

**An “Unplanned Artifact of Social Evolution”:
Tolerance in the Correspondence of David Hume and Adam Smith**

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In constructing an overview of moral development among eighteenth century Scottish *literati*, historian Richard B. Sher argues that these early modern literary figures contributed to “an environment of mutual support and common cause on behalf of economic and moral improvement, polite learning and literature, cosmopolitanism, and other enlightenment values.”¹ This superstructure of literary camaraderie therefore begs the question: In contributing to “an environment of mutual support and common cause,” how did these men of letters recognize shared social mores? The genesis for such an epistemological undertaking rests primarily in documents that pertain to discussion held, at that time, by historical actors such as Scottish philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith. In their extant letters, written to one another, Hume and Smith practice a form of morality not previously issued by Enlightenment thought, a form of morality concerned primarily with the notion of “character.” It is therefore my intention to explicate statements made by both Hume and Smith, concerning not only their own character, but also the character of each other and of other historical actors. In doing so, I believe I will be able to historicize the eighteenth-century Scottish *literati* and his tolerance of human conduct through human action.

Born only twelve years apart, Hume and Smith were peers not just in the sense that they were contemporaries but, as well, in the sense that they shared many similar opinions. In his 1776 autobiographical sketch entitled *My Own Life*, David Hume – born David Home 26 April, 1711 (Old Style calendar) in Edinburgh, Scotland – states: “My family...was not rich; and being

myself a younger Brother, my Patrimony, according to the Mode of my Country, was of course very slender.”² While Hume may have considered himself less-off it is nonetheless through his modest estate that the Scot finds education at the University of Edinburgh, where, according to social historian Roy Porter, “during the course of half-hearted attempts to launch a career in trade and then the law, both of which he found unpalatable, the young Hume developed the aspiration to be *homo philosophicus*” or the philosophical man.³ It is from this early infatuation with philosophy then that Hume enters the burgeoning scene of the eighteenth-century Scottish *literati*.

While dedicated to this notion of the philosophical man, Hume’s career as a thinker was continuously fraught with disappointment. The extent to which misfortune hampered Hume I will later discuss in my description of Hume’s conception of the self. For the moment, however, an example is worth mentioning. Today renowned for offering what literary critic Adam Potkay calls “an enlivening account of how the forces of passion ‘actuates’ even the enlightened,”⁴ A *Treatise on Human Nature* – Hume’s *magnum opus* and first attempt at a theoretical construct of moral philosophy – upon publication in 1739 and 1740 “fell dead-born from the Press.”⁵ In addition to this critical failure the book was met with outrage. For as Scottish clerical records reveal, Hume “arrived at such a degree of boldness, as publicly to avow himself the author of books containing the most rude and open attack upon the glorious gospel of Christ, and principles evidently subversive even of natural religion, and the foundations of morality, if not establishing direct Atheism.”⁶ Such claims therefore leave the historian with the impression that in his own lifetime, Hume was a controversial figure.

By contrast with the controversy over Hume, however, his contemporary man of letters and friend Adam Smith lived an apparently quiet life. Though the exact date of his birth is

unknown, Smith was baptized 5 June 1723 (O.S.) in Kirkcaldy, Scotland. In addition to being taught at the University of Glasgow, under the tutelage of renowned moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson, Smith studied at Balliol College, Oxford. Unlike Hume, Smith's education at Oxford was financed through a charitable foundation for youth entering into the priesthood of the Church of England. While grateful for the opportunity, Smith's growing interest in philosophical conceptions, apart from theology, kept him from meeting the consideration of his financiers. Thus, by the age of twenty-three, Smith returned to Scotland "firmly committed to a life of scholarship."⁷

Although Smith left no autobiographical sketch for posterity, contemporary biographies such as the one written by Smith's student and fellow moral philosopher Dugald Stewart convey "a general idea of the genius and character of this illustrious man."⁸ By using accounts from friends, peers and pupils of Smith, Stewart reconstructs Smith's life as one of simplicity and contemplation. This notion of simplicity and contemplation, Stewart believes, afforded Smith the ability to fashion himself as above all else a thinker. This interpretation of Smith is seconded by later studies of the eminent philosopher and economist, an example of which comes from Ian Simpson Ross. In his 1994 biography of Smith entitled *the Life of Adam Smith*, the biographer states that Smith was "characteristic of a scholar who aims at exactness of coverage of his subject, as well as meticulous care in its organization" and "someone whose 'schemes of Study' leave him 'very little leisure,' and resemble the web of Penelope, since he 'scarcely sees[s] any Probability of their ending.'"⁹

Biographers of Smith therefore see the Scot's devotion to his craft as earning him not only a life of simplicity and contemplation but, as well, prohibition of leisure. This form of asceticism typifies the extent to which men of letters, such as Smith and Hume, were willing to

go in order to codify their moral philosophies. Therefore, while neither Hume nor Smith correlates to the other in terms of background, they are both nevertheless bound and determined in their opinions regarding moral philosophy to establish a new mode of human understanding. This new mode of human understanding, as it will be discovered, appoints character, above all else, as the defining attribute of human action and thus the defining attribute of human conduct.

