

The risks of an economic agent: a Rousseauian reading of Adam Smith

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Summary

This article is a critical review of Adam Smith's notion of an economic agent. Using Jean Jacques Rousseau's arguments, I show the shortcomings of Smith's hypothesis regarding individuals' economic behaviour within market society. The morals of sympathy, understood as a social theory and beyond the limitations Smith himself acknowledges, attempts to present the economic agent as a natural and unthreatening figure restricted to market transactions. A careful reading of Rousseau shows the historical character of Smith's construction, and thereby its failure to recognise the influence of social, cultural and economic development on the formation of this economic agent. Rousseau refuses the possibility of constructing economic theory based on this agent and denounces it as a way of justifying irresponsibility and tyranny. Two possible paths in economics are thus open: economics as an independent field of action or economics as a field regulated by politics.

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Introduction

How should we think the economic agent? What are the conditions that make it possible to think the economic agent? Using Adam Smith and Jean Jacques Rousseau we will address these questions so as to find two different answers. While the first will tell us that the economic agent is one of the dimensions necessary to think of the human being, the second will denounce this construction as being the absolute perversion of self-love¹. In fact, these two authors lead us to reformulate the question in the following terms: do we have the right to think an economic agent? Or, more precisely: is it possible to conceive an economic agent without risking the moral subject and therefore human society? Smith's answer is positive: the economic agent is thought of as a conceptual device to explain human activity. Rousseau's answer is negative: the human being can only be thought of as an indivisible unit; division leading to vice.

Rather than a comparison, which has been undertaken by others before me², I present a reading of Smith's answer based on Jean Jacques Rousseau's work. This might seem anachronistic not only for chronological reasons but also because while there is evidence that Smith read Rousseau, the latter makes no reference to Smith's work. In 1756 Smith sent a letter to the Edinburgh review in which he presents a brief analysis of the Second Discourse. In this letter Smith describes Rousseau as one of Bernard Mandeville's disciples. This leads me to believe he

¹ Rousseau makes an important distinction between *amour propre*, which we will translate as self-love, and *amour de soi*, which we will translate as love of one's self. The consequences of this distinction will appear clearly in the second part of the paper.

² L. Colletti [1972], L. Sfez [1978] and M. Ignatieff [1986] present a comparison between Rousseau and Smith based on their vision of the market society, the first as critic the latter as defender. E. West [1971] explores the concept of alienation presented by both authors and S.J. Pack [2000], in an answer to West, presents, rather than a confrontation between the authors, the traces of Rousseau's influence on Smith's moderate optimism concerning the effects of the division of labour. J.P. Dupuy [1982] develops a comparison between both authors on their vision of society as the cause and the consequence of social individual action. H. Defalvard [1990] presents Rousseau's individual, as read by Smith, and considers the latter's theory of sympathy as having a critical affiliation to Rousseau. A profound analysis of their answers to the circular question on social order can be found in F. Tricou [1990].

didn't agree with Rousseau in moral matters. He analysed Mandeville's doctrine in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and refuted what he called the licentious system. In his correspondence there are also some letters to and from his friend David Hume concerning his dispute with Rousseau. In these letters Smith does not speak well of Rousseau, calling him a "pretentious hypocrite". But it seems that at the end of his life Smith had a high opinion of the *Social Contract* and hoped for better times for its author.

According to the 1756 letter, Rousseau would only be the continuation of a system that presents every virtuous action as the result of vanity, with a difference in the style of presentation. Thus, the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men* was nothing but a stylistic exercise aiming at rendering Mandeville's theory more acceptable³.

In this article, I will argue that an interesting criticism of Smith's morals can be made using Rousseau's work. This criticism covers Smith's conception of the economic agent: his starting point is false or, at least, incorrect. The looks exchanged among individuals (the origin of the impartial spectator) imply that the individual lives outside himself, that he finds his own sense and meaning in the opinion of others. This opinion is the source of all evil, of all vice. Therefore a comparison can never generate a moral judgement or moral behaviour. Moral action, according to Rousseau, is action by duty, action under the law. The General Will defines the law, which is absolutely independent from individuals⁴. And yet, it is precisely this conception of morality that allows Smith to think of the economic sphere and, to a certain extent, the economic agent independently from morality.

³ H. Defalvard [1990: 507] presents a detailed analysis of each paragraph Smith quotes from the *Second Discourse*. This analysis leads Defalvard to find at least one common point between Rousseau and Smith: the development of individual conscience needs the presence of the other. Besides, this comparison founds Defalvard's presentation of Smith's theory of sympathy as surpassing some dark points in Rousseau's work.

⁴ In fact, for Rousseau there would be three stages: in the first, the natural state, there is no morality but the feelings that will lead to morality are already present. In the second, the constitution of human society, pity will be enhanced and understood by reason and this will be the beginning of moral relations among human beings. Finally, there would be a third state, the consolidation of human society, where morals would give place to politics and individuals would become citizens guided only by the General Will. This point represents an important difference with Smith because Rousseau's morals would not be exclusively founded upon a feeling of pity. A merely "sentimental" morality would seem insufficient in the light of the *Second Discourse*, the *Essay on the Origin of Language* and the *Emile*. This point will be treated in more detail in the second part.

Rousseau's and Smith's different stands have a direct relation with the way in which each of them conceive the social sphere, and more precisely with the place they give to morality. They both agree that morality starts with the arrival of the other, of a fellow human being. For Rousseau this encounter entails the risk of comparison, the source of self-love and of all vices. On the contrary, Smith believes that all individuals do not perceive this entrance in the same way and above all, the economic agent does not "see" this other. The different perceptions of the effects of comparison, and therefore of the formation of moral sentiments, leads each author to diverging notions not only of the economic agent but also of the place of the economic sphere in society and, particularly, in a market society.

