

BALANCING SELF-INTEREST AND PUBLIC INTEREST: VIRTUES AND THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT¹

AJUSTANDO AUTO-INTERESSE E INTERESSE PÚBLICO: VIRTUDES E CONTEXTO PANDÊMICO

EVANDRO BARBOSA²
(UFPel/Brasil)

THAIS ALVES COSTA³
(IFFAR/Brasil)

ABSTRACT

This article explores how the COVID-19 pandemic's external conditions have affected individuals' moral psychology. We will argue that challenging contexts like the pandemic are external conditions that shape human moral behavior. Supported by Adam Smith's theory of virtues, it is argued that individuals can balance self-interest with concern for others, even in difficult circumstances, through the virtues of justice, benevolence, prudence, and, most importantly, self-control. We will conclude by stating that, even in challenging contexts, individuals need to balance private and public interests to develop appropriate moral action.

Keywords: Self-interest; Virtues; Pandemic context; Outer conditions.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora como as condições externas da pandemia do COVID-19 afetam a psicologia moral dos indivíduos. Argumentaremos que contextos desafiadores como a pandemia são condições externas que moldam as ações humanas. Amparados pela teoria das virtudes de Adam Smith, argumentaremos que os indivíduos podem equilibrar o interesse próprio com a preocupação pelos outros, mesmo em circunstâncias desafiadoras através das virtudes da justiça, da benevolência, da prudência e, principalmente, do autocontrole. Concluiremos afirmando que, mesmo em contextos desafiantes, indivíduos precisam equilibrar interesse privado e público para oferecer uma ação moral apropriada.

Palavras-chave: Auto interesse; Virtudes; Pandemia; Circunstâncias externar.

Framing the pandemic issue

It is undeniable that the coronavirus pandemic has created various kinds of moral and social problems. In considering the possibility that we are experiencing a *pandemic age* (Barbosa, 2023; Araujo, 2023) with

different degrees of intensity of this phenomenon, a crucial aspect of analyzing human behavior in such contexts concerns the factors motivating individuals' decision-making. At first glance, it may seem that the hardest phase of a pandemic is not conducive to the development of individuals' virtues (see Coitinho, 2023). However, theoretical elements argue that the moral behavior of individuals in challenging contexts is better than what immediate intuition suggests, that we are individuals who only look out for our interests with an egoistic bias. Our objective is to challenge this perspective on human nature based on Adam Smith's theory of virtues through his work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), showing that the virtue of self-control is fundamental for appropriate moral behavior in a pandemic, where 'appropriate' denotes moral consideration for others' interests.

To attain this goal, in section 2, this paper discusses how external conditions, like a pandemic challenge context, shape an individual's *inner conditions*, a fancy way to describe moral psychology and affect their moral perception of justice. In section 3, we dive into Adam Smith's theory of virtue, which is centered around sympathy and its role in promoting moral behavior (TMS, I, i, 1). Despite that individuals may have conflicting feelings or dispositions, such as self-interest, selfishness, and self-preservation, that could undermine moral behavior, we stand based on Adam Smith's theory of virtue that individuals can balance self-interest with concern for others by demonstrating virtues of self-command, benevolence, prudence, and justice. In section 4, we aim to illustrate that the virtue of self-control assumes a central role in understanding, from a moral standpoint, how individuals behave in a pandemic context, which is markedly different from the typical social stability as it breaks our ordinary way of life. (see Zack, 2009, chap. 01) We conclude by affirming that a specific moral anticipation exists regarding human conduct in such circumstances. In consequence, adhering to health regulations during a public emergency would not be viewed as altruistic or misguided behavior from the perspective of one's own interests; it's simply about the appropriate management of self-interest through a set of virtues.

The pandemic as a scarcity condition

This section aims to demonstrate how external conditions, like a pandemic challenge context, shape an individual's inner conditions, a fancy way to refer to the moral psychology issue and affect their moral perception of justice. Relevant external conditions can be characterized as

circumstances that can drive individual moral behavior in challenging contexts. We refer to it as an *outer condition*, namely, “necessary circumstances to establish the limits of justice” (Barbosa, 2022, p. 20)⁴ and that which interferes with individuals’ moral perception. In a nutshell, such conditions can either facilitate or restrict behavior and have an undeniable impact on individual and collective well-being.

