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The "Science" of Political Economy – A Victory for Common Sense?

A Comparative Reading of Adam Smith and Thomas Reid*

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Abstract

This work offers the first comprehensive comparison between the philosophy of Adam Smith and that of his successor, Thomas Reid. It looks at Reid's and Smith's remarkably similar accounts of human perception and judgement, and at their different moral and economic theories. In this way, this paper offers not only a new perspective on Reid's critique of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but also new insights into the intellectual roots of the genuinely Scottish debates about sense perception and the task of scientific philosophy. "Reiding" Smith can thus offer a unique vantage point from which to understand the connections between epistemological and economic issues in Smith's work. With a focus that is at once historical and philosophical, this undertaking serves three purposes: a) to familiarise economists with the philosophical and economic works of Thomas Reid, b) to sharpen our understanding of Adam Smith's intellectual context in the Scottish Enlightenment, and c) to better understand the paradoxical role that individual human judgement plays in Adam Smith's analysis of the economy.

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The purpose of this article is to give an overview of central aspects in the thinking of Adam Smith and Thomas Reid, which will not only lead to a better understanding of their respective philosophical approaches, but also clarify some historical features of the Scottish Enlightenment of which both thinkers formed a part. To this end, this article will survey quite different domains of knowledge. First, it will be shown how both Smith and Reid can be classified as philosophers of perception, and how ques-

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tions about human perception linked many of the debates among Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. In a second step, it will be examined how, departing from a shared anti-scepticism about the workings of the human senses and the integrative role of philosophy, Smith and Reid develop two rather different theories of judgement. From this vantage point, it can then be better understood why Reid and Smith arrive at startingly different conclusions about the social and economic order. Lastly, this analysis will allow us to elucidate a unique problem in Smith's view of the economy, namely the extent to which a certain kind of common sense – of appropriate judgement of local agents – is both required for the expansion of the division of labour, and threatened by it.

1. A Scottish Theme: Reid and Smith as Philosophers of Perception

It makes sense to address the biggest caveat about my project right at the beginning. It would simply consist in the criticism that the "common sense" philosopher Thomas Reid does not seem to deserve the attention of being read alongside the political economist. There is nothing in the correspondence of either Smith or Reid that would indicate a profound exchange of ideas between them, they did not share the same circle of friends, and they did not respond or refer to each other in their published work. So, why bother?

In response to this, one can list at least three reasons to investigate the connection between the two thinkers. First of all, there are persistent claims by some Smith scholars that Smith's ([1776] 1981) methodology in the *Wealth of Nations* (WN) has significant elements in common with Reid's philosophy of common sense (see Fleischacker 2004; Comim 2010). Second, it was Reid who succeeded Smith in his chair of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow in 1764. And third, the simultaneity of Smith's and Reid's thought in Scotland had an impact not only on generations of political economists like Dugald Stewart, who was decisively influenced by Smith as well as by Reid, but also on the later historiography of what became called the Scottish Enlightenment.[1] In the 19th until the mid-20th century, for example, it was quite a usual practice to class all the thinkers of Smith's time under the common heading of a "Scottish School," and to see in Reid's work its metaphysical and philosophical underpinning (see, for example, McCosh 1875, 6–8; Bryson 1945, 10–11). By virtue of this universal position that Reid occupies in his own historical period, his writings can help to single out some of the "lowest common denominators" that the philosophers of the time were preoccupied with, and which consequently can also provide clues to Smith's work. One of these themes is the treatment of human perception and judgement. It is the only aspect with regard to which Reid explicitly criticises Smith's ([1759] 1982) *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS). And in general, it can be said that this topic forms a nexus that connects many debates of the time.

[1] This is especially relevant for a U.S. American context, see Herman (2003, 368).

1.1 Trust Your Senses

Born in 1710, Reid, who died in 1796, was a cleric before he became a university professor, quite late in his life, but in the same year as Smith – in 1752. Reid had studied theology in Aberdeen under what was then called the "regency system," in which one single "regent" takes a pupil through all of the different disciplines (see Wood 1990, 148–9). In Reid's student days, the early 1720s, one of his regents was the moral philosopher George Turnbull. If one wants to dive deeper into the historical connection that subsists between Smith and Reid, Turnbull is the important link in the chain. The naturalistic theologian fused the thought of Francis Hutcheson with a science of the human spirit; with a "pneumatology" (Turnbull [1740] 2015, 17). Turnbull claimed that all about the human mind, comprising "innate instincts, faculties and powers of several sorts […] is well adapted to its purposes" (Norton 1975, 716) – an optimistic stance which David Fate Norton has dubbed *teleological realism.* Hutcheson, the Irish philosopher from whom Turnbull drew inspiration, and who had developed an aesthetic and moral theory based on distinct aesthetic and moral "senses," had in turn been Adam Smith's teacher, and Smith had been appointed in 1752 to the chair of moral philosophy that Hutcheson had vacated in 1746. It is thus Turnbull who, via Hutcheson, links Reid, who took over Smith's professorship in 1764, to the "main line" of the Glasgow chair.[2] Hutcheson, in his philosophy of (moral) perception, did not only draw on the natural law tradition introduced by Gershom Carmichael, but also reacted to the theories of sense-perception of George Berkeley (see Herman 2003, 70–1). This preoccupation resurfaces in the works of Smith and Reid.

