

SCEPTICISM, RELIGION AND POLITICAL THEORY IN THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT

Richard Gunn

Some years ago, in conversation at the University of Kocaeli (Turkey), I declared that the Scottish Enlightenment did not exist. My friends talked me out of holding – or, at any rate, expressing – such an implausible view. The declaration still strikes me as a tempting one, however. Not only must the thought of the “Scottish Enlightenment” be understood in relation to two previous centuries of theoretical reflection. In addition, theorists of the period must be understood as differing amongst themselves. The “Scottish Enlightenment” is, I still think, a problematic category. Whether or not my suspicions of the category are justified, my points regarding (first) the importance of previous centuries and (second) differences amongst eighteenth-century Scots are illustrated in the present paper.

My paper concerns developments in Scottish political theory during the eighteenth century. More specifically, it is concerned with a revolution in political theory brought about by David Hume and Adam Smith. The paper approaches Hume and Smith in an indirect fashion, commenting on Scottish thought during what may be referred to as the reformation-to-enlightenment period, because it is important to understand the intellectual situation which theorists of mid-eighteenth century Scotland faced.

Section 1 of my paper gives a brief overview (a “thumbnail sketch”) of my picture of issues in Scottish intellectual history. The aim of the section is to help a reader/listener not to become lost in a wood consisting of what may (in part) consist of unfamiliar trees. Sections 2 and 3 add some all-too-selective detail to the general comments which section 1 contains. Section 4 turns directly to Hume, indicating the sense in which his work may be said to undermine the natural law tradition. Section 5 asks whether Hume supplies convincing answers to the demon of scepticism which his work had re-invigorated and unleashed. The final sections of my paper (sections 6 to 8) shift the focus of attention from Hume to the Smith of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: there, I suggest, Smith presents a conception of human interaction which makes no reference to natural law and which shows how – in a thoroughly secular fashion – Humean scepticism may be overcome. So to say, a heretically-interpreted Smith is the “hero” of the discussion that my paper presents.

1. *Historical overview*

The situation confronted by Scottish theorists of the mid-eighteenth century was one where *issues concerning religion* and *issues concerning scepticism* held an important place. An account of such issues can take as its starting point 1560, the year when the protestant Reformation became victorious in Scotland.

The course of intellectual history in Scotland up to and including the Scottish Enlightenment becomes intelligible when the nature of the protestantism introduced in 1560 is understood. The Scottish Reformation was, above all else, a Calvinist reformation – which is to say that the combination of dogma and scepticism which characterised John Calvin's theology entered deeply, and lastingly, into Scottish thought. The entrance of Calvinist attitudes into Scotland had a profound impact on the development of political theory: in the decades immediately following 1560, the notion of *natural law* was all but debarred from consideration. (In the history of ideas, natural law was conventionally seen as identifiable by *natural and human reason* – and a strongly-held Calvinism, for which the world was steeped in sin, viewed human and natural reason with scepticism and distrust.) Only in the closing years of the seventeenth century, and in the opening decades of the eighteenth, did changes in Calvinism allow the modern natural law tradition to establish itself in Scottish universities. When natural law did succeed in establishing itself, religious considerations remained fundamental (natural law was seen as deriving its authority from God). And sceptical reservations were never far wawy.

In 1739-40, Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* appeared. Although the book does not polemicize directly against natural law, and although Hume was later to complain that few people followed his arguments, a twentieth or twenty-first century reader can be in little doubt that the *Treatise* attacked from a sceptical standpoint the basis of religiously-oriented natural law theorising. A reader of the work who is persuaded by Hume's arguments finds him or herself confronting a scene where rubble and destruction has replaced the the conceptual edifice of natural law. Stated differently, such a reader confronts what Max Weber described as a disenchanted world.

A note to this summary of Hume's critical achievement may be added. The note acknowledges a puzzle. Throughout his life, Hume was an opponent of Calvinism – and yet it was Calvinists who, in the years following 1560, counted as natural law's most deeply-entrenched foes. For Calvinists and for Hume alike, the claims of natural reason were open to question. How, in terms of the history of ideas, may we account for this similarity – indeed, for this co-incidence – of views? An explanation may lie, I suggest, in the circumstance that European scepticism took, in the course of its lengthy history, religious as well as anti-religious forms.¹ When scepticism was

1 In my comments on European scepticism, I draw (loosely) on R.H. Popkin *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus*

religious, it generally advocated “fideism” – or, in other words, appeal *from* a natural reason which was seen as riddled by doubt *to* the superior certainties of faith. Calvin, I shall propose in a moment, was “fideist” and a sceptic in the religious sense. When Hume, in his *Treatise*, theorised in a sceptical manner this was not, therefore, scepticism's first appearance in Scotland; on the contrary, the Calvinism introduced into Scotland in 1560 already prepared Humean scepticism's way. Stating the point differently: it would be wrong to think of Hume's scepticism as coming out of nowhere. What happened in 1739-40 was that scepticism in Scotland shifted its viewpoint from a position *inside religion looking out* to a position *outside religion looking in*.

Whatever may be the background in the history of ideas to Humean scepticism, a question arises – and arose, historically – about how its challenge might be met. A number of Scottish theorists attempted to meet the challenge. Amongst them was, I propose, Hume's close friend Adam Smith.

Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the first edition of which appeared in 1759, may be regarded as a work which provides fresh orientation in a world where (following Humean critique) disenchantment rules. That is to say, Smith responds to Hume not by projecting a return to pre-sceptical innocence but by accepting that previously-taken-for-granted conceptual landmarks – natural law, for example, and godly purpose – are not to be found. In such a world, Smith asks, how may we proceed? His answer is that we may proceed by interacting with one another: at the core of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments'* argument there lies a conception of human interaction as a mode of human activity through which normative – and, indeed, cognitive – foundations may be laid. The line of argument which the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* opens is, I suggest, one which leads European thought away from natural law and towards a focus on social relations.

2. Calvin and Scottish thought

To understand Scottish thought is to understand the theology of the protestant reformer John Calvin (1509-64). In 1560, the year of the Scottish Reformation, Calvin and Calvinism entered the mainstream of Scottish culture – and, for close on two hundred years, theoretical and practical issues tended to be seen through a Calvinist lens. There is an irony in this. The Calvin whom the Scottish Reformers prized was, on the whole, the Calvin who preached god-given faith and, as part of faith, doctrinal certainty; but Calvin as a writer was a complex figure, for whom dogmatic or doctrinal issues (on the one hand) and issues raised by currents of European sceptical thought (on the other) were closely intertwined. When, in 1560, Calvin-the-dogmatist was imported into Scottish culture, Calvin-the-sceptic was (wittingly or unwittingly) attached. Whatever might be the confident pretensions of

Scottish Calvinism, scepticism was established at its core.

Let me explain – in the first place, about Calvin's own writings. The broad framework of argument in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is one where humankind is Fallen and sinful and destined for hell, but where God (who is not merely just but merciful) makes to some individuals the gift of faith. The sins of such individuals are forgiven – their faith is a “saving” faith – and they alone are destined for heaven. Calvin is emphatic that, in this (Fallen) world, no action that we can perform – and no thought that we can think – is sufficiently sinless to merit salvation; whether or not the gift of faith and salvation is extended to us depends on God's inscrutable choice. How, in the history of ideas, is this body of argument to be understood?

