

Rousseau and Smith: On Sympathy as a First Principle

Pierre Force

In the work of Adam Smith explicit references to Rousseau are few. The only extended treatment of Rousseau's views happened very early in Smith's career. In 1756 Smith published a critical review of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, just a few months after the publication of the book.¹ Smith scholars have generally seen the review as negative, but its ambiguous tone has allowed for diverging interpretations. I was one of the first commentators to argue, in a 1997 article² and in a 2003 book,³ that Rousseau was an essential interlocutor for Smith and that the discussion of first principles in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations* appropriated key elements of Rousseau's philosophy (Keith Tribe's review described my analysis of the Rousseau-Smith connection as a "hitherto unwritten book").⁴ I will structure this article as a critical discussion. I will summarize the claims I made at the time regarding how Smith's discussion of first principles was indebted to Rousseau. I will then summarize the objections made to these claims in reviews of my 2003 book, and will attempt to advance the discussion by responding to these objections. Finally, I will try to show how this debate about first principles was related to the story of the development of commerce as Smith told it in the *Wealth of Nations*.

Early Claims About the Rousseau-Smith Connection

Before I summarize the claims I made about the Rousseau-Smith connection in 1997 and 2003, I should indicate what the state of the question was

¹ *Letter to the Edinburgh Review*, in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects. The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976–1983), III, pp. 242–256.

² P. Force, "Self-Love, Identification, and the Origin of Political Economy," *Yale French Studies* 92 (1997): pp. 46–64.

³ P. Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith. A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. chap. 1 and 4.

⁴ K. Tribe, review of P. Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, *History of Economic Ideas* 12:3 (2004): pp. 123–125.

at the time. In the small number of studies that discussed the relationship between these two authors, Rousseau was almost always presented as a polemical target for Smith. According to E.J. Hundert, Smith's review of the *Second Discourse* was "an attack upon Rousseau."⁵ To the extent that Rousseau had some importance for Smith, it was as someone whose theses should be refuted. E.J. Hundert argued that "for Smith, confronting Rousseau's picture of the development of civility and commerce as the last phase of a history of moral decline was the necessary preliminary to his qualified endorsement of competitive individualism in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*."⁶ Major Smith scholars such as A.L. Macfie and D.D. Raphael gave similar interpretations. According to A.L. Macfie, the *Letter to the Edinburgh Review* is a "statement of man's essentially social nature" in which Smith "criticizes Mandeville and Rousseau" for describing natural man as an unsociable being.⁷ D.D. Raphael argued that in the passage in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* about the invisible hand Smith "was implicitly contesting Rousseau's claim that the acquisition of property causes inequality."⁸ Such conventional wisdom about the Rousseau-Smith connection was itself based on widely shared assumptions about each author. Rousseau was seen as the most eloquent critic of modern commercial society. Adam Smith was taken to be its most prominent advocate. It stood to reason that the latter had to be a critic of the former.

There were dissenting views, however. If we go as far back as Delatour's 1886 book on the life and works of Adam Smith, we'll see a more nuanced assessment of the relationship between these two authors.⁹ Delatour noticed the ambiguity of Smith's review of the *Second Discourse* and took it to mean that Smith reserved judgment on Rousseau.¹⁰ He also pointed out that the critique of the division of labor one finds in the *Wealth of Nations* seemed to be borrowed from Rousseau: "In sum, it is civilization itself that the Scottish philosopher seems incidentally to put on trial, and in truth this reads not like a fragment of the *Wealth of Nations* but like a passage from Rousseau."¹¹ In the same interpretive vein R. Glenn Morrow noticed in the conclusion of his 1923 book that in ascribing the origin of government to the rise of private property Smith probably

⁵ E. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 220.

⁶ Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable*, p. 221.

⁷ A. Macfie, *The Individual and Society. Papers on Adam Smith* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 44.

⁸ D. Raphael, *Adam Smith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 71–72.

⁹ A. Delatour, *Adam Smith, sa vie, ses travaux, ses doctrines* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1886).

