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0521830605 - Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science

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Introduction

In an eloquent formula manifesting the reverence economists have for the founder of their discipline, George Stigler characterizes Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as "a stupendous palace erected upon the granite of self-interest."¹ The meaning of the metaphor is clear. Self-interest provides a rock-solid foundation for the theory developed in *The Wealth of Nations*. Furthermore, since Adam Smith's work is itself the foundation of modern economic science, self-interest is the first principle of economics. Because self-interest is a concept of such fundamental importance, one would expect Adam Smith to mention it quite often. Yet the term "self-interest" is remarkably rare in *The Wealth of Nations*. It appears only once, in the context of a discussion of religion. Smith explains that in the Catholic Church, "the industry and zeal of the inferior clergy are kept more alive by the powerful motive of self-interest than perhaps in any established Protestant church."² Catholic priests work harder than the established Protestant clergy because, instead of being salaried, they depend upon voluntary gifts from their parishioners. In the famous passage analyzing the motives "the butcher, the brewer, or the baker" may have for providing our dinner, Smith does not refer to *self-interest* but rather to *self-love*: "We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages."³ One may be tempted to brush the difference aside, and argue that *self-love* and *self-interest* are synonyms. I contend, however, that Smith's choice of terms is significant, especially in a passage that lays out the theoretical foundations for the rest of the book. *Self-love* is a term used by moral philosophers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from Hobbes to Shaftesbury, Mandeville,

¹ George J. Stigler, "Smith's Travels on the Ship of State," *History of Political Economy* 3 (1971), p. 265.

² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 2, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976 [London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776], v.i.g.2.

³ *The Wealth of Nations*, i.ii.2.

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and Hume. It is the translation of a technical term used by Renaissance humanists, *philautia*.⁴ The French translation of the term, used by Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Nicole, and Rousseau among many others, is *amour-propre*. The choice of the term *self-love* carries with it an entire philosophical and literary tradition.

The purpose of this book is to study the history of the concepts of self-love and self-interest before Adam Smith, in order to understand what these concepts meant when Adam Smith decided to use them as foundation for the system he constructed in *The Wealth of Nations*. Some important work has been done (especially by late-nineteenth-century German scholars) on the connections between Smith and the philosophical tradition exemplified by La Rochefoucauld in France and Mandeville in England.⁵ A lot of excellent work exists on the intellectual origins of modern economics.⁶ My purpose in this book is narrower. I dedicate all my attention to first principles. I ask what the first principles of Smith's system are, and what the previous history of these first principles is. My goal is to place Adam Smith's axiomatic choices in their historical and philological context.

My greatest intellectual debt is to Albert Hirschman's work, *The Passions and the Interests*.⁷ Hirschman has shown many essential connections between the rise of the modern concept of self-interest and the development of moral philosophy and reason of State theory in the seventeenth century. This book brings a lot of additional evidence in support of Hirschman's insights, and it takes them further on some key points. For instance, I show that in collapsing all the passions into the drive for the "augmentation of fortune," Smith was appropriating Rousseau's psychology. As to

⁴ *Philautia* is itself the transliteration of a term used by Plato and neo-Platonic philosophers. On the history of the words *philautia* and *amour-propre*, see Hans-Jürgen Fuchs, *Entfremdung und Narzissmus. Semantische Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der "Selbstbezogenheit" als Vorgeschichte von französisch "amour-propre"*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1977.

⁵ See Wilhelm Hasbach, "Laroche foucault und Mandeville," *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich*, Leipzig, 1890, pp. 1–43 and *Untersuchungen über Adam Smith und die Entwicklung der Politischen Ökonomie*, Leipzig, 1891; Albert Schatz, "Bernard de Mandeville. Contribution à l'étude des origines du libéralisme économique," *Vierteljahrschrift für Social- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Leipzig, 1903.

⁶ James Bonar, *Philosophy and Political Economy in Some of Their Historical Relations*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1992 [New York: Macmillan, 1893]; Karl Pribram, *A History of Economic Reasoning*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983; Louis Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx. The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977; Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique*, Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1992.

⁷ *The Passions and the Interests. Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1977].

