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ECON 485

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12/12/18

The Perspective of Nature in Hume and Smith

Abstract: Both Smith and Hume spend much of their works employing the concept of nature. Many have read the instances of nature to mark an approval from Smith in terms like the “system of natural liberty”. I make the case that nature in Smith and Hume does not refer to a specific category of things in the external world, but one perspective among others that lives in the realm of experience. Nature in Smith and Hume is referred to as a source of sentiment and belief distinct from other sources such as reason or revelation. They also employ the terms Nature and natural to refer to the process by which the more primal natures of man span out over time.

Introduction

Adam Smith wrote a review of *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary* in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1755. (EPS 232) In the dictionary, Nature is defined as such (omitting examples for brevity):

Náture. *n.s.* [*natura*, Latin; *nature*, French.]

1. An imaginary being supposed to preside over the material and animal world.
2. The native state or properties of any thing, by which it is discriminated from others.
3. The constitution of an animated body.
4. Disposition of mind; temper.
5. The regular course of things.
6. The compass of natural existence.
7. Natural affection, or reverence; native sensations.
8. The state or operation of the material world.
9. Sort; species.
10. Sentiments or images adapted to nature, or conformable to truth and reality.
11. Physics; the science which teaches the qualities of things. (Johnson [1755] 2013)

The number of definitions that Johnson refers to may be encompassed or exceeded by the number of ways that Smith and Hume employ the term nature. Nature is not a straightforward concept, and it doesn't lend itself to easy interpretation, especially in Smith's work.

Despite the confusion that the word nature may cause, Smith seems to have no reservations about using it. He uses 670 times (my count) in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), and 765 times (count from Waterman 2002) in *The Wealth of Nations* (WN). Smith clearly has multiple definitions, but it is hard to delineate what each one is.

In the text of TMS, Smith uses the word nature in three main ways. The first use refers to some great order of things, the body of Nature or the system of Nature. Capital-N Nature often has an Author attached to it, and wisdom and benevolence woven within it. Nature would go along with Johnson's first and eighth definitions (and perhaps eleven). Second, he refers to the

nature of particular things: the qualities that are inherent to them and distinguish them. It is very similar to the Aristotelian concept of essence: what makes a thing what it is—as in “human nature”—and corresponding to Johnson’s second, third, and ninth definitions. Smith’s third use is most difficult to grasp, and refers to the ordinary pattern of events over time. For example, “such a misfortune naturally excites such a degree of sorrow” (TMS I.i.3.4). It is not the same as Nature as it does not refer to the whole system. It is also different than essential nature as it refers to no one thing, but to the typical course of multiple things. The process of nature is Johnson’s definition number five.

A quality of Smith that allows him to be such an advanced thinker is his ability to use the world meaningfully to his audience without needing to be overly systematic. In this way he is non-foundational and a proto-pragmatist, parallel in many ways to William James. When he employs such a concept as nature, he means not to establish once and for all the fundamental order of some thing’s nature, but to supply a thinker some useful distinction in order to make use of the concept. In his *Principles of Psychology*, James comments on the scholastics use of the concept of essence:

...Men are so ingrainedly partial that, for common-sense and scholasticism (which is only common-sense grown articulate), the notion that there is no one quality genuinely, absolutely, and exclusively essential to anything is almost unthinkable.

... Meanwhile the reality overflows these purposes at every pore. Our usual purpose with it, our commonest title for it, and properties which this title [any

given definition] suggests, have in reality nothing sacramental. They characterize *us* more than they characterize the thing. (James in Wilshire 145-46)

I want to argue that Smith is using the concept of nature in such a way; a way that is not an attempt at speculative metaphysics, but a use of common-sense ideas to guide the reader to better understanding. Nature is more of a statement about internal perception than a category of things outside oneself, though it can be used to describe parts of the external world as well.

Smith clearly wants the reader to consider natural sentiment and its place in the grand system of Nature given how often he uses the terms. Smith wants us to think about nature as we experience and understand it in the great buzzing of life. Natural is in common-sense associated with its counterpart, artificial. Though Smith does not demonstrate the metaphysical distinction between Nature and Artifice, he appeals to our sense of these concepts. David Hume appeals to the same distinction in the *A Treatise on Human Nature* when discussing whether Justice is a Natural or Artificial Virtue. I believe that nature in Smith and Hume tends to refer to the senses of the world which are given before reflection. They are gut feelings rather than products of reason, that we cannot help but believe or sense regardless of what our skepticism wants to convince us. Nature is a distinct but not superior source of beliefs to reason.

