

A Language of Taste in the Moral Philosophy of Adam Smith*

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to show that Adam Smith constructed a new language of taste in his moral philosophy, wherein the term “taste” describes how a commercial society unexpectedly emerged out of the agreement of aesthetic judgments. Smith described how aesthetic judgments by people of various tastes and interests could still achieve agreement through the evaluation of the means for achieving the end, rather than the utility of the end itself, and how they could do so impartially through the imagined sympathy from the impartial spectator. Against Marxist critic John Guillory, this paper emphasizes that taste in Smith’s philosophy is a powerful sentiment which extends to the vast majority of common people, an intrinsic sentiment indispensable to the motivation of vanity and ambition—complex passions that go beyond the reach of utility calculation in stimulating the demand for finer products and in driving people to the pursuit of wealth. Taste is also an instrumental factor in establishing the order of commercial society, and the freedom and independence of the masses by distributing wealth among the poor, productive sector of society. This paper concludes that, in these arguments, aesthetics was the basis for Smith’s political economy.

Keywords: Adam Smith, Taste, Judgment of Merit, Impartial Spectator, Commercial Society

JEL Classification Numbers: B12, B31

1 Introduction

In his fascinating study on eighteenth-century thought, *Cultural Capital* (1993), Marxist critic John Guillory argued that in the British moral philosophy of the time, the problem of aesthetic judgment was essential to the shaping of the political economy. Moral philosophers, such as John Locke, Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper), Bernard Mandeville, Francis Hutcheson, David

*This paper is part of the research funded by the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKENHI) for Young Scientists (B), Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), within the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), Japan.

Hume, and Adam Smith, were to question the nature of civil society as to the relationship between “private interests” and the “public good.” They were concerned about the contrast between the apparent disorder of incompatible individual self-interests and the manifest order of the newly emerging civil society in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain. Despite clashing self-interests within, civil society appeared as a distinctive, relatively autonomous domain of economic emulation, commerce, and production. In this context, moral philosophers were to represent the order, proportion, or harmony of civil society as analogous to those of a work of art or an object of beauty, whose rational principle could be detected in the exercise of taste. Their theory of civil society was, therefore, at stake in the analogous conception of taste in British moral society, to whose order Britain’s eighteenth-century moral philosophy was to give its legitimacy (Guillory, 1993, pp. 303–306).

This paper looks into Guillory’s intriguing critique on the language of taste in Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Guillory argued that moral philosophy’s problem of reconciling private interests with the public good was resolved with Smith’s concept of political economy as the discourse describing the harmony between production and consumption, or between needs and desire. In this, Smith deliberately omitted the conflict between wage-laborers and entrepreneurs. Wage-laborers were in the domain of production, excluded as a group or class from the domain of aesthetic consumption, or taste. Entrepreneurs, on the other hand, were in the domain of taste, whose aestheticized cupidity motivated production. They were to be legitimated in Smith’s language of taste for their exploitation of the surplus beauty of the commodity over their actual needs as the source of social and economic surplus—Smith’s explanation and justification for the wealth of nations (Guillory, 1993, pp. 311–312). Guillory concluded that Smith’s theory of value in *The Wealth of Nations*, which focused on the pole of production alone, could never find its way back to, or be included within, its formula for price, the “beauty” of the commodity, and the aestheticized conception of utility that would have bridged private interests and the public good, as previously proposed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Guillory, 1993, p. 315).

In this paper I will assess whether Guillory’s critique stands. While I agree that the language of taste was crucial to Smith’s moral philosophy, the main agenda of the eighteenth-century theory of taste (called the criticism of taste) was to seek a standard of taste as a common ground for agreement on private aesthetic judgments among people of varying preferences and interests. Its main target was Bernard Mandeville, who presented a critique of the Augustan conception of taste. Mandeville argued that instead of virtues, beauties, and tastes, it was paradoxically the evil quality of human passions that delivered the prosperity and order of a commercial society. Selfish individual value judgments conflicting with each other in tastes and interests, could not deliver public good. As John Harrison (1995) argues, Mandeville’s critique pointed the eighteenth-century theory of taste toward increased emphasis on sentiment,

feeling, intuition, and sensibility in an inner sense, rather than on rational and objective criteria (Harrison, 1995, pp. 91–92).¹ Smith's two books reflect (a) the tensions and shifts taking place between the Augustan canons of correct taste; (b) the increasing emphasis on taste as a subjective phenomenon, which would eventually lead to the full-blown subjectivism and free expression of Romanticism, such as William Blake's; and (c) the continuing focus on the scientific and empirical method, but with an increasing weight on utility in social and political terms, which would eventually lead to Benthamite Utilitarianism (Harrison, 1995, p. 99). I find Guillory's critique unacceptable.

I seek to show that Smith elaborated his language of taste² to argue that the judgments of merit are primarily judgments of a means to achieve that merit, rather than the utility of merit itself, because utility judgments would not be impartial. Instead, merit is to be achieved as the unintended consequence of valuing the propriety of a means more than the utility of the end. In the end, Smith's issue was not so much between agreement and disagreement as between partiality and impartiality to overcome the judgments of merit resulting from biased ideas of utility, passions, and interests. The primary purpose of Smith's theory of beauty was to prove that aesthetic judgments could be impartial, not only among men of refined taste and good critics, but also among the vast majority of common people. In other words, anyone can be impartial in aesthetic judgments that are made from the viewpoint of an impartial spectator. If the judgments of a means are proper and consequently approved of by the impartial spectator, they can ultimately achieve merit itself impartially and without any regard to its utility. Smith would, in the end, present the unexpected prosperity and consequent establishment of a commercial society as a product of the impartiality of the judgments of merit through the evaluation of a means for achieving the end, rather than the utility of the end itself. Assessing Guillory's critique of Smith's language of taste depends on how to interpret the concept of taste in Smith's moral philosophy. I emphasize that for Smith, taste was not exclusive to wealthy consumers but an instrumental factor in establishing

¹Harrison calls eighteenth-century aesthetic theory "neo-classic"—a literary term denoting the early eighteenth century. In this paper, however, I replace this term with "Augustan" in order to avoid confusion with latter-day neoclassical economics.

²Charles Griswold (1999) surveys the importance of Smith's concept of beauty (Griswold, 1999, pp. 311–354, especially, pp. 330–335). As I argue below, however, "taste" was a far more crucial concept in Smith and other Scottish Enlightenment philosophers than "beauty." In his *Outlines of Moral Philosophy*, Dugald Stewart, for instance, reflected that taste had been treated as one of the most important intellectual powers and "an ultimate fact in the constitution of the human mind." At the end of the Scottish Enlightenment, Stewart still asserted that "the extensive influence it [taste] possesses in such a state of society as ours, not only over the pursuits of those who devote themselves to the study of Literature and of the Fine Arts, but over the enjoyments of every individual who partakes of the general refinement of manners, might justify the allotment of a separate article to an illustration of the intellectual process by which it is formed" (Stewart, 1854, p. 32).

the order of commercial society, securing the freedom and independence of the masses, and distributing wealth among the poor, productive sector of society. As such, Smith's theory of taste, which posited the surplus of beauty over needs as the motor of production, did not become irrelevant to his political economy.