Character, as it was recognized by Scottish *literati* of the eighteenth-century, was heavily influenced by a great philosophical movement occurring throughout early modern Western Europe. According to Sher, recent historical scholarship concerning this philosophical movement – what is referred to, in general, as “the Enlightenment” – defines the practice of men of letters like Hume and Smith as “not in a fixed body of doctrine...but rather in a set of general values to which proponents of the Enlightenment adhere” to.¹⁰ It is important for the historian to differentiate between these two conceptions of Enlightenment praxis, for as twentieth century commentators have discovered the first definition of Enlightenment thought proves problematic.¹¹ The second conception of Enlightenment praxis – practice as a set of general values to which proponents of the Enlightenment adhere to – is thus more helpful to the historian than the first, as it alleviates the burden of previously issued argumentation concerning Enlightenment thought made by separate historians.

What is more, this definition is enhanced by the fact that proponents of the Enlightenment did, in fact, uphold a specific set of general values. For as intellectual historian Lawrence J. Connin argues in his article entitled “Hayek, Liberalism and Social Knowledge,” “once we jettisoned our irrational and mythical ideas about the ways society operated, and began to investigate how things actually operated, we could start the process of rationally reconstructing society and begin the process of solving the age-old problems plaguing

humanity.”¹² As there are a number of movements associated with the Enlightenment commentators have frequently divided the movement into regionalisms. An example of the regionalization of the Enlightenment as a historical event comes from Porter and his study of the rise of modernity amongst British *literati* during the eighteenth century. In *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, the historian argues that “the story standardly told of the heroic rise of the modern self is not...without its sub-plots.”¹³ One such regionalism, Porter says, occurs in Scotland, where “living in a rapidly changing society with a strong academic tradition, Scots were prominent in [the Enlightenment,] contributing particularly coherent philosophies of progress.”¹⁴

Taken together, these particularly coherent philosophies of progress written by “Scottish Moralists” are codified as “critical rationalism.” According to Connin, critical rationalism entails:

a healthy dose of skepticism about the exaggerated claims made on behalf of human reason. [The] insights [of critical rationalists] into the human condition recognized that the best products of civilization were the products of human actions, but not of preconceived human design. Languages, morals and legal codes, and various economic arrangements did not come from the designing boards of all-knowing human creators who consciously worked out the details of these complex and intricate social processes. Instead, these products were the unplanned artifacts of social evolution.¹⁵

Acting against separate movements within the Enlightenment – such as Enlightenment rationalism, which asserts confidence in what Connin refers to as “the capabilities of the human mind to absorb, analyze, understand and utilize knowledge about the social world,” and therefore apply “reason to human problems”¹⁶ – critical rationalism asserts that it is only through the allowance of human action and the rejection of the forceful implementation of human reason that social knowledge is furthered. While the theoretical codification of critical rationalism is certainly helpful to the philosopher in documenting the various philosophical movements associated with the Enlightenment in Scotland, the historian must look deeper into the lives of its

practitioners if ever this “unplanned artifact of social evolution” is to be properly historicized. Thus, in order to historicize the shared social mores of Scottish Moralists, I will analyze the correspondence of Hume, Smith as well as the opinions of their fellow men of letters.

Beginning with a letter to Adam Smith dated 28 July 1759, Hume makes mention of a Mr. Alexander Wilson, at that time a professor in Practical Astronomy at the University of Glasgow. While the primary purpose of this letter is to suggest to Smith that Wilson fund their mutual friend, the book seller Andrew Millar and his “compleat elegant Set of Classics, which might set up his Name equal to the Alduses, Stevens, or Elzivirs,” Hume’s first words to Smith concerning Wilson are that “he seems a very modest, sensible, ingenious Man.”¹⁷ It is believed by historian Annette C. Baier that such adjectives as the ones Hume uses in his description of Wilson “enable a person to gain control over what...[Hume] termed [his]/her ‘violent’ and unruly passions, in favor of [his]/her calmer, less disruptive ones.”¹⁸

This is to say that Hume sees in Wilson a conduct necessary for the furtherance of social knowledge through human action. For in adjudicating calmer, less disruptive passions, Wilson is participating in the formation of a new mode of human understanding. Moreover, the expectation that Hume holds for the character of Wilson assists the moral philosopher in constructing, for himself, a set of general values from which to further social knowledge. Character-expectation, then – as employed by Hume in this passage – relies heavily on what philosopher David Gauthier refers to as Hume’s insistence “that morality cannot be derived simply from self-love, but rather requires the presence of other sentiments, all of which we may take as affecting the scope of a person’s interests.”¹⁹ These “other sentiments” which Gauthier deduces as the source of morality are the “passions” cited by Baier, which find further explication in Hume’s *Treatise on Hume Nature*.

Thus, in Book Three of his treatise entitled “Of Morals” Hume writes:

an action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious...because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind. In giving a reason, therefore, for the pleasure or uneasiness, we sufficiently explain the vice or virtue. To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very feeling constitutes our admiration. We go no farther; nor do we enquire into the cause of the satisfaction.²⁰

This excerpt, then, encapsulates Hume’s understanding of the passion or “impression” an individual develops when observing the actions or character of another individual. For according to Hume, impressions are the means by which human beings properly comprehend self-interest. In other words, in cognizing the utility of character or the use that one’s impression of the action or character of another serves, Hume believes the individual may recognize “the interest of those, who are served by the character or action approved of” which is to say the interest of ourselves.²¹

Breaking away from previous traditions of Enlightenment thought in order to explore undocumented regions of human understanding, then, Humean utilitarianism focuses on the impressions from which human beings derive their interests. This is to say that the utility of character represents a larger historical shift in philosophy from what Donald Ainslie calls “the crisis philosophy creates for itself when it restricts its interest in human nature merely to our cognitive capacities [e.g. Enlightenment rationalism]” to what a “study of human nature should look like, namely, a careful, naturalistic investigation of the ‘social and passionate’ ways we relate to one another in all the complexities of... ‘our common life.’”²² Thus, the character-expectation of Hume in relation to Alexander Wilson is indicative of a larger epistemological movement away from the solipsism of Enlightenment rationalism and towards a moral philosophy that seeks to confront problematic concepts such as “society” and “passion” and make them the vectors of a new mode of human understanding.

