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Animating the Public Spirit: Adam Smith on Constitutions, Conscience, and Civic Education

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Civic education is experiencing a renaissance in America. After decades of prioritizing STEM disciplines in standards, curriculum, and testing, Democrats and Republicans are worried about the consequences of having neglected civics. Watershed national events—from Donald Trump's election in 2016, to the George Floyd protests and associated riots in 2020, to the January 6 attack on the Capitol in 2021—have raised serious questions about the stability, unity, and the future of the American constitutional order. Perhaps more importantly, civic leaders have watched as trust in US institutions—from organized religion, to schools, to Congress—have fallen to an all-time net low, prompting Democrats, Republicans, and even bipartisan coalitions to pass bills funding civic education and inaugurating new civics initiatives, at both the K–12 and university levels.[1] Yet while most of our national factions agree that we have neglected the cultivation of citizens, their remedies for our civic maladies differ depending on what they see as the root cause. For many Republicans, the disease is a lack of civic knowledge, particularly of the American Founding, our constitutional form of government, and the foundational principles they see underlying these. As a result, recent civic education initiatives funded by Republicans have tended to

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focus on prescribing historically focused civics courses, particularly of the Founding period, and proscribing content like critical race theory that they see as either inaccurate or as undermining the effi cacy of the constitutional order and its foundational ideas. For many Democrats, our civic disease is often seen as either a lack of civic participation or, more fundamentally, a lack of inculcating the civic dispositions that lead to proper participation.[2] For example, recent Democrat-funded initiatives have tended to promote academic service learning—the application of classroom learning to real-world applications—and action civics, which is learning leading to advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged or oppressed persons. When advocating for changes to content-based curricula, they largely focus on changes to curriculum that highlight past and current injustices (particularly systemic ones), for the sake of historical completeness but also for the motivational (or dispositional) power these injustices evoke in the student. Because of the deep-seated antipathy between these national factions, Republicans frequently perceive "service learning" as a dangerous concept, while Democrats often view "America's founding principles" as a dog-whistle for discrimination. But if the civics renaissance we are witnessing is to be anything more than tweet-deep, it will require thoughtful and sustained deliberation about civic knowledge (especially, constitutional knowledge), civic dispositions (or virtues), and the important relationship between them. As a guide to such deliberations, one important—but currently neglected—resource is the eighteenth-century intellectual luminary Adam Smith and his treatment of constitutional education and the civic virtue of public spiritedness.

Like many of his Scottish Enlightenment contemporaries, Smith believed that virtuous citizens are prerequisite for stable and just government. Among these virtues are "public spirit," or the habitual disposition toward the common good of the nation. Yet according to Smith, the very capitalist societies that adopt the economic principles Smith promotes in *The Wealth of Nations*, particularly economic specialization, face serious difficulties when

it comes to promoting the critical civic virtue of public spiritedness. But Smith offers an important solution for consideration: civic educators can employ both the self-love and selfless virtue (benevolence) of their students to motivate public spiritedness. In particular, educators can build upon citizens' "love of system" by teaching the nation's constitution and laws. Taught in this way, Smith argues, constitutional education can be the educator's most powerful tool in promoting public spiritedness. However, Smith also leaves educators with a caution: when not moderated by the civic virtue resulting from an active conscience, public spirit motivated by self-love can actually lead to factional conflict between citizens and to ambitious leaders who would, if unchecked, overthrow constitutions and refound states to further their selfish ends. Thus, constitutional education is necessary, but not sufficient, in promoting the public spirit; an active conscience and the exercise of other civic virtues are required. In this way, Smith speaks directly to our civic divisions today, demonstrating not only that constitutional knowledge and civic virtues like public spiritedness are both eminently worth seeking but also that civic educators can and ought to see them as mutually reinforcing and even requisite to avoid dangers inherent in capitalist liberal democracies like the United States.

By addressing Smith's recommendations to civic educators, I make two contributions—one primarily public and the other scholarly—to our understanding of Smith. First, I add an additional case study to counteract the obviously erroneous but overwhelmingly persistent public (and too often, scholarly) view of Adam Smith as a dogmatic market capitalist whose contributions to liberal-democratic thought are limited to the realm of economics. As I and some of the other contributors to this volume of the *Political Science Reviewer* demonstrate, Smith was, first and foremost, a moral and cultural theorist. As such, his explanations of capitalism's most central concepts, such as economic specialization, also include an "eyes-wide-open" analysis of their downsides, dangers, and unintended consequences. Second, by addressing a yet-unexplored facet of constitutional education and its relationship to public spirit, I make an important contribution to the

current (and currently scant) literature on Smith and civic education in general, and on "public spirit" and constitutional education in particular. Stephen Macedo of Princeton has extensively analyzed Smith's treatment of civic education in relation to the insufficiency of market forces to produce qualified citizens, but his work has primarily focused on the use of religious institutions as tools for shaping citizens.[3] In a much different but equally relevant vein, Ryan Hanley has explored Smith's treatment of virtue, including virtues that ultimately have serious political consequences, but he too has touched only briefly on the particular virtue of public spiritedness.[4] Similar to Hanley, but much more briefly, Amartya Sen has reflected on the virtue of prudence in Smith but does not address public spiritedness.[5] Other treatments of Smith on public spiritedness are few and even more taciturn or they misunderstand Smith entirely.[6] More specifically, the subject of constitutional education and its relationship to public spiritedness remains a wholly unexplored, though crucially important, territory in the Smith literature.

Why Adam Smith?

