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**NO NEED FOR SOCIETY:
ADAM SMITH'S CRITIQUE OF PUFENDORF'S *SUMMA IMBECILLITAS***

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**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS
FACULDADE DE CIÊNCIAS ECONÔMICAS
CENTRO DE DESENVOLVIMENTO E PLANEJAMENTO REGIONAL**

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**CEDEPLAR/FACE/UFMG
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SUMÁRIO

INTRODUCTION.....	6
SUMMA IMBECILLITAS	7
SOCIETY WITHOUT DIVISION OF LABOUR	9
DESERVING AND OBTAINING	12
OBJECTIONS OBVIATED.....	13
CONCLUSION	16
REFERENCES.....	17

RESUMO

Os filósofos do Iluminismo Escocês viam em Pufendorf a ideia de uma sociabilidade baseada nas necessidades humanas e anterior à instituição do governo. Essa ideia era um desdobramento de uma visão da condição humana como naturalmente destituída e desamparada. A sociabilidade surgiria da percepção das vantagens da cooperação e da assistência mútua para superar essa inabilidade natural de satisfazer as próprias necessidades. Os seres humanos se tornariam sociáveis através do amor-próprio, entendido como o interesse pela própria preservação. A ideia de um princípio de sociabilidade independente do governo era também crucial para a concepção de sociedade de Adam Smith. Contudo, Smith buscou revisar as premissas de Pufendorf a respeito da natureza humana. Seguindo Hutcheson, ele as considerava muito próximas do sistema egoísta de Hobbes. Como este artigo pretende mostrar, para Smith, a sociabilidade não surge da necessidade da assistência dos outros, como frequentemente afirmado, mas do desejo por estima merecida.

Palavras-chave: Sociabilidade; Divisão do Trabalho; Necessidades; Adam Smith; Samuel Pufendorf;

Classificação JEL: B10, B11, B12.

ABSTRACT

The Scottish Enlighteners saw in Pufendorf the idea of a pre-government need-based sociability. This idea stemmed from a picture of the human condition as naturally destitute and powerless. Sociability therefore arose from the perception of the advantages given by cooperation and mutual assistance in overcoming this natural inability to provide for one's own needs. Human beings became sociable through their self-love, understood as the interest in self-preservation. The idea of a principle of sociability independent of government was also crucial to Adam Smith's conception of society. However, Smith sought to revise Pufendorf's premises on human nature. Following Hutcheson, he considered them too close to Hobbes' selfish system. As this article intends to show, for Smith sociability did not arise from need for the assistance of others, as it is often said, but from the desire for deserved esteem.

Key-words: Sociability; Division of Labour; Needs; Adam Smith; Samuel Pufendorf;

JEL Classification: B10, B11, B12;

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to show that Adam Smith's theory of sociability can be understood as a critique of the idea that society arises from the need for cooperation between individuals. Like Francis Hutcheson, Smith attributes this conception to the Prussian jurist Samuel Pufendorf, whose work was a reference in jurisprudence courses in Glasgow in the eighteenth century.¹ In his critique of Thomas Hobbes, Pufendorf would have conceived a sociability based on the need of the assistance of others, which would prompt individuals coexist peacefully even in the absence of civil government.² This sociability would be derived from self-love as the desire for self-preservation, given the destitute and utterly powerless condition of solitary men.

The idea of a principle of society prior to the foundation of the state is central to Smith's social and political philosophy, who is often seen as an author who endorses Pufendorf's idea of sociability.³ For Smith, too, as often stated, the desire to live together with others would derive from the need of the assistance of others to survive. The social bond would thus consist in the convenience of cooperation in the satisfaction of needs.⁴ Some authors have also tried to show the direct influence that Pufendorf could have on Smith's thinking.⁵ While others have criticised the possibility of establishing a direct influence of one on the other, they do not seem to dispute that Smith shares Pufendorf's basic position.⁶

However, as this article intends to show, Smith developed a different theoretical foundation for thinking about human interaction. He consciously sought to move away from the discourse that society is originally founded on the need to cooperate to satisfy needs and that individuals become sociable with the advantages of the division of labour in mind. For Smith, the convenience provided by the division of labour is only seen after it has been implemented. It is rather “a very slow and gradual consequence” of a certain natural propensity to exchange (WN I.ii.1).