Smith's answer to this Rousseauian criticism is complex. He shares with Rousseau his concern for human freedom and for the place of virtue within society. But he does not share Rousseau's pessimism concerning the market society, even though he is aware of the negative effects of the division of labour. Hence, even if Smith agrees with Rousseau's definition of happiness as tranquillity and safety, he does not see any threat coming from the economic sphere. The market is independent from morality and the agents who act in it are guided by amoral tendencies.

In order to develop these statements and appreciate the relevance of these questions in understanding the concept of an economic agent, I have divided the text into three main parts. The first presents a brief outline of the morals of sympathy that emphasises the separation that Smith makes between morals and economics. The second gathers the criticisms Rousseau could address to Smith on the basis of his conception of morality, the human being and market society. The last is an attempt to answer these criticisms and open new research tracks into the work of these two authors.

The morals of sympathy

In the first part of his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*⁵ Smith presents his system of morals. According to this system the origin of our moral judgements is based on the sympathy operator. The system defines sympathy as our fellow-

⁵ From now on TMS. The quotes from Smith's works follow the Glasgow edition's conventions.

feeling for any passion that arises when our imagination puts us in the place of someone we observe and allows us to share what the person is feeling [TMS I.i.1.2-6].

The main feature of Smith's system is that our moral judgments are the product of our ability to see ourselves through the eyes of others, as in a game of infinite mirrors reflecting one another⁶. These looks explain not only the origin of our judgements concerning others' behaviour but also our own [TMS III.1.2]. Using the mirror society provides we can see ourselves as others see us and form a judgement on the motivations of our actions. Society offers us this mirror in which we can see the beauty or deformity of our own character and without which we would be guided only by the dictates of self-love [TMS III.1.3]. Thus, the looks exchanged between individuals explain, according to Smith, the origin of individual conscience, which he calls the impartial spectator⁷.

This spectator corresponds to the internalisation of the way others look at and perceive us [TMS III.1.5]. From the way a third party, any real unconcerned spectator, looks at us we can make a judgement about the way the impartial spectator perceives us. We become spectators of our own behaviour and we try to imagine the effect this behaviour has on our fellow human beings [Ibid.]. Thus we divide ourselves, says Smith, into two people: "The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of a spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion. The first is the judge; the second the person judged of." [TMS III.1.6].

This process teaches us about how others perceive us and, because of the pleasure of mutual sympathy, we try to bring our passions to a degree where any spectator will be able to sympathise with us [TMS I.i.4.6, III.3.22-24]. As we participate in the game of mirrors, in the great school of self-command [TMS III.3.22,34], we begin to imagine what any spectator feels when he looks at us without this imaginary change of places. This is the moment when the impartial spectator, "the man within"⁸, takes the place of the external spectator and guides our actions

⁶ For a suggestive analysis of this "game of mirrors" see J.P. Dupuy [1992: 82-89].

⁷ An analysis of the formation and implications of the impartial spectator figure can be found in Raphael [1975].

so as to regulate our passions and allow us to act according to the motivations that the spectator shares with us. Human beings, according to Smith, want not only to be loved but also to be worthy of love, they want not only to be praised but also to be worthy of praise [TMS III.2.1]. They act in consequence based on the example of those they consider worthy of the love and praise of their fellow creatures [TMS III.2.3]. Even if they are not fully admired they know that the impartial spectator approves of them, and that if others had the necessary information they would share this feeling [TMS III.2.5]⁹.

Nature, according to Smith, has given individuals the necessary mechanisms for them to live in society, which is the state for which they were designed [TMS III.2.6-7]. Morality is therefore a product of society; a game in which each individual lives in view of all other members of society, and through which individuals change so as to enjoy and take part in the game [Berthoud 2002]. The ultimate goal of this game and, therefore, the deep motivation for all moral actions, is nothing other than to be loved, to participate in the pleasure of social interaction with our fellow creatures.

The limits of sympathy

The universal operator of sympathy is not all-powerful: it requires certain conditions to function¹⁰. Sympathy is not always immediate; there are some passions with which we have great difficulty sympathising because of their origin or because we need more information as to what has produced them¹¹. For

⁸ “The man within” is a different figure from the real spectator [Campbell 1975]: “But though man has, in this manner, been rendered the immediate judge of mankind, he has been rendered so only in the first instance; and an appeal lies from his sentence to a much higher tribunal, to the tribunal of their own consciences, to that of the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator, to that of the man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of their conduct. [...] The jurisdiction of the man without, is founded altogether in the desire of actual praise, and in the aversion to actual blame. The jurisdiction of the man within, is founded altogether in the desire of praise-worthiness, and in the aversion to blame-worthiness”. [TMS III.2.33].

⁹ The consequences of the possible disagreement between the real spectator and the impartial spectator on individual autonomy are considered by Campbell [1975].

¹⁰ For an analysis on these limits see Diatkine [1991]. Concerning the difficulties of exercising sympathy see, among others, Witztum [1999].

¹¹ “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].

example, our sympathy with emotions related to the body, except when they are the expression of sudden pain caused by something known, is very limited [TMS I.ii.1.1]. The same holds for rage or gratitude if we do not know why and in what circumstances they have arisen [TMS II.i.2], who produced them, his motivation and the consequences¹² of his action [TMS II.iii.1.6]. We can also sympathise with people who are not aware of what is happening to them and who, therefore, do not feel anything regarding their own situation. This is the case with the mentally deranged or with the dead, we do not sympathise with their emotions but with their situation [TMS I.i.11,13]. All these limits are connected to the absolute impossibility of truly becoming the other. In fact, for Smith there always remains an insurmountable distance between individuals¹³.

Another obstacle to sympathy is physical distance [TMS VI.ii.1-3]¹⁴. We sympathise with those who are close to us, beginning with ourselves, and our sympathy with those that we never see is almost none existent¹⁵. This does not mean that we are selfish or that we are willing to sacrifice others' interests to achieve our own. On the contrary, and this has little to do with sympathy, it is the result of the influence of the impartial spectator's voice and more precisely of our "love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters" [TMS III.3.4].

