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# The Moralizing Distance in Adam Smith: The Theory of Moral Sentiments as Possible Praise of Commerce

Maria Pia Paganelli

Even if his analysis is not a blind, one-sided lauding of commerce, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (WN) is often presented as a book that praises commercial societies. For Smith, commerce increases material prosperity and allows for freer institutions and more moral customs. By focusing on the role of distance in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), this article proposes that TMS could also be read as a book praising commercial societies because commerce may bring about the environment that best facilitates moral development.

Commerce breaks the boundaries of small and closed communities. Commercial societies allow for, and are based on, interactions among strangers. And the continuous exposure to strangers can facilitate the moralizing process. In TMS, Smith tells us that humankind is naturally biased by its self-love. Smith also tells us that each individual naturally desires the approbation of others. A person receives approbation when another individual reacts similarly or feels the same as he or she does. The closer one person is to another, the easier it is to share the same feelings and the less effort one has to exert to develop command over his passions. The farther away one is from another person, the more difficult

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it is to share feelings. To gain the approbation of someone far away, an individual has to reach out and strongly control his passions. This effort, when repeated with consistency, will develop into a solid self-command that is the foundation of moral development. One can therefore infer from the words of TMS that commercial societies, being societies in which the exposure to strangers is frequent and stable, placing individuals neither too close nor too far away from each other, may be the most fertile ground for moral development.

The reading of TMS that I propose here suggests that TMS may be included in the line of literature that defends commercialization from the accusations, so common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that it erodes values and ethics. It is consistent with recent works by Deirdre McCloskey (2006) and Paul Zak (2008). Both works critically summarize the idea, predominant since antiquity and still present today, that commerce and commercial societies breed excessive greed and are detrimental to moral development and social cooperation. Both works, as well as the interpretation of TMS that I propose, instead suggest that commerce and commercial societies may favor moral development and social cooperation. McCloskey examines many centuries with her analysis of virtue ethics to show that commercial societies improve morals rather than destroy them. Zak and his colleagues use a variety of contemporary experimental results, while continuously mentioning Adam Smith, to point in the same direction. I differ from both of them in scope and method. My focus is limited to the textual interpretation of Adam Smith and to TMS in particular.

The interpretation of TMS offered here builds upon, and adds to, at least two lines of interpretation of Smith that are present in the literature. One is the line that looks at WN as praise of commerce, the other, the one that looks at proximity in an attempt to integrate WN with TMS.

The view that WN describes commerce as a positive force for material progress is now commonplace. Despite its admitted costs, commerce is the reason that an English “workman, even of the lowest and poorest order,” is better off than an African king (WN introduction, 4; and also WN I.i.11).<sup>1</sup> It is also well recognized that in WN, the betterment of material conditions leads to the betterment of customs. As Jeffrey Young (1992) reminds us, it is thanks to the increased prosperity brought about by

1. On the many costs and benefits of commerce in Smith, see, among others, Viner 1927, Fleischacker 2004, and Samuels 2007.

commerce that it is possible to eliminate the poverty-driven practice of “directly destroying, and sometimes of abandoning . . . infants . . . old people, and those afflicted with lingering diseases, to perish with hunger, or to be devoured by wild beasts” (introduction and plan of the work, 4). It is also recognized by many (including, for example, Joseph Cropsey [(1957) 2001], Nathan Rosenberg [1968, 1990], Donald R. Stabile [1997], and Edwin West [1996]) that, in WN, commerce is presented and praised as a civilizing force that is conducive to freedom. As Robert E. Prasch (1991, 348) explains,

To illustrate this idea of commerce as a civilizing force Smith provided us with the third book to *The Wealth of Nations*. . . . Although it is ostensibly about the progress of opulence in different nations, at every turn the argument pivots on the conclusion that it was the force of commerce and capital accumulation, not the actions of any person or government, that brought Europe to a state of natural liberty. In this historical discussion commerce is the force of rationalization. Commerce brings us to a refinement of natural liberty and a more civilized world. This civilized world, embodied in the victory of natural liberty, is the purpose of growth and progress; it provides the answer to the ethical purpose of the economy in Smith’s system of political economy.