It may, I suggest, be understood as an instance of an argument that became common in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries amongst sceptical and, so to say, scepticism-influenced thinkers. The argument, which is characteristic of a “fideist” position, is to the effect that human and natural reason is so vulnerable to objection that only a turn to the notion of god-given faith holds out hope. If Calvin's image of a sinful world is seen as coinciding with (or including) scepticism's image of human reason's unreliability, the arguments of Calvinist theology and of fideism map on to one another. Is there justification, in Calvin's writings, for relating his work to the sceptical tradition? I think there is. In his *Concerning Scandals* (1550), he shows himself to be familiar with sceptical writers (including Rabelais and Agrippa);² his view is that individuals troubled by 'scandals' – including the scandal of scepticism – need only 'look within themselves' and reflect on their wretchedness before God.³ In his *Institutes*, he sees sin as entering the world not through sexual indulgence but through the devil's entanglement of Eve in what are in effect sceptical arguments.⁴ As though to confirm the line of interpretation here sketched, no less a sceptic (and fideist) than Pierre Bayle quotes Calvin as endorsing scepticism where human reason is concerned.⁵

Does Calvin consistently maintain the position here ascribed to him? My response is that he does although, perhaps inevitably, his position shows signs of stress. According to fideism, faith is the god-given solution to problems which human and natural reason must face. For Calvin, however, the line between *problems* and their *solutions* becomes indistinct, and sceptical worries enter into faith itself. Even an assured faith is, Calvin tells us, affected by doubt and anxiety; believers 'have a perpetual struggle with their own distrust'.⁶ Since the possession of a god-given faith is necessary to an individual's salvation, the doubts and anxieties (the scepticism-inspired torments) that are intrinsic to faith *per se* are clearly of a painful kind. From

2 J. Calvin *Concerning Scandals* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press 1978) p. 61; the passage is quoted and discussed in B. Gordon *Calvin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2011) p. 195.

3 Ibid. p. 20.

4 J. Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1989), Vol. 1, pp. 212-3.

5 P. Bayle *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett 1991) pp. 206-7. The passage quoted by Bayle occurs in J. Calvin *Writings on Pastoral Piety* (New York: Paulist Press 2001) p. 153.

6 *Institutes*, Vol. 1, p. 484; see also p. 501.

this inner pain, Calvinism's fascination with the doctrine of assurance was borne.

Standing back from my sketch of Calvin's theology, I turn to the question of how much of Calvin survived (in 1560) transposition on to Scottish soil. To what extent, in particular, did the strand in Calvin associated with scepticism reappear in a Scottish guise?

My suggestion is that the strand associated with scepticism survived, and did so in a vivid form. For a Calvinist, the issue around which sceptical thought clusters is that of whether the individual's faith is god-given and thereby "real". In Scottish thought in the post-1560 period, expressions of *angst* regarding doubt and faith's authenticity are widespread. For example Robert Bruce, preaching in Edinburgh in 1589, drew his listeners' attention to 'the terrible doubt, the strange pits of desperation, into which the dearest servants of God are cast ' and declared that 'doubt and faith are not directly opposed'.⁷ John Welch (sometime minister at Ayr, and John Knox's son-in-law) preached that 'faith is mixed with doubting'⁸ and is so for as long as the Child of God 'lives in this world'.⁹ Welch articulates worry about faith's authenticity – 'But how can ye know if your worship be in sincerity and truth?'¹⁰ – and frequently raises the issue of assurance. More than a century later, Thomas Halyburton, professor of divinity at St Andrews, recounted a number of episodes in his early life when he was 'brought into a doubt about the truths of religion'.¹¹ Such passages do not, to be sure, approach the detached and seemingly unconcerned tone in which – say, from Hume onwards – a sceptical viewpoint is frequently expressed. However, they tap directly in to the gnawing and compulsive questioning and self-questioning which is scepticism's darker side.

3. *Natural law and Scottish thought*

I have suggested that much in Scottish thought falls into place only when its relation to Calvin's theology is considered. The present section of my paper proposes that Scotland's reception of the modern natural law tradition bears out this claim.

In Calvin's own writings, the position of natural law is ambiguous. On the one hand, the *Institutes* argue that 'ancient [i.e. Classical] lawgivers' – and, more generally, 'men whom the Scriptures termed natural' – retained (despite the Fall) sufficient acuity and clear-sightedness to see how human affairs and civil order should be arranged.¹² The place in Calvin's theology to a notion of natural law seems assured. Elsewhere in the

7 T.F. Torrance, ed., *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper: Sermons on the Sacrament preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh by Robert Bruce in A.D. 1589* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House 2005) pp. 201-3.

8 J. Welch *Forty Eight Select Sermons* (Edinburgh 1744) p. 175; see, similarly, p. 215.

9 *Ibid.* p. 42.

10 *Ibid.* p. 188; see also p. 90.

11 T. Halyburton *Memoirs of the Life of Mr. Thomas Halyburton* (Edinburgh 1714) pp. 26-7, 41-4, 52-5. (The quoted passage is on p. 26.)

12 Calvin *Institutes*, Vol. 1, p. 236.

same work, however, the emphasis falls on the extent to which the image of God in his creation is (through the Fall) damaged almost beyond recognition; the natural and human order of things is, without remainder, sodden with sin.¹³ If this emphasis is characteristic of the “true” Calvin – or if, stated differently, the sceptical strand in Calvin's thought is thoroughgoing – no foothold for natural law in the edifice of Calvinist theology remains. Sin has so polluted nature, and scepticism has so undermined reason, that the notion of a *nature which counts as rational* or a *reason which counts as natural* – the notion which underpins natural law theory – becomes impossible to maintain.

In protestant Scotland, between 1560 and the closing years of the seventeenth century, a fundamentally Calvinist (or Calvin-inspired) hostility towards the claims of natural reason prevailed. As part of this hostility – or suspicion, or scepticism – the notion of natural law was unable to put down deep and lasting cultural roots. The notion was, indeed, appealed to by a diverse range of theorists. George Buchanan, for example, expressed the view that God implanted in human nature a 'law of nature' which allowed man to 'distinguish base from noble things'.¹⁴ King James VI referred to 'the law of nature' as one of three headings under which the obligations of king and people might be discussed.¹⁵ Thomas Craig (writing in 1603) maintained that the law of nature was a component of Scottish law.¹⁶ In 1638, William Drummond of Hawthornden followed James in referring to the 'Law of God and Nature imposed on princes [or kings]'.¹⁷ Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex* of 1644 combined appeals to the Bible with natural law views and urged that 'the Scripture's arguments may well be drawn out of the school of nature'.¹⁸ Such appeals notwithstanding, it remains the case that Scotland as a newly Calvinist country was unreceptive to the notion of a political theory couched in terms of natural law. A striking historical circumstance is that the main debate in Scottish politics and Scottish political theory during most of the seventeenth century – I refer to the debate between a Stewart divine-right theory of monarchy and a Presbyterian promise-based or covenant-based account of sacred and secular accountability – was one in which the notion of natural law played little part. James, the chief proponent of divine-right theory, saw a king's authority as resting, ultimately, on a supernatural rather than a merely natural foundation; and the Presbyterians rested their claims on the human speech act of collective promising.¹⁹ It is as though, during most of the seventeenth century, the natural realm (to which natural law centrally refers) is merely the no-man's-land across which supporters of the Stewart and Presbyterian causes exchanged fire.

