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Adam Smith: A Relational Egalitarian Interpretation

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ADAM SMITH: A RELATIONAL EGALITARIAN INTERPRETATION

by

KATHRYN E. JOYCE

Under the Direction of Christie J. Hartley

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I argue that Adam Smith is committed to moral egalitarianism, which extends to his theory of political economy. While Smith's work is often used to justify economic inequality in society, I show that his political theory is best understood as a kind of relational egalitarianism. Using Elizabeth Anderson's Democratic Equality as a model, I examine Smith's commitment to equality in the space of social relationships. In particular, I argue that Smith's focus on eliminating inequalities that cause oppression in society in conjunction with his efforts to design a political and economic system that will yield social conditions of freedom for individuals make him a relational egalitarian.

INDEX WORDS: Adam Smith, Egalitarianism, Relational equality

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KATHRYN E. JOYCE

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Adam Smith: A Relational Egalitarian Interpretation

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iError! Bookmark not defined.
I. Introduction	Error! Bookmark not defined.
II. Anderson’s Relational Egalitarianism: Democratic Equality	4
III. Smith’s Relational Egalitarianism	8
<i>Smith’s Moral View</i>	8
<i>Sympathy</i>	8
<i>Equality</i>	14
<i>Esteem</i>	18
<i>Smith’s Political View</i>	21
<i>Relationship</i>	21
<i>Oppression</i>	22
<i>Freedom</i>	25
IV. Challenges to Interpreting Smith as a Relational Egalitarian	31
<i>Hierarchy: Social Rank and the Division of Labor</i>	32
<i>Differences</i>	3
<i>Government</i>	36

Conclusion.....
.....38

References.....
.....39

I. Introduction

Although Adam Smith is known as the father of capitalism and his work is often used to justify economic inequality in society, in this thesis, I will argue that Smith's political theory is best understood as a kind of relational egalitarianism. Recent Smith scholarship has increasingly turned to examine how Smith's moral theory can ground a liberal political theory by highlighting egalitarian themes within Smith's moral view that undergird his political commitments.¹ These scholars provide compelling evidence to support the view that Smith considers every individual to have equal moral standing, but little has been said about the type of egalitarianism found in Smith's theory of political economy.

Smith's egalitarianism is distinctive. He does not advocate for the equal distribution of material goods or favor economic equality as some egalitarians do. Instead he calls for both recognizing others as morally equal and awarding admiration unequally, based on the virtue of one's character and conduct. Smith's view of social rank and the widespread material inequality found in Smith's commercial system also appear to conflict with many versions of egalitarianism. For these reasons, any viable egalitarian interpretation will have to be explicit about the type of egalitarianism found in Smith's work.

In constructing his egalitarian interpretation of Smith, Samuel Fleischacker attributes to him a "strong moral egalitarianism." Fleischacker's description of the kind of equality he finds in Smith is vague; he describes it as "some sort of fundamental equality in worth" which underlies Smith's normative claim that individuals ought to be regarded as equals (Fleischacker 2004, 74). Fleischacker also says that "Smith appears to have been

¹ See Darwall (1999, 2001), Fleischacker (2004), Griswold (1999), Weinstein (2006).

committed to a remarkably strong version of the claim that people are essentially equal in abilities" (Fleischacker 2004, 76).

Most notable among the critics of an egalitarian interpretation of Smith is D.D. Raphael, who argues in response to Fleischacker that "Smith does not espouse egalitarianism proper" (Raphael 2007, 123). By "egalitarianism proper" Raphael seems to be referring to a strong, comprehensive view of equality that covers a wide range of human characteristics and political values. For example, Raphael points out that Smith evaluates the life of a soldier as superior to the life of a monk. According to Raphael, if Smith were an egalitarian he would view these two lives equally (Raphael 2007, 123). In opposition, I argue that Smith assesses the life of the soldier as superior in terms of virtue; this is consistent with a relational egalitarian view.

Raphael also argues against Fleischacker that "it cannot be true that Smith was 'committed to a remarkably strong' form of egalitarianism" because Smith does not deny the existence of natural differences or argue that individuals have equal talents and abilities (Raphael 2007, 123). I agree with Raphael that Smith acknowledges natural differences in talent and ability, but I will show that Smith still expresses a strong commitment to moral egalitarianism because he argues that these differences are not morally important. Rather, individuals are equal in terms of moral worth. Raphael rejects the view that Smith recognizes individuals as having equal moral worth; he points to several passages that seem to dispute such an interpretation. Raphael argues further that if Smith was a moral egalitarian, then evidence of this view should appear in Smith's primary ethical work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which, he claims, it does not (Raphael 2007, 122).

I will argue that these criticisms stem from a misunderstanding of Smith's egalitarian commitments. Certainly, Fleischacker's failure to be clear about what he means by 'egalitarianism' invites severe criticism. However, for my purposes, egalitarianism can be understood as the view that justice requires that individuals be treated equally with respect to certain factors that pervasively affect an individual's life. The ultimate basis for this view is the claim that all persons have equal moral worth.² Egalitarianism, as such, does not require that those individuals that count as persons have all the same abilities; it also does not require that individuals be made equal in terms of material goods. Indeed, egalitarians disagree over the respect(s) in which individuals should be equal.

In order to make the argument that Smith is an egalitarian, I will examine the nature of Smith's commitment to equality. I will argue that i) Smith is committed to moral equality—the view that human beings share equal moral standing based on their equal worth, and that ii) Smith's political theory grows out of his commitment to moral equality,³ and properly interpreted, is a relational egalitarian theory. Relational egalitarianism is distinct from other forms of egalitarianism because of its central claim that what is important is equality in those matters that affect the social relations in which individuals stand, rather than equality as such. Elizabeth Anderson provides an especially clear account of relational egalitarianism; I will therefore examine Smith's political view in light of Anderson's model of equality as a social relationship to reveal Smith's commitment to relational egalitarianism. Interpreting Smith this way best captures Smith's commitment to

² See Arneson (2009) and Anderson (1999).

³ See Haakonssen (1988)

equality and avoids apparent problems with an egalitarian interpretation, including those posed by Raphael.

To begin, I will briefly describe relational egalitarianism, using Anderson's view as a paradigmatic example. Next I examine Smith's moral theory in order to show that he is committed to moral equality. Then I argue that certain fundamental commitments of his political theory are the same commitments held by relational egalitarians. Although I consider particular passages that appear to conflict with my egalitarian interpretation of Smith, I argue that understanding Smith's egalitarianism as relational assuages these concerns.

II. Anderson's Relational Egalitarianism: Democratic Equality

Relational egalitarianism is the view that justice requires eliminating the kinds of inequality that allow for oppression and domination. Andrew Altman and Christopher Heath Wellman explain,

...the kinds of inequality that are of greatest moral concern are those that involve an asymmetry that empowers the better-offs to systematically treat the worse-offs in ways that seriously wrong them. The wrong is variously identified as oppression or domination. In whatever way one thinks that the wrong is best explained, the key point is that the focus of moral concern should not be on inequality as such but rather on what the wealthy or the politically powerful or the socially privileged can do, with impunity, to those below them. And what the better-offs can do to those below them is a function of the kind of relationship in which they find themselves (Altman & Wellman 2009, 132).

On this view, not all inequalities are morally important because not all inequalities cause members of society to be vulnerable to oppression. Relational egalitarians are concerned about equality among those who interact and form relationships. Equality between societies that have no contact is not as morally important as equality among members of a society.

