

NOTES ON ROUSSEAU AND SMITH

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In March 1756, Adam Smith published a review of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inegalite parmi les homme* which had appeared in May of the previous year.¹ The precise tone of the review is difficult to judge, because Smith characterises the *Discourse* as 'a work which consists almost entirely of rhetoric and description'.² My own "take" on this formulation is that it by no means disparages Rousseau's position. On the contrary, it praises the *Discourse* for describing life in civil society in vivid and forceful and, indeed, undeniable terms. To what themes in the *Discourse*, it may be asked, did Smith especially respond? The circumstance that the review selects three paragraph-long passages for translation makes an answer to this question possible. There can be no doubt at all that Smith homes in passages where inequality is seen as stemming from private property,³ and where the role of *appearances* in a competitive and property-based society is stressed.⁴

These admittedly loose and general observations on Smith's review of Rousseau suggest a number of questions. The first concerns Rousseau's and Smith's respective places in the history of ideas. Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* can, I think, justifiably be described as the first major work of European social philosophy to identify – and to condemn with horror – the property-based thinking on which the modern natural law tradition turns.⁵ Given this, and given Smith's seeming admiration

1 See A. Smith 'Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*' in his *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1982) esp. pp. 250-6.

2 Ibid. p. 251.

3 See J.-J. Rousseau *A Discourse on Inequality* (London: Penguin Books 1984) pp. 116, 119; Smith 'Letter' pp. 252-3.

4 See Rousseau *Discourse* pp. 119, 136; Smith 'Letter' (same ref.).

5 On the role of property in the modern natural law tradition, see H. Grotius *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2006) pp. 23, 500; H. Grotius *Rights of War and Peace* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2005) pp. 86, 420-34, 438; S. Pufendorf *On the Law of Nature and Nations* (London 1729) Book IV, chapter IV; J. Locke *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988) pp. 285-302. For

for the *Discourse*, is it not paradoxical or, at least, puzzling that Smith should have (rightly or wrongly) become famous as a champion of 'commercial' or market-based life? One way of resolving this paradox is, I suggest, to read the *Wealth of Nations* not as a defence or apologia of market society but as a work which maintains critical detachment – and where perspectives which contradict commerce's flattering self-image are stressed.⁶

A second question concerns Smith's understanding of a specific concept. Did Smith and Rousseau understand the term *property* in the same way? I suggest that, on at least one fundamental issue, they did. Whereas the natural law tradition saw the concept of property as logically prior to the concept of society,⁷ Smith and Rousseau viewed society as prior to property and set out to understand property in social terms. In Rousseau's work, this ordering is made explicit at the start of *Discourse* Part Two, where property is said to make its historical appearance only when property-claims are accorded widespread belief.⁸ Smith advocates a similar ordering when he bases property on what a 'spectator' may reasonably 'go along with': 'If I have gathered some wild fruit it will appear reasonable to the spectator that I should dispose of it as I please'.⁹ (In Smith, I take it, a 'spectator' – however impartial – has an irreducibly *social* status.) This reversal in conceptual ordering is of fundamental significance because it stands not merely natural law thinking but (more generally) “proprietary” views of social existence on their head.

A third and, here, final question concerns recent Smith-scholarship. Dennis C. Rasmussen observes, rightly, that Smith and Rousseau share the view that 'people tend to be greatly concerned with the opinion of others'.¹⁰ He goes on to argue, however, that 'unlike Rousseau, ...he [Smith] contends that this is actually a *good* thing'.¹¹ How should we respond to the picture of the Rousseau/Smith comparison that Rasmussen presents?

I do not attempt to answer this question in a detailed fashion. Instead, I offer two general observations which a reader of Rasmussen may or may not judge to be fair. The first is that Rasmussen stands in a closer relation to a stereotypical reading of Smith – one where Smith is a champion of commerce – than I myself find comfortable. His general picture is one where Smith approves of interactions in

discussion of Rousseau's relation to the natural law tradition, see R. Wokler 'Rousseau's Pufendorf: Natural Law and the Foundations of Commercial Society' *History of Political Theory* Vol. XV, No. 3 (1994). For further discussion of texts referred to in the present footnote, see R. Gunn 'From Marx to Grotius and from Grotius to Marx' (www.richard-gunn.com).

6 This suggestion is considered further below. Here, I note only that my suggestion is in broad sympathy with the views expressed in D. Gocmen *The Adam Smith Problem: Reconciling Human Nature and Society in 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments' and 'Wealth of Nations'* (London: I.B. Tauris 2007).

7 This ordering is implied in the *natural right to property* which Grotius *et al.* stress.

8 Rousseau *Discourse* p. 109.

9 A. Smith *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1982) p. 459; see also p. 17. For a more nuanced discussion of Smith's view of property than is attempted here, see S. Fleischacker *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2004) pp. 192-3, 302.