Among the philosophers who stand astride the dawning of our modern world and thus helped shape its foundations, Adam Smith is well positioned to help us explore the relationship between civic (particularly, constitutional) knowledge and civic virtues. This is particularly evident when compared briefly with several of his canonical early modern contemporaries. For example, according to Thomas Hobbes, civic knowledge and civic virtues are each limited to one dimension: future subjects know the law of nature, an absolute law of self-preservation, which mandates that they leave the state of nature and seek the security afforded by a powerful sovereign. This results in one, if all-consuming, civic virtue: obedience to the sovereign. Similarly, knowing the content of human-made law, as dictated by the sovereign, matters for the purpose of obedience, but for little more: in fact, knowing too much could lead to the exercise of independent moral judgment, which Hobbes explicitly decries as subversive to the sovereign and its concomitant

political stability.[7] For John Locke, civic knowledge, particularly an understanding of the proper origins of government and the natural rights those origins make manifest, would be necessary for subjects and citizens alike. But his discussions of civic virtues are limited to the largely negative injunction of the law of nature to not violate the natural rights of others.[8] While more substantive on the subject of civic responsibilities than Hobbes, Locke too lacks a positive theory of civic virtues to guide us.[9]

Lest one think the moderns had set their sights too low and have thus removed virtue from the philosophical menu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau clearly possesses both a theory of civic knowledge and of citizen virtues. In terms of civic knowledge, citizens in Rousseau's idealized polity must understand the social contract and his ideal citizen, Emile, is required to study the laws of his country.[10] Likewise, the citizens of the social contract and Emile are both taught the virtues necessary for republican citizenship, virtues that, at least in Emile's case, are formulated so as to accord with, or at least not violate, the natural virtues otherwise corrupted by civilizational decadence. Yet Smith will prove a better candidate for our purposes than Rousseau and thinkers like him. This is because Rousseau rejects much of the modern world and its virtues as inherently corrupt and corrupting, whereas Smith, seen as the "father" of much of the modern world, strives to work within it, noting its strengths and alerting us to its dangers and pitfalls, as explored in this essay. Smith's approach will thus be less all-encompassing than Rousseau's, but it will also be more nuanced and therefore more applicable. Likewise, Smith's constitutional thought assumes the need to sustain the current political order, whereas Rousseau's thought necessarily assumes the necessity of revolution to effectuate the social contract, a temptation Smith explicitly warns us against.[11] For all these reasons, Smith will prove the surer guide.

What Is Public Spirit?

For Smith, the goal of civic educators is to promote "public spirit." But before we turn to promoting it, we need to understand what

public spirit is, why it matters, and what motivates it. Smith does not provide a straightforward definition of public spirit. Rather, he treats it as something commonsensical, a virtue that every thoughtful person should know and regard. Yet despite the assumed familiarity with the concept, Smith's account of public spirit is nuanced, probing, and even counterintuitive. Thus, though Smith may begin from the common understanding, he quickly complicates matters, making a working definition all the more important.

If we, like Smith, are to begin with the common understanding of public spirit, we will find no better beginning than the celebrated Dr. Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, published just four years before Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Johnson first defines "publick" as "[b]elonging to a state or nation; not private," which he illustrates with a passage from Swift: "Have we not able counsellors, hourly watching over the publick weal?"[12] Building on the theme of Swift's "publick weal," Johnson provides a further definition that points to not just the political nature of "publick" but to a notion denoting something relating to the good of all: thus, he further defines "publick" as "[r]egarding not private interest, but the good of the community." Moving to *spirit*, we find among Johnson's nineteen entries, a cluster of definitions related to one's state of mind. Thus *spirit* can be a "Temper" or "habitual disposition of mind" or "vehemence of mind," "vigour of mind," or "turn of mind." Putting Johnson's definitions together, the common understanding of public spirit would be something like "the habitual disposition of mind toward the common good of the state or nation." This definition fits well as the common definition Smith simply assumes.

For Smith, public spirit is a kind of virtue. He lists it, along with other virtues like humanity, justice, and generosity, as a quality "most useful to others."[13] Yet unlike those other virtues, the "public" in public spirit denotes a particular context: the nation, state, or public sphere. As such, it raises the question famously posed by Aristotle in his *Politics*, of whether a good man and a good citizen are, or could be, the same thing.[14] To properly address this question, we must first understand what Smith means by virtue

generally and then explore public spirit, specifically, as a virtue. We can then address the compatibility of public spirit and virtue generally, which will also help address the question of why public spirit matters to Smith.

"Virtue is excellence," Smith says, particularly moral excellence.[15] In defining it thus, Smith is pointing back to virtue's Latin root, *viru*, which denotes "moral strength" or simply "excellence."[16] As a manifestation of excellence, virtue means more than simply correct action. It implies both just motives and moral excellence above the mean. In terms of motive, the "sentiment . . . of the heart from which any action proceeds" is the factor upon which "its whole virtue and vice must ultimately depend."[17] In terms of moral excellence, virtue is different, for example, from propriety. To Smith, propriety includes those things that are right and proper, things that everyone must necessarily approve but that are sufficiently common or vulgar enough to be unexceptionable. By way of example, Smith notes that "to eat when we are hungry, is certainly, upon ordinary occasions, perfectly right and proper, and cannot miss being approved of as such by every body. Nothing, however, could be more absurd than to say it was virtuous."[18] Virtue, on the other hand, "is excellence, something uncommonly great and beautiful, which rises far above what is vulgar and ordinary."[19]

Virtue as moral excellence occurs when human beings choose to act in accordance with the best of their natural sentiments and evaluate their choices through the light of conscience, or what Smith has famously termed the "impartial spectator." But to understand public spirit as a virtue, we must first understand the foundations of Smith's moral psychology and epistemology, including the role conscience or the "impartial spectator" plays in ethical decision-making.

It is significant that the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, who meticulously catalogues how the pursuit of self-interest can lead to public benefits, would begin his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* thus: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he

derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it."[20] We uncover the root of our regard for others, argues Smith, in the phenomenon of sympathy: witnessing another's pain is painful to me; another's joy, barring some interceding factor, brings a smile to my face.

