

## Adam Smith and Propriety in Moral and Political Discourse

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[The informality of the following text reflects its purpose as a script for a lecture on October 17, 2020 at George Mason University, whose administration has announced a Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence. The lecture treats not improprieties of such agendas but, in the first instance, improprieties in the discourse of the advocates of such agendas. A video of the lecture is available [here](#).]

Hello, I address you today on Adam Smith and propriety in moral and political discourse.

Adam Smith offered a four-stage theory of social development. The four stages are hunters, shepherds, agriculture, and commerce.

The hunter-gatherer stage is small simple, and fits what we now know about the bands we evolved within.

The 40 people of the band were the whole.

For you as member of the band, there was an immediacy to the good of the whole, gained by lived-experience. Lower-things like your daily activities and

interactions closely connected to higher-things, the well-being of the band. One could see the connections between lower and higher.

Interpretations of the connections were simple, direct, and few. There was pressure to shared interpretation. There was conformity about the good of the whole and how it is advanced.

You've heard the expression, "God is good." Well, God is good because good is God. Religion has always been about the good of the whole, as Emile Durkheim suggested.

But there are different wholes: bands, clans, tribes, cities → Polytheism, paganism, heathenism.

Monotheism enlarges the whole vastly, and thus enlarges complexity. Dogmas and rituals about how actions serve the good.

Let's jump forward to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the printing press, trade, division of labor, division of knowledge. Now, one was part of an immense system and ones actions could have far-reaching and unknown consequences.

Monotheisms continued to try to hold society together with an overall lower-to-higher interpretation or culture.

The monotheisms warred on each other. We had a great period of religious war.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries came a remarkable emergence: liberal civilization. Its main idea has been: Let's allow a much more profound range of disagreement on the higher things. The idea expressed itself as religious toleration, religious freedom, freedom of the press and speech, and freedom of association, including trade.

Thinkers elaborated a social grammar, which would then allow people to write their own compositions, subject to the basic social grammar -- not messing with other people's stuff.

Of course such liberty was never close to entire, and can never be close to entire, but the reform movement in that direction was called liberal principles, the liberal system, the liberal plan, which Smith summarized as allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way provided that he not mess with other people's stuff.

Such aspiration is expressed in the Declaration of Independence: Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Great Enrichment.

What I have to say today is addressed especially to people on the political left. I think that you should slow down and think through any allegiance you feel toward Critical Race Theory, DEI programs, and similar movements – movements that

some people term “woke” or “wokeism.” I think that these movements will be bad for everybody.

A DEI agenda is being launched at George Mason University. Among the proposed [measures](#) are, and I quote:

“Inclusive excellence planning”

“Implicit bias training”

“Implicit bias recognition in faculty promotion and tenure”

“Equity Advisors in every academic department”

“required diversity, inclusion, and well-being coursework”

“We will require an anti-racism statement on all syllabi.”

These movements have the effect of reducing dissent from leftism. We should be asking ourselves whether that is an underlying impetus, even if that impetus is subconscious. As much as 99 percent of brain activity is subconscious (McGilchrist 2009, 187), so the impetus could be like the [elephant in the brain](#), that Jonathan Haidt talks about.

I realize that many people on the left, such as [John McWhorter and Sam Harris](#), are horrified by the DEI movement and related movements, but that does not preclude that the effect of such movements is to reduce dissent from leftism. Many classical liberals and others not on the left feel fearful. Speaking as one such, I say that we must overcome that fear and speak up for what we feel is right.

[Coleman Hughes](#) is an African American critic of DEI and related movements. He was [interviewed](#) on UnHerd by Freddie Sayers, and Sayers brought attention to the following quotation by Hughes: “I would submit that if this new ‘anti-racist’ bias is justified—if we now have a moral obligation to care more about certain lives than others based on skin color, or based on racial-historical bloodguilt—then everything that I thought I knew about basic morality, and everything that the world’s philosophical and religious traditions have been saying about common humanity, revenge, and forgiveness since antiquity, should be thrown out the window.”

