

A Tale of Two Traditions:
Pierre Force's *Self-interest before Adam Smith* *

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To my mind Pierre Force's work *Self-interest before Adam Smith* (Force 2003) marks an important moment in studies of Smith and of the Scottish eighteenth century. This research domain has, it is true, become very busy since the Glasgow edition of the works of the Scottish philosopher was published (see for example Brown 1997, Tribe 1999). And the tide is still in full flood, the publication of Force's book being immediately followed, to note only two titles, by Michaël Biziou's *Adam Smith et l'origine du libéralisme* (2003) – a hackneyed title that conveys little of the book's actual contents – and Samuel Fleischacker's *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion* (2004). The watchword is: explore all those aspects of Smith's thinking – literary, aesthetic, philosophical and political – neglected by the old 'economistic' reading; above all, restore the unity and coherence of the author's intentions, for the *Wealth of Nations* is only one moment of the work, certainly an important moment but all the same one that cannot be understood apart from all the other elements of the edifice. Those analyses hitherto thought to be 'economic' are consequently subjected to renewed interpretation; but they are also, at the same time, heavily relativised, recast in the light of a philosophical problematic that is nevertheless considered more

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fundamental. This viewpoint is perfectly legitimate: and it allows us to break with an established economic fundamentalism¹ which has mutilated and hence deformed Smith's work, effecting a striking renewal in our understanding of his thought.

Investigating the 'Selfish Hypothesis'

Self-interest before Adam Smith is placed in this burgeoning context.² Its general purpose is not unambitious: not only does it seek to challenge the idea that in Smith the egoistic behaviour of agents forms a general explanatory principle; the chief aim is to analyse the significance and precise status, in Smith's work, of what Hume called 'the selfish hypothesis'. This calls for meticulous historical investigation.

The purpose of this book is to study the history of the concepts of self-love and self-interest before Adam Smith, in order to understand what those concepts meant when Adam Smith decided to use them as foundation for the system he constructed in *The Wealth of Nations*. (p. 2)³

Here the author steps into a minefield. The terms in question have an important polysemic dimension – evident in publications going back over three decades which investigate the concepts of *passions* and/or *interests*. It is for this reason that Force pays great attention to usage, distinguishing and demarcating the terms *self-interest*, *self-love*, *amour-propre* and *amour de soi-même*, noting the complex play of concord and discord between these concepts in differing theoretical contexts, whether in their transfer between English and French or within each of these languages. It is, for example, an error to

¹ Expressed for example, not to say caricatured, in George Stigler's well-known articles (1975, 1976).

² Force is aware of the extent of the literature and does refer to it. But, rather oddly, he does neglect certain publications in the history of economics – books or articles in established journals such as *EJHET*, *HOPE* and *JHET* – which would reinforce, or sometimes counter, his analysis. Does the author really think that economists are all cast in the same mould as Stigler and thus have nothing interesting to say on the subject?

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all references and page numbers are to the book under review.

translate Smith's 'self-love' by Rousseau's *amour-propre* since it corresponds to a neo-Stoic notion and hence to Rousseau's *amour de soi-même*. Generally, *amour de soi* denotes the legitimate regard each has for the conservation of their own person, while *amour-propre* has the negative connotation of selfishness.

If one is not careful, therefore, one can easily understand the opposite of what is meant and make analytical connections and distinctions that do not exist. I do however regret that Force, despite the meticulousness of an investigation conducted 'under the guidance of language' (p. 6) allows several ambiguities to stand, especially concerning the significance of the central expression 'self-interest', varying as it does from author to author, and sometimes within the very same work. 'Interest' can be related to all of the passions of a human being, to some of them, or to just one. This last case is not necessarily a 'material interest' – that is to say, an interest in material things or a 'pecuniary interest' – but might concern some entirely different passion, such as for instance honour or glory.⁴ The distinction is not an idle one. If many (mostly seventeenth century) authors did use the term in its extensive meaning, only in the narrow sense of a relation to material goods can it be maintained (see below) that Rousseau's concept of *pitié* is not an 'interested sentiment', or that one can even talk in his work of an *amour-propre désintéressé*. When defining the concepts at stake a narrower and more systematic connection with the theories of the passions would therefore be desirable.

