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Toland and Adam Smith's Posthumous Work

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TOLAND AND ADAM SMITH'S POSTHUMOUS WORK

– Eric Schliesser –

Abstract. In this paper I offer a speculative answer to the question why Adam Smith, who burned nearly all of his papers, arranged for posthumous publication for a number of his essays. I rely on a number of hints in those essays and put them in the context of eighteenth century natural philosophy. I argue that those hints trace back to John Toland and Spinozism.

Keywords: Adam Smith, John Toland, John Hutton, Spinozism, Extinction.

In this paper I offer a speculative answer to the question why Adam Smith, who burned nearly all of his papers, arranged for posthumous publication for a number of his essays. I rely on a number of hints in those essays and put them in the context of eighteenth century natural philosophy. I argue that those hints trace back to John Toland and Spinozism.

In the first section I discuss the details of posthumous publication and relate this work to Smith's systematic projects. In the second section I argue that Smith's posthumous texts call attention to scientific findings that put pressure on then-orthodox religious ideas. I also argue that Smith repeatedly calls attention to the significance of esoteric writing and he does so in a fashion reminiscent of Toland.

1. Posthumous Publication¹

In 1795 Adam Smith's *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (EPS), edited by Joseph Black and James Hutton, appeared posthumously.² On the title page Smith is identified as a doctor of laws, and "fellow of the Royal Societies of London and Edinburgh." During his life-time, the first editions of his (non-anonymous) publications note his affiliation with Glasgow University as a professor of moral

¹ This introduction will appear with minor modifications in "The Imagination in Adam Smith's Philosophy of Science." I am grateful to the editor of the volume, Koen Vermeir, to allow this self-plagiarism.

² I quote from the so-called Glasgow Edition of all of Smith's works by paragraph and page-numbers. Smith [1982a] – hereafter "TMS"; Smith [1982b] – hereafter "EPS"; Smith [1984] – "WN," a reprint of the Glasgow Edition, vol. 2 (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1976, as revised in 1979); Smith [1987] – "Correspondence," cited by letter number, and page; Smith [1985] – hereafter "LRBL" quoted by page-number.

philosophy (1751–1764) one way or another.³ We know that Smith cared about such matters; in a letter to his publisher, Strahan, he writes, “In the titles, both of the Theory [of Moral Sentiments] and Dissertation [on the origin of Languages], call me simply Adam Smith without any addition either before or behind.” (Winter 1767–1767, Letter 100, Correspondence 122) While we cannot be confident that the final publication reflects Smith’s intentions, it is, nevertheless, useful to reflect briefly on the contrast between the former professor of moral philosophy (as he is called on the title-page of the first edition of *Wealth of Nations*) and the fellow of royal societies.

The Theory of Moral Sentiments (hereafter: TMS, first published in 1759) is a contribution to understanding what Smith, echoing the title of Hume’s second *Enquiry*, calls the “principles of morals.” (TMS 7.1.2, 265) In TMS Smith states that TMS is intended to be read alongside his other works on the “general principles of law and government, and of the different revolutions which they had undergone in the different ages and periods of society; not only in what concerns justice, but in what concerns police, revenue, and arms, and whatever else is the object of the law.” (TMS Advert.2, 3; see also 7.4.37, 342) TMS, *An Inquiry Concerning the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (hereafter WN), and the intended but never completed, “theory” or “history” of jurisprudence, all belong to a *system of moral philosophy* in Smith’s sense.

TMS and his other writings also belong to another project, or so I argue next. Despite the immediate and ongoing success of TMS, Smith claims in the “Advertisement” of the (1790) sixth edition (the final one published during his lifetime) that he “always intended” to revise it “with care and attention.” (TMS Advert.1, 3) One such change is announced on the revised title-page of TMS, “A Dissertation upon the Origin of Languages,” (hereafter: Languages) which Smith had already added to the third edition of TMS (1767). In fact, the quoted letter to Strahan above instructs that Languages “is to be printed at the end of” TMS. In the eighteenth century, TMS and Languages could, thus, be seen as mutually enlightening. For example, when Sophie de Grouchy produced her very fine, authoritative translation of TMS into French (1798), she appended her *Letters on Sympathy* to her *combined* translation of TMS and Languages.⁴

³ The exception is Smith’s (1777) “Letter to Strahan,” which was added to Hume’s “My Own Life.” This only identifies the law doctorate. Both can be found in Smith’s Correspondence.