Perspectives on Nature in Smith

In “Economics as Theology: Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations”, Anthony Waterman develops a reading of the *Wealth of Nations* that presents nature as both a positive expression of the world and a normative one. By doing a theological reading, Waterman believes that Smith’s system is one in which nature (positive) is in the long-run tending towards nature (normative) as

nature is well-ordered by the Deity. "The most interesting uses of "natural" occur within an explicit economic-theoretic context. A key example is found at the beginning of Book III, "Of the Natural Progress of Opulence." "According to the natural course of things... capital of every growing society is, first, directed to agriculture.... This order of things is so very natural" (W, p. 380). The redundant phrase "so very" is a giveaway. In a strictly positive sense, something is either "natural" or it is not. Smith was here using "natural" to mean "good"."(Waterman 2002, 910) Waterman also points to the use of the term "Natural Price" which is analogous to equilibrium or market clearing price in contemporary mainstream economics.

Waterman's reading of Smith is unsatisfactory to me. Spencer Pack argues against reading nature as a normative standard in an article titled appropriately for the complexity of the subject, "Adam Smith's Naturally Unnatural (nonetheless Naturally Unnatural) use of the Word Natural". Pack discusses several uses of the word natural that refer to something Smith clearly disapproves of. An interesting use he finds in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* is:

"Things were different after the fall of the Roman empire: "As the dependents were in every respect so entirely maintained by these allodial lords {as they were called) for maintainance and everything 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." ie 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. (Pack 1995, 5)

Similarly, “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.” (Pack 1995, 5-6) Pack shows that Smith does not hold natural principles to be the normative standard whatsoever.

His second insight is that natural is not a fixed category of things for all humans and it is dependent on various contexts, notably socioeconomic ones.

In Italy, and particularly in Tuscany, everything was compared with sheep, as this was their principal commodity . This is what may be called the natural measure of value." Notice how a "natural" measure of value arose at a certain level of socioeconomic development. ... 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. (Pack 1995, 8-9)

Notice how contextual and process oriented meaning of natural used here is similar to the third use I propose in the Introduction.

Pack and Schliesser have later proposed in “Adam Smith, Natural Movement, and Physics” that Smith typically uses nature to refer to the second definition I propose, that of Aristotelian essence. “... we argue that often when Smith used the word "natural", it was not in contradistinction to supernatural, social, or artificial; but to violent.” (Pack and Schliesser 2015, 1) In Smith’s essay on the History of Ancient Physics he discusses the nature of four classical elements. “The natural motion of two of these elements, Earth and Water, was downwards, upon account of their gravity. ... The natural motion of the two other elements, Fire and Air, was upwards, upon account of their levity,...” (EPS 109) The gravity and levity are in their essence. Their motion is a product of their nature, not the product of some outside force as in Newtonian Physics.

In the *Wealth of Nations* for example, men naturally employ their capital where they believe they will receive the most profit. The maximizing of the natural movement of people is what Pack believes is referred to in the “system of natural liberty”. "But the great object of the political economy of every country, is to increase the riches and power of that country...It ought, therefore, to give no preference nor superior encouragement to the foreign trade of consumption above the home-trade, nor to the carrying trade above either of the other two. It ought neither *to force nor to allure* into either of those two channels, a greater share of the capital of the country than what would *naturally* flow into them of its own accord"(emphasis added) (WN II.v.31) In some way then, it may be in the nature of government actors to curb the natural actions of the people below in the ways that they see fit. Smith happens to believe that natural liberty is more

more proper than the natural desire to control. Smith's man of system then may be such a controlling character. Though there are two natural instincts one is given primacy over the other.

Humean Naturalism and the Doctrine of Nature

Hume's wonderful insight is that all science, as it is done by humans, should be based on the science of man or the study of human nature. Matson defines Humean Naturalism as, "the mind's pragmatic acceptance of a rationally unverifiable frame of belief formation." (Matson 2018, 1) "...two core 'natural beliefs' of common life and experience that Hume sees as organizing the mind's broader frame of belief formation: the belief in the external existence [of] objects and the belief in causal connections. These two beliefs instinctively and naturally spring to the mind before reflection. They "provide the context" - the frame of reference so to speak" (Matson 2018, 4) Such natural frames, those frames given by instinct and common-sense, can be subject to skepticism. These frames are natural as no one derived them. The sense of time and space are part of our experience. Other metaphysical frameworks derived from reason can be supposed, for example Leibniz's monadology or Spinoza's rational Nature.

Smith takes on Hume's charge to study the mechanics of human nature in understanding the process of inquiry. Smith when describing the practice of an astronomer in *The History of Astronomy* uses three sensations to describe the movement between beliefs and conceptions: surprise, wonder, and admiration. These are all natural sentiments that a scientist feels toward her concept. Surprise responds to a jarring experience that makes the inquirer uncomfortable. Wonder is the experience of searching for a new interpretive framework, and admiration is what one feels upon arriving at a newly acceptable framing (Matson 2018, 7).

