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Seduced by System
Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Embrace of Adam Smith's Philosophy

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There is little scholarly agreement about how to understand the relationship between Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. Philosophical commentators often see the two in fundamental opposition, reading Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as precisely the sort of unflinching, systematic critique of existing society which Burke is held to have so abhorred.¹ There is much truth to this; Smith himself described his magnum opus as 'a very violent attack... upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain'.² Yet historians point out that Smith and Burke were personal friends who not only shared a sentimental attachment, but also considered themselves to be in fundamental agreement on most philosophical and political issues. Burke repeatedly praised Smith's writings as both beautiful and true, not only in his conversation and in his correspondence, but also in at least one published review. For his part, Smith is alleged to have commented that Burke 'was the only man, who, without communication' thought on topics of political economy 'exactly as he did'.³ Scholars must confront the fact of this mutually recognized similarity in viewpoints before describing Smith as fundamentally anti-Burkean or Burke as fundamentally anti-Smithian.⁴

We must be careful, however, not to replace one unduly reductive thesis on this subject with its equally reductive opposite.⁵ The record of their interaction does no more to support the thesis that Burke and Smith were in full agreement than it does to support the view that they were in full disagreement.⁶ If nothing else, it forces us to recognize that Smith and Burke lived very different lives, and as a result engaged in very different modes of thinking and writing.⁷

This difference between both the biographies and the philosophies of Smith and Burke is best captured by noting that the former was primarily an academic, and the latter primarily a politician, albeit one with philosophical predilections. This essay will argue that Burke's and Smith's respective understandings of their different social roles are central both to the complex relationship between their respective worldviews and to their deep mutual admiration. For Burke, Smith was always the model of a wise philosopher. For Smith, Burke grew into the model of a prudent statesman.

The contrast between the philosopher and the statesman was a constant theme for Burke and Smith alike. They shared an opposition to the 'man of system', the hybrid philosopher/statesman who attempts to shape actual societies according to some preconceived theoretical model. The man of system, both argue, is enchanted by the aesthetic appeal of his imagined ideal society, and is made blind to the suffering which occurs in the futile attempt to actualize this ideal. Yet while Smith joins Burke in warning against the dangers of sublime and beautiful systems, Smith does not refrain from constructing systems of his own. Indeed, both *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* contain intricate intellectual systems. In the reviews of both these works in Burke's *Annual Register*, Smith's systems are lauded for their remarkable degree of beauty and sublimity.⁸ As a result, it is entirely possible to be caught up in the aesthetic enchantments of Smith's systems, and to become a man of system blind to the suffering that the actualization of Smith's theories may bring.

With his evident enthusiasm for the aesthetic aspect of Smith's philosophy, Burke is particularly vulnerable to becoming such a dangerous utopian. And in his posthumously published *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, the great opponent of philosophical systems reveals that, for at least a moment, he has indeed fallen prey to their aesthetic allure. Burke here calls for

the implementation free market policies with dogmatic zeal, regardless of the consequences, equating the laws of the market with the commands of God. The power of his Smith's ideas were such that they could, with terrible irony, turn a man of refined aesthetic sensibility like Burke into precisely the sort of man of system Burke himself is so famous for opposing.

I. Burke on Smith's Two Systems

1. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

On April 12, 1759, David Hume wrote to Smith from London, informing Smith that he and Alexander Wedderburn had distributed copies of Smith's newly published *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to 'such of our acquaintances as we thought good judges and proper to spread the reputation of the book'. Among these is Burke, described as 'an Irish gentleman, who wrote lately a very pretty treatise on the sublime'.⁹ Smith's response to Hume's letter has not survived, but it seems that he expressed some interest in the 'Irish Gentleman'. Hume describes him further in his next extant letter to Smith, from the following July 28. 'I am very well acquainted with Burke', he writes, 'who was very much taken with your book. He got your direction [i.e., postal address] from me with a view of writing to you, and thanking you for your present, for I made it pass in your name. I wonder he has not done it'.¹⁰

Burke was not to write Smith until September 10, after he had returned to London. He explains his lateness in giving thanks to Smith for the copy of his 'very agreeable and instructive work' as stemming from a desire to 'defer... [his] acknowledgements until I had read your book with proper care and attention'.¹¹ Burke then goes on to describe at some length the merits of the *Theory*. The following year, parallel arguments for the greatness of the work were made in an unsigned review for the second volume of Burke's *Annual Register*, that for 1759.¹² Considering

that Burke was not only editing the successful almanac at this time, but also writing almost all of its nearly 500 pages of content, it is a safe assumption that the review is Burke's own; it has been universally identified as such in the literature.

In his initial letter to Smith on the *Theory*, Burke writes that he is 'not only pleased with the ingenuity of your theory', but also 'convinced of its solidity and truth'.¹³ Rather than discuss the validity of any of Smith's arguments in particular, however, Burke praises the soundness of its construction as a systematic whole. He writes:

I have ever thought that the systems of morality were too contracted and that this science could never stand well upon any narrower basis than the whole of human nature. All the writers who have treated this subject before you were like those gothic architects who were fond of turning great vaults upon a single slender pillar; there is art in this, and there is a degree of ingenuity without doubt; but it is not sensible, and it cannot long be pleasing. A theory like yours, founded on the nature of man, which is always the same, will last, when those that are founded on his opinions, which are always changing, are gone and forgotten.¹⁴