¹² We will more readily sympathize with someone whose action produces a positive consequence than with someone whose action, even if we sympathize with his motivation, does not produce the intended consequence. This is what Smith calls the influence of fortune and hazard upon our moral sentiments [TMS II.iii].

¹³ On this point see Defalvard [1990] and Dupuy [1992]. Sympathy is always imperfect because we consider the other's situation from the safety of our own situation, we can never completely change places with that other because we know they are not us and in any case this exchange is only momentary [TMS I.i.4.7].

¹⁴ This, according to Smith, goes along with Nature's objectives: "That we should be but little interested, therefore, in the fortune of those whom we can neither serve nor hurt, and who are in every respect so very remote from us, seems wisely ordered by Nature" [TMS III.3.9]; "The administration of the great system of the universe, however, the care of universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and tho the narrowness of his comprehension; the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country" [TMS VI.ii.3.6]. This means that the morals of sympathy, the mechanism of the impartial spectator is at risk in a great society [Skinner 1987: 371, Viner 1928].

¹⁵ For an analysis on the consequences of such a constitution of human nature see Witztum [1999].

Nevertheless, the impartial spectator is not infallible and his voice can be weakened or even neutralised by the voice of the real spectator [TMS III.2.32; III.3.1, 49] or by our own passions [TMS III.4.1, 5]. There are two moments in which the impartial spectator judges our behaviour: when we are on the point of acting and after acting [TMS III.4.2]. Unfortunately, our passions may be so strong in the first of these moments that they prevent us from hearing his voice [TMS III.4.3]. Or we have such a great difficulty thinking negatively of ourselves that we try to ignore his voice when we have done something wrong [TMS III.4.5]. It can also happen that the voice of exterior spectators –of opinion– is so loud that we decide to act without considering the impartial spectator’s advice. This is what Smith calls the corruption of our moral sentiments and it is generally produced by our tendency to admire the rich and the powerful [TMS III.3.43; V]¹⁶.

Smith delves even deeper into the limits of the morals of sympathy: there are some individuals who cannot form their conscience, individuals without an impartial spectator¹⁷. All human beings, because they are social individuals, are potentially moral beings. They are all susceptible of feeling shame, but this does not mean that, in their daily lives, they will be led by their impartial spectator. The mirror game permits establishing general rules of morality that simplify the activity of sympathy [TMS III.4.7]. When these rules have been formed and

¹⁶ There is, however, a positive aspect to this corruption: the order and preservation of society [TMS I.iii.2.3]. Smith associates this tendency to admire the rich and powerful with a love of systems: people admire the rich and powerful not really because they seem to be happier but because they possess the means to attain happiness, because of their material possessions. And this, according to Smith, also has a positive consequence: “And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which arouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind” [TSM IV.i.10].

¹⁷ There is an important point to be made here: theoretically every human being would have an impartial spectator, but real, historical human beings might not have one. This distinction between two levels of analysis, one providing a general answer and the other considering history, the first philosophical and the second sociological, has been neglected in Smith’s works. Instead of recognising the distinction made by Smith, commentators have talked about Smith’s duality: his optimistic and his pessimistic side, or the exceptions to his theory he is willing to recognise. It seems more accurate to think in terms of analysis levels to explain the structure of Smith’s work: a presentation of the general theory (philosophy), a confrontation of the facts (sociology) and a refutation of preceding theoretical systems. This in no way suggests that Smith practiced a deductive method, but seeing him merely as a representative of inductionism is also reductionism. Stewart [1793: 14] called Smith’s method Conjectural or Theoretical History: philosophical research that shows how a phenomenon is produced by applying known principles of human nature.

universally acknowledged most individuals will follow their dictates without the imaginary change of places [TSM III.5.1]. Respecting these rules is what Smith calls sense of duty [Ibid.] and he tells us that there are some individuals who lead their lives only following these rules because they are not capable of feeling the emotions that found them: “The regard for those general rules of conduct, is what is properly called a sense of duty, a principle of the greatest consequence in human life, and the only principle by which the bulk of mankind are capable of directing their actions. Many men behave very decently, and through the whole of their lives avoid any considerable degree of blame, who yet, perhaps, never felt the sentiment upon the propriety of which we found our approbation of his conduct, but acted merely from a regard to what they saw were the established rules of behaviour” [Ibid.]¹⁸.

All these limitations lead us to believe that maybe the universal operator of sympathy is not that universal after all. Smith differentiates between the philosophical history of morals and the history of manners, in which he recognises the influence of socialisation, envy, imitation, etc. Even if we think that eventually they will unite, for the time being we have the right to believe that the morals of sympathy do not apply to all individuals in society. Morals understood as a moral education and the control of passions is not the only guide for individuals. As we have seen, they may also act according to their sense of duty; they will control their passions only to continue being part of a society, not because of a love of virtue or for their own grandeur of spirit.

This allows us to make an important distinction between moral life and social life¹⁹. It is undeniable that, according to Smith, the formation of individual conscience and, therefore, the mechanisms that control passion, is the result of living in society. Nevertheless, there are some individuals who do not have the necessary sensibility²⁰ to develop their sympathetic feelings and hence their conscience. These individuals remain sociable because sociability for Smith is a natural human characteristic²¹. These individuals continue to participate in the

¹⁸ Smith gives us the example of the friend and the wife who accomplish their task only because they have received a virtuous education that allows them to understand their duties and fulfil their roles, not because they really feel the passions generally linked to their situation: gratitude, friendship or love. Smith considers them not as the first, but maybe the second of their kind [TMS III.5.1].

¹⁹ A similar development of this idea can be found in Brown [1994: 208].

²⁰ Or enough information.

