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Comments

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Adam Smith's Unnaturally Natural (Yet Naturally Unnatural) Use of
the Word Natural

Natural and nature are complex words, fraught with ambiguity and contradiction. This paper does not attempt to give a complete account of Smith's use of these words. However, it does demonstrate that Smith did not necessarily approve of what he called "natural" or "nature". Economists and others who assume otherwise are in error. A study, analysis, and/or interpretation of Smith's work which depends upon this (at times unstated) assumption - that Smith necessarily approved of "nature" or the "natural"- needs to be read with great care; perhaps even incredulity.¹

The impression has been given by various knowledgeable commentators of Adam Smith's work that Smith was unambiguously in favor of (or normatively disposed towards) what Smith called "natural" or "nature". So, for example, Patricia Werhane in a recent extensive study of Smith's work writes that for Smith "a

society that emulates the system of natural liberty is most harmonious and closest to the natural order"; hence, for Smith "the natural order of society is the ideal moral order."²

Charles Clark, in a recent book lambasting "natural law economics" for making economic thought ahistorical and asocial writes that "Smith's work was Newtonian because that was the best way of discovering the natural laws and God's design - the natural order". For Smith "God implanted in our nature drives and propensities which lead us to promote His end, which - since He is a benevolent God - is the well-being of society." Clark claims that for Smith "the basic idea behind the Invisible Hand is one of the major themes of Natural Theology: nature is arranged so as to provide for the prosperity and happiness of mankind, as long as man followed nature's design, the natural laws."³

Jacob Viner in his classic article "Adam Smith and Laissez Faire" wrote that "Smith's major claim to fame ... seems to rest on his elaborate and detailed application to the economic world of the concept of a unified natural order, operating according to natural law, and if left to its own course producing results beneficial to mankind." Viner explicitly reads Smith as associating the natural with good and the not natural with bad; hence, "government activity is natural and therefore good where it promotes the general welfare, and is an interference with nature and therefore bad when it injures the general interests of society."⁴

David McNally in a recent detailed reinterpretation of Adam Smith and the classical political economists as exponents of a theory of "agrarian capitalism", argues that Smith "saw these historical changes as creating a social relation (wage labour) consistent with the natural order of things and thus as indispensable to economic prosperity and social harmony". McNally interprets Smith as having "naturalized and eternalized historically specific relations of production", thus giving Smith's work "its uncritical and apologetic character."⁵

These writers (as well as many others) have a tendency to misunderstand Smith, and mislead their readers, because they are insufficiently aware that Smith did not feel that what was "natural" was necessarily desirable.⁶

This paper does not attempt a full analysis of Smith's promiscuous relationship to the words "natural" and "nature".⁷ Yet, it will be here noted that "nature" and the "natural" is an extraordinarily rich, complex, contradictory, no doubt dialectical concept.⁸ C.S. Lewis in his Studies in Words says that nature can mean, among other things, everything, or that which is created by God, or that which is sublunary, or the ordinary, or a thing's real character, or the actual, or the real, or the pre-civil, or that which is not touched by divine grace. Nature's opposite may be unnatural, artificial, not "Man", not "rational" law, supernatural, or towns.⁹ Samuel Johnson's dictionary contains ten definitions for "natural" as an adjective and thirteen definitions for "nature".¹⁰ It takes over four

pages of small type for the Oxford English Dictionary to define "natural"; and over two pages to define "nature".¹¹ It perhaps should not be expected that Smith should be entirely consistent in his use of such a pregnant term as nature or natural.¹² Nonetheless, I will now give examples where Smith used the word natural or nature to describe something which he clearly did not approve of.