10 D.C. Rasmussen *The Problem and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press 2008) p. 12.

11 *Ibid.*

commercial society that Rousseau deplored. Such a picture is one which shades over too readily into seeing Smith as a writer with apologetic intent. My second observation is that Rasmussen underestimates the difference between *sorts of statement* which Smith's writings contain. On the one hand, there are statements which report current opinions and attitudes – opinions and attitudes which, in Smith's view, may be valid or invalid. On the other hand, there are statements which describe the dynamic of interaction itself.¹² Statements of the latter kind do not merely report current moral and social attitudes but supply a theoretical and practical foundation on which, in Smith's view, moral and social judgements may rest.¹³ A striking feature of Smith's discussion of interaction is that, besides raising issues about the foundations of judgement, it offers a criterion according to which valid and invalid interaction may be distinguished.¹⁴ In virtue of this feature, his discussion of interaction has – we may note – an implicitly critical dimension. My concern is that, if Smith's statements about interaction are treated *as though* they were merely further reports about opinions and attitudes which are prevalent in a commercial society, his discussion not merely in the *Wealth of Nations* but in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* becomes bland and socially conformist and loses its critical edge. In Rasmussen's presentation, Smith is (I suggest) in danger of becoming bland in this sense.

So far, my notes have taken up questions which a reading of Smith's review suggests. In the remainder of my comments,¹⁵ I continue the theme of a comparison between Rousseau and Smith but explore a more general possibility. Uncontroversially,

12 Such statements cluster together, I suggest, in the opening pages of Parts I and III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. From these statements, a conception or model of human interaction unfolds.

13 The *foundational* character of the arguments in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was clear to Smith's contemporaries. Opinions might differ about whether Smith's interactionist or sympathy-related arguments succeeded, but there was little doubt that issues concerning conceptual foundations were at stake.

14 Interaction is valid or authentic when, in the terminology of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the figure of an 'impartial spectator' is invoked; in the absence of an appeal to an 'impartial spectator', interaction becomes trapped in a relativistic morasse. A perhaps less misleading way of characterising the distinction – a way which abandons Smith's terminology but remains faithful to the spirit of his argument – is to say that, in valid interaction, all participants have an equal chance to perform speech acts of the same time. Smith's notion of an 'impartial spectator' is considered later in the present paper. See also the concluding section of R. Gunn 'Scepticism, Religion and Political Theory in the Scottish Enlightenment' (paper presented at the Annual East Mediterranean Seminar for the Study of the Scottish Enlightenment, Zakynthos, June 2012) (www.richard-gunn.com).

15 These comments do not – I stress – discuss *all* issues on which a Rousseau-Smith comparison might turn. They do not even discuss *all important* issues. For example, they do not consider Rousseau's key notion of *amour propre*. We may note in passing that Rousseauian *amour propre* is Hobbesian *glory* – but translated from a natural to a social register. For Hobbes, 'man, whose joy consisteth in comparing himself with other men, can relish nothing but what is eminent' – see T. Hobbes *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1968) p. 226 – and 'joy', in turn, is a matter of glorying in how much more power than others an individual has. For Rousseau, *amour propre* is 'a relative [*relatif*], artificial [*factice*] sentiment, born in society, a sentiment which prompts each individual to attach more importance to himself than to anyone else' (*Discourse* p. 167). When Smith comments, famously, on the role of 'frivolous and useless' consumer goods in the introduction of market relations – see A. Smith *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 18-981) pp. 418-9 – he in effect emphasises the historical importance of *amour propre* in Rousseau's sense.

Rousseau and Smith have at least one thing in common: questions have been asked about the relation between their respective works. In Rousseau's case, the question is at its most acute when the *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) and the *Social Contract* (1762) are placed alongside one another: in what sense, if any, do these works form parts of the same conceptual picture?¹⁶ In the case of Smith, a similar problem – the well-known “Adam Smith problem” – arises: in what relation do the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) and the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) stand?¹⁷ My discussion abandons uncontroversial territory when it explores a suggestion about how the “Adam Smith problem” may be approached. Might the relation between the *Wealth of Nations* and the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* be seen as analogous to the relation between the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Social Contract*? Might the conceptual structure of Smith's and Rousseau's literary outputs be not, indeed, identical but broadly homologous?