Only in the later decades of the seventeenth century did the modern natural law

13 For passages relevant to this issue, see *Institutes*, Vol. 1, pp. 233-6, 292-3. In secondary literature on Calvin, which I do not cite here, questions about Calvin's relation to natural law are widely debated.

14 G. Buchanan *A Dialogue on the Law of Kingship among the Scots* (Edinburgh: Saltire Society 2006) p. 49.

15 James I and VI *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994) p. 64.

16 T. Craig of Riccarton *The Jus Feudale* (Edinburgh and London: William Hodge 1934) pp. 105-6.

17 W. Drummond *Poems and Prose* (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press 1976) p. 180.

18 S. Rutherford *Lex, Rex* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications 1982) p. 3.

19 There is, of course, more – much more – to say about both sides of this protracted debate. However, I do not attempt to say it here.

tradition come of age in Scotland. In part, this coming-to-age took part because Scots seeking education in the Netherlands came in contact with the natural law tradition;²⁰ in part, it stemmed from political changes and changes in Scottish universities.²¹ Besides these considerations, however, the new situation was made possible by a circumstance which forms part of the story that I have been tracing: Calvinism made its peace with the notion of natural law (and *vice versa*). An early sign of this peace comes in James Dalrymple's (Viscount Stair's) 1693 observation that, although 'sin and evil custom' had 'much defaced' natural law, 'God in his goodness hath given man more radiant rays of reason and preserved it more after his fall, about his rights of *meum* and *tuum*, than in any other science or knowledge'.²² A somewhat later sign is Gershom Carmichael's view of natural law as resting on natural theology.²³

In the present connection, the notion of natural theology needs a word of explanation. By "natural theology", I understand such knowledge of the attributes of God as is available through human and natural reason alone. As indicated above, Calvin regarded the world subsequent to the Fall of man as a realm where God's image is unrecognizable (other than through the eyes of god-given faith) and where, without remainder, sin and scepticism rule. One consequence of such a perspective is that natural law becomes problematic; another is that natural theology is rendered – in William J. Bouwsma's words – 'virtually impossible'.²⁴ When Carmichael proposes that natural law may be defended on the basis of natural theology, he is resting his case on a confidence that 'men are still in a state of probation and have not yet been thrust into the eternal abyss while they live on earth'.²⁵ In doing so, he orients his thinking less towards Calvin himself, with his an agonised perception of a world drowning in sin, than towards a generation of Calvinists with included the so-called Reformed Scholastics.²⁶ In sum: natural law established itself in Scotland when, and only when, Calvinism relaxed its view of natural theology as problematic and adopted a (relatively) more favourable view of the human and natural world.²⁷ Once

20 See J.W. Cairns 'Importing Our Lawyers from Holland: Netherlands Influence on Scots Law and Lawyers in the Eighteenth Century' in G.G. Simpson, ed., *Scotland and the Low Countries 1124-1994* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press 1996) pp. 136-53; also his 'Legal Theory' in A. Broadie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) esp. pp. 226-8. On the (subsequently) best known of the Scottish students abroad, see K. Van Strien and M. Ahsmann 'Scottish Law Students in Leiden at the End of the Seventeenth Century: The Correspondence of John Clerk, 1694-1697' *Lais Nos.* 19 and 20 (1993 and 1994). Also J. Clerk *Memoirs of the Life of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society 1892) pp. 12-9.

21 See J.W. Cairns 'The First Edinburgh Chair in Law: Grotius and the Scottish Enlightenment' (<http://law.ed.ac.uk>).

22 James, Viscount Stair *Institutions of the Law of Scotland* (Edinburgh and Glasgow: University Presses of Edinburgh and Glasgow 1981) pp. 77, 89.

23 See J. Moore and M. Silverthorne, eds., *Natural Law on the Threshold of the Scottish Enlightenment: The Writings of Gershom Carmichael* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2002) pp. 24, 30-1 and (especially) 229-31.

24 W.J. Bouwsma *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989) p. 154. See, however, pp. 102ff. Bouwsma acknowledges that, in raising questions about Calvin's attitude to natural theology, he is 'touching...on a much-disputed question' (p. 262).

25 *Threshold* p. 48.

26 *Ibid* p. 229. On the Reformed Scholastics, see J. Moore 'The Two Systems of Francis Hutcheson: On the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment' in M.A. Stewart, ed., *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1990) pp. 39-40; S.J. Grabill *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2006) chs. 4-6.

27 In Scotland, doubts regarding natural theology continued to be expressed throughout most of the eighteenth century: see J.R. McIntosh *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740-1800* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press 1998) p. 36. When Adam Smith lectured in Glasgow in the 1750s, he faced criticism that his

natural theology was accepted as a basis, natural law might indeed put down roots in Scottish culture. What is striking is that its justificatory arguments continued to take a religious turn.

I end the present section by noting the extent to which Scottish eighteenth-century natural law theory rested upon religious – and, indeed, natural-theological – ideas. For Francis Hutcheson, the notions of right and wrong derive 'from the very structure of our nature', this structure being one which 'exhibits clear evidence of the will of God'.²⁸ It was, we are assured, 'God our Creator' who 'implanted this sense of right and wrong in our souls'.²⁹ Hutcheson's posthumously published *System of Moral Philosophy* declares, before unfolding a doctrine of natural law in detail, that '*The ORIGINAL MIND is benevolent*':³⁰ a reader is encouraged to see the alleged appropriateness and fittingness of arrangements in nature as evidence that a creator-God exists. The notion of a law of nature makes sense, in other words, because notions of final causality and teleology, as instanced in God's benevolence, point to something real. The line of argument, which is in effect a restatement of a line of thought in natural theology, was far from unique to Hutcheson. George Turnbull, for example, grounds natural law in the 'benevolence and rational government' of 'an all-perfect Maker and Governer of the universe'³¹ and Adam Ferguson – writing, it may be noted, as late as 1768 (and thereby after Hume's critique) – describes 'final causes' as 'the language in which the existence of God is revealed to man'.³² David Fate Norton has sharpened our focus on the line of thought just indicated by pointing to what he terms 'Providential Naturalism'³³ as the key doctrine which Hume opposed but which numerous eighteenth-century Scottish theorists tended to endorse.³⁴

4. *Hume's critique*

Into the polite consensus regarding natural law which was emerging in Scottish universities, David Hume hurled a thunderbolt. Although, in Hume's own judgement,

'speculations on natural religion' flattered 'human pride' and encouraged the view that 'the great truths of theology...may be discovered by the light of nature without any special revelation': John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, quoted in I.S. Ross *The Life of Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995) p. 118. See G. Kennedy at <http://adamsmithslostlegacy.blogspot.com>.

