"The poor man's son" and Adam Smith's theory of beauty

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ABSTRACT

The article's novelty is its focus on the role of Smith's theory of beauty and its implications for utility, systems, and morality in the narrative of "The Poor Man's Son". From his enlightenment worldview, the narrative contains Smith's criticism of the misguided or reductionist view of the beauty of utility and affirmation of harmonious systems. Adam Smith's narrative of "The Poor Man's Son" in his book, *The theory of moral sentiments* [1759], has received significant attention from scholars. Three modes of interpretation can be distinguished. The first group follow a mode of interpretation from the world of the text, which is literal and regards the narrative as Smith's support of beneficence. The narrative is perceived as Smith's criticism of commerce and consumerism in pursuing happiness. The second group, reading from the world behind the text, pay more attention to historical and material aspects and argue that the narrative warns against misplaced ambition and affirms the virtue of commerce. The third group, reading from the world in front of the text, focus on the reception of the text, and the emphasis shifts to the tension between beneficence and commercial prowess in Smith's work. The problem with all three interpretations is that the interrelated nature of beauty, utility, and commerce has not been explored. Consequently, an analysis of the narrative from Smith's theory of beauty underscores that the poor man's son's anguish resulted from a lack of appreciation of the beauty of the economic system and not solely the pleasure of consumption. This unlocks the connection between beauty, utility, and commerce, affirming the common good and societal harmony of systems when artefacts function correctly.

Keywords: Adam Smith, beauty, utility, commerce

1. Introduction

The novelty of this article is the emphasis on Adam Smith's theory of beauty in the interpretation of the narrative (also referred to by some scholars as a *parable*), "The Poor Man's Son" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) [1759]. The emphasis on beauty in the narrative introduces the unique interconnectedness of beauty, utility, and commerce, where the beauty of utility extends beyond mere functionality to include the qualities of the technologies employed, emphasising their practical use and the advantages they offer to both the individual and society. Similarly, for Smith, the value of the commercial system lies in its effectiveness in facilitating the exchange of goods and in its efficiency in promoting the common good and fostering social harmony. Smith's theory of beauty represents his unique and nuanced enlightenment aesthetic worldview that focuses on inherent characteristics of what Smith refers to as machines and systems (TMS IV.i.1). These are things like technological artefacts, objects, structures or activities in a systemic form (e.g. commerce, politics). The focus on the characteristics is unique because it suspends reductionist utilitarian thinking, where beauty is solely related to the usefulness of things. This amplifies a unique perspective on the interpretation of the narrative that complements and enriches scholarly research that usually reads the narrative in isolation from the broader context of TMS VI.i, which deals with beauty and systems (Brown, 1994:7; Hanley, 2009:1-93; Paganelli, 2020:4-5; Forman-Barzilai, 2010:1-32).

In this article, the various contemporary modes of interpretation of the narrative will be discussed, accentuating the shifts of focus from the world in the text, to the world behind the text and the world in front of the text. Secondly, a historical analysis of beauty and Smith's unique contribution to the beauty of utility in TMS IV.1 will be presented. This will be followed by the textual analysis of the narrative, exploring the relationship between beauty and utility presented in the son's narrative, its preface and postscript.

2. Modes of interpretation

"The Poor Man's Son", in TMS IV.i.8, starts with the revelation that heaven has bestowed ambition on a poor man's son who lives with his father in a humble abode, where he works with his hands, uses a horse for transport, and follows a simple existence. His ambition makes him discontented with their current existence, and he starts envying the mansions of the wealthy, their servants, their forms of transport, and the abundance they seem to experience. The son begins working and educating himself to improve his situation. Later, it appears that he is engaged in some profession where he works for people whom he sometimes finds unscrupulous, but in pursuing wealth, he drives himself forward until old age. In old age – tired, sick, and despondent – he regrets the senseless ambition that drove him and left him miserable.