¹⁰ Delatour, *Adam Smith*, pp. 84–85. ¹¹ Delatour, *Adam Smith*, p. 145.

followed Rousseau's *Second Discourse*.¹² In addition, "another point of agreement with Rousseau was his distrust of class interests in government, and his belief that the general welfare is best expressed by individuals, not by groups."¹³ In 1938–39, Richard B. Sewall published a series of articles about the reception of the *Second Discourse* in England. According to Sewall, Adam Smith "was suspicious of Rousseau's sentimental picture of the state of nature, but there was much in the *Discourse* that he found to praise and even to make use of in future publications of his own."¹⁴ Sewall added that the first paragraph of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was "little more than a restatement of Rousseau's conception of pity."¹⁵ More generally, "when Smith summed up the essay as revealing 'only the true spirit of a republican carried a little too far,' he indicated a sympathy for Rousseau's political liberalism from which he never completely departed."¹⁶ In the 1980s Michael Ignatieff and István Hont published several pieces, separately and together, which argued that Smith took Rousseau's positions seriously and shared many of his concerns about the rise of modern commercial society. According to Ignatieff, "Smith's [. . .] deep concern, for example, with the issue of standing armies, and his unconcealed preference for government by the independent landed class in preference to the ascendant commercial interests make it clear how deeply he shared Rousseau's anxieties, if not his solutions."¹⁷ Ignatieff and Hont together claimed that "Rousseau is an important if unavowed interlocutor in the passages in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* which Smith devoted to the pursuit of wealth in modern society."¹⁸ Lastly, in his 1996 book on the history of British political economy, Donald Winch argued that "Smith's theory of sympathy, as expounded in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is an augmented version of Rousseau's conception of *pitié*."¹⁹

¹² R. Morrow, *The Ethical and Economic Theories of Adam Smith: A Study in the Social Philosophy of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1923), p. 87.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ R. Sewall, "Rousseau's Second Discourse in England from 1755 to 1762," *Philological Quarterly* 17:2 (1938): pp. 97–114, 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* ¹⁶ R. Sewall, "Rousseau's Second Discourse in England from 1755 to 1762," p. 99.

¹⁷ M. Ignatieff, "Smith, Rousseau and the Republic of Needs," in T. Smout (ed.), *Scotland and Europe 1200–1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1986), pp. 187–206, 197. Also see Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), pp. 107–131.

¹⁸ I. Hont and M. Ignatieff, "Needs and Justice in the *Wealth of Nations*," in I. Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 389–443, 400. Originally published in I. Hont and M. Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–44.

¹⁹ D. Winch, *Riches and Poverty. An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 72.

Winch qualified his claim by adding that, according to Rousseau, *pitié* diminished with civilization, while Smith saw civilized society as the vehicle for the perfection of sympathy.

Rousseau and Smith on First Principles

In my own work on the relationship between Smith and Rousseau, I focused on the discussion of first principles: the meaning of *amour-propre*, *amour de soi*, *pitié*, and *identification* in Rousseau, and how these concepts were appropriated by Smith in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*. I made the following four claims:

1. **From the *Second Discourse* Smith borrowed the notion that *pity* cannot be derived from or explained by *self-interest* (based on a discussion of Mandeville).** The background of the discussion was the analysis of *amour-propre* by seventeenth-century French moralists such as La Rochefoucauld, who had claimed that pity was fundamentally a selfish feeling because it is our own misfortunes we feel in the suffering of other people. Mandeville was seen as the continuator and exponent of these theories that ascribed all human behavior to *amour-propre*. Yet as Rousseau, and Smith after him, showed, Mandeville acknowledged the existence of pity as a separate principle. The refutation of the “selfish hypothesis” came from inside the system of its most famous proponent.
2. **Smith appropriated Rousseau’s concept of *identification* when he established *sympathy* as the cornerstone of his system in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.** In ancient and early modern accounts of sympathy, one “felt the pain” of others quite literally. Sympathy was described as a sort of emotional contagion that went from one body to another. Rousseau’s innovation was to show that we experience pity by putting ourselves mentally in the position of the sufferer, a process he called identification. Smith appropriated this point and developed it as a paradox: through sympathy we do not have access to the feelings of others; we reconstruct these feelings through imagination in our own minds, based on our own feelings.
3. **Smith analyzed *vanity* (the engine of economic growth) as based on reason and reflection, like Rousseau’s *amour-propre*.** For Rousseau, *amour-propre*, far from being a basic, instinctual impulse, was a product of reason and reflection (and as such a historically contingent development). This connection between *amour-propre* and

rational calculation was appropriated by Smith in both the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*. Smith insisted that in modern commercial society the acquisition of goods and luxuries was the most common way of securing the esteem and approbation of others.

