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**The Seductiveness of System  
Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Embrace of Adam Smith's Philosophy**

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The contemporary right consists of an alliance between defenders of the free market and defenders of traditional values. There is considerable disagreement as to whether this alliance is merely strategic or whether there is some deeper philosophical affinity between these two seemingly divergent worldviews. In order to help resolve this dispute, it might be helpful to begin with the observation that, in the English-speaking world, both economic libertarians and social conservatives often trace their intellectual heritage to certain eighteenth-century British men of letters. Many economic libertarians embrace Adam Smith as their intellectual founding father, while significant numbers of social conservatives similarly embrace Edmund Burke. One might therefore reasonably hope that scholarship on the relationship between the political philosophies of Adam Smith and Edmund Burke would shed some light on the contemporary alliance of economic libertarians and social conservatives.

Unfortunately, there is no more of a scholarly consensus on the relationship between the respective ideas of Smith and Burke than there is on the possible affinity between the worldviews of their latter-day intellectual descendants. Just as there are many who see free-market capitalism and social traditionalism as fundamentally opposed to one another, so too are there many who see Smith and Burke in fundamental opposition. "Smith is not some sort of Burkean conservative," writes Spencer J. Pack. "He does not call for a defense of the political or social status quo out of respect (real or manipulated) for tradition. Rather, old traditions or

customs, which made sense in their own time but do so no longer, should be overthrown.”<sup>1</sup> And no traditional institutions were more in need of complete removal, this interpretation of Smith continues, than the ancient feudal and newer mercantilistic restrictions on free enterprise. Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* is then read as precisely the sort of unflinching, systematic and rationalist critique of existing society which Burke is held to have so abhorred. Smith himself described his magnum opus as “a very violent attack... upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain.”<sup>2</sup> W. C. Dunn writes that it is “in these lights – Smith as an economic liberal, and Burke as a political conservative – [that] these men have been traditionally considered.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet those who embrace this standard view often ignore the fact that Smith and Burke were not merely contemporaries, but acquaintances who over the course of their continued interactions developed what Jerry Z. Muller calls “a cordial if sporadic relationship... based on mutual respect.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the pair not only shared an attachment of friendship, but also considered themselves to be in fundamental agreement on most philosophical and political issues. Burke repeatedly praised Smith’s writings as both beautiful and true, not only in his conversation and in his correspondence, but also in at least one published review. For his part, Smith is alleged to have commented, that Burke “was the only man, who, without communication” thought on topics of political economy “exactly as he did.”<sup>5</sup> Commentators

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<sup>1</sup> Spencer J. Pack, *Capitalism as a Moral System: Adam Smith’s Critique of the Free Market Economy*. Brookfield, VT: Edward Elgar, 1991, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Smith, October 26, 1780 Letter to Andreas Holt. Letter 208 in *Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Henceforth cited parenthetically as *CAS*). Edited by Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987, pp. 249-253, p. 251.

<sup>3</sup> W. C. Dunn, “Adam Smith and Edmund Burke: Complementary Contemporaries,” *Southern Economic Journal*. Volume 7, Issue 3 (January 1941), pp. 330-346). Reprinted in John Cunningham Wood, *Adam Smith: Critical Assessments*. London: Croon Helm, 1983, Volume IV, pp. 58-68, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Z. Muller, *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours: Designing the Decent Society*. New York: The Free Press, 1993, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Bisset, *The Life of Edmund Burke*. London: G. Cawthorn, 1798, Volume II, p. 429, as cited in Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 125. Winch later laments how this undocumented anecdote has found its way into virtually all biographies of both Smith and Burke (p. 128). See, for example, John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*.

must confront the fact of this mutually recognized similarity in viewpoints before describing Smith as fundamentally anti-Burkean or Burke as fundamentally anti-Smithian. Many defenders of the standard view, however, do nothing more than note these historical facts before proceeding in their analysis with complete disregard for them.<sup>6</sup> Contrarian scholars seeking to refute the standard view have therefore sought to trace the mutual influence of Smith and Burke upon one another.<sup>7</sup> Commentators in this mode are often led to the opposite extreme of the conventional position, and, as K. Willis argues, they are prone to exaggerate the agreement between the two men.<sup>8</sup>

In truth, the record of their interaction does no more to support the contrarian thesis that Burke and Smith were in fundamental political and philosophical agreement than it does to support the standard view that they were in fundamental disagreement. As it so often does, careful historical scholarship precludes such reductive theses.<sup>9</sup> If nothing else, it forces us to recognize that Adam Smith and Edmund Burke lived very different lives, and as a result engaged

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New York: MacMillan and Company, 1895. Reprinted, with an Introduction, "Guide to John Rae's *Life of Adam Smith*," by Jacob Viner, New York: August M. Kelley, 1965, p. 387.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Minowitz, for example, writes, "Although Burke proclaimed himself Smith's disciple [and, we may add, Smith recognized him as such], Smith contributed to the Enlightenment enterprise that Burke decried: tearing away life's 'decent drapery' and 'pleasing illusions.'" Minowitz, *Profits, Priests and Princes: Adam Smith's Emancipation of Economics from Politics and Religion*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 44. For the passage quoted by Minowitz, see Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Henceforth cited parenthetically as *RRF*). Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by J. G. A. Pocock. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, this enterprise has been largely limited to the field of technical political economy. See, for example, Donald Barrington, "Edmund Burke as an Economist," *Economica*. New Series Volume 22, pp. 252-258.

<sup>8</sup> K. Willis, "The Role in Parliament of the Economic Ideas of Adam Smith: 1776-1800," *History of Political Economy*. Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 1979), pp. 505-544. Reprinted in Wood (*op. cit.*) 1984, Volume I, pp. 772-803, p. 784.

<sup>9</sup> The best such non-reductive overview of the relationship between Smith's ideas and Burke's in the existing secondary literature is Winch, 1996, especially Part II, pp. 125-220. Winch compares and contrasts Smith's and Burke's respective positions on such issues as the independence of the American colonies (Ch. 6, pp. 137-165), the social utility of aristocracies and established churches (Ch. 7, pp. 166-197) and support for the laboring poor (Ch. 8, pp. 198-220). Yet Winch's nuanced study never focuses on the respective social roles of the philosopher and the statesman, or the aesthetic appeal of system, which are the subject of the present essay.

in very different modes of thought, producing very different sorts of political-theoretical work.<sup>10</sup> This difference between both the biographies and the philosophies of Smith and Burke is best captured by noting that the former was primarily an academic philosopher, and the latter, primarily a practical statesman, albeit one with philosophical predilections. “Academic life and political life are interestingly different as incubators of ideas,” Dunn writes. “The former is typified by Smith, the professor of moral philosophy in Glasgow College where he systematized his thought in two treatises and a set of lectures. The latter is characterized by Burke, the Member of Parliament in London where he set forth his tenets in sporadic speeches and correspondence.”<sup>11</sup> We thus cannot compare the views of Smith and Burke as we would compare the views of two philosophers, expecting both to be fully developed in systematic treatises with a high degree of logical consistency. Such formally formulated worldviews are not to be expected from politicians, however intellectually inclined.

One important task that the philosopher and the statesman share, however, is that both must reach an informed conception of their contrasting social roles. Burke, for one, spoke repeatedly on the subject. Many have interpreted his position as anti-philosophical, which is certainly a valid description of some of his statements on the inapplicability of abstract, rational systems to the concrete operations of states. Yet Burke also spoke of the politician as a “philosopher in action” whose role was to embrace the “proper ends of Government” discovered by the “speculative philosopher” so as to “find out proper means towards those ends, and employ them with effect.”<sup>12</sup> Smith, too, had a complex and ambiguous position on the relationship

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<sup>10</sup> As Melchior Palyi has observed, “their ideas, their methods, even their problems were decidedly different, as different as the men themselves and their personal careers.” Melchior Palyi, “The Introduction of Adam Smith on the Continent,” in John Maurice Clark, et. al. *Adam Smith, 1776-1926*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1928, p. 181.

<sup>11</sup> Dunn, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770). Reprinted in *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*. Edited by Ian Harris. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 103-192, p. 187.

between philosophical inquiry and the formulation of public policy. The author engaged in a stinging critique of utopian politics while simultaneously constructing a philosophical utopia in his own work, the so-called “system of natural liberty” which has since been identified with laissez-faire capitalism. This essay will argue that Burke’s and Smith’s respective understandings of their different social roles are central to the complex relationship between their worldviews.

