Does "Bettering Our Condition" Really Make Us Better Off? Adam Smith on Progress and Happiness

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Adam Smith is almost certainly history's most famous advocate of commercial society, but he frankly admits that the relentless pursuit of wealth is a major obstacle to tranquility and contentment and hence that, at first glance, the higher living standards that people "enjoy" in commercial society seem to come only at the cost of their happiness. I argue that the solution to this apparent paradox can be found in Smith's account of the positive political effects of commerce: dependence and insecurity are the chief obstacles to happiness and have been the hallmarks of most of human history, and so the alleviation of these ills in commercial society constitutes a great step forward. Money really cannot buy happiness, but the liberty and security that commercial societies tend to provide help to assuage the greatest sources of misery.

In the eighteenth century, when commercial society in the fullest sense was first emerging, thinkers as disparate as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Justus Möser blamed this kind of society for making people miserable in the name of prosperity, for encouraging people to continually toil and chase after material goods that could never truly satisfy them (cf. Muller 2002). Such criticisms have, if anything, multiplied over time: despite (or perhaps because of) the unprecedented living standards of today's commercial societies, our popular culture abounds in stories about the futility of the "rat race" and the lack of leisure even in the midst of prosperity, and the idea that "money can't buy happiness" is a well-worn cliché. This dilemma is one that history's most famous advocate of commercial society, Adam Smith, himself acknowledged and indeed *insisted* on. In one of the most famous passages in his corpus, Smith writes that "the desire of bettering our condition . . . comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave. In the whole interval which separates these two moments, there is scarce perhaps a single instant in which any man is so perfectly and completely satisfied with his situation, as to be without any wish of alteration or improvement, of any kind" (*WN*, 341).[1] According to Smith, the desire to better our condition is the main engine driving economic growth in commercial society, yet he admits that this desire also tends to disrupt people's tranquility, which he sees as the key component of all true happiness. Further, we will see, he maintains that the most important measure of a society is the degree to which it promotes people's happiness, *not* the standard of living it provides. Hence, the obvious questions arise: why does Smith advocate commercial society if it undermines people's happiness—that is, if it falls short of his own measure of a good society? Or, conversely, why does he think commercial society promotes people's happiness, given that he concedes that the desire for ever-more material goods—the desire on which commercial society is based—seems to keep people from enjoying true happiness?

The answer to these questions is of much more than antiquarian interest not only because Smith is one of history's foremost proponents of our own way of life but also because his view of the relationship between progress and happiness is very different from (and, I would argue, much more compelling than) those prevalent today. Smith unequivocally states that *the* most important benefit of commercial society is that it tends to provide a greater degree of liberty and security than precommercial societies were able to provide, and I argue that this statement points toward the ultimate solution to the apparent conflict regarding progress and happiness in his writings. Given that dependence and insecurity are the chief obstacles to happiness and have been the hallmarks of most of human history, according to Smith, the alleviation of these ills in commercial society constitutes a great step forward. Although the fact that people tend to desire ever-more material goods might keep them from enjoying complete or unalloyed happiness, this tendency also plays a crucial role in paving the way toward liberty and security, thereby removing the great sources of misery that so dominated precommercial societies. From Smith's point of view, then, the relationship between progress and happiness is a paradoxical and complicated one: there is no necessary tradeoff between the two, as many critics of commercial society suggest yet nor does commercial society make us better off for the reasons that most people expect, because wealth and material goods themselves actually do little to make people any happier.

Many of the other apparent conflicts in Smith's corpus have been analyzed and (in many cases) resolved in the outpouring of scholarly work on Smith in the past several decades. To take just a few examples, a multitude of scholars have focused on the seeming divergence between Smith's famous account of the benefits of the division of labor with regard to productivity

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[1] I have used the standard Glasgow edition of Smith's works and the following in-text abbreviations: *Astronomy* = "The History of Astronomy." *LJ* = *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. *TMS* = *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. *WN* = *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Full citations can be found in the Reference section.

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in Book I of *The Wealth of Nations* and his equally famous castigation of the debilitating effects of the division of labor on people's characters in Book V (e.g., Rosenberg 1965, 1995; West 1996), between his frequent invocations of God and other "teleological" statements and his apparent secularism and empiricism (e.g., Kleer 1995, 2000; Minowitz 1993), and between his emphasis on self-interest in *The Wealth of Nations* and his emphasis on sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—the key issue in the notorious "Adam Smith Problem" (e.g., Montes 2004; Otteson 2002). The apparent conflict between Smith's view of happiness as tranquility and his defense of commercial society has, however, received far less attention. To be sure, many studies have examined issues that are related to this one—for instance, dozens if not hundreds of works have addressed Smith's view of the relationship between economic growth and the welfare of the laboring poor (e.g., Heilbroner 1975; Hont and Ignatieff 1983) and his notions of history and historical progress, especially with respect to the rise of commercial society in modern Europe (e.g., Haakonssen 1981; Muller 1993), and many works before this one have stressed that Smith advocates commercial society much more for the sake of liberty and security than for the sake of wealth itself (e.g., Berry 1990; Cropsey 2001; Rothschild 2001). Yet surprisingly few works have devoted much explicit attention to the question of why Smith thinks commercial society promotes people's *happiness* despite the fact that it encourages them to strive for ever-more wealth and material goods, thereby disrupting their tranquility. This issue *has* been prominently raised, however, in two of the best recent works on Smith: Charles Griswold's (1999) *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* and Samuel Fleischacker's (2004) *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations*. Both of these works offer insightful discussions of the place of happiness in Smith's thought, but I argue that neither of them fully succeeds in resolving this apparent conflict.