Although it is not sufficiently noted by contemporary readers, Smith's break with the tradition of thought, which finds in Pufendorf one of its great advocates, is noted and sharply criticized by a well-known reader of the time, Thomas Pownall. He clearly sees the idea of the propensity to exchange as an alternative to the thesis that individuals associate out of the need to obtain the assistance of others.⁷

¹ Natural jurisprudence was incorporated into the moral philosophy courses at Glasgow University in 1690 through curriculum reform headed by Gershom Carmichael, Francis Hutcheson's predecessor. Pufendorf's abridged treatise, *De officio hominis et civis juxta legem naturalem* (1673), became the main reference for jurisprudence courses. Cf. Moore and Silverthorne (1983) and Lieberman (2006, p. 219-220).

² See Hont (1987).

³ See, among others, Rosanvallon (1989 [1979]), Hont (1987; 2005; 2015), Kingsbury e Straumann (2010, p. 37-8) and Sagar (2018, p. 168-9). Haakonssen (1996, p. 131), in turn, considers that, in Smith's view, “We turn to other people not only out of need but out of curiosity or a spontaneous tendency to identify with the other, a tendency which Smith calls 'sympathy’”. This reading is more in line with the thesis defended in this paper. However, it is argued more explicitly here that, in Smith's theory, the inability to satisfy one's needs alone is not the principle of sociability, as in Pufendorf.

⁴ See Rosanvallon (1989), according to whom this would be the basis of an economic representation of society, in which the societal bond is human needs and interests.

⁵ In particular, see Hont (1987; 2005; 2015).

⁶ See Berry (2013, pp. 43-4) and Sagar (2018, p. 19, n. 41).

⁷ Hont (1987, pp. 255-6) notes the relevance of Pownall's commentaries, but does not see the relevance of his critique of Smith's propensity to exchange.

In what follows, we show how Pufendorf's attempt to move away from Hobbes is seen as insufficient by Hutcheson and Smith and how the latter tries to overcome his limitations through the idea of a society without division of labour. The assumption of such a society challenges the assumption that society arises from the need to cooperate. Next, we point out that for Smith, society is the condition in which individuals are naturally born and grow up, and in which they develop the desire to be rightly recognized by others. Finally, also discussing Pownall's objections, we show that, for Smith, what originally drives individuals to be with others is not the inability to satisfy needs, but rather this desire of deserved esteem.

SUMMA IMBECILLITAS

Smith mentions Pufendorf only a few times. But this does not mean that Smith, notoriously sparing with quotations, was not influenced by this thinker.⁸ Like Hutcheson before him, he sees in Pufendorf the forerunner of the idea that civil government is not an indispensable condition for social life. An idea, this, shared by Smith, for whom civil government is the historical product of social life and not a precondition for it (see WN V.i.b.2-3, LJ A, iv.19).

In the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Smith acknowledges that Pufendorf took an important step with respect to Hobbes. He tried to show that the "society might subsist, tho' not in so harmonious a manner, without civil institutions" (LJ B, 3). Smith refers to Pufendorf's "large treatise", namely his *De Jure Naturae et Gentium* (1672). With this text, Pufendorf would have stood out among those who criticised Hobbes's idea that social life is impossible without civil government. As Istvan Hont (1987, p. 256) pointed out, Pufendorf introduced the possibility of thinking about "a principle of society independent of and prior to the foundation of the *civitas*".

However, in the TMS, Smith explicitly associates Pufendorf with Hobbes, again following the approach of Hutcheson, who believes that Pufendorf did not really succeed in his attempt to disentangle himself from Hobbes.

Smith argues that according to Hobbes and Pufendorf, society is not the result of a natural love for one's fellow human beings that drives them toward one another. Rather, society is necessary for individual survival itself. From their point of view, as Smith explains, "without the assistance of others" every human being is "incapable of subsisting with *ease or safety*" (TMS VII.iii.1.1, emphasis added). Only by joining with others can each person pursue his desire for self-preservation. With the two terms "ease" and "safety," Smith is pointing to two different principles of union. The first is due to the cooperation between individuals considered necessary to overcome a condition that, in Hobbes' words, otherwise implies a "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" life (Hobbes, 1998 [1651], *Leviathan*, XIII.9, p. 84). The second principle is due to the fact that in the absence of union with others, again in

⁸ The lack of quotations from Pufendorf has led interpreters such as Stein (1988, p. 400), Berry (2013, pp. 43-4) and Sagar (2018, p. 19, n. 41) to question the hypothesis of influence raised by Hont (1987), especially in regard to the formulation of Smith's four stages theory. This article does not intend to analyse the hypothesis of such an influence, but only the relationship between Smith's theory of sociability and the critique of the conception of sociability commonly attributed to Pufendorf by the moral philosophers of the University of Glasgow. On the relevance of the theory of property of Pufendorf and other seventeenth-century natural jurists to the emergence of Scottish social theory, see the studies by Medick (1981 [1973]), Meek (1976), Forbes (1982), Hont (1987), and Buckle (1993).