The preface to the narrative in TMS VI.i.1-7 and the postscript in TMS VI.i.9-11 frame this story (TMS VI.i.8). The preface in TMS VI.i.1-7 focuses on utility and the fact that the usefulness and pleasure provided by things may bestow a sense of beauty on them (a fact that may also result in the misappropriation of utility, as was the case with the son's failed search for happiness in material wealth). TMS VI.i.9-11, on the other hand, underscores the beauty of harmonious systems, such as commerce, that go beyond the individual pursuit of wealth and happiness.

This tragic story has been investigated by many scholars who follow one of three modes of reading the text. The first group follow a literal mode of reading from the world in the text, and they mainly regard the narrative as Smith's support of beneficence. The narrative is perceived as Smith's criticism of commerce and consumerism in pursuing happiness. Vivian Brown (1994:7-8) notes that the narrative expresses Smith's criticism of liberal capitalism and materiality. A similar position is supported by Forman-Barzilai (2010) and Hanley (2009:68), although Hanley focuses on psychological distress and anxiety prevalent in capitalist society, amongst others. De Oliveira (2018:13) views the narrative as an example of the limitations and self-deception of the impartial spectator, which result in the son's anguish. The son sought the pleasure of the world, but his ambition ended in anguish. Alvarez and Hurtado (2012:14-23) argue that the narrative is an example of mismatched sympathetic passion due to the distance between the son and the wealthy. The impartial spectator, a mental construction of seeing situations through the eyes of others and used in moral decision-making, may have overrated the joy of the rich without understanding their lifeworld. This may be part of why the impartial spectator failed to guide the son who was confused about the difference between wealth and happiness.

These interpretations take the world of the text as a point of departure and analyse it from the perspective of Smith's intended meaning of the narrative. In other words, the literary nature of the narrative as a parable contains a more profound meaning regarding the nature of wealth, labour, and happiness, which are placed in juxtaposition. This highlights Smith's proposed support of beneficence and pursuing happiness beyond reliance on material objects. Alvarez and Hurtado (2012:2-3) include an intertextual element by reading the text in the broader context of Smith's discussions of the impartial spectator and sympathetic passions.

Secondly, reading from the world behind the text, Paganelli (2020:1-5) gives more attention to historical and material aspects, and he argues that the narrative is a warning against

misplaced ambition and affirmation of the virtue of commerce. The beneficence, or the pursuit of moral magnanimity beyond materiality prevalent in the previous mode of reading the narrative, has shifted to the 18th-century commercial context of the text. In response to Virgil Storr and Ginny Choi's (2019) analysis of the relationship between morality and markets, Paganelli (2020:5) argues that the son's anxiety was not due to collusion, dishonesty, or corruption, but rather to misplaced ideas about what makes a person happy. Paganelli (2020:4) notes that the son

> … did nothing wrong – he did not elbow anybody aside or cheat his competitors (TMS, II.ii.2.1). He did not steal or hurt anyone. He may (or may not) have been wrong about what brings happiness, but that does not make him immoral or vicious.

Conversely, according to Paganelli, Smith warns against the dishonesty and collusion between merchants and manufacturers, as well as the government and other parties, regarding the business practices of their time. Paganelli (2020:4-5) underscores that morality is contextually bound, and the values supported by Smith are informed by 18th-century commercial society, which can sometimes result in unethical practices. This, however, does not mean that commerce or the markets are immoral or result in unethical conduct, but are context specific:

> For Smith, markets do corrupt our morals, if our morals are the morals of a feudal system. Markets make us undisciplined and cowardly in war, weaken hospitality, feed our vanity, and challenge austerity. But they do not create moral monsters unless we are able to access the monopoly power of the state. Markets substitute the more typical masculine virtues of pre-commercial societies with the more feminine virtues of commercial society.

This assessment of the son's ambition and the reason for his anxiety is based on the historical situation and Smith's view of the functioning of commerce, markets, and morality that support an interpretation of the text that highlights the son's failed understanding of happiness. Therefore, the son's unhappiness does not intend to mean that commerce is morally obsolete. Instead, morality is historically bound and reflects the values of the 18th-century commercial society (in the case of Smith) and not those of a medieval society where economic exploitation by landowners was common.