Let us begin with Smith's Lectures on Jurisprudence.¹³ In a discussion of property rights, and means of acquiring property, in this case property by accession, Smith says: "Among men too the child is considered as the property of the mother unless where she is the property of the husband, and then the offspring belongs to the father as an accession to the wife. This was the case in the old law in the state of wedlock and in this point is still so, but natural children are the property of the mother and generally take her name".¹⁴

A natural child was one born of unwed parents. Smith wished to discourage the production of natural children.¹⁵

In lecturing on the transfer of property by succession, i.e. from the dead to the living, Smith says: "Though when men get the power of conveying an estate by a testament they are often more willing to give their fortunes to those who are already rich, as they are their more respectable relations, than to those who are in lower circumstances. This perhaps is not altogether just but it is what men are naturally inclined to."¹⁶

Note: here Smith makes an invidious comparison between what

is perhaps "altogether just" and that which men are "naturally" inclined to do. Clearly, Smith does not necessarily favor what men are "naturally" inclined to do.

In a discussion of earlier times, Smith describes how the barbarous nations of the north overran the Roman Empire, the arts were neglected, and a great share of power went into the hands of those who possessed the greatest property. Smith says that in his contemporary society "A tradesman to retain your custom may perhaps vote for you in an election, but you need not expect that he will attend you to battle."¹⁷ Things were different after the fall of the Roman empire: "As the dependents were in every respect so entirely maintained by these allodiall lords (as they were called) for maintainance and every thing they enjoyed, it was natural that they should attend him in war and defend him when injured by the other lords or their dependents. And they were constantly about him, whether in peace or in war; in peace they were entertained at his table, and in war they were his soldiers." ¹⁸

Smith is here describing a relationship which was "natural"; yes, natural given the socioeconomic arrangements at the time. Yet, note: this is exactly the type of "natural" personal servile relationship which vexed Smith dearly.¹⁹ For Smith, "Nothing tends so much to corrupt and enervate and debase the mind as dependency, and nothing gives such noble and generous notions of probity as freedom and independency."²⁰

In discussing slavery Smith says: "It is to be observed that

slavery takes place in all societies at their beginning, and proceeds from that tyrannic disposition which may almost be said to be natural to mankind." 21

For people who think that Smith was some kind of Panglossian optimist, Smith's views on slavery make sobering reading. Smith doubted that slavery would "ever be totally or generally abolished." 22 Smith says of slavery in a free country that "the love of domination and authority and the pleasure men take in having every thing done by their express orders, rather than to condescend to bargain and treat with those whom they look upon as their inferiors and are inclined to use in a haughty way; this love of domination and tyrannizing, I say, will make it impossible for the slaves in a free country ever to recover their liberty." 23

A little later in discussing the situation of the coal miners in his time, Smith says that it is in the narrow economic interests of the masters of coal works to free their miners, who are kept in virtual slavery. "[O]ne who works a year and day in the coal pit becomes a slave as the rest and may be claimed by the owner, unless he has bargained not to take advantage of this. But this the masters of coal works will never agree to. The love of domination and authority over others, which I am afraid is natural to mankind, a certain desire of having others below one, and the pleasure it gives one to have some persons whom he can order to do his work rather than be obliged to persuade others to bargain with him, will for ever hinder this from taking

place."²⁴

Smith deeply desires a social system to be set up, which is structured so that it minimizes the ability of the powerful to use personal domination and authority over others and to tyrannize their underlings. In the above particular situation, if the superiors in question freed their coal miners, wages would fall; coal owners in effect pay a premium so as to be able to have the coal workers in slavery.²⁵ Note how Smith wants to develop social institutions to counteract a "natural" human inclination: the love of personal domination and authority over others.

In a similar vein concerning "natural" human passions which are undesirable, Smith says: "Treasure and derelict goods by the laws of Britain belong to the king. This arises from that natural influence of superiors which draws every thing to itself that it can without a violation of the most manifest rules of justice."²⁶

This is reminiscent of a point Smith made on the proper subjects of tragedies in his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. There Smith says that "There is in human nature a servility which inclines us to adore our superiors and an inhumanity which disposes us to contempt and trample under foot our inferiors."²⁷

Note how in the same sentence Smith attributes an inhumanity to human nature.