THE PURSUIT OF UNHAPPINESS

Smith understands happiness as a lasting state of contentment, a state that is content precisely because it is not continually disturbed by restless desires. "Happiness consists in tranquillity and enjoyment," he writes. "Without tranquillity there can be no enjoyment; and where there is perfect tranquillity there is scarce any thing which is not capable of amusing" (*TMS*, 149; cf. 37). Happiness, according to Smith, is produced above all by a state of inner harmony or balance—a lack of significant internal discord—and Smith claims that this is the "natural" or "usual" state that our minds take when they are not disturbed by incessant desires or by major fears or worries (*TMS*, 149). He explicitly links this view to that of the Stoics in the previous sentence, but he does not *wholly* adopt the Stoic view, for he recognizes that the eradication of all passions and feelings—which he generally refers to as "apathy" or "indifference"—is undesirable (cf. *TMS*, 143, 292). A degree of emotion is necessary, because although tranquility of mind is the key component of happiness, it is not the *whole* of happiness; rather, it must be combined with "enjoyment" or pleasure. External fortune does have a role to play in attaining happiness, then, and hence Smith says only that the Stoic view of happiness was "very nearly in the right" (*TMS*, 149).[2]

Although external fortune plays a role in attaining happiness, however, great fortune is by no means necessary. Smith believes that it is not great achievements or vast ambitions that make people truly happy, but simpler and calmer pleasures such as the knowledge that one has acted virtuously and rewarding relationships with family and friends. According to Smith, people are so constituted that they take pleasure in knowing that they have acted in a praiseworthy manner, and in this sense virtue really is its own reward: warranted praise from others and warranted self-approbation are two of the surest sources of "inward tranquillity and self-satisfaction" and hence of happiness (*TMS*, 113, cf. 166, 187). Smith also believes that personal relationships based on mutual affection and genuine sympathy are crucial ingredients of happiness (cf. *TMS*, 39, 224–25). He claims, for example, that it is better to advance slowly and steadily toward a higher station than to experience a "sudden revolution of fortune," because such revolutions tend to provoke envy and thereby alienate one's friends, and friendship is far more important than fortune (*TMS*, 40–1). Indeed, in the midst of this discussion Smith posits that "the chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved" (*TMS*, 41; cf. 113).

This kind of happiness requires little in the way of material goods, of course, and so Smith claims that the rich and powerful are no more likely to attain it than the poor and weak. He asks rhetorically, "What can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience? To one in this situation, all accessions of fortune may properly be said to be superfluous" (*TMS*, 45; cf. 149). In fact, Smith sometimes even seems to imply that the poor may be *more* likely to attain happiness than the rich: he writes that "Except the frivolous pleasures of vanity and superiority, we may find, in the most humble station, where there is only personal liberty, every other which the most exalted can afford; and the pleasures of vanity and superiority are seldom consistent with perfect tranquillity, the principle and foundation of all real and satisfactory enjoyment" (*TMS*, 150). He harbors no illusions about the importance of possessing the necessities and some of the conveniences of life, but even if *some* material goods are necessary, he argues, the "trinkets and baubles" of the rich are often more trouble than they are worth (cf. *WN*, 421). These goods cost a great deal of trouble to buy, protect, fix, and replace, and they cannot relieve any of the real ills in life: they "may save [their possessor] from some smaller inconveniencies," but they "leave him always as much, and sometimes more exposed than before, to anxiety,

[2] Smith's relationship to the Stoics has received a good deal of scholarly attention; see, for example, Montes 2004; Vivenza 2001; Waszek 1984.

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to fear, and to sorrow; to diseases, to danger, and to death" (*TMS*, 183). Even further, he writes that "power and riches" are "enormous and operose machines contrived to produce a few trifling conveniences to the body. . . which must be kept in order with the most anxious attention, and which in spite of all our care are ready every moment to burst into pieces, and to crush in their ruins their unfortunate possessor" (*TMS*, 182–3). For Smith, then, many of the commodities produced by commercial society are ultimately useless (and perhaps even worse than useless).

Just as important as the fact that money cannot buy happiness, for Smith, is the fact that the relentless *pursuit* of money tends to *detract* from people's happiness, for when people desire ever-more wealth and material goods, they often submit themselves to nearly endless toil and anxiety in the pursuit of them. People typically think that they would be happier if they had more money, but Smith argues that this false belief actually tends to lead to *un*happiness: "The great source of both the misery and disorders of human life, seems to arise from over-rating the difference between one permanent situation and another" (*TMS*, 149; cf. 182). This belief leads people to strive for more and more wealth and consequently to abandon the simple pleasures that are available to them at any time. To illustrate this point Smith relates a charming story told by Plutarch:

> What the favourite of the king of Epirus said to his master, may be applied to men in all the ordinary situations of human life. When the King had recounted to him, in their proper order, all the conquests which he proposed to make, and had come to the last of them; And what does your Majesty propose to do then? said the Favourite.—I propose then, said the King, to enjoy myself with my friends, and endeavour to be good company over a bottle.—And what hinders your Majesty from doing so now? replied the Favourite. (*TMS*, 150)

In stark contrast to his close friend David Hume (cf. Hume 1987, 269–70), Smith maintains that labor is "toil and trouble" (*WN*, 47), that it requires a person to "lay down [a] portion of his ease, his liberty, and his happiness" (*WN*, 50). He speaks of "all that toil, all that anxiety, all those mortifications which must be undergone in the pursuit of [wealth and greatness]; and what is of yet more consequence, all that leisure, all that ease, all that careless security, which are forfeited for ever by the acquisition" (*TMS*, 51). Happiness consists largely of tranquility, for Smith, and there is little tranquility to be found in toiling and striving.

