

Adam Smith as Solon: Accommodating on the Edges of Liberty, Not Abandoning It

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Abstract:

This paper puts forth evidence that Adam Smith held liberty as a central principle, but also that he adopted an approach of strategic yielding and caution. Smith associated this accommodating approach with the Athenian official Solon, who put forth laws that attempted to be “the best that the people can bear.” I argue that the view of Smith as Solon, accommodating where necessary, is underrepresented in the modern literature and is in contrast to views suggesting that the liberty principle was not so central to Smith’s teachings.

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When he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will not disdain to ameliorate the wrong, but like Solon, when he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavour to establish the best that the people can bear.

– Adam Smith

Adam Smith and the Approach of Solon

Jacob Viner once observed, “the one personal characteristic which all of [Smith’s] biographers agree in attributing to him is absent-mindedness, and his general principle of natural liberty seems to have been one of the things he was most absent-minded about” (Viner 1927, 228). Viner’s remark seems quite strange. How could the central principle of Smith’s work be what he was most likely to neglect?

In a letter to Smith, the prominent French Physiocrat Dupont de Nemours provides us with one explanation for this supposed absent-mindedness (Prasch and Warin 2009). Dupont described the effects of propounding liberty too vigorously and bluntly. Dupont utilizes Plato’s allegory of the cave and suggests that seeing liberty too fully, like seeing the sun when stepping out of the cave, could cause individuals to “return to blindness.” For Dupont the exposure to the idea of liberty needs at times to be dimmed to have any positive effect at all. Dupont’s solution to Viner’s puzzle was that Smith was a cautious champion of liberty—one who dimmed the light when necessary—not one who was absent-minded.

An implied alternative view of Viner’s conundrum has arisen out of modern Smith scholarship. Some modern Smith scholars suggest that Smith’s views were simply nuanced, complicated, and quite willing to go along with a large number of exceptions to the liberty principle. This view posits that perhaps Smith wasn’t so absent-minded after all when it came to liberty. His worldview was simply bigger than one principle. Emma Rothschild alludes to such a view when she says, “Smith is perhaps peculiarly susceptible to the history which consists of . . . single principles which are thought to epitomize his entire theory” (Rothschild 2001, 138). Perhaps Smith’s exceptions to his system of

natural liberty aren't really exceptions, but rather amount to other principles that push the liberty principle out of the center of his "science of a legislator" (Winch 1983).

Smith scholarship by Samuel Fleischacker, Gavin Kennedy, Ian McLean, and Emma Rothschild represent this alternative view. Their work has resulted in a more social-democratic reading of Adam Smith (Fleischacker 2004; Kennedy 2008; McLean 2006; Rothschild 2001).¹ It calls into question the central place of liberty in Smith's system, or, as in the case of Rothschild (2001, 71), it affirms Smith's adherence to liberty, but liberty with a modern re-interpretation that includes elements of social justice and intervention:

Freedom consisted, for Smith, in not being interfered with by others. . . . Interference, or oppression, is itself an extraordinarily extensive notion; Smith at times talks of inequality as a form of oppression and of low wages as a form of inequity. But it was just this multiplicity which was lost after his death. . . . It was little more now than the freedom not to be interfered with in one side of one's life (the economic), and by one outside force (national government).

The various approaches make up what I am calling the alternative view. They are not homogeneous, but all respond to Viner's conundrum in a way that challenges or at the very least, underrepresents the view of Smith provided by Dupont—that Smith should be recognized as a cautious advocate of liberty.

This paper stands in contrast to the social democratic reading and affirms that Smith held liberty as a central principle. It argues that Smith's strategic handling of liberty is underrepresented in Smith scholarship. This is not to argue against the entire body of the work provided by authors such as Fleischacker, Kennedy, McLean, and Rothschild. Their insights have added to our understanding of Smith's works. They also bring to the foreground discussions that require one to immerse oneself in Smith's mature and nuanced approach to political economy. Of course Smith is not the proponent of unbridled selfishness and free-markets in the way that he is at times straw-manned (or his classical liberal admirers are straw-manned as presenting Smith as such). But the idea

¹ For more on the modern interpretation see (Tribe 1999, 610) and (Smith 2012).

