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Possibilities for a Relational Theory of Autonomy for Care Ethics: Adam Smith on Self-Interest and the Social Formation of Morality

Posibilidades para una teoría relacional de la autonomía para la ética del cuidado: Adam Smith en cuanto al interés personal y la formación social de la moralidad

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Abstract

While Smith does not explicitly refer to autonomy, it has been argued that in the Smithean individual there is a place for agency and self-determination, as portrayed in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments.* In this paper, I contend that the Smithian perspective on moral action encompasses self-interest and a relational perspective of the formation of morality as integral components of autonomy. This conceptualization bears resemblance to the notion of relational autonomy as expounded in care ethics. In Smith's framework, morality is a product of societal interactions facilitated by the sympathetic process and the impartial spectator, that lead individuals to emerge as moral subjects. The interplay of sympathy, self-interest, society, and the conception of the individual as delineated in TMS could provide a robust foundation for a theory of relational autonomy that integrates the social, as care ethics proposes, and that does not sacrifice justice and individual rights.

Keywords: ethics; care ethics; Adam Smith; Carol Gilligan; autonomy; sympathy; self-interest; relational autonomy; justice; individual rights.

Resumen

Aunque Smith no hace referencia explícita a la autonomía, se ha argumentado que en el individuo smithiano hay un lugar para la agencia y la autodeterminación, tal como se retrata en la *Teoría de los sentimientos morales*. En este artículo, sostengo que la perspectiva smithiana sobre la acción moral abarca el interés personal y una perspectiva relacional de la formación de la moralidad como componentes integrales de la autonomía. Esta conceptualización guarda similitud con la noción de "autonomía relacional" de la ética del cuidado. En Smith, la moralidad es un producto de las interacciones sociales facilitadas por el proceso simpatético y el espectador imparcial, que llevan a los individuos a emerger como sujetos morales. La interacción de la simpatía, el interés personal, la sociedad y la concepción del individuo delineada en la TMS podría proporcionar una base sólida para una teoría de la autonomía relacional que integre lo social, como propone la ética del cuidado, y que no sacrifique la justicia ni los derechos individuales.

Palabras clave: ética; ética del cuidado; Adam Smith; Carol Gilligan; autonomía; simpatía; interés personal; autonomía relacional; justicia; derechos individuales.

Introduction[1]

In her famous book *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals*, Annete Baier argues that self-conscience depends to a big extent on our linguistic abilities (1985, p. 84). These have been acquired during infancy and childhood, periods of our life in which we have depended on another. She continues to say that "[a] person, perhaps, is best seen as one who was long enough dependent upon other persons to acquire the essential arts of personhood. Persons essentially are *second persons*, who grow up with other persons" (1985, p. 84; my emphasis). Baier essentially says that we need to have been a "you" for somebody else before being an "I." For her, "dependence," "being a second person," "being someone to somebody" is a defining element of personhood. The designation of "dependence" as a constitutive characteristic of personhood explains why human beings, as a species, are one of the animals that stay the longer with their parents or caregivers and go through one of the most extended process of nurture and formation in nature.[2] Through this process we learn both that *we are* persons—an end in itself, in Kantian terms, someone infinitely valuable—and *how to be* a person. We are also the beings that form the deepest relationships with other personal beings because we can share our interiority, and we learn the standards of right and wrong from others in dialogue with our individual conscience in the context of these relationships. It is natural then to say that we learn autonomy—our capacity to discern and carry out our decisions—as anything else, through relationships, and that autonomy itself will be relationship oriented in its origins, development, and ends. A baby or a child needs to be treated as an end, so she can learn to take care of herself in the future and see self-interest as a virtue, an important part of human development. Maybe the crisis of meaning

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[2] The other animal that stays the longest with its parents is the killer whale. Female orcas reach their maturity around 12-13 years of age, while male killer whales reach it around 15-20 years. Elephants, gorillas, and orangutans also have extended periods of upbringing.

and commitment, and the disinterest with one's life in today's Western world is related to adults that weren't appropriately sympathized with and treated as "second persons."[3]

Baier's posture is a criticism to the modern understanding of the individual and personal autonomy. From Kant onwards, autonomy has been considered "as the pinnacle of human achievement, the source of human dignity, *the* mark of human maturity" (Keller, 1997, p. 154). Baier, care ethicists, and feminist philosophers are very critical about this fact.

However, the understanding of autonomy has changed much since the XVIII century. Originally Kant defines autonomy as the capacity of the person as a free being to establish their own rules based on human reason, distinct from the laws of nature that govern the rest of the universe. We can give moral law to ourselves. This makes us different from the rest of nature and is the source of our dignity. Because of this, we owe respect to ourselves and to other human beings (Christman, 2020), who are ends in themselves. For Kant, human autonomy is not arbitrary. The moral law we establish for ourselves is universal. Therefore, while each of us may individually engage in the process of ethical reflection through our intellect, the ultimate conclusions for what we need to do when we face a problem are the same. Virginia Held (2014, p. 109), a prominent philosopher in care ethics, states that both the Kantian and Rawlsian individual rejects emotional insight and tells us that we must act as autonomous individuals in pursuit of abstract, universally applicable principles of reason, or engage in contractual agreements with others based on a hypothetical state of complete freedom and equality.

