

### 3 Language, sociability, and history: some reflections on the foundations of Adam Smith's science of man

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#### I

Adam Smith is often described as a member of 'the Scottish historical school' and as the author of a science of man that was framed and focused by a distinctive theory of history. But what sort of historian was he? Smith always thought of 'history' in conventional terms, as the study of political and military events, their causes and consequences. Like William Robertson, however, he believed that such an enterprise had philosophic potential. He thought that Tacitus had transformed the traditional scope of history by paying attention to 'the temper and internall disposition of the severall actors who had shaped events' and had shown that history was of value to 'a science no less usefull, to wit, the knowledge of the motives by which men act.'<sup>1</sup> But although history studied in this Tacitean fashion could yield up information about the minds of statesmen and generals and the secret causes of particular policies, Smith was more interested in a history which explained the hidden causes of civilisation's progress from its barbarous to its polished states in terms of changes in the means of subsistence and the distribution of property. It was a move which heralded the appearance of that celebrated stadial theory of history which Dugald Stewart, somewhat opaquely described as 'conjectural history' and which remains one of the intellectual glories of the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

Historians of historiography are entitled to point out that Smith and fellow stadial theorists like Robertson, Kames, and Millar – Ferguson's

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<sup>1</sup> A. Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*, ed. J. G. Bryce (Indianapolis, 1985), pp. 112–13. Cf. William Robertson's Collingwoodian observation that 'In order to complete the history of the human mind, and attain to a perfect knowledge of its nature and operations, we must contemplate man in all those various situations wherein he has been placed': *The Works of William Robertson D.D.*, 8 vols. (Oxford, 1825), VI, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup> D. Stewart, 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith L.D.', in *Adam Smith: Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman, J. C. Bryce, and I. S. Ross (Oxford, 1980), p. 293.

theory took a somewhat different form – were strikingly cautious in exploiting the resources of this new approach to history, using it as a conceptual resource to refresh traditional agendas rather than as the foundation stone of a new, general history of civilisation. Robertson, for example, used his celebrated stadial accounts of the progress of feudal society in Europe and of savage society in America to throw light on a traditional Tacitean preoccupation with the *arcana imperii* and the mental worlds of the kings and *conquistadores* who had laid the political and imperial foundations of the modern world. Kames, Millar, and Smith himself used stadial history to reconstruct the conceptual foundations of the somewhat battered natural law tradition which had formed so important a part of Scottish academic moral philosophy teaching. The *grand projet* of a new history of civilisation built on stadial foundations lay beyond the reach of their – or indeed anyone else's – scholarship if not their imagination and intelligence.

Every Scot was sensitive to the Montesquieuan dimension of stadial history. After all, stadial analysis provided them with a powerful tool for studying what Montesquieu had called the *relations* between the laws and customs of past ages by demonstrating their functional value for peoples whose lives were circumscribed by the means of subsistence and the distribution of property that were to be found in given times and given places. At the same time, they found in stadial history a means of highlighting the problems that must occur when laws and customs and the political institutions which sustain them are at odds with changing attitudes to subsistence and property. And in this they, and above all Smith, found a context in which to situate the political problems of preserving liberty in an age in which the spirit of commerce was often at odds with laws and customs whose origins lay in the needs of a feudal age.

Many of these questions have attracted scholarly attention. What is often overlooked is the theory of human nature and the theory of sociability on which the stadial theory of history rested. Here Smith's thought was to be of critical importance to the new historiography. His theory of human nature was developed in lectures about language, rhetoric, taste, morals, and justice, given in Edinburgh and Glasgow between the late 1740s and 1763 and in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), and it is significant that his thought on these subjects developed in parallel with his thinking about jurisprudence and history. His theory of human nature was 'experimental' in the Humean sense that it was based on the observation of human behaviour as it appeared in society, and it was designed to show how human beings acquire the cognitive skills they need to articulate and satisfy their needs in the course of common life. It was thus a theory of sociability which was derived from a natural history of the

progress of the self-understanding of human beings who were faced with the problem of living sociably in societies whose mores were shaped by distinctive economies, constitutions, and cultures. His theory of human nature was thus a theory of sociability which was only intelligible when it was set in the context of a general theory of the progress of civilisation. It is with the origins and nature of this theory that this essay is concerned. As we shall see, it was a theory which placed great stress on the socialising function of speech and language.

