

# Smith on Happiness: Toward a Gravitational Theory

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## Abstract:

Some commentators have tried to link Smith's analysis with fundamental results in economics of happiness. These contributions mainly focus on the influence of wealth on happiness (Ashraf, Camerer and Loewenstein, 2005; Bruni, 2006; Brewer, 2009). However, this connection is far from covering Smith's considerations about individual happiness and their possible similarities with today's analysis in economics of happiness. In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith asserts that adverse events depress people's mind much more below their "ordinary state of happiness" than prosperous ones. However, close to what we call, today, "hedonic adaptations theories", he views adverse and prosperous events as only short term shocks, so that an individual's level of happiness tends towards the one of his "ordinary state of happiness", just as short term market prices tend towards long term natural prices. This paper aims at throwing light on the foundations of Smith's "gravitational" theory of happiness, on its consequences on an individual's preferences, and also on its implication with regard to the possibility of long-term variations of happiness. The first step leads to establish a link between the nowadays familiar idea that individuals adapt to circumstances and Smith's analysis of individual happiness. The second step puts to the fore the role that Smith grants to the sympathy with the impartial spectator in the way back to the "ordinary state of happiness" after deviations produced by prosperous or adverse events. At last, we focus on the decisional consequences that Smith draws from his gravitational theory of happiness, chiefly those which deal with the choice between various permanent situations (for instance, poverty and riches) and their evaluation.

## 0. Introduction

This paper aims at throwing light on the foundations of a Smithian "gravitational" theory of happiness, formally close to the well-known gravitational theory of prices in the *Wealth of Nations* (WN, I, 7), and on its implications for his work<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The question of knowing whether Smith is a Newtonian or not and, in case he is, how and where in his works, might remain open. Yet, whatever the answer, the methodological proximity between the gravitation of market prices around natural prices, in the *Wealth of Nations*, and the gravitation of happiness around the ordinary state, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, constitutes an argument which would favor the thesis of a Newtonian influence. Of course, a prerequisite to this argument is the bare existence of the gravitational theory of happiness.

In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith depicts an asymmetric effect of adverse and prosperous events. He asserts that the first ones depress people's mind much more below their "ordinary state of happiness" than the second ones elevate the mind above it. But close to what we are used to call, in today's analysis of happiness, "hedonic adaptations theory", he also views adverse and prosperous events as only short term shocks, so that their effects would vanish in the long term, thanks to the individuals adaptation to circumstances. On the one hand, this confirms the homology already observed between Smith's analysis and some typical results in the economics of happiness (Ashraf, Camerer and Loewenstein, 2005; Bruni, 2006; Brewer, 2009). But on the other hand, since these contributions only focus on the influence of wealth on happiness, it gives evidence that this homology might be still wider.

The idea that people adapt to circumstances is linked to key concepts of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* such as *sympathy* and the *impartial spectator*. Indeed, the return to the ordinary state of happiness is due to an individual's gradual adoption, with the help of sympathy, of the impartial spectator's point of view for whom people may be equally happy in most permanent situations. And according to him, the level of happiness that they should enjoy corresponds to the one of the ordinary state of happiness.

Far from being trivial, the gravitational theory of happiness shows significant consequences from both a decisional and an evaluative standpoint, allowing comparisons between various permanent situations (for instance, poverty and riches). The conclusion that Smith draws from his analysis of happiness is that although individuals may show preferences between situations, they are equally happy in most of them, as soon as these situations have become permanent. Moreover, the author's gravitational theory of happiness also leads to consider the evolution of the judgment of the impartial spectator as the only means to obtain long-term variations of an individual's happiness.

Section 1 accounts for Smith's idea that in the long-run, people adapt to changes in circumstances caused by prosperous or adverse events. An analysis of the author's definition of happiness, of which components are "tranquillity of mind" and "enjoyment", allows understanding that adverse or prosperous events affect an individual's happiness through the operation of the "tranquillity of mind", which appears as an aptitude to "enjoyment". It also explains why adaptation to a new situation or, which is the same, return to the ordinary level of happiness after a deviation, is due to a return to the ordinary degree of tranquillity of mind along with a trade-off between the objects of enjoyment which were reachable in the previous situation and those which are reachable in the new one. The consequences of this adaptation mechanism concern the aptitude of all situations for bringing happiness and the preferences of the individuals over these situations. Section 2 argues that sympathy does not only play the part of a regulator of passions in Smith's moral philosophy, but also of a regulator of happiness, since it is the very principle in which, through the action of the impartial spectator,

the adaptation mechanism of the gravitational theory of happiness is rooted. The previous distinction between short-run and long-run influence of external events on an individual's happiness is related to the one between the "natural point of view" and the "impartial spectator's point of view" over the individual's situation. The identification process, from which sympathy derives, allows explaining how an agent may be affected by a spectator's conception of his own situation and, by extension, how the impartial spectator's point of view gradually overcomes his natural point of view, leading him to return to the ordinary state of happiness. As a result, although the level of happiness does not allow distinguishing among people, the process of gravitation itself provides some relevant indicators. Unsurprisingly, Smith's distinctions rather rely on moral and psychological features involved in this process of gravitation such as the practice of the virtues of *self-command* and *prudence*.

## 1. From Short Run to Long Run Effects: How Do Events Affect Happiness?

In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith argues that, because most people enjoy a same relatively high level of happiness, which he calls the "ordinary" or "natural state of happiness", adverse events depress them much more below this state than prosperous events elevate them above it. However, he also considers that, after such deviations have occurred, people return to their "natural and usual state of tranquillity". It will be shown that, despite the seeming dissimilarity with regard to the vocabulary between these two assertions, the latter could be seen as an extension of the former, supporting the thesis of an adaptation to circumstances (that is, to external perturbations) in Smith's work (§1.1). An analysis of the structure of Smithian happiness allows establishing a link between them, since it puts to the fore its relation with "tranquility of mind" but also with "enjoyment", both being identified as its components (§1.2). A consequence of the fact that people adapt to whatever becomes their permanent situation is that since adaptation results in a return to their usual state of tranquillity, they can be equally happy in each of these situations. This leads to conclude that, according to Smith, preferences do not rely on differences in the aptitudes of permanent situations to bring happiness, as these aptitudes are broadly the same (§1.3).

### *1.1. An Extension over Time of the Effects of Favorable and Unfavorable Events*

The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* shows recurrent considerations about the way favorable and unfavorable events (respectively, "prosperity" and "adversity") affect individual happiness (see, for instance, TMS, I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45; III, 2, §15, p. 121; 3, §30, p. 149). In a previous work, I had focused on Smith's assertion according to which people are more sensitive to adverse than to prosperous events and on its foundations (L. Bréban, 2012). The reason argued

to explain this greater influence of “adversity” on happiness compared to the one of “prosperity” (TMS, I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45) is that the former produces a pain more “pungent” than the pleasure generated by the latter:

“Pain, I have already had occasion to observe, is, in almost all cases, a more pungent sensation than the opposite and correspondent pleasure. The one, almost always, depresses us much more below the ordinary, or what may be called the natural state of our happiness, than the other ever raises us above it.” (TMS, III, 2, §15, p. 121)<sup>2</sup>

The greater influence of pain is said to depend on the fact that most people enjoy a same relatively high level of happiness: the “ordinary, or [...] natural state of happiness” (TMS, III, 2, §15, p. 121), which is much closer to the “highest pitch of human prosperity” than to the “lowest depth of misery” (TMS, I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45). This link, not that intuitive, is enlightened by the *Lectures on Rhetoric* and by the *History of Astronomy*, where it is made clear that for people enjoying “the ordinary pitch of human happiness”, painful sensations should be “less common” (LRBL, Lecture 16<sup>th</sup>, §3, p. 85), in the sense that the mind is simply not accustomed to them<sup>3</sup>: adversity is a kind of “surprise”, which produces a greater change and has a greater effect on the mind than prosperity (HA, i, §8, p. 37)<sup>4</sup>. Following Smith, this means that sensitivity to prosperous and adverse events is not merely given: it depends on the location of an individual’s ordinary state of happiness. It seems obvious to the contemporary reader that Smith’s analysis of the influence of sensations in relation to their contrast with previous ones is concurring with Harry Helson’s later “adaptation-level theory” (1964). However, a difference deserves being noticed: whereas Smith assumes that sensitivity depends on the position of an individual’s usual state of happiness, adaptation-level theory would only state that it depends on the magnitude of the change produced upon the mind compared with the corresponding adaptation-level (see L. Bréban, 2009).

