

# Smith and Rousseau, after Hume and Mandeville

Political Theory  
2018, Vol. 46(1) 29–58  
© 2016 SAGE Publications  
Reprints and permissions:  
[sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav)  
DOI: 10.1177/0090591716656459  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/ptx](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ptx)



Paul Sagar<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This essay re-examines Adam Smith's encounter with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Against the grain of present scholarship it contends that when Smith read and reviewed Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, he neither registered it as a particularly important challenge, nor was especially influenced by, or subsequently preoccupied with responding to, Rousseau. The case for this is made by examining the British context of Smith's own intervention in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where a proper appreciation of the roles of David Hume and Bernard Mandeville in the formation of Smith's thought pushes Rousseau firmly into the background. Realising this, however, forces us to re-consider our evaluations of Rousseau's and Smith's very different political visions. Given that questions of individual recognition, economic inequality, and political stability remain at the heart of today's social challenges, the implications of this are not just historical but of direct contemporary import.

## Keywords

Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Bernard Mandeville, Scottish Enlightenment, commercial society, epicureanism, sociability

## Introduction

In writing the history of political thought there is a danger that one's estimation of a thinker is unduly influenced by the subsequent reputation, no matter

---

<sup>1</sup>King's College, Cambridge, UK

### Corresponding Author:

Paul Sagar, King's College, Cambridge, 711 King's College, CB2 1ST, UK.  
Email: [prs49@cam.ac.uk](mailto:prs49@cam.ac.uk)

how well deserved, that the thinker has come to possess. This can lead not only to distorted and anachronistic readings of past texts but also to mistakes about their significance to contemporaries. My aim in this essay is to suggest a particular case in which the subsequent eminence of a thinker may have clouded our assessment of how they were received by one of their sharpest contemporaries. The case in question is Adam Smith's intellectual encounter with Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>1</sup>

Against the thrust of most of what has been written on this matter, I believe that Smith did not take Rousseau particularly seriously as an intellectual opponent, instead receiving his positions as neither novel nor uniquely challenging. This is revealed by returning to Smith's intellectual context in the 1750s, when he both reviewed Rousseau's *Second Discourse* and published his own *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), but where a proper appreciation of the significance of David Hume and Bernard Mandeville pushes Rousseau firmly into the background.

This essay proceeds in four main sections. The first situates my argument by using the publication of István Hont's 2009 Carlyle Lectures as a critical foil for interrogating the Smith–Rousseau interface. The second challenges the view that Smith was impressed by Rousseau as a result of the latter's conception of pity, by suggesting that Smith's much richer British philosophical context meant that the Genevan's intervention would have been received by him as far behind the best available English work. The third considers Smith's distinction between praise and praiseworthiness, and argues that although this functions as a reply to Rousseau, its original target was Mandeville. The final section examines the role of utility, vanity, and economic consumption in the context of Smith's paraphrasing of Rousseau's rhetoric from the *Second Discourse*, but suggests that a careful reading indicates that Hume is the primary interlocutor, with Rousseau featuring more like collateral damage. I conclude by indicating some of the wider implications of my re-evaluation.

## **Smith and Rousseau: The Question of Influence**

My argument is indebted to the posthumous publication of Hont's 2009 Carlyle Lectures as *Politics in Commercial Society*. My aim, however, is not to straightforwardly endorse or extend Hont's positions but to take his central point of departure and argue that if properly worked out it yields a very different picture of the Smith–Rousseau relationship to that which presently prevails. This may seem surprising, or even redundant, insofar as Hont *already* presents himself as offering a position distinct from that to be found in the existing scholarship. But where that difference lies is a matter that needs careful consideration, one that we must review before proceeding.

Hont claims that Rousseau is typically taken to be a fierce critic of commercial modernity, whilst Smith is standardly depicted as its defender (or apologist). Hont himself rejects this dichotomy: both Smith and Rousseau ought to be considered theorists of commercial society, who are attempting to explain its foundations, predicaments, and possibilities.<sup>2</sup> Hont does not deny that Smith and Rousseau's political visions are very different, but he does contend that they share the same, or at least very similar, "theories of moral foundations."<sup>3</sup> Given this, Hont suggests that the interesting question is why their politics nonetheless diverged, and how each might be evaluated in the light of the other. Yet even if Hont's analysis differs from what he presents as the inadequate traditional dichotomy, he shares with the established literature the view that Rousseau was important to Smith, and exercised meaningful influence on the development of his ideas. Hont does not state this as explicitly as, for example, Pierre Force, for whom Smith was an "admirer" of Rousseau,<sup>4</sup> or Dennis Rasmussen, who claims that Smith took Rousseau's arguments "quite seriously, for in his view they pointed to the deepest and seemingly most intractable problems of the emerging commercial societies of his time."<sup>5</sup> But he does credit Rousseau's concept of pity as leaving a direct mark on Smith's thought, and suggests that crucial aspects of the Scot's political system are specific replies to the Genevan.<sup>6</sup> Overall, Hont agrees with most other commentators that when Smith read Rousseau, he registered him as a major intellectual interlocutor and challenger.

Of course, believing that Rousseau influenced Smith by itself settles nothing of further significance. There is protracted debate about *how* Rousseau did so, to what extent and where Smith responded, and who had the better of things on a variety of intellectual fronts. Yet all of these further questions are affected by whether Smith *did* take Rousseau particularly seriously, and was in various ways preoccupied with responding to his challenge(s). If that turns out not to be so, or at least not in the regards often supposed, then the proffered answers will be in varying ways inadequate because the wrong starting questions will have been asked. To see why the wrong questions may indeed have been asked, we must bring the foundations of Hont's own project more clearly into focus.

The editors of *Politics in Commercial Society* suggest that a key difference between Hont's analysis and the majority of the existing literature is that whereas the latter tends to analyze Smith in ways that make him look more like Rousseau, Hont brings out the ways in which Rousseau resembles Smith.<sup>7</sup> This is fair enough, but it is not the most illuminating way to draw the comparison. A more important difference between Hont and other commentators is that whilst the latter tend to compare Smith and Rousseau primarily as theorists of morality, Hont begins the analysis a step further back,

with the question of sociability. A root-concept in eighteenth-century debates on morality and politics, sociability (as Hont has shown elsewhere) was the foundational issue that had to be settled before anything else could be determined.<sup>8</sup> Hont maintains that neither Smith nor Rousseau countenanced the idea that man was naturally sociable, and hence explaining the emergence of stable society required some appeal to artifice. We can therefore label both thinkers in this regard “epicureans,” albeit without expecting too much theoretical precision from that label.<sup>9</sup> However—and as I argue below—when we more fully develop the claim that both Smith and Rousseau were primarily sociability theorists, pressure is put on the idea that Smith was seriously influenced or impressed by Rousseau. This is because Smith was the inheritor of an advanced British sociability discourse to which Rousseau had no access because he could not read English, and largely constructed his own intervention from a working out of Hobbes’s *De Cive*, and secondary discussions of Hobbes’s positions in French.<sup>10</sup> In other words, when encountering Rousseau in the mid-1750s, the Scot would have registered the Genevan as a highly able, but very behind-the-curve, thinker, any shared “epicureanism” notwithstanding.

It may nonetheless remain the case that there is much value to be had in comparing Smith and Rousseau’s positions, regardless of the question of influence. Hont’s own wider analysis of political, moral, and economic theory indicates as much, as do (for example) Ryan Patrick Hanley’s detailed and illuminating comparative studies of Smith and Rousseau, which typically proceed without putting heavy weight on matters of influence.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless our views on exactly how Smith and Rousseau should be compared, and what those comparisons ultimately yield, may come to change if we end up believing that one viewed the other’s positions as largely obsolete, or without special force. And there are ramifications for the wider conceptualization of the history of political thought in turn. The efforts of a so-called Cambridge School notwithstanding, there is still typically held to be a canon of great historical political thinkers in the western tradition. Rousseau is most definitely a member. Smith, despite recent healthy interest in his political thought, is not typically granted inclusion. Yet the discovery that Smith was unimpressed by Rousseau is potentially disruptive to established evaluations, especially if we come to believe that Smith was *right* not to be impressed. In either case there follow implications not just for how we read Rousseau, but regarding what should count for inclusion in a canon, and whether such a thing should be thought to exist at all. Those are some of the wider matters raised. In the rest of my argument, however, I limit myself to making the case regarding (as I see it) Rousseau’s lack of serious influence upon or importance to Smith, leaving the further implications for another day.

