# Jesse Norman's Adam Smith: Tensions and Resolutions

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Jesse Norman's book on Smith is impressive both as a display of learning and as an appreciation of Adam Smith. In addition, the work is a fine effort in bringing Smith alive in today's world, which seems to be one of its main purposes. Although the book is entitled *Adam Smith: Father of Economics*, the discussion is by no means limited to economics. Law, politics, history, culture and especially morality are well covered in this work. Indeed, the penultimate chapter of the book is on morality and commerce suggesting that perhaps this issue may have been foremost in Norman's mind. The bulk of the book, behind the very useful biography that begins the first third of it, is devoted to what might best be described as political economy. One has the clear indication that part of the purpose of Norman´s discussions is to see economics as integrated with matters outside of economics such as morality and culture.

Norman seeks to paint Smith as a man of moderation who avoids extremes while also seeing the various dimensions that might apply to a given issue. For example, Norman—like numerous others these days—is intent upon pointing out that "no one who has read Smith closely can rationally believe he is an out-and-out free marketer" (p. 187). Instead, Smith not only identifies certain pathologies of the market order but also, according to Norman, allows plenty of room for state projects and guidance of the economy. We thus avoid the extreme of socialism on the one hand and laissez-faire on the other.

Distancing Smith from laissez-faire is all well and good and no doubt true enough, but at times the effect seems to either turn Smith into a kind of Mandevillean or weakens him as a guide to much of anything. In the first case, commerce gets presented as a good thing so long as it is managed by, in Mandeville's terms, "skillful politicians." In the second case, Smith's "moderation" is inclusive of so much that he appears useful only in ruling out extremes, but not much help in guiding us within the space left after the extremes are removed. The text thus finds a place for left-Smitheans, right-Smitheans, and sensible non-Smitheans with little guidance about how to choose between them. This may be, perhaps, exactly where Norman wants us to be, for the "evidence" is to do the talking, rather than any pre-conceived perspective on how Smith should be interpreted. Of course if that is the case, it is likely that skillful politicians will, in the end, be guiding the commercial order by positioning themselves as the best interpreters of the "evidence." I might have been more comfortable with this outcome if it had been accompanied by as strong a sense of "public choice" theory as it is of other economic doctrines discussed in the book. But alas, only one brief mention is made of James Buchanan and public choice economics.

Although my "right" Smithean sympathies sometimes balk at Norman's rendering of Smith for our times, the picture of the man of moderation Norman rightly points to is certainly accurate. Smith is a complex and subtle thinker and one who is interesting for that very reason. Norman does a credible job of noting some of those subtleties and how they can contribute to a better climate of political discourse. But Smith is often most interesting in regard to the tensions to be found in his thought. Perhaps because Norman is so eager to sell Smith to contemporary audiences he ignores some of these tensions. Yet such tensions, by their very contrast with our expectations, help highlight not only what is generally the case in Smith but also what the limits of those general dispositions might be. One of the most famous tensions, of course, is the one in TMS where Smith gives a negative judgment concerning the "poor boy's" ambition but then follows this by suggesting that that very ambition "rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind" (TMS IV.I.10). This tension is often used to point to Smith´s willingness to consider the moral pathologies that attend to commerce. Yet an alternative interpretation is available to us as well, namely that commerce finds ways to utilize at least some common moral pathologies to the benefit of society. Whichever way one goes, the tension does not melt away; for even if we allow that these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, we are still left

with which side should be pulling us more. I want to take a moment here to look at a few other tensions in Smith´s moral theory, more or less missed by Norman, that put a bit of a brake upon Norman's enthusiastic depiction of Smith's moral theory as a public morality for our times. But first we might note that Norman is not without his own tensions, perhaps precisely because he senses them in Smith's text.

Norman generally sees Smith as an evolutionary moral theorist and notes, that "moral norms emerge, tacitly or explicitly, as the outcome of human action but not of human design" (p. 297). In this system there is a "selection pressure in favour of norms which are deemed most widely acceptable within a given context, even if they may be disobeyed in specific instances" (ibid.). But Norman also tells us that "markets constitute not a purely natural but a created, constructed order " (p. 242). Indeed, "wise states and wise officials have recognized this over the years and sought to enable and support markets for that reason" (ibid.). Now one could argue that markets and morality are different things, but if anything would seem to be evolutionary it would seem to be markets. Indeed, markets are the model for social thinking about anything in an evolutionary way, including morality. Moreover, to separate morality from markets runs contrary to the intent Norman has in advancing the idea of their integration. Most especially, making morality evolutionary poses a tension between that evolutionary view and the constructivism Norman allows for morality as a means to constrain markets (e.g., see his positive account of Sandel p. 311ff and his concluding worries about commercialization, p. 328).