This analytical proximity will be discussed hereafter. But whatever its interpretation, the simple idea of an adaptation mechanism involves taking into consideration the time structure of the process. At first, the author’s analysis about asymmetric sensitivity to prosperity and adversity seems to focus exclusively on the *temporary* effects of favorable and unfavorable events on individual happiness. But further in the text, Smith asserts that

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<sup>2</sup> On Smith’s references to the greater pungency of painful sensations compared to pleasurable ones, see also HA, i, §6, pp. 35-36; TMS, I, iii, 1, §3, p. 44; VII, ii, 2, §6, p. 296.

<sup>3</sup> As already noticed by M. E. L. Guidi (1999, p. 12), in the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Smith hesitates between two kinds of answers to found the superior influence of painful sensations, the one concerning “custom”, and the other favoring a naturalist argument (LRBL, Lecture 16<sup>th</sup>, §3, p. 85). Unlike M. E. L. Guidi (1999, p. 12), I favor the answer based on the habit of the mind which appears more consistent with Smith’s analysis of people sensitivity to pleasure and pain, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (see L. Bréban, 2012)

<sup>4</sup> Smith’s argument might be extended to the exceptional opposite situation, where an individual’s ordinary state of happiness is closer to the lowest depth of misery. In this situation, the individual concerned would be more familiar to uneasy sensations than to pleasant ones, and a prosperous event should have a greater effect on his happiness than an adverse one (see HA, II, i, §9, p. 37).

“in every permanent situation, where there is no expectation of change, the mind of every man, in a longer or shorter time, returns to its natural and usual state of tranquillity. In prosperity, after a certain time, it falls back to that state; in adversity, after a certain time, it rises up to it” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149)<sup>5</sup>

The passage from which this extract is quoted has been widely discussed, principally in order to highlight the influence of wealth on happiness in Smith’s work (see V. Brown, 1994, pp. 88-9; D. P. Levine, 1998, pp. 40-1; A. Denis, 1999, pp. 80-1; S. Fleischacker, 2004, p. 68, 78-9 and 112-3; N. Ashraf, C. F. Camerer and G. Lowenstein, 2005, pp. 138-40; A. Brewer, 2009<sup>6</sup>). However, long term considerations, namely the idea according to which people tend to return to their “natural and usual state of tranquillity” has been less noticed (on the exception of S. Fleischacker, 2004, p. 68; N. Ashraf, C. F. Camerer and G. Lowenstein, 2005, pp. 138; P. Kesebir and E. Diener, 2008, p. 120). And as for the link between this last assertion and the one about the asymmetric effects of adverse and prosperous events, it has been neglected. Yet, the former could be seen as an extension of the latter: the return to an ordinary state has something to do with the respective effects of adversity and prosperity. The connection between these two statements, which take place in different chapters of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is discussed in the following subsection.

### *1.2. Happiness, Tranquillity, and the Ordinary State*

Despite the seeming dissimilarity with regard to the vocabulary between the two passages from, respectively, chapter 2 and chapter 3 in part III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith is writing about the same topic, that is, the effect of adverse and prosperous events on happiness. But he is more explicit in chapter 2, which concerns short-run effects, than in chapter 3 which concerns long-run effects. Whereas, in the former, he considers deviations from “*the ordinary, or what may be called the natural state of our happiness*” (TMS, III, 2, §15, p. 121; my italics, L.B.) produced by “adversity” or “prosperity”, in the latter he is interested in the convergence toward our “*natural and usual state of tranquillity*” ( TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149; my italics, L.B.), again after deviations of the same kind. It is the context of this last passage that suggests Smith’s concern for the influence of “adversity” and “prosperity” on happiness. His definition of happiness is contained in the sentence that just precedes it: “Happiness”, he argues, “consists in tranquillity and enjoyment” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149). An analysis of the content of happiness helps to highlight the reason why the author usually focuses on “tranquillity of mind” while writing about “happiness” and

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<sup>5</sup> This passage fits into a discussion about sensitivity and behavior under “private misfortunes” with regard to the control of passive feelings, where Smith mainly focuses on the influence of unfavorable events. Subsequently, he extends this statement to all kind of events (see TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149).

<sup>6</sup> For a critical comment on Vivienne Brown (1994)’s and Samuel Fleischacker (2004)’s interpretations, supporting the idea that wealth would constitute the end pursued by the individuals, see Daniel Diatkine (2010).

consequently, why convergence toward our “*natural and usual state of tranquillity*” corresponds to convergence toward “*the ordinary state of our happiness*”.

Contrary to recent interpretations by S. Fleischacker or C. L. Griswold, Smith’s conception of happiness consists neither in a “balance between tranquillity and enjoyment” in favor of tranquillity (S. Fleischacker, 2004, p. 68), nor exclusively in tranquillity (C. L. Griswold, 1999, pp. 217-227). The structure of happiness, though stated simply (it “consists in tranquillity and enjoyment”), seems more complex. When Smith, for instance, writes that

“[w]ithout tranquillity there can be no enjoyment; and where there is perfect tranquillity there is scarce anything which is not capable of amusing.” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149)

he does not give a greater weight to tranquillity as a component of happiness, but he rather argues that, together with the individual’s situation, it influences the kind and the amount of objects that we acknowledge as able to generate our enjoyment and, by this way, to determine our happiness<sup>7</sup>. This means that increasing tranquility would give rise to new and better sources of enjoyment, so that the degree of tranquillity and the degree of enjoyment might vary in the same direction.

This also makes clear why the author usually focuses on “tranquillity of mind” while writing about happiness, leaving aside enjoyment (see, for instance, TMS, I, ii, 3, §7, p. 37; III, 3, §30, p. 149; §31, p. 150; IV, 1, §8, p. 181; VI, ii, 2, §14, p. 232; iii, §19, p. 245): since levels of enjoyment and of tranquillity vary co-monotonously when the individual tries to achieve his greater enjoyment, Smith does not need to mention both components while dealing with happiness. Tranquillity of mind is sufficient to provide the relevant information about the individual state of happiness; and so does enjoyment, since each level of enjoyment is associated to a corresponding level of tranquillity (see *infra*, p. 9).

Similar shifts in the vocabulary in use are also encountered in Smith’s short-term analysis of the effect of prosperous and adverse events on happiness. The passage from chapter 2 of part III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where the author asserts that pain has a greater influence on people’s happiness than the one of pleasure (TMS, III, 2, §15, p. 121), explicitly refers to an almost identical one from part I, where he focuses on the influence of prosperity and adversity on the “state of mind” (instead of happiness):

“Adversity [...] necessarily depresses the mind of the sufferer much more below its natural state, than prosperity can elevate him above it.” (TMS, I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45)

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<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Smith’s analysis displays some similarities with that of Hume. According to Hume (1777, pp. 269-270), happiness consists in a mixture of three ingredients: action, indolence and pleasure. The proper proportion between the two former ingredients, that corresponds to the calm passion, results in a higher aptitude to feel pleasure (A. Lapidus, 2010, pp. 17-18). Smith’s conception of tranquillity might therefore be viewed as a homologue to Hume’s conception of the calm passion.

Here, the “state of mind” has to be understood as the “state of tranquility of mind”. Indeed, Smith also uses, in the same paragraph of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the phrase “temper of mind” as a synonym of “state of mind” (see TMS, I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45). In a similar context, in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, “temper of mind” (and consequently “state of mind”), refers to “tranquillity of mind” (LRBL, Lecture 21st, §95, p. 126). Like in the passage from chapter 3 part III about the long term effects of prosperous and adverse events on tranquillity of mind, the reference to happiness in this passage remains implicit until the third part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* where, in chapter 2, Smith refers to it. So that from the very beginning, it is clear that Smith is dealing with the influence of such events *on happiness*.