## The Amiable Principle of Pity

In 1756, Smith famously offered Scottish readers an extended consideration of Rousseau's *Second Discourse* through a "Letter" to the short-lived *Edinburgh Review*. Demonstrating Smith's direct engagement with Rousseau's ideas, the "Letter" has perhaps unsurprisingly served as a principal source of evidence for the influence on, or importance of, Rousseau to Smith in recent discussions.<sup>12</sup> After calling for Scottish readers to extend their gaze both to English and French achievements in natural and moral philosophy, whilst indicating that the most exciting future advances were likely to come from the continent, Smith certainly dedicates the bulk of his "letter" to summarizing (as he sees it) the key features of Rousseau's *Discourse*, listing its main claims and providing translations of three long passages from Part 2 of the work. But it is by no means obvious that in doing so Smith was signaling the particular importance, novelty, or urgency, of Rousseau's intervention. Indeed he may be read as indicating precisely the opposite, once we unpack the content of his remarks in the context of 1750s British intellectual advances.

Of especial importance is Smith's declaration that "whoever reads this last work with attention, will observe, that the second volume of the Fable of the Bees has given occasion to the system of Mr. Rousseau." Yet despite drawing attention to this alleged connection, Smith also claimed that there was an important difference. Rousseau's account differed from Mandeville's insofar as it was "softened, improved, and embellished, and stript of all that tendency to corruption and licentiousness which has disgraced them in their original author." The reason for this was that Rousseau maintained that the "amiable principle" of pity was capable of producing all the virtues the reality of which Mandeville had denied.<sup>13</sup>

Hont takes Smith's zeroing in upon pity as evidence that he was a fellow traveller in making the capacity for shared affective sentiment foundational for any satisfactory "epicurean" account of sociability. Hont must be correct that by 1755 Smith would have had the argument of *TMS* largely in place; hence his own system cannot have had its genesis in reading Rousseau. Instead, Hont suggests, when Smith read the *Discourse* this must have helped him "more easily decide that the way ahead was through the generalization of the pity model."<sup>14</sup> The problem with this latter claim is that although it is true, when we restore the intellectual context—which Hont hints at, but does not explore—it turns out to be trivial. Yet that triviality in turn gives reason to suspect that when Smith encountered Rousseau's ideas he cannot have registered them as especially important.

In Britain, debate over the capacity to feel on behalf of others had been raging for decades by the time Smith read Rousseau. The principal point of

antagonism was originally Thomas Hobbes's infamous supposition that human beings were entirely selfish and incapable of genuine feeling on behalf of others. As he put it in *Leviathan*:

*Griefe*, for the Calamity of another is PITTY; and ariseth from the imagination that the like calamity may befall himselfe; and therefore is called also COMPASSION, and in the phrase of this present time a FELLOW FEELING: And therefore for Calamity arriving from great wickedness, the best men have the least Pitty; and for the same Calamity, those have least Pitty, that think themselves least obnoxious to the same.<sup>15</sup>

This position was part-and-parcel of Hobbes's denial of natural sociability. Once one dismissed Aristotelian notions of a *zoon politikon*, and also denied that human beings were capable of non-selfish affective sentiments directed towards others, then, as Hobbes put it in *De Cive*, human beings could form "large and lasting" society only from the materials of "honour" and "advantage," that is, from attempts to further utility, or out of the desire to secure recognition in the eyes of peers.<sup>16</sup> Yet for Hobbes the interplay of honour and advantage was inherently unstable.<sup>17</sup> The desire for unequal recognition (in Hobbes's language, pride) overwhelmed efforts to live peacefully in order to secure utility and the mutual satisfaction of the need to be liked. As a result, large and lasting society could not be stabilized from the materials of honour and advantage. The only solution was "fear," that is, the imposition of an overwhelming power to terrorize potential defectors into obedience, thus making large-scale society possible.<sup>18</sup>

This vision was resisted by many of Hobbes's British successors.<sup>19</sup> Particularly important to Smith's intellectual context, and certainly known to him, were Bishop Butler and Francis Hutcheson, who both drew upon the Earl of Shaftesbury's anti-Hobbesian "An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit" to further attack the Hobbesian edifice. Butler's 1726 *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* argued directly against Hobbes's claim that human beings were incapable of genuine fellow feeling, offering a refutation of the supposition of necessary motivational egoism.<sup>20</sup> Butler similarly appealed to capacities for fellow feeling as providing the "cement" to society, which he believed disproved the Hobbesian supposition of natural unsociability.<sup>21</sup> Influenced by Butler, Hutcheson in his 1728 *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions* invoked the idea of a "public sense," which operated alongside his earlier idea of an innate "moral sense" that disinterestedly detected virtue in others.<sup>22</sup> This "public sense" accounted for men's capacity for fellow feeling, "our Determination to be pleased with the *Happiness* of others, and to be uneasy at their *Misery*," which Hutcheson presented as

giving the lie to Hobbesian and Mandevillean suppositions of irreducible selfishness.<sup>23</sup> Regarding sociability, Hutcheson's 1730 inaugural lecture as Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow—where he would of course teach Smith in the late 1730s—invoked the idea of “sympathy” (or in the original Latin, “contagio”) to offer a theory of natural sociability that was targeted at Hobbes, Mandeville, and Pufendorf.<sup>24</sup> After these more major theorists, the now little-known Scottish philosopher Archibald Campbell offered a sophisticated reworking of Hobbes's concept of pity, which he labeled “sympathy,” in the 1733 reissue of his *An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue*.<sup>25</sup>

Most important of all, however, was David Hume. In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, published in 1739 and 1740, Hume supplied a complex theory of sociability rooted in the most advanced theory of fellow feeling yet deployed. Hume's “sympathy” posited that human beings literally shared each other's sentiments, in his parlance transforming the “idea” of an other's affective state into an “impression.” As he memorably put it, in a metaphor later picked up and developed by Smith, “the minds of men are mirrors to one another,” reflecting passions back and forth.<sup>26</sup> Sympathy allowed Hume to block the Hobbesian supposition that pride destabilized the capacity to form society. On the contrary, “*Vanity* is rather to be esteem'd a social passion, and a bond of union among men.”<sup>27</sup> Due to the capacity to sympathize with others, man was “the creature of the universe, who has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by the most advantages.”<sup>28</sup> But Hume did not maintain that man was therefore straightforwardly naturally sociable. The trouble came not from “honour,” as Hobbes had supposed, but “advantage.” The pursuit of material interests led men into conflict, threatening to destabilize social arrangements because of the co-ordination problems generated by the instability of possessions combined with the limited generosity of men in conditions of moderate scarcity. Artifice was ultimately required in order for humans to achieve large and lasting society, but it was not that of overawing sovereign power, as Hobbes had supposed, or the invention of systems of morality and honour by legislator figures, as Mandeville claimed. Rather, it was the convention (and subsequently, virtue) of justice: a spontaneously developed, but artificial, response to the need to co-ordinate utility-seeking across groups of self-interested, but nonetheless sympathetically capable, individuals. Hume's theory of justice was an “epicurean” account of sociability, but one that hoped to avoid the licentious and scandalous implications associated with Hobbes and Mandeville.<sup>29</sup>

There is no doubt that Smith knew Hume's position. Not only had he read the *Treatise* whilst an unhappy visiting undergraduate at the University of Oxford,<sup>30</sup> but in the *TMS* he supplied a compact summary of Hume's view,<sup>31</sup>

and endorsed his central conclusion (albeit with technical modifications) that the organization of utility-seeking was the central sociability question, hence why justice was to be considered the “main pillar” that upheld society, benevolence its mere “ornament.”<sup>32</sup> The point of this for present purposes, however, is that compared to Hume’s complex position, Rousseau’s account of pity in the *Discourse* would have struck Smith as extremely basic, far behind the best English work available.

