* more thoroughly infused into *WN*, *Economic Behaviorists* suggest that Smith’s story of history interprets economic exchange as a value-free activity.

III.III. Civic Humanism

For John G. A. Pocock, Smith’s use of the virtues mirrors that of other eighteenth-century Scottish scholars, which Pocock believes shows

Smith's reliance on a *Civic Humanist* paradigm. *Civic Humanists*, like Adam Ferguson, use the language of virtue, corruption, and reform in their schemes of historical development, and Pocock traces the vocabulary and ideology it expresses back to Machiavelli and Aristotle (Pocock 1972). The *Civic Humanism* type is concerned with virtue as it appears in autonomous citizens who participate in a political community, which is conceived on institutional and constitutional grounds. Citizens should be able to participate freely in government, and they should be active in the defense of the country through militias (Robertson 1983, 138). *Civic Humanism* sees that human beings are essentially public beings, and thus personality is "fully expressed only in the practice of citizenship as an active virtue" (Pocock 1983, 235). Because virtue is central to the tradition—and specifically virtue as developed within a political community—it is understandable that the tradition is also concerned with the way corruption erodes the practice of virtue and restricts the autonomy of citizens.

The *Civic Humanism* type emphasizes Smith's warnings about the moral and material dangers of commercial life. Pocock suggests that Smith creates the typology of the four states of society to show that the "normative control" of historical development is not one's mode of subsistence, but "the humanist concept of the personality's integrity" (Pocock 1989, 102). Each state involves different forms of political community and thus different forms of citizenship, freedom, virtue, and corruption. No state of society is immune from corruption, and thus no inevitable linear view of history suffices.

Because of the presence of corruption in history, *Civic Humanists* read Smith as holding a cyclical rather than a linear view of history (Winch 1978, 63). In regards to the commercial state of society, *Economic Behaviorists* may speak of the "degree of opulence" for which nations are "naturally destined", but *Civic Humanists* point out that only a few paragraphs later Smith writes that "the course of human prosperity, indeed, seems scarce ever to have been of so long continuance as to enable any great country to acquire capital sufficient for all those three purposes [i.e., agriculture, manufacture, and trade]" that lead to opulence (*WN*, II.v.20-22). In fact, Smith contends that rarely does human prosperity endure longer than 200 years in any given nation (*WN*, III.iv.20). *Civic Humanists* argue

that the commercial state is by no means a permanent one, even today.¹² The culmination of the commercial state seems to be not perpetual growth, but stagnation and perhaps even decline. Though Smith knows that no society has reached the point of saturation, it is notable that he envisions the culmination of the commercial state as a saturated plateau (*WN*, I.ix.14–15).

The *Civic Humanism* type suggests that virtue and corruption are important historical hermeneutics for Smith, but they too narrowly restrict Smith to their language of virtue. He sees virtue and corruption in history, but he also sees a plurality of other forces at work, like changes in forms of governance, modes of subsistence, social forms, moral laws, and much more. Also, his particular virtues differ from those of the *Civic Humanists*.¹³ Because his virtues differ, the kind of community needed to develop them also differs. He believes we need a plurality of communal forms because the wealth of a nation depends on strong relationships between the country and the towns. For Smith, *Civic Humanists* too narrowly place their emphasis on the moral strength of agrarian communities, which they view in opposition to the cities.

III.IV. Natural Jurisprudence

The *Natural Jurisprudence* type contends that history is the place in which legal precedents are formed and laws are crafted in a dynamic relationship with changing contexts and needs. This fourth type sees Smith's interest in economics as a subset of his larger concern with jurisprudence. At the beginning of Book IV of *WN*, Smith defines political economy as "a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator" (IV.1), and the lecture notes from his 1762–1763 course on jurisprudence include under the topic of "Police" material that is similar to what one finds in *WN* (*LJ(A)*, vi). The *Natural Jurisprudence* type reads *WN* as a text that shows legislators how to structure the laws and practices of a nation to encourage maximum economic growth. Smith's version of *Natural Jurisprudence* is typically seen as most indebted to Hutcheson, Hume, and Montesquieu, but it also has roots in the continental natural law tradition of Pufendorf

¹² Alvey develops the more pessimistic *Civic Humanist* assessment of history, showing that progress is neither inevitable, nor permanent because of "the necessity of a legislator, yet the improbability of having one; the influence of climate, terrain and custom; and the persistence of slavery" (2003, 15).