4. In the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith borrowed Rousseau's analysis of commerce as a form of persuasion, where self-interest was used as an argument, not as a first principle. This last point was derived from the third one. The famous passage about the baker and the butcher in the *Wealth of Nations* is conventionally read as stressing the role of self-interest as an explanatory principle for economic behavior. Yet Smith's point, borrowed from Rousseau, was not that those who engage in commercial transactions are self-interested (this would be trivial or tautological). It was that commercial transactions are a form of persuasion where self-interest is used as an argument. Rousseau had shown that in modern commercial society, the only way of obtaining assistance from others was to appeal to their self-interest. Such appeal was therefore subject to debate and persuasion.

Summary of Objections

Before I take up the objections, I would like to quote Gilbert Faccarello's review,²⁰ which conflated these four points into two after stating that my study of the Rousseau-Smith connection "is certainly the book's strong point, its most novel and also most fascinating aspect."²¹ According to Faccarello, the book established the following two main points:

1. The first move is to counter Mandeville's "doctrine of interest" by showing that human behavior is naturally founded upon other principles: Rousseau's *amour de soi*, *identification* or *pitié*, which correspond to self-love and sympathy in Smith (p. 43), all behaviors that cannot be "described as rational pursuit of self-interest" (p. 46).
2. But at the same time there is a recovery, though historicization, of the "selfish hypothesis": what we call the "rational pursuit of self-interest" certainly exists, but it is an "historically contingent phenomenon" (p. 247). The behavior described by Mandeville, far from being

²⁰ G. Faccarello, "A Tale of Two Traditions: Pierre Force's *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*," *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 12:4 (2005): 701–712.

²¹ Faccarello, "A Tale of Two Traditions . . .," p. 704.

universal, is only “the description of human behavior in civilized society, a behavior that is in large part driven by the desire to obtain marks of esteem and approbation by others.” (p. 44) At the conceptual level, this translates in Rousseau as the emergence of *amour-propre*: reason and reflection, allied to identification, engender it (p. 262) and the calculation of interest becomes a means to maximize our status in the eyes of other individuals. In Smith, this is translated by vanity – “a passion that does not originate in self-love [. . .] but rather in sympathy and the desire for sympathy” (p. 261) – which engenders the desire to ameliorate one’s condition. *Amour-propre* and *vanity* are practically universal principles of conduct in commercial society: enjoyment is postponed so that the admiration and approbation of others might be obtained through accumulation.²²

In the critical reaction to the book, the main contributions as Faccarello summarizes them have for the most part not been challenged. Most of the objections have been directed at the claims regarding sympathy and identification. Christopher Berry²³ criticizes my contention that Smith “bases sympathy on a psychological disposition that is very similar to what Rousseau calls identification.”²⁴ Like me he quotes a passage from the *Second Discourse* where Rousseau speculates that identification with the sufferer must have been much greater in the savage man than that it is in the civilized. He then brings up another, conflicting passage: “L’imagination qui fait tant de ravages parmi nous ne parle point à des cœurs sauvages” [*imagination, which causes so much damage among us, does not speak to savage hearts*].²⁵ Since identification requires imagination, and savage man had no imagination, savage man’s pity cannot have been based on identification. Berry then brings a related objection, drawn from N.J.H. Dent’s work on Rousseau, which he says points to a fundamental difference between Rousseau’s pity and Smith’s sympathy.²⁶ According to Rousseau, pity “moves us” and impels us to help the sufferer. However, there is no such impulse in Smith’s sympathy, since we can sympathize even with the dead. Finally, as Berry points out, the development of civilization works in opposite ways for Smith and Rousseau regarding the efficacy of sympathy: “Whereas for Rousseau the development of ‘civilization’ is deleterious because it causes pity to be overlaid, for Smith civilization enhances the efficacy of sympathy because the interactions within a developed, complex

²² *Ibid.*

²³ C. Berry, “Smith under Strain,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 3 (2004): pp. 455–463.