As with the character-expectation of Hume to Alexander Wilson, Smith also typifies this conception of morality particular to the epistemological conceptions of eighteenth century Scottish *literati*. Dated 4 November 1764, Smith formally introduces a confidant of his to Hume, a Mr. William Urquhart, 2nd of Craigston. Referring to Urquhart, Smith states that “he is not a man of letters and is just a plain, sensible, agreeable man of no pretentious of any kind.”²³ While upon first glance this assessment of Urquhart appears somewhat condescending, Smith’s characterization of his courier is, in fact, a testament to the recognition of a new and emerging mode of human understanding. For as historian James Buchan states, in “surveying the general order, and...decency of modern Scottish social life, [Smith] thought he espied a guiding principle in the operations of what he called ‘sympathy’.”²⁴ Further recognition of this conception of sympathy, then, is given in Smith’s 1759 treatise of moral philosophy entitled *the Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

In it, the moral philosopher finds that “when the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to...[the spectator] just and proper, and suitable to their objects.”²⁵ Clearly, then, Smith’s theoretical construct of the “impartial spectator,” he calls it, is based upon the sympathy an individual holds in regard to the person he/she, in the present, considers. Furthermore, Smith believes character-expectations are necessary in the orientation of oneself to other individuals. For if individual human beings are to gain anything from others – be it social, economic or political – they must necessarily sympathize with their fellow man in order to ascertain their interests. Without this construct of sympathy, Smith finds, the self-interested individual is left not just to his own devices but, indeed, to himself.

While Smith feels that sympathy is necessary in the orientation of oneself to another person, he nevertheless “calls attention” to what philosopher Roberto Scazzieri refers to as “the role of situation in determining the space of mental representations, and thus the pattern of reasoning of rational individuals.” This is to say that Smith believes “deliberation (choice) reflects context principally because the latter may significantly affect the representation of problem spaces and the identification of rational standards.”²⁶ More succinctly stated, Smith emphasizes his theory of choice in the formulation of character-expectations by the spectator. For it is only through confronting one’s limitations, Smith believes, that a person can rationally construct his/her volume of sympathy for another individual.

In the description offered by Smith of Mr. Urquhart then the historian bears witness not to the animosity but the empathy the moral philosopher chooses for his friend. This is not to say that Smith pities his friend or that Hume surmises from this letter that Smith holds Urquhart to be of little regard. Far from it, in fact, as Smith lauds all those character-expectations – plainness, sensibility, agreeability, unpretentiousness – with which he uses in his presentation of Urquhart. From this text then, the historian understands the Smithian theory of choice to be correlative to the Humean utility of character. This is because both moral philosophies produce character-expectations that are essential for one’s comprehension of the morality of Scottish *literati* writing in the latter half of the eighteenth-century. For as historian Roger L. Emerson states “without recourse to the philosophy and the spirit which set the atmosphere of the time...no one can understand either the Scottish concern with men and societies or the Scottish Enlightenment.”²⁷

Having thus established the *modus operandi* for the character-expectations of Hume and Smith – their moral philosophies – the character-expectation Hume and Smith held of one another may, presumably, be further deduced from their correspondence. Dated 12 April 1759,

Hume writes to Smith, joining with other Scottish *literati* in praise of the moral philosopher's recent publication *the Theory of Moral Sentiments*. However, what is most intriguing about this particular letter is not so much the message Hume wishes to present to Smith as much as it is *the manner* in which he presents it. For in commending his friend, Hume illustrates the character-expectation he holds for Smith, in that moment, through humor. It is therefore not what Hume states explicitly that indicates his character-expectation of Smith as much as it is what he states implicitly, through the use of irony.

Thus, having teased the reader Smith by side-stepping the topic of his *Theory Moral Sentiment* twice in the aforementioned mentioned letter, Hume jocularly implores:

My Dear Mr. Smith, have Patience: Compose yourself to Tranquility: Show yourself a Philosopher in Practice as well as Profession: Think on the Emptiness, and Rashness, and Futility of the common Judgements of Men: How little they are regulated by reason in any Subject, much more in philosophical Subjects, which so far exceed the Comprehension of the Vulgar...Nothing indeed can be a stronger Presumption of Falshood than the Approbation of the Multitude.²⁸

Taken literally, this passage – like Smith's letter concerning Mr. Urquhart – implies condescension. However, Hume's intention in writing this passage is understood as complementary by Smith. For as philosopher John Valdimir Price notes "Hume's friends learned...that irony was a constant, yet varied mode of expression in his life."²⁹ Furthermore, historian Ernest Campbell Mossner describes Smith's friendship with Hume as "evidently based upon a complete meeting of the minds."³⁰ Therefore, the true meaning of Hume's literary device is not lost on Smith, as Hume's manner of presentation turns in the moral philosopher's mind to commencement, not criticism. This use of irony is made plainly clear to the historian as Hume suspends his literary device in order to promise Smith "to secure favorable attention to" his book, "stimulate critical evaluation of its teachings, and achieve career advancement for its author."³¹

