

***Thumos* in Adam Smith's System of Thought.**

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Introductory Comments

For Adam Smith *thumos* ('spiritedness' or 'ambition') is a universal and innate human characteristic that consists in a desire for achievement and glory and which compels a person to strive for social approval and recognition. The desire 'to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation' plays an extremely important role in Smith's ethics, social physics and theory of economic progress. It is an unremitting urge that, via the mechanism of invidious comparison, prompts us to better our material circumstances. It also acts as a primary form of social control through its interactions with the operations of sympathy. By acting on the urges of *thumos*, Smithian agents are not only enabled to

achieve glory and social recognition but to minimize shame and social anxiety. In this paper I examine the nature of Smith's concept of *thumos* and explore its place in his overall system.

Thumos:

The concept of '*thumos*' (sometimes referred to as '*thymos*') is Platonic in origin. In Book Four of the *Republic*, Socrates explains that the soul is composed of three distinct parts: 'the rational, spirited, and desiring elements.'¹ Platonic *thumos* is the spirited part of the soul or psychic constitution although some commentators stress 'its primary attachment to anger'.² But 'spirit' or 'noble indignation' might be better translations for contemporary readers, especially when we consider the relationship of *thumos* to the other parts of the soul. Socrates explains that the first element of the soul is that with which it 'reasons' while the second is 'that with which it loves, and hungers, and thirsts'. This is the 'irrational and desiring part, the companion of various indulgences and pleasures'. 'Spirit' or *thumos* (the third part of the soul) is that 'by which we feel indignant' and which sometimes expresses itself as a kind of 'anger' when it fights against 'the desires' or second element. In such battles, contrary to what might be expected, desire invariably bends to the dictates of reason. '[W]hen a man is forced by his desires against his reason...he abuses himself and is indignant with that within him which is constraining him.' In such cases 'the spirit appears as an

¹ It has been noted that Plato's references to *thumos* are confined to the *Republic* adding 'an element of complexity to Platonic psychology not found in earlier dialogues. Prior to the *Republic*, when the subject of psychology comes up, the human personality is usually defined in terms of a simple dichotomy between reason and desire' (Rabel, 2001, 1).

² In Aristotle too, *thumos* is often seen in terms of its relationship to anger. See, for example, Gay (1988, 258). Barbara Koziak interprets Aristotle's use of the term more broadly 'in three different ways: as one word for the emotion anger; as the psychic drive of the traditional, aggressive, impetuous character; and as a name for one of the soul's capacities, the capacity to feel emotion in general' (Koziak 2000, p.82).

ally of the reason'. What usually happens is that the 'spirit' will not 'sid[e] with the desires when the reason decides that they are not to interfere with it'. *Thumos* is also invoked when a person thinks 'he' is 'wronged'. It will cause 'him' to 'fume and chafe and fight on the side of what he believes to be just' no matter how daunting the resistance or obstacles. 'Though he suffer hunger and cold and every kind of privation, he perseveres till he conquers, and never desists from his noble indignation, until he has either accomplished his purpose or perished, or until reason within calls him back as a shepherd calls his dog, and he relents.' Socrates is careful to insist that *thumos* is an element in its own right, not subsumed under 'the rational' part of the soul, but distinct and only its 'auxiliary'. Similarly, it is distinct from the desiring element (Plato 1995, IV. 439; c-e, 125-27).

Another thinker notable for his interest in *thumos* is G.W.F. Hegel who focused on the recognition dimension and made it the centrepiece of his historiography. For Hegel, social agents establish families and engage in work and exchange in order to achieve recognition within civil society. However, because the market and civil society give rise to class hierarchies people are motivated 'to find freedom in the state' and through institutions like trade unions and formal systems of justice. On this view 'the state mediates the inequities of civil society' and 'provides for equal recognition of individuals as legal persons' (Estes 2001). The best known contemporary popularizer of Hegel's use of the concept is Francis Fukuyama. In Fukuyama's (Kojève inspired) adaptation of Hegelian *thumos*, history is driven by the overwhelming desire for recognition expressed in a dialectic between two distinct forms of this desire: The first, *megalothymia*, is 'the desire to be recognized as superior to other people'; the second is *isothymia*, 'the desire to be recognized as the equal of other people' (O'Neill 1997, 192). More recently, Philip Pettit and Geoffrey

Brennan, animated by Smith's exposition, have revived the concept of *thumos* in their book *The Economy of Esteem*. The aim of the book is to examine 'in the manner of an economics, the system whereby perhaps the most important resource of ...esteem...is allocated among individuals' (Pettit and Brennan 2004, 3).

Just as the idea of *thumos* has received very little attention in Plato scholarship (Hobbs 2000, 3-4) and in social science generally (Pettit and Brennan 2004,1), so it has been generally overlooked in Smith scholarship. The present discussion is an attempt to rectify this.