that some of that nuance and diversion from the liberty principle is the result of Smith strategically compromising, hedging, or accommodating when faced with prejudice against his ideas has received too little attention. Liberty with accommodation can allow liberty to remain central—it does not need to become an amorphous approach that only seasonally features liberty.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS)* and in *The Wealth of Nations (WN)*, Smith highlights an approach that can help us understand his alleged absent-mindedness. It is a purposeful, moderating, and strategic approach. Smith associated it with the great Athenian lawmaker Solon. In a less unified way, Smith's approach as Solon has already been showcased in the academic literature. Smith has been shown to use rhetorical tools such as hedging (Henderson 2006), inconsistency (West 1997, Bonica and Klein 2019, Clark 2010), and even fudging of extreme views (Kennedy 2011, Klein 2007, Klein 2008, DelliSanti 2019). Smith's Solon-like approach may even involve non-disclosure of extreme views to the public (Smith 1980, 56), but that is hard to pin down as finding the absence of things not said is quite the tricky task. Scholarship has also shown Smith as Solon in practice: Smith's approach on usury (Diesel 2019) and education (Drylie 2019) are two substantial examples. Other policies, such as corn bounties, will be put forth within this paper to highlight the Solon-like approach,

One should not confuse all of Smith's exceptions and concessions as ringing endorsements of contravening the liberty principle. If we come to understand the approach of Solon, an approach that Smith wrote about, we can make sense of Viner's odd remark. In what follows, we'll see that in Smith's published works, and in his personal correspondence, the evidence is sufficient for a Solonic approach to be taken seriously by Smith scholars on all sides.

An Introduction to Smith as Solon

In *TMS* and *WN* Adam Smith mentions Solon on three separate occasions (TMS 233, WN 543 and 777).² In two of the statements Smith highlights Solon as one who created law that “though not the best in itself, it is the best which the . . . times would admit” (Smith 1776, 543). In the third passage (777) Smith mentions Solon, but in regard to the creation of a law unrelated to this moderating approach.³ This third passage is very similar to the eight times Solon can be found within the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Smith, 1763) student notes.⁴

While Solon isn’t a name often heard today, he has been cited with reverence by men ranging from Plato to James Madison (Lewis 2006, 1). Solon was a figure known to many thinkers during and just preceding Smith’s time. Hume, Hutcheson, Mandeville, Bentham, Gibbon, and Malthus all mentioned Solon. Hume writes of “Solon, the most celebrated of the sages of Greece” (Hume 1742). In his *Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith*, Dugald Stewart brings attention to Smith’s discussion of Solon in *TMS*, quotes it at length, and made clear the importance of the approach (Smith 1980, 317-

² A fourth citation of Solon, again in reference to a strategic and moderating approach, is suggested by the modern editors of the Liberty Fund Edition of *TMS*. The editors propose that Solon was incidentally omitted from a passage: “Smith, writing from memory, has probably confused” a passage from Cicero and listed Ulysses instead of Solon (TMS, 242 footnote 9). The context of the potential mistake by Smith is within his paragraph on the self-command of dissimulation—one’s concealing, deceit, and apparent tranquility in the face of provocation, public disorder, or the violence of faction (241-242). Thus, the content of the section is very much in line with what this paper calls Solonic moderation. Why do we think Smith confused Ulysses for Solon? Within this section on dissimulation Smith notes how Cicero exemplifies the act of strategically concealing one’s views via four characters. Smith states that Cicero highlights the idea via Themistocles, Lysander, Marcus Crassus, and Ulysses. Cicero does have a passage where he highlights those “shrewd and ready at concealing their plans”; however, within this section Cicero uses as exemplars Themistocles, Lysander, and Marcus Crassus, but not Ulysses (Cicero *De Officiis*, I.XXX.108-109). Sandwiched between these other examples, Cicero writes, “Especially crafty and shrewd was the device of Solon, who, to make his own life safer and at the same time to do a considerably larger service for his country, feigned insanity.” So perhaps Smith did err and simply swapped in Ulysses for Solon. Thus, in a way, we have a type of shadow example, or indirect reference, to Solon within *TMS*. Either way, the spirit of the passage highlights Smith’s appreciation for the strategic approach discussed within this paper. The matter of Smith’s apparent error is treated by Murphy and Humphries (2019).

³ The “law of Solon” that Smith referenced was a law which relieved children from maintaining their parents into an old age given that their parents had not provided them any means for gaining a livelihood (777).