⁴ Inexplicably, the editors of the Glasgow edition, which has been the standard one for most recent scholarly purposes, moved Languages into a volume with student notes of Smith’s LRBL – without even mentioning Languages in the title volume! Hanley’s Penguin edition of TMS does better.

That is, TMS was not only meant to be read alongside WN and the never-completed history of jurisprudence as part of a system of moral philosophy, but also alongside Smith's more theoretical (to use a Humean term) science of man. In *Languages*, Smith presents his Dissertation as a response to Rousseau's treatment in the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* on the origin of language – a topic heavily debated during the eighteenth century. Human equality is important in its own right, of course, as Smith argues we are “one of the multitude in no respect better than any other in it.” (TMS 2.2.2.1, 83) Existing inequalities are a central part of wider debates about human nature and the nature of political and intellectual life in commercializing societies. But these debates also impinge on a second-order set of reflections about the kind of agents that can engage in the development of “principles” of scientific learning at all.

Some parts of this more theoretical project were deliberately saved from the flames and published posthumously by Smith's friends, Black and Hutton in EPS.⁵ In their advertisement to EPS, they write:

The much lamented Author of these Essays left them in the hands of his friends to be disposed of as they thought proper, having immediately before his death destroyed many other manuscripts which he thought unfit for being made public. When these were inspected, the greater number of them appeared to be parts of a plan he once had formed, for giving a connected history of the liberal sciences and elegant arts. (Advertisement, EPS 32)

The saved fragments of the connected history of the liberal sciences and elegant arts focus – as the title-page of EPS indicates – on “the principles which lead and direct philosophical enquiries; illustrated by the history of astronomy” or as Black and Hutton put it, the “Principles in the Human Mind which Mr. Smith has pointed out to be the universal motives of Philosophical Researches.” (EPS 105)

So, Smith's writings are embedded in two, larger Smithian projects: one that focuses on the moral and psychological requirements “sufficient for the harmony of society,” (TMS 1.1.4.7, 22) in the context of a broad account of the origin and causes of flourishing of civilized law and government. This project is circumscribed by a more theoretical account that explains how from “savage” origins “remote from the societies of men,” (*Languages* 1, LRBL 203) crucial intellectual features of human nature as found in civilization themselves *could*

⁵ In the final (1790) edition of TMS, Smith added quite a bit of new material on the intellectual virtues in Parts 3.2 and 6. See Hanley [2013].

have developed over long expanses of time.⁶ This second, more theoretical project place Smith's writings alongside what we would call meta-philosophical reflections as practiced by the French *philosophes*, Rousseau, Hume's *Treatise*, and MacLaurin's *Account* (amongst others).

2. Averting Popular Odium

Here, I offer a speculative account of why Smith left the full details of the more theoretical project to late additions and posthumous publications. I motivate my speculation with the following passage from EPS:

From arranging and methodizing the System of the Heavens, Philosophy descended to the consideration of the inferior parts of Nature, of the Earth, and of the bodies which immediately surround it. If the objects, which were here presented to its view, were inferior in greatness or beauty, and therefore less apt to attract the attention of the mind, they were more apt, when they came to be attended to, to embarrass and perplex it, by the variety of their species, and by the intricacy and seeming irregularity of the laws or orders of their succession. The species of objects in the Heavens are few in number; the Sun, the Moon, the Planets, and the Fixed Stars, are all which those philosophers could distinguish. All the changes too, which are ever observed in these bodies, evidently arise from some difference in the velocity and direction of their several motions; but the variety of meteors in the air, of clouds, rainbows, thunder, lightning, winds, rain, hail, snow, is vastly greater; and the order of their succession seems to be still more irregular and unconstant. The species of fossils, minerals, plants, animals, which are found in the Waters, and near the surface of the Earth, are still more intricately diversified; and if we regard the different manners of their production, their mutual influence in altering, destroying, supporting one another, the orders of their succession seem to admit of an almost infinite variety. If the imagination, therefore, when it considered the appearances in the Heavens, was often perplexed, and driven out of its natural career, it would be much more exposed to the same embarrassment, when it directed its attention to the objects which the Earth presented to it, and when it endeavoured to trace their progress and successive revolutions. (History of Ancient Physics 1, EPS 106)

This passage is the start of the "History of Ancient Physics," (hereafter: Ancient Physics) which in EPS is the second essay that follows the first essay, "History of

⁶ See Steuart's obituary of Smith in EPS. Schliesser [2006] pp. 69–97, [2011] pp. 14–22.