2 Beauty and Society in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

A discussion of beauty, the sublime, and taste was central to eighteenth-century British philosophers such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Edmund Burke, Smith, Alexander Gerard, Archibald Alison, and many others (Townsend, 1992, p. 205). As Carolyn Korsmeyer (1999) sums it up, the problem of taste in eighteenth-century moral philosophy was a paradox between the subjective nature of individual aesthetic judgments and the importance of a standard of taste that was more than subjective. Aesthetic reactions are subjective because individual pleasure is involved, yet aesthetic judgments about beauty, order, and harmony are more than mere preferences of subjective tastes, and thus demand standards of taste that can be shared. The question was how a subjectivist position (envisaged in the empiricism that became dominant in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British philosophy) could avoid relativism or skepticism and give an object of appreciation its due (Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 46). Smith's approach to this question was to deny beauty a status of objective quality and analyze it simply as a species of pleasure that can yet be agreed upon and even become impartial.

Eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosophers set themselves two main questions for their theory of morals: the nature of morals and the principle of moral approbation.³ Their questions for the aesthetic theory were similar: the nature of beauties and the principle of aesthetic judgment or standard of taste. These questions were concerned with whether aesthetic and moral judgments could achieve agreement as to the nature of beauties and morals, and share universal principles of aesthetic and moral approbation. They were especially concerned about refuting the Mandevillian claim of subjective relativism. According to Mandeville, the judgments of merit could decide nothing about the objective qualities of an object, as they are just a matter of personal taste, and there is no accounting for taste (Korsmeyer, 1992, p. 245).

Smith began *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* by developing his own theory of sympathy in order to show how the judgments of merit can achieve not only their agreement but also their impartiality through sympathy. Smith was more than happy to endorse Hume's idea of sympathy as a source of disinterestedness and agreement on the judgments of merit (*TMS*, I. i. 1. 1, p. 9). Smith immediately distanced himself from natural law theorists and

³Clearly set out by Hutcheson in *Passions*, p. 107, as well as by Smith in *TMS*, VII. i. 2, p. 265. In both books, the questions appear in their accounts of the history of moral philosophy.

Mandeville, who contended that human nature was fundamentally selfish. As such, therefore, there could be no ground for agreement about the public good. The main objective of his theory of sympathy was to determine whether sympathy could guarantee the impartiality of the judgments of merit, rather than a unanimous agreement about them or an alleged standard of taste and morals. Against Hume, Smith emphasized that sympathy did not so much consist of the communication of passions as attention to the situation of others. For instance, extremely strong passions may cause people to inquire into another person's situation rather than sympathize with him or her (*TMS*, I. i. 1. 6–9, p. 11).

Style: Indentation. Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it. (*TMS*, I. i. 1. 10, p. 12)

The compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same...situation.... (*TMS*, I. i. 1. 11, p. 12)

Sympathy, in Hume's view, was the idea of an emotion being converted into the emotion itself through an enlivening association with an impression of self. In contrast, Smith saw sympathy as imagining oneself in another person's situation and, in one's imagination, going through all the emotions he or she would be experiencing. Whether or not I sympathize with a certain person is how I would respond if I were placed in his or her situation (Mercer, 1972, p. 85). Smith saw a basis for the impartiality of the judgments of merit in the harmony of the passions through sympathy, rather than in the communication of the passions. The communication of the passions in the Humean sense only brings agreement about judgments but not their impartiality. Smith thought that people judge the propriety or impropriety of the affections of others by their concord or dissonance with their own.

To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them. (*TMS*, I. i. 3. 1, p. 16)

Although the compassion, or fellow feeling, of a spectator can never be the same as the original sentiments of the first agent, these two sentiments still "have such a correspondence with one another, as is sufficient for the harmony of society." What is demanded in the process is that "though they will never be unisons, they may be concords, and this is all that is wanted or required" (*TMS*, I. i. 4. 7, p. 22). Smith's theory of sympathy implied that sympathetic emotions can relate to any kind of passion, be it joyful or sorrowful. This was a development from Hume's view that pleasure from sympathy was only with the joyful passions, not the sorrowful ones. For Hume, an idea of pleasure from sympathy with agreeable

emotions would give rise to the passions of pride and love, whereas an idea of uneasiness from the sorrowful passions would excite the passions of humility and hatred. Hume called Smith's new idea that sympathy was applicable to both joyful and sorrowful passions, "the Hinge of your System" and said, "I wish you had more particularly and fully prov'd, that all kinds of Sympathy are necessarily Agreeable" (Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, letter 169, from Hume to Adam Smith, dated 28 July 1759, p. 313). In the second edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith further clarified the point.

I answer, that in the sentiment of approbation there are two things to be taken notice of; first, the sympathetic passion of the spectator; and, secondly, the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned. This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful. The other may either be agreeable or disagreeable, according to the nature of the original passion, whose features it must always, in some measure, retain. (*TMS*, footnote to I. iii. 1. 9, p. 46)

"To sympathize" is to put oneself in another's shoes, not only to feel pity for those who are victims of ill fortune or ill usage, but also to share by imagination in the feelings of another person occasioned by good fortune as well as bad (Wilson, 1976, pp. 73–74). Sympathetic feelings bring pleasure more from viewing the propriety of a motive than the utility of an action, either agreeable or disagreeable. In this process, sympathy can achieve the impartiality of the judgments of merit through the impartial spectator. The

passions of human nature, seem proper and are approved of, when the heart of every impartial spectator entirely sympathizes with them, when every indifferent by-stander entirely enters into, and goes along with them. (*TMS*, II. i. 2. 2, p. 69)

Sympathy should be neutral and independent of the interests of the impartial spectator.⁴ The judgments of merit would then be impartial. This view is

⁴The concept of the impartial spectator was central to Smith's moral philosophy. Alexander Broadie (2006) clarifies that an impartial spectator is an agent whom one imagines for himself or herself, and who observes one's own actions as well as judgments of propriety and of merit at a distance and with the advantage of disinterest. David Raphael (2007) also interprets the concept as a theory of conscience built up from judgments made by an imagined agent who, by exercising sympathy and imagination, can tell whether an action or a judgment is proper or not. In *The Wealth of Nations*, the impartial spectator reappears as the country gentleman in a province (such as in Scotland, Ireland, and above all, North America) who was supposed to be indifferent to metropolitan party-politics (*WN*, V. iii. 90, p. 945). This clearly shows that Smith's spectatorial account, essential to his account of the aesthetic judgments (*TMS*, IV. I. 1–11, pp. 179–187) that were generated from his moral theory, migrated well into his economic theory, as argued later in this paper.

not Humean, because Smith argued that the judgments of merit could be made without considering the public good, which Hume had argued should be the basis for the standard of taste and morals. In Smith's words, the propriety of characters and actions depends on whether the motive can be sympathized with, regardless of their merit or demerit.

[W]e cannot at all sympathize with the resentment of one man against another, merely because this other has been the cause of his misfortune, unless he has been the cause of it from motives which we cannot enter into. (*TMS*, II. i. 4. 3, pp. 73–74)

The spectator's sympathy is concerned mainly with the motive of an agent. The spectator imagines himself in the shoes of the agent, and if he finds that he could share the agent's feelings of either joy or sorrow, the correspondence of sentiments makes his sympathy and causes him to approve the agent's motive as fit and proper. Smith agrees with Hume that utility may please a spectator through sympathy, with pleasure given to the direct beneficiary, but he entirely disagrees with Hume's idea that this kind of sympathy with utility is the sole or main cause of approval (Raphael, 1975, p. 96). The propriety of characters and actions will be determined by our views of their motives themselves, not by their tendency to promote public good or evil in view of whomsoever's interest. Beauty and virtue primarily consist of propriety and only secondarily in utility, and the judgments of merit can then be impartial. If the passions are proper and consequently sympathized with, they can arouse impartial approbation, without any regard of their utility, yet in a way accomplishing public good in the end.