More importantly, the analysis of the content of happiness shows that it is affected by both events through the tranquillity of mind, enjoyment following this last. In the short run, adversity produces a pain that “depresses” people below their “ordinary, or [...] natural state of happiness” (TMS, III, 2, §15, p. 121), because it depresses the mind below its “natural and usual state of tranquillity” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149; see also I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45). Conversely, prosperity produces a pleasure that raises people above their “ordinary, or [...] natural state of happiness” (TMS, III, 2, §15, p. 121) because it elevates the mind above its “natural and usual state of tranquillity” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149; see also I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45)<sup>8</sup>. In the long run, people return to their ordinary state of happiness, since “in adversity, after a certain time, [the mind] *rises up* to [its natural and usual state of tranquillity]” just like “[i]n prosperity, after a certain time, [the mind] *falls back* to [its natural and usual state of tranquillity]” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149; my italics, L. B.)<sup>9</sup>.

### 1.3. *Adaptation to Circumstances, Preferences, and Happiness*

The way Smith extends to the long-term his analysis of the influence of favorable and unfavorable events on happiness requires some explanations. Whatever the initial shock, this results in the return to the ordinary state of happiness: adverse and prosperous events are

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<sup>8</sup> One could object that prosperous events do not elevate tranquility of mind since it produces a change upon the mind. However, the passage about the long term effect of prosperous and adverse events on tranquility is very explicit. When Smith writes that “in prosperity, after a certain time, [the mind of every man] falls back to [its natural and usual state of tranquillity]” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149), he clearly means that prosperous events, in a first time, lead to an increase in tranquility. Note that the author insists on the fact that this is true “in every permanent situation”. The same idea is contained in the above quotation where “prosperity” is viewed as something that “elevates” the “mind” or, which is the same, “tranquility of mind” above “its natural state” (TMS, I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45).

<sup>9</sup> In the same way that Smith defines an interval of level of happiness which goes from the “lowest depth of misery” to the “highest pitch of human prosperity” (TMS, I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45), he defines an interval of state of tranquillity which goes from an absence to a “perfect tranquillity” (see TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149).

considered as producing only short term shocks on the mind that do not, at the very end, keep on affecting happiness. In other words, individuals are supposed to adapt to circumstances:

“sooner or later, [they] accommodate themselves to whatever becomes their permanent situation” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149).

Far from being incongruous, such a process is well-known in economics of happiness as a “hedonic adaptation”<sup>10</sup> of which typical formulation is the already mentioned adaptation-level theory (see *supra*, p. 4). Besides, the stress on the term “permanent situation” (TMS, III, 3, §30 and §31, p. 149) underlies the fact that the way back to an ordinary state of happiness is a consequence not of the move from a situation back to a previous state, but of an adaptation to the new situation.

The idea that individuals would adapt to new situations and, as a result, return to their ordinary state of happiness, allows Smith to draw not so obvious consequences concerning: (i) the aptitude of all permanent situations to bring happiness; (ii) individuals’ preferences in relation to happiness:

“[t]he never-failing certainty with which all men, sooner or later, accommodate themselves to whatever becomes their permanent situation, may, perhaps, induce us to think that the Stoics were, at least, thus far very nearly in the right; that, between one permanent situation and another, there was, with regard to real [that is, “effective”; L.B.] happiness, no essential difference” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149)

In this passage, Smith seems to express, as Samuel Fleischacker puts it, “a very tentative agreement with the stoics” (S. Fleischacker, 2004, pp. 112-3). If we agree with this position, a possible consequence of this final return to an ordinary state of happiness could be that all permanent situations are fit to bring the same “[real] happiness”. But, such an interpretation would neglect the way Smith continues the previous sentence, making his point more precise. After having explained that we might be induced to think that there is no essential difference between two permanent situations, he complements his position, arguing

“that, *if there were any difference*, it was no more than just sufficient to render some of them the objects of simple choice or preference; but not of any earnest or anxious desire: and others, of simple rejection, as being fit to be set aside or avoided; but not of any earnest or anxious aversion” (TMS, III, 3, §30, p. 149; my italics, L.B.)

Here, the author imagines the extent and the consequences of differences, in terms of happiness, between permanent situations, on the structure of preferences and on their respective intensity. He intimates that there could be preferences over permanent situations, but that the intensity of the preference of such situation over such other situation could not be strong. Contrary to Samuel Fleischacker’s interpretation, which considers Smith’s above-

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<sup>10</sup> In their paper on “Adam Smith, Behavioural Economist”, N. Ashraf, C. F. Camerer and G. Lowenstein, point out the similarity between Smith’s assertion concerning people’s adaptation and the concept of hedonic adaptation (2005, pp. 138). For a review of the various lines of research on hedonic adaptation, see S. Frederick and G. Loewenstein (1999). And for an analysis of the contributions of hedonic adaptation theory to the analysis of happiness, and of their historical and analytical roots, see J. M. Edwards (2009, pp. 163-77).



mentioned sentence as a simple “qualification within the stoics own views” (S. Fleischacker, 2004, pp. 112-3), it seems that this rather constitutes an hypothetical proposition in which the author does not really believe (“if there were any difference”), but which aims at showing that, if it were possible, it would not change, fundamentally, the analysis. Besides, in the next paragraph, Smith is still more explicit concerning his own view, since he claims that people may be equally happy in most permanent situations:

“in all the ordinary situations of human life, a well-disposed mind may be equally calm, equally cheerful, and equally contented” (TMS, III, 3, §31, p. 149)

He goes on explaining how a difference between permanent situations might be associated with a lack of difference between levels of happiness. Two extreme, opposite, permanent situations are taken into account: “the most humble station”, which could be summarized as poverty, on the one hand, and “the most glittering and exalted situation”, which corresponds to riches, on the other hand:

“In the most glittering and exalted situation that our idle fancy can hold out to us, the pleasures from which we propose to derive our real happiness, are almost always the same with those which, in our actual, though humble station, we have at all times at hand, and in our power. 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” (TMS, III, 3, §31, p. 150)

In this passage, Smith makes clear that one can be equally happy in poverty and in riches because the same degree of enjoyment can be derived in both situations. The objects of pleasure, from which happiness is derived, are said to be “almost” the same in each situation, on the double exception of “personal liberty” which is the privilege of poverty and of “the frivolous pleasures of vanity and superiority” which are the privilege of riches<sup>11</sup>. But this difference between both situations does not lead to a difference in the degree of enjoyment that one can derive from them. It should be noted that this comparison focuses on the second component of happiness – *enjoyment*, and not on *tranquillity* which is considered as a self-important information on an individual state of happiness (see *supra*, p. 6). In the light of Smith’s definition of happiness discussed in the previous subsection, this implies that Smith’s comparison between poverty and riches holds only for a given tranquillity of mind. And the lines that precede this passage let it be understood that he considers the degree of enjoyment brought by both situations that corresponds to the one of *the ordinary state of tranquillity*.

With regard to what interests Smith in priority, in this part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, (that is, the influence of a change of situation on happiness) this means that a move from the

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<sup>11</sup> According to Smith, the sole advantage of wealth and greatness consists in the admiration or in the fellow-feeling that it arouses in others (see TMS, IV, 1, §8, p. 182): “It is this, which, notwithstanding the restraint it imposes, notwithstanding the loss of liberty with which it is attended, renders greatness the object of envy, and compensates, in the opinion of mankind, all that toil, all that anxiety, all those mortifications which must be undergone in the pursuit of it” (TMS, I, iii, 2, §1, p. 51).

first situation (poverty) to the second (riches) by means of a prosperous event, corresponds to a tradeoff where the pleasure of personal liberty is exchanged for the frivolous pleasures of vanity and superiority, the long-run level of happiness remaining constant. Now, let us imagine what would be the influence of such a change in the short-run regarding enjoyment: an individual going from poverty to riches would first enjoy a superior tranquillity of mind which makes him imagine he can enjoy both kinds of pleasures; but afterwards, when tranquillity of mind decreases and when it becomes obvious that he has given up personal liberty in exchange of pleasures of vanity, he comes to return to his ordinary state of happiness, driven by a parallel return to the ordinary state of tranquility, which comes along with a correct assessment of the objects of enjoyment which are available to him. The dramatic recalling of the imprisonment of the Count de Lauzun constitutes a typical case of return to the usual state of tranquillity along with a tradeoff between different kinds of pleasures:

“In the confinement and solitude of the Bastille, after a certain time, the fashionable and frivolous Count de Lauzun recovered tranquillity enough to be capable of amusing himself with feeding a spider. A mind better furnished would, perhaps, have both sooner recovered its tranquillity, and sooner found, in its own thoughts, a much better amusement.” (TMS, III, 3, §31, p. 150)

In a first period, the Count’s tranquillity of mind presumably decreased but, as time elapses, he recovered enough tranquillity to enjoy something as trifling as feeding a spider. This means that as his tranquillity had increased, he had traded both the frivolous pleasures and his liberty which he previously enjoyed with other reachable objects of enjoyment in his new situation.