Hobbes' words, everyone would live in "continual fear, and danger of violent death" (Ibid). Hobbes evidently gives priority to the second principle, which is why he sees the only way out of this condition as the establishment of a civil authority that would impose peace and consequently allow cooperation. As Smith points out, this means that "antecedent to the institution of civil government there could be no safe or peaceable society among men" (TMS VII.iii.2.1).

Unlike Hobbes, Pufendorf instead puts the emphasis on that of "ease." As with Hobbes, in Smith's reading, also for Pufendorf individuals associate because of the necessary assistance of others. However, this assistance is seen first and foremost from the perspective of the possibility of meeting the necessary needs of life, before the common defence against violent death. The necessity of cooperation for individual survival is such that makes sociability a norm, or a natural law. The point is not that individuals are naturally sociable beings, but rather they must be so in order to survive and live peacefully.⁹

The idea that society is useful to all in some way allows us to think of peaceful relations between individuals even before the need to establish a civil government. The necessary assistance of others derives, according to Pufendorf, from the needy and powerless condition in which the solitary individuals would naturally find themselves. They would be incapable, unlike other animals, of meeting their own needs alone. Such "*summa imbecillitas*" would not allow them to get out of the natural condition of "*indigentia*" without the cooperation of their fellow humans (Pufendorf, 1729, p. 135-9: LNN, II.iii.14-15). Individuals are naturally infirm, but it is precisely this infirmity that makes them sociable.

Pufendorf, therefore, attempts to distance himself from Hobbes by considering the possibility of sociability independent of government. However, this attempt does not seem fully successful, at least in the eyes of Hutcheson and Smith, because of the principle on which he bases such sociability, namely self-love as desire for self-preservation.

In his inaugural lecture at the University of Glasgow, Hutcheson (2006 [1730], p. 201) seeks to determine "in what sense social life is natural to man, whether in the state of liberty or in the civil state," the state of liberty being the "society without government".¹⁰ For him, the truly controversial question to be addressed concerns the foundations of sociability, namely the discussion of "what part of our nature makes us fit and inclined to society" (ibid., p. 195). This question, however, had not been adequately addressed by the important moral philosophers who recognized sociability as the foundation of society, such as Grotius, Pufendorf and Cumberland.¹¹

In particular, according to Hutcheson (2006, p. 202), Pufendorf regarded self-love, "or the desire of every man for his own private pleasure or advantage," as the only principle of human action, and

⁹ Cf. Pufendorf (1729, p. 109-116: LNN, II.ii.5-11, II.iii.15), where Pufendorf respectively contests Hobbes's idea that the natural state of mankind is a state of war, and states that sociability is the fundamental law of nature.

¹⁰ The inaugural lecture was delivered in Latin, and its original title was *De Naturali Hominum Socialitate Oratio Inauguralis*. According to Hont (2005, p. 39, n. 72), Hutcheson's text was reprinted in 1756 by Foulis Press. We have as reference the translation made by M. Silverthorne, whose title is *On the Natural Sociability of Mankind Inaugural Oration* (Hutcheson, 2006).

¹¹ The recognition of sociability as the foundation of rights and duties was an alternative view to the voluntarist conceptions of the origin of morality and civil obligations. According to these, the obligatory nature of moral laws resulted from the fact that they were imposed by a superior (be it God, or the sovereign). On this, see Haakonssen (1996).

derived all sociable and virtuous actions from this feeling. Benevolence and willingness to cooperate, therefore, would be based on the calculation of the individual benefits that result from sociable conduct. Omitting important aspects of human nature, Pufendorf seemed to suggest that sociability is the mere result of man's "need, weakness and destitution" (Ibid., p. 202). In the same way that "hunger, thirst, and the fear of cold often compel men to endure heavy labours from which our nature shrinks," for Pufendorf, it would seem that "men were driven into society merely by external advantage and dread of external evils, contrary to the nature of their hearts, contrary to all their natural desires and affections" (Ibid., p. 203).