Rousseau’s position was that (as Smith put it in his review) pity was “in itself no virtue,”<sup>33</sup> but was more like an instinct, possessed by many animals as well as savage man in his primitive condition: “a natural sentiment which, by moderating in every individual the activity of self-love, contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species.”<sup>34</sup> The central function of pity in Rousseau’s sociability story was to discredit Hobbes’s claim that in the state of nature man was naturally aggressive and violently competitive for status: “in the state of Nature,” pity “takes the place of Laws, morals, and virtue, with the advantage that no one is tempted to disobey its gentle voice; pity that will keep any sturdy Savage from robbing a weak child or an infirm old man of his hard-won subsistence if he can hope to find his own elsewhere.”<sup>35</sup> Hobbes’s vision was a back-projection of civilized man into his primordial state.<sup>36</sup> The proof that it was a back-projection, and a false one at that, was that it would have been impossible for men to ever group together long enough to escape their situation of primitive indolence if they were naturally aggressive in the way Hobbes supposed. Instead, Rousseau deduced, man had originally been solitary (Hobbes was right that there was no principle of natural sociability), yet nonetheless non-aggressive due to the possession of pity. He had ultimately entered society not by being overawed by superior power, but (as Smith summarized) because of some “unfortunate accidents having given birth to the unnatural passions of ambition and the vain desire of superiority.”<sup>37</sup> Crucial to Rousseau’s story, however, was that natural pity was extensively suppressed after his *amour propre*—that is, the desire for recognition—became pathologically inflamed as a result of contact with economic inequality and the rise of luxury.<sup>38</sup> According to Rousseau, in modern conditions when pity was suppressed and *amour propre* was inflamed, yet *amour de soi-même*—that is, the material needs of the body—remained still active, the only materials human beings had to form society were, as Hobbes claimed, honour and advantage. Hobbes’s mistake was thinking that human beings had always been like this. What he was not wrong about was how they were now.

From Smith’s perspective in 1756 this story would have appeared far behind the advances achieved in Britain, by Hume in particular. Compared to the sophistication of Hume’s sympathy matrix, Rousseau’s pity was a very

primitive notion. Furthermore, in order to explain the emergence and stability of large-scale societies, whereas Hume had his complex theory of justice, on top of which he grafted an account of allegiance rooted in affective sentiment that Smith himself directly picked up and extended, Rousseau posited the systematic deception of the poor by the rich after the point at which run-away inequality and inflamed *amour propre* meant that the state of nature was left behind forever (something we shall return to below). And it is important to emphasize that in Rousseau's story pity becomes fatally suppressed when humanity enters advanced, large-scale society. For although Rousseau dismissed Mandeville for failing to see that pity could be the source of natural virtue, that is, criticizing the Dutchman for supposing that no natural virtue was possible at all, this was a very specific point. What Rousseau did not deny was that now, in conditions of modernity, with *amour propre* pathologically inflamed and when pity was extensively suppressed, most individuals did not act virtuously but only out of selfish regard to their own desire for recognition.<sup>39</sup> Rousseau's corrective of Mandeville was a technical point about the capacity for virtue amidst uncorrupted human beings, not a claim that pity enabled the widespread practice of virtue in the here and now. Yet when compared to Hume's complex and detailed ethical theory—which took sympathy as its starting point, and which his 1751 *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* made clear told decisively against theorists like Mandeville who denied the reality of moral distinctions due to suppositions of irreducible selfishness—Rousseau's intervention cannot have struck Smith, despite its rhetorical power, as anything other than a variation on a theme that had already been surpassed.<sup>40</sup>

All of which throws into doubt Hont's contention that there is a "direct imprint" of Rousseau's influence on the very first page of Smith's *TMS*.<sup>41</sup> Smith certainly declares that "However selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently principles in his nature which interest him in the fortune of others" and gives "pity . . . the emotion which we feel for the misery of others", as a prime example.<sup>42</sup> Yet rather than Smith here offering an endorsement, or continuation, of Rousseau's basic insight, it is something like the opposite. Not only could Smith have taken the claim that we are capable of pity from several previous British thinkers, he should anyway be read as saying that theorists like Rousseau are simply wrong. No matter how selfish we may be supposed, the principle of pity can "evidently" be discerned in us, and not as a rarely encountered residue from an uncorrupted age, but as a quotidian fact of present existence. Furthermore, immediately after making this declaration in the first paragraph, Smith moves into a discussion of full-blown sympathy, expanding greatly beyond the rudimentary capacity of pity with which he opens. Explicitly taking over Hume's term, and developing the

older philosopher's framework, Smith's opening chapter laid the foundations of an account of sympathy that constituted a bold new intervention in the ongoing British debate. Ultimately, from Smith's vantage point in Glasgow during the mid-1750s, Rousseau's softened and embellished Mandevilleanism would have had nothing new or important to add to what had already been achieved in Britain.

This of course raises the question of why Smith chose to review the *Discourse* at all. It is doubtful that we will ever have an entirely satisfactory answer. One suggestion, made in light of the above, might be that rather than seeing Smith's "Letter" as straightforward evidence of his interest in Rousseau, we might instead read it as something like an advertisement for his own forthcoming intervention. Smith may have been priming his readers: telling them that the interesting part of Rousseau's thesis—the only thing that separates him from Mandeville—is the attempt to build a theory of morality on the capacity for fellow-feeling. Rousseau hadn't gotten it right, but Smith would soon offer his own, much more sophisticated, explication of how to do it properly. Admittedly this explanation is limited: an advertisement appearing three years before the advertised product has obvious drawbacks. But be that as it may, we are not entitled to assume that the mere fact of the review is by itself evidence for Rousseau's influence upon, or importance to, Smith. To assume that it must be is to back-project contemporary estimations of these thinkers' respective importance, and invest the "Letter" with a meaning to Smith that we cannot know that it had. After all, motivations for reviewing the works of others are many and various: of those of us writing book reviews today, who would wish such things to be taken as a clear and unambiguous evidence of influence, or one's estimations of importance, in two hundred and fifty years' time? The fact is that we simply do not know why Smith reviewed Rousseau for his Scottish audience, and in light of that ignorance we ought not to assume that it clearly signals anything one way or the other. To arrive at an adequate judgment on the matter of Smith's intellectual relationship to Rousseau, we must instead consider the wider evidence from Smith's own published positions.

## Praise and Praiseworthiness

Ryan Patrick Hanley has demonstrated that Smith's central distinction between the love of mere praise, and the love of being genuinely praiseworthy, functions as a response to Rousseau's claim that "commercial society is fundamentally driven by a vanity that threatens to corrupt its participants."<sup>43</sup> According to Rousseau, "commercial society stimulates in men a desire for esteem and consideration such that they can only live in the eyes and opinions

of others. Such individuals, plagued by solicitude for recognition, can no longer achieve the simple goodness natural to them in their uncorrupted, self-sufficient state.”<sup>44</sup> Living always in the eyes of others, men developed the distinction between being and appearing to be—between *être* and *paraître*—and in the process lost the capacity for virtue, possessing only its simulacrum in the gratification of *amour propre*. Smith recognised this danger, but believed that it could be resisted. “To avoid such slavishness, nature invested man with a second side . . . in which the praises of others are mitigated by a natural regard for what is praiseworthy.”<sup>45</sup> Man desired not simply to appear virtuous, but to *be* virtuous. Indeed, Smith went so far as to claim that “so far is the love of praise-worthiness from being derived altogether from that of praise; that the love of praise seems, at least in a great measure, to be derived from that of praise-worthiness.”<sup>46</sup> As Hanley concludes, “Through the love of praiseworthiness, nature has supplied not simply a cure for an existing malady but an inoculation against an illness to come, for in a renewed appeal to our natural love of praiseworthiness lies what Smith takes to be the key to recovering virtue in civil society, and thereby returning civilized man from a concern with *paraître* to the love of *être*.”<sup>47</sup>

I agree that Smith’s distinction between praise and praiseworthiness operates as a reply to Rousseau. But a philosophical argument may function effectively against a particular position without that position being the original intended target. Hanley takes it that Rousseau was indeed Smith’s original target. I believe the evidence points in another direction.