It is in that spirit that I turn to Adam Smith. His thought is, in my opinion, especially important within, as Hughes puts it, “the world’s philosophical and religious traditions”. Smith’s thought offers a perspective on woke-left discourse.

Smith’s ethics are patterned after benevolent monotheism. Smith said we learn to form rules for our conduct by considering how an impartial spectator would feel about the conduct. We learn what an impartial spectator would feel is proper conduct.

The “impartial spectator” notion, however, [ranges all the way](#) to a being who is like God in knowledge, universality, and benevolence. Of course we do not know what such a God-like spectator knows, and we do not have any direct or reliable access to the God-like spectator, but we develop our conscience as a

representative of such a being. Our conscience is not necessarily a good representative.

The God-like being looks upon the whole of humankind. Smith spoke of the Chinese as the brethren of Europeans and he spoke of African nations as “nations of heroes.” The view of Smith’s ethics, like monotheism, is all inclusive. Our tradition of liberal arts education is built on an inclusive view of humankind.

In developing his ethics, Smith developed a multifaceted understanding of justice. Justice in Smith has three senses or layers. We might call it [tri-layered justice](#). The three layers say a lot about propriety in moral discourse. That is the main theme of my talk today: Propriety in moral discourse, including political discourse.

So what are justice’s three layers?

Let’s start with the layer that is like grammar, in that its rules are precise and accurate. That justice is called **commutative justice**, and it can be summed up as *not messing with other people’s stuff*. “Stuff” here means the other’s person, property, and promises due (by contract or consent).

The liberal arc of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries took commutative justice and flipped it to “other’s not messing with one’s stuff”, notably the government not messing with one’s stuff. Smith called that liberty. That is the spine of the original political meaning of the word “liberal.”

The next two layers are very different. They have rules that are loose, vague, and indeterminate. We disagree. That's the really important thing: We disagree.

So, whereas commutative justice has grammar-like rules, the next two have aesthetic-like rules. It is like what makes a good movie.

Indeed, Smith uses the word "becoming": The becoming use of what is our own. That was his way of expressing **distributive justice**. When Jim uses, or distributes, his resources in a becoming way, he does distributive justice. Again, the beauty in the becoming is in the eyes of the impartial spectator who is benevolent toward the whole of humankind.

Finally, there is justice in estimating ideas, beliefs, and other objects. **Estimative justice** is estimating the object as the impartial spectator thinks you should estimate it. That is estimative justice.

Take an object like the minimum wage. Now, here is where the immensity of the world is so important. Does the minimum wage serve universal benevolence? Does it make the world more or less beautiful in the eyes of God-like benevolent universal beholder? The world is so huge and complex and unknowable. Our evolution in the small band did not equip us for understanding the macrocosm of humankind.

Well, people disagree. We disagree. Even economists disagree.

Suppose we have two economists Deirdre McCloskey and Joseph Stiglitz, who disagree. McCloskey thinks the minimum wage is bad, and Stiglitz thinks it's good.

You might think of the disagreement as stemming from two possible sources: First, McCloskey and Stiglitz might disagree about what it is that the God-like beholder finds beautiful, just as they might about what makes a good movie. Second, even if they were to agree about what it is that the beholder finds beautiful, they might disagree about how the minimum wage plays out in serving or disserving that beauty.

Another way to put it: They may disagree in their notions about the higher things, and they may disagree in their understandings of how lower-things (such as minimum wage policy) impinge on higher things.

For controversial issues, these two areas of disagreement are very profound. We disagree. Indeed, we disagree with ourselves as our own thinking evolves through time. We have to cope with disagreement. That is what civil discourse is about.

