

Title: The Social Self in Classical Economy: Adam Smith and the Reverend Chalmers meet G.H. Mead

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Abstract

The idea of a 'natural harmony' in human affairs runs like a leitmotif through Adam Smith's work. Unsurprisingly, given Smith's own predilections, his allusions to this 'harmony' or 'concord' are typically read as to the possibility (and desirability) of a liberal political economy based upon the principle of self-interest. Yet for Smith it is clear that it takes a certain form of self-interest to sustain liberal political-economic arrangements, and thus the analysis and explication of this form becomes a matter of some concern. But then this should (and does) lead Smith into a more fundamental investigation of the human self and its actions - an investigation primarily carried out in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It is this more fundamental action-theoretic Smith that is our concern here.

We will want to show that for Smith the human self and the characteristically human way of acting involve the taking within and pre-reflective anticipation of the attitudes of others. Thus for Smith there is not first a self that later may become moralized or socialized but rather the human self as such is constituted as a moral or ethical being: human being is irreducibly social. This we take to be the essence of Smith's talk of a natural harmony: that the human self is hard-wired for harmony, so to say. Yet we will also want to show that Smith is not alone amongst political economists in seeing things in this way. Thomas Chalmers, the early nineteenth-century political economist, social critic and religious reformer, also comes at the action-theoretic question from the standpoint of a liberal political economy. But again like Smith for Chalmers the self that enables liberal-economic arrangements is an irreducibly social self. Inevitably, the idea of a social self is fraught with interpretive difficulty. By social self one could mean an instinctive and/or reflective care for others. Both Smith and Chalmers do of course identify such a concern, but neither confuses personal attitude (such as benevolence) with the way in which personality is constituted. In saying, then, that both hold to the view that the self is irreducibly social is not to say that human being is essentially benevolent, or that even the most 'private' of actions has consequences for others, but rather that the characteristically human form of acting presupposes a pre-reflective anticipation of the responses of others.

The writer most readily associated with the idea of an irreducibly social self in the sense given above is the twentieth century philosopher and social psychologist, George Herbert Mead. Our point is not that one finds in Smith or Chalmers Mead-style arguments for an irreducibly social self fully developed or articulated. Rather the point is that something like Mead's conception must lie behind what they do argue, albeit in a somewhat inchoate form. Our purpose is then to reconstruct what they do argue so as to bring their background presupposition of an irreducibly social self to the fore. Hence our claim: that in their attempt to situate their political-economic theorizing in a wider moral framework, Adam Smith and the Reverend Chalmers meet G. H. Mead.