Matters are complicated here by the fact that Smith’s most comprehensive discussion of the praise—praiseworthiness distinction was added at the very end of his life, to the sixth and final 1790 edition of *TMS* in the heavily revised and extended chapter 2 of Part III. At first glance it would appear that this is an area of Smith’s thought that cannot be posited as having been significantly formed prior to contact with Rousseau. Indeed, some commentators see the final edition as bearing indelible marks of the long-lasting influence of the Genevan. John Robertson, for example, has claimed that perhaps Smith’s most notorious final addition to the *TMS*—his claim that “the disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful” is “the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments”<sup>48</sup>—evidences Smith’s “wrestling over his answer” to Rousseau, “finally conceding the point” that modern commercial society corrupts the individuals who must live within it.<sup>49</sup> But we must be cautious here. With regards to the claim that excessive regard for the rich and the powerful corrupts our moral sentiments, Smith immediately states that this has been “the complaint of moralists in all ages.”<sup>50</sup> If Rousseau is indeed the primary interlocutor, Smith is expressly denying his originality. And in what follows Smith actually paints a very different picture to that found in Rousseau’s

thought. For whereas the Genevan depicts advanced society as a state in which pretty much all individuals are corrupted by the love of fame and fortune, and thus lose their natural capacity for virtue, Smith denies this. In the “middling and inferior stations of life” the “road to virtue and that to fortune” usually coincide.<sup>51</sup> The real problem is a specifically and narrowly political one: that those in positions of power can be consistently materially rewarded for unethical behaviour, and are surrounded by flatterers who exacerbate the problem (two factors which do not hold in ordinary life). In other words, Rousseau’s general worry (if indeed he is even the target) about the ethical corruption of all individuals in advanced societies is misplaced and he misses the real issue: how rulers can be corrupted by their position, and what needs to be done, institutionally, to stymie and control that. This is not to suggest that Smith was therefore blasé about the potential for ethical corruption unleashed by inequality, the desire of material possessions, and the servility towards the rich and the great that the human predilection for sympathy with superiors generated. It ought to be clear to any reader of his texts that these matters concerned him deeply. The present point, however, is a more limited one: that Smith held these concerns independent of his engagement with Rousseau, and the Genevan’s polemic cannot satisfactorily be viewed as a, let alone the, decisive spur to Smith’s concerns about moral corruption in commercial society.<sup>52</sup>

With regards to praise and praiseworthiness, although it is true that Smith’s most thorough articulation of this distinction only appeared in 1790, it can nonetheless clearly be identified in the earliest version of the *TMS*, to which the late addition refers when answering “Some splenetic philosophers” who have “imputed to the love of praise, or to what they call vanity, every action which ought to be ascribed to that of praise-worthiness.”<sup>53</sup> This discussion is located in Part VII, and is trained explicitly upon the sceptical theory of Mandeville.<sup>54</sup>

Part VII is the written-up version Smith’s student lectures on moral philosophy and the history of ethics, dating in part from his 1748–1750 stint at Edinburgh, and thereafter from his appointment at Glasgow, first as Professor of Logic in 1751, then of Morals from 1752.<sup>55</sup> Part VII is thus likely to be one of the oldest of the *TMS*, and what we find there is even more likely to pre-date Smith’s encounter with Rousseau than other sections of the book. And one thing that we find is the distinction between praise and praiseworthiness being used to refute Mandeville’s “licentious” system. As Smith puts it, “Dr. Mandeville considers whatever is done from a sense of propriety, from a regard to what is commendable and praise-worthy, as being done from a love of praise and commendation, or as he calls it from vanity.”<sup>56</sup> Against this Smith maintains that “the love of virtue” is “the noblest and best passion in human nature,” and that even “the love of true glory” whilst inferior to the love of true virtue, “in dignity appears to come immediately after it.”<sup>57</sup> Men of real magnanimity will still desire to be praised for

their virtues, but they are conscious that this is because their virtues are deserving of real glory and this holds even if they don't actually receive the praise they are owed. By contrast, "none but the weakest and most worthless of mankind are delighted with false glory." Although Smith had not yet worked out the most powerful statement of his view as it would appear in the final additions to Part III, it is nonetheless clear in his 1759 rejoinder to Mandeville that a man of true virtue, who is unfortunate enough to be thought vicious by his peers "Though he despises the opinions which are actually entertained of him, he has the highest value for those which ought to be entertained of him." Although Smith admitted that only a very few robust individuals could live from praiseworthiness alone—most people needed frequent doses of psychologically stabilizing praise to keep them going—he nonetheless took the possibility of living for praiseworthiness alone, and the admission of the legitimate enjoyment of praise for behaviour that was indeed praiseworthy, as refuting Mandeville's claim that we only ever acted to selfishly secure our "vanity."<sup>58</sup>

Yet recognising that Smith employs the praise–praiseworthiness distinction in the first edition of the *TMS* implies a particular significance regarding his claim that Rousseau was a softened and embellished Mandeville. Recall that, according to Smith, Rousseau presented the same essential system as Mandeville, but without the *apparent* scandal and licentiousness of the earlier version, because Rousseau claimed that natural pity meant that we were not always incapable of virtue, as Mandeville provocatively claimed. Yet by the mid-1750s Smith already knew what he thought was wrong with the kind of debunking theory which posited that because we act out of a desire for recognition in order to satisfy *amour propre*—or as Mandeville termed it in the *Fable of the Bees Volume 2*, "self-loving"<sup>59</sup>—so all putative ethical behaviour is necessarily fraudulent or normatively compromised. This kind of argument could be defeated via the distinction between praise and praiseworthiness—and was originally worked out as a refutation of Mandeville. Certainly it operated *pari passu* against Rousseau. But that was because the Genevan was restating the same ideas as the Dutchman, albeit in a manner that deceptively made them appear to have all the "purity and sublimity" of the "morals of Plato."<sup>60</sup>

Why, then, did Smith in 1790 offer an expanded and more thorough articulation of the praise–praiseworthiness distinction? We need not here posit the special or lasting influence of Rousseau. Rather, the answer lies in the deep structure of Smith's own ethical theory. As Hont encourages us to see, Smith's theory of morals may be understood as an extension of the insight Hume had applied to justice, but to all of the virtues: their origin in repeat experience of social interaction.<sup>61</sup> Hume divided the virtues into "natural" and "artificial," where the existence of the former was evidenced by immediate sympathetic responses to the imputed motivations of other agents, whilst the latter required some external

convention to be in place before they could be made intelligible.<sup>62</sup> Smith, by contrast, backed up the story to ask how it was possible that there could be any virtues at all, even the putatively natural ones. This was a facet of the question of sociability: before one could examine the content of morality, one had to know where it came from—and that meant exploring the origins of society. This Smith did in Part III of *TMS*, where he offered a conjectural history of human ethical capacities as rooted in repeat iterations of judging and being judged over long periods of time. Morality, for Smith, was ultimately socially composed, an outcome of having to live in the gaze of others.<sup>63</sup>

By doing this, however, Smith sailed much closer to Mandevillean shores than Hume. For the older Scot, precisely because there were “natural” virtues antecedent to reflection, Mandeville’s claim that all moral virtue was fraudulent - in his notorious phrase merely “the Political Offspring which Flattery begot upon Pride” - could be straightforwardly dismissed.<sup>64</sup> And Mandeville was also wildly off-target with regards to the artificial virtues: the manipulation of sociable behaviour by self-interested legislator figures mistook a secondary re-enforcement effect for a primary cause of sociability, which Hume instead located in the artifice of justice.<sup>65</sup> Smith had to take Mandeville much more seriously because he essentially agreed with the Dutchman that the origins of all morality lay in repeat experiences of social interaction with judging peers. As Hanley writes, “insofar as sympathy is natural,” nonetheless “Smith seems to argue that it is natural for our natures to be shaped by convention. But at the same time, Smith clearly foresaw the possible consequence of such an ethics if pursued to its conclusion—namely that an individual shaped by the morality of sympathy would be preeminently a slave to the strong need that men have for the approbation of their fellows.”<sup>66</sup> This explains why Smith could write that “how destructive soever” Mandeville’s system might appear, “it could never have imposed upon so great a number of persons, nor have occasioned so general an alarm among those who are the friends of better principles, had it not in some respects bordered upon the truth.”<sup>67</sup> This was an assessment Hume would never have countenanced, but which Smith did because his own account of the foundations, if not the normative validity, of morals travelled along much more similar lines to Mandeville’s than Hume’s had done.

The praise-praiseworthiness distinction was required to secure the possibility of genuine virtue in a world where ethical practices and values were ultimately a function of deep-rooted conventions of social interaction—of judging others and being judged in turn—whilst equipped with the capacity to share each other’s sentiments. Smith needed such a distinction to prevent his own theory from collapsing into the sceptical debunking genealogy of Mandeville’s “licentious” system. By 1790 he judged that his earlier attempts

had not adequately or most powerfully explicated what separated him from Mandeville. Yet Smith's felt need to make good on his arguments was a product of the demands incumbent upon his own system, given his unwavering commitment not to cede the field to Mandeville, instead consistently denying that a socially composed origins theory of the foundations of morals must therefore be a sceptical or debunking one. As a result, Rousseau featured not as a source of any great influence or intellectual threat, but as merely repeating a challenge that Smith had already long-registered, and knew that his own position needed to address.