In short, Smith vividly shows that neither the pursuit nor the attainment of wealth brings true happiness. He also vividly shows, however, that the vast majority of people struggle mightily for wealth in any case—recall his statement that "the desire of bettering our condition . . . comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave" (*WN*, 341). Smith argues that people are deceived into thinking that wealth is so desirable mainly because of their concern for the opinions of others: "It is chiefly from . . . regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches and avoid poverty" (*TMS*, 50). It is clear that people do not pursue wealth simply "to supply the necessities of nature," because people's true needs are relatively few: "the wages of the meanest labourer can afford them" (*TMS*, 50). Rather, people want wealth and luxuries because of the attention it brings them: "It is the vanity, not the ease or the pleasure, which interests us" (*TMS*, 50; cf. *WN*, 190). People forfeit leisure, ease, and security and undergo endless toil and anxiety, in the end, to fulfill their vanity and avoid the contempt that comes from being poor. Smith claims that even if there are some moments when people are able to see that neither wealth nor the fulfillment of their vanity will bring them happiness, such as when they are old or sick or depressed—or perhaps when they are enlightened by a book like *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—they almost inevitably turn back toward the delusory pursuit of wealth because it is so difficult to continually view things "in this abstract and philosophical light" (*TMS*, 183; cf. 181–82).

The tendency to continually strive for more and more is part of human nature, for Smith, but it also seems that commercial society deepens the problem. Even if the "desire of bettering our condition" has always been present, there is simply more to desire in commercial society, for the combination of an extensive division of labor and a large market helps to produce a great deal of luxuries and so makes available to people a myriad of things they could not otherwise want. Whereas the desire for the necessities of life must be relatively limited because these things are fairly easily attainable, Smith claims that the desire for luxuries and "conveniencies" is "altogether endless" (*WN*, 181). Moreover, the continual pursuit of material goods is not just a minor component of commercial society, but the very engine that drives it: "The uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition [is] the principle from which publick and national, as well as private opulence is originally derived" (*WN*, 343). In a word, Smith accepts that both the rise of commercial society and continued economic growth *within* this kind of society are based on a delusion among the members of that society about their own happiness; the wealth of nations is made possible only by a massive self-deception about the true ends of human life.

Smith's explicit response to this problem, moreover, seems to do little to answer the question of why he ultimately thinks commercial society makes people better off. After discussing the fact that people strive for evermore material goods even though these goods cannot provide true satisfaction, he continues: "And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. It is this which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life" (*TMS*, 183–84). This passage, however, does not seem to solve the problem; it seems to merely suggest that the continual pursuit of wealth is good because it advances civilization, but this of course begs the question of why civilization is desirable in the first place. What good are all of these "improvements" (the

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arts and sciences and the rest), one might reasonably ask, if most of the individuals within commercial society remain deluded about the nature and basis of their own happiness?

In a discussion of this passage, Charles Griswold (1999, 222) notes the "comic irony" inherent in Smith's view that the wealth of nations is made possible only by a pursuit of wealth that leaves people "constantly dissatisfied," and he attempts to spell out Smith's reasoning by positing a distinction between what is good for society and what is good for the individual: "In both of his books Smith is recommending a society devoted to the improvement of the human lot but governed by a systematic self-deception about its own ends. Such a society is therefore inclined to private, though not necessarily public, unhappiness" (263; cf. 288, 302). Even if the deception associated with the pursuit of wealth renders the individuals who are deceived unhappy, in other words, it leads to "public happiness," by which Griswold seems to mean above all economic development: "In the kind of twist so typical of his thinking, Smith explicitly argues that the fact that most individuals are *not* perfectly happy contributes to the 'happiness of mankind, as well as of all rational beings.' The deception of the imagination underlying the drive to better our condition . . . creates 'progress' or 'civilization,' that is, productive labor, which may increase the wealth of nations" (225).

As we have just seen, however, the fact that the deception associated with the pursuit of wealth creates prosperity and encourages "progress"—and thereby produces what Griswold dubs "public happiness"—does not seem in itself to be enough to fully resolve the tension. Smith's defense of commercial society could be easily reconciled with his acknowledgment that it is based on this deception if he was concerned only with how wealthy or civilized a society is and not how happy it is, but this is patently not the case: in the very next paragraph, he writes that "All constitutions of government . . . are valued only in proportion as they tend to promote the happiness of those who live under them. This is their sole use and end" (*TMS*, 185). Further, Smith explicitly argues against the notion of a "public happiness" that is separate from—indeed, opposed to—the happiness of each individual: "No society can be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable" (*WN*, 96). Smith's touchstone is the happiness of the individuals who make up a society, not some vague notion of "public happiness." Griswold is right to contend that, on Smith's view, people generally fail to understand what true happiness is or how it might be attained, but he never makes entirely clear why Smith thinks commercial society truly makes people better off despite the fact that it expands and builds on this confusion.