The oeconomy of nature is in this respect exactly of a piece with what it is upon many other occasions. With regard to all those ends which, upon account of their peculiar importance, may be regarded, if such an expression is allowable, as the favorite ends of nature, she has constantly in this manner not only endowed mankind with an appetite for the end which she proposes, but likewise with an appetite for the means by which alone this end can be brought about, for their own sakes, and independent of their tendency to produce it. Thus, self-preservation, and the propagation of the species, are the great ends which Nature seems to have proposed in the formation of all animals. (*TMS*, II. i. 5. 10, p. 77)

The passions and sympathy are "means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce." They are built in human nature like the wheels of a watch.

The wheels of the watch are all admirably adjusted to the end for which it was made, the pointing of the hour. All their various motions conspire in the nicest manner to produce this effect. If they were endowed with a desire and intention to produce it, they could not do it better. Yet we never ascribe any such desire

or intention to them, but to the watch-maker, and we know that they are put into motion by a spring, which intends the effect it produces as little as they do. (*TMS*, II. ii. 3. 5, p. 87)

Moral sentiments, in general, are intended to autonomously control human conduct, leading people to proper characters and actions, and into making the impartial judgments of merit, in the same manner as the artifices built into a watch. The judgments of merit are primarily the judgments of a means to achieve that merit, rather than of the end of the merit itself, because utility judgments based on Humean, biased sympathy would not be impartial, even if honest and disinterested (see *THN*, III, pp. 312–314; Brand, 1992, pp. 67, 70, 96, 98 and 110–112). Instead, the end of merit is to be achieved as an unintended consequence of sympathy and the passions that derive pleasure from the propriety of a means, more than the utility of the end. If sympathy and the passions work in this manner, the propriety of characters and actions is always approved of by sympathy, and the judgments of merit would be accordingly impartial. In the end, Smith's issue was not so much between agreement and disagreement as between partiality and impartiality to overcome the judgments of merit based on the biased ideas of utility. Unlike Hume's theory, Smith's theory of sympathy was that the impartiality of aesthetic judgments would be possible not only among people of refined taste, or good critics, but also among the vast majority of common people; and consequently, that people can come nearly as impartial in aesthetic judgments as in judging moral merits and defects that can be made according to the viewpoint of an impartial spectator.

In Smith's theory, there can be general rules of beauty as well as those of morals. Unlike Hume's, as Harrison (1995) and others have commented, Smith's ethics was effectively an aesthetics of conduct written in a language of taste. "Sensibility," for instance, was a term that denoted in eighteenth-century Scotland a capacity for refined emotion and the delicate sensitiveness of taste, a moral virtue that was involved to determine a degree to which a spectator can "enter into" the feelings of the subject. Smith's preferences were based not so much on moral, objective, and cognitive criteria—righteous, wicked, or guilty—as on aesthetic, subjective, personal, and emotional ones—noble, strong, effective, splendid, or pathetic (Harrison, 1995, pp. 106–110; Lyons, 1993, pp. 41–60; Skinner, 1996, p. 57). "Propriety" was another aesthetic concept, like "fitness or propriety" (*TMS*, VII. ii. 1. 49, p. 294), or "the suitability or unsuitability, in the proportion or disproportion which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it" (*TMS*, I. i. 3. 6, p. 18).

Smith's aesthetics, in turn, was to be the basis for his ethics, in his new concept of sympathy, which was to show that the judgments of merit could be impartial in terms not only of morals but also of beauties. Criticizing Hume, Smith defined a sense of beauty as not primarily concerned with the utility of beauty (*TMS*, IV. 1. 6, p. 180). Hume had argued that beauty was derived from its utility, which would give the possessor pleasure and convenience

(*TMS*, IV. 1. 2, p. 179). Claiming the originality of his account of beauty, Smith argued:

But that this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended; and that the exact adjustment of the means for attaining any conveniency or pleasure, should frequently be more regarded, than that very conveniency or pleasure, in the attainment of which their whole merit would seem to consist, has not, so far as I know, been yet taken notice of by any body. That this however is very frequently the case, may be observed in a thousand instances, both in the most frivolous and in the most important concerns of human life. (*TMS*, IV. 1. 3, pp. 179–180)⁵

Smith presented the sense of beauty as originated from the pleasure of seeing the order, harmony, and economy of organization or arrangement. The Augustan notion of taste for order, proportion, elegance, reasonableness, or harmony had been based on rational standards of taste, with reason as its essential part. Hume retained the Augustan feature of the scientific and empirical method in his theory of beauty, but he also developed an Augustan notion of taste, with his emphasis on utility, and presented the sentiment of beauty as something that provides a motive to moral action and ideas. Hume's beauty was the beauty of interest, rather than that of form (see *THN*, II. II. 5. 16–17, p. 235), derived from utility, only through the exercise of an imaginative sympathy rather than that of reasoning (Harrison, 1995, pp. 92–93, 98–99 and 101–102). Smith, on the other hand, developed the Augustan notion of taste in line with the Hutchesonian theory, which had an increasing emphasis on taste as a subjective phenomenon. Certainly, Smith's ideas of aesthetic judgments

⁵Even though his claim of originality can be accepted, Smith knew of Claude Buffier's observation of beauty, which presented an anti-utilitarian argument of beauty—that beauty did not necessarily consist in convenience for which each part of the body was designed, because a very large mouth, for instance, was surely useful for eating but not always beautiful. See Buffier, *First Truths*, pp. 70–71. This argument might have offered Smith a hint for criticizing Hume's utility-oriented account of beauty. After arguing that “beauty consists in the particular form which is most common among other particular forms found in things of the same species” (*First Truths*, p. 71), however, Buffier eventually reached his conclusion that “if we suppose that true beauty is to be found in the world, it must incontestably be that form which is most common to all nations; and if particular people, through prejudice, and particular habits, will not at first concur in this opinion, time and reflection must at length incline them to the more numerous party, that is, to the side of opinion of Reason and Nature” (*First Truths*, p. 75). Smith seems to have followed Buffier's conclusion all through his argument of beauty in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As a Jesuit, Buffier had also stated that nature was something existing and acting in conformity with the laws that God had established, so that in this sense, what was natural was opposed to what was considered supernatural or miraculous (*First Truths*, p. 230). Smith examined Buffier's account of beauty in detail in Part V of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. However, Smith described Buffier as a philosopher who had derived beauty from custom, though it should be noted that Smith, like Hutcheson, was more interested in the sense of beauty and its origin in human nature rather than beauty itself.

inherited many features from the rules of Augustan taste, such as the love of order (the beauty of a systematic arrangement) and harmony. However, Smith's concept of beauty was also an intrinsic pleasure, not reason and advantage—at least, not primarily. While Hume had itemized utility, making no reference to the form of object, Smith put greater emphasis on the psychological aspects of desired form than utility as a source of aesthetic pleasure (Harrison, 1995, pp. 100–102). A spectator would sympathize with the beauty of formal arrangement and balance, symmetry, and proportion. In other words, beauty is valued intrinsically by a spectator, not by its tendency to promote public good or evil, in view of whosoever's interest.

