CHAPTER I

Conflicted self

We must soften into a credulity below the milkiness of infancy to think all men virtuous. We must be tainted with a malignity truly diabolical, to believe all the world to be equally wicked and corrupt.

Edmund Burke, Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents

And what a malignant philosophy must it be that will not allow to humanity and friendship the same privileges which are undisputedly granted to the darker passions of enmity and resentment. Such a philosophy is more like a satyr than a true delineation or description of human nature, and may be a good foundation for paradoxical wit and raillery, but is a very bad one for any serious argument.

David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals

Until very recently, philosophers tended to ignore Adam Smith. They acknowledged his idea of sympathy in the Theory of Moral Sentiments, but generally regarded it as superficial and unsophisticated, and tended to dismiss Smith as a minor figure in the shadow of David Hume. Moreover, he was regularly cast aside as a crass materialist who reduced human motivation to selfishness and corrupted the world with a moral justification for capitalism. In this environment, Smith scholarship was left to the mercy of economists and historians of economics who because of their training and pressing worldly concerns tended to subordinate or ignore Smith’s moral philosophy.

This tendency finds its earliest traces in a debate that began among late-nineteenth-century German capitalists and Marxists, on the extent to which Smith’s two seminal books might be reconciled.¹ The so-called “Adam Smith problem” turned on how we might reconcile the Theory of

Moral Sentiments (1759) and its emphasis on sympathy with the Wealth of Nations (1776) and its emphasis on self-interest. Are the books consistent or continuous? And if not, which in Smith’s mind was prior? Was Smith primarily an ethical or an economic thinker? Were human beings driven primarily by sympathy or self-interest, virtue or vice? Homo socius or homo oeconomicus? Interpretation of Smith’s thought throughout the last two centuries was dominated by “present-minded” people who wanted to say something or another about capitalism. In that environment the “Adam Smith Problem” was most often resolved in the direction of self-interest, with the Wealth of Nations and its purported “celebration of avarice” rising triumphant as the motivating center of Smith’s thought, and the Moral Sentiments set aside as puerile and academic. The most urgent of interpreters dismissed the “Adam Smith problem” altogether as an academic luxury.

Saying something or another about capitalism is a worthy enterprise, no doubt. But as ideology goes, it tends to produce very bad history. And in Smith’s case, it mattered very little where one stood on the political spectrum. Whether one extolled the virtues of capitalism or condemned its excesses and blindness; whether one advocated a small state or big one; there was general agreement about what Smith said and what he meant by it. Whether he was praised by liberals as a champion of individual freedom or maligned by Marxists as an “evil genius” responsible for inventing bourgeois ideology, interpretations generally “converged” around Smith as the founding father of liberal capitalism, leaving posterity with a ridiculously superficial, deeply flawed and selective interpretation of his thought. The very idea of “Adam Smith,” so frequently invoked in public debates today on the left and on the right, has not moved very far from this caricature – conveyed, for example, in such statements as those made by a recent US presidential candidate that China today acts like “Adam Smith on


4 For discussion, see Donald Winch’s “Introduction” to Adam Smith’s Politics, pp. 1–27; and Donald Winch, “Adam Smith and the Liberal Tradition,” in Traditions of Liberalism: Essays on John Locke, Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Sydney: Center for Independent Studies, 1988), pp. 82–104.

5 Winch, Adam Smith’s Politics, pp. 19 and 70.
steroids” when it buys oil from tyrants and sells its nuclear technology; or by a well-known left-leaning journalist in the midst of the global economic crisis in early 2009 that Adam Smith’s invisible hand has failed us.  

Among a majority of Smith scholars today in the humanities and social sciences, however, the unity of Smith’s system is no longer in serious contention. Today we understand how thoroughly the nineteenth-century formulation of the “Adam Smith Problem” distorted what Smith meant by sympathy and self-interest, and missed the overall coherence of his moral philosophy and the place of political economy within it. From Smith’s pupil John Millar, we know that Smith’s lectures on moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow (1750–1764), delivered as Chair of Moral Philosophy, were divided into four tracks: natural religion, ethics, jurisprudence and political economy. The second track later provided the basis for the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith’s first book published in 1759; the third was published posthumously from student lecture notes as *Lectures on Jurisprudence*; and the fourth became the core of *The Wealth of Nations*. From a mere outline of Smith’s lectures, one observes that political economy is one part of a far broader, comprehensive moral philosophical system, what Charles Griswold calls “a coherent whole.” Thus the nineteenth-century formulation of the “Adam Smith Problem” rests on a tension that was essentially foreign to Smith, but instead conveys the urgency of nineteenth-century debates about political economy. Knud Haakonssen and Donald Winch, in their recent discussion of Smith’s legacy, speculated that Smith “could hardly have suspected that the

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6 Mitt Romney, speech at the Republican National Convention, September 3, 2008.

7 Phil Donahue interview, Fox News, March 18, 2009.


question of systematic coherence and/or incompleteness in his intellectual
endeavour would constitute an enduring part of his legacy.10

Economists began to lose their hold on Smith’s legacy in the 1970s. An
important moment in this story of Smith’s twentieth-century recovery
came in 1978 when Donald Winch confronted the “economist’s Smith”
head-on in his path-breaking book, Adam Smith’s Politics: An essay in
historiographic revision. Inspired by the “new” contextual approach to
historical meaning (then) associated with Quentin Skinner and the so-
called “Cambridge School” of intellectual history, Winch pursued various
problems with interpreting Smith’s thought through the anachronistic
lens of nineteenth-century debates about liberal capitalism. Winch’s
particular focus was Adam Smith’s politics. He wanted to unmask the
“economist’s Smith” in order to resuscitate the political elements of
Smith’s thought, which economists and economic historians had margi-
nalized, or sublimated altogether, by claiming that politics, for better or
for worse, was “epiphenomenal to the more profound economic forces at
work in modern commercial society.”11 Properly contextualized, Winch
demonstrated that Smith’s thought drew explicitly upon a very old
political language about virtue and corruption that his contemporaries
would have identified with the Augustan humanism of Montesquieu
and Hume.