In a response to Griswold's argument, Samuel Fleischacker insists that it does not make sense for Smith to have maintained that the pursuit of wealth is conducive to unhappiness but to have also "applaud[ed] a social system that depends upon, and encourages, that very pursuit" (2004, 104). He attempts to solve this puzzle by claiming that later in life Smith changed his mind about the deception associated with the pursuit of wealth: "TMS IV.i.10 [the passage which explains why this deception is a good thing] is Smith's earliest published writing on political economy, and he later significantly altered many of the views it expresses" (104). Smith does not claim in *The Wealth of Nations* that the pursuit of wealth is founded on the false supposition, aroused by vanity, that wealth and material goods will make them happier, Fleischacker argues; rather, he maintains in his later work that the economy is driven by "the humble goods of the poor, not luxury goods," meaning that "the desire crucial to economic growth is not based on illusion" (118, 111). Hence, Smith's earlier claim that people's vanity leads them to pursue meaningless luxuries, and that this pursuit is good because it is what drives the progress of civilization, must not represent his settled views, and we ought to stress the later writings over earlier ones (cf. 108–11, 294). Fleischacker cites the fact that the section of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in question was written for the first edition in 1759 and received only "one tiny revision" over the course of the next five editions and suggests that Smith "may well have wanted to leave it in undisturbed in later editions whatever he thought of some of its implications" because it was "a beautiful piece of writing" (108).

Fleischacker's (2004) explanation, however, does not seem fully satisfactory either. After all, the fact that luxury goods are not the primary driving force of the economy in *The Wealth of Nations* is entirely compatible with people's pursuit of wealth being misguided,[3] and Smith gives no indication that striving and toiling for nonluxury goods is any less disruptive of people's tranquility and happiness than striving and toiling for luxury goods; we have seen that even in *The Wealth of Nations* Smith maintains that labor is "toil and trouble" (47), that it requires a person to "lay down [a] portion of his ease, his liberty, and his happiness" (50). Fleischacker's contention that a "slow, gradual 'bettering of one's condition' is perfectly compatible with contentment, for the later Smith" (113) seems to overlook Smith's insistence that this desire must be "uniform, constant, and uninterrupted" and hence generate nearly continuous labor in order for a nation or an individual to prosper (*WN*, 343). Further, the idea that Smith changed his mind about the deception associated with the pursuit of wealth but did not bother to change the passage in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that describes this problem so powerfully is also doubtful: Smith was an extraordinarily careful writer, as Fleischacker himself shows (3–15), and he *did* retain this passage in all six editions of this work up until his death in 1790, whereas he elsewhere showed no reluctance to remove or change very large portions of his works. Moreover, as Fleischacker also notes (112, 120), in the final (1790) edition of this work Smith added an entire chapter on the corruptions associated with people's tendency to admire the wealthy, a chapter

[3] Fleischacker seems to partly concede this point at the end of his discussion (cf. 120).

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which would seem to reinforce the point of the earlier passage on the delusory nature of the pursuit of wealth (cf. *TMS*, 61–6). Thus, it seems improbable that Smith simply overlooked the earlier passage in his revisions or chose to keep it because he thought it was "a beautiful piece of writing"; the tension in Smith's writings on the issue of progress and happiness cannot be avoided by discounting the importance of one or another of his statements on the issue.

I believe that Smith's statements on this issue *are* ultimately consistent with one another, and that the solution to the apparent paradox described earlier can be found in his account of the positive political effects of commerce. In a crucial passage in Book III of *The Wealth of Nations*, at the culmination of his account of the transition from the feudal age to the commercial age in Europe, Smith offers the most explicit statement of his entire corpus about why he thinks commercial society ultimately makes people better off:

> . . . commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals, among the inhabitants of the country, who had before lived almost in a continual state of war with their neighbours, and of servile dependency on their superiors. This, though it has been the least observed, is by far the most important of all their effects. (*WN*, 412)

The importance of this passage is demonstrated not only by Smith's superlative language—the promotion of liberty and security is *by far* the most important of *all* of commerce's effects—but also by its age: as W. R. Scott has shown, Book III is the oldest part of *The Wealth of Nations* and may have originated as early as Smith's public lectures in Edinburgh in 1748 to 1750 (1937, 56; cf. *WN*, 412n6). As I mentioned at the outset, other scholars have rightly emphasized that the promotion of liberty and security rather than the promotion of wealth was in fact Smith's larger concern. Joseph Cropsey (2001, 112) argues, for instance, that "Smith may be understood as a writer who advocated capitalism for the sake of freedom, civil and ecclesiastical," and Christopher Berry maintains that Smith defends commercial society "because the conditions that make opulence possible also, in a mutually complementary fashion, make possible a superior form of freedom—that of liberty under law, the hallmark of civilisation" (1990, 116; cf. Rothschild 2001, 14, 70–1). Even these scholars, however, have generally said very little about the importance of happiness for Smith. If the true measure of a society is the happiness of the people who live in it, then why does he say that liberty and security are the most important advantages of commercial society? In other words, what is the connection, for Smith, between liberty and security on the one hand and happiness on the other?

PREVENTING MISERY

The idea that liberty and security are key factors in solving the happiness puzzle in Smith's writings was in fact suggested by Dugald Stewart, Smith's contemporary and first biographer, in his "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D." ([1793] 1982). Stewart prefaces his account of *The Wealth of Nations* with the observation that in modern times "the most wealthy nations are those where the people . . . enjoy the greatest degree of liberty" and that "it was the general diffusion of wealth among the lower orders of men, which first gave birth to the spirit of independence in modern Europe" (313). He then goes on to declare, in a revealing passage, that these comments on the relationship between wealth and liberty

> . . . appeared to me to form, not only a proper, but in some measure a necessary introduction to the few remarks I have to offer on Mr Smith's Inquiry; as they tend to illustrate a connection between his system of commercial politics, and those speculations of his earlier years, in which he aimed more professedly at the advancement of human improvement and happiness. It is this view of political economy that can alone render it interesting to the moralist, and can dignify calculations of profit and loss in the eye of the philosopher. Mr Smith has alluded to it in various passages of his work, but he has nowhere explained himself fully on the subject (314–15).

