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Vanity and Temptation: Was Thomas Reid a Critic of the Scottish Enlightenment?

Graham McAleer

The leading Continental theorist of moral intuitionism, Max Scheler (d. 1928), was a bitter opponent of commercial society. Not exactly hostile to riches, he nonetheless thought the animating principles of commercial civilization, the appetite for luxury and the adornments of vanity, destructive of true morals.[1] A remarkable feature of Thomas Reid's thought is his poor opinion of riches, luxury and vanity. Remarkable, of course, because Hume and Smith spent so much time arguing that markets generate national greatness and human happiness and do so at the behest of vanity's quest for riches.

Is it just a peculiarity that Reid and Scheler are united in their hostility to vanity or is there a genuine basis for this negative reaction in moral consensus or the objective order of value?[2]

The stakes are high. Civilisation, refinement in the arts and sciences, is a consequence of commerce, argues Hume. He writes:

> The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become … They flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or their breeding; their taste in conversation or living, in clothes or furniture. Curiosity allures the wise; vanity the foolish; and pleasure both. Particular clubs and societies are very where formed: Both sexes meet in an easy and sociable manner; and the tempers of men, as well as their behavior, refine apace. So that, beside the improvements which they receive from knowledge and the liberal arts, it is impossible but they must feel an increase of humanity, from

[1] For Scheler's appreciation, and criticism, of the Scottish school, please see each Introduction I wrote for Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy* (London, 2007) and *On the Eternal in Man* (London, 2009). In the course of this essay, references to Scheler are from *The Nature of Sympathy*, cited in the text as *NS*.

[2] There is remarkable consensus across the ideological spectrum. See my discussion of Carl Schmitt on this point in my Introduction to Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism* (London, 2010) and on Peter Singer in *To Kill Another: Homicide and Natural Law* (London, 2010), chapter 8.

> the very habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other's pleasure and entertainment.[3]

It is the allure of fashion, opulence and vanity which incites our 'relish for action', quickness of mind, and our very humanity, insists Hume. Between them, Smith and Hume might be said to have established the Whig Consensus. Their argument is dramatic: Vanity is the basis of liberty. Turning the moral tradition on its head, they argued that the human appetite for adornment – for looking at the beautiful and being thought to be beautiful – is the engine of commerce. Given free rein, vanity would induce new refinements in the mechanical and liberal arts and carry nations out of poverty and towards civilisation. Rule of law is essential as these refinements are only made possible through the use of property. Property holding is basic to adornment – indeed, it maintains our idea of self[4] – and gives owners both an interest in liberty and the means to resist abuses of power.[5] This is the Whig argument that has settled into the Western mind and become a fixed sensibility of her peoples.[6]

Who can doubt that Hume is basically correct? Whether one loves the music of Sir Charles Avison, Spode china, Gucci, Facebook, or the applications on your iPhone, the benefits of vanity and commerce are apparent.

Hume endorsed this argument heartily, Smith only with hesitation. Smith frequently speaks of the 'delusive colours' the imagination is apt to paint a life of luxury (*TMS*, 51) and his portrait of the ambitious young man fooled by riches, and betrayed, is chilling (*TMS*, 181). Commercial society is about toil, risk and anxiety, warns Smith; it is a matter of serving those you hate and deferring to those you contemn; there is little room for dignity in ambition, what Smith terms 'heaven's anger' (*TMS*, 181). But Smith is convinced a price has to be paid so that the earth can redouble her fertility, as he says, and poverty be alleviated (*TMS*, 184). Smith's sober assessment contrasts with Hume's celebration and both contrast starkly with Reid's reticence, if not

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[3] D. Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts', *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis,1987), 271.

[4] D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford,1985), 340–1. See also Hume on the moral life as an embellishment and adornment of the person, *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford, 1978), 225.

[5] D. Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts', especially 277–8.