As the quotation above indicates, Smith believed that his theory of beauty could be relevant to many aspects of human life. Howard Caygill (1989) and Andrew Skinner (1996), for instance, have clearly pointed out the connection between Smith's theories of beauty and political economy. First, beauty explains the demand for commodities as the source of their value: We appreciate and buy goods for their aesthetic value, not functional reasons (as Hume had argued), to satisfy our taste for pleasure, not our strict needs.⁶ Smith's notion of beauty here rings up one for the ordinary consumer against Marxist exploitation theorists of every stripe. Second, beauty fans the passion and ambition for wealth and power to produce these commodities. The production of wealth is prompted by the pleasure of taste, of contemplating and enjoying the beauty of a means without seeing its end, which then encourages the exorbitant expenditure of effort. Third, beauty induces the rich to distribute the product to the masses—the laboring poor. Here an “invisible hand” ensures that the sum of individual interests tends towards the common welfare or the maximization of happiness, serving both wealth and virtue. This image of the “invisible hand” was the Stoic picture of Providence, characteristic of eighteenth-century theories of taste in which the Deity orchestrates individual judgments through sentiments and thus maximizes happiness. Finally, beauty addresses the issue of subjective preference in the problem of demand for commodities and the self-interested pursuit of wealth. Beauty provides psychological drives not only for the production of wealth in the form of the desire for status and the approbation and admiration of peers, which justifies the toil and trouble in the pursuit of wealth. Beauty also provides the psychological drives for self-restraint in the self-interested pursuit of wealth, so as to avoid indignation from other people. In the end, this would establish rational self-love, impartiality in judging our own self-interests and conduct, and the orderly conduct of economic affairs (Caygill, 1989, pp. 97–98; Skinner, 1996, pp. 62–70).

Smith described how the ambition for wealth and power is prompted by the sense of beauty in the anticipation of pleasure that is supposed to be

⁶See also Phillipson, 2000, pp. 82–83; Phillipson, 2010, pp. 116–117. Smith followed Josiah Tucker here in what is called the “rich country-poor country debate” between Hume and Tucker: see Hont, 2005, pp. 70–71.

derived from them. This theme had already appeared in Hutcheson and Hume (see *BOHD*, VIII. I, pp. 87–89; *THN*, II. I. 10. 1–11, pp. 202–205; II. II. 5. 1, p. 231), but Smith was to illustrate how little ambition and the sense of beauty were concerned with the real utility they pursued.

The poor man's son, whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition, when he begins to look around him, admires the condition of the rich. ... It appears in his fancy like the life of some superior rank of beings, and, in order to arrive at it, he devotes himself for ever to the pursuit of wealth and greatness. To obtain the conveniencies which these afford, he submits in the first year, nay in the first month of his application, to more fatigue of body and more uneasiness of mind than he could have suffered through the whole of his life from the want of them. ... [I]f in the extremity of old age he should at last to attain it, he will find to be in no respect preferable to that humble security and contentment which he had abandoned for it. ... [H]e begins at last to find that wealth and greatness are mere trinkets of frivolous utility, no more adapted for procuring ease of body and tranquillity of mind than the tweezer-cases of the lover of toys; and like them too, more troublesome to the person who carries them about with him than all the advantages they can afford him are commodious. (*TMS*, IV. 1. 8, p. 181)

Smith went on to argue that ambition is, therefore, not always the product of our curiosity in the ease and utility of the situation of the wealthy, or of their riches and power, as Hume had assumed. While Hume had derived beauty from deferred, imagined utility through sympathy, or the communication of the passions, Smith derived beauty, as Guillory (1993) has interestingly put it, directly from the commodity. Hume's concept of sympathy had distinguished between the sense of beauty for the possessor of the commodity and that for the spectator. Smith, on the other hand, differentiated between its being a means (its beauty) and an end (its use); he abstracted the means from the end. Hume's sense of beauty motivates the action of the spectator through sympathy—a desire to attain a particular end. Smith's sense of beauty motivates action by the pleasure arising from the employment of the means to the end. The commodity is, therefore, pursued for its aesthetic dimension (the beauty of fitness to its end) rather than for its use to satisfy the minimal needs of human survival. Here, we need to take seriously Smith's emphasis on fitness against utility. The aesthetic disposition itself, not basic human needs, is the motor of the economy. Much more effort than necessary will be spent in disposing the means to a particular end for the immediate enjoyment of that end, for the pleasure in imagining the order—the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine, or the economy—that produced it. While Hume's sense of beauty would be satisfied with immediate utility, Smith's would provoke the production of more goods than is necessary to satisfy the minimal needs and immediate desires, consequently distributing the wealth within the society. The surplus beauty of the commodity thus produced over its actual use, Guillory goes on, would then be the source of

social surplus in Smith, which explains and justifies the production of the wealth of nations (Caygill, 1989, pp. 88–91; Guillory, 1993, pp. 310–312). The sense of beauty propels ambition towards pursuing wealth as something beautiful in and of itself, rather than merely useful. Pleasure, to be satisfied, requires goods to be made, specialization to keep costs down, and exchange to satisfy the taste for variety. Beauty, it turns out, is actually the driving force behind all aspects of the economic system. The best of fashioning is fitness, as it achieves unexpected connections that may convince us that systems are possible, and we take pleasure in all the properties that apply to systems (*TMS*, IV. I. 11, pp. 185–187; *LJ(A)*, v. 122, p. 319). Smith’s aesthetics thus become the language of a political economy insofar as we wish to emphasize the system properties of the economy.

Smith then had to show how the working of this sense of beauty involved sympathy and an impartial spectator. This suggests that the primary purpose of his theory of beauty was to prove that aesthetic judgments could be impartial. Smith, like Hume, praised Hutcheson in the sense that “Dr. Hutcheson had been at large pains to prove that the principle of approbation was not founded on self-love” (*TMS*, VII. iii. 3. 4, p. 321) but on a sentiment. Smith, however, criticized Hutcheson’s theory of the sense of beauty, which Hutcheson had argued as the principle of aesthetic approbation (*TMS*, VII. iii. 2. 9, pp. 320–321; VII. iii. 3. 2, p. 321).⁷ Smith was to argue that only a comparison of our own judgment and that of others could render us able to assess other people’s approbation (*TMS*, VII. iii. 3. 14, p. 325). In this sense, in Smith’s view, the impartiality of the judgments of merit escaped Hutcheson’s theory of the sense of beauty. Smith concluded that there was no such rational faculty as the sense of beauty and the moral sense exerting “itself alone and unmixed with sympathy or antipathy, with gratitude or resentment” (*TMS*, VII. iii. 3. 16, pp. 326–327). Smith’s concepts of sympathy and “an impartial spectator” were conceived to solve this problem.