It will be seen that both Smith and Burke shared an opposition to the “man of system,” the hybrid philosopher/statesman who attempts unsuccessfully to shape actual societies according to some pre-conceived philosophical model. The man of system, both authors argue, is enchanted by the aesthetic appeal of his imagined ideal society, and is made blind to the suffering which occurs in the futile attempt to actualize this ideal. Yet while Smith joins Burke in warning against the dangers of sublime and beautiful systems, Smith does not refrain from constructing systems of his own. Indeed, both *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* contain intricate intellectual systems. In his reviews of both these works in the *Annual Register*, Burke explicitly lauds these systems for their remarkable degree of beauty and sublimity. Unlike rival systems for the wholesale transformation of human society, however, Smith’s systems suggest an anti-utopian utopia, one in which the natural workings of human sentiments organically lead to a moral and prosperous social order.

This paper argues, however, that it is still possible to be caught up in the aesthetic enchantments of Smith’s systems, and to become a man of system blind to the suffering that the actualization of Smith’s anti-utopian utopia may bring. With his evident enthusiasm for the aesthetic element of Smith’s work, Burke is particularly vulnerable to become such a dangerous anti-utopian utopian. And in his 1795 work *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, the great opponent of philosophical systems reveals that he has indeed fallen prey to the aesthetic allure of Smith’s

philosophy. Burke here calls for the implementation free market policies with dogmatic zeal, regardless of the consequences, equating the laws of the market with the commands of God. I conclude that the embrace of Smith's system in this manner remains a real danger today.

## **I. A Brief History of a Friendship**

### **1. Establishing Contact**

Before moving on to address the respective thoughts of Smith and Burke on the man of system, it is necessary to provide a brief account of the two thinkers' interactions. This account must necessarily be incomplete due to the fragmentary nature of the historical record. It is uncertain, for example, when Smith and Burke first became known to one another. Smith's biographer John Rae recounts conflicting, questionable reports that, as a young man, Burke unsuccessfully applied for the Chair of Logic at Glasgow in 1752, a post which Smith had recently vacated to take the Chair of Moral Philosophy and for which he was one of the electors, or that Burke at least made some preliminary steps to obtain the position.<sup>13</sup> It can be understood why such a tale would be popular among those interested in the lives of eighteenth-century British men of letters, for David Hume also pursued the Chair of Logic at Glasgow unsuccessfully at this time. Smith's younger friend Dugald Stewart, however, wrote to Burke's nineteenth-century biographer James Prior to refute the story of Burke seeking the professorship. Stewart claims that Smith had informed him that "he knew of no evidence on which it rested, and he suspected it took rise entirely from an opinion which he had himself expressed at Glasgow upon the publication of Burke's book on the *Sublime and the Beautiful* [in 1757, with a second edition in 1759] that the author of that book would be a great acquisition to the College if he

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<sup>13</sup> Rae, p. 46. Rae cites Bisset, Volume I, p. 32 and James Prior, *Memoir of the Life and Character of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*. London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1824, p. 38.

would accept a chair.”<sup>14</sup> Stewart’s testimony would then indicate that Smith read Burke’s treatise on aesthetics upon its initial appearance five years (or, if Smith is referring to the second edition, seven years) after the alleged incident concerning the Chair of Logic, but gives us no reason to believe that the two men were personally acquainted even at this later date. Conjectures as to how the young Burke’s life and thought would have been different had he joined Smith on the faculty at Glasgow rather than pursuing a career in politics must be saved for another occasion.

The first, real concrete link between the names of Smith and Burke in the existing historical record does not appear until 1759. On April 12 of that year, David Hume wrote to his close friend Smith from England, informing Smith that Hume and Alexander Wedderburn had distributed copies of Smith’s newly published *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to “such of our acquaintances as we thought good judges and proper to spread the reputation of the book.” Among these is a certain “Burke,” described as “an Irish gentleman, who wrote lately a very pretty treatise on the sublime” (Letter 31 in *CAS*, p. 33). Even if Smith was familiar with Burke or his work at this time, it is nonetheless clear that Hume believed him not to be so. Smith’s response to Hume’s letter has not survived, but it seems that the professor expressed some interest in the “Irish Gentleman,” for Hume describes the young provincial further in his next extant letter to his friend, from the following July 28. “I am very well acquainted with Bourke [sic],” Hume writes Smith, “who was very much taken with your book. He got your direction from me with a view of writing to you, and thanking you for your present: For I made it pass in your name. I wonder he has not done it: He is now in Ireland” (Letter 36 in *CAS*, pp. 42-43).

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47, citing Stewart’s letter as reprinted in a later edition of Prior’s biography of Burke: Prior, *Life of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*. London: H. G. Bohn, 1854, p. 38. For the treatise to which Stewart is referring, see Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757/1759) in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*. Edited by David Womersley. New York: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 49-200.

That Burke had to ask Hume for Smith's "direction" (i.e., postal address) indicates that the two men of letters had in fact not been previously acquainted.

Burke was not to write Smith until September 10, after he had returned to London. Burke begins his correspondence, "I am quite ashamed that the first letter I have the honour of writing to you should be an apology for my conduct," thus suggesting the first historically documented interaction between the two men was indeed their first such interaction at all. Burke explains his lateness in giving thanks to Smith for the copy of his "very agreeable and instructive work" as stemming from a desire to "defer... [his] acknowledgements until I had read your book with proper care and attention." This was a task Burke was unable to carry out since he "was immediately after [receiving Smith's book] hurried out of town, and involved ever since in a variety of troublesome affairs" (Letter 38 in *CAS*, p. 46). Burke then goes on to describe at some length the merits of the *Theory*, a discussion which will be addressed further later in this essay. The following year, parallel arguments for the greatness of the work were made in an unsigned review for the second volume of Burke's *Annual Register*, that for 1759.<sup>15</sup> Considering that Burke was not only editing the successful almanac at this time, but also writing almost all of its nearly 500 pages of content,<sup>16</sup> it is a safe assumption that the review is Burke's own, and it has been universally identified as such in the scholarly literature. This review will therefore play a central role in our analysis of Burke's understanding of Smith's moral philosophy.

While Burke and Smith by now had certainly established an intellectual camaraderie based in their published work and personal correspondence, there is no indication that the two men met in person at any time for nearly two decades, as Burke was busy with his career in

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<sup>15</sup> *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politicks and Literature of the Year 1759*. (Henceforth cited parenthetically as *AR 1759*) London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1760. This author consulted a paper copy of the third edition, printed in 1762, as well as the first edition online at Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO). The review in question appears on pp. 484-489 in both editions.

<sup>16</sup> C. B. Macpherson, *Burke*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 11.

Parliament, and Smith was equally busy composing his masterpiece on political economy. This is reason alone to doubt the traditional tale that Smith consulted Burke and paid great deference to his opinions during the composition of the *Wealth of Nations*. Jacob Viner traces this tradition to the preface to the 1800 edition of Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, a work that will indeed be seen to speak volumes about the relationship between the economic thought of Burke and Smith respectively.<sup>17</sup> Viner, however, argues that this story is improbable considering that on the basis of what is known about Smith's and Burke's respective activities, the earliest they could have met in person would have been in London late in 1775, only a few months before the *Wealth* was published.<sup>18</sup> It was at this time that Smith was elected to the London literary institution known simply as "The Club," of which Burke was an original member. Smith attended his first meeting on December 1, 1775, and probably attended semi-regularly through the publication of the *Wealth* in April of the following year.<sup>19</sup> It is almost certain that Smith and Burke met in the capital sometime before Smith left London shortly after the publication of the *Wealth* in April of 1776, though some have suggested that the meeting took place only upon Smith's return to London early in 1777.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jacob Viner, "Guide to John Rae's *Life of Adam Smith*." Introduction to Rae (*op. cit.*). New York: August M. Kelly, 1965, p. 24. Viner cites Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity, originally presented to the Right Hon. William Pitt, in the month of November, 1795*. London: F. and C. Rivington, 1800, Editor's Preface, p. vi, and tentatively identifies the editor in question as French Lawrence.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> During this time, Samuel Johnson is alleged to have remarked "Smith too is now of our club. It has lost its select merit." See Rae, p. 268. The other details on Smith's admission to The Club are drawn from J. F. Bell, "Adam Smith, Clubman," *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*. Volume 7 (June 1960), pp. 108-116. Reprinted in Wood (*op. cit.*) 1984, Volume I, pp. 94-101, p. 100 and Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 251-252.

