

Custom and Moral Variability: An Interpretation of Part V of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*¹

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ABSTRACT: Through a consideration of Part V of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, this paper investigates the differential effects of custom on morality, which depend on the social station and profession of the moral actor, and on place, time, and situation. This paper shows how Smith understands that moral sentiments develop naturally and yet are susceptible to vital forces of moral leadership ("fashion") that can affect their development. Smith prescribes different moral actions in differing circumstances and demonstrates moral leadership in his own action. This paper argues further that Smith holds it necessary for social elites to model behaviors that are productive of freedom in society at large.

Keywords: Adam Smith, Theory of Moral Sentiments, Custom, Moral Leadership, Liberalism, Virtue

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1. Introduction

Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is a book filled with elegant and poignant descriptions of moral phenomena. The great strength of his theory, and much of its persuasive power, resides in its ability to account, in a systematic and generalizable way, for the large amount of descriptive data he puts before our eyes. While his theory does result in prescriptive ideas, such as the need to consider one's situation from the perspective of an impartial spectator, it remains firmly grounded in an empirical account of the world; we are given an analysis of the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. In this way, Smith's theory is less demanding than the classical tradition—the path to right action is not so steep and narrow that only a few may become truly good.² Since morality is a by-product of human nature, we may allow nature to be our guide in ethical judgments. So long as the true voice of nature is not drowned out by the competing chorus of custom, fashion, law, and irrational vanity, we are able to hearken to its call even without becoming saints or philosophers in the process. Like the theories of Hobbes and Locke before him, Smith's theory of moral sentiments is built on low but solid ground. He may not be sharing the same sub-sub-basement as Hobbes,³ but he is still far from the teleological orientation of the ancients.

We may thus be led to believe that Smith's moral prescriptions all have a demotic or popular quality; here, we may think, is a morality that all people can follow, so long as they are sufficiently attentive to their own nature. Broadly speaking, this is true. Smith's morality is not aristocratic. It is not the sole province of the great-souled human being. However, Smith also indicates throughout *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that, while the same moral theory is always operative in human nature, on the great as well as the humble, the commands that issue from it

² See, e.g., Plato, *Republic* 476b-c, 537b-d, 540a-b.

³ See Joseph Cropsey, *Polity and Economy*, pg. 84, cf. 99n.101 and 136f.

may vary depending on one's status within society. Whether an impartial spectator would find an action appropriate or not will depend to some extent upon who is undertaking the action. What is appropriate for a beggar may not be so for a prince. The distinctions among ranks of people, which operate to create real moral distinctions among individuals, seem to undercut Smith's claim to offer a morality based upon nature. Social rank may seem to be customary or, at most, legal. It seems to be a product of environment or history, rather than nature. But Smith teaches that the effect of custom upon us is itself an artifact of our nature. A lion has no culture; its ways are not affected by custom and history. But a human being is a being for whom culture, as that which is transmitted by word and idea, has real effects that cannot be ignored.

Smith's theory, thus, must be more than a mechanical account of the effects of sympathy upon us and the concomitant need to fix our behavior according to the impartial spectator in order to call upon the fellow feeling of others. The theory must also account for the effects of culture upon morality. This paper is an attempt to understand Smith's account of these effects, primarily as it is presented in Part V of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. I will show that an understanding of the effects of custom upon morality will help us to determine not only how Smith's theory operates differently with respect to differing individuals, but also the various classes of prescriptions that may be said to issue from Smith's theory. In other words, a close reading of how Smith's moral theory distinguishes among differing individuals will reveal, as a by-product, moral prescriptions that themselves only apply to certain groups of people. In particular, I will show that Smith's theory has special relevance for the question of how social and political elites should understand their place within the broader moral landscape of a society.

2. Custom and Fashion

Near the beginning of Part V, Smith distinguishes custom and fashion. Fashion is a species of custom and is determined by the tastes of those “of a high rank, or character” (TMS, 194). The constant combination of these great men with these fashions lends the glitter of the men to the styles they prefer.⁴ As soon as they adopt new fashions, the prior styles become passé and are preferred only by “the inferior ranks of people” (195). The revolutions of these forms may follow quite quickly. “A well-fancied coat is done in a twelve-month” (195). We may wonder why Smith delves into a topic so trivial, but his intention is quite serious. Two points can be made. On the one hand, he demonstrates how powerful and fickle fashion and custom can be. If a great man liked this coat just a year ago, why should he not like it now? Why are the great, even those men of great character, so apt to change their preferences? Smith points to the relatively short life of clothing, which wears thin and must be replaced by what is new. But this does not quite explain why “that fashion appearing ridiculous today. . . was admired five years ago” (195). Why doesn’t the great man buy another coat of the same kind he had before? Why would he ridicule men for holding preferences he had held before? Fashion even affects the sentiments of the trendsetters. The constant combination of their newly preferred styles and their own highly esteemed companions conditions their approbation just as it does the rest of mankind.

On the other hand, fashion is the field in which custom makes its most easily discerned mark. All men know that fashions change quickly. Most men, however, do not see that custom, too, changes, albeit more slowly. The productions of the other arts, those not concerned with fleeting fashions, last longer than a suit of clothes or a couch. Buildings “may endure many centuries” and “a well-written poem may last as long as the world” (195). These productions

⁴ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, Part 3, Section 6, Paragraph 15: “We have no other notion of cause and effect, but that of certain objects, which have been *always conjoin’d* together, and which in all past instances have been found inseparable. We cannot penetrate into the reason of the conjunction. We only observe the thing itself, and always find that from the constant combination the objects acquire a union in the imagination.”

seem permanent, and surely Homer and Shakespeare will last forever. But who writes like Shakespeare anymore? Who wrote like Shakespeare in Smith's day? The modes of poetry also shift and change like the modes of dress, but more slowly.