Note that Burke believes Smith's method to not only ground his moral system on a stronger foundation than all other such systems, but also to render it more 'pleasing'. Burke devotes the rest of his letter to Smith to the praise, not of Smith's philosophical acuity, but of his literary skill. Smith makes expert use of 'easy and happy illustrations from common life'; he provides an 'elegant painting of the manners and passions'; his prose style is 'lively' and 'well varied'.¹⁵ Burke even makes use of the categories of his own aesthetic theory to analyze the appeal of Smith's work – in which beauty is understood as a source of love and joy arising from ordered harmony, and sublimity as a source of delight and awe arising from glorious power. Not only does the *Theory* show countless 'beauties', Burke writes, but it also 'is often sublime too, particularly in that fine picture of the Stoic philosophy... which is dressed out in all the grandeur and pomp that becomes that magnificent delusion'.¹⁶ If Smith's literary achievement bears any flaws, it is 'rather a little too diffuse', though this is 'a fault of the generous kind'.¹⁷

In his review of the *Theory* for the *Annual Register*, Burke continues his effusive praise of the book along these same aesthetic lines. He begins by questioning a reviewer's ability to 'give the reader a proper idea of this excellent work'.¹⁸ Burke rhapsodizes:

A dry abstract of the system would convey no juster idea of it, than the skeleton of a departed beauty would of her form when she was alive; at the same time the work is so well methodized, the parts grow so naturally and gracefully out of each other, that it would be doing it equal injustice to show it by broken and detached pieces.¹⁹

After insisting that the only possible solution is for the reader of his review to purchase a copy of Smith's book, Burke then goes on to praise, not only the work's beauty (though he continues to insist it presents 'one of the most beautiful fabrics of moral theory, that has perhaps ever appeared'²⁰) but also the book's 'ingenious novelty'.²¹ Such praise may strike the contemporary ear as strange coming from the author who was to become Britain's most famous defender of the old against the new, and Burke indeed maintains that 'with regard to morals, nothing could be more dangerous' than sheer novelty.²² Smith avoids this danger, however, because his philosophical system 'is in all its essential parts just, and founded on truth and nature'.²³ The review, as was customary in the eighteenth century, then provides an extended quotation from the work being discussed. Burke selects 'the first section, as it concerns sympathy, the basis of his [Smith's] theory; and as it exhibits equally with any of the rest, and idea of his style and manner'.²⁴

2. *The Wealth of Nations*

While Burke and Smith by now had certainly established an intellectual camaraderie based on their published work and personal correspondence, there is no indication that the two men met in person at any time for nearly two decades. This is reason alone to doubt the traditional tale that Smith consulted Burke and paid great deference to his opinions during the

composition of the *Wealth of Nations*. Jacob Viner traces this tradition to the editor's preface to the posthumous *Thoughts and Details*.²⁵ Viner, however, argues that this story is improbable considering that on the basis of what is known about Smith's and Burke's respective activities, the earliest they could have met in person would have been in London late in 1775, only a few months before the *Wealth* was published.²⁶ It was at this time that Smith was elected to the London literary institution known as 'The Club', of which Burke was an original member. Smith attended his first meeting on December 1, 1775, and probably attended semi-regularly through the publication of the *Wealth* in April of the following year.²⁷ It is almost certain that Smith and Burke met in the capital sometime before Smith left London shortly after the publication of the *Wealth* in April of 1776, though some have suggested that the meeting took place only upon Smith's return to London early in 1777.²⁸

The review of *The Wealth of Nations* in that year's *Annual Register* closely parallels Burke's earlier review of Smith's *Theory* in terms of both style and content. The latter review begins with the observation that while 'the growth and decay of nations' has 'sometimes exercised the speculations of the politician' the subject has 'seldom been considered... by the philosopher'.²⁹ It then goes on to compare Smith's work favorably with the writings of the physiocratic school of 'French economical writers', lauding the *Wealth* for its unparalleled 'sagacity and penetration of mind, extent of views, accurate distinction, just and natural connection and dependence of parts' and its completeness as a systematic 'analysis of society'.³⁰ The review even makes the same criticism of the *Wealth* that Burke earlier made of the *Theory*, that it 'may be sometimes thought diffuse', though it excuses this literary fault by noting that 'the work is didactic, [and] that the author means to teach, and teach things that are not obvious'.³¹

Like the review of the *Theory*, the piece then concludes with an extended quotation, in this instance, Smith's entire introduction to the *Wealth*.³²

It is uncertain what role, if any, Burke himself played in the composition of this review. While some scholars have attributed it to Burke, others have questioned this attribution.³³ Burke had certainly relinquished control of the *Annual Register* by this time, though he continued to write book reviews and to provide editorial guidance. The *Register's* review of the *Wealth* in 1776 is so similar to that of the *Theory* in 1759, however, that we can have some confidence that it is an accurate reflection of Burke's position on the work, even if it was not composed by him directly.

In the years between the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 and Smith's death in 1790, Burke and Smith maintained an active correspondence. Smith repeatedly expressed support for Burke's practical political work, and Burke repeatedly expressed his admiration for Smith as a sagacious philosopher.³⁴ After Smith's death, in his 1796 *Letter to a Noble Lord*, Burke claimed to 'have made political economy an object of my humble studies from my very early youth to near the end of my service in Parliament'.³⁵ Burke takes considerable pride in the fact that 'great and learned' political economists 'thought my studies were not wholly thrown away, and deigned to communicate with me now and then on some particulars of their immortal works'.³⁶ Smith was certainly foremost among those political economists to whom Burke could have been referring.