The popular understanding of autonomy in modern liberal societies as the capacity to decide over one's life as one wants significantly diverges from the sense it held in Kantian philosophy. It bears a connotation of independence and assumptions of individualism in ethical thinking (Christman, 2020). For example, one aspect implied in today's common conception of autonomy is to be able "to take care of oneself." Many

[3] Some discoveries of modern psychology would seem to support Baier's position of "dependence" being the essential element of personhood. Ainsworth & Bowlby (1991) have shown that a healthy attachment to the caregiver (usually a parent, but not necessarily) during the first period of life—meaning a secure personal bond with proper attunement to the needs of the infant—will have a decisive impact on the personality of the child or adult, who will be able to be both autonomous *and* capable of healthy relations.

parents strive to instill in their children the most significant value of being able to "fend for themselves" as adults, and many people judge a life as successful if the person, to put it in simple terms, "doesn't need anybody" to be happy. Without doubt, the ability to self-sustain, to face life's hardships and challenges successfully, to "stand on one's feet" is important in human development. The process of education itself might be seen as growing formation in autonomy, as the child emerges as a responsible moral agent. However, complications arise when autonomy becomes the sole measure of realization in a person's life and is interpreted purely from an individualistic or utilitarian standpoint. The usual portrayal of liberal society that holds this view, as illustrated by Bryan Barry, is "made up of independent, autonomous units who co-operate only when the terms of co-operation are such as make it further the ends of each of the parties" (1975, p. 166). According to the common understanding of individual autonomy from a purely liberal or utilitarian standpoint, in the "race of life" either there is no space for the other, or there is space for her just if the benefit I receive from them is bigger than the cost.

This ethical understanding of the autonomous individual as self-sufficient and independent has been called into question since the 1980's by care ethicists, who have proposed a "relational" understanding of autonomy.[4] This ethical perspective has been developed from the findings in psychology of Nel Noddings (2013) and Carol Gilligan (2003). In the introductory letter addressed to readers that precedes the 1993 edition of *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan raises questions about

[4] Care ethicists have proposed to the Kantian, liberal, and utilitarian visions of autonomy an alternative which is referred to as "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). This vision, born from feminist critics of the traditional views of autonomy, rights, and justice, make relatedness a central point in the person's self-conception, and an essential element for the possibility of personal autonomy, which wouldn't be possible without it (Christman, 2020). "Relational autonomy" is a concept that is still being worked on, and it could be an equivocal concept: it could be understood at least in two different ways. First, autonomy being self-government and the self being understood in a relational way, autonomy would be relational. In the second case, autonomy is seen as involving social relationships rather than individual traits (Christman, 2020). A development of the idea of a "relational autonomy" within care ethics will remain outside the context of this paper, which will try to establish the possibility of a relational vision of autonomy from Smith's moral philosophy.

the relationship between individuals as it has been shaped by the contemporary understanding of autonomy:

> [A] tension […] remains unresolved in this book: whether there is an endless counterpoint between two ways of speaking about human life and relationships, one grounded in connection and one in separation, or whether one framework for thinking about human life and relationships which has long been associated with development and with progress can give way to a new way of thinking that begins with the premise that we live not in separation but in relationship (2003, pp. xvi-xvii).

Is there a contradiction between understanding the human being as inherently connected with others, embedded in relationships, *and* as an individual capable of autonomy? Can she be considered both? Furthermore, could it be argued that the moral agent's ability to exercise autonomy is preceded and sustained by relationships and social contexts? Or are human beings determined by society, and hence, incapable of autonomy? Care ethicists consider that all human beings are interrelated and are dependent on one another, at least for many years of their lives. Held claims that its central focus is "on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility" (2006, p. 10). Care focuses on "caring relations" and not on "caring individuals" (p. 30). The ethical question of the good is approached from the perspective of caring relationships, rather than the classic approach centered on the individual. This emphasis on relationality raises questions regarding the possibility of autonomy for caregivers and care receivers. If maintaining caring relationships is *the* ethical ideal, with attitudes of "care for another," "maintaining relation" and "responding to need" as main values, and the self is conceived as partly constituted by its relationships, is there space in care ethics for individual autonomy? How would this relationship between autonomy and care work out? This paper wants to delve into a point that would seem initially problematic for a conception of autonomy for ethics of care: to explore the possibility of accommodating within care ethics, with its emphasis on "other-oriented" values, the notion of self-interest as a legitimate motive for action. Principio del formularioThis paper argues that Adam Smith's concept of sympathy and the process of formation

of the impartial spectator in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* provide a robust foundation for a relational perspective of autonomy, one that accommodates self-interest in a manner akin to the relational view of autonomy within care ethics. I will consider autonomy mainly as a moral value, emphasizing the place of agency and freedom of action, rather than from an economic perspective. Similarly, the concept of the individual will refer to the subject of moral action, not as an economic category. Consequently, I will prioritize the use of TMS over the *Wealth of Nations*. I assume the unity between "Smith the moral philosopher" and "Smith the economist" and follow Cuevas Moreno's (2009, pp. 56-60) suggestion to read his work as a totality. Thus, I consider his moral philosophy to be the foundation of his economic theory, and that liberalism should be read from the perspective of TMS in unity with WN.