Few men have an opportunity of seeing in their own times the fashion in any of these arts change very considerably. Few men have so much experience and acquaintance with the different modes which have obtained in remote ages and nations, as to be thoroughly reconciled to them, or to judge with impartiality between them, and what takes place in their own age and country. Few men therefore are willing to allow, that custom or fashion have much influence upon their judgments concerning what is beautiful, or otherwise, in the productions of any of those arts; but imagine that all the rules, which they think ought to be observed in each of them, are founded upon reason and nature, not upon habit or prejudice. (195)

Men will not believe that their judgments are founded on anything but reason and nature. Their own judgments must constitute the truth of the matter, since they seem to be founded on a reasoned account of the nature of things. Smith makes an example of the architecture of columns. Which head to put upon each column does not seem to be a choice but rather is determined by "the rules of architecture" (196). The respect for these rules, Smith tells us, is rooted in the antiquity of the practices they codify. The ancients, according to common opinion, showed "exquisite judgment" in choosing to do things as they did, but Smith objects that "antecedent to established custom" many other rules would have been equally good. After the establishment of custom, however, giving over the traditional modes for others, even if the others are "somewhat superior," is thought absurd and ridiculous.

Men are led to believe these things for two reasons. First, few men live to see the arts change very drastically. The stability of the modes of production is such that men do not believe the arts change at all, especially the arts of ancient provenance, like architecture. Because things have been done in a certain way one's entire life, one believes that these ways are timeless rules. Smith's example is from poetry. An Englishman is accustomed to hearing his comedies in one

meter and his tragedies in another; to switch meters, e.g., to write a comedy in tragic verse, would be too jarring to the English ear.⁵ These “rules” remain in place unless there is “an eminent artist” who is able to “bring about a considerable change in the established modes of each of those arts” (197). We might expect such eminences to be rare occurrences, as indeed they are, but they are not so rare as one might expect. For Smith, such men seem to come along about once a generation. He says that Samuel Butler and John Dryden were replaced with Swift and Pope, who were younger contemporaries. In discussing eminent writers he takes care to say that they “introduce a new fashion of writing,” tying them to the quick revolutions of clothing and furniture (197). But perhaps these changes are not drastic enough to alert the majority of men to the power of custom. After all, Smith had specified that few men live to see these things change “very considerably.” So while every generation may tweak the old rules, none is so bold as to throw them out entirely. Pope and Swift still wrote with rhyme and meter.

This first reason that men deny the power of custom relies on chance. Whether one is born in a time of small innovators like Pope or in the time of a founding poet like Shakespeare or Dante is not in one’s hands. The extent to which the power of custom reveals itself to men, then, seems to be an artifact of the times in which men live. But Smith’s second reason why few men recognize custom gets underneath this problem. People, after all, are not completely bound by the horizons of their age and place, for art from other ages and other places can be accessed. Few people, however, take up the study of these “remote ages and nations” seriously enough. They are not able “to be thoroughly reconciled to them, or to judge with impartiality between them, and what takes place in their own age and country” (195). We may not wonder that few are able to do what Smith recommends, for doing so requires a person to put question marks after every

⁵ One doubts that this is still the case today, outside of a particularly well-educated and sensitive few. The aesthetic movement away from meter in poetry is itself an example of the shifts in custom that Smith is analyzing.

rule he has learned in life. Smith offers a mundane example from poetry and a set of more radical examples drawn from differing ideas of human beauty.

The mundane example is telling. The verses used in English tragedy are the comedic verses in French and vice versa (197). Two peoples who share so much culture in common, who are neighbors, who worship the same God and have similar forms of government differ so wildly that the rhythms which one nation associates with laughter the other associates with weeping. Smith does not speculate about the causes of the difference beyond attributing it to custom, but we may rightly ask what difference led to such a difference in custom? The answer that immediately presents itself, of course, is that the English and French are divided by the languages they speak, and it is this difference that gives rise to the poetic difference Smith alludes to. But such explanation is not sufficient, for it seems that if the early French poets had chosen to write their tragedies as the early English poets had, then the metrical customs would have been identical. Understanding the difference between the two places amounts to understanding the histories of the places, for it is only long use that makes such choices into rules.

The further away one gets from one's own country, the stranger the customs seem to become. Smith shows this with his examples drawn from the work of the "learned Jesuit, father Buffier" (198). Buffier advances a system for understanding custom, which Smith calls "ingenious." According to this theory, humans find beauty in features that lie "in a certain middle, equally removed from a variety of other forms that are ugly" (198). Smith gives the example of a beautiful nose that lies at a mean between short and long, crooked and straight.⁶

⁶ This example is actually Buffier's, as are most, but not all, of the examples in this paragraph. See Claude Buffier, *First Truths and the Origins of Opinions Explained*, Part I, Chapter 13. The 1780 London edition of this work is available through Google Books.