II. Smith on System

1. The Aesthetic Appeal of System

Before he abandoned the life of the philosopher for that of the statesman, the young Burke was widely hailed as a savant in the field of philosophical aesthetics. Yet even those well aware of Burke's aesthetic predilections must be surprised to find Burke praising Smith's work primarily through the categories of the sublime and beautiful rather than those of the true and the good. Burke was only speaking metaphorically when he described Smith's prose as 'rather painting than writing' and yet he consistently describes moral philosophy and political economy of what now seems a dry and technical nature as if they were works of art.³⁷ Nor can this striking feature of Burke's reviews be merely attributed to the conventions of his time, in contrast to those of ours. Although aesthetic criteria were more often used when assessing philosophical works in the eighteenth century than they are today, the almost exclusively aesthetic emphasis in this review is unusual, both among eighteenth-century book reviews in general and among the reviews in Burke's *Annual Register* in particular. To cite just one obvious example, Burke's review of Rousseau's *Letter to D'Alembert* – which immediately precedes his review of Smith's *Theory* – does not take this aesthetic approach, instead engaging in a substantive critique of Rousseau's arguments against the theater.³⁸

Smith himself was well aware that aesthetic considerations can play an important role in science and philosophy, terms which he uses interchangeably for the construction of explanatory systems. Smith makes note of this fact in his posthumously published essay on 'The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries as Illustrated by the History of Astronomy'. 'A [philosophical] system', Smith writes, 'is an imaginary machine invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed'.³⁹ Some explanatory systems, though, are created with 'a more simple and intelligible as well as more beautiful machinery' than others.⁴⁰ Typically, scientific systems are created to dispel the

unpleasant sensation of ignorant awe one feels upon contemplating the unexplained. Yet an especially well-crafted scientific theory, with its ‘novelty and unexpectedness’ may itself become a sublime object of wonder, if not outright awe. Such was the case with Copernican astronomy, which ‘excited more wonder and surprise than the strangest of those appearances, which it had been invented to render natural and familiar, and these sentiments still more endeared it [to humanity]’.⁴¹

Smith’s two great systems – the system of sympathy as the foundation of ethical life and the system of natural liberty that would, if realized, maximize the wealth of nations – are both designed to so endear themselves to our aesthetic sensibilities. The author’s system of political economy in particular makes use of complex mechanics of ingeniousness perhaps even surpassing those of Copernican or Newtonian astronomy.⁴² The paradoxical power of the invisible hand to guide the pursuit of private interests so as to maximize the wealth of all is perhaps the single most striking element of Smith’s system, and hence the one most closely embraced by the mass of his readers. Smith dismissively attributes the popularity of physiocratic economics precisely to the fact that ‘men are fond of paradoxes, and of appearing to understand what surpasses the comprehension of ordinary people’.⁴³ Smith was surely aware, however, that the same cause would lead to the popularity of his own economic theory.

2. The Danger of System

Over the course of his intellectual development, Smith came to see the beauty and sublimity of imaginary, philosophical systems, not only as a source of aesthetic delight, but also as a source of considerable danger. He outlined this position in a small section of Part VI of the *Theory*, the entirety of which was added to the work for the sixth and final edition of 1790, the

year of Smith's death. Smith's analysis of the dangers of systemic thinking is part of a larger discussion of political loyalties, for it is only with regard to systems describing the interactions among human beings that this frightening phenomenon arises. The excessive love of system in natural philosophy is basically harmless; perhaps its worst effect is the rather absurd cult of the scientist that formed at the altar of the deceased Newton. Yet the intellectual systems of a moral philosopher, unlike those of a natural scientist, describe imaginary social systems, and a moral philosopher can never remain wholly satisfied as long as the utopia in his imagination has not been actualized as a social reality. In this way, 'a certain spirit of system' can inflame 'even to the madness of fanaticism' the reformist drive of an opposition party, as its members become 'intoxicated with the imaginary beauty of... [some] ideal system, of which they have no experience, but which has been presented to them in all the most dazzling colors in which the eloquence of their leaders could paint it'.⁴⁴

The man of system, the unholy union of the philosopher and the politician, is to be contrasted with the prudent statesman. The statesman, 'prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence', will, in reforming the ills of society, 'content himself with moderating, what he cannot annihilate without great violence... When he cannot establish the right, he will not disdain to ameliorate the wrong; but like Solon, when he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavor to establish the best that the people can bear'.⁴⁵ The man of system, however, is 'often so enamored with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it'. The result is that a society governed by men of system will function 'miserably' and 'at all times in the highest degree of disorder'.⁴⁶ Blind to the defects in his idealized plan, the man of system cannot see the suffering its enactment will cause.⁴⁷

III. The Statesman and the Philosopher

1. Burke as a Prudent Statesman

There is reason to believe that Smith was thinking of Burke as he contrasted the prudent statesman with the man of system. While constantly working to enact practical improvements in the body politic, Burke always insisted that radical political change according to philosophical schemes of perfection was to be entirely avoided. There is more direct evidence that Smith thought of Burke as a model statesman when the passages in the *Theory* on the subject are considered in conjunction with a certain relevant section of the *Wealth*. At the end of a chapter on the corn trade in that latter work, Smith discusses a law Burke had marshaled through the House of Commons in 1773, reforming but hardly eliminating bounties for the export of grain.⁴⁸ Smith argues that Burke's bill 'seems to have established a system with regard to the Corn Laws, in many respects better than the ancient one, but in one or two respects perhaps not quite so good'.⁴⁹ In the first edition of the *Wealth*, this chapter then concluded with a critique of Burke's reform. For the second edition of 1778, however, Smith added an additional paragraph at the very end of the chapter:

So far, therefore, this law seems to be inferior to the ancient system. With all its imperfections, however, we may perhaps say of it what was said of the laws of Solon, that, though not the best in itself, it is the best which the interests, prejudices, and temper of the times would admit of. It may perhaps in due time prepare the way for a better.⁵⁰