María A. Carrasco's assertion that "sympathetic individualism is what underlies Smithian liberal justice, or sympathetic justice, and it is also […] what can serve as an appropriate foundation for promoting public care policies, where the well-being of the other matters to me for its own sake" (2024, p. 207) can be properly understood when considering Smith's work as a totality. This paper aims to build on this claim by addressing two essential points for reconciling Smith's liberalism with the concept of care. First, it explores how the individual can emerge given the significant role society plays in their formation. Second, it examines the role of self-interest, understood from a relational perspective, within a relational conception of autonomy. When presented this way, self-interest is not opposed to good care, although this affirmation has its limits. On the contrary, mature care implies a proper amount of self-interest, as Gilligan (2003) observed in the women she studied. The possible connection between Smith and care underscores Cuevas Moreno's assertion that Smith is far from being the champion of competition and egoism (2009, p. 56). It also uncovers new potential foundations to enrich care ethics' proposals.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The first section presents the critiques of the possibility of autonomy within care ethics, considered by some authors to be one of its weak points, and selects a definition of autonomy to utilize as part of the framework to make the case for a relational view of autonomy from Smith's moral philosophy. In the second section, the concepts of sympathy and the impartial spectator are briefly introduced to finish building this framework, with some

considerations relating to care ethics. The third and fourth sections provide the main contributions of this work. The third section delves into how individual morality and autonomy arise in a strongly social context, as described by Smith. The fourth and final section connects the role of self-interest in autonomy within Gilligan's care perspective with Smith's relational understanding of self-interest, while also addressing its limitations. The method used in this paper is the hypothetic-deductive method, incorporating the study of original sources and a comparative analysis between Smith's TMS and Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, considered the forerunner of care ethics.

1. The scope problem: Critiques to the possibility of a vision of autonomy for care ethics

Jean Keller, who has worked on the concept of autonomy in a framework compatible with care ethics and feminism, offers the following general understanding of autonomy, which is also compatible with a liberal conception. She understands autonomy:

> […] as self-governance, the ability to exercise control over one's life through the choices one makes. To be self-governing, a person must first develop the capacity to *reflect critically* on one's reasons for action; that is, to question why one is acting in a particular manner and to assess whether it is really in accordance with one's actual beliefs, values or desires. Then one must *be able to act* in accordance with the outcome of one's deliberations (1997, p. 156; my emphasis. See Meyers, 1989).

Three abilities are necessary to be autonomous according to this conception: critical reflection on one's motives for action, self-knowledge to identify one's own values, and priorities in life and capacity to carry out one's decisions.[5] To this I would add a fourth ability, which is to be responsible, to be held accountable for one's actions.

[5] This understanding of autonomy is suggested by authors like Keller (1997) and Meyers (1989) as compatible with a relational model of agency implied in care ethics.

Regarding the problematic relationship between care ethics and an individualistic understanding of autonomy, Keller identifies three main critiques. One strand comes from feminist ethics: it refers to the implication that women's practice of care—which is the core of care ethics—is inculcated through a socialization process and could never be an autonomous action (Keller, 1997, pp. 152-153). The incompatibility of autonomy and care ethics suggested by this critique would be supported by care ethics itself, because Gilligan opposes and differentiates the perspectives of care and justice and the conception of the self that derives from each. She "juxtaposes the relational conception of the self to a view of the self as separate and autonomous, thereby reinforcing the perception that one sees oneself either as related or as autonomous, but no both" (Keller, 1997, p. 153).[6] Thus, justice and respect for rights, which are essential elements of autonomy, have revealed themselves as vulnerable aspects of care ethics. Marilyn Friedman, who has worked extensively on the topic of autonomy within gender studies and care ethics, speaks to the need within care ethics to work on the notion of individual, which she affirms is not properly developed and is the essential part of ethics. Caring relations are not moral agents, she writes, but individuals are. Individuals are the ones capable of responsibility, and the ones that should be addressed by a moral theory (Friedman, 2008, p. 552).

The second critique made to care ethics is similar to the previous one, but it comes from the theory itself instead of from the threat of an excessive socialization process. Because of its "other-oriented" values, care would jeopardize the care-giver's autonomy, because she doesn't really have a choice whether to offer care or not (Keller, 1997, p. 152). The decision to provide care could wrongly be assumed from a totally altruistic understanding, which would be opposed to "mature care," term introduced by Gilligan (2003, pp. 151-174), and would produce resentment in the caregiver. For responding to this critique an understanding of the role that the caregiver's self-interest has in a model of relational autonomy as proposed by care ethics is important.

According to the third critique, the caregiver should make the decision of providing care by asking herself *what form of care* could be

[6] Virginia Held holds a different position: the perspectives of justice and care deal complementary with different problems and a comprehensive moral theory should include both views (see Friedman, 2008, p. 541).

given while safeguarding her own integrity and self-respect. These two values are essential components for autonomy. However, this perspective holds that these qualities are not fostered within traditional feminine socialization practices. Consequently, although care and autonomy could be reconcilable in theory, because of cultural and political factors they ultimately are not (Keller, 1997, pp. 158-60).

I plan to respond to these critiques made to the possibility of a relational perspective of autonomy for care ethics from Smith's TMS. Adam Smith argues that the formation of morality is an intrinsically relational process. Nevertheless, moral conscience also remains the conscience of an individual that can transcend its context.

2. Sympathy and the impartial spectator

In order to explain how this relational conception of autonomy is possible and the role self-interest plays in it, I will briefly explore the concepts of sympathy and the impartial spectator, including some considerations from a care perspective. These two concepts serve as foundational elements to TMS and underpin Smith's sentimentalist, socially oriented moral philosophy.