Hutcheson recognizes that thanks to society, life can be safer and more desirable. However, need and self-love are for him only secondary reasons. As he makes clear in his *System of Moral Philosophy* (SMP), the foundation of sociability is not a consideration of the utility of cooperation, but a natural moral sense. The consideration of this utility only reinforces the obligation to the duties founded on the moral sense (Hutcheson, 1755, pp. 287-292: SMP II.4.v).¹² What unites individuals, therefore, is not their absolute inability to provide for the satisfaction of their needs on their own. They live in society not with the aim of enjoying the advantages of the division of labour, but because of a natural sense of justice and benevolence towards others.

SOCIETY WITHOUT DIVISION OF LABOUR

From the hypothesis on the natural infirmity of each individual, Pufendorf deduces the possibility and the need of sociability priori to government.¹³ Such sociability arises in order to enjoy the benefits of cooperation and thus to overcome the powerlessness of individuals. This explanation of sociability, however, for Hutcheson still remains captive to the Hobbesian idea that society arises from the calculation of individual advantages, rather than from a natural inclination towards the happiness of others.

If Hutcheson's criticism of Pufendorf is clear and direct, the same does not seem to be true of Smith's. First of all, the latter does not adopt Hutcheson's conclusions about the moral sense and natural benevolence (see TMS VII.ii.3.13-18; VII.iii.3.8-16). Furthermore, from the very first chapter of the WN he emphasizes the advantages of the division of labour. Moreover, as is often pointed out, in the second chapter of the WN he states that "man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren" (WN I.ii.1). Somehow, as Hont (1987; 2015, p. 12) argues, Smith seems rather to return to Pufendorf's position, that is, to a sociability based on the utility of cooperation. Whether this return is due to a direct or indirect influence of the latter's thought is a debated question. Less controversial, on the other hand,

¹² Also in this regard, Hutcheson (2004 [1725], p. 85-6) makes a qualitative distinction between the *natural* and the *moral* goods. The former is understood as the pleasure derived from the enjoyment of useful things, and the latter as the pleasure one feels when observing altruistic actions. The pleasure felt when obtaining an external benefit is caused by the external senses, and does not provoke any kind of approval or love in the spectators. The pleasure felt when observing a good action, in turn, is caused by an internal moral sense, and calls forth the approval and love of the spectator for the agent, even when the former expects no benefit from the latter. This distinction was meant to underline the amoral status of self-love as the desire for external advantages.

¹³ For Pufendorf (1729, p. 137: LNN, II.iii.15), sociability is a law of nature, that is, an obligation in the face of the need for self-preservation. "Now that such a Creature may be preserv'd and supported, and may enjoy the good Things attending his Condition of Life, it is necessary that he be *social* [sic: *sociabile*, i.e., sociable] [...]. This then will appear a fundamental Law of Nature, *Every Man ought, as far as in him lies, to promote and preserve a peaceful Sociableness with others, agreeable to the main End and Disposition of the Race in general*".

is the idea that for Smith, too, individuals ultimately live together and divide labour because otherwise they would be unable to survive on their own.¹⁴ The hypothesis of "summa imbecillitas" and of the union aimed at overcoming it thus seems to be at the basis of the society conceived by Smith.

However, when Smith says that human beings constantly need the cooperation of others, he is not referring to a natural and original condition that would lead them to join together in society to divide labour. Rather, he refers to that advanced society in which the division of labour is already widely developed. It is not by chance that Smith's sentence begins by pointing out: "*In civilized society* he stands at all times in need of the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes" (WN I.ii.1; emphasis added).

This point is made even more explicit in the introduction to the second book of the WN. In the "rude" state of society, "every man provides every thing for himself" (WN II.intro.1). "But" – Smith adds – "when the division of labour has once been thoroughly introduced, the produce of a man's own labour can supply but a very small part of his occasional wants" (WN II.intro.2). For this reason, in the civilized society where the division of labour has been "thoroughly introduced" each individual is in constant need of the cooperation of others. This, however, does not happen "in that rude state of society in which there is no division of labour" (WN II.intro.1). Smith states that in this primitive state, although there is no division of labour, each individual is nevertheless more or less capable of satisfying his needs: "When he is hungry, he goes to the forest to hunt; when his coat is worn out, he cloaths himself with the skin of the first large animal he kills: and when his hut begins to go to ruin, he repairs it, as well as he can, with the trees and the turf that are nearest it". In this opening of the second book of the WN, Smith implicitly refers to a paragraph from Rousseau's *Second Discourse*. In this paragraph, Rousseau evidently criticises Pufendorf's "summa imbecillitas", which is explicitly mentioned in this regard (cf. Rousseau, 2002, p. 91).¹⁵ Smith's "savages" seem capable of satisfying their own needs on their own, such as those described by Rousseau and unlike the solitary individuals of Pufendorf's state of nature.