One need not share Winch’s historiographical orientation, his Cambridge
proclivity for republican sentiments or his preoccupation with Smithian
politics to recognize the value of approaching Smith’s thought without
ideologically charged nineteenth-century assumptions and with sensitivity
to how Smith might have understood his own project. When permitted to
speak in his own eighteenth-century voice, the “economist’s Smith” begins to
lose touch with himself. For one thing, the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the
University of Glasgow never anchored human life on what George Stigler
called the “granite” of self-interest.12 Self-interest is a central dimension of
human motivation, no doubt, but for Smith takes its place within a far richer
motivational complex, marked as much by passion and imagination as by
interest and reason. Why else would he have devoted a treatise to the subject
of moral sentiment, demonstrating his life-long commitment to the project

10 Knud Haakonssen and Donald Winch, “The Legacy of Adam Smith,” in Knud Haakonssen, ed., The
Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 366–394,
at p. 369.
11 Winch, Adam Smith’s Politics, p. 27.
by revising it substantially five times over thirty-one years? Indeed, the enterprise of political economy was not itself at the center of Smith’s thought, but takes its place in a larger project of moral philosophy.

What’s more, Smith was ambivalent about commercial culture, and critical of the very economic totality he is accused of inventing and enshrining. Despite what history has made of him, he was never a flat-footed optimist about the effects of commercialism on the texture of human life, locally or globally. Modernity was never easy or uncomplicated for him. He did believe that a free market economy, supplemented by appropriate political and social institutions and policies, was modernity’s best hope for general well-being. He was committed to reducing human poverty and misery and promoting human equality, and had great faith in the trajectory of history in this sense, leaving him justly susceptible to charges of woeful shortsightedness, well intentioned as it may have been. But he also elaborated the dangers of commercial culture in detail and intensity matched only by Karl Marx himself. The “very meanest person” in eighteenth-century Europe might indeed be better off than “an African king,” he once asserted. But at the same time, he echoed Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s counter-Enlightenment claims about the hypocrisies of modern happiness, charging that commercial life rested on a pervasive self-deception about our needs and our happiness, that it tended to corrupt our moral sentiments by encouraging vanity and conspicuous greed, and that it sapped our magnanimity and public-spiritedness. Smith encouraged commercial people to cultivate habits of personal thrift and to resist emulating the superfluities of the rich, which would lead to perpetual disappointment at best, failure and poverty at worst. Moreover, even at the very dawn of the industrial revolution, he observed that the division of labor dehumanized its participants through “mental mutilation,” rendering them “as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.” Smith was keenly aware of the “wonderful world” of early industrial capitalism so memorably conveyed in Robert Heilbroner’s portrait of the tin mines of Cornwall and the textile

13 For discussion of Smith’s focus on ameliorating human poverty and misery, and his general preoccupation with the dignity of workers, see especially Samuel Fleischacker, *Wealth of Nations;* Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Nussbaum, “‘Mutilated and Deformed.’”
14 *WN* i.i (pp. 23–24).
15 *WN* V.i.f.50 (p. 782). For discussion of this theme in Smith, and its implications for a cosmopolitan interpretation of the *Wealth of Nations*, grounded in the material basis for human dignity, see Nussbaum, “‘Mutilated and Deformed.’"
factories of Derby. Indeed, Smith’s orientation to modernity was one of genuine ambivalence – ultimately embracing the rise of commerce for its material benefits, its extension of human liberty, and its “ennobling byproducts,” as Eric Schliesser puts it, but also acknowledging and at times directly confronting the profound indignities and cruelties of modern commercial life, seeking to counter-balance some of them through the “expense” of public education.

The revisionist spirit Winch initiated in *Adam Smith’s Politics* has reproduced itself in waves of scholarship committed to the project of wrestling Smith’s thought from the economistic grip, unmasking the economists’ hegemony over Smith’s meaning, recovering new meanings that have a more solid claim to historical accuracy, and that are potentially useful for a generation no longer narrowly preoccupied with Marx and his legacy. And this momentum has not been confined to intellectual history. Smith revisionism is a truly multidisciplinary project within the humanities and social sciences. The last thirty years have witnessed a genuine renaissance of revisionist scholarship among moral philosophers, political and social theorists, anthropologists, psychologists, students of communication, of culture, of gender, of literature, among others.

**The Smithian Self**

Though their evaluations of the “Smithian legacy” radically diverged, Chicago-school types like Hayek, Friedman and Becker, and Marxists like

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18 This phenomenon is evident in the academic culture surrounding Smith scholarship today. The *Adam Smith Review*, published by Routledge and sponsored by the International Adam Smith Society, is situated at the heart of this, evident as well in several recent volumes of new scholarship: Christel Fricke and Hans-Peter Schütt, eds., *Adam Smith als Moralphilosoph* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005); Knud Haakonsen, *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Leonidas Montes and Eric Schliesser, eds., *New Voices on Adam Smith* (London: Routledge, 2006). International conferences commemorating the 250th anniversary of the first edition of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* across the globe in 2009 (in Oxford, Glasgow, Oslo, Istanbul and Athens) are remarkably multidisciplinary.

Macpherson and Dumont\textsuperscript{20} generally agreed that the *Wealth of Nations* presented an essentially materialist, Hobbesian orientation to human motivation checked by a fundamental optimism that human egoism can be restrained autonomously, invisibly, through free competition in commerce. This is one thing interpreters mean when they refer to Smith as a “commercialized Hobbes”\textsuperscript{21} – they mean his attempt to harness man’s natural selfishness without sympathy, without moral philosophy, without the coercive political authority of a Leviathan or the skillful maneuvering of a wise mercantilist statesman,\textsuperscript{22} but instead to socialize him through “enlightened self-love.”\textsuperscript{23} Enlightened self-love is the notion that self-love can be directed through reason to selfless ends.\textsuperscript{24} On this account, sociable behavior is an instrument employed by rational egoists (i.e. Smith’s “brewers, butchers and bakers”\textsuperscript{25}) calculating future benefit, and little more. According to this instrumental view of society, sociability among men who were thoroughly egoistic and given easily to the suasion of their appetites could be attributed to no grander motive than its utility. Sympathy (usually interpreted wrongly by “Smith’s economists,” we shall see, as compassion, or benevolence, or some other related sort of ethical impulse) was nice to contemplate, but was unnecessary to sustain a viable social theory.