While Hume had presumed his own theory of sympathy as “the communication of passions” (in this case, the communication of agreeable sentiments from utility between the possessor of beauty and the spectator), Smith insisted that sympathy was to be aroused from the spectator’s curiosity to the situation of an agent. Even if Smith ruled out the sense of beauty and the moral sense as the aesthetic and moral faculties in the Hutchesonian, Neo-Platonist sense, and endorsed Hume’s idea of sympathy as far as it was the source of disinterestedness and agreement about the judgments of merit, Smith still disagreed with Hume as to the identity of an object of this sympathy (Mercer, 1972, p. 87). Smith agreed with Hume in the sense that he founded the principle of approbation on sympathy, but disagreed with his idea of sympathy being concerned only with the utility of a well-contrived machine rather than with the motives or

⁷Smith’s assessment was concerned with Hutcheson’s theory of moral sense, but Smith understood that the moral sense was discussed in Hutcheson as analogous to the sense of beauty (*TMS*, VII. iii. 3. 6–7, p. 322).

passions of living human beings (*TMS*, VII. iii. 3. 17, p. 327). Smith argued that the judgments of merit were based on those of an impartial spectator, whereas Hume had based them on sympathy. In Hume's view, utility was approved of as beauty by sympathy, as sympathy was the communication of passions. The pleasure of utility was to be directly transmitted through sympathy. However, Smith argued that beauty rested primarily in propriety, and only secondarily in utility. Propriety could only be approved through an interactive and self-judgmental process involving others. Smith would have thought that neither Hutcheson's idea of the sense of beauty nor Hume's concept of sympathy were satisfactory in order to refute the Mandevillian aesthetic relativism. For Smith, a modern commercial society appeared to be a place where not only good critics but also the vast majority of common people were constantly making the judgments of merit. Smith's new concepts of sympathy and an impartial spectator were to show that most of the common people were capable of reaching agreement about aesthetic judgments and achieving it impartially.⁸

With his own concept of sympathy, Smith explained why the ambitious more eagerly pursue "The palaces, the gardens, the equipage, the retinue of the great, ... of which the obvious conveniency strikes every body" than a curiosity in the basic essentials of life, of which "Their conveniency may perhaps be equally great, but it is not so striking." The reason is

in this, as in all other cases, we constantly pay more regard to the sentiments of the spectator, than to those of the person principally concerned, and consider rather how his situation will appear to other people, than how it will appear to himself. If we examine, however, why the spectator distinguishes with such admiration the condition of the rich and the great, we shall find that it is not so much upon account of the superior ease or pleasure which they are supposed to enjoy, as of the numberless artificial and elegant contrivances for promoting this ease or pleasure. (*TMS*, IV. 1. 8, p. 182)

Sympathy with the rich and powerful is the product of our curiosity in their situation or the beauty, order, harmony, and economy of organization or arrangement that their wealth and power seem to deliver to them and from which their sense of beauty would take the pleasure of seeing and experiencing them. It is not always the product of our curiosity in the ease and utility of their situation or of their riches and power, as Hume had assumed. In Smith's interpretation of human behavior, the recognition and admiration of our fellow human beings were to be pursued by ambition, emulation, and the acquisition of a large stock of wealth simply for possession and display, which might then

⁸In his essay on the "Imitative Arts" in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (1795), Smith argues that paintings reveal the secrets of their construction even to the uninitiated. Smith saw beauty as something both aesthetes and everyone else could appreciate (*EPS*, Imitative Arts, I. 16, p. 185).

enhance the perceived rank and distinction of the possessor, rather than for the enjoyment of riches itself (Rosenberg, 1968, pp. 364–367). Desire for approbation from our fellows, however, could foster our capacity for the impartial judgments of merit, because the act of imaginative sympathy could enable us not only to understand the position of other people in the pursuit of wealth and power but also to view our own conduct through others' eyes, and to observe our own actions as they might appear in the eyes of an imaginary impartial spectator (Wilson, 1976, p. 74). The impartial spectator was important for Smith primarily in terms of the effect on the agent (such as myself) of the reactions of the spectator; the approbation and disapprobation of myself could be nothing other than an effect of judgments made by the spectator (judging myself only by imagining whether an impartial spectator would approve or disapprove of myself). The impartial spectator is, in this sense, a social product, a mirror of social feeling, not an actual bystander (who tends to be biased by partiality, ignorance, and prejudices) but a creation of my imagination, or even myself (although in the character of a supposed spectator, not in the actual character of myself) (Raphael, 1975, pp. 89–90). Ambition would, therefore, be more concerned with an impartial spectator and his supposed admiration for the beauty of wealth and power, and from which an impartial spectator's sense of beauty would be imagined by ourselves to take pleasure of seeing them, rather than with the frivolous or even troublesome utility with which we would end up.

We are then charmed with the beauty of that accommodation which reigns in the palaces and oeconomy of the great; and admire how every thing is adapted to promote their ease, to prevent their wants, to gratify their wishes, and to amuse and entertain their most frivolous desires. If we consider the real satisfaction which all these things are capable of affording, by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling. But we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light. We naturally confound it in our imagination with the order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine or oeconomy by means of which it is produced. The pleasures of wealth and greatness, when considered in this complex view, strike the imagination as something grand and beautiful and noble, of which the attainment is well worth all the toil and anxiety which we are so apt to bestow upon it. (*TMS*, IV. 1. 9, p. 183)

And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. ... The earth by these labours of mankind has been obliged to redouble her natural fertility, and to maintain a greater multitude of inhabitants. It is to no purpose, that the proud and unfeeling landlord views his extensive fields, and without a thought for the wants of his brethren, in imagination consumes himself the whole harvest that grows upon them. ... The produce of the soil maintains at all times nearly that number of inhabitants which it is capable of maintaining. The rich only select

from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species. (*TMS*, IV. 1. 10, pp. 183–185)

While Harrison (1995) has argued that Smith tended to blur the distinction between the beauty of utility and that of form (Harrison, 1995, pp. 102–105), Smith's beauty was primarily the beauty of form and only secondarily, that of utility. Smith's sense of beauty was not so much the Augustan notion of taste for the beauty of form *per se*, as aesthetic delight, or inner, subjective, and intrinsic pleasure in seeing formal arrangement and the preference for balance, symmetry, and proportion. The focal point of Smith's arguments was to make the case that the sense of beauty, by primarily pursuing such aesthetic delight, could unexpectedly serve the beauty of interest in the end. Smith's strategy was to rule out the Humean arguments of the beauty of interest, or utility, as the sole or even the primary object of aesthetic judgments, and thereby show that the beauty of form alone as the object of aesthetic judgments can accomplish their impartiality and consequently achieve the beauty of interest as well through its pursuit of aesthetic delight.

Therefore, Smith did not simply endorse the Augustan taste by confusing the distinction between form and interest, but developed the Augustan notion into a more subjective one that could, in the end, achieve the beauty of interest without implying the Mandevillian relativism. Mandeville argued that taste could not be accountable because it was subjective and self-interested, and therefore incapable of delivering the public good collectively even if its standard was agreed upon. Smith's criticism was that the judgments of merit could still be impartial if they were agreed upon by an impartial spectator. Even though changeable, tastes could become the driving force behind all aspects of the economic system and thereby contribute, rather unintentionally, to the public good. Fitness embodies a universal psychology of pleasure in form. Even ordinary people are capable of participating in the pleasure of consumption for fitness (modern Marxists, such as Guillory, would argue otherwise). The judgments of fitness are not subjective, as Mandeville had argued. They are qualities with which the impartial spectator can sympathize. A standard of taste may spring, if it does, from sympathy and the universal psychology of beauty, not from educated taste and the agreement of informed critics, as argued by Hume.