It should be noted that Smith does not use the Greek word *thumos* but rather its English equivalents, namely, 'spiritedness', 'spirit' or 'ambition'. However, it is clear that he is employing the idea in the sense first invoked by Plato and it is Plato rather than Aristotle who seems to be his key source for the concept.³ In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith paraphrases Plato's account of it:

In the system of Plato the soul is considered as something like a little state or republic, composed of three different faculties or orders. The first is the judging faculty...[which] Plato...very properly called, reason, and considered it as what had a right to be the governing principle of the whole. ...The different passions and appetites, the natural subjects of this ruling principle, but which are so apt to rebel against their master, he reduced to two different classes or orders. The first consisted of those passions, which are founded in pride and resentment, or in what the schoolmen called the irascible part of the soul; ambition, animosity, the love of honour, and the dread of shame, the desire of victory, superiority, and revenge; all those passions, in short, which are supposed either to rise from, or to denote what, by a metaphor in our language, we commonly call spirit or natural fire. The second consisted of those passions which are founded in the love of pleasure, or in what the schoolmen called the concupiscible part of the soul. It comprehended all the appetites of the body, the love of ease and security, and of all sensual gratifications (Smith 1776, VII. ii. 1. 2-4, 267-8).

Though both the irascible and concupiscible parts of the soul are designated as passionate in nature, there is a distinction made between our bodily needs on the one

³ Though Zeno was probably an ancillary source (Smith 1976, VII.ii.1.16, 272).

hand, and our social and emotional needs for recognition, respect and dignity, on the other.

Smith notes that we seldom deny the rulings of ‘reason’ (‘the governing principle’) when prompted to act by either the desiring or spirited parts of the soul, nevertheless it sometimes happens that ‘ungovernable ambition and resentment’ and ‘the importunate solicitations of present ease and pleasure’ lead us astray. Yet, Smith insists that these are all ‘necessary parts of human nature’. Employing the language of design and teleology, he notes that both sets were ‘*given*’ to ensure that both our physical and social survival needs are met. On the one hand, desire drives us to provide proper ‘support for the necessities of the body’; on the other, ‘spirit’ impels us to ‘defend’ ourselves ‘against injuries, to assert our rank and dignity in the world, to make us aim at what is noble and honourable, and to make us distinguish those who act in the same manner’ (Smith 1976, VII.ii.1.5, 268). Smith also quotes Zeno (the founder of Stoicism) for the view that the imperative for ‘wealth, power, honours’ and ‘the respect and esteem of those we live with’ is a natural drive borne of ‘self-love’ and intended to preserve ‘existence’ (1976, VII.ii.1.16, 272). Smith reiterates Plato’s conception of the relationship between the three elements of the soul: Reason or ‘prudence’ is ‘the governing principle’ whereas spirit and ambition are ‘the auxiliaries of reason’ and act ‘to check and restrain the inferior and brutal appetites’. In this manner ‘the irascible part of our nature is...called in to assist the rational against the concupiscible’ (Smith 1976, VII. ii.1.7, 267).

In these passages, it seems as though Smith is simply reporting on and interpreting the opinions of Plato and Zeno, but a careful trawling of his works reveals that the concept of *thumos* is carried into and assumes a central place in his moral and economic system and especially his account of the operations of self-interest. Though

he never defines their relationship explicitly, it appears from the discussion that *thumos* is a set of self-regarding passions that is distinct from the set devoted to bodily survival (self-preservation) and which includes 'hunger, thirst, the passion which unites the two sexes, the love of pleasure and the dread of pain' (1976, II.i.5.10, 77). These two sets roughly correspond with the second (thumotic) and third (desiring) elements of the soul identified by Plato. The first, the reasoning part, is associated in Smith with the virtues of self-command and prudence; its role in relation to the second and third parts, is to curb any of their potentially excessive manifestations.

Like Plato, Smith acknowledges courage, shame, a sense of justice, indignation and resentment as dimensions of *thumos* but he is more inclined to lay stress on the yearning for honour, glory and worldly achievement aspects including the concomitant desire to avoid shame. Here he highlights the relationship of spiritedness to productive effort, wealth accumulation and a sense of dignity and social standing.

For Smith, a lack of ambition or spirit is contemptible. Those who fail to pursue the 'more extraordinary and important objects of self-interest', show a reprehensibly cavalier regard for their own 'rank' and reputation. Complacency is a moral defect: The 'prince' who is 'not anxious about conquering or defending a province'; the gentleman who disdains to 'exert himself to gain an estate'; a 'member of parliament' who seems indifferent to the outcome of 'his own election'; or a 'tradesman...who does not bestir himself to get...an extraordinary job' are all 'mean-spirited' persons of 'dull regularity' whom Smith contrasts unfavourably with the keen and spirited 'man of enterprise' (1976, III. 6.7, 173-4). The archetypal spirited agent is neither pious nor retiring but worldly and sociable; the inferior morality of the monk who earns his place in heaven by 'penance and mortification' is compared with