[6] P. Nemo, *What Is the West?* (Pittsburgh, 2006). Cf. J. Armstrong, *In Search of Civilzation* (Minneapolis, 2011).

clear suspicion (214).[7] Aberdeen's great riposte to skeptics everywhere looked towards Glasgow's 'delusive colours' with skepticism.

Certainly, Reid does not share the utter dismay of later critics of commercial society. Though I want to examine the thematic connections between Reid and Scheler, Reid does not share the latter's frank animosity towards commercial sensibility, an animosity found in so many other authors, ranging across the political spectrum from the likes of Carl Schmitt to Peter Singer. Reid draws a definite contrast between undeveloped, turgid, rough cultures and those which all should favour: Cultures exhibiting luxury, industry and politeness (115). Nonetheless, Reid's departure from Smith and Hume is marked.

To demonstrate this, I (1) document Reid's distance from the great Scottish Whigs; (2) show to what degree Reid was sensitive to the nuances of Hume's and Smith's reasoning in favour of markets; (3) explain how Reid's arguments against riches and vanity emerge from his broad commitments in morals and natural law. Turning then to the thematic problem, (4) after briefly documenting Scheler's basic objection to commercial society, my hope is that (5) a comparison between his moral theory and Reid's will help clarify whether vanity is objectively morally disordered. I take points (1) to (5) to explore two broad points: How Reid can help us assess the moral standing of markets and whether Reid had a fractious relationship to the Scottish Enlightenment.

Reid's distance from the great Scottish Whigs

Reid's theism unsurprisingly moderates his sense of the authority of vanity. Our concern for the good regard of God, says Reid, 'should in a great measure swallow up our desire of the approbation of our fellow men'. Our desire for honour, Reid believes 'should lean chiefly toward that honour that is from God' (119). To this end, Reid is interested in 'the path of virtue' (cf. 178; 184f) whereas it would not be too much to say that for Hume and Smith what matters most is the path of commerce.

In his discussion of entails, Reid acknowledges that riches can have a licit place in human life. Familiar from every Jane Austen film you have ever seen, an entail was a mechanism to secure inheritors far into the future. Reid and Smith both thought ill of entails (333, n. 46) but Reid's criticism that entail is contrary to natural law (153) cuts heavily against Smith's basic ideas of vanity.

[7] Throughout I rely on Reid's *Practical Ethics*, a text dating to the 1760s when Reid was in Glasgow: K. Haakonssen (ed.), Thomas Reid, *Practical Ethics* (Princeton, 1990).

Reid especially objects to the irrationality of an agent bestowing control over a fortune to an heir not yet extant. This is an irrational act because the point of a fortune is 'to make a good use of it' (152). Reid argues that riches ought to result from virtue and industry (151–2) but knowledge of a secure fortune 'often weakens those incitements to industry and virtue which the wisdom of providence has provided in the natural course of things' (151). The ambition of the great to perpetuate their family's prestige is 'both a natural and laudable ambition' but the Romans did this without recourse to entails. Without entails, the Romans had to foster in their children 'those qualities which make men truly great' (152) and in this way did they satisfy the point of having property, to enhance 'public utility' (153). Formalizing this point in his fascinating utopian speculations (281), Reid notes that the appetite for distinction is basic to human life, second only to the appetite for life itself (285). This appetite is not wrong in itself, and it is, Reid says, 'by far a more generous and noble principle than the love of money or of private interest' (282). However, excelling in a life of virtue is the only means to attain distinction adequate to human dignity: 'A man may acquire riches by means honest and dishonest, but to acquire esteem his conduct must be accounted honest and laudable. Esteem is the natural reward of merit … ' (282; cf. 205).