Smith scholarship in the past three decades has identified many problems with this general tendency to reduce Smith’s thought to a materialist, utilitarian account of “enlightened egoism,” or the “unintended consequences” of self-interest. In this chapter, I would like to emphasize two: one historiographical and methodological, the other theoretical. First, the conventional articulation of the “Adam Smith Problem,” and the ultimate

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Cropsey-1972} See, for example, Cropsey, *Polity and Economy*, p. 72.
\bibitem{WN-Li.2} *WN* Li.2 (vol. I, pp. 26–27).
\end{thebibliography}
prioritization of Smith’s materialism and his commercial egoism, fails to integrate the series of revisions Smith made to his *Moral Sentiments* over the course of his life. Few scholars have given these revisions the careful attention they merit. Thought I don’t intend to provide anything like a systematic account here, I shall signal in various places that Smith’s thought becomes more intelligible when we recognize changes and adjustments that took place in his mind between 1759, when the first edition of the *Moral Sentiments* appeared, and the final sixth edition, published nearly thirty-one years later in 1790. When we acknowledge that the first edition was completed seventeen years before the 1776 publication of the *Wealth of Nations*, while the sixth edition surfaced fourteen years after, then the conventional articulation of the “Adam Smith Problem” is flawed, and in a distinctly historiographical way. One might even say that a new “Adam Smith Problem” emerges – that the question can no longer be simply the extent that the economic argument of the *Wealth of Nations* in 1776 flowed or departed from the ethical arguments of the *Moral Sentiments* of 1759, for the *Moral Sentiments* was not a static event. The question becomes: why did Smith revise his *Moral Sentiments* five times, and twice rather significantly? What so dissatisfied him? This issue of Smith’s revisions will emerge again and again throughout my interpretation.

My second reason for rejecting an “egoistic” interpretation of Smith’s thought is that Smith himself in many places flatly rejected it. As Donald Winch put it, he “did not make use of the construct known as ‘economic man.’” I would like to spend the balance of this chapter demonstrating that the Smithian self cannot be reduced to egoism, even though egoism played an undeniable and important role in his general description of human motivation. This will not come as earth-shattering news to anyone familiar with the recent debates. But what I do hope to illuminate here is the extent that the Smithian self was conflicted, ever struggling to negotiate tensions between its social and unsocial passions. First, I will introduce the notion of enlightened self-love which Smith in the *Moral Sentiments* took great pains to condemn, despite what neo-classical economists and public choice thinkers have wanted us to believe about him. Second, I will turn to Smith’s conflicted self, and introduce the techniques through which people in his theory learn to negotiate their inner conflicts and become sociable.


Adam Smith’s understanding of self-love is not Hobbesian, but distinctively Stoic in origin. It arises, I believe, from the Stoic idea of *oikeiōsis*, the idea that human affection is spatially oriented concentrically around the self. We will see later in our discussion of the Stoic influence on Smith that Smith’s discussion of beneficence in the *Moral Sentiments* (in a chapter titled “Of the Character of the Individual, so far as it can affect the Happiness of other People”) is itself framed concentrically, considering first our self-love and our beneficence toward those closest to us; then toward various societies to which we belong; and finally toward the community of “all rational and sensible beings.”

Smith adopted the fundamental assumption of the Stoic structure of human care, and began his own concentric journey with the Stoic observation that man’s attention has been directed by nature to care for himself and for those who are “naturally the objects of his warmest affections” and “upon whose happiness or misery his conduct must have the greatest influence.” He argued:

*Every man, as the Stoics used to say, is first and principally recommended to his own care; and every man is certainly, in every respect, fitter, and abler to take care of himself than of any other person.*

And yet, Smith condemned the practice of “deducing all our sentiments from certain refinements of self-love.” Revealingly, he opened the *Moral Sentiments* with the following:

*How 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.*

Any educated eighteenth-century reader would have recognized that this assertion was directed at Thomas Hobbes and his followers, Samuel Pufendorf and Bernard Mandeville. In this well-known passage Smith rejected not only the claim that men were purely selfish beings without social impulses or needs, but also the corollary Mandevillian claim (embraced by many of his eighteenth-century contemporaries, and still attributed to Smith today) that any society or good-will to be found among them was little more than the by-product of enlightened selfishness.

“Enlightened self-love” is an old notion that egoism can be directed through reason to selfless ends. According to this instrumental view of

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28 *TMS* VI.ii (pp. 218–237).  
29 *TMS* VI.ii.1.2 (p. 219).  
30 *TMS* VI.ii.1.1 (p. 219).  
31 *TMS* I.i.1.1 (p. 9).
society, men are thoroughly selfish by nature, but are endowed with the faculty of foresight through which they are able to recognize future interests and to reason how most effectively to pursue them. The classical roots of this instrumental way of thinking about human motivation run deeper than I wish to go here. But in the generations just before Smith, the idea was often employed as a substitute for religious motivation in such diverse figures as the French Jansenist Pierre Nicole, the British natural theologian Bishop Joseph Butler, and the German natural lawyer Samuel Pufendorf, all of whom Smith was familiar with. Only later, when the eighteenth-century English physician-pamphleteer Bernard Mandeville popularized it, did the idea of “enlightened self-love” become commercialized, and an object of derision and ridicule among philosophers.

In his 1675 essay “De la charité et de l’amour-propre” (“Of Charity and Self-Love”), Pierre Nicole observed that man is naturally resistant to moral education because he not only loves himself but loves himself beyond measure, loves only himself, and relates everything to himself. He wants every kind of property, honor, pleasure, and he wants them only for himself. Placing himself at the center of everything, he would like to rule over everything and wishes that all creatures were occupied with nothing but pleasing him, praising him, and admiring him. This tyrannical disposition, being firmly implanted deep in the hearts of all men, makes them violent, unjust, cruel, ambitious, obsequious, envious, insolent, and quarrelsome.32

The tyrannical nature of self-love meant that men were highly immune to traditional moralism. More than a century later, Mandeville noted that even

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coercion was often insufficient to counter man’s self-love: though “he may be subdued by superior Strength, it is impossible by Force alone to make him tractable.”\textsuperscript{33} For this reason, Mandeville observed, “Moralists and Philosophers of all Ages” attempted to persuade people “that it was more beneficial for every Body to conquer than indulge his Appetites, and much better to mind the Publick than what seemed his private Interest.”\textsuperscript{34} But the philosophers’ attempts to persuade were always thwarted, Mandeville observed, because

whether Mankind would have ever believ’d it or not, it is not likely that any Body could have persuaded them to disapprove of their natural Inclinations, or prefer the good of others to their own, if at the same time he had not shew’d them an Equivalent to be enjoy’d as a Reward for the Violence, which by so doing they of necessity must commit upon themselves.\textsuperscript{35}