One of the earliest surviving texts in Adam Smith's (1982) *oeuvre* is the essay *Of the External Senses* (ES, in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, EPS). In this short, but dense essay of about 20 pages, supposedly written before 1752, Smith engages with Berkeley's *Theory of Vision.* He discusses, in subsequent order, the human senses of touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, and seeing, and treats the question how they give us an access and understanding of external reality. He concludes that the senses of vision and touch are the most important, because together they form a kind of "language" (ES 60) in which the resistance of external bodies is translated into an internal mental representation of their shape and their respective distance to us. According to Smith, the senses of smell, hearing and taste work on the basis of the same principle, but are less important for human behaviour, because if one of these senses is deficient, our orientational capacities may be reduced, but not severely impaired (ES 22–48). In all this, Smith further develops the central kernel of premises that Berkeley had exposed in his *Theory of Vision.* According to Berkeley, vision functions like a sign-system in which visual impressions need to be read as indications for what are signs from tactile impressions. It is a system that needs to be learned like a language, which Berkeley illustrates with reference to children and to blind people whose cataracts are removed, and who thus need to "learn" how to see (Berkeley [1709] 1957, CXLIV). Berkeley, however, had used this philosophy of perception, with its intricate link between what is perceived and what exists, as a stepping stone for the immaterialist philosophy of his later writings: if it is perceptive signs that establish the existence and shape of an

[2] I am here appropriating a term which Peter J. Boettke initially reserved for the history of economic thought; see Boettke, Haeffele-Balch, and Storr 2016.

object for us, then we, as objects, will necessarily depend upon someone's perception; which leads to the thesis that our world exists only as an idea in God's perception (see Winkler 2005, 152).

Smith, as we are going to see, is against such radically immaterialist conclusions. But he applies Berkeley's methodological insights from vision to the senses of smell, hearing and taste. And in 1764, eventually, Thomas Reid publishes his *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (IHM), which follows precisely the same outline as Smith's essay, but is substantively longer and more detailed. Reid discusses, in this order, smelling, taste, hearing, touch, and vision, to explain the workings of the human mind, our representation of and access to external reality, and our judgement of it. Again, Berkeley is the main reference (see Matthiessen 2022). And like Smith, Reid concludes that sign-reading processes are present in the entire apparatus of perception.

Smith and Reid thus share a preoccupation with the Berkeleyan philosophy of perception, which, it is safe to assume, had been transmitted to them by their teachers Hutcheson and Turnbull, who had already applied Berkeleyan reasonings to the perception of moral behaviour and art (see Stewart 1985). There is, however, a new sense of urgency in the writings of Smith and Reid which is missing in the works of their teachers. Smith and Reid both really *care* to assure us that our ordinary perception does indeed put us "in touch" with the world. Their motivation for this stance can be found in the writings of David Hume, who played a pivotal role for both Smith and Reid; not only because he inspired and befriended the former, but also because he was the one philosopher who Reid, above all, most aimed to refute.

Hume, in his own time, was not only read as a historian and as a political economist, but also perceived as a sceptic. He challenged fundamental principles cherished by philosophers of his era, such as the idea of necessary causation in nature or the conviction of an immediate sensory access to external reality, and he flirted with atheism, too. His assertion that all we can truly know are our own impressions and ideas, and the relations between them, led him to unsettling questions. For instance, if we never directly sense space or general laws, but only have access to the ideas we have formed about our impressions, then how can one say to truly know the laws of nature (see Hume [1739] 1998, 67–8)? Strictly speaking, we only know our own impressions – not more.

With regard to such epistemic issues, Hume adopted a scepticism that he never renounced, although he simultaneously also aimed at establishing a "science of man," rooted in "experience and observation" (*ibid.*, 4–5). This tension created a gap between abstract philosophy and common sense in the architecture of his theory: a gap between Hume's desire for a rigorous scientific account of human knowledge and his aspiration to explain human behaviour and common life rationally (see Livingston 1984, 30–1). Hume recognized that philosophy could not counter sceptical doubts stemming from rational inquiry and instead put trust in mundane activities to escape the "cold and strained nature" (Hume [1739] 1998, 174) of philosophical and rigorous reasoning. However, this only meant that the divide between abstract thought and common sense remained, preventing Hume from integrating the two into an overarching philosophy; a divide that unbridled abstract thought from any concrete constraints of real life and its social and theological norms, and was thus seen by

his contemporaries as dangerous, as an invitation to atheism and licentiousness (see Meyer 2013, 757–62).

1.2 Plug the Gap Between Reason and Life

Thomas Reid wanted to counter precisely this danger: the danger of a science that leads to an abstract scepticism, and thus detaches itself from the necessities of life and the intuitions of our common understanding. Reid undertook this task in the IHM by way of an anti-sceptical theory of human perception that was supposed to reconcile "reason to common sense" (Reid [1764] 1997, 70). He saw Humean scepticism as arising precisely from the assumption of a separation between the inner realm of the mind which only has access to its own "impressions", and an "external world" which supposedly generates those impressions, but remains essentially hidden behind the sensory veil within which human perception operates. According to Reid, this division allowed doubt about the connection between our conscious mental experiences and the external object, by leading to circular arguments in which philosophers could only view the external world through the lens of mental content that ultimately refers to itself instead of the world (see Michaud 1989).