In the "Early Draft of Part of The Wealth of Nations" Smith

writes of a "greediness which is natural to man".²⁸ Smith's use of the word natural in connection with greediness (which Smith does not approve of) occurs in the context of outlining how political rulers seize all vacant lands as soon as the idea of private property in land is introduced. This seizure inhibits the slow progress of opulence; naturally, Smith denounces it.²⁹

Returning to the Jurisprudence Lectures, Smith discusses war between nations, and comments upon guilt by association: "We have been injured by France, our resentment rises against the whole nation instead of the government, and they, through a blind indiscriminating faculty natural to mankind, become the objects of an unreasonable resentment."³⁰ Smith is against this "unreasonable" resentment; it is "quite contrary to the rules of justice observed with regard to our own subjects".³¹ Unfortunately, "in war there must always be the greatest injustice but it is inevitable."³² Inevitable, perhaps; yet, Smith clearly does not approve of this injustice which results from a natural indiscriminating human faculty.

Smith discusses the development of money as a universal equivalent. "In Italy, and particularly in Tuscany, every thing was compared with sheep, as this was their principal commodity. This is what may be called the natural measure of value."³³ Notice how a "natural" measure of value arose at a certain level of socioeconomic development. Smith discusses how money developed from cattle and oxen and sheep to the precious metals. Gold and silver became the measure of value. "In the same manner as they

changed the natural measures of length into artificial ones, so did they those of value. All measures were originally taken from the human body; a fathom was measured by the stretch of a man's arms, a yard was the half of this, a span an inch or digit, ... These natural measures could not long satisfy them, as these would vary greatly, ... Prudent men therefore contrived, and the public established, artificial yards, fathoms, feet, inches, etc. which should be the measures of all different lengths. For the same reason they converted the original and natural measures of value into others not so natural, but more convenient than any of those naturally used by men in the ruder ages of society."³⁴

Smith favored the development away from a more "natural" measure of value to the precious metals. "The natural measures of sheep or oxen would not answer their purpose; a more precise measure was requisite, the value of which could always be ascertained by its quantity."³⁵ People became more careful in their trades and "bargains"; the "natural" measure of value was rightfully superseded. After all, as Smith patiently explains, it would indeed be "a very great hardship on a Glasgow merchant to give him a cow for one of his commodities."³⁶

In the so-called "History of Astronomy" essay³⁷ in a discussion of the origin of philosophy Smith writes that "in the first ages of society ... cowardice and pusillanimity, so natural

to man in his uncivilized state ... unprotected by the laws of society, exposed, defenceless, he feels his weakness upon all occasions; his strength and security upon none."³⁸

For Smith, cowardice and pusillanimity are natural to man in the early stages of society. W.P.D. Wightman, Smith's rather quarrelsome modern editor of the majority of Smith's Essays on Philosophical Subjects³⁹ writes that "Smith seems to have had an obsession about 'cowards'".⁴⁰ Smith, of course, was against cowardice and pusillanimity. One of his major concerns in the Lectures on Jurisprudence was how to defend society.⁴¹ Smith deals with this issue in The Wealth of Nations, in Book V, Chapter I, Part I, "Of the Expence of Defence". Here, among other things Smith claims that "An industrious, and upon that account a wealthy nation, is of all nations the most likely to be attacked; and unless the state takes some new measures for the public defence, the natural habits of the people render them altogether incapable of defending themselves."⁴² According to Smith, due to the 'natural' social habits engendered in a commercial (or capitalist) society, the state of a commercial society must spend the money to maintain a standing army. In this passage, coming as it does in the middle of a discussion comparing the warlike qualities of people in hunting, shepherding, farming and commercial societies, it is clear that Smith is dealing with "natural habits" which are, indeed, socially determined by the level of society. Moreover, Smith does not entirely approve of all of these "natural habits". Some

of these undesirable "natural habits" require the attention of the state.

In the Wealth of Nations, in discussing the advantages of the division of labor and specialization, Smith writes that "The habit of sauntering and of indolent careless application, which is naturally, or rather necessarily acquired by every country workman who is obliged to change his work and his tools every half hour, and to apply his hand in twenty different ways almost every day of his life; renders him almost always slothful and lazy, and incapable of any vigorous application even on the most pressing occasions."⁴³

Naturally, Smith is against the sloth and laziness "natural" to the country workman.