The interpretation of the moralizing role of distance in TMS that I propose here adds to this line of literature by suggesting a reading of TMS that is consistent with WN. TMS, like WN, can be seen as a defense or an endorsement of commercial societies, since commercial societies place individuals at the most appropriate distance to facilitate moral development. Furthermore, this reading of TMS would add to the non-constructivist ideas developed in WN, as it implies that the development of the moral order may in part be an unintentional consequence of commerce rather than a conscious construction.

The role of distance in TMS has also been addressed in the literature, albeit mostly in terms of proximity. Russell Nieli’s (1986) “spheres of intimacy,” James Otteson’s (2002) “familiarity principles,” and Charles Griswold’s (1999) “circles of sympathy” are all analyses intended to show that “proximity—both physical and psychological familiarity—forms the foundation of social unity” (Weinstein 2006, 80).<sup>2</sup> When sympathy is weakened, by increasing distance, social stability is potentially

2. See also Forman-Barzilai 2006.

jeopardized. But as sympathy diminishes, self-interest takes its place and commercial relationships help glue individuals back together into society (Cropsey [1957] 2001).

My approach is partially similar to, yet partially different from, these works on proximity. I look at how an increase in distance provides incentives to develop self-command and therefore develop morally, rather than merely giving space to self-interest. In this, I am in concord with Richard Teichgraeber (1981, 117) when he claims that “it is this morally constructive interplay between Smith’s essentially stoic notion of ‘sympathy’ and self-interest that perhaps proved to be the starting point for what in the *Wealth of Nations* would become a more thoroughgoing ethos of economic individualism. For to put it very simply, what we find here is Adam Smith as a moral advocate of what he called a ‘society of strangers.’” But while Teichgraeber wants to explain “the intellectual transition from the *Theory* to the *Wealth of Nations*” (118),<sup>3</sup> I would like to explore TMS as a *solo* work. I propose that TMS, even by itself, could be read as praise of commercial society. Adding WN to it simply enhances this proposed interpretation, but even on its own TMS is a book promoting commercial societies.

The article develops as follows. The next two sections illustrate how, in TMS, Smith describes the process of developing moral conduct. The impartiality of our judgment, a requirement for becoming moral, is learned. It can be achieved through a delicate balance between our natural self-love and our natural desire to receive approbation from others. We learn impartiality and morality by observing a situation at the appropriate distance and by practicing a command of our passions. Being too close or too far away from a situation does not adequately constrain the violence of our passions; it distorts one’s judgment, hindering moral development. The third section describes how, for Smith, strangers are a source of moral development because they force us to develop self-command. A description of the relationship between the moralizing effects of distance and commerce follows, showing that Smith understood commerce to have moralizing effects beyond simply the development of some commercial virtues such as punctuality, but he did not necessarily regard commerce as a change in customs that would eliminate wars, as some of his contemporaries proposed. Concluding remarks end the essay.

3. For a summary of the debate in the literature on the relationship between TMS and WN, see Montes 2004.

## The Development of Moral Conduct

In TMS, Smith claims that there are at least two natural tendencies in humankind. One is that we naturally care more for ourselves than for others—we are naturally biased by our self-love. The other is that we naturally want our feelings to correspond with those of other people—we naturally desire the approbation of others. We develop moral conduct when our self-love and our desire for approbation interact in such a way as to allow us to learn how to judge our own actions as impartially as possible and to build morally healthy habits based on those judgments.