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Hirschman's main thesis (that Smith sided with the "republican" critique of modern commercial society in rejecting the Montesquieu–Steuart doctrine on the political benefits of commerce), I qualify it by showing that a limited endorsement of the Montesquieu–Steuart doctrine was compatible with a "republican" point of view.

My training as a literary scholar makes me especially sensitive to issues of consistency and inconsistency in discourse. I attempt to withhold judgment about the meaning of a text until all of its aspects have been accounted for. In some instances, Smith contradicts himself. This, I argue, should not be interpreted as a shortcoming in his doctrine, or as an apparent contradiction that should be resolved in favor of one's favorite interpretation of Smith. Like his classical models, Cicero and Carneades, Smith believes that one gets closer to the truth by arguing both sides of an issue. This is particularly clear in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where Smith develops Rousseau's arguments on the corrupting influence of commerce, and subsequently refutes them as "splenetic philosophy."⁸ In Smith's view, Rousseau's critique of commerce and the critique of Rousseau's critique were equally true. I read *The Wealth of Nations* as an attempt by Smith to reconcile Hume's views on the social and political benefits of commerce with Rousseau's republican critique of commercial society.

Smith scholars rarely mention Rousseau as an important interlocutor for Smith.⁹ Charles Griswold wrote recently that "a comparative work on Smith and Rousseau holds tremendous interest."¹⁰ This book does more than a comparison. It makes the case that Rousseau is an essential interlocutor for Smith. There has been a good deal of debate in the past twenty years on Smith's place within the traditions of civic humanism and natural jurisprudence. The interpretation I propose here emphasizes the connections with the civic humanist tradition, and it agrees in some respects with Emma Rothschild's recent parallel of Smith and Condorcet,¹¹ where Smith appears as a fervent republican. What I argue, however, following

⁸ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (sixth edition), *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 1, edited by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976 [London and Edinburgh, 1790; first edition 1759], IV.1.

⁹ The most notable exceptions are Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty. An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 66–76, and Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1984. Also see Ignatieff's "Smith, Rousseau and the Republic of Needs," in *Scotland and Europe, 1200–1850*, edited by T.C. Smout, Edinburgh: J. Donald, 1986, pp. 187–206.

¹⁰ Charles Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 25.

¹¹ Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments. Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

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Hirschman's suggestion, is that Smith's republican leanings are the paradoxical cause of the advent of economics as an autonomous science.

The current fashion among historians is to dismiss as teleological any interpretive scheme that reads past events and past ideas as a foreshadowing of the present. Donald Winch argues, correctly, that the historical Smith has little to do with the image today's economists have of the founding father of their discipline.¹² This does not mean, however, that we should not approach Smith with today's questions. My goal is not to describe a historical Smith or a historical Rousseau as objects of knowledge that would themselves be abstracted from history. We could read authors from the past as if there were no historical distance, and blindly project our own concerns onto them. We would gain nothing from this experience because we would learn nothing that we did not know in the first place. On the other hand, we could make the historical distance so great that authors from the past would appear as radically strange and foreign to us. This also would teach us little, and the study of the past would be a matter of mere intellectual curiosity. I agree with Gadamer that the locus of hermeneutics is somewhere between complete strangeness and the complete absence of strangeness. As Gadamer puts it, "the call to leave aside the concepts of the present does not mean a naïve transposition into the past. It is, rather, an essentially relative demand that has meaning only in relation to one's own concepts."¹³ A hermeneutic approach to Rousseau and Smith should start with the familiar image we have of these authors; it should then seek to question this image by making them strange and unfamiliar; in the end, we should gain a better knowledge of Smith and Rousseau, but, more importantly, this process should make us more aware of the pre-conceptions that had defined and structured our understanding of these authors. These pre-conceptions do not need to be discarded. In fact, they cannot be discarded because they form the core of what we are as historical beings. We can simply gain a greater awareness of them. The ultimate purpose of a hermeneutic approach is self-knowledge.