²⁴ Berry, p. 455. ²⁵ *Ibid.* ²⁶ Berry, p. 456.

commercial society (an ‘assembly of strangers’), more thoroughly abate ‘the violence’ of feelings than those that occur in face-to-face settings.”²⁷

Similarly, Jimena Hurtado points to major differences between Rousseau’s pity and Smith’s sympathy. She argues, based on Larrère’s analysis,²⁸ that Smith’s “system of sympathy allows the exclusion of the poor through their invisibility.”²⁹ This stands in contrast to Rousseau’s “system of pity, where the poor leads to the identification with the human condition shared in suffering.”³⁰ Hurtado claims that for Rousseau “pity is the principle of moral, social, political and economic life.” Sympathy, on the other hand, cannot be the foundation of social order because it generates a world of isolated individuals who hide behind false appearances.³¹

Gloria Vivenza’s objections are in a similar vein.³² According to her, I equate Mandeville’s (and Rousseau’s) “pity” with Smith’s “sympathy.”³³ Smith, however, “makes clear that to himself ‘sympathy’ is something more than pity.”³⁴ Consequently, I have difficulty accounting for the “counterintuitive, straining or paradoxical [...] passages where Smith says that we sympathize more easily with the joy than with the sorrow of others.”³⁵

S.J. Pack’s objections are of a different nature.³⁶ While the previous reviewers challenged the connections I establish between Rousseau’s first principles and Smith’s, Pack states: “Force’s central point, that Smith was deeply influenced by Rousseau, and accepted many of Rousseau’s criticisms of commercial society, is basically correct.”³⁷ However, Pack claims priority for his own analyses, which he published in a 2000 article,³⁸ while my book appeared in 2003. On the priority claims, I confess that I was unaware of Pack’s 2000 article when I published my 2003 book. However, my analysis of the Rousseau-Smith connection predates the 2003 book

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ C. Larrère, “Adam Smith et Jean-Jacques Rousseau: sympathie et pitié,” *Kairos. Revue de Philosophie* 20 (2002): pp. 73–94.

²⁹ J. Hurtado, “Pity, Sympathy and Self-Interest: Review of Pierre Force’s *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*,” *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 12:4 (2005): pp. 713–721, 718.

³⁰ *Ibid.* ³¹ *Ibid.*

³² G. Vivenza, review of *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science*, EH.NET, September 2004: http://eh.net/book_reviews/self-interest-before-adam-smith-a-genealogy-of-economic-science/ (accessed September 16, 2014).

³³ *Ibid.* ³⁴ *Ibid.* ³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ S. Pack, review of *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 27:4 (2005): pp. 465–467.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

³⁸ S. Pack, “The Rousseau-Smith Connection: Towards an Understanding of Professor West’s ‘Splenetic Smith,’” *History of Economic Ideas* 8:3 (2000): pp. 35–62.

since the main claims were stated in a 1997 *Yale French Studies* article. Essentially, S.J. Pack's response is that on the Rousseau-Smith connection my analysis is valid but he's the one who should get credit for these findings. As I will show later, my analysis is substantially different from Pack's. I will not discuss Schliesser's review here,³⁹ since I have already done it elsewhere,⁴⁰ and it does not mainly bear on the Rousseau-Smith connection (Schliesser, like Pack, seems to agree with me on the central importance of this connection).

Pity, Sympathy, and Identification

There is a good deal of convergence (Pack and Schliesser excepted) in the objections I have summarized above. The critics are on to something, but I'd like to show that the objections are based on a misunderstanding, which is itself the consequence of a major difficulty in Rousseau's thinking about pity and identification.

In his own analysis of the Rousseau-Smith connection, S.J. Pack states that "Smith's sympathy is fundamentally a generalization, a broadening of the idea of pity."⁴¹ According to Berry, Hurtado, and Vivenza, my own analysis posits a similar equation between Rousseau's pity and Smith's sympathy. The point I made is a more complex one, however. It took two additional dimensions into account: first, the concept of identification, which is not synonymous for pity; second, Rousseau's stadial theory, in which pity works differently for primitive man, savage man, and civilized man.

As we have seen above, Berry points to a fundamental difference between Rousseau's pity and Smith's sympathy. For Rousseau, if I feel pity I feel compelled to help the one who suffers. There is no such impulse in Smith's sympathy. According to N.J.H. Dent, to whom Berry refers to support his point, the kind of identification that is at work in Rousseau's pity is far removed from "*projective* identification,"⁴² i.e. what psychologists usually mean by identification today. As Dent puts it, "what 'identification' signifies is that just as when I feel a pain I am *immediately* and *directly* moved by distress to try to alleviate it, so in pity I am moved to try

³⁹ E. Schliesser, review of Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, *The Adam Smith Review* 3 (2007): pp. 203–211.

⁴⁰ P. Force, "Putting Categorizations in Context," *The Adam Smith Review* 3 (2007): pp. 211–214.

⁴¹ S. Pack, "The Rousseau-Smith Connection . . .," p. 46.