Anderson's democratic equality is a relational theory of equality which requires that individuals have equal standing with fellow members of society so that they can make claims on others, have their interests receive equal consideration, have their rights respected, and have the ability to fully participate in civil society (Anderson 2009, 219). She argues that the proper negative aim of egalitarian justice is to end oppression, which is socially imposed. The proper positive aim is to "create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others" (Anderson 1999, 289). Anderson claims that members of society must recognize one another as equal and hold one another mutually accountable for abiding by principles that secure conditions of freedom for all.

Rather than accepting the view that equality and freedom are conflicting ideals, Anderson emphasizes the connection between equality and freedom (Anderson 1999, 315).⁴ She explains that oppression negates freedom, while standing in relations of equality with others allows individuals to act freely:

Equals are not subject to arbitrary violence or physical coercion by others. Choice unconstrained by arbitrary physical coercion is one of the fundamental conditions of freedom. Equals are not marginalized by others. They are therefore free to participate in politics and the major institutions of civil society. Equals are not dominated by others; they do not live at the mercy of others' wills. This means that they govern their lives by their own wills, which is freedom. Equals are not exploited by others. This means they are free to secure the fair value of their labor (Anderson 1999, 315).

Anderson agrees with Amartya Sen that capabilities ought to be the proper metric of justice. Living, for Sen, is an aggregate of functionings, understood as the things that an individual can be or do (Sen 1992, 39-40). Capabilities consist of the set of functionings that a person can achieve with the resources available to her. The capabilities set one has reflects her

⁴ Anderson rejects the libertarian notion that freedom is lack of interference or obstruction because, as she says, "this definition of freedom neglects the importance of having the means to do what one wants" (Anderson 1999, 315).

freedom to lead one kind of life or another (Sen 1992, 46). Anderson argues that “negatively, people are entitled to whatever capabilities are necessary to enable them to avoid or escape entanglement in oppressive social relations” and “positively, they are entitled to capabilities necessary for functioning as an equal citizen in a democratic state” (Anderson 1999, 316).

In particular, Anderson claims that individuals must be capable of functioning as i) a dignified human being, ii) a citizen of a democratic state, and iii) a participant in a system of cooperative production (Anderson 1999, 318). The capability to function as a human being requires effective access to the goods required for physical survival, along with access to the basic conditions of human agency (Anderson 1999, 318). To be capable of functioning as equal citizens, individuals need “effective access to the goods and relationships of civil society” (Anderson 1999, 318). Anderson specifies that members of society need to be capable of functioning as a citizen in a *democratic* state because democratic arrangements facilitate collective self-determination (Anderson 1999, 313). Functioning as an equal citizen also requires social conditions in which persons are accepted by others and can “appear in public without shame”⁵ (Anderson 1999, 318). Anderson emphasizes the importance of institutions that recognize individuals as equals in all of their diversity and are organized so that the “diversity of people’s talents, aspirations, roles, and cultures” can benefit all members of society (Anderson 1999, 308).

Anderson views the economy as a system of cooperative production in which contributions at all levels should be appreciated within relationships of equal respect rather

⁵ Pogge points out that Smith is the first to recognize the ability to appear in public without shame is a necessary part of individual liberty. See Pogge (2010).

than a system that empowers some to exploit others. She argues that egalitarians ought to be concerned with the “relationships within which goods are distributed” rather than the pattern of distribution itself (Anderson 1999, 314). Anderson explains,

...democratic equality is sensitive to the need to integrate the demands of equal recognition with those of equal distribution. Goods must be distributed according to principles and processes that express respect for all. People must not be required to grovel or demean themselves before others as a condition of laying claim to their share of goods. The basis for people’s claims to distributed goods is that they are equals, not inferiors, to others (Anderson 1999, 314).⁶

Similarly, the division of labor should be regarded as a comprehensive, efficient system in which contributions at every level are recognized as necessary components. Those holding low-skill positions ought to be valued for relieving others from having to perform these tasks, which allows them to make more productive use of their talents. Also, individuals must have the freedom to choose their occupation and careers must be open to talents. On this view, material inequalities that grow out of the economic system are not problematic, as long as “all citizens enjoy a decent set of freedoms, sufficient for functioning as an equal in society” (Anderson 1999, 326).

While Anderson’s view carries a strong endorsement of democracy, democracy is a feature particular to her model and is not a necessary component of all relational egalitarian theories. Anderson is concerned primarily with a society in which rules of justice and public policy are acceptable to all members, regarded as equals; she argues that a democratic government insofar as it is a “manifestation of democratic culture” provides the best means for ensuring that everyone who is subject to a set of laws and policies within a

⁶ As Pogge points, the idea that people should not have to depend on the benevolence of others or “grovel and demean themselves” in order to secure their share of goods comes from Smith’s *WN*. See Pogge (2010).

society is given equal consideration in their construction (Anderson 2009, 214; 1999, 314-16). Anderson recommends democracy as the best approach for fostering social conditions of equality in society, but this implementation strategy is independent of the relational egalitarian-making features of her view.

In review, relational egalitarians don't consider equal outcomes as such valuable, and they do not identify all persons as being the same in terms of talents or abilities. Rather, they promote arrangements in which all individuals are able to function as equals, regardless of natural talents. Relational equality is concerned with distribution of divisible resources to the extent that individuals have enough to avoid oppression and function as equal members of society. Because relational egalitarians are concerned with relationships within a particular society, what resources are needed depends to some extent on social norms and individual circumstances.

III. Smith's Relational Egalitarianism

In this section I argue that Smith is best understood as a relational egalitarian. To show that Smith is best interpreted this way, I briefly explain his moral theory to reveal his commitment to moral equality. Then I turn to his political view in order to show that this commitment pervasively influences his political recommendations, through which he seeks to eliminate oppression and provide conditions of liberty for individuals.

Smith's Moral View

Human Nature and Sympathy

Smith begins *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the observation that humans are naturally social and interested in the well-being of others (*TMS* I.i.1.1). The social nature of human beings underlies Smith's notion of sympathy, and extends throughout his account of moral psychology. Sympathy is commonly understood as a mere emotion. But Smith uses sympathy primarily to refer to "the means through which emotions are conveyed and understood" (Griswold 1999, 79). Sympathy, in the Smithian sense, is a process⁷ by which spectators share in the experience of others through imagination and award moral approval to others' sentiments and actions. Individuals are naturally motivated to sympathize because it is pleasurable and they desire the social relationships enabled by sympathy.⁸

To explain the process, a spectator witnesses an actor in a particular situation and observes her actions and emotional response to her situation. The spectator imagines herself as the actor in the actor's place. She compares the sentiments depicted by the actions with the sentiments that she imagines that she, or anyone else, ought to feel if she were the actor in that particular situation. Smith says,

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...By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them (*TMS* I.i.1.2).

If, by imagining oneself as the actor in her situation and considering what she would properly feel, the spectator experiences the same sentiments as the actor, then the spectator

⁷ See Griswold (1999)

⁸ For Smith, the process of sympathy itself is pleasurable, whether the sentiments shared are pleasant or unpleasant. Smith says, "the pleasure which we find in the conversation of one whom in all the passions of the heart we can entirely sympathize with, seems to do more than compensate the painfulness of that sorrow with which the view of his situation affects us" (*TMS* I.1.2.6).

is said to sympathize. If the spectator's sentiments are significantly different, then the spectator does not sympathize with the actor.

