

SMITH AT 300: HOW SELFISH SOEVER MAN MAY BE SUPPOSED

BY

KAREN HORN 

Selecting a single favorite quote from the work of one's favorite thinker is quite a challenge. Although I had been immediately enthusiastic about the project when I first heard about it, I struggled with this selection task for weeks. The first reason is that there are just so many quotable passages in Adam Smith's work that I like very much, and not always on the same grounds. Some quotes I appreciate because they drive home Smith's broader argument, or because they are philosophically rich, such as his quite Lockean evaluation of long apprenticeships in the *Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1976; *WNI* x.c.12). Others have been long-time companions for me, either because they require a more meticulous analysis than one would think, for example the famous brewer or baker passage (*WN* I.ii.2), or because there is something paradoxical about them, such as the quote that describes "the great precept of nature to love ourselves only as our neighbour is capable of loving us" (*Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1756] 1976; *TMS* I.i.5.5). And then there are passages that are enormous fun to read because Smith gives free rein to his literary skills and irony, such as the "poor man's son" passage in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS* IV.i.8), or where he sheds his polite restraint, for example when he lashes out against Oxford (*TMS* V.ii.f.8) or against colluding merchants (*WN* I.x.c.27). The second reason why the choice wasn't easy had to do with the underlying, perhaps unintended, incentives of the project itself. Opting for a popular quote came at the risk of more competition and fewer chances in the submission process. In the end, I nevertheless dropped all tactical considerations and went for the well-known opening words in Smith's first opus magnum, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it" (*TMS* I.i.I.1).

In order to prove how much I like these opening words, let me admit to a ridiculous (past) habit here. For some time, I used a part of this quote as a password for some online tool that I had to log into every morning. What is it that I like so much about these lines? It is their very position in the book and their tremendous foundational role, just like a small seed that will produce a large forest. In novels, the importance of the incipit, the opening

Karen Horn: Universität Erfurt. Email: karen.horn@uni-erfurt.de

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words, is obvious: it sets the tone and defines the mood. Just think of the hard-to-translate first sentence in Albert Camus's 1942 novel *L'étranger*: "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte." Sober and sobering, its brutal brevity reflects both the protagonist's disturbing indifference and the ill fate that awaits him. Scholars in moral philosophy and economics aren't novelists, and we don't usually expect them to deploy any comparable art of composition. But Adam Smith is a master in it.

Of course, his incipit isn't quite as succinct as Camus's, but that doesn't make it less powerful or intriguing. It deserves the same close reading. In fact, Smith throws the word "selfish" at our faces as early on as possible, shocking the readers out of any potential complacency. At the same time, he introduces us to his typical, idiosyncratic logical tactics. When he observes something that he will be using as a conjectural premise for his system, he may nevertheless take a personal distance now and then, disinvolve himself, and thereby sort of wash his hands of responsibility. Here, he by no means bluntly judges man as a selfish being; no, he merely notes that some people "may" suppose that man is selfish, and perhaps excessively so. This is the de-emotionalized hypothesis that he starts from, nothing more and nothing less. Later in the text, the reader will understand that as much as Smith himself disdains crude selfishness (e.g., *TMS* II.ii.1.3; *TMS* III.3.4; *TMS* III.4.1; *TMS* IV.1.10; *TMS* VII.ii.2.13; *TMS* VII.ii.3.4; *WN* II.iii.42; *WN* IV.ix.13), he views the underlying dispositions of self-interest and self-love as naturally given and socially useful—under the condition that they be checked and balanced (e.g., *TMS* III.3.4; *TMS* III.4.12; *TMS* VII.ii.3.16).

The hypothetical part of the opening sentence ends after seven words, after the first comma, upon which Smith switches to certainty. Through the catchy paradox that unfolds between the two legs of the sentence, between "may be supposed" and "evidently," he erects the two systematic pillars that his philosophical edifice will rest upon, here, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and also, after some contextual adaptation, in the *Wealth of Nations* (see Horn 2019, p. 26). Smith puts it all on the table. He builds his system on the stunningly lean twin assumptions about human nature according to which people care about themselves (self-regard) and also about others (other-regard). Minimalistic as this is, everything starts from there. By the way that Smith introduces these parallel dispositions, it is clear that the latter cannot be collapsed into the first, as he also explains at length when dealing with Francis Hutcheson and Bernard Mandeville (e.g., *TMS* VII.ii.3.13; *TMS* VII.iii.1.4). Other-regard and self-regard coexist. Each in itself, unchecked by the other, is but a moral corner solution. We must strive to prudently combine the two time and again. In Smith's system, everything evolves in interaction, and everything is about balance.

That's a wise enough insight to begin a day with, isn't it?

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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