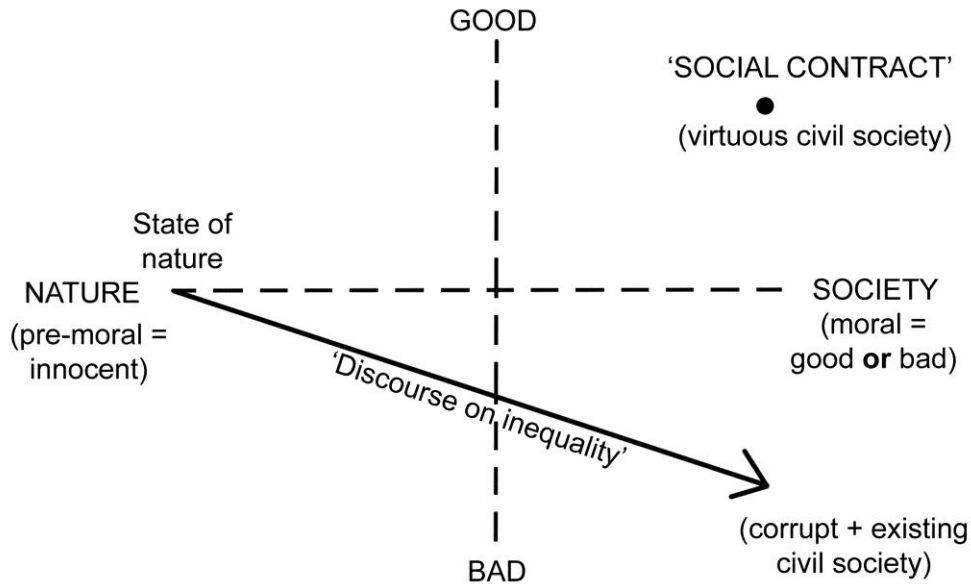
Before exploring this suggestion, I emphasise three points. First: the discussion which follows is, indeed, an exploration – rather than an advocacy or scholarly defence. Second: the suggestion is not that Rousseau's and Smith's works have *the same* conceptual structure. It is that the structures are, at most, broadly similar. If they are homologously related, the homology is imperfect or incomplete. And third: it is not suggested that similarity or homology is the result of conscious or unconscious influence. Such a suggestion would be chronologically absurd. Whilst it is possible that Smith may have thought of the *Wealth of Nations* as a reworking of themes broached in Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, the first edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* predates the *Social Contract* by thirteen years. What is, I think, conceivable is that Rousseau's portrayal of civil society struck Smith forcibly in 1755-6 – and continued to work as an influence in subsequent decades.¹⁸ What also conceivable is that Smith, like Rousseau, diagnosed ills in society without being able to see a route of social development leading beyond them – and that this, a critical but “pessimistic” mindset, is responsible for similarities between their structures of thought.

In exploring the suggestion of an (imperfect) homology, I take as my starting point a view of how Rousseau's social and political writings may be seen. The view, which combines the *Discourse* and the *Social Contract* into a coherent position, may for reasons of convenience be summarised in a diagrammatic way:

16 A. Cobban, for example, discusses the question of whether Smith's works display 'inconsistency' in his classic *Rousseau and the Modern State* (London: George Allen and Unwin 1964 [originally 1934]) pp. 18-9.

17 See, for example, A. Oncken 'The Consistency of Adam Smith' *Economic Journal* Vol. 7, No. 27 (1897); R. Teichgraber III 'Rethinking *Das Adam Smith Problem*' in J. Dwyer, R.A. Mason and A. Murdoch, eds., *New Perspectives on the Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh John Donald 1982); V. Brown *Adam Smith's Discourse* (London: Routledge 1994) ch. 2.; Gocmen *The Adam Smith Problem* (as cited in note 6, above).

18 I do not, here, attempt to identify points of resemblance between the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Wealth of Nations*. But Rousseau's comments on the effects of a division of labour between 'metallurgy' and 'agriculture' (see *Discourse* p. 116) are striking in this connection, as are his comments on how *amour propre* (see note 15, above).



The readiest way of introducing the diagram is to note that it has the form of a graph. The vertical axis of the graph runs from “badness” to “goodness” (or “corruption” to “virtue”). The horizontal axis runs from “nature” (pictured as pre-moral realm, where goodness and badness are non-applicable or non-existent) to “society” (where moral standards obtain, and which may be good or bad). As thus interpreted the diagram draws a double distinction. It suggests a framework in which Rousseau's writings may be interpreted and, more especially, points to a way in which his notion of a state of nature may be viewed.

If Rousseau's and his *Social Contract* are mapped on to my diagram, the result is as indicated: the *Discourse on Inequality* traces a process – namely, a slide from amoral innocence¹⁹ to the corruptions of existing society – whereas the *Social Contract* gives an idea of how, historically, a virtuous society might be reached. In what follows, I comment in turn on the views of the *Discourse* and the *Social Contract* that my diagram suggests.

- A reader of Part One of the *Discourse on Inequality* is introduced to a notion of a state of nature. At the same time, he or she encounters an affirmation to the effect that Rousseau's conception of a state of nature and conceptions present in the natural law tradition are fundamentally distinct.²⁰ My proposed diagram suggests a manner in which this distinction may be viewed. Whereas the natural law tradition regards the state of nature as supplying a moral standard or criterion – for example, it tells a story about how private property “naturally” comes into existence – Rousseau, on the other hand, views the state of nature as a quasi-animal condition²¹ and (socially and morally) a 'degree zero' point.²²

19 So to say, “amoral innocence” is amoral – but, if we insist on classifying it morally, we tend to locate it between “good” and “bad” extremes. My diagram attempts to take this complexity of response into account.

20 I take this to be Rousseau's meaning in his famous declaration: 'The philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all felt it necessary to go back to the state of nature, but none of them has succeeded in getting there' (*Discourse* p. 78).