Our judgment is naturally biased by our self-love, as we naturally consider ourselves to be the center of the universe.<sup>4</sup> We cannot judge ourselves impartially because we are too self-involved. Our perspective is distorted since we are too close to look at ourselves with detachment. Similarly, if we put an object too close to our eyes, it appears distorted. When we do something wrong, our actions appear to us distorted by our self-love. We tend to have very little “sense of the disgrace” (TMS III.2.11–13) and tend to “turn away our view from those circumstances which might render that judgment unfavourable.” Our self-deception, caused by our inability to see ourselves as others see us because we lack “a more distant prospect,” not only generates “half of the disorders of human life,” but perpetuates them as well (TMS III.4.2–6).

Nature offers a remedy, albeit an imperfect one, for our self-delusion—the desire to receive the approbation of others. When we approve of someone else’s conduct, we are inspired by their behavior (TMS III.2.2). We want others to feel for us what we feel for them. We want to emulate them and to be the object of their approbation, just as their conduct was the object of our approbation. Similarly, when we abhor someone’s behavior, we take note to avoid those actions because we do not want to “render ourselves . . . the object of universal disapprobation” (TMS III.4.7).

So, to understand if our actions will command the approbation or the disapprobation of others, we need to look at ourselves as another would look at us. We need to split ourselves in two, to simultaneously become an agent and a spectator of our actions (TMS III.1.6). We need to create some distance between the I-agent and the I-examiner who looks at the I-agent, because “we can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves,

4. For an analysis of how, in Smith, we go from partiality to impartiality, see Levy 1995.

as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to *view them as at a certain distance from us*” (TMS III.i.2; emphasis added).

Smith claims that to be able to try to see ourselves through the eyes of others, we actually need to see the others. The first step toward morality is therefore achieved with a process of socialization achieved “*in no other way than*” by using others as mirrors in which we see ourselves at a distance (TMS III.1.2; emphasis added). The presence of others is indispensable. Smith indeed claims that “were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species,” he would have no moral sense because he would have no “looking-glass” through which he is able to see himself. But “bring him to society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before” (TMS III.3). Indeed, “[the eyes of other people are] the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure . . . scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct” (TMS III.1.5). The habitual presence of others will generate the habit of looking at ourselves through someone else’s eyes. So, our moral sense will eventually grow stronger and more stable with habit (TMS III.1, III.1.4).

But the presence of others will always be needed to keep that mirror in front of us. Without the looking glass of the presence of others, too often we would be at risk of being deformed by our self-love.

### **The Moralizing Role of Distance**

We receive approbation when another individual reacts similarly to us or feels the same as we do (TMS I.i.3.1). We are more likely to gain someone’s approbation by placing ourselves in his shoes and trying to think as he would. This process of placing ourselves in someone else’s shoes, with all its limitations, is done through the act of imagination that Smith calls sympathy.<sup>5</sup>

But despite our natural sympathy, the intensity of our reaction to something that affects us directly is naturally stronger than what we feel about others (TMS I.i.4.7). Indeed, since we are at different distances from each other (one is closer to oneself than to another), we perceive the same situation differently and we therefore feel differently about it. In Smith’s words, “My companion does not naturally look upon the misfortune that has befallen me, of the injury that has been done to me, from the same

5. On the role of imagination in Smith, see Griswold 2006.

point of view in which I consider them. They affect me much more nearly. We do not view them from the same station” (TMS I.i.4.5–6).

The difference in reactions may cause interpersonal problems, as Smith describes: “If you have either no fellow-feeling for the misfortunes I have met with, or none that bears any proportion to the grief which distracts me; or if you have either no indignation at the injuries I have suffered, or none that bears any proportion to the resentment which transports me, we can no longer converse upon these subjects. We become intolerable to one another. I can neither support your company, nor you mine. You are confounded at my violence and passion, and I am enraged at your cold insensibility and want of feeling” (TMS I.i.4.5).