Sympathy is the principle in human nature which makes the person be interested in the fortune of others "and render their happiness necessary to him, although he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it" (TMS.I.i.I.1). Smith acknowledges the existence of both self-interest (which differs from selfishness) and egotistical passions within human beings, which are consistently moderated and governed by the sympathetic principle. Sympathy is an innate tendency, which gives origin to an imaginative process that we begin to exercise from a very young age and can develop and refine as we mature. According to Smith, the term "sympathy" was originally employed to describe our sentiments of pity and compassion towards others, but he employs it in a more extensive context "to denote our fellow feeling with any passion whatever" (TMS I.i.I.5). As we lack direct experience of the other person's feelings,

> […] we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation […]. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into

> his body, and become in some measure the same person with him (TMS I.i.I.2).

Sympathy relies on the capacity to envision oneself in someone else's position (TMS I.i.1.3). Smith introduces the notion of "impartial spectator" to explain how the sympathetic process comes about. When we witness a certain conduct, "we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station" (TMS III.1.2). But we don't just stay there. We don't judge our own and other person's actions from an immediate and spontaneous position, but we "endeavor to view them at *a certain distance from us* […] with the eyes of other people, or as *other people are likely to view them* […]. We endeavor to examine our conduct as we imagine any other *fair and impartial spectator* would examine it" (TMS III.1.2; my emphasis). If the impartial spectator can enter into the passions and motives of the agent, she will approve of them; if she can't sympathize with them, she will condemn them (TMS III.1.2). The impartial spectator can also judge our own actions; in this case, it is as if "I divide myself, as it were, into two persons" (TMS III.1.6). On the one hand, I am the examiner and judge; on the other hand, I am also the agent, the person judged.

Imagination and rationality play an essential role in this process: we imagine ourselves being in the other person's situation, and from that exercise, we experience the other's feelings to a certain extent. Or we imagine watching our own actions and how this witness would feel. This process has limits: the other remains other. Maybe the poverty that someone experiences makes me angry, but the person experiencing it has come to terms with it and lives in peace (Fleischacker, 2019, p. 13). While there may be a component of "emotional contagion" in rudimentary forms of sympathy, and also a natural and premoral tendency to sympathize, Smith emphasizes that it is not primarily aroused by merely witnessing a passion. Rather, it is kindled by understanding the circumstances that precipitated it (TMS I.i.1.10). This is why Fleischacker calls this "projective" or "Smithean" empathy. Smithian sympathy calls for rationality, curiosity and intention. It is not a passive process: it implies that I choose how and to what extent I engage in it (Fleischacker, 2019, p.11). In this sense, it can be considered a moral act that can be educated.

As Hurtado (2016, p. 300) writes, through the impartial spectator we participate in a game of mirrors, in which we look at others, at ourselves,

and at society, and through this process we can discern the propriety or impropriety of the action. For Hurtado, the impartial spectator can be understood as a "constant feedback process" (2016, p. 299) between us and society. The impartial spectator is like an extended self who doesn't loose itself nor is fused with others in social interactions. On the contrary, Hurtado affirms, this feedback process helps us preserve our autonomy and uniqueness in society: it implies a "transcendent sense of freedom-in-the-world-with-others" (2016, p. 299).

When, through the impartial spectator, I engage with another in the sympathetic process and arrive to an affinity of sentiments, entering the other person's passions and her entering mine, we achieve mutual sympathy. For Smith, this brings about immense pleasure. He links the desire for sympathy to self-interest when he suggests that emulation, present in every individual, and wanting to attain riches are not driven by the comforts or pleasures derived from them, but by a very different passion, the desire of mutual sympathy. The root of the desire to "better out condition" is the desire "to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice with sympathy, complacency, and approbation" (TMS I.iii.2.1). The desire for sympathy, which can deviate into vanity, and not wealth or material things for their own sake is thus at the root of self-interest. People believe riches garner the world's attention (TMS I.iii.2.1): we tend to confuse means with ends.

Stephen Darwall (1998, p. 262) notices that sympathy, viewed as an imaginative process, does not inherently include a consideration for the well-being of the other person, as it would be assumed in caring relations in care ethics. For example, when I see in the news that someone has lost his house due to heavy rain, it doesn't necessarily move me to take action, locate the man and see how I could help him. Following indirectly Batson's "empathy-altruist hypothesis," Darwall argues that the inclination to work for others' happiness springs from a consistent practice of sympathy (pp. 272-274). Similarly, Smith states when he says that "what is called affection, is in reality nothing but habitual sympathy" (TMS VI.ii.1.7). If the man who lost his house is my neighbor, who I have seen every day for the last ten years, it is much more probable that I will help him concretely and not just sympathize with him. Smith states that we are more habituated to enter into the feelings of members of our own family, or people that we meet every day, like our neighbors, because we *see* them. One feels for these people "nearer, in short, for what feels for himself" (TMS VI.ii.1.2). We can

conclude from Smith's argument that proximity is of utmost importance in this process of creating relationships of care: "Relations being usually placed in situations which naturally create this habitual sympathy, it is expected that a suitable degree of affection should take place among them" (TMS VI.ii.1.7). Affection moves us to look for what we consider the good of the other. Care, then, springs from familiarity, because it is harder to ignore the suffering of a person we see every day. Thus, Smith signals a link between heightened empathy and genuine care (Carrasco, 2024, p. 199).

The impartial spectator will be able to counteract, to a certain extent, the most compelling impulses of self-interest and enable us to be just and even good, although we are the "whole world to ourselves" (TMS II.2.1) and the egotistical passions are very strong in us. As Smith says, when compared to benevolence, the impartial spectator "is a stronger power, a more forcible motive […]. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct" (III.3.4). As Hurtado writes, the impartial spectator is "conscience, a social construct, an incarnation of the individual and social value, the highest authority of human conduct, and an image of ourselves" (2016, p. 299).