In discussing wages, Smith notes that "We rarely hear, it has been said, of the combinations of masters ... because it is the usual, and one may say, the natural state of things which nobody ever hears of."⁴⁴ Smith was against combinations of masters; he disapproved of this "natural state".

Smith writes that "entails are the natural consequences of the law of primogeniture."⁴⁵ Primogenitor is the right of the eldest child, especially the eldest son, to inherit the entire estate of one or both parents; entails on land were rules by which the inheritance to the land in future generations was

fixed. Smith was against both of them.

In a chapter arguing against government deficit spending Smith writes "In a commercial country abounding with every sort of expensive luxury, the sovereign, in the same manner as almost all the great proprietors in his dominions naturally spends a great part of his revenue in purchasing those luxuries."⁴⁶ Smith argued against this sort of "natural" profligate government spending since, among other reasons, "The want of parsimony in time of peace, imposes the necessity of contracting debt in time of war."⁴⁷

In a discussion of what Smith perceived to be a contemporary stationary state, Smith writes that "China seems to have been long stationary, and had probably long ago acquired that full complement of riches which is consistent with the nature of its laws and institutions."⁴⁸ Hence, human laws and institutions can have a "nature"; and, Smith disapproved of some of those laws and institutions. In particular, if China opened up more to foreign commerce, and gave greater security to the poor and the owners of small capital, then it could break out of the stationary state and increase its wealth.

Right before explaining that "the mean rapacity, the monopolizing spirit of merchants and manufacturers, who neither are, nor ought to be the rulers of mankind ... may very easily be

prevented from disturbing the tranquility of any body but themselves" Smith comments that "the violence and injustice of the rulers of mankind is an ancient evil, for which, I am afraid, the nature of human affairs can scarce admit of a remedy."⁴⁹ Here is a situation in which the "nature" of human affairs can do little to remedy an ancient evil. Although the word "evil" is one which has generally dropped out of 20th century economists' discourse, I think it is clear enough that Smith was against this sort of "evil" engendered by the nature of human affairs.

In Book IV, at the end of the long chapter "Of Colonies", after a description castigating how the East India Company is ruining India, Smith writes "I mean not, however, by any thing which I have said, to throw any odious imputation upon the general character of the servants of the East India company, and much less upon that of any particular persons. It is the system of government, the situation in which they are placed, that I mean to censure; not the character of those who have acted on it. They acted as their situation naturally directed, ..." ⁵⁰

Here the stewards in the East India company acted in a "natural" way, based upon their position in a mercantile monopoly which was also the sovereign of a country. This was a "natural" way which Smith disapproved of. Smith disapproved of a monopoly mercantile firm being the sovereign of a country and the "natural" consequences which follow from it.

Smith returns to the theme of monopolies in Book V, and

elaborates on how they attempt to restrict output and increase prices. "The usual corporation spirit, wherever the law does not restrain it, prevails in all regulated companies. When they have been allowed to act according to their natural genius, they have always, in order to confine the competition to as small a number of persons as possible, ... "51 Attempts to restrict competition is exactly the sort of "natural genius" which Smith most vehemently attacked.

Later in the same article, near the end of a very long paragraph outlining the disgraceful history of the English East India company, Smith writes: "No other sovereigns ever were, or, from the nature of things, ever could be, so perfectly indifferent about the happiness or misery of their subjects, the improvement or waste of their dominions, the glory or disgrace of their administration; as, from irresistible moral causes, the greater part of the proprietors of such a mercantile company are, and necessarily must be."52 These are the "nature of things", the irresistible moral causes which result when a monopolist, mercantile company is the sovereign of a country; Smith was against this sort of nature.53

In the next article, in dealing with managerial problems in controlling college professors, Smith argues that professors should be at least partly paid for by the students themselves. If professors are not, and they are responsible to authorities outside of the university, such as a bishop or a governor or a minister, there will be administrative difficulties. "An

extraneous jurisdiction of this kind, besides, is liable to be exercised both ignorantly and capriciously. In its nature it is arbitrary and discretionary, and the persons who exercise it, neither attending upon the lectures of the teacher themselves, nor perhaps understanding the sciences which it is his business to teach, are seldom capable of exercising it with judgment. ... Whoever has attended for any considerable time to the administration of a French university, must have had occasion to remark the effects which naturally result from an arbitrary and extraneous jurisdiction of this kind."⁵⁴