Calling the pre-skeptical interpretive frames Humean Natural Beliefs fits well with the way that I believe Smith uses the word natural, to mean the given sentiments and understandings that leap from the gut, and not those constructed in the head (Matson 2018, 12). Multiple times in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith refers to “the doctrine of Nature” as a source of belief about morals as opposed to other doctrines (provide the cites).

When discussing the moral sentiment towards obedience of the king, Smith says, “That kings are the servants of the people, to be obeyed, resisted, deposed, or punished, as the public conveniency may require, is the doctrine of reason and philosophy; but it is not the doctrine of Nature. Nature would teach us to submit to them for their own sake, to tremble and bow down before their exalted station, to regard their smile as a reward sufficient to compensate any services, and to dread their displeasure, though no other evil were to follow from it, as the severest of all mortifications.” (TMS I.iii.2.3) Here Smith is not putting the doctrine of Nature over the doctrine of reason, but he is representing it as another potential source of belief.

Smith also refers to Nature as a source of belief by anthropomorphizing it with a voice and an eye. “The appetites of hunger and thirst, the agreeable or disagreeable sensations of pleasure and pain, of heat and cold, etc. may be considered as lessons delivered by the voice of Nature herself, directing him what he ought to chuse, and what he ought to avoid, for this purpose.” (TMS VI.i.1) “In the eye of nature, it would seem, a child is a more important object than an old man; and excites a much more lively, as well as a much more universal sympathy. It ought to do so.” (TMS VI.ii.1.1) Here he even speaks of Nature’s wisdom in an approving tone.

Our sentiment for eating then is not motivated out of a need to survive, but out of a need to appease our hunger. It is, however, a mechanism by which we survive.

In a passage that was removed in the sixth edition Smith speaks of the belief that the Deity holds a love for virtue and hatred for vice to be a refinement of philosophy and not from the doctrine of Nature. He then uses the phrase natural sentiments joint with the word untaught. “Our untaught, natural sentiments, all prompt us to believe, that as perfect virtue is supposed necessarily to appear to the Deity, as it does to us, for its own sake, and without any further view, the natural and proper object of love and reward, so must vice, of hatred and punishment” (TMS II.ii.3.12 (This section only appears in editions 3-5).

The two core Humean Natural Beliefs are a part of the doctrine of Nature, while skepticism is part of the doctrine of reason. Nature in Hume and Smith is a unique voice and doctrine in the human mind at times cooperating with reason, and at times at odds. It is only internally distinguishable to the thinker. Nature can be thought of as a unique teacher along with other teachers; reason, society, parents, or revelation. Each of us can tell when something is a gut instinct or a machination of reason. Neither of the two doctrines is superior, but they are distinguishable.

Artificial and Natural Justice

Late in his *Treatise*, Hume asks whether justice is a natural or artificial virtue. Justice here refers to what Smith calls mere or commutative justice, the respect of property and contract. Is the sense of duty towards the rules of justice from the doctrine of nature or the doctrine of reason? The sense of duty to justice is perfectly reasonable to men in civilized

society, but it is not necessarily so to man in “his rude and more natural condition” (Hume 1739). He concludes that there is no direct natural sentiment for the rules of justice as there is for other virtues such as benevolence.

From all this it follows, that we have no real or universal motive for observing the laws of equity, but the very equity and merit of that observance; and as no action can be equitable or meritorious, where it cannot arise from some separate motive, there is here an evident sophistry and reasoning in a circle. Unless, therefore, we will allow, that nature has establish'd a sophistry, and render'd it necessary and unavoidable, we must allow, that the sense of justice and injustice is not deriv'd from nature, but arises artificially, tho' necessarily from education, and human conventions. (Hume 1739)

Note that nature is associated with being “a real or universal motive” and that though justice is not derived from nature it is arrived at “artificially, tho' necessarily” via artificial means.

Hume consoles his reader soon after. “To avoid giving offence, I must here observe, that when I deny justice to be a natural virtue, I make use of the word, natural, only as oppos'd to artificial. In another sense of the word; as no principle of the human mind is more natural than a sense of virtue; so no virtue is more natural than justice” (THN 252). So here even the sense of duty to rules of justice is from the gut, but it is a gut that is established by human education and convention. It is artificial in the sense that humans at one point in history made a conscious head decision to develop rules, but they are now just as part of our natural sentiment as any other. Here natural is used in the third sense, to mean what is developed in the ordinary course of

things. Most men who grow in civilized society will develop an affinity for these artificial sentiments making them for them just as natural as any other.