Smith's thinking about sociability was deeply influenced by the philosophical education he received from Francis Hutcheson at Glasgow between 1737 and 1740 and by the education he gave himself at Oxford between 1740 and 1746. From Hutcheson, he received an introduction to a neo-Stoic system of moral philosophy which was intended to reactivate an idiom that was under pressure from the scepticism and Epicureanism of Hobbes and Mandeville. Hutcheson wanted to rebut two of Mandeville's charges: that men were naturally selfish, and that claims that they were capable of genuinely benevolent behaviour were the product of hypocrisy or self-deception. His rebuttal was based on two observations about human nature: that human beings are naturally attracted by what they believe to be virtuous behaviour and repelled by vice; and that they have a profound longing to be able to think of themselves as virtuous. Indeed Hutcheson's moral theory suggests that unless men and women are able to satisfy this latter need, they will be imperfectly socialised and unable to contribute to the public good. How, then, could they be assured that virtue and the benevolence which inspires it was genuine and uncontaminated by self-deception and hypocrisy? Hutcheson attempted to show, famously and controversially, that our capacity for virtue was controlled by an inner faculty, a moral sense, which formed part of the constitution of the mind, and ensured that benevolent actions would serve the public good and the good of humanity generally. He concluded that the task of the modern Stoic moralist was to advertise the existence of this inner sense, demonstrate its powers, and show citizens that it was prudent as well as virtuous to submit to its guidance. Because this moral sense formed part of the constitution of the mind, he was able to speak of man's capacity for virtue as 'natural', and because its cultivation simply meant submitting to the dictates of our own nature, he was able to claim that virtue was a skill which could be easily cultivated by those who were prepared to cultivate liberty and the public good.

From Hutcheson, Smith learned to think of the Stoic and Augustinian longing for virtue as a fundamental moral need which would have to be satisfied if men and women were to be truly sociable. He also realised that

a society that was unable to satisfy its subjects' moral needs would be unable to maximise its productive capacity. Hutcheson also taught him that, in a cynical Mandevillian age, we would never be able to experience the joys of self-approval unless we could be sure that we were capable of genuinely virtuous conduct. Unfortunately, like many Scots, Smith did not believe in the existence of the moral sense. Instead, he was to construct a new theory of morality which showed how our capacity for virtue and the self-assurance which offered us those feelings of liberty and what the Stoics called *apathaeia*, were derived from what David Hume called the experience of common life and from the use of language.

After leaving Glasgow in 1740, Smith spent six years at Balliol College, Oxford as a Snell Exhibitioner. Although we know next to nothing about these Oxford years, it seems likely that he spent them distancing himself from the neo-Stoic culture of Hutcheson's Glasgow and preparing the ground for his own theory of human nature.<sup>3</sup> They were years spent in relative intellectual isolation in an environment which Smith did not find particularly congenial. Dugald Stewart thought that he must have spent much of his time reading the philosophy and literature of the ancient and modern world and particularly that of France, always with an eye on the study of human nature.<sup>4</sup> His taste for ancient and modern tragedy, above all his love of Racine; his reading of La Rochefoucauld and the *Moralistes*; his relish for the labyrinthine sentimental fiction of Marivaux and Richardson suggest that he was intrigued by moral and psychological complexity, by questions about the meaning of *amour de soi* and *amour propre* and by the dilemmas of those who found it difficult to satisfy their moral needs. It was a French moral landscape which suggested that the moral needs of modern citizens were more intricate and harder to satisfy than Hutcheson had realised.

I am also tempted to believe that contemporary rumours that Smith read Hume's *Treatise* at Oxford were true.<sup>5</sup> The *Treatise* had been published in 1739 and 1740 while Smith was still at Glasgow and its existence was well known to Hutcheson. However, he is unlikely to have recommended a text of which he greatly disapproved. But Smith must have known about Hume's activities; his close friend, James Oswald of Dunnikier, was a friend of Hume and an enthusiastic publicist and for this reason alone it seems biographically plausible to think of Smith as an early reader of the *Treatise*.<sup>6</sup> But whenever he read the *Treatise* – and for

<sup>3</sup> What is known of Smith's Oxford career is summarised in I. S. Ross's invaluable *The Life of Adam Smith* (Oxford, 1995), ch. 5. The interpretative gloss is mine.

