

Adam Smith Anti-Stoic

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The virtue of self-command plays a key role in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), and Adam Smith's frequent references to Stoicism led the editors of the *Glasgow edition* to argue that Smith's ethic was "predominantly Stoic" (Raphael and Macfie 1976: 10). Subsequently, a number of scholars have sought to corroborate this thesis, examining the features of this alleged influence.

We suggest that far from embracing Stoicism, albeit moderately, Smith takes a radically critical attitude towards it, deeming Stoicism an ethic better suited to savages than to civilized people. The adoption of Stoic morality among non-savages is therefore an aberration.

For Smith the appropriate level of self-command varies with historical circumstances and is inversely proportional to improvement in living conditions. The savages Smith considers in TMS live in such harsh conditions that expression of emotions is inappropriate and stoical self-control has to be the norm. By contrast, the ease generated by commercial society renders freer expression and sharing of emotions right and proper. Rather than restraint of the passions, commerce allows for their appropriately unconstrained expression. This "free communication of sentiments and opinions" represents the "most delightful harmony," as TMS (VII.iv.28) concludes.

Even when distinguishing between the insensitive and the sensitive forms of Stoicism, Stoic ethics remains inappropriate for commercial societies. Insensitive Stoic ethics, as expounded by the Greek Chrysippus, comes in for severe criticism if adopted in commercial societies, because it suppresses that harmony of feelings that commerce promotes. Sensitive Stoic ethics, as advocated by the Roman Seneca, censures the expression of passions and is

therefore also inadequate in commercial societies, unable to adjust to the more sensitive humanity that commerce brings about.

For Smith, “Hardships, dangers, injuries, misfortunes” and “the violence of factions, the hardships and hazard of war” are “the great school of self-command” (i.e. III.3.24, III.3.36, VI.3.27). The kind of people more regularly facing these circumstances are savages or civilized people in wartime. A savage, in fact, “is in continual danger: he is often exposed to the greatest extremities of hunger, and frequently dies of pure want... [he faces] a sort of Spartan discipline, and by the necessity of his situation is inured to every sort of hardship”, thereby achieving “absolute self-command” (V.2.9). Similarly, for civilized society wars generate such hardships that self-command needs to be cultivated (III.3.37).

Accustomed to the idea of facing death through violence or necessity, the savages familiarise themselves with the thought of death, preparing their *death-song* from early youth. Similarly, “Those philosophers, in short, prepared a death-song, if I may say so, which the Grecian patriots and heroes might make use of upon the proper occasions; and, of all the different sects, the Stoics, I think it must be acknowledged, had prepared by far the most animated and spirited song.” (VII.ii.1.30)

Thus, for Smith, Stoicism is a sort of death song, a philosophy appropriate for the conditions of permanent war and systematic indigence experienced by savages. Any impartial spectator would approve of the absolute self-command of the savages, considering the general conditions in which they lead their lives.

However, these conditions are not necessarily permanent. Should they change, then the impartial spectator’s judgement on the expression of emotions would change too, and Stoicism itself would no longer make sense. As Smith explains:

“The situations in which the gentle virtue of humanity can be most happily cultivated, are by no means the same with those which are best fitted for forming the austere virtue of self-command. *In the mild sunshine of undisturbed tranquillity*, in the calm retirement of undissipated and philosophical leisure, the soft *virtue of humanity* flourishes the most, and is capable of the highest improvement. But, in such situations, the greatest and noblest exertions of self-command

have little exercise. *Under the boisterous and stormy sky of war and faction*, of public tumult and confusion, the sturdy *severity of self-command* prospers the most, and can be the most successfully cultivated. But, in such situations, the strongest suggestions of humanity must frequently be stifled or neglected; and every such neglect necessarily tends to weaken the principle of humanity” (III.3.37)

And again: “Among civilized nations, the virtues which are founded upon humanity, are more cultivated than those which are founded upon self-denial and the command of the passions. Among rude and barbarous nations, it is quite otherwise, the virtues of self-denial are more cultivated than those of humanity. The general security and happiness which prevail in ages of civility and politeness, afford little exercise to the contempt of danger, to patience in enduring labour, hunger, and pain. Poverty may easily be avoided, and the contempt of it therefore almost ceases to be a virtue. The abstinence from pleasure becomes less necessary, and the mind is more at liberty to bend itself and to indulge its natural inclinations in all those particular respects.” (V.2.8)

Civilised societies, and commercial societies in particular, guarantee greater economic security even among the less privileged groups. Extreme self-command is therefore no longer needed among civilians far from the battlefield. The milder and more prosperous conditions allow for sensibility to develop and flourish with relatively little impediment. The general circumstances of civilized societies are such that relatively open expression of sentiments and opinions no longer appears out of place but actually appropriate (V.2.10: “Hardiness is the character most suitable to the circumstances of a savage; sensibility to those of one who lives in a very civilized society” (V.2.13). Emerging from the respectable and honourable savage world means leaving behind the stoical art of living in the direction of a society characterised by the exchange of good offices, opinions and sentiments and opening up to that “correspondence of sentiments and opinions” which leads to the “most delightful harmony” (VII.iv.28).