21 In the state of nature, 'free agency' and a 'faculty of self-improvement' are the sole distinguishing marks of human

Rousseau's state of nature is distinctive because it is, as my diagram indicates, amoral and innocent rather “good” (as in Locke) or “bad” (as in Hobbes). For Rousseau, we may note, a description of a state of nature cannot be invoked as a source or basis of moral views.²³

In Part Two of the *Discourse on Inequality*, a reader finds him or herself embarked on a different sort of discussion: Rousseau charts the history of humanity's decline from animal like innocence to the competitive deceptions of the existing social world.²⁴ This was the section of the *Discourse* that triggered Smith's admiration. Here, I note only that the downward path of human history as presented by Rousseau is strictly one-way. Not only is there is no question of a return to an arcadian natural existence.²⁵ There is no prospect, either, of a regenerative change which might lead to existence which is both social and alienation-free.

- From the *Discourse*, I turn to the *Social Contract*. A circumstance which rapidly captures the attention of a reader is that the *Social Contract*, unlike the *Discourse*, has a fundamentally ahistorical cast. If the *Discourse* traces a process, the *Social Contract* sets out the conditions under which a virtuous (moral, non-corrupt, non-alienated) society might exist. In the technical terminology employed in the *Social Contract*, a society may display civic virtue when and only when a 'general will' – rather than, merely, a 'will of all' – is in play.²⁶ A 'general will' is, as I understand the term, a 'will of all' which has met various conditions: most notably, the society in question must be one where there is a 'common interest'²⁷ – I take Rousseau to mean a common socio-economic interest²⁸ – and where the polity is relatively small-scale.²⁹ The point which concerns me here is that nothing is said in the *Social Contract* about how these conditions may be brought into existence. Besides invoking the formulaic notion of a pact of association³⁰ and the no-less-mythical figure

being (*Discourse* p. 88). Humans are distinct from animals, in other words, solely in virtue of potentials that they contain. See L. Colletti *From Rousseau to Lenin* (London New Left Books 1972) 'Rousseau as Critic of “Civil Society”' pp. 150-1.

22 I borrow the term 'degree zero' from Colletti (ibid. p. 149).

23 See J.-J. Rousseau 'The General Society of the Human Race [*Social Contract*, draft chapter]' in J.-J. Rousseau *The Social Contract and Discourses*, ed. by G.D.H. Cole (London: Dent/Everyman 1913) esp. pp. 156-8.

24 This historical transition is a 'decline' because, on a moral scale, innocence is roughly half way between goodness and badness (see note 19, above).

25 Rousseau rules out the notion of a “back to nature” scenario at *Discourse* p. 153. If there is a route out of existing alienations, the route must be social rather than natural – as the above-cited 'General Society of the Human Race' insists: 'Let us show him [a hypothetical critic of Rousseau's position] that the art of living together can, as it develops, repair the evils which, in its initial stages, it caused to human nature...' (*Social Contract and Discourses* p. 162).

26 On the 'general will' in contradistinction to the 'will of all', see especially J.-J. Rousseau *The Social Contract* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1968) pp. 72-3.

27 Ibid. p. 76.

28 Thus Rousseau: 'no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another, and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself' (ibid. p. 96; see similarly p. 68).

29 Ibid. p. 90.

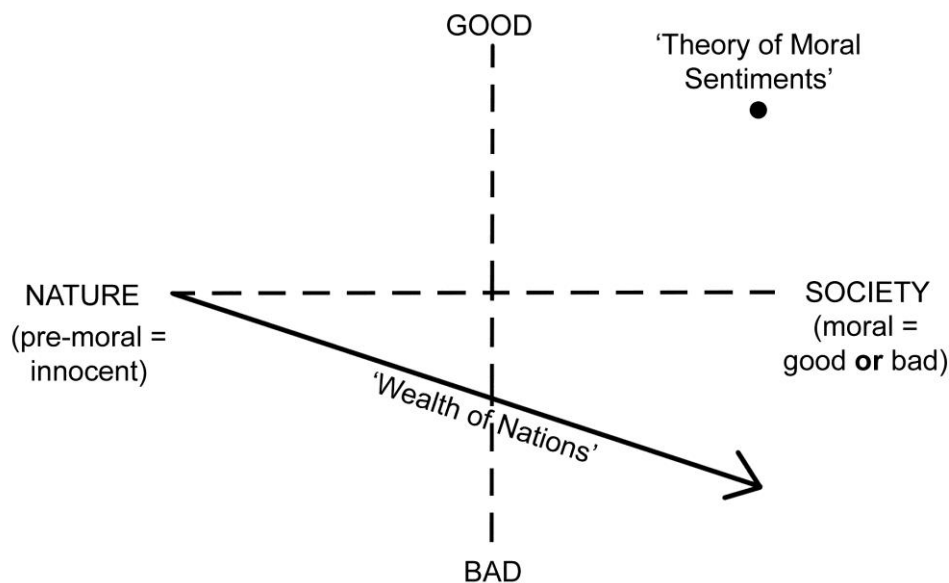
30 Ibid. pp. 60-1.

of a classical lawgiver,³¹ Rousseau charts no practical route towards the social existence which, for him, is virtuous and morally free. As it were, the *Social Contract* presents an image of society which is deeply desirable but which, in practical terms, remains a disconnected dream.