⁴² N. Dent, *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 130.

to alleviate the pain of another with that same immediacy and directness.”⁴³ I am moved to respond to another person’s hurts exactly as I am moved to respond to my own hurts. This stands in contrast to “sympathetic suffering,”⁴⁴ a process in which I trade places mentally with the other and experience the other’s suffering thanks to the work of my imagination. What Dent calls “sympathetic suffering” is close to Smith’s sympathy. In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith insists that through sympathy I never have access to the feelings of the other. I reconstruct those feelings in my own mind based on my own feelings and my imagination. In that sense, Smith’s sympathy is far removed from Rousseau’s pity.

Rousseau’s analysis of pity and identification is far more complex, however. Dent bases his analysis on two references to Rousseau. The first one is to *Emile*, where Rousseau describes pity as the first feeling that touches the human heart according to the order of nature:

In fact how do we let ourselves be moved by pity if not by transporting ourselves outside of ourselves and identifying with the suffering animal by leaving, as it were, our own being to take on his being? We suffer only so much as we judge that it suffers. It is not in ourselves, it is in him that we suffer.⁴⁵

The second one is the *Second Discourse*, where Rousseau had used similar language: “Commiseration will be all the more energetic as the observing animal identifies himself more intimately with the suffering animal.”⁴⁶ For the purposes of our analysis, the main points of these two passages are the following: natural pity is based on identification; the stronger the identification, the stronger the pity; identification in this context means the ability to feel someone else’s pain without mediation: we suffer not in ourselves but in the other. In that sense, pity is “prior to all reflection.”⁴⁷

However, another passage from the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* poses an exegetic difficulty. Pity alone cannot move us. It is effective only with the help of the imagination:

Pity, although natural to the heart of man, would remain eternally inactive without the imagination that puts it into play. How do we let ourselves be moved by pity? By transporting ourselves outside of ourselves; by identifying ourselves with the suffering being.⁴⁸

Similarly, in the passage from *Emile* that Dent quotes to support his analysis of pity as an unmediated feeling, Rousseau does mention the role

⁴³ Dent, *Rousseau*, p. 129. ⁴⁴ Dent, *Rousseau*, p. 130. ⁴⁵ *Emile*, CW XIII, p. 374.

⁴⁶ *Discourse on Inequality*, CW III, p. 37. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, CW VII, p. 306.

of imagination in triggering pity: "Thus no one becomes sensitive until his imagination is animated and begins to transport him out of himself."⁴⁹ This description of pity is much closer to Smith's description of sympathy: it is with the help of imagination that we identify with someone else's feelings. David Marshall has shown the central role that theatrical metaphors play in Smith's description of sympathy as well as in Rousseau's description of pity. As he puts it, "for Smith, sympathy depends upon a theatrical relation between a spectator and a spectacle."⁵⁰ Such a theatrical model is already present in the *Second Discourse*. In his analysis of pity in the state of nature, Rousseau states that pity will be stronger when the "observing animal" (*animal spectateur*) identifies more closely with the "suffering animal" (*animal souffrant*). What the English translation fails to convey properly is that the animal experiencing pity is a spectator and the suffering animal is a spectacle. The reference to theater is not coincidental. For Rousseau, the experience of theater is the best proof that the propensity to feel pity is an integral part of human nature:

Such is the force of natural pity, which the most depraved morals still have difficulty destroying, since daily in our theaters one sees, moved and crying for the troubles of an unfortunate person, a man who, if he were in the Tyrant's place, would aggravate his enemy's torment even more.⁵¹

Rousseau may have misgivings about theater as a source of corruption but he argues that paradoxically the position of the spectator in the theater approximates the position of men vis-à-vis each other in the state of nature. Because the characters on stage are fictional no interests are at stake, thus the sight of suffering can trigger the full force of natural pity. On the contrary, in civilized society, calculations of self-interest stand in the way of our propensity to identify with others.

Marshall deals with the exegetical difficulty from a deconstructionist point of view. His comparative reading of Smith and Rousseau leads him to conclude that Rousseau's state of nature is "always already theatrical."⁵² In his narrative of origins, Rousseau wants to posit pity as a pure, original, unmediated feeling, but the narrative of origins necessarily brings in language and concepts that are connected to civilization. In that sense, thanks to the theatrical metaphor, Smith's sympathy as a projective form of identification is already present in Rousseau's description of natural pity.