⁴ In the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* Smith’s reference to Solon deal with laws of succession (38, 62, 64, and 462), the punishment of crime (130), the selection of magistrates (228, 410), and the law relieving children from their duty of maintaining neglectful parents, found also in *WN* (777).

318). The philosophers of Smith's day understood both who Solon was and, as this tradition of allusion thickened, what he came to stand for.

Solon was entrusted with immense power in 594 BC as the chief Athenian official. Adam Smith noted that he "encouraged trade and commerce" during his reign (Smith 1763, 231). However, Solon's time in power was filled with challenges. He was forced to deal with fierce factions and clashing ethical views that threatened the functioning of community life (Plutarch 76-92, Anhalt 1993, 1). While he did not give in to any and all demands, Solon is recognized as a great reformer who achieved what gains he could while still keeping factional conflicts at bay. He had great power but did not completely wipe away all of the entrenched policies of Athens. Instead, Solon compromised and worked with the prejudices of the time in an effort to move toward better policies. Solon attempted to move policy in the right direction without resorting to an overlord's decree. In his own poetry, Solon revealed that he felt he was successful in his mediation (Plutarch 76-92; Ehrenberg 1967, 70). Instead of taking personal advantage of the power he was given and becoming a self-glorifying autocrat, Solon made what progress he could as he navigated his way through opposing viewpoints. Eventually he surrendered his authority and became an Athenian legend.

Like Solon, Adam Smith promoted a way of thinking that showed a possibility for compromise and reconciliation with political opposition. Smith did not castigate those in power for their folly; instead, his rhetoric shows how he was joining with those in power. Equipped with economic principles, he wrote as though he was an advisor to the legislator's team, cooperating in the aim of making a better polity, society, and government.

The Man of Humanity and Benevolence—Solon in *TMS*

The virtue Smith sees in the approach of Solon is contrasted with what Smith calls "the man of system," who believes he can manipulate people "with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board" (Smith 1790, 234). Despite being attached to this famous passage, Smith's praise of Solon's approach receives relatively

little attention (notable exceptions being Donald Winch 1978; 1996, 90f; Griswold 1999, 304). In the preceding paragraph Smith set up a figure to contrast with the man of system. Smith called the contrasting approach the man “whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence” (233). This man respects but does not necessarily agree with the current order of the state’s governance. Smith is careful to make it clear that respect is far from saying that the order is always correct. “Though he should consider some of them as in some measure abusive, he will content himself with moderating, what he often cannot annihilate without great violence” (233). Smith praises a cautious approach of doing only the best one can to change the order of society when the general prejudice is against it. He calls for man to use “reason and persuasion” while trying to “conquer the rooted prejudices of the people” (233). Smith believes that the Solonic man “will accommodate, as well as he can, his public arrangements to the confirmed habits and prejudices of the people; and will remedy as well as he can, the inconveniencies which may flow from the want of those regulations which the people are averse to submit to” (233.16). Smith closes the paragraph on the Solonic man: “When he cannot establish the right, he will not disdain to ameliorate the wrong; but like Solon, when he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavour to establish the best that the people can bear” (233).

Reading what follows clarifies Smith’s idea of the Solonic man:

The man of system, *on the contrary*, is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. He goes on to establish it . . . without any regard . . . to the strong prejudices which may oppose it.

And then in the next paragraph:

Some general, and even systematical, idea of perfection of policy and law may no doubt be necessary for directing the views of the statesman. But to insist upon establishing, and upon establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, every thing which that idea may seem to require, must often be the highest degree of arrogance. (Smith 1790, 233-234, italics added)

The man of system is given as *the contrary* of the Solonic style. Libertarians, classical liberals, and modern conservatives often use “the man of system” passage as a critique of interventionist, top-down control and government domination. However, apt as such applications may be, it is hard to find anything in the passage that should lead one to believe Smith would not apply this same insight equally to those who aim to liberalize policy suddenly, drastically, or against the “rooted prejudices” of the people. In fact, there is evidence that suggests Smith’s primary intent with the passage was not to criticize the interventionist man of system, but of cautioning against, or of justifying his own desisting from, being a liberal man of system.