In my diagrammatic representation of Rousseau's work, the “disconnected” character of the *Social Contract* is depicted by the circumstance that it lies nowhere on a connected line. In Rousseau's social and political world, there are no solutions: at any rate, there are no solutions of a practicable kind.³² Rousseau was a revolutionary – but a “pessimistic” revolutionary. His revolutionary pessimism and the paranoia which consumed him were one and the same.

How may my comments on the conceptual structure displayed in Rousseau's work be related to Smith? Evidently, Smith's and Rousseau's personalities were very different,³³ as were the backgrounds which produced them. But may the phrase “revolutionary pessimism” have application not merely in Rousseau but in Adam Smith as well?

If we transpose Smith's writings on to the graph-based diagram introduced in connection with Rousseau, the result is the following:



31 Ibid. pp. 84-5.

32 As it stands, this statement is of course an exaggeration: if Rousseau seriously believed that there were no political solutions he would not have concerned himself with the constitutions of Corsica (see *Social Contract* p. 96) and Poland. But for reasons of simplicity, and because I believe it captures the dynamic of Rousseau's position, I leave the statement unchanged.

33 But how different? In the quarrel between Hume and Rousseau at the time (1766-7) of the latter's stay in England, Smith appeared to take Hume's (his friend's) side. But his concern appears to have been to steer Hume out of needless literary difficulties – rather than to take a stance on an issue of a substantive kind. For a “journalistic” but nonetheless fascinating account of Rousseau's trip to England under Hume's patronage, see D. Edmonds and J. Eidinow *Rousseau's Dog* (London: Faber and Faber 2006).

Does this mapping of Smith's works on to Rousseau's carry conviction? Three features of my transposition appear open to objection, and I note them (together with the objections that they occasion) here.

- The first is the representation of the *Wealth of Nations* by a line that starts with “nature”. The use of a *line*, in the present connection, is not the circumstance that gives rise to difficulty: like the *Discourse on Inequality*, the *Wealth of Nations* is a work where a historical dimension is essential. But the use of a line that *starts from* “nature” is a different matter. Smith (unlike Rousseau) was not a social contract theorist.³⁴ This being the case, can a diagram which links his work to a notion of “natural” origins avoid distorting his thought?

- Second, the *Wealth of Nations* is diagrammatically represented by a *declining* line. The objection here is that such a representation falsifies the *Wealth of Nations*' social and political teaching. In the case of the *Discourse on Inequality*, the use of a declining line is, surely, appropriate. Even if the stereotypic notion of Smith as a champion of commercial society is rejected, however, the *Wealth of Nations* does not point to a history where life becomes uncontroversially “worse”.

- Third, my diagrams (when taken together) suggest that the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Social Contract* are kindred or analogous works. The objection is that, in reality, the books could not be more dissimilar. The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* does not set out a social ideal – whereas the *Social Contract* does. (It sets out the ideal of a free and virtuous republic.) Whilst it is true that the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* makes and defends moral judgements, it does not count as – so to say – a “utopian” work.

My response to these objections is that their clear-cut form is misleading. In each case, the issue raised is more complex than at first appears. Once this complexity has been considered, the seemingly knock-down quality of the objections is lessened. I comment on each objection in turn.

(i) *Can a diagram that links Smith's work to the notion of “natural” origins avoid misrepresenting his thought?*

My response is that it can. Rousseau, who favours a “natural” origin, does so in a manner that is not inimical to Smith's thought. And Smith, who does not employ the notion of a state of nature, nonetheless appears to endorse the view that history has a “natural” – more exactly, a “natural-becoming-social” – beginning. I explain these contentions briefly.

In the case of Rousseau, the relevant circumstance is that (as I have already

34 See, most explicitly, *Lectures on Jurisprudence* pp. 316-7.

suggested) the *Discourse on Inequality* pictures the state of nature as a quasi-animal zero point. If Rousseau regarded the state of nature as a condition where moral values might be discovered – if, that is to say, he saw the state of nature as having a foundational significance – then, it is true, the notion's presence in Rousseau and absence in Smith would count as a fundamental difference. But he did not share this (so to say, “Hobbesian” or “Lockean”) view. Indisputably, Rousseau was a social contract theorist. However, he in effect agrees with anti-contractualists such as Hegel who saw obligations as coming into existence only on a social (and thereby a historical) terrain.³⁵

In the case of Smith, the issue is complicated by the distinctive history of Scottish social contract theory.³⁶ Fascinating though it is, however, I do not discuss this history-of-ideas issue here. Instead, I note that, in Smith's writings, the notion of a historical *beginning* – indeed, the notion of a *beginning that starts from “nature”* – may be glimpsed. Such a glimpse is afforded when, in his Glasgow lectures, he allows that the notion of 'property acquired by occupation' – in present-day terminology, the notion of property by acquisition – is worth considering.³⁷ And a reader of Smith is brought face to face with the issue of beginnings when it is asked how a Smithian “four stages” account of history (see below) gets under way.