<sup>4</sup> Stewart, 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith LD.D', pp. 271–2.

<sup>5</sup> Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*, pp. 77, 423.

<sup>6</sup> E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1970), pp. 144–5.

reasons that will shortly become apparent, I assume he must have read it before preparing his lectures on rhetoric and *belles-lettres* in 1746 and 1747 – what he would have found was a brilliant but incomplete essay in historicism which showed that it was possible to explain how we develop the cognitive skills on which sociable life depends from the experience of common life without presuming the existence of occult and theologically loaded assumptions about the organisation of the mind. In Hume's theory, man was to be seen as a creature of imagination and passion, a being whose understanding of the world was shaped by custom, habit, and the conventions of everyday life. Indeed, his theory pointed towards the radical sceptical conclusion that the 'mind' which regulated our understanding and the self itself were cultural constructs, mere bundles of impressions given coherence and continuity by customs and conventions. Ethically, however, this theory pointed towards a cool moral scepticism which Smith was to find unsatisfying. For Hume, the virtuous individual was a sociable agent whose respect for custom and convention was tempered by the knowledge that customs could all too easily degenerate into the superstitions and enthusiasms which had so often destroyed social order and progress. Such a person realised that virtue was an accomplishment which lay within the reach of every polite and sceptical citizen who was sensitive to the opinions of others and to the utility of his actions for the public good. In Hume's idiom, the Hutchesonian longing for virtue was little more than a form of enthusiasm which could be purged by politeness.

For Smith, Hume's philosophy had a serious philosophical weakness. As modern commentators know, it is difficult to explain his theory of knowledge without presuming the existence of a theory of language which is generally assumed but never developed. There can be no doubt that Hume was acutely aware of the importance of speech and language to his theory of mind. The *Treatise* is full of references to the importance of 'conversation' in shaping the mind. What is more, his famous discussion of the crucially important events which make us aware of the meaning and necessity of justice, speak of that concept as a 'language' which has to be learned by all of those who wish to live in organised societies. Indeed, in book III of the *Treatise* Hume seems to sketch the outlines of a natural history to show how we acquire the ideas of justice, political obligation, morality and beauty and religion on which sociability depends. We shall never know why Hume failed to develop the theory of language which would have given theoretical depth to his science of man; perhaps he felt that he had done enough to justify turning from the natural history of man to the civil history of his own country and to important questions about the preservation of liberty in contemporary

Britain. What matters here is that Smith's first major intellectual project consisted in developing what may be described as a post-Humean theory of language which he was to use to develop an 'experimental' and historicist account of the progress of sociability and morality. It was an enterprise which meant turning once again to France and to the remarkable thinking about the origins of language that emerged from that country in the later 1740s and early 1750s following the publication of Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* in 1746.<sup>7</sup>

Condillac argued that the organisation of the mind could only be understood in terms of the organisation of language and that language was to be seen as a system of communication whose origins could only be explained in terms of the changing needs of primitive man. Using a device first used by Mandeville, Condillac speculated on how two solitary, vulnerable aboriginal children first learned to communicate by means of gestures and cries and in time developed the rudiments of language. Their primary instinct would have been to assign particular names to particular objects. However, 'il n'étoit pas possible d'imaginer des noms pour chaque objet particulier; il fut donc nécessaire d'avoir de bonne heure des termes généraux' and it was in the creation of these *genera* that primitive man first acquired the capacity for abstract thought and the capacity for language.<sup>8</sup> The crucial problem for Condillac, as it would be for Smith, was explaining the origin of this power of abstraction. Locke had argued that its roots lay in reason. Condillac, who regarded himself as a critic as well as a disciple of Locke, concluded that the power of reasoning, like that of memory, imagination and perception, had its origin in sensation, and in a capacity for connecting ideas: a 'liaison des idées'. Need had obliged aboriginal man to conceive general ideas. Need had given him the power of thought. In other words, need had given birth to 'mind'. As he put it:

