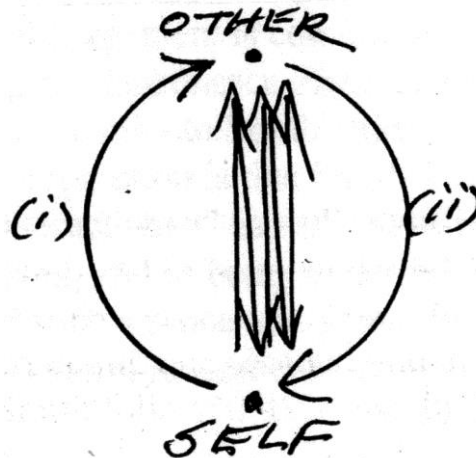


ADAM SMITH AND INTERACTION – A HANDOUT

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[Note: What follows is a revised version of a handout circulated at the Ragged University, Edinburgh, on 29 October 2015. As circulated, the handout contained only diagrams and brief references. In the website version, explanations – marked by square brackets – have been added.]

(1) INTERACTION BETWEEN TWO INDIVIDUALS ('SELF' AND 'OTHER') AS SEEN BY ADAM SMITH IN HIS *THEORY OF MORAL SENTIMENTS*:



[In the course of *TMS*, Smith sets out an argument with two intersecting arcs.

In arc (i), Smith maintains that *knowledge of other people* requires *knowledge of oneself*. We cannot know another person directly. We cannot have another person's experience. But we can imagine what is like to be in his or her situation. We can imagine this, because we have been in similar or related situations. What we know about ourselves allows us to understand others.

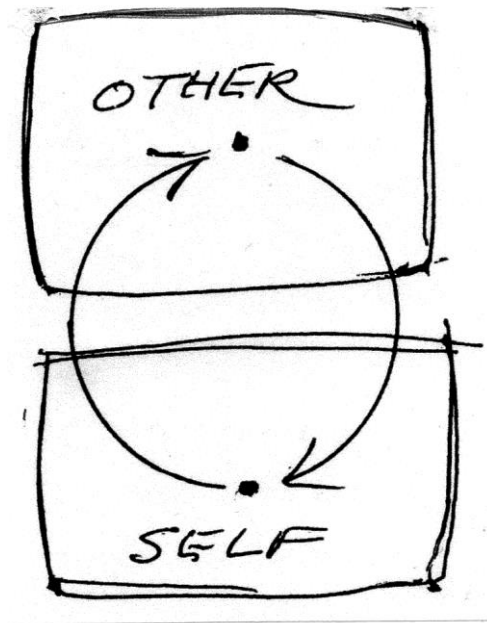
In arc (ii), Smith maintains that *knowledge of ourselves* requires *knowledge of other people*. We cannot know ourselves directly – say, by introspection. (If we try to look at ourselves – or look into ourselves – directly, we form incomplete or distorted views.) But we can attempt to view ourselves 'with the eyes of other people' (*TMS* p. 110). We can attempt to *see ourselves* through *other people's eyes*. (To complete the picture: Smith is assuming that, when other people look at us, they imagine – on the basis of their self-knowledge – what is like to be in our situation. So to say, arc (i) in reverse.)

Arc (i) of Smith's argument is presented in *TMS* Part I. Arc (ii) is presented in *TMS* Part III (opening pages).

Arcs (i) and (ii) complement one another. Is Smith's argument viciously circular? The suspicion of vicious circularity vanishes when we – the readers of *TMS* – realise what is going on. Smith's argument is a description – a “phenomenological” description – of interaction. *Discussion* or *conversation* is the sort of interaction that Smith has in mind. In the distinction between arcs (i) and (ii), and in the lines across the diagram, conversation's to-and-fro movement is reflected.

Smith's account of interaction can be developed in various ways. One way is to think further about the *roles* which interaction – as described by Smith – involves. An individual may, Smith tells us be a 'spectator' (i.e. someone who imagines other people's situations and, in this sense, “sees” them); or an individual may be an 'agent' (i.e. someone whose situation is imagined and, in this sense, is “seen”) (*TMS* p. 113). Why should we find such a distinction interesting? One answer is that it helps us to understand what a “good” or “rewarding” (as distinct from a “bad” or “tedious”) conversation is. A “good” conversation is, it may be suggested, one where interactive roles are frequently and freely exchanged – as in Jürgen Habermas's account of an 'ideal speech situation'. A “bad” conversation is one where interactive roles are fixed – and where, for example, one party to the interaction asks all the questions. An emipated society is, presumably, one where “good” conversation takes place. The more freely interactive roles are circulated, the closer we are to a situation where fixed *roles* do not exist.]

(2) A POSSIBLE VIEW OF WHAT HAPPENS TO INTERACTION IN A
'COMMERCIAL' SOCIETY:



[Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is frequently seen as a hymn of praise to 'commercial' (or market-based) society. If such an interpretation is adopted, however, it must be acknowledged that *WN* contains discordant notes.

The discords (which are not noted here) are numerous. Should we not, perhaps, abandon the “hymn-of-praise” interpretation? Should we not see Smith as a *critic of political economy* instead?

If Smith is best seen as a critic of political economy, and of 'commercial' society, we may ask: what, in his view, happens to interaction (as *TMS* describes it) in a 'commercial' or market-based world?

For Smith, the secret of commercial society's 'wealth' is the 'improvement in the productive powers of labour' (*WN* p. 13) that a division of labour brings. But, for Smith, a society where a division of labour has developed is a society with a dark side. 'The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations... generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgement...' (*WN* p. 782). In short: such an individual cannot raise his or her eyes from particularistic to general concerns.

Where a social division of labour prevails, the individual (the labourer) becomes trapped. He or she becomes all-but-incapable of 'conversation'. A social division of labour increases society's 'wealth' (as *WN* chs. 1-2 suggests). But interaction (as described in *TMS*) is eroded.

The handout's second diagram points to the entrapment, and the erosion, that – for

Smith – a division of labour entails.]

[For further discussion of Smith and interaction, and of roles more generally, a distinction between a *technical* and a *social* division of labour is essential.]

On Smith and interaction, see http://richardgunn.com/pdf/3_smithian_sympathy.pdf and http://richard-gunn.com/pdf/6_adam_smith.pdf. Further papers at http://richard-gunn.com/scottish_thought.html are relevant.

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