This process has its limits, of which Smith is conscious, and that remain as a challenge for care in Western liberal societies. Sometimes justice and the desire for sympathy are not enough to counteract excessive self-interest in overly individualistic cultures. There is also the question of visibility: we tend to sympathize more with joy than sorrow (TMS I.iii.2.2), with happiness than with sadness, with fortune than with misery (TMS i.III.1.5), with the rich than with the poor. Thus, the poor and miserable are covered with obscurity: "the dissipated and the gay […] turn away their eyes from him, or if the extremity of his distress forces them to look at him, it is only to spurn so disagreeable an object from among them" (TMS I.iii.2.1). Counteracting the natural disposition that makes us overlook the poor and the vulnerable, making them visible and seeing them as "neighbors," is essential in order to motivate a caring society.

Care ethics claims to reject the universal and impartial vision of the different ethics of modernity (Held, 2006, pp. 15-16). It is important to note that the "impartiality" of the spectator does not mean universality—not every individual has to choose the same course of action—nor a rational judgement detached from emotions. Through the education

of moral sentiments and sympathy, the virtuous individual in Smith is able to discern the appropriate course of action. There is likely a universality in that experience, such as the appropriateness of a son or daughter deciding to leave work to care for an elderly parent. However, this does not imply a determinate course of action that everybody must follow: it can be done in a number of different ways. The perspective of the impartial spectator allows for a variety of approaches that take into account the specific relationships involved and call for different levels of responsibility.

3. Autonomy and the relational formation of morality in Smith

As was stated above, an autonomous person is someone that is able to reflect critically on her goals (according both to the knowledge she has of herself and the possibilities life presents), act in accordance with her deliberations (Keller, 1997, p. 156), and remain accountable for her actions. Rationality gives us the capacity to act not just on immediate impulses or desires but on "second-order desires," moving ourselves to the goals that we choose to desire (Frankfurt, 1971, pp. 6-7). Even though Smith doesn't use the word "autonomy," Griswold notes that "his theory insists on a place for agency or self-determination" (1999, p. 115). By reflecting on our own actions from the perspective of the impartial spectator, and identifying ourselves with that standpoint, "one can direct one's actions and shape one's character" (Griswold, 1999, p. 115). The concept of self-command or self-possession refers to the capacity that enables individuals to act in accordance with their deliberations and is an essential element of autonomy. This capacity is extensively explored in the works of Smith, but it will remain outside the scope of this paper.[7] I will focus on how the goals which we aim to achieve are conceived, and whether it is possible for the individual to transcend social contexts in their formulation. This is important in order to respond to the critique of some feminist critics of care ethics, who assert that socialization determines the practice of care and the position of women within it. Keller suggests that a substantial portion of the philosophical discourse on autonomy argues that individuals possess the capacity to rise above their social context and act in accordance with

[7] Carrasco (2012) and Kopajtij (2020) have discussed the topic of self-command.

what their "authentic selves really want," construing "authentic" as something asocial, a deep inner essence to be found within ourselves and no related to society whatsoever. Some feminist thinkers have embraced this perspective, presenting the ideal of autonomy as authenticity as a goal for women to move away from the effects of feminine socialization (Keller, 1997, p. 155) and discarding care as a feminist value.

This stance conflicts with the care ethics conception of a relational self. It also diverges from Smith's view of morality, which is shaped within society. In Smith's framework, both the impartial spectator and the goals toward which individuals choose to move in life emerge as integral components of the socialization process, in dialogue with individual conscience. Persons progressively attain autonomy from societal influences. In this sense, autonomy invariably retains its relational nature, as individuals acquire a substantial portion of their moral standards from society and continually harbor a desire for mutual sympathy that informs their actions. By constantly assessing our actions and what society presents us through the lens of the impartial spectator, we are empowered to discern and detach from societal pressures and internal impulses that do not align with our ethical ideals.

Without society, one wouldn't even be able to develop as a moral individual: if a human creature were to be born apart from it, "he could no more think about his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of its own face" (TMS III.1.3). Her passions and actions, or her own appearance, wouldn't be object of her thoughts; they wouldn't generate further movements of the soul besides first impressions. But "bring him into society," Smith adds,

> […] and all his passions will immediately become the causes of new passions. He will observe that mankind approve of some of them, and are disgusted by others […] [;] his desires and aversions, his joys and sorrows will now often become the causes of new desires and new aversions, new joys and new sorrows: they will now, therefore, interest him deeply, and often call upon his most attentive consideration (TMS III.1.4).

This self-awareness develops in society. The eyes of others are the only "looking glass" by which we can scrutinize our own conduct (TMS III.1.5). This is why even when examining ourselves, individuals adopt

the perspective of others, projecting what they believe those others would think through the impartial spectator. The process of formation of character and self-awareness is a lifelong journey (Herzog, 2016, p. 346). It starts when a child enters society, "that great school of self-command" (TMS III.3.22), where she learns to enter the passions and attitudes others can sympathize with:

> If in the course of the day we have swerved in any respect from the rules which he prescribes to us […] [,] if […] we have hurt in any respect the happiness of our neighbor […] [,] it is this inmate, who in the evening, calls us to account for all those omissions and violations, and his reproaches often makes 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 VI.concl.1).