From this viewpoint, the interpretation proposed by Harkin (2005) and Nussbaum (*forthcoming*) seems to invert the picture. Nussbaum and Harkin remark that in Part V of TMS Smith criticises the civilised Europeans for their lack of martial spirit, while admiring the American savages for their absolute self-command. Going on to observe the affinity between the savages and the stoical sages by virtue of their total control over passions, Nussbaum finds this dispassionate endorsement of virile Stoicism in TMS incompatible with the feminine humanity of commercial prosperity. However, while it is true that Smith does not pass negative judgement on the self-command of the savages, he does not hold it to be appropriate for civilised society. Although admirable in the circumstances that demand it, extreme self-command is aberrant and condemnable in a society where it is not necessary.

The complete lack of expression of emotion of a North-American savage requires a level of self-command that is inconceivable for a European of Smith's time (TMS V.2.9). If a civilised man showed such self-command as to eliminate any demonstration of passions, to the extent that he should feel no more for the loss of his father or son than for the loss any other's father or son, it would be that 'such unnatural indifference, far from exciting our applause, would incur our highest disapprobation' (TMS III.3.13). In Smith's society it would be 'unpardonable' if a general at the head of an army offered public expression of grief for the death of his child, yet as a normal father he is expected appropriately to express grief in private at the loss of his only child (TMS V.2.5). Similarly, Smith does not seem to condemn the savage practice of infanticide in very poor societies, but rather asserts that "such nations are so miserably poor, that from mere want, they are frequently reduced, or at least think themselves reduced, to the necessity sometimes of directly destroying, and sometimes of abandoning their infants [...] to perish with hunger, or to be devoured by wild beasts" (WN, into.4) and that "To abandon [an infant] to hunger, or to wild beasts [...] in that rudest and lowest state of society it is undoubtedly more pardonable than in any other" (TMS V.2.15). When, however, the practice is continued in rich and commercial societies, such as "the latter ages of Greece" this custom becomes "so dreadful a violation of humanity [and] the most unjust and unreasonable conduct" (TMS V.2.15). An ethics of hardship typical of savages and barbarians or of military life is inappropriate and condemnable in an age or place where such hardship is no longer present.

Thus, rather than embracing Stoicism, Smith views it as an ethics appropriate only for savages, or only for circumstances as hard as those experienced by savages, such as warfare. Stoicism is not an appropriate moral code for civilized and commercial societies.

Smith condemns even the more moderate forms of stoicism such as that of the “Academical or Peripatetical sage” who, in turn, according to Smith, “constitutes very nearly the character” of the Epicurean sage (VI.i.15). A number of scholars (Brown 1994, Fitzgibbons 1995, Griswold 1996 and 1999, Vivenza 2001, Forman-Barzilai 2009, Hanley 2009, Montes 2008 and 2016) find a certain similarity between this “moderate” figure of the stoical sage and the sage proposed by Smith in TMS, tracing the origins of the latter not only to the Stoics but also to Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus. According to these interpretations, the judgement of the impartial spectator that guides the Smithian sage comes rather closer to the Aristotelian “golden mean” or Epicurean “prudence” than to the extreme stoical apathy of Chrysippus (Vivenza 2001: 82), whereas, guided by the impartial spectator, the Smithian sage attunes emotions at the *right pitch*. Thus, as circumstances change, the requisite degree of self-command also changes, and with it the pitch at which emotions can be expressed without deserving disapproval. If this sage were to approve of the expression of emotions solely at their *golden mean*, he could never approve of their total negation, or of their far more open expression, which Smith is ready to admit.

Thus, the wise Stoic does not represent the apex in the development of civilisation (Waszek 1984, Harkin 2005), but rather its rudest expression and response to the crudest conditions of humankind. Prescribing Stoicism in commercial society would mean proposing the ethic of savages in refined society – an aberration.