²¹ Which is not Rousseau's case, as we will see in what follows.

social game but they make affective communication²² difficult: “None but those of the happiest mould are capable of suiting, with exact justness, their sentiments and behaviour to the smallest difference of situation, and of acting upon all occasions with the most delicate and accurate propriety. The coarse clay of which the bulk of mankind are formed, cannot be brought up to such perfection” [TMS III.5.1]. This imperfection does not threaten society’s preservation. Individuals are guided by their sense of duty [Ibid.]: they respect the rules of justice that constitute the true foundations of human society [TMS II.ii.3.3; III.5.2]²³.

There exist, so to speak, two groups of individuals: those who are capable of developing their conscience and those who are not. Each group chooses a different path towards love and admiration [TMS I.iii.3.2]. The impartial spectator guides those who belong to the first group and so they seek virtue and wisdom and do not pay much attention to public opinion. They strive to be worthy of praise and not only to be praised. They are satisfied with their situation, understand that happiness is based on the tranquillity and security to be found in the present state, and are bolstered by their certainty of acting according to the norms and dictates of “God’s vicegerent upon earth” [TMS III.2.31]. The “man without” guides those who belong to the second group. They want to be praised and look for the exterior signs that make them amiable. They pursue power and wealth and are victims of an illusion that does not allow them to enjoy their present state. They take the means for true happiness and act following the general rules of morality. Moral life, the road to virtue and wisdom, is a calm and solitary life²⁴. Social life, the road to wealth and power, is an agitated and tumultuous life. The virtuous individual finds the sense of his existence within himself, through the judgement of the impartial spectator. The ordinary individual finds the sense of his existence outside himself, using the opinion of others.

Morals, though a result of social life, do not condition it. This is why, in the classification presented in the TMS, Smith considers a possible society formed of individuals without relations based on gratitude; a society of “merchants” based on the “mercenary exchange of their good offices according to an agreed

²² I borrow this term and its meaning from E. Tugendhat [1998].

²³ V. Brown [1994: 208] would say: “In this way, society may cohere and its people may live decently, in spite of the moral failure of mankind at large”.

²⁴ Solitary in the sense that this individual will not look for and will not find people’s approbation. He is not an isolated or asocial individual because the impartial spectator who guides his actions is a product of the social game [Brown 1994: 208].

valuation” [TMS II.ii.3.3]²⁵. Only justice, a negative virtue that only requires standing still and doing nothing [TMS II.ii.1.9], is truly necessary for the preservation of society.

Anonymity and money

It is precisely of this kind of society that Smith talks in the Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations²⁶. In this book he describes a society in which the division of labour increases the productivity of labour and extends the market, which allows the growth of the wage funds. This is a commercial society in the sense that each individual makes his living by exchanging the surplus of his work [WN I.iv.1]. Smith is interested in the way in which market relations take place and develop within this society. If individuals do not have the certainty of being able to exchange the surplus of their work, specialisation will not take place because they won’t be able to assure their survival [WN I.ii.3]. Production, exchange and distribution do not need the social game; their only requirement is the existence of the market²⁷.

Thus different abilities are profitable to all members of the commercial society. The propensity to exchange characteristic of human nature [WN I.ii.1] makes things happen as if all surpluses were at everyone’s disposal in a common stock from which everybody can buy whatever he or she needs [WN I.ii.5]. All members of this society know that they can devote themselves to the production of one single good or service and they will find the rest of the goods and services they might need in the market because everyone else does the same. This means that

²⁵ In this paragraph Smith tells us that beneficence is not necessary for the preservation of society. In fact, society does nothing but embellish social relations. He is not excluding sympathy, which is not the same as beneficence, from this society of merchants. But the point here is that society can subsist without all individuals being moral, in the sense of being guided by the impartial spectator. Besides, each time Smith uses the expression “perfect virtue” to designate the maximum development of the impartial spectator and his authority, he presents us with a personality that combines self-command and sensibility, guided in its relations with others by universal benevolence [TMS VI.ii].

²⁶ WN in what follows.

²⁷ In the “sociological” explanation we find in the WN, individuals’ economic activity, exchange, production and distribution needs the existence and respect of private property and hence the respect of the rules of justice. But what I intend to show is the “pure” economic theory that comes out of Smith’s analysis: the necessary conditions that allow us to think about economic activity.

individuals will be in a symmetrical position when they go to the market: each one brings the surplus of his/her work in order to exchange it for somebody else's surplus, and all know that this is what happens. Therefore, even if the market is a social place where individuals meet each other [Young 1986: 369, Berthoud 2002] it does not need sympathetic relations, exchange of looks or change of places to function²⁸. It is not in the market that individuals will find others' approbation and admiration [Berthoud 2002]²⁹.

The possibility of finding what each individual needs in the market is increased by the existence of money. Individuals no longer need to bargain, or look for the person who produces exactly what they need. They take their surpluses to the market where they exchange them for money in order to then buy what they need: "But when barter ceases, and money has become the common instrument of commerce, every particular commodity is more frequently exchanged for money than for any other commodity. The butcher seldom carries his beef or his mutton to the baker, or the brewer, in order to exchange them for bread or beer, but he carries them to the market, where he exchanges them for money, and afterwards exchanges that money for bread and for beer" [WN I.V.6]. Therefore, money is equivalent to anonymity. In a monetary society there is no possibility of confusing social life and economic life. They are theoretically detached.

The propensity to exchange and the desire to better our condition: the foundations of the economic agent

Smith presents an economic theory differentiated from economic sociology and social theory. Even if his aim is to propose a complete theoretical system of society, within this system we can clearly distinguish its parts.

²⁸ This is also true for production: the division of labour and therefore increasing specialisation distance individuals. The gap between emotional relations and productive relations grows as individuals interact less. The fact that they are devoted to one single task may be pernicious for their moral, social and cultural development. Smith perceives this as a risk to commercial society against which the State must act through public education.

²⁹ There is a huge amount of literature on what has been called Das Adam Smith problem and its new version, for a review of this literature see: Teichgraeber [1981], Dickey [1986], Brown [1987], Defalvard [1990]. Even if my work assumes, as does that of most contemporary commentators, the coherence of Smith's work, a particular solution to this problem may be taken from my text, but the development of this solution lays outside my present purpose.