The coronavirus pandemic can be classified as a relevant external condition of scarcity. The conditions may make it challenging for agents to determine what is fair and right; in turn, they may affect their ability to identify what is morally relevant. In this case, the pandemic represents a type of non-ideal circumstance in which to determine right and wrong because challenging contexts of this type are described by conditions of scarcity on certain goods or resources that affect our decision-making. According to Hubin, if a society is faced with a situation in which no distributive scheme provides each individual with a minimally acceptable share of wealth, “it is a society of severe scarcity” (1989, p. 188). The condition of scarcity can lead to conflicts of justice, especially when there is instability in the possession of goods or an inadequate amount of goods to be shared. One way to observe this is by identifying that the mortality rate of nurses in India and the Philippines is directly linked to the degree of shortage linked to the health of the population (see Fernandez, 2022; Lopez & Jiao, 2020).

These pandemic shortage conditions create a challenging environment where people may have to compete for certain limited resources. Such conditions can result in moral dilemmas in which people must make decisions about how to allocate essential resources fairly and whether to fight for better positions, for example, in line for vaccines or ICU beds. In that regard, scarcity can also affect people’s cognitive processes, causing them to focus more on immediate needs and short-term goals rather than long-term planning and ethical considerations (see Morton, 2017; Mullainathan, S. and E. Shafir. 2013).

How can we interpret human behavior in these situations? A more immediate intuition on the topic may suggest that agents in such situations tend to promote their self-interest to the detriment of the common. It would be a true simulation of Hardin’s tragedy of the commons (1968), reinforcing the idea that the challenging context exerts pressure on agents’ decision-making. According to this perception, in circumstances where people are faced with a shortage of essential resources, like food, water, or medicine, they are more likely to act selfishly, even if it means disregarding the needs of others. For instance, medical supply shortages during a pandemic are challenging

circumstances that can affect people's ability to behave morally. We will explore the Smithian thesis about our capacity to sympathize and our development of social virtues to the detriment of *merely* self-interested attitudes. As we mentioned, the pandemic is a context that puts pressure on our social virtues in favor of self-interested attitudes, so it is important to identify the best scenario for all individuals to mediate our interest with such virtues to make moral decisions.

Self-interest and virtues

In the first part, we saw how circumstances interfere with the way moral agents act. Now, it is important to identify the moral quality of these actions; after all, this context may lead individuals to a kind of corruption of their notions of justice and drive them to consider only the self-interested attitudes that nature has provided us with (TMS III.ii.5,112).

Smith has a positive view of human nature in opposition to the *selfish hypothesis* as follows:⁵

We should never forget, that, notwithstanding all the talk of self-love, of self-preference, and of self-interest, the love of virtue, the respect for justice, and the dread of shame and of blame, are the earliest and most powerful principles in the human breast (TMS, III, iii, 3).

Smith is part of a long tradition of debate about human nature throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. On the one hand, proponents of the *selfish hypothesis* argued that "all our motives and desires can be ultimately analyzed in terms of self-love" (Maurer, 2019, p. 03). Authors like Thomas Hobbes, Bernard Mandeville, John Locke, Samuel Pufendorf, and French Augustinian moralists align with this line of thought. On the other hand, we have authors like Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith who do not reduce the motive for actions to the thesis that became associated with theories on psychological and moral selfishness attributed to Hobbes and Mandeville. Smith agrees that all individuals possess a sense of self-love. However, his concept of self-love differs from the negative form associated with "the illusions of self-love" discussed by Mandeville. According to Smith, "self-love can often be a virtuous motive for action" (TMS VII.ii.4.8), which puts him in opposition to a pessimistic view of human nature as portrayed in Mandeville's theory.⁶

Smith rejects the selfishness hypothesis by denying that human actions can be reduced to the idea that they are motivated solely by self-interest. To this end, he associates his theory of moral sentiments with a theory of virtues to control the deviations that self-love can generate. There are non-selfish mechanisms in human psychology “that play their roles both in motivation and moral judgment” (Maurer, 2019, p. 189). In tandem, he recognizes the role of virtues in controlling possible deviations in our conduct, especially self-control, as we will see soon. Self-interest is intertwined with our social virtues within Smith’s theoretical perspective, serving as a measure to reconcile our intrinsic self-interest with the public’s interests. This balancing makes it possible for individuals to consider others’ interests and creates room for them to engage in actions with appropriate moral value. In such a case, it would not be morally absurd from the point of view of individuals’ interests to follow rules, for example, lockdown, in a pandemic at the cost of limiting their particular interests.