Letter from Dupont

The paragraphs on the man of humanity and benevolence and the man of system were added to the sixth edition of *TMS* (1790) and greatly parallel statements found in a 1788 letter from Dupont de Nemours to Adam Smith (Prasch and Warin 2009, Rothschild 2001). Dupont de Nemours’ letter came just after Dupont had published a book on the trade relations between France and Britain. Dupont stated that he was very concerned with the growth of liberal ideas, and that his book “avoided shocking the prejudices of [his] readers head on.” He said the book contains faults “some of which are voluntary.” Dupont not only deliberately made the exoteric faulty, but he writes as though Smith will naturally understand why he would have designed some voluntary faults into his own book. Purposefully having errors in one’s work would seem to require immediate explanation. But Dupont presumed that the reason was obvious. From his letter, it is clear that Dupont did not dare pursue or press some ideas for fear that his readers would immediately be turned off to all his ideas. It is also clear that Dupont felt Smith understood the concept of his esoteric moderation. The letter apologizes for such a timid approach, but it could more accurately be described as a justification. The real regret that Dupont is expressing is that his liberal views need to be so dimmed, hedged, and moderated.

Dupont's words and tone suggest that Smith would understand and perhaps appreciate such an approach, but the letter carries much stronger weight because Smith seemed to directly paraphrase Dupont's statements within his last edition of *TMS*. In her work *Economic Sentiments*, Emma Rothschild noted the similarity. She notes that Dupont's letter makes a claim that some opponents of the commercial treaty were "animated even to fanaticism" (Rothschild 2001, 272). Smith's version is that the spirit of system "always *animates* it, and often inflames it *even to the madness of fanaticism*" (Smith 1790, 232 italics added). Rothschild notes that Dupont says, "I have avoided shocking directly the prejudices of my readers. . . . All public opinion deserves to be treated with respect" (Rothschild 2001, 272). Smith writes: "when he cannot conquer the rooted prejudices of the people by reason and persuasion, he will not attempt to subdue them by force" (Smith 1790, 233). Smith's statements on the man of system seem to be an extension of Dupont's remark that "if the administration appears itself to want to follow only the principles of a new philosophy, mass prejudice forbids any success" (Smith 1977, 311-313). Smith remarks that the man of system may try for a complete implementation of his ideal philosophy, without any regard to the prejudice against it, and that such an approach could cause the highest degree of disorder (Smith 1790, 234).

Other Ways Smith Seems Tied to Solon

This section sketches evidence that shows how Smith promoted caution and respect with the power of ideas. Personal letters, core concepts from *TMS*, and other works such as the *History of Astronomy* will be used to showcase these other ways Adam Smith seems tied to the approach of Solon.

Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1763b) do not explicitly call attention to the approach of Solon, but there are some directly pertinent passages. Smith acknowledges that it may be prudent to partially "conceal our design" (Smith 1763b, 147). One should consider the "practicability and honourableness of the thing recommended" (146) and that the audience "may either have a favourable or unfavourable opinion of that which he is to prove. That is they may be prejudiced for or

they may be prejudiced against [the view the author is attempting to prove]" (147).⁵ Even one's style does not aim at perfection, but at "that perfection which they thought most suitable" (56).

In *History of Astronomy* it is clear that Smith is attuned to the problem of public prejudice. He is aware that philosophers who face bias against their ideas must be cautious. Smith noted that in ancient times some philosophers of the Italian school taught their doctrines to pupils only "under the seal of the most sacred secrecy, that they might avoid the fury of the people, and not incur the imputation of impiety" (Smith 1980, 56). Montes and Schliesser (2006) conclude that Smith knew that "even the most free societies . . . can respond negatively to the activities of philosophers."⁶

In his 1751 letter to William Cullen, Adam Smith highlights his concern for public perception. "I am afraid the public would not be of my opinion; and the interest of society will oblige us to have some regard to the opinion of the public" (Smith 1977, 6). To implement or even discuss real change in the rules of a society will certainly cause emotions to run high and Smith privately acknowledges the concern.

One can also see the importance of the approach of Solon by looking at Smith's moral philosophy. The parallel can be seen when Smith invokes ideas of coordinated sentiment through his concept of sympathy. The coordinated sentiment is shared; it exists as a common experience, much like the beat of a chant or melody of a song, neither mine, nor yours, but ours (Klein and Clark 2011). The role of sympathy and our individual development through experiencing these coordinated sentiments are foundational to Smith's moral theory. In judging an action, at each turn we consult our sympathy with a spectator that is natural or proper to the occasion. We are concerned that our sentiment beats along with those around us. When our disagreeable passions inflame us to an extreme, the only consolation a man can receive is that others' sentiments beat in tune with his own:

⁵ See also page 56: "These authors did not attempt what they thought was the greatest perfection of stile, but that perfection which they thought most suitable."