Astronomy" (hereafter: Astronomy). The first sentence of the quoted passage suggests that Smith indeed presupposes his Astronomy (i.e., "from arranging and methodizing the System of the Heavens [...] descended to"). We have to be cautious in interpreting the passage because it is not always easy to disentangle when Smith is merely summarizing other people's views or also subtly inserting his own perspective into the narrative. My reading assumes that in this paragraph Smith is not making merely a historical point, but using the history for his own end.

One important reason to think that in this paragraph Smith is speaking in his own voice is his claim that "The species of fossils, minerals, plants, animals, which are found in the Waters, and near the surface of the Earth, are still more intricately diversified." While Smith was certainly familiar with Ancient writers who noted the existence of fossils (e.g. Pliny), the meaning of fossils had become explosive material in the eighteenth century. In posthumously published work on earthquakes (1705), the secretary of the Royal Society, Robert Hooke, had used his work on fossils to argue that "There have been many other Species of Creatures in former Ages, of which we can find none at present; and that 'tis not unlikely also but that there may be divers new kinds now, which have not been from the beginning."⁷

By the time of Smith's death, the significance of a scientific study of fossils was well understood, especially by his very two editors of EPS. For, in 1785 Hutton gave a public lecture, "Concerning the System of the Earth, Its Duration, and Stability," at University of Edinburgh. Due to illness of Hutton, Black gave the lecture on Hutton's behalf. In the lecture Hutton used geological and fossil evidence to argue that the Earth was almost certainly older than 6000 years (Hutton 1785).⁸ We do not know for sure if Smith attended the lecture, but he was in Edinburgh at the time.⁹

Hooke's "many other" is not the same as Smith's "infinite variety." But in his (1788) *Theory of the Earth*, Hutton emphasizes the "infinite variety of mineral productions which we find in nature,"¹⁰ (vol. 1, 90; according to Mizuta's catalogue of the library, Smith owned this book, but not the dissertation abstract of the 1785 lecture.)¹¹ So, Smith's phrasing may well be inspired by discussion with

⁷ Quoted from Chapman [2004] p. 296, n. 36.

⁸ Dean [1992] p. 17.

⁹ I thank Nick Phillipson for conversation on this.

¹⁰ Hutton [1795] p. 90. I have used the addition available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12861>.

¹¹ Mizuta and Bonar [1967].

Hutton, whom he met weekly in their Oyster Club dinners.¹² Smith's interest in biology and botany is well attested. As Spencer Pack has emphasized, there is evidence that Smith also took an interest in species extinction in the *Wealth of Nations* (WN 4.7.a.11, 560).¹³

It is also possible that Hutton got the idea of an infinite variety from discussion with Smith. For it is generally assumed that the "history of ancient physics" was written in the 1740s. One might suggest that Smith added the quoted paragraph to the History of Ancient Physics near the end of his life as a kind of bridge between the history of astronomy, a very mathematical science, and the history of ancient physics and meteorology, sciences where no exactitude was forthcoming.