This natural or instinctual phenomenon of sympathy results from our epistemological capacity as human beings. We cannot, Smith argues, "have immediate experience of what other men feel": their experiences of pain or loss, for example, are jailed within the confines of their own mind and body: I cannot experience them, because I am not them.[21] Actual human experience, then, is wholly subjective, bound within the subject and inaccessible to others. By itself, this concept would mean a deep and incredible alienation of individuals from the experiences of others and would make human relations, including public morality, a highly nihilistic affair.

Yet for Smith, this is not the case. In its beneficence, nature has endowed human beings with the powerful, singular faculty of imagination. This faculty gives us the capability of hypothetical thought, of being able to imagine ourselves doing, seeing, or feeling something that, at present, we do not. When we feel compassion for others, it does not result from the living, tangible experience of my own senses but through the transporting power of imagination as I conjure up what I must experience were I to walk in another's shoes. Thus, argues Smith, "the compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he were reduced to the same unhappy situation, and, what perhaps is impossible, were at the same time able to regard it with his present reason and judgment."[22] In this way, through imagination, we experience sympathy and overcome, if imperfectly, the reality of subjective human experience.

This thus leads us to a crucial point: unlike some of his Early Modern contemporaries like Bernard de Mandeville and Thomas Hobbes, and contrary to the Adam-Smith-arch-capitalist stereotype many utilize today, Adam Smith does not see human beings as essentially selfish beings. What we are, according to Smith, are

wholly *self-referential* beings. Because our epistemic capacities are limited to our own senses and faculties, we must, of necessity, use ourselves as the measuring rod against which we judge the world: "Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them."[23] However, because of our capacity for imagination and thus for sympathy, we have the ability to sympathize with the sufferings and joys of others.

Smith then goes one step further: we not only have the capacity for sympathy but are hardwired for it. This natural or instinctive inclination toward sympathy is also Smith's response to his fellow philosophers "who are fond of deducing all our sentiments from certain refinements of self-love," making sympathy, at its core, a selfish enterprise. Smith counters his contemporaries like Hobbes and Mandeville by noting the instinctual, automatic experience of sympathy: "both the pleasure and the pain" we experience at the suffering or joy of others "are always felt so instantaneously, and often upon such frivolous occasions, that it seems evident that neither of them can be derived from any such self-interested consideration."[24] The natural, instinctual, instantaneous experience of sympathy leaves no room for selfish calculations of self-benefit. Thus, he argues, we are by nature both self-referential and sympathetic beings. This explains the expanse of human moral possibilities, from selfish to benevolent, as well as the complexity of human epistemology, which, though bogged down in the individuality of the self, is still capable of approximating the experience of others.

Of the experience of mutual sympathy, where both persons sympathize with the sentiments of the other, "nothing pleases us more," says Smith.[25] Because we deeply enjoy the feeling of mutual sympathy, we are also hardwired to care about what others think of us. "The chief part of human happiness," Smith declares, "arises from the consciousness of being loved."[26] We have a natural desire "of being approved," of experiencing mutual sympathy with others.[27]

Yet when it comes to judging the justness of our own actions, we fi nd ourselves in a seemingly impossible position: surely, we will always agree with our own sentiments and will thus be horrible judges of our own cause. If we are to be able to scrutinize the justness of our own actions, it can occur only if we employ the same faculty that enables us to sympathize with others: imagination. In order to evaluate the justness of our own actions, we have to "remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavor to view them as at a certain distance from us."[28] We attempt to view our actions from the perspective of a "fair and impartial spectator."

This naturally leads to the question, Where do we get our standard by which our "impartial spectator" measures our actions? From where do we procure the "mirror" that can accurately present the image of our actions for our impartial view?[29] According to Smith, our perception of the opinions of others constitutes the mirror in which we can view ourselves. Were a person never to have lived in society, Smith posits, he would be incapable of such a self-analysis. But "bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before."[30] But living in society, I naturally take a hypothetical walk in what I imagine to be the opinions of others. "This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct."[31]

Smith's fi nal and most crucial observation is that our imaginations have the capacity to take the mirror a step further to analyze not only what we believe others would think but also what we believe others *ought* to think, or would have thought had they been acting impartially themselves. In other words, we can consider what others would think were they also employing their imaginations to think impartially. In this way, nature has endowed man "not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of; or what he himself approves of in other men."[32] Were we to care solely about others' perceptions, we would care only about being perceived as virtuous. But because we are capable of this fi nal, imaginative level of

abstraction, we can also care about the "real love of virtue, and the real abhorrence of evil."

Choosing to follow the dictates of the impartial spectator constitutes virtue because it requires the sacrifi ce of our current desires, including, in many cases, our deep-seated need to feel loved. This sacrifi ce is what makes our actions virtuous: it contains both the proper motive—seeking not just praise but also praiseworthiness—and the proper end: what we believe an impartial spectator would consider right. This sacrifi cial moral excellence constitutes virtue and is the explanation to the central question of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: when we are so "deeply affected by whatever concerns ourselves," what is it that "prompts the generous, upon all occasions, and the mean upon many, to sacrifice their own interests to the greater interests of others?" For Smith, the answer is "conscience": "It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct."[33] For Smith, virtue means acting according to conscience, despite our strong desire or natural inclination to the contrary. Acting according to conscience by consulting the impartial spectator can, through constant effort, become a habit.[34] When it does, this constitutes virtue for human beings.

Public spirit is a virtue because it requires moving beyond our deep affection for that which concerns ourselves, instead considering, through the eyes of a spectator, the common good of the state or nation. The young soldier who possesses public spirit willingly dies for his country, but not because the addition of more territory will benefit him personally: "To him his own life is of infinitely more value than the conquest of a whole kingdom for the state which he serves."[35] When the virtuous soldier compares his own life with the good of the nation, "he does not view them in the light in which they naturally appear to himself, but in that in which they appear to the nation he fi ghts for." Thus, the nation becomes his conscience, and when it does, "he immediately feels that he cannot be too prodigal of his blood, if by shedding it he can promote so valuable a purpose." Smith concludes, "In thus thwarting . . . the

strongest of all natural propensities, consists the heroism of his conduct."