Parallel to his investigation Force traces two interpretative traditions of the concepts in question: the first tradition links on this point Augustinians and neo-Epicureans, while the second concerns neo-Stoicism. These two traditions – to which I will later return – can be distinguished by the role they ascribe to the principle of *self-interest* in the explanation of human behaviour: for the first tradition a prime and universal explanatory principle inscribed in human

⁴ This is stressed by La Rochefoucauld in the fifth edition of his *Réflexions ou maximes et sentences morales* in 1678 (La Rochefoucauld 1964: 402). The point is also underlined in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* in 1694.

nature, and consequently a danger for all social order; while for the second tradition it is a derivative principle, neither original nor universal and having positive social effects. Furthermore, these two traditions are supposed *as a consequence* to be at odds with each other over the meaning of Providence and its role in the establishment of political, social and economic order. The various authors are therefore distributed between two camps: the Epicurian/Augustinian tendency includes Hobbes, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Nicole, Mandeville, Melon, Hume and Montesquieu; while the neo-Stoic tendency covers Shaftesbury, Butler, Hutcheson, Rousseau, Charles Bonnet, and Adam Smith.

But Force's book cannot be summed up through this systematisation and classification, nor in terms of its many elaborations, such as the troubled relationship between *economics* and *ethics* and the division of the two domains with the emergence of the concept of *disinterestedness*. Certainly the work goes beyond the scope modestly announced in the introduction; Force in fact brings to our attention a new view of the formation and significance of Smith problematic. Over the six chapters of this careful inquiry we can see this problematic coherently emerging from a confrontation with those authors named above, especially Mandeville, Rousseau and Hume.

Among this collection of illustrious names, it is however the *Citoyen de Genève* who takes pride of place: 'Rousseau is an essential interlocutor for Smith.' (p. 3) That is certainly the book's strong point, its most novel and also most fascinating aspect: to see exactly how Smith's approach responds to Rousseau's and links in with it, even while being clearly distinct on essential points. Other recent studies have disclosed an important 'influence' of Rousseau in places one would not have previously expected: on Condorcet, for example. Pierre Force's book shows convincingly that the *Citoyen* has to be added to the number of Smith's covert interlocutors. Taking the remarks made by Smith in the celebrated *Letter* that Smith published in the shortlived *Edinburgh Review* in 1756 – generally interpreted as a severe critique of

Rousseau – Force shows that Smith deploys the same strategy as Rousseau. Schematically, this deployment has two aspects.

(i) The first move is to counter Mandeville’s ‘doctrine of interest’ by showing that human behaviour is *naturally* founded upon other principles: Rousseau’s *amour de soi*, *identification* or *pitié*, which correspond to *self-love* and *sympathy* in Smith (p. 43), all behaviors which cannot be ‘described as rational pursuit of self-interest’ (p. 46).

(ii) But at the same time there is a recovery, though *historicisation*, of the ‘selfish hypothesis’: what we call the ‘rational pursuit of self-interest’ certainly exists, but it is an ‘historically contingent phenomenon’ (p. 247). The behaviour described by Mandeville, far from being universal, is only ‘the description of human behavior in civilised society, a behavior that is in large part driven by the desire to obtain marks of esteem and approbation by others.’ (p. 44) At the conceptual level, this translates in Rousseau as the emergence of *amour-propre*: reason and reflection, allied to identification, engender it (p. 262) and the calculation of interest becomes a means to maximise our *status* in the eyes of other individuals. In Smith, this is translated by *vanity* – ‘a passion that does not originate in self-love [...] but rather in sympathy and the desire for sympathy’ (p. 261) – which engenders the desire to ameliorate its condition. *Amour-propre* and *vanity* are practically universal principles of conduct in commercial society: enjoyment is postponed so that the admiration and approbation of others might be obtained through accumulation.

