



# Reading Adam Smith after Darwin: On the evolution of propensities, institutions, and sentiments<sup>☆</sup>

Eric Schliesser

Blandijnberg 2, Philosophy and Moral Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent 9000, Belgium

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 July 2009  
Received in revised form 5 April 2010  
Accepted 5 April 2010  
Available online 21 September 2010

### JEL classification:

B12  
B31  
B52

### Keywords:

Adam Smith  
Darwin  
Institutional evolution  
Economic psychology

## ABSTRACT

This paper calls attention to Smith's "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages" in order to facilitate understanding Adam Smith from an evolutionary perspective. In particular, such an evolutionary view can be discerned in how Smith saw that generic "natural sentiments" are applied and articulated, in light of local circumstances, into "moral sentiments." In doing so, the paper calls attention to the developmental interplay between the propensities of human nature in Smith's thought. First, it argues that at the start of *Wealth of Nations* Smith signals that human nature is not fixed. Second, it connects this evidence with an infamous passage on infanticide in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in order to argue that Smith is committed to a thin group selection of institutions. Third, it argues that in "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages" one can find building blocks for the claim that mind and language co-develop over time. It claims that in TMS there is a distinction between natural sentiments and moral sentiments. Natural sentiments are evolved (presumably through cultural selection) and moral sentiments are developed (through acculturation within society).

© 2010 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction and summary

This paper calls attention to Smith's "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages" (in Smith, 1985 hereafter *Languages*) in order to facilitate understanding Adam Smith from an evolutionary perspective (see also Haig, 2010).<sup>1</sup> In particular, such an evolutionary view can be discerned in how Smith saw that in light of local circumstances generic "natural sentiments" are applied and articulated into "moral sentiments." In doing so, the paper calls attention to the developmental interplay between the propensities of human nature in Smith's thought. In order to avoid confusion, I am not claiming that Smith embraces natural selection,<sup>2</sup> an idea familiar to him from Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, nor am I claiming here that Smith had any views on evolution's influence on physiological changes.

First, the paper argues that at the start of *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (hereafter WN) Smith signals that human nature is not fixed (Smith, 1981). Second, this evidence is connected with an infamous passage on infanticide in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) in order to argue that Smith is committed to a thin group selection

<sup>☆</sup> I am grateful to several diligent anonymous referees, Elias Khalil, John Wright, Sandra Peart, David Haig and other participants of the very fruitful seminar on Emotions, Natural Selection and Rationality, at Richmond University as well as Spencer Pack and David Levy for comments on early drafts of this paper.

E-mail address: [nescio2@yahoo.com](mailto:nescio2@yahoo.com).

<sup>1</sup> I quote Adam Smith from the Glasgow edition by paragraph and page-number.

<sup>2</sup> For useful discussion of the difference between the idea of evolution, which is not limited to Darwin, and natural selection mechanism, see Khalil (2009).

of institutions. Third, this paper argues that in *Languages* one can find building blocks for the claim that mind and language co-develop over time. More controversially the paper argues that in TMS there is a distinction between natural sentiments and moral sentiments. Natural sentiments are evolved (presumably through cultural selection) and moral sentiments are developed (through acculturation within society). The distinction between natural and moral sentiments is historical and conceptual.

Before turning to details of the argument, here follow four methodological and historical caveats. First, this paper offers a construction of Adam Smith's views from an evolutionary point of view. This means that unity of thought may be imposed where there is none. Yet, Smith facilitated the construction by appending what he sometimes called, "The Dissertation upon the Origin of Languages" to the third edition of TMS in 1767.<sup>3</sup> In Smith's lifetime TMS and *Languages* could be seen as mutually enlightening. Inexplicably, the editors of the Glasgow edition have moved *Languages* into a volume with student notes of Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. In current editions TMS ends with a historical survey of moral theories (part VII). This obscures Smith's final intent; *Languages* is a response to Rousseau's treatment on the origin of language—a topic heavily debated in 18th century. Removing *Languages* from its place at the end of TMS obscures Smith's design of placing his treatment of the moral sentiments in a natural historical context.