To remedy, or prevent, this unfortunate “intolerable” situation that would cause us pain, since “nothing pleases more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast” (TMS I.i.2.1), we reach out and try to close the gap between us and the others in an attempt to increase the chance that we feel similarly. So, to appeal to others, we “adjust the pitch of our passion,” so that we would approve of ourselves if we were in their place looking at us (TMS I.i.4.5–6). This is a process that we learn to apply whenever we face others. Eventually, we learn to lower the pitch of our passions even if there is no physical other.<sup>6</sup>

But the closer one person is to another, the easier it is to share the same feelings about an event, and the less effort one has to exert to develop command over his passions. On the other hand, the farther away one is from another person, the more difficult it is to share feelings. To gain the approbation of someone relatively far away, an individual has to reach out and strongly control his passions. Here lies the center of the problem: If I, as it were, come all the way to you, you will indulge. If you come all the way to me, I will indulge. But if I am extremely far away from you, you will see the possibility of fellow-feelings as nonexistent and you will not even try; your judgment will maintain its bias. The same would happen to you if you are too far away from me. The distance to develop impartiality has to be the right distance. Being too close or too far away biases the judgment. Indeed, “the propriety of your moral sentiments is never so apt to be corrupted, as when the indulgent and partial spectator is at hand, while the indifferent and impartial one is at a great distance” (TMS III.3.41).

6. On the role of self-command in Smith and its relation to Stoicism, see among others Brown 1994, Griswold 1999, Vivenza 2001, and Raphael 2007.



In Smith's account, the corruption of our moral sentiments can be generated by the partiality of being too close. Family and close friends risk being too close to us to promote a healthy moral development. They are too close, so they sympathize too much, letting us indulge too much in our passions, hindering the development of the self-command so necessary to full moral growth. Parents are too partial and indulgent with their children: "A very young child has no self-command; but, whatever are its emotions, whether fear, or grief, or anger, it endeavours always, by the violence of its outcries, to alarm, as much as it can, the attention of its nurse, or of its parents. While it remains under the custody of such *partial* protectors, its anger is the first and, perhaps, the only passion which it is taught to moderate. . . . When it is old enough to go to school, or to mix with its equals, it soon finds that *they have no such indulgent partiality*" (TMS III.3.20; emphasis added). And close friends, with their warm comfort, let us abandon ourselves to our weaknesses, exactly because they are very close to us: "Yet by relating their misfortunes they in some measure renew their grief. They awaken in their memory the remembrance of those circumstances which occasioned their affliction. Their tears accordingly flow faster than before, and *they are apt to abandon themselves to all the weakness of sorrow*. They take pleasure, however, in all this, and it is evident, are sensibly relieved by it; because the sweetness of his sympathy more than compensates the bitterness of that sorrow, which, in order to excite his sympathy, they had thus enlivened and renewed" (TMS I.i.2.4; emphasis added). Smith repeats this point again in a different way later in the book: "Modern good manners, which are extremely indulgent to human weakness, forbid, for some time, the visits of strangers to persons under great family distress, and permit those only of the nearest relations and most intimate friends. The presence of the latter, it is thought, will *impose less restraint* than that of the former; and the sufferers can more easily accommodate themselves to the feelings of those, from whom they have reasons to *expect a more indulgent sympathy*" (TMS III.3.24; emphasis added).

But while too little distance causes laxness and partiality in our judgments, excessive distance also causes biases and improper moral development. If one is too far away, there is a risk of too much indifference. Smith indeed notices that children's lack of respect for their parents and their weak domestic morality, observable "in the higher ranks," is most likely due to having sent the children to boarding schools too far away from home (TMS VI.ii.1.10). Similarly, foreign nations, especially if "at

variance,” are too far away from each other, so that “the citizen of each pays little regard to the sentiments which foreign nations may entertain concerning his conduct.” Likewise, by decreasing social distance internally, factions generate too much distance between themselves and non-members. Partiality “is at hand,” justice is disregarded, and one can abandon oneself to “hostile passions” (TMS III.3.42).