To Smith's mind, merit earns a grudging esteem (*TMS*, 56) whereas beauty gains rapid recognition. Appetite is not stoked by necessity, thinks Smith, for even the meanest labourer easily fills his stomach. Appetite responds to beauty, and commerce is built on the effort to acquire vanity objects which allow the possessors to live out a fantasy, what Smith terms, 'the system of happiness' (*TMS*, 52). Fantasy does not replace nature but is its product. Our ideas about the 'perfect and happy state' of the rich and glamorous are generated by Smith's minimalist natural law, what might be termed, the law of the imagination: The imagination is excited by the well-formed effects of an object; the imagination defers to this object on account of these effects even if they more remotely entail ill-formed effects. Because the remote effects of public utility and civic virtue seldom pierce the initial haze of beauty, says Smith, a palace will always strike the imagination as a more agreeable object than a prison (*TMS*, 35).

Smith's observation plays havoc with Reid's hopes. Far from tying esteem to merit, the imagination divides persons into those of 'rank and distinction' and those of 'spirit and ambition'. The latter must exhibit 'probity and prudence, generosity and frankness' and a man of ambition must work patiently to 'acquire superior knowledge of his profession, and superior industry in

the exercise of it' (*TMS*, 55). By contrast, the man of rank has few talents but much grace and 'to figure at a ball is his great triumph', as Smith rather marvelously says. If opportunity presents, the man of talent and ambition will strive to take advantage of events that 'may draw upon himself the attention and admiration of mankind' (*TMS*, 55). And such is the basic ambition of human kind: 'To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy …' (*TMS*, 50). This the man of rank accomplishes by the elegance of his own deportment and the refinement of objects with which he adorns himself; in this case, merit matters not at all, merely beauty. As Smith puts it: 'These are the *arts* by which he proposes to make mankind more easily submit to his authority, and to govern their inclinations according to his own pleasure: and in this he is seldom disappointed' (*TMS*, 54; emphasis added).

To what degree Reid was sensitive to the nuances of Hume's and Smith's reasoning in favour of markets

Reid's *Practical Ethics* is a natural law text; it is rooted in theism, though not richly theological. Sometimes, the natural law defended is naturalism. Explaining the virtue of moderation, Reid argues that what counts as moderation of the appetites for food and drink is normed by 'the health and vigour of the body' (187; 251). All the organs of the body have a proper function and our appetite for food and drink is no different (186–7). The health and vigour of the body is best satisfied by 'plain and simple fare', says Reid, not appetite 'provoked by the refinements of luxury' (187).

Reid is not insensitive to the play between nature and fantasy that so strikes Smith. About contracts which state a price, Reid argues that the measure of 'the natural and reasonable price' is 'according to the customs and opinions of the country' and this will reflect the incidence of luxury in the society (165). The price of a commodity is fixed through the prism of 'mens real and imaginary wants' (162) and the iterations of these wants in the society's cult of luxury. Yet what Smith regards as the human penchant for fantasy, Reid sees as temptation. Reid grants there is a natural subordination to those possessing riches (176–7) and while Smith sees this as a fruitful deception of the imagination, Reid regrets it profoundly (285–7). From Reid's utopian speculations, which are so critical of money, Reid can only hesitate about the moral standing of price. The terms 'money', 'property', and 'riches', can be used interchangeably and have rendered society nothing 'else but a scramble

for money' (286). The reason? The benevolent affections are 'checked, opposed and born down' (287) by temptations generated by money; the root of all evil, as testified to by Scripture, Reid reminds us (285). In effect, Reid concedes that commerce is about fantasy satisfaction, not public utility.