<sup>20</sup> See Mossner and Ross's notes to *CAS*, p. 47.

## 2. Intellectual and Political Camaraderie

Even if their friendship was based solely on correspondence until perhaps as late as 1777, Burke was sufficiently intimate with Smith in May of 1775 to write him asking the philosopher to petition the Duke of Buccleuch, whom Smith had tutored, on a matter then before the House of Lords. Interestingly, the case in question was one concerning the extension of a patent on china manufacture belonging to one of Burke's Bristol constituents, the potter Richard Champion. At this time, Burke was fighting for the patent extension in Commons despite the vigorous opposition of the Champion's more famous and powerful ceramics rival, Josiah Wedgwood. Burke claims Wedgwood "pretends indeed he is actuated...by nothing but the common good," though the pragmatic statesman notes that "a declaration of the lowest species of any common self interest would have much greater weight with me, from the mouth of a Tradesman" (Letter 145 in *CAS*, p. 181). Burke must have been sufficiently familiar with Smith's economic views at this point to know that he would of the "temporary monopoly" granted by patents in order to spur self-interested innovation, despite the common argument that such patents act against the general welfare.<sup>21</sup>

A review of the *Wealth*, which appeared in the *Annual Register* for 1776, might be taken as further evidence that Burke was familiar with Smith's doctrines on political economy, and that he heartily approved of them. This piece, which is of questionable authorship, will be discussed further later in this essay.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of whether it was Burke who reviewed the *Wealth*, however, it is evident he must have read the work, in his 1796 *Letter to a Noble Lord* claiming to "have made political economy an object of my humble studies from my very early youth to near

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<sup>21</sup> On patents, see Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. (Henceforth cited parenthetically as *WN*) General Editors R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner. Textual Editor W. B. Todd. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1981, V.i.e.30, pp. 754-755. See also the discussion of this letter in Ross, p. 265.

<sup>22</sup> *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics and Literature of the Year 1776*. (Henceforth *AR 1776*) London: J. Dodsley, 1777. The review is on pp. 241-243.

the end of my service in Parliament.”<sup>23</sup> Even at a time when the discipline was “still in its infancy in England,” Burke insists that “great and learned” political economists “though my studies were not wholly thrown away, and deigned to communicate with me now and then on some particulars of their immortal works” (*Works*, p. 192). It is difficult to imagine that Smith was not one of those political economists producing “immortal works” from whom Burke claims to have learned the subjects, a group that Burke might have also intended to include Arthur Young, and perhaps also David Hume.<sup>24</sup>

In the years following the publication of Smith’s great work on political economy, it seems Burke and the philosopher maintained a cordial relationship. Smith wrote the next surviving letter between the two on July 1, 1782, when the pair were both in London. Smith addresses Burke as a “dear friend,” and consoles him over the death of the leader of his political faction, the Prime Minister Charles Watson-Wentworth, Second Marquess of Rockingham. Smith had always been a supporter of the Rockingham Whigs, and Burke had recently recommended Smith to Rockingham as a man of “sense and honesty” who could be relied on as a source for good policy advice.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Smith felt so close to Burke and his faction that he writes his first inclination upon hearing of Rockingham’s death was to run to Burke’s house, restraining himself “for fear of disturbing” the MP in a time of personal sorrow and political crisis (Letter 216 in *CAS.*, p. 258). From his letter, it appears Smith wished Burke to rally the Rockingham Whigs behind William Petty, Earl of Shelburne, but when Burke and his

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<sup>23</sup> Burke, *A Letter to a Noble Lord on the Attacks Made Upon Mr. Burke and his Pension in the House of Lords...* (1796). Reprinted in Reprinted in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (Henceforth cited parenthetically as *Works*). London: John C. Nimmo, 1887. Facsimile published New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1975, Volume V, pp. 171-232, p. 192.

<sup>24</sup> See C. R. Fay, “Edmund Burke and Adam Smith,” in *The World of Adam Smith*. Cambridge, England: W. Heffer and Sons, 1960. Photographically reprinted in the series “Reprints of Economic Classics,” New York: August M. Kelly, 1966, pp. 1-21, pp. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Burke to Rockingham dated April 27, 1782 in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*. Edited by Thomas W. Copeland. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958-1978. 10 Volumes. Volume IV, pp. 448-449. As cited in Winch, 1996, p. 49.

compatriots resigned their cabinet posts rather than accept the Home Secretary as Prime Minister, Smith praised him in a July 6 letter later as acting with great honor.<sup>26</sup> As Smith was returning to Scotland that very day, he also included a valediction to Burke which suggests that the two had developed a genuinely intimate friendship. “Farewell, my Dear Friend,” Smith writes. “I hope we shall soon meet again even in this world in times of more joy and prosperity” (Letter 217 in *CAS.*, p. 259).

It should come as no surprise, then, that Smith should write Burke with great warmth from Edinburgh the following April upon learning that Burke had regained the post of Paymaster General, or that Burke should respond in kind that June (Letters 226 and 230 in *CAS.*, p. 265, p. 268). In his letter, Burke toys in a friendly manner with the respective positions of the two men. “In what state I am to be met with your sympathizing sentiments when you receive this, I know not,” he writes, in a reference to the principle of sympathy that plays the central role in Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. He continues:

That such a friend, and such a man as you are, should take any concern in my fortunes is a circumstance very flattering to me. I want some consolation I assure you – not with relation to such paltry affairs as mine, which I hope do not rate a great deal above their value; but on account of finding, that the labors of many years are likely to produce few or none of the advantages, with regard to objects (for which I readily forget myself) which ought to be, and are, far nearer to your heart and to mine (Letter 230 in *CAS.*, p. 268).

While Burke’s language is ambiguous, it seems that he envies Smith’s life as an esteemed philosopher, concerned with eternal and genuinely important matters rather than the ephemeral concerns of a politician. Such are certainly understandable emotions at a time of parliamentary intrigue, when Burke’s political fortunes were alternately rising and falling quite rapidly and over matters unrelated to substantive issues of governance.

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<sup>26</sup> For further discussion of Smith’s take on these political developments, see Ross, pp. 350-351 and Dunn, p. 65.

In April of 1784, Smith was to get his wish and see Burke again one last time in this world, and at a time of joy and prosperity at that. Burke now came to Scotland to be installed as Lord Rector at Glasgow University, having achieved an honorary title at the same university at which it was alleged he had earlier failed to obtain an academic position.<sup>27</sup> Smith and Andrew Dalzel, Professor at Greek at Edinburgh, served as Burke's hosts in that city, and accompanied Burke over the entire course of his travels in Scotland, during which they were joined by Dugald Stewart and several others. Both Stewart and Dalzel provide a record of the conversation over the course of this remarkable journey, which lasted about nine days, in their private papers. Much of the talk centered on party politics, and Smith repeatedly affirmed his loyalty to the Rockingham Whigs. Stewart also records that in Smith's absence Burke spoke very highly of Smith's writings on political economy, but that the statesman "spoke rather coldly of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*."<sup>28</sup> While this is odd considering Burke's earlier fulsome praise of the *Theory* both in his correspondence and in his published review, it is possible that Burke's ardor for Smith's philosophical debut cooled as the pair aged.

Age was indeed catching up to both Smith and Burke, and it is unknown whether the two met personally again before Smith died on July 17, 1790. One last epistolary exchange survives from December 1786, when Burke wrote to Smith asking for a letter of introduction for his cousin in India to Smith's friend in the colony, Lt. Col. Alexander Ross. Smith obliged the request, enclosing the extant letter to Ross with one for Burke that has not survived. Burke wrote back promptly with hearty thanks, as well as thanks for the kind treatment Smith gave to his son Richard while the young man visited Scotland in 1785 (Letters 263-265 in *CAS*, pp. 297-300).

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<sup>27</sup> Smith himself was to be given the same title of Lord Rector three years later. See Fay, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Unpublished manuscript in Edinburgh University library, cited by Ross, p. 357. Ross's complete account of this trip can be found on pp. 355-358, and a parallel account can be found in Rae pp. 387-397.