The main characters in this story are La Rochefoucauld, Bayle, Mandeville, Hume, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Smith. I attempt to explain how one goes from the interest doctrine (selfish motives are behind all human actions) to economic science (self-interest explains *economic* behavior, but not all types of human behavior). All the authors mentioned here did position themselves strategically with respect to their predecessors and

¹² Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics. An Essay in Historiographic Revision*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York: Crossroad, 1992, p. 397 [*Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960].

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contemporaries, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. I focus on the way in which authors construct their own systems by adopting or rejecting the first principles used by other authors. In all cases, I try to show what authors *do* as much as what they *say*. Throughout this book, I show how each author uses, rejects, or transforms what Hume calls “the selfish hypothesis,” i.e. the idea that all human conduct can be explained in terms of self-interest. This exclusive focus on the “selfish hypothesis” is what gives my story its unity.

Instead of trying to construct a grand narrative that would take us step by step from the middle of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, I have chosen to approach the same problem from several angles. Each chapter discusses a distinct question. In the first chapter, I ask: “Is self-interest the engine of human behavior?” In the second chapter, I establish an important distinction, used in the rest of the book, between two main traditions: an Epicurean/Augustinian tradition, which uses self-interest as its sole principle, and a neo-Stoic tradition, which uses self-interest as one among other principles. The third chapter discusses the meaning of the expression: “rational pursuit of self-interest.” In the fourth chapter, I revisit the topic of Hirschman’s book on the passions and the interests, and I discuss the ways in which passions and interests can be either opposed or identified. The fifth chapter studies the rise of the concept of disinterestedness, in theology first, and subsequently in moral philosophy. I argue that the novel concept of disinterestedness is fundamental to the establishment of economics as a distinct field of knowledge. In the sixth and last chapter, I examine the relationship between private interests and the public interest, and I trace the genealogy of Jean-Baptiste Say’s affirmation of the autonomy of economics with respect to politics.

This narrative includes works like La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims*, which have most often been studied as “literature.” Yet the subject matter of the *Maxims* would probably now go under the rubric of “psychology” or “social theory.” Conversely, in spite of many efforts to come up with a language free of connotations, social scientists continue to use words like utility, preference, rationality, which are loaded with history – a history that is the philologist’s province. This book tries to look at the issue from both ends. It approaches the works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophers with today’s questions. At the same time, it seeks to illuminate today’s questions by reconstructing the intellectual tradition that has made them possible. Some of the puzzles for social theory can find the beginning of an explanation if one looks at economic science at the moment of its coming into being. It is my hope that this book can do its

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bit to help rediscover the common ground shared by the social sciences and the humanities.

Since this investigation is taking place “under the guidance of language” (to use Gadamer’s expression) I systematically give the original language (French or Latin) in the footnote for every excerpt I quote. Whenever possible, I use translations from the period of the work quoted, because they usually provide a better rendition of the terminology. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century translations always render *amour-propre* by *self-love*, while many modern translations use anachronistic terms like *egoism* or *ego-centrism*. When using modern translations, I have systematically made the changes necessary to keep the terminology consistent. In some instances, I have made the translation myself. Whenever I speak in my own name, I follow the now-prevailing custom of using gender-neutral language. However, I follow the usage of the authors I study when I paraphrase or analyze them.

As far as editions are concerned, I refer to the standard *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*. For *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I refer to the book, chapter, and paragraph number rather than to the page number. I quote the original text of Rousseau from the *Œuvres complètes* (Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade) with the volume number and the page number. English translations come from the excellent but still incomplete *Collected Writings of Rousseau* (University Press of New England). I quote *Émile* in Allan Bloom’s translation. For every work I quote in an edition other than the original, I give, where known, the date, place and publisher of the original edition between square brackets. Spelling in all quotes has been modernized.