⁶ Montes and Schliesser point out that Smith makes a very similar claim in *WN* (Montes and Schliesser 2006, 333). Smith states that the schools of the philosophers "were not supported by the publick. They were for a long time barely tolerated by it."

He can only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him. . . . These two sentiments, however, may, it is evident, have such a correspondence with one another, as is sufficient for the harmony of society. (22)

Smith later connects the idea of the synchronous beating of our passions to the temperance and potential implementation of extreme policy views.

If you would implant public virtue in the breast of him who seems heedless of the interest of his country, it will often be to no purpose to tell him, what superior advantages the subjects of a well-governed state enjoy; that they are better lodged, that they are better clothed, that they are better fed. These considerations will commonly make no great impression. You will be more likely to persuade, if you describe the great system of public police which procures these advantages, if you explain the connexions and dependencies of its several parts, their mutual subordination to one another, and their general subserviency to the happiness of society; if you show how this system might be introduced into his own country, what it is that hinders it from taking place there at present, how those obstructions might be removed, and all the wheels of the machine of government be made to move with *more* harmony and smoothness, without grating upon one another, or mutually retarding one another's motions. (Smith 1790, 185, italics added)

One should note that Smith's focus is on achieving *more* harmony and *more* smoothness in the motion of society. He is not calling for complete harmony or perfection. Smith explains that the wheels of government and all society must have some synchronicity in order to achieve a beneficial outcome. Just as when Smith explained how our disagreeable passions could inflame us beyond what the sentiments of others can beat along with, Smith explains practical persuasion as involving something less than our extreme view of perfection. We must aim merely at more harmony to change policy for the better. We must be aware of coordinating our sentiments with those around us in order to not inflame opposition or resistance.

Corn Bounties—A Clear Example of Smith as Solon

From time to time in *WN* Adam Smith does not hide the fact that he utilizes tactics akin to Solon. While many of Smith's anti-interventionist sections are written with

fierceness and indignation, there are times when Smith admits he is willing to compromise or back away from his bold ideas of liberty. In his section on corn bounties Smith not only directly refers to the strategic approach of Solon, but pages prior to that reference he also explains why one should not worry too much about dimming the light of liberty.

The natural effort of every individual to better his own condition, when suffered to exert itself with freedom and security, is so powerful a principle, that it is alone, and without any assistance, not only capable of carrying on the society to wealth and prosperity, but of surmounting a hundred impertinent obstructions with which the folly of human laws too often incumbers its operations. (Smith 1776, 540)

Smith is not putting forward Solonesque compromises to liberty as any idea of perfection, but instead just acknowledging that liberty can take a punch or two, so to speak, and still provide many of its blessings.

Smith's section on bounties in *WN* provides what is perhaps the most important window for seeing Smith's Solonic style. Smith had a direct attack on bounties within the first edition of *WN*, but a digression on corn bounties followed in the 1778 2nd edition. In the digression, Smith seems to be directly speaking with his friend and prominent statesman Edmund Burke. Smith rather sharply objected to the implementation of bounties, but Burke, operating within the politics of his day, disagreed. According to Thomas Jefferson, a friend of Burke's, the two men engaged in a ten-year private correspondence in which Burke criticized the economist for his strong take on bounties. The spirit of their debate can be captured by an account of one such exchange; Smith was upset that parliament did not immediately counteract a harmful intervention, and Burke replied.

You, Dr. Smith, from your professor's chair, may send forth theories of freedom of commerce as if you were lecturing upon pure mathematics, but legislators must proceed by slow degrees, impeded as they are in their course by the friction of interest and the friction of preference. (Viner 1965, 27)

Burke feels Smith is, to use Smith's own words, only considering the "science of a legislator, whose deliberations ought to be governed by general principles which are

always the same” (Smith 1776, 468).⁷ Working within practical policymaking, one has to understand how to accept the subtle imperfections that come from dealing with the “friction of preference” and the troubles of the times. Later in their correspondence, Burke once again turned Smith’s attention to the uneasy balance that is the turmoil of politics, stating that in his parliamentary life they currently “walk the Streets of Naples” (Smith 1977, 268). Burke’s phrase would have held great meaning during this time given that Mount Vesuvius casts its shadow on Naples and had recently erupted. Burke, an advocate of liberal reform (Collins 2017), was challenging Adam Smith that when it comes to bounties, Smith was doing too little to understand the art of liberal politics, too little to understand the delicate balance that must be taken to work within the system and do the best good that one can.