Hume's letter to Smith also illustrates a cultural bias he holds in regard to British society at large. This bias becomes more prominent throughout the correspondence between Hume and Smith, particularly in the letters written during the years 1763 and 1765, while the former was working abroad, in France, as secretary to Francis Seymour-Conway, 1st Marquess of Hertford. In one such letter, dated 5 September 1765, Hume states:

London is the Capital of my own Country; but it never pleased me much. Letters are there held in no honour; Scotsmen are hated: superstition and Ignorance gain Ground daily...My present Mind, this Forenoon the fifth of September is to return to France. I am much pressed here to accept of Offers, which would contribute to my agreeable Living, but might encroach on my Independence, by making me enter into Engagements with Princes and great Lords and Ladies. Pray give me your Judgement.³²

While there is no doubt that this particular letter contains a form of pessimism Hume feels as a result of the growing "Ignorance" of the "Multitude" of British society, the statement is nevertheless indicative of the moral philosophy Hume constructs in his own theoretical work. For in asking Smith whether or not he should stay in France or return home to Great Britain, Hume is seen as participating, alongside Smith, in a form of morality that emphasizes the feeling one gains from contemplating the character of another. That is to say, in this particular instance, Hume's contemplation of the opinion or character of Smith can be seen as a proper representation of their shared sense of morality.

As both men are found to be practitioners of their own moral philosophies, it is therefore discernible from the reply by Smith to Hume's letter of 5 September 1765, that he himself sympathizes with Hume in his cultural bias towards British society. However, in answering Hume, Smith's undated response is, at first glance, very judgmental. Answering his friend, Smith argues:

A man is always displaced in a foreign Country, and notwithstanding the boasted humanity and politeness of this Nation, [the French] appear to me to be, in general, more meanly interested, and that the cordiality of their friendship is much less to be depended

on than that of our own countrymen. They live in such large societies and their affections are dissipated among so great a variety of objects, that they can bestow but a very small share of them upon any individual. Do not imagine that the great Princes and Ladies who want you to live with them make this proposal from real and sincere affection to you.³³

A sure criticism of French society and its inability to match British society in terms of “dependability,” Smith’s words are damning when juxtaposed with Hume’s comical tribute to *the Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In spite of this initial appearance, however, the same moral conception issued by Smith in his philosophical text – the construct of sympathy – is found in his consultation with Hume. The historian understands this to be so as a result of Smith’s emphasis on context.

As with Humean utilitarianism, Smith’s theory of choice pronounces the character of another only after deliberation or choice has been reached by the spectator. This choice may be surmised only after the spectator acknowledges the pattern of reasoning allotted to it by situation. Thus, in the context of Hume’s cultural bias against British society, Ross claims that Smith is “extending the meaning of sympathy beyond the concept of sharing someone’s feelings to that of an individual’s *awareness* that he is sharing another person’s feelings. This extension permits Smith to account for the different kinds of moral judgment: first, the ‘propriety’ of an action, that it is right or wrong; and second, that praise or blame is to be attached to it.”³⁴ In offering Hume his judgment on the matter of British and French society, then, Smith is understood to pass judgment only insofar as it corresponds to these two kinds of moral judgment, both of which relate to the mental representations or character-expectations of Smith that are exclusively linked to the volume of sympathy he feels for Hume.

The correspondence of September 1765 between Hume and Smith thus illustrates the manner in which a particular idea or volume of sympathy for another individual human being –

the character-expectation of the onlooker or spectator – is developed through momentary deliberation. But what of the character-expectation Hume and Smith held in relation to themselves? It is a question that has been asked by many friends and biographers of the moral philosophers and answered mostly through speculation alone. However, as Hume and Smith show in their character-expectations to one another, further use of their moral philosophies in explicating the notion of character as it relates to the self can be found.

Again, the historian learns much of the character-expectations Hume held in regards to his own self by examining the moral philosopher's autobiographical sketch. Most interesting is the way in which Hume discloses his origins. For in placing himself in a needy disposition, as was previously mentioned, Hume's motive for his first attempt at literary success – *A Treatise on Human Nature* – is made obvious. This motivation concerning self-dependence is likewise in keeping with Hume's overall resolution "to make a very rigid Frugality supply my Deficiency of Fortune, to maintain unimpaired my Independency, and to regard every object as contemptible, except the Improvement of my Talents in Literature."³⁵

While seemingly from birth, Hume lives a life of misfortunate, the character-expectation he gains from his intellectual youth – reconsidered in his final days in 1776 – is one of prudence and self-reliance. This character-expectation is not without worth for "notwithstanding this Variety of Winds and Seasons to which my Writings had been exposed, they had still been making such Advances, that the Copy Money, given my by the Booksellers, much exceeded anything formerly known in England: I was become not only independent, but opulent."³⁶ It was perhaps this opulence that, while stimulating to both the mind and the well-being of Hume, nonetheless produced controversy throughout his adult life.