Reid attributed the origin of this doctrine of a "mediation" between mind and world to Descartes, and proposed eliminating this premise entirely. Descartes had only accepted one arbiter to determine what counts as true or false: reason. This, so Reid, had in turn led to the strange assumption that, to ascertain whether it is "valid," perception itself would need to be subjected to reason's "tribunal." Reid wants to avoid this unfounded suspicion and restore the original epistemic status of perception as a warrant of validity, equal to that of rational thinking. *Pace* Descartes, he speaks of two equal tribunals: one of reason, one of perception. When we perceive an object, so Reid, we have a trustworthy belief in its existence without any mediation by any other faculty of the mind (see Rollin 1978). To this end, Reid took from Berkeley the idea of perception as an inherently semiotic activity where sensations, when successfully interpreted, act as signifiers: "we are so accustomed to use the sensation as a sign, and to pass immediately to the hardness signified, that […] it was never made an object of thought" (Reid [1764] 1997, 56). In a sense, Reid turned Berkeley's immaterialism on its head. What, in perception, according to him, determined sensory rightness or wrongness, were simply "principles of common sense." The task that Reid set himself was to explain their origin and validity. We are going to see in the next section how this doctrine of a "common sense" is intrinsically linked to a specific account of judgement.

What matters is that we see in Smith's philosophy of perception a strategy to dispel scepticism that is very similar to Reid's. As his ES testifies, Smith never shares with Hume a scepticism about the *basics* of human perception, and anticipates conclusions that mirror Reid's later arguments from the IHM. Smith even uses the same Berkeleyan rhetoric of a language of "suggestions" which "suppose" existence:

> Before we can feel […] sensations, the pressure of the […] body which excites them must necessarily suggest […] *the most distinct conviction of its own* […] independent existence. […]. [Also] the very desire of motion supposes some […] preconception of externality;

> and the desire to move towards […] agreeable […] sensation, supposes […] some vague notion of some external which […] is the cause of those respective sensations. […]. Those sensations could not well have answered the intention of Nature, had they not thus instinctively suggested some vague notion of external existence (ES 84–6).

It is well known that David Hume and Adam Smith were good friends, and Hume's influence on Smith's moral and economic theory is attested. But Samuel Fleischacker is justified when he claims that "Smith's work belongs chronologically just after that of the sceptical philosopher Hume and just before that of the common sense philosopher Thomas Reid […], and […] it belongs between them philosophically as well" (2004, 21–2). This claim is a little more drastic than it seems: it relativises the proximity of Hume and Smith that much scholarship has become so accustomed to. And lastly, it also underlines why the link between Smith and Reid via Turnbull, Hutcheson and Berkeley is important. Berkeley's philosophy of perception is the intellectual source that ties most of the Scottish discussions about human judgement together (see Berman 2012). In it we find the immaterialism which Hume radicalises, and which Reid critiques. We have in Berkeley the focus on the nature of the senses as sources of objectivity which we find further developed in Hutcheson's aesthetic sense and moral sense, and in Turnbull's versions of Hutcheson's aesthetics. And we find in Berkeley the idea of a sensory "language," which Reid uses against Hume: an argument that Smith mirrors in his first writings without knowing that it would later reappear, in a more developed and extended form, in Reid's IHM.

2. The Order of Judgement: "Top Down" and "Bottom Up"

I have already alluded to the fact that Reid uses a specific account of judgement to validate perception as a reason-independent "tribunal" of truth and falsity. But in Smith's account of social behaviour, judgement plays an important part, too. It thus makes sense to revisit what each of the two thinkers mean by the term "judgement," and to revise some misconceptions about Smith's theory of judgement in particular. In what is so far the most comprehensive study of the topic of judgement in Adam Smith, Samuel Fleischacker simply assimilates Smith's conception of judgement with the way most philosophers – after Kant – explain the activity of judging: as the application of a "general rule to a particular case" (Fleischacker 1999, 8), as a "conclusion of a train of thought where the interpretation of particular cases is essential to that train of thought" (*ibid.*, 9). But if one looks at the passages in which Smith and Reid examine the way judgement is at work in human perception and behaviour, one arrives at a more nuanced view; a view that can eventually shed some light on their theories of the market and of morality.

2.1 Reid's Tribunal

For Reid, human judgement is an act whereby the mind establishes the truth or falsity of an issue in question, *i. e.*, denies or affirms something: "The definition commonly given of judgment, by the more ancient writers in logic, was, that it is an act of the mind, whereby one thing is affirmed or denied of another" (Reid [1785] 2002,

406). In this sense, Reid's conception of judgement could be seen as "top down": like a beam of light, the mind singles out what is to be judged, and determines its truth. At least this is a picture that Reid himself seems to have in mind: "As a judge, after taking the proper evidence, passes sentence in a cause, and that sentence is called his judgment; so the mind, with regard to whatever is true or false, passes sentence […]" (*ibid.*, 407).

But Reid does not stop at this purely formal definition. Instead, he makes the theory of judgement part of general pneumatology, of a general inquiry into the "anatomy of the mind" (Bow 2018, 9). In this, he neatly follows his teacher Turnbull. Reid even assigns pneumatology, undertaken in a naturalistic fashion, a foundational role in providing the basic categories of the other sciences. For example, when he takes over Smith's lectures on natural jurisprudence and practical ethics, he declares: "[T]he Dignity of the Object of Pneumatology, or its subserviency to Science in General, […] is indeed the ground work […] of all that follows in my Course […]" (Reid 2007, 8). In other words, it means that a holistic theory of the human cognition is, for him, the methodological basis of theoretical inquiry into the most diverse subjects. But this inquiry includes metaphysical statements about the nature of mind, cognition and reality. This way, and in contrast to Hume's "science of man," Reid grounds the elucidation of everyday life in a philosophical explanation of it, instead of leaving an open tension between the two. Whereas for Hume, philosophising referred to an anti-metaphysical cleansing of everyday beliefs, Reid sees philosophising precisely as a metaphysical activity by which those objective principles are found that everyday experience is rooted in.