Smith responded in the 2nd edition of *WN*—engaging the art of liberal politics and not just the science of the legislator. Smith still listed a number of theoretical reasons for disliking the bounties and restrictions on corn trade in general. He begins his digression on the corn bounties as follows, “I cannot conclude this chapter concerning bounties, without observing that the praises which have been bestowed upon the law which establishes the bounty upon the exportation of corn, and upon that system of regulations which is connected with it, are *altogether* unmerited” (Smith 1776, 524 emphasis added). Thus, Smith starts his discussion on bounties with an unequivocal stance that the praises given to bounty laws are thoroughly incorrect. Further, Smith goes on to examine four reasons why the restrictions are as demeritorious as he claims. First, he explains how the price mechanism helps encourage efficient use of the corn. Second, he explains that limiting trade reduces real wealth. Third, he shows that restricting trade increases the potential for a drastic market shortage because all surpluses are avoided. And finally, Smith shows how the restrictions prevent all of Great Britain from being a storehouse or middleman for corn trade and thus lose all associated advantages.

After explaining his four reasons, Smith provides his policy prescription, “If bounties are as improper as I have endeavoured to prove them to be, the sooner they

⁷ See also the work of Haakonssen (1981), Winch (1983), Hanley (2008).

cease, and the lower they are, so much the better” (Smith 1776, 542). But then, at the very end of the section, Smith turns his attention to a recent change in the Corn Laws. Smith states that the new system is “in many respects better than the ancient one, but in one or two respects perhaps not quite so good” (Smith 1776, 541). After spending an entire section denouncing the current bounty system found in Great Britain, Smith acknowledges the recent change as having some merit.

With all its imperfections, however, we may perhaps say of it what was said of the laws of Solon, that, though not the best in itself, it is the best which the interests, prejudices, and temper of the times would admit of. It may perhaps in due time prepare the way for a better. (WN, 543.53)⁸

Smith seemed to understand Burke’s concerns and admit that one must acknowledge some of the prejudices of others and compromise accordingly. While Smith was accepting some of Burke’s challenge, he was, however, not backing down completely. Smith was willing to deviate from the best possible policy toward one that was at least liberalizing in relation to the previous status quo. He acknowledged the benefits of Burke’s favored proposal on bounties and extended an olive branch of sorts.

This give-and-take between Burke and Smith should be seen as the rule, rather than the exception, in Smith’s works. In Smith’s world the science of the legislator was not altogether separable from the art of liberal politics. Communication and coordination between men like Smith and men like Burke were common in Britain, but in not France, according to Alexis de Tocqueville:

In England writers on the theory of government and those who actually governed co-operated with each other, the former setting forth their new theories, the latter amending or circumscribing these in the light of practical experience. In France, however, precept and practice were kept quite distinct and remained in the hands of two quite independent groups. One of these carried on the actual administration while the other set forth the abstract principles on which good government should, they said, be based; one took the routine measures appropriate to the needs of the moment, the other propounded general laws without a thought for their

⁸ This sentence was, not in the first addition of the *Wealth of Nations*, but was added in the second edition (1778). This most likely occurred after meeting with Burke who pushed the new bill through the House of Commons (Viner 1965, 26-27).

practical application; one group shaped the course of public affairs, the other that of public opinion. (de Toqueville 1955, 145-6)

Smith's digression on the corn trade bounties, emanating from his relationship and correspondence with Edmund Burke, showcases such a spirit of appreciating the art of liberal politics. We not only see Smith being Solonic, but we see the way in which Smith is being Solonic—by dimming the light of liberty.

Additional Examples

Another case of Smith directly stating his willingness to back away from the radical implications of his theory is his famous prediction about the future of free trade. “To expect, indeed, that the freedom of trade should ever be entirely restored in Great Britain is as absurd as to expect that an Oceana or Utopia should ever be established in it” (Smith 1776, 471). Although his criticisms demolished mercantilist ideas and almost any regulations that upset the natural course of trade, he here conceded that in practice his ideas likely would not be implemented to the extent that his theories suggested. Following his sentence on Oceana and Utopia, however, Smith more or less admits that this statement is a mere concession. His very next words speak to his concern for “the prejudices of the public” (Smith 1776, 471). Thus, in a discussion of liberty, he gave a brief nod and polite gesture to the prejudice that opposed him, but did not truly hold back when it came to showcasing what he saw as the importance of freedom to trade. It would not have made much sense to hold back within this section. *WN* was, after all, largely a book that attacked mercantilism (Ekelund and Hebert 2007, 50). But his Oceana and Utopia comment is symbolic of the respect he had for his audience and the strategic approach he took regarding them.