## Utility and Deception

I turn now to Part IV of the *TMS*, where Smith directly paraphrases Rousseau's arguments from the *Discourse*. Surely here we can discern the latter's profound influence upon the former? I suggest not. The reasons are revealed by paying close attention to Smith's wider purposes and strategy of argument.

Part IV is primarily a response to Hume's claim, stated in the *Treatise* and repeated even more forthrightly in the second *Enquiry*, that a regard for utility is the dominant factor in explaining value judgements. According to Hume, Smith reminded his readers, the "utility of any object . . . pleases the master by perpetually suggesting to him the pleasure or convenience which it is fitted to promote," with spectators able to share in this pleasure via sympathy.<sup>68</sup> Despite the initial plausibility of this account, Smith insisted that it was subtly and importantly mistaken. In fact, human psychology exhibited a pervasive and wide-ranging quirk, such that the "fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended." Bizarrely—at least, to a sober philosophical eye—"the exact adjustment of the means for attaining any conveniency or pleasure, should frequently be more regarded, than that very conveniency or pleasure, in the attainment of which their whole merit would seem to consist."<sup>69</sup> Smith took himself to be the first to have noticed this, yet pointed to a multitude of everyday examples to prove its truth: the man who expends much effort arranging the chairs in a room to achieve an order which costs him more in convenience than is gained by having the floor clear; the person who is excessively curious about watches and rejects one model on the grounds that it loses two minutes in a day, replacing it with a much more expensive one that only loses a minute in a fortnight, despite both being perfectly adequate for the basic function of telling the time; he who adores "trinkets of frivolous utility" and walks about "loaded with a multitude of baubles" which cost him more inconveniency to constantly carry about than can ever be gained from having them to hand.<sup>70</sup>

Taken alone these examples would constitute little more than a simple refinement of Hume's account. But Smith's next case—that of "The poor man's son, whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition"—opened up the deeper implications.<sup>71</sup> It is vital to recognise that the poor son in Smith's example is *not* primarily motivated by *amour propre*. One might expect Smith to suggest that a desire for esteem and status underlies such "ambition," especially in the context of his having read both Mandeville and Rousseau, and what he himself appears to say in *TMS* Part I. Indeed, this is how he is usually interpreted. Hanley writes that "Smith in his own name advances the claim originally made in his translations of the *Discourse*: that markets are driven by solicitude for praise and recognition, and that such dependence on the esteem of others is also the source of the corruption of all our moral sentiments."<sup>72</sup> Jerry Z. Muller similarly states that for Smith "the dominant motive for engaging in economic activity—beyond providing for one's bodily needs—is the non-material desire for social status."<sup>73</sup> Hont likewise claims that Smith "rehearsed" Hume's point that continuous consumption of material goods beyond the point of needs-satiation was not simply about utility but about the "beauty of their design that pleased their owners," but he nonetheless concludes that "Smith conceded Rousseau's case, also describing the hectic culture of status seeking as a giant deception."<sup>74</sup> These readings, however, subtly misconstrue Smith's argument.<sup>75</sup>

For it is categorically *not* status recognition that does the central work in Smith's account, at least in Part IV. The "love of distinction so natural to man," he tells us, is at best only a secondary consideration in explaining the human tendency towards luxury consumption. The primary factor is the quirk of human rationality Smith takes himself to be the first to have identified. The poor man's son feels his daily inconveniences and compares those to what he imagines are the pleasure of the rich, afforded to them by their many devices for promoting utility. Whereas he must walk, they ride in carriages; whereas he must labour for all his wants, they have a retinue of servants. The poor son sees these conveniences and imagines that because they are fitted to promote pleasure they therefore make the rich happy—and that if he had them, then he too would be happy. Accordingly, the poor son becomes "enchanted with the distant idea of felicity," and devotes himself to the endless "pursuit of wealth and greatness." But the outcome is a paradox: the poor son spends his life toiling to achieve wealth as a means of securing instruments of pleasure, and in the process expends far more effort, and incurs far more inconvenience, than could ever be compensated for by the riches he manages to amass. "Through the whole of his life he pursues the idea of a certain artificial and elegant repose which he may never arrive at, for which he sacrifices a real tranquility that is at all times in his power." The situation ends in irony:

because the poor son is enchanted with the idea of utility-promotion rather than utility itself, he will never achieve the levels of wealth that he thinks will make him happy. Such levels are constantly receding from him due to the very quirk of human psychology that makes him pursue the imagined means of pleasure rather than solidly attainable pleasures themselves. In old age such a man may finally come to see, with regret and bitterness, the error of his ways: that “wealth and greatness are mere trinkets of frivolous utility, no more adapted for procuring ease of body or tranquility of mind than the tweezer-cases of the lover of toys.” But by then it will largely be too late, and he will realise that he has wasted most of his life in chimerical pursuits.<sup>76</sup>

It is important to recognise, however, that Smith’s poor man’s son is an *extreme* example. He is not supposed to represent how all people typically think and behave, but merely illustrates, in acute and dramatic form, those tendencies that are much less pronounced in ordinary well-adjusted people. Smith did not deny that the condition of the rich and the great received widespread admiration, and that this forwarded the desire of ordinary people to themselves become rich and great. However:

If we examine . . . why the spectator distinguishes with such admiration the condition of the rich and the great, we shall find that it is not so much upon account of the superior ease or pleasure which they are supposed to enjoy as of the numberless artificial and elegant contrivances for promoting this ease or pleasure. He does not even imagine that they are really happier than other people: but he imagines that they possess more means of happiness. And it is the ingenious and artful adjustment of those means to the end for which they were intended, *that is the principle source of his admiration.*<sup>77</sup>

Yet matters are complicated by the fact that Smith appears to take a much more Rousseau-like position in *TMS* Part I. He there writes that “to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive” from “that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition.” Indeed, Smith even seems to contradict what he later says in Part IV, declaring that “it is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us.”<sup>78</sup> This passage is what commentators seem to have in mind when they claim that Smith concedes Rousseau’s claim about *amour propre* as the underlying driver of material consumption beyond bare necessity. But we must read carefully. The context of these passages is Smith’s claim that “mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than our sorrow,” where he follows Hume’s view that we tend to love and esteem, rather than hate and envy, the rich and powerful.<sup>79</sup> Yet Smith’s “vanity” is not Rousseau’s *amour propre*. The notes of the *Discourse* specified *amour propre* to be “a relative

sentiment . . . which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else, inspires men with all the evils they do one another.”<sup>80</sup> In contrast to this, what Smith claims in *TMS* Part 1 is that individuals pursue riches because observers sympathize with the pleasure that the rich ought to receive from their wealth, and this in turn augments the pleasures the rich themselves expect from their material affluence.<sup>81</sup> “The rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world, and that mankind are disposed to go along with him in all those agreeable emotions with which the advantages of his situation so readily inspire him.”<sup>82</sup> According to Rousseau we primarily desire riches to rub other people’s noses in our superiority: “the ardent desire to raise one’s relative fortune less out of genuine need than in order to place oneself above others, instills in all men a black inclination to harm one another . . . and always the hidden desire to profit at another’s expense.”<sup>83</sup> For Smith, by contrast, we pursue riches to augment the pleasures that wealth brings by the added pleasure that arises from having others themselves take pleasure, via sympathy, in our prosperous condition. Hence “that emulation which runs through all the different ranks of men” is not a zero-sum game of brute status competition, but a complex product of the capacity to share each other’s sentiments, made in the context of Smith’s central claim that having other people agree with our sentiments via sympathy is inherently pleasurable.<sup>84</sup>

The difference between Smith and Rousseau is ultimately pronounced. The *Discourse* postulated that a figure like the “poor man’s son” was motivated primarily by competitive *amour propre* in a zero-sum competition for status (and inevitably so since pity had been fatally suppressed, meaning that men could only compete with each other not share each other’s sentiments). Furthermore, following the introduction of private property and the advent of inequality, the poor man’s son was not the extreme, but the archetype, of how corrupted human beings behaved in contemporary conditions. Smith rejected both these claims. The desire for riches and greatness, and the admiration of the rich and the great, were primarily motivated not by the competitive seeking of recognition in the eyes of peers, but by two other features of human psychology. First, the quirk that encouraged men to value the means of utility-promotion more than utility itself. Second, the propensity, via sympathy, to take pleasure not in the actual pleasures of the rich, but in the pleasures one imagined that they *ought* to take (even if they in fact didn’t) from their possessions, and in turn the pleasure, via sympathy, that the rich themselves took from knowing that others took pleasure in observing their condition. Yet this view was one that Smith arrived at through a correction of Hume’s ideas, both with regards to the quirk of rationality regarding utility as explicated in Part IV but also with the claim that individuals pursue luxuries to augment

their pleasures as a function of Smith's central contention that "mutual sympathy pleases"—the very aspect of Smith's system that Hume labeled its "hinge," but believed to be a mistake.<sup>85</sup> Insofar as Rousseau was also answered, that was a secondary effect, and one that in any case essentially addressed a vision of the motivations behind luxury consumption that had already (and notoriously) been stated in Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees Volume 1* as long before as 1714.