28 F. Hutcheson *Philosophiae Moralis Institutio Compendiaria and A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2007) p. 103.

29 *Ibid.* p. 105.

30 F. Hutcheson *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London: Continuum 2005), Vol. 1, pp. 175-89.

31 G. Turnbull 'A Discourse upon the Nature and Origin of Moral and Civil Laws' in J.G. Heineccius *A Methodical System of Universal Law* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2008) p. 609.

32 A. Ferguson *Institutes of Moral Philosophy For the use of Students in the College of EDINBURGH* [Kessinger reprint] (Edinburgh 1768) p. 118.

33 Providential naturalism as understood by Norton is the view that, because the furniture or structure of our minds is created by a beneficent God, we may appeal to our common sense (or to what seems to us natural) as a basis for moral judgement.

34 D.F. Norton *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralism, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1982) pp. 19, 152-91.

the *Treatise of Human Nature* 'fell dead-born from the press'³⁵ and reached few readers, its arguments addressed fundamental issues on which natural law theory had come to rely. My discussion in previous sections has sketched the story in which, I consider, Hume's theorising is a dramatic chapter; my hope is that a reader who has followed me thus far has a sense of the situation in which the *Treatise* intervenes.

My further hope is that a reader will agree that the arguments of the *Treatise* are, indeed, directed against natural law. This hope is based, in part, on my preceding argument: so to speak, natural law as understood by the Scots is an apple which has ripened and is ready to be struck from its branch. In part, however, my hope is based on textual or interpretative considerations and to these I now turn.

An unmistakable sign that, in Hume's view, all is not well in natural law theory comes in Book III of the *Treatise* – the Book devoted to moral topics – where 'justice' is said to be an 'artificial' (rather than a straightforwardly 'natural') virtue.³⁶ No doubt much can be said for and against the claim that justice has an 'artificial' status but, for us, the key circumstance is that Hume's declaration opposes the notion that justice is to be found inscribed in the natural order of things. Hume's position is not merely, we may note, that nature needs, if it is to be just, an artificial complement. It is that justice is *solely* and *without remainder* artificial: it rests on a foundation of what the *Essays* term 'sensible utility'.³⁷ For Hume, justice rests on social 'convention';³⁸ and, if the conventions may be dubbed *natural*, this can only be in the sense that 'obvious and absolutely necessary' inventions made by mankind as 'an inventive species' count as natural for their part.³⁹ When the term *natural* is employed in relation to the rules of justice, it signifies (in Hume's view) not an unchanging order of things but what is decided upon, and held necessary, by a species of an inventive kind.

Perhaps, by dwelling on the notion of 'obvious and absolutely necessary' inventions, a reader of *Treatise* Book III might succeed in rooting Hume's 'artificial' conception of justice in a cosmologically natural order of things. Perhaps, in other words, the arguments of Book III *refine upon*, rather than *undermine*, the natural law tradition. To a reader who is tempted by such an interpretation, I reply with advice: turn to *Treatise* Book I, where the argument is more bitter. There, Hume unfolds a position which can be presented in two stages. First, he disallows appeal to final causality (and to God). And, second, he disallows appeals to natural order. I comment briefly on each step.

(i) According to Hume, 'all causes are of the same kind' ; 'there is no foundation for that distinction, which we sometimes make...betwixt efficient causes, and formal, and

35 D. Hume 'My Own Life' in his *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1987) p. xxxiv.

36 D. Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978) p. 483.

37 Hume *Essays* p. 469. The phrase 'sensible utility' (which Hume does not explain) refers, I take it, to the view that rules are binding when two conditions are met: first, the rules must be socially useful and, second, they must be *felt to be useful* by individuals.

38 *Treatise* p. 489.

39 *Ibid.* p. 484.

material, and exemplary, and final causes'.⁴⁰ A declaration that *there is only one sort of cause* is not, to be sure, the same as a declaration that *only efficient causality exists* – and yet something like this appears to be what Hume has in mind. The quoted passage continues by explaining that 'our idea of causality is derived from the constant conjunction of two objects' and that, wherever this is observed, 'the cause is efficient' (ibid.). Hume's meaning appears to be that, when we employ the idea of causality, we think in causal and sequential (and thereby “effecient”) terms. However this may be, what is for us striking about the passage just quoted from is that the notion of 'final' or teleological causality is hurled to the winds. If the doctrine taught in the passage is accepted, there can never again be reference to the notion of God's purpose in fashioning nature or, indeed, the furniture or structure – see note 33, above – of human minds. There can never again be teleologically-phrased proofs of God's (presumably benevolent) existence, and the pious and elaborate construction on which Hutcheson *et. al* based natural law is, conceptually speaking, swept away.

Are we reading too much that is polemical into an admittedly technical argument? There is evidence that Hume was aware of the importance of issues at stake. In 1739, he sent Hutcheson a manuscript copy of *Treatise* Book III; in the exchange of letters which ensued, he declared that Hutcheson's view of nature was 'founded on final Causes' and thereby appeared 'pretty uncertain and philosophical'. It appeared uncertain, Hume went on to explain, because there is no way to decide whether (for example) man is made 'for himself or for his Maker'.⁴¹ The letter helped Hume lose an potential academic patron.

(ii) The second line of argument which I wish to emphasise likewise turns on how causality is to be seen. A central argument of the *Treatise* is that a 'connexion betwixt causes and effects' is, however seemingly 'necessary', rooted in an experience of constant conjunction; in general, 'necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects'.⁴² Elsewhere, and to the same general effect, Hume states that 'the notion of substance is wholly confused and imperfect'.⁴³ In Hume's view there is, in short, no potency and no principle of order that inheres in nature or in being or in things-in-themselves. The notion of a natural order – or an order *in nature* (understanding the term 'in' in a logically strong sense) – is without basis, and is close to being a category mistake. It is a mistake because nature or being is not the kind of thing that can *have* an intrinsic order. Hume is willing to push this line of argument to its limits and argue that the notion of an order in nature is mistaken because “nature” (in the conventional eighteenth-century meaning of the term) does not exist.

A striking implication of the passages quoted and the line of thought which they suggest is, once again, that the ground is pulled from underneath natural law's feet. In general terms, this implication is clear but in order to understand it more exactly two

40 Ibid. p. 171.

41 Hume, letter to Hutcheson c. September 1739, as quoted in E.C. Mossner *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1980) p. 135.

42 *Treatise* p. 165; cf. pp. 155, 266.