Much like virtue in Aristotle, beauty consists in hitting the mean. Beauty is rare, since it relies on hitting so many means. To have a beautiful face consists in having a mouth that is just so, ears that are placed in just the right place in relation to the eyes, a forehead of just such a height, and on and on. It is the very existence of the deviations that points to the possibility, and the beauty, of the mean. Buffier's theory would seem to suggest that if one were to take all the possible faces a person could have and average them, so that the long noses were balanced by the snub noses, one would end up with an image of the ideal beauty. Such a beauty "bears the strongest characters of the general fabric of the species, and has the strongest resemblance to the greater part of the individuals with which it is classed" (198). The notion that resemblance to the generality is the essence of beauty is confirmed when we consider the profoundly ugly. A monster is unique. Such "singular and odd" creatures do not resemble each other so much as beauties resemble other beauties.

From these reflections upon our experience of beauty, Buffier concludes that beauty, since its essence is commonality, can be reduced to the customary. Those forms to which one is most accustomed are the forms which one finds most beautiful. This reminds Smith's reader of the "rules" of architecture and poetry. It also harmonizes quite well with Smith's claim that custom is generated by constant combination.⁷ When one is used to English poetry and has seen many examples of it, those things that the poems all have in common, the shared form at which they all aim, becomes the standard by which any particular is judged. One cannot judge an object, according to Buffier's theory, without "practice and experience in contemplating each species of objects" (199). Knowing a lot of poetry does not make one qualified to judge the beauty of flowers, but constant experience with flowers over a period of time would allow one to

⁷ "Though, independent of custom, there should be no real beauty in their union, yet when custom has thus connected them together, we feel an impropriety in their separation" (194).

judge the beauty of particular flowers.⁸ Men who do not seriously take up the study of remote ages and nations have only experienced one sort of human culture, their own sort. They are unable to understand, to sympathize with, the aesthetic judgments made in those far-off lands. They cannot be “thoroughly reconciled” to these modes of judging and, thus, cannot “judge with impartiality” between these modes and their own. Smith highlights the difficulty of this task with his examples of foreign notions of beauty.

Smith gives four examples, only the first of which is taken from Buffier.⁹ The rest have been supplied by Smith himself. Buffier’s example is the least shocking and conforms most to his own theory: In Africa, traits considered beautiful in Europe are considered ugly. The people in Africa are accustomed to seeing dark complexions, broader noses, and thicker lips. The generality that these traits point to is very unlike the generality of the European, and a man with no experience in African women would not find himself agreeing with Africans about which women are most beautiful. He would pick women conforming to his own experience. Smith’s first original example ups the ante by adding the unusual to the simply foreign. He says, “In some nations long ears that hang down upon the shoulders are the objects of universal admiration” (199). Smith, in his time, could count on his readers to snicker a bit at this idea. Even today, the notion of poetry inspired by a beloved’s ears swaying in the breeze is at least faintly ridiculous. Smith is letting his readers feel superior to these far-off savages for now. He even engages our sense of justice with his next example. “In China if a lady’s foot is so large as to be fit to walk upon, she is regarded as a monster of ugliness.” Stretching ears is one thing, but

⁸ Liberal societies have led to a great proliferation of such object categories, such that, for example, a film can be a brilliant and beautiful specimen of the mid-1980s slasher movie genre without being a brilliant or beautiful film.

⁹ Buffier., pg. 74

finding such a crippling trait beautiful is unthinkable for Smith's audience. One can only pity the women born into a society in which being beautiful means being immobile.

Smith's final example combines the oddity of his first with the cruelty of his second. Some native tribes of North America, he says, surround the pliable skulls of their children with boards in order to mold their bones into perfect squares. This, surely, is beyond the pale. It seems to be an example of mass lunacy, whose considerations of beauty seem too alien to apply. "Europeans are astonished at the absurd barbarity of this practice, to which some missionaries have imputed the singular stupidity of those nations among whom it prevails" (199). But it is here that Smith pulls the rug out from underneath our feet.

But when they condemn those savages, they do not reflect that the ladies in Europe had, till within these very few years, been endeavouring, for near a century past, to squeeze the beautiful roundness or their natural shape into a square form of the same kind. And that, notwithstanding the many distortions and diseases which this practice was known to occasion, custom had rendered it agreeable among some of the most civilized nations which, perhaps, the world ever beheld. (199)

The "perhaps" at the end is particularly sly and serves to make Smith's point almost by itself. Smith's contemporaries, who felt so obviously superior to the "barbaric" peoples of far away, were actually no better. Perhaps the square-headed tribes of America would have gawked at English ladies in their elaborate costumes and clucked their tongues about how uncomfortable those Europeans made their women. Smith crafts his examples in order to demonstrate the use of studying remote places and times. Such study allows one to judge the customs of one's own place and time from a perspective outside of those customs. The manner of dress in Europe seems *natural* to a European. It is only by entertaining other perspectives that one can see the strangeness of one's own perspective. Smith demonstrates here how one begins to put question marks after the truths we have inherited.