Public Spirit as a Political Virtue (and Why It Matters)

Yet while none will deny the heroism of the soldiers' actions, a careful observer will immediately be struck by two things: first, as I have already noted, public spirit is unlike the other virtues in that "public" denotes a particular context in which that virtue is to be exercised. Public spirit is not simply the habitual disposition of mind toward others' good; it is the habitual disposition of mind toward the common good *of the state or nation*. Public good is, then, a political virtue, one particular to the public sphere. Second, Smith's conception of conscience occurs when the individual views her own actions in light of what others would think were they also employing their imaginations to think impartially; put another way, the individual asks herself what she thinks is actually just, right, and virtuous, uncolored by her own interests and desires. But that is not what Smith says regarding public spirit. Recall the example of the virtuous young soldier: he weighs his own life against the good of the state according to how "they appear[s] to the nation he fights for."[36] The spectator is not, as in the case of conscience, the impartial spectator but the nation. This spectator, then, is certainly not impartial. In the level of our imaginative abstraction, the virtuous soldier pauses one stop short of the final ethical station.

In making this observation, Smith leaves several important points unanswered. First, he never states what constitutes the national spectator. By "nation," does he mean the opinions of its statesmen, or his fellow citizens, or the national *zeitgeist*? Given that the national spectator is a creation of the individual's imagination, we can infer the status of "nation" may differ depending on the individual's conception of "nation" and is therefore, subjective, not objective. Relatedly, Smith does not state whether the views of the national spectator constitute (a) what is actually in the nation's best interest or (b) what the nation, however that is defined, thinks is in its best interest. This ambiguity is simply one iteration of a problem throughout Smith's account of conscience: in Smith's

account of human moral psychology and epistemology, individuals have no external standard by which the subjective conscience can be compared, no scholastic *synderesis* to accompany *consciencia*. Yet Smith himself, on a variety of occasions, uses normative "nature" as a measuring rod, much as Aristotle would. Why the philosopher Smith has access to the natural standard and the average reasoner does not is never explained.

Third and most important is that Smith does not clearly define whether the individual's perception of the national spectator is what the individual believes the nation actually thinks (e.g., what a national poll would say) or, as in the case of the impartial spectator, what the nation *would think* were it to reason impartially. If the latter, then there would seem to be little difference between the national spectator and the truly impartial spectator. Yet were this the case, it would seem redundant to reference the nation at all. If the former, then the dictates of the national spectator could, in many cases, seriously conflict with the proper dictates of conscience. On the whole, the context of Smith's comment seems to suggest that the judgment of the national spectator is what most benefits the nation, not what is universally right or just. In the case of the virtuous soldier, the national spectator thinks "the success of the war is of the highest importance—the life of a private person of scarce any consequence."[37]

This points to the same problem raised long ago by Aristotle in Book III of the *Politics*. The good citizen, according to Aristotle, serves a particular function within the constitutional order: a good soldier obeys orders, a good general issues orders.[38] Because each plays a different role, the virtuous (excellent) soldier is not the same as the virtuous (excellent) leader, and thus both of them cannot be the same as the virtuous man. Similarly, there are different kinds of constitutions, and "the virtue of the citizen must therefore be relative to the constitution of which he is a member." If, then, there are many different constitutions, "it is evident that there is not one single virtue of the good citizen." Returning to Smith's virtuous soldier, if he consults the national spectator, he willingly dies for his country. Yet if another soldier, on the enemy's

side, does the same, he or she will also die willingly. Both soldiers will have acted virtuously and, paradoxically (or impossibly), against the "virtuous" interests of each other.

Smith is not unaware of the problem. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, his chapter titled "Of the Infl uence and Authority of Conscience" acknowledges the problem directly. Among nations, only neutral ones can be "indifferent and impartial spectators"; but on the international stage, they are relegated to the sidelines.[39] "When two nations are at variance," they little regard the interests of each other. On the contrary, opposing the opposite side, regardless of what conscience might dictate, becomes a "virtue" that covers all other vices. During war, an individual's "whole ambition is to obtain the approbation of his own fellow-citizens; and as they are all animated by the same hostile passions which animate himself, he can never please them so much as by enraging and offending their enemies." Thus, Smith concludes that in confl icts between nations, "the partial spectator is at hand: the impartial one at a great distance."

How, then, does Smith reconcile defining public spirit as a virtue, if a contextual one? What did he mean when he lists public spirit, alongside the universal virtues of humanity, justice, and generosity, as a quality "most useful to others?"[40] We fi nd his answer in the naturalness of political community. Nature, or "that wisdom which contrived the system of human affections," Smith posits, "seems to have judged that the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of each individual to that particular portion of it which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and of his understanding."[41] We are naturally directed to care most about what we are best suited to influence, and that is a good thing. If true, this would suggest that despite its problems, the love of one's nation is (perhaps paradoxically) a universally good thing; as such, the habitual interest in the common good of the nation is a virtue and therefore "most useful to others" (or at least, to those within our sphere). Lest we consider this some *deus ex machina*, a glib and easy way out, Smith presents a vigorous argument for the importance of proximity in the practice of virtue.