Smith, then was thinking specifically of a reform championed by Burke when he referred to Solon's laws in the 1778 edition of the *Wealth*, good evidence that he was also thinking of Burke when he made an identical reference twelve years later in the 1790 edition of the *Theory*. It is probably not a coincidence that Smith seems to have first made Burke's personal acquaintance sometime between the composition of the *Wealth* and its revisions for the second

edition, which suggests that the statesman himself may have objected to Smith's critique of his 1773 reforms. Such, at least, is the tradition preserved in an 1804 article by Francis Horner. After discussing Smith's statements on the laws of Solon, Horner observes that the philosopher 'probably bore in mind when he used these expressions, the answer which Mr. Burke had made to him, on being reproached for not effecting a thorough repeal'.⁵¹ Burke, with his usual gift for metaphor, is reported to have argued, 'that it was the privilege of philosophers to conceive their diagrams in geometrical accuracy; but the engineer must often impair the symmetry, as well as the simplicity of his machine, in order to overcome the irregularities of friction and resistance'.⁵²

There is another account of Burke addressing Smith on the differing natures of philosophy and statesmanship quoted in the papers of Thomas Jefferson. 'You, Dr. Smith, from your professor's chair, may send forth theories upon freedom of commerce as if you were lecturing on pure mathematics', Burke is reported as saying. 'But legislators must proceed by slow degrees, impeded as they are in their course by the friction of interest and the fiction of preference'.⁵³ Regardless of whether Burke expressed such a position to Smith sometime between 1776 and 1778, however, he certainly adhered to this view concerning the respective social positions of the pair. 'A statesman differs from a professor in a university', the MP wrote. 'The latter has only the general view of society; the former, the statesman, has a number of circumstances to combine with those general ideas, and to take into consideration'.⁵⁴

2. Smith as a Systematic Philosopher

If Burke is the model of a prudent statesman, then Smith must consider himself as (at least attempting to be) the model of a true philosopher, and certainly not a man of system. Such philosophers are in a difficult position. It is not enough that they themselves resist the spirit of

system; they must also help their followers avoid this danger. Nonetheless, it is still the philosopher's responsibility to provide the ideals toward which societies must strive. As much as he feared the man of system, Smith also saw that 'the same principle, the same love of system, the same regard to the beauty of order, of art, and contrivance' that so intoxicates such an individual also 'frequently serves to recommend those institutions which tend to promote the public welfare'.⁵⁵ After all, the vast majority of the projects of humanity began as imaginary systems in the mind of some philosophical designer, and these plans were made into reality through the work of others acting out of a commitment to this imagined machine. The realization of Smith's system of natural liberty, however, requires less the action than the inaction of humanity, or at least of humanity's governmental institutions.⁵⁶ In systematically presenting the mechanisms of the natural economic order, Smith thus turns the love of system against itself.

This system of natural liberty, moreover, while remaining a source of ideals for the orientation of political action, is itself riddled with numerous flaws.⁵⁷ It is beyond the scope of this essay to detail these many imperfections – from the dehumanizing alienation of the working class, to an ultimate end to economic growth. Nonetheless, his foregrounding of the many flaws in this system is evidence that Smith was capable of designing a model social order while immunizing both himself and his readers from the intoxicating effects of imagined perfection.

Indeed, Smith repeatedly cautions his reader that the total realization of even this imperfect utopia may be practically impossible. Smith's discussion of Burke's reform of the Corn Laws can certainly be read as an admission that it may be infeasible to legislate the immediate adoption of perfectly free trade. Elsewhere, Smith is even more explicit on the matter. 'To expect, indeed, that the freedom of trade should ever be entirely restored in Great Britain', the philosopher writes, 'is as absurd as to expect that an Oceana or Utopia should ever be

established in it. Not only the prejudices of the public, but what is much more unconquerable, the private interests of many individuals, irresistibly oppose it'.⁵⁸ Even if it were politically feasible to actualize Smith's still imperfect utopian vision instantly and immediately, it would nonetheless not be economically feasible to do so. One of 'the unfortunate effects of all the regulations of the mercantile system', Smith writes, is to 'not only introduce very dangerous disorders into the state of the body politick, but disorders which it is often difficult to remedy, without occasioning, for a time at least, still greater disorders'.⁵⁹

In short, the refusal to directly apply philosophical systems to political decision-making is a central element of Smith's nonetheless highly systematic thought. James Boswell reportedly marveled at the strangeness of this seemingly anti-philosophical philosophy. 'Mr. Smith', Boswell recounts, 'wrote to me some time ago, 'Your great fault is acting upon system'. What a curious reproof to a young man from a grave philosopher! It is, however, a just one, and but too well founded with respect to me'.⁶⁰ It is certainly possible that Burke sometimes acted for Smith as Smith himself acted for Boswell, serving to help warn the philosopher against the dangers of system.

IV. Men of System

1. Richard Price and the French Revolutionaries as Men of System

Smith's discussion of the man of system in the *Theory* is immediately preceded by arguments concerning the alteration of a nation's constitution and the loyalty one owes to one's fatherland and its existing regime. Here, Smith argues that 'the love of our own country seems not to be derived from the love of mankind', adopting a thesis directly contrary to Richard Price's in the radical Dissenter's November 4, 1789 sermon, 'A Discourse on The Love of Our

Country'.⁶¹ It was in response to this sermon that Burke composed his 1790 masterpiece *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. While Burke makes it clear that he is directly addressing Price's sermon, however, Smith does not. There is, moreover, some reason to believe that Smith was unaware of Price's sermon when composing these passages. While the sixth edition of the *Theory* was not printed until January 1790, the papers of Smith's friend Thomas Cadell record that Smith finished 'the very last sentence' of his revisions to the work on November 18, 1789.⁶² It is unlikely that Price's text of November 4 would have reached Smith in Edinburgh in time for him to have composed a refutation of the speech a mere two weeks later.