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I

*Self-interest as a first principle**Self-interest is the only motive of human actions.*P. H. d'Holbach, *A Treatise on Man* (1773)

In his classic work, *The Passions and the Interests*, Albert Hirschman describes the rise of the concept of interest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He shows how this concept, originally linked to statecraft and *raison d'État* theory, was so successful that it soon became a tool for interpreting not only the behavior of rulers, but also the totality of human conduct. "Once the idea of interest had appeared," Hirschman remarks, "it became a real fad as well as a paradigm (à la Kuhn) and most of human action was suddenly explained by self-interest, sometimes to the point of tautology."¹ It is generally assumed that the birth of modern economic science, conventionally marked by the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, was one of the most significant manifestations of the triumph of the "interest paradigm." According to this view, self-interest provided the axiom upon which Adam Smith constructed his political economy. After the marginalist revolution in the second half of the nineteenth century, when economics became a highly formalized and mathematical discipline, self-interest was enshrined as the first principle that made all theoretical constructions possible. As F.Y. Edgeworth put it in 1881, "the first principle of Economics is that every agent is actuated only by self-interest."² More recently, Kenneth Arrow traced back to Adam Smith the idea that "a decentralized economy motivated by self-interest and guided by price signals would be compatible with a coherent disposition of economic resources that could be regarded, in a well defined sense, as superior to a large class of possible alternative dispositions."³

¹ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests. Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1977], p. 42.

² Francis Y. Edgeworth, *Mathematical Psychics. An Essay on the Application of Mathematics to the Moral Sciences*, London: C. Kegan Paul, 1881, p. 16.

³ Kenneth Arrow and F. H. Hahn, *General Competitive Analysis*, San Francisco: Holden Day, 1971, p. vi.

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Traditionally, economists have maintained that the assumption of self-interested behavior holds only for economic activity (as well as the business of warfare, according to Edgeworth). There have been attempts, however, to generalize the scope of self-interest (or its more abstract synonym, *utility maximizing behavior*) as a first principle in the analysis of all human conduct. Gary Becker claims that “the economic approach is a comprehensive one that is applicable to all human behavior, be it behavior involving money prices or imputed shadow prices, repeated or infrequent decisions, large or minor decisions, emotional or mechanical ends, rich or poor persons, men or women, adults or children, brilliant or stupid persons, patients or therapists, businessmen or politicians, teachers or students.”⁴ Becker too ascribes a long ancestry to his axiomatic choices. “The economic approach to human behavior is not new,” he writes, “even outside the market sector. Adam Smith often (but not always!) used this approach to understand political behavior.”⁵ Becker could have added other moral philosophers of the same period, who are probably better examples of the “interest paradigm.” In 1758, Claude-Adrien Helvétius asserted that “if the physical universe be subject to the laws of motion, the moral universe is equally so to those of interest.”⁶ In the same spirit, d’Holbach, a major contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, wrote: “Self-interest is the only motive of human actions.”⁷ Incomparably more famous, however, is Adam Smith’s pronouncement: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”⁸ George Stigler expresses a view shared by the vast majority of economists when he says that the inevitable quote about the butcher, the brewer and the baker, constitutes the first principle not only of Smith’s doctrine, but also of modern economic science:

Smith had one overwhelmingly important triumph: he put into the center of economics the systematic analysis of the behavior of individuals pursuing their self-interest under conditions of competition. This theory was the crown jewel of

⁴ Gary Becker, “The Economic Approach to Human Behavior,” in *Rational Choice*, edited by Jon Elster, New York: New York University Press, 1986, p. 112.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁶ Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *Essays on the Mind*, London: Albion Press, 1810, II, 2, p. 42. “Si l’univers physique est soumis aux lois du mouvement, l’univers moral ne l’est pas moins à celle de l’intérêt.” *De l’Esprit*, Paris: Durand 1758, vol. 1, p. 53.

⁷ “L’intérêt est l’unique mobile des actions humaines.” Paul Henri Thiry, baron d’Holbach, *Système de la nature, ou des lois du monde physique et du monde moral*, Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973 (2 vols.) [London, 1770], I, xv, p. 312.

⁸ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 2, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976 [London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776], I.ii.

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The Wealth of Nations and it became, and remains to this day, the foundation of the theory of the allocation of resources.⁹

ONE OR SEVERAL PRINCIPLES?