The matter of estimating an object like the minimum wage often relates to whether a person publicly discourses about that policy. In speaking publicly, or even privately to other people, one is making a use of one's own tongue, mind, hands, keyboard, and so on. So estimative justice – estimating the minimum wage – often relates closely to the matter of distributive justice – making a becoming use of one's own. Again, these two justices are beyond the grammar-like commutative justice.



The difference between commutative justice and the other two justices relates to *the manner* in which we talk justice. That is perhaps the main point of my lecture today, the *manner* in which we talk or discourse.

First commutative justice: Smith said that clearly evidenced violations of commutative justice may call loudly for response (“call loudest,” TMS, 84). Remember, the rules of not messing with other people’s stuff are grammar-like, precise and accurate. So the community of us doesn’t have much doubt or disagreement that a violation took place, assuming that the evidence of the crime is clear enough. If there is clear evidence that Jim broke into Tom’s car and stole something, we all feel strongly *that that is wrong* and call loudly for response.

But then there is estimative justice and distributive justice. Smith estimates government policy in *The Wealth of Nations*, passing judgment throughout. That’s a lot of judgment about social issues and public policy. When he talks about that macrocosm, does he ever call loudly?

No, almost never. Almost always he, instead, proffers his judgment coolly. Instead of calling loudly he proffers coolly.

*Proffer* means to offer something as a proposal. One proffers an opinion as something to consider. Coolly means not heatedly or fervently. Coolly reflects thoughtfulness, recognition of the diversity of opinion, and readiness to engage in civil discourse and to weigh pros and cons.

I, then, proffer coolly a contrast between calling loudly and proffering coolly. I realize that these two expressions use different metaphors – “loudly” is about sound and “coolly” is about temperature – but I choose these two expressions because of Smith’s talk of calling loudly and reflecting coolly.

My suggestion is that we should consider following Smith: We should be reluctant to call loudly, and instead proffer coolly. We should listen especially to figures who proffer coolly, not to figures who call loudly.

Another way to put it:

There is a *propriety* in proffering coolly.

There is usually an *impropriety* in calling loudly.

Let’s work through why that is.

In the spirit of [C. Wright Mills](#) (1959, 128-130), think of a chain:

*Troubles,*

*problems,*

*issues,*

*positions on the issue*

→ *arguments for the position on the issue.*

It is a long way from troubles or problem to a public-policy position and responsible arguments for it. The workings of the world are a blooming, buzzing confusion.

Again, we disagree on what the God-like beholder finds beautiful.

Even if we agree on that, we disagree on what serves that.

Propriety calls for recognizing that disagreement, respecting that disagreement, exploring that disagreement, and proffer our own positions coolly.

If that is propriety, *what is impropriety?*

I list a number of forms of impropriety. The following improprieties are like calling loudly when one should be proffering coolly.

A common impropriety is to treat someone who disagrees with your policy position as someone who disagrees about the troubles addressed. If someone disagrees with the DEI agenda, she is a racist. Even if you say “racist” quietly it is like calling loudly. If someone disagrees on climate *policy*, she is a climate denier. If someone disagrees on schooling *policy*, she is anti-child or anti-education. Such imputation impugns character. Respectful discourse presumes that the other person is a moral equal equally concerned with aligning herself with what serves the good of the whole of humankind. Propriety calls for respectful engagement to understand why another presumptively virtuous person might come to a different

policy position in this unfathomably complex world we live in. By demeaning the one who disagrees on policy, one not only unjustly insults a fellow human being but forgoes opportunity to explore the diversity of interpretations of our world.

A related impropriety is to note the other person's political outlook and use that to debase. Maybe the political outlook is gleaned from a person's association with, say, the Hoover Institution or the Cato Institute: This discourse tactic again is the dehumanizing of someone based on disagreement over policy in our complex world. Another form of dehumanization is to debase someone based on income sources. If you receive income, you receive it from a source. It's no moral failing to receive payment or research support. Every effort requires income for research and the production of discourse, and every income source, whether it is a private foundation or government agency, is made up of people who have a political outlook. It is natural and necessary that we develop a political outlook. To point out that someone received money from a source staffed by people you tend to disagree with on political or policy issues is not more discrediting to that person than your receiving income from a source she disagrees with. Again, it is improper to dehumanize someone simply for disagreeing on politics or policy, and that is all that harping on income sources is. It is a form of loud name-calling.