Is there any control of the possible iterations of luxury? Is there any coherence to the idea of a 'natural measure' of price when its scope includes man's imaginary wants? Is there a clear point where Reid can say that the imaginary tips over into the delusional? We are surely far from Reid's naturalism of bodily appetite. As it is, this naturalism seems to sit at odds with moral intuitionism[8] which is typically explained as the idea that besides natural facts there are moral facts immediately perceivable by the mind[9] and, in the language of the European school, these moral facts are phenomenological tones – discrete, self-contained, value essences e.g. the taste of a peach or malice.[10]

How Reid's arguments against riches and vanity emerge from his broad commitments in morals and natural law

Is Reid's natural law reasoning tied to naturalism? I do not think so. Reid celebrates the Roman sensibility that forgiveness comes easily to the great souled, and he decries revenge cultures as unworthy of humankind, insisting that resentment is only licitly indulged for 'injuries so atrocious in their own nature or so frequently repeated and persisted in' (167–9). For 'if we consider the state of a mind enflamed by resentment and meditating upon revenge: It is surely of all states the most undesirable, the most unlovely' (168). This sense of the unlovely seems theoretically less a matter of an understanding of the human mind delivered through the psychological sciences than of a grasp of the value hierarchy (178; 205). We have, says Reid,

> … an immediate perception of right and wrong, of moral rectitude and depravity, in moral agents, in like manner as we have a perception of

[8] For Reid's intuitionist credentials, see T. Cuneo, 'Intuitionism's Burden: Thomas Reid on the Problem of Moral Motivation', *Journal of Scottish Philosophy,* Vol. 6:1 (2008), 21–44.

[9] There is a good variety of theoretical positions that all claim to be intuitionist but for the basics see the good summary in Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (Oxford, 2009), 87–8.

[10] See Scheler's classic discussion in M. Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* (Evanston, IL, 1973), 13–14; 68; 196–97.

> black and white in visible objects by the eyes, of harmony and discord by a musical ear, and of other qualities in objects, by means of the several faculties of our nature, which are adapted so by the author of our nature as to give us not only the ideas of such qualities but an immediate perception of their existence in certain subjects (144).

Reid stresses that it is not the actions of an agent which we judge, properly speaking, but 'a real quality' in the agent (144). He seems to have in mind the idea of a value quality very comparable to the European phenomenological school.

Reid does speak of the idea of contract proving there is a moral faculty common to all mankind (156). Is this a matter of the moral cognitive faculties being attuned to values exhibited by objects or the faculties investing values in objects? It is the former.[11] Reid writes:

> So universal a consent of mankind with regard to the main points of right and wrong of virtue and vice ought to satisfy the most skeptical not only of the reality of the distinction between the one and the other, but also that the Almighty has taken care of the constitution of our nature, to make this distinction *so apparent and obvious* that it requires no deep enquiry or laborious reasoning to discover it (179; emphasis added).

In Smith and Hume beauty is an allure, economic life itself stemming from the need to be beautiful. For Smith, as we saw, this is a matter of the imagination latching onto the well-formed and avoiding the ill-formed. It is not Smith's suggestion, it seems to me, that the imagination invests objects with characteristics, rather is it that an aesthetic order is shot through nature, the effects of which strike the imagination, itself sensitive, and deferential, to this order. If one asks who is the spectator in Smith's thought, the answer is the imagination, and at an even deeper level, aesthetic order (*TMS*, 183).

Even the mob can rightly reflect this order (*TMS*, 34–5). There is nothing in Reid approaching Smith's passage on the contemptible man who submits to insults. Smith writes:

> Even the mob are enraged to see any man submit patiently to affronts and ill usage. They desire to see this insolence resented, and resented by

[11] Scheler holds this position, too. For projectionism, however, see J. Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* and R. Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (London, 2006).

> the person who suffers from it. They cry to him with fury, to defend, or to revenge himself. If his indignation rouses at last, they heartily applaud, and sympathize with it (*TMS*, 35).