that of the industrious and socially active commercial agent who exhibits his virtue by 'liberal, generous, [and] spirited conduct' (Smith, 1979, V.i.e.29, 772). S/he who exercises the 'passion' of ambition 'within the bounds of prudence ... [reason] is always admired in the world' (Smith, 1976, III. 6.7, 173). The 'irascible' part of the soul pursues all and any objects that afford recognition, be they big or small. Some endeavours are so 'great' that they should only be attempted by 'a few men of extraordinary spirit and ambition' (Smith, 1979, V.i.f.4, 759). But there are many ordinary acts of life that also require a degree of spirit: After all, '[t]he objects of avarice and ambition differ only in their greatness. A miser is as furious about a halfpenny, as a man of ambition about the conquest of a kingdom' (Smith 1976, III. 6.7, 174). In fact, spirit is most commonly exercised in the pursuit of material improvement and the conspicuous consumption of 'numberless artificial and elegant contrivances' devised for the promotion of 'ease or pleasure' (Smith 1976, IV. i. 8., 182). But 'ease or pleasure' is not the *real* or final end of material acquisition. Rather, as Smith wrote famously, 'it is chiefly from [a] regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches and avoid poverty' (1976, I. iii. 2. 1, 50). At times the *thumos*-driven agent appears in an almost comical light: It is a desire for recognition that causes people to spend so much of their income on such 'trinkets of frivolous utility' as a tweezer-case, a tooth-pick, 'an ear-picker' or 'a machine for cutting the nails'. *Thumos* inspired 'lovers of toys' are apt to acquire so many useless fripperies that they are obliged to 'contrive new pockets, unknown in the clothes of other people', in order to carry their 'multitude of baubles' about them.

The acquisition of status or symbolic goods is not the only end of *thumos* because it is also 'often the secret motive of the most serious and important pursuits of both private and public life' (Smith 1976, IV. i.6-8, 180-2). In fact, the whole point

of almost *any* human endeavour is to ‘acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind’ (Smith 1976, I.iii.3.2, 62). Our irrepressible regard for ‘place’ or station is ‘of such mighty importance’ that it is the purpose of ‘half the labours of human life’ (Smith 1976, I.iii.2.8, 57). Furthermore, the drive for social recognition is not only the ‘most ardent’ but also an *insatiable* drive (Smith 1976, I.iii.2., 51; 1979, I. xi.c, 81).

Sometimes *thumos* assumes the form of a need for dignity and self-respect. Smith notes that ‘[t]he want of proper indignation is a most essential defect in the manly character’ because it ‘renders a man incapable of protecting either himself or his friends from insult and injustice’ (1976, VI. Iii. 16, 243). Notable contemporary exemplars of *thumos* are the ‘leading’, ‘high-spirited’ and ‘ambitious’ ‘men of British America’ who famously stood on their dignity and refused to be taxed by an English parliament, preferring to ‘draw the sword in defence of their own importance’ (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c.75, 622). As with Fukuyama ‘[o]ne can demand recognition not only for one’s moral worth, but for one’s wealth, or power, or physical beauty as well’ (Fukuyama 1992, 182). We have a general desire ‘to obtain a good name, to rise above those about us and render’ ourselves in ‘some way’ the superior of others (Smith 1978A, I. 24., 13). *Thumos* is also expressed as a ‘love of domination’ which is based, in turn, upon a dislike of having to ‘condescend to persuade’ our ‘inferiors’ or to ‘be obliged to...bargain’ with equals to perform a service (Smith 1979, III. ii. 10, 388; 1978A, iii. 129, 192). And yet, *thumos* also presents itself in one of our ‘strongest’ desires which is that of ‘being believed’ and of being capable of ‘persuading...leading and directing other people’ (Smith 1976, VII.iv.25, 336). Indeed, even the universal desire to exchange (‘truck’) has at its root an even deeper need to ‘persuade’. For this reason, ‘every one is practicing oratory on others thro the whole of his life’ (Smith 1978A, vi.56, 352). But, for the most part, spirit directs its

considerable energies to the acquisition of wealth through work and enterprise and the subsequent indulgence of conspicuous consumption (in *WN* Smith amends this sequence to stress the importance of *saving* as opposed to consumption).⁴

Smith believed that ‘the species’ was more concerned to be admired than loved and wrote that the ‘great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition’ is motivated by the desire to be noticed with ‘approbation’ (1976, I. iii. 2.1, 50). Translated to the economic sphere, these factors give rise to the unremitting ‘desire of bettering our condition’ which ‘comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us until we go into the grave’. The most expedient – and therefore ubiquitous – means for lording it over our neighbours is via the acquisition of material goods, a dynamic that Thorstein Veblen would later refer to as ‘conspicuous consumption’. The successful and active agent constantly seeks to augment ‘his fortune’ but it is not for the sake of the ease or convenience afforded by wealth but for the glory of recognition. The unremitting desire to be regarded with approval and jealousy by our ‘fellows’ is our primary motive force: ‘[W]hat are the advantages which we propose by that great purpose of life which we call bettering our condition? To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it’ (Smith, 1976, I. iii. 2.1, 50).