We can go deeper into this distinction: certain human propensities are prior to the social game; they remain outside moral education, and are not bound by a sense of duty; such propensities are independent of social and moral life. These propensities, which therefore are not sympathetic passions, are the propensity to exchange and the desire to better one's condition [Berthoud 2002]. Both, according to Smith, are part of human nature. The first is the consequence of reason and language and the second accompanies us from the womb³⁰.

These two propensities both shape individuals' economic activity and explain economic agents' actions. The first gives us technical intelligence, it helps us discover our own interest [WN I.ii.3]. The second leads us to save [WN II.iii.28]. Therefore, the economic agent is a part of every individual, but does not explain the whole [Berthoud 2002]. Smith shows us a part of ourselves that acts outside the social game and which, in consequence, is not shaped by others' scrutiny, nor that of the impartial spectator [Diatkine 1991].

Indeed, the economic agent does not see an other because it does not really exist; it is nothing but the conceptualisation of a particular human activity. Thus, the economic agent has no independent life, it is not a subject. This agent is conceptualised in Smith's system in order to show us³¹ the part of ourselves that accounts for our economic activity. It is thought for and by subjects. It is a concept that allows explaining and presenting economic activity in such a way as to ensure that it does not threaten our social and moral life.

Smith's conception of the origin of our moral judgements and the principles that guide our economic activity, allow him to consider morals and economics as two separate spheres. The same individual operates in both spheres, but his propensities and motivations are different [Raphael and Macfie 1984]. Social life allows the individual to love himself through the love of others (the real or impartial spectator) while economic life guarantees his material subsistence.

³⁰ In Lectures on Jurisprudence we find that this propensity to barter and exchange is the consequence of our natural inclination to influence our fellow human beings [LJ(A) vi.56]. The desire to better our condition is a calm, dispassionate feeling that will never leave us as long as we live [WN II.iii.28].

³¹ Us, readers of his work, whole individuals, members of a society who participate in the social game.

Rousseau's criticism

Jean Jacques Rousseau would be completely opposed to Smithian theory not only regarding the formation of our moral judgements but also, and foremost, regarding the economic agent. According to Rousseau, Smithian theory is subject to criticism on two points: first, morals cannot be based exclusively on feeling [Cassirer 1987: 87] and second, the socialised human being is not a reflection of human nature.

Rousseau shows Smith's theory to be wrong because it is based on the observation of a very particular social organisation. According to Rousseau, a market society is just one of many possible social organisations. It does not represent the natural course of history or the accomplishment of human nature. On the contrary, it is a degenerate society that emerged from the corruption of the human being.

Adam Smith falls into what Rousseau calls the philosophers' mistake: to ascribe to human nature characteristics that belong to a certain human being, to the member of market society [Rousseau 1990(1755): 65, 73].

In order to clarify his assertion Rousseau starts a speculative investigation [Ibid. 65]; he uses the abstract construct of the natural state to show the transformation suffered by human beings during the transition from this state to the civil state [Durkheim 1966: 116].

The passage between the state of nature and the civil state

The starting point: the natural human being

In the state of nature the human being is free and independent [Rousseau 1990(1755): 96]. He is free because he can do all he pleases and he is independent because he needs nobody else. Besides, in the state of nature the human being has no fellow-creature, he does not recognise himself in another [Rousseau 1993(1781): 84, 1990(1755): 175]. He has not yet developed language and therefore he cannot conceive any abstract ideas. He is satisfied with his present state because he has no way of foreseeing his future³² and he is enough for himself.

³² The natural human being has not yet developed his reason. According to Rousseau, the human being in the state of nature is a being of sensations and it is these sensations that will

In the state of nature human beings are not very different from animals except for one thing: they are free, they can choose and they can deviate from the rule [Rousseau 1990(1755): 75]³³. Natural human beings' second characteristic is perfectibility [Cassirer 1987: 93], which will allow them, among other things, to develop their reason and to become true human beings. Therefore, change is normal for human beings that are always in motion and, therefore, everything they produce will also change continuously. Human beings have in themselves the dynamics that they will impose on society, and that will eventually explain their decay.

Relationships between people are reduced to their very basics; human beings are frightened rather than attracted by their fellow-beings [Rousseau 1993(1781): 83]. Rousseau thus believes that sociability is not innate; it is not part of human nature.

However, Rousseau does not believe that the state of nature is a state of war. Fear is not expressed through violence but via a desire to flee, to not annoy others [Rousseau 1990(1755): 88]. In fact, this state of peace is enforced by two passions found in the human heart: self-love and pity³⁴. The first explains why we are more interested in ourselves than in others and why we act to guarantee our own survival. The second restrains us from grieving others by moderating

develop his reason. Needs give birth to passions and passions account for the progress of our knowledge [Rousseau 1990(1755): 77].

³³ The point made by Defalvard [1990: 506-7] takes here all its significance: the natural human being for Rousseau is not truly a human being, in Rousseau's words, he is not yet a man.

³⁴ The notion of pity seems to change from the Second Discourse to Emile because in the first Rousseau presents pity as a natural and primary feeling while in the latter Rousseau says that a child discovers pity thanks to reason. Indeed, Emile discovers pity because he has developed his reason and therefore he is capable of conceiving a fellow-being. He has developed his imagination, which transports him out of himself and into the place of the one who suffers [Rousseau 1969(1762): 341]. In the Second Discourse Rousseau presents pity as a feeling shared even by animals [Rousseau 1990(1755): 89-90]; it therefore has no need of reason. It is in the Essay on the Origin of Languages where we may find a synthesis: here, Rousseau affirms that although pity is a natural and original feeling (Second Discourse) it needs imagination. Not only because we must have a concept of a fellow-creature but also because we must be able to put ourselves in his/her place (Emile); it is through imagination that we will be able to break our isolation [Rousseau 1993(1781): 83-4]. Hence, pity is proper of sensible beings and it is the "first relative feeling that touches the human heart according to natural order" [Rousseau 1969(1762)]. Emile feels something he does not understand; it is thanks to reason that he will understand that it is pity. Besides, pity is not the result of a comparison among people but of ideas, therefore it is not the result of self-love and is not exclusive of the civil state.

our love of ourselves and guarantees the preservation of human kind and of our environment [Ibid. 59].