As with the imbroglio surrounding Hume's theoretical work, then, an example of such controversy occupies a place in the moral philosopher's correspondence with Adam Smith. Dated August 1766, Hume contemplates publishing words he had exchanged that year with the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in what eventually becomes known as *A Concise and Genuine Account of the Dispute between Mr. Hume and Mr. Rousseau: with the Letters that Passed between them during their Controversy*. According to historians David Edmonds and John Eidinow, this dispute was the outcome of "a mocking letter, a spoof in the name of the king of Prussia satirizing Rousseau as wallowing in misery."³⁷ However, before explicating to Smith his reasons for countering the Swiss philosopher's claim that he was responsible for this besmirchment, Hume exclaims:

I shall not publish them unless forc'd, which you will own to be a very great deal of Self denial. My Conduct, in this Affair, woud do me a great deal of Honour; and his woud blast him for ever; and blast his Writings at the same time: For as these have been exalted much above their Merit, when his personal Character falls, they woud of Course fall below their Merit. I am however apprehensive that in the End I shall be oblig'd to publish.³⁸

In this examination of the self to which Smith is privy, the agitated Hume acknowledges both ascetic and sensualist outcomes that his response to Rousseau might afford his character. This is to say that Hume is fully aware of both the character-expectations that witnesses to the quarrel have of his actions as well as the character-expectation he might make of himself through acting (or failing to act.)

For as Humean utilitarianism finds "what actions are right or wrong cannot...be determined by any amount of ratiocination; the question can only be settled by observation and experience."³⁹ In other words, Hume's character-expectation of himself – like the character-expectations he formulates of others – is constantly being reoriented by the interest of the onlooker when confronted with phenomenological impressions. This is in keeping with Potkay's

comment that “for Hume as for his contemporaries, the self tends to be defined by, in Annette Baier’s phrase, ‘the fiery circling of our successive passions’.”⁴⁰ However, as was mentioned previously in this exposition, the successive passions with which Potkay references through Baier’s interpretation of Humean utilitarianism are not maddening to the onlooker. Instead, they merely affect the scope of a person’s interest and thus the scope of a person’s conception of himself/herself.

Moment by moment, then, Hume is constantly reassessing the character-expectation he holds for himself and moment by moment his interests are being met through this reorientation of the onlooker to the self. Thus in analyzing the character-expectation Hume held of himself in both his short autobiography as well as in his affair with Rousseau, the moral philosophy employed by Hume and others like him, such as Smith, is furthered. This at least is the conclusion Porter makes in surmising that “personal identity...was something in flux, discontinuous, confusing and complicated. Hume never broached ‘multiple personality’ as such, but...he clearly thought people were different awake and sleeping and in various moods. Identity was not a given but a variable, a construct upheld by memory, habit and custom, and by the bonds of society.”⁴¹

The variability of identity, therefore – determined by an ongoing reorganization of the self – is dependent upon experiential formulae such as “memory,” “habit,” “custom” and “the bonds of society,” all of which constitute a new mode of human understanding for the Scottish man of letters. This new mode of human understanding is further classified in Scazzieri’s study of the theoretical work of Adam Smith, wherein the philosopher argues:

Smith’s analysis of social interaction places great emphasis upon the combined influence of imagination and sympathy. Both are rooted in a failure of direct knowledge: “(a)s we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like

situation.”⁴²

The Smithian theory of choice therefore includes a component not found in the Hume’s theory of utility: “imagination.” Smith believes it is necessary to combine sympathy with imagination in order for the spectator to deduce the necessary presuppositions it must hold so as to successfully meet the interest of the individual in each moment in time.

In other words, Smith’s moral philosophy denotes more than just empiricism as the Smithian theory of choice requires of the spectator “the ability to imagine counterfactual set-ups” that “brings sympathy about by following a variety of routes” or fantasies.⁴³ In his own self-assessment, Smith weaves such a fantastic situation by imagining his life less squandered from one he – at the time – endured. Writing to Hume on the 5 July 1764 from Toulouse, France while accompanying his student Henry Scott, 3rd Duke of Buccleugh, Smith snivels: “The Life which I led at Glasgow was a pleasurable, dissipated life in comparison of that which I lead here at Present.”⁴⁴ From this short lamentation, then, springs forth a character-expectation with which Smith imagines a scenario that entails all the comfort that comes with being a thinker.

Smith was raised by his mother Margaret Douglas, who just six months prior to the birth of her son was widowed by the death of her husband, the civil servant Adam Smith. Buchan states that the death of the elder Smith was – for Adam Smith – an instance wherein “the most important events of a life occur before it has begun.”⁴⁵ Likewise, Ross believes that this family tragedy brought the younger Smith and his mother together, as he sees the moral philosopher and economist “loving [Douglas] deeply and seeking to please her, not least in achieving distinction in his career as a professor and man of letters.”⁴⁶ This desire that Smith maintains throughout his and his mother’s life is thus representative of the life with which Smith imagines in opposition to

the malaise of France in his letter to Hume. This imaginative construct, in turn, is supported by the notion of “a certain simplicity of character.”⁴⁷

This certain simplicity of character, as has been previously stated in this essay, is partially defined by an absence of self-indulgence. Like Hume, Smith celebrates this discipline of asceticism in his treatise of moral philosophy *the Theory of Moral Sentiments* as well as in his later work of political economy entitled *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. However, while the historian perceives Hume to have fallen short of this character-expectation, as evident in his bout of Francophilia and his public squabble with Rousseau, Smith is seemingly dedicated to this mode of temperance. Such dedication is articulated by Smith in his counsel with Hume during the course of the previously mentioned affair with Rousseau. Dated 6 July 1766, Smith writes to his “dear friend”:

By endeavoring to unmask before the Public this hypocritical Pendant [Rousseau], you run the risk, of disturbing the tranquility of your whole life. By letting him alone he cannot give you a fortnights uneasiness. To write against him, is, you may depend upon it, the very thing he wishes you to do. He is in danger of falling into obscurity in England and he hopes to make himself considerable by provoking an illustrious adversary. He will have a great party. The church, the Whigs, the Jacobites, the whole wise English nation, who will love to mortify a Scotchman, and to applaud a man that has refused a Pension from the King [of Prussia.]⁴⁸

From this excerpt, it is clear that Smith holds no high opinion of Rousseau nor does he hold any high opinion of those that laud the Swiss’s misdeeds. However, Smith is straightforward with Hume, in that his character-expectations have sympathy only for those whom are simple.