For the sake of argument, let’s consider how self-interest works in line with human virtues, and let’s see how Smithian concepts may be applied in the pandemic context. Smith’s theory of virtue is centered around sympathy⁷ and its role in promoting moral behavior (see TMS, I, i, 1). Smith argues that virtues are defined by moral sympathetic processes, in which individual judgments presuppose “sympathetic feelings of an impartial and well-informed spectator” (TMS VII, ii, 1, 49). Sympathy enables individuals to experience a sense of moral obligation toward others, leading them to act with benevolence, prudence, justice, and self-command.⁸ Smith says that these social virtues are the gears that allow the social organism to function properly.

The expression of sympathy⁹ in society is the foundation stem of virtue because this is where the agent manages to build their behavior, observing others’ actions that are reflected in their actions. In this way, society is a mirror of actions (see TMS III.i.3, 11). Smith introduces his theory of virtue in *TMS* by carefully describing how the virtues of justice, benevolence, prudence, and self-command govern human actions. As we will see, there is a complex social phenomenon in which human beings take part in continuous interaction to develop their virtues. Such virtues play essential roles in balancing our self-interest with others’ interests.

The virtue of justice (*i.*) comes from our ability to put ourselves in others’ situations and to “imagine or conceive of ourselves as if we were them” (TMS VII.iii.1, 4). This virtue shows a dimension of recognition of identity and humanity that makes us indignant at others’ violations. An individual who is currently engaged in some action should be an

appropriate object of reward when we feel pleasure about it. Conversely, an agent appears as an appropriate object of punishment when we recognize not pleasure but pain in their action.

The Smithian theory of virtues reveals the social necessity for justice and a kind of equal recognition of the other's humanity. In this sense, reward or punishment aims to make the other sensible of our dignity, eliciting respect for us (see Darwall, 1999, p. 154). Within the general class of moral judgments, a call for justice involves the agent's and the patient's points of view. Consequently, even if we avoid identifying with others' actions, we cannot escape evaluating our conduct toward them. In doing so, other points of view will discipline our judgments, as the justice dimension of our actions determines the impartiality of judgment in relation to them and us. Such judgments of adequacy or inadequacy will promote feelings of justice or injustice (TMS VII ii, 47). In this sense, recognizing another's gratitude or resentment creates a sense of justice, and our recognition of the identity and humanity of others leads us to feel indignant at any violations they may suffer (TMS II.i.1.2, 68). The virtue of justice and the development of a sense of justice allow individuals to understand the expanded dimension of the rules of justice. This recognition enables us to support shared rules of justice that transcend local and individual perspectives, even as we affirm our differences.

In addition to justice, Adam Smith highlights the importance of the virtue of benevolence (*ii.*). Smith argues that loving others is equivalent to loving ourselves when we consider that we feel as if we were the other. Sympathy is playing here to connect the two. This virtue promotes collective well-being through mutual kindness and is intrinsically related to human dignity. It involves doing good to others as an expression of our love for humanity (TMS VII.ii.4,8). To act with benevolence, one must imagine oneself in the other's position and feel the same pain. However, the central point is not just how one feels self-love but how one constitutes it. Simply desiring approval from others for charitable acts is not enough to motivate one to act benevolently. Instead, true benevolence stems from a sense of love and integrity for the benefit of the needy person without seeking approval (TMS II.i.1.2, 68). To summarize, benevolence is a love for humankind that arises from sympathy and recognizing the humanity of all others. Consequently, it prevents us from causing harm to others and leads us to help others in a disinterested way (WN, IV.ii,4).

The virtue of prudence (*iii.*) involves making considered decisions. Smith offers a broad definition of prudence as follows:

The care of the health, of the fortune, of the rank and reputation of the individual, the objects upon which his comfort and happiness in this life are supposed principally to depend, is considered as the proper business of that virtue which is commonly called Prudence (TMS VI.i.5. p. 213).

This brings us to the figure of the *prudent man*¹⁰ who analyzes his actions to seek the best results. It is clear that our private interests (health, fortune, and so on) are components of the virtue of prudence, but it would be hasty to summarize prudent attitudes in this objective. The consideration for the interests of others also fulfills this role, and a social-moral issue is also at play. Smith posits in *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* that prudent action is driven by “strong desires for approbation and respect” from others as an unfolding of sympathy (TMS VI.i,12). According to Smith, the motivation for prudence is not just the desire to be approved but rather the aspiration to be the one who should be approved. In moral terms, a prudent person is not seeking approval from everyone but aims to become a just and appropriate object of approval for others (see TMS IV.i,17).