In sum: whether argument starts from Smith or with Rousseau, the line in my diagram which represents the *Wealth of Nations* is in a defensible place.

(ii) *Is Smith's work distorted, if it is linked to a scenario of decline?*

As indicated earlier, the diagrammatic representation of the *Wealth of Nations* as a *line* is not a source of difficulty. Although the work is not set out in the form of a narrative, a distinctive conception of history (and thus of a “time line”) underpins the discussions of commercial society that it presents. The conception of history favoured by Smith turns on the listing of four occupation-defined stages: an initial 'Age of Hunters' (or hunter-gatherers), an 'Age of Shepherds' (or pastoralists), an 'Age of Agriculture' (or of settled cultivation) and – finally – an 'Age of Commerce'.³⁸ The 'Age of Commerce' is the age

35 See Hegel in L. Rauch *Hegel and the Human Spirit* (Detroit: Wayne University Press 1983) pp. 110-1.

36 In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Scottish contractualism was at its height, references to a state of nature were few and far between. The emphasis in Scottish social contract theory fell not on the notion of a state of nature but on the act of promising itself – and promising (whether in the communal promising of the National Covenant or in the coronation oath kings were expected to swear) was seen in decidedly “actual” rather than “hypothetical” terms. In the light of this, should we conclude that Smith was not so much opposed to the notion of a “natural” condition as *uninterested* in how such a condition might be pictured?

37 *Lectures on Jurisprudence* p. 16. In case Smith's reference to 'property acquired by occupation' strikes a reader as a lapse into social contract theory, it is worth observing that Smith's ensuing discussion of property turns on the idea of an impartial spectator (and thence on social interaction).

38 *Ibid.* p. 14. See *Wealth of Nations* Bk.V, ch. 1 (esp. pp. 689-95). On the “four stages” account of history, see R.L. Meek *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976) and I. Hont 'The Language of Sociability and Commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the Theoretical Foundations of the “Four Stages”

which the *Wealth of Nations* anatomises and in which Smith himself lives. For purposes of the present discussion, we may note that the Age of Shepherds stands (in Smith's estimation) closest to nature; in the Age of Commerce, by contrast, the majority of products used by an individual are acquired not directly, through his or her labour, but through exchange.

But may the *Wealth of Nations* be plausibly represented by a *declining* line? Let us concede that such a representation is schematic. If the figure of a descending line is rejected, however, so too must the figure of line that ascends. (The figure of an ascending line captures what I have referred to as the “stereotypic” reading of Smith.) And it is not as though Smith sets out to write in a value-neutral way. The truth is that it is difficult to be certain of Smith's overall evaluation of the commercial age. Famously, he estimated that the 'accommodation' of a frugal peasant in the age of commerce 'exceeds that of many an African king'.³⁹ But, if the focus of discussion shifts from narrowly economic to broader social questions, his comments become darker in tone. A likewise-famous passage emphasises that, in a society where there is a social division of labour, labour is reduced to 'performing a few simple operations': because such operations do not call for 'understanding' of general issues, the labourer 'becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become'.⁴⁰ If a reader approaches the *Wealth of Nations* as a text in favour of commercial and market-based society, he or she rapidly discovers that the work contains numerous discordant notes. Besides the “alienation” passage just quoted, Smith acknowledges a conflict of interests between 'masters' and 'workmen'. Whereas 'workmen' combine to raise wages, 'masters' combine to lower them.⁴¹ The struggle is an unequal one in that combinations of masters, unlike combinations of workmen, have state power on their side.⁴² He acknowledges, too, that 'those who live by profit' lack 'connection with the general interest of society': their interest is sectional because the rate of profit and general social interests do not vary at the same rate.⁴³ Merchants and manufacturers are 'always demanding monopoly against their countrymen'.⁴⁴ If Smith adopts a “benign” view of commercial society, entrepreneurs are his most likely heroes; in the event, merchants and manufacturers are the villains of the piece.

Theory' in his *Jealousy of Trade* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 2010).

39 *Wealth of Nations* p. 24.

40 *Ibid.* p. 782.

41 *Ibid.* p. 83.

42 *Ibid.* pp. 83-4, 157-8. Smith admits that 'we rarely hear...of the combination of masters', but explains that this is because masters 'are always and every where in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination, not to raise the wages of labour above their actual rate. To violate this combination is every where a most unpopular action, and a sort of reproach to a master among his neighbours and equals. We seldom, indeed hear of this combination, because it is the usual, and one may say, the natural state of things which nobody ever hears of' (*ibid.* p. 84).

43 *Ibid.* pp. 266-7.

44 *Ibid.* p. 467. See also p. 141: 'People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.' J. Dwyer – in his *The Age of the Passions* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press 1998) p. 43 – notes that merchants and manufacturers 'were...the target of most of Smith's criticism in his great economic work'.