Perhaps because of the tension just mentioned, Norman effectively throws up his hands in the end by saying that Smith "struggles to supply a wholly naturalistic basis for his theories either of norms or of justice" (p. 318). Thus while an evolutionary approach may be generally true, the tensions such an approach gives rise to not only add interest to the theory, thereby spawning different interpretations of Smith, but they also perhaps caution us from a tendency to over moralize the public realm. The last is a lesson I would draw. I am uncertain if Norman would agree, for Norman's welcomed enthusiasm for Smith often bleeds into an impression that Smith has the answer for everything. In my view, Smith is not only comfortable with moral anomalies, but actually makes no claim that morality is the measure of all things, including commerce. I refer here not just to his rejection of the "man of system," but to the "whining moralists" (TMS III.3.9) that seem to dominate our contemporary landscape and who wish to legislate a moral solution for every social problem. Perhaps, then, the lesson to be learned from Smith runs in quite the other direction from ceaseless moralization to a willingness to live with certain prejudices and pathologies.

In any case, our first example of a tension in Smith comes from the *Wealth of Nations* where Smith seems to suggest that moral propriety can be situational:

> In every civilized society, in every society where the distinction of ranks has once been completely established, there have been always two different schemes or systems of morality current at the same time; of which the one may be called the strict or austere; the other the liberal, or, if you will, the loose system. The former is generally admired and revered by the common people: The latter is commonly more esteemed and adopted by what are called people of fashion. The degree of disapprobation with which we ought to mark the vices of levity, the vices which are apt to arise from great prosperity, and from the excess of gaiety and good humour, seems to constitute the principal distinction between those two opposite schemes or systems. In the liberal or loose system, luxury, wanton and even disorderly mirth, the pursuit of pleasure to some degree of intemperance, the breach of chastity,…are generally treated with a good deal of indulgence, and are easily either excused or pardoned altogether. In the austere system, on the contrary, those excesses are regarded with the utmost abhorrence and detestation (WN V.i.g.10).

Here we see that the moral norms that guide us may differ depending upon the favorability of one's circumstances. The more favorable the circumstances the less need there is to adhere to certain norms of conduct. It is likely that Smith himself does not favor the loose morals of the wealthy, but it is not clear at all that the impartial spectator would object to their conduct given their circumstances, unless there was a lack of prudence in handling one's resources. The point, however, is that this sort of situational morality seems in tension with a morality guided by an impartial spectator who judges generally. Or to put it another way, situational relativism seems to undermine impartial spectating altogether because it undermines the functionality of generalizing norms by favoring a kind of consequentialism of circumstances. Even if one were to try and say that prudence

covers both the loose and austere moral codes in this case, it is really not clear that, in the end, prudence does so in the case of the wealthy, except at the extreme.

The second case of a tension in Smith is also tied to consequences and is often conveniently ignored when talking of Smith's moral theory:

> Every body agrees to the general maxim, that as the event does not depend on the agent, it ought to have no influence upon our sentiments, with regard to the merit or propriety of his conduct. But when we come to particulars, we find that our sentiments are scarce in any one instance exactly comfortable to what this equitable maxim would direct. The happy or unprosperous event of any action, is not only apt to give us a good or bad opinion of the prudence with which it was conducted, but almost always too animates our gratitude or resentment, our sense of the merit or demerit of the design (TMS II.iii.3.1) (see also, TMS II.iii.intro.5).

In other words, whatever the intent of the action, or lack thereof in the case of bad consequences, the consequences of the action play the most significant role in our judgment of it even when "every body agrees to the general maxim." The tension between norms and consequences arises because "nature…when she implanted the seeds of this irregularity in the human breast, seems as upon all other occasions, to have intended the happiness and perfection of the species" (TMS II.iii.3.2). Our sentiments, then, upon which the whole edifice of morality is built are in essence "irregular" in that outcomes can trump virtually any motivation for action, as well as the norms that may arise from them, provided they bring benefits. Smith's point is to show, of course, that we are made for the production of positive outcomes and seek the well-being of our fellows. But the effect can also be to put in tension moral rules, and perhaps propriety itself, with consequences. Even the impartial spectator feels it to some degree (TMS II.iii.2.1). This sort of consequentialism no doubt led thinkers like Kant towards a separation of morality from outcomes, and in Kant's case from the phenomenal order altogether. Hence while the irregularity of our moral sentiments removes any deontic predilections, it also leaves us with the question of when and how, if ever, norms can or should override consequences.