Smith explicitly moderated another extreme view – his view on British imperialism. By Smith's calculations, Great Britain would actually benefit by simply cutting political ties with the American colonies.

Great Britain would not only be immediately freed from the whole annual expence of the peace establishment of the colonies, but might settle with them such a treaty of commerce as would effectually secure to her a free

trade, more advantageous to the great body of the people. (Smith 1776, 617)

But Smith does not put forth this idea as his actual proposal. He attempts to obscure and muddle his view before putting it forth in his writing.

Smith discusses at great length the problems inherent in the settlement of the colonies, including the general costs and the tendency to establish monopolistic trade relations. His discussion of the costs of the colonies ranges nearly uninterrupted from page 571 to 617. But then, Smith distances himself from the potential proposal his evidence supports. He uses language that seemingly takes the author's opinion on the matter off the table. Smith repeatedly mocks any attempt at proposing such a radical policy as releasing the colonies. "The most visionary enthusiast would scarce be capable of proposing such a measure with any serious hopes at least of its ever being adopted" (Smith 1776, 617). Then Smith, without himself directly becoming such a visionary enthusiast, posits an analysis of releasing the colonies—not of his opinion or his proposal for the situation—as a supposition that he is trying neither to support nor deny. Smith claims that "If [a complete release of the colonies] was adopted" then the outcome might be "advantageous to the great body of the people" (Smith 1776, 617). Smith repeatedly hints that he views the release of the colonies as a favorable policy, but is very indirect about his stance. He distances himself from the suggestion. He makes remarks like the suggestion "would be to propose such a measure as never was, and never will be adopted" (616.66). Smith is trying to be sensitive to national prejudice. He even states that he is aware that any suggestion for the release of a colony is "always mortifying to the pride of every nation" (Smith 1776, 617). He covertly or indirectly puts forth the extreme view that releasing the colonies would be beneficial, but obscures his own tie to the extreme view and shows a willingness to moderate.

When Smith continues his discussion on the colonies near the end of *WN*, his direct statements against keeping any attachment to the colonies persist. But he continues his trend of softening his radical remarks regarding the colonies. He often commits only to the stance that "if" the colonies have some certain effect on Great Britain "then" Great Britain should release the colonies. The "if-then" statements seem to be simply a matter

of style, but seem out of place given the fervor with which Smith shows that the “if” statements are always true. For example, in the last paragraph of *WN*, Smith is adamant that the costs of the colonies are higher than the benefits derived from them. But Smith does not state that because of their great cost the colonies should be released, writing instead, “If any of the provinces of the British empire cannot be made to contribute towards the support of the whole empire, it is surely time that Great Britain should free herself” (Smith 1776, 947). Smith seemed to lay his cards on the table, but then Smith distanced himself to some extent from an admittedly radical stance by seemingly removing his judgment from the situation. Once again, Smith understood how bold his ideas were and he understood that such radical ideas needed to be put forth and implemented with great caution and respect for common views.

One final way in which we can see Smith’s Solonic approach is via a general analysis of his deviations from liberty. As argued in Clark (2010, 94-110), if you consider two types, interventionist policy recommendations and liberalizing policy recommendations, Smith’s interventionist policy prescriptions are close to being direct restatements of the Scottish status quo. In eighteen policy areas where Smith can be seen as putting forward some form of interventionist policy, Smith almost never⁹ gave his support to anything that added to the level of intervention in Scotland and never added a new type of intervention all together. On the other hand, many of Smith’s liberalizing policies aimed at reducing the interventions that currently made up the status quo. In 1876, intellectual historian Leslie Stephen noticed this tendency to accept some restrictions to his system of natural liberty, but only as compromises to the status quo: “Smith dealt over-delicately with some existing restrictions. . . . The exceptions which he admits are remnants of old prejudices rather than anticipations of any new principle” (Stephens 1876, 322-323). When one looks at Smith’s exceptions to liberty it is important to note that they were not entirely new interventions. When considering Smith’s

⁹ The only policy that went beyond the status quo of Scotland was Smith’s discussion of regulating small denomination notes. The level Smith recommended was already in place in England and thus Smith was not reaching too far away from what we could consider his status quo. Scotland also had a similar policy, but Smith’s proposal would have increased the magnitude of the intervention to the level that was in place in England.

interventionist side the status quo is an important element of analysis. Smith was not a champion of the status quo, as we can see with his attacks on the interventionist policy of his day, but he was one who could accommodate or accept elements of the status quo in a Solonic fashion.