In the passage, Smith seems to be saying that (i) celestial phenomena are simple; (ii) phenomena in the atmosphere are a bit more complex; while (iii) terrestrial phenomena are infinitely complex. The simple phenomena are clearly capable of being subject of a mathematical science, but the terrestrial phenomena are, if they are subject to science at all, of a very different kind. So, as we move from (i) to (iii), there are intrinsic epistemic limitations on any possible mathematical science.¹⁴

Indeed, if there are literally an infinite variety of phenomena in a domain, then the application of mathematics to it may give false confidence in our ability to discern the genuine underlying connections. We may discern a robust, even causal pattern without doing justice to the complexity of the larger whole. Spinoza had made such an argument famous in his "Letter on the Infinite" and his "Letter on Worm in the Blood." While there is no direct evidence that Smith ever read Spinoza, these two letters had been attacked vehemently and in detail by Clarke and MacLaurin in works that Smith knew well.¹⁵

Either way, the passage signals that Smith is flirting with ideas that undercut any attempts to defend the truth of the Bible about physical theory of the sort that would cause problems in the Scottish Kirk. As Gavin Kennedy has persuasively argued, Smith's prudence in such matters was well known among his friends, including William Robertson, who in addition to being one of the outstanding historians of his generation was also one of the leaders of

¹² Phillipson [2010].

¹³ Pack [2010] p. 105.

¹⁴ In a larger work I explore Smith's attitude toward formalism.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the treatment by MacLaurin, see Schliesser [2012a] pp. 299–319. (Smith discusses MacLaurin in the Astronomy.) For Clarke's discussion of Spinoza, see Schliesser [2012b] pp. 436–458. (Smith discusses Clarke in TMS.)

the Moderate party in the Presbyterian General Assembly. In commenting on an ultimately suppressed preface in which James Hutton argued against Scriptural geology, Robertson advised Hutton to “consult our friend Mr. Smith” in order to render his work “a little more [orthodox] theological.” (Kennedy [2013] p. 468; the letter can be consulted in Dean [1992] p. 23 with analysis.) Kennedy nicely argues that Smith “was adept at using theological dressing when composing his arguments” (Kennedy [2013] p. 479).¹⁶

In fact, Smith’s publications repeatedly call attention to the risks associated with philosophical opposition to public religion. He writes, for example, that “in Ancient times some philosophers” of the “Italian School” (that is, Pythagoreans) taught their doctrines to pupils only “under the seal of the most sacred secrecy, that they might avoid the fury of the people, and not incur the imputation of impiety.” (“Astronomy” 4.4, 55–56) The ancient “schools” of the philosophers “were not supported by the public. They were for a long time barely tolerated by it.” (WN 5.1.f.43, 777). One may think that philosophers’ emphasis on the usefulness of their activities is precisely the rhetorical response required to society’s disapproval (TMS 4.2.7, 189; cf. WN 5.1.f.43, 778).

Smith’s comment on the Italian School echoes a claim by John Toland (offered in the context of his debunking genealogy of the idea of immortality of the soul):

But in all sects there never wanted particular persons who really opposed the soul's immortality, though they might accommodate their ordinary language to the belief of the people: for most of the philosophers (as we read) had two sorts of doctrines, the one internal and the other external, or the one private and the other public; the latter to be indifferently communicated to all the world, and the former only very cautiously to their best friends, or to some few others capable of receiving it, and that would not make any ill use of the same. Pythagoras himself did not believe the transmigration which has made him so famous to posterity, for in the internal or secret doctrine he meant no more than the eternal revolution of forms in matters, those ceaseless vicissitudes and alternations, which turns every thing into all things and all things into any thing, as vegetables and animals become part of us, we become part of them, and both become parts of a thousand other things in the universe. [I have modernized Toland's spelling – E.S.]¹⁷

¹⁶ Kennedy [2013].

¹⁷ Toland [1704/2013]. I quote from the original [1704] edition, available at books.google (Letter II, paragraph 14, pp. 56–57).

Now, in context, Toland bases his claim about Pythagoras on an interpretation of Timaeus Locrus. In his account of the “systems of nature,” Smith remarks in passing,

The same notion, of the spontaneous origin of the world, was embraced, too, as the same author tells us, by the early Pythagoreans, a sect, which, in the ancient world, was never regarded as irreligious.” (“Ancient Physics,” 9, EPS 113, in context Smith is citing Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.)