To sum up, a consequence of the fact that people adapt to whatever becomes their permanent situations is that they can be equally happy in each of these situations, since adaptation results in a return to their usual state of tranquility, allowing a tradeoff between objects of enjoyment, so that they get a same degree of enjoyment. For all that, Smith does not conclude that all permanent situations should be indifferent to an individual. On the contrary, he asserts that “[s]ome [...] situations may, *no doubt*, deserve to be preferred to others” (TMS, III, 3, §31, p. 149; my italics, L.B.). This means that, for example, whatever be my permanent situation, I would prefer health to illness. But these preferences do not rely on differences in the aptitudes of permanent situations to bring happiness, since these aptitudes are broadly the same<sup>12</sup>. They rely on a hypothetical comparison in which the tradeoff between the objects of enjoyment brought by tranquillity is neglected: I prefer staying in good health to getting ill, because I make abstraction of the new objects of enjoyment that might compensate my illness.

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<sup>12</sup> Matters turn out differently concerning not the *existence* of preferences, but their intensity, about which Smith argues that none of them could give birth to an intense preference (see *infra*, p. 13).

## 2. Sympathy and the Working of Gravitation

The underlying mechanism of adaptation which gives rise to the convergence toward the ordinary state of happiness relies on sympathy, a keystone of Smith's moral philosophy. The reason is that the distinction between the ways events influence happiness in the short and in the long-run is related to the one between what Smith calls the "natural point of view" and the "impartial spectator's point of view" over a situation – sympathy being of course involved in the Smithian concept of the impartial spectator (§2.1). As sympathy with any spectator leads an agent to be affected by what he considers this spectator's point of view on his own situation, sympathy with the impartial spectator leads an individual to be affected by his point of view on his new permanent situation. The adaptation process is the story of a gradual overcoming of the individual's natural point of view by the impartial spectator's point of view, through the identification process from which sympathy derives, a story which is completed when the individual returns to his ordinary state of happiness (§2.2). But since most people enjoy the same ordinary state of happiness, the distinction that Smith establishes among them is not a question of happiness. It rather focuses (i) on the rate at which they return to their ordinary state, but also (ii) on the likelihood that their level of happiness remains stable over time. These two points lead to stress the role that Smith grants to virtues in his gravitational theory of happiness, respectively, (i) *self-command* and (ii) *prudence* (§2.3).

### *2.1. Short Term versus Long Term: the Natural Point of View and the Impartial Spectator Point of View*

In the first part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, when Smith writes about the influence of adversity and prosperity upon the mind, he concentrates on "what is *naturally felt* by the person principally concerned" (TMS, I, iii, 1, §8, p. 45; my italics, L.B.). This reference to what is "naturally felt" echoes to the author's distinction between one's "own natural view" and "the impartial spectator's view" of "his own situation" which takes place in the third part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS, III, 3, §28, p. 148). The former view is called upon the "untaught and undisciplined feelings" (TMS, III, 3, §3, p. 135) and leads one to a disproportioned view of his own situation (see, TMS, III, 3, §3, p. 135), whereas the latter is called upon the "sense of honour, [the] regard to [one's] own dignity" (TMS, III, 3, §28, p. 148), and refers to propriety: "[I]t is only by consulting this judge within", Smith says, "that we can ever see what relates to ourselves in its proper shape and dimensions" (TMS, III, 3, §1, p. 134).

Such a distinction, between the natural point of view and the impartial spectator's point of view, is at issue in Smith's analysis of the way events influence happiness in the short-run as

well as in the long-run. Both this distinction, between an individual's alternative views on his own situation, and the statement about his return to his ordinary state happiness take place in the same chapter, "Of the Influence and Authority of Conscience" (TMS, III, 3). The title of the chapter itself testifies that the influence of conscience, of which instance is given by the impartial spectator, is the means thanks to which an individual returns to his ordinary state of happiness. Smith views the deliberation which follows an event which departs us from our ordinary state of happiness as an interaction between these two points of view. And he considers that convergence towards the ordinary state of happiness corresponds to the fact that the impartial spectator's point of view gradually overcomes an individual's natural point of view on his own situation. The case of the "man who has lost his leg by a cannon shot" (TMS, III, 3, §26, p. 147) constitutes an evocative illustration of the link established between the influence of adverse events in the short run and the natural point of view, on the one hand, and between the influence of the same adverse events, but in the long run, and the impartial spectator point of view, on the other hand. During the "paroxysm" or what the author also calls the "first attack" (TMS, III, 3, §32, p. 151), the man's natural view on his own misfortune forces itself upon him:

"His own natural feeling of his own distress, his own natural view of his own situation, presses hard upon him, and he cannot, without a very great effort, fix his attention upon that of the impartial spectator" (TMS, III, 3, §28, p. 148)

At this point, the man who has lost his leg because of a cannon shot *naturally* feels a considerable pain and a fear that depress his tranquillity of mind and his happiness much below their ordinary state. And his misfortune prevents him to adopt the impartial spectator's point of view unless he exercises a significant effort<sup>13</sup>. However, according to Smith, he finally achieves to view his situation from the impartial spectator's point of view, which the author explicitly links to the return to the ordinary state of tranquillity<sup>14</sup>:

"By the constitution of human nature, however, agony can never be permanent; and, if he survives the paroxysm, he soon comes, without any effort, to *enjoy his ordinary tranquillity*. A man with a wooden leg suffers, no doubt, and foresees that he must continue to suffer during the remainder of his life, a very considerable inconveniency. *He soon comes to view it, however, exactly as every impartial spectator views it*; as an inconveniency under which he can enjoy all the ordinary pleasures both of solitude and of society" (TMS, III, 3, §28, p. 148; my italics, L.B.)

From the impartial spectator's point of view, the inconveniency caused by the loss of his leg is not inconsistent with the enjoyment allowed by an ordinary state of tranquility, and thus with a level of happiness which corresponds to the ordinary state. Besides, the impartial

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<sup>13</sup> This effort corresponds to the exertion of self-command, one of the virtues in Smith's moral philosophy which will be shown (see, *infra*, p. 18) to govern the speed of the gravitational process of happiness.

<sup>14</sup> It might also be argued that the similarity between the gravitational theory of prices and the gravitational theory of happiness is not only based on formal considerations, but that it involves as well similar elements of content. The impartial spectator, as connected to the ordinary state of happiness, might also be viewed, with Benoît Walraevens (2009), as connected to natural prices.

spectator also points out the reachable objects of enjoyment (“all the ordinary pleasures both of solitude and of society”) which he could enjoy in his new situation once his ordinary tranquillity of mind is recovered. Of course, this inconveniency prevents him from enjoying pleasures which were reachable only in his initial situation. But he may discover, through the impartial spectator’s point of view, new enjoyments, when compared with those of his former situation, which take place of the previous ones now out of reach. As above-mentioned (see *infra*, p. 9), the return to the ordinary state of tranquillity of mind comes with a trade-off between the pleasures that he previously enjoyed and other reachable objects of enjoyment in his new situation.