Sympathy underlies moral approval, and serves as the core of moral judgment.

Smith explains,

When the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects; and, on the contrary, when upon bringing the case home to himself, he finds that they do not coincide with what he feels, they necessarily appear to him unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes which excite them. To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them (*TMS* I.i.3.1).

If moral approval cannot be awarded, the spectator cannot be said to sympathize with the actor.⁹ Sentiments and the actions that they give rise to are evaluated separately. Whether an actor's conduct can be deemed virtuous or vicious depends on "the cause which excited it, or the motive which gives occasion to it" and "the end which it proposes, or the effect which it tends to produce" (*TMS* I.i.3.5). A spectator can, through imagination, identify with the sentiments of the actor and consider them proper in accordance with the situation but disapprove of the actions taken by the actor in response to the situation. Take a case of revenge for example. If a person is unjustly harmed by another, a spectator might identify with her feelings of resentment toward the offender, but condemn her vengeful response. To do so is to disapprove of her conduct.

Smith claims that everyone has the capacity to sympathize, but observes that certain things can make sympathy difficult. It is easiest for agents to sympathize with those they

⁹ Smith also writes that we sympathize with someone's sentiments "when we have thus adopted them and made them our own" (*TMS* I.i.1.2). His language shows that to sympathize with someone is to "adopt" his or her sentiments. If the spectator cannot identify with the sentiments or actions of the person observed, then she cannot sympathize with them—even if she can imagine herself as the person observed in the situation at hand.

are closest to because agents have a better understanding of these actors and contexts so they use imagination to enter into their situation more easily (*TMS* I.i.4.10).¹⁰ It is more difficult for a spectator to sympathize with those she does not have a personal relationship with because the spectator cannot always accurately assess the context and what motivates their behavior. For instance, if I witness a friend of mine react angrily to a comment made by an acquaintance who has been continuously harassing her, I am likely to sympathize with her anger and her response. Someone observing who is unaware of the harassment and does not know that my friend is an even-tempered person may evaluate her behavior as inappropriate. I, on the other hand, have the necessary information to judge her behavior accurately. I don't sympathize with her *because* she is my friend and I care for her. Rather, I have enough information to properly interpret her behavior and judge impartially.

Smith views all persons as fundamentally similar in terms of psychology and basic human experience, but he recognizes that perceived differences between individuals or groups can obstruct sympathy. When a spectator observes an actor that she perceives as fundamentally different from herself, she won't be able to imagine herself as that actor in the particular situation.¹¹ This prevents her from making a connection with the actor and obstructs possible social relationships that may have grown from that connection.

Smith illustrates how failure to sympathize can lead to ill-treatment and oppression with the example of a slave-owner's failure to sympathize with his slaves. He writes,

¹⁰ Griswold calls the spheres of people whom an actor most readily sympathizes with "circles of sympathy" (Griswold 1999, 77, 94, 192). These circles include family members, friends, and neighbors (*TMS* IV.ii.1.16; VI.2.i.2).

¹¹ Several contemporary theorists stress the importance of imagination for overcoming difference and facilitating equal respect among members of society. For example, Martha Nussbaum in *From Disgust to Humanity* says, "equality and equal respect cannot come into being, or long survive, without the ability to imagine the situation of a person in a different social group and assess it from that person's point of view" (Nussbaum 2010, 47).

There is not a negro from the coast of Africa who does not... possess a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his sordid master is too often scarce capable of conceiving. Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished (*TMS* V.2.9)

Smith condemns slavery and attributes the treatment of slaves to the inability of slave-owners to recognize that slaves are similar to themselves. This failure prevents sympathy which can lead to ill treatment of others and give rise to oppressive relationships.¹² Notice that Smith asserts that the contempt slaves hold for those who enslave them is justified. In doing so he claims that the slaves suffer from an injustice imposed on them by oppressive relationships. When spectators observe suffering that is unjustly inflicted on some by others their sympathy with the sufferer will result in disapproval for those who cause the harm (*TMS* II.i.2.5). In the case of slavery, custom produces perceived differences between spectators and those observed which obstructs the sympathy required for moral evaluation.

Smith appeals to education and conscience as a means of overcoming perceived differences advanced by “habit, custom and education” (*WN* I.ii.4). Through moral education, individuals can learn to evaluate and treat others properly by appealing to general moral rules as uniform standards for judgment and behavior. General rules are established over time as an agent identifies patterns in her own judgments and the judgments made by others (*TMS* III.4.7-8). Once the general rules are established, agents begin to act according to these moral principles rather than their sentiments, which allows agents to evaluate and treat others the same way—even those with whom they don’t easily sympathize. This becomes important for eliminating oppression.

¹² Here I follow Weinstein (2006).

Agents can also evaluate their own sentiments and behavior. By assessing whether external spectators will approve of their actions, agents come to judge their own behavior by imagining what an internal impartial spectator would think if aware of the motives behind the observable action. Smith explains,

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view (*TMS III.1.6*).

The impartial spectator constitutes conscience. Conscience, for Smith, must be disinterested and impartial in order for an agent to correctly evaluate her own behavior and guide proper action. One must use imagination to enter into the point of view of a spectator and “examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it” (*TMS III.i.3*).

Referencing David Hume’s mirror analogy,¹³ Smith explains how individuals develop the ability to evaluate their own actions impartially. When an individual enters society,

...he is immediately provided with the mirror which...is placed in the countenance and behavior of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind (*TMS III.i.3*).

¹³ In *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume writes that “the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each other’s emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees” (*Treatise 2.2.5.21*).

Individuals in society are constantly engaged in actor-spectator relationships. As an actor, one observes how she is evaluated by others and holds herself accountable to their judgments, aiming to act in a way that warrants their approval (*TMS* III.i.3; I.i.5.3-4). She becomes capable of viewing herself as others view her and gains the ability to self-assess through imagination by becoming an impartial, well-informed spectator of her own conduct.

Smith observes that a person is “much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself than in what concerns any other man” (*TMS* II.ii.2.1). This natural propensity toward self-interest often corrupts moral judgment and obstructs moral action because individuals tend to favor their own interests when determining how to act. For this reason,

Before we can make any proper comparison of those opposite interests, we must change our position. We must view them, neither from our own place nor yet from his, neither with our own eyes nor yet with his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has no particular connexion with either, and who judges with impartiality between us (*TMS* III.3.3).

In order to determine the appropriate way to act, individuals must, through imagination, distance themselves from their self-interested perspective and consider the interests of others. When an individual sets aside her partial view of the situation, she can apply “those general rules of conduct” which are “of great use in correcting the misrepresentations of self-love concerning what is fit and proper to be done in our particular situation” (*TMS* III.4.12).

Impartiality and Moral Equality

The importance that Smith places on impartiality in conscience and moral judgment reveals his commitment to moral equality. Smith says that the purpose of adopting an impartial perspective is “to learn the real littleness of ourselves” (*TMS* II.3.4).¹⁴ Here, Smith means that through the impartial spectator, individuals can temper their self-interested sentiments and recognize that the interests of others are equal to their own. Moral equality here refers to the view that all human beings have equal moral worth, and so deserve equal consideration from others.

Indeed, for Smith, determining proper action requires that individuals give others equal consideration. Smith writes,

When we are always so much more deeply affected by whatever concerns ourselves, than by whatever concerns other men...reason, principle, conscience...calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it (*TMS* III.3.4).