Naturally, Smith is against authority which is of its nature ignorant, arbitrary and capricious.⁵⁵

Later in the same article, Smith deals with the deleterious effects of the division of labor on the mind and character of the worker in commercial (capitalist) society. According to Smith, the worker "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." ⁵⁶ Smith is against work-induced stupidity and ignorance which "naturally" arises from the division of labor in commercial societies. Smith argues that the government should use education to try to counteract these undesirable "natural" traits.

Greater study and care needs to be devoted to how Smith uses the words "natural" and "nature". These are complex words, fraught with ambiguity. The present paper has proposed to demonstrate that Smith did not necessarily approve of things which he denoted as "natural" or "nature". Yet, the paper's implications may possibly be farreaching. Economists and others who assume that Smith necessarily approved of what is "natural" or of "nature" are in error. A rereading of Smith with this point in mind may be warranted.

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Endnotes

1. This paper is part of a series of papers I am working on concerning Smith's methodology and world view. My reading of Smith is that he is an epistemological sceptic; concerning human nature he is an ontological pessimist; Smith did not unambiguously believe in "progress" or that humans can approach "truth": hence the importance of rhetoric in his thought; (see e.g. Griswold(1991)) and, Smith's analyses were generally historically specific (see e.g. Pack (1993); also Cremachi (1981)). Smith's promiscuous use (by today's standards) of the words nature and natural has tended to obscure the fact that his analyses were neither asocial nor ahistorical; nor were they uncritical of commercial or capitalist society.
2. Werhane(1991), pp. 82; 50, emphasis added.
3. Clark, (1992) pp.42; 48, emphasis added. See also Clark, (1989); (1990). That this seems to be an oversimplification of Smith's theological views see e.g. Pack, 1992.

4. Viner. (1928) pp. 118; 141, emphasis added.
5. McNally(1988), p. 261 emphasis added. For interpretations that Smith's work was neither apologetic nor uncritical see e.g. Rothschild(1992), Pack (1991).
6. For other prominent examples of this problem see e.g. Veblen(1948) and Marx (1963) "Chapter 2, #1, "Seventh and Last Observation".
7. The most profound reflections on the use of "nature" and "natural" in Smith's work is perhaps Cremachi (1989). Cremachi argues that Smith used "nature" and "natural" as a metaphysical link between "reality" or "truth" which, following Hume, Smith felt he was unable to know or appropriate or make "progress" towards, and historicism. Hence, talk of nature and the natural provided Smith with a buffer or bridge between "the individual mind and the ultimate order of reality". (p. 104) Indeed, it is "true" that Smith rarely if ever talks of e.g. "the progress of truth" (Stewart (1980), p. 327) or if something is truthful. Smith does talk incessantly about the nature of a thing and if something is natural.
8. See e.g. Freud (1963), "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words" pp. 44-50; Hegel (1967), "Perception: Or Things and Their Deceptiveness", pp. 161-178. Indeed, if there is some sort of dialectical unfolding of human history, or if there is any "truth" to "Freudian slips" and Freud's concern that "we should understand the language of dreams better and translate it more easily if we knew more about the development of language"

(Fraud (1963), p. 50) then they should be particularly reflected in the history and development of the use of the words nature, and natural, and their synonyms and antonyms. The proper understanding of texts by economists could be enhanced by attention to the field of historical linguistics. This field, of course, was a keen interest of Smith's; see, e.g. "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages" in Smith (1983).

9. Lewis (1967), Chapter 2, "Nature (With Phusis, Kind, Physical etc.)" pp. 24-74. Its opposite can also be revealed, as in revealed theology.

10. Smith wrote an influential review of Johnson's dictionary for the Edinburgh Review. See Smith (1980), pp. 229-241.

11. A few years ago I asked the curator of the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale University to define "natural" for me. He could not. I asked him then how he could decide what belonged in a museum of natural history and what did not. His answer was exceedingly complex; in fact, I was unable to decipher it.