This was where man’s self-interest became a tool for the more persistent, inventive species of moralist: hence, Mandeville’s claim that man is “an extraordinary selfish and headstrong, as well as cunning Animal.”\textsuperscript{36} Man’s cunning enables him to recognize future interests, and to pursue them even at the cost of sacrificing certain immediate desires. In “Of Charity and Self-Love” Nicole advised that:

to banish all the vices, and all the gross Disorders therein, and to make Mankind happy even in this life, there needs only instead of Charity, to give everyone a harmless self-love, which may be able to discern its true Interests, and to incline thereto by the ways which true Reason shall discover to it.\textsuperscript{37}

Likewise, in his \textit{Sermons} of the 1720s, the English natural theologian Bishop Joseph Butler, grounded a practical morality in what he called “reasonable


\textsuperscript{34} Mandeville, “Moral Virtue,” p. 42.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Nicole, “Charity,” p. 376.
self-love.” Employing categories and concepts strikingly similar to Nicole’s, Butler argued that the presence of “virtue in the world depends on its appearing to have no contrariety to private interest and self-love”:

Let it be allowed, though virtue or moral rectitude does indeed consist in affection to and pursuit of what is right and good, as such, yet, that when we sit down in a cool hour, we can neither justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit till we are convinced that it will be for our happiness or at least not contrary to it. For this reason Butler, like Nicole, insisted that religious leaders ought never “disown” the “principle of self-love.” He believed he was edifying rather than compromising his Christianity when he sought to “convince men that the course of life we would persuade them to is not contrary to their interest.” While “reasonable self-love” would never approximate the pure Pauline charity of the elect, it was a valuable substitute in a society of ordinary weak men because it so admirably contained the more extreme tendencies of self-love and imitated charity in a worldly way.

But which future interests were compelling enough to move man against himself, to quiet his passions? Mandeville asked: what could possibly inspire man to violate himself by “crossing his Appetites and subduing his dearest Inclinations”? What “Equivalent” was “shew’d” to his self-love to justify the sacrifice? Nicole had fastened upon man’s natural desire to be an object of love and esteem, an “inclination … so cunning and so subtle, and at the same time so pervasive, that there is no action into which it cannot creep.” Man’s “violent temptations” are thus “weakened and counterbalanced” in Nicole’s formulation by the “fear of men’s judgments.”

Prompted by reason to seek the esteem and affection of men, self-love so perfectly imitates charity that if we consult it on how to conduct our outward actions, it will give us the same advice as charity will and launch us on the same course.

Mandeville was doubtless drawing here on Nicole’s argument about the civilizing effects of “esteem and affection” when he emphasized the “Power” that “Flattery” and “Contempt” had upon man’s natural “Pride,” and the extent to which man perceived his greater interest to lie in securing that

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39 Butler, *Sermon XI*, p. 56. 40 Ibid., p. 55. 41 Ibid., p. 56.


“Flattery” and averting that “Contempt” by exercising “Self-denial” – by harnessing, or at least “hiding or disguising,” his natural appetites. To explain motives for virtuous action among intractably selfish creatures, Mandeville appropriated what Nicole and the Jansenists had called l’amour-propre éclairé, rendering into rustic English as man’s “Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of being good.” This is precisely what Mandeville meant when he claimed that “private vices” morally unchecked but enlightened through reason could yield “publick benefits.” The practice of “Moral Virtue” among ordinary men could be attributed to no grander motive than this.

**SMITH AND ENLIGHTENED SELF-LOVE**

Little wonder so many interpreters have linked Mandeville and Smith with the idea that sociable behavior is little more than an instrument pursued by rational egoists calculating future benefit. Famously, Smith argued in the Wealth of Nations that despite man’s natural “passion for present enjoyment,” human life wasn’t fated to Hobbesian War, since the most urgent of man’s passions were balanced by a foresight, by “a desire of bettering our condition, a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate, comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave.” In this particular passage, Smith was discussing incentives to “frugality” and against “profusion,” but this instrumental way of thinking was by no means confined to his thoughts on personal spending habits. In fact, it is in this vein that interpreters regularly invoke Smith’s famous reference to “the brewer the butcher and the baker,” who act sociably toward their patrons not from benevolent intentions, not with a desire to cultivate society for its own sake, for its beauty or for its general utility, but in the interest of “bettering their condition.”

Smith maintained that “self-interest,” or what he called the “selfish passions,” held a sort of “middle” position between man’s “social” and

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“unsocial” passions. A “selfish” man employing his “reason” will recognize a certain “utility” in resisting his “unsocial” inclinations and, as best he can, feigning sociable ones. The butcher smiles to his customers as he envisions their next visit to buy meat. And with regard to his competitors, experience in the commercial world has taught him the norms of “fair play”:

In the race for wealth, and honours, and preferments, he may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrip all his competitors. But if he should jostle, or throw down any of them, the indulgence of the spectators is entirely at an end. It is a violation of fair play, which they cannot admit of.

I spend considerable time later exploring the ways that spectators constrain our behavior in commercial life as in most other spheres of life. But the point for now is to recognize Smith’s claim that the world does not tolerate, does not sympathize with, open and flagrant violations of fair play. This knowledge makes the merchant gentle, douceur, in his interactions with customers and competitors – to invoke Albert Hirschman’s famous description of the prudent actor in The Passions and the Interests. That “bettering our condition” can socialize in this negative way, Smith argued, requires that an individual through his reason is “capable” of “discerning the remote consequences” of his actions – “the advantage or detriment that is likely to result from them” in the future. If the butcher takes advantage of his customers, willingly sells them a substandard product, they will likely turn elsewhere, and tell their neighbor to turn elsewhere – which will ruin his reputation, destroy his business, starve his family, and fuel the bourgeois cycle of fear that keeps him awake at night. The “prudence” of an action, therefore, represents an actor’s rational choice that he would best be served by abstaining from various “immediate” impulses and interests in order to obtain a greater pleasure, or to avoid a worse pain, at a “future time.” It is worth noting now that Smith invoked this prudential, instrumental way of thinking when he reflected on the motivation of nations in international affairs – how to overcome the absence of good-will and cooperation among inescapably “selfish” national actors. This will be a subject for us later in Chapter 6.