Put differently, the human spectator is a basically sound reflection of the aesthetic-moral order. Reid's utopian speculations show he does not share this confidence, and the point is crucial: A spectator is assumed in Reid's account of natural price–price stems from social comparison. Reid is less a populist than Smith; he is more suspicious of crowds. For Reid, ethics is 'for the most part easy' (110) because our duty is relatively easy to grasp (111). However, agreement about what is actually fairly transparent is hard to come by on account of 'biass and prejudice' (111). Alert to what he calls the 'deluded multitude' (135), Reid speaks of a blindness:

> And as men are much disposed to take the rules of conduct from fashion rather than from the dictates of reason, so with regard to vices which are authorized by fashion, the judgments of men are apt to be blinded by the authority of the multitude, especially when interest or appetite leads the same way. (111)

Vanity without crowds is hardly possible. Hume has us crowding into cities precisely to mirror one another at the behest of vanity. Reid, however, is very classical about where ethics is situated: Ethics is a matter of interior order not exterior adjustments. Where Hume relishes the inversion of avarice into a foundational virtue, Reid resists such reversals. Reid runs together avarice, fraud and rapacity (174). For him, avarice is not a pragmatic social catalyst but a personal trial. There is a conflict between our spirit and flesh and our appetites grow and ripen faster than our reason matures (120; 131). The passions are 'useful and necessary', Reid insists (120), but he does not celebrate them as bearers of unique moral insight. Absent from Reid is any idea of an original sympathetic communication, out of which might naturally arise individual articulations of social life. The communication fostered by commerce as an extension of our sympathetic interest in one another's lives, must be achieved radically, so to say, for Reid. The state takes its origin from the need for individuals to have protection from one another (174; 191). Security is the basis of community whilst for Hume and Smith sympathy is the basis of solidarity. Reid's is more a solidarity of duty and virtue *attained* than an easily come by fellow-feeling. His thinking has about it a Platonic edge: For him,

the resources of nature to attain virtue are few; and few because opposed by temptation, money. If Reid views social comparison as a temptation and not fruitful fantasy, as does Smith, it is because Reid sees bifurcation where Smith claims continuity. Smith has about him something of a moral minimalist to Reidian eyes because sympathy is, for Smith, a relatively uncomplicated phenomenon: Human appetite might be beholden to fantasy but seldom blighted by out and out perversity; perversity, we might say, can register in Smith as no more than statistical noise.[12]

Scheler's basic objection to commercial society

Vanity is hardly possible without inequality and property. It is striking that inequality is not a dominant theme in Reid (177; 286), whereas it is the touchstone of progressive thinking today. Reid speculates on the elimination of property because he sees it as a source of temptation, all too easily satisfied by crime (285). Temptation matters to Reid less because it fosters social inequality and more because it destroys the integrity of the person. Scheler echoes Reid's worry.

Vanity might bring people together, as Hume thinks, but, argues Scheler, vanity trips the abandonment of the self. Ever sensitive to how he is received by others, the vain man lives out a social self leaving his personal, individual self untended. The 'spiritual vampire', as Scheler terms him, is the human type mired in vanity. Thomas Aquinas identified a leading characteristic of vanity as exhilaration in novelty. The spiritual vampire, writes Scheler, 'does not fasten on a single individual, but always on one after another, so as to live a life of his own in their experiences, and fill the void within' *(NS*, 43).[13] There is a reversal of value here, one that defines the modern world, according to Scheler. The high value of personal discrimination is forsaken for lower generic values of assimilation (*NS*, 39–44). Many today intuit what Scheler seeks to make explicit: there is an unacceptable twisting of values inside of much of the business world. Whether in film and television or local shops

[12] For my discussion of the same point in Hume, see 'New Spartans: Jankélévitch, Scheler and Tolkien on Vanity' in A. Udoff (ed.), *Jankélévitch and the Question of Forgiveness* (Lexington Press, forthcoming).

[13] Examples abound: Whether one thinks of the hook up culture on campus, serial divorce, the political junkie, the fashion victim, the cult of the celebrity, academics reading six books at once, or the culture of reactivity to cell phones and texting. A great film portrayal is Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho.*

and bars a common complaint about business is the way in which persons are disregarded as mechanistic management practices squeeze out profits wherever and however they are to be had. That which is highest, persons, and that which is finest, the life of the mind, arts and hobbies, play second fiddle to what is least inspiring, routinization.