⁴⁹ *Emile*, 374.

⁵⁰ D. Marshall, *The Figure of Theater: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 190.

⁵¹ *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, p. 36. ⁵² Marshall, *The Figure of Theater*, p. 151.

Another way of dealing with the difficulty is Goldschmidt's analysis, which involves some measure of rational reconstruction of Rousseau but is very useful in clarifying the issues.⁵³ Goldschmidt makes distinctions based on Rousseau's stadial theory. He claims that the kind of pity that is prior to all reflection (simple pity) belongs to the primitive man. The pity that is based on identification (*pitié identifiante*, to use Goldschmidt's words) belongs to the savage man. There is a parallel evolution in the development of *amour-propre*. The rise in the ability to reflect marks the passage from primitive to savage man, and with it the transformation of love of oneself (*amour de soi*) into disinterested self-love (*amour-propre désintéressé* – Goldschmidt's expression again) i.e. a kind of self-love that only wants marks of esteem, and not the wealth that triggers esteem in civilized society. The third stage in the evolution is marked by the full development of human reason, which is itself closely tied to the ability to compute one's interest:

Behold all our faculties developed, memory and imagination in play, amour-propre aroused, reason rendered active, and the mind having almost reached the limit of the perfection of which it is susceptible.⁵⁴

The ability to make rational assessments of his interests has transformed man's self-love. It is no longer *désintéressé*. It has become *intéressé* ("aroused," as in the translation above, or more precisely "looking out for its interests"). In the third stage, the workings of pity and identification are also changed in fundamental ways. The "feeling that puts us in the position of him who suffers" is "obscure and lively in Savage man, developed but weak in Civilized man."⁵⁵ The capacity for identification evolves in two seemingly contradictory ways: from obscure to developed, and from strong to weak. Prior to the development of human reason, our ability to identify with the suffering of others always resulted in pity. When combined with reason and reflection, the capacity for identification is weaker, and therefore less likely to result in pity. For Rousseau, it is the philosopher, rational man par excellence, who says at the sight of the sufferer: "Perish if you will; I am safe."⁵⁶ Now, our capacity for identification is weaker because our reason tells us that it would be against our interests to help others, but at the same time it is more developed and more complete. With the development of reason, reflection, and imagination we

⁵³ V. Goldschmidt, *Anthropologie et politique. Les principes du système de Rousseau* (Paris: J.Vrin, 1974), pp. 337–341.

⁵⁴ *Discourse on Inequality*, CW III, p. 51. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

have a much greater ability to see things through the eyes of others, to trade places in fancy with them. This kind of reflective, projective identification is an essential component in the development of *amour-propre*, and it is very similar to what Smith calls sympathy.

Thus, Winch is right to notice that for Rousseau pity diminishes with civilization while for Smith sympathy is perfected by it. Berry, Hurtado, and Vivenza are right to state that there are major differences between Rousseau's pity and Smith's sympathy. However, in my 2003 book I did not attempt to equate Smith's sympathy with Rousseau's pity (differing on this key point from S.J. Pack). I showed that Smith's analysis of sympathy was borrowed from Rousseau's analysis of identification in civilized society.

Rousseau and Smith on the "Unnatural and Retrograde Order"

In order to see what was at stake in these discussions of first principles, I would like to show how the discussion of *amour-propre* and identification was related to the story of the development of commerce as Smith told it in the *Wealth of Nations*.

Adam Smith meant the *Wealth of Nations* to be an attack on the "mercantile system," which favored commerce at the expense of agriculture. This attack is carried out in Book IV of the volume. In the preceding book, Smith tells the prehistory of the mercantile system. He shows that commerce and cities were artificially developed by kings at the expense of agriculture. This was a historically contingent phenomenon that went against the natural course of things. Agriculture should have been developed first, commerce later.