Smith, however, was certainly aware of Price's earlier work, and displayed an antipathy toward the radical Dissenter almost as great as Burke's own. 'Price's speculations cannot fail to sink into the neglect that they always deserved', Smith wrote in a 1785 letter to George Chalmers. 'I have always considered him as a factious citizen, a most superficial philosopher and by no means an able calculator'.⁶³ Regardless of whether Smith was directly addressing either the French Revolution or Price's sermon in the sixth edition of the *Theory*, it is undeniable he was adding his views to the debate of the day on the constitutions of nations, and that his position was at least sympathetic to that later adopted by Burke in the *Reflections*.⁶⁴

Certainly, the *Reflections* paints the French revolutionaries and their British sympathizers as men of system of the type we have seen denounced by Smith. 'They conceive, very systematically', the statesman writes, 'that all things which give perpetuity are mischievous, and therefore they are at inexpiable war with all establishments. They think that government may vary like modes of dress, and with as little ill effect'.⁶⁵ It is therefore that the revolutionaries feel free to rebuild society to conform with their rationalistic conception of the rights of man. The resulting behavior of the 'abettors of this philosophic system' inevitably devolves into 'frauds,

impostures, violences, rapines, burnings, murders, confiscations, compulsory paper currencies, and every description of tyranny and cruelty to bring about and to uphold this Revolution'.⁶⁶

In his rhetorically overheated attack, Burke never makes a general, philosophical case against the man of system, and freely mixes general denunciations of philosophically systematic politics with specific arguments against the particular utopian system advanced by the revolutionaries of his day. 'In the system itself', Burke writes of the constitution put forward by the French National Assembly, 'I confess myself unable to find out anything which displays in a single instance the work of a comprehensive and disposing mind or even the provisions of a vulgar prudence'.⁶⁷ Later, the statesman rails against the 'imbecility... of the puerile and pedantic system, which they [i.e., the National Assembly] call a constitution'.⁶⁸ So flawed is the new regime in its design, that Burke questions whether it even 'deserves such a name' as 'system' at all.⁶⁹

While this attack on the French constitution may function quite well rhetorically, it serves to undermine any more general attack on the man of system. As Smith recognized, it is not the flaws, but the very perfection of utopian political systems that renders them so dangerous. Burke, too, recognizes that 'in a new and merely theoretic system, it is expected that every contrivance shall appear, on the face of it, to answer its ends, especially where the projectors are no way embarrassed with an endeavor to accommodate the new building to an old one, either in the walls or on the foundations'.⁷⁰ Burke argues, of course, that the new French constitution fails in this regard, but in doing so he weakens his argument that even a perfect philosophical system ought not to be actualized through sudden, revolutionary change. Burke, however, wishes to portray the revolutionaries of his day as villains or fools, and hence could not admit the truth if they were in fact merely misguided lovers of beauty, blinded by the philosophical genius of their

utopian dreams. Smith, who has no such ideological axe to grind, is free to present a more sympathetic, and hence also more realistic, portrait of the revolutionary man of system, a character who the philosopher nonetheless denounces as surely as does Burke.

Indeed, throughout his discussion of patriotism, the constitutions of nations, and (perhaps) Price, Smith adopts a far more moderate position than does Burke. After establishing that the love of country has a different source from the love of humanity, Smith sees that the former sentiment ‘seems, in ordinary cases, to involve in it two different principles; first, a certain respect and reverence for that constitution or form of government which is actually established; and secondly, an earnest desire to render the condition of our fellow-citizens as safe, respectable and happy as we can’. Fortunately, ‘in peaceable and quiet times, those two principles generally coincide’, for the maintenance of the established regime will be the best means of promoting the welfare of the citizenry. ‘But in times of public discontent, faction and disorder, those two different principles may draw different ways’. The decision as to whether to dismantle a nation’s system of government completely, of course, requires ‘the highest effort of political wisdom’. The statesmen who chooses correctly has the opportunity to ‘assume the greatest and noblest of all characters, that of the reformer and legislator of a great state’.⁷¹ It is only after his praise of the great legislator that Smith launches his analysis of the man of system, thus robbing this analysis of any rhetorical force it might have in condemning the revolutionaries of the day.

Smith’s dispassionate analysis and Burke’s partisan speechifying are characteristic rhetorical modes of the philosopher and the politician, respectively. Smith is engaged in the rational construction of model social systems, while Burke is rallying his fellow citizens to action, and this divergence in purpose serves to alter the very nature of the thought conveyed.

Smith, concerned with the consistency and completeness of his philosophical investigations, offers a highly systematic refutation of acting upon system. Burke, striving to corral all possible arguments in support of his position into a single, rhetorically effective package, constructs a powerful, if haphazard and often contradictory case, a case which is anything but systematic.