Smith, however, does not intend to idealise the rude state, as Rousseau seems to do. In the *Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review* (EPS, 251), he states that Rousseau has exaggerated in describing the state of the "savage". In that state, in the latter's words, each individual sees "all his wants completely supplied" (Rousseau, 2002 [1755], p. 90). For Smith, on the other hand, in the rude state of society, "every man *endeavors* to supply by his own industry his own occasional wants as they occur", as well as for example "when his hut begins to go to ruin, he repairs it, *as well as he can*" (emphasis added). It is not certain that he always succeeds at his best. His conditions are in any case less secure than those generally enjoyed by individuals in commercial society thanks to the cooperation of a multitude of other individuals¹⁶.

¹⁴ See, among others, Rosanvallon (1989 [1979]), Hont (1987; 2005; 2015), Kingsbury e Straumann (2010, p. 37-8) and Sagar (2018, p. 168-9). See also Fleischacker (2004, p. 142), who suggests the centrality of the need for self-preservation by saying that, according to Smith, without the assistance of others, human beings would be unable to survive.

¹⁵ About the natural man, Rousseau (2002 [1755], p. 90) states: "I see an animal less strong than some, and less agile than others, but, upon the whole, the most advantageously organized of any: I see him satisfying his hunger under an oak, and his thirst at the first brook; I see him laying himself down to sleep at the foot of the same tree that afforded him his meal; and there are all his wants completely supplied". See the correspondent passage in Pufendorf (1729, p. 101: LNN, II.i.8). On the relevance of Pufendorf for Rousseau's thought, see Wokler (1994).

¹⁶ This insecurity and hardship necessarily leads him to become accustomed to great hardiness and thus assume an "absolute self-command" (TMS V.2.9, 15). The "general security" offered by commercial society, on the other hand, allows everyone to relax their self-command and share their feelings more freely (Ibid.; emphasis added). Rousseau sees in society the moral corruption of the "savage". Smith, on the other hand, intends to show that society and its advancement can be accompanied by moral improvement, understood as a broader capacity to open up to others and thus to mutually sympathise. On this moral improvement in Smith, see Bee (2018), Bee and Paganelli (2019).

At the same time, however, again in the *Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review*, Smith notes that at the opposite extreme is Mandeville's position: "Dr. Mandeville represents the primitive state of mankind as the most wretched and miserable that can be imagined: Mr. Rousseau, on the contrary, paints it as the happiest and most suitable to his nature"¹⁷. Although he does not intend to idealise the primitive state of mankind, at the same time Smith does not seem to approve of the idea that it can be described as an extremely miserable state. That is, a state in which individuals necessarily require the assistance of others. It is no coincidence that in associating Pufendorf and Hobbes in the TMS in this regard, Smith also explicitly adds Mandeville to these two thinkers (see TMS VII.iii.2.1).¹⁸

Contrary to what is often stated, Smith does not support the hypothesis of "summa imbecillitas" and the necessary assistance of others as a motive for individuals to associate. This is also shown by the fact that it is always already in a society of human beings that all the individuals obtain by themselves what they need, albeit more precariously than in commercial society. When Smith begins the second book of the WN by stating that the "rude state of *society*" is that state "in which there is no division of labour, in which exchanges are seldom made, and in which every man provides every thing for himself", he is talking about a state of society (WN II.intro.1; emphasis added).¹⁹ In it, exchanges also take place, although not so frequently as to give rise to the division of labour, understood as the specialization from which the "many advantages" described in the first chapter of the WN are derived. As explained in the following chapter of the WN, these advantages occur involuntarily and manifest themselves slowly. They are the consequence of such a frequency of exchanges that individuals eventually realise that by specializing in a single trade they can obtain more goods and services than they could before. In the society without division of labour, individuals first exchange frequently and only later realise that they can get more than they had before (WN I.ii.3). The division of labour is not the result of human wisdom or prudence capable of foreseeing its advantages, but of a certain natural tendency to exchange (see WN I.ii.1; LJ A, vi.54)²⁰. It emerges in an already established society in which exchange already takes place. Such a society cannot, therefore, be the result of the prediction of the benefits of cooperation by hypothetical isolated individuals unable to provide for their own needs.