I am not one to say that *ad hominem* arguments play no role in navigating discourse. In a court case, motive and character do play a role. But that role is limited; it may give grounds for suspicion and further investigation. The real work is in arguing the evidence. In political discourse, the real work is in arguing for one's position as compared to the other person's position. In such argumentative

engagement, it is *irrelevant* what a person's motives, personal habits, associations, and income sources are. To harp on such *ad hominem* irrelevancies is to confess the weakness of one's argument.

Another kind of impropriety one might fall into is abusing semantic convention, that is, twisting the meaning of words or just leaving words, as you use them, ill-defined or undefined.

I will remark on the following words:

*Diversity*

*Inclusiveness*

*Bias*, as used for example in "unconscious bias" *and* "implicit bias"

*Anti-racism*

*Social justice*

First, *diversity*. In the DEI movement we do not see emphasis on the most important kind of diversity, namely diversity in beliefs and sentiments. People like people like them, but the most important likeness is in sentiment. Nobody cares that Shrek is an ogre or even that the Terminator is a machine provided he is a good guy, and we recognize him as a good guy when his sentiment concords with our own sentiment. In the DEI movement it is the urge to likeness in *certain sacred beliefs and sentiments* that concerns me: The urge seems to be to get everyone's sentiment in line, their line. Diversity in demographics is not diversity in beliefs and sentiments. It sometimes seems like uniformity in certain beliefs is the goal, while diversity in skin tone *et cetera* is a tool.

Next, *inclusiveness*. I've not seen guidance on what is to be included in what. As regards the university, if the suggestion is that demographic groups are not currently included in hiring or promotion, I wonder about the empirical basis of concern. I trust we all affirm the ethical inclusiveness that inheres in liberal education. From the medieval university, our arc of liberal education comes out of benevolent monotheism, the idea being that a benevolent God looks on all of humankind, and includes every soul, and with equal worth and dignity. Adam Smith clearly follows the same ethical pattern. I see no warrant for telling students or staff that they need remedial instruction in demographic inclusiveness.

The next word is the word *bias*. The word *bias* is pejorative, it implies defectiveness. We would not say that someone has a bias toward virtue or a bias toward goodness or a bias toward wisdom. So when Bill says that Klara is biased, Bill draws on his own beliefs. "Klara's bias," as reported by Bill, necessarily involves Bill's judgment. We all ponder what it is, in the eyes of the impartial spectator, that constitutes the good of the whole, and we all ponder what actions here on Earth serve that goodness. We develop different beliefs about those sublime questions. Bill could be wrong when he says Klara is biased. We disagree.

We disagree in our figurings of what is right or just or equitable.

Who decides what ideas or sources or statements are biased? Accusations of bias could reflect the biases of the accuser.

Sometimes words are used in ways that conflict with conventional definitions. Consider *anti-racism*. This one is often ill-defined. According to some, like Ibram Kendi (2019), you are a racist if you don't buy into a far-reaching political interpretation and agenda. Prior to authors like Kendi, one thought, and I still think, that anti-racism means opposition to racial bigotry, as expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr. when he spoke of judging people upon the content of their character, not the color of their skin. If that is the definition, one might ask of the DEI measures at the university: What is the evidence of racism at the university?

Finally, *social justice*. The expression is used principally by the left. For my own part, I follow Adam Smith in seeing the three senses of justice given here – commutative, distributive, and estimative – none denominated “social justice.” It is improper to presuppose shared acceptance of expressions such as “social justice.” It is improper to pressure people or require them to avouch allegiance to “[social justice](#).” One should recognize that others may not include that expression in their active vocabulary, and would therefore be demeaned by being required to avouch it.

