

Magali Bessone and Michaël Bizou (eds.), *Adam Smith philosophe. De la morale à l'économie ou philosophie du libéralisme*.

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Reviewed by Sergio Cremaschi

This is a collection of seven essays by French Adam Smith scholars with three papers by Anglo-American scholars. At least two among the latter, originally invited lectures at an Adam Smith workshop in Paris, are strictly related with each other, since they deal with the relationship of state and civil society. Donald Winch in on “Civil society and the State in Adam Smith” adds some useful comments to what he has been writing on Smithian politics since the Seventies, showing how the dichotomy state-civil society is absent from Smith, the idea of the *homo oeconomicus* or the autonomy of the economy are still to come, and his peculiar idea of politics is that of a special kind of prudence, the virtue of a legislator who has to be able to cope with the ebbs and flows of society while keeping a view at the common good but with a kind of reasonableness that is almost the opposite of the attitude of the man of system. Knud Haakonssen’s “Adam Smith and Civil Society” sets out to prove how Smith’s discussion of morality, justice, and government does not ‘forerun’ eighteenth-century discussion of the opposition between the State and civil society, but also that his own occasional use of the term civil society shares very little with the meaning current in his century and that even his discussion of government has little to do with any notion of the State qua juridical subject. I would say that neither Winch nor Haakonssen would understand their own contributions in terms of discussion of Adam Smith’s “liberalism”, one key-word casting in the book’s title and discussed at length in Bizou’s paper. The third invited lecture is “Justice and Market according to Adam Smith” by Charles Griswold, who summarizes what he had said on justice in his book. Coming to the French papers, Magali Bessone discusses Smith’s theory of penal justice arguing that it is partly “utilitarian” and partly anti-utilitarian, punishment being partly justified by the moral sentiment of resentment. Michaël Bizou discusses Smith’s views on the relationship between merchants and master-manufacturers and the working poor, arguing quite appropriately that his argument in favor of the system of natural liberty was far from an argument from efficiency, being rather a moral argument for institutional arrangements which would foster re-establishment of a more fair balance of power in favor of the less privileged class, and besides that, on the same approach, facing contemporary society, Smith would probably argue for a more active intervention by the State aimed at protecting the poor. This is fair enough, and indeed it has been illustrated by Winch and more recently by Fleischacker and others, but it seems to the present reviewer that this is not just a proof to the fact that Smithian “economic liberalism” was a *normative* doctrine to be contrasted with *positive* doctrines like Chicago-School kinds of “liberalism” fancy they are, but rather to the fact that Smith’s political views were not primarily liberal ones. What Winch’s and Haakonssen’s papers show is that Smith’s agenda was a different one, and that it could be better described, in the reviewer’s words, in terms of “disenchanted Republicanism” (Cremaschi 1989).

Another group of papers intends to discuss Smith’s moral theory. François Calori treats Smith’s relationship to Hutcheson; Claude Gautier compares Hume and Smith on sympathy; Vanessa Nurock discusses too the notion of sympathy; Eléanor Le Jallé compares Hume and Smith on the admiration for the rich and powerful as well as on the opposite sentiment of envy.

A reviewer is expected to discuss and criticize at least something in a book and so, in order to be fair to everybody, let him proceed random, discussing at length the paper which happens to come first in the table of contents. Philippe

Hamou, "History of Science Naturalized. Adam Smith from the History of Astronomy to Moral Sentiments" (pp. 19-36) is an examination of the *History of Astronomy* heading to the conclusion that Adam Smith's view of natural science makes it consist in reduction of particular phenomena to general principles and that he works out his own moral theory on the basis of this very model of a scientific theory, but also that such a view of science is reached by Smith through an historical approach that resembles Kuhn's, and an attempt at naturalizing science that foreruns Quine's, and yet this attempt co-exists with that "meta-sceptical dimension" which, according to Hamou, has been appropriately highlighted by Griswold (p. 36).

The first comment is that Hamou for some reason seems to have chosen to ignore all the secondary sources on Smith's epistemology apart from Raphael 1977 (a paper that has been reprinted as an Appendix to the General Introduction to the *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* in the Glasgow Edition), that is Moscovici 1956; Becker 1961; Thompson 1965; Megill 1975; Wightman 1975; Raphael 1977; Skinner 1979; Cremaschi 1981, 1984, 1989, 2000; Freudenthal 1982; Hetherington 1983; Fiori 2001; Montes 2004; Schliesser 2006.