Simple, of course, means that the actions observed by the spectator, in order to be considered sympathetic, must align with the Scot’s imaginative construct of “an incorruptible integrity, which [is] acutely sensible to the smallest indelicacy or incorrectness.”⁴⁹ This verification of character by the spectator, as was previously witnessed in Smith’s profile of William Urquhart wherein the moral philosopher referred to his courier as “plain, sensible and

agreeable,” is again corroborated in his words with Hume concerning the “Pendant” Rousseau. Thus, urging Hume against reproducing the conversation that transpired between he and Rousseau for a public audience, Smith maintains his vigilance over the austere character-expectations he holds for not just his dear friend Hume, but as well, for himself.

Therefore, while Hume’s theory of utility – when confronted with phenomenological impressions – satisfies the onlooker through the reorientation of interest, it is nevertheless epistemologically relativistic in comparison with Smith’s theory of choice. This relativism is due to the fact that Humean utilitarianism lacks the presupposition of imagination that Smith advocates in both his theoretical works as well as in his life. At this point in my presentation the notion of a shared social mores of Scottish *literati* is seemingly jeopardized by the epistemological distinction between the philosophical projects of Hume and Smith. However, in extending my analysis of character as it was understood by Scottish men of letters writing in eighteenth century to the critics and commentators of these two thinkers, I believe their moral philosophies may find reconciliation under a larger schema of morality.

Throughout their correspondence, Hume and Smith allude to a host of historical actors, the majority of whom are favorable to their character-expectations. While a number of these historical actors themselves find preference in the persons of David Hume and Adam Smith, not all can be said to reciprocate the favor Hume and Smith find in them, particularly with regards to Hume. An instance of this failure to reciprocate similar character-expectations to the character of Hume comes from the controversial Scot’s correspondence with Smith. In a dispatch dated 17 December 1754, Hume bemoans Robert Dundas – Smith’s employer and dean of the department of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow – for having denied him a position within the faculty. Hume extends this complaint by stating:

I saw it then impossible to succeed, and accordingly retracted my Application: But being equally unwilling to lose the Use of the Books and to bear an Indignity; I retain the Office [of librarian to the Faculty of Advocates at the University of Glasgow], but have given [Thomas] Blacklock, our blind Poet, a Bond of Annuity for the Sallary.⁵⁰

What is disconcerting about this particular letter is not so much Hume's animosity towards Dundas as it is Hume's evasion of "Indignity" through the exploitation of his friend Blacklock.

Receiving from Hume what can only be referred to as sour money, Blacklock himself is scrutinized by a number of Scottish *literati*. Notable among these critical men of letters is the Scottish philosopher James Beattie. In a letter to the Blacklock, marked 18 April, 1769, Beattie, now certain that the poet has dismissed Hume from his circle of friends, expounds on his opinion of the moral philosopher, stating that "the Gentleman in question is a Bad philosopher, and a Bad member of Society...which I must certainly explain, and will explain without scruple – and let those blame me who can refute my arguments."⁵¹ While Beattie obviously feels disdain for Hume, his letter nevertheless contains a very important component in the emerging morality of eighteenth century Scottish *literati*.

This component or notion, recently enumerated by intellectual historian Richard Boyd in his essay "Reappraising the Scottish Moralists and Civil Society" as "ethical pluralism," provides human understanding "an ideal barrier between a superintending public realm, ruled by reason, self-interest and uniform obligation, and a private sphere characterized by ethical and religious diversity and governed by the dictates of individual conscious."⁵² This distinctly private sphere, in addition to resolving all personal difference – such as the difference between Beattie and Hume – through private confrontation, also works to disarm what economist and philosopher Friedrich A. Hayek calls the "naïve brand of rationalism which holds that human reason can "design-to-order" a range of benevolent social arrangements and institutions."⁵³ In other words, by classifying disagreement as a discrete, rather than societal, Boyd understands the

Scottish Moralists – as previously mentioned – “recognized that the best products of civilization were the products of human actions...not of preconceived human design.”

Thus, ethical pluralism offers those who disagree with one another’s character-expectations the opportunity to make peace in an arena separated from the dictates of public opinion. These terms are clearly agreed upon by men of letters writing during the latter-half of the eighteenth-century in Scotland. For as Boyd argues in his essay, since philosophical “efforts to understand the task of government...lie in more contentious and debatable attempts to bring about some shared moral good in the political community beyond simply...‘publick interest.’ The public sphere becomes a place where ‘measurable’ interests are compromised.”⁵⁴ This is to say that Scottish *literati* find it folly for the conduct of a citizenry to be based upon the moral construct of a government, being that that which is “measurable” or measurable is inconceivable to such an administrative body. Hence it follows that Beattie, like his adversary Hume, believes the public sphere must be reduced and the private sphere emboldened if ever controversy and debate are to be eliminated from human conduct.