The fact that interest-based interpretations come to mind so easily, even in popular consciousness, testifies to the power of the “interest paradigm.” Originally, the idea that the pursuit of self-interest by independent agents would result in some kind of order or equilibrium was a paradox. Arrow and Hahn rightly notice that the most surprising thing about the interest paradigm is that it is no longer seen as a paradox:

The immediate “common sense” answer to the question “What will an economy motivated by individual greed and controlled by a very large number of different agents look like?” is probably: There will be chaos. That quite a different answer has long been claimed true and has indeed permeated the economic thinking of a large number of people who are in no way economists is itself sufficient grounds for investigating it seriously.¹⁰

For social scientists, the principle of self-interest complies with the injunction that one should not needlessly generate assumptions. Between two explanations, the one that relies on the smallest number of first principles is to be preferred. That certainly is Gary Becker’s view. Whenever human behavior seems to contradict the assumption that self-interest is the motive, the theorist must stick to the axiom, and assume that an explanation based on self-interest is possible, even if it cannot be provided immediately:

When an apparently profitable opportunity to a firm, worker, or household is not exploited, the economic approach does not take refuge in assertions about irrationality, contentment with wealth already acquired, or convenient *ad hoc* shifts in values (that is, preferences). Rather it postulates the existence of costs, monetary or psychic, of taking advantage of these opportunities that eliminate their profitability – costs that may not be easily “seen” by outside observers. Of course, postulating the existence of costs closes or “completes” the economic approach in the same, almost tautological, way that postulating the existence of (sometimes unobserved) uses of energy completes the energy system, and preserves the law of energy . . . The critical question is whether a system is completed in a useful way.¹¹

Alternatively, one may decide to deprive self-interest of its pre-eminent status, and assume that motives other than self-interest are at work. For

⁹ George J. Stigler, “The Successes and Failures of Professor Smith,” Selected Papers no. 50, Graduate School of Business, University of Chicago, 1976, p. 3.

¹⁰ Arrow and Hahn, *General Competitive Analysis*, p. vii.

¹¹ Becker, “The Economic Approach to Human Behavior,” p. 112.

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instance, Jon Elster, while acknowledging the appeal of interest-based explanations, dismisses them as being contrary to experience:

The assumption that all behavior is selfish is the most parsimonious we can make, and scientists always like to explain much with little. But we cannot conclude, neither in general nor on any given occasion, that selfishness is the more widespread motivation. Sometimes the world is messy, and the most parsimonious explanation is wrong.

The idea that self-interest makes the world go round is refuted by a few familiar facts. Some forms of helping behavior are not reciprocated and so cannot be explained by long-term self-interest. Parents have a selfish interest in helping their children, assuming that children will care for parents in their old age – but it is not in the selfish interest of children to provide such care. And many still do. Some contributors to charities give anonymously and hence cannot be motivated by prestige.¹²

Another type of argument is invoked by Hirschman, who recalls Macaulay's critique of an attempt by James Mill to construct a theory of politics on the axiom of self-interest. Simply put, if self-interest explains everything, it explains nothing. In that sense, the interest doctrine is "essentially tautological."¹³ For Hirschman, parsimony is certainly a virtue when it comes to positing first principles, but like any virtue, it can be overdone. Consequently, Hirschman proposes to complicate economic discourse by assuming that "benevolence" may be just as important as self-interest in explaining economic behavior.¹⁴ In so doing, he implicitly goes against Smith's famous statement dismissing "the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker" as a motive for trade.

Along the same lines, Amartya Sen questions the wisdom of limiting the first principles of economics to self-interest, and notices that, according to Edgeworth himself, pure egoism could not explain the behavior of real people: "I should mention that Edgeworth himself was quite aware that his so-called first principle of Economics was not a particularly realistic one."¹⁵ Indeed, Edgeworth added a caveat to the assertion that self-interest is the first principle of economic science. His system is based on a dichotomy between economics and ethics. Each domain has its own species of agents.

¹² Jon Elster, *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 54.

¹³ Albert O. Hirschman, "The Concept of Interest: From Euphemism to Tautology," in *Rival Views of Market Society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992 [1986], p. 48.

¹⁴ Albert O. Hirschman, "Against Parsimony: Three Easy Ways of Complicating Some Categories of Economic Discourse," in *Rival Views of Market Society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992 [1986], p. 159.

¹⁵ Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1977), pp. 317–344.