Such is the final surviving documentation of the friendship between Smith and Burke, the sort of prosaic exchange typical of such a cordial relationship. The bond between Smith and Burke admittedly lacked the sustained intimacy of Smith's far closer camaraderie with Hume, but it also lacked the dramatic conflict of Burke's interactions with his genuine political and intellectual opponents, from Richard Price to Thomas Paine to both William Pitts. Certainly, it would be inappropriate to make too much of the limited friendship of these two men, neither of whom ever invoked the other's authority in their published writings or public speeches.<sup>29</sup> It would also be inappropriate, however, to ignore this friendship entirely, or to fail to make use of the interpretive insight it might grant into the thought of both Smith and Burke, particularly their thought on their different social roles as a philosopher and a statesman respectively.

## **II. Burke on the Beauty and Sublimity of Smith's Systems**

### ***1. The Theory of Moral Sentiments***

There can be no better way to begin this interpretive project than with an analysis of Burke's reaction to Smith's first book: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In his initial letter to Smith on the *Theory*, Burke is effusive in his praise of the work. "I am not only pleased with the ingenuity of your theory," he writes, "I am convinced of its solidity and truth." Rather than discuss the validity of any of Smith's arguments in particular, however, Burke praises the soundness of its construction as a systematic whole. He writes:

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

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<sup>29</sup> Willis, p. 784.

will last, when those that are founded on his opinions, which are always changing, are gone and forgotten (Letter 38 in *CAS*, pp. 46-47).

Note that Smith's original method for the building of moral systems not only grounds his system on a stronger foundation than all other such systems, but also renders it more "pleasing." Burke thus devotes the rest of his letter to Smith to the praise, not of Smith's philosophical acuity, but of his literary skill. Smith makes expert use of "easy and happy illustrations from common life;" he provides an "elegant painting of the manners and passions;" his prose style is "lively" and "well varied." Burke even makes use of the now-famous categories of his own aesthetic theory to analyze the appeal of Smith's work. Not only does the *Theory* show countless "beauties," but it also "is often sublime too, particularly in that fine picture of the Stoic philosophy... which is dressed out in all the grandeur and pomp that becomes that magnificent delusion." If Smith's literary achievement bears any flaws, it is "rather a little too diffuse," though this is "a fault of the generous kind" (Letter 38 in *CAS*, p. 47).

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

A dry abstract of the system would convey no juster idea of it, than the skeleton of a departed beauty would of her form when she was alive; at the same time the work is so well methodized, the parts grow so naturally and gracefully out of each other, that it would be doing it equal injustice to show it by broken and detached pieces (*AR 1759*, pp. 484-485).

After insisting that the only possible solution to this dilemma is for the reader of his review to purchase a copy of Smith's book, Burke then goes on to praise, not only the work's beauty – though he continues to insist it presents "one of the most beautiful fabrics of moral theory, that has perhaps ever appeared" – but also the book's "ingenious novelty." Such praise may strike the contemporary ear as strange coming from the author who was to become Britain's

greatest defender of the old against the new, and Burke indeed maintains that “with regard to morals, nothing could be more dangerous” than sheer novelty. Smith avoids this danger, however, because his philosophical system “is in all its essential parts just, and founded on truth and nature.” The review, as was customary in the eighteenth century, then provides an extended quotation from the work being discussed. Burke selects “the first section, as it concerns sympathy, the basis of his [Smith’s] theory; and as it exhibits equally with any of the rest, and idea of his style and manner” (*AR 1759*, p. 485).<sup>30</sup>

## **2. *The Wealth of Nations***

The review in the *Annual Register* of *The Wealth of Nations*, published seventeen years after that of the *Theory*, closely parallels Burke’s earlier piece, not to mention his 1759 letter to Smith, in terms of both style and content. The latter review begins with the observation that while “the growth and decay of nations” has “sometimes exercised the speculations of the politician” the subject has “seldom been considered... by the philosopher.” It then goes on to compare Smith’s work favorably with the writings of the physiocratic school of “French economical writers,” lauding the *Wealth* for its unparalleled “sagacity and penetration of mind, extent of views, accurate distinction, just and natural connection and dependence of parts” and its completeness as a systematic “analysis of society.” The review even makes the same criticism of the *Wealth* that Burke earlier made of the *Theory*, that it “may be sometimes thought diffuse,” though it excuses this literary fault by noting that “the work is didactic, [and] that the author means to teach, and teach things that are not obvious” (*AR 1776*, p. 241). Like the review of the

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<sup>30</sup> The selection is quoted pp. 485-489, and can be found in Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. (Henceforth cited parenthetically as *TMS*) Edited by A. L. Macfie and D. D Raphael. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1984, pp. 9-13.

*Theory*, the piece then concludes with an extended quotation, in this instance, Smith's entire introduction to the *Wealth* (*AR* 1776, pp. 241-243).<sup>31</sup>

Admittedly, it is uncertain whether Burke himself composed this review. While some scholars have attributed it to Burke, others have questioned this attribution.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Burke appears to have relinquished control of the *Annual Register* sometime around 1776, though he continued to write the occasional book review and to provide general editorial guidance.<sup>33</sup> The *Register's* review of the *Wealth* in 1776 is so similar to that of the *Theory* in 1759, however, that we can be certain it is an accurate reflection of Burke's position on the work, even if it was not composed by the statesman directly.

### **III. Smith on the Beauty and Sublimity of System**

#### **1. The Aesthetic Appeal of System**

While the young Burke was widely hailed as a savant in the field of theoretical aesthetics, it nonetheless strikes today's reader as odd that Burke evaluates Smith's work primarily through the categories of the sublime and beautiful rather than those of the true and the good. Surely, Burke was only speaking metaphorically when he described Smith's prose as "rather painting than writing" (*AR* 1759, p. 485), and yet he speaks of moral philosophy and political economy of a rather dry and technical nature as if they were works of art. Nor can this striking feature of Burke's reviews be merely attributed to the conventions of his time, in contrast to those of ours. Although aesthetic criteria were more often used when assessing philosophical works in the eighteenth century than they are today, the almost exclusively aesthetic emphasis in this review

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<sup>31</sup> The passage quoted can be found in *WN*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>32</sup> For a defense of the attribution, see Mario Einaudi, "The British Background of Burke's Political Philosophy," *Political Science Quarterly*. Volume 49, Issue 4 (December 1934), pp. 576-598, p. 589. For a rejection of it, see Carl B. Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1964, Volume II, p. 490.

<sup>33</sup> Macpherson, p. 11.

is unusual, both among eighteenth-century book reviews in general and among the reviews in Burke's *Annual Register* in particular. To cite just one obvious example, Burke's review of Rousseau's *Letter to D'Alembert*—which immediately precedes his review of Smith's *Theory*—does not take this aesthetic approach, instead engaging in a substantive critique of Rousseau's arguments against the theater (see *AR 1759*, pp. 479-484).<sup>34</sup>

Although today's academics downplay the aesthetic element of their enterprise, Smith himself was well aware that aesthetic considerations play an important role in science and philosophy, terms which Smith uses interchangeably for the construction of explanatory systems. Smith first made note of this fact in one of his earliest philosophical works, albeit one he held back from publication until after his death, an essay on "The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries as Illustrated by the History of Astronomy." "A [philosophical] system," Smith writes in that early essay, "is an imaginary machine invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed."<sup>35</sup> Some explanatory systems, though, are created with "a more simple and intelligible as well as more beautiful machinery" than others (*EPS*, p. 74). Typically, scientific systems are created to dispel the unpleasant sensation of ignorant awe one feels upon contemplating the unexplained. Yet an especially well crafted scientific theory, through its ingenious beauty as well as its "novelty and unexpectedness" may itself become an object of wonder, if not outright awe. Such was the case with Copernican astronomy, which "excited more wonder and surprise than the

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<sup>34</sup> The essentially aesthetic character of Burke's reviews of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations* has yet to receive adequate attention in the secondary literature. Winch, for example, attributes Burke's enthusiastic reception to the *Theory* to his substantive philosophical agreement with Smith on the issue of moral anti-rationalism, to their common belief that morality is a product of our moral sentiments, and not of our reason alone (Winch, 1996, p. 170).

<sup>35</sup> Smith, "The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries as Illustrated by the History of Astronomy," in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Henceforth cited parenthetically as *EPS*). Edited by W. P. D. Wrightman and J. C. Bryce. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982, pp. 33-105, p. 66.

strangest of those appearances, which it had been invented to render natural and familiar, and these sentiments still more endeared it [to humanity]” (*EPS*, p. 115).