Smith is careful, however, to put these words into the mouth of the Jesuit Buffier. The sentence following the quote above begins, “Such is the system of this learned and ingenious Father, concerning the nature of beauty” (199). And though he praises the system, he is also careful to distance himself from it. He “cannot be induced to believe” that custom is the sole foundation of beauty, since the beauty of utility seems to work independently of custom. This he merely asserts, and we may wonder about the interrelation of utility and custom. He also states, with no argument, that certain colors are by nature more pleasant and that we prefer smoothness to roughness, variety to uniformity, and order to chaos. Even if these observations are true, they make for thin soup if they are the whole of what is spared from the power of custom. Having made these remarks, Smith concludes this first chapter of Part V by granting to “this ingenious system” that hardly any form is so beautiful or ugly that it can be judged as such if custom says otherwise. Indeed, he reiterates a point that he had himself introduced into this system, saying that no form can be “so deformed as not to be agreeable, if custom uniformly supports it, and habituates us to see it in every single individual of the kind” (200).

3. Custom and Morality

Smith moves on, in the second chapter of Part V, to discuss the influence of custom on morality. This chapter is almost twice as long as the first. In the remainder of this paper, I will follow Smith’s indications about the power of custom, particularly as revealed in the differences of time and place, to determine what influence custom has on morality and what effect that influence has on the theory of moral sentiments that Smith advances.

At the beginning of the first chapter of Part V, Smith had spoken of custom’s “considerable influence upon the moral sentiments of mankind,” which accounts for “the many

irregular and discordant opinions . . . concerning what is blamable or praiseworthy” (194). There, the reader is led to wonder whether custom might be much more powerful than utility, which Smith in Part IV argued was secondary to propriety. At the beginning of Part V chapter two, Smith says that, seeing how sentiments of beauty are “much influenced” by custom, we cannot expect that sentiments “concerning the beauty of conduct should be entirely exempted from the dominion of these principles” (200). He is quick, however, to distinguish moral sentiments from other sentiments of beauty.

There is, perhaps, no form of external objects, how absurd and fantastical soever, to which custom will not reconcile us, or which fashion will render even agreeable. But the characters and conduct of a Nero, or a Claudius, are what no custom will ever reconcile to us, what no fashion will ever render agreeable; but the one will always be the object of dread and hatred; the other of scorn and derision. (200)

Smith announces here what he had only alluded to earlier—a natural standard transcending variable custom (194). There are some actions so ugly that no custom can persuade us they are beautiful. Neither the weakness and dissipation of Claudius nor the vicious cruelty of Nero can ever be approved of, even by the community in which they occur. The fact that these two emperors seemed to suffer from equal but opposite vices reminds us of Buffier’s doctrine of the mean. These men were so uniquely unwholesome that they are moral monsters. They only resemble each other in so far as they are equally, singularly ugly. If morality were to be determined by custom, along the lines of Buffier’s system, these two men might still stand out as examples of monstrosity, since neither conform to the generality that all conduct and character seem to point to. Buffier would have to add “in this place and time,” but Smith says no such thing.

While our judgments of beauty “may easily be altered by habit and education,” our moral judgments “are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and

though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted” (200). Smith here firmly advocates for his own theory of morals. Men, all men everywhere, are so constituted as to take pleasure in moral action and to find immorality repugnant. This is because moral actions call upon our strongest passions, those for justice and security, so naturally and spontaneously that we feel the truth of our judgments without needing to reflect on them.¹⁰ Our love of fashionable clothing or even female beauty cannot compare to our love of justice, which is never so bent by custom as those weaker passions are.

But our love of justice is bent nonetheless. Smith undertakes in this chapter to determine the extent of the power of custom. If it can warp but not pervert morals, where is that line drawn and on what ground? Smith speaks of custom’s power both to strengthen and to subvert the “natural principles of right and wrong.” When customs support these principles, “they heighten the delicacy of our sentiments, and increase our abhorrence for every thing which approaches to evil” (200). When customs speak against these principles, on the other hand, men “lose, though not all sense of the impropriety of such conduct, yet all sense of its dreadful enormity, or of the vengeance and punishment due to it.” This is curious. How can a man sense that his action is improper but deny that it deserves punishment? Smith presents such a man as a Machiavellian, one who thinks of evil conduct as “the way of the world, something which may, or must be practiced, to hinder us from being the dupes of our own integrity” (201).¹¹ If the world is such

¹⁰ “[T]here could be no occasion, in order to conceive how horrible such an action was, that he should reflect, that one of the most sacred rules of conduct was what prohibited the taking away the life of an innocent person, that this was a plain violation of that rule, and consequently a very blamable action. His detestation of this crime, it is evident, would arise instantaneously and antecedent to his having formed to himself any such general rule” (*TMS*, 159).

¹¹ Cf. Smith’s formulation with Machiavelli’s in *The Prince*: “And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good” (*The Prince*, Chapter XV). That Machiavelli means this as a description of the general moral state of humanity, rather than restricting it to monarchical principalities, is shown, first, by his reference here to republican governments, and

that man is constrained to be evil in order to prosper, then there can be no “dreadful enormity” in evil practice. Rather such a man would be seeking his good in the only available way. Smith does not elaborate on this point, however. Indeed, he drops this argument immediately, perhaps because it is so corrosive to morality. We have no reason to believe, after all, that our sentiments are in harmony with the ways of the world. Perhaps we are naturally bad for ourselves, since we have moral sentiments that lead us to act against our own interest.