¹³ See McCloskey (2008, 50). Brown (1994, 208–212) also makes a strong case for the differences between Smith and the *Civic Humanist* tradition, citing specifically the apolitical nature of Smith's virtues.

and Grotius. Knud Haakonssen argues that, viewed from the perspective of *Natural Jurisprudence*, Smith's use of history serves two functions. It helps us "gain an understanding of how the principles of the impartial spectator work in practice", and it "explains the present state of the law which is the object of critical evaluation from the standpoint of natural justice" (Haakonssen 1981, 154).

Smith's desire to demonstrate how the impartial spectator functions in the formation of law arises in *LJ(A)*. In his treatment of the five origins of property, Smith contends that the first rights to property come through "occupation" or the simple fact that someone has something in his physical possession. Because such exclusive property rights arise in the hunting state before a separate judicial branch exists, Smith contends that the right of occupation is first judged by the impartial spectator. That is, if I pick up an apple with my hand and someone comes and rips it out of my hand, the impartial spectator will perceive the injury done to me and rule in my favor. Through sympathy the spectator brings my situation home to himself and decides the case based on "reasonable expectation" (*LJ(A)*, i.36-37).

As society moves into the shepherding and agricultural states, additional ways to obtain private property form, but like the rights of occupation and accession, all forms of ownership are originally based on the judgment of the spectator. When Smith explains the right of prescription, which means being granted ownership based on the attachment one has to something she has had for a long time, he turns to the spectator:

For in the same manner as the spectator can enter into the expectations of the 1st occupant that he will have the use of thing occupied [. . .] in the same manner, the right of prescription is derived from the opinion of the spectator that the possessor of a long standing has a just expectation that he may use what has been thus possessed. (*LJ(A)*, i.77)

Similar to the early examples of the spectator assessing what constitutes reasonable expectations, Smith shows how the spectator functions in the commercial state to assess the fairness of contracts (*LJ(A)*, i.41, i.57). By illustrating how the spectator functions in different times and places, Smith helps the future leaders to whom he offers his lectures learn how to respond to complex situations. Haakonssen (1981, 154), thus, believes that Smith uses history to teach through examples.

The four states of society in the *Natural Jurisprudence* perspective depict not determined material relationships between modes of subsistence, kinds of property, and forms of government, but complex relationships (*LJ(B)*, 11). Donald Winch suggests that the dynamic relationship between property and government “was to be one of the main themes of Smith’s historical account of progress, though it should be noted that, contrary to more deterministic interpretations, the relationship envisaged between government and property is a reciprocal one” (1978, 51).¹⁴ The four states tell “the story of how the possibility of strong government slowly emerges hand in hand with the need for it. And at the end of the process so many institutional factors have developed in mankind’s [*sic*] situation that we can no longer explain the further social evolution by reference to the simple needs of survival” (Haakonssen 1981, 157). Only by studying and understanding the dynamic relationships of property, government, and justice can a legislator organize a nation to be capable of providing well for itself.

Like *Civic Humanists*, the *Natural Jurisprudence* type does not read Smith as suggesting a linear progression through the four states of society. But unlike the *Civic Humanism* type, *Natural Jurisprudence* does not believe history simply turns in on itself in a continuous cycle; it is more like a spiral—circular, but going somewhere. Another difference between *Natural Jurisprudence* and *Civic Humanism* lies in the norm through which they understand history. Pocock explains that “the basic concept in republican thinking is *virtus*; the basic concept of all jurisprudence is necessarily *ius*; and there is no way of representing virtue as a right” (1983, 248). The problem with many interpretations of Smith is that they see virtues and rights as necessarily opposed (Pocock 1983, 249). The narrow focus of *Civic Humanism* on virtue leads to a more provincial formation of morality through small communities. And the narrow focus of *Natural Jurisprudence* on rights promotes a cosmopolitan view of morality because the basis of rights and law pervade the particularities of communities (*LR*, i.v.30–31).¹⁵ Instead of insisting that Smith squeeze into the narrow confines of *Civic Humanism* or *Natural Jurisprudence*, attention to his texts shows that he wants it both ways—he embraces a plurality of approaches, using both the language of virtues and rights. He wants small

¹⁴ Winch writes that “the whole unilinear stadial sequence begins to seem highly contingent on circumstances that are by no means traceable merely to economic causes” (1983, 259).

¹⁵ For a reading of Smith’s work as a kind of provincialism, see Phillipson (1983). For a reading of Smith as a cosmopolitan, see Winch (1983, 267).

communities with pure languages to form the moral sentiments and virtues of individuals, but he also wants the simplification of language, the spread of international commerce, and universal conceptions of laws and rights.¹⁶ Smith's use of both virtues and rights demonstrates the plurality of approaches to moral action that his symbolic universe uses to describe and guide the complexity of human life.