Unlike Aristotle, who decreed that recognition could not be an end in itself because it was ‘parasitic on other goods’ (O’Neill 1997, 194), Smith sees recognition as an end in itself, at least from the point of view of human agents (to be discussed

⁴ This is because he has decided on reflection that saving rather spending encourages growth. Only among the rich was luxury spending condoned because their ‘ostentatious consumption’ would ‘act as a spur to others, not to imitate such behaviour, but to work harder. Over time, this hard work would then generate the wealth by which deserving individuals could join the ranks of the rich and successful, and could then legitimately display their new social status through personal consumption’ (Brewer, 1998, 78-9).

further). The objects of self-interest should be pursued '*for their own sake*' (Smith 1976, III.6.7, 173. My emphasis). In fact, they *are* pursued for their own sake because we are constitutionally inclined to perpetually seek the approval of our fellows:

Nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend his brethren. She taught him to feel pleasure in their favourable, and pain in their unfavourable regard. She rendered their approbation most flattering and most agreeable to him *for its own sake*; and their disapprobation most mortifying and most offensive (Smith 1976, III.2.6, 116-7. My emphasis).

This does not mean, however, that *thumos* has no significant social function or *telos*. Indeed, as will be shown, Smith conceives it as an adaptive urge *divinely endowed* for express social-system purposes. But from the *individual agent's* point of view, the objects of *thumos* are pursued as ends in themselves. I will say more about this presently.

***Thumos* and the Theatre of Approval:**

In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith shows us a world 'that is structured and governed by theatrical relations' in which prevails 'a necessary theatricality that is to be both sought after and avoided' (Marshall 1984, 608). What is sought is recognition and glory; what agents seek to avoid, above all, is public shame.⁵ The theme of social anxiety is a ubiquitous one in Smith. The positive opinion of others is relentlessly sought while the threat of public humiliation and ostracism casts a constant shadow over every fully functioning human actor.

⁵ 'We desire both to be respectable and to be respected. We dread both to be contemptible and to be contemned' (Smith 1976, I.iii.3.2, 62).

It should be noted that although the drive of *thumos* is innate and universal, the standards for glory or shame vary from culture to culture and are context-sensitive. We learn the social cues for correct behaviour and comportment through witnessing and experiencing the sympathetic responses of the community or milieu with which we identify. As Smith notes: 'Emulation, the anxious desire that we ourselves should excel, is originally founded in our admiration of the excellence of others (1976, III.2.6, 116-7).

In mass societies of increasingly differentiated and distant strangers, it is not the qualities that inhere in a person that count so much as *appearances*. *Thumos* demands, for example, that no decent person should appear in public without the proper trappings and appurtenances of her/his rank. Smith distinguished between necessities and luxuries but both are defined in relation to prevailing custom and opinion. Though the 'Greeks and Romans' managed 'very comfortably' without linen, nevertheless in contemporary Europe anyone 'would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt'. In England, 'custom' has 'rendered leather shoes a necessary of life' and anyone - regardless of sex or social location - 'would be ashamed to appear in public without them'. Yet, in France, it is acceptable for the poor to appear either bare-footed or 'in wooden shoes' (Smith 1979, V.II.k. 3, 869-71).

What makes poverty so shameful is that it is less likely to elicit the 'sympathy' of spectators than wealth or greatness. Smith notes with apparent dismay that the rich 'man glories in his riches' whereas the poor 'man' is 'naturally ashamed' because the sight of him evokes, not pity or compassion, but a curious combination of disgust, outrage and incredulity: 'The fortunate and the proud wonder at the insolence of human wretchedness, that it should dare to present itself before them, and with the

loathsome aspect of its misery presume to disturb the serenity of their happiness’ (Smith 1976, I. iii.2.1, 51-3).⁶

This seemingly cold-hearted psychological dynamic is related to Smith’s eccentric use of the term ‘sympathy’. It is not synonymous with beneficence, ‘pity’ or ‘compassion’, as might be imagined, but ‘denote[s] our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever’ (Smith 1976, I.i.1. 5., 10). The act of sympathizing involves placing ourselves in the position of the person under observation and imaginatively experiencing their state of mind. Alternatively, ‘we imagine the social rank or distinction of others as pertaining to [our] own person’ (Khalil, 2005).⁷ The person under consideration reflexively reciprocates and imaginatively adopts the perspective of those observing her in order to carefully calibrate and moderate her behaviour accordingly. But we are more likely to sympathize with someone who is in a fortunate position because of the positive sensation that arises from imaginatively placing ourselves in her situation. Therefore, it is ‘because mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than with our sorrow, that we make parade of our riches, and conceal our poverty’ (Smith 1976, I.iii.2.1., 50). Anticipating the predictable moral objections, Smith rebukes those ‘whining and melancholy moralists’ who are ‘continually reproaching us for our happiness’. Since, on his reckoning, only one in twenty actually ‘suffer pain or misery’; better that we ‘rejoice’ with the twenty than commiserate with the one (Smith 1976, III. 3.9, 140).