An excess or a defect of distance lets us indulge in the violence of our passions. The right distance instead lets us develop impartiality in our judgments. Indeed, being at the proper distance from another gives us incentives to develop command over our passions so that we can become the object of approbation and even of applause. Impartiality in judging ourselves and others, the key to moral development, is achieved by looking at ourselves as if from the point of view of a third party, who is not directly involved with either of us because he is not too close and not too far. And just as we learn to perceive physical distance through experience, so that we know that the window next to which we sit is not larger than the “distant mountains” we see through it, in the same manner we learn to deal with moral magnitudes by experiencing moral distances (TMS III.3.2–3). Smith tells us indeed that

the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance, excites a much more passionate joy or sorrow, a much more ardent desire or aversion, than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connexion. . . . As to the eye of the body, objects appear great or small, not so much according to their real dimensions, as according to the nearness or distance of their situation; so do they likewise to what may be called the natural eye of the mind: and we remedy the defects of both these organs in pretty much the same manner. . . . I can form a just comparison between those great objects and the little objects around me, in no other way, than by transporting myself, at least in fancy, to a different station, from whence I can survey both at nearly equal distances, and thereby form some judgment of their real proportions. Habit and experience have taught me to do this so easily and so readily, that I am scarce sensible that I do it. (TMS III.3.3)

The deceptive powers of our self-love are stronger than those of the eye of the body. They are difficult to tame, they need “a discipline which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection” (TMS III.3.22). To develop the ability of “transporting myself,

at least in fancy, to a different station, from whence I can survey both at nearly equal distances, and thereby form some judgment of their real proportions” (TMS III.3.2) and to look with the eyes of a third person, we need to practice habitually dealing with people who “had no particular connexion with either [of us]” (TMS III.3.3). These people are strangers.

### **Strangers as a Source of Moral Development**

Smith seems animated about the fact that we learn self-command through the presence of strangers, from early schooling on. And the more we interact with strangers, the more we develop self-command, and the more self-command we have the more virtuous we are. It is this effort, consistently repeated, that will develop into solid self-command that is the foundation of moral development. Practice and habit will make the impartiality stick.

So, when “a very young child” is sent to school or to play with other children, and “it naturally wishes to gain their favour, and to avoid their hatred or contempt . . . it soon finds that it can do so in no other way than by moderating, not only its anger, but all its other passions, to the degree which its play-fellows and companions are likely to be pleased with. It thus enters into the great school of self-command, it studies to be more and more master of itself, and begins to exercise over its own feelings a discipline which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection” (TMS III.3.22).

The idea that it is through increasing the distance between us and others that we develop the self-command needed to develop morally is presented right from the beginning of TMS. In TMS I.i.4.9, indeed, we find the following description of how we regain tranquillity in time of distress, by increasing the distance between the people with whom we interact:

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. . . . 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, and endeavour to fix our thought upon those general outlines of our situation which he is willing to consider. *We expect even still less sympathy from an assembly of strangers, and we assume, therefore,*

*still more tranquility before them, and always endeavour to bring down our passion to that pitch, which the particular company we are in may be expected to go along with.* Nor 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; emphasis added)

In book III, Smith continues and strengthens this idea that it is through social interaction, especially with strangers, that we “restore the mind to its tranquility.” There, he repeats that “in all private misfortunes, in pain, in sickness, in sorrow, the weakest man, when his friends, and *still more when a stranger visits him*, is immediately impressed with the view in which they are likely to look upon his situation” (TMS III.3.23).

Smith then goes on, extensively, in describing the beneficial and moralizing effects of being with strangers. Strangers will force us to contain our whining in our bad times and will prevent us from developing too much arrogance in good times. It is a section that is worth quoting in full, given the effectiveness of Smith’s words:

In solitude, we are apt to feel too strongly whatever relates to ourselves: we are apt to over-rate the good offices we may have done, and the injuries we may have suffered: we are apt to be too much elated by our own good, and too much dejected by our own bad fortune. The conversation of a friend brings us to a better, that of *a stranger to a still better temper*. 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: and *it is always from that spectator, from whom we can expect the least sympathy and indulgence, that we are likely to learn the most complete lesson of self-command*.