Le bon sens, l'esprit, la raison et leurs contraires naissent également d'un même principe; qui est la liaison des idées les unes avec les autres; que, remontant encore plus haut, on voit que cette liaison est produite par l'usage des signes; et que, par conséquent, les progrès de l'esprit humain dépendent entièrement de

<sup>7</sup> The following discussion of Condillac is much indebted to two works by Hans Aarsleff, 'The Tradition of Condillac: The Problem of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy before Herder', in his *From Locke to Saussure: Essays in the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (London, 1982), pp. 146–209; *The Study of Language in England 1780–1860*, new edition (London, 1983), pp. 13–43. See also E. M. Hine, *A Critical Study of Condillac's Traité des Systemes* (The Hague, 1979); J. Sgard, *Condillac et les problèmes du langage* (Geneva, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> *Oeuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, ed. G. Le Roy, 3 vols. (Paris, 1947), I, p. 86: 'As it was impossible to invent names for each particular object; it therefore became necessary to have recourse to general terms.'

l'adresse avec laquelle nous nous servons de langage. Ce principe est simple, et répand un grand jour sur cette matière: personne, que je sache, ne l'a connu avant moi.<sup>9</sup>

Condillac drew two important conclusions from his theory, which Smith was to develop. In the first place, he was able to trace man's ability to reason to a precise moment in historical time, when his ability to take cognitive control of his environment was challenged and when he was forced to use words and signs in a radically new way. In the second place, Condillac was able to show how each individual fashioned a particular language of his own out of the linguistic resources of the world in which he found himself; 'je dis *son langage*', Condillac wrote, 'car chacun a le sien, selon ses passions'.<sup>10</sup> This meant that the intellectual progress of any nation was constrained by the limitations of its language. Indeed he thought that 'les nations ne peuvent avoir des génies supérieurs qu'après que les langues ont déjà fait des progrès considérables'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed,

On doit donc trouver dans une langue qui manque de mots, ou qui n'a pas de constructions assez commodes, les mêmes obstacles qu'on trouvoit en Géométrie avant l'invention de l'algèbre. Le français a été, pendant longtemps, si peu favorable aux progrès de l'esprit, que si l'on pouvoit se représenter Corneille successivement dans les différens âges de la monarchie, on lui trouveroit moins de génie, à proportion qu'on s'éloigneroit davantage de celui où il a vécu, et l'on arriveroit en fin à un Corneille qui ne pourroit donner aucune preuve de talent.<sup>12</sup>

Smith's thinking about the origins of language was probably first sketched out in Edinburgh in 1748 in the course of his lectures on rhetoric and *belles-lettres* and developed in Glasgow. However, it was not published until 1761 when it appeared in the *Philological Miscellany* as 'Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages'. It was later attached to the third and subsequent editions of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and was, said Stewart, an essay 'on which the author himself

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 36. 'Common sense, the contents of the mind, reason and their opposites share the same source; a principle which states that ideas are related, one to another; that, more profoundly, one sees that this relationship is the product of the use of signs; and that, as a consequence, the progress of the human mind depends entirely upon the skill with which we have made use of language. This principle is simple enough and one day will be considered of great importance: no one that I am aware of has recognised it before me.'

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 98: 'every man according to his passion has a particular [language] of his own'.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 100. 'It is demonstrable that there can be no such thing as a superior genius, till the language of a nation has been considerably improved'.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 100. 'In a language therefore, defective in words, or whose construction is not sufficiently easy and convenient, we should meet with the same obstacles as occurred in geometry before the invention of algebra. The French tongue was for a long time so unfavourable to the progress of the mind, that if we could frame an idea of Corneille successively in the different ages of our monarchy, we should find him to have been possessed of less genius in proportion to his greater distance from the age in which he lived, till at length we should reach a Corneille who could not give the least mark of his abilities.'