This distinction between the natural point of view and the impartial spectator’s point of view is the device on which is grounded Smith’s already discussed conclusion (see *supra*, p. 10) according to which no permanent situation could be the object of an *intense* preference. Actually, this refers to the instance of *propriety*, which characterizes the impartial spectator’s point of view, and where the author sees the suitability of a passion to its object (see TMS, I, i, 3): as a result, when one is in a permanent situation and comes to adopt the impartial spectator’s point of view, if some permanent situation can be preferred to some other permanent situation, always following the impartial spectator, none of them can be the *proper* object of an “earnest and anxious” desire or aversion that leads one to violate the “rules of morality” ultimately founded upon our sense of propriety (see TMS, III, 4, §8, p. 159):

“[N]one of them can deserve to be pursued with that passionate ardour which drives us to violate the rules either of prudence or of justice; or to corrupt the future tranquillity of our minds, either by shame from the remembrance of our own folly, or by remorse from the horror of our own injustice.” (TMS, III, 3, §31, p. 149)

It should be emphasized that such a conclusion does not concern the preference between situations as a simple binary relation, but the intensity of this preference, which implies some kind of cardinalist view. What Smith argues is that the sense of propriety, transmitted by the impartial spectator, sets the individual upper or lower bounds to his desire or aversion, and that even in the case where a situation is preferred to another, these bounds produce a limitation in the intensity of preferences.

## 2.2. *Sympathetic Interactions*

The case of the man with a wooden leg puts to the fore the origin of the distinctive influence of an event according to the time-period considered, through the prevalence of the natural point of view or of the impartial spectator’s point of view. But as such, this does not say anything on the way the impartial spectator’s influence leads one to return to his ordinary state of happiness. However, Smith puts his reader on the track: he goes on explaining that the man with a wooden leg recovers his ordinary tranquillity of mind by *identifying* himself to the impartial spectator:

“He soon identifies himself with the ideal man within the breast, he soon becomes himself the impartial spectator of his own situation.” (TMS, III, 3, §28, p. 148)

This reference to identification makes it clear that sympathy with the impartial spectator is at the heart of the process that leads to return to the ordinary state of happiness<sup>15</sup>. The introduction of sympathy in a process which concerns happiness is far from being insignificant. Sympathy is known from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as a passion regulator. But it also appears, for this reason, as a happiness regulator. Yet, sympathy with a spectator, either impartial or not, might seem a bit strange to a reader which would be unfamiliar to Smith’s moral philosophy. But it is well-known to those who are more familiar to it that one of its originalities, when compared to the previous conceptions in moral philosophy, is its foundation not only on sympathy strictly speaking – that is, primary sympathy of the spectator with the person principally concerned – but upon a *return* of sympathy – that is, secondary sympathy of the person principally concerned with the spectator.

Making clear the role of the sympathy with the impartial spectator in the return to the ordinary state of happiness therefore requires a double clarification. The first clarification concerns the specificities of a spectator’s (primary) sympathy with an agent. The second one deals with the effect on the agent himself of his (secondary) sympathy with a spectator of his situation, of which an individual’s sympathy with the impartial spectator constitutes a particular case. These two points will be addressed successively.

The specificity of Smithian sympathy, which is at issue in the convergence toward the ordinary state of happiness, concerns its bi-dimensional nature, both *cognitive* (in the sense that it is the principle by which the other’s sensations are perceived) and *emotional* (in the sense that it is also the principle by which one is affected by this perception). The first dimension characterizes the identification upon which sympathy is founded: it corresponds to a complex cognitive process caused by the perception of other’s passion or situation. The reason for this complexity is given at the very beginning of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

“As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation” (TSM, I, i, 1, §2, p. 9).

Smith emphasizes our inability to feel impressions resulting from the others’ senses, so that we can acquaint ourselves with others sensations only from our own senses, by means of our imagination<sup>16</sup>. This is the reason why Smith designates the identification process by the phrase “imaginary change”. Identification, as a cognitive process, produces a cognitive

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<sup>15</sup> On the identification process involved in Smithian sympathy, see P. Fontaine 1997, pp. 264-71; C. L. Griswold, 1999, pp. 86-91; R. Sugden, 2002, pp. 71 and 74; L. Montes, 2004, pp. 47-50.

<sup>16</sup> On the fundamental separateness between individuals in Smith’s analysis of sympathy see C. L. Griswold, 1999, pp. 83-91.

outcome: “[W]e can form any conception of what are his [the other’s ; L.B] sensations” (TSM, I, i, 1, §2, p. 9)<sup>17</sup>.

However, something more is needed in order to understand how one can be affected by others’ sensations or situations. The identification process also produces an *emotional* outcome<sup>18</sup>, a feeling, linked to the cognitive outcome through what Smith calls the “force” or “vivacity” of the conception (TSM, I, i, 1, §2, p. 9; §3, p. 10; III, 3, § 34, p. 152). Indeed, it is obvious that Smith wholly accepts, although he does not explicitly mention it, many features of David Hume’s conception of “belief”. For this latter, an idea is not likely to involve action as long as it is deprived of any emotional content. “Belief” is the element that comes to give an idea a part of the force and vivacity of the original impression, hence providing the emotional content which could give birth to action (see, for instance, D. Hume, 1739-40, I, iii, 8, p. 98-106<sup>19</sup>). And this is exactly the way Smith explains how a conception is likely to affect an individual. Using nearly the same vocabulary as David Hume, he says, for instance, that

“[f]or as to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to Conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, *in proportion to the vivacity or dulness of the conception.*” (TSM, I, i, 1, §2, p. 9; my italics, L. B.)

The same operation is involved in the particular case of the process which leads to conceive, and then to feel, the emotions assigned to others. To imagine oneself in the situation of the observed person, arouses some degree of the emotion that we would have felt in the case where we had really lived it, and this secondary emotion depends on “[t]he very force of this conception” (TSM, I, i, 1, §3, p. 10) or, in Humean words, on the belief relative to our idea of the other’s situation<sup>20</sup>. In brief, the force of the conception allows Smith to link cognitive aspects of the identification with emotional ones.

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<sup>17</sup> Smith takes up the Humean opposition to the innatism of ideas (see D. Hume, 1739-40, I, i, 1). Close to Hume’s words, he explains that the “ideas” of others’ sensations that we are forming comes from the fact that “our imaginations copy” the “impressions of our own senses” (TSM, I, i, 1, §2, p. 9; the similarities with regard to the vocabularies between Hume and Smith have also been noticed by A. Broadie, 2006, p. 166). This boils down to say that when we conceive others’ sensations we can only figure what would be our own sensations in the same situation through the recollection of our past experiences (TSM, I, i, 1, §2, p. 9): “Every man feels his own pleasures and his own pains more sensibly than those of other people. The former are the original sensations; the latter the reflected or sympathetic images of those sensations. The former may be said to be the substance; the latter the shadow.” (TSM, VI, ii, 1, §1, p. 219)

<sup>18</sup>It is evident to the reader familiar to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that this emotional outcome is one of its key elements. Nonetheless, the features of this outcome are not discussed in this paper.

<sup>19</sup> For comments on the role of belief in Hume’s theory of action, see A. Lapidus (2000, p. 16; 2010 p. 7-9) and M.-A. Diaye and A. Lapidus (2012).

<sup>20</sup> The existence of a link between belief and sympathy in Hume was put to the fore by N. Kemp Smith (1941, pp. 169-73)

Now, it is well-known that the way one is affected is different for the spectator and for the person principally concerned: as noted by several commentators, the identification upon which Smithian sympathy relies might justly be viewed as imperfect<sup>21</sup>. The main reason is that the conception which derives from the identification process cannot reach its maximal force<sup>22</sup>: the spectator's conception of the agent's situation is not as intense as the original one since, as Smith argues, "[t]hat imaginary change of situation, upon which [his] sympathy is founded, is but momentary" (TMS, I, i, 4, §7, p. 21). Since the spectator himself is not really the sufferer, his consciousness that the change of situations involved in the sympathetic interaction "is but imaginary" (TMS, I, i, 4, §7, p. 22) continually forces itself upon him and lowers his belief of being in the agent's situation. As a result, this leads him to more detachment than the agent, and to a feeling that differs from the original one with regard to its type and, most importantly for our purpose, with regard to its intensity (see TMS, I, i, 4, §7, p. 22).