In other words, Stewart too recognizes that Smith retained his concern for happiness when writing *The Wealth of Nations* and that there is a connection between "his system of commercial politics," the rise of modern liberty, and the advancement of human happiness. But what *is* this connection to which "Mr Smith has alluded . . . in various passages of his work" but which he has "nowhere explained . . . fully"? Even if commercial society is able to provide a greater degree of liberty and security than previous societies, what does this have to do with *happiness*?

The first point to notice is that Smith—joining a long tradition of philosophers from Socrates to the present—holds that a life of perfect, unalloyed happiness is simply unattainable. We have seen that for Smith incessant desires are, along with continual anxieties and fears, *the* major obstacles to attaining the tranquility that is the key component of happiness. We have also seen that the "desire of bettering our condition" is not exclusive to commercial society, on Smith's account: he claims that people will *always* desire more than they have, whether they desire luxuries and refinements or more food and a better hut, because their chief desire is ultimately to impress others and fulfill their vanity rather than to actually enjoy the goods themselves (cf. *TMS*, 50). Although some circumstances are undoubtedly more conducive to tranquility and happiness than are others, then—because continual fears and anxieties are *not* inescapable features of human nature as Smith depicts it—it seems that unfulfilled (and unfulfillable) desires will prevent people from enjoying *complete* happiness under any conceivable circumstances. Hence, Smith states that a government should be valued insofar as it *tends* to *promote* the happiness of those who live under it—not that people must attain happiness without fail (cf. *TMS*, 185).

One of the surest ways of *promoting* people's happiness, of course, would be to alleviate the greatest

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sources of misery. Further, preventing misery seems to be a more pressing task than ensuring happiness, on Smith's view, because pain is a more "pungent" sensation than pleasure and because suffering lowers people's spirits more than enjoyment can raise them: "Pain . . . almost always, depresses us much more below the ordinary, or what might be called the natural state of our happiness, than [pleasure] ever raises us above it," he writes (*TMS*, 121; cf. 44). "Though between [the ordinary or natural state of happiness] and the highest pitch of human prosperity, the interval is but a trifle; between it and the lowest depth of misery the distance is immense and prodigious," and so it would seem even more crucial to assuage the deepest miseries than to encourage the greatest joys (*TMS*, 45). Thus, it seems that in the end Smith judges a society not by whether it ensures people's complete happiness—because this is impossible—but by the degree to which it *promotes* their happiness, if only by keeping them from being miserable.

I will argue that according to Smith the key prerequisites for avoiding misery—for attaining a reasonable degree of tranquility and enjoyment—are a sense of relative safety and freedom from direct dependence on another individual. When people feel safe and secure and do not feel subject to the caprice of others, in other words, they are less likely to experience the kinds of fears and anxieties that ruin almost any chance of finding a measure of tranquility. This conjecture is substantiated throughout the remainder of this essay, but we can observe immediately the connection between these two prerequisites and Smith's description of the benefits of commerce in the passage whose importance I emphasized earlier. Smith writes there that whereas before the rise of commercial society people commonly "lived almost in a continual state of war with their neighbours, and of servile dependency on their superiors," these ills were finally alleviated in commercial society—a change which constitutes "by far the most important of all [of commerce's] effects" (*WN*, 412). It is my contention that these very effects—providing a greater degree of security and a greater degree of liberty, understood here as freedom from direct, personal dependence on others—are precisely the preconditions for attaining a meaningful degree of tranquility and enjoyment, on Smith's view. In other words, the surest way of promoting people's happiness, for Smith, is to provide them with liberty and security; this reading neatly solves the puzzle described earlier, that of why Smith identifies liberty and security as the most important aspects of commercial society when he also says that the true measure of a society is the degree to which it promotes people's happiness.

The idea that liberty and security are the key prerequisites for any degree of tranquility and happiness is, in fact, the entire point of Smith's claims that the rich tend to be no happier than the poor. We have seen Smith's assertion that "Except the frivolous pleasures of vanity and superiority, we may find, in the most humble station, *where only there is personal liberty*, every other which the most exalted can afford" (*TMS*, 150, italics added). In other words, Smith maintains that personal liberty is *the* necessary ingredient for taking pleasure in life and that it is equally available to the rich and the poor. In his most extreme example of this claim, Smith writes, "In what constitutes the real happiness of human life, [the poor] are in no respect inferior to those who would seem so much above them. In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for" (*TMS*, 185). Smith here essentially equates "the real happiness of human life" with "ease of body and peace of mind" and with security; the poor and the beggar would not be "nearly upon a level" with the rich and the king with respect to happiness if they did not feel free and secure. Given that this passage is found at the end of the paragraph in which Smith describes how the deception associated with the pursuit of wealth spurs industry and thereby advances civilization, it is relatively clear that the poor and the beggar here should be assumed to be living in a commercial society. The rich do not tend to be much happier than the poor in commercial society, according to Smith, because they both enjoy liberty and security under the law. We will see, however—and this is a crucial point—that this might not always be the case in societies that fail to provide as much liberty and security, for in these societies wealth may be the only means of avoiding dependence and insecurity.