Furthermore, Rousseau's argument implies that there are no moral relations in the state of nature because people do not have any obligation to others [Ibid. 87]. Consequently, natural human beings are neither good nor bad, they have no vice nor virtue because they do not have to control any passion. They follow their instincts, which lead them to avoid each other. Thus feeling alone (love of one's-self or pity) cannot be the founding principle of morality: "Only taking care of his needs, he acquires through the commerce of his fellow-beings, with the enlightenment that must guide him, the feelings that must make him happy. In one word, it is only by becoming sociable that he becomes a moral being, a reasonable animal, the king of other animals, and the image of God upon Earth" [Rousseau 1964: 299].

Contrary to Smith, Rousseau does not believe that human beings are sociable or moral by nature even if he believes they are intended to become so. Nothing in human nature predisposes a person to seek the company of its fellow, the natural human being stands in need of no one. The natural human being does not see anyone, is incapable of conceiving any comparison whatsoever, lives within himself and is satisfied with his present state. Nothing like sympathy is present in the state of nature. This is the meaning of natural liberty that will completely change within the civil state, and this is what Smith does not realise.

The intermediary state: the origin of human society

Rousseau leaves no reason coming from human nature that could explain the end of the state of nature. Thus, he justifies the passage from this state to the civil state with the consequences of natural catastrophes [Rousseau 1993(1781): 91, 1990(1755): 106]. Human beings begin to gather because they must rebuild all that has been destroyed by deluge, volcanoes or earthquakes. Weather contributes to this gathering because in warm lands people meet around water sources and in cold regions they get together around fireplaces [Rousseau 1993(1781): 92-97].

This is how languages arise and how human beings start, for the first time, to look at each other. Hence, for Rousseau "it is weakness that makes him sociable; it is our common miseries that lead our hearts towards humanity" [Rousseau

1969(1762): 339]. A person is not enough for herself, she stands in need of others and this is the origin of human society.

In the intermediary state of Rousseau's theory people share their labour and begin to establish long term relationships among them. This is the beginning of morality and social affections [Rousseau 1983(1781): 83-4]. The members of this new society consume others' work without separating the product of labour from the one who works. Labour is not the object of exchange. Nobody is perceived as a means or as an instrument another could use in order to satisfy his own needs. Nobody works for anyone else, people work together and the product of their labour belongs to all³⁵.

Therefore, on one hand, it is collaboration between equal human beings that marks the beginning of human society; in terms of sharing individual labour and, more precisely, consuming of this labour. And on the other labour and industry are the real foundation of this society. Labour is thus important for all people but it is also important for society. It is labour that makes individuals worthy of being members of society because within this society each individual owes his existence to others and so in return he owes them his work. Labour becomes an essential duty for social individuals [Rousseau 1969(1762): 305-6].

According to Rousseau, society originated from a particular situation that made individuals dependent on each other, which is not the case for Smith. Smith considers interdependence as a natural consequence of the division of labour. This follows from the fact that for Smith there is no individual without society and that all individuals possess a propensity to exchange that favours specialisation.

The passage from love of one self to self-love: the role of comparison

Human relationships begin then to have a permanent character. People look at each other and begin to compare themselves. This comparison is the origin of preferences. Love of one self starts to change. Human beings begin to conceive ideas, to conceive the future and to consider their situation regarding others. This is the origin of jealousy, of love, of envy [Rousseau 1969(1762): 330].

³⁵ Contrary to Smith and following Locke, Rousseau considers that labour is the foundation of property rights. Rights that will be abused by the rich in order to establish a pact between classes.

The passage to the civil state corresponds to entry into the domain of infinite needs. Individuals want to be loved and try to become loveable through exterior signs that make them agreeable to others. It is only within the civil state that individuals wish to better their condition. The natural human being cannot conceive the future, he is satisfied with what he is and with what he has, he finds happiness within himself. The civil human being wants to rise up the social ladder, he wants to show himself off and be admired, he no longer lives within himself, he lives for others.

This is the passage between love of one self and self-love. Rousseau establishes a clear distinction between both: “There must be no confusion between self-love and the love of one self, two very different passions in their nature and in their effects. The love of one self is a natural feeling that leads every animal to take care of its own preservation and that, guided in man by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue. Self-love is but a relative feeling, artificial, and born within society, that leads every individual to pay more attention to himself than to any other, that inspires men with all the evils they do to each other, and that is the true source of honour” [Footnote XV, Rousseau 1990(1755): 174].

This passage marks the beginning of civil human beings’ relative existence. They do not see themselves through their own eyes any longer, they see themselves through the eyes of their fellow-beings and they want others to prefer them to anyone else including the others themselves. This gives rise to a permanent contradiction that will dominate the civil state: the human being is no longer satisfied with himself.

This contradiction is not to be found in Smith, who does not see the risks associated with sympathy. In fact, sympathy cannot be a passion regulator because it only increases self-love, and therefore turns the civil state into a state of war where the dominant passion is the envy that comes with unlimited desire. It is precisely this unlimited character of desire that will threaten human beings. Indeed, the individual has no way of facing the infinite that surpasses him.

This is how the individual is born: an incomplete being that only thinks about himself and that engages in a mad race in order to obtain the unattainable. Not only does he need others to give sense to his existence, he also needs them to satisfy his unlimited needs. He has lost his independence, he is no longer autonomous or free [Rousseau 1990(1755): 99]. He has formed a society that disfigures him, that alienates his nature by making him evil and vicious.