Rather than dwelling on such a point, Smith turns to examples of the influence of custom on moral sentiment. His examples are of two sorts. First, he has examples of differences seen in a single place and time, e.g., those between different classes, generations, and professions. Second, he has examples taken from other places and times, e.g., the barbarian nations and ancient Rome. As before, his domestic examples are somewhat mundane while his foreign examples are often quite striking. His references, for example, to the fashionable vices of the aristocracy and the corresponding “rigid adherence to rules” of “the inferior ranks of people” seem fairly straightforward (201). This view may be complicated, however, if we remember that the fashions of the great are aped by the inferior orders (see 195), but any premonitions of moral decline are at best implications and are not discussed explicitly. Likewise, his discussion of youth and old age repeats many time-tested observations about “the levity, the carelessness, and the vanity, which are indulged in youth” and the “extreme coldness, and dull formality, which are pardoned in old age” (202). Such examples seem to ease the reader into the idea that custom may influence judgments of propriety. We all know that aristocrats are more allowed to be wastrels and that

second, by the treatment of republican government in his *Discourses on Livy*, where he writes, e.g., “it is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it” (I.3).

children are more allowed to be careless, so we cannot be shocked that custom has some effect on morals.

Our judgments vary not only according to the age and class of a person, they vary according to his profession. While the former are broad categories, such that very few discrete types arise, the professions a man might have are more difficult to enumerate. If each profession leads us to expect different behavior from its practitioners, then perhaps custom has more influence on our moral sentiments than he has made it seem. Smith's examples are clergymen and soldiers. These two groups have something in common, since both professions concern death. The clergyman "is to keep the world in mind of that awful futurity which awaits them, [and] is to announce what may be the fatal consequences of every deviation from the rules of duty" (202). This clergyman seems perfectly designed to counter the argument made by Smith's Machiavellian sinner, since that man has lost his sense of that futurity which brings punishment. A man with such a solemn vocation cannot properly, according to Smith, be frivolous or indifferent, but rather must be grave and austere. The description conforms to our common experiences of the clergy, so we are not adverse to Smith's argument. The matter is complicated, however, by the case of the soldier. The soldier does not merely remind his fellows of death, he watches them suffer it. Therefore:

We should be apt to determine, perhaps, that the most serious and thoughtful turn of mind would best become those whose lives are continually exposed to uncommon danger, and who should therefore be more constantly occupied with the thoughts of death and its consequences than other men. It is this very circumstance, however, which is not improbably the occasion why the contrary turn of mind prevails so much among men of this profession. (203)

Because "it requires so great an effort to conquer the fear of death," those who are continually faced with it prefer to forget about it by means of "every sort of amusement and dissipation."

We are thus led to reconsider the case of the clergyman. How is he so “solemn” while the soldiers are so lighthearted? It seems he does not think of death as a soldier does, because a soldier is potentially much closer to his own death at any given time.¹² Yet, the world is such that any man may die at any time. The man home in his bed on the day of Agincourt may still have died in that bed while many in Henry’s army lived. And if all men are equally prone to the whims of fortune, why are not all men given to the morality of the soldier? Seemingly, it is because men are not reminded of their deaths so often as a soldier is. But is it not the preacher’s job to remind men of just this? Yes and no, because the preacher does not remind them of death alone but of God’s judgment after death, a judgment which treats harshly the licentiousness to which soldiers are given, unless, one hastens to add, God is judging a soldier. The actions of the soldier are approved by men by reason of our experience with soldiers, who are all “like that,” so that we do not feel the soldier acts inappropriately. If a clergyman were to act in such a way, however, it would be blamable. The clergyman’s profession is to make us think of death correctly, i.e., solemnly and with awe. The inspiring of solemnity and awe is not identical to provoking reflection on death as such, however, for if it were, the preacher would preach licentiousness despite himself. The gap between the preacher’s teaching and the soldier’s life is itself an example of the power of custom. Education, particularly religious education, can change our natural response to death from a flight toward sensuality into an attitude of reverential concern for moral uprightness. And this custom holds men in its grip unless a more powerful influence changes their customs, as battle changes the soldier.

This power of custom to inform the moral opinions of man is even more easily studied in far-off places and times, for in these cases not only do individual types of men differ but whole

¹² See *WN*, V.i.a.22 on the “invisible death to which every man feels himself every moment exposed” in modern battle (699).

societies radically differ from each other and, over time, themselves. Smith begins by stating that the differences among places and times cause variance in the “sentiments concerning the particular degree of each quality that is either blamable or praise-worthy . . . according to that degree which is usual in their own country and in their own times” (204). His language here is very careful. Differences in situation do not cause men to approve or disapprove of different things, such that in one place murder is acceptable or charity reprehensible. Rather, differences arise with regard to the degree to which we are able to approve of others’ actions. We can see these differences at work even among regions of twenty-first-century America. Politeness in the South is much more rigorous than in New York City. A polite New Yorker might still make a rude Georgian. Smith explains this difference according to Buffier’s theory. “Every age and country look upon that degree of each quality, which is commonly to be met with in those who are esteemed among themselves, as the golden mean of that particular talent or virtue” (204). Where we fix the mean, where we set the virtuous standard, is determined by the generality of our experience with men. Smith, however, modifies Buffier’s theory somewhat, for he adds that we fix the mean based on those “esteemed” by men. Buffier had not said that beauty was determined by our experience with beautiful people, which would have been circular. Things are not beautiful until we have enough “practice and experience” to judge correctly (199). For Smith, on the other hand, the virtues are determined not by the actions of men in general, but by those actions done by men we already esteem. Or, at least, acceptable conduct, which is susceptible to praise and blame, is determined to some extent by what we already praise. Smith’s reasoning seems to involve a circle or a spiral.