In his discussion of "universal beneficence," Smith first notes the practical problem with universal ethics in practice. A wise and virtuous person is always "willing that his own private interest should be sacrificed to the public interest," both of his community and of his nation, of which community is merely a part.[42] Likewise, because nations are simply part of the "greater interest of the universe," the virtuous man should be willing to sacrifice for the universal good. However, although there are no natural boundaries to the reach of our goodwill, "our effectual good offices can very seldom be extended to any wider society than that of our own country."[43] So as a practical matter, even though virtuous persons desire the common good of all humankind, their efforts will be limited to their own sphere. But again, this practicality becomes normative: "The administration of the great system of the universe . . . is the business of God, and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension—the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country."[44] Our own country is endeared to us "by nature," "not only by all our selfish, but by all our private benevolent affections."[45] Thus, we are morally obligated to work in the sphere allotted to us.[46] In fact, too much contemplation of the universal good actually becomes a vice if it interferes with the commission for good standing right before us: "The most sublime speculation of the contemplative philosopher can scarce compensate the neglect of the smallest active duty."[47]

For Smith, moral duty requires seeking the good of those within one's own sphere, including the good of oneself, one's family, and one's nation, even if this can result in tension between the good of one's nation and the universal good. Some may call this a contradiction, but in his own defense, Smith would surely note that a similar tension exists throughout ethics: a mother's interest in her own health conflicts with caring for a sick child, the soldier's foreign service conflicts with the well-being of his family. An unlimited commitment to any one sphere can become a vice if misapplied or taken to excess. Smith equally condemns "[t]he mean

principle of national prejudice," which is "often founded upon the noble one of the love of our own country,"[48] as he does a commitment to the universal good at the expense of the particular good: even the all-embracing philosophizing of Marcus Aurelius could not justify his neglecting his empire.[49] In this way, Smith's answer to Aristotle's question of whether the virtuous man and the virtuous citizen are the same, suggesting, in short, that they are, or can be, the same despite the apparent contradictions that may result.

In this sense, Smith disagrees with Aristotle in the fi nal analysis. However, and perhaps ironically, Smith's rationale for his disagreement with Aristotle is oddly Aristotelian. As Samuel Fleischacker has noted, "Smith's way of approaching virtue often resembles Aristotle's," something Smith acknowledged near the end of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.[50] For Smith, virtue rests between a kind of excess or defect of commitment in every sphere. The entire disregard of any one sphere, whether of oneself or humankind, would constitute a failure of right action. A citizen owes a duty to his or her nation, and so under most circumstances, abrogating that duty would be a vice; but national hostility for hostility's sake is also a breach of moral duty, often attributable to the nation's leaders.

We are fi nally prepared to answer the question of why public spirit matters to Smith. Public spirit, or the habitual disposition toward the common good of the nation, not only is good for the nation, which is obvious, but also constitutes an integral part of a virtuous life. Its goodness lies in the fact that like justice, benevolence, and the other virtues Smith lists, public spirit requires us to see beyond our own desires and act according to conscience, all within the sphere of one's own ken. Acting according to conscience is the mainstay of morality, the efficacy of those rules "upon the tolerable observation of which depend the whole security and peace of human society."[51] In another place, Smith asks, "What institution of government could tend so much to promote the happiness of mankind as the general prevalence of wisdom and virtue? All government is but an imperfect remedy for the deficiency of these."[52] Citizens inspired by public spirit perceive their actions in light of the good of the nation and will be willing to

sacrifice their own desires for the benefit of others—a clear manifestation of moral excellence.

While Smith believes public spirit is universally important, it is particularly so in modern, capitalist societies. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith points to the dark side of economic specialization: a decreased capacity for public spiritedness. "The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations," Smith observes, "has no occasion to exert his understanding." [53]As a result, he "naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become." This incapacitative effect of economic specialization has a serious impact on the public spirit and on the welfare of the nation as a result. The highly specialized citizen is largely incapable of public spirit: "His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues." Of "the great and extensive interests of his country," Smith concludes, "he is altogether incapable of judging; and unless very particular pains have been taken to render him otherwise, he is equally incapable of defending his country in war." Smith concludes that concerted effort toward public education generally, and civic education in particular, are necessary to counter the detrimental effects of economic specialization and thus promote public spiritedness.

Public Spirit and Civic Education

Now that we understand what public spirit is and why it matters, we can turn to the important question of what motivates public spirit and how the civic educator can promote it. We have already seen that for Smith, human motivation is multifaceted and complex. We are strongly inclined toward that which benefits ourselves, simultaneously being hardwired for mutual sympathy with others. Although perhaps requiring more effort, we also have the capacity for moral conscience through the operation of our imagination in conjuring up the impartial spectator.

Part of this motivational complexity is that self-interest is not necessarily or automatically opposed to virtue. On the contrary,

some degree of self-interest or ambition is often required for our respect. For example, we have little patience for a prince who will not defend his province, nor for a gentleman who will not seek to improve his estate, nor for a member of parliament who shows no interest in working for reelection.[54] "Ambition," says Smith, is "a passion which, when it keeps within the bounds of prudence and justice, is always admired in the world."[55] As before, what matters is that ambition not be defective, nor taken to excess. Similarly, in his discussion of the defects of Mandeville's moral philosophy, Smith acknowledges that "self-love may frequently be a virtuous motive of action." To Smith, as we have already discussed, virtuous action is a combination of the right motive and the proper end. "The desire of doing what is honourable and noble, of rendering ourselves the proper objects of esteem and approbation, cannot with any proprietary be called vanity."[56] On the contrary, this desire is "the love of virtue, the noblest and best passion in human nature." Even the love of "well-grounded fame and reputation," though a lesser motivation than the love of virtue, does not constitute a vice. In fact, Smith sees the two as being closely related: both aim at actually "being honourable and noble" and both delight in having been worthy of what is truly praiseworthy.[57] In his recommendations of how to motivate public spirit, Smith recognizes the need for civic educators to draw on self-love and selflessness, both of which, when kept in check, can be the proper motivation for public spiritedness.