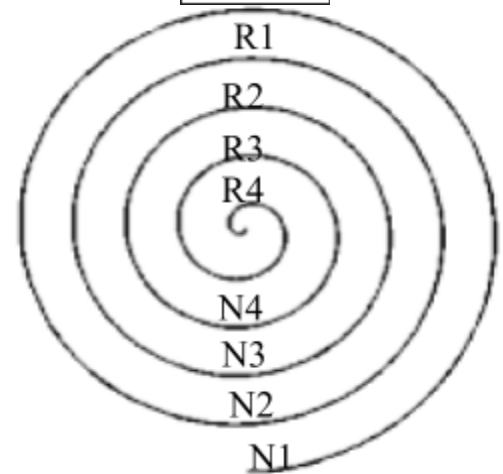
Hume goes further to state that those objects that are necessary to man in all states but are still rationally constructed are just as natural as any other principle. “Mankind is an inventive species; and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly be said to be natural as anything that proceeds immediately from original principles, without the intervention of thought or reflexion” (Hume 1739). It is necessary for man to consume water in some way. Each cup, bowl, or straw is its own artificial construction, but it can be called natural in the sense that all men will naturally employ reason to consume water.

Think back to the Pack’s examples in *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. It was natural at one time to use body parts as units of measurement.

Out of reason, we developed a more sophisticated and useful system of measurement. Now our natural system of measurement is these artificial constructs, but similarly natural in the sense of gut feeling. Upper levels of nature, however, requires the transmission of knowledge through education and convention. At each round of natural sentiment we may employ reason to solve certain problems

that we see. The product of reason is then adopted again as part of our nature for the next round (Figure 1). N1 can be considered primal human nature while the higher levels of the spiral are

Figure 1



constructed over time. Perhaps N1 always remains with us, but we overcome it with education and discipline. This entire process can be seen as natural. Justice is a natural virtue in the same way. When this entire process is looked back at, reason and nature get lumped together into the great system of Nature. Smith seemed to think of the grand system as wise. At the margin of life, referring to natural gut sentiments is not always wise, but referring to Nature in its entirety grants you a certain wisdom.

Consider an example from the *Wealth of Nations* Book 1, Chapter 2. The principle which gives occasion to the division of labor according to Smith is the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange. He goes on to say, “Whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature, of which no further account can be given, or whether, as seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech, it belongs not to our present subject to inquire.” (WN I.ii.2) It is not a natural principle of humans to trade as it might be to eat, drink, or laugh. Out of our faculties of speech and reason, we have developed property and exchange to solve our other natural motives to gather material wealth. N1 is the motive to gather wealth, R1 is the faculty of speech and reason discovering property rights and exchange, and N2 is the person who tends to truck, barter and exchange. So the principle which gives occasion to the division of labor is not in primal human nature, but it is in the natural course of most societies. The upper levels of the spiral are less fixed as there are clearly societies in which men have a propensity to violence rather than voluntary trade.

Reflecting on the question of artificial and natural virtue in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume says in a footnote:

Natural may be opposed, either to what is UNUSUAL, MIRACULOUS or ARTIFICIAL.

In the two former senses, justice and property are undoubtedly natural. But as they suppose reason, forethought, design, and a social union and confederacy among men, perhaps that epithet cannot strictly, in the last sense, be applied to them. Had men lived without society, property had never been known, and neither justice nor injustice had ever existed. But society among human creatures had been impossible without reason and forethought.... But all these disputes are merely verbal. (Hume 1777)

Conclusion

Smith's psychology of understanding maps very well onto Charles Saunders Peirce's concepts in "The Fixation of Belief", and the whole spirit of Humean Naturalism is very much in line with William James' "radical empiricism." In the preface to *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, James says, "I say "empiricism," because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say "radical," because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis" (James 1897). Hume and Smith are empirical in that they refer to human experience and that they regard each claim as a hypothesis: part of an open ended process of enquiry. They are also radical in the sense that they employ such hypotheses to include those larger spiritual beliefs and the world of moral sentiments. Our senses are not limited to the Five elementary ones, but include a moral sense, a sense of time, externality, and causality.

Nature is merely one internally distinguishable source of these hypotheses. The doctrine of Nature will stand tall until it is attacked by reason, revelation, custom or some new challenger. We experience the inner world as a battle between sentiments more often than a wonderful cooperation of them from the same source. Humean Naturalism and pragmatism allow one to conceptually ride the line between inner feeling and artificial thought. James called pragmatism a melioristic doctrine between empiricism and rationalism. Smith's man of wisdom and virtue has the internal qualities that separate the wheat from the chaff in terms of his reason and his nature. The greatest wisdom seems, however, to be in the grand system of Nature; the accumulation of nature and reason over time towards greater and greater heights. Eschewing one or the other will not allow you to get higher. Reason corrects nature's shortsightedness, but reason without nature is only skepticism.

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