Two traditions

In articulating this problematic Force touches on many points (see Jimena Hurtado’s article in the same issue) and the analysis is detailed and thorough. The reader finds no space for indifference: and if not all the points developed necessarily carry conviction – I’m thinking in particular of the statement that ‘the official divorce of economics from politics was pronounced in 1803 by

Jean-Baptiste Say' (p. 206);⁵ or of some incursions into contemporary debates and the references to Amartya Sen and Jon Elster (Ch. 3) – the work is that rare thing, a text that forces the reader to react and reflect. However, I would like in the following to focus on one of the book's themes, the distinction between the Epicurian/Augustinian current and that of neo-Stoicism, and make some observations on this distinction. Not that the distinction is one that can be disputed: all those who have looked into the philosophical debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have confirmed both the existence of this distinction, and its power – even if, as Force also recognises, there are numerous apparent convergences and similarities in the vocabularies employed by the two currents. One cannot at all dispute its relevance for our object of study since it is the understanding and the interaction of central concepts, subsequently taken over by economic analysis, which are in question. Here Force's systematic use of this distinction in tracing the emergence of political economy as a specific discipline merits discussion – the subtitle of the book indicates what is at stake: *A Genealogy of Economic Science*.

Undoubtedly 'most of the notions that Rousseau and Smith criticize in Mandeville could indifferently be called Epicurean or Augustinian' (p. 49). But is that enough to validate one of the book's theses, that the emergence of the idea of a self-regulating economic equilibrium, in other words 'the advent of economics as an autonomous science' (p. 4) must be sought in neo-Stoicism – 'that the modern concept of 'economy' has its roots in neo-Stoic providentialism' (p. 73)? For our author this would surely involve a paradox, since the later development of economic theory made its own the very 'selfish hypothesis' that Smith rejected. To establish this thesis Force uses two related arguments. The first involves the examination of the significance of the word 'Providence' in each current of thought, reaching a conclusion in respect of the presence or absence of stability in the resulting social order. The second

⁵ On this point, see Faccarello and Steiner (2004).

confirms and illustrates the first by making reference to theories which, in the domains of physics and natural phenomena, marked contemporary debates.

All writers in this epoch invoked the notion of Providence in their analysis of the social order. What does this term mean? In the neo-Stoic tradition 'Providence' is used as a synonym for 'nature' and denotes the ensemble of laws that rule the universe. This is the way that Shaftesbury thinks, but also Smith: the invisible hand motif is Stoic. There is a 'convergence between nature and reason, between instinctual tendencies and rational designs' (p. 68). 'An invisible hand explanation consists in saying that individuals contribute unknowingly to the public good. They do what they are doing for their own reasons, and their action happens to be beneficial to the public.' (p. 232) Harmony between society and the universe is translated into a natural and stable social order.

...the Stoic account of Providence, preferred by Smith, emphasizes the harmony of the universe and the harmony of systems of government, which are the object of philosophical contemplation. The highest form of philosophical speculation consists in perceiving the harmony between the parts and the whole, in nature as well as in society (pp. 83-4).

One illustration of this viewpoint is the Stoic comparison of life with sporting competition. 'The Stoic metaphor of life as sport [...] suggests that other human beings are competitors, not enemies' (p. 83). This contrasts starkly with what this metaphor would convey in the other tradition: 'the choice of an Epicurean/Augustinian scheme would have implied that other human beings are enemies rather than competitors.' (ibid.)