Clearly, Smith’s thoughts about prudence here were influenced by the Nicole–Butler orientation to “enlightened” or “reasonable” self-love. Butler

55 TMS II.ii.2.1 (p. 83).
56 TMS IV.2.6 (p. 189).
57 TMS IV.2.6–8 (pp. 189–190).
had defined “prudence” as the “reasonable endeavor to secure and promote” ones own “interest and happiness” in the future. He contrasted this “cool” way of thinking with the heat of passion and impulse. “Imprudence” was “dissolutely to neglect” one’s “greater good in the future” for the sake of a “present and lesser gratification.” Smith’s description of the calculation was nearly identical.

Moreover, Smith agreed with Nicole and Butler that selfish rational choice emulated morality in a sociological way, permitting society to thrive in the absence of genuine affection, and without anachronistic forms of moral policing that too often rested on contentious assumptions about God and morals, and tended to stifle modern commercial aspirations. As Nicole observed,

However corrupt this society might be inwardly … outwardly nothing would be more orderly, courteous, just, peaceful, honorable, and generous; moreover, it would be an excellent thing that, everything being inspired and driven only by self-love, self-love would not show itself and that, society being entirely without charity, what one would see everywhere would be only the forms and outward marks of charity.

Indeed, one would live among self-lovers “as peacefully, safely and comfort-ably as if one were in a republic of saints.” Similarly, Smith argued that:

though among the different members of society there should be no mutual love or affection, the society, though less happy and agreeable, will not necessarily be dissolved. Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection.

Istvan Hont suggests that Smith derived much of his optimism here from Pufendorf’s notion of socialitas. Socialitas was the idea that prior to any sort of social contract, prior to politics (civitas) and its institutional enforcement of positive law, man possessed a natural capacity to reason about how

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58 Butler, Sermons, p. 72. 59 Ibid. 60 Nicole, “Charity,” p. 372. 61 TMS II.i.ii.3.2 (p. 86).

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best to secure his own preservation. What gave this capacity ethical point for Pufendorf was that, unlike the beasts, man concluded that it was most useful to preserve himself by cooperating with other men. Hont suggested that the idea of socialitas finds its earliest expression in the Aristotelian idea that man’s natural condition of need was implicitly a principle of koinónia, of community. Motivated by self-preservation, men came together without a contract, without a political apparatus, to deliberate about how to cooperate with one another.

Similarly for Smith, the most rudimentary form of social existence is inspired not by a “natural love of society” or a “desire that the union of mankind should be preserved for its own sake,” but through an enlightened form of “selfishness.” No one intends it, but society benefits nevertheless through the “unintended consequences” of prudence – what Martin Hollis has called a “cunning of reason.” Smith extended this way of thinking in his discussion of utility in Part IV of the Moral Sentiments. There he invoked his well-known formulation of the “invisible hand” to describe how the “rich” are led without knowledge or intention to benefit the “poor”:

The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and

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64 By conceiving natural cooperation through the medium of utilitarian reason, Pufendorf sought to bridge the monumental gap between Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes. He could admit to a Hobbesian, individualist orientation to human nature, and avoid Grotius’ natural sociality, but still achieve a non-political, non-Hobbesian conclusion about social life. See Hont, “Pufendorf,” pp. 258 and 264. With Hont’s interpretation, however, we almost forget about Pufendorf’s absolutism. Obviously people don’t stay forever for Pufendorf in socialitas. On how to understand Pufendorf’s sociability in the context of his absolutism, see Daniel Gordon, Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociality in French Thought, 1670–1789 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 61–64; and especially Alfred Dufour’s examination of Pufendorf’s “two-fold” social contract in Alfred Dufour, “Pufendorf,” in The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1789, ed. J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 561–588, at pp. 572–579. There, Dufour shows that Pufendorf’s idea of sovereignty involved two distinct historical stages: First, pactum associationis, which corresponds to the utilitarian socialitas Hont described; and second, once men have united and contracted with one another in the first stage to cooperate for mutual preservation, they make a second contract, a “contract of subjection,” which establishes the sovereign. This kind of thinking leads Richard Tuck to doubt Pufendorf’s absolutism in Natural Right Theories, pp. 175–176.

65 TMS II.ii.3.6–10 (pp. 88–90); TMS IV.2.3 (p. 188).

rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They 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 among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.67

Nevertheless, we shouldn’t inflate the “unintended consequences” dimension of Smith’s thought beyond proper bounds. The Moral Sentiments was an extended and rich description of how “Nature” inclines man to cultivate his moral sentiments – not merely an account of how through selfishness he produces social ends without.68 Even the most economistic of Smith’s interpreters cannot deny this. But cold utility was in Smith’s texts too, undeniably, perhaps for those turned callous by commercial life, perhaps as a supplement to moral sentiment when self-love spoke too loudly – a sort of insurance policy implanted in the world by Nature through what Smith often referred to as her benevolent “œconomy.” Butler too seems to have conceived of enlightened self-love as an accommodation to an imperfect world. Instead of condemning utterly “the condition in this world,”69 as a traditional moralist might do, Butler accommodated his ideals to the “present state of things, bad as it is” by seeking out resources for social coordination in the “familiar and daily intercourses among mankind.”70

CONFLICTED SELF

Smith was preoccupied with social order and greatly influenced by Nicole, Butler and Pufendorf on the glue of modern society. The implications of this influence will emerge again and again throughout my interpretation of his thought. And yet, there are problems with reducing Smith to enlightened selfishness, as if he had nothing else to say on the subject of social cooperation. For one thing, it fails to account for Smith’s suspicion of “prudence” as the sole motivation for action, and his outright condemnation of that Mandevillian species of “sophistry” that “deduce[s] all our

67 TMS IV.1.10 (pp. 184–185).
68 Hume, at Enquiry 5.2 (p. 50), argued that “utility … is a foundation of the chief part of our morals.” Smith challenged this idea, especially at TMS II.ii.3.6–12 (pp. 87–91) and IV (pp. 179–193).
69 See Ignatieff, Needs of Strangers, p. 61.
70 Ibid., pp. 60–63.
sentiments from certain refinements of self-love.” Smith from the first page of the *Moral Sentiments*, the Patron Saint of neo-classical economics and rational choice flatly rejected moral systems that conceived of man primarily as his own as a rational calculator of interests. In his discussion of ancient Epicureanism in Chapter VII, for example, Smith distanced himself from any practical morality that reduces human nature to selfishness and grounds practical morality in prudential calculation. There, he associated “prudence” with a spurious Epicurean “temperance.” Since the “whole value of this virtue arose from its utility, from its enabling us to postpone present enjoyment for the sake of a greater to come,” Smith rejected as Epicurean “temperance” was “nothing but prudence with regard to pleasure.” Since “virtue,” according to Smith’s Epicurus, “did not deserve to be pursued for its own sake,” but “was eligible only upon account of its tendency to prevent pain and to procure ease and pleasure” Smith decried Epicureanism as “no doubt, altogether inconsistent with that which I have been endeavouring to establish.”