Smith’s two great systems – the system of sympathy that the philosopher argued is the foundation of ethical life moral theory and the system of natural liberty that he argued would, if realized, maximize the wealth of nations – are both designed to so endear themselves to the aesthetic passions of humanity. The author’s system of political economy in particular makes use of complex mechanics which are of a beauty and ingeniousness perhaps even surpassing those of Copernican or Newtonian astronomy.<sup>36</sup> It is the paradoxical power of the invisible hand to guide the pursuit of private interests so as to maximize the wealth of all which is perhaps the single most striking element of Smith’s system, and hence the one most closely embraced by the masses of his readers. Smith dismissively attributes the popularity of physiocratic economics precisely to the fact that “men are fond of paradoxes, and of appearing to understand what surpasses the comprehension of ordinary people” (*WN*, IV.ix.38, p. 678). Smith was surely aware, however, that the same cause would lead to the popularity of his own economic theory, regardless of its superior validity to that of his mercantilist and physiocratic predecessors.

Smith and Burke agree, then, that philosophy, like art or architecture, is concerned with the construction of sublime and beautiful creations, designed to stir men’s souls rather than cater to their more prosaic needs. It is little wonder that Burke, swept up in the ugly trivialities of petty politicking, would envy the social position of his Scottish friend, the author of philosophical systems whose aesthetic excellence profoundly touched the statesman.

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<sup>36</sup> Winch, for one, cannot help but marvel at the intricate “connections between the overlapping sub-systems that compose Smith’s highly ambitious and systematic enterprise – the most ambitious enterprise to be carried through to near-completion in an age and place that was notable for the compendious quality of its intellectual projects.” See Donald Winch, “Adam Smith’s ‘Enduring Particular Result:’ A Political and Cosmopolitan Perspective” in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds. *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 253-270, p. 253.

## 2. The Dangers of Sublime and Beautiful Systems

Over the course of his intellectual development, however, Smith came to see the beauty and sublimity of imaginary, philosophical systems, not only as a source of aesthetic delight, but also as a potential source of considerable danger. He outlined this position in a small section of Part VI of the *Theory*, the entirety of which was added to the work for the sixth and final edition of 1790, the year of Smith's death. Smith's analysis of the dangers of systemic thinking is part of a larger discussion of political loyalties, for it is only with regard to systems describing the interactions between men that this frightening phenomenon arises. The excessive love of system in natural philosophy is basically harmless; perhaps its worst effect is the rather absurd cult of the scientist that formed at the altar of the deceased Newton in Smith's day or that of the deceased Einstein in our own. In moral philosophy and the social sciences, however, systems may not only explain what is, but also what could be or ought to be. In this way, "a certain spirit of system" can inflame "even to the madness of fanaticism" the reformist drive of an opposition party, as its members become "intoxicated with the imaginary beauty of... [some] ideal system, of which they have no experience, but which has been presented to them in all the most dazzling colors in which the eloquence of their leaders could paint it" (*TMS*, VI.ii.2.15, p. 232).

The man of system, the unholy union of the philosopher and the politician, is to be contrasted with the wise statesman. The statesman, "prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence," will, in reforming the ills of society, "content himself with moderating, what he cannot annihilate without great violence... When he cannot establish the right, he will not disdain to ameliorate the wrong; but like Solon, when he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavor to establish the best that the people can bear" (*TMS*, VI.ii.2.16, p. 233). The man of system, however, is "often so enamored with the supposed beauty of his own ideal

plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it.” The result is that a society governed by men of system will function “miserably” and “at all times in the highest degree of disorder” (*TMS*, VI.ii.2.1.17, p. 234). Blind to the defects in his idealized plan, the man of system cannot see the suffering its enactment will cause.

#### **IV. The Statesman, the Philosopher and the Man of System**

##### **1. Burke as the Model of Smith’s Ideal Statesman**

There is reason to believe that Smith was thinking of the statesman Burke as he contrasted such an individual with the man of system. It was Burke, after all, who while working to enact practical improvements in the body politic, insisted that radical political change according to philosophical schemes of perfection was to be entirely avoided.<sup>37</sup> There is more direct evidence that Smith thought of Burke as a model statesman when the passages in the *Theory* on the subject are considered in conjunction with a certain relevant section of the *Wealth*. At the end of a chapter on the corn trade in that latter work, Smith discusses a law Burke had marshaled through the House of Commons in 1773, reforming but hardly eliminating bounties for the export of grain.<sup>38</sup> Smith argues that Burke’s bill “seems to have established a system with regard to the Corn Laws, in many respects better than the ancient one, but in one or two respects perhaps not quite so good” (*WN*, IV.v.b.46, p. 541). In the first edition of the *Wealth*, this chapter then concluded with a stinging critique of Burke’s reform. For the second edition of 1778, however, Smith added a new paragraph at the very end of the chapter:

So far, therefore, this law seems to be inferior to the ancient system. With all its imperfections, however, we may perhaps say of it what was said of the laws of Solon,

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<sup>37</sup> As C. B. Macpherson writes, “Scorn for abstract theory was a constant refrain” of Burke’s “output as a reforming politician. Again and again he argued that it was unrealistic, even disastrous, to try to deduce practical policy from abstract principles” (Macpherson, p. 14).

<sup>38</sup> The law in question is 13 Geo. iii, c. 43.

that, though not the best in itself, it is the best which the interests, prejudices, and temper of the times would admit of. It may perhaps in due time prepare the way for a better (*WN*, IV.v.b.53, pp. 542-543).

Smith, then was thinking specifically of a reform championed by Burke when he referred to Solon's laws in the 1778 edition of the *Wealth*, good evidence that he was also thinking of Burke when he made an identical reference twelve years later in the 1790 edition of the *Theory*. It is surely also not a coincidence that Smith probably first made Burke's personal acquaintance sometime between the composition of the *Wealth* and its revisions for the second edition, which suggests that the statesman himself may have objected to Smith's critique of his 1773 reforms. Such is the tradition preserved in an 1804 article by Francis Horner. After discussing Smith's statements on the laws of Solon, Horner observes that the philosopher "probably bore in mind when he used these expressions, the answer which Mr. Burke had made to him, on being reproached for not effecting a thorough repeal." Burke, with his usual gift for metaphor, is reported to have argued, "that it was the privilege of philosophers to conceive their diagrams in geometrical accuracy; but the engineer must often impair the symmetry, as well as the simplicity of his machine, in order to overcome the irregularities of friction and resistance."<sup>39</sup> There is another account of Burke addressing Smith on the differing natures of philosophy and statesmanship quoted in the papers of Thomas Jefferson. "You, Dr. Smith, from your professor's chair, may send forth theories upon freedom of commerce as if you were lecturing on pure mathematics," Burke is reported as saying. "But legislators must proceed by slow degrees, impeded as they are in their course by the friction of interest and the fiction of preference."<sup>40</sup> Regardless of whether Burke expressed such a position to Smith sometime between 1776 and

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Francis Horner, *The Economic Writings of Francis Horner in the Edinburgh Review*. Edited by Frank W. Fetter. London: London School of Economics and Political Science Press, 1957, p. 98.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Edited by Julian P. Boyd. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 195. Volume VIII, p. 59. See the discussion of the accounts of this exchange by both Horner and Jefferson in Viner, pp. 26-28.

1778, however, he certainly adhered to this view concerning the respective social positions of the pair. “A statesman differs from a professor in a university,” the MP wrote. “The latter has only the general view of society; the former, the statesman, has a number of circumstances to combine with those general ideas, and to take into consideration.”<sup>41</sup>

## 2. Smith as a Systematic Philosopher

If Burke is the model of a true statesman, then Smith must consider himself as (at least attempting to be) the model of a true philosopher, and certainly not a man of system. Such a philosopher is in a difficult position, for even if he can avoid falling prey to the spirit of system, he must be careful his followers also do not do so. Nonetheless, as we saw Burke observe earlier, it is still the philosopher’s responsibility to provide the ideals toward which societies must strive. As much as he feared the man of system, Smith also saw that “the same principle, the same love of system, the same regard to the beauty of order, of art, and contrivance” that so intoxicates such an individual also “frequently serves to recommend those institutions which tend to promote the public welfare” (*TMS*, IV.1.10, p. 185). After all, the vast majority of the projects of humanity began as imaginary systems in the mind of some designer, and these plans were made into reality through the work of others acting out of a commitment to this imagined machine. Smith’s system of natural liberty, however, requires for its realization less the action but the inaction of humanity, or at least of humanity’s governmental institutions. “It is a system,” Charles Griswold writes, “which liberates politics *from* system, a sort of anti-utopian utopianism. Although positive action is required to maintain the system of natural liberty, it generally takes

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<sup>41</sup> Burke, “Speech on a Petition of the Unitarians,” as cited in Dunn, p. 66.

the form of removing obstacles to liberty and then refraining from reinstituting them.”<sup>42</sup> In systematically presenting the mechanisms of the natural economic order, Smith thus turns the love of system against itself.