Liza Herzog (2016, p. 340) raises the question of whether Smith's emphasis on the communitarian foundation of morality entails an abdication of the notion of a sufficiently autonomous individual subject. As Smith describes, social influences are very strong and partly determine our character. He says that we are influenced by different elements, such as custom and fashion, by the human condition of admiring the rich or by the habit of passing easily from one object to the other when two objects are often seen together (TMS V.1.2). We are also influenced by the degree of civilization our culture has achieved. For example, what Smith calls "barbarians" tend to cultivate the "terrible" virtues of self-denial, necessary for survival. On the other hand, civilized nations foster "humanitarian" virtues, like generosity, good manners and affability, that are possible in their context. The first will be false and dissimulate—it is necessary for survival while the latter will tend to be "open, frank and sincere" (TMS V.2.8). Smith mentions that even virtuous individuals, such as Plato and Aristotle, approved of exposing unwanted babies—that is, "the murder of new-born infants" (TMS V.2.15)—to death by hunger or wild beasts. For Smith, this practice probably came from earlier times, when men died from indigence and hunger and it was impossible for them to support themselves and their children, and thus, the custom was excusable. But in later times in Greece this was done for reasons of "remote interest or conveniency," which for Smith were intolerable (TMS V.2.15). The

practice was maintained by "uninterrupted custom," and not even the "doctrine of philosophers" questioned it, but actually encouraged it (TMS V.2.15). Smith doesn't go into the reasons for the conscience of virtuous individuals being determined by the customs of their time in this case, but just notices that "no society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men's conduct and behavior with the horrible practice I have just mentioned" (TMS V.2.16).

Is then the influence of society absolute? Herzog's question is of vital importance, because if we are determined by society we wouldn't be capable of personal responsibility and we wouldn't be accountable for our actions. The crimes of Eichmann, which he claimed he wasn't guilty of because he just "followed the law", would not be punishable; or the men that harassed so many women in the workplace in the past wouldn't have any blame, because it was "what everybody did." Women themselves, if they were totally determined by their social context, as some feminist opposed to care ethics claim, wouldn't be capable of accountability. And care would reveal itself to be a product of socialization.

Herzog (2016, p. 345) argues that the Smithean individual is able to emerge as a moral agent because, even if our morality is formed in a social setting, we still hold each other accountable for individual actions. We also hold ourselves accountable. Accountability is the fourth condition for an integral view of autonomy. The development of a truly impartial spectator that demands accountability speaks to an individual's moral and psychological conscience, which remains as a defense for living life as others would like, for the excesses of socialization or for when culture's standards of right and wrong are deviated. Even though what we want the most is to engage in the sympathetic process and be accepted and loved, human beings want even more to be loveable, meaning attaining true virtue and not just the appearance of virtue (TMS III.2.1). This is common to everybody: as Smith holds, "There exists in the mind of every man an idea of [exact propriety and perfection]" (TMS VI.iii.25), and the impartial spectator will hold ourselves accountable if we don't strive to live up to its demands. People naturally want to gain total identification with the impartial spectator, the "man within the breast"; one "naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love" (TMS III.2.1).

For Smith, the wise and virtuous individual doesn't seek mere empty applause; shallow admiration from others without merit may

provide only superficial satisfaction: "He desires, not only praise, but praise-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise" (TMS III.2.1). The love of praise and praiseworthiness, although they are two different principles, are very similar, and most people get them confused (TMS I.iii.3.3). That is why some tend to admire the rich: we admire what is praised by the majority of people, and not necessarily virtue, which is alone praiseworthy. According to Smith, this predisposition to admire the rich and powerful while neglecting the poor is "the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments" (TMS I.iii.3.1). This predisposition diminishes autonomy as the individual becomes unable to discern her genuine desires beyond those dictated by societal norms.

On the other hand, when a person grows in virtue, her judgment becomes increasingly independent from superficial public opinion. As the impartial spectator develops and we listen to what it dictates, we become more discerning, distinguishing genuine value and virtue from mere appearance. Love of virtue is more intrinsic to the individual than the desire for praise, and it guides those who seek the approval of the impartial spectator to uncover personal motivations that remain hidden from those who live at a superficial level. The impartial spectator brings them back to the concreteness and possibilities of their own lives. The virtuous man has modeled his thoughts and feelings according to "this awful and respectable judge" (TMS III.3.26) and is capable of acting from an interior place that remains unknown to those who live superficially.

Total independence from societal judgment is never entirely absolute. This speaks to our intrinsically relational nature. Should slander have an impact on how others perceive virtuous individuals, it will still engender profound emotional distress: they "will be struck with horror at the thoughts of the infamy which the punishment may shed upon his memory […] [;] he is to be remembered […] with shame, and even with horror" (TMS III.2.13). The sole source of solace in such circumstances lies in the approval of the impartial spectator, a sentiment known only to the individual, along with the endorsement of the ultimate arbiter of souls. Additionally, there remains the prospect of justice prevailing in "another world," one not bound by the same constraints as our own (TMS III.2.13). The existence of God is very convenient for Smith's theory of justice.