While Hume’s visitation to the enlightened sparing ground of ethical pluralism is not in the least bit surprising to those familiar with the recalcitrant moral philosopher and the character-expectations his contemporaries held in regards to his actions, it might startle the historian to learn that Smith too agreed to the terms of this new mode of human conduct. Continuing his account of the life of the eminent moral philosopher and economist, Stewart explains how it was that Smith – throughout many encounters during the course of his life – was brought to recognize this component of the shared social mores of Scottish *literati*:

The opinions he formed of men, upon a slight acquaintance, were frequently erroneous; but the tendency of his nature included him much more to blind partiality, than to ill-founded prejudice. The enlarged view of human affairs, on which his mind habitually dwelt, left him neither time nor inclination to study, in detail, the uninteresting

peculiarities of ordinary characters; and accordingly, though intimately acquainted with the capacities of the intellect, and the workings of the heart, and accustomed in his theories to mark, with the most delicate hand...yet in judging individuals, it sometimes happened, that his estimates were, in a surprising degree, wide of the truth.⁵⁵

Characterized in this text as intellectually inundated and therefore quick to judge the character of others as incongruous with his own imaginative construct of simplicity, Smith's conduct is brought into question by Stewart. In light of this critical analysis of Smith, then, modern-day Smith biographer William R. Scott asks "what is the worth of his verdict" if the Smithian notion of the "impartial spectator" is "capricious and generally unreliable?"⁵⁶

In other words, what good does the morality of eighteenth century Scottish *literati* offer human understanding if it is left unattended by the individual (e.g. Smith?) This supposed epistemological paradox, while initially plausible, is easily resolved by the fact that the notion of ethical pluralism allows time for the Smithian "impartial spectator" to calculate the volume of sympathy it finds in the character of a separate individual. This means that the morality of eighteenth century Scottish men of letters presupposes toleration of the phenomenologically inexplicable, so as to assist the individual in his/her assessment of the character of other individuals. Stewart himself recognizes this in the excerpt cited, as the initial judgments that Smith is said to have made towards men of "slight acquaintance" are later relinquished upon further deliberation. Ethical pluralism, then, is highly prevalent in Smith's theory of choice as the spectator – while initially imprecise in its estimations of the character of other individuals – is genuinely adept at differentiating between the impulsive and the prudential.

This component of Smithian sympathy extends beyond the capricious and generally unreliable findings that Scott associates with Smith's biographical behavior and adequately explains the emphasis with which Stewart places in deliberation as it pertains to Smith's

consideration of character. Smith's use of ethical pluralism is further highlighted by Boyd, who in referencing the moral philosopher's economic tract *the Wealth of Nations*, speaks of:

a spirit of "good temper and moderation"... "obliged to respect those of almost every other sect, and the concessions which they would mutually find both convenient and agreeable to make to one another."⁵⁷

Thus, in connoting the social mores or "spirit" of the times, Smith – like his fellow men of letters Hume, Stewart, et al. – recognizes the obligation he has to respect all other forms of morality.

This collective acknowledgement is in keeping with the liberal notion that stressed at the onset of this essay by Lawrence J. Connin: "that society as a whole would begin to prosper as the level of personal freedom or autonomy increased."⁵⁸ This is to say Scottish *literati* find that once individuals are detached from the dictates of public interest – be they the authoritative command of a parliamentary monarchy or the ambition of sectarian leaderships, religious or commercial – a private sphere of toleration will emerge, whereby the dictates of individual consciousness will enable the onlooker or the spectator to calculate their character-expectations for other individuals with a greater rate of prudence than previous modes of human understanding allowed for. Thus, the notion of tolerance allows for both the Humean onlooker and the Smithian spectator to recognize their shared social mores of character-expectations.

As eighteenth century Scottish *literati* deliberated upon the moral conception of character, the shared social mores or character-expectations these men of letters made of human conduct in their theoretical work contributed to a new mode of human understanding. This new mode of human understanding is properly historicized by the toleration of human conduct. For historical actors like Hume and Smith, tolerance enables humanity to "start the process of rationally reconstructing society and begin the process of solving the age-old problems plaguing humanity." Of course, as an "unplanned artifact of social evolution," tolerance also requires that

the thinker reject separate philosophical conceptions of Enlightenment thought, particularly the Enlightenment rationalist's notion of "unassisted human reason."

