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David Hume, Adam Smith and the Science of Man in Scotland

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Synopsis

This lecture offers an introduction to the most ambitious project undertaken by the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment; that of developing a Science of Man. It focuses in particular on the development of the project's founding fathers, David Hume and Adam Smith. It offers a reading of their foundational theoretical work and discusses the relationship between their respective contributions. It concludes by raising questions about their reluctance to develop thinking which was of enormous conceptual power and potential.

1. Introduction

The Science of Man - the enlightenment's most ambitious project

The Scottish contribution - the intellectual outcome of a country at an epochal moment in its history.

2. Hume and Smith – men of their time, educated in universities in the middle of a process of radical reform. The new philosophy curriculum. The pre-eminence of moral philosophy and of Newton.

3. Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and Hume's claim that it was the blueprint of a Science of Man, "Built upon a foundation almost entirely new"

In Book 1 Hume offers an account of the "process of reasoning" we employ to make sense of the world. Our "knowledge" or rather our "understanding" of the world is encapsulated in the "beliefs" we acquire in the course of common life. They are embodied in the habits, customs and education we acquire in everyday life and shaped by our 'sympathetic' relations with others. Hume has offered a natural history of the workings of the mind. The mind now appears as a historically-determined entity.

In Book 2, Hume sets out to explain how every member of every society learns to think of justice, government, political allegiance and morality as necessary to common life. He argues that it is the necessary result of our experience of scarcity and competition for resources. This teaches us the meaning of private property and the necessity of preserving it from others. This experience teaches us all the necessity of regular government to secure our 'rights', maintain the rules of justice and preserve that 'sociability' on which the preservation of civil society depends.

4. Hume has constructed a natural history of the educational process on which our understanding of the world and our place within it, depends. He shows little interest in developing his powerful theory any further. From now on, his energies will be devoted to applying his 'science' to an understanding of a world that is being transformed by war, commerce and the spread of science. His particular interest is in the state of public life and politics on contemporary Britain. He is troubled by the dangerously fractured state of British politics, and by the deep ideological divisions that inflame and threaten to make modern Britain ungovernable. His new mission is to persuade

citizens and magistrates to think again about the relevance of ideologies born in older times for an 'enormous monarchy' being transformed by the progress of society. He has moved from studying the natural history of the mind to the civil history of England.

It is Adam Smith who takes up the challenge of developing the theoretical base of Hume's science on man

5. Smith is presented as a young philosopher and early reader of the *Treatise*. The first fruits of this early reading were probably made public in two public series of lectures given in Edinburgh in 1748-51. These were the courses on Rhetoric and Jurisprudence which Smith later developed in Glasgow between 1752 and 1762.

The lectures on Rhetoric were based on a conjecture about the origins of language which would be used to sustain the theory of sociability he developed in his lectures on moral philosophy and published as the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1759. The lectures on Jurisprudence were based on a distinctive theory of property distilled out of Hume's theory of justice.

6. The theory of language opens up and reinforces Hume's theory of belief. Smith argues that it is *need* that has made human beings in aboriginal and modern societies into language users. It has facilitated the cooperation and exchange necessary for survival in society. As he will show in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, it also unintentionally performs the task of socialising and civilising the inhabitants of a society and provides them with a sense of identity.

7. The theory of property develops Hume's theory. Smith points out that as property takes different forms in different forms of civilisation, ideas of rights and expectations of justice, government and morality will differ accordingly. His discussion focuses on the problems different types of government will have in enforcing the rules of justice, and the consequences this will have for creating the conditions in which men will seek to better their condition and set in motion the mechanisms on which the progress of civilisation depends.

Between them, Hume and Smith have laid the foundations of the theory on which the *Wealth of Nations* would be built and the Scottish science of man was founded.

8. A problem remains for the historian. Smith never published his Jurisprudence and the theory of progress that lay at its centre. In writing the *Wealth of Nations* he was, like Hume, turning from the theorists business of writing natural history to the political scientist's business of exploring the civil history of contemporary France and above all, Britain. Some reflections on the significance of this situation are offered by way of conclusion.