Related to issues of word-meaning are issues of presupposition. In the DEI discourse on campus, I am appalled by the “leaning-in” of obviously highly controversial presuppositions, such as that certain procedures represent bias and other do not, or that certain authors are moral and intellectual authorities and others are not. Such presuppositions sometimes showing little respect for how auditors dissent from the presupposition. Again, it is like calling loudly when one

should be proffering coolly. The idea of liberal education is to acknowledge our deep disagreements about the good of the whole and how it is best served –we disagree – but leaning in with such presuppositions squashes that liberal ethic. Confronted with a leaning-in presupposition, a dissenter might try to surface the presupposition for discussion—something that is not possible in a required so-called training session. Another way for a dissenter to deal with leaning-in is to withdraw, that is, abstain from such discourse: But the only way to do that in the case of a required session is to withdraw from campus.

There are many other improprieties in discourse. For example:

- Strawmanning opponents and opposing ideas, for example by misrepresenting their position or their arguments for their position.
- Employing double-standards, such as comparing the other person’s position unfavorably to a perfect world, while holding your own position up to merely working at all.
- Other improprieties may include: Refraining from open debate; ignoring worthy critics; not giving diverse viewpoints a chance to speak.

I said earlier that there is *usually* an impropriety in calling loudly. I said that Smith *almost never* calls loudly. He does occasionally call loudly. He does occasionally pound his fist on the table.

One instances is when he says the following about restrictions on freedom of occupation:



The property which every man has in his own labour, as it is the original foundation of all other property, so it is the most sacred and inviolable. The patrimony of a poor man lies in the strength and dexterity of his hands; and to hinder him from employing this strength and dexterity in what manner he thinks proper without injury to his neighbour, is a plain violation of this most sacred property. ... The affected anxiety of the law-giver lest they should employ an improper person, is evidently as impertinent as it is oppressive. (WN, 138)

Another is about the Settlement Acts, restrictions on poor people settling within a town or parish:

To remove a man who has committed no misdemeanour from the parish where he chuses to reside, is an evident violation of natural liberty and justice. ... There is scarce a poor man in England of forty years of age, I will venture to say, who has not in some part of his life felt himself most cruelly oppressed by this ill-contrived law of settlements. (WN, 157)

Another is on the slave trade:

Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and

baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished. (TMS, 206-207)

In these three cases, Smith calls loudly.

These are cases in which commutative justice is violated. Smith felt that the justifications for these restrictions on liberty did not come close to meeting a burden of proof. That is why he felt justified in calling loudly against these three contraventions of liberty.

It is common now to speak of DEI and similar woke movements as a religion or quasi-religion. This is captured in the expression The Great Awakening. I think it apt to see wokeism as a quasi-religion, but in a way we all must find a religion or quasi-religion. The issue is: What quasi-religion best serves our modern complex social world? We are a long way from the hunter-gatherer band, and we cannot go back. Get used to it. What quasi-religion best serves our modern complex social world? In a similar way, I think to some extent we are all identitarians: But what identity should we embrace and affirm? For my own part, I identify as liberal. What do you identify as? I think that is an important question to ask yourself.

Adam Smith (TMS, 45) asked, “What can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience?” Civil discourse presumes that everyone wants a clear conscience, that everyone wants to be better aligned with what serves the good of the whole of humankind. I strive for

that. But a clear conscience, not to mention health and being out of debt, cannot be taken for granted. A clear conscience is hard work. In the cool hours, maybe as we climb into bed at night, our conscience tells us to improve how it is that we practice moral and political discourse.

Smith spoke of the conscience as the man within the breast: “it is this inmate who in the evening calls us to an account for all those omissions and violations, and his reproaches often make us blush inwardly, both for our folly and inattention to our own happiness, and for our still greater indifference and inattention, perhaps, to that of other people” (TMS, 262).

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