Thirdly, reading from the world in front of the text, the reception of the text is of principal importance, which is found in Hill's (2017:9-25 interpretation of the narrative, where the emphasis shifts to the tension between beneficence and commercial prowess. This mode of interpretation follows a trajectory from contemporary culture and experience back to the narrative. In other words, contemporary presuppositions and problems related to markets, commerce, and morality guide the interpretation, although these are not clearly expressed. Hill (2017:9) opens her discussion of the narrative with the following statement:

> In order to operate effectively, modern capitalism depends on agents who evince a rather morally undemanding type of moral character; one that is acquisitive, pecuniary, recognition-seeking and merely prudent. Adam Smith is considered to have been the key legitimiser of this archetype.

According to this statement, the contemporary experience by people of 'modern capitalism' and the moral erosion of certain commercial practices inform the discussion of the narrative. The contemporary tension between business and ethics takes centre stage (Wight, 2015; Stigler, 1981; Stark, 1993). In other words, the real-life challenges of board members, businesspeople, managers, and workers to keep a business running and to be moral are the hermeneutical key to interpret the narrative. Hill (2017: 22-23 explores this tension by debunking the stereotypical view of Smith as a justifier of greedy and dubious business activities. She notes that Smith warned that the "reverence for wealth and glory"

can corrupt our moral sentiments, and we can get involved in unethical business dealings. Still, Smith concurred that people might be lured into business for self-interested reasons only to find – like the son – that the invisible hand might use ambition for society's most significant good without consideration for individuals' well-being.

Hill (2017: 22) concludes that we are left with a tension between business and ethics, represented by "Smith, the social scientist and political economist". Therefore, this interpretation represents our contemporary challenges to understand business and ethics with the tension embedded in this polarity and disjunction. The interpretation of Storr and Choi (2019:1-11) represents a similar mode of reading from the world before the narrative, where contemporary capitalist societies and moral development are analysed, concluding that an ethical infrastructure is part of contemporary business. The conclusion is that commerce corrupted the son, but this is part of the context of business that achieves the greatest good of society. The anxiety and failure of the son are instead a function of his failure to come to grips with the ethical system that underpins commerce.

Each of the modes of interpretation discussed here has its strengths and weaknesses related to the mode (or point of departure) of the interpretation. The world in the text recognises the textual content of the narrative and the meaning nuances related to what the author wrote. In the interpretations of Brown (1994:7-8), Hanley (2009:68) and others, preference is given to the meaning present in the text, from where the narrative is viewed as a critical parable that focuses on greed and materialism on the one hand and labour practices lacking more profound existential meaning on the other hand. Another benefit of this mode is the intertextual nature of interpretation in which other parts of the larger textual context are accessed. This has the potential to underline more complex concepts and themes that may enrich the meaning of a text, as was evident in Alvarez and Hurtado's (2012:2-3) interpretation of the text that introduced the implied spectator and sympathy.

Interpretations from the world in the text are limited because historical aspects are required to understand the text fully. Therefore, Paganelli's (2020:4-5) interpretation contributes to a broader understanding of the narrative by accentuating the historical situatedness of Smith's view of markets and commerce. The historical insights thus refute interpretations that regard the narrative as a critique of markets and provide perspective on the moral evaluation of the son's labour practices.

Finally, the world in front of the text shifts the focus of interpretation to the uniqueness of contemporary culture and problems related to the tension between business and ethics. Hill's (2017:9-11) reading makes the connection between the text and the contemporary relevance of the narrative by emphasising the disjunction between business and ethics faced by contemporary businesspeople. Nevertheless, as in the case with the other modes, this approach has shortcomings that specifically relate to the absence of historical information and the presentation of the narrative and its wider textual context, such as the preface in TMS IV.i.1-7 on utility and the postscript in TMS IV.i.9-11, which focuses on the role of harmonious systems.