Among the Augustinians the doctrine of original sin engenders a very negative conception of amour-propre, centred upon a structural and ineradicable selfishness which in turn, if one is not vigilant, prompts a war of all against all. A social order can however be established, but it is always 'on the verge of chaos, because the road from self-interest to social order requires co-operation' (p. 84) and 'co-operation based on self-interest is necessarily precarious' (p. 85). Hence, for Augustinians, social order is always

‘providential’ in the sense that it is the outcome of a miracle, a deliberate intervention by God in the course of history (p. 84). Does not Mandeville talk of the invention of society as coming ‘from God, by miracle’ (p. 233) – a formula that can also be read in an Epicurean way, the social order being the product of chance? But if one is reluctant to invoke permanent miracle or chance, what other foundation can there be for a social order constantly on the brink of eruption? According to Force – he here refers to Hirschmann (1977) and somewhat qualifies the analysis put forward in *The Passions and the Interests* – it is the ‘countervailing passions principle’ that is brought into play by the Augustinians (pp. 144-54) in the realm of politics.

The second argument advanced by Force in favour of his thesis makes reference to two great physical theories of the time: Descartes’ vortices and Newton’s universal attraction.

Another way of contrasting the Augustinian and Stoic concepts of Providence is to look at the physical theories associated with them. (p. 85)

According to Force, the Augustinians in referring to the theory of vortices found confirmation for their vision of a social order founded upon centrifugal forces and always ‘on the verge of chaos’. By contrast the neo-Stoics admired Newton’s theory, in which they found confirmation for their vision of a stable order founded upon centripetal forces.

The image of states and kingdoms as whirlwinds is a clear indication of the limited confidence Augustinians have in the beneficent effects of self-love. [...] While Nicole proposes a centrifugal model based on Cartesian physics, Adam Smith favours a centripetal scheme, reminiscent of Newton’s physics, which he lauded abundantly in his *History of Astronomy*. Sympathy, like universal gravitation, is a univocal principle of order. (p. 86)

An incomplete appraisal of the Augustinian tradition?

What can be said about these two arguments? Let us begin with the second. It would have some force if one were able to establish a significant correspondence between those holding to one tradition and a particular

physical theory of the behaviour of matter and of the universe. But that is not the case. It is true that, historically, some French Augustinians, especially some Jansenist writers of the seventeenth century, not only close to Pascal but also to Descartes, adopted the vortical theory and used it to characterise the prevailing order in society. This is especially true of Pierre Nicole in a celebrated passage of an essay entitled ‘De la charité et de l’amour-propre’ published in vol. 3 of his *Essais de morale* in 1675 (Nicole 1675; see also Nicole 1845, 1999). But in the first place, I doubt that this instance was broadly imitated and a glance at the list of authors included under this current of thought confirms my puzzlement. There is obviously a corresponding question with respect to the neo-Stoics.

In any case, even if one were able to establish a significant correspondence, what conclusion could be drawn? It seems difficult to argue that vortices engender unstable states ‘because equilibrium is the product of opposite forces’ (p. 86). Generally speaking, an equilibrium which arises out of opposing forces can be perfectly stable. More specifically in respect of the case in point here, what do the principles of Cartesian physics expressed in *Le Monde* and *Les Principes de la philosophie* (Descartes 1633, 1644) describe but the constitution and functioning of our universe? The ‘ordinary laws of nature’ that Descartes outlines in his mechanics are part of these ‘eternal truths’, ‘these truths, I say, according to which God himself teaches us that he has arranged all things by number, weight and measure’ (Descartes 1633: 263; 1996: 29).⁶ Isn’t the message that disorder is only apparent, and that a permanent order results from it?

For God has so wondrously established his laws, if we were to suppose that he created no more than I have said and even if he set this in no kind of

⁶ Descartes refers here to a passage from the Apocrypha, ‘The Wisdom of Solomon’ Ch. 11 verse 20: ‘Even apart from these, people could fall at a single breath when pursued by justice and scattered by the breath of your power. But you have arranged all things by measure and number and weight.’ This reference is in no respect a rarity among scientists of the time who interpreted in terms of their new *ethos*. William Petty drew on it in turn.

order nor proportion, but composed a chaos more confused and more entangled than a poet could describe, his laws suffice for the fragments of this chaos to disentangle themselves and arrange themselves into such a good order that they will have the form of a perfected world. (Descartes 1633: 249-50; 1996: 23)

Certainly for an Augustinian who refers to Cartesian physics, and in particular to his vortices, reference to society could have conferred a different significance on these illustrations. But I do not think that was so in the case of Nicole, nor for an author who took over his analyses: Pierre Le Pesant de Boisguilbert. Here we can find confirmation precisely with respect to their conception of Providence, and this leads us back to the first argument advanced above.