set a high value'.<sup>13</sup> The 'Considerations' was a characteristically unassuming but unobtrusively powerful response to Condillac's *Essai*. Like Condillac, Smith wanted a theory of language that would throw light on the operations of the mind. He told George Baird that such an approach was 'not only the best System of Grammar, but the best System of Logic in any Language, as well as the best History of the natural progress of the Human mind in forming the most important abstractions upon which all reasoning depends'.<sup>14</sup> He used natural history in the same way as Condillac, speculating on the cognitive experience of aboriginal man and concluding that language and the mind were the product of need. However, he had little time for Condillac's ambitious attempt to construct a new account of the principles of grammar which was based on sensation and 'la liaison des idées'. His own understanding of grammar was conventional and derived from the Port Royal *Rhetorique ou l'art de parler*, by Bernard Lamy, a book he had probably used in the Logic and Metaphysics class at Glasgow. Smith thought that aboriginal man had first learned to construct *genera* by using tropes to extend the range of his vocabulary. Lamy had thought that all tropes were metonymies ('metonymie signifie un nom pour un autre') and had regarded the inventiveness which human beings show in the use of tropes to express their own peculiar thoughts as one of the most striking characteristics of human speech.<sup>15</sup> Smith agreed and thought that they had probably used a somewhat obscure form of metonymy known to grammarians as 'antonomasia' which involved assigning 'one object the name of any other which nearly resembles it, and thus to denominate a multitude by what originally was intended to express an individual'.<sup>16</sup> Thus we might say of a great orator that he was a Cicero, or of a wise judge that he was a

<sup>13</sup> Stewart, 'Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith LD.D', p. 292. It is important to remember that the version of the essay which was published in 1761 addressed not only Condillac's thought on the origins of language, but that of those who had written about the subject subsequently – Rousseau included. Smith summarised the elements of his thought in narrowly Condillacian terms in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*. I have assumed that the elements of this argument were in place by 1748.

<sup>14</sup> *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross (Indianapolis, 1987), pp. 88–9; cf. *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, p. 274.

<sup>15</sup> 'La fécondité de l'esprit des hommes est si grande, qu'ils trouvent steriles les langues les plus fécondes. Ils tournent les choses en tant de manières, il se representent sous tant de faces différentes, qu'ils ne trouvent point de termes pour toutes les diverses formes de leurs pensées. Les mots ordinaires ne sont pas toujours justes, ils sont ou trop forts ou trop foibles. Ils ne'en donnent pas la juste idée qu'on en veut donner': B. Lamy, *La Rhetorique, ou l'art de parler* (Sussex Reprint, French Series No. 1, Brighton, 1969), p. 90. Lamy's discussion of tropes is to be found in book II, ch. 2.

<sup>16</sup> 'Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages and the Different Genius of Original and Compounded Languages', reprinted in *Adam Smith Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis, 1985), p. 204



Solomon. The invention of this trope was an epic moment in human history for it was then that human beings had acquired the capacity for language and thought.

In the beginnings of language, men seem to have attempted to express every particular event, which they had occasion to take notice of, by a particular word, which expressed at once the whole of that event. But as the number of words must, in this case, have become really infinite, in consequence of the really infinite variety of events, men found themselves partly compelled by necessity, and partly conducted by nature, to divide every event into what may be called its metaphysical elements, and to institute words, which should denote not so much the events, as the element of which they were composed. The expression of every particular event, became in this manner more intricate and complex, but the whole system of the language became more coherent, more connected, more easily retained and comprehended.<sup>17</sup>

Smith's theory was a conjecture about the first and most important step in man's progress from rudeness to refinement, the moment in which he became a language user and acquired the capacity for discourse on which his subsequent development would depend. Like Condillac, he realised that every stage in his progress as a moral and sociable agent would be controlled by the structure and resources of the language of the society in which he lived. He also realised that the linguistic resources of a closed, static society, insulated from the outside world, would tend towards stasis and stagnation and would confine the intellectual, social, and moral impulses of its people. Condillac had deplored the linguistic confusion which must occur when two societies are brought into contact accidentally. Characteristically, Smith welcomed such contact on the grounds that it would put pressure on existing languages and on the inventive tropic powers of those who used them.