¹⁷ Smith continues: "Both of them however suppose, that there is in man no powerful instinct which necessarily determines him to seek society for its own sake: but according to the one, the misery of his original state compelled him to have recourse to this otherwise disagreeable remedy; according to the other, some unfortunate accidents having given birth to the unnatural passions of ambition and the vain desire of superiority, to which he had before been a stranger, produced the same fatal effect"

¹⁸ See, for instance, Mandeville (1988, ii.180): "The Love Man has for his Ease and Security, and his perpetual Desire of meliorating his Condition, must be sufficient Motives to make him fond of Society; considering the necessitous and helpless Condition of his Nature".

¹⁹ It includes all "savage *nations*" (TMS V.2.9; emphasis added). In describing the way in which the division of labour emerges from exchange, Smith speaks of a tribe, and not of isolated individuals: "In a tribe of hunters, an individual..." (WN I.ii.3).

²⁰ On the other hand, if Smith had not conjectured an already established society in which exchanges are made before the division of labour is established (since the advantages are not yet known), and within which it gradually emerges due to the frequency of exchanges, he could not have supported the thesis of the third chapter of the WN. According to this thesis, it is the extension of the market that limits the development of the division of labour, since the division of labour is derived from the spread of exchanges (and not vice versa). For a more in-depth discussion of this point, see Bee (2021).

DESERVING AND OBTAINING

Regarding a hypothetical state of nature composed of solitary individuals, Smith makes it clear in the LJ that from his point of view "there is no such state existing" (LJ B, 3). It is an empirical fact that individuals are always born into some form of society, however small or primitive it may be. To be already in society for Smith means to be already subject to the judgment of others and self-judgment, and thus sensitive to the desire for an appropriate judgment of oneself. On the contrary, Smith states, if it were ever possible for an individual to be born and grow up outside society, he would not even possess the ideas of "of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct", and would not be able to judge himself (TMS III.1.3). But this, for Smith, is primarily a thought experiment and not the natural condition of human beings. By being born and growing up in society, each individual becomes sensitive to the common desire to deserve and obtain the esteem of others. This desire, for Smith, is a form of self-love that is distinct from the mere desire for self-preservation. It has to do with the right recognition of oneself, understood as the desire to obtain the esteem of others that concords with one's own self-esteem. The pleasure given by the satisfaction of this form of self-love is a pleasure of a different order from the pleasure given by the satisfaction of survival needs. To wish to satisfy the pleasure given by obtaining the deserved esteem is to wish to continue living with others.

As with Pufendorf, therefore, for Smith the vehicle of sociability is self-love. However, this is a different conception of self-love, developed from a revision of the premises of the anthropology of Hobbes and Pufendorf based on the desire for self-preservation. This revision also marks the divergence between Smith and Hutcheson. While the latter criticises Pufendorf's position by arguing that sociability does not derive from self-love but from benevolence, Smith, for his part, rather makes a revision of the meaning of self-love. From his point of view, it is not the desire for self-preservation that drives one to be in society, to exchange and improve one's conditions, but the desire to deserve and obtain the esteem of others. The pursuit of material goods itself stems from the latter desire and not the former. As he writes in the TMS (VI.i.3; emphasis added):

Though it is in order to supply the necessities and conveniencies of the body, that the advantages of external fortune are originally recommended to us, yet we cannot live long in the world without perceiving that the respect of our equals, our credit and rank in the society we live in, depend very much upon the degree in which we possess, or are supposed to possess, those advantages. The desire of becoming the proper objects of this respect, of deserving and obtaining this credit and rank among our equals, is, perhaps, the strongest of all our desires, and our anxiety to obtain the advantages of fortune is accordingly much more excited and irritated by this desire, than by that of supplying all the necessities and conveniencies of the body, which are always very easily supplied. (TMS VI.i.3)

This revision of self-love also distances Smith from Mandeville and Rousseau, although scholars often tend to miss the difference when quoting this well-known passage from the TMS.²¹ Mandeville and Rousseau think of individuals in society as vain people, that is, anxious to gain the esteem of others. If for Rousseau vanity is a product of society, for Mandeville it pre-exists it and makes it possible. It is vanity (due to a natural spirit of superiority) that would make us understand how to be sociable and avoid conflict: we know that others are as vain as we are, and so the best way to gain their consideration is to turn their vanity towards us, flattering them regardless of whether they deserve it or not (see Mandeville 1988). Smith's small but decisive variation is that perhaps the strongest desire of human beings is not simply to gain the esteem of others, but to *deserve* and obtain it.