4. Savage and Civil Virtues

Smith indicates how the esteeming of things happens as he revisits the topic of civilization and barbarism. Whereas before Smith had drawn civilization and barbarism closer together by showing Europe its own barbarism, here he begins by drawing a sharp distinction. “Among civilized nations, the virtues which are founded upon humanity, are more cultivated than those which are founded upon self-denial and the command of the passions. Among rude and barbarous nations, it is quite otherwise, the virtues of self-denial are more cultivated than those of humanity” (205). Here Smith employs his distinction between “amiable” and “respectable” virtues (23ff). According to Smith, the “general security and happiness” that civilization brings with it encourage the growth of politeness and a certain amiable indulgence for weakness. The harshness of life in savage places, on the other hand, necessitates “a sort of Spartan discipline” in these men, who become hard and unsympathetic as a consequence. The savage is too concerned with living one more day to worry about the miseries of his neighbors. He also knows that they do not care about his troubles, and he therefore makes no show of his pains. “His passions, how furious and violent soever, are never permitted to disturb the serenity of his countenance or the composure of his conduct and behavior” (205). This ability to suppress any show of emotion is “almost beyond the conception of Europeans.” The ramifications of this difference are wide-ranging, but Smith focuses particularly on the effects it has on attitudes toward death.

Smith's example is of a prisoner of war who is sentenced to be tortured to death. According to Smith, such a man both hears his sentence and undergoes its rigors without “discovering any other passion but contempt of his enemies” (206). Rather than screaming and begging for mercy, he describes how he had tormented the kin of his torturers’ and how much more effective he had been than they are. He sings a song, “the song of death,” which he has himself composed for this purpose.

It...expresses the highest contempt for death and pain. He sings this song upon all extraordinary occasions, when he goes out to war, when he meets his enemies in the field, or whenever he has a mind to show that he has familiarized his imagination to the most dreadful misfortunes, and that no human event can daunt his resolution, or alter his purpose. (206)

The savage's song acts as a reminder of the awful future that awaits him and it steels his will against it. This soldier ministers to himself just as the clergymen minister to men in civilized society. The savage is the man of seriousness and thoughtfulness that Smith had expected to find among civilized soldiers, but instead he had found men fleeing from death. What accounts for this difference?

Smith says that *all* savage nations show this "contempt of death and torture." This "heroic and unconquerable firmness" is necessary in savage places but is not demanded of civilized men. We immediately assume that this difference is related to the harshness of life that Smith had spoken of earlier, and this is certainly true, but Smith does not point to raw environmental difference. Rather, it is the "custom and education" of each nation that explains this difference. The difficulty of life in savage countries makes virtues of self-denial indispensable, but it does not teach a man to sing his song of death. A man is *taught* to do such a thing. It may be true that the climate makes such institutions necessary, but climate alone is not sufficient to establish them. On the contrary, it takes men acting as examples to show others what the proper response to the hardships of life is. Every savage looks death in the face every day. Yet no savage acts as a European soldier does, because every savage has been brought up under strict rules of conduct, that "Spartan discipline" that Smith alluded to earlier. Civilized soldiers drill once they join the service, but they have still been educated by the soft lives which they

have led.¹³ In Europe, one shows emotion freely, sure that one's fellows will sympathize. So long as they do nothing "contrary to justice or humanity, they lose but little reputation" for their displays (207). The more civilized a place is, the more emotion they may show, such that in France and Italy, "the two most polished nations," a man may weep in full company. This would be amazing to the savage. It is even strange to an Englishman, according to Smith. That Smith places the Englishman between the savage and the Frenchman is instructive, especially in light of the digression on Rome that he next makes.

In the most polished era of the Roman republic, men were also given to weeping in public. This would have been unthinkable to the "earlier and ruder" Romans, who would have considered it "a violation of nature and propriety . . . to have exposed so much tenderness" (207-8). The earlier Romans were much like the savages, whereas the later Romans are more like Italians. But Smith surprises us when he reveals the length of time separating these two eras. Cicero was able to weep openly at the "end of almost every oration," and yet this "passionate eloquence. . . was first introduced into Rome not many years before the birth of Cicero" (208). Within perhaps two generations, the Romans had moved from savage to polished customs. It is worth remembering that Cicero's generation was one of the last to live under the Republic; not long after his death the Empire began. This puts into relief Smith's next sentence. "This animated eloquence, which has been long practiced, with or without success, both in France and Italy, is but just beginning to be introduced into England" (208). Smith does not draw out the

¹³ "A shepherd has a great deal of leisure; a husbandman, in the rude state of husbandry has some; and artificer or manufacturer has none at all. The first may, without any loss, employ a great deal of his time in martial exercises; the second may employ some part of it; but the last cannot employ a single hour in them without some loss, and his attention to his own interest naturally leads him to neglect them altogether. . . Military exercises come to be as much neglected by the inhabitants of the country as by those of the town, and the great body of the people becomes altogether unwarlike" *WN*, V.i.a.15 (697). Also see V.i.f.50: "The uniformity of his [a poor laborer's] stationary life naturally corrupts the courage of his mind, and makes him regard with abhorrence the irregular, uncertain, and adventurous life of a soldier" (782).