Forbes, who analyzes Smith’s theory in terms of human and social progress, reinforces this point by saying, “The most important psychological factor in social progress (...) is the fact that men are highly sensitive to the opinions and feelings of others” (1975, p. 194). It explains why some attitudes of prudence will receive high recognition from other individuals and generate a *superior degree of esteem* (TMS, VII, ii, 1, 50), while others do not gain such recognition, i.e., *cold esteem* (TMS, VI, I, 14; see Carrasco, 2014). The attitude of a prudent man toward the mere private interests of health, prestige, or wealth is still an attitude of prudence. However, its recognition would generate a type of cold esteem. Actions that reconcile private interests with consideration for the interests of others are at a higher level in terms of virtue, morally speaking (see Barbosa & Costa, 2015, p. 06).

At this point in the discussion, it seems clear that there will be situations where individual interests conflict with others’ interests. Another social virtue responsible for blending individual well-being with others’ well-being is self-command (*iv.*). To explain how this control works, Smith divides passions into two types: those that require much effort to be controlled, for example, fear or anger, and those that, although easy to control for a moment, require incessant vigilance to remain constantly controlled, like pleasure (TMS VI. i,9). Self-command is the fundamental virtue that moderates all the passions possessed by human beings (TMS

VI.ii,3). This is the phenomenon that occurs in the balance between our self-interest and what our morality recommends us to do.

It is not true that people should always give up their interests, but “that the individual in the pursuit of his own interests should do so in a way which respects the interests and needs of others” (Skinner 1992, p. 143). For this reason, the key role of self-command is the moderation of our emotions and not the elimination of them. This contention springs from the stoic idea that sympathy can be used to control self-interest. By contrast, Smith states not the eradication but the minimization of our self-interested role in human actions. Smith recognizes the problem that stoics are seen to be trying to overrule moral sentiments, endeavoring “not merely to moderate, but to eradicate all our private, partial, and selfish affections,” and, in so doing, trying to render us indifferent to “every thing which nature has prescribed to us as the proper business and occupation of our lives” (TMS VI.i,13). Conversely, Smith’s self-command idea does not require us to entirely eliminate our selfish natural emotions and self-interests. Rather, it is about moderating them in a way that considers the interests and needs of others. In other words, we should strive for a balance between our self-interests and the common good, or others’ interests (see TMS VI. i, 9).

Self-command also plays a fundamental role in developing others’ social virtues because it drives and permeates all other virtues, since they require that self-love be checked to the degree judged appropriate by the spectator. This approach seems to support that self-command’s virtue “constitutes the perfection of human nature” providing feelings like altruism and self-sacrifice (TMS III.iii.2,145). In this way, self-command contributes to the overall development of our moral character and the promotion of social harmony (Griswold, 1999, p. 203). Also, this process enables us to renounce our egocentric feelings and assume, without prejudice, others’ interests and feelings.

Emerging from the sentiment of sympathy, which is the core of the Smithian moral system, the virtues of prudence, justice, benevolence, and self-command serve as catalysts for morally relevant actions. Through sympathy, we engage with others’ sentiments, allowing us to regulate our behavior and establish a moral standard of propriety. This standard’s ultimate goal is to nurture our natural inclinations toward social harmony, cooperation, and the well-being of all. In essence, prudence is the virtue that guides our considered decisions, enhancing our ability to anticipate potential obstacles. Justice ensures we will respect the rights of others, taking into account their needs and interests. Benevolence motivates us to seek others’ well-being, driven by our inherent inclination to care for

them. Lastly, self-command is the virtue that moderates our passions, reconciling our self-interest with others' interests.

These four virtues can modulate agents' sentiments to the pitch required by the community. The individual is motivated to act virtuously by their own sentiments, like self-love, self-interest, and approval, by feeling that the other recognizes their humanity, in association with an appropriate moral standard. While the intention behind social agents' attempts at self-control may not always be the care of others, sometimes, being driven by their interests, it still enhances life and contributes to society. The measure of convenience allows for the collective good and the interests of society. In summary, social virtues promote a harmonious and virtuous community.