This system of natural liberty, moreover, while remaining a source of ideals for the orientation of political action, is itself riddled with numerous imperfections; Griswold paradoxically termed it “an imperfect utopia.”<sup>43</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this essay to detail the many flaws Smith identifies in his ideal system—from the dehumanizing alienation of the working class to an ultimate end to economic growth—the observation of these flaws is evidence that Smith was capable of designing a complex system while immunizing both himself and his readers from its intoxicating spirit.

Indeed, Smith repeatedly cautions his reader that the total realization of even this imperfect utopia may be practically impossible. Smith’s discussion of Burke’s reform of the Corn Laws can certainly be read as an admission that it may be infeasible to legislate the immediate adoption of perfectly free trade. Elsewhere, Smith is even more explicit on the matter. “To expect, indeed, that the freedom of trade should ever be entirely restored in Great Britain,” the philosopher writes, “is as absurd as to expect that an Oceana or Utopia should ever be established in it. Not only the prejudices of the public, but what is much more unconquerable, the private interests of many individuals, irresistibly oppose it” (*WN*, IV.ii.43, p. 471). Even if it were politically feasible to actualize Smith’s still imperfect utopian vision instantly and immediately, it would nonetheless not be economically feasible to do so. One of “the unfortunate effects of all the regulations of the mercantile system,” Smith writes, is to “not only introduce

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<sup>42</sup> Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 308. For more on Smith’s strategic use of the aesthetic appeal of system against itself, see Winch, 1996, pp. 94-96.

<sup>43</sup> Griswold, p. 302.

very dangerous disorders into the state of the body politick, but disorders which it is often difficult to remedy, without occasioning, for a time at least, still greater disorders” (WN, IV.vii.c.44, p. 606).

While a young Smith may have been swept away by the beauty of philosophical systems, the older (and presumably wiser) philosopher made the critique of the rash application of such schemes to political decision-making a central element of his still highly systematic thought. James Boswell, in a letter to a friend, reportedly marveled at the strangeness of this seemingly anti-philosophical philosophy, also providing evidence that Smith’s opposition to system was hardly confined to his published writings. “Mr. Smith,” Boswell recounts, “wrote to me some time ago, ‘Your great fault is acting upon system.’ What a curious reproof to a young man from a grave philosopher! It is, however, a just one, and but too well founded with respect to me.”<sup>44</sup> It is certainly possible that Burke, both as a critic of the man of system in theory and a practical statesman who shunned rationalist systems in practice, acted for Smith as Smith himself acted for Boswell, serving to help warn the philosopher against the dangers of system.

### **3. The French Revolutionaries and British Radicals as Men of System**

There is still another connection, however, between Smith’s discussion of philosophical systems in the *Theory* and the figure of Edmund Burke. Smith’s discussion of system is immediately preceded by arguments concerning the alteration of a nation’s constitution and the loyalty one owes to one’s fatherland and its existing regime. Here, Smith argues that “the love of our own country seems not to be derived from the love of mankind” (*TMS*, VI.ii.2.4, p. 229), adopting a thesis directly contrary to Richard Price’s in the radical Dissenter’s famous November

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<sup>44</sup> Cited in Viner, pp. 32-33. Viner, in turn, cites Clyde E. Dankert, “Adam Smith and James Boswell,” *Queen’s Quarterly*. Volume 68 (1961), p. 331.

4, 1789 sermon, *A Discourse on The Love of Our Country*. It was in refutation of this sermon, of course, that Burke composed his 1790 masterpiece *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

While Burke makes it clear that he is directly addressing Price's sermon, however, Smith does not do so, and there is some question whether he could have been doing so in the passages in question. While the sixth edition of the *Theory* was not printed until January 1790, the papers of Smith's friend Thomas Cadell record that Smith finished "the very last sentence" of his revisions to the work on November 18, 1789. It is unlikely that the text of Price's sermon would have reached Smith in Edinburgh in time for him to have composed a refutation of the speech by that date.<sup>45</sup> Smith, however, was certainly aware of the thought of Price and other British radicals in support of the French Revolution, and displayed an antipathy toward that outspoken preacher and political economist in particular, albeit one without the vitriol shown by Burke. "Price's speculations cannot fail to sink into the neglect that they always deserved," Smith wrote in a 1785 letter to George Chalmers. "I have always considered him as a factious citizen, a most superficial Philosopher and by no means an able calculator" (Letter 251 in CAS, p. 290).

Regardless of whether Smith was directly addressing Price's 1789 sermon in the sixth edition of the *Theory*, it is undeniable he was adding his views to the debate of the day on the French Revolution and the constitutions of nations, and that his position was at least sympathetic to that adopted by Burke in the *Reflections*.

Certainly, the *Reflections* paints the French revolutionaries and their British sympathizers as men of system of the type we have seen denounced by Smith. "They conceive, very systematically," the statesman writes, "that all things which give perpetuity are mischievous, and therefore they are at inexorable war with all establishments. They think that government may vary like modes of dress, and with as little ill effect" (*RRF*, p. 77). It is

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<sup>45</sup> See Ross, p. 391, 394.

therefore that the revolutionaries feel free to rebuild society to conform with their rationalistic conception of the rights of man, the most fundamental of which, according to Burke's Price, "compose one system and lie together in one short sentence, namely, that we have acquired a right: (1) to choose our own governors, (2) to cashier them for misconduct, (3) to frame a government for ourselves" (*RRF*, p. 14). The resulting behavior of the "abettors of this philosophic system" inevitably devolves into "frauds, impostures, violences, rapines, burnings, murders, confiscations, compulsory paper currencies, and every description of tyranny and cruelty to bring about and to uphold this Revolution" (*RRF*, p. 108).

#### **4. Statesmanlike and Philosophical Criticisms of System**

In his rhetorically overheated attack on Price and the Revolution, however, Burke never makes a general, philosophical case against the man of system, and freely mixes denunciations of philosophically systematic politics generally with contingent arguments against the specific utopian system advanced by the revolutionaries of his day. "In the system itself," Burke writes of the constitution put forward by the National Assembly, "...I confess myself unable to find out anything which displays in a single instance the work of a comprehensive and disposing mind or even the provisions of a vulgar prudence" (*RRF*, p. 146). Later, the statesman rails against the "imbecility... of the puerile and pedantic system, which they [i.e., the National Assembly] call a constitution" (*RRF*, p. 190). Indeed, so flawed is the new regime in its design, that Burke questions whether it even "deserves such a name" as "system" at all (*RRF*, p. 116).

While this attack on the French constitution may function quite well rhetorically, it serves to undermine any more general attack on the man of system. As Smith recognized, it is not the flaws, but the very perfection of utopian political systems that renders them so dangerous. Burke,

too, recognizes that “in a new and merely theoretic system, it is expected that every contrivance shall appear, on the face of it, to answer its ends, especially where the projectors are no way embarrassed with an endeavor to accommodate the new building to an old one, either in the walls or on the foundations” (*RRF*, p. 152). Burke argues, of course, that the new French constitution fails in this regard, but in doing so he weakens his argument that even a perfect philosophical system ought not to be actualized through sudden, revolutionary change. Burke, however, wishes to portray the revolutionaries of his day as villains or fools, and hence could not admit the truth if they were in fact merely misguided lovers of beauty, blinded by the philosophical genius of their utopian dreams. Smith, who has no such ideological axe to grind, is free to present a more sympathetic, and hence also more realistic, portrait of the revolutionary man of system, a character who the philosopher nonetheless denounces as surely as does Burke.