By “multitude” Smith means the community of individuals, that we might now call the moral community. Stephen Darwall uses this language, arguing that, implicit in Smith’s “framework of judgments” is “a moral community among independent equal persons” (Darwall 2002, 132). As equals in the moral community, Smith recognizes that individuals must hold one another mutually accountable. In a detailed footnote Smith writes,

A moral being is an accountable being...accountable being, as the word expresses, is a being that must give an account of its actions to some other, and that consequently must regulate them according to the good-liking of this other. Man is accountable...to his fellow creatures...he must necessarily conceive himself as accountable to his fellow creatures (*TMS* III.i.3[3]).¹⁵

¹⁴ Fleischacker notes that for Smith, “all people ought to be regarded as equal” and “the moral point of view requires us to see all human beings as equal” (Fleischacker 1999, 79).

¹⁵ In this footnote Smith also argues that individuals are “principally accountable to God,” but that they must hold themselves as accountable to one another in order to be considered a moral being (*TMS* III.i.3[3]).

This passage reveals that Smith recognizes each person as having equal standing as one among mutually accountable “moral beings.” A moral being, for Smith, seems to be an individual capable of conducting assessments of oneself and others through imagination and sympathy. Assuming an impartial perspective entails recognizing that everyone is “but one of the multitude” with equal moral standing.

The equal moral standing of individuals is based on their inherent moral worth.¹⁶ Smith’s commitment to the equal standing of individuals based on their inherent worth is implicit in his theory of moral judgment¹⁷ and also prominently displayed in his discussion of justice and resentment. Smith’s account of moral judgment involves conferring a particular status to others by holding oneself accountable to them. His recognition of individuals’ authority signifies an underlying commitment to equal moral worth. When actors adjust their sentiments and conduct to “that pitch” which spectators can approve of they are recognizing the authority of others as spectators and judges.

Likewise, when agents deliberate about how to act morally, they assign authority to the viewpoints of spectators. Agents must consult the impartial spectator to determine what behavior is morally permissible. As seen, the impartial spectator is formed as individuals gain a sense of how others assess their sentiments and conduct through actor-spectator interactions. Smith insists that acting in a way that the impartial spectator will approve of requires that the agent consider the interests of others in her practical deliberations (*TMS* II.ii.2.1). Considering the interests of others is not a matter of mere utility or concern for preserving society. According to Smith, “regard for the individual” does not “arise from

¹⁶ For further reading on equal dignity, or inherent worth, in Smith see Darwall (2002), especially pages 132-133; and Rothschild (2001).

¹⁷ Following Debes (forthcoming).

our regard for the multitude” or “concern for the general interest of society” (*TMS* II.ii.3.10). Rather, agents show concern for every individual “merely because he is our fellow-creature” (*TMS* II.ii.3.10). Thus, contained within Smith’s account of moral judgment and conscience is a notion of the inherent value of individuals.

Smith’s commitment to equal standing based on moral worth is further demonstrated by his discussion of justice. According to Smith, the proper sentimental response to acts of injustice is resentment. Acts that warrant resentment are those that cause harm to individuals. To determine whether an act is just, the spectator must assess whether the receiver of the action is justified in feeling resentment toward the actor; that is to say, whether an impartial spectator would sympathize with the resentment. For example, recall Smith’s claim that slaves are justified in their contempt for those who oppress them. To declare that the slaves properly resent their owners is to adopt their resentment and disapprove of the slave-owners.

According to Smith, individuals correctly feel resentment toward those who disregard their status as equals. He writes,

What chiefly enrages us against the man who injures or insults us, is the little account which he seems to make of us, the unreasonable preference which he gives to himself above us, and that absurd self-love, by which he seems to imagine, that other people may be sacrificed at any time, to his conveniency or his humour (*TMS* II.iii.1.5).

The resentment that arises when one treats another as inferior “is chiefly intent upon” making the offender realize that “the person whom he injured did not deserve to be treated in this manner” and aims “to bring him back to a more just sense of *what is due* to other people, to make him sensible of what he *owes* us” (*TMS* II.iii.1.5, my emphasis). This passage shows that, in holding others accountable for acts of injustice, individuals rightly

seek to be recognized and treated as equals—this is what is *owed* in virtue of their status as “fellow-creatures.”

As illustrated by his account of moral judgment and the previous example, Smith believes that individuals have equal moral worth, and thus ought to be respected by others. The term ‘respect,’ as Smith uses it, seems to denote an attitude of regard or reverence toward individuals or rules (*TMS* I.ii.4.2; I.iii.3.5; III.4.10-11). Smith sometimes uses ‘respect’ interchangeably with ‘esteem’ or ‘admiration,’ but often uses ‘respect’ in conjunction with ‘esteem’ or ‘admiration,’ suggesting a distinction between the two. Smith likens respect for individuals to respect for rules of justice and general rules of morality, “respect for you must always impose a very useful restraint upon their conduct; and respect for them may frequently impose no useless restraints upon your own” (*TMS* VI.ii.I.10). Like recognition of a rule, recognition of one’s equal standing among others imposes an attitude of regard that necessarily restrains one’s conduct.

Individuals can claim respect from others in virtue of their equal moral worth. Darwall terms this “recognition respect” (Darwall 2010, 108). Even though Smith often conflates respect and esteem, Darwall suggests contrasting recognition respect with appraisal respect, or moral esteem—the respect earned by merit of character and conduct. Darwall explains the distinction,

We can simultaneously believe that all persons are equally entitled to respect simply by virtue of being persons *and* that whether a person deserves respect, and how much respect he deserves, depends on how he conducts himself as a person (Darwall 2010,108 his emphasis).

Individuals are *entitled to*, and thus can claim, equal respect based on recognition of their equal standing---individuals can *earn* moral esteem by virtue of character and conduct. Both

types of respect are found in Smith's theory, as I will explain further below. Failure to recognize this distinction underlies common objections to viewing Smith as an egalitarian.

Social Rank and Moral Esteem

Smith argues for equality of moral worth as a normative principle requiring that all individuals be regarded as equals, whereas social rank is just a matter of what members of society do, in fact, admire.¹⁸ Smith notes that there are better and worse—understood as more and less appealing—positions that one can hold in society. The higher ranked social positions are sought after because individuals naturally wish to receive sympathy from others in society and earn their praise. Smith observes that the desire to be praised and worthy of praise is inherent in human nature (*TMS* III.2.1).¹⁹ He explains that, “the love of praise is the desire of obtaining the favourable sentiments of our brethren. The love of praiseworthiness is the desire of rendering ourselves the proper objects of those sentiments” (*TMS* III.2.25). Praiseworthy behavior, whether or not praise is actually awarded, warrants moral esteem. And, Smith seems to think that a person's social status ought to be based on his or her moral esteem. However, “upon coming into the world, we soon find that wisdom and virtue are by no means the sole objects of respect; nor vice and folly, of contempt” (*TMS* I.iii.3.2). While Smith thinks that virtue of character and conduct are the only praiseworthy objects, he observes that wealth and power are often awarded praise (*TMS* I.iii.3.2).

¹⁸ See Darwall (2010), especially page 110.

¹⁹ Smith also says, “He desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is however, the natural and proper object of praise (*TMS* III.2.1).