Nothing is so mortifying as to be obliged to expose our distress to the view of the public’. It ‘is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind’ that we devote our lives to the pursuit of wealth...power, and preheminance [sic]’ (Smith

⁶ ‘The disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise, or at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition’ is ‘necessary both to establish and maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society’ (Smith, 1976, I. iii. 1, 61). Indeed, it was ‘Providence who first divided the earth among a few lordly masters’ (Smith 1976, IV. 1. 10, 185).

⁷⁷ Elias Khalil describes this process as ‘vicarious sympathy’ (Khalil, 2005).

1976, I.iii.2.1., 50). Obviously it is not to 'supply the necessities of nature' which are very easily obtained with even 'the wages of the meanest labourer'. Neither is it to provide that the satisfaction of 'ease' or 'pleasure' which such commodities might afford; rather it is to obtain 'conveniencies' and 'superfluities' that serve our sense of 'vanity' and lend 'distinction'. To be reduced to the level of a humble labourer is in many respects 'worse than death'. The 'poor man' knows that his poverty disgraces him and 'places him out of the sight' and sympathetic regard of humanity. But the 'man of rank and distinction' is 'observed by all the world. Every body is eager to look at him, and to conceive, at least by sympathy, that joy and exultation with which his circumstances naturally inspire him. His actions are the objects of the public care. Scarce a word, scarce a gesture, can fall from him that is altogether neglected.' Therefore, to be the 'object of envy is worth all the 'restraint', 'loss of liberty', 'toil', 'mortification', 'anxiety' and loss of leisure and 'ease' that it invariably costs 'him' (Smith 1976, I.iii.2.1., 50-51).

Even though the concerns of *thumos* seem closely allied to the basic needs of the body there is an important distinction between them. Whereas 'the passions' that originate in the body excite little or 'no sympathy at all' it is 'quite otherwise with those [thumotic] passions' that have their source in 'the imagination'.

The frame of my body can be but little affected by the alterations which are brought about upon that of my companion: but my imagination is more ductile...The person who has lost his whole fortune, if he is in health, feels nothing in his body. What he suffers is from the imagination only, which represents to him the loss of his dignity, neglect from his friends, contempt from his enemies, dependence, want, and misery, coming fast upon him; and we sympathize with him more strongly upon this account, because our imaginations can more readily mould themselves upon his imagination, than our bodies can mould themselves upon his body (Smith 1976, I.ii.1.6, 29).

The loss of *thumos*-associated status goods is more devastating than the loss of physical survival goods because the sympathetic imagination is more readily engaged and alert to any issue associated with reputation and social survival.

As with Plato, Smithian spirit often requires perseverance and a willingness to expose one-self to danger: The agent of ‘spirit and ambition’ is ceaselessly alert for any ‘great opportunity to distinguish himself’ before her/his social reference group, be it the nation, the neighbourhood, the social class or close circle of acquaintance. It matters not however difficult or perilous such a ‘circumstance’ may be so long as it represents an occasion for drawing ‘upon [one] self the attention and admiration of mankind’(Smith 1976, I.iii.2.5, 55). Achilles is sometimes described as a notable victim of ungoverned *thumos* because his desire for fame and recognition caused him to choose death in battle over returning home to live out his days in contented repose and obscurity (Hobbs 2000, 21).

War is an ideal setting for attracting approval because of the unusually sympathetic and partial nature of the target audience of compatriots:

When two nations are at variance, the citizen of each pays little regard to the sentiments which foreign nations may entertain concerning his conduct. His whole ambition is to obtain the approbation of his own fellow-citizens; and as they are all animated by the same hostile passions which animate himself, he can never please them so much as by enraging and offending their enemies (Smith 1976, III. 3.42, 154).

The opinions of the social reference group count for almost everything because of its power to bestow the immediate psychological reward of approbation and acceptance and to inflict social isolation and ostracism upon those lacking in spirit. People who initiate duels, rightly or wrongly, would rather put their lives at risk than be ‘for ever after despised and contemned as a poor, mean-spirited, faint-hearted wretch by those of his own rank, *from whose company he will be ever afterwards excluded*’ (Smith

1978A, ii. 136-7, 122-3. My emphasis). The member of parliament who is indifferent to the outcome of 'his own election' is rightly '*abandoned by his friends*, as altogether unworthy of their attachment' while the neighbours of the tradesman who failed to 'bestir himself' to gain 'some uncommon advantage' will likely think him a rather insipid and '*poor-spirited fellow*' (Smith 1976, III.6.7., 173-4. My emphases).