More striking is the chapter Smith devoted to debunking the “ingenious sophistry” of Mandeville’s “licentious system.” In Smith’s words:

Man, he observes, is naturally much more interested in his own happiness than in that of others, and it is impossible that in his heart he can ever really prefer their prosperity to his own. Whenever he appears to do so, we may be assured that he imposes upon us, and that he is then acting from the same sel

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72 *TMS* VII.i.i.2 (pp. 294–300).

73 *TMS* VII.i.i.2.9 (p. 297).

74 *TMS* VII.i.i.2.17 (pp. 299–300); *TMS* VII.i.2.13 (p. 298). We know, of course, by reading Seneca or Cicero, that Epicurus himself was not regarded by his contemporaries as a theorist of sensual indulgence, but that his thought is often confounded with what became of “Epicureanism.” See for example Seneca, *Letters From a Stoic*, trans. and ed. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin, 1969), IX, p. 53; XVI, p. 65; XXVIII, p. 73. In 1790, Smith’s attack on the Epicurean tendencies of prudence will become far more systematic and severe as he begins to prioritize the Stoic idea of “propriety.”

75 *TMS* VI.i.4 (pp. 306–314).
Conflicted self

is, according to him [Mandeville], a mere cheat and imposition upon mankind; and that human virtue which is so much boasted of, and which is the occasion of so much emulation among men, is the mere offspring of flattery begot upon pride.\textsuperscript{76}

In contrast, Smith asserted that man possesses a drive, a principle “in his nature” that conflicts with his baser, selfish passions, and inclines him toward the happiness of others “though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.”\textsuperscript{77}

It was a common strategy among early modern moral philosophers reflecting on human nature to craft a “middle way” to explain the foundations of society among men without succumbing to Hobbesian egoism or resorting to a sappy and implausible natural benevolence or moral sense. Joseph Butler, for example, attempted to wedge his view of human nature between the mutually obdurate categories of Hobbesian–Mandevillian self-love and Shaftesburian benevolence. He argued in 1726 in \textit{Sermon XII} that the two extremes of “self-love” and “benevolence” actually exist in nature, by God’s design, “in proportion” to one another in the minds and hearts of men – and that “virtue to be sure exists in the due proportion.”\textsuperscript{78} Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s \textit{Second Discourse} (1755) provides another useful example for us here,\textsuperscript{79} since his attempt to “balance” human nature was so well known at the time, and because Smith read Rousseau’s discourse with great care, and wrote a formal reply to Rousseau in the \textit{Edinburgh Review} in 1756, just three years before the publication of his own \textit{Moral Sentiments} in 1759.\textsuperscript{80} Like Butler, Rousseau argued in the \textit{Second Discourse} that the human soul operates in nature, before the cultivation of reason, according to two principles:

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{TMS} VII.ii.4.7 (pp. 308–309). That E. J. Hundert could conclude after reading \textit{TMS} VII.ii.4 (pp. 306–313) that “Smith was never deeply concerned with the tangible licentiousness of Mandeville’s conclusions” is puzzling (Hundert, \textit{Fable}, p. 221).

\textsuperscript{77} Once again, \textit{TMS} I.i.11 (p. 9).

\textsuperscript{78} Butler, \textit{Sermons}, pp. 57–67, at p. 61. One of the few scholars to include Butler in a discussion of Adam Smith’s anti-Hobbesism is Milton Myers in \textit{The Soul of Modern Economic Man}. Despite the book’s many shortcomings, which all seem to stem from its narrow Anglo-centered approach to Smith’s intellectual context, it is useful nevertheless for situating Smith’s anti-Hobbesism in the context of British moral philosophy.


of which one makes us ardently interested in our well-being and our self-preservation, and the other inspires in us a natural repugnance to seeing any sentient being, especially our fellow man, perish or suffer. It is from the conjunction and combination that our mind is in a position to make regarding these two principles, without the need for introducing that of sociability, that all the rules of natural right appear to me to flow.”

Smith agreed. Like Rousseau and Butler, he claimed that “the Deity” had implanted an “œconomy” in nature, endowing men with an “appetite” for both “self preservation and the propagation of the species.” At one point, he referred specifically to these appetites as our “social” and “unsocial” passions, and repeated in several places that they coexist in a certain proportion to one another:

In every part of the universe we observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce; and in the mechanism of a plant, or animal body, admire how every thing is contrived for advancing the two great purposes of nature, the support of the individual and the propagation of the species.

Sometimes, as in this passage, Smith attributed this “œconomy” and balance to the contrivance of “the Deity.” In other places, confirming his affinity with natural theology, he referred to the “adjustments” of “Nature,”

And Nature, indeed, seems to have so happily adjusted our sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, to the conveniency both of the individual and of the society, that after the strictest examination it will be found, I believe, that this is universally the case.

Characterizing human nature as a combination of selfish and social appetites – and referring to that combination as an “œconomy” implanted by the Deity, or as a “Natural” adjustment – it may seem as though Smith argued that our passions for self and society exist naturally in a harmonious relation with one another and require nothing additional from their mortal possessors. A reader attracted to the theme of spontaneous order in Smith’s thought might be inclined to describe the adjustment here as such. But I believe we are mistaken to read Smith in this way. Like Butler, Rousseau and others, Smith placed an imperative on man to strike a practical balance between his “social” and “unsocial” passions. Indeed, the *Moral Sentiments* in its entirety might profitably be read as Smith’s empirical description of

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81 Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, p. 35.  
82 *TMS* II.i.5.10 (p. 77).  
83 *TMS* I.ii.2 (pp. 31–43).  
84 *TMS* II.ii.3.5 (p. 87).  
85 *TMS* IV.2.3 (p. 188).
the very processes through which people learn actively to balance their social and unsocial passions, actively to put them into harmony.