The third tension has to do with Smith's discussion of infanticide. So far as I can see, there is only a brief mention of the infanticide issue in Norman, no doubt because it would strike us, as it does Smith, as simply wrong. Yet what Smith says there is problematic, and this problematic character applies to Norman as well when it comes to using an evolutionary theory of morality. To put the point succinctly what Smith gives us there—TMS V.2.15-16—is a rant rather than an argument. The only real argument Smith offers against infanticide, besides an appeal to our sensibilities, is to say that "no society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men's conduct and behavior was of a piece with the horrible practice I have just now mentioned." But, of course, Smith's own argument is undermined, since Greek society did subsist for more than a "moment." Moreover, many other societies have practiced infanticide as well.[1] My purpose here is not to defend infanticide, nor to argue against Smith's claim that it might be immoral. Infanticide, however, is brought up in the section of TMS on custom, giving us every reason to believe that Smith saw a difference between customary norms and moral norms. The tension here is that on a strictly evolutionary account it is difficult to tell the difference, unless one conjures up a theory about one being more deeply felt and/or pervasive or longer lasting than the other. Smith indicates the way out of the problem by referring to the idea of "natural propriety" (TMS V.2.14). But this only suggests that some important dimensions of moral norms do *not* evolve but are dependent on our nature.. It should be noted that he allows another way out as well, going back to our first tension, in that he is open to the possibility that circumstances may mitigate completely the negative judgement about infanticide (TMS V.2.15 ).

The idea that our nature has some built in propensities of response that essentially do not evolve leads us to consider our fourth tension—the impartial spectator. The temptation on an evolutionary theory is to see the impartial spectator as the codification of "favored" norms that have been the result of mutual acts of sympathy over time. In short, the impartiality is the *result* of a process, not its origin. Smith's famous distinction between praise and praiseworthiness—which is referred to by Norman as well—provides something of a contrast to this picture. For our idea of praiseworthiness is not primarily built out of a process of interchanges of praise, but the reverse (TMS III.2.2-4). That is, our desire for praiseworthiness precedes the love of praise, and it is praiseworthiness that we use to measure specific acts of praise, at least when no self-interest intervenes. And the matter does not rest just with praise: "man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to

be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love" (TMS III.2.1). And more generally, "nature…has endowed him, not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of" (TMS III.2.7). Notice that "nature" is again mentioned here, suggesting that evolution alone does not tell the whole story—even when speaking of norms that may be favored over time. Such norms, as we see with infanticide, must be measured against some "natural and proper" object of our sentiments. How the "natural and proper" objects play against evolving sentiments is precisely the interpretative task to which the tension calls us. Finally, there are dimensions of impartial spectating that move away from social interactions almost entirely and towards some "architype of perfection" (TMS VI.iii.25). We sometimes need to take refuge in these judgments of the impartial spectator that stand apart from the judgments of our actual society.

One way of dealing with such tensions, as we have seen, is to appeal to nature. Another way of dealing with them is to appeal to a "higher tribunal" (TMS III.2.33) or to what Norman refers to as providence (p. 318). The latter would also add another layer of contrast on to the evolutionary story, if we must include it. But our task here has not been to resolve these tensions, but to indicate their role in complicating the process of giving moral evaluations and the possibility that we may have to live with moral anomalies. Indeed, Norman himself recognizes "the relativity that comes from Smith's insistence on moral community" (p. 296) He sees the Smithean system as being largely "empirical" which would allow for untidy moral packages in practice (p. 221). And Smith himself notes that "the general rules of almost all the virtues…are in many respects loose and inaccurate, admit of many exceptions, and require so many modifications, that it is scarce possible to regulate our conduct entirely by a regard to them" (TMS III.6.9). There may be unifying patterns that can explain away these tensions,[2] or we might have to live with the anomalies that populate actual practice—something Smith not only allows but recommends (TMS VI.ii.2.16).

In light of what has been said above, we might consider a different direction from at least one aspect of the Smithean "renewal" Norman suggests in his last chapter, namely the need to have a Smithean public morality. Perhaps the complications of moral life suggest a focus more upon one's own local circumstances and surroundings than upon the public at large. Perhaps it is best not to see morality as a legislative tool to be universalized across society—something against which Norman himself cautions (p. 296)—but as something better suited to a more localized context, even to the level of the individual. If that would be the lesson of Smith for our times, it is a hard lesson to hear over the din of today's moralists.

## NOTES

1 *Aeon,* Nov. 27th 2017

2 See Eric Schleisser, for example, *Adam Smith: Systematic Philosopher and Public Thinker.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.