This brings us to the question of the role of deception in human psychology, where Smith is often read as (in Hont's phrase) "conceding Rousseau's case." Yet this is not an accurate construal. First of all, we need to be clear that there are two metrics of deception in play when we compare Smith and Rousseau. The first relates to the matter we have just been discussing: the psychological processes underpinning market activity and the pursuit of material, and especially luxury, goods. What should already have been established is that Smith did not "concede" Rousseau's case in this regard. Whereas the Genevan posited that market activity was driven by an irreducibly competitive desire for superior status—luxury was both the focus of *amour propre*, and pathologically inflamed it—Smith claimed that the majority of material appropriation beyond the satisfaction of bare necessity was the result of a product of the quirk of our rationality when it came to estimating pleasures, their means of attainment, and the corresponding connection to happiness. Smith certainly described this as a deception—but it was not the one that Rousseau supposed.

The second metric along which the notion of deception may be considered relates to how economic inequality, arising from market interactions and the rise of luxury, interacted with the basis of political power in large-scale advanced societies. Rousseau's claim in the *Discourse* was that the rich originally tricked the poor into accepting the property rights that formalized and entrenched material inequality, fooling them into believing that this would be to their own advantage. "All ran toward their chains in the belief that they were securing their freedom; for while they had enough reason to sense the advantages of a political establishment, they had not enough experience to foresee its dangers."<sup>86</sup> The "deception" therefore amounted, as Michael Rosen has noted, to a form of false consciousness.<sup>87</sup> Smith entertained no such thing, and opted to follow Hume's alternative in locating the stability of large-scale political societies in a theory of natural authority. Although it's full sophistication and power has long lain obscured from modern readers, Book 3 of Hume's *Treatise* contained a detailed theory of allegiance rooted in what his later essays called the "opinion of mankind."<sup>88</sup> Thanks in part to sympathy's ensuring that ordinary people tended to admire and esteem the rich and powerful, men typically deferred to the authority of their rulers,

initially out of utilitarian self-interest, but eventually—and as was typically the case in stable and advanced societies—out of a belief in the rightfulness of the political authority they found themselves living under. Certainly, significant abuses of power led to the forfeiture of the basis of allegiance with regards to (in Smith's later phrase) “utility” and “authority.”<sup>89</sup> But in ordinary circumstances human beings did not need to be deceived in order to live under conditions of material and political inequality, instead spontaneously submitting to established modes of authority.<sup>90</sup>

Smith certainly knew Hume's account of natural authority—indeed he spent much of his working life attempting to extend and improve it. The *TMS* offered a compact endorsement of the thesis as the basis of political rule when explaining “the distinction of ranks, and the order of society,”<sup>91</sup> whilst Book V of the *Wealth of Nations* would offer a more developed analysis of the psychological foundations of natural authority than Hume ever supplied,<sup>92</sup> and what are now known as the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* featured a sustained attempt to supply a historically grounded political theory organised around natural authority and the opinion of mankind.<sup>93</sup> The point of this for present purposes is that with Hume's theory already in hand, Rousseau's false consciousness explanation of the basis of advanced political society would have struck Smith as crude and anyway redundant. Indeed, it would have looked rather like Mandeville's claim that society was founded in the systematic manipulation of the weak and stupid by the powerful and cunning. Which is exactly what Smith stated in his 1756 review, where he wrote that both Rousseau and Mandeville held that the “laws of justice, which maintain the present inequality amongst mankind, were originally inventions of the cunning and the powerful, in order to maintain or to acquire an unnatural and unjust superiority over the rest of their fellow-creatures.”<sup>94</sup>

With these wider matters in focus, we can now appreciate the proper context and import of Smith's paraphrasing of Rousseau in *TMS* Part IV. As is well known, Smith claimed that with regards to the “deception” underlying the pursuit of material goods “it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind.”<sup>95</sup> Echoing Rousseau's rhetoric from one of the passages of the *Discourse* that he had translated for readers of the *Edinburgh Review*, he continued:

It is this which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all sciences and arts, which ennable and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of

---

subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth.<sup>96</sup>

Although it was the designs of the rich for their own pleasure that originally stimulated much economic activity, the paradoxical outcome was to improve the lot of all, as market-consumption stimulated demand and the rising tide of economic productivity lifted all boats.<sup>97</sup> As Hont notes, by making this move Smith firmly aligned himself with Locke and Mandeville, and against Rousseau, in the tradition of thought that held that the division of the world into unequal propertied holdings was on balance justified insofar as the result of the economic activity such inequality stimulated made the worst-off vastly better off than they could have been if the earth remained communally owned and yet uncultivated.<sup>98</sup>

But let us now put all of the pieces together. Smith is typically read as first conceding Rousseau's fundamental case about the way markets are driven by competitive *amour propre* and in turn tend to corrupt participants through processes of deception, but then offering, as a consolation, and via what Hont terms a "rudimentary theodicy," the beneficial effects this deception had in terms of the overall gains to mankind.<sup>99</sup> But this is not right. Smith's deployment of Rousseau's rhetoric takes place in a discussion whose primary target is Hume's theory of utility, and where Smith did *not* endorse the "deception" that Rousseau posited, either with regards to the personal pursuit of luxury, or the basis of political societies exhibiting high levels of material inequality. In Part IV Smith located the primary "deception" that gave rise to property, productivity, market-exchanges, and eventually large-scale inequality, not in the desire for recognition—and not even in his own, sympathetically-modified, account from Part I—but in the quirk of human rationality regarding utility-seeking he took himself to be the first to have noticed. In other words, *both* the premises *and* the conclusions of Rousseau's case were mistaken. The more general point for present purposes is that in seeing this we can also appreciate that rather than Rousseau being Smith's primary target in Part IV, he featured as something more like collateral damage. Once Hume's account of utility was properly corrected to make the central "deception" in human psychology the quirk of rationality with regards the means rather than the ends of pleasure, Smith could in passing also explain what was wrong with the recent polemic from the continent, recycling the key passages he'd translated in his earlier review to this effect. In this case, one prominent thinker's paraphrasing of another corresponds to their marginal, rather than central, importance.

The extent to which Smith's own view of the "deception" that lies behind economic consumption is darkly pessimistic, or perhaps ultimately more

sanguine than might be supposed, is a matter requiring further interpretation.<sup>100</sup> But whatever the outcome of that question, we should recognise Smith's intervention for what it was. A new innovation, self-consciously moving beyond Hume's earlier framework of combining the capacity for sympathy with regard for the effects of utility, that was neither a concession to, nor an adoption of, Rousseau's Mandevillean emphasis on bare competitive *amour propre* as the primary motor of economic activity.