Pandemic context: between self-interest and virtues

In section 1, we discussed how the course of the COVID-19 pandemic has moral implications and raises questions about the societal and individual factors that influence moral decision-making. Specifically, we argued that external factors, like social conditions and unjust circumstances, can trigger actions that are merely self-interested, leading society to corrupt moral values and a distorted sense of justice, thus affecting the inner dimension of social agents in sociability. We also presented Adam Smith's theory of virtues and emphasized the significance of social virtues in limiting the excess of our self-interest. As we have seen, Smith's theory of virtue posits that moral behavior arises from sympathetic identification with others and the cultivation of virtuous habits through practice and reflection. In dealing with the natural emotion of self-interest and reconciling it with the interests of others, the main point behind these four social virtues is their capacity to control our passions, balancing our interests with others' interests (TMS III.iii,21).

It is important to see how capable this theory is of dealing with the problems arising from the pandemic. As we argued, social virtues are crucial during a pandemic. In a pandemic scarcity context, an individual should balance the pursuit of self-interest with concern for the well-being of others and the recognition that individual actions can significantly impact the wider community. Our defense was that based on social virtues, we could justify adopting behaviors that follow health rules during the pandemic, even if these rules interfere with our self-interests. Thus, we could support the need to follow the rules for minimizing the effects of the pandemic, taking Smith's theory of virtues as a starting point. For instance, individuals can demonstrate interest and sympathetic

engagement by following public health guidelines, wearing masks, practicing social distancing, and getting vaccinated.¹¹ They can also support vulnerable community members by checking in on neighbors, donating to local food banks, and volunteering with organizations that support those in need.

Self-command and prudence allow us to foresee the future consequences of certain actions. In this sense, giving up our right to come and go while remembering our attitude can generate harmful consequences in the future, such as contracting COVID-19, is a motivator to follow lockdown rules. Likewise, our desire to go indoors without wearing masks (as they suffocate or bother us) can be balanced with the concern that the older person or person with comorbidity next to us may contract the virus. Therefore, we act with self-command for the benefit of others. By weighing the potential consequences of our actions and considering their impact on others, we can make more responsible and ethical choices. This is particularly important during a health crisis like a pandemic, where our actions can have far-reaching consequences beyond ourselves. Furthermore, a benevolent person's concern for the well-being of the most economically vulnerable during economic crises, such as unemployment or inability to work, may lead them to financially assist poor people or support groups aimed at the most vulnerable population. Ultimately, the virtue of justice sustains our sense of fairness and concern for others. Collectively, these virtues foster the social harmony necessary during extreme situations, such as a pandemic. Moreover, we contend that these virtues provide effective measures to address the inner condition of agency presented in the first section of this text.

Smith advocates for the notion of individual freedom while emphasizing the importance of cooperation among individuals. Selfish and dishonest behavior may yield short-term success. However, in the long run, individuals tend to distance themselves from those who lack trustworthiness. Conversely, we naturally gravitate toward honest and reliable individuals as partners in their endeavors. While we cannot neglect the self-interested nature of our actions, it is also part of our psychology to possess certain virtues and a sentiment of sympathy to balance private interests with the public good. This metric should also apply when external conditions, like the pandemic, make the context challenging for appropriate moral actions.

Closing remarks

In this essay, our concern has been to emphasize that individuals are called upon to take pro-public actions by following public health guidelines, supporting vulnerable members of our community, and so on in challenging contexts like the pandemic. Under a moral prism, a balance between private and public interests is crucial for individuals in this theater of interpersonal relationships¹², where each *character* plays the moral game: who observes, who acts, who receives, and who criticizes.

We have stressed in particular that virtues – mainly self-command – enable cooperation and foster fair behaviors among community members to overcome the challenges presented by non-ideal circumstances. In Smithian theory, virtues work “as a kind of expertise or skill,” so they must be reinforced through the exercise of moral sentiments (see Raphael, 1984). We endorse the thesis that virtuous behavior is not innate but must be cultivated through practice and reflection. It has driven us to recognize the significance of *outer* and *inner conditions* for appropriate moral behavior and to understand how challenging contexts should not diminish or authorize less sympathetic attitudes. On the contrary, individuals must draw upon virtues like self-command, benevolence, prudence, and justice to contribute to collective efforts in a pandemic aimed at mitigating the virus’ effects.

However, this is a *Janus-faced* issue for individuals, as they have conflicting feelings or dispositions regarding such attitudes. Such tension can be seen outside these pages in a pandemic situation, where people need to balance the pursuit of self-interest with concern for others’ well-being. Our approach to resolving this tension relies on recognizing that self-interest is a powerful motivator for individuals, but it should be tempered by those virtues that promote social interaction and cooperation. By adhering to health guidelines and acting to support vulnerable community members, they are showing such virtues and sympathy towards others while also taking care of their own well-being. By striking private interests with concern for the wider community, all agents increase the chances of offering an appropriate moral answer.