As long as any language was spoke by those only who learned it in their infancy, the intricacy of its declensions and conjugations could occasion no great embarrassment. The far greater part of those who had occasion to speak it, had acquired it at so very early a period of their lives, so insensibly and by such slow degrees, they were scarce ever sensible of the difficulty. But when two nations came to be mixed with one another, either by conquest or migration, the case would be very different. Each nation, in order to make itself intelligible to those with whom it was under the necessity of conversing, would be obliged to learn the language of the other. The greater part of individuals too, learning the new language, not by art, or by remounting to its rudiments and first principles, but by rote, and by what they commonly heard in conversation, would be extremely perplexed by the intricacy of its declensions and conjugations. They would endeavour, therefore, to

<sup>17</sup> 'Considerations', p. 218. Jo Donohu tells me that Smith may have drawn some of his thinking about tropes from C. Du Marsais' classic *Traité des tropes* (1730). I am very grateful for this reference.

supply their ignorance of these, by whatever shift the language could afford them.<sup>18</sup>

In this remarkable conjecture, which forms part of the conclusion of the 'Considerations', a conjecture which may well have been formulated as early as 1748, Smith outlined one of the planks on which his general theory of progress would henceforth rest. Closed societies had a tendency to stagnate linguistically, socially, economically. A general instinct for improvement would only be awakened when such a society was exposed to outside pressure. Only then would the further progress of civilisation be possible.

Smith's theory of language and his account of the conditions which impelled human beings to invent the tropes which transformed the resources of language was to structure his theories of rhetoric and *belles-lettres* and morals, and inform his thinking about the moral economy of polished and commercial societies. This was why he summarised the argument in the third of the lectures on rhetoric and *belles-lettres* and published the whole text in the second and subsequent editions of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres* Smith dealt with the use of language in polished societies where citizens were practised in the art of discourse and sensitive to its persuasive powers. He argued, conventionally, that language will only persuade if it pleases, and less conventionally that it would only please if it was used 'naturally' and with a due sense of 'propriety'.

A wise man . . . in conversation and behaviour will not affect a character that is unnatural to him; if he is grave he will not affect to be gay; nor, if he be gay will he affect to be grave. He will only regulate his naturall temper, restrain [it] within just bounds and lop all exuberances and bring it to that pitch which will be agreable to those about him. But he will not affect such conduct as is unnaturall to his temper tho perhaps in the abstract they may be more to be wished.

In the like manner what is it that is agreable in Stile; It is when all the thoughts are justly and properly expressed in such a manner as shews the passion they affected the author with, and so that all seems naturall and easy. He never seems to act out of character but speaks in a manner not only suitable to the Subject but to the character he naturally inclines to.<sup>19</sup>

Propriety was the concept on which Smith's theory of rhetoric depended. In a polished, spectatorial world men and women quickly learned to rely on

<sup>18</sup> 'Considerations', p. 220. This dimension of the argument, though not Smith's theory about the origin of languages, was explored by two of Smith's Glasgow pupils, Archibald Arthur, Thomas Reid's assistant and successor as Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow, and William Richardson, Professor of Humanity 1773–1815, in an essay 'On the Confusion of Tongues', in *Original Essays and Translations by Different Hands* (Edinburgh, 1780), pp. 324–7, 359. <sup>19</sup> *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*, p. 55.

a sense of propriety that would socialise and individuate simultaneously. It was a lesson which implied that a pleasing and persuasive use of language would help to ease the tensions between *amour de soi* and *amour propre* on which sociability depended. Apart from casual but revealing remarks about the quasi-aesthetic pleasure we derive from using language with propriety and apart from observing that ‘it is the custom of the people that forms what we call propriety’, Smith seems to have said nothing systematic about the nature of propriety in the lectures.<sup>20</sup> That was left for the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) which was based on Smith’s Glasgow course in moral philosophy. That course was run in parallel to the course on rhetoric and *belles-lettres*; indeed the treatment of the two subjects is complementary. Once again, Smith resorted to the use of natural history in explaining the way in which individuals acquire moral sentiments. He tells us about the moral progress of individuals who live in polished societies, who become as skilled in trading sentiments as they are in trading goods and sentiments. They are individuals who long for the approval of others but learn the hard way that self-approval brings more contentment than the applause of the world. They are individuals who learn to value propriety. And, strikingly, they are individuals who have learned to value fiction as a means of furthering their pursuit of approbation and *apathaeia*.