## Conclusion

Despite what might reasonably be supposed, and is indeed assumed in the much of the existing literature, when Smith read Rousseau's *Second Discourse* he did not register it as the work of a particularly important or challenging interlocutor. As a result, the influence of Rousseau upon Smith is at best minimal and secondary. One reason for this, I have tried to suggest, is that it is a mistake (even if an understandable one) to assume that because the *Discourse* was published in 1755, and the *TMS* in 1759, and because both survey much of the same or similar terrain, that they must therefore share the same intellectual context.<sup>101</sup> As Robin Douglass's recent work has shown, Rousseau's sources were relatively limited when he was developing his ideas. When it came to the debate over sociability he effectively worked out of the French translation of *De Cive*, and contemporary French criticisms of Hobbes and Pufendorf of extremely varying reliability (as well, presumably, as the French translation of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* available after 1740).<sup>102</sup> That Rousseau could write the *Discourse* from such materials makes his achievement, if anything, that much more impressive. But Smith was a more fortunate genius. Not only did he have greater access to published works than Rousseau, first as a student and then as a teacher in a university setting, but he was also the inheritor of long-standing British debates that Rousseau could not access. In particular, Smith was able to read and absorb Hume's revolutionary contributions in the light of which Rousseau's *Discourse* must have paled, as I have tried to indicate above.

The case I have mounted here is principally internal to the history of political thought: an attempt to identify proper lines of influence and reception, themselves revealed by, but also furthering, alternative lines of philosophical interpretation. Yet what is at stake is not merely historical. We should certainly agree with Hont that Smith and Rousseau be read as theorists of how large-scale politics can operate in a world of market interactions that yield material, social, and political inequalities that need both to be made intelligible to those subject to them, and be stable enough to prevent the collapse of the systems of exchange and opulence that generate them in the first place. Inequality is today very much back at the heart of political debate and popular

concern. Although the gap between developed and developing nations is shrinking, disparities of wealth *within* developed nations have increased dramatically and consistently over the past three decades.<sup>103</sup> If the argument of Thomas Piketty's recent surprise bestseller *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* is correct, this is no accident.<sup>104</sup> That absent the unusual political circumstances of the past hundred years—in particular two world wars and the presence for several decades of powerful competitor ideologies to liberal democratic capitalism—the twenty-first century is more likely to resemble the nineteenth than the twentieth, because when left unchecked and free from political interference, capitalism tends to concentrate wealth, reinforcing and expanding existing inequalities. If that is indeed so, then questions of how much inequality market-based societies can bear, whilst remaining stable both politically and economically, are likely to come once again to the fore. In looking for insights into how to theorize—and maybe even address—the predicaments of capitalist inequality, Smith and Rousseau may represent attractive starting points. But in picking up their texts today, separated by 250 years of historical change and many varieties of intellectual amnesia, we must not assume that they simply started from the same place, or can be read as on an equal footing. That Smith was apparently unmoved by Rousseau's diagnosis of the predicaments of commercial societies invites us to consider whether we ought likewise to be cautious of using the Genevan as a guide, and whether the Scot offers a more advantageous point of departure from which to try and make sense of our difficult present.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following for their continued generosity and support, and for the specific advice received in this essay's long gestation: Hallvard Lillehammer, Richard Bourke, Bernardo Zacka, Robin Douglass, John Robertson, Michael Sonenscher, Richard Tuck, John Dunn, Chris Brooke, Tim Stuart-Buttle, Duncan Kelly, Richard Serjeantson, Tom Pye, and James Stafford. I would also like to thank the two anonymous readers for the *Journal*, who helped me refine and improve the argument while being extremely supportive of the content therein. I would also, slightly unusually, like to thank two anonymous readers for *The Journal of the History of Philosophy*, who provided comments on an earlier (very inadequate) version of these ideas, and who rightly rejected that incarnation, yet in doing so helped me to see how to put right what was wrong. Finally, I thank the Provost and Fellows of King's College for their continued support in all regards.

## Author Note

Versions of this essay were presented at the Cambridge Postdoc Forum, the Cambridge Seminar in Political Thought and Intellectual History, and to the Department of

Political Science at the University of California at Davis. I am extremely grateful to all participants for their help in improving my ideas, and to the conveners for giving me the chance to present my work.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. It was an intellectual encounter only. As far as we know the two never met in person, or corresponded, although Smith certainly knew of Hume's later unhappy interactions with Rousseau.
2. Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, ed. Béla Kapossy and Michael Sonenscher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 2.
3. *Ibid.*, 22.
4. Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20–24. Force's reading of Smith is convincingly critiqued in Christopher J. Berry, "Smith Under Strain," *European Journal of Political Theory* 3 (2004).
5. Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 70. Similar endorsements of Rousseau's importance to Smith can be found in Charles Griswold, "Smith and Rousseau in Dialogue: Sympathy, *pitié*, spectatorship and narrative," in *The Adam Smith Review* Vol. 5, ed. Vivien Brown and Samuel Fleischacker (London: Routledge, 2010), 59; Michael Ignatieff, "Smith, Rousseau and the Republic of Needs," in *Scotland and Europe 1200-1850*, ed. T.C. Smouth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986); E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 105–15, 220–21; John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 392–96; Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain 1750-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 3.
6. Hont, *Commercial Society*, 26–27, 51.
7. Béla Kapossy and Michael Sonenscher, "Editor's Introduction," in *Commercial Society*, xi.
8. Istvan Hont, "Introduction," in *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap

Harvard, 2005), 40–45; “The Language of Sociability and Commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the Theoretical Foundations of the ‘Four Stages’ Theory,” in *Jealousy of Trade*; “Commercial society and political theory in the eighteenth century: the problem of authority in David Hume and Adam Smith,” in *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays*, ed. Willem Melching and Wyger Velema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

9. Hont, *Commercial Society*, 14–18, 20–21.
10. That this was Rousseau’s relationship to the sociability debate, via his complex engagement with Hobbes and Hobbes’s French critics, see Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Free Will, and the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Introduction (especially 16–20), and chaps. 1 and 2.
11. Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Commerce and Corruption: Rousseau’s Diagnosis and Adam Smith’s Cure,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 7 (2008); “From Geneva to Glasgow: Rousseau and Adam Smith on the Theatre of Commercial Society,” *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 35 (2006); “Enlightened Nation Building: The Science of the Legislator in Adam Smith and Rousseau,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008).
12. For discussions of Smith’s review, see Nicholas Philipson, *Adam Smith, An Enlightened Life* (London: Penguin, 2010), 144–48; Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society*, 59–71; Eric Schliesser, “Adam Smith’s Benevolent and Self-Interested Conception of Philosophy,” in *New Voices on Adam Smith*, ed. Leonidas Montes and Eric Schliesser (London: Routledge, 2006), 329–57; Shannon C. Stimson, “The General Will after Rousseau: Smith and Rousseau on Sociability and Inequality,” in *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept*, ed. J. Farr and D. Lay Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 253–58; Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 66–76; Hont, *Commercial Society*, 18–21, 26.
13. Adam Smith, “Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*,” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. L. D. Wightman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 250–51.
14. Hont, *Commercial Society*, 34.
15. Thomas Hobbes, *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan*, 3 vols., ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), II, 90; cf. Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies and M. M. Goldsmith (London: Frank Cass, 1969), 44.
16. Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21–22.
17. Hont, *Commercial Society*, 10–12.
18. Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 24.
19. For an overview of some relevant theories of pity, Christian Maurer, “Facing the Misery of Others: Pity, Pleasure and Tragedy in Scottish Enlightenment Moral Philosophy,” in *The Poetic Enlightenment: Poetry and Human Science 1650–1820*, ed. Tom Jones and Rowan Boyson (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013).

20. Joseph Butler, *Butler's Fifteen Sermons*, ed. T. A. Roberts (London: S.P.C.K., 1970), 49–63.
21. *Ibid.*, 23.
22. On the moral sense see Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), 85–182.
23. Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 17.
24. Francis Hutcheson, “Inaugural Oration,” in *Logic, Metaphysics, and the Natural Sociability of Mankind*, ed. James Moore and Michael Silverthorne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006).
25. Archibald Campbell, *An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue* (Edinburgh, 1733), 30–48, 215–55.
26. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), T.2.2.5.21; SBN 365; cf. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), III.I.3.
27. Hume, *Treatise*, T.3.2.2.12; SBN 491.
28. *Ibid.*, T.2.2.5.15; SBN 363.
29. On Hume as an epicurean theorist see especially James Moore, “Hume and Hutcheson,” in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), and Robertson, *Case for the Enlightenment*, chap. 6.
30. Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 64–66.
31. Smith, *TMS*, II.ii.3.6, the entirety of which is an explication of Hume's utility-centered theory of justice, predicated upon first granting that man has a “natural love for society” as manifested in the primitive family, but requiring utility-regarding artifice to attain large and lasting associations, i.e., the real sociability problem.
32. *Ibid.*, II.ii.3.4.
33. Smith, “Letter,” 251.
34. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Second Discourse,” in *The Discourses and other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 154.
35. Rousseau, “Second Discourse,” 154; Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes*, 68–69, 90–93.
36. Rousseau, “Second Discourse,” 132, 138–40.
37. Smith, “Letter,” 250.
38. Rousseau, “Second Discourse,” especially 171–72, on how “Nascent Society gave way to the most horrible state of war” after the “unbridled passions of all” lead to the “stifling of natural pity and the still weak voice of justice” at the point when the state was invented by the rich as a way of enforcing property

rights, whilst tricking the poor into their own subjection. Rousseau does say that the force of natural pity sometimes resists even “the most depraved morals,” as evidenced by people being moved to weeping in theatres (Rousseau, “Second Discourse,” 152), but the overall point is that inflamed *amour propre* had effectively negated pity as a source of virtue for almost all who live in advanced society.