4. Autonomy and self-interest in care ethics and Smith: possibilities and limits

In the liberal conception of autonomy, self-interest is generally accepted as a valid motive for action. On the contrary, self-interest holds a conflictive place in care ethics. Held (2006, pp. 13-14) conceptualizes persons as relational and interdependent, not as self-sufficient, independent, self-interested, or as rational autonomous agents. Friedman (2008, p. 550) affirms that, for Held, persons in care ethics are capable only of relational autonomy and are often not self-interested. Held herself refers to studies which indicate that economics students exposed to the concept of self-interest are statistically more prone than their counterparts to "free ride and fail to cooperate" (Held, 2006, p. 14), thus insinuating a contradiction between self-interest and care ethics.[8]

On the other hand, for some thinkers that defend a care approach to ethics, it seems that self-interest is, or at least should be, considered a valid motive. Carol Gilligan highlighted the challenges faced by women in asserting their autonomy, making independent decisions, and taking responsibility for their circumstances and what they wanted—which can be considered in the realm of self-interest— without external influences, context, or societal expectations dictating their choices. Lack of autonomy posed a significant problem, as Gilligan notices, leading many women to find themselves in life situations that did not bring them fulfillment. They had arrived at these circumstances not through conscious choice, but by *not making a decision,* thus letting people or events choose for them (Gilligan, 2003, pp. 24-64). This attitude was, in itself, a decision—one that often led to unhappiness. Gilligan's work involved women confronted with the difficult decision of having an

[8] Smith's beloved teacher Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) had understood virtue as beneficence, as doing the good and working towards the happiness of the greatest number of people (TMS VII.ii.3.3-6;10). In his conception, if an action was motivated in any way by self-interest "such a discovery would entirely destroy all notion of merit or praiseworthiness in either of these actions" (TMS VII.ii.3.6), similar to what Held seems to convey. Virtue, for Hutcheson, consisted of pure benevolence alone (TMS VII.ii.3.6), and self-interest could never be virtuous in any degree. It was vicious when it was an obstacle for the welfare of society (TMS VII.ii.3.12).

abortion. She observed that extreme situations like these compelled them to confront the reality of their freedom and take responsibility for their own lives, forcing them to think about what they really wanted. In the process, they were able to become more autonomous (Gilligan, 2003, pp. 106-128). They still confronted moral problems giving importance to relationships, but with a stronger sense of self and of personal responsibility. They stopped being a "nonentity" and confronted their power to hurt and destroy (Gilligan, 2003, p. 95), the possibility of being wrong and of giving priority to themselves over others, which are also constituent parts of being a moral agent. Thus, self-interest holds an ambiguous position in the realm of care: Held's approach is somewhat extreme, while Gilligan's, on the other hand, acknowledges important nuances.

On the other hand, for Smith, self-interest is both a valid and necessary motive for action. For him, it is morally justifiable to prioritize self-interest over "humanitarian" passions to the extent it doesn't infringe upon justice. The concept of the moral individual is at the heart of Smith's ethics and has priority over the multitude.[9] When he discusses punishment and the infringement of justice, he states that the concern that we have for individuals generally doesn't arise from an apprehension for society in general, "but our regard for the multitude is compounded and made up of the particular regards which we feel for the different individuals of which it is composed" (TMS II.ii.3.11). When a man is injured unfairly, we become indignant, and it makes no difference if the one injured was an odious person, because it is our sense of justice that has been breached. Although this indignation in the face of injustice works in us as an instinctive sense of preservation of society (TMS II.ii.3.12), our motive to be indignant is the injury caused to the individual subject, which could be us.

Fellow human beings readily endorse the prioritization of an individual's own happiness, as well as that of their family and friends, over the well-being of others. We instinctively approve appropriate expressions of self-interest and we can assume that others share a similar perspective. This is because the preservation of the body and fortune of each individual are entrusted to her own care (TMS VI.1.1): she is the one that can best fulfill this task. The care of health, fortune, rank, and

[9] This priority of the individual over the multitude in the moral sense is analogous to the priority of the individual.

reputation of the individual are, for Smith, "the proper business of that virtue which is commonly called Prudence" (TMS VI.1.4). Consequently, "in the race for wealth, and honors, and preferments, he may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrips his competitors" (TMS II.ii.2.1). The only limit in this race to better my condition is not violating the sacred happiness of my neighbor, which Smith assimilates to the holy ground consecrated to some god in ancient religion. In the same manner, "the happiness of every innocent man is […] rendered holy, consecrated" (TMS II.iii.3.4), and protected by the "sacred laws" of justice, which for Smith are the basis of society. That is why the impartial (and real) spectators wouldn't indulge an act of injustice done to one's neighbor, which violates fair play, and thus, "they do not enter into that self-love[10] by which he prefers himself *so much* to this other and cannot go along with the motive from which he hurt him" (TMS II.ii.2.1; my emphasis). The impartial spectator corrects our distorted perspective, in which we seem much bigger and more important than others. This error of perception is totally normal, being through our own senses the way we perceive the world: "Though every man […] be the world to himself, to the rest of mankind he is a most insignificant part of it" (TMS II.ii.2.1). With time, as human beings mature in the "great school of self-command," they learn to act as if they are not the center of the world.

The limit, then, of self-interest for Smith will always be the duty of justice, to others and to oneself. Having this limit in mind, he contends that acting out of self-interest is not only acceptable but virtuous. In fact, he suggests that an appropriate self-interest is a fundamental component of virtue, as Raphael & Macfie (1982, p. 21) hold. For Smith, self-interest leads to numerous socially endorsed attitudes:

> Regard to our own private happiness and interest, too, appear upon many occasions very laudable principles of action. The habits of oeconomy, industry, discretion, attention, and application of thought, are generally supposed to be cultivated from self-interested motives, and at the same time are apprehended to be very

[10] In the XVIII century, self-love is used as a synonym for self-interest. In Smith, they are both distinguished from selfishness (see Raphael & Macfie, 1982, p. 22).