For Smith, there are two classes of needs: natural and artificial. Agriculture addresses natural needs which should be satisfied first. Commerce addresses artificial needs whose satisfaction is secondary:

As subsistence is, in the nature of things, prior to conveniency and luxury, so the industry which procures the former, must necessarily be prior to that which ministers to the latter. The cultivation and improvement of the country, therefore, which affords subsistence, must, necessarily, be prior to the increase of the town, which furnishes only the means of conveniency and luxury.⁵⁷

Agriculture takes precedence over commerce as a matter of natural law. If one lets nature take its course, agriculture will develop before commerce,

⁵⁷ *Wealth of Nations*, in *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* II, p. 377.

and commerce will develop only to the extent that it will help the development of agriculture:

That order of things which necessity imposes in general, though not in every particular country, is, in every particular country, promoted by the natural inclinations of man. If human institutions had never thwarted those natural inclinations, the towns could no-where have increased beyond what the improvement and cultivation of the territory in which they were situated could support.⁵⁸

This is not how things unfolded historically, however. The development of towns and commerce took precedence over the development of agriculture for an array of political and legal reasons. The main cause Smith gives is an alliance of convenience between kings and urban elites against the landed nobility:

The burghers naturally hated and feared the lords. The king hated and feared them too; but though perhaps he might despise, he had no reason either to hate or fear the burghers. Mutual interest, therefore, disposed them to support the king, and the king to support them against the lords. They were the enemies of his enemies, and it was his interest to render them as secure and independent of those enemies as he could.⁵⁹

The exact reasons given matter less than the broader point: the faster development of commerce and cities was the result of decisions made for reasons of convenience or ambition at particular points in time. These decisions were historically contingent but put together they fundamentally altered the “natural progress of opulence.”⁶⁰ In the end, agriculture itself benefitted from the development of commerce, because the growing population of towns had to be fed, but the sequencing of events was such that the “natural order of things” was “entirely inverted.”⁶¹ The effect became the cause and the cause became the effect: “It is thus that through the greater part of Europe the commerce and manufactures of cities, instead of being the effect, have been the cause and occasion of the improvement and cultivation of the country.”⁶²

As István Hont has suggested, in telling this story of “unnatural and retrograde order”⁶³ Smith replicated a move made by Rousseau in the *Second Discourse*.⁶⁴ Hont pointed out that Rousseau did refer to the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* ⁵⁹ *Wealth of Nations, Works II*, p. 402. ⁶⁰ *Wealth of Nations, Works II*, p. 376.

⁶¹ *Wealth of Nations, Works II*, p. 380. ⁶² *Wealth of Nations, Works II*, p. 422.

⁶³ *Wealth of Nations, Works II*, p. 380.

⁶⁴ I. Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

four stages theory of human development, which was broadly used in the eighteenth century and was understood to have been initially formulated by Lucretius in his poem *On the Nature of Things*. The standard theory posited four stages in the development of civilization: 1. Hunting/gathering; 2. Pastoralism; 3. Agriculture; 4. Commerce.⁶⁵ Rousseau's move, according to Hont, was to invert the order of stages 3 and 4. The standard Lucretian story was that commerce arose as a consequence of the development of agriculture. Rousseau's intervention reversed the order of causes and consequences—the development of agriculture was a consequence of the development of commerce:

The invention of the other arts was therefore necessary to force the human Race to apply itself to that of agriculture. As soon as some men needed to smelt and forge iron, other men were needed to feed them. The more the number of workers was multiplied, the fewer hands were engaged in furnishing the common subsistence, without there being fewer mouths to consume it; and since some needed foodstuffs in exchange for their iron, the others finally found the secret of using iron to multiply foodstuffs. From this arose husbandry and agriculture on the one hand, and on the other the art of working metals and multiplying their uses.⁶⁶

According to Rousseau the development of agriculture was predicated on the development of metal tools, and the development of metal tools was itself predicated on the division of labor: those employed in metallurgy could not cultivate the land themselves and had to buy food from farmers. In that sense the development of commerce was a precondition of the development of agriculture. There was never such a thing as subsistence farming: the production of metal tools required the existence of a surplus in food production that could be traded with artisans.

Smith made a very similar point in the *Wealth of Nations*. He argued that farmers could not operate without a whole array of artisans who lived in small towns and provided them with clothes and equipment:

Without the assistance of some artificers, indeed, the cultivation of land cannot be carried on, but with great inconveniency and continual interruption. Smiths, carpenters, wheel-wrights, and plough-wrights, masons, and bricklayers, tanners, shoemakers, and taylors, are people, whose service the farmer has frequent occasion for. Such artificers too stand, occasionally, in need of the assistance of one another; and as their residence is not, like that

⁶⁵ R. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 5–36.

⁶⁶ *Discourse on Inequality*, CW III, p. 50.

of the farmer, necessarily tied down to a precise spot, they naturally settle in the neighbourhood of one another, and thus form a small town or village.⁶⁷

In that sense the commerce between towns and country was not a recent development but rather a precondition of the development of agriculture itself, and the kings who favored towns at the expense of the countryside relied on a mechanism that was always already there.