Thomas Paine, in his 1791 response to Burke, argued that the statesman not only refused to engage in systematic thinking, but was also incapable of doing so. Paine argues that Burke, as a brilliant orator but a second-rate philosopher, was unable to see the wise order provided by the constitution put forth by the French National Assembly. Interestingly, Paine contrasts Burke with a philosopher of the day famed for observing the hidden order underlying political and social phenomena. Paine writes:

Had Mr. Burke possessed talents similar to the author of *On the Wealth of Nations*, he would have comprehended all the parts which enter into, and, by assemblage, form a constitution... It is not from his prejudices only, but from the disorderly cast of his genius, that he is unfitted for the subject he writes upon. Even his genius is without a constitution. It is a genius at random, and not a genius constituted.⁷²

The works of Burke and Smith, according to Paine, both display aesthetic brilliance in their critiques of acting upon system, but aesthetic brilliance of very different sorts, corresponding to the primary categories of Burke's own aesthetic theory. The beauty of the *Theory* and the *Wealth* is akin to that found in the ordered harmony of classical architecture, and is greeted with joy and love for the systems constructed therein. The sublimity of the *Reflections* is akin to that of a bombastic tragedy, and is greeted with weeping and the gnashing of teeth. Both such forms of aesthetic achievement have their dangers. Smith's philosophy could potentially give rise to men of system who pursue natural economic liberty in a radical manner never intended by the author, and the staid professor took great steps to inoculate his readers against this utopian madness throughout his books. Burke's oratory, for its part, might beget

counter-revolutionary fanatics with an unreasonable and unreasoning fear of change. It is not evident that Burke was aware of the threat to human welfare posed by his own work, as Smith was undoubtedly aware of the threat posed by his.⁷³

2. Burke as a Man of System

Adam Smith died the same year that Burke published the *Reflections*, so it is impossible to say whether the philosopher would have been moved by his friend's rhetoric. Burke, however, was clearly moved by Smith's philosophy, both in the field of ethics and that of political economy. The historical evidence also indicates that the statesman continued to embrace Smith's economic doctrines with considerable enthusiasm throughout his career.

The fullest statement of Burke's economic views was not composed until late 1795, less than two years before his death; it was published posthumously in 1800 as *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. Here, Burke argues against any interference in the market to counteract rising food prices – be they regulations of the trade in grain, the establishment of public granaries, minimum wage laws, or even direct payments to supplement the wages of laborers of the sort first enacted in Speenhamland at this time. While Smith himself did not address the possibility of a policy akin to that in Speenhamland, he did argue against regulation of the trade in food staples, even during times of scarcity. 'The unlimited, unrestrained freedom of the corn trade', Smith maintained, 'is the only effectual preventative of the miseries of a famine', as well as 'the best palliative of the inconveniences of a dearth; for the inconveniences of a real scarcity cannot be remedied; they can only be palliated'.⁷⁴ Burke certainly provides arguments against Speenhamland-type programs along these Smithian lines, maintaining that redistribution of wealth would impede the efficient operations of self-interest, and that interfering in the

operations of the market is generally an ineffective choice of policy. ‘Such is the event of all compulsory equalizations’, Burke writes. ‘They pull down what is above; they never raise what is below; and they depress high and low together beneath the level of what was originally the lowest’.⁷⁵ It is not necessary here to evaluate the validity of Burke’s argument that even a temporary redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor would prove deleterious to the material welfare of all, though this argument does demonstrate that Burke possessed more than a moderate facility for political economy in the Smithian mold.

It is critical to note, however, that Burke also includes a second line of argument against Speenhamland-type policies independent of their ineffectiveness, a deontological moral argument grounded in natural theology. ‘We, the people’, Burke piously proclaims, ‘ought to be made sensible that it is not in breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of Nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the Divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer or which hangs over us’.⁷⁶ With a single rhetorical flourish, Burke has transformed scientific, positive laws with no more moral weight than the laws of physics into divine commands whose violation is a grave sin. Christian charity, Burke acknowledges, is also God’s law, but with such admittedly obligatory acts of mercy ‘the magistrate has nothing at all to do; his interference is a violation of the property which it is his office to protect’. While feeding the poor is the duty of all, ‘the manner, mode, time, choice of objects, and proportion [of charitable donation] are left to private discretion; and perhaps for that very reason it is performed with the greater satisfaction, because the discharge has more the appearance of freedom’.⁷⁷ That is, even if a magistrate were able to design some scheme of payments to the poor during times of famine which would prevent their starvation effectively and

efficiently, he would be morally wrong to do so, as he would be acting contrary to the will of God.

Such theological arguments could not be further from Smith's own views.⁷⁸ Never in the *Wealth* does Smith describe the laws of commerce given free reign under the system of natural liberty as possessing any moral authority independent of their uncanny ability to maximize the wealth of nations to the benefit of all. Indeed, talk of God and divine law, while still present in the *Theory*, has been entirely excluded from Smith's later work, and nowhere in any of his writings does the philosopher ever indicate that the laws of commerce carry some supernatural sanction.

To the contrary, Smith gives several examples of circumstances in which it will advance the common good for a magistrate to interfere with the free operation of the market. A government official 'may prescribe rules, therefore, which, not only prohibit mutual injuries among fellow-citizens, but command mutual good offices to a certain degree', though 'it requires the greatest delicacy and reserve' to lay down such laws 'with propriety and judgment'.⁷⁹ For example, although Smith called for a reform of existing 'poor laws', which had required localities to provide aid to the indigent since Elizabethan times, he nowhere called for their wholesale abolition.⁸⁰ The criterion according to which such policies are to be judged is not its conformity with divinely ordained laws of the market, but rather their ability to improve the welfare of the populace. 'No society can surely be flourishing and happy', Smith memorably insisted, 'of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable'.⁸¹

In pursuing the welfare of the people, moreover, the prudent statesman must be willing to defer to popular opinion as necessary. And nowhere is this more necessary, Smith argued, than with regard to the people's very sustenance and survival. 'The people feel themselves so much

interested in what relates either to their subsistence in this life, or to their happiness in a life to come, that government must yield to their prejudices, and, in order to preserve the public tranquility, establish that system that they approve of'.⁸² There is thus reason to believe that, had he lived to see the sharp rise in food prices in the second half of the 1790's, Smith might have advocated accommodating popular demands for a governmental response.⁸³ Yet Burke seems to reject, not only any new response to sudden scarcity, but even the existing scheme of poor laws. He rejects them, independent of their consequences, as a kind of blasphemy, a wanton flouting of the divine laws of the free market.