Where do these points leave us? My suggestion is that they leave us in territory that Rousseau considers. Smith would, I think, agree with Rousseau that social ills can only be tackled through further social development.⁴⁵ He would further agree (whether “realistically” or “pessimistically”) that a scenario of major social change – a change which leads beyond commerce – is inadmissible. If the precise angle of the line representing the *Wealth of Nations* is difficult to determine, the appropriateness of mapping Smith's thought on to Rousseau's is easier to see.

(iii) *Can the 'Theory of Moral Sentiments' and the 'Social Contract' be seen as analogous works?*

At first sight, dissimilarities between the works outweigh similarities – as my imagined objector indicates. And questions about one work influencing the other do not arise. Looked at more closely, however, common themes – or, at least, related themes – start to appear.

In the first place, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* does more than make and defend moral judgements: in parts of the book, something resembling an “ideal” is set out. The “ideal” is a specific pattern of human interaction.⁴⁶ In Smith's view, human interaction counts as “ideal” – my term rather than Smith's – when the interactive roles of 'agent' and 'spectator'⁴⁷ are circulated rapidly and in an unconstrained way.⁴⁸ In short, Smith's conception of authentic interaction is not unlike Habermas's notion of an 'ideal' speech-situation – where participants have equal chances of performing the same kinds of speech act.⁴⁹ A reader of these remarks may protest that a Habermasian notion of ideality is foreign to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*'s conversational and, so to say, “everyday” tone. But, we may reply, a notion of ideality *is* present – in the passages where Smith invokes the notion of an impartial spectator. And the notion of an impartial spectator is present when, precisely, the conditions of what I have termed “authentic” interaction are met. In the reading of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that I am proposing, much depends – it is evident – on how Smith's notion of an impartial spectator is understood. In some of the best-known passages of the book, the impartial spectator is pictured as an individual of superhuman status.⁵⁰ My heretical suggestion is that this conventional picture of the impartial spectator is misleading. If the impartial spectator is pictured as a complex of social relations – namely, the social relations which

45 See note 25, above.

46 On Smith's conception of interaction, see R. Gunn 'Adam Smith and Friends' (www.richard-gunn.com), section 1.

47 A. Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976) p. 113.

48 If the circulation is not rapid and unconstrained, interaction loses its to-and-fro character.

49 J. Habermas 'Wahrheitstheorien' in H. Fahrenbach, ed., *Wirklichkeit und Reflexion* (Pfullingen 1973) p. 255. See T. McCarthy *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1984) p. 306.

50 I am thinking of, for example, the passages where the impartial spectator is pictured as 'the man within the breast', 'the man within', 'this demi-god within the breast', etc. (*Theory of Human Sentiments* pp. 130-1).

allow “authentic” interaction – then, I suggest, Smith's argument in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* emerges in a more vivid way.

Standing back from these comments, I note that they refute the third objection listed. If the line of thought that I have sketched is present, however implicitly, in Smith's discussion, then we may speak of an “ideal” and, indeed, a “utopia”, in Smith's body of work. This “ideal”, or “utopia”, is one of authentic interaction or good – “good” in the sense of unrestricted – conversation.⁵¹ Smith's “ideal” or “utopia” is to be found in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* rather than the *Wealth of Nations*. The *Wealth of Nations* can be read as an anatomization of a society where this ideal is alienated and contradicted and besmirched.⁵²

I have suggested a reading of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* which brings its relation to the *Social Contract's* notion of a virtuous republic into relief. Although I do not pursue the point, I suggest that the “good” civil society outlined in the *Social Contract* is one where interaction is a key theme.⁵³ Here, I move beyond the notion of ideality and comment, briefly, on a rather different issue. In the introductory remarks to the present paper, I noted that the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* addresses foundational issues.⁵⁴ In the light of the previous two paragraphs, I now explain this observation. My thought is that, for Smith, good or authentic interaction is the foundation, or basis, on which judgements (especially moral judgements) rest. It is because moral judgement rests on this foundation that its erosion – say, in commercial society – is so crucial an issue.

Are foundational issues addressed in the *Social Contract*? I suggest that they are – in an indirect fashion. The picture of existing (commercial) society presented by Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* is one where competition prevails. It is one where, in consequence, the appearance of virtue is accorded more importance than virtue itself.⁵⁵ If appearances were all that exist or might exist, then (we conjecture) a social theorist must remain unable to decide between conflicting evaluative claims. To employ Smith's terminology, such a theorist would resemble a conversationist who knew what counted as 'praise' in

51 The claim that Smith looks towards a “utopia” is defended in Gocmen's *Adam Smith Problem* (see note 6, above). My own discussion here is intended to harmonise with Gocmen's position. Although he and I may differ on points of detail, our readings of Smith run on parallel lines.

52 In case a reader of my remarks remains unconvinced that the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* contains an “ideal” dimension, I remind him or her that Mary Wollstonecraft – in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (London: Penguin Books 1975) esp. p. 191 – invokes Smith's notion of sympathetic fellow-feeling in her discussion of egalitarian friendship.