> praise-worthy qualities, which deserve the esteem and approbation of everybody (TMS VII.ii.3.16).

For Smith, then, prudent human beings should be concerned with their future, resource management, and their personal circumstances. He views the neglect of self-interest as a deficiency (TMS VII.ii.3.16), because we don't assume a responsibility which we can fulfill the best (TMS II.ii.2.1). By disregarding self-care, we impose a burden on someone else, be it a parent, relative, or the state, to care for ourselves. This can potentially provoke resentment. If we only look after ourselves out of consideration for our family and friends, rather than genuine self-interest, Smith suggests that we may become objects of pity. Failing to maintain proper self-interest could "somewhat diminish the dignity and respectability of [one's] character" (TMS VII.ii.3.16).

Self-interest was also of outmost importance in the realm of economics. In addition to its fundamental role in ensuring one's subsistence, earning a salary confers upon individuals a sense of dignity and self-worth by virtue of their contribution to the market's value exchange. Wealth engenders increased sympathy for others, something that also moves individuals to strive for riches. This is why, as Smith famously stated, self-interest moves economy:

> It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from *their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love*, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of *their advantages*. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens (WN I.2.2; my emphasis).

This emphasis on self-interest, however, has been adopted by extreme liberal economic theories, often interpreted without considering the link to the vision of human connectedness and sympathy articulated in Smith's TMS. Smith recognizes that some elements, such as the division of labor and the pursuit of luxury, can act as a force pushing society towards economic growth, and improve the level of life in general. But, on the other hand, the same forces that create the wealth of the nations are also the cause of social inequality, like the one created from the different wages that accompany each type of trade (WN I.10.1). Inequality always creates tension. Although it has been a longstanding issue, its severity

has intensified. This dynamic is exemplified by the Chilean experience, where the economy experienced prolonged growth following the end of Pinochet's regime in 1989, largely due to market liberalization and minimal regulatory constraints. However, this economic expansion came at the cost of social cohesion, which deteriorated for various reasons, prominently including inequality and individualism. These factors significantly contributed to the social unrest witnessed in 2019 (Edwards, 2023).

This example raises questions about the ability of Smith's liberalism to sustain relationships based on sympathy and care in today's large and anonymous cities, technological societies, and financial markets. Commerce today functions very differently from the way it did in a 18th-century European city, where knowing one's neighbor and creating relationships of economic interdependence that remained personal in character was far easier. For Smith's liberalism to be able to ground an ethics and policies of care, the need to create spaces where sympathy and care among individuals can develop remains a challenge.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued, drawing from Adam Smith's moral philosophy, that a relational model of autonomy and morality is possible. This perspective provides a more accurate depiction of human beings than the prevailing notions of the self-sufficient individual found in liberal, utilitarian, and contemporary ideals of autonomy. Emphasizing the importance of social interconnections, this approach aligns with care ethics' concept of "relational autonomy." While Smith explicitly incorporates self-interest as a fundamental component of autonomy, Gilligan contends that self-interest is not merely an appropriate motive but a necessary one. She calls our attention to the fact that sometimes it is vital—Smith would say virtuous—to prioritize our own needs and desires, even if this entails conflicting with others' emotions or perceptions of what is beneficial for them.

The danger of assuming care arising from excessive socialization practices or from a misguided understanding of care remains. However, both men and women have the capacity to transcend their social contexts and the pitfalls of disordered desires of sympathy. This is possible through the impartial spectator, an internal moral compass that holds individuals and others accountable to an inherent sense of justice and virtue, and that has been formed in dialogue with society. The decision

to care and engage in situations that may imply self-sacrifice, a process that essentially entails "losing" oneself, *can arise from autonomous beings.* When this decision is made freely and consciously, individuals can embrace caring as an authentic expression of their autonomy. The mutual sympathy that arises in caring relationships can be very rewarding and expand our possibilities of autonomy. This speaks to our relational nature. However, if caring is not undertaken freely, it can lead to resentment in the future, potentially transforming it into a motive for victimization rather than growth.

On the one hand, the combination between Smith's moral philosophy and care ethics could potentially address the shortcomings of the latter, including its limited conception of the individual, justice, and rights. By recognizing humans as intrinsically relational beings and also capable of accountability, the Smithean perspective of moral action might offer a more comprehensive framework for understanding autonomy and moral decision-making. On the other hand, it would be valuable to explore if and how the care perspective can address some of the limitations inherent in Smith's theory, as the extent to which sympathy can create contexts of care. An exploration of Smith's concept of circles of sympathy concerning the responsibility for oneself and others and how this tendency affects our perception of the world could also offer a promising avenue for further research on a social conception of autonomy.[11] This examination could serve as a foundation for enriching the discourse of moral action within care ethics, given its inclination towards the particular rather than the universal.

The ongoing discourse surrounding diverse notions of autonomy and care continues to be a significant arena for shaping political and social debates. We eagerly anticipate the future of care ethics, as it hopefully enriches the concept of "relational autonomy" by incorporating a nuanced understanding of the individual, justice, and rights. In this regard, the insights of Smith's philosophy can be an "unexpected companion" for the forthcoming development of care ethics.

[11] The idea of circles of sympathy in Smith, who follows Stoic philosophy in this regard, has been vastly developed by Forman-Barzilai (2010).

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