The parallel here with Butler is again illuminating. Reflecting on the presence of both “self-love” and “benevolence” in the human heart, Butler argued that “virtue to be sure exists in the due proportion.” In other words, the burden was placed on man to put his divine gifts in order and to proper use. In the balance of this chapter, I explore what Smith meant when he said that our sentiments are “adjusted to the conveniency both of the individual and of the society,” emphasizing that our “appetites” for each often come into conflict.

I argue that the self was conflicted for Smith, in three related ways – the first two I will address here; the third later in Chapter 4. First and foremost, people were ever struggling to negotiate conflicts that inevitably emerged in life between their selfish and social passions. Second, perhaps less frequently, they struggled to negotiate conflicts that emerged between the objects of their love – between filial obligation and patriotism, to take the classic Sophoclean example, or between patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Third, Smith observed that the self often conflicted with itself – that indeed human judgment and action did not always flow smoothly from steady rational decision in Smith’s thought. What makes Smith’s description of moral life so compelling, so much richer and more complex than the “rational man” reading that dominated for so long, is his psychological sensitivity to ways that the human mind often deludes and destabilizes itself. This is not an insignificant dimension of Smith’s thought for he characterized it as the “source of half the disorders of human life.”

For the moment, however, I would like to supplement the egoistic reading of Smith’s thought with a more “complicated” and textured account of human motivation by discussing the first two sorts of struggle mentioned above: those between self and society; and those between conflicting loves. Later in Chapter 4, we will examine Smith’s thoughts about why the self often deludes and disrupts itself, as well as the various solutions he offered to combat self-disruption.

**SELF AND SOCIETY**

While Smith fully acknowledged the selfish basis of human motivation, and frequently drew upon it to stabilize society in a very rudimentary way, he was also deeply concerned that our natural affections sometimes inspire

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87 *TMS* III.4.6 (p. 158).
judgments and actions that neglect or overtly violate the well-being of those not particularly connected to us. It was therefore one of Smith’s central objectives in the Moral Sentiments to enlarge the perspective of those whose judgments were easily led astray and often blinded by narrow affective entanglements. He illustrated the problem vividly in his famous discussion of the “Chinese earthquake,” through which he attempted to provide some solution to Hume’s troubling assertion that “it is not irrational for me to prefer the destruction of the entire world to the merest scratching of my little finger.” Without explicit reference to Hume’s formulation (surely his readers would have needed no assistance) Smith compared the emotion one would experience over the news that a hundred million Chinese people (read: distant strangers) had been swallowed into the earth in a sudden massive earthquake, with the distress one would experience over the loss of one’s own pinky finger—a great and tragic misfortune to distant strangers, in other words, versus a comparatively small misfortune to oneself. Smith speculated:

He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general. And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquility, as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.

Smith likened the suasion of man’s selfish passions to visual deception. Understanding why we often elevate our selfish needs shamelessly above the needs of others is much like understanding why an untrained eye will passively accept that a distant mountain it observes through a window is in reality smaller than the window through which it is observed. We are

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88 *TMS* III.3.4 (pp. 136–137). I write this in the aftermath of the massive Shandong earthquake of May 2008. Smith’s example leaps from the page, especially as I reflect on the months that have passed since the media have thought it necessary to update us on the well-being of the earthquake victims. The reference to Hume is *Treatise on Human Nature*, II.i.3 (p. 60).

89 *TMS* III.3.4 (pp. 136–137).
sentimentally near-sighted. Our selfish passions tend to delude us into fantastic over-evaluations of ourselves, our own joys and pains, the importance of our place in the world relative to others.⁹⁰

But given this natural propensity passively to elevate our own interests and concerns far above those of others, how can we possibly coexist in a world with others similarly inclined? The problem is sharp enough even in our own homes and communities, but Smith uses the case of distant strangers to illustrate the problem in its purest form. The distant Chinese stranger provided Smith with the most acute example of sufferers his audience would have had no physical, affective, cultural or economic connection with – no compelling reason, in other words, to stimulate concern. So, what is it for Smith that restrains us from sacrificing the well-being of others in order to save our little finger? He asked:

When our passive feelings are almost always so sordid and so selfish, how comes it that our active principles should often be so generous and so noble? When we are always so much more deeply affected by whatever concerns ourselves, than by whatever concerns other men; what is it that prompts the generous, upon all occasions, and the mean upon many, to sacrifice their own interests to the greater interests of others?⁹¹

For Smith the answer lies in man’s conscience:

It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. It is a stronger power, a more forcible motive, which exerts itself upon such occasions. *It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct.* It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration. It is from him only that we learn the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves, and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator.⁹²

For Adam Smith there was something *inside* of us – “reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast,” etc. – that corrects our emotional near-sightedness by confronting us with the ugliness of our self-preference, and stabilizes our moral judgments by reminding us “that we are but one of

the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it.”93 I spend considerable time in this book exploring this internal faculty Smith identified and the ways it was used in his theory to socialize our judgments and actions and to stabilize modern society.

Interesting to note that Smith invoked this “internal tribunal” again when he reflected on how people adjudicate the second sorts of conflict I introduced above: those that emerge between degrees of social commitment. I turn next to this problem of “conflicting loves.”