IV. PRODUCTIVE TENSIONS IN SMITH'S HISTORY

The four types developed here are simple, broad depictions of how scholars have approached Smith. They do not exhaust all possible interpretations and are not exclusive of each other, but each of them reveals a unique layer of reality. And while Smith's types often do align in a historical sequence, the types of Smithian interpretations are not aligned here to demonstrate a historical sequence (though historical connections between these interpretations could be traced). Smith uses the four states to talk about human progress, and he also uses them to understand the dynamics within states of society.

Smith uses history, not just to tell a story of progress, but to highlight the complexity and plurality of human nature, institutions, and moral and economic development. James Alvey (2003) explores the apparent paradox between Smith's positive, teleological, liberal reading of history (here named the *Economic Behaviorist* type) and his negative, cyclical, *Civic Humanist* reading. Alvey confines himself to these two views on Smith's history, and in doing so, brilliantly highlights their contrasts. In the end, Alvey concludes that Smith does not leave a fully coherent doctrine, but I want to suggest that coherence may not have been the goal. Weinstein (2013, 7) is right that Smith is no post-modern pluralist, but that his openness to difference, integration of otherness, and form of dialectic "prefigures" what one finds in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For Smith, the historical narrative is always caught betwixt and between: between a teleological ideal and an empirical reality, between freedom and determinism, between communities and individuals, between virtues and rights. The aim is not unified coherence, but a kind of dynamism that feels more like the moral complexity of lived experience, and that can better earn the sympathy of Smith's audience—in his day and ours.

¹⁶ One benefit Smith reaps by incorporating both perspectives is that he does not allow his analysis to be reduced to a debate between Tory and Whig ideologies. See Pocock (1983, 247).

Though Smith typically refers to his typology as ‘states’ or ‘periods’ he treats the states in a particular order and leads the reader to think that the basic principles of human nature cause societies to move naturally from one state to the next—as *Behaviorists* and *Materialists* emphasize, albeit in different ways. Though we may even move through the agricultural state in an altogether ‘inverted’ way, we still emerge into a kind of commercial life for Smith. But he also shows how all the types of society include within them dangers and pitfalls. The states of society are fluid and open to both regression and progression, and the choices of individuals and legislators do tend to matter—as the *Civic Humanism* and *Natural Jurisprudence* types emphasize. Whatever constants may exist in human nature, they do not determine the direction of history completely. Each type alone runs into errors because of its narrow reading of Smith, but together they reveal the tensions and complex reality to which moral action responds.

The *Civic Humanism* type, for example, illuminates the paradox of freedom in the *Economic Behaviorist* approach. *Civic Humanists* emphasize the ability of human beings to form virtue and to change their tastes, preferences, and desires over time, but *Economic Behaviorists* see human tastes, preferences, and desires as stable (basically always self-interested). Even though *Behaviorists* are the biggest advocates of free choice, they allow individuals no real power to change their characters—no ‘growth-mindset’ we might say today. Otteson (2002, 93) attempts a middle way between the two types, arguing that “Smith believes that the various characteristics one finds in human nature do not automatically lead to specific behaviors or specific rules of conduct. They are interests, inclinations, proclivities”. Though Otteson offers a constructive synthesis, the two types highlight an important tension in moral action. The degree to which we can call an action ‘moral’ seems to imply some freedom of choice (either in the present or in the past when the virtues were formed) about whether to engage in the action. It should not surprise one then that *Economic Behaviorists* see economic actions as ‘amoral’ because they believe that such self-interested actions are a determined (or ‘natural’) part of human virtue. Though such a narrative fits with the *Behaviorists’* accounts of their value-free science, it does not fit with Smith’s interest in educating workers, cultivating virtues, forming good legislators, or increasing the wealth of the nation because these all intend ‘good’ or moral consequences beyond mere desire satisfaction.

My point is not to conclude whether Smith endorses determinism or freedom because that would be a false choice. Smith sees moral action and history as existing in tension with both—human beings are both free and determined. Smith shows that moral action is *relational* action (bound to relationships and contexts, but not determined by them) that arises in a historically embedded person who cultivates the best resources of her tradition to sympathize with others and to enter the impartial spectator. Garrett and Hanley (2015), especially, demonstrate how the impartial spectator ruptures deterministic views of morality, even as it strives for impartiality. Though people owe much to our communities and histories, the marvel of relational moral action is that we are never completely bound to what has come before. Novelty exists in history. It is not about libertarian freedom versus material determinism, but about relationships, which both bind us and promote creativity.