43 *Essays* p. 591.

points must be added. The first is that the order which Hume opposes is not merely *causal* order but order of any allegedly 'necessary' kind. His argument is not that natural laws are causal laws, and thereby open to objection. It is that *any* law which imputes necessity to 'objects' or 'substance' or being or nature rests on an error. The second point concerns the scope of Hume's discussion. Given what has been said under heading (ii), above, the arguments of the *Treatise* must be seen as attacking not merely *doctrines of natural law which rest on a religious foundation* – this was Hume's target in passages discussed under heading (i) – but broader doctrines of natural law which see norms and values as inscribed in nature *per se*. If such more general doctrines are in the *Treatise's* firing line then, of course, interesting and challenging questions arise. Can a doctrine of natural law appeal to a natural order of things *without* introducing a religious perspective? Can a doctrine of natural law be formulated without appealing to the notion of natural order? My feeling is that both questions must, in the last resort, be answered negatively; but I do not argue for the suggested negative answers here.

Standing back from what has been said about Hume's arguments in the *Treatise*, two observations may be made. One is specific: my comments are in accordance with Norton's judgement that Hume opposes 'Providential Naturalism'. Books I and II of the *Treatise* go out of their way, we may note, to undermine the notion of a divinely-provided mental structure or furniture on which – see note 33, above – providential naturalism relies.⁴⁴ The other is more general. Where, in the history of ideas, does Hume's scepticism regarding natural law come from? One possible answer to this question is to point to sceptical strands which had emerged in the natural law tradition.⁴⁵ Another is to stress Hume's place in the European sceptical tradition which was epitomised in Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Scepticism* and restated, in the 1690s, by the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* of Pierre Bayle.⁴⁶ Both answers are valid. To them, and compatibly with them, the present paper adds a third. The arguments of the *Treatise* can be seen as renewing a sceptical tone of voice which entered Scottish thought not after, but during, its Calvinist days.

Viewed in a history-of-ideas perspective, Hume articulates a scepticism regarding nature and the claims of human reason which had prevailed in Scotland before natural law orthodoxy tightened its grip.

44 Thomas Reid, for, example, feels the force of (and deplores) Hume's mockery of providential naturalism when he writes: 'if it [the mind] is indeed what the *Treatise of human nature* makes of it, I find I have only been in an enchanted castle, imposed upon by spectres and apparitions. I blush inwardly to think how I have been deluded; I am ashamed of my frame, and can hardly forbear expostulating with my destiny: Is this thy pastime, O Nature, to put such tricks upon a silly creature, and then to take off the mask, and show him how he hath been befooled? If this is the philosophy of human nature, my soul enter thou not into her secrets' – T. Reid *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000) p. 22. Cf. D. Miller *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981) pp. 35-6.

45 See J. Moore 'Natural Law and the Pyrrhonian Controversy' in P. Jones, ed., *Philosophy and Science in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: John Donald 1988).

46 See R.H. Popkin 'Sources of Knowledge of Sextus Empiricus in Hume's Time' *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 54, No. 1 (1993). See, too, Hume's letter to Michael Ramsay of Mungale of 26 August 1737 (quoted in Mossner *Life* p. 104) where 'the more metaphysical Articles of Bailes Dictionary' are mentioned as useful preparation for a reading of what became the *Treatise*.

5. Hume's solutions

Where do the arguments of Hume's *Treatise* leave us? Taken together, the statements gathered under headings (i) and (ii) require their reader to accept that he or she lives and makes choices in a demystified world. By a demystified world I understand one where norms and values are not inscribed in the order of things.⁴⁷ So to say, Hume's critique throws human action and choice-making back upon itself.

How does Hume respond to the crisis in human affairs – to be sure, we should say the *potential* crisis in human affairs – which the *Treatise's* scepticism has unleashed? At different places in his work, three lines of argument are attempted – but with dubious success.

(a) In his *Treatise*, Hume – as reported earlier – rests the notion of justice on the conventions which are entered into in order to enable social life.⁴⁸ The conventions belong in the realm of 'artifice', rather than 'nature', but are not *promises* (as social contract theory assumed was the case).⁴⁹ Illustrating the idea of an agreement which emerges 'without the interposition of a promise', Hume refers to 'two men, who pull the oars of a boat': such men, he suggests, 'do it by an agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other'.⁵⁰ Might rules of justice come into being through a process such as is here imagined? Conservative commentators on Hume have found the scenario attractive, because the notion of non-promissory agreement may be broadened out chronologically through notions of custom and gradualism; but, if the example of the two men in a boat is taken literally, a question remains about who first dips an oar in the water and attempts a provisional stroke.

(b) In his *Essays*, Hume attempts a line of argument which departs more drastically from notions current in the natural law tradition and sets out to turn scepticism against itself. The line of argument proceeds by identifying (or attempting to identify) a secular parallel of scepticism's (and Calvin's) notion of faith as god-given: just as fideist versions of scepticism construe faith as a helping hand extended to humans floundering amid sin and scepticism, so Hume construes society as containing mechanisms which operate successfully regardless of what individuals who operate the mechanisms choose or think. Two examples of such mechanisms are given. One is the eighteenth-century British party system, which works best (Hume considers) when prised away from notions of 'WHIG' and 'TORY' identity and allowed to

47 This may be *either* because 'things' exist but do not contain norms or values *or* because there are no 'things'. Since both views entail demystification, I do not discuss the difference between them here.

48 See note 38, above.

49 One reason for Hume's rejection of founding promises may be presbyterianism's favouring of political theory where ideas of contracting or covenanting held a central place.

50 *Treatise* p. 490. See, similarly, D. Hume *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1963) p. 306.

function in a way where self-interest has free reign.⁵¹ The other is the emerging eighteenth-century market economy, where rich countries unintentionally help poor countries through investment (the attraction being cheap labour)⁵² and where 'a government...may safely trust to the course of human affairs' as long as barriers to trade are removed.⁵³ Evidently, numerous readers of Hume have been willing to offer the 'trust' which the *Essays* advocate. However, a traditional Calvinist might be quick to point out that faith in God (who is seen as good by definition) and trust in a wayward world are very different. And a secular reader who is unimpressed by claims of political economy may protest that, far from overcoming scepticism, essays such as 'Of Money' and 'Of the Balance of Trade' (referred to a moment ago) merely whistle into the wind.

(c) It is, I suggest, time to remind ourselves that Hume's essays are just that: by an *essay*, Hume understands an 'essay [attempt, endeavour] or trial'.⁵⁴ It is, indeed, sometimes difficult to be certain whether Hume endorses the views that his *Essays* express – as when 'Of the Balance of Power' tells us that free trade is what the 'Author of the world' intends.⁵⁵ This caution notwithstanding, however, a further line of thought in the *Essays* may be noted. In his 'Of Essay-Writing', Hume proposes that the 'elegant Part of Mankind' may be 'divided between the *learned* and the *conversible*'; he regrets, he says, the division and hopes that a 'League betwixt the learned and conversible Worlds' may be furthered.⁵⁶ The *Essays*, we are told, attempt such a furtherance. The line of thought is of interest in that it echoes the famous passage towards the end of *Treatise* Book I where Hume contrasts the pleasures of social life wherein 'I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends' with the sceptical 'melancholy and delirium' which prevails when he is alone in his study.⁵⁷ An acceptable life is, the *Treatise* suggests, one where the sceptically troubled intellectual oscillates between study and parlour just as, according to the *Essays*, a writer such as Hume oscillates between learned and conversible realms. The "oscillation" view is, we may note, developed in various directions elsewhere in Hume's writings.⁵⁸ Although it is not in itself an attempt to overcome scepticism it is of interest, not least because in more recent letters a striking parallel obtains.⁵⁹

51 *Essays* pp. 70-2.