**CONFLICTING LOVES**

Smith observed that conflicts can arise when our affections are in tension or incompatible – when the claims they exert, or the actions they demand, draw in different directions or draw on finite or indivisible resources. John Rawls articulated the problem well when he observed that “benevolence is at sea as long as its many loves are in opposition in the persons of its many objects.”94 How does an individual in Smith’s theory adjudicate such conflicts, when the claims of friendship collide with those of family, for example, or when family conflicts with country? In such cases, Smith insisted that the abstract priority rules advanced by ancient and modern casuists could provide no assistance: “When those different beneficial affections happen to draw different ways, to determine by any precise rules in what cases we ought to comply with the one, and in what with the other, is, perhaps, altogether impossible.”95 Priority rules in the case of conflicting duties, he claimed, are impossible to accommodate to all the different shades and gradations of circumstance, character, and situation, to differences and distinctions which, though not imperceptible, are, by their nicety and delicacy, often altogether undefinable.96

Rules, for Smith, could not explain why in Voltaire’s *Orphan of China* we admire both Zamti who is “willing to sacrifice the life of his own child, in order to preserve that of the only feeble remnant of his ancient sovereigns and masters” and Idame, his wife, “who claims her infant from the cruel hands of the Tartars, into which it had been delivered.”97

If not by rules how then were conflicting affections and obligations to be negotiated? Charles Larmore observed that Smith’s rejection of casuistic rule-following was accompanied by a claim that such conflicts could be

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93 *TMS* III.3.4 (p. 137).
95 *TMS* VI.ii.1.22 (p. 226).
96 *TMS* VI.ii.1.22 (p. 227).
97 *TMS* VI.ii.1.22 (p. 227).
resolved through the “function of moral judgment.”98 I agree, for here Smith revived his idea of conscience, which figured so prominently earlier in the book (in Part III) in his discussion of self-preference in the Chinese earthquake example. There, we recall, Smith claimed that conscience was the moral faculty through which a person adjudicates conflicts that arise between his self-love and the claims of others, even distant, foreign others. Now, in Part VI, Smith extended this discussion of conscience to conflicts that emerged between degrees of social affection:

In what cases friendship ought to yield to gratitude, or gratitude to friendship; in what cases the strongest of all natural affections ought to yield to a regard for the safety of those superiors upon whose safety often depends that of the whole society; and in what cases natural affection may, without impropriety, prevail over that regard; must be left altogether to the decision of the man within the breast, the supposed impartial spectator, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. If we place ourselves completely in his situation, if we really view ourselves with his eyes, and as he views us, and listen with diligent and reverential attention to what he suggests to us, his voice will never deceive us. We shall stand in need of no casuistic rules to direct our conduct.99

That Smith in this crucial passage appoints conscience the arbiter of conflicting duties, recalls Kant’s discussion of conflicting imperfect duties in the *Metaphysical first principles of the doctrine of virtue*. I would venture to say that Smith came closer to Kant in this passage than in any other in any work. Though many have recognized the transcendental aim of Smithian conscience (even though, as we shall discover in the next chapter, it was formed empirically through the *a posteriori* processes of sociology and psychology,100 even though it wasn’t reason-ordained101), no one to my knowledge has explored the Kantian implications of Smith’s resort to conscience for adjudicating conflicting duties.

To appreciate this, we recall Kant’s idea of imperfect duties. For Kant, a perfect duty is strict, juridical and absolutely binding. The duty to respect others as ends in themselves is universal; it transcends the vicissitudes of context, the contingencies of time and place, categorically. Imperfect duties, on the other hand, such as the duty of active beneficence, are broad and flexible – not in the sense that they permit an agent to make random

99 *TMS* VI.i.2.22 (pp. 226–227), emphasis added.
exceptions to the duty itself, but rather in the sense that context and particular circumstances will bear on the manner in which the duty is to be appropriately fulfilled. This is what is often referred to as the “latitudinarian” character of imperfect duty in Kant’s moral philosophy. It refers to an agent’s permission to limit one maxim of duty by another (e.g. love of one’s neighbor in general by love of one’s parents), by which the field for the practice of virtue is widened.\textsuperscript{102} In his discussion of the need for latitude Kant pointed specifically to cases when duties of beneficence collided. The resolution of such conflicts required a faculty he called “judgment”:

ethics, because of the latitude it allows in its imperfect duties, unavoidably leads to questions that call upon judgment to decide how a maxim is to be applied in particular cases.\textsuperscript{103}

But what exactly was this faculty for Kant? Kant had read Smith’s \textit{Moral Sentiments} just before composing the \textit{Metaphysics}.\textsuperscript{104} Given this, it is stunning that he described this adjudicating faculty as “conscience”; and more specifically, that he captured the dialogical quality of the Smithian impartial spectator when he referred to conscience as “an internal court in the human being,” and “a business of a human being with himself.”\textsuperscript{105} The consonance with Smith is remarkable indeed:

Every human being has a conscience and finds himself observed, threatened, and, in general, kept in awe (respect coupled with fear) by an internal judge; and this authority watching over the law in him is not something that he himself (voluntarily) makes, but something incorporated in his being.\textsuperscript{106}

Of course, Kant’s description of conscience as “incorporated” in a man’s being, as an “original and (since it is the thought of duty) moral predisposition,”\textsuperscript{107} clashes importantly with what we shall discover about the empirical basis of Smithian conscience. But its \textit{functional} parity with Smith’s account of conscience as an internal adjudicator of conflicting duties is significant, given what we know about Kant’s interest in Smith’s book.

We turn in the next two chapters to Smith’s idea of conscience – what it was, where it came from, and how it operated. It is not obvious what


\textsuperscript{103} Kant, \textit{Doctrine of Virtue}, Intro.XVII, 6:411 (p. 538).

\textsuperscript{104} See Fleischacker, “Kant and Adam Smith,” pp. 249–255, for biographical details.

\textsuperscript{105} Kant, \textit{Doctrine of Virtue}, II.i.13, 6:438–440 (pp. 559–562).

\textsuperscript{106} Kant, \textit{Doctrine of Virtue}, II.i.13, 6:438 (p. 560).

\textsuperscript{107} Kant, \textit{ Doctrine of Virtue}, II.i.13, 6:438 (p. 560).
Conflcted self

conscience was for Smith for he referred to it throughout the treatise in a
variety of ways: as “society within,” “the man within,” “the great inmate,”
“the great demigod in our breast,” “reason” and “principle.” These are very
different ways of characterizing conscience, and we are left wondering
which Smith really meant – or the extent to which they might be reconciled
in his thought. What are we to make of Smithian conscience?

We know that Smith was certain about the authority of conscience in
moral judgment and action:

Upon whatever we suppose that our moral faculties are founded, whether upon a
certain modification of reason, upon an original instinct, called a moral sense, or
upon some other principle of our nature, it cannot be doubted, that they were given
us for the direction of our conduct in this life.\textsuperscript{108}

But how did Smith ground man’s moral faculties, certain as they apparently
were to him? Recognizing the authority of conscience is one thing, and in
eighteenth-century British moral philosophy, not a terribly controversial
thing. But, identifying the source of moral knowledge was another question
entirely. What, for Smith, was the source?

\textsuperscript{108} TMS III.5.5 (pp. 164–165).