But the identification process is not limited to the identification of the spectator with the agent. The agent also identifies himself with the spectators of his own situation:

"As [the spectators] are constantly considering what they themselves would feel, if they actually were the sufferers, so he is as constantly led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he was only one of the spectators of his own situation" (TMS, I, i, 4, §8, p. 22)

Since the spectators' force of conception is not as strong as the original one, the agent is led to conceive his situation, by sympathy, from a more distant and impartial point of view:

"As [the spectators'] sympathy makes them look at [the situation of the sufferer], with his eyes, so his sympathy makes him look at it, in some measure, with theirs [...]: and as the reflected passion, which he thus conceives, is much weaker than the original one, it necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before he came into their presence, before he began to recollect in what manner they would be affected by it, and to view his situation in this candid and impartial light" (TMS, I, i, 4, §8, p. 22).

By this way, he is *affected* by what he conceives "in proportion to the vivacity [...] of the conception". Like the spectator in the case of the original sympathy, his consciousness that the change of situations is but imaginary, or, in other words, his "natural point of view" on his own situation, constantly intrudes itself upon him and lowers his belief of being in the spectator's situation. The feeling produced upon the person principally concerned in the course of the return of sympathy, through the force of the conception, is the basis on which is

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<sup>21</sup> See P. Fontaine 1997, pp. 265-6; C. L. Griswold, 1999, pp. 86-7; J. DelleMotte, 2002, 147-9; A. Broadie, 2006, pp. 168-9; V. Nurock, 2009, pp. 66-7.

<sup>22</sup> A second reason which explains the relative weakness of the identification process is that it can hardly avoid a permanent bias. Though the spectator has a precise idea of the agent's situation, it is impossible to admit that both the agent and the spectator share exactly the same conception: the spectator's identification relies on his own way of living his past experiences, definitely irreducible to the one of the person principally concerned, even in the case they have lived the same things. In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, this idea is best illustrated by the extreme case of the "illusory sympathy" (TMS, II, i, 3, §5, p. 71).



built Smith's proposition that people return to their ordinary state of tranquillity and finally identify with the impartial spectator.

Smith moves to this question in the first part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, just after having outlined the existence of a return of sympathy:

"The mind, therefore, is rarely so disturbed, but that the company of a friend will restore it to *some degree of tranquillity* and sedateness [...] We are immediately put in mind of the light in which he will view our situation, and we begin to view it ourselves in the same light, for the effect of sympathy is instantaneous. We expect less sympathy from a common acquaintance than from a friend: we cannot open to the former all those little circumstances which we can unfold to the latter: we assume, therefore, more tranquillity before him [...] we expect still less sympathy from an assembly of strangers, and we assume, therefore, still more tranquillity before them (TMS, I, i, 4, §9, pp. 22-23; my italics, L.B.)

In this few lines, he explains how an individual's sympathy with a spectator of his misfortune leads him to recover some tranquillity. The author stresses the fact that the less the spectator has particular connections with the agent, or the more he is indifferent to him, the more the return of sympathy is efficient. In other word, the more the spectator is *impartial*, the more the person principally concerned recovers tranquillity. Most importantly, Smith adds that

*[n]or is this only an assumed appearance: for if we are at all masters of ourselves, the presence of a mere acquaintance will really compose us, still more than that of a friend; and that of an assembly of strangers still more than that of an acquaintance."* (TMS, I, i, 4, §9, p. 23; my italics, L.B.)

The link between this passage about the way the return of sympathy helps one to recover tranquillity, from part I of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and the one, from part III, where the author says that people return to their ordinary state of happiness after deviations thanks to the fact that the impartial spectator's point of view overcomes the natural point of view, is straightforward. Here, Smith only introduces the premises of the influence of sympathy with the impartial spectator on an individual's state of mind. As a consequence, sympathy with the spectators is the mechanism that allows an individual to really recover his tranquillity of mind, because it offers him a point of view, alternative to the natural one, on his new situation. And in the third part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith draws recommendations from the first part, extending his previous analysis to prosperous events:

"In solitude, we are apt to feel too strongly whatever relates to ourselves: [...] we are apt to be too much elated by our own good, and too much dejected by our own bad fortune [...]. Are you in adversity? Do not mourn in the darkness of solitude, do not regulate your sorrow according to the indulgent sympathy of your intimate friends [...] Live with strangers, with those who know nothing, or care nothing about your misfortune [...] Are you in prosperity? Do not confine the enjoyment of your good fortune to your own house, to the company of your own friends, perhaps of your flatterers, of those who build upon your fortune the hopes of mending their own; frequent those who are independent of you, who can value you only for your character and conduct, and not for your fortune." (TMS, III, 3, §38-40, p. 153-4)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Such recommendations testify the link that Smith establishes between the impartial and the real spectator: "The man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be awakened and put in mind of his duty, by the presence of the real spectator" (TMS, III, 3, §38, p. 153)

### 2.3. *The Practice of Virtue: a Way to Distinguish Among People*

Enjoyed by most people (see *supra*, p. 4), the “ordinary state of happiness” is stable since everyone is assumed to accommodate himself with what becomes his permanent situation, this accommodation leading to converge toward this ordinary state. It is easy to conclude that the level of happiness cannot be viewed as the main source of difference among people. Smith distinguishes individuals, with regard to happiness, from two other aspects:

1. the *speed* of the return to the ordinary state of happiness after a change of situation, which depends on the already mentioned *force of conception* (see *supra*, p. 15);
2. the *stability* over time of the level of happiness, which is related to the concept of *security*.

Unsurprisingly, the distinction that Smith establishes among people relies on moral and psychological features, each of them being linked to a specific virtue, respectively: *self-command* and *prudence*. Henceforth, the speed of the return to the ordinary state of happiness and its stability might be viewed as indices of self-command, for the first, and of prudence, for the second. The working of these two criteria will be dealt with successively hereafter.

The first distinction, concerning the speed of return to the ordinary level of happiness, is set up by Smith, in the short-run, when individuals face events that change their permanent situation. Focusing on misfortunes which do not admit any remedy, he states that

“it is chiefly in what may be called the paroxysm, or in the first attack, that we can discover any sensible difference between the sentiments and behaviour of the wise and those of the weak man. In the end, Time, the great and universal comforter, gradually composes the weak man to the same degree of tranquillity which a regard to his own dignity and manhood teaches the wise man to assume in the beginning. The case of the man with the wooden leg is an obvious example of this.”  
(TMS, III, 3, §32, p. 151)

The reaction to the “first attack” helps Smith to contrast two kinds of men, the “wise man” and the “weak man”, who are different from each other according to the nature of the motives or “sentiments” by which they are governed, and to the resulting behavior. They display a sensible difference in the speed of return to the ordinary state of tranquility, related to the point of view which is called to be dominant during the first attack: either the impartial spectator’s point of view or the natural point of view. The example of the man who has lost his leg might obviously be interpreted in this way. Smith describes, more precisely, what happens to this man:

“Both views [the impartial spectator’s point of view and the natural point of view; L.B.] present themselves to him at the same time. His sense of honour, his regard to his own dignity, directs him to fix his whole attention upon the one view. His natural, his untaught and undisciplined feelings, are continually calling it off to the other. He does not, in this case, perfectly identify himself with the ideal man within the breast; he does not become himself the impartial spectator of his own conduct. The different views of both characters exist in his mind separate and distinct from one

another, and each directing him to a behaviour different from that to which the other directs him” (TMS, III, 3, §28, p. 148).

Actually, what the author calls “the paroxysm” or “the first attack” corresponds to a struggle between these two points of view, which are called upon two contradictory motives, each one leading to an opposite behavior: either self-command, or submission to passion. From this perspective, the wise man differs from the weak man because, at this moment, “his sense of honour, his regard to his own dignity” leads him to adopt the impartial spectator’s point of view. This is an alternative way of saying that the wise man practices *self-command*. On the contrary, the weak man, giving in “his untaught and undisciplined feelings”, does not practice *self-command*: his natural point of view on his situation overcomes the impartial spectator’s one. Since Smith links the return to the ordinary state of tranquility to the fact that the impartial spectator’s point of view overcomes one’s natural point of view on his situation (see *supra*, p. 12), it becomes clear that the reason why the wise man recovers sooner his ordinary tranquility of mind than the weak man is that the former succeeds in identifying with the impartial spectator sooner than the latter.