It is within this society that the economic agent will replace the moral subject. An economic agent that will only look for the exterior signs of distinction, that only tries to satisfy his personal interest and that cannot be satisfied with himself. The economic agent is an other and above all it is opposed to the moral subject. Furthermore, this economic agent, member of the civil state, is opposed to true human nature. These are all the things that Smith does not see because he has characterised the human being with passions that are in no way natural, he has confused the human being with the individual.

Immorality of the market society

The intermediary state is not permanent. Comparison and envy lead to accumulation and thereby to private property [Rousseau 1990(1755): 110-1]. Natural inequality is enforced by conventional inequality [Ibid. 108], society starts to divide into two groups: the possessors and those who possess nothing. In order to satisfy their unlimited needs each individual is forced to call upon others and so to address himself to their interests³⁶. He must make clear to others that it is in their own advantage to work for him, and by becoming their chief he becomes their slave. Society becomes a society of slaves that exchange goods among themselves. Exchange was not possible before as there was no private property.

But there is something even worse in Rousseau's opinion. It is neither the alienation of the human being from his true nature and his transformation into an individual of mere appearance, nor the exchange of the products of individual labour. It is the fact that in a market society there are individuals who have no other possession besides their work and who, therefore, are obliged to exchange it. Labour thus becomes a commodity, it can be bought and sold, the individual is stripped of the only thing he had left and therefore he is no longer a free agent.

³⁶ Smith quotes the passage of the Second Discourse that deals with this behaviour in his letter to the Edinburgh review in 1756 [p.252]. It is not difficult to connect this paragraph to his own thesis contained in the passage on the butcher, the brewer and the baker in the WN [I.ii.2]. Nevertheless the immoral character given by Rousseau has completely disappeared in Smith's argument because, according to him, exchange is the product of a natural propensity, as I have argued above.

Smith is not aware of this because, in terms of Rousseau, he does not realise that the propensity to exchange is a product of society not human nature. It is only in a market society that individuals are interested in persuading others. There is no natural inclination, according to Rousseau, to persuade others to take interest in our fate. This only happens in a market society [Rousseau 1969(1762): 302-3].

Pact between social classes

The economic problem is from the beginning a moral one. There is nothing before the comparison or the perceptions exchanged between individuals that could explain their economic activity. The pursuit of material goods is nothing more than a quest for distinction. The human being seeks exterior signs of wealth only because they allow him to show he is different and, thereby, accumulation only increases inequality. A market society is clearly an immoral society [Rousseau 1990(1755): 109]: besides being a society marked by conflict, hatred and rivalry, it entails the instrumentalisation of the person. The rich take advantage of the poor and so individuals become means [Starobinski 1971: 43].

This is confirmed by Rousseau's description of this society as a pact between rich and poor: "You need me, because I am rich and you are poor; let's then establish an agreement between us: I will allow you to have the honour of serving me on the condition that you will give me the little you have left for the pains I will undergo for commanding you" [Rousseau 1990(1755): 93]. The poor must hence give up their liberty and become the means for the powerful to obtain wealth. This, according to Rousseau, is absolutely contrary not only to morals but also to human nature. A person is by far too noble a being to become the instrument of others and it is intolerable to use a human soul for the advantage of others [Rousseau 1993(1761): 159-160].

This pact is illegitimate because it strips human beings of their liberty and therefore removes any possible morality in their relationships [Rousseau 1964(1762): 124]. In fact, Rousseau gives no place, unlike Smith, to the existence of amoral individuals. A free agent who becomes related to his fellow-beings enters immediately into morality. In other words, for Rousseau morals (and later politics) cover all other spheres of human action, nothing can escape from them.

Money as a social bond

This illegitimate pact is maintained through the existence of money. Commercial society is a society of commodities whose social bond is money. It is a society of merchants, guided exclusively by their own interests, who need a form of conventional equality to carry out their exchanges. This equality is given by money: “Conventional equality between things caused the invention of money; for money is nothing but a term of comparison for the value of things of different types, and in this sense money is the true tie of society” [Rousseau 1969(1762): 297]. The introduction of money transformed the very nature of social relationships, which became the commercial relationships that give a particular character to commercial society.

Therefore, individuals establish ties between things and have relationships only with things, without consideration for their fellow-beings or the common good. Because of its role as a relative sign money permits the preservation of the reign of opinion, as well as inequality among the members of a market society [Rousseau 1969(1762): 298, 1990(1861): 127]. Money allows the survival of the economic agent.

In short, because of money the individual does not recognise himself as a member of a society. He does not recognise his fellow-beings and sees in others nothing but instruments. He does not even recognise himself as an autonomous agent, he makes sense of his existence only through his material possessions. Human beings become slaves –slaves to opinion, to desires– and market society guarantees the continuity of this slavery [Rousseau 1964(1762): 335-336]³⁷.

Money is not a veil it is the basis, the foundation, of a market society. The anonymity it guarantees is nothing but the reification of social relationships. A market society is a monetary society and yet it is precisely this monetary character that explains all its miseries. Money is nothing but a symbol. But, society has forgotten this, which gives rise to “all chimeras of opinion”, to the distinction of ranks and to the poverty in which the majority live [Rousseau 1969(1762): 298]³⁸.

³⁷ In the words of Ignatieff: “what Rousseau reveals clearly, is that the very processes that liberates men from being the slaves of natural scarcity will make them slaves of social scarcity” [1986: 99].

³⁸ A market does not make individuals equal. Smith is mistaken when he considers that individuals stand in symmetrical situations when they arrive at the market.

Society as the result of human will

Smith is mistaken in refusing to accept the consequences of the artificial nature of society. Accepting that the individual has been created to live in society, which seems acceptable to Rousseau even if he does not agree with natural sociability, does not mean that society has always existed. It is, on the contrary, the product of human action³⁹. Obviously, people will be transformed by the social organisation they establish but they remain as responsible for it as its creators [Durkheim 1966, Cassirer 1987]. Rousseau wants members of society to be conscious of their role and he wants them to assume full responsibility for their actions. There is no transcendental natural law that could explain social functioning and allow individuals to pursue their private lives without concerning themselves with social life [Burgelin 1952].