Indeed, throughout his discussion of patriotism, the constitutions of nations and (perhaps) Price, Smith adopts a far more moderate position than does his friend Burke. After establishing that the love of country has a different source from the love of humanity, Smith sees that the former sentiment “seems, in ordinary cases, to involve in it two different principles; first, a certain respect and reverence for that constitution or form of government which is actually established; and secondly, an earnest desire to render the condition of our fellow-citizens as safe, respectable and happy as we can.” Fortunately, “in peaceable and quiet times, those two principles generally coincide,” for the maintenance of the established regime will be the best means of promoting the welfare of the citizenry. “But in times of public discontent, faction and disorder, those two different principles may draw different ways, and even a wise man may be disposed to think some alteration necessary in that constitution which, in its actual condition, appears plainly unable to maintain the public tranquility” The decision as to whether to dismantle

a nation's system of government completely, of course, requires "the highest effort of political wisdom." The statesmen who chooses correctly, however, has the opportunity to "assume the greatest and noblest of all characters, that of the reformer and legislator of a great state; and, by the wisdom of his institutions, secure the internal tranquility and happiness of his fellow citizens for many succeeding generations" (*TMS*, VI.ii.2.11-14, pp. 231-232). It is only after his praise of the great legislator that Smith launches his analysis of the man of system, thus robbing this analysis of any rhetorical force it might have in condemning the revolutionaries of the day.

Smith's dispassionate analysis and Burke's partisan speechifying are characteristic rhetorical modes of the philosopher and the politician, respectively. Smith is engaged in the rational construction of models of reality, while Burke is rallying his fellow citizens to alter that reality, and this divergence in purpose serves to alter the very nature of the thought conveyed. Smith, concerned with the consistency and completeness of his philosophical investigations, offers a highly systematic refutation of acting upon system. Burke, striving to corral all possible arguments in support of his position into a single, rhetorically effective package, constructs a powerful, if haphazard and often contradictory case, a case which is anything but systematic.

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

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

constitution. It is a genius at random, and not a genius constituted. But he must say something – He has therefore mounted in the air like a balloon, to draw the eyes of the multitude from the ground they stand upon.<sup>46</sup>

While Burke is no Adam Smith, Paine argues, he is still possesses a certain “genius,” albeit a “genius at random.” As, years earlier, Burke compared Smith’s philosophical genius to that of an artist, so too does Paine describe Burke’s own genius with this simile, albeit to far less flattering effect. “As to the tragic paintings by which Mr. Burke has outraged his own imagination, and seeks to work upon that of his readers,” Paine writes, “they are very well calculated for theatrical representation... and accommodated to produce... a weeping effect.”<sup>47</sup>

The works of Burke and Smith, according to Paine, both display aesthetic brilliance in their critiques of acting upon system, but aesthetic brilliance of very different sorts, corresponding to the primary categories of Burke’s own aesthetic theory. The beauty of the *Theory* and the *Wealth* is akin to that found in the harmony of classical architecture, and is greeted with joy and enthusiasm for the anti-systematic systems constructed therein. The sublimity of the *Reflections* is akin to that of a bombastic, operatic tragedy, and is greeted with weeping, the gnashing of teeth and perhaps even hatred toward the revolutionaries denounced within its brilliantly disordered pages. Both such forms of aesthetic achievement have their dangers. Smith’s philosophy could potentially give rise to men of system who pursue natural economic liberty in a radical manner never intended by the author, and the staid professor took great steps to inoculate his readers against this utopian madness throughout his books. Burke’s oratory, for its part, might beget counter-revolutionary fanatics with an unreasonable and unreasoning fear of change and an insatiable lust for vengeance against the perpetrators of

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791). Reprinted in *Collected Writings*. New York: The Library of America, 1995, pp. 431-662, p. 472.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 446.

revolutionary violence. It is not evident that Burke was aware of the threat to human welfare posed by his own work, as Smith was undoubtedly aware of the threat posed by his.

## **V. Disciples of Smith as Men of System**

### **1. Burke as a Smithian Man of System**

Adam Smith passed away the same year Burke published the *Reflections*, so it is impossible to say whether the philosopher would have been moved by his friend's rhetoric on the subject of revolution. Burke, however, was clearly moved by Smith's philosophy, both in the field of ethics and that of political economy. The historical evidence also indicates that the statesman continued to embrace Smith's economic doctrines with some degree of enthusiasm throughout his career, though, if Stewart is to be taken at his word, Burke's fervor for the ethics of the *Theory* may have cooled later in life. It is thus well worth examining if Burke's advocacy of the system of natural liberty was of the moderate, reasoned sort of which Smith approved, or whether Burke could qualify as a man of system, albeit one enraptured with Smith's paradoxically anti-utopian utopia.

While Burke was engaged with economic questions throughout his political and economic career, his fullest statement of his views was not to be composed until 1795, and was not published until after his death in 1797, under the title *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. Here, Burke argues against any interference in the market to counteract rising food prices—be they regulations of the trade in grain, the establishment of public granaries, minimum wage laws or even direct payments to supplement the wages of laborers of the sort first enacted in Speenhamland at this time. While Smith himself did not address the possibility of a policy akin to that in Speenhamland, he did argue against regulation of the trade in food staples, even during

times of scarcity. “The unlimited, unrestrained freedom of the corn trade,” the philosopher maintained, “is the only effectual preventative of the miseries of a famine,” as well as “the best palliative of the inconveniences of a dearth; for the inconveniences of a real scarcity cannot be remedied; they can only be palliated” (*WN*, IV.v.b.7, p. 527). Burke certainly provides arguments against Speenhamland-type programs along these Smithian lines, maintaining that redistribution of wealth would impede the efficient operations of self-interest, and that interfering in the operations of the market is generally an ineffective choice of policy. “Such is the event of all compulsory equalizations,” the statesman writes. “They pull down what is above; they never raise what is below; and they depress high and low together beneath the level of what was originally the lowest.”<sup>48</sup> It is not necessary for our purposes to evaluate Burke’s argument that even a temporary redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor would prove deleterious to the material welfare of all, though this argument does demonstrate that Burke possessed more than a moderate facility for political economy in the Smithian mold.

It is critical to note, however, that Burke also includes a second line of argument against Speenhamland-type policies independent of their ineffectiveness, a moral argument grounded in natural theology. “We, the people,” Burke piously proclaims, “ought to be made sensible that it is not in breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of Nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the Divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer or which hangs over us” (*Works*, pp. 156-157). With a single rhetorical flourish, Burke has transformed scientific, positive laws with no more moral weight than the laws of physics into divine commands whose violation is, by definition, sin. Christian charity, Burke acknowledges, is also God’s law, but with such admittedly obligatory acts of mercy “the magistrate has nothing at all to do; his interference is a violation of the property

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<sup>48</sup> Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795/1797). Reprinted in *Works*, Volume V, pp. 131-170, pp. 142-143.

which it is his office to protect.” While feeding the poor is the duty of all, “the manner, mode, time, choice of objects, and proportion [of charitable donation] are left to private discretion; and perhaps for that very reason it is performed with the greater satisfaction, because the discharge has more the appearance of freedom” (*Works*, p. 146). That is, even if a magistrate were able to design some scheme of payments to the poor during times of famine which would prevent their starvation effectively and efficiently, he would be morally wrong to do so, as he would be acting contrary to the will of God.

When discussing Burke’s theological argument, J. R. Poynter observes that Burke has elevated “Smith’s system of economic liberty into a dogmatic faith that the author might scarcely have recognized.”<sup>49</sup> Never in the *Wealth* does Smith describe the laws of commerce given free reign under the system of natural liberty as possessing any normative authority independent of their uncanny ability to maximize the wealth of nations to the benefit of all. Indeed, talk of God and divine authority, while still present in the *Theory*, has been entirely excluded from Smith’s later work, and nowhere in any of his writings does the philosopher ever indicate that the laws of commerce carry some supernatural sanction. While Smith maintains there are very few instances in which it may advance the common good for a magistrate to interfere with the free operation of