Burke's description of the laws of commerce as normatively binding laws of God, a description never intended by Smith, cannot be explained as simply the tendency of a religious man to see the hand of God at play in fields addressed in a secular manner by irreligious scientists. After all, a religion must select which natural phenomena are to be given moral authority as the work of its deity, and which are to be rejected as the work of chance, chaos, or even Satan himself. From a Christian perspective, as C.B. Macpherson observes, 'that the capitalist order is part of the divine and natural order is not self-evident; indeed, at least until the end of the sixteenth century, most writers and preachers would have treated it as nonsense'.⁸⁴ J. R. Poynter sees such a view as highly uncommon even at the end of the eighteenth century, and argues that 'Burke's tract resembles the lesser writings of the generation after Malthus rather than its contemporaries'.⁸⁵

It seems, then, that Burke could not imagine that the machinery of commerce described by Smith was anything other than the handiwork of God. Only an artist of divine sublimity could be responsible for a system of such overpowering aesthetic power. Burke thus insisted that this imaginary system be actualized, regardless of the human suffering that such a project might

cause. Here, the proper roles of the philosopher and the statesman are reversed, with the philosopher advocating political caution, the statesman becoming enamored with the perfection of an imagined ideal.⁸⁶ This is a classic example of the madness of system that Smith so accurately described in the last edition of the *Theory*. Although it may come a surprise to many that Edmund Burke, of all people, would fall prey to this particular folly, it is one to which those who judge works of social science and moral philosophy according to aesthetic rather than ethical criteria are all too prone.⁸⁷ Had Smith lived to see Burke's overheated economic essay, the prudent Scottish philosopher might have repeated the warning he gave Boswell against acting upon system. Considering the brilliant and impassioned attack on such behavior in his own writings, Burke might have heeded his friend's warning well.

Notes

¹ W. C. Dunn writes that it is 'in these lights – Smith as an economic liberal, and Burke as a political conservative – [that] these men have been traditionally considered' (Dunn, 'Adam Smith and Edmund Burke', 330-346). And the view has long outlived Dunn; see, for example, Pack, *Capitalism as a Moral System*, 121.

² Smith, *Correspondence*, no. 208, 251. As with all quotations from eighteenth-century texts in this essay, the spelling and punctuation have been modernized for purposes of clarity.

³ Bisset, *The Life of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2, 429; as cited in Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 125. Winch laments how this undocumented anecdote has found its way into virtually all biographies of both Smith and Burke (*Riches and Poverty*, 128) – see, for example, Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*, 387.

⁴ Some have attempted, rather unconvincingly, to deny the importance of this fact. Peter Minowitz, for example, writes, ‘Although Burke proclaimed himself Smith’s disciple, Smith contributed to the Enlightenment enterprise that Burke decried: tearing away life’s ‘decent drapery’ and ‘pleasing illusions’ (Minowitz *Profits, Priests and Princes*, 44; quoting Burke, *Reflections*, 67).

⁵ On this point, see Willis, ‘The Role in Parliament’.

⁶ The best non-reductive overview of the relationship between Smith’s ideas and Burke’s is Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, esp. 125-220. Winch compares and contrasts Smith’s and Burke’s respective positions on such issues as the independence of the American colonies (*ibid.*, 137-165), the social utility of aristocracies and established churches (*ibid.*, 166-197) and support for the laboring poor (*ibid.*, 198-220). Yet Winch’s nuanced study never focuses on the respective social roles of the philosopher and the statesman, or the aesthetic appeal of system, which are the subject of the present essay.

⁷ As Palyi, ‘The Introduction of Adam Smith’, 181, has observed, ‘their ideas, their methods, even their problems were decidedly different, as different as the men themselves and their personal careers’.

⁸ Burke, ‘*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, by Adam Smith’, and Burke, ‘*An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith’. (Authorship disputed for the latter.)

⁹ Smith, *Correspondence*, no. 31, 33. For the treatise to which Hume is referring, see Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 49-200.

¹⁰ Smith, *Correspondence*, no. 36, 42-43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 38, 46.

¹² Burke, ‘*An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith’.

(Authorship disputed.)

¹³ Smith, *Correspondence*, no. 38, 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Burke, ‘*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, by Adam Smith’, 484.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 484-485.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 485.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 485-489; citing Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 9-13

²⁵ Viner, ‘Guide’, 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ During this time, Samuel Johnson is alleged to have remarked ‘Smith too is now of our club. It has lost its select merit’. See Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*, 268. The other details on Smith’s admission to The Club are drawn from Bell, ‘Adam Smith, Clubman’; as well as Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*, 251-252.

²⁸ See Mossner and Ross’s notes to Smith, *Correspondence*, 47.

²⁹ Burke, ‘*An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith’, 241.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 241-243; citing Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 10-12.

³³ Eindaudi, 'The British Background', 589, is one of such works in which the attribution is given to Burke, whereas it is questioned, e.g., in Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, vol. 2, 490.

³⁴ For Smith's political support of Burke, see letters 216 and 217 in Smith, *Correspondence*, 258-259. For Burke's praise of Smith as a wise philosopher, see Letter 230. Ibid., 268.