Smith explicitly advocates making public spiritedness a matter of pleasure for the otherwise uninterested as a means to awaken them to their civic duty. In particular, he recommends appealing to citizens' pleasure in the "beauty of utility" by teaching the constitution, laws, and system of government of one's country—in other words, by providing substantive constitutional education:

> Nothing tends to promote public spirit as the study of politics, of the several systems of civil government, their advantages and disadvantages, of the constitution of our own country, its situation, and interest with regard to foreign

> nations, its commerce, its defence, the disadvantages it labours under, the dangers to which it may be exposed, how to remove the one, and how to guard against the latter.

"If anything is capable of making an impression," argues Smith, constitutional education will.[58] Smith arrives at the crucial importance of constitutional education for motivating public spirit by way of his observations regarding the pleasure we find in "the beauty of utility."[59]

Smith builds on David Hume's observation that human beings find pleasure in observing the effectiveness or "utility" of an object or system because when we see something that works well, we immediately contemplate the "pleasure or conveniency which it is fitted to promote," which is pleasurable in and of itself.[60] That utility or function is an important dimension of beauty is in no way original to Hume: the Roman architect Vitruvius lists *utilitas* alongside *firmitas* (solidity) and *venustas* (beauty) as the foundational dimensions of classical architecture.[61] What Smith adds to Hume and all those who came before him is to note that counterintuitively, we often find more pleasure in the system by which we bring about some end than in the end itself.[62] This "love" or "spirit" of system can be a powerful motivator, both in small and great objects. For example, we find ourselves wholly annoyed when we see our watch is off by two minutes and will go through great lengths to fix it, even though doing so does not improve our knowledge of the time, as we already know our watch is two minutes behind. What gives us pleasure, argues Smith, is not simply knowing the correct time (as we already knew it), but in the proper functioning of the means for attaining that end.[63]

The "spirit of system" can apply equally to the public sphere as to the private and is the reason why Smith advocates constitutional education as the best way for motivating public spiritedness. "When a patriot exerts himself for the improvement of any part of the public [administration], his conduct does not always arise from pure sympathy with the happiness of those who are to reap the benefit of it."[64] Rather, it is often the case that when public-spirited

persons advocate public improvements, such as improved roads, they do so for the love of seeing the roads work well, more than from "fellow-feeling with carriers and waggoners."[65]

Nowhere is the spirit of system more powerful in "promoting the happiness of society" than in the way civic instruction, and particularly constitutional instruction, can motivate public spirit.[66] As if he were channeling the frustration of high school civics teachers throughout the centuries, Smith advocates the following: "If you would implant public virtue in the breast of him who seems heedless of the interest of his country, it will often be to no purpose to tell him, what superior advantages the subjects of a well-governed state enjoy."[67] Rather, civic educators "will be more likely to persuade, if [they] describe the great system of public [administration] which procures these advantages, if [they] explain the connexions and dependencies of its several parts, their mutual subordination to one another, and their general subserviency to the happiness of society." For this reason, Smith concludes, "Nothing tends so much to promote public spirit as the study of politics, of the several systems of civil government . . . [and] of the constitution of our own country." In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith praises the superior public virtue ("public morals") of the Romans over the Greeks, noting that unlike in Greece, Roman patristic education included the study of civil law.[68] Smith also claims that the Romans were the first to make the study of laws a science and attach great honors to those who mastered them. The Romans, Smith seems to conclude, understood the virtue of teaching one's constitutional system.

If civic educators wish to animate the public spirit, they must help their students experience the pleasure of understanding the workings of their constitutional system. Any teacher that has seen students come alive when studying the *Federalist Papers*, that great treatise on the American constitutional order, has witnessed how powerful a motivator the "spirit of system" can be.

Dangers of a Spirit of System for Animating Public Spirit

Although Adam Smith contends that the public spirit is most effectively motivated by the spirit of system manifested in constitutional

education, he also points out the political dangers that arise from civic education that is motivated *only* by the spirit of system and thus unmoderated by the higher virtue of genuine benevolence. According to Smith, public spirit motivated by the spirit of system can lead, particularly in times of factional conflict, to an unmitigated urge to reform, or even refound, a constitutional system, even when doing so is contrary to the common good.

Smith begins by noting that the love of country typically involves two fundamental principles: (a) "a certain respect and reverence for that constitution or form of government which is actually established"; and (b) "an earnest desire to render the condition of our fellow-citizens as safe, respectable, and happy as we can."[69] Under normal circumstances, these two principles work harmoniously in public-spirited citizens, interesting them both in the constitutional system and in the well-being of their fellow citizens. Yet in times of factional conflict, these two principles may "draw different ways," with those motivated by a desire to improve the lot of their fellow citizens inclined to undermine the otherwise respected constitution in order to enact wide-sweeping changes: "Amidst the turbulence and disorder of faction, a certain spirit of system is apt to mix itself with that public spirit which is founded upon the love of humanity, upon a real fellow-feeling with the inconveniencies and distresses to which some of our fellow-citizens may be exposed."[70] Thus, the spirit of system that normally motivates interest in the constitutional order can lead to a desire to overturn the constitutional order.

Because public spirit motivated purely by the spirit of system has, at its root, a form of self-love (i.e., the desire for the pleasure of the beautiful system), the unrest of factional conflict presents the irresistible opportunity to maximize one's pleasure and glory by founding a new constitution; individuals become "intoxicated with the imaginary beauty of this ideal system, of which they have no experience" and "new-model the constitution" as a result. If unmoderated by virtue rooted in the impartial spectator of conscience, this "defect of better motives" leads to revolution, not because of a desire for the common good, but because the spirit of system was left unchecked.