Such an epistemological shift in the philosophical conceptions of eighteenth century Scottish *literati* offers rationale for the social interactions of Hume and Smith, as both men seek to instantiate this discipline of human conduct through human action. Thus, in their correspondence with one another, their social interactions, and in the opinion of their contemporary men of letters, Hume, Smith and their literary comrades all seek ways to propagate their own theoretical models of human understanding while at the same time recognize the moral conceptions of others. While at times these historical actors failed to maintain the discipline of simplicity and contemplation, as represented best in the actions of Hume and his inability to circumvent public opinion through ethical pluralism, the private sphere of tolerance nevertheless offered the Scottish Moralists an alternative to separate traditions of Enlightenment thought. This alternate philosophical tradition of critical rationalism thus allowed historical actors of eighteenth century Scotland to overcome what previous Enlightenment thinkers failed to surmount: recourse to an untenable conception of human reason through public interest.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Richard B. Sher, *The Enlightenment & the Book: Scottish Authors & Their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, & America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 147.
- ² David Hume, "My Own Life," in *The Letters of David Hume* vol. 1, ed. J.Y.T Greig (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), 1.
- ³ Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 324.
- ⁴ Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 8.
- ⁵ Greig, *Letters of David Hume* vol. 1, 2
- ⁶ "An Account of the Debate upon the Motion for Censuring Infidel Writers," in *Responses to Hume's Life and Reputation* vol. 1, ed. James Fieser (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Press, 2003), 69.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ⁸ Dugald Stewart, *Biographical Memoir of Adam Smith* (New York: Augustus K. Kelley, 1793, 1966), 76.
- ⁹ Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 234.
- ¹⁰ Sher, *Enlightenment & the Book*, 16.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6: Such criticisms are found in the work of historian Carl Becker, author of *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* and the work of philosophers/sociologists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
- ¹² Connin, Lawrence J., "Hayek, Liberalism and Social Knowledge", *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 23, no. 2 (1990): 298.
- ¹³ Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, 8.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 345.
- ¹⁵ Connin, "Hayek, Liberalism and Social Knowledge", 299-300.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 298.
- ¹⁷ David Hume to Adam Smith, 28 July 1759 in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Ross Simpson Ross (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987), 42.
- ¹⁸ Annette C. Baier, *Death and Character: Further Reflections on Hume* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 3.
- ¹⁹ David Gauthier, "Hume and Morality's 'Useful Purpose,'" in *Persons and Passions: Essays in Honor of Annette Baier* eds. Joyce Jenkins, Jennifer Whiting, and Christopher Williams (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 214.
- ²⁰ David Hume, *David Hume: The Philosophical Works* vol. 2, eds. Thomas Hill Green and Thomas Hodge Grose (London: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964), 247.
- ²¹ David Hume, *David Hume: An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical Edition*, ed. Thomas L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 37.
- ²² Donald Ainslie, "Sympathy and Unity of Hume's Idea of Self," in *Persons and Passions: Essays in Honor of Annette Baier* eds. Joyce Jenkins, Jennifer Whiting, and Christopher Williams (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 143.
- ²³ Smith, Adam. Letter to David Hume, 4 Nov. 1764. In *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited by E.C. Mossner, 103. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987.
- ²⁴ James Buchan, *The Authentic Adam Smith: His Life and Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 9.
- ²⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1976), 16.
- ²⁶ Roberto Scazzieri, "A Smithian theory of choice," in *The Adam Smith Review* vol. 2, ed. Vivienne Brown (London: Routledge Press, 2006), 40, n2.

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- ²⁷ Roger L. Emerson, "Science and moral philosophy" in *Oxford Studies in the History of Philosophy, Volume I: Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* ed. M.A. Stewart (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1990), 34.
- ²⁸ Hume, David. Letter to Adam Smith, 12 Apr. 1759. In *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited by E.C. Mossner, 34-35. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987.
- ²⁹ John Valdimir Price, *The Ironic Hume* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1965), 6.
- ³⁰ Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume: Second Edition* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980), 279.
- ³¹ Ross, *Life of Adam Smith*, 158.
- ³² Hume, David. Letter to Adam Smith, 5 Sept. 1765. In *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited by E.C. Mossner, 107. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987.
- ³³ Smith, Adam. Letter to David Hume, ? Sept. 1765. In *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited by E.C. Mossner, 108. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987.
- ³⁴ Ross, *Life of Adam Smith*, 164
- ³⁵ Greig, *Letters of David Hume* vol. 1, 2.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ³⁷ David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Rousseau's Dog: Two Great Thinkers at War in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: HaperCollins Publishers, 2006), 132.
- ³⁸ Hume, David. Letter to Adam Smith, ? Aug. 1766. In *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited by E.C. Mossner, 118. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987.
- ³⁹ Harrison, *Hume's Moral Epistemology*, vii.
- ⁴⁰ Potkay, *Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume*, 162.
- ⁴¹ Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, 332.
- ⁴² Brown, *Adam Smith Review* vol. 2, 22.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ⁴⁴ Smith, Adam. Letter to David Hume 5 July 1764. In *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited by E.C. Mossner, 102. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987.
- ⁴⁵ Buchan, *The Authentic Adam Smith*, 13.
- ⁴⁶ Ross, *Life of Adam Smith*, 17.
- ⁴⁷ William Robert Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor with Unpublished Documents, including Parts of the "Edinburgh Lectures", a Draft of The Wealth of Nations, Extracts from the Muniments of the University of Glasgow and Correspondence*, (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1937, 1965), 99.
- ⁴⁸ Smith, Adam. Letter to David Hume, 6 July 1766. In *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited by E.C. Mossner, 113. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987.
- ⁴⁹ Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor*, 99.
- ⁵⁰ Hume, David. Letter to Adam Smith, 17 Dec. 1754. In *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited by E.C. Mossner, 16. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 1987.
- ⁵¹ James Beattie to Thomas Blacklock, 11 Oct. 1769, in *Early Responses to Hume's Life and Reputation* vol. 1, ed. James Fieser (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Press, 2003), 199.
- ⁵² Richard Boyd, "Reappraising the Scottish Moralists and Civil Society", *Polity* 33, no. 1 (2000): 108.
- ⁵³ Connin, "Hayek, Liberalism and Social Knowledge", 298.
- ⁵⁴ Boyd, "Reappraising the Scottish Moralists and Civil Society", 109.
- ⁵⁵ Stewart, *Biographical Memoir of Adam Smith*, 78.
- ⁵⁶ Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor*, 100.
- ⁵⁷ Boyd, "Reappraising the Scottish Moralists and Civil Society", 118.
- ⁵⁸ Connin, "Hayek, Liberalism and Social Knowledge", 297.