

THESIS ABSTRACT

GROWTH AND PROGRESS IN ADAM SMITH'S THOUGHT

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The thesis deals with the rich and complex link between growth and progress in Adam Smith's work by focusing on two essential elements of thought. The first is that Adam Smith aimed at creating a comprehensive and consistent system of wide-ranging moral philosophy. This system revolves around three topics—morality, law, and economics—in order have to a good grasp of the social life of men, as rich and complex as it may be. The second element of thought, which is seldom mentioned and is linked to the first, is Adam Smith's strong and almost continuous interest in rhetoric and belles lettres. Thus, the thesis seeks to shed a new light on Smith's unfinished work, and more particularly on his study of the connection between growth and progress, based on an extensive recourse to the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*.

The first chapter ("The Corruption of Workers in Commercial Societies") deals with probably the main moral issue brought up by economic development. It is shown that the Smithian analysis in Book V of the *Wealth of Nations* does not foreshadow the Marxian alienation, but rather extends the debate from civic humanism on the loss of civic virtues. The analysis nonetheless slightly diverges in that it proposes an extended definition of the corruption of workers. This new corruption would encompass the loss of the four cardinal virtues of the theory of moral sentiments: prudence, justice, self-command, and beneficence.

The second chapter ("Corruption and the Ethics of Commerce") shows that, according to Smith, men are 'commercial animals' who exchange goods and services,

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feelings and passions, opinions and ideas in similar fashion. A Smithian model for bilateral exchange is developed, based on the mutual sympathy pattern. It is shown that, far from promoting selfishness and corruption, commerce encourages sympathy, impartiality, prudence, justice, and self-command.

The third chapter (“Wealth, Virtue and Happiness”) espouses that Smith wrote the *Wealth of Nations* as a moral philosopher. This work provides an answer to a moral problem: how to promote a society where everyone could lead a dignified and decent life. Indeed, increasing a nation’s wealth means nothing more than ensuring everyone enjoys an easier access to vital and social goods, otherwise referred to as ‘propriety goods,’ ‘easier’ meaning requiring less work, pain, and loss of time and liberty.

The fourth chapter (“The Invisible Hand”) first stresses that this concept refers to the cunning of Nature, through which it satisfies its needs by inducing men to perform socially benevolent actions, of which they are not aware. Hence, two arguments are put forward. On the one hand, the invisible hand is nothing but a metaphor, a figure of speech that embodies the idea without adding any meaning. On the other hand, there may exist an “invisible hand” ethics: the personal interest of the capitalist harmonizes with the general interest only if statesmen are impartial and capitalists are prudent.

Chapter Five (“Of Discourses on Commercial Society”) gives a new interpretation of Smith’s critique of mercantilist and physiocratic systems, based on the dichotomy between the didactic and the rhetorical discourse. Thus, both systems are said to be ‘rhetorical systems’ because they give partial, biased, and incomplete visions of political economy. By taking on the philosopher’s part, Smith proposes to denounce their errors and false pretense. As an impartial spectator of the economic activity, he also suggests the elaboration of a didactic, comprehensive, and impartial discourse: that of the system of natural liberty.

Chapter Six (“From the Discourses to the Economic Reality: The Wage Relationship through the Discourses on Political Economy”) underlines that there exists a dual point of view of the wage relationship in the *Wealth of Nations*. The first is a rhetorical speech that opposes the capitalists’ and the workforce’s interests, and shows the superiority of the former in wage negotiation because of their superior social status and power of persuasion. The second is a didactical discourse that reconciles the interest of both classes, thanks to a new, positive relation between wage and productivity, which gives way to a virtuous circle of growth.

Chapter Seven (“Virtues and Morality of the Market”) highlights the moral aspect of Smith’s perception of the market. It is shown first that the process of the creation and evolution of economic rules or prices is similar to that of moral rules. It is contended further that the market is an impartial spectator of desires and the subjective appreciation of goods, and that natural prices are just prices. The last part sheds light on the moral discipline that is imposed by a competitive market.

As a conclusion, this work promotes the idea that Smith is a ‘commercial humanist.’ The subject matter of his work is not the commercial society as such, but the commercial civilization. He wishes to show that the quality of life of men betters with the progress of society. These views are economic but also moral and political. The development of commerce softens the manners of men, and brings with it freedom, independence, wealth, and security to individuals. Growth induces a beneficial process of civilization.