Even the desire to possess the advantages of "external fortune" derives more from this desire, Smith says, than from the need to provide for one's own survival. So much so that an exchange can be assumed even when there is no desire for survival as a motive. In the society where there is not yet a division of labour, things are exchanged that everyone can get for themselves and without yet anticipating that in the long run they will get more (see WN I.ii.3). So, the motive for exchange here cannot be the aim to better satisfying one's survival needs. Rather, the motive may be a certain propensity to exchange that has as its purpose finding with others the proper recognition of oneself through what one does. Accepting something in return for some of our services may mean finding recognition of the goodness of what we do for each other and thus of our own merit. The equivalent obtained in return makes explicit and possibly confirms the worth of what for the other may be a "good office".²² This type of exchange can take place between individuals who are already living with others in society and who are therefore sensitive to the common desire to obtain and deserve the esteem of others.

The principle of sociability underlying the society without division of labour in which exchange already takes place does not seem to be for Smith self-love as a desire for self-preservation (more or less fuelled by self-love as vanity) of isolated individuals driven by the need of cooperation. Rather, it can be seen in what appears to Smith as perhaps the strongest of human desires, namely the desire to deserve and obtain the esteem of others.

OBJECTIONS OBVIATED

Smith formulates the hypothesis that there is a certain propensity to exchange at the origin of the division of labour. This hypothesis has among its consequences the denial of the assumption of "summa imbecillitas" and of the human need to cooperate. This was immediately noticed by Thomas Pownall (1722-1805), an important official of the British Empire, who wrote an open letter to Smith in which he harshly criticised this point along with other aspects of his thinking.²³ Although he later

²¹ See, among others, for instance, Dupuy (1987), Force (2003), Hanley (2009), Douglass (2017).

²² For an explanation of exchange in the WN in a society in which there is no division of labour and therefore in the absence of its advantages, see Bee (2021).

²³ A Letter from Governor Pownall to Adam Smith, LL.D.F.R.S., being an Examination of Several Points of Doctrine, laid down in his 'Inquiry in to the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations' (London, 1776). This letter is found in Appendix A of the Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, vol. 7 (Smith, 1987, pp. 337-376). References to this letter are made by indicating the acronym of Correspondence of Adam Smith (CAS), followed by a comma and the page in question.

claimed that he had taken such criticisms into account, Smith never changed his thesis on the matter. Smith could therefore not have been unaware of the consequences of his hypothesis with respect to the principle of sociability.

Among the first commentators on the WN, Pownall sees arguments in it that complement the debate on sociability. He argues that Smith made a unique contribution "that might fix some first principles in the most important of sciences, the knowledge of the human community, and its operations" (CAS, 337). However, according to him, in the early chapters of the WN there are "some aberrations from the exact line of demonstration in the deductive part" (CAS, 337-8) that could lead to pernicious theoretical consequences.

Pownall is a critic of the hypothesis of an "imagined theoretic state of nature" à la Hobbes (CAS, 339). But at the same time he also criticises Smith's hypothesis of a natural propensity to exchange. In Pownall's view, the danger of this hypothesis would be to think of the community and its government as based on a "capricious", volatile and voluntary inclination:

It is not in the voluntary desires, much less in a capricious 'propensity to barter,' that this first principle of community resides; it is not a consequence of reason and speech actuating this propensity, it is interwoven with the essence of our nature, and is there in the progress of, and as part of that nature, the creating and efficient cause of government; of government as the true state of nature to man, not as an artificial succedaneum to an imagined theoretic state of nature (CAS, 339).