Smith explains that members of society tend to praise and admire the wealthy and powerful because “mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than with our sorrow...it is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches and avoid poverty” (*TMS* I.iii.2.1). According to Smith, what individuals are after in pursuing wealth is esteem. However, the ambitious often have a distorted sense of what it means to be praiseworthy and conflate praiseworthiness with actual praise. Smith observes that “wealth and greatness are often regarded with the respect²⁰ and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue” and “contempt, of which vice and folly are the only proper objects, is often most unjustly bestowed upon poverty and weakness” (*TMS* I.iii.3.2).

For Smith, social hierarchy in a society does not represent a natural hierarchical order in which some are morally justified in treating others poorly; it is only natural in the sense that individuals are naturally “disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than with our sorrow” (*TMS* I.iii.2.1). Since the wealthy appear happier²¹ than those struggling with poverty, individuals more readily sympathize with the wealthy. Social status is a matter of mere social fact because it depends on what members of society *as a matter of fact* admire, not what they ought to admire.

Smith perceives this tendency toward admiring wealth as both beneficial to society and highly problematic. He acknowledges that admiring wealth has some beneficial

²⁰ In this context Smith is using “respect” and “esteem” interchangeably. This is clear because he is discussing “respect and admiration” for “wisdom and virtue,” which must be earned by cultivating these traits.

²¹ Smith says that “the rich man glories in his riches, because...mankind are disposed to go along with him in all those agreeable emotions which the advantages of his situation so readily inspire him” (*TMS* I.iii.2.1).

consequences, in that it promotes ambition, leading to progress that benefits everyone,²² but he also criticizes this tendency because it distorts the moral sentiments and causes people to falsely identify social status as indicative of moral worth (*TMS* I.iii.3.1). This impedes the ability of spectators to enter into an impartial perspective when evaluating, and determining proper action toward, those who occupy different social positions. This often results in unequal social relationships that empower some members of society to treat others unjustly, as revealed by attitudes toward the poor.

Smith observes that the poor are often wrongly perceived as naturally inferior, in terms of moral worth, to others in society and so do not receive equal recognition respect. For this reason, members of society are unable to sympathize with the poor. As a result, the poor²³ are not equally capable of creating the social relationships necessary to participate in society and, thus, do not have the opportunity to earn moral esteem or improve their own condition (*TMS* I.iii.2.4). Individuals falsely identify the wealthy as having a higher moral standing, worthy of sympathy and praise. Smith identifies this tendency as “the most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” because it prevents individuals from claiming recognition respect on the basis of their equal moral worth and holding one another accountable as equal members in the moral community.

Recall that relational egalitarians are concerned about unequal social conditions insofar as they facilitate relationships that empower some to oppress others. This concern drives Smith’s criticism of social hierarchy. He recognizes, though, that material inequality both stimulates and is a natural consequence of the commercial system that benefits all

²² For Smith, the desire for admiration can lead to ambition, which aids economic progress (*TMS* I.iii.3.1).

²³ This can be extended to other marginalized groups as well. See Weinstein (2006).

members of society. So rather than eliminate material inequalities, he advocates better education and a sort of economic sufficiency to encourage members of society to view one another as having equal value despite material differences. Smith understands that social conditions often hinder the recognition of equal worth and proper moral esteem, and he seeks to create conditions which foster equality in matters that bear on social relationships and freedom for individuals.

Smith's Political View

Equality as a Social Relationship

Smith is a relational egalitarian in that he does not regard inequality as such problematic. Rather, inequality is of moral concern insofar as it obstructs individuals' equal standing, freedom, and opportunities. As noted, Smith endorses equality of moral worth as a normative principle. Importantly, Smith's conception of moral equality does not assume that people are equal in virtue or intelligence, or entail that they be made equal in terms of wealth, rank, or material goods. He thinks that by virtue of their equal moral worth, individuals deserve to stand in social relations that allow them to participate freely in society and the economy. In order to be capable of participating, individuals must be recognized and treated as moral equals who deserve equal consideration and respect.

It is clear that Smith views equality as a social relationship because he endorses market and political principles that enact equal respect and facilitate sympathy.²⁴ For Smith, sympathy is the mechanism that enables social relationships. The inability to sympathize with others obstructs individual liberty and perpetuates oppression, as seen in Smith's

²⁴ See Muller (1993), Weinstein (2006), Darwall (2010)

extensive discussion of the poor and his reference to slavery. To enable sympathy among members of society that an agent doesn't easily sympathize with, Smith advocates measures that aid equal recognition by ensuring that all members of society have enough in terms of material goods and resources²⁵ to lead dignified lives. This way, individuals have the freedom to enter into trade agreements and have the ability to better their own condition.²⁶ Smith's commitment to equality as a social relationship can be seen in his efforts to eliminate socially constructed oppression.

Eliminating Oppression

In designing a decent society,²⁷ Smith seeks to eliminate oppression in order to secure conditions of freedom. As Rothschild explains, "Freedom, for Smith, is not being interfered with by others...Interference, or oppression, is itself an extraordinarily extensive notion; Smith at times talks of inequality as a form of oppression" (Rothschild 2001, 71).²⁸ Oppression, for Smith, consists of relationships among individuals in society in which the liberty of one is obstructed by another (Rothschild 2001, 27). This might happen when some members of society are excluded from the economy or civil society because they are viewed as morally inferior, as is the case for slaves and, often, the poor. This is why, according to Rothschild, Smith recognizes that "The most oppressive of all institutions...are the incorporations and communities of civil society" (Rothschild 2001, 33). Smith believes

²⁵ By "resources," I am referring to Smith's strong support of public education and the other public services he argues should be made available to citizens by the state (WN V.i.f.54; WN V.i.f.55).

²⁶ Smith says that individuals naturally aspire to improve their own condition and better themselves (TMS I.iii.2.1).

²⁷ See Muller (1993) 63-164

²⁸ Here Rothschild is referring to Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, pg 564

that the state must place some restrictions on citizens in order to promote conditions of freedom by ensuring justice for all individuals.

Smith claims that social and political inequalities are more a result of “custom, habit, and education” than actual intrinsic differences (*WN* I.ii.6). There are inherent human differences, but the implications of these differences are amplified by social practices and education. As Jack Russell Weinstein notes, “For Smith, non-physical, racial, gendered, class, and other differences are learned, not biologically determined” (Weinstein 2006, 102). Rather than stemming from fundamental disparities among individuals, oppression arises from custom and cultural diversity within a society. Smith writes,

...custom authorizes the widest departure from what is the natural propriety of action...its influence is often much more destructive of good morals, and it is capable of establishing, as lawful and blameless, particular action, which shock the plainest principles of right and wrong (*TMS* V.2.1.6).

Custom influences individuals’ moral judgment and hinders their ability to enter into an impartial perspective and sympathize with others through imagination. Smith uses slavery to demonstrate how custom can lead to oppression and cause injustice. Recall that Smith criticizes slave-owners for mistakenly perceiving their slaves as lesser moral beings than themselves. It is because the slave-owners are blinded by custom that they cannot sympathize with the slaves (*TMS* V.2.12).

Smith appeals to education as a means of overcoming oppression. Through education,²⁹ individuals can learn about others and come to treat them with respect (*TMS*

²⁹ Smith explains that through education, individuals can be impartial in their moral reasoning even when impartiality does not come naturally, “the most vulgar education teaches us to act, upon all important occasions, with some sort of impartiality between ourselves and others... it is the most artificial and refined education only...which can correct the inequalities of our passive feelings (*TMS* III.3.7). He argues in *WN* that public education should be provided, and paid for by the public. (*WN* V.i.f.54). See also *WN* V.i.f.55.