52 *Ibid.* pp. 286-7.

53 *Ibid.* p. 326.

54 *Ibid.* p. 507; see editor's glossary p. 659.

55 *Ibid.* p. 324. If Hume's opposition to final causality is taken seriously then, of course, appeals to the notion of an 'Author of the world' are out of line.

56 *Ibid.* pp. 533, 535.

57 *Treatise* p. 269.

58 Elsewhere in the *Essays*, it is proposed that the study of history 'keeps in a just medium' studious and sociable 'extremes' (*Essays* p. 568). In his work on natural religion, dialogue is said to unite the pleasures of 'study and society' – especially in regard to topics where 'doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction' prevail: D. Hume *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1990) p. 38.

59 I am thinking of the view of truth (in the lifeworld and in discourse) presented by Habermas in his later writings: see J. Habermas *Truth and Justification* pp. 39-42, 250-4.

6. Adam Smith and interaction

Scottish thought in the latter half of the eighteenth century responded to Humean scepticism in part with outrage and in part with a mixture of caution and incomprehension. Amongst those who responded cautiously, a restatement of providential naturalism or teleologism – a restatement mediated through notions of history and/or common sense – was frequently seen as sufficient.⁶⁰ In the writings of Hume's friend Adam Smith, everything is (so I suggest) different. Smith, as a theorist, makes no attempt to return to the days of providential naturalism or, indeed, natural law. He makes no attempt to resurrect a *status quo ante* which may or may not have obtained in pre-*Treatise* days. On the contrary, he argues in a manner compatible with demystification and (to borrow Weber's term again) disenchantment. The remainder of my paper proposes that Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* may be read as a work which attempts to answer Hume in Hume's own terms.

My proposal is that the conception of human interaction which lies at the centre of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (henceforth *TMS*) supplies a foundation on which Humean scepticism can be answered. At the same time, it is a conceptual base-camp which lies beyond the limits of the natural law tradition.

The conception of interaction is one where a human individual (i) *knows other individuals in consequence of his or her self-knowledge* and (ii) *possesses self-knowledge through his or her knowledge of other selves*. The first of these propositions (the proposition that the individual *knows others in consequence of his or her self-knowledge*) is unfolded in the opening pages of *TMS* Part I: 'sympathy' in Smith's sense involves imagining what it would be like for to be, oneself, in another person's situation.⁶¹ The second proposition (the proposition that the individual *possesses self-knowledge through his or her knowledge of other selves*) is presented in *TMS* Part III: crucially, the individual must look into other individuals' eyes and learn how, by others, he or she is seen.⁶² Viewed in terms of these propositions, interaction is pictured as a process whereby a individual occupies, in turn, the positions of 'spectator' (who sympathises or "sees") and 'agent' (who is sympathised with, or is "seen").⁶³ For interaction to proceed, the roles of "seer" and "seen" must – we gather – circulate in an uninterrupted way.⁶⁴

60 I do not attempt to justify this statement here. However, I note that Ferguson – as quoted at note 32, above – is a theorist whose work tends to bear out the generalisation.

61 A. Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments [TMS]* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976) pp. 9-13.

62 See, especially, *TMS* p. 110: 'We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgement concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them.'

63 On 'spectator' and 'agent', see *TMS* p. 113.

64 In outline, Smith's conception of interaction in *TMS* resembles Habermas's notion of communication where 'there is a symmetrical distribution of the opportunities for all participants to choose speech acts [questioning, answering, stating, intervening, etc.] and carry them out': see J. Habermas 'Wahrheitstheorien' in H. Fahrenbach, ed., *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion* (Pfullingen 1973) p. 255. See also T. McCarthy *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1984) p. 306.

Before turning to the significance which, I suggest, *TMS* attaches to the the above comments on self and other, two clarificatory points may be added. One is that what is presented in the comments *is* an image of interection: there is no other way in which Smith's contentions can be seen. If, for example, propositions (i) and (ii) are understood as stages in a conceptual argument, the result is not merely that, in a viciously circular fashion, the argument outlined chases itself. The propositions cease to be caught up in vicious circularity when they are seen as having phenomenological status, and when what is described phenomenologically is the to-and-fro structure of interaction itself. When seen phenomenologically, the propositions describe not a conceptually closed circle but – so to say – a dialectical or dialogical spiral through which, perhaps, something new may be learned.

My second clarificatory point concerns the notion of a *situation*: I have referred to the notion when I said that, for Smith, 'sympathy' involves imagining what it would be to be in another person's situation – but the point requires underlining here. Not the least of the reasons for underlining it is to sharpen an issue in the history of ideas. At various places in his *Treatise*, Hume refers to 'sympathy',⁶⁵ and an impression may thereby arise that *TMS* is nothing more than elaboration on an idea that Hume's work already contains. However, Hume and Smith understand the notion of 'sympathy' differently. For Hume, sympathy amongst individuals is – so to say – a matter of emotional infection or contagion.⁶⁶ In Smith's view, by contrast, sympathy 'does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it'.⁶⁷ For Smith, that is, sympathy (and the imagination that sympathy involves) is a matter not simply of emotional expression but also of judgement concerning the world (i.e. the *other's* world). Is this difference between Hume's and Smith's views of sympathy merely a matter of nuance? I think more is at stake. It is, I think, difficult not to relate the difference to a contrast between Hume's and Smith's positions taken in an overall and global sense. Here, I state the contrast schematically and over-sharply: whereas Hume's thought tends to remain trapped within a solipsism sometimes associated with subjective idealism, Smith thinks dialogically and envisages a world where (to paraphrase Hannah Arendt) not *man in the singular* but *men in the plural* inhabit the earth. Seen thus, Smith's discussions of sympathy and interaction press beyond the limits of what Hume was conceptually able to say.

This final remark raises the question of the significance which *TMS* attaches to interaction. To this question I now turn. The theme of interaction is, I consider, crucial because exploration of it indicates how sceptical questions – including sceptical questions about moral values – may be approached.

Did Smith himself see discussion of interaction as a means of meeting scepticism's challenge? For two reasons, I think it is evident that he did. First, a famous passage in

65 E.g. *Treatise* pp. 316, 358, 575.

66 'As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another' (ibid. p. 576).

67 *TMS* p. 12.