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; return, as soon as possible, to the day-light of the world and of society. *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. . . . if, by the simplicity of your unassuming demeanour, you can gain their favour and kindness, you may rest satisfied that you are modest enough, and that your head has been in no respect turned by your good fortune. (TMS III.3.38–40; emphases added)

This continuous lowering of the pitch of our passions is an effective training ground for self-command, so that we can hope to reach the point where “habit and experience have taught [us] to do this so easily and so readily, that [we are] scarce sensible that [we] do it” (TMS III.3.2).

The more effortlessly, the more “mechanically” (TMS III.3.23), we are able to respond and control our passions, the more we have been successfully trained in the school of self-command. The progression of the ability to command our passions that Smith offers us is indicative of the power of habit. A child has no self-command until he is exposed to his peers in school. A “weak man” is “like a child that has not yet gone to school” (TMS III.3.23), while the “man of a little more firmness” is able to moderate his passion, but if “he has not . . . been well inured to the hard discipline of self-command, he soon grows weary of this restraint” (TMS III.3.24). It is only “*the wise and just man* who has been thoroughly bred in the great school of self-command.” It is “*in the bustle and business of the world*” that “*the man of real constancy and firmness . . . has been in the constant practice and, indeed, under the constant necessity, of modelling, or endeavouring to model, not only his outward conduct and behaviour, but, as much as he can, even his inward sentiments and feelings, according to those of this awful and respectable judge. He does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel*” (TMS III.3.25; emphases added).

### **Moral Distance in Commerce**

If we read TMS with an eye on distance, we could see that the kind of society in which we are most likely and/or most frequently placed in the conditions to be at the right distance from others is a commercial society. Commercial societies are indeed societies of strangers.<sup>7</sup> We have our family and our friends, but we are also in constant interaction with peo-

7. See Seabright 2004.

ple we do not know. It may happen that our brewer is also our friend, but most likely our baker does not know our names, nor would our butcher care to know. In front of them, we have to compose ourselves, control our passions. While we can and do burst into tears with our close friends in case of a large emotional loss, it is inappropriate for us to cry in a public place (so Smith contends) and unlikely that we will do it. In a public place, we will push back our tears and our sighs, trying to control and compose ourselves. The more we try to do it, the easier it will become, and the more likely we will be able to internalize the behavior, acquiring moral strength. And since in a commercial society there are many situations in which one has to be in contact with strangers, one has many chances to train one's self-command. And through the habit of interacting with strangers, we develop that habit of self-command that is necessary for strong morality and virtuous rules of conduct. In TMS, commercial societies seem to be indirectly praised as a locus in which moral development could be most fruitful.

Although the focus of this article is TMS, a glance at WN seems necessary. With WN, Smith's picture of the role of distance in the moralization process, and therefore of a society in which individuals are placed at a distance, is corroborated, and yet qualified.

In WN V.i.g.12 we hear that, for "a man of low condition," finding the right distance in commercial societies may not always be easy. Moving from his small village to a great city, he abandons an environment with close personal ties for one in which he "is observed and attended to by nobody." Others are too far away to play a positive role in controlling his "low profligacy and vice." In some cases, to compensate for his excessive distance from others, the debauched villager may fall into relationships characterized by too little distance: he may fall into the hands of a small religious sect and be punished "by what is always a very severe punishment" so that he will follow the morals of sects that "have frequently been rather disagreeably rigorous and unsocial." Smith suggests that to generate the appropriate moral distance there are two tools: the "study of science and philosophy" (WN V.i.g.14) and "publick diversions" (WN V.i.g.15). Science and philosophy offer a different perspective, training us to change our point of view, and "publick diversions," such as theater performances, are also very strong training grounds for putting ourselves in the place of others (Marshall 1986).