Although providing liberty and security might not seem to be a terribly lofty goal—as opposed to, say, promoting virtue or salvation—Smith shows that the vast majority of societies have been unable to meet even this relatively modest objective. Indeed, significant portions of *The Wealth of Nations* and even larger portions of Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* read like little more than extended descriptions of the astonishing range of ills that dominated previous stages of society. Like many other thinkers of the eighteenth century (cf. Meek 1976), Smith adopts a "four-stage" theory of history, according to which humanity progresses through four different socioeconomic periods—the hunting, shepherding, agricultural, and commercial stages of society. History is, for Smith, a story of humanity's ever-widening conquest of nature; whereas people originally had to remain content with accepting what nature provides, in later stages they are able to control and harness nature and thereby ensure themselves a more comfortable existence. It is not until the final (commercial) stage, however, that liberty and security are extended to more than a few individuals.

Smith maintains that in the earliest ages poverty is the keynote to all aspects of life (cf. *WN*, 712), and he sees nothing redeeming about poverty: he notes on the first page of *The Wealth of Nations* that many "savage nations . . . are so miserably poor, that, from mere want, they are frequently reduced, or, at least, think themselves reduced, to the necessity sometimes of directly destroying, and sometimes of abandoning their infants, their old people, and those afflicted with lingering diseases, to perish with hunger, or to be devoured by wild beasts" (10; cf. *TMS*, 210). Because of the scarcity that prevails in these societies, Smith

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writes, "Every savage . . . is often exposed to the greatest extremities of hunger, and frequently dies of pure want" (*TMS*, 205). Competition for scarce resources at this stage is cutthroat, and not only in a metaphorical sense: he graphically describes a prisoner of war among the American Indians being "hung by the shoulders over a slow fire," then being "scorched and burnt, and lacerated in all the most tender and sensible parts of [the] body for several hours together" (*TMS*, 206; cf. *LJ*, 239, 548).

The inhabitants of hunting societies might seem to have a great deal of liberty or independence, at least, given that there is little or no government in this stage, but Smith claims that this is far from always being the case. Before the rise of governmental power there was no authority that could intervene in family life, he notes, and so "the father possessed a power over his whole family, wife, children, and slaves, which was not much less than supreme" (*LJ*, 143–44; cf. 176). Husbands "had absolute power over [their wives], both of death and of divorce," and fathers were not even obliged to provide for or educate their children (*LJ*, 66; cf. 172, 449). Even the adult males in these societies could not enjoy their relative independence, according to Smith, simply because life was so utterly precarious. Without a reasonable level of security people must live in constant anxiety: "unprotected by the laws of society, exposed, defenceless, [a person in the first ages of society] feels his weakness upon all occasions; his strength upon none" (*Astronomy*, 48). Although the life of a savage is not solitary, for Smith, it is rather poor, nasty, brutish, and short.[4]

If the keynote of life in the hunting stage is poverty, according to Smith, the defining element of both the shepherding and agricultural stages is dependence. Given the relative absence of luxuries in these societies, he repeatedly asserts, the wealthy have little on which to spend their wealth other than "maintaining" or providing for a great multitude of tenants and retainers (cf. *LJ*, 49–51, 202, 248, 405, 416; *WN*, 413–15, 712–13). Because government and the rule of law are generally not powerful enough in these stages to effectively reach into their estates, the wealthy enjoy almost complete control over their dependents. Thus, to use Smith's chief example, the feudal lords of Europe held their serfs—who often numbered in the thousands—utterly at their mercy: "every great landlord was a sort of petty prince. His tenants were his subjects. He was their judge, and in some respects their legislator in peace, and their leader in war. He made war at his own discretion, frequently against his neighbours, and sometimes against his sovereign" (*WN*, 383; cf. 415; *LJ*, 51, 55, 128).[5] As a result of the nearly absolute power of the lords, people in these societies enjoyed little security: "The law at that time . . . did not provide, nor indeed could it, for the safety of the subjects" (*LJ*, 55). The lords regularly used their power to make war on each other, so "depredations were continually committed up and down the country" (*LJ*, 416), and at times nearly the whole countryside was a scene of "violence, rapine, and disorder" (*WN*, 418; cf. 381; *LJ*, 520).

Just as detrimental as the general lack of security caused by the chiefs and lords in these stages, for Smith, was the near ubiquity of direct, personal dependence itself. He repeatedly draws attention to the unfortunate condition of the tenants and retainers of medieval Europe who had few rights of any kind: they could have no private property that was free from encroachment by their lord, they were bought and sold with the land and so were unable to freely move, they typically could not choose their own occupations, and they often had to obtain their lord's consent to get married (cf. *LJ*, 48, 53–5, 255; *WN*, 386–87). Precisely because the vast majority of people were so heavily dependent on the caprice of another person, Smith claims of these stages that "A more miserable and oppressive government cannot be imagined" (*LJ*, 414). Although subsistence is not as precarious in the shepherding and agricultural stages as in the hunting stage, then, Smith shows that most people in these periods still have little liberty or security.

In short, Smith argues that no society prior to the emergence of commercial society had been able to provide liberty and security for more than a small number of individuals. Because dependence and insecurity are the greatest obstacles to happiness, for Smith, no precommercial societies were able to promote people's happiness as effectively as the commercial societies of his day that *did* provide their inhabitants with liberty and security. The question is, why are commercial societies able to succeed where every other society in history has failed? How exactly *does* commerce introduce "order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals" (*WN*, 412)?