meaning of this fact, and instead forthrightly concludes this topic saying, “So wide is the difference between the degrees of self-command which are required in civilized and barbarous nations.” We notice that Smith replaces the phrase “self-denial” with the phrase “self-command.” The Italians, like the later Romans, lack self-command when compared to the savages and the early Romans. If this difference is tied to the passionate style of rhetoric that Smith describes, then the English too may go the way of the Romans within a generation; they may move away from the savage virtues and become overly polished.¹⁴ Considering the difference between savage military virtue and European military virtue, as well as the difference between Roman freedom and Roman servitude (for Claudius and Nero soon followed the advent of empire), we can well see Smith’s worry. It is indeed a justifiable fear, for, though he did not know it, France itself was on the road to plebeian revolution and Caesarism. It may not be accidental that the passionate rhetoric was introduced in Rome by a Tribune of the People (208). If the English lose what remains of their Spartan self-command, then they might also, within a generation or two, lose their liberty.¹⁵

But how might they guarantee that liberty? The answer seems to lie in the stern virtues, which are instilled in the savages by custom and education. But how are these instituted? Are they entirely path-dependent or may trends be reversed? If Smith provides an answer, it seems to arise from the conjunction of two points he has hitherto left unresolved. Smith, as was shown,

¹⁴ One possible mechanism for dealing with this problem from within modern, liberal society is the division of labor, which allows for a small number of citizens to specialize in warfare as full-time professional soldiers, thus eliminating the problem of the competing duties that lead business-minded citizens to neglect martial training. Weighing against such a solution, however, is the traditional fear of standing armies and their effect on the liberty of society.

¹⁵ Smith discusses English political rhetoric at *LRBL* ii.248ff. where he contrasts it favorably with French, Italian, and Spanish customs. In English rhetoric, “if even one brings in anything that may appear designed to move the passions it must be only by the by, a hint and no more” (p. 197f.). Accordingly, “Floridity and Splendor has always been disliked” in England (199). Smith’s own class lectures on rhetoric, we may say, were doing their part to instill self-command in his students, in the name of “Politeness.”

seems to rely on the circular or spiraling argument that we determine the praise-worthy in light of what we already praise.¹⁶ He also points to the educational function of the clergy in society. But he had quietly disparaged the effectiveness of the clergy, both by highlighting the difference between their attitude toward death and that of a soldier in Europe and by using circumspect language in discussing the character of the clergy, who are “supposed to be” concerned with the “grand and solemn” and “seem to be” the messengers of tidings that cannot be delivered lightly (203).¹⁷ If the English are tending toward over-polished customs, it is perhaps because those men whom they already most esteem are failing to educate them in the harsher customs of self-command. It would seem then that either the clergy must truly become the moral teachers of the nation or the English must learn to esteem new teachers. Smith has already indicated where one might look for such new teachers. The great men, the aristocrats, are the most polished people in Europe, and they are also given to petty vices, as was discussed above. The inferior ranks, however, are distinguished by their “painful industry” and “strict adherence to rules” (201). While the life of a poor Englishman far surpasses in ease the life of even the king of a savage country,¹⁸ the virtues of the working and middle classes are sterner than those of the refined elite. If, on the contrary, the virtues of the working class became more widespread, if industriousness became the rule for all of society, then the problem with English customs might fix itself.¹⁹ This requires, however, that the high imitate the low, a thing that is not the usual way of things. If,

¹⁶ The notion of a “spiraling” rather than a circular notion is owed to Daniel B. Klein, who has argued convincingly that Smith’s argument, while it does make reference to existing preferences, does not do so in a viciously circular way, but rather holds that humans build upon (or, alternately, deepen) our moral experience through consecutive and additive moral judgments.

¹⁷ In both cases, Smith has softened his language in later editions. In the first two editions, both “seems to be” and “is supposed to be” read simply “is.”

¹⁸ *WN*, I.i.11; *LJ* (A), vi.21-28.

¹⁹ At *TMS* pp. 63ff., Smith describes how “the middling and inferior stations of life” can often lead to “real and solid professional abilities, joined to prudent, just, firm, and temperate conduct.” He adds, “In such situations, therefore, we may generally expect a considerable degree of virtue.”

however, some among the high²⁰ took it upon themselves to act in such a way, then the people would be educated by those whom they already esteem, but in an opposite, and more salutary, direction.²¹

Custom then is very powerful indeed. The forms of education in a place determine the character of those living there and how these forms are established has a great impact on the health and vitality of the society. Smith ends Part V, however, by again emphasizing the limits of custom. Custom is powerful in the moral realm, but this power is not as obvious to us as it is in the aesthetic realm of fashion and taste. “It is not concerning the general style of character and behavior, that [custom and fashion] produce the greatest perversion of judgment, but concerning the propriety or impropriety of particular usages” (209). While the differences among nations have an effect on moral sentiments, “the worst that can be said to happen even here, is that the duties of one virtue are sometimes extended so as to encroach a little upon the precincts of some other” (209). So savage customs emphasize self-mastery over humanity, but this does not mean that they hold humanity to be vicious in and of itself. Rather, the savage simply finds it proper that these aspects of character be deemphasized in favor of those heroic virtues that best preserve their way of life. This way of life, with all its harshness, also may give rise to particular usages that are “much more destructive of good morals,” for example, infanticide. The Greeks held this

²⁰ The following passage is suggestive of whom Smith might have in mind: “In a civilized state... though there is little variety in the occupations of the greater part of individuals, there is an almost infinite variety in those of the whole society. These varied occupations present an almost infinite variety of objects to the contemplation of those few, who, being attached to no particular occupation themselves, have leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people. The contemplation of so great a variety of objects necessarily exercises their minds in endless comparisons and combinations, and renders their understandings, in an extraordinary degree, both acute and comprehensive. Unless those few, however, happen to be placed in some very particular situations, their great abilities, though honorable in themselves, may contribute very little to the good government or happiness of society” (*WN*, V.i.f.51, p. 783). Also consider in this context *LJ* (A), vi.42-49.