Similarly, while commerce may generate the right distance for moral development for most, it may also generate too little, or too much distance

for others. Great merchants and manufacturers indeed find themselves at a very close proximity to each other. This proximity biases their views and allows them to generate cartels, so detrimental to the general public. Additionally, a dense concentration of merchants can be accompanied by a great distance between their customers and people living in the faraway countries where the merchants have other commercial interests. Merchants and manufacturers are willing and able to bring a country into war “for the sake of that little enhancement of price” (WN IV.viii.53), and their fellow-citizens, “who live in the capital, and in the provinces remote from the scene of action . . . enjoy, at their ease, the amusement of reading in the newspapers the exploits of their own fleets and armies” (WN V.iii.37). To these defects and excesses of distance, Smith does not offer a clear remedy, save perhaps the policy prescriptions and the appeals to the laws of justice.

This particular consideration—that commerce may induce wars because great merchants and manufacturers want to open new markets, and because citizens enjoy reading the news of the wars and the dreams of empire (if they are far from the front and if they do not have to pay for the war thanks to the use of public debt to finance it)—makes Smith stand out among eighteenth-century authors who believe commerce brings better and “softer” customs. Actually, even Smith worries that commerce softens the spirit, making poor soldiers, but this does not mean that he thinks that peace is a necessary consequence.

The reading of the role of distance in TMS proposed here—that commercial societies offer the conditions under which it is most likely that an individual is placed at the appropriate distance to develop morally—is consistent, with some caveats, with a common theme that emerged in the eighteenth century, despite differing predictions about whether universal peace is a necessary consequence of commerce. That common theme is what Albert Hirschman ([1977] 1997) refers to as the *doux commerce*.<sup>8</sup> The introduction of commerce changes the character and disposition of men, making them less violent and more sociable, as Montesquieu ([1748] 1989) and David Hume ([1752] 1985) in particular suggest.

Focusing on the moralizing effect of (the right) distance also places TMS in a line of thinking that goes back to at least Aristotle. Carlo Ginzburg (1994, 49) notes “the contradictory implications stressed by Aristotle both

8. See also Clark 2007.

in his *Poetics* and in his *Rhetoric*. If extreme distance leads to indifference, extreme closeness can lead either to pity or to destructive rivalry. This ambivalence . . . found a powerful expression on the Greek stage.” But while Smith seems, implicitly at least, to see that commercial societies may help us to find the right distance, Ginzburg shows a tension in authors such as Diderot and Balzac regarding the moral implication of distance between “a general idea of just and unjust in accordance with nature” and the increasing social distance that “in bourgeois society [makes] it . . . difficult to observe moral obligation, including the most basic ones” (55).

The reading of distance in TMS proposed here is also consistent with the reading of Smith proposed by Jerry Evensky (2005). Evensky’s idea is that, in Smith, “ethical maturation is an ongoing process because the ideal is a limit—we can forever refine our values as we approach it, but we can never achieve it” (47). Evensky indeed describes Smith as telling the story of the coevolution of individuals and social norms of ethics, a story in which not only change but progress occurs. “In this story, human nature is constant (we are not ‘better’ than our predecessor), but human character evolves along with human institutions, and these have the capacity to mature toward the ideal” (56). The presence of commerce, and the distance that it generates among individuals, would indeed generate that moral environment that would fit in the story of coevolution and maturity toward the ideal.

## **Conclusions**

Focusing on the role of distance in the moralizing process in TMS, this article proposes that TMS could be interpreted as a defense of commercial societies. In TMS, Smith explains that being too close or too far away from others keeps us in our indulgent partiality, which is detrimental for moral development. Strangers, on the other hand, allow us to train ourselves to be at the appropriate distance to develop impartiality. Dealing with strangers forces us to build and strengthen self-command to control our passions, which is the basis of moral development. Frequent interactions with strangers foster the habit of virtue. Since commercial societies are societies of strangers, we can infer that commercial societies are a fertile ground for moral development. With this reading, Smith would appear to praise commerce not only in WN, but also in TMS—because commerce can make us not only wealthy but also moral.



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