Smith wrote about this process of moral education as someone who valued Stoic ethics for their own sake, for their seemingly natural appeal to citizens in all ages, and for their value in encouraging sociability. As he put it: ‘The never failing certainty with which all men, sooner or later, accommodate themselves to whatever becomes their present situation, may, perhaps, induce us to think that the Stoics were, at least, thus far very nearly in the right; that, between one permanent situation and another, there was, with regard to real happiness, no essential difference.’<sup>21</sup> The core of his theory lay in his famous account of the process of moral trading. It was in such encounters that individuals learned how to estimate the characters of others, here that they learned to see themselves as others saw them, here that they learned to value propriety and the consolations of Stoic ethics.

Characteristically, Smith realised the satisfaction of moral need was a matter of learning to deploy language effectively. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* begins with a dramatic – even melodramatic – case study significantly adapted from the discussion of Stoic ethics in *De Finibus*.<sup>22</sup> It deals with our response to the agonies of a brother on the rack.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5. Cf. Du Marsais, ‘C’est toujours le plus commun et le plus connu qui est le propre’, *Traité des tropes*, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis, 1982), p. 149. <sup>22</sup> *De Finibus* III, xxiii.

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels.<sup>23</sup>

The pressures that are placed on our cognitive and linguistic resources are made immediately obvious. Smith realised that the partialities of language make it impossible for us to enter into our brother's sufferings except by resorting to fiction, attempting to imagine what we would feel in his position and judging whether, in such circumstances, we would want to act as he does. For unless his behaviour satisfies that condition, we shall not feel that he has acted with propriety and we shall withhold our sympathy. To avoid that painful situation our brother will have no option but to respond in kind and make his own assessment of our conduct. And so the transaction will proceed until we reach a situation in which sympathy can be offered and reciprocated. A pleasurable state of mutual sympathy will have been achieved, a state which Smith thought offered the greatest pleasure society had to offer.<sup>24</sup> The encounter has been driven forward by moral need. The rhetorical skills of the two brothers have been tested to the utmost by their attempts to enter their respective cognitive and passionate worlds and to negotiate a potentially rewarding moral transaction. In the process they will have created the illusion of 'knowing' each other.

However, it was when men and women found that they could no longer rely on the world to supply them with approbation and sympathy that they were obliged to resort to the greatest rhetorical ingenuities of all. In this situation, Smith observed they were in the habit of seeking the approval of a 'man within the breast', an 'abstract man', an 'impartial spectator' whose voice was the voice of propriety and whose judgement was to be valued over that of the world. In editions 2 to 5 of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith offered a long, meticulously crafted analysis of

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.      <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

the social and moral experience which shows us the limitations of worldly approval and encourages us to look for alternative interior sources of approbation; it is an account which at every point presupposes an encounter regulated by the resources of speech and language.

When we first come into the world, from the natural desire to please, we accustom ourselves to consider what behaviour is likely to be agreeable to every person we converse with, to our parents, to our masters, to our companions. We address ourselves to individuals, and for some time fondly pursue the impossible and absurd project of gaining the good-will and approbation of everybody. We are soon taught by experience, however, that this universal approbation is altogether unattainable. As soon as we come to have more important interests to manage, we find, that by pleasing one man, we almost certainly disoblige another, and that by humouring an individual, we may often irritate a whole people. The fairest and most equitable conduct must frequently obstruct the interests or thwart the inclinations of particular persons, who will seldom have candour enough to enter into the propriety of our motives, or to see that this conduct, how disagreeable soever to them, is perfectly suitable to our situation. In order to defend ourselves from such partial judgements, we soon learn to set up in our own minds a judge between ourselves and those we live with. We conceive ourselves as acting in the presence of a person quite candid and equitable, of one who has no particular relation either to ourselves, or to those whose interests are affected by our conduct, who is neither father, nor brother, nor friend either to them or to us, but is merely a man in general, an impartial spectator who considers our conduct with the same indifference with which we regard that of other people. If when we place ourselves in the situation of such a person, our own actions appear to us under an agreeable aspect, if we feel that such a spectator cannot avoid entering into all the motives which influenced us, whatever may be the judgements of the world, we must still be pleased with our behaviour, and regard ourselves, in spite of the censure of our companions, as the just and proper objects of approbation. On the contrary, if the man within condemns us, the loudest acclamations of mankind appear but as the noise of ignorance and folly, and whenever we assume the character of the impartial judge, we cannot avoid viewing our own actions with his distaste and dissatisfaction.<sup>25</sup>

Philosophers sometimes write of Smith's impartial spectator as though it was a quasi-Hutchesonian faculty of the mind. It is nothing of the kind. Smith has shown here that the impartial spectator is another fiction generated by rhetoric, language, and the imagination. It is a testimony to fictive virtuosity of moral agents living in polished worlds and to the disciplined manner in which they construct fictions to serve their primary moral needs.