TMS comments not merely on 'praise' (the objects of which may vary from community to community) but on 'praiseworthiness': by 'praiseworthiness', Smith means what 'should' be praised in a 'proper' or authentic sense.⁶⁸ If Smith considers that questions about praiseworthiness may be addressed within an interaction-based or sympathy-based ethics, it follows that he sees interaction as able to transcend the boundaries of (so to say) moral language games or communal groups. It follows, in other words, that Smith pictures interaction as able to overcome the relativism which a sceptical outlook entails. Second, Smith and his contemporaries were in no doubt that *TMS* addresses foundational issues. According to Henry Home, for example, *TMS* gives an account – in his view, an inadequate account – of the 'foundation' of 'the various sentiments of morality'.⁶⁹ Reid considered that Smith's definition of 'Sympathy' is not accurate enough 'to be a foundation for a Theory of Morals':⁷⁰ in the present connection, what is of interest is that Smith and Reid agree on the standard by which *TMS* is to be assessed. Smith for his part lists as one of the fundamental questions of moral theory: 'by what power or faculty in the mind is it, that this character [the character of virtue]...is recommended to us'.⁷¹ In short, *TMS* does indeed attempt to answer questions about foundations – and *foundational questions* and *sceptical questions* are, ultimately, questions about the same thing.⁷²

How, in Smith's view, does interaction overcome scepticism? The passage in *TMS* where 'praise' and 'praiseworthiness' are distinguished is one where the notion of *impartial spectatorship* is introduced: conduct inspired by a love of praiseworthiness (as distinct from a love of what a community happens to praise) is conduct of which an impartial spectator would approve.⁷³ Clearly, the respect in which interaction surmounts scepticism and relativism is intended to become clear when the notion of an 'impartial and well-informed spectator'⁷⁴ is brought into view. Are passages in *TMS* devoted to the notion of an impartial spectator conceptually successful? I suggests that are and they aren't. At best, they are unfinished. In the closing section of my paper section 8 – I suggest that they are markers on a pathway along which a convincing answer to problems about relativism may be sought.

68 Ibid. p. 114.

69 H. Home (Lord Kames) *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2005) p. 71.

70 Quoted in E.H. Duncan and R.M. Baird 'Thomas Reid's Criticisms of Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments' *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 38, No. 4 (1977).

71 *TMS* p. 265.

72 In the present section, I have not engaged with the views of commentators on Smith. However, it may be noted that commentators differ sharply on how what may be termed "interaction" passages in *TMS* are to be read. For example, C.L. Griswold, Jr., *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999) p. 162 argues that passages on interaction 'dovetail...with skepticism', whereas D.C. Rasmussen *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University 2008) *passim*. sees the same passages as maintaining that – *pace* Rousseau – appearances, or how an individual is seen by others, can have a beneficial effect. My own view is that "interaction" passages are neither sceptical (Griswold) nor socially conformist (Rasmussen) but, on the contrary, indicate a potentially critical – a potentially socially critical – foundation on the basis of which sceptical challenges may be met.

73 Ibid. pp. 114, 116, 131.

74 Ibid. p. 130.

7. Adam Smith and natural law

Before turning to issues arising in connection with the notion of an impartial spectator, I offer some very brief notes on Smith's relation to natural law. Above, I cast Hume in the role of a critic of natural law thinking and suggested that Smith, in his discussion of interaction, establishes so-to-say a base camp outside natural law's conceptual domain. For such comments to be more than impressionistic, a discussion of what counts as "natural law" is clearly needed. Here, I do not attempt such a discussion. Instead, I indicate two features which I rightly or wrongly take to be associated with the modern natural law tradition; and I note the absence of these features in Smith's claims.

The features, which I take to be related, are a monological view of the subject and a picture of the human individual as a proprietor. By a *monological* view, I understand one where the subject is seen in asocial and solitary terms. Stated differently, it is one where subjectivity is seen as conceptualisable prior to consideration of intersubjective life. By a picture of the individual *as a proprietor*, I understand one where private ownership and human status go hand in hand. Without exploring these features further, I comment (in very general terms) that monological subjectivity is central to a number of modern or early-modern currents of thought – for example, Calvinism and post-Cartesian or "introspective" philosophy – and that a conception of the individual *as a proprietor* is taken for granted in a disturbingly wide area of social and political thought.⁷⁵

In Smith's *TMS*, the features which I have suggested are associated with modern natural law are set to one side. Where monological subjectivity is concerned, the setting-to-one-side is explicit: 'Were it possible' – declares Smith – 'that a human creature could come up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with its own species, he could no more think of his own character... than of the beauty or deformity of his own face... Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before.'⁷⁶ Alongside this striking passage may be placed another, where Smith appears willing to view not merely normative but epistemological issues in dialogical terms: 'Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason... I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them.'⁷⁷ However we should judge this relatively isolated reference to the senses,⁷⁸ it is clear enough that a notion

75 This last remark raises a question about whether possessive individualism – see, famously, C.B. Macpherson *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962) – is present in the modern natural law tradition. My own view (which I state rather than attempt to substantiate) is that it is. My further view is that Macpherson weakens a strong case by defining possessive individualism in excessively narrow terms.

76 *TMS* p. 110. The passage raises, to be sure, intriguing questions about the relation between selfhood and self-consciousness – questions which I do not explore here.

77 *Ibid.* p. 19.

78 Might it be argued that the just-quoted passage merely makes one's own judgements the criterion of judgements by other people? Such an argument might be questioned. If Smith is suggesting that *self-knowledge is a key to*

of solitary and asocial subjectivity stands at the opposite extreme of Smith's claims.

Where a conception of the individual *as a proprietor* is concerned, Smith's setting-to-one-side is (I concede) more indirect. But it is no less decisive. Whether the notion of the individual *as a proprietor* is understood in terms of self-ownership or in terms of a domain which is ineluctably one's own, the issue which clamours for attention is where the outermost boundaries of self are to be drawn. In *TMS*, a very different picture is presented. There, the picture of the self that emerges is not one defined in terms of boundaries. It is one defined through interaction by the irreducibly first-person viewpoint that a "conversing" individual brings.⁷⁹ In reflecting on myself, Smith remarks, 'I divide myself, as it were, into two persons':⁸⁰ from the context, it is clear that what allows self-division and self-unity to obtain together is interaction's play.

My comments on Smith's distance from monological and proprietorial conceptions of the self, discussion may develop in a number of directions. Reflections concerning Smith's view of the self's relation to property give rise to questions about Smith's conception of property *per se*.⁸¹ Observations regarding Smith's conceptual distance from a property-based conception of the self invite consideration (or reconsideration) of the extent to which Rousseau influenced his thought.⁸² My suggestion that *TMS* establishes a base-camp beyond the limits of the natural law tradition invites a number of questions. Can the line of thought which I have followed be related to the circumstance that, between 1762-3 and 1766, Smith reversed the order of topics covered in his lectures on jurisprudence?⁸³ Should Smith be regarded as a theorist who belongs in, and deepens, the natural law tradition (as commentators tend to argue) or is he to be seen as one of its critics? Is it an accident that, if commentaries are consulted, ambivalence on this vital issue is a feature that Smith and Rousseau share?

8. Adam Smith and the impartial spectator

knowledge of other people, he likewise maintains that knowledge of other people – knowledge of how one is seen by others – is a key to knowledge of oneself. See section 6, above. Knowledge obtained through the senses (eyes and ears) and through reason is, we are to understand, rooted in interaction's to-and-fro dynamic.