Society is only a means for the realisation of the human being; it allows individuals to achieve moral freedom and to reach their potential⁴⁰. Freedom is achieved through the conscious and voluntary exercise of citizenship and, in consequence, it cannot be the result of decentralisation. Society changes the human being. By transforming him it transforms the essence of freedom.

Therefore, Smith should be included within the general criticism Rousseau addresses to philosophers and specially to political economists (the physiocrats): there is no natural law to be discovered; there is no such thing as an invisible hand. Hence, the possibility of an economic science independent from any moral or political consideration is mere irresponsibility. It would only serve as a distraction in order to keep individuals enslaved, to deprive them of their character of citizens and to allow princes to govern in the name of an ultimate truth that leaves the road to tyranny wide open.

³⁹ Following F. Tricou [1990] society is as created and creative for Smith as for Rousseau. This vision and the one presenting society as a spontaneous effect of human action are not equivalent. Exploring this difference is beyond my present goal but deserves further consideration.

⁴⁰ See, among others, L. Colletti [1972].

Draft for an answer

Despite all his efforts to understand the human being, to form a new citizen and to transform society, Rousseau is rather pessimistic. Addressing the problem of finding a form of government that will be able to put law above human beings, he states: “If unfortunately this form cannot be found, and I confess candidly that I think it cannot be found, my opinion is that we must go to the other extreme and boldly put man as far above the law as he may be, consequently establish arbitrary despotism and as arbitrary as possible: I would like that the despot could be God. In one word, I see no bearable middle term between the most austere Democracy and the most perfect hobbism: for the conflict of men and laws, that puts the State in a continual intestine war, is the worst of all political States”. [Rousseau 1979(1767): 240].

Smith would offer a solution with no risk of tyranny⁴¹. Human beings, who are the source of all their own grievances, can guarantee their freedom and mutual respect by living in a decentralised society whose functioning is beyond their reach. They are only responsible for their own acts and, as long as they respect the rules of justice, there is no real danger for society. Therefore, individuals only need their sense of duty⁴² to be good members of society.

Moreover, in what Smith calls the middle ranks of society, where the majority of people are to be found, the paths to virtue and wealth coincide [TMS I.iii.3.5; WN IV.iii.c.9; I.x.c.27; I.x.p.10]. However, it is not the design of this “average” individual that guarantees convergence. It takes place at a higher level through the action of the invisible hand [Tricou 1990: 109].

Rousseau and Smith seem to share the same views concerning the development of inequality throughout history, as well as their apprehension regarding the threat that envy and emulation may represent to virtue within a market society [Ignatieff 1986: 101,105]. Yet Smith tries “to demonstrate that a society that would strive to cultivate equality and virtue by restraining its needs [...] would end by endangering economic growth, which, in the long run, ensures the

⁴¹ In J.P. Dupuy’s terms: to the question “Do men have the liberty of abandoning their freedom to the anonymous game of social automatisms?” the economic solution would be to dilute sovereignty in the social body and to reduce it to individuals’ self-sufficiency [1982: 256].

⁴² This could open the path to an amoral society.

satisfaction of the needs of the underprivileged” [Ibid. 103]⁴³. The analytical independence Smith establishes between morals and economics allows him to explore the paths of economic growth (commerce) without being troubled by the salvation of the human soul. The moral subject is not to be found in the market –the two principles that guide his economic activity have nothing to do with his behaviour as a moral being.

For Smith the economic agent is a particular human activity that does not depend on the social game. It is precisely this characteristic of his theoretical system that leads him to separate morals and economics. While moral and social activity is based upon comparison, economic activity remains apart. We have the right to think of an economic agent because it does not represent a threat; it is removed from the comparison game. The economic agent is not the product of self-love it is completely independent. This part of our individuality is spared from the possible risk of contamination or corruption. It is not through the economy that individuals will lose their free and autonomous nature. Economic activity is an amoral activity.

This is not true for Rousseau because the economic agent is not a natural activity. The propensities from which it proceeds are the product of the social game, of the game of mirrors. Economics can never be separated from morals and thinking of an economic agent implies thinking of a fractional, thus immoral, individual.

We may conclude that the concept of the economic agent found in Smith’s economic theory leads him to establish the foundations for the economic sphere’s independence from specific human activity. Thus, contemporary economic theory as the study of a particular subject matter would be Smith’s successor. However, Smith also shows us that the economist must be humble. Any analysis of economic

⁴³ The current view that portrays Rousseau as opposed to economic progress and growth must be revised. In the *Project of Constitution for Corsica* Rousseau exposes policies tending to the increase of society’s resources. Agriculture, he says, is the economic activity that increases a nation’s wealth: its population. The development of agriculture will lead to a life of abundance (different from luxury) where all members of society will receive what they need. Even if he is opposed to commerce among individuals, he concedes that the State may establish commercial relations with other States. However Rousseau is aware of the dangers associated with this growth: the emergence of unlimited needs and thereby the introduction of vice. And so he says: “The evil is inevitable and as it necessary that all human things end, it is beautiful that after a long and vigorous existence the State might finish by the excess of population” [Rousseau 1990(1861): 147].

activity or of the economic agent's actions cannot be generalised to all human activities. Therefore, the imperialism of economic theory will not find a predecessor in Smith. The study of the economic agent cannot be considered as a theory of human action.

Rousseau's work is on the opposite end of contemporary economic theory. By providing a severe judgement on the possibility of analysing economic activity as an independent activity, Rousseau equally denies the possibility of a positive economic science. Economic theory built upon the behaviour of a free and independent economic agent starts from a false hypothesis that can in no way be generalised. This economic theory would thus be wrong and could have no pretension of being a positive theory. Furthermore it is dangerous as a project for society: it only describes a particular society and provides the "scientific" foundations for an unequal, tyrannical society.

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