COMMERCE AND PROGRESS

Smith's emphasis on the prevalence of dependence and insecurity in precommercial societies helps to shed an interesting light on the famous comparison between the European peasant and the African king that he uses in the first chapter of *The Wealth of Nations* to illustrate the fact that even the poor in commercial society are better off than the rich are in precommercial societies. Locke's equally famous statement along these lines holds that "a King of a large and fruitful Territory [among the American Indians] feeds,

[4] Although Smith's view of primitive societies is a dim one, I do not mean to imply that Smith was a follower of Hobbes in other senses, as Cropsey (2001) and Minowitz (1993) have contended. Contrary to the argument of these scholars, Smith does not see self-preservation as the primary end of human life, nor does he see commerce as incompatible with, or a substitute for, virtue (cf. Fleischacker 2004, 100–103). Just as important in the context of this essay, Smith's view of happiness is nearly the opposite of Hobbes' contention that "Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another, the attaining of the former being but the way to the latter" (Hobbes 1994, 57; cf. 34–5).

[5] Wealth brings its possessor great authority in a similar manner in shepherding societies, for Smith—a fact which would have been especially palpable to him from his familiarity with the Scottish Highlands, where the chieftains held the power of life and death over their clans (cf. *LJ*, 54; *WN*, 416).

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lodges, and is clad worse than a day Labourer in England" (Locke 1988, 297). The stress here is solely on material well-being. The analogous passage in *The Wealth of Nations*, however, adds an important political twist: Smith writes that "the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, *the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages*" (*WN*, 24, italics added). Although the fact that the material conditions of the poor in Europe are superior to those of even a king in Africa is itself remarkable, Smith also points here to something that is ultimately more significant: in contrast to the "ten thousand naked savages," no one is the absolute master of the life and liberty of the European peasant. In addition to increasing wealth, Smith indicates here and throughout his works, commercial societies are able to provide liberty and security for their inhabitants to an extent that far surpasses all previous societies.

Smith explains how commerce helped to pave the way toward liberty and security in Book III of *The Wealth of Nations*, where he relates a now well-known story about how the nobles in feudal Europe squandered their authority over their dependents for the sake of frivolous luxuries. After the fall of the Roman empire, Smith recounts, the great landowners throughout Europe each maintained thousands of tenants and retainers over whom they exercised complete control, because the authority of the sovereign was rarely strong enough to be effective throughout the country. The inhabitants of the cities eventually sought to combine to protect themselves from the lords, and the kings tended to support their efforts toward independence in an attempt to weaken the power of the lords, thereby extending the reach of their own authority (cf. *LJ*, 188, 256; *WN*, 402). Eventually, Smith writes—in a passage that closely prefigures the one to which I attached so much importance earlier—"Order and good government, and along with them the liberty and security of individuals, were . . . established in cities at a time when the occupiers of land in the country were exposed to every sort of violence" (*WN*, 405). At this point, then, the burghers enjoyed a greater degree of liberty and security under the protection of the king, but they constituted only a small proportion of the population. These individuals unsuspectingly helped to pave the road toward liberty and security for the rest of the population, however, simply by engaging in commerce—especially by producing and importing luxuries and manufactured goods, which Smith claims were the ultimate cause of the lords' demise (cf. *WN*, 406–7).

Once luxuries were introduced, Smith reports, the lords finally had something on which to spend their wealth other than the maintenance of their dependents; these goods gave them a way to spend their wealth on themselves alone, one which they immediately adopted out of greed and vanity. Thus, "For a pair of diamond buckles perhaps, or for something as frivolous and useless, they exchanged . . . the price of the maintenance of a thousand men for a year, and with it the whole weight and authority which it could give them" (*WN*, 418–19). Once the lords began to spend the bulk of their wealth on luxuries, in other words, they could no longer afford to keep their dependents. When their dependents were dismissed,

> . . . the great proprietors were no longer capable of interrupting the regular execution of justice, or of disturbing the peace of the country. Having sold their birth-right . . . for trinkets and baubles, fitter to be the play-things of children than the serious pursuits of men, they became as insignificant as any substantial burgher or tradesman in a city. A regular government was established in the country as well as in the city, nobody having sufficient power to disturb its operations in the one, any more than in the other. (*WN*, 421; cf. *LJ*, 264)

The decline in the power of the lords allowed the kings to establish a "regular government" that was strong enough to effectively enforce order and administer justice throughout the country.[6] Accordingly, Smith claims, the rule of law tends to be adequately enforced in commercial societies, to the point where "In modern commercial nations . . . the authority of law is always perfectly sufficient to protect the meanest man in the state" (*TMS*, 223; cf. *LJ*, 55; *WN*, 384).

Great wealth may give the rich a great deal of purchasing power in commercial society, Smith argues, but (unlike in earlier societies) it does not give them any direct authority over others because everyone stands in a market relationship with one another and there are generally a multitude of potential buyers, sellers, and employers (cf. *WN*, 48). "Each tradesman or artificer derives his subsistence from the employment, not of one, but of a hundred or a thousand different customers," Smith writes, and thus "Though in some measure obliged to them all . . . he is not absolutely dependent upon any one of them" (*WN*, 420; cf. 712). Wealthy individuals in commercial society *indirectly* support many others by employing them or by buying goods which they produce, of course, but Smith argues that this indirect support is not enough to place these people at their command: even if employees are likely to try to please their employers in order to keep their jobs, it is highly unlikely that they would surrender their rights to them or accompany them into battle, for example (cf. *LJ*, 50, 202; *WN*, 421). In the words of Knud Haakonssen, "the modern economy enables [the working poor] to sell their labour without selling themselves" (1998, 820; cf. Griswold 1999, 299). Once the people were no longer directly dependent on the lords, then, they enjoyed not only greater security (because the rule of law was enforced by the king) but also greater freedom or discretion, such as the choice of where to live and what occupation to practice. It was only after people gained this kind of freedom of choice, Smith says, that they "became really free in our

[6] Several of Smith's Scottish contemporaries, including his best friend (David Hume) and best student (John Millar), related similar stories about how the introduction of luxuries led the feudal lords to dismiss their dependents and thereby made possible a more effective administration of justice (Cf. Hume 1983, vol. 3, 76–7; vol. 4, 383–85; 1987, 277; Millar 1960a, 375–78; 1960b, 290–91).