Aesthetic judgments should be primarily judgments of the beauty of form, rather than of the beauty of interest, because utility judgments based on the

Humean, biased sympathy would not be impartial, even if honest and disinterested. The beauty of interest is instead to be achieved as the unintended consequence of the judgments of the means of merit that derive pleasure from the beauty of form, not of interest. If the judgments of merit work in this manner, the beauty of form is always recommended to us by sympathy, and aesthetic judgments would be consequently impartial. If the judgments of the means of merit are proper and consequently approved of by an impartial spectator, they can ultimately achieve the merit itself, without any regard of its utility.

3 Taste and history in *The Wealth of Nations*

In his jurisprudence lectures and *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith turned his attention to the actual course of the unexpected emergence of the commercial society in European history. He wanted to see exactly how private interests had contributed to public benefits in a modern commercial society and if his theories of sociability and the sense of beauty in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* were equally applicable to it. This was part of the project of the eighteenth-century Scottish Historical School, or what is now called “a materialist conception of history,” in which the production and reproduction of real life were to be described as the ultimate, if not the only, determining element in history.⁹ Luxury and commerce, for instance, were understood as the inevitable outcome of human desires. These basic propositions, or the “materialist principles,” as Ronald Meek called them, represented their view that society develops blindly. They emphatically rejected any facile explanation of social development in terms of any human design, or arbitrary or accidental causes, such as the activities of individuals, occasional policy, and peculiar, one-off wisdom or folly.¹⁰ In their historical narrative, the course of social development was to be described as the combined influence of the whole people. Book III of *The Wealth of Nations* was a formal model of such “philosophical history,” representing Smith’s mature version of a much older analysis in his jurisprudence lectures. It was a retrospective account of the emergence of the commercial society as a product of a long period of historical evolution. The account was based on an earlier account in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* of the manner in which people formed the judgments of merit that were the hinge of the conditions

⁹In addition to Smith, Scottish historians belonging to this School are Hume, Lord Kames (Henry Home), Adam Ferguson, William Robertson, John Millar, and others (Meek, 1967, pp. 35–36). For their Continental European predecessors, see Skinner, 1996, p. 76.

¹⁰The controversy still continued in twentieth-century social anthropology, between functionalists (who argued that any institution evolves *in order to* serve certain functions in society) and substantivists (who argued that an institution evolves of itself *and subsequently happens to* serve certain functions in society).

for an ordered social structure. The conditions, such as economy, industry, discretion, application, and frugality, were explained as specific to the economic, social, and cultural environment that corresponded to the fourth and final stage of the stadial theory in the narrative of the Scottish Historical School; that is, the exchange economy directed exclusively to the pursuit of wealth and status (Skinner, 1996, pp. 93 and 102; Meek, 1967, pp. 35–40).

More specifically, Smith was going to explain “taste” as a phenomenon becoming important only in civilized societies, where goods were easily acquired, in contrast with savage societies controlled by communal values and attitudes for procuring a bare subsistence, rather than the expression of personal tastes (Rosenberg, 1968, pp. 362–367 and 372). The main players in Smith’s narrative were country landlords, and merchants and manufacturers in towns. In this, Smith described how the establishment of liberty and the independence of tenants and retainers in the country had been accomplished by the mutual interest between country landlords and townsmen. He showed that, however unintentional and invisible it might have been, the unexpected consequence of this significant political and economic dynamism was, in fact, derived from the agreement about, and the impartiality of, the judgments of merit between country landlords and townsmen. Smith’s concerns here were the role of the “vanity” and “taste” of country proprietors on the one hand, and the role of the self-interests of merchants and manufacturers in towns on the other. These were, therefore, the private interests Smith was now considering. They supported each other in the following manner:

The inhabitants of trading cities [such as Venice, Genoa, and Pisa], by importing the improved manufactures and expensive luxuries of richer countries, afforded some food to the vanity of the great proprietors, who eagerly purchased them with great quantities of the rude produce of their own lands. (*WN*, III. iii. 15, pp. 406–407)

A taste for the finer and more improved manufactures, was in this manner introduced by foreign commerce into countries where no such works were carried on. But when this taste became so general as to occasion a considerable demand, the merchants, in order to save the expence of carriage, naturally endeavoured to establish some manufactures of the same kind in their own country. Hence the origin of the first manufactures for distant sale that seem to have been established in the western provinces of Europe, after the fall of the Roman empire. (*WN*, III. iii. 16, p. 407)

Nathan Rosenberg (1968) interpreted Smith’s account of tastes as evidence that Smith did have a demand-side theory to explain the determination of natural price, which was often assumed to be neglected by Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*. This assumption might be true, at least in an analytical context, but not necessarily true, Rosenberg accurately argued, in Smith’s framework of historical narrative concerning economic growth. Tastes and the preference

structure of consumers were indispensable elements in Smith's account of the process of economic growth. As such, Smith had a fairly cohesive idea of the nature and formation of consumer tastes, of the manner and direction in which human wants developed over time. This was an essential part of Smith's "materialist conception of history," in which economic growth and surplus were seen as affected by consumer tastes in a decisive manner (Rosenberg, 1968, pp. 361–362). Landlords' tastes, for instance, inflamed by their vanity, unexpectedly contributed to the public good, although at their expense, since they brought on their own ruin by distributing their wealth. Foreign commerce and manufactures "gradually furnished the great proprietors with something for which they could exchange the whole surplus produce of their land, and which they could consume themselves without sharing it either with tenants or retainers" (*WN*, III. iv. 10, p. 418). In other words,

[T]hey exchanged ... the price of the maintenance of a thousand men for a year, and with it the whole weight and authority which it could give them. ... [T]hus, for the gratification of the most childish, the meanest, and the most sordid of all vanities, they gradually bartered their whole power and authority.¹¹ (*WN*, III. iv. 10, p. 419)

And thereby,

Indirectly, perhaps, he [the great proprietor] maintains as great or even a greater number of people than he could have done by the ancient method of expence. For though the quantity of precious productions for which he exchanges his whole revenue be very small, the number of workmen employed in collecting and preparing it, must necessarily have been very great. Its great price generally arises from the wages of their labour, and the profits of all their immediate employers. By paying that price he indirectly pays all those wages and profits, and thus indirectly contributes to the maintenance of all the workmen and their employers. (*WN*, III. iv. 11, p. 420)

The effects of this in Smith's theory were twofold: the dismissal of unnecessary retainers and tenants (*WN*, III. iv. 13, p. 420) and the creation of the long lease of lands to tenants, in exchange for higher rents. "The expensive vanity of

¹¹ This meant that the nobility declined, from their self-love, by spending their wealth on "elegance" instead of on the previous "plain and hospitable way of living," as the result of "the introduction of arts, commerce, and luxury" (*LJ* (A), iv. 157–159, pp. 261–262), so did the sovereign by spending on "all the costly trinkets" and "insignificant pageantry" from their "frivolous passions" (*WN*, V. iii. 3, pp. 908–909). Rosenberg (1968) pointed out that in Smith, a taste for goods was therefore preferable to a taste for services, and a taste for durable goods was even more preferable to a taste for non-durables. Durable goods are most favorable to economic growth as a matter of accumulating things which, in Smith's view, would provide the most flow of useful services in the future (Rosenberg, 1968, pp. 371–373).

the landlord made him willing to accept of this condition”; that is, “that they [the tenants] should be secured in their possession, for such a term of years as might give them time to recover with profit whatever they should lay out in the further improvement of the land” to pay higher rents to the landlord (*WN*, III. iv. 13, p. 421; see also *LJ* (A), iii. 124–125, p. 190; *LJ* (B), 140–141, p. 454).