Evidently, Pownall reads Smith's propensity to exchange as a factor in the aggregation of isolated individuals (as is the self-love of Pufendorf and Hobbes) and not as a principle of sociability that takes place already in society, where individuals naturally born and grow, and such that individuals wish to continue living in it. At the same time, however, he grasps and highlights the opposition between the hypothesis of the propensity to exchange and the hypothesis of the necessity for social life due to the need for cooperation.

According to Pownall, the human community had a necessary cause, which made society and government indispensable: the combination of the limited capacities of individuals and the extent of their needs. Individuals would need to live together because they were unable to meet their needs alone.

Smith argues that the division of labour is not so much based on natural talents, but that the different skills are mostly due to the division of labour itself. Pownall, on the other hand, does not accept Smith's reversal of the traditional discourse and argues that specialisation naturally and necessarily comes before exchange:

Before a man can have the propensity to barter, he must have acquired somewhat, which he does not want himself, and must feel, that there is something which he does want, that another person has in his way acquired; a man has not a propensity to acquire, especially by labour, either the thing which he does not want, or more than he wants, even of necessaries; [...]

Nature has so formed us, as that the labour of each must take one special direction, in preference to, and to the exclusion of some other equally necessary line of labour, by which direction of his labour, he will be but partially and imperfectly supplied. Yet while each take a different line of labour, the channels of all are abundantly supplied. (CAS, 338)

Pownall's point is that it makes no sense for exchange to take place without the advantage given by previous specialisation. The division of labour would be the cause of the exchange, not the other way round. Individuals would only exchange because of the advantages given by specialisation. The division of labour would be a natural process, the *immediate* (and not a "very slow and gradual") result of the different abilities and skills of individuals and of the perception that they can get what they need by exchanging their surplus with others. Therefore, society and government would be natural for human beings due to the need for preservation. To criticise Smith and the hypothesis of the propensity to exchange, Pownall assumes Pufendorf's hypothesis on *summa imbecillitas* and the need for cooperation.²⁴

Pownall's comments were published in 1776 and referred to the first edition of the WN. In 1778, Smith published a second revised edition with minor changes, some of them in response to Pownall's objections.²⁵ This indicates that Smith took his letter rather seriously. In correspondence with Andreas Holt of October 1780, he even says that: "In the second edition I flattered myself that I had obviated all the objections of Governor Pownal" (CAS, 250). However, Smith never changed the hypothesis of a propensity to exchange prior to anticipating the advantages of the division of labour. This means that for him what was expressed in the early chapters of the WN was in itself sufficient to obviate Pownall's objections. Besides, those chapters are built precisely with the purpose of refuting the opposite traditional hypothesis, based on the idea that the division of labour precedes exchange. Smith states that he has considered all of Pownall's objections, thus demonstrating that he is fully aware that his hypothesis on the propensity to exchange is opposed to that of a sociability based on the need to cooperate in order to satisfy one's needs.

²⁴ Pownall also writes that: "Man's wants and desires require to be supplied through many channels; his labour will more than supply him in some one or more; but through the limitation and the defined direction of his capacities he cannot actuate them all. This limitation, however, of his capacities, and the extent of his wants, necessarily creates to each man an accumulation of some articles of supply, and a defect of others, and is the original principle of his nature, which creates, by a reciprocation of wants, the necessity of an intercommunion of mutual supplies; this is the forming cause, not only of the division of labour, but the efficient cause of that community, which is the basis and origin of civil government; for, by necessarily creating an inequality of accumulation, and a consequential subordination of classes and orders of men, it puts the community under that form, and that organization of powers, which is government" (CAS, 338-9).

²⁵ See, for example, WN I.v.7, where Smith made changes in order to better explain the idea that equal quantities of labour always have the same value for the labourer. This had been a specific objection made by Pownall (CAS, 344-5).

CONCLUSION

Smith's criticism of Pufendorf's conception of sociability concerns the need for self-preservation as the root cause of human society. In Smith's view, individuals do not stick together primarily because of this need. They do so deliberately because they feel pleasure in living together. This pleasure is based on the confirmation of one's own self-esteem through the recognition of the other, which for Smith is perhaps the strongest desire that holds individuals together. Nothing could be further from the Hobbesian idea that social life is an unpleasant necessity.

Like Pufendorf, Smith thinks of the origin of sociability and society as separate and independent from civil government. However, his representation of society now has a different connotation. Society is not the fruit of an egoistic calculus of individual advantages, but of the pleasure of being with others. Cooperation doesn't come from that calculus, but from a moral life that find its manifestation in exchange.

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