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present sense of the word Freedom" (*WN*, 400). Thus, for essentially the first time in history, a good deal of liberty and security were extended to an entire society.

Alexis de Tocqueville would later famously claim that despite their economic and political subservience, the serfs of medieval Europe were actually in some ways better off than people in commercial society because they were not driven by the same incessant drive to better their condition. Just as the aristocrats in these societies "are not preoccupied with material well-being because they possess it without trouble," he writes, the lower classes "do not think about it because they despair of acquiring it and because they are not familiar enough with it to desire it" (2000, 507). In other words, Tocqueville argues that the serfs knew their situation could not substantially change and so eventually became reconciled to their poverty and insignificance. People in commercial societies, on the other hand, face no legal barriers confining them to their current station and so continually have their eyes set on more and more wealth and prestige, and according to Tocqueville their boundless desires undermine their happiness in precisely the way that Smith himself so forcefully describes.

Smith's response to Tocqueville's argument would, I think, be twofold. First, he would argue that the desire of bettering one's condition is an integral component of human nature and so could not be as easily curbed or eliminated as Tocqueville seems to assume. Smith stresses over and over that this desire is ultimately a result of people's natural concern for others' opinions—their desire for their approbation (e.g., *TMS*, 50)—and this concern presumably cannot be eliminated by any political or economic situation. Even if the serfs' desire to better their condition was not displayed as visibly as it is by most people in commercial society because it was not afforded the same kind of outlet, in other words, the desire itself was still present and still disrupted their tranquility. Second, although Smith agrees with Tocqueville that the ability to reconcile oneself to one's situation is a key ingredient of tranquility and happiness (cf. *TMS*, 149–51), he maintains that insecurity and direct dependence on another individual are circumstances to which people cannot simply reconcile themselves. The serfs were utterly dependent on the caprice of another person, and in this kind of situation "Life and fortune are altogether precarious" and so attaining tranquility seems extraordinarily unlikely (*LJ*, 414).

The fact that people continually strive for meaningless luxuries, then, turns out to in some ways be a crucial *advantage* of commercial society, according to Smith, for if there were no luxuries (or if people were not inclined to strive for them in order to show them off) then the wealthy would instead be likely to spend their money on maintaining vast numbers of dependents. Smith never tires of asserting that owning slaves—which is essentially what the tenants and retainers were, in feudal Europe (cf. *LJ*, 48, 189)—is in reality unprofitable, because slaves have no incentive to work hard (cf. *LJ*, 185, 191, 453, 523, 526; *WN*, 99, 387–88, 684), but he also acknowledges that a purely financial incentive would not alone be sufficient to bring about an end to slavery since people's natural "love of domination and authority over others" tends to be even stronger than the profit motive (*LJ*, 192; cf. 186–87, 452; *WN*, 388). The desire to fulfill one's vanity seems to be, on Smith's account, the only desire strong enough to counter the desire to oppress others (cf. Lewis 2000). It is only because the desire to gain the esteem of others "is, perhaps, the strongest of all our desires" and because people thus have an "altogether endless" desire for luxuries that their desire to dominate their dependents can be transformed into the comparatively less harmful desire to show off their wealth—that domination can be replaced by ostentation (*TMS*, 212–13; *WN*, 181).

In the kind of ironic twist so typical of Smith's writings, then, it seems that people's mistaken view of happiness, which leads them to try to find satisfaction in material goods and in the fulfillment of their vanity, *does* in fact tend to promote their happiness, albeit for very different reasons than they expect. Although people will find little true happiness in material goods themselves, Smith claims, their tendency to strive for these goods plays a crucial role in paving the way toward liberty and security and thereby removing the great obstacles to happiness that so dominated precommercial societies.

CONCLUSION

Smith's decisive argument for commercial society, we have seen, is that it tends to provide its inhabitants with a greater degree of liberty and security than was available in precommercial societies. We have also seen that these improvements are crucial ingredients in promoting people's happiness, on Smith's account: although the vast majority of human history has been a story of dependence and insecurity, these key obstacles to happiness are finally alleviated in commercial society. People in this kind of society are unlikely to be *completely* happy because they *do* tend to undermine their own tranquility by constantly striving to better their condition, but then again this is true of people in *every* society, and in other societies people generally face other significant hardships which people in commercial society are able to escape. None of this is to say, of course, that there is nothing that individuals can do *within* commercial society to increase their chances of attaining happiness. Indeed, James Otteson (2002, chapter 6) has persuasively argued that the entire moral system outlined in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is designed to show Smith's readers how to do exactly that; because Smith sees warranted approbation as a key component of happiness, Otteson argues, the "meta-argument" of this work "takes the form of a hypothetical imperative: if you wish to obtain a tranquil and happy psychological state, then you should abide by the system of morality that has arisen naturally and unintentionally in the way described in TMS" (236). Rather, the point of Smith's argument is that when we complain that "money can't buy

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happiness" and blame commercial society for making us miserable by encouraging us to continually toil and strive for ever-more meaningless luxuries, we generally fail to see the whole picture. We fail to see, that is, that even as our incessant "desire of bettering our condition" keeps us from enjoying complete happiness, it also helps to bring about and sustain a form of society that provides us with a reasonable degree of liberty and security, thereby ultimately making us better off.

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