Reid's moral theory and Scheler compared: Broad implications

The diminishment of the person figures in Reid. For Reid, departure from natural law, and the life of virtue, is a dissolution of self, albeit expressed in a more traditional, less personalist, tone than in Scheler. For Scheler, vanity eliminates the person; for Reid, it destabilizes, prompting the passions to overrule reason's proper perception of moral properties, and even inciting to crime. Though in a highly moderated form, Reid does agree with Scheler about the negative tone of commercial culture. He is a critic of the Scottish Enlightenment – at least with respect to what I think is its primary gesture – and whilst not rejecting commerce, Reid does highlight its moral precariousness. About this, our intuitionists are clear.

In shattering self-command, vanity leads to the inversion of the value hierarchy. It has a place in a fallen world, thinks Reid, but he is more severe than even Aquinas on this point. Aquinas thinks that vanity can at least act as a goad to others and thereby help build a better world.[14] Reid does not dismiss this idea but his interesting application to the idea of utopia suggests a darker assessment of vanity, and a more radical solution. Comparison to others distorts our sense of moral valuation and perhaps Reid's theory even suggests that aesthetics, if given the prominence Smith proposes, is itself distorting. Fantasy easily collapses into temptation, fashion fostering delusion, and whilst Smith accepts this as a sort of *felix culpa*, Reid thinks of it as simply negative. In pulling us away from the natural, fantasy obscures the moral order as such.

The antidote to vanity is utopianism, a speculation about the elimination of property. Utopianism commits Reid, minimally, to a criticism of spontaneous order in favour of significant state formation; he is an advocate of Christian progressivism correcting a fallen world. Scripture speaks of the 'principalities of this world', and Reid agrees: Temptation and moral corruption are genuine

[14] Please see my discussion of Thomas's position, 'Vanity and Commerce: How *De malo* Supports Whig Thomism', *Ressourcement Thomism: Sacra Doctrina, the Sacraments and the Moral Life* (Washington DC, 2010), 353–63.

moral phenomena; for the Whigs, they are epiphenomena of basically sound aesthetic-sympathetic foundations.

How successful are these arguments? *Is intuitionism adequate to the demonstration that vanity is objectively moral disordered? Much hinges on whether* fantasy collapses into temptation. Scheler's identification of the spiritual vampire is undeniably correct but how pervasive is the condition? The poor opinion of riches he shares with Reid accords with a permanent unease almost everyone has about business. As Alain de Botton points out, there is something that rings false about the eighteenth century claim that work and happiness go together.[15] Hume's celebratory tone rings less true than Smith's cautions but how does Reid fair? Our unease about the modern conception of work and industry is offset, it seems, by the human regard for fantasy and our fascination with the beautiful. How thoroughly one thinks business inverts the moral hierarchy depends ultimately, I think, on whether the moral order can adequately be isolated from the aesthetic. Elsewhere, I have argued that a modern intuitionist heavily influenced by Reid, Aurel Kolnai (d. 1973),[16] may well have found a way to meet both the concerns of Scheler and Reid, as well as those of Hume and Smith. Kolnai attempts a modern rehabilitation of the idea of nobility: With the patience of a classical phenomenologist, he unearths the value tones of nobility and shows the connection the concept has to that of refinement. Refinement is a central motif in Hume's defence of commerce and property. It is a concept little emphasized by Reid – but perhaps implicit in a number of his discussions and not least his magnificent account of courtship – and it may well hold the clue to how best to think of the moral character of markets.

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[15] A. de Botton, T*he Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (New York, 2009), 106–9.

[16] See my Introduction to A. Kolnai, *Politics, Values, and the National Socialism Essays* (London, 2013). I employ Kolnai's original intuitionist theory widely in my *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics* (New York, 2005).