³⁵ Burke, *A Letter to a Noble Lord*, 192.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Burke, 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments, by Adam Smith', 485.

³⁸ Burke, 'A Letter by M. Rousseau', 479-484. The essentially aesthetic character of Burke's reviews of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations* has yet to receive adequate attention in the secondary literature. Winch, for example, attributes Burke's enthusiastic reception to the *Theory* to his substantive philosophical agreement with Smith on the issue of moral anti-rationalism, to their common belief that morality is a product of our moral sentiments, and not of our reason alone (Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 170).

³⁹ Smith, 'The Principles', 66.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁴¹ Ibid., 115.

⁴² Winch, for one, cannot help but marvel at the intricate 'connections between the overlapping sub-systems that compose Smith's highly ambitious and systematic enterprise – the most ambitious enterprise to be carried through to near-completion in an age and place that was

notable for the compendious quality of its intellectual projects' (Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 253).

⁴³ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 678.

⁴⁴ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 232.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴⁷ Smith's man of system thus represents one example of a larger phenomenon described by Kateb, 'Aestheticism and Morality', 5-37, in which aesthetic considerations lead individuals to act immorally.

⁴⁸ *Burke's Act 1773*, 13 Geo. III, c. 43.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 541.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 542-543.

⁵¹ Horner, *The Economic Writings*, 98.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Jefferson, *Papers*, vol. 8, 59; see also Viner, 'Guide', 26-28.

⁵⁴ Burke, 'Speech on a Petition of the Unitarians', as cited in Dunn, 'Adam Smith and Edmund Burke', 66.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 185.

⁵⁶ On this topic, see Griswold, *Adam Smith*, 308; as well as Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 94-96.

⁵⁷ See Griswold, *Adam Smith*, 302.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 471.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 606.

⁶⁰ Cited in Viner, 'Guide', 32-33; see also Dankert, 'Adam Smith and James Boswell', 331.

⁶¹ The quote appears in Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 229. See also Price, ‘A Discourse’.

⁶² See Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*, 391-394.

⁶³ Smith, *Correspondence*, no. 251, 290.

⁶⁴ For a plausible account of the specific historical circumstances which may have inspired Smith’s account of the ‘man of system’, see Rothschild, ‘Adam Smith and Conservative Economics’, 54-55.

⁶⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, 77.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁷¹ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 231-232.

⁷² Paine, *Rights of Man*, 472.

⁷³ For more on the moral dangers of the aesthetic elements of Burke’s political writings, see Kateb, ‘Aestheticism and Morality’, 24-27.

⁷⁴ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 527.

⁷⁵ Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, 142-143.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 156-157.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷⁸ Indeed, the differences between Smith’s actual views and the views advanced by Burke are so great that Emma Rothschild has argued that the *Thoughts and Details* ‘is close, at several points,

to being an open attack on Smith' (Rothschild, 'Adam Smith and Conservative Economics', 87). If this is taken to mean that a close reader of both Burke's work and Smith's will notice that the two are often in important disagreement, then it is certainly true. Yet if Rothschild is suggesting that Burke intended the *Thoughts and Details* as an attack on Smith, then the claim is a false one. Such a view is incompatible with the considerable evidence, outlined earlier in this essay, that Burke believed himself to be in full agreement with Smith on matters of political economy, however much he may have been blind to the real differences between them. Indeed, Rothschild acknowledges that almost all of Burke's contemporaries were also blind to these real differences. Rothschild writes that Burke's work 'was received as little more than an exposition of Smith's 'principles', with these 'principles' understood to be nothing more than 'the simple prescription for economic freedom' (ibid., 87). This oversimplification of Smith's position survives to our own day, as does the interpretation of the *Thoughts and Details* as a correct application of Smith's views (ibid., 88, fn. 83). There is no reason to believe that Burke himself was immune from this widespread error. To the contrary, there is considerable evidence he was one of the first to fall prey to it. In this respect, my own interpretation of the relationship between Burke and Smith is close to that of Gertrude Himmelfarb; see Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 68-79.

⁷⁹ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 81.

⁸⁰ Smith's main suggestion for reform of the poor laws is not to abolish, or even lessen, governmental aid, but to remove local residency requirements to allow for the free movement of labor; see Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 152-157. For more on Smith's position on the poor laws, see Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 61.

⁸¹ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 96.

⁸² Ibid., 539.

⁸³ For further discussion of this issue, see Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 208-212.

⁸⁴ Macpherson, *Burke*, 62.

⁸⁵ Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*, 55.

⁸⁶ For a similar observation, see Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 204.

⁸⁷ Many previous commentators have noted the disjoint between Burke's arch-libertarian economic views in the *Thoughts and Details* and the social conservatism of the *Reflections*, especially given that local forms of poor relief were well-established traditional practices in Britain at this time. For an overview of many competing attempts to resolve this inconsistency, all ultimately unsuccessful, see Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 71-73. To mention only the most prominent such argument, Macpherson argues that Burke was able to be both a laissez-faire capitalist and a defender of traditional social institutions because 'the capitalist order *had in fact been* the traditional order in England for a whole century' (Macpherson, *Burke*, 51). Yet this argument ignores *both* the all-important differences between a highly regulated mercantilist system and a system of genuine free trade which would be obvious to any reader of Smith *and* the entire history of the poor laws dating back to the reign of Elizabeth I; see Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 73. Judith Shklar offers a more promising solution when she finds a deeper consistency behind Burke's seeming inconsistency only insofar as insistence on strict logical coherence is one of the qualities that 'conservatives have resented most in their opponents' (Shklar, *After Utopia*, 225).

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