As we know from his (1755) "Letter to the Edinburgh Review" (reprinted in Smith, 1982b), Smith read widely in 18th century, especially French natural history, botany, and zoology; his posthumously published essay, "Of the External Senses" (also in Smith, 1982b) also shows evidence that in researching the Molyneux problem (for an introduction see Degenaar and Lokhorst, 2008) Smith valued careful empirical comparison among man and other animals (see Glenney, 2007, Chapter 4).<sup>4</sup> So, while this paper offers a construction, it is probably closer to Smith's own evolving self-understanding than the current practice of ignoring *Languages* when treating TMS (or WN).<sup>5</sup> Second, the paper ignores some very important material found in the student notes to Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Smith, 1982c). Ever since Haakonsen (1981), scholarship on Smith has integrated these quite fruitfully in understanding of Smith and his development. But the content of these lectures was largely unknown outside of 18th century Scotland; a focus on them gives a misleading impression of how Smith's non-Scottish contemporaries and later 19th century readers would have understood Smith. This paper attempts to contribute to a recovery of, given how Smith presented his views to the learned world, how Smith may have been received by such readers (for an example, see Schliesser, Forthcoming on Sophie de Condorcet, who translated TMS and *Languages* into French in one volume, but the exercise could well be fruitfully extended to Alfred Marshall).

Third, there is no doubt that Darwin read or pretended to be familiar with some Smith (Darwin, 2004) (*Descent of Man* (hereafter *Descent*), 129, and the accompanying footnote).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is neither the point of this paper to argue for a direct influence nor to compare Smith's impact with evidence from Hume, Malthus, Erasmus Darwin, Lyell, etc. Fourth, this paper ignores markets and invisible hands; these can be fruitfully connected to neo-Darwinian themes, but in this context focus on these tends to obscure Smith's texts.<sup>7</sup> This means I also largely ignore the much debated extent of Smith's debt to Stoicism and to what degree his references to an "Author of Nature" reveal Christian commitments (see Hill, 2001; Evensky, 2005; Brown, 1992–1993; Schliesser, 2008).

## 2. Human nature and the wealth of nations

Right near the start of WN, just after Smith introduces his crucial concept, the division of labor, he adds the following remark:

"THIS division of labour, from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends that general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another. Whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature of which no further account can be given; or whether, as seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech, it belongs not to our present subject to inquire. It is common to all men, and to be found in no other race of animals, which seem to know neither this nor any other species of contracts," (WN 1.2.1, 25).

<sup>3</sup> See: <[http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=202&chapter=55505&layout=html&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=202&chapter=55505&layout=html&Itemid=27)>, accessed July 16, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Spencer Pack has long argued that by reading Buffon, Smith was almost certainly aware of the extinction of the dodo. In WN there is a tantalizing passage that comes very close to acknowledging the possibility of extinction: "The Cori, something between a rat and a rabbit, and supposed by Mr. Buffon to be the same with the Aperea of Brazil, was the largest viviparous quadruped in St. Domingo. This species seems never to have been very numerous, and the dogs and cats of the Spaniards were said to have long ago almost entirely extirpated it, as well as some other tribes of a still smaller size" (IV.vii.a.11). Pack (2010, Chapter VII.II "Smith on Change," particularly the section on "Aristotelian Residues and the Temporality of Species"). See also Schabas (2005) for more on these themes; cf. Schliesser (2007a).

<sup>5</sup> Pioneering Berry (1974) is the still the best piece on Smith's *Languages*. For other interesting treatments see Levy (1997), Otteson (2002a,b, chapter 7); Dascal (2006) ignores the previous literature (cf. Schliesser, 2007b).

<sup>6</sup> Here I ignore the relationship among David Hume, Adam Smith and Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Animals and Man*.

<sup>7</sup> In Schliesser (2005a) I have explored the relationship between counter-factual mobility of factor-resources and considerations of justice in *Wealth of Nations*.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/884072>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/884072>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)