As mentioned above, the clue in Reid's rebuttal of Hume, and his attack on the Cartesian "way of ideas," lies in his strategy to make this "top down" tribunal of judgement a central pillar of his pneumatological theory of cognition. How does the cognitive process of judging arrive at truth or falsity? Reid's answers by pointing to a further perceptive faculty: when people "differ about a first principle, the appeal is made to another tribunal; *to that of common sense*" (Reid [1788] 2010, 270). This makes it feasible to analyse this sense *qua* virtue of being a sense of judgement: "[I]n common language, sense always implies judgment. A man of sense is a man of judgment. Good sense is good judgment" (Reid [1785] 2002, 424). As Nicholas Woltersdorff has pointed out, this ambition behind Reid's theory of common sense creates a twofold, perhaps a threefold ambiguity: common sense could be understood as consisting in the principles that all human beings fundamentally assent to, or as in the very faculty in which these principles are grounded, or, derived from the that latter view, in the content of those judgements that the faculty ensures (Woltersdorff 2001, 219). And, in fact, in line with the first option, Reid is standardly treated as an epistemological foundationalist who merely reacts to metaphysical worries with undeniable truisms (see Beanblossom 1983). But as John Greco and Claire Etchegaray have lately remarked, one can take Reid's words literally, and interpret his insistence on first principles as really grounded in "a" common sense, in a specific "faculty" of judgement (see Greco 2014; Etchegaray 2018). In a fragment from Reid's lectures which David F. Norton dates to late 1768 or early 1769, Reid clearly articulates such a view:

> By that faculty which we call common sense we compare objects that are presented to us and discern various affections and relations belonging to them, things concerning them, such as identity or diversity, number, similitude, contrariety, proportion, sum, difference, quantity, quality, time, place, genus and species, subject and accident, whole and parts and innumerable other relations.[…] Indeed, there are "large classes of notions" in every art and science that are clearly apprehended by common sense (Marcil-Lacoste 1982, 187).

This account sits well with the historical context outlined above. Berkeley wanted to probe how there is conceptual distinction between (visual) perception and the impressions of the various sense organs. Hutcheson had posited his internal and moral senses as distinct faculties to account for our perception of beauty and moral behaviour. Now one sees how the philosophically original core of Reid's argument consists in making "the" common sense the very epistemic warrant by which certain natural signs can be seen as being truthfully linked to beliefs. His theory of judgement thus serves Reid as the hinge with which to link a theory of the common sense to a theory of sense-perception and to use both to refute the Cartesian-Humean "way of ideas" and the therefrom resulting scepticism. As judgement necessarily consists in acts of affirmation or denial, the very sense that transforms the tactile, visual and olfactory signs of our sense-organs into a coherent perception of our surroundings also – by some "natural kind of magic" (Reid [1764] 1997, 60) – supplies us with the belief in their real existence. "Just as our ability to link up artificial signs with what they mean […] shows us the existence of an innate […] indexical sign, so our ability to move from sensation to object bespeaks the existence of an innate machinery of external reference" (Rollin 1978, 267).

With this pneumatological account of judgement, Reid provides a connection between abstract scientific reasoning and ordinary intuitive judgement, shows how both are rooted in the evidence of the same first principles, and thus overcomes Hume's dichotomy between a sceptical philosophy and the "common life" upon which his "science of man" is built. It is an impressive act of philosophical synthesis: for Reid, one way or other, all the more complex operations of the mind, like reasoning or social interactions, will return to the "self-evidence" that is found in the content of these rudimentary functions of cognition.

2.2. Smith's Missing Link in the Chain

If Reid has a "top down" view of judgement, it might be useful to label Smith's view as "bottom up." "Bottom up," because Smith sees the human mind engaged in the constant activity to find harmony and completeness in the objects of its surroundings, and – by giving them names, finding metaphors or developing theories – to join these diverse and disjoint particular phenomena around us within larger ideal constructs that "sooth the imagination" (HA II.12). The act of judging thus cannot be separated from this libidinal rather than purely cognitive way by which to relate to the world. According to Smith, we as human beings simply desire a natural and unimpeded state of "flow." We are naturally engaged in a constant activity of "gap-plugging" (C. Smith 2016, 96), in the natural as well as in the moral world. And the sole definition of judgement which Smith (1983) gives in his writings – in the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (LRBL) – fits this picture. Here, Smith explains the way in which sentences

relate and enchain one thing to another: "every Judgement of the humane mind must comprehend two Ideas between which we declare that relation subsists or does not subsist […]" (LBRL i. v.43). And according to Smith, every normal statement that expresses a judgement usually includes three parts: "[With] two of these we affirm some thing or other, and the third connects them together […]" (*ibid.*).

A single judgement thus encapsulates a relation. But Smith's judgements are not, like for Reid, singular mental acts. Rather, if one looks at the way Smith thinks about human emotions and scientific theories, judgements seem to be capable of solidifying into more long-term states of mind on the basis of which one relates to other human beings or perceives the natural world. In a sense, we are, in Smith's eyes, formed by relations: by the way we perceive how phenomena in nature relate to one another, by the way our cognition, language, and eventually, our scientific theories relate these phenomena; by the way we relate to others and the way they relate to us.

By way of relating one thing to another, a judgement can compound particulars, but it can also discern them. What counts is thus not so much what Fleischacker calls the "subsumption" of the particular under the general, but rather the capacity to differentiate things, that is, to appropriately (not) match one thing to another, no matter whether there is a general rule for it. A good sense of judgement is a sense of what is appropriate in each case. But this sense depends on our capacity to survey our surroundings from a fairly general point of view, to discover their "hidden chains" (HA III.1) and to be able to transpose matches or gaps that have been observed in one particular instance to what might be a completely different domain. The man of good judgement would, for example, have learned to expect the rain when he sees the clouds, but also desire to bring about a harmony in social interactions that equals the harmony that he perceives in nature.