Smith notes that 'man is an anxious animal' (1978B, 231, 497) in 'continuall care and anxiety for his support' (1978A, vi.85, 363). In the bustling society of commercial agents, social anxiety haunts every gesture and deed. We are constantly 'anxious' about our comportment (Smith 1976, I.iii.2.5, 54-55) to 'know how far our appearance deserves either...blame or approbation' (Smith 1976, III.1.4., 111-12) and to learn 'how far we deserve [the] censure' of others. Artists and writers are particularly vulnerable to 'public opinion' (Smith 1976, III.2.18, 123). Status anxiety can be so compelling that it causes the vain man seeking 'higher rank and a greater fortune than really belong to him' to reduce himself to 'poverty and distress' in pursuit of it (Smith 1976, VI.iii.37, 256). The suffering attendant on such a fate is far greater than any enjoyment attendant on a promotion in social status (Smith 1976, VI.i.6, 213). Indeed, any fall from grace is one of the 'most affecting and atrocious injuries that possibly can be inflicted' on a person (Smith 1978A, i.24, 13). Our anxiety about the opinion of others is so strong that it can overcome 'the strongest of all natural fears' – the fear of death – causing people to act as did Achilles and 'voluntarily thro[w] away life to acquire after death a renown which they could no longer enjoy' (Smith 1976, III.2.6, 116).⁸

Apart from the seemingly endless round of self-regarding duties that attach to the spirited Smithian agent, there is an additional duty which s/he may not, in safety,

⁸ For a fuller discussion of this point see Kerkhof (1995).

shirk. This is to exercise perpetual status-conscious surveillance over both herself and others. First of all, s/he must scrupulously avoid over-estimating her own standing. To do so would be to make herself ridiculous and risk losing the sympathy of those from whom approval is being sought. But s/he should also take care not to allow *others* to over-estimate their worth. It is every person's responsibility to estimate both herself and others carefully, accurately and without leniency. Even the most respectable among us risks moral failure when we permit the undeserving to assume pre-eminence over us:

The man...who, in matters of consequence, tamely suffers other people, who are entitled to no such superiority, to rise above him or get before him, is justly condemned as *mean-spirited*. This weakness is commonly founded in indolence, sometimes in good nature, in an aversion to opposition, to bustle and solicitation, and sometimes, too, in a sort of ill-judged magnanimity (Smith 1976, VI.iii.16, 243-4. See also Smith 1976 VI.iii.22, 246).

It is true that we sometimes indulge without censure persons of 'great and distinguished superiority' in some degree of 'excessive self-estimation', but we are always 'disgusted and revolted' by the same behaviour in those of lesser stature (1976, VI.iii.36, p. 255).

Effects and Benefits:

Smith is not the sort of thinker to devote so much literary energy to a mechanism that has no important role in his social and economic system. What, then, is the function of *thumos* within his system of thought? Let us first examine the role of thumotically-driven social surveillance.

1. Virtue and Justice.

In terms of Smith's overall scheme, it is not immediately clear why it is so important to keep ourselves and everyone else in their 'proper' place. Smith does tell us that it is a duty because a person who feels no 'resentment for the injuries which are done to himself, must always have less for those which are done to other people'. As a result 'he' will be 'less disposed' to exercise justice in either 'protecting or avenging them'. He also says that a 'stupid insensibility to the events of human life necessarily extinguishes all that keen and earnest attention to the propriety of our own conduct' which is, after all 'the real essence of virtue' (Smith 1976, VI.iii.18, 244). Though his reasoning is rather opaque (even tautological) here, what Smith seems to be saying is that a healthy regard for the interests of ourselves and others both hones – and is a sign of – our sense of justice; it also promotes the virtue of propriety. This is the individuo-psychic level function of social surveillance but what is its *social* function or role on the social-systems level?

Our innate sense of propriety for our own and for others' behaviour generates a kind of spontaneous moral system that makes social and economic life both possible and rewarding. Good behaviour is regulated by the subtle physics of social reward and punishment; so too is the system of rank distinctions upon which social order depends. We preserve the class system by our constant vigilance over those who might try to flout its conventions and boundaries, ensuring that no-one achieves undeserved eminence and punishing those who either fail to strive for distinction or else assume a distinction they have not earned. In this way, the dynamic of emulation, 'ostentatious avidity' (Smith 1976, I.iii.3.2, 62), saving and growth is preserved. If it were easy to gain recognition or if the undeserving routinely achieved it, this whole dynamic would break down. This all makes sense when viewed in the more general

context of Smith's approach to the relationship between social causation and human behaviour. Social and moral conduct is never policed directly by the Creator of this system (God), but *indirectly* via the regulatory principles that inhere in the human mind. In this case, we have a mandate from God 'to superintend the behaviour of [our] brethren' (Smith 1976, II.ii. 31, 130; Smith 1976, III. 5.6, 165).