12. For an example of, e.g., Smith's rather loose translating style, compare his translation of extracts from Rousseau's Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inegalite parmi les hommes with the original in Smith (1980) pp. 251-256.

Puro (1992) gives examples of eight distinct usages of the term "natural" in The Wealth of Nations.

13. Smith's Lectures on Jurisprudence, especially his more recently discovered "Report of 1762-3" have not received the attention they deserve from Smith scholars. These lectures

reveal a deep historical depth to Smith, as well as an affinity with Marx. See Meek (1977).

14. Smith (1978), p. 27, emphasis added.
15. See e.g. ibid., pp. 447-448.
16. Ibid., p. 40, emphasis added.
17. Ibid., p. 50.
18. Ibid., p. 51, emphasis added.
19. See e.g. Perelman (1989).
20. Smith (1978), p. 333.
21. Ibid., p. 452, emphasis added.
22. Ibid., p. 181.
23. Ibid., p. 186.
24. Ibid., p. 192, emphasis added.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 460, emphasis added.
27. Smith (1983), p. 124, emphasis added.
28. Smith (1978), p. 579, emphasis added.
29. It also introduces the concept of monopoly rent which creates havoc with Smith's theory of price determination. See Ricardo (1977), Dmitriev (1974).
30. Smith (1978), p. 547, emphasis added.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p. 548.
33. Ibid., p. 499, emphasis added.
34. Ibid., pp. 367-368, emphasis added.
35. Ibid., pp. 368-369, emphasis added.

38. Ibid., p. 500.

37. This and the "History of the Ancient Physics" and the "History of the Ancient Logics and Metaphysics" are each preceded by the title "The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries". Thus, each of these pieces appear to be actually part of a larger, unified, unfinished essay of that name. The traditional nomenclature emphasizes viewing these pieces as separate histories, rather than as pieces of a unitary essay on methodology. This nomenclature has the tendency to obscure the importance of these essays for understanding Smith's methodology.

38. Smith, (1980), p. 48, emphasis added.

39. "At this stage some readers may reasonably protest that it is an editor's function at most to comment on the text and not to argue with its author." (Wightman (1980), p. 25.) Quite true.

40. Smith, (1980), p. 168, fn. 35.

41. Particularly calamitous in Smith's view is when a society based upon an "earlier" or "more primitive" stage of development, such as a shepherding society, overruns a more "advanced" or "sophisticated" society such as one based upon farming or commerce. Arguably, the importance of Smith's concern has been highlighted in recent years by such events as the destruction wrecked by the backwards Khmer Rouge in Kampuchea and the contemporary so-called "ethnic cleansing" by the rude (primitive, relatively undeveloped) Serbs in Bosnia Herzegovina.

42. WN V.i.a.15, emphasis added.

43. Ibid., I.i.7, emphasis added.
44. Ibid., I.viii.13, emphasis added.
45. Ibid., III.ii.5, emphasis added.
46. Ibid., V.iii.3, emphasis added.
47. Ibid., V.iii.4.
48. Ibid., I,ix,15, emphasis added.
49. Ibid., IV.iii.c.9, emphasis added.
50. Ibid., IV.vii.c.107, emphasis added.
51. Ibid., V.i.e.7, emphasis added.
52. Ibid., V.i.e.26, emphasis added.
53. For someone who used Smith's name to argue in favor of mercantile rule, see Stigler (1988). This truly disheartening misuse of Smith's name by someone who clearly knew better, was peddled to the apparently unsuspecting philistines in the National Association of Business Economists. As Galbraith (1992) has pointed out, Smith was "deeply averse to joint stock companies, now called corporations ... Modern advocates of free enterprise would find Smith's attack on corporations deeply disconcerting.". (pp. 99-100)
54. WN., V.i.f.9, emphasis added.
55. The accuracy of Smith's characterization of French universities is not currently at issue.
56. WN., V.i.f.50, emphasis added.

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