The tenants having in this manner become independent, and the retainers [sub tenants and peasants] being dismissed, the great proprietors were no longer capable of interrupting the regular execution of justice, or of disturbing the peace of the country.... A regular government was established in the country as well as in the city, nobody having sufficient power to disturb its operations in the one, any more than in the other.¹² (*WN*, III. iv. 15, p. 421)

As Skinner (1996) has commented, this process was described as the transition from the third to the fourth stage, from the stage of agriculture to that of commerce, in the Scottish Historical School’s four-stages narrative and its historical application (Skinner, 1996, pp. 81–82; *LJ* (A), i. 27–32, pp. 14–16). The agricultural stage of society was marked by the relations of power and dependence, and disorder and conflict, with no incentive to industry and economic growth. The exchange economy emerged from the transition from the agricultural to the commercial stage, removed the disincentive to industry from the agrarian sector, and made it fully independent with towns and cities for the first time in history. It effectively eliminated the direct dependence between the nobility and the tenant and replaced it with the productive service in both the town and the country. The tradesman, the merchant, and the farmer now independently commanded their respective prices (Skinner, 1996, pp. 84–86 and 89–92). As a result, Smith concluded:

A revolution of the greatest importance to the publick happiness, was in this manner brought about by two different orders of people, who had not the least intention to serve the publick. To gratify the most childish vanity was the sole motive of the great proprietors. The merchants and artificers, much less ridiculous, acted merely from a view to their own interest, and in pursuit of their own peddler principle of turning a penny wherever a penny was to be got. Neither of them had either knowledge or foresight of that great revolution which the folly of the one, and the industry of the other, was gradually bringing about.

It is thus that through the greater part of Europe the commerce and manufactures of cities, instead of being the effect, have been the cause and occasion of the improvement and cultivation of the country. (*WN*, III. iv. 17–18, p. 422)

¹²The churches and clergymen also lost their authority “the most profuse hospitality” and “the most extensive charity” based on their landed estates in the same manner as the nobility, by spending their rents “upon the gratification of their own private vanity and folly” (*WN*, V. i. g. 22 and 25, pp. 801 and 803–804).

In this way, Smith showed how the proprietors' passion of vanity, inflaming their tastes, as well as the merchants' and manufacturers' passion of interest, unexpectedly contributed to the improvement and cultivation of the country, along with the security and independence of cultivators. Smith essentially described the transition from the agricultural to the commercial stage in European history as the unintentional result of intentional private motives. As usual, Smith was sarcastic in presenting the behavior of the country proprietor and the city manufacturer and merchant. Later, in Book IV of *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith again described how the public good was to be achieved by the private actions of the city manufacturer and merchant unintentionally:

He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the publick interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. ... [H]e intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the publick good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need to be employed in dissuading them from it. (*WN*, IV. ii. 9, p. 456)

However, Smith was effectively arguing that their vanity and their pursuit of wealth had still led both the country proprietor and the city manufacturer and merchant into agreement about their respective aesthetic judgments. In other words, what Mandeville had criticized as “private vices” turned out to be the source of agreement about the judgments of merit, not at all conflicting each other even when they were being perfectly selfish. Smith's famous term, “an invisible hand,” was in essence the effect of moral sentiments such as sympathy, and the sense of beauty and ambition endowed by nature to motivate people into unexpectedly contributing to the public good, in the same manner as an artifice built in a watch.¹³ It was possible, however, to assume this mechanism

¹³ The implication of the idea that the sense of beauty is instrumental in sociability and industry was widely recognized in eighteenth-century British moral philosophy. See, for instance, the second edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Moral Philosophy, or Morals,” pp. [1]–[33] and 5197–5202 (after p. 5192, p. [33] overlaps with p. 5197), and “Beauty,” pp. 1077–1079. Jerry Evensky (1987) argued that this Design argument was the foundation of Smith's moral philosophy (as distinguished from his more empirical social critiques), which saw the order of society as the Design of the Deity. For Smith, therefore, to be moral was to be in harmony with the Design and in accordance with the intentions of the Deity. In this, an impartial spectator was “an approximation” of a perfect vision of the Deity, or a person who saw and judged the balance of sentiments, and whether these sentiments were in a state of equilibrium in harmony with the Design and therefore, on that ground, “moral”

was working in human nature because the judgments of merit made in the process could be impartial as far as they were made out of consideration for the beauty and propriety of a private means to its end, rather than the public utility and merit of the end themselves. In other words, everything the invisible hand stands for depends on whether the judgments of merit made in the process are impartial or not. Even though ambition is excited by “the condition of the great, in those delusive colours in which the imagination is apt to paint it” (*TMS*, I. iii. 2. 2, p. 51), the unexpected establishment and prosperity of the commercial society will be the product of agreement about the judgments of merit rather than a paradox of the beneficial outcome of necessary evils, or private motives and unaccountable tastes conflicting each other. Because of this agreement about the judgments of merit in the process of its emergence, the commercial society could be a reliable force for the accumulation of “moral capital,” in addition to physical capital. Self-interest could lead to moral, just, and honest behaviors, just as justice and security had been established in the transition from an agricultural society to a commercial one (Rosenberg, 1990, pp. 12–14).¹⁴

4 Conclusion

Smith’s language of taste was a new language wherein the term “taste” could describe how the commercial society unexpectedly emerged out of agreement about aesthetic judgments. It described how aesthetic judgments by people of various tastes and interests could still achieve agreement through the evaluation of the means for achieving the end (the beauty of form) rather than the utility of the end itself (the beauty of interest), and how they could do so impartially through the imagined sympathy from the impartial spectator.¹⁵ This brings us back to that

sentiments. The impartial spectator would then arbitrate these sentiments to create the balance between them, so that conduct becomes morally good to be consistent with the Design. Evensky interpreted the invisible hand as Smith’s metaphor for the Deity as Designer for the universe; more specifically, the order of society; and most specifically, that of commercial society, leading society to the best of all possible worlds, given the balanced sentiments ensured by the impartial spectator (Evensky, 1987, pp. 448–456).

¹⁴Raphael (1975), on the contrary, argued that the natural harmony of individual and social interests in *The Wealth of Nations* owed nothing to sympathy, assuming that the harmony was a utilitarian account of economic activity abstracted from the whole of social life, while Smith was a severe critic of utilitarianism in many parts of his ethics (Raphael, 1975, p. 96). As shown above, however, Smith’s argument of the public good as the unexpected consequence of intended private interests was hardly utilitarian. *The Wealth of Nations* must have been effectively part of Smith’s moral philosophy.