Nowhere was Smith's thinking more powerful than in his quasi-Mandevillian insights into the facility which human beings show for investing the language of common experience with new, tropic meanings.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129–30n. Cf. *Correspondence*, pp. 54–5.

We are apt to value notions of propriety and justice for aesthetic rather than functional reasons. We find ourselves valuing trinkets for 'the aptness of the machines which are fitted to promote [production]' and not for their utility.<sup>26</sup> More generally, we are apt to view all the satisfactions of life in relation to 'the order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine or oeconomy by means of which it is produced'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed it was out of such illusions that we conjured up the Stoic image of the world as part of a divinely ordered and benevolent universe which offered the individual the consolation of *apatheia* and society the prospect of sociability, order and improvement. 'And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner', Smith wrote. 'It is this *deception* [my italics] which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. It is this which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth.'<sup>28</sup> It was an insight 'that has not, so far as I know, been yet taken notice of by any body'.<sup>29</sup>

As Smith grew older and physically frailer, he seems to have become impressed by the difficulty of mastering the resentments of common life. In the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* he had spoken of the affronts that the progress of society and the growth of inequality bring in its wake and both here and in the *Wealth of Nations* he had been scathingly aware that government must naturally appear to many as an institution for preserving the property of the rich from the envy of the poor. In the sixth and last edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* his faith in the civilising powers of commerce seems muted as he calls for a more austere, more Epictetan Stoicism to arm the modern citizens against the rigours of commercial civilisation. Whether these were lessons the writing of the *Wealth of Nations* had taught him is a question that lies beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless it is striking that, in the final edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he became increasingly aware of the frailty of the judgements of the man within the breast when faced with the praise or blame of the world. Once again the crisis is seen in rhetorical terms as a failure of language which calls for new displays of tropic ingenuity. 'The man within seems sometimes, as it were, astonished and confounded by the

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.180.    <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.    <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.183–4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179–80. Smith's argument was designed as a critique of Hume's theory of utility.

vehemence and clamour of the man without' he wrote. Under these circumstances 'he discovers his connexion with mortality, and appears to act suitably, rather to the human than to the divine, part of his origin'. Under these circumstances, the 'humbled and afflicted man' had only one resource left to him, to resort to a final act of moral fiction, to appeal 'to a still higher tribunal, to that of the all-seeing Judge of the world, whose eye can never be deceived, and whose judgements can never be perverted'. And it was from him and him alone that we could look for justice and happiness in the world to come.<sup>30</sup> In the final months of his life, Smith had returned to a more austere, Epictetan Stoicism, spun out of the resources of language by recourse to a new form of theological fiction.

Smith's natural history had shown how individuals seek the satisfaction of their material and moral needs by exploiting the resources of worlds in which they find themselves, their understanding being constrained at every point by the limitations of language and by material circumstance. It was a natural history which was designed to make sense of the experience of individuals living in polished societies; unlike Robertson, Smith had little interest in barbaric or non-European societies. What is more, it was a natural history which argued that human beings will only be truly sociable and productive when they are free to exchange their goods, services, and sentiments and when their conduct is constrained by propriety rather than laws. For only then will they be able to aspire to a life directed by the impartial spectator, a life led according to the principles of Stoic virtue. In commercial society it will be easier for the many to live according to the direction of the impartial spectator than it was in the slave-orientated societies of antiquity, although the condition of the few who worked on the production lines of an advanced economy were a famous source of worry for the author of the *Wealth of Nations*. The species whose material and moral progress Smith charts in his historicised theory of human nature and in his account of the progress of civilisation is a species in search of the Stoic satisfactions which commerce has now made generally available. His historiography has made possible the birth of a new philosophic Whiggery.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.131–2.