For this reason, the interpretation of the narrative in this article ensues from the broader context of the story's preface, which highlights the relationship between beauty and utility. This provides a unique perspective on the story about the labour of the son and the commercial system. This underscores the son's limited understanding of the beauty of utility in terms of the happiness it must produce and does not recognise the inherent characteristics of the utility of commerce and its systemic beauty that promotes harmony and the common good, referenced by Smith in the postscript to the narrative.

In the next section, a historical trajectory of the theory of beauty will be discussed to situate Smith's unique enlightenment worldview.

3. History of beauty and Adam Smith

This section is a historical appreciation of Smith's unique enlightenment worldview embedded in his theory of beauty, emphasising his nuanced perspective of the relationship between beauty and utility that goes beyond the prevalent subjectivism during his time by including characteristics of artefacts that enhance their beauty in use and social harmony. Therefore, it is essential to trace the influences on Smith's theory of beauty from classic Greek philosophy with its objective and realist views of beauty juxtaposed with the preference for beauty in the eyes of the beholder of the 18th century, which was later followed by David Hume's sentimentalism, Immanuel Kant's idealism and contemporary phenomenological studies of beauty.

Classics Greek philosophers followed an objectivist view of beauty, which means that beauty is in the characteristics of an object deemed to be beautiful. Plato (1978:1-35) [427-347 BC] related beauty to pure forms that have an eternal value. He started with the human body, the mind, and institutions such as the state and science, and at the top of the hierarchy, he placed the pure form of transcendent or absolute beauty beyond the limits of the physical world. In other words, all expressions of beauty reflect a distorted or incomplete reflection of the absolute beauty of the body, state, law, and so forth. Aristotle (1941:3-41) [384-322 BC] was more empirically minded, and his approach prioritised physical objects of beauty. He studied the characteristics of these objects to ascertain the principles of beauty as observed through sense experience. However, beauty was objective and not influenced by the senses or perception.

The ideas of Plato were developed further by Augustine (2001:12-53) [354-430 AD], who linked pure forms of beauty (Plato) with the mind of God, who illuminates the human observer of physical reality. Thomas Aquinas (2011:1-24) [1224-1274 AD] related beauty to qualities of things or goodness, such as harmony and integrity. The interpretations of the Church Fathers had a common thread, namely that the visible reality contained signs of God. This perspective continued in the 15th and 16th centuries as proof of the existence of God but was challenged during the enlightenment.

Aesthetics of the 18th century, associated with Alexander Baumgarten (2007:86-87), can broadly be defined as the philosophical study of the principles related to nature and appreciation of beauty, also known as *artistic taste*. The word is derived from the Greek word *aesthetics*, which refers to the sense perception of things and is also strongly connected to the work of Hume and Kant, who emphasised subjective experience related to beauty rather than an objective quality of a thing, as previous schools of thought going back to Plato did. Baumgarten (2007:86) regards aesthetics as the critique of taste with applications beyond philosophy. Three aspects of aesthetics can be distinguished: the aesthetic object, recipient, and experience. The aesthetic object is involved in a recipient's aesthetic experience. Since Kant, this has become associated with phenomenology and the value of truth, goodness, and beauty. Kant identified taste, disinterestedness, universality, and finality as some of the critical concepts that accentuate the transcendental nature of aesthetics. For Kant, beauty is not functional because this means that the object is subjected to a purpose that goes beyond disinterested meaning and freedom or without rules of beauty.

Hume argues that beauty lives in the mind that contemplates the aesthetic object and may differ from another person's perspective (Gracyk 2003:1-12). It is important to note that Hume rejected objective realism, but his subjectivism was not relativist or arbitrary. Gracyk (2003:1) writes, "Hume is an inner-sense theorist who treats aesthetic pleasure as an instinctive and natural human response. Successful art exploits our natural sentiments by employing appropriate composition and design. Only empirical inquiry can establish reliable ways to elicit taste approval."