¹⁵The so-called “Adam Smith Problem” claimed that Smith based his moral theory on the motive of sympathy, and his economic theory on the motive of self-interest, and required an account of how *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* could be squared with each other (Broadie, 2006, pp. 164–165). As this paper has sought to show so far, Smith’s economic theory was

intriguing critique by John Guillory of the language of taste in Smith's moral philosophy. Guillory has argued that moral philosophy's problem of reconciling private interests and the public good was neglected by Smith because he resolved the conflict between wage-laborers on the one hand and entrepreneurs on the other, by legitimating the latter in his language of taste for their exploitation of the surplus beauty of the commodity over its actual needs. This surplus, according to Guillory, was the source of social and economic surplus that allowed Smith to justify as well as explain the wealth of nations (Guillory, 1993, pp. 311–312).¹⁶

An assessment of this critique of Smith's language of taste rests on how to interpret the concept of taste in Smith's moral philosophy. I have endeavored to show that Smith's taste is not exclusive to wealthy consumers but an instrumental factor in establishing the order of the commercial society, and the freedom and independence of the masses, as well as an effective device in distributing wealth among the poor, productive sector of society. In a modern commercial society, taste (or the sense of beauty, as Smith had previously called it) works as an instinctive judgment which is not primarily affected by the thought or idea of utility, as Hume had argued. Taste is a more powerful sentiment which extends even to the vast majority of common people far outnumbering the confined group of aesthetes who alone are supposed to reach sound aesthetic judgments out of their refined tastes that can foresee the utility and the public good. On the contrary, taste is an internalized sentiment which is indispensable to the motivation of vanity and ambition, those complex passions that go beyond the reach of utility calculation; in stimulating the demand for finer products; and in driving people to the pursuit of wealth. "The poor man's son" with ambition in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, who admires the condition of the rich and, in order to arrive at it, devotes himself to the pursuit of wealth and greatness (*TMS*, IV. 1. 8, p. 181), would reappear in *The Wealth of Nations* as the city tradesman or merchant, who would have unexpectedly brought down the nobility (and the church) and

emerged within the context of his argument about aesthetic judgments, which at that time had been developed within his moral philosophical framework. As Broadie (2006) comments, sympathy was not the motive for moral action, and in fact it was not a motive at all. It was rather a mechanism for moral and aesthetic judgment generated by the impartial spectator, wherein there would be room for the proper pursuit of self-interest. To assume the contrast between sympathy and self-interest, if considered as two distinctive kinds of motive, is therefore a mistake (Broadie, 2006, p. 165).

¹⁶Despite Guillory's own affiliation here with Caygill, this is not Caygill's view. Caygill presents a reconstruction of Smith's arguments of taste from a more ideologically neutral viewpoint of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790): The existence of the Design cannot be proven in a strictly logical sense, but it is still imperative, on the ethical grounds, that we must make the judgments of merit *as if* such a Design did exist. In Caygill's view, Smith not only transformed the legislation of manners by Continental *Polizeiwissenschaft*, but also transformed the Providential theory of taste and civil society current in Smith's Britain. Smith showed the way to bring private and public interests into harmony not by the regulation of production but by placing *political judgment*, or the criticism of taste, in the process of production, leaving the responsibility for good manners and the common welfare to Providence and letting everyone pursue his or her own interests.

contributed unintentionally to the establishment of the commercial society. As Meek (1967) argued, the transition from agrarianism to capitalism was, to Marx, essentially the substitution of a new ruling class with a new method of exploitation for an old one; that is, the subordination of the laborer to the capitalist. To the Scottish Historical School, however, this transition triggered the emergence of a new state of economic and political independence, or the newly acquired capacity of the laborer to become a little capitalist himself (Meek, 1967, p. 45). It was, after all, the Georgian “commercial society” emerged under the Court Whig aristocratic patronage that the Scottish Historical School was describing, rather than the early- and mid-Victorian industrialized “civil society” in the Marxist conception. Here, we may have to go beyond Rosenberg’s idea of Smith’s tastes solely as consumer tastes. Indeed, the less-privileged producers of finer goods in towns and cities had to acquire a clear understanding of the prevailing tastes among wealthy consumers, notably the nobility, in order to exploit and manipulate them. It would require the virtue of “sensibility”—that quality for refined emotion and the delicate sensitiveness of taste—with which the producer must “enter into” the vanities and follies of his customer and thereby turn “a penny wherever a penny has to be got.” Smith’s theory of taste could not, in the end, make sense without this supply-side dimension, together with the demand-side psychological analyses of consumer drive for the beauty of finer products and status.¹⁷

Against Guillory’s critique, I therefore conclude that Smith’s theory of taste, which posited the surplus of beauty over needs as the engine of production, by no means became irrelevant to his political economy. Guillory claimed that Smith’s theory of value in *The Wealth of Nations*, which focused on the pole of production alone, could never find its way back to, or be included within, its formula for price—the “beauty” of the commodity, the aestheticized conception of utility that would have bridged private interests and the public good—previously proposed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Guillory, 1993, p. 315). If Smith seems to have separated aesthetics from the political economy for the justification of the exploitation of laborers by aesthetes, it would be probably because of the eighteenth-century question of the judgments of merit—how to achieve agreement about these judgments and their impartiality among different people with different tastes and moral sentiments—has been forgotten in post-Smithian political economy. Because Smith more or less answered the question successfully, and left the question no longer relevant in political economy, we tend to read his arguments, which were his answer to this question,

¹⁷On the relationship between pleasure and goods, Smith argued in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* that if we want to know what to produce, we must first know what people want, and what they want is determined by the characteristics of goods that yield us pleasure. Smith then went into a discussion about what those pleasure-yielding characteristics were: color, form, variety or rarity, and imitation (*LJ* (A), vi. 13–16, pp. 335–337; *LJ* (B), 208–209, p. 488). His argument may be limited, but Smith clearly gives concrete expression to his psychology of beauty. What is important are the bundles of characteristics they contain.

without ever recognizing what the original question was all about. Smith showed that taste can make aesthetic judgments impartially under the auspices of the “impartial spectator.” To Smith, this was the necessary and sufficient condition for the “invisible hand” to bring the prosperity of the commercial society as the unexpected outcome of these judgments. In these arguments, aesthetics was the basis for his political economy. Taste, for instance, explains the prices of commodities, whose demand would arise from the beauty of the commodity, and ultimately from taste (*LJ* (A), vi. 12–16, pp. 335–337; *LJ* (B), 208–209, p. 488; *WN*, I. xi. c. 31–32, pp. 189–191). Taste partly explains each of the three main sources of revenue in society: wage, profit, and rent. The natural rate of wages was determined by the natural taste, among others (*LJ* (A), vi. 62, pp. 354–355; *LJ* (B), 226, p. 495; *WN*, I. x. b. 2–3, pp. 117–118; I. x. b. 25–26, pp. 124–125), so is the natural rate of profits (*WN*, I. x. b. 4, p. 118; I. x. b. 33–34, pp. 127–128; IV. vii. a. 18–21, pp. 562–564). Rents are equally derived from taste, the demand for the beauty of the situation, among several other factors (*WN*, V. ii. e. 3, pp. 840–841). However, economic valuation on each occasion will be impartial because agreement about aesthetic judgments is always reached “by the higgling and bargaining of the market” (*WN*, I. v. 4, pp. 48–49).

The “rational interest theory” of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville had challenged that each aesthetic judgment was an expression of purely individual concern. They argued that beauty could always be reduced to self-interest. Therefore, instead of virtues, beauties, and tastes, it was supposedly the evil quality of human passions that paradoxically delivered the prosperity and order of the commercial society. In their views, selfish individual value judgments conflicting each other with their varying tastes and interests, could neither agree about nor deliver the public good. Smith showed that aesthetic judgments by people of various tastes not only reach agreement but also accomplish their impartiality at least at the time of judgment, if not a stable and universal standard. In his view, many people are still engaged in the pursuit of wealth and power in seeking the approbation of the impartial spectator in their quest for the beauty of wealth and power as the means rather than the utility of their ends. There would still be commonalities for and the impartiality of shared preferences in wealth and power that could be as reliable as for the objects of beauty. Self-interest is, after all, not that subjective.

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