Another function of social surveillance is to ensure that people, despite their insatiable desire for luxury goods, do not overspend and thereby ruin themselves: We tolerate the routine 'profligacy of a man of fashion' but in someone of more modest means even 'a single transgression of the rules of temperance and propriety' is resented and held in contempt (Smith 1976, I.iii.3.4, 63).⁹ The reasonable part of the soul (propriety) if it does not operate in our own breasts is, at least, operating at all times in the breasts of those around us; the thumotic drive for recognition via consumption is thereby constrained by the thumotic drive for recognition via social approbation. Beyond its capacity to urge a tight system of social surveillance, *thumos* is at work at another - and perhaps deeper - level of social and economic activity. Here it drives industry and progress and operates as a potent force of social control in the mass societies to which it inevitably gives rise.

2. Prosperity.

It seems that the most important function of *thumos* is to generate and maintain prosperity.¹⁰ Due to the insatiability of human needs, the desire for luxuries and 'conveniencies' and the capacity to trade the surplus of our labour for the surplus of other people's labour, *thumos* is enabled to drive exponential progress and prosperity.

⁹ 'That self-command, in the same manner, by which we restrain our present appetites, in order to gratify them more fully upon another occasion, is approved of, as much under the aspect of propriety, as under that of utility' (Smith 1976, IV. 2.8, 189).

¹⁰ In *TMS*, Smith devotes more space to its ordering function and less to its economic effects but in both *WN* and *TMS* *thumos* plays a key economic role. As Raphael and Macfie note 'there is a difference of tone, but both books treat the desire to better our condition as natural and proper' (Raphael and MacFie 1976, 8).

Basic human needs are limited ‘but the desire of the conveniencies and ornaments of building, dress, equipage, and household furniture’ is ‘altogether endless’. People who ‘command’ more of the necessities than they need will exchange this surplus for ‘superfluities’. In order to provide for their necessities, the poor work to ‘gratify [the] fancies of the rich’ and in order to gain advantage ‘they vie with one another in the cheapness and perfection of their work.’ This continual competitive exertion, fuelled by the expectation of reward for effort, increases the ‘quantity of food’ and therefore stimulates population levels among ‘workmen’. It is this dynamic which drives increasing specialization and innovation, and which, in turn, drives the demand for greater and more various supplies of raw materials (Smith 1979, I.xi.c.7, 180-2).

Our drive for recognition, when harnessed to a fair wage system and reward for effort, has enormous productive and creative power: it ‘rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind’ and is the source of almost all progress and civilization and material and cultural accomplishments. Roger Johnson (1990, 262) has described this relationship as a ‘trickle-up’ theory of growth. In Smith’s words:

It is this which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth. The earth by these labours of mankind has been obliged to redouble her natural fertility, and to maintain a greater multitude of inhabitants (1976, IV.i.1.10, 183-4).

But there is also a trickle-*down* effect at play in the relationship between *thumos* and the drive for exponential acquisition. Because the rich have the same basic physical needs as everyone else, they have a good deal of surplus wealth for the consumption of luxury goods and services. In the gratification of these ‘vain and insatiable desires,’

‘thousands’ of workers are employed and are thereby enabled to ‘derive’ from the ‘luxury and caprice’ of the rich ‘that share of the necessaries of life, which they would in vain have expected from his humanity or his justice.’ In this way the rich are ‘led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species’ (Smith 1976, IV.i.1.10, 184-5).

3. Social control.

Smith notes that, although it is sometimes ‘*said*’ that people of good sense ‘despise place’ and are indifferent to whether or not they are placed at ‘the head of the table’, the fact is that ‘no man’ – unless he is uncommonly wise or else hopelessly ‘sunk in slothful and sottish indifference’ – is oblivious to a sense of ‘his’ accorded ‘rank’, ‘distinction’ or ‘pre-eminence’ (1976, I.iii.2.8, p. 57. My emphasis). Our natural ‘obsequiousness’ to our ‘superiors’ is so strong that neither ‘fear’, ‘hatred’, nor class resentment can overcome it (Smith 1976 I.iii.2.3, 53; Mitchell 1987,409). Rank distinctions are generated and maintained by the ‘natural’ and instinctive deference of the poor towards the rich. This, for Smith, is highly desirable because in mass societies ‘peace and order’ depends on the maintenance of a well-structured system of rank distinctions (1976 VI.ii.1.21., 226; 1976 I.iii.3.1, 61; 1978B, 210, 489). Furthermore, in the absence of a class system and wealth inequality, there would be no invidious comparison to motivate the labouring and commercial classes.