In making this acute observation Smith seems to foreshadow Abraham Lincoln's concerns about the perpetuation of political institutions raised in the Lyceum Address. There, Lincoln is concerned about the ambitious "new reapers" who are dissatisfied by living under the shadow of past founders.[71] These "towering genius[es]" disdain perpetuating the old constitutional order because of an unrelenting hubris and seek to refound the nation as a result. To Smith, the men of system are not dissimilar: "To insist upon establishing, and upon establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, ever thing which the idea may seem to require, must often be the highest degree of arrogance. It is to erect his own judgment into the supreme standard of right and wrong."[72]

Given the near universal appeal of the spirit of system and the relative rarity of Caesars and Napoleons—those of the "family of the lion or the tribe of the eagle" decried by Lincoln—perhaps we are more likely to encounter constitutional danger from the "men of system" Smith describes. Although the motivations attributed to Smith and Lincoln's would-be-founders may be slightly different (though they share the same root of self-love), the result is the same: a deep unwillingness to perpetuate the constitutional order and a strong desire to refound or rewrite the constitution to satisfy oneself.

The remedy to this great danger is not less public spirit but a greater measure of that public spirit drawing on the "better angels of our nature."[73] "The man whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence," argues Smith, will "respect the established powers and privileges even of individuals, and still more of the great orders and societies, into which the state is divided."[74] Those who possess the public spirit motivated by benevolence are still concerned with reform, but they are able to hold the constitutional and interpersonal dimensions of love of country in balance. Thus, though the benevolent citizen may consider aspects of the current constitutional order "as in some measure abusive, he will content himself with moderating, what he often cannot annihilate without great violence. When he cannot conquer the rooted prejudices of the people by reason and persuasion, he will not attempt to subdue them by force."

For civic educators, whether statesmen, teachers, pastors, or something else, Smith presents a rigorous, philosophically profound account of public spirit as a civic virtue, one that includes both timeless and timely reasons for why it matters. He also helps us understand what can motivate public spirit and suggests that political education, particularly constitutional education, has an important role to play. And while Smith famously lauds the effects of economic specialization and self-interest for the public good, he also probes their dark sides, offering a warning to those in times of factional conflict not unlike our own: beware both the Scylla of political apathy and the Charybdis of public spirit unmoderated by conscience. In the fi nal analysis, only the virtuous will chart the proper course that leads to national safety, prosperity, and peace.

Notes

1. Jeffery M. Jones, "Confidence in U.S. Institutions Down; Average at New Low," *Gallup*, July 5, 2022, accessed July 31, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutionsdown-average-new-low.aspx.
2. "Civic dispositions" are often defined as civic "orientations" or types of "democratic character formation," such as the inclination to participate in civic activities like voting or showing respect for the rule of law. See, e.g., Diana Owen, "High School Students' Acquisition of Civic Dispositions: The Impact of We the People," *Center for Civic Education*, July 2015, accessed July 31, 2023, https://www.civiced.org/pdfs/research/ImpactofWethePeople_DianaOwen_July2015.pdf.
   The popularity of the term *dispositions* rose sharply in the late 1980s and has continued in popularity ever since, particularly among educators, even while the term *disposition* has otherwise declined precipitously since the late 1800s (see Google Books Ngram Viewer for "civic dispositions" and "disposition"). "Civic dispositions" is often used in place of what would previously be called "civic virtues," a manifestation of ostensibly "value neutral" or nonnormative language rightly decried by Allen Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987. Interesting to note is that while always a part of American civic discourse, use of "civic virtues" also began to increase in the late 1980s (see Google Books Ngram Viewer for "civic virtues"). As its use here and elsewhere evinces, "civic dispositions" is no less normative than "civic virtues," but the shift does represent a disassociation from the classical, Christian, and civic

republican traditions of civic virtue(s). In the opinion of this author, this is a serious mistake.

3. See, e.g., Stephan Macedo, "Community, Diversity, and Civic Education: Toward a Liberal Political Science of Group Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13, no. 1 (1996): 240–68; and Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in A Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
4. Hanley, in *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*, treats public spiritedness in two instances: first, he briefly employs Smith's observation that the love of system, as a manifestation of the love of beauty, can motivate public spiritedness more effectively than sentiments like sympathy; the second occurs in his discussion of magnanimity and the excesses of self-love, rightly noting that both the love of system and public spiritedness are, taken separately, "both natural and desirable in Smith's view" but that when combined can lead to "arrogance" or an "excessive self-estimation." Hanley does not note in this second passage Smith's observation that the spirit of system is the most effective way to generate public spiritedness, but he does so in the first passage. One of my contributions here is to connect Hanley's two observations and propose a limiting principle for the excesses or dangers of combining love of system and public spiritedness (which, in his brief treatment, Hanley does not do). See Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 71, 167.
5. Sen does mention public spiritedness, but only in passing. Amartya Sen, "Adam Smith's Prudence," in *Theory and Reality in Development: Essays in Honour of Paul Streeten*, ed. Sanjaya Lall (New York: St. Martins' Press), 28–37.
6. E.g., in a two-sentence passage, Winch rightly, but only briefly, notes the paradoxical relationship between a love of system and public spiritedness in relation to the statesmanlike role of the legislator. Donald Winch, "Science and the Legislator: Adam Smith and After," *The Economic Journal* 93 (September 1983): 503. Khalil, in contrast, misunderstands Smith by trying to ascribe public spiritedness to a solely self-interested motive (also, in a somewhat mystifying passage, Khalil equates the "love of system" with "ideology"). See Elias L. Khalil, "An Anatomy of Authority: Adam Smith as Political Theorist," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 29, no. 1 (2005): 57–71.
7. See Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen*, ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), esp. chap. 12.