III.3.7). Learning about others facilitates sympathy because it allows access to the experience of others through imagination—which is essential to sympathy. As noted, connecting with others through sympathy enables social relationships. Also, learning the general rules of morality is important for treating others equally when spectators find themselves unable to sympathize with another.³⁰ Smith’s conception of justice also requires treating others equally; this will be addressed in more detail below.

Smith is concerned with removing the appearance of differences that are commonly perceived as morally important so that members of society can recognize the fact that they share a common basic standing. Smith thinks that standing in social relations of equality necessitates economic sufficiency. By economic sufficiency I mean that individuals must have enough in terms of economic assets to meet their physical needs for survival and to have a certain standing relative to other members of their society. Smith describes this in terms of “necessaries.” He writes,

By necessaries I understand, not only the commodities which are necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is not, strictly speaking, a necessary of life...But in present times...a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote the disgraceful degree of poverty (WN, II.iv.11).

Smith argues that because custom highly influences how members of society are viewed, custom must determine what resources are necessary in order for individuals to be respected within their society. Smith finds lacking material necessities degrading³¹ and asserts that it is morally demeaning for individuals to have to depend on the benevolence of

³⁰ Smith says, “even in those cases in which sympathy does not actually take place...the general rules derived from our preceding experience of what our sentiments would commonly correspond with, correct upon this, as upon many other occasions, the impropriety of our present emotions” (*TMS* I.i.3.4).

³¹ This can be seen in his treatment of contemporary China (*WN*, I.viii.24) and ancient Greece (*TMS*, V.i.2.15).

others to obtain the things needed for personal well-being. He endorses an institutional structure for distribution³² that yields economic sufficiency because he recognizes the poor as equal and equally deserving, not inferior to the well-off (*WN*, I.viii.36).³³ Economic sufficiency is central to relational egalitarianism because it aids in the removal of oppression and in doing so, provides individuals with some of the means to their freedom.

Securing Conditions of Freedom

Liberty, for Smith, is freedom from obstruction, both physical and those caused by injustice, and freedom for exchange and professional pursuits. Smith acknowledges that individuals need certain material goods and resources in order to exercise their rights and liberty.³⁴ Liberty, for Smith, isn't merely the absence of obstacles; as Darwall puts it, liberty "includes the intrinsically valuable relation of mutual respect" (Darwall 2002, 130). Here Darwall is referring to Smith's argument that justice requires individuals to give equal consideration to the interests of others and conduct themselves accordingly (*TMS* II.ii.2.1-2). This is important for understanding Smith as a relational egalitarian. Further explicating Smith's view, Darwall notes that for Smith, "In the free air of liberty and independency individuals relate to one another on equal terms, as having dignity as persons who may not

³² Smith endorses taxing luxury items that only the well-off in society can afford so that "the indolence and vanity of the rich is made to contribute in a very easy manner to relief of the poor" (*WN* V.i.d.5). He also argues that, "it is not very unreasonable that the rich should contribute to the publick expence, not only in proportion to their revenue, but something more than in proportion" (*WN* V.ii.e.6).

³³ See Fleischacker 2004, 207-208

³⁴ Weinstein points out that Smith's system provides much of the inspiration for post-Rawlsian capabilities approaches to justice. See Weinstein, "Overlapping Consensus or Marketplace of Religions? Smith and Rawls" forthcoming.

be dealt with in the arbitrary and vexatious ways that would-be superiors typically presume” (Darwall 2002, 130).³⁵

To be free, members of society must be recognized as equals—this is what allows them to engage in exchange and pursue professional and personal goals. And this requires more than non-interference from others. Smith relies on participation in a system of cooperative production, the market, and rules of justice to ensure conditions that facilitate mutual respect and social conditions of equality.

Smith sought to design a commercial society in which, as Jerry Muller puts it, every person “becomes a merchant rather than a slave, retainer, serf, or servant” because through such economic conditions “the relations of direct dependence upon a master which foster servile behavior are replaced by relations of greater personal freedom” (Muller 1993, 72). He argues that a nation’s revenue and stock must be continually growing³⁶ in order for members of society to have enough to support themselves and improve their own condition (WN I.viii.36). Economic growth, coupled with just institutions in a “well-governed society” leads to conditions in which “all are abundantly supplied, and a workman, even of the lowest and poorest order...may enjoy a greater share of the necessaries and conveniences of life” (WN I.intro.4). Smith refers to conditions in which necessary and desirable goods are available to all members of society as “universal opulence” (WN I.i.10). He writes,

It is the great multiplication of the productions...in consequence of the division of labour, which occasions, in a well-governed society, that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people. Every workman has a great quantity

³⁵ Rothschild further explains “Interference with the freedom to buy and to sell and to work is for Smith a form of political oppression...freedom of commerce in the *Wealth of Nations*, is an emancipation from personal, political, and sometimes physical oppression” (Rothschild 2001, 27).

³⁶ As Darwall notes, Smith is committed to the view that goals to increase economic efficiency may be pursued only to the extent that they are consistent with mutual respect for all persons as free and equal (Darwall 2001, 133). Also see Rothschild (2001).

of his own work to dispose of beyond what he himself has occasion for; and every other workman being exactly in the same situation, he is enabled to exchange a great quantity of his own goods for a great quantity...of theirs. He supplies them abundantly with what they have occasion for, and they accommodate him as amply with what he has occasion for, and a general plenty diffuses itself through all the different ranks of the society (WN I.i.10).

Smith's commercial society is a system that creates social interdependence while simultaneously increasing personal freedom.³⁷ He thinks that with economic growth made possible by the division of labor, members of society will have enough goods to trade with one another in order to obtain what they need and create relationships of mutual accountability through market exchange.

For Smith, the division of labor is the means by which goods can be most efficiently produced, which as he observes, will benefit all members of society. He stresses that the division of labor does not reflect a natural hierarchy of roles or abilities (WN V.f.50). Instead, the benefit that this arrangement yields for participants at all levels promotes social mobility and freedom to better one's own condition. Smith is concerned that the division of labor might *appear* to represent a natural hierarchy that will lead to members of society viewing some as inferior to others based on their position. He also worries that dividing labor will inhibit personal growth for laborers who perform monotonous tasks, which may perpetuate the appearance of inferiority (WN V.i.f.50). Smith advocates for public education as a means of facilitating personal edification for laborers and reducing the appearance of natural hierarchy (WN V.i.f.50-54). Much like in the case of social rank, Smith recognizes the efficacy of certain arrangements that may promote oppressive relationships

³⁷ See Muller (1993) 63-76

and stresses the importance of both informal moral learning and formal education to ensure that such conditions do not become oppressive.

The division of labor allows individuals to use their natural talents and abilities to participate in a system of cooperative production. Individuals participating at all levels ought to be appreciated for their role. Smith thinks that all workers should be appropriately compensated and have enough to appear in public without shame, but also endorses patterns of distribution and public services to ensure economic sufficiency (*WN* I.viii.36, V.i.c.iii.1-2). Smith writes, “It is but equity...that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged” (*WN* I.viii.36). This allows them to enter into trade agreements that demonstrate equal respect through mutual accountability (Darwall 2010, 110). Holding one another accountable in trade agreements facilitates sympathy, and by extension equality, by allowing individuals to engage and sympathize with those members of society who are not close in proximity.