So, regardless if Smith has read Toland (Smith is notoriously ungenerous in his citations,¹⁸ he is aware of the existence of a Toland-like claim about the Pythagoreans, and a few lines down in the *Ancient Physics*, Smith also cites Toland’s source, Timaeus Locrus. Now, one might think from these lines that Smith thinks that Pythagorean esotericism is a modern invention (of, say, Toland), to be rejected by more careful readings. But in his own voice Smith affirms that in Ancient times some philosophers of the “Italian School” taught their doctrines to pupils only “under the seal of the most sacred secrecy, that they might avoid the fury of the people, and not incur the imputation of impiety.” (“Astronomy” 4.4, 55–56; according to Smith, in addition to Pythagoras, the major figures in the school consist of “Empedocles... Archytas,... Timaeus, and ... Ocellus the Lucanian.”)

Smith, thus, explicitly accepts that at least some philosophers taught esoteric doctrines in order to avoid popular condemnation. (Smith also contests this about others, see his long footnote on Plato at EPS 122.) We need not accept such readings about the Pythagorean school, but we cannot ignore that it seems to be a trope in the eighteenth century. In fact, such tropes about esoteric teachings are not inventions of the eighteenth century. We find the attribution of an esoteric doctrine explicitly in Cicero’s *On the Nature of the Gods* (which was very well known in the eighteenth century) – not to mention that Cicero’s dialogue serves as exemplar to the very *Dialogues of Hume* that Smith refused to publish posthumously on Hume’s behalf. In it one of the speakers says, “undoubtedly closer to truth is the claim made in the fifth book of his “Nature of the Gods” by Posidonius, whose friendship we all share: that Epicurus does not believe in any gods, and that the statements which he made affirming the immortal gods were made to avert popular odium.” (Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 1.123)¹⁹

¹⁸ Rashid [1998].

¹⁹ I have used Cicero [1978].

Either way, Smith is aware that society can be hostile to philosophical doctrines; he was not blind to the troubles his teacher, Hutcheson, and his friend, Hume, faced from religious fanatics. As is well known, Smith refused to publish Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, but his obituary, a "very harmless Sheet of paper, which I happened to Write concerning the death of our late friend Mr Hume, brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain," (Letter 208, To Andreas Hold, October 1780, Correspondence, 251). After portraying Hume's cheerfulness on his deathbed, while reading Lucian's *Dialogues with the Dead*, Smith added a sentence offensive to the religious opinion of his day: "Thus died out most excellent, and never to be forgotten friend; concerning whose philosophical opinions men will, no doubt, judge variously, every one approving or condemning them, according as they happen to coincide or disagree with his own; but concerning whose character and conduct there can scarce be a difference of opinion."

Smith's unwillingness to condemn Hume's philosophical doctrines – many of which were inimical to the natural religion and physico-theology of even the moderate religious establishment – and his willingness to insist that a skeptic (if not Atheist) had can lead a moral life were infuriating to many (if only because it echoes Bayle's idea that a city of atheists would be possible). Even so, what matters for my present purpose is that Smith's position implies that there is, in fact, no authoritative vantage-point outside philosophy – neither *sub specie aeternitatis* nor revelation – from which one can evaluate "philosophical opinion."

Here I conclude that this latter point also signals the considerations of prudence that made Smith delay publication of EPS – too much of the material in EPS undermines crucial features of the consensus of British natural religion, which relied on the authority of Newtonian natural philosophy to promote a providential natural religion. Even if Smith accepted parts of the Newtonian edifice, his focus in the *Astronomy* on the roles of the passions and the imagination in scientific inquiry has a decidedly deflationary character. For in the quoted passage he essentially denies the natural theologian access to evidential support from the sciences that deal with the "waters, and near the surface of the Earth," (*History of Ancient Physics* 1, EPS 106) – many of which were crucial to design arguments in Clarke's 1705 *Demonstration* (and later Paley).

3. Conclusion

Smith was familiar with a practice of deliberate posthumous publication of sensitive material (e.g., Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Spinoza's *Ethics*, and Hume's

Dialogues). In his obituary of Hume, Smith defends by example the legitimacy of striving for posthumous fame.²⁰ The very prudent Smith counts on later generations to use EPS in their evaluation of the implications of Smith's analysis of the growth of knowledge. These implications suggest that we should be cautious about attributing to Smith a very firm commitment to the Newtonian Deism common in his generation.

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²⁰ Schliesser [2003], especially pp. 344–347.

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