The second is that one claim in the paper, namely that Smith wanted to naturalize epistemology along the lines later designed by Quine (p. 30), is indeed original but it is mistaken; one could object to this claim on three grounds: i) Bittermann 1941 claimed that Smith could be read as a logical-empiricist, Campbell 1973 assumed that his methodology was Popperian, Lindgren 1974 that Smith was a 'forerunner' of Thomas Kuhn and Peter Winch, Brown 1988 discovered striking similarities between Smithian and Lakatosian methodologies; such a story should have made Hamou wary that his own could turn out to be one more anachronistic reading into Smith of the latest epistemological fashion; ii) an attempt at reducing natural science to a production of the imagination sounds *prima facie* as a strong anti-realist program with a rather heavy commitment to epistemological subjectivism; Quine's program instead was that of dropping the Cartesian subject-object opposition (allegedly still haunting both analytic philosophy of science and such Continental schools as Phenomenology) in order to study the production of science as one more natural phenomenon among others; thus, the reader is likely to find in the *History of Astronomy* more a piece of Rortian post-modernism than any manifesto for a naturalization program; iii) according to a not too uncommon diagnose concerning fin-de-siècle philosophy, Quine's was one among several attempts at getting rid of the last vestiges of Cartesianism still left after two centuries critique starting with Condillac, d'Alembert, Hume, and the Scottish philosophy as a whole (Cremaschi 2000), and reaching Peirce, Dewey, and the post-empiricist philosophy of science, and Smith's character in the plot may have been that of a scout trying one way out of the Cartesian subject's conundrums, and failing to do so. The reviewer's own wild conjecture is that the main reason for having his own manuscripts burnt was that he was aware of such a failure and believed that in such papers the reader would have found "more refinement than solidity".

A third is that Hamou's main conclusion, namely that both in his philosophy of the natural sciences and in his moral epistemology Smith ends up with a stalemate, is correct but not original. Hamou writes that in both epistemology and ethics "the issue of relativism comes to the fore, and in both cases I would say that Smith leaves us without an answer to the question asked, by suggesting more than once that on principle he does not endorse the relativist's claims, that he even rejects them, but without offering us the means for understanding how we could escape relativist claims. This holds true for the sciences [...] And it is apparently the same in the domain of morality" (p. 35). This brings us back to the "more refinement than solidity" clause, which Hamou would have better quoted, and which had been quoted by Moscovici who, while enouncing Hamou's own conclusion, had remarked that there is "a twofold aspect of the Newtonian theory, namely that of a system of nature that the mind may views as its own creation, and that of a tool useful to everyday life, trade, navigation, and yet this twofold aspect is not yet a splitting into two. And while the instrumental dimension of other systems has gone lost to the point that we tend to think that it never existed, Newton's

is still too much present, it is actually *the* present time. We cannot be sure that Adam Smith did clearly bring to the fore such a conundrum, but for sure he did sense it” (Moscovici 1956: 10). Moscovici added that “we meet in his historical considerations the idea, that one is tempted to label Pascalian, that the system may be wholesale true if it is not true at retail price” (Moscovici 1956: 18-19). The impasse diagnosed by Moscovici is the point which the present writer took as his own starting-point, thanks to the not-too-extraordinary skill of reading French which has apparently disappeared among Anglo-American scholars, while trying to add something, for example the conclusion that Smith “while leaving *The History of Astronomy* unfinished, apparently felt [...] that it was impossible to account for the historical phenomenon ‘science’ as precomprehended by our culture, so far as the Cartesian presuppositions are accepted. The separation of the order of ideas from the order of things and the atomistic nature of phenomena (which makes the individual phenomenon unintelligible) are presupposition that make it impossible to acknowledge any kind of rationality in the history of science, or to formulate any idea of the truth of scientific theories that makes sense” (Cremaschi 1989: 103-104). It may be appropriate to add that in recent discussion the issue has been not so much whether Adam Smith’s account presents us with conundrums, but instead where their roots lie. Schliesser 2006 suggested that Smithian epistemology is a kind of modest *realism* and the present writer’s suggestion is that it is radical anti-realism combined with an attempt at immunizing sceptical implications by quasi-transcendental constraints provided by technology in natural science and by social interaction in morality (Cremaschi 1989 and 2009).

The book ends with a list of books on Adam Smith including 150 titles. Since it is neither a bibliography of the works cited in the present book nor a select bibliography organized by themes, the purpose it may serve is not so clear. Besides, were such a list useful, its compilation is seriously defective. It includes apparently books published after 1900 in English, French, German, Italian, and no reason is spelled out for excluding Spanish. Besides it omits as many books as it includes. It is as well to assume that the selection was not carried out on the basis of quality, since even such an – to say the least – ‘oddment’ as Lux 1990 has been included.

By way of conclusion, one could say that most papers by French contributors suffer from a tendency to overlook specific secondary literature on the various subtopics dealt with in each paper; one could add that all contributors overlooked the opportunity to read generally neglected French literature on Smith, such as the abovementioned Moscovici 1956 or Mathiot 1988, a book whose balanced suggestions on Smith and Kant nobody seems to know, and which is instead cited in this book only once by Gautier, just in order to declare that something Mathiot says “doesn’t make any difference” (p. 86).

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