In addition to economic sufficiency and economic participation that facilitates social relationships, liberty requires justice. Smith observes that relationships of “authority and subordination” give rise to government, which ought to benefit all members of society (*WN* V.i.b). Smith asserts that an important duty of the state is “that of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member in it, or the duty of establishing an exact administration of justice” (*WN* V.i.b.1). Justice serves to protect individuals from harm; “the violation of justice is injury: it does real and positive hurt to some particular persons, from motives which are naturally disapproved of” (*TMS* II.ii.1.5). Smith says that justice encompasses “everything which his

equals can with propriety force him to do, or which they can punish for not doing” (*TMS* II.ii.1.10).

As discussed, the harm that Smith is concerned with isn’t just physical harm or destruction of property, but the harmful treatment that results from placing one’s interests above the interests of others.³⁸ Smith writes, “When we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment” (*TMS* III.3.4). Smith describes resentment as the appropriate sentimental response to acts of injustice. He says that a “violation of justice” is whatever act is “the proper object of resentment” (*TMS* II.ii.1.5).³⁹ This statement suggests that viewing others as inferior to oneself constitutes an act of injustice. Consider the passage examined above:

What chiefly enrages us against the man who injures or insults us, is the little account which he seems to make of us, the unreasonable preference which he gives to himself above us, and that absurd self-love, by which he seems to imagine, that other people may be sacrificed at any time, to his conveniency or his humour (*TMS* II.iii.1.5).

The unjust harm depicted in this passage consists in treating the victim as less worthy than the agent. And, according to Smith, the rules of justice arise from “the general fellow-feeling which we have with every man merely because he is our fellow-creature” (*TMS* II.ii.3.10) and are meant to “correct the otherwise natural inequality of our sentiments” when a person’s “sense of propriety” cannot (*TMS* III.3.3). Thus, rules of justice are meant to protect individuals from harm, including unfair treatment and oppression.

³⁸ See Fleischacker (2004), 72-79.

³⁹ Smith also says, “Resentment...is the safeguard of justice and the security of innocence” (*TMS* II.ii.1.4). Also, that “The sentiment...which most immediately and directly prompts us to punish, is resentment” (*TMS* II.i.1.2).

Smith asserts that the state must ensure justice and protect individuals against harm in order to secure individual liberty, so that citizens can function equally in society. He writes,

To hurt in any degree the interest of any one order of citizenship for no other purpose but to promote that of some other, is evidently contrary to that justice and equality of treatment which the sovereign owes to all the different orders of his subjects (*WN IV.viii.30*).

The rules of justice express equality for all members of society. By attributing this role to the state Smith is “instating a legal framework that expresses equality of all citizens” (Fleischacker 2004, 74).

Smith contrasts justice with benevolence. Whereas duties of justice are generally negative duties not to do harm, duties of benevolence require acts of “friendship, charity, or generosity” (*TMS II.ii.1.5*). Initially, Smith says that “even the most ordinary degree of kindness or beneficence, cannot, among equals, be extorted by force” (*TMS II.ii.1.7*). Here Smith says that we cannot compel acts of benevolence from one another. This is because while acts of justice are required, but acts of benevolence are simply worthy of moral esteem. However, he says in the very next paragraph that the state may enforce duties of benevolence,

A superior may, indeed, sometimes with universal approbation, oblige those under his jurisdiction to behave in this respect, with a certain degree of propriety to one another. The laws of all civilized nations oblige parents to maintain their children, and children to maintain their parents, and impose upon men many other duties of beneficence. The civil magistrate is entrusted with the power not only of preserving the public peace by restraining injustice, but of promoting the prosperity of the commonwealth...he may prescribe rules, therefore, which not only prohibit mutual injuries among fellow-citizens, but common mutual good offices to a certain degree (*TMS II.ii.1.8*).

Smith is sometimes interpreted as inconsistent because his statements concerning the enforceability of acts of benevolence appear in tension with one another.⁴⁰ However, it seems that in this excerpt when Smith says that “duties of beneficence” can be imposed he means that the state can enforce duties that are commonly perceived as acts of benevolence, because in some cases such acts are more properly understood as acts of justice. According to Smith’s definition, if performing or failure to perform an act causes harm, then it is an act of justice and not benevolence.

It seems that Smith conceives of justice as a concise set of rules that govern society and protect individuals from harm, but also recognizes that a just society may require more than constraints on behavior. Refraining from harm may not consist simply in lack of harmful actions, but in fair and equal treatment. Smith understands that enforcing acts that are generally viewed as acts of benevolence is a delicate task that could threaten “liberty, security, and justice” but warns that failure to enforce them “exposes the commonwealth to many gross disorders and shocking enormities” (*TMS* II.ii.1.8). It is because of the delicacy of enforcing such duties that Smith assigns it to just institutions rather than individuals.

IV. Challenges to Interpreting Smith as a Relational Egalitarian

In this section I consider possible objections to the relational egalitarian interpretation that I’ve proposed. Critics of an egalitarian reading often point to particular passages in Smith’s work that appear to support inequality in society. I argue that these passages cease to conflict with an egalitarian reading once we establish that Smith is not concerned with equality as such, but with relational equality.

⁴⁰ See Fleischacker (2004) 148-152.

Hierarchy: Social Rank and the Division of Labor

Smith offers an account of social rank which seems to suggest that he believes human beings are naturally disposed to form hierarchical groups. At times it seems that Smith supports hierarchical social arrangements. For instance, Smith says “upon this disposition of mankind to go along with all the passions of the rich and powerful, is founded the distinction of ranks, and the order of society” (*TMS* I.iii.2.3). By claiming that the “order of society” rests upon social hierarchy Smith appears to favor such unequal arrangements.

This aspect of Smith’s work presents the most powerful objection to the egalitarian interpretation I’m offering. However, it seems that Smith’s commitment to social hierarchy is often misunderstood. Smith prioritizes the well-being of individuals in society over society as a whole (*TMS* II.ii.3.10). And, while Smith doesn’t argue that all social inequalities ought to be eliminated, he is concerned with eradicating the relationships of oppression and domination which often stem from social hierarchy. In particular, Smith stresses the importance of the equal administration of justice by the sovereign (*WN* IV.viii.30). He also proposes that apprenticeship requirements be abolished and a system of public education be implemented, which he believes will allow the poor to improve their social conditions (*WN* I.x.c.1-6). Because the “master” of any profession can only have one apprentice at a time, and many professions require an apprenticeship, careers are not open to talents and very few are able to access the necessary education to compete professionally (*WN* I.x.c.5). Smith also calls for tax policies in which “the indolence and vanity of the rich is made to contribute in a very easy manner to the relief of the poor” (*WN* V.i.d.5).

Furthermore, recall that Smith recognizes that social rank and the division of labor may lead to oppressive relationships *but* is concerned with avoiding such an outcome while preserving the utility of these social arrangements. Smith criticizes the wealthy and powerful and the tendency of members of society to admire them. Rather than trying to prevent individuals from admiring wealth, Smith argues that individuals ought to recognize that wealth does not make one superior in terms of moral worth to another, or give license to dominate another. He endorses a commercial system that will foster universal opulence and a fair distribution of wealth so that individuals who are worse off can be recognized as having moral standing equal to other members of society. Smith doesn't view social rank or the division of labor as inherently oppressive; instead of abandoning these arrangements that are useful for the economic growth that benefits all members of society Smith seeks to foster conditions that allow for freedom and equal respect within these systems.