53 The 'moral freedom' (*Social Contract* p. 65) which Rousseau envisages is one where neither *natural independence* nor *personal dependence* (or social patronage) is in operation. Instead, what obtains is universal *impersonal dependence*. The notion of *impersonal dependence* may, at first, strike a reader as having an unpleasant ring. But if all individuals (without exception) are totally dependent on society as a whole – as in the notion of a social contract which involves 'the total alienation of each associate to himself and all his rights to the whole community' (ibid. p. 60) – then the conditions of “authentic” interaction are in effect met.

54 See note 13, above.

55 *Discourse* p. 119 (quoted by Smith in his 'Letter' p. 252).

different societies but where considerations of 'praiseworthiness' are out of reach.⁵⁶ What such a theorist lacks is an ability to address foundational issues. In Smith's case, foundational issues may be considered when authentic interaction – or, stated differently, impartial spectatorship – comes into play. In Rousseau's case, purchase on foundational issues depends “good” or “virtuous” social relations being pictured in a convincing (albeit in a counterfactual or, indeed, counterpossible) fashion. If such a picture may be given, then a conceptual route out of relativism may be charted. And such a picturing is what the *Social Contract* attempts.

My comments under headings (i) – (iii) suggest that the notion of a partial homology between Rousseau's and Smith's literary output is not far-fetched. These comments are on specific topics, presented in response to specific objections, but at this point a more general difficulty may be addressed.

Can Smith's works plausibly be mapped on to a graph whose horizontal axis runs from “nature” to “society” and whose vertical axis runs from “bad” to “good”? Does not the very notion of a graph with these axes undermine the project which the *Wealth of Nations* and the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* attempt? No doubt, such a question may be raised while defending a number of Smith-interpretations. However, one interpretation in particular comes to mind and, because it is influential, I comment on it here. Quite frequently, Smith is seen as an exponent of 'natural jurisprudence' and his thought is taken to be a development of (rather than a departure from) the natural law tradition.⁵⁷ An effect of assimilating Smith to the natural law tradition is, I propose, to treat the distinction between “nature” and “society” and the distinction between “good” and “bad” as parallel to one another – or as one and the same. The “graph” which my diagram has presented becomes impossible to draw.

How should we respond to the circumstance that a currently-influential interpretation of Smith and the terms in which my diagram is constructed are at odds? My recommendation is that we call in question the natural law interpretation. Points of dissimilarity between Smith and the natural law tradition are, in fact, easy to indicate: for example, he saw property in social terms whereas natural law pictured a society of proprietors (see note 7, above). He saw individuals as social rather than solitary,⁵⁸ and as existing in and through interaction – rather than through a set of rights that individuals bear or possess. Above all, he saw value claims – and, arguably, truth claims more generally⁵⁹ – as grounded not in “nature” (or in a “state of nature”) but in human interaction. By grounding claims on interaction, Smith does more than express

56 *Theory of Moral Sentiments* p. 114.

57 The term 'natural jurisprudence' is used in E. Rothschild *Economic Sentiments* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 2002) p. 130. The general interpretation that I have in mind is exemplified in K. Haakonssen *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996).

58 *Theory of Moral Sentiments* p. 110.

59 '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... neither have, not can have, any other way of judging them' (ibid. p. 19).

reservations concerning the natural law tradition; he sets out, conceptually, on his own.

To these observations on Smith and natural law, a final point may be added. Rousseau, I have suggested, may be seen as a critic of the natural law tradition.⁶⁰ By suggesting ways in which Smith departs from natural law thinking, I underline (in effect) a further sense in which Rousseau and Smith were at one. I underline a sense in which Smith's 'Letter' of 1756 is of crucial importance. And I acknowledge the sense in which my proposed diagrams point to a Rousseauian interpretation of Smith's thought.

I end by noting that the case in favour of the comparison that I have suggested does not depend on the number of similarities that can be found. We are not in a conceptual territory where ticking boxes is helpful. A more relevant circumstance is whether my comments have brought a shared outlook, or set of shared preoccupations, to light. I suggest that they have: Rousseau and Smith, alike, feel disquiet about existing (commercial) society and neither theorist feels that a society *minus* existing ills can be pictured. Earlier, I have referred to this structure of thought as that of a “pessimistic revolutionary”. Whether the term “revolutionary” can be applied to Smith is, no doubt, a debatable matter. But what is common to Smith and Rousseau is a circumstance that may be rendered diagrammatically. In both cases, there is work containing social criticism which is historical and may be diagrammatically represented by a *line*. And there is an idealising and foundational work from which the *line* is disconnected. In each case, the *disconnection* is a measure of the “pessimism” that the outlook concerned entails.

The train of thought which these notes have explored is highly provisional. At most, my notes indicate how a suggestion may be followed through. And the train of thought (however provisional) generates a host of questions. Is the “pessimism” referred to above merely another name for realism? Might foundational issues be linked with a programme of social critique? Might a social transformation be imagined that – *pace* Rousseau and Smith – made the ills of commercial society a thing of the past? My inclination is to reply “No” to the first of these questions and “Yes” to the remaining two. But I make no attempt to engage with the questions here.

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⁶⁰ See Wokler as cited in note 5, above.