The Solonic Adam Smith

The Solonic view of Smith in his public writing is not a new one. The friends, peers, and colleagues of Smith understood the compromising spirit of Smith's public statements. Dugald Stewart claimed Smith was "cautious with respect to the practical application of general principles" (Rothschild 2001, 62). Dupont de Nemours regarded some of Smith's more interventionist claims to be "mistakes, which were not and could not have been the result of his great mind, but rather a sacrifice to popular opinion, a sacrifice that he thought was useful in his homeland" (Dupont de Nemours 1809, 179). And I've not even touched on the object lessons Smith beheld in the career of his dear friend David Hume.

Smith's Solonic approach invites multiple interpretations of Smith. "An economist must have peculiar theories indeed who cannot quote from the *Wealth of Nations* to support his special purposes" (Viner 1927, 207). Nonetheless, Smith was very concerned with how *WN* would be received. Even though Smith obscured his work, he felt that the reception of his work had "been much less abused than [he] had reason to expect" (Smith 1977, 251).

Smith in private was reportedly more liberal and less reserved. The two sides of Smith are evident when one compares his private statement that *WN* was really a "very violent attack . . . upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain" (Smith 1977, 251) to his public sentiments that *WN* was designed to help the policy of Britain. Later in Dupont's life, he suggested that Smith compromised, fudged, and concealed some of his real thoughts on liberty. He explained and justified Smith's works as qualified in order to avoid severe judgment. Just as Dupont's 1788 letter had defended the temperance in his own work, Dupont defended Smith's restraint. Dupont felt that the private Smith would

not have put forth such interventionist ideas “in his room or in that of a friend” (Dupont de Nemours 1809, 181).

It must be understood that Smith’s moderation and partial concessions toward the public’s prejudice were primarily, if not exclusively, applied in one direction. From Smith’s approach it appears that when he conceals, he conceals his free-market views. Smith’s published works and correspondence make clear that he is aware of the prejudice against radical free-market views. Smith is consistently worried about the prejudice against his free-market views and tries to lessen the likelihood of his views being cast aside as ideological extremism. The approach stands in contrast to the trend in Smith scholarship that suggests a more social-democratic reading of Adam Smith.

A reading of Smith as concealing and cautious with his ideas of liberty does not, however, mean that the evidence points to an interpretation of Smith as a doctrinaire advocate of laissez-faire. I suggest only that when Smith is worrying about the “practicability . . . of the thing recommended” (Smith 1763b, 146) and considering if it may be prudent to partially “conceal [his] design” (Smith 1763b, 147), he would be concealing how closely aligned he is to the liberty principle. When Smith claims that the virtuous man of humanity and benevolence “will accommodate, as well he can, his public arrangements to the confirmed habits and prejudices of the people” (Smith 1790, 233), the inference to be made is that Smith means accommodating to the more interventionist views surrounding him. The cases where Smith essentially admits that he is backing away from a more extreme policy are put forth as concessions to the public’s prejudice against liberal prescriptions. Other evidence, such as Dupont’s letter and Smith’s odd absent-mindedness when it came to natural liberty, suggest Solonic compromises to interventionist prejudice. Thus, Smith’s more interventionist stances should perhaps be read with a grain of salt or at least a keen and aware eye.

Adam Smith had a deep understanding and love of liberal ideas, but he also understood the context of his own discourse. Smith’s approach caused Jacob Viner to admit that it was refreshing to “return to the *Wealth of Nations* with its eclecticism, its good temper, its common sense, and its willingness to grant that those who saw things

differently from itself were only partly wrong” (Viner 1927, 232). Smith expounded brilliant insights but understood that it was proper at times to dim them. Maybe that is why Smith got what he wanted after all—for us to see the light of liberty, but not be blinded by it.

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