"Good sense" can thus not be simply presupposed, like in Reid's theory, but has to be acquired, although its attainment is linked to our natural psychological desire to be able to live a life without disruption, a life in which what we expect matches with what happens. Learning what to expect means developing a kind of foreboding of what to hope for. The man of good judgement knows how to find a good measure rod, a good "canon" (TMS I.i.3.9) for each singular vagary in which he might find himself. To a stronger extent than Reid, Smith thus assimilates the scope of our sense of judgement to what other authors of the period see as the scope of our sense of taste, most notably Hume, who writes: "It is natural for us to seek a Standard […]; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another" (Hume [1757] 1987, 229). Indeed, the terms "taste" and "judgement" are paired more than once in Smith's writing: "taste and good judgment, […] are supposed to imply […] delicacy of sentiment and […] acuteness of understanding" (TMS I.i.5.6).

So, just as taste needs to be learned, good judgement is the product of some sort of education in human and natural affairs, an "art of being" (Tomaselli 2021). This, on the other hand, also makes it quite difficult to develop good judgement. One needs to have been exposed to a variety of contexts, situations and phenomena to develop appropriate expectations and to enact them properly. It is much easier to develop bad judgement. And so, in Smith's oeuvre, we find a lot of failures: the poor man's son, who

thinks riches will make him happy, although that is not so (TMS IV.1.8); the opera singer who chooses this job although she will not be well remunerated for it (TMS I.x.b.25); the "man of system," who mistakes his fellow beings for chess figures that he can move around at his will (TMS VI.ii.2.17), and so on. In need of criteria that are not automatically provided by a "natural" sense, people can go wrong, choose mismatching standards, and judge things from inappropriate standpoints.

In this sense, Smith's "bottom up" account of judgement could be interpreted as a lot more context-sensitive and fallibilistic than Reid's. This is an observation that can elucidate why Smith is optimistic and anti-sceptical about simple matters of perception, whereas he is pessimistic and rather sceptical about knowledge of a higher order. From this vantage point, one can better understand the differences between Smith's and Reid's economic and social theories.

3. The Mind in the Market

Thomas Reid lectured on jurisprudential, economic and political topics both in Aberdeen and Glasgow. He was active in the Glasgow Literary Society, where he addressed monetary matters, and in 1794, most probably in response to the French revolution, gave a talk entitled *Some Thoughts upon the Utopian System.* In this talk, he exposes a bundle of thoughts that are interesting to compare with Smith's political economy, partly because they seem like a critique of Smith's project. These thoughts profoundly draw on his moral theory and on his criticism of Smith's TMS. It is thus useful to briefly revisit this issue.

In 1778, Lord Kames, patron to both Smith and Reid, advanced critiques of Smith's account of justice in the third edition of his own *Essays on the Principles of Morality.* Reid (1778, 104) congratulated Kames: "I have always thought Dr Smith's System of Sympathy wrong." In fact, much of Reid's *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (EAP), although mainly directed against Hume, can also be read as a clear critique of Smith's account of moral behaviour. The central point of Reid's criticism is that Smith cannot explain normativity, *i. e.*, the question why we ought to disapprove of immoral behaviour of others, or why we should blame criminals. According to Reid's reading, Smith reduced the source of moral disapprobation to feeling.

Yet, as Reid points out, moral blame cannot escape the question of truth: if I blame a criminal for stealing, then this implies that it is true that any act of stealing has to be regarded as morally wrong, and that in the act of moral disapprobation I am affirming the truth of the moral depravity of stealing and the criminal's having done so (see Reid [1788] 2010, 345 – 346). Reid, in other words, makes moral disapprobation an act of judgement, and charges Smith with not doing so. In presenting the act of moral disapproval as merely sentimental – as our imagination being unpleasantly affected by the sight of a robbery, for example – Smith cannot, so argues Reid, account for the truth or falsity of that disapproval. Sentiments, as Reid sees them, can simply not fulfil any assertive function (see *ibid.*, 277).

Instead, Reid founds his own ethics upon the notion of duty. He argues that certain duties, the necessity and self-evidence of which we can readily understand by virtue of

them being both revealed in scripture and open to the common sense, prescribe rules for the moral worth or squalor of our actions, that we can conceive them clearly, and that we can form judgements about them. In these judgements, in turn, the truth and falsity of the correspondence of our own behaviour with these duties can be expressed, and right and wrong actions can be discerned (see *ibid.*, 271).

There has been scholarly debate about whether Reid's criticisms of Smith are accurate and justified (see Duncan and Baird 1977; Norton and Stewart Robertson 1980). As should be clear from my reconstruction of Smith's theory of judgement above, Reid must have either misunderstood or not accepted Smith's move of making the act of judgement not a singular sentence, but an expression of a relationship between two particulars that is guided by some sort of standard. If we revisit Smith's theory of morality in this light, it becomes clear that Smith is not simply reducing all morality to mere feelings, but that he sees no other way than to see in feelings the standard by which human beings judge of relationships between themselves (see TMS I.i.3.8).[3] This could strengthen Smith's position: it pre-empts Reid's criticism if Smith's notion of sentiment could be interpreted as already including a degree of judgement.

In fact, Reid himself never denies this role of feeling in informing our moral intuitions: "If moral approbation be a real judgment, which produces an agreeable feeling in the mind of him who judges, both speeches are perfectly intelligible, in the most obvious and literal sense" (Reid, [1788] 2010, 350). Seen from this angle, Reid's attack on Smith's ethics might have simply resulted from his unwillingness or inability to see a relational conception of judgement at work in Smith's notion of "feeling," and one could reconsider debating whether Reid's criticism really hits its target.