A second tension suggested by the types of Smithian interpretation plays out between historical particulars and universals. Both the *Economic Materialist* and the *Natural Jurisprudence* types emphasize how Smith's history shows that moral action takes place in the presence of universal laws. Laws, like a prohibition against murder or the Golden Rule, seem universal and fundamental to society. *Civic Humanists* and *Economic Behaviorists* come at it from the other side. They emphasize the historically particular origins of moral action through the virtues and self-interested behavior. *Behaviorists* emphasize Smith's advocacy of the liberty of the individual to follow her desires, and *Civic Humanists* emphasize the particular kinds of virtue Smith wants people to cultivate.

Smith, however, sees how universals and particulars work in tandem to form moral action. He acknowledges that an elite group of people—himself among them—know that laws only have value because of the many individual actions that give rise to them (*TMS*, III.2-3).¹⁷ He thinks that most people orient their lives around such laws without even considering that they might not be universal or “manifestations of God's will” (Otteson 2002, 76).¹⁸ Smith argues that if it were not for the impartial spectator, there could be no moral judgments, and without judgments there would be no law.¹⁹ And yet the impartial spectator seems to be the

¹⁷ See also Otteson (2002, 105).

¹⁸ See also *TMS* (III.5.3).

¹⁹ Haakonssen (1981, 61) writes, “general rules of morality are thus the unintended outcome of a multitude of individual instances of natural moral evaluation”. Notice here that Haakonssen emphasizes that rules result from both particular decisions and from the ‘natural’ or universal form of evaluation that undergirds them.

result of unchanging human nature. That is, while laws might be the result of generations of particular and relative decisions human beings have made through our impartial spectators, the spectator develops because of a universal human desire to be in mutual sympathy with others. Once we realize that others' biases prevent them from being in sympathy with us, we learn—and eventually they do too—to enter the position of the impartial spectator so our biases do not prevent us from being in sympathy with others. The desire for mutual sympathy appears universal in Smith's account, and yet, it is a principle Smith culls out of his empirical investigations into the nature of virtue and why we value the virtues (*TMS*, VII.i). He suggests that laws get their value out of the many individual actions that give rise to them (*TMS*, III.2-3). Another way to state this tension is as one between relativism and universalism. Smith's historical method and view of human action attends to particular and relative events and yet it often relies on seemingly universal claims.

Moral action must also navigate a third tension. It is one between individuals and institutions. Individuals who have lived forever in isolation cannot create laws, modes of subsistence, the arts, science, and government. From the earliest hunter and gatherer groups, individuals have lived together in increasingly complex forms. *Economic Behaviorists* see the history of moral action from the vantage point of the autonomous individual or economic agent pursuing his self-interest, but the full history of human action cannot be told from the vantage point of the autonomous citizen or economic agent pursuing his or her self-interest because individuals live in communities and communities are organized through institutions. The other types of Smithian interpretation insist that individuals live in communities and that communities are organized through institutions. But we must also admit that the *Natural Jurisprudence* emphasis on institutions over individual virtues, choices, and imaginations at times fails to shed light on the motivations that prompt individuals to pursue particular courses of action. "In Smith's analysis", according to Jerry Evensky (2005, 53), "individuals are social beings *and* they are sovereign beings". *WN* is not just a manifesto for the autonomous economic agent (*Economic Behaviorists*) or one for an institutional revolution (*Economic Materialists*). It also simultaneously cultivates the virtues of the commercial life (*Civic Humanism*) and instructs young legislators in how to reform the nation's legal structure to increase opulence (*Natural Jurisprudence*). The four states of society depict the ways in which individual motivations interact with social and institutional forces. They show the

necessary provincialism of the small early human groupings, and they show the cosmopolitan tendencies of commercial states. But just as the commercial state cannot exist without the small communities of herders and husbandmen, so too cosmopolitanism requires strong local communities. In the end, *WN* and *TMS* offer a relational view of moral action that only arises when individuals stand in relation to each other and to social forces. The tension cannot and should not be dissolved.

V. CONCLUSION

Writing history requires that we imagine our way into different contexts, sympathize with others, and build a story that coheres with empirical experience and offers a persuasive meaning to past, present, and future actions. Smith engages in writing history in order to teach people a narrative that embraces the plurality of values in modern life to help them understand their lives and make moral judgments.

The differences in the four types of Smith scholarship described here do not reveal a lack of clarity in Smith's work, but rather they show his ability to hold together plurality and to teach a view of history that is complex. Human beings always seem to struggle to understand moral action amidst the tensions between freedom and determinism, particularity and universality, and individuals and institutions. The ideal types Smith used to describe the four states of society highlight the complex realities to which moral action must respond, and it has been my intention to demonstrate Smith's enduring contribution by applying such a typology to his work, showing his similarly complex theory. While these types can capture some of the complexity of the world to help people undertake prudent moral and economic action, they should never be confused for the far more complex realities in which our decisions actually take place.

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