This is an outstanding example of the link that Smith establishes between a moral and an analytical perspective. From a moral perspective, it is well-known that the impartial spectator, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is the instance which comes to explain the origin of men’s judgments upon their own sentiments and conducts:

“We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them. Whatever judgment we can form concerning them, accordingly, must always bear some secret reference, either to what are, or to what, upon a certain condition, would be, or to what, we imagine, ought to be the judgment of others. We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. If, upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influenced it, we approve of it, by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed equitable judge. If otherwise, we enter into his disapprobation, and condemn it.”

With regard to the question of judgments, the figure of the impartial spectator reflects men’s interest for other’s sentiments on their own sentiments and behavior. Smith refers to this interest as to the “sense of honour” or people’s “regard to their own dignity”, that is, to their regard for approbation or disapprobation. The author founds the sense of propriety on this regard for other’s sentiments: for an agent, propriety consists in producing a harmony between his own sentiments and those of the real or supposed spectators concerning his situation<sup>24</sup>. But the achievement of this harmony of sentiments is made possible only if the

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<sup>24</sup>In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith first defines “propriety” as the suitability of a sentiment or of a behavior to the cause or the object which excites it (TMS, I, i, 3, §6, p. 18). But, since men can only refer to what they would have felt in the situation of the one they observe in order to judge the propriety of other’s sentiments (see TMS, I, i, 3, §9, p. 18-9), in the following of his moral philosophy, he refers to propriety as to the adequacy

agent moderates his passions, through what Smith properly names “self-command”, to the intensity at which the spectators can enter into them since (see *supra*, p. 16) the latter can never feel, by sympathy, something as intense as the former does. Now, comes the link to the analytical perspective: the practice of self-command supposes some sense of propriety, that is, some regard for other’s sentiments, which could be measured by the already mentioned “force of conception” (see *supra*, p. 15). In the paragraph that just follows his analysis of individual happiness over time, Smith explicitly deals with the concept of “force of conception” in relation to the control of one’s own passions:

“Our sensibility to the feelings of others, so far from being inconsistent with the manhood of self-command, is the very principle upon which that manhood is founded. The very same principle or instinct which, in the misfortune of our neighbour, prompts us to compassionate his sorrow; in our own misfortune, prompts us to restrain the abject and miserable lamentations of our own sorrow. The same principle or instinct which, in his prosperity and success, prompts us to congratulate his joy; in our own prosperity and success, prompts us to restrain the levity and intemperance of our own joy. *In both cases, the propriety of our own sentiments and feelings seems to be exactly in proportion to the vivacity and force with which we enter into and conceive his sentiments and feelings.*” (TMS, III, 3, § 34, p. 152; my italic, L.B.).

At first, he explains that the practice of “self-command” is not inconsistent with a “sensibility to the feeling of others”. Moreover, he asserts that the former is founded on the latter, since self-command expresses a regard for other’s sentiments concerning our own. Subsequently, Smith concludes that the achievement of self-command, allowing the spectator to entering into our sentiments, depends on our force of conception of other’s feelings. This concerns both primary feelings (the primary sympathy), upon which our knowledge about propriety is founded, and sympathetic feelings (the return of sympathy) which inform us about the spectator’s sentiments concerning our own situation, especially during the paroxysm<sup>25</sup>.

The stress on “the force of conception” allows a rereading of the first attack through the process which leads to self-command, and highlights the distinction between the weak man and the wise man with regard to the rate at which they converge toward the ordinary state of tranquility. Let us come back to the man who has lost his leg. He is affected by his conception of the impartial spectator’s point of view in proportion to the force of this conception, which is altered by the consciousness that the change of situation is imaginary (see *supra*, p. 16). The more this consciousness is strong, the more the natural point of view prevails and lowers his belief in being in the spectator’s situation or, in other words, his regard for the spectator’s sentiments concerning his conduct. Ultimately, the wise man recovers his ordinary tranquility of mind sooner than the weak man does because, during the paroxysm, the former’s

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between one’s own sentiments and those of the real or supposed spectators concerning his situation. His concept of “point of propriety” constitutes a typical illustration of this idea (see TMS, I, ii, Introduction, p. 27).

<sup>25</sup> “The man of the most perfect virtue, the man whom we naturally love and revere the most, is he who joins, to the most perfect command of his own original and selfish feelings, the most exquisite sensibility both to the original and sympathetic feelings of others.” (TMS, III, 3, § 35, p. 152)

conception of the impartial spectator's feeling concerning his own situation has a much greater "vivacity and force", than that of the latter. More specifically, Smith asserts that the wise man "scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct", adding that "in prosperity and in adversity", his force of conception is such that "he almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator" (TMS, III, 3, §25, p. 147). From the beginning, his conception of the impartial spectator's feeling concerning his own situation (that is, that his new situation is not inconsistent with an ordinary tranquility of mind), has such a force that he can already enjoy, to some extent, this degree of tranquility:

"In all the irreparable calamities which affect himself immediately and directly, a wise man endeavours, from the beginning, to anticipate and to enjoy before-hand, that tranquillity which he foresees the course of a few months, or a few years, will certainly restore to him in the end" (TMS, III, 3, §32, p. 151)

On the contrary, in the paroxysm, the weak man's conception of the impartial spectator's feeling, his regard for his sentiments, is not that strong because of the persistent consciousness that the imaginary change upon which is founded his sympathy is but ephemeral. He is therefore little affected by this conception. For instance, still in the case of the man who has lost his leg, Smith says that, contrary to the wise man:

"[w]ith most men, upon such an accident, their own natural view of their own misfortune would force itself upon them with such a vivacity and strength of colouring, as would entirely efface all thought of every other view. They would feel nothing, they could attend to nothing, but their own pain and their own fear; and not only the judgment of the ideal man within the breast, but that of the real spectators who might happen to be present, would be entirely overlooked and disregarded." (TMS, III, 3, §26, p. 147)

Nevertheless, he finally achieves to return to his ordinary state of happiness:

"He no longer weeps, he no longer laments, he no longer grieves over it [...] The view of the impartial spectator becomes so perfectly habitual to him, that, without any effort, without any exertion, he never thinks of surveying his misfortune in any other view." (TMS, III, 3, §29, p. 148)

As suggested, the reason why the weak man at last achieves to recover his ordinary tranquility of mind seems to rely on his repeated interactions with the impartial spectator. For Smith, the weak man also endeavors to produce a harmony between his own feelings and those of the spectator, not by moderating the former, but by importunately calling upon the latter (see TMS, III, 3, §23, pp.145-6). By doing so, he arouses the spectator's disapprobation – and this is the regulating factor which, at last, is powerful enough to drive back the weak man to his ordinary state of happiness. Indeed the desire to deserve approbation constitutes a strong motive to act properly:

"Respect for what are, or for what ought to be, or for what upon a certain condition would be, the sentiments of other people, is the sole principle which, upon most occasions, overawes all those mutinous and turbulent passions into that tone and temper which the impartial spectator can enter into and sympathize" (TMS, VI, conclusion, §2, p. 263).

Facing the impartial spectator's disapprobation, the weak man therefore adjusts his view of his own situation until he achieves this harmony of feelings. His repeated interactions with the

impartial spectator increase the force of his conception of the impartial spectator's point of view concerning his own situation, until he identifies with him. As a conclusion, the speed at which an individual returns to his ordinary state of happiness expresses his self-command, that is, depends on the force with which he conceives the impartial spectator's point of view. In other words, closer to Smith's vocabulary when dealing with virtues, it depends on the individual's sense of propriety.

The second criterion that allows distinguishing among people corresponds to the security of their happiness, which is linked to the reachable objects of enjoyment in each permanent situation. Going back over Smith's comparison between poverty and riches, the difference between "the most humble station" and "the most glittering and exalted situation" is that the latter provides "the frivolous pleasures" which are inaccessible in the former, though their absence is compensated by the pleasure of "personal liberty". But the author carries on his comparison between these two situations for a same level of tranquility which corresponds to "perfect tranquility" and which is, according to him, "the principle and foundation of all real and satisfactory enjoyment":

"Neither is it always certain that, in the splendid situation which we aim at, those real and satisfactory pleasures can be enjoyed with the same security as in the humble one which we are so very eager to abandon." (TMS, III, 3, §31, p. 150)

Interestingly, Smith extends the difference which concerns the objects of pleasure to a new dimension, security, and he clearly avoids a possible confusion with tranquility. Although the rich and the poor do enjoy a same degree of tranquility and, consequently, a same level of happiness, the *security* of this happiness is lower for the former than for the latter. However, the meaning of "security" should be made more explicit.