²¹ Consider Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard persona in this context. Franklin, speaking directly to the working people, delivers himself of a number of savage apothegms, including: “Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.” “Deny Self for Self’s sake.” “God helps them that help themselves.” “Force shites upon Reason’s Back.” “There’s none deceived but he that trusts.” See Franklin, *Autobiography, Poor Richard, and Later Writings*, pp. 457, 458, 461, 462

as a long-established practice, probably dating back to “times of the most savage barbarity” (210). The “extreme indigence” of those times was such that many were unable to support both their children and themselves, so that children had to be sacrificed for the good of the whole. Later Greek people continued doing this long after the time when it had been necessary, because “uninterrupted custom had by this time so thoroughly authorized the practice” (210).²² Even men so greatly esteemed as Plato and Aristotle were led to excuse, or at least not condemn, this usage due to its long lineage. Smith concludes that if custom can lead the civilized Athenians to justify infanticide, then “we may well imagine that there is scarce any particular practice so gross which [custom] cannot authorize” (210).²³

These particular usages may seem to be a large admission into Smith’s otherwise mechanical theory of moral sentiment. After all, one such usage may be an aberration, but eight or ten of them might well corrupt an entire people. However, Smith argues, in the last sentences of Part V, that such a case is not possible. In doing so, Smith picks up and ties off the final remaining thread of his argument by returning to the Machiavellian sinner, who had posited a natural need to play foully if one is to prosper. Men are given to excusing abominable usages by saying they are the way of the world. “Such a thing, we hear men every day saying, is commonly done, and they seem to think this is sufficient apology for what, in itself, is the most unjust and

²² For an intriguing reading of TMS Part V, see Daniel B. Klein (forthcoming), which convincingly argues that this discussion of infanticide conceals an even more trenchant critique of the European slave trade, which also excused great evil by appeal to custom. The present article may enhance Klein’s reading: Smith tells us, and shows us, how fashionable trendsetters (as it were) in moral philosophy can correct unjust particular usages.

²³ In *WN*, Smith writes as follows: “Marriage is encouraged in China, not by the profitableness of children, but by the liberty of destroying them. In all great towns several are every night exposed in the street, or drowned like puppies in the water. The performance of this horrid office is even said to be the avowed business by which some people earn their subsistence” (I.viii.24, p. 90). Smith adds detail to this story at *LJ* (A), iii.80-81: “There were therefore women who made a practise of going about from house to house every morning and receiving the children, which they carry off and thro into the river, in the same manner as we would send a parcell of puppies or kittons to be drowned. The fathers make a great merit of their conduct on this occasion. They converted to Christianity two of these women, and took their promise that they should bring them to be baptized before they drowned them. And in this they glory as having saved a vast number of souls” (p. 173).

unreasonable conduct” (210). That Smith hears such talk every day tells us that there are more than a few Machiavellians in England at this time, which may cause us to worry still more for England’s moral future. But Smith advises us not to fear, for it is “obvious” that general customs cannot be perverted as particular usages can, i.e., the Machiavellian argument cannot hold against the whole of propriety and justice. This is because, under such conditions, “no society could subsist for a moment” (211). Society relies upon the firm virtues of “truth and justice” (209), those which make infanticide, in principle, forbidden. Without these virtues, society would devolve to a state of real savagery, in which we may again learn self-mastery but in which we would lose our feeling for the enormity of injustice.

The humane virtues of Europe are necessary for a nation to prosper, for they are a necessary condition of an ordered and peaceful society. But, as Smith has shown, the harder virtues of the savage are equally necessary if a nation is to remain able to protect itself and its freedoms from the dissipation and laxity brought on by over-refinement. By considering the power of custom, Smith is able to reflect upon both the social bases of morals and the social ends that morality may serve. He demonstrates that a mean must be struck between self-mastery and humanity, so that men may sympathize with their fellows and still be strong enough to bravely face death in the protection of their freedom. This mean can only be found by careful reflection on other times and places, which allows one to enter a higher position from which one may judge the morality of his own time. It can only be established if those who are most esteemed by the people make themselves examples of the virtues they wish to see emulated.

Smith’s theory, while it is generalizable to humanity as such, still makes important allowances for different sorts of people. Just as the moral expectations we have for a vicar may differ from those we have of a sergeant, so too the moral expectations we have for the eminent

differ from those we have for others. For the sake of political liberty, to avoid barbarizing despotism, the social elites must comport themselves in ways that foster the harder virtues of industry and frugality in those who look up to them, even if nature, left unguided, may lead them into luxurious dissipation. Like the ancients, Smith seems to teach that there is a natural tendency for freedom to devolve into despotism.²⁴ Smith, however, locates resources within his moral theory that will help to forestall this end and create customs productive of freedom and prosperity.

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²⁴ Plato, *Republic* 572d-573b; Polybius VI.9.3-9

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