Notes

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² Evandro Barbosa is professor of philosophy at the Federal University of Pelotas and researcher at the Nacional Council for Scientific and Technological Development. Email: evbarbosa.ufpel@gmail.com. Orcid: 0000-0002-5695-3746.

³ Thais Alves Costa is professor of philosophy at the Federal Institute of Farroupilha in São Borja. Contact: costa.thaisalves@gmail.com. Orcid: 0000-0002-1274-0431.

⁴ A more in-depth analysis of the relationship between *inner* and *outer conditions* regarding and human moral behavior can be uncovered in Barbosa, 2022.

⁵ Smith is part of a long tradition of debate about human nature throughout the 17th and 18th centuries about human nature. On the one hand, proponents of the *selfish hypothesis* argued that "all our motives and desires can be ultimately analyzed in terms of self-love." (Maurer, 2019, p. 03) Authors such as Thomas Hobbes, Bernard Mandeville, John Locke, Samuel Pufendorf, and French Augustinian moralists align with this line of thought. On the other hand, we have authors such as Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith who do not reduce the reason for actions to just the thesis that became associated with psychological and moral selfishness attributed to the theories of Hobbes and Mandeville, for instance. Maurer explores in great detail the relationship between self-love and egoism throughout the 18th century. Also, Maurer presents how the term self-love has been interpreted in different ways over time, such as egoistic desire, or egoistic self-love, love of praise, self-esteem or due pride, *amour-propre* or excessive pride, respect of self. (See, 2019, 1.1).

⁶ Smith criticizes Mandeville's theory of self-love, claiming that it removed the distinction between virtue and vice. The Stoics also confused the theoretical perspectives of moral agents so that essential aspects of the former disappeared. (see TMS VII.ii.4,8) Although less pessimistic than Hobbes about selfish human nature, Mandeville is skeptical of regulating society. For him, there are no disinterested attitudes of people in a community. As a skeptic, he claims that either one lives as selfish and rich or in a virtuous but poor society. He idealizes the paradox of private addiction and public benefit, whereby public benefits are increased when individuals engage in certain habits, including self-interest. Whereas certain virtues, as in the case of charity, are motivated by self-interested reasons or other similar vices. So, although altruism and benevolence

are traditionally significant for a prosperous society, what is observed is people engaging in vices such as fraud, pride, and luxury. This self-love is responsible for motivating us to act virtuously.

⁷ For a more detailed explanation of the definition of sympathy and its use in Smith's moral theory, see Costa & Babosa, 2022; Darwall, 1998; Sayre-McCord, 2013.

⁸ The hierarchy of Smith's virtues is controversial and discussed at length. To illustrate, Werhane (1991) considers Smith's central virtue as being justice; Hanley (2009) nominates benevolence and Deirdre McCloskey (2006), prudence. Agreeing with Raphael and Macfie in the *Introduction* to TMS, we take the stoical interpretation that self-command plays a central role. (1976, p. 06).

⁹ The feeling of sympathy that springs from my connection with the other will permeate even the Smithian idea of society of exchanges and social interactions. (See Costa, 2022; Wong, 2017).

¹⁰ For more details on Smith's work, see TMS VI.i.7-9; for comments on the topic, see Charlier, 1996.

¹¹ In the Smithian view, moral values and liberalism are not irreconcilable paradigms. He is a liberal, period; and the fundamental issues related to human society are questions of morality and virtue. This is a defense of a public space in which people can thrive, both materially and virtuously. (TMS VI.ii.1, 20) Smithian liberalism did not cease to be individualistic since its theory of moral sentiments is centered on the agent, whose sympathetic ability to connect with others is reflected in trust and social engagement. We cannot predict human behavior, but we can manage to create a public environment (with just public institutions) conducive to sociability and exchanges in civil society. By valuing individual and commercial freedoms, Smith values social justice and believes virtues are necessary for the prosperity' society. (TMS I.iii.2.3,3; WN V.i.b) So, in conclusion, social harmony and its prosperity rely on the cooperative attitude of its agents.

¹² Smith used this metaphor in TMS (I.i.1,4) to refer to society as a theater of relationship. For comments on this topic, see Costa, 2022; Griswold, 1999.

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