Consider two essays so characteristic of Nicole: once more ‘De la charité et de l’amour-propre’ – this is where he employs the image of vortices – and ‘De la grandeur’, published in 1670 in *De l’éducation d’un prince*. For Nicole, an Augustinian Jansenist, what provoked wonder was to observe that social order emerged despite the irremediably corrupted nature of the human being after the Fall, in spite of *amour-propre* in the strong and negative sense of the term – a principle whose disintegrating force should *a priori* be an object of dread. Astonishment grew when he noted that society maintained itself not only in spite of this amour-propre, but because of it. And astonishment grew yet greater when he remarked that this society, in which all charity was forthwith banished, seemed in fact governed by it; and even governed in a more effective manner, especially with respect to material things, than would have been possible if human beings had been led by charity.

It was obviously God who allowed all this. Not because he intervened in an arbitrary and mysterious way; but by arranging things so that, after the Fall, the motivation for action on the part of a corrupted human nature led necessarily to this result, and could turn out no differently. In the social order the fear of death prompted a strict and hierarchised ‘political order’ in which the play of cupidity, on the one hand, and the wish to be admired and loved on the other, engendered outcomes which resembled, and could be taken for,

those which charity would have produced; and perhaps would not even have been capable of engendering. In this context, references to Providence do not relate to Providence as miracle, but to Providence as law: the world is ruled in a regulatory manner by the laws that God introduced at the beginning of time. It was therefore unnecessary to wait for any miracle, and submit to these laws.

One text of Nicole's is very characteristic of this way of seeing things: 'Des différents manières dont on tente Dieu', likewise published in vol. 3 of the *Essais de morale*. What does it mean to tempt God? It is an attitude whereby one evades his wisdom in seeking to provoke a manifestation of his omnipotence, 'seeking to oblige him to act against the ordinary rules of his providence, whether in the order of nature, or that of grace' (Nicole 1675: 249; 1999: 437). It is certain that everything stems from God, but that can happen by two quite different routes: hidden and ordinary, or visible and extraordinary. The concealed route is that of immutable laws governing the functioning of things and beings; the visible route is that of the miracle. Providence is placed with the former.

But there is nonetheless a difference between the two ways in which he [God] works upon bodies and souls, the first being the common path along which he leads his creatures, and the other is an extraordinary path of which he makes use but rarely, and for which there are no certain rules. The order of Providence lies in the first, which he allows men to know; and the second only entails certain effects that we can never foresee ourselves. (ibid.: 216; 1999: 419)

It is however necessary to go further, and add a final step. For it is possible to show how, playing on one of Force's expressions, 'the modern concept of "economy" has its roots' in ... Augustinianism (Faccarello 1986). For this we must remain for a little longer with Nicole's *Essais*. In the description given by this author of the socially-beneficial effects of amour-propre there is a striking passage which describes the effects of cupidity in the economic order and which gives the impression of a society perfectly ordered by the simple interplay of the 'self-interest' of agents in markets.