The enlightenment introduced a renewed interest in beauty with the Earl of Shaftesbury, who believed beauty was associated with the moral good (a perspective that influenced Smith). Alternative to Hume and Kant's subjectivism, others like Frances Hutcheson and John Locke contended that beauty resided in an object. Smith followed this empirical sense, closely related to moral sentiments and his theory of beauty. For Smith, beauty was not a matter of mere subjective opinion; rather, beauty and utility are linked beyond function by accentuating the inherent characteristics of machines, such as the precision of a watch that supports the usefulness of machines and systems. Further, for Smith, beauty contributes tosystemic morality by enhancing the common good and harmony in society. This perspective ofthe beauty of utility is developed in "The Poor Man's Son". Smith's perspective contrasts with Humes's subjectivism and the later idealism of Immanuel Kant. But further, it also resists reductionist views of beauty and utility associated with usefulness. For Smith, beauty is not limited to the functionality of objects, but also their natural characteristics that have moral value in society, similar to Aristotle's belief in the relationship betweenmorality and beauty (Fudge, 2009:133-134), an aspect that will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

4. The narrative of 'The Poor Man's Son'

This section follows a textual analysis of the story of the "Poor man's son" (TMS IV.i.8) in its broader context of the preface (TMS IV.i.1-7) and postscript (TMS IV.i.9-11). The TMS part in the broader context of the narrative is named *Of the effect of utility upon the sentiments of approbation*. The theme of utility – along with its impact on the sentiment of approbation – is the main focus of part 4, underscoring the proper use of machines. In chapter 1 of part 4 this discussion is refined in terms of the relationship between beauty and utility. The title of the chapter is *Of the beauty which the appearance of utility bestows upon all the productions of art, and of the extensive influence of this species of beauty*. The focus of chapter 1, which contains the son's story, is on the relationship between utility and beauty, providing a clear hermeneutical key for interpreting the narrative. The inclusion of the larger context of the narrative in TMS part 4, chapter 1, honours the textual constraints of the narrative, which also provides a novel scholarly perspective that was not included in the interpretations of the narrative discussed in the first section (except for Hill (2017:133)), who includes the postscript in her interpretation.

In the following section, the theme of beauty and utility from the perspective of the preface will be discussed first. This is followed by an analysis of the narrative, which will emphasise the impartial spectator's misguided adoration of the utility and beauty of the possession of wealth and his failure to appreciate the beauty of systems. Finally, the functioning of naturalistic aesthetics in the narrative and Smith's work will be explored.

4.1 Beauty, propriety and utility

The title of TMS VI focuses the discussion on utility's role in the propriety and the sentiments of approbations of beauty (TMS IV.i.1-7). Smith (TMS IV.i.1) argues that "utility is one of the principal sources of beauty" because the "fitness of any system or machine to produce for which it was intended, bestows a certain propriety and beauty upon the whole, and renders the very thought and contemplation of it agreeable". Smith uses various examples of this in the preface of "The Poor Man's Son" narrative to underscore the temporary nature of the beauty of things that become fashionable and frivolous and that do not focus on the utility of these things. From this perspective, the discourse followed in the narrative is based on the premise that beauty influences our view of utility. Things we use can thus develop a meaning beyond their appropriate use (TMS IV.i.1-7). Smith notes that the systematic arrangement of furniture in a home (TMS IV.i.4) and the precision of a watch (TMS IV.i.5) are the basis of a sense of beauty beyond utility. Concerning a home, Smith notes that it is not "the convenience" of a home but the arrangement that "bestows upon it the whole of its propriety and beauty" (TMS IV.i.4). Further, the timekeeping ability of a watch is related to

its precision emphasising the "perfection of the machine which serves" to attain the correct time (TMS IV.i.5). The whole system of arrangements makes the home beautiful and proper. However, he warns that we must be careful of frivolous objects (such as trinkets) and secret motives in life that become the superficial guiding principles for our conduct. Smith (TMS IV.i.7