Smith offers an interpretation of security in a passage which takes place in the section of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* on the "Character of the Individual, so far as it affects his own Happiness or of Prudence" (TMS, VI, i) and where it is opposed to "hazard":

"We suffer more, it has already been observed, when we fall from a better to a worse situation, than we ever enjoy when we rise from a worse to a better. Security, therefore, is the first and the principal object of prudence. It is averse to expose our health, our fortune, our rank, or reputation, [the objects upon which an individual's comfort and happiness in this life are supposed principally to depend,] to any sort of hazard. It is rather cautious than enterprising, and more anxious to preserve the advantages which we already possess, than forward to prompt us to the acquisition of still greater advantages. The methods of improving our fortune, which it principally recommends to us, are those which expose to no loss or hazard" (TMS, VI, i, §6, p. 213).

According to this passage, security consists in avoiding any situation where there exists "hazard", that is, a chance of an adverse event (a negative impact on "health", "fortune", "rank" or "reputation"). Again, asymmetric sensitivity to adversity and prosperity plays a crucial part, and Smith's conception of security is rooted in it. This analysis helps to highlight the author's comparison between "the most glittering and exalted situation" and "the most

humble station” with regard to security. When he claims that it is not certain that the real and satisfactory pleasures associated to perfect tranquility can be enjoyed with the same security in the former as in the latter, he means that the situation of the rich is more liable to be threatened by some adverse event than that of the poor. As a result, not only are the rich just as happy as the poor, but their happiness also comes to be less stable over time. This interpretation of the situation of the rich compared to the one of the poor with regard to security is confirmed by several passages of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For instance, when taking up the kind of life to which the rich are devoted, Smith makes obvious that it is not a *stable* situation because of the high likelihood of an adverse event:

“Power and riches [...] are enormous and operose machines [...] 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. They are immense fabrics, which it requires the labour of a life to raise, which threaten every moment to overwhelm the person that dwells in them” (TMS, IV, 1, §8, p. 182-3)<sup>26</sup>

Now, this raises the question of the connection between an economic situation (being rich or poor) and a moral quality, since Smith considers “security” as the “first and [...] principal object of prudence” (TMS, VI, i, §6, p. 213). The idea according to which it cannot be taken for granted that the situation of the rich is as stable as that of the poor (TMS, III, 3, §31, p. 150) seems to express Smith’s skepticism concerning the practice of virtue, especially the one of prudence, in what he calls “the most glittering and exalted” situation. This skepticism is still more explicit in the famous chapter of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* about the “corruption of our moral sentiments” (see TMS, I, iii, 3, p. 61). In this chapter, Smith explains that there are two different ways “[t]o deserve, to acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind” which he considers “the great objects of ambition and emulation”: (i) the study of wisdom and the practice of virtue, and (ii) the acquisition of wealth and greatness (see TMS, I, iii, 3, §2, p. 62). More importantly, Smith claims that the admiration of wealth and greatness by greater part of men is independent from their possible admiration of virtue<sup>27</sup>. But whereas, in the middling and inferior stations of life, the acquisition of this respect and this admiration aroused by wealth and greatness is nearly impossible without the practice of virtue, such limitation does not exist for superior stations of life. An obvious consequence is that one should expect more virtue in the poor condition than in the rich one:

“In the middling and inferior stations of life the road to virtue and that to fortune, to such fortune, at least, as men in such stations can reasonably expect to acquire, are, happily in most cases, very

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<sup>26</sup> Some pages further, a nowadays famous passage confirms this interpretation: “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, IV, 1, §10, p. 185)

<sup>27</sup> It should be recalled that it is on this admiration for wealth and greatness that Smith finds the corruption of our moral sentiments (see TMS, I, iii, 3, p. 61).

nearly the same [...] In such situations, therefore, we may generally expect a considerable degree of virtue; and, fortunately for the good morals of society, these are the situations of by far the greater part of mankind.

In the superior stations of life the case is unhappily not always the same. In the courts of princes, in the drawing rooms of the great [...] flattery and falsehood too often prevail over merit and abilities. In such societies the abilities to please, are more regarded than the abilities to serve.” (TMS, I, iii, 3, §5-6, p. 63)

Of course, such a picture of the superior stations of life is inconsistent with the character of the prudent man depicted in part VI of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (see, for instance, TMS, VI, i, §7, p. 213; §8, p. 214; §13, pp. 215-6). A prudent man who,

“in the bottom of his heart [...] would prefer the undisturbed enjoyment of secure tranquillity, not only to all the vain splendour of successful ambition, but to the real and solid glory of performing the greatest and most magnanimous actions” (TMS, VI, i, §13, pp. 215-6).

For the reader, the conclusion is unambiguous, and lead to found an analytical property (the stability of happiness) to a moral virtue. The very idea that the situation of the rich is not as stable as the one the poor depends on the lack of prudence in the superior stations of life, when compared to the middling and inferior stations of life.

### 3. Concluding Remarks: Smith on the Level of Adaptation

The impartial spectator is well-known as the concept which, for Smith, comes to explain the universality of moral judgments. But Smith still extends this universality to the level of happiness that individuals tend to enjoy. Since from the impartial spectator’s point of view, people may be equally happy in most permanent situations, his influence leads them to derive the same level of happiness from these situations, in spite of the differences between them. As a result, Smith’s gravitational theory of happiness should be distinguished from more familiar analysis, like those conveyed by adaptation-level theory, from the point of view of both the involved mechanism, and the very possibility of obtaining long-term variations in the level of happiness.

The question of the mechanism is the most obvious. The normative implications of Smith’s gravitational theory of happiness are different from the ones underlined, for instance, in the classical work by Philip Brickman and Donald T. Campbell (1971) regarding Harry Helson’s adaptation-level theory (1964). Following this latter, the influence of a sensation is an increasing function of its contrast with the previous ones. Transposed to happiness, this would mean that a higher state of happiness, when associated to a new permanent situation that provides higher pleasurable sensations, is only transient. The reason is that habituation is supposed to lead an individual to feel identically through time the more pleasurable sensations in the new permanent situation and the less pleasurable sensations from the previous one. As a consequence, he returns back to his previous level of happiness. On the contrary, Smith links levels of sensations with a state of happiness and does not seem to support the idea that



convergence toward the ordinary level of happiness is due to habituation to sensations that provide a new permanent situation, but to a mechanism which involves, behind the progressive taking into account of the impartial spectator point of view, variations of tranquillity. And it is these variations which allow a trade-off between various kinds of goods, in which initial variations of pleasure are compensated by opposite variations of the same magnitude, thus leading to a return to the ordinary state of happiness. In other words, if the individual moves back to his ordinary state of happiness, it is not because he gets used to the new one, but because he progressively becomes conscious of the possibility of new substitutions between goods.

The question of the possibility of long-term variations of happiness also points out Smith's specificity. According again to Philip Brickman and Donald T. Campbell, what they call the "pessimistic" implication of adaptation-level theory is that people are on a "hedonic treadmill", therefore condemned to never achieving a lasting higher level of happiness (1971, p. 289). Now, the implication of Smith's gravitational theory of happiness is more optimistic. The increase, on a long-term basis, of an individual's level of happiness would consist in elevating, always on a long-term basis, his ordinary state of happiness. However, this would require not a single individual increase in happiness, but an increase which would concern most people, so that the impartial spectator's point of view on the happiness that an individual should derive from his permanent situation, would also have changed. Of course, this is obtained not only because people, and after them the impartial spectator, have changed their mind: they can do so only to the extent that tranquillity of mind increases and new combinations of goods are made available. And understanding how it could be possible leads the reader of Smith's works to move to the question of the increase in the system of natural liberty, that is, to shift from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to the *Wealth of Nations*. Again, his two masterpieces appear more complementary than contradictory.

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