39. This is spelled out explicitly at the close of the *Discourse*, when Rousseau summarises that “everything being reduced to appearances, everything becomes facetious and play-acting . . . we have nothing more than a deceiving and frivolous exterior, honour without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness”: “Second Discourse,” 187.
40. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), especially Appendix 2. Indeed it is not even clear that Rousseau was as far away from Mandeville as he presented himself, or as Smith credited him with being. Mandeville after all does discuss pity, but rather than seeing it as a building block of sociability and morality, simply dismisses it as a self-regarding and thereby *ipso facto* vicious motivation: Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees Volume 1*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 56. Nonetheless, it is striking that in remark “P” of the *Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville explicitly talks of the “strong remains of Primitive Pity and Innocence, which all the arbitrary Power of Custom, and the violence of Luxury, have not yet been able to conquer” (174). Mandeville does not develop this claim any further—indeed it looks like he ought not be able to make it at all given his other commitments—but this may put him even closer to Rousseau than I have suggested in my main line of argument. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for the Journal for pointing this out: as they suggest, this may mean that Smith is even less interested in Rousseau—as against Mandeville—than I have indicated above.
41. Hont, *Commercial Society*, 26–27.
42. Smith, *TMS*, I.i.I.1.
43. Hanley, “Commerce and Corruption,” 138.
44. *Ibid.*, 139.
45. *Ibid.*, 143.
46. Smith, *TMS*, III.2.4.
47. Hanley, “Commerce and Corruption,” 143.
48. Smith, *TMS*, I.iii.3.1.
49. Robertson, *Case for the Enlightenment*, 394.
50. Smith, *TMS*, I.iii.3.2.
51. *Ibid.*, I.iii.3.5.
52. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for the journal in helping me make this point clearer.
53. Smith, *TMS*, III.2.27.
54. Smith originally included La Rochefoucauld alongside Mandeville, but removed this in the final edition upon the request of the former’s descendants.

However, as the original argument was anyway always trained on Mandeville's specific arguments, the removal was of no material consequence.

55. See the editor's introduction at Smith, *TMS*, 1–5.
56. Smith, *TMS*, VII.ii.4.7.
57. *Ibid.*, VII.ii.4.8.
58. *Ibid.*, VII.ii.4.10.
59. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees Volume 2*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 128–36.
60. Smith, "Letter," 251.
61. Hont, *Commercial Society*, 35.
62. Hume, *Treatise*, T.3.2.1-2; SBN 477-84, T.3.3.1-2; SBN 574-91.
63. Smith, *TMS*, III.I.1-7.
64. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees Volume 1*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 51.
65. Hume, *Treatise*, T.3.2.6.11; SBN 533-4, T.3.3.1.11; SBN 578-9. On this see especially Hundert, *Enlightenment's Fable*, 62–86.
66. Hanley, "Commerce and Corruption," 143.
67. Smith, *TMS*, VII.ii.4.13. For differing assessments of Smith's response to Mandeville, compare Hundert, *Enlightenment's Fable*, chap. 5, with Force, *Self-Interest*, chap. 1.
68. Smith, *TMS*, IV.I.2.
69. *Ibid.*, IV.I.3.
70. *Ibid.*, IV.I.4-6.
71. *Ibid.*, IV.I.8.
72. Hanley, "Commerce and Corruption," 141.
73. Jerry Z. Muller, *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours: Designing the Decent Society* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 133.
74. Hont, *Commercial Society*, 92. Hont is wrong to say that Smith "rehearses" Hume's points; Smith is correcting what he takes to be Hume's mistakes.
75. For a reading of Smith on the role of utility in the psychology of consumption which is closer to mine, although still different in important technical respects, Daniel Diatkine, "Vanity and the Love of System in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*," *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 17 (2010).
76. Smith, *TMS*, IV.I.8.
77. *Ibid.*, IV.I.8, emphasis added.
78. *Ibid.*, I.iii.2.1.
79. Hume, *Treatise*, T.2.1.10-11; SBN 309-24.
80. Rousseau, "Second Discourse," 218.
81. The contempt the poor receive, through lack of spectator sympathy with their poverty, operates in exactly the reverse manner.
82. Smith, *TMS*, I.iii.2.1.
83. Rousseau, "Second Discourse," 171, also 184 on how the rich "value the things they enjoy only to the extent that the others are deprived of them."

84. Smith, *TMS*, I.i.2, “Of the Pleasure of Mutual Sympathy,” which also lays out Smith’s core claim about how “mutual” sympathy brings pleasure, and hence is the foundation of normative approbation and disapprobation.
85. David Hume, “Letter to Adam Smith, July 1759,” in *Hume’s Letters: Volume 1, 1727-65*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 313.
86. Rousseau, “Second Discourse,” 173.
87. Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 80–95. Rosen also compares Smith’s theory of natural authority with Rousseau’s account and notes the considerable further complexity and sophistication of the former, 95–100, 117–29.
88. David Hume, “Of the First Principles of Government,” in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 32–33. For a full explication of Hume’s theory of natural authority, Paul Sagar, “The State without Sovereignty: Authority and Obligation in Hume’s Political Philosophy,” *History of Political Thought* 37 (2016).
89. Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 401–3.
90. Hume, *Treatise*, T.3.2.8-10; SBN 539-67; cf. “Of Passive Obedience” and “Of the Original Contract,” in *Essays*.
91. Smith, *TMS*, I.iii.2.3.
92. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), V.ii.1–25.
93. On this see especially Istvan Hont, “Adam Smith’s History of Law and Government as Political Theory,” in *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn*, ed. Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Smith’s intellectual biographer suggests that the lectures were first delivered by Smith in Edinburgh in the late 1740s, meaning Smith’s attempts to develop his own theory of natural authority significantly pre-date his encounter with Rousseau: Phillipson, *Enlightened Life*, 90–92.
94. Smith, “Letter,” 251.
95. Smith, *TMS*, IV.I.10.
96. Ibid.; cf. Ignatief, “Republic of Needs,” 191.
97. Smith, *TMS*, IV.I.10. This fundamental point is reiterated, although applied in a different direction, in the *Wealth of Nations*, with Smith’s declaration that “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”: *WN*.I.ii.2.
98. Hont, *Commercial Society*, 80.
99. Ibid., 92.
100. For discussion, see Charles L. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 259–66, but also the response in Samuel Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), chap. 6.

101. Smith apparently recognized the intellectual power of Rousseau's later *Social Contract*, which he is supposed to have claimed "will one day avenge all of the persecutions he experienced": Barthélémy Faujas de Saint-Fond, *Travels in England, Scotland and the Hebrides, undertaken for the purpose of examining the state of the arts, the sciences, natural history and manners, in Great Britain* (London: James Ridgway, 1799), II, 242. Yet Smith clearly constructed a very different kind of politics to Rousseau. Appreciation of ability is distinct from influence or agreement.
102. Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes*, "Introduction," 16–20 especially, and chap. 1 on the French reception of Hobbes.
103. For analyses, see Anthony B. Atkinson, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Branko Milanovic, *Worlds Apart: Measuring International and Global Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
104. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2014).

### **Author Biography**

**Paul Sagar**, PhD, is currently a junior research fellow at King's College, Cambridge. His main areas of expertise and research lie in the political thought of the eighteenth century, as well as issues relating to "realism" in contemporary political theory, especially the work of Bernard Williams.