3.1 Reid: An Optimism of a Higher Order

Reid's political theory is republican and contractarian. He also considered the science of politics an application of probabilistic reasoning based on assumptions about general features of human nature (Haakonssen and Wood 2015, xliv, xlviii). In some respects, Reid saw the process in which trade was transforming society as an approvable one. But at the origin of this historical development Reid posited an ethical principle: that of contract (*ibid.*, lvii). To him, the question of the "ethical" was therefore a paramount criterion in his assessment of social phenomena. It made Reid's evaluation of market mechanisms far more critical in tone than Smith's, because in Reid's eyes, markets could effectively undermine the sources of moral order. Commercial society, according to Reid, "cuts the direct link between, on the one hand, intentional behaviour and, on the other, social and economic outcome, typically market price, which is the unintended outcome of the behaviour of individuals acting on their separate intentions" (*ibid.*, lx).

It is clear from Reid's criticism of Smith that unless an action springs from a regard for its inherent moral truth-value and hence is done out of a sense of duty, it has no moral value. Commercial society poses a problem to Reid precisely to the extent

[3] Smith's theory may be duly described as "sentimentalism," but, as Frazer emphasises, only as *reflective* sentimentalism; see Frazer 2010, 10–11, 100.

that it undermines the intentional awareness of behaving for the sake of behaving ethically. That is why, in his talk on the Utopian system, Reid pictures it as opposed to the spirit of markets and property exchange. Instead, he presents a society that regulates itself to the end of virtue, and makes sure that each action is not only economically rational, but also undertaken with regard to its moral value.

People would "have their Wants supplied by the Publick" (Reid [1794] 2015, 141). This, in turn, means that "the Labour of the People must […] be directed by the Publick […]. The Labourers in every Profession must be trained, directed and overseen, and the produce of their Labour received and stored by proper Officers" (*ibid.*). Such a handling of the economy would be quite the opposite of a Smithian system of natural liberty, given that a public bureaucracy is here seen as successfully directing all economic activities towards the "Happiness of Society" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the "Love of Money" is depicted as "the Root of all Evil" (*ibid.*, 142), riches are critiqued, and private property is attacked on three grounds. First, Reid claims, it leads to a separation of private and public interest, thus distorting social harmony. Secondly, it produces inequality, thus instilling in many the passions of jealousy and hatred, and depriving some of the material conditions for moral education. Both leads to crime and vice. Thirdly, it is

> a capital Defect in the System of private Property that the different Professions and Employments are not honoured & esteemed in proportion to their real Utility, & the Talents required for the discharge of them. The most usefull and necessary Employments are held in no Esteem. Nor indeed do they deserve it; because they are undertaken onely for the sake of private Interest. Their Utility to the publick is accidental, & not in the View of those who practise them. It is otherwise in a Utopian State where every Man labours […], not for his own, but for the publick benefit (*ibid.*, 146).

Through its abolition in the Utopian system, the bad effects of private property are redeemed. All members of its society are instead supposed and enabled to direct their labour to the public good, to live virtuously, and to receive their merits according to their utility. This, by no means, is an old man's fancy. As Knud Haakonssen remarks:

> [M]ost fundamental [to Reid's notion of Utopia] is the idea of humanity's educability, both individually and collectively. It runs as a red thread through Reid's work that while the human mind has been naturally endowed with intellectual and active powers, these powers need to be cultivated through education; […] and that there are objective measures for the right or wrong exercise of the powers of the mind, namely the extent to which they rely upon the principles […] that make up humanity's common sense. The education of the individual is a matter of social interaction, and there is therefore an interchange between individual and collective development, which Reid tended to see in perfectibilist terms, […]. In this regard, his Utopia is simply an extension of his common sense moral theory and the associated moral progressivism (Haakonssen and Wood 2015, c).

One can thus conclude that Reid, in his economic and political theory, was just as optimistic about the capacities of the human mind and human action as he was affirmative about the power of human judgement and perception in his critique of Hume's scepticism. For Reid, certain intuitive judgements equip everyone with universally shared knowledge of basic facts about the world, and this universally shared knowledge is taken as a fundament both for the branches of the diverse sciences and for practical pursuits. Everyone shares an insight into truths of common sense, and that is also

precisely "that degree of judgment which is common to men with whom we can converse and transact business" (Reid [1785] 2002, 424).

3.2 Smith: A Scepticism of a Higher Order

There is a significant strand in Smith scholarship that emphasises how Smith understands markets in a rather contrary way, namely as devices to "enable us to make use of knowledge we do not know we have" (Gray 1988, 56). The division of labour is a perfect example: the owner of a pen-factory might not be able to judge how exactly a specific wire is best drawn out, or how bread is best baked, but by employing a labourer who judges well how to handle wires, and by trading the pens of his manufactory with someone of "skill, dexterity, and judgment" (WN Intro 3) in bread-baking, the entrepreneur as well as the labourer can have both the pens and the bread. Underlying judgements which the labourer, the fabricant and the baker all share, are of much less relevance. Instead of aiming at a foundationally shared knowledge in Reid's sense, markets, for Smith, coordinate *lack* of knowledge, and harmonise the specificities of differing individual judgements.