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<sup>49</sup> Poynter, pp. 52-53. Indeed, the differences between Smith’s actual views and the views advanced by Burke are so great that Emma Rothschild has argued that the *Thoughts and Details* “is close, at several points, to being an open attack on Smith” (Emma Rothschild, “Adam Smith and Conservative Economics,” *The Economic History Review*, New Series 45:1 [February 1992], pp. 74-96, p. 87). If this is taken to mean that a close reader of both Burke’s work and Smith’s will notice that the two are often in important disagreement, then it is certainly true. Yet if Rothschild is suggesting that Burke intended the *Thoughts and Details* as an attack on Smith, however, then the claim is a false one. Such a view is incompatible with the considerable evidence, outlined earlier in this essay, that Burke believed himself to be in full agreement with Smith on matters of political economy, however much he may have been blind to the real differences between them. Indeed, Rothschild acknowledges that almost all of Burke’s contemporaries were also blind to these real differences. Rothschild writes that Burke’s work “was received as little more than an exposition of Smith’s ‘principles,’” with these “principles” understood to be nothing more than “the simple prescription for economic freedom” (Ibid., p. 87). This oversimplification of Smith’s position survives to our own day, as does the interpretation of the *Thoughts and Details* as a correct application of Smith’s views (see Ibid., p. 88, fn. 83). There is no reason to believe that Burke himself was immune from this widespread error. To the contrary, there is considerable evidence he was one of the first to fall prey to it. In this respect, my own interpretation of the relationship between Burke and Smith is closer to that of Gertrude Himmelfarb; see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. New York: Vintage Books, 1985, pp. 68-79.

the market, he did provide a number of instances in which such interference might be beneficial. A government official “may prescribe rules, therefore, which, not only prohibit mutual injuries among fellow-citizens, but command mutual good offices to a certain degree,” though “it requires the greatest delicacy and reserve” to lay down such laws “with propriety and judgment” (*TMS*, II. ii.1.8, p. 81). Although Smith thus called for a reform of existing “poor laws,” which had required localities to provide aid to the indigent since Elizabethan times, he nowhere called for their wholesale abolition.<sup>50</sup> The criterion according to which such policies are to be judged is not its conformity with divinely ordained laws of the market, but rather their ability to improve the welfare of the populace.<sup>51</sup>

In pursuing the welfare of the people, moreover, the prudent politician must be willing to defer to popular opinion as necessary. And nowhere is this more necessary, Smith argued, than with regard to the people’s their very sustenance and survival. “The people feel themselves so much interested in what relates either to their subsistence in this life, or to their happiness in a life to come, that government must yield to their prejudices, and, in order to preserve the public tranquility, establish that system that they approve of” (*WN*, IV.v.b.40, p. 539). There is thus reason to believe that, had he lived to see the sharp rise in food prices in the second half of the 1790’s, Smith might have advocated accommodating popular demands for a governmental response.<sup>52</sup> Yet Burke seems to reject, not only any new response to sudden scarcity, but even the existing scheme of poor laws. He rejects them, independent of their consequences, as a kind of blasphemy, a wanton flouting of the divine laws of the free market.

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<sup>50</sup> Smith’s main suggestion for reform of the poor laws is not to abolish, or even lessen, governmental aid, but to remove local residency requirements to allow for the free movement of labor; see *WN* I.x.c.45-59, pp. 152-157. For more on Smith’s position on the poor laws, see Himmelfarb, p. 61.

<sup>51</sup> “No society can surely be flourishing and happy,” Smith memorably insisted, “of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable” (*WN*, I.viii.36, p. 96).

<sup>52</sup> For further discussion of this issue, see Winch, 1996, pp. 208-212.

Burke's description of the laws of commerce as normatively binding laws of God, a description never intended by the philosopher through whose work Burke and the rest of eighteenth-century Britain first systematically learned of these laws, cannot be explained as simply the tendency of a religious man to see the hand of God at play in fields addressed in a secular manner by irreligious scientists. After all, a religion must select which natural phenomena are to be given moral authority as the work of their deity, and which are to be dismissed, or even courageously struggled against, as the work of chance, chaos, or even Satan. From a Christian perspective, as Macpherson observes, "that the capitalist order is part of the divine and natural order is not self-evident; indeed, at least until the end of the sixteenth century, most writers and preachers would have treated it as nonsense."<sup>53</sup> Poynter sees such a view as highly uncommon even in the eighteenth century, and argues that "Burke's tract resembles the lesser writings of the generation after Malthus rather than its contemporaries."<sup>54</sup> It is always possible that Burke merely included his argument from theology in the *Thoughts* as a calculated, rhetorically powerful means of buttressing his prudential argument, but the intellectual historian must assume, unless he has reason for doing otherwise, that an author believes what he writes.

We must conclude, then, that Burke could not imagine that the beautiful machinery of commerce described by Smith as fully functional only under the system of natural liberty was anything other than the handiwork of God. He thus insisted that this imaginary system be actualized, regardless of the human suffering that such a project might cause. Here, the proper roles of the philosopher and the statesman are reversed, with the philosopher advocating political caution, the statesman becoming enamored with the perfection of an imagined ideal.<sup>55</sup> This is a classic example of the madness of system that Smith so accurately described in the last edition of

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<sup>53</sup> Macpherson, p. 62.

<sup>54</sup> Poynter, p. 55.

<sup>55</sup> For a similar observation, see Winch, 1996, p. 204.

the *Theory*. Although it may come a surprise to many that Edmund Burke, of all people, would fall prey to this particular folly,<sup>56</sup> it is one to which those who judge works of social science and moral philosophy according to aesthetic rather than ethical criteria are all too prone.

## 2. The Continuing Danger of Smithian Men of System

If the Enlightenment project is understood to have involved the rebuilding of society according to rational standards of moral perfection, then Smith is as much a thinker of the counter-Enlightenment as is Burke. Smith, after all, argued repeatedly against any attempt to remold society completely relying only on what he called the “feeble efforts of human reason” (*WN*, V.i.g.24, p. 803). While admittedly offering his readers a vision of a utopian system of natural liberty, Smith provided only an imperfect utopia, built from state inaction rather than from state action, and one which he warned cannot and ought not to be actualized through sudden, revolutionary change. There are limits, however, to the extent of Smith’s counter-Enlightenment conservatism. When faced with Smith’s critique of acting upon system, Griswold warns, “We are not to infer that social arrangements are inaccessible to philosophical criticism or that Smith’s ‘politics of imperfection’ amounts to a ‘Burkean’ quietism.”<sup>57</sup> A philosopher, Smith realized, can both criticize the social status quo and, through the aesthetic appeal of his

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<sup>56</sup> Many previous commentators have noted the disjoint between Burke’s arch-libertarian economic views in the *Thoughts and Details* and the social conservatism of the *Reflections*, especially given that local forms of poor relief were well-established traditional practices in Britain at this time. For an overview of many competing attempts to resolve this inconsistency, all ultimately unsuccessful, see Himmelfarb, pp. 71-73. To mention only the most prominent such argument, Macpherson argues that Burke was able to be both a laissez-faire capitalist and a defender of traditional social institutions because “the capitalist order *had in fact been* the traditional order in England for a whole century” (Macpherson, p. 51). Yet this argument ignores *both* the all-important differences between a highly regulated mercantilist system and a system of genuine free trade which would be obvious to any reader of Smith *and* the entire history of the poor laws dating back to the reign of Elizabeth I; see Himmelfarb, p. 73. Judith Shklar offers a more promising solution when she finds a deeper consistency behind Burke’s seeming inconsistency only insofar an insistence on strict logical coherence is one of the qualities that “conservatives have resented most in their opponents” (Judith N. Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 225).

<sup>57</sup> Griswold, p. 304.

systematic criticism, stir men to change it for the better. Smith was remarkably successful in this regard, and his effect on the commercial policies of the world's governments shows no sign of flagging over two centuries after his death. Indeed, Smith was too successful, and turned many of his readers, from the first publication of the *Wealth* until the present day, into the very sort of men of system he so criticized. Jerry Muller observes that, when blinded by their love for Smith's system of natural liberty, Smith's wayward disciples overlook "the need for institutions to direct the passions, the role of social science in designing institutions, [and] the obligation of government to combat the dangers inherent in commercial society," all of which are central themes in Smith's own work. The intoxicating power of Smith's beautiful system therefore has "the paradoxical effect of making his message appear both more conservative and more libertarian than he intended it to be."<sup>58</sup>

There is good reason to believe that one of the first victims of the intoxicating power of Smith's work was none other than history's greatest opponent of philosophical systems in politics. Indeed, in his *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, Burke sometimes seems as intoxicated with Smith's philosophy as the most dogmatic of today's economic libertarians, while also being as certain in his supposed knowledge of the will of God as today's most extreme religious conservatives. Had Smith lived to see that overheated treatise, or to see the similar distortion of his views by the enthusiasts for what would come to be called laissez-faire capitalism, the prudent Scottish philosopher might have repeated the warning he gave Boswell against acting upon system. Considering the brilliant and impassioned attack on such behavior in his own writings, Burke might have heeded his friend's warning well.

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<sup>58</sup> Muller, p. 187.