

Adam SMITH – The Theory of Moral Sentiments

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Adam Smith (1723-1790) is known as the father of modern economics through his most famous work, *The Wealth of Nations* (WN) that appeared in the same year as the Declaration of Independence of the United States (1776). In the times of the Industrial Revolution, we can say that Adam Smith had the chance to witness an entire set of social, cultural, economic, etc. changes that spread from England to the entire Europe and which still influence nowadays micro and macroeconomics.

As economy is to a great extent rather a humanistic phenomenon, in a permanent nexus with human psychology, the second largely known book signed by Adam Smith preambles the first cited: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), first published in 1759.

The book constitutes an overview of morality, illuminating upon the actions and reactions (consequent of certain human *emotions* controlled by moral standards) of the individual toward himself or when integrated to a group. The most important innate aspects that trigger sentiments are debated along with their positive or negative consequences. A tribute to the superiority of man in relation to other beings, the work is not meant to be a guide of morality, but a typical philosophical proposition reflecting present and later intellectual preoccupations of the author. Fundamental categories as the *propriety* and the *passions* (Part I), the *merit/demerit* and the *justice/beneficence* (Part II), the *sense of duty* (Part III), the *virtues* (Part VI) are attentively analyzed both as *action* and *emotion*. The author also debates the Principle of Approbation (Part IV, Part VII Section III.),

reserving an interesting chapter to “The influence of Custom and Fashion upon the Sentiments of Moral Approbation and Disapprobation” (Part V). Thus, the notion of Beauty is discussed alongside the notion of Good, as a fact (Part V) or as an effect (Part IV) in the context of moral approbation. At the same time, Smith's awareness of society's nature is highly remarkable and constitutes a valuable precursory of XX^s century advanced theories such as Maslow's classification of human needs. As a Professor, Ch. Berry asserts in the *Introduction* of the 2016 English reediting of Demiurg Publishing House: “In many ways it is a book of social and moral psychology. [...] what we can call economic behavior is necessarily situated in a moral context” (p. 14).

As nowadays the more and more present phenomenon of self-awareness lead economics and especially consuming behavior studies to complex views, a simple reading of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* refreshes our memory to the basis of the epistemology of *need* (developed by other disciplines as *desire*). Actually, Smith integrates the dichotomy *pleasure/pain* in a nexus of objects of *gratitude* and *resentment* (p.111-113); the individual should be both the object that benefit/evil is reversed upon and the one that is capable of reversing beneficence or evil. In our view, these manifestations still occur within the consumerist society, as the demand-offer principle may satisfy or not the actors of the market. Professor Ch. Berry also noticed in *TMS* the very use of *the invisible hand*: “Although its best known appearance is in *WN*, where it has come (misleadingly) to encapsulate *free market economics*, in *TMS* it turns on the deception that the imagined *pleasures of wealth and greatness* produce 'real happiness' but this illusion has a positive outcome” (p.15).

The permanent need of *recognition* and self-evaluation (or self-approbation) is grasped as well by Smith in connection to the notion of Beauty and its 'social' relativity: “Our first ideas of personal beauty and deformity are drawn from the shape and appearance of the others, not from our own. We soon become sensible, however, that other exercise the same criticism upon us. We are pleased when they approve of our figure, and we are disobliged when they seem to be disgusted. We become anxious to know how far our appearance deserves either their blame or approbation. We examine our person's limb by limb, and by placing ourselves before a looking glass [...], endeavour as much as possible, to view ourselves at the distance and with the eyes of other people” (p. 128). Hereof, the importance of *custom* and *fashion* in our social economy. The development of an individual's personality (and therefore morality) relies on education and social and cultural environment in the author's view. In the XVIII^s century, *taste* also seems to be a matter of high occurrence, as Smith appeals to examples from classic literature in order to exemplify, in a platonic understanding, the consequences of reverting rightness with badness in such case.

Eventually, Professor Ch. Berry concludes that *TMS* should produce more effects in academic debate as: “Although long over-shaded by *WN*, *TMS* has more recently attracted the attention of scholars as an important text in its own right” (p.16).

Even less known, especially among linguists, the essay *Considerations concerning the First Formation of Languages and the Different Genius of Original and Compounded Languages* is published independently in 1761, as it first constituted an annex of *TMS*. Like most of the intellectual of his time and much earlier, Adam Smith astonishes with his multidisciplinary preoccupations and views. We may consider that he writes one of the first linguistic work, anticipating Schlegel, as E. Coseriu asserts in the Afterword of the bilingual reprinting (Romanian-English) offered by Demiurg Publishing House in 2016. But we may advance that Smith also anticipates Saussure, Bourdieu or even Péninou (though any intellectual remains tributary to a general truth and precedent theories on human nature, yet each stepping aside as pioneers of their field). The genius of Smith consists in seizing the very basis of economics and its actors, that is, society (market) and producers/consumers (speakers). Thus, the linguistic dichotomy of the *significant/signified* and, further developed in the semiotic *process of naming* are presented in an intelligible manner within the *Thames* example: “The general word *river*, therefore, was, it is evident, in his acceptance of it, a proper name, signifying an individual object. If this person had been carried to another river, would he not readily have called it a river? Could we suppose any person living on the banks of Thames so ignorant, as not to know the general word river, but to be acquainted only with the particular word Thames, if he was brought to any other river, would he not readily call it *a Thames*?” (p. 50-51).

Unfortunately, less promoted among linguists and grammarians, the essay constitutes an utterly virtuous demonstration of Adam's times knowledge and views upon the field. It is even more valuable as it depicts the linguistic perspective of an economist.

As influenced by the empiricism of David Hume, still, Smith offers precise examples of linguistic issues among which *the denotation/the connotation, impersonal/personal verbs, prepositions, nouns*, etc. Thus, in Coseriu's view, “concerning the typology of language, Smith had a great influence” (p. 89) pioneering the notions that will be conceptualized as *synthetic* and *analytic*.

With a Foreword signed by Professor Al. Gafton and Adina Chirilă who include the work in the general specter of philosophical preoccupations of Smith's time, we strongly believe that *Considerations concerning the First Formation of Languages and the Different Genius of Original and Compounded Languages* should be promoted as a *proto-study* of grammar and linguistic issues.

Adam SMITH, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*,
Casa Editorială Demiurg, Iași, 351 p. ;
*Considerations concerning the First Formation of Languages
and the Different Genius of Original and Compounded Languages*,
Casa Editorială Demiurg, Iași, 108 p.