Indeed, one can radicalise this thought and argue that Smith does not even make the truthfulness of individual judgements a necessary criterion for the functioning of markets. In a recent piece on the role of trust and luck in the WN, Sylvana Tomaselli (2021) found that Smith integrates a surprising degree of individual miscalculations and mistakes into his depiction of a working economy, which makes successful outcomes often heavily dependent on fortune rather than on right estimation and judgement on this side of individuals. Businessmen frequently fail to appropriately insure their goods, young people enter studies that do not secure them financial prosperity or social esteem, and smugglers carry on their activities in spite of the high chances of being sentenced. "Structural or sociological idiocy aside," she concludes, "Smith's was a world in which […] individuals seemed to have very little sense whatsoever […]. The art of being in the 18th century […] required, in the first instance, mastering the art of navigating through a maze of delusions […]" (*ibid.*, 5).

The real *Adam Smith Problem* on this reading would lie in the perplexing question how Smith's optimistic vision of the overall self-regulation of the economy could work, if, in his opinion, we actually "could not be trusted to judge our own self-interest" (*ibid.*, 8). Considering how Smith, on the one hand, seems to value the quality of individual, "dextrous" judgement more than principled state interventions, and how, on the other, he seems to assess the accuracy of such ordinary judgements as, in the main, fairly low, it thus remains an open question which role the common sense of individuals plays in his overall social theory.

4. Disperse the Risks, Trust the Locals, and Face the Inevitable

It is known that Smith identified a serious problem for commercial societies in the loss of the intellectual capacities that the workers suffer from routine jobs in the division of labour:

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> The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, […] has no occasion to exert his understanding, […]. He […] generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as is possible for a human creature to become […] (WN V.i.f.50).

Although Smith recognizes that the division of labour does not depend on creative and knowledgeable workers, he is not cynical about the prospect of their functional ignorance. He laments it. Seen from this perspective, it should actually puzzle us why Smith does not resort to a Reidean-style model in which "the publick" is administering each individual's occupation to the end of everyone's flourishing. Smith may urge the government "to take pains to prevent" the "great masses of the labouring poor" from falling into the monotony and stupidity that are the effects of the division of labour, and recommend public investments in education and infrastructure – but essentially, he is well aware that this means further division of labour and further specialisation (of teachers, of public officers, *etc.*), and thus a reiteration, and not a reversion of the historical process that created the modern deprecation of the human mind:

> in the barbarous societies, as they are commonly called, of hunters, of shepherds, and even of husbandmen […], the varied occupations of every man oblige every man to exert his capacity, and to invent expedients for removing difficulties which are continually occurring. Invention is kept alive, and the mind is not suffered to fall into that drowsy stupidity, which, in a civilized society, seems to benumb the understanding of almost all […]. In those barbarous societies, […] every man […] is in some measure a statesman, and can form a tolerable judgment concerning the interest of the society (WN V.i.f.51).

In modern, commercial civilizations, most people's minds are narrowed. And yet the reason why Smith proposes to go along with this process of social differentiation, and not to stop or centrally steer it, is that, according to him, the alternative would still be worse.

4.1 Have Faith in the Common Ploughman

Smith's central divergence from Reid's outlook lies in the importance that Smith accords to one principle: that not everyone has to know everything for a social order to function; in other words, that through the division of labour, people benefit from a common pool of knowledge(s) which, however, they individually do not possess. This general guideline that everyone should do what they know best, and then exchange it, naturally places a strong emphasis on the judgements of the local agents involved in the economic process, as opposed to the preconceptions of an overarching legislator who does not know the reality of local contexts. Through his fallibilistic and context-sensitive theory of judgement, however, Smith takes into account that such local judgements can be mistaken, as agents might fail to form the right criteria suited to the specificity of a situation. In this sense, the fact that such delusions form a relevant part of the reality that Smith was writing in does neither contradict Smith's account of judgement nor his preference for local over governmental decisionmakers:

> That [individual economic agents] knew their self-interest better than government did, that their pursuit of it led to a better system of distributive justice than a governmental one, did not mean that individual actors in the market place were inherently rational and wise in their

> estimation of the probability of the success of their ventures […]. They were just better at *it in the main* […] than governments (Tomaselli 2021, 10).

On the one side, then, the argument that Smith motivates *against* central planning is largely an argument from risk dispersion. If most human beings tend to be fallible in their judgements, and if government officials are human beings, then they will be fallible, too, and misestimate what good they do for others. Of course, the risk arising from officials misjudging the situation of an entire community or trade augments in proportion with their responsibility. On the whole, then, an entire country or an entire branch of industry fares less badly if people make mistakes only for themselves, and not for other people, too. The abolition of corporate privileges or government interventions thus not only implies greater freedom for the local agents involved, but also the obviation of risk by means of its particularization. It is simply better to have many people who are affected by their own bad decisions on a small scale than to have a select few who make bad decisions on a scale which is so large that it affects everyone.

On the other side, there seem to be some more basic intuitions that drive Smith's view *in favour* of social differentiation. In fact, the optimistic, anti-sceptical current in his thought, the current which motivates his anti-Humean philosophy of perception, seems at this point to overweigh the more cautious, fallibilistic reservations from his theory of judgement. There are various passages in the WN which suggest that although social fragmentation will have a negative impact on most functions of the modern mind, there are some basic features on which we can always rely. It is in such assumptions that a Reidean rhetoric of common-sense shines through:

> The common ploughman, though generally regarded as the pattern of stupidity […], is seldom defective in […] judgment and discretion. […] How much the lower ranks of people in the country are really superior to those of the town, is well known to every man whom either business or curiosity has led to converse much with both. In China and Indostan accordingly both the rank and the wages of country labourers are said to be superior to those of the greater part of artificers and manufacturers (WN I.x.c.24).