Smith wonders why this ‘disposition to go along with all the passions of the rich and the powerful’ should be so compelling. After all, except for a select few, the great masses can hardly benefit from the ‘goodwill’ that their fawning of social

‘superiors’ might evoke. He satisfies himself with the conclusion that our ‘obsequiousness to our superiors...arises from our admiration for the advantages of their situation’ not ‘from any private expectations of benefit from their good-will.’ We are in sympathy with them in the strictly Smithian sense, ‘eager to assist them in completing a system of happiness that approaches so near to perfection; and we desire to serve them for their own sake, without any other recompense but the vanity or the honour of obliging them.’ Smith is also keen to insist that our ‘deference’ has nothing to do with any *conscious* utilitarian considerations regarding the maintenance of social order. If this were the case, we would also be prepared to ‘oppose’ our social superiors in those cases when social order actually required it. The explanation lies in subrational, rather than rational, explanations. The claim that ‘kings are the servants of the people, to be obeyed, resisted, deposed, or punished’ according to the will of the people, may be ‘the doctrine of reason and philosophy; *but it is not the doctrine of Nature.*’ The fact is that...

...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 (Smith 1976 I.iii.2.3, 52-3. My emphasis).

Our instinctive admiration of the rich also produces a further unanticipated social order benefit. Smith notes that the ‘undistinguishing eyes’ of ‘the great mob of mankind’ are incapable of distinguishing a wise and virtuous person from a foolish and vicious one; yet they can easily detect the presence of wealth (1976, VI. ii. 1.20, 225-6). God has therefore endowed people with a reverence for those qualities immediately appreciable to even the most unsophisticated among us and this provides a basis for leadership. Smith congratulates Nature in the wisdom of placing the burden

of leadership, not as we might imagine, upon the shoulders of the wise and virtuous, but upon those of the rich: 'Nature has wisely judged that the distinctions of ranks, the peace and order of society would rest more securely upon the plain and palpable difference of birth and fortune than upon the invisible and often uncertain determinations of wisdom and virtue'. Smith is well aware that the rich are no more morally fit for leadership than the poor but he does regard them as better equipped *practically* because they are generally better educated and are more familiar with the trappings and protocols of authority than are the poor (1976, I. Iii.2.5. 55).

Although Smith insists on a benevolent and moral deity, he perceives God's presence in the banal and hedonistic machinery of daily life; in physical and social survival, the perpetuation of the species, in the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain (1976 III. 3.9., 139). We were *designed* to be recognition seeking, consumerist, self-regarding and separative selves; these attributes are instinctive, natural and providentially teleological. To those with the usual moral objections, Smith responds curtly that the 'present inquiry is not concerning matter of right...but...a matter of fact' (1976, II.i.5.10, 77).

Design or Adaptation?

It could be argued that Smith's argument about the survival enhancing aspects of *thumos* point more to evolutionary adaptation than to providential teleology. This, is of course, how such apparently vicious drives are understood in modern evolutionary psychology and even some contemporary social science. In fact, some commentators *have* suggested that Smith's is a secular system exhibiting prescient strains of a proto-Darwinistic theory of evolution (eg Hayek 1967, 115; Flew 1987,

202). But, rather than anticipating some kind of open-ended, evolutionary theory of progress, Smith's model is located within the 'chain of being' tradition; is predicated on the design principle and depends on final causes. In other words: human survival and adaptivity is achieved via entelechy and is a function of the neat symmetry and mutual accommodation of a perfectly *designed* system (1976, II.ii.3.5, 87; III. 5.7.,166; III. 5.12, 170). Smith takes as given that the species is immutable (1979A vi.48), distinctive (1980, 136) and superior to other species (1979A, 57, 352-3), therefore there is no suggestion of an evolvment from other species.¹¹ He seems to be firmly convinced that the survival capacity of all of created nature is a product of intention and design. As he notes: 'Nature never bestows upon any animal any faculty which is not either necessary or useful' (Smith 1980, 163). Smith's model is further disqualified as proto-Darwinistic because it posits *happiness* as opposed to mere survival of the fittest as the great end of Nature (Kleer 1995, 296-300).¹²

Concluding Remarks:

I have argued here that *thumos* is for Smith an inherent drive, teleologically conceived for the express purpose of generating and maintaining the prosperous, materially abundant, orderly society. But I have also tried to show that, although Smith scholarship tends to focus upon self-interest as the sovereign drive of economic growth and prosperity, his conception of this drive is far more layered, subtle and

¹¹ Humans are distinguished from dogs, monkeys and every other type of 'brute' by the fact that we alone possess the capacity and desire to 'truck barter and exchange'. Since specialisation derives from our bartering instinct and since specialisation is the source and cause of progress, human beings and human beings alone, are destined to advance. There is a distinctive mode of life beyond basic material needs which only humans are destined to lead and they are, accordingly, equipped for the means (i.e. progressive drives) for achieving it (Smith 1976, I.iii.2.2, 50; Early Draft of *WN*. 28-29, reproduced in Smith 1979, 573).

¹² For a fuller discussion of this aspect of Smith's thought see: Hill (2001).

sociologically rich than is commonly understood. This, I believe, has been partly a function of Smith's terminology – his preference for terms like 'spirit' and 'ambition' over 'thumos' – which have led scholars to overlook that Platonic *thumos* (or its eighteenth century equivalent) is in fact what he has co-opted and adapted for his own purposes.

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