For example, when travelling in the country, we find men ready to serve those who pass by and who have lodgings ready to receive them almost everywhere. We dispose of their services as we wish. We command them; they obey. [...] What could be more admirable than these people if they were acting from charity? It is cupidity which induces them to act [...]. Think what charity would be required to build an entire house for another man, to furnish it, carpet it and hand him the key! Cupidity does this quite joyfully. What charity would be to go in search of medicines in the Indies, abasing oneself before the vilest ministries, and rendering others the lowliest and most arduous services! Cupidity accomplishes all this without complaint. (Nicole 1670: 204-5; 1999: 213-4)

However, this impression is false for, in Nicole the socialisation of individuals is first effected through political and religious connections as well as civility (the rules of *bonnêteté*). But the step that Nicole does not venture was taken by Boisguilbert – likewise a Jansenist and who frequented the *Petit écoles* of Port Royal. Here for instance is his version of Nicole’s passage which I just quoted:

... all the commerce of the land, both wholesale and retail, and even agriculture, are governed by nothing other than the self-interest of the entrepreneurs, who have never considered rendering service nor obligating those with whom they contract through their commerce; and any innkeeper who sells wine to passers-by never intended to be useful to them, nor did the passers-by who stop with him ever travel for fear that his provisions would be wasted. It is this reciprocal utility which makes for the harmony of the world and maintains states; each man thinks of procuring the greatest degree of individual interest with the greatest ease possible, and when he travels to purchase a commodity four leagues from his home, it is because it is not sold three leagues away, or else that it is cheaper, which compensates for the longer journey (1705 in Boisguilbert 1966: 748-9).

Very schematically, in the various writings of Boisguilbert written and/or published between 1695 and 1707, he describes and analyses a society capable of self-regulation through the market, in which agents, led by their particular interests, unintentionally bring about an ‘equilibrium’, a ‘state of opulence’ characterised by a system of ‘prices of proportion’. In my view it is Boisguilbert who, on an Augustinian footing, truly founds the theoretical line that can be followed through Quesnay and Turgot. How does he do it? Very simply, if I might dare to say so: by taking a path different from that of Nicole

and which will no longer be that of Smith as restored by Force. He does not place himself, strictly speaking, in the schema of ‘countervailing passions’, and in no respects does he assume a neo-Stoic harmony. His equilibrium results from the fact of *a passion*; cupidity – or ‘material interest’ or ‘pecuniary interest’ – is, in the markets, *opposed to itself*. To be sure, like all writers of the time he refers to Nature, to Providence, and even talks of ‘the harmony of the Republic that a superior power rules invisibly’ (1695 in *ibid.*: 621). But, beyond the rhetoric, once one takes proper account of what is really referred to by these words, one sees that the ‘superior power’⁷ which constrains agents, which balances out their interests and which produces opulence is nothing other than competition free of all hindrance. Boisguilbert describes the effects of this with precision, and demands that it be set to work.

The points raised above thus qualify one of the theses developed in *Self-interest before Adam Smith*. They show that the opposition drawn between two currents of thought, Epicurean/Augustinian and neo-Stoic, while certainly real, cannot be pushed too far, for all excessive schematisation becomes counter-productive.⁸ They take nothing away from the real value of the book; from its attempt – which one could somewhat teasingly call ‘neo-Stoic’ – at restoring the ‘harmony’ which reigns in Smith’s work; nor above all the minute analysis (sketched very quickly above) of the importance, for Smith, of his reading of Rousseau. This book brings a very important stone to the work of renovation on of our understanding of the Scottish philosopher: it is now up to economists to draw *systematic* conclusions for a new reading of the *Wealth of Nations*.

⁷ Marx talked much later of the ‘coercive force of competition’.

⁸ It is always possible to assert, of course, that Boisguilbert was ‘contaminated’ by neo-Stoic themes: but this is not admissible. Boisguilbert accepts, develops and asserts strongly – with a verbal violence remarked upon by his contemporaries and which stands out sharply from classical style – all of the basic themes that he could find in Nicole. To claim that Boisguilbert was not truly Augustinian would amount to crossing out most of the names on the list of writers that Force brings together under this banner, including that of Pierre Nicole.

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⁹ Works marked * can be downloaded free of charge in facsimile (as pdf files) from *Gallica*, the electronic library of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France — <http://gallica.bnf.fr>

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