As a deconstructionist would say, Rousseau, and Smith after him, reversed the hierarchy between origin and end. What was thought to be the end of the story was put at the beginning. Commerce was not a late development made possible by the growth of agriculture. It was precisely the development of commerce that made agriculture possible. In both Smith and Rousseau, we see the same dual move: on the one hand, the assertion of a natural norm, a natural course of things; on the other hand, the story of how this course was altered based on propensities in human nature that were there from the very beginning.

One sees a similar conceptual move here as in the story of pity and identification. Rousseau's state of nature, as Marhsall puts it, is "always already" theatrical. In that sense, the capacity for projective identification was there *in potentia* from the very beginning. In his description of pity in *Emile*, Rousseau says revealingly that pity is a *relative* feeling: "Thus is born pity, the first relative sentiment which touches the human heart according to the order of nature."⁶⁸ In another context he uses the exact same expression, *sentiment relatif*, to describe *amour-propre*:

And that is how the love of self, which is a good and absolute feeling, becomes amour-propre, which is to say a relative feeling by which ones makes comparisons; the latter feeling demands preferences, whose enjoyment is purely negative, and it no longer seeks satisfaction in our own benefit but solely in the harm of others.⁶⁹

We experience pity by comparing our position with that of others. The same operation of comparison is what makes *amour-propre* possible. In Rousseau, the story of agriculture and the story of *amour-propre* have a common root in the concept of *perfectibility*, "a faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual."⁷⁰ Human nature is subject to change, and change is historically contingent; *amour-propre* a historically contingent phenomenon, like the development of cities and

⁶⁷ *Wealth of Nations*, III.i. ⁶⁸ *Emile*, p. 374. ⁶⁹ Rousseau, *Judge of Jean-Jacques*, CW I, p. 9.

⁷⁰ *Discourse on Inequality*, CW III, p. 26.

commerce. The discussion of first principles in the *Wealth of Nations* is not nearly as clear, but there are strong indications that Rousseau's story was a major implicit reference. At the beginning of Book I, Smith poses the question of the origins of commerce and the division of labor. In response, he invokes "the propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another."⁷¹ Such propensity, however, is probably based on a more fundamental principle:

Whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature, of which no further account can be given; or whether, as seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech, it belongs not to our present subject to enquire.⁷²

Smith declines to make a final call on the issue of first principles. This may be due in part to the fact that in the *Wealth of Nations* he proceeded analytically (starting with a problem and resolving it into simpler and simpler nations) while in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* he proceeded *more geometrico* (starting with first principles). This may also be due to the fact that putting "the faculties of reason and speech" as a first principle was controversial. Smith's correspondence with Governor Pownall is revealing in that respect. In his September 25, 1776 letter to Smith, Pownall commented at length on the only passage in the *Wealth of Nations* where Smith brings up first principles. He agreed with Smith that the propensity to barter and trade could not be a first principle, but he felt that Smith's discussion was inconclusive: "I think you have stopped short in your analysis before you have arrived at the first natural cause and principle of the division of labor."⁷³ Pownall's own view was that the first principle of the division of labor was necessarily the same as the first principle of government. If one thought that the origin of government lied in the faculties of reason and speech, one had to believe that government was "an artificial succedaneum to an imagined theoretic state of nature."⁷⁴ In other words, invoking reason and speech as a first principle meant replicating the move Rousseau made in the *Second Discourse*: positing a conjectural state of nature and asserting that the division of labor and the invention of government were historically contingent developments that deviated from the natural course of things:

⁷¹ *Wealth of Nations*, I.ii.1. ⁷² *Wealth of Nations*, I.ii.2.

⁷³ Letter from G. Pownall to A. Smith in *Correspondence of Adam Smith, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 6, p. 338.

⁷⁴ Letter from Pownall to Smith, p. 339.

And as I think that great danger may arise [. . .] in deriving the source of community and government from passions and caprice, creating by will an artificial succedaneum to nature, I could not but in the same manner, *en passant*, make this cursory remark.⁷⁵

Smith did not change the incriminated passage in response to Pownall's warning. What we can learn from the exchange is that for a perceptive early reader like Pownall, Rousseau's story about the development of civilization lurked in the background of Smith's account of the origins of commerce in the *Wealth of Nations*.

⁷⁵ Ibid.