79 Note the perceptive observation by the nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher James Ferrier that Smith's ethics is 'a species of Moral Optics': J.F. Ferrier 'Criticism of Adam Smith's Ethical System' *Edinburgh Review* No. 74 (August 1986) p. 105.

80 *TMS* p. 113.

81 Contrast the seemingly "Lockean" view of property at A. Smith *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1981) p. 138 with the view presented at A. Smith *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1982) pp. 17, 459. See, for discussion, S. Fleischacker *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2004) pp. 192-3, 302.

82 Such a consideration must take as its starting point Smith's 1755-56 'Letter to the Authors of the *Edinburgh Review*' (see A. Smith *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1982, pp. 242-56). The 'Letter' is discussed in Rasmussen *Problems and Promise of Commercial Society* (referred to in note 72. above).

83 See, especially, *Lectures on Jurisprudence* p. 401. Contrasting views on the significance of the change in order are expressed in V. Brown *Adam Smith's Discourse* (London: Routledge 1994) pp. 116-9 and K. Haakonsen *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996) pp. 129ff.

Our final question must be whether Smith succeeds in meeting Hume's sceptical challenge. Does *TMS* adequately show how moral values may be affirmed in a disenchanted and demystified world? My answer is, in part, that Smith says either too much or too little. However, my further answer is that *TMS* may be read in a manner which leads us towards fertile conceptual ground.

What Smith says turns on the notion of an impartial spectator. The passage in *TMS* which addresses questions about 'praiseworthiness' is, as has been indicated,⁸⁴ a passage where the notion of impartial spectatorship comes to the fore. An *impartial spectator* is, in Smith's use of the term, a spectator who counterfactually *would* be present *if* an action were regarded in a detached and disinterested and (in all relevant respects) all-knowing way.⁸⁵ In terms of the argument which, I have suggested, *TMS* mounts against scepticism, the significance of impartial spectatorship is as follows. According to Smith, interaction contains within itself resources which allow it to cross boundaries between moral – and, we may add, linguistic – communities. Thereby, it contains within itself resources which overcome scepticism and relativism. But (as may readily be demonstrated) not all interaction employs these resources. Interaction surmounts relativism only when the notion of an impartial spectator is invoked.⁸⁶

How is this invocation to be pictured? In essence, an interacting individual asks him or herself how a course of action or social arrangement *would* be viewed by a disinterested and knowledgeable spectator.⁸⁷ Smith's argument does not, that is to say, appeal to the notion of impartiality directly; what is appealed to is, so to say, the interacting individual's appeal.

But is such an appeal a sufficient means of overcoming relativism? Does the notion of such an appeal succeed in ensuring that conversational interaction addresses issues concerning 'praiseworthiness' rather than 'praise'? Can *any* appeal to impartiality surmount relativistic difficulties *unless* what counts as impartial is stipulated in an *a priori* way? And must not such a stipulation presuppose the falsity of relativism which it was supposed to show? Must not such a stipulation be viciously circular? Is the fundamental problem with the notion of an appeal to impartiality not that different communities – different moral and linguistic communities – are apt to understand *what counts as impartial* in different ways?

As they stand, the cluster of problems here indicated strike me as insuperable. If the notion of an impartial spectator is introduced by Smith as an answer to problems of scepticism, the answer is, it seems, one which fails. Either the answer says too much, and an *a priori* understanding of impartiality results in vicious circularity, or it says too little and problems of relativism remain.

84 At notes 72 and 73, above.

85 This characterisation of an impartial spectator is drawn, in a portmanteau fashion, from a number of *TMS* passages.

86 The invocation of impartial spectatorship is, in effect, an invocation of 'idealisation' in Habermas's sense.

87 My reference to *social arrangements* alludes to the circumstance that, in Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, private property is made to rest on what an impartial spectator might approve. For refs., see note 81 above.

What has gone wrong in Smith's discussion? My suggestion is that his comments become question-begging and misleading at the point where the impartial spectator is pictured *as an individual* of a supremely or, by definition, impartial kind. *TMS*'s best-known passage on impartial spectatorship makes such a picture all but inescapable: the impartial spectator is described as the 'viceregent upon the earth' of the 'all-wise Author of Nature', as the 'man within' (as distinct from the 'man without') and as a 'demigod within the breast'.⁸⁸ The same picture underlies, say, John Dwyer's proposal that the sixth edition of *TMS*, which emphasises the notion of the impartial spectator, departs in an individualist direction from earlier editions' interactionist approach.⁸⁹ But is the passage just referred to in *TMS* to be taken at its face value? If we are to understand the passage literally, we must conclude that Smith believes that demigods and (despite Hume) final causality exist.⁹⁰ If we are not to take the passage literally, a question-mark appears against the notion of a lawgiver-like figure of impeccable impartiality who may, supposedly, keep interaction on its course.

An alternative is, I propose, to set aside the picture of the impartial spectator *as an individual* and to see Smith as pointing to interaction of a specific kind. When Smith refers to an 'impartial and well-informed spectator'⁹¹ his meaning may be that good conversation, wherein the interactive roles of 'spectator' and 'agent' circulate freely and readily, is such as takes place when a specific form of social relations obtains. His conception of an impartial spectator may, in short, be more closely related (conceptually rather than chronologically speaking) to Habermas's notion of an 'ideal speech situation'⁹² than it is to eighteenth-century images of a lawgiver or an 'Author of Nature' or a purposive God. May such a (relational rather than individualistic) reading of *TMS* be defended? Whilst conceding that it is contentious, I suggest that it may. A relational or, so-to-say, Habermasian interpretation is more faithful – I am tempted to say, *much* more faithful – to the interactionist inspiration of *TMS* than is a reading which (following Hutcheson and Turnbull and providential naturalism) introduces theism into the conceptual scene. It is more faithful, likewise, to the current of dialogical thinking that centres on social relations which, it may be argued, was partially inspired by Smith and became pivotal in Europe in the decades and centuries following Smith's death.

88 *TMS* pp. 128-31.

89 J. Dwyer *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Donald 1987) pp. 168-85.

90 I do not here address questions about Smith's view of religion. See, however, E. Rothschild *Economic Sentiments* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 2001) pp. 68, 130 and N. Phillipson *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (London: Allen Lane 2010) pp. 66-7, 84. See also note 27, above.

91 See note 73, above.

92 J. Habermas 'Wahrheitstheorien' pp. 252-60.

My paper started by recollecting a conversation where I claimed that the Scottish Enlightenment did not exist. What I have said, above, bears out the suggestion that events in political theory during the Scottish Enlightenment period are, as it were, episodes in a narrative which Calvin's sceptical-*cum*-dogmatic entrance into Scottish culture began. A useful chronological unit for the study of Scottish thought is, it may be suggested, 1560 (the year when Scotland's Reformation Parliament met) to 1790 (the year when the sixth, posthumous, edition of *TMS* appeared). What I have said bears out, likewise, the suggestion that controversies between theorists of the Scottish Enlightenment period ran deep. No doubt, despite such suggestions, the identity of a cultural formation named the "Scottish Enlightenment" remains intact.

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[Note: The presentation draws on papers made available at www.richard-gunn.com.]