And Smith adds: these wages "would probably be so every where, if corporation laws and the corporation spirit did not prevent it" (WN I.x.c.24). In other words – it would be so, "had not the interested sophistry of merchants and manufacturers confounded the common sense of mankind" (WN IV.iii.c.10).

In spite of Smith's awareness of the fallibility of human judgement, it thus remains a central assumption behind his "system of natural liberty" that local agents will know better, in the main, and within their familiar circumstances, how to act, decide, or allocate resources than far-removed government officials do. The engine of economic development, for Smith, lies in the ideas and ingenuity of those actually involved in the process of production and exchange; he shifts it from the removed bird's eye perspective of a bureaucrat to the embedded view of the man of "common prudence" who knows "to which of the two sorts of people he has lent the greater part of his stock, to those who, he thinks, will employ it profitably, or to those who will spend it idly" (WN II.iv.2). And so, although Smith thus does not need to attribute a high degree of education and general knowledge to the people involved in daily economic life, he has to assume – or hope! – that they, in the main, judge well what they are doing. For a

nation to become wealthy, as Smith simply puts it, "the same maxims which would […] direct the common sense of one, or ten, or twenty individuals, should regulate the judgment of one, or ten, or twenty millions" (WN IV.iii.c.11).

4.2 "Das neue Adam Smith Problem"

Nonetheless, this strategy of combining trust and risk dispersion is not free from pitfalls. It can be doubted whether it really resolves what above I have named the genuine *Adam Smith Problem*, *i. e.*, the paradox that the more advanced the division of labour becomes on the basis of the constant expansion of people's intellectual and professional activities, the less the guidance of common sense might suffice to provide orientation to the people on whose judgement that very process of expansion depends. One example can be found in Smith's recognition that the degree of complexity of commercial societies makes it more difficult for individual agents to advocate policies that are in their own interest. By taking Smith's mention of the "clamour" (Oprea 2022, 19) of workers as a criterion for their simultaneous discontent and inability to promote programmes that improve their situation, Alexandrea Oprea has recently visualised this "mismatch between the demands of political judgment and the capacities of ordinary citizens" (*ibid.*) in its essentially historical dimension. The more a society evolves in social differentiation, the more it requires ordinary citizens to take decisions outside of the reach of their specific local contexts, and yet the less it is able to provide the criteria by which such judgements could be made accurate:

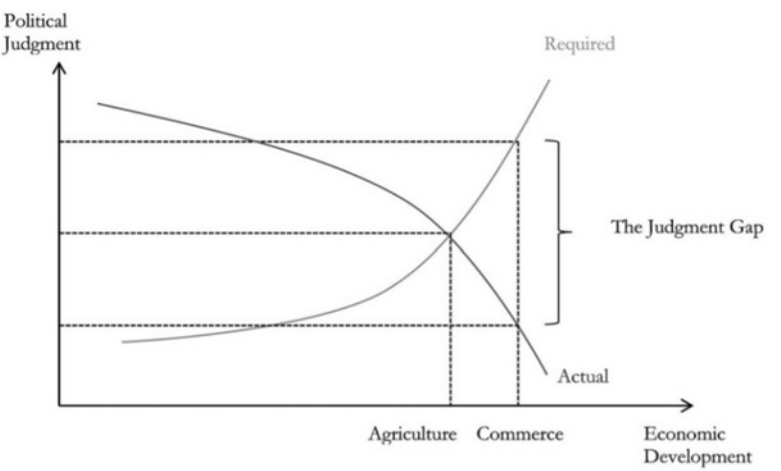

Figure 1: The Judgment Gap
Source: Taken from Oprea 2022, 24.

Oprea's findings about the political judgements of workers could be extrapolated on the judgements of modern individuals in general. It would confirm Tomaselli's observation of the "madness of the world [Smith] depicted" (Tomaselli 2021, 5) when it comes to the exorbitant misestimations of institutions and economic agents. These agents might be precisely falling into the "judgement gap" between the knowledge which commercial society requires them to enact (pay for ship insurance, choose professions wisely, support political parties that actually represent one's own interest) and the knowledge they actually have. Yet, if it is the individual judgement of the "great body of the people" that has to function as the engine of the economy, as opposed to government officials in charge, then it is, of course, quite problematic if the effects of the division of labour prevent the ordinary citizens from judging well.

5. Conclusion

We have now surveyed the intellectual context within which Thomas Reid and Adam Smith developed their philosophical views. We have seen how a certain engagement with Berkeley's philosophy of perception leads both of them to an anti-sceptical stance that sets them apart from Hume, and embeds them in central debates of their time. We have reconstructed how nuanced differences in their conception of human judgement, however, make them adopt very different assumptions about the nature of moral behaviour and the purpose of the economy. It has become clear how both thinkers presuppose a degree of common sense in the individual subject to account for a stable social order; and we have examined how in Smith's economic theory in particular, the division of labour seems to threaten precisely that degree of common judgement upon which it ultimately rests.

There is a sense of something tragic in this. On the one hand, Smith cannot identify a good reason for any action by which the process of the division of labour could or should be reversed. On the other hand, this very process makes it increasingly difficult for our common sense to navigate contexts that have become too large for us to comprehend. In the context of the 18th century, Smith's insight into the tensions within the epistemic structure of commercial societies can definitely be judged to be astonishingly original. Given the contemporary relevance of his insight, it could be an interesting task for further research to find out what Smith would actually propose to manage the effects of social complexity on the individual human mind. Perhaps his thoughts on ethics and rhetoric – especially his praise of serenity and tranquility – could be revisited in light of this question.

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