8. While Locke's theory of natural rights permits individuals to enforce the law of nature and defend the rights of others, it in no wise imposes a positive duty on individuals to do so. In fact, Locke seems to suggest they likely will not, given the danger to themselves. This is one more reason for the necessity of government. See John Locke, *The Two Treatises of Civil Government* (Hollis ed.) (London: A. Millar et al., 1689), esp. chap. 2, secs. 8–9, 1, and chap. 3, sec. 21, *Online Library of Liberty*, accessed July 30, 2023, https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/hollis-the-two-treatises-of-civil-government-hollis-ed.
9. While Locke's *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature* may appear to point toward a more ethically robust treatment of natural law that could include moral and civic duties, persuasive arguments have been made for questioning the prescriptive nature of these. See Robert Horwitz, "John Locke's *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*: A Commentary," ed. Michael Zuckert, *Interpretation* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1992); more broadly, see John Locke, *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*, ed. and trans. Robert Horwitz, Jenny Strauss Clay, and Diskin Clay (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1990).
10. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979); and Rousseau, "The Social Contract," in *Rousseau: "The Social Contract" and Other Later Political Writings*, 2nd ed., trans. and ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
11. In addition, much of Rousseau's thought apart from *The Social Contract* focuses on ambivalence to, or outright hostility toward, formal political life. See, e.g., *Emile* and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières*, ed. Christopher Kelly (Dartmouth, NH: Dartmouth University Press, 2000).
12. The full quotation is, "Have we not able magistrates and counsellors hourly watching over the publick weal?" Samuel Johnson, "publick, adj.1755," *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), accessed July 30, 2023, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/publick_adj.
13. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments and on the Origins of Languages* (Stewart ed.) (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1759), 272. Hereafter cited in notes as TMS.
14. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, *Classics.MIT. edu*, accessed July 29, 2023, https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html.
15. Smith, TMS, 28–29. Smith is almost always referring to moral excellence when employing the term *virtue*, though he does speak of intellectual virtues. See, e.g., Smith, TMS, 20–21.

16. "Virtue," *Etymoline: Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed July 31, 2023, https://www.etymonline.com.
17. Smith, TMS, 17–18.
18. Smith, TMS, 29.
19. Smith, TMS, 28–29.
20. Smith, TMS, 3–4.
21. Smith, TMS, 3–4.
22. Smith, 8.
23. Smith, TMS, 18–19.
24. Smith, TMS, 10–11.
25. Smith, TMS, 10–11.
26. Smith, TMS, 56.
27. Smith, TMS, 171.
28. Smith, TMS, 162.
29. Smith, TMS, 163. John Locke also speaks of conscience as a mirror: "These simple ideas, when offered to the mind, the understanding can no more refuse to have, nor alter, when they are imprinted, nor blot them out, and make new ones itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the images or ideas which the objects set before it do therein produce." Smith, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. II, chap. 1, ss. 25.
30. Smith, TMS, 163.
31. Smith, TMS, 163–64.
32. Smith, TMS, 171.
33. Smith, TMS, 186–87. When Smith uses reason, principle, and conscience as synonyms for the impartial spectator, he appears to be using the terms in the common manner of his time: Smith does not think reason (or our rational capacity) is synonymous with the impartial spectator. Rather, he means the colloquial "dictates of reason," which is synonymous with conscience.
34. Smith, TMS, 206–7.
35. Smith, TMS, 276
36. Smith, TMS, 276.
37. Smith, TMS, 276.
38. Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. III, pt. 4.
39. Smith, TMS, 218.
40. Smith, TMS, 274.
41. Smith, TMS, 337.
42. Smith, TMS, 337.
43. Smith, TMS, 345–36.

44. Smith, TMS, 348–49.
45. Smith, TMS, 335.
46. See also Smith, TMS, 335-36.
47. Smith, TMS, 348–49.
48. Smith, TMS, 236.
49. Smith, TMS, 348–49.
50. Fleischacker notes a variety of similarities between Smith's and Aristotle's moral philosophy: "Smith's way of approaching virtue often resembles Aristotle's—who has also sometimes been seen as too fond of the description of virtue, and who tried to acknowledge the many diverse elements of virtue, and the judgment of virtue, rather than to reduce them to a single principle. . . . The attentive reader of TMS will have noticed this earlier: when he characterizes propriety as lying between the excess and defect of passion, for instance, or when he distinguishes the restraint of appetite out of self-interest from the virtue of temperance, or when he emphasizes habit, or the superiority of friendships of virtue over friendships of pleasure." Samuel Fleischacker, "Adam Smith's Moral and Political Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, February 15, 2013, accessed July 30, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/smith-moral-political.
51. Smith, TMS, 195–96.
52. Smith, TMS, 269–70.
53. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 2:782.
54. Smith, TMS, 247.
55. Smith, TMS, 247.
56. Smith, TMS, 453.
57. Smith, TMS, 453.
58. Smith, TMS, 267–68.
59. See Smith, TMS, 277.
60. Smith, TMS, 258. This is Smith's evaluation of ideas found in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.
61. Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. Ingrid D. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
62. Smith, TMS, 258-60.
63. Smith, TMS, 259-60.
64. Smith, TMS, 266. Smith's original here is "public police," but that misleads more than it clarifies, as the term *police* had yet to take on its current meaning. Johnson defines *police* as "[t]he regulation and government of a city or country, so far as regards the inhabitants,"

making "public administration" a more accurate translation. See Samuel Johnson, "police, n.s.1755," in *A Dictionary of the English Language*, (1755), accessed July 30, 2023, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/police_ns.

65. Smith, TMS, 266-67.
66. Smith, TMS, 268.
67. Smith, TMS, 266-68
68. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 2:778.
69. Smith, TMS, 339-40.
70. Smith, TMS, 342.
71. Abraham Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" (Lyceum Address, January 27, 1838), *Abraham Lincoln Online*, accessed July 31, 2023, https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm.
72. Smith, TMS, 344.
73. Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address" (March 4, 1861), *Abraham Lincoln Online*, accessed July 31, 2023, https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/1inaug.htm.
74. Smith, TMS, 342-43.