Natural Differences

Smith famously proclaims that "the differences between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education" (WN I.ii.4). Fleischacker, and others who interpret Smith as an egalitarian, rely heavily on this passage to support the claim that Smith views all individuals as equal in terms of abilities and talents until they are integrated into society (Fleischacker 2004, 75-77). This claim invites criticism from Raphael

and other critics of an egalitarian interpretation.⁴¹ Raphael takes this to mean that, in order to be an egalitarian one must deny differences in natural endowments among individuals. He responds by arguing that Smith “does not espouse egalitarianism proper” because he acknowledges natural differences among individuals. Raphael says,

[Smith] undoubtedly thinks that social distinctions do not reflect natural, innate, differences of potential talent, but he does not deny the existence of natural differences. In his remarks about the philosopher and the porter, he goes on to say that in their infancy the two were ‘perhaps very much alike’, so that parents and playfellows could not perceive ‘any remarkable difference’ (Raphael 2007, 123).

Raphael is correct to point out that Smith does not perceive individuals as originally identical; but recognizing that there are natural differences between individuals does not conflict with a relational egalitarian view. Recall Anderson’s view of individuals as “equal in all of their diversity” (Anderson 1999, 308).

Smith’s purpose in comparing the philosopher and the porter is to show how natural differences can become more prominent over time and are perpetuated by education and custom. Smith recognizes that individuals are not identical in terms of abilities and talents, but observes that differences in circumstances pervasively influence the developments of talents and abilities, making the appearance of natural differences much more pronounced than they actually are. In particular, social circumstances make it difficult for some individuals to develop their abilities, which promotes the appearance that those who belong to a lower social order are less talented, intelligent, and have lesser capacities for virtue. By comparing a philosopher to a street porter, Smith calls attention to how social standing contributes to this perception of the poor. But his conclusion isn’t that differences

⁴¹ See Jeffrey T. Young and Barry Gordon (1997).

between individuals are absent, just that “the difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of” (*WN* I.ii.4).

Rather than denying them, Smith regards differences in talents and abilities as useful because they allow for an interdependent division of labor. Smith explains that, as individuals enter professions:

The difference of talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at least the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance. But without the disposition to truck, barter, and exchange, every man must have procured to himself every necessary and conveniency of life which he wanted. All must have had the same duties to perform, and the same work to do, and there could have been no such difference of employment as could alone give occasion to any great difference of talents. As it is this disposition which forms that difference of talents, so remarkable among men of different professions, so it is this same disposition which renders that difference useful (*WN* I.ii.4-5).

Smith embraces differences in talent, but warns that such differences should not be taken to indicate moral worth. As discussed, Smith stresses the importance of education to ensure that natural differences don't foster relationships of oppression and domination. This is consistent with a relational egalitarian interpretation of Smith.

Raphael also objects to the claim that Smith views individuals as equal in terms of moral worth, citing the following passage:

That there is a world to come, where exact justice will be done to every man, where every man will be ranked with those who, in the moral and intellectual qualities, are really his equals; where the owner of those humble talents and virtues which, from being depressed by fortune, had, in this life, no opportunity of displaying themselves...will be placed upon a level, and sometimes above those who, in this world, had enjoyed the highest reputation...is a doctrine...that the virtuous man who has the misfortune to doubt of it, cannot possibly avoid wishing...to believe it (*TMS* III.2.33).

Raphael takes Smith to be claiming that individuals are not equal in terms of moral worth. But this passage actually contains a descriptive claim that does not conflict with moral egalitarianism.

Smith explains that at a fundamental level all individuals desire to receive and be proper objects of praise and approval from others (*TMS* III.2.1). Often in society the virtue that renders an individual the proper object of praise is not recognized by others and praise is not awarded. Praise is frequently given to those who do not deserve it, like the wealthy and powerful. Because this is the case, Smith observes that members of society often hope that there will be an afterlife in which their praiseworthiness will be recognized and they will be ranked among their equals in terms of virtue, not moral worth. The above passage is a description of this “life to come” (*TMS* III.2.33). According to Smith, this belief is often what encourages individuals to cultivate a virtuous character even when praise is withheld.

Even if we were to take the above passage as containing the claim that Raphael attributes to it, the wording does not suggest moral inequality if we apply the distinction between moral worth and moral esteem. Smith says that “every man will be ranked with those who, *in moral and intellectual qualities*, are really his equals; where the owner of those humble talents and virtues which, from being depressed by fortune, had, in this life, no opportunity of displaying themselves” (*TMS* III.2.33). This implies that individuals will be ranked in terms of their moral estimability rather than other arbitrary features that tend to be praised by members of society. Smith recognizes that circumstances and fortune, as a matter of fact, have a significant influence on how individuals are perceived by others; he reiterates this throughout his discussions of social rank.

The Purpose of Civil Government

Critics may also point to passages in which Smith's account of the foundation and purposes of civil government appear inegalitarian. In particular, Smith famously writes,

Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all (WN V.i.b.12).

This may seem to suggest that Smith prioritizes the interests of the wealthy and powerful over the impoverished members of society. However, considering this passage in context rather than in isolation suggests otherwise. The purpose of the section that contains this passage is to discuss the proper role of the sovereign in administering justice. Which, as quoted previously, Smith describes as "that of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it, or the duty of establishing an exact administration of justice" (WN V.i.b.1).

Smith defends his endorsement of an equal and fair system of justice by giving a historical account of how civil government came to be. He explains that the need for government emerged in order to protect property (WN V.i.b.12). "Inequality of fortune" led to relationships of "authority and subordination" which laid the groundwork for the models of civil government that Smith criticizes. It is in this context of providing a history of unjust government that the above passage appears.

After explaining that civil government arose in the "second period of society" as a means for the rich to protect their property, Smith argues that this arrangement led to "several very gross abuses" (WN V.i.b.14). For instance, the sovereign was not held accountable and justice was wrongly employed as a source of revenue, leading to unfair

practices. Smith admonishes these systems of government, asserting that the executive branch of the sovereign must be separate from the judicial and rules of justice ought to be applied equally across society. Smith says,

...upon the impartial administration of justice depends the liberty of every individual, the sense which he has of his own security. In order to make every individual feel himself perfectly secure in the possession of every right which belongs to him, it is not only necessary that the judicial should be separated from the executive power, but that it should be rendered as much as possible independent of that power (*WN* V.i.b.25).

Smith's clear endorsement of the equal administration of justice shows that leveraging the above, often misused, passage as an objection to my view would be misguided.

V. Conclusion

I have shown that Smith is committed to moral equality and argued that this commitment provides the foundation for his theory of political economy. Using Anderson's democratic equality as a model I have argued that Smith's political theory is best interpreted as a kind of relational egalitarianism. Like Anderson, Smith aims to design a decent society in which institutions provide individuals with a certain kind of freedom and relational equality. At the core of Smith's political view is justice and liberty. As shown, this means that individuals must be able to participate in society without being oppressed or identified as less worthy of respect based on social status, material goods, or morally irrelevant natural endowments and that they must be able to hold one another mutually accountable. Freedom from oppression and social conditions of freedom are at the heart of relational equality, and I have shown that Smith's fundamental commitment to these principles make him a relational egalitarian. Importantly, this interpretation of Smith

explains how the material inequality and social hierarchy that Smith allows are consistent with an egalitarian political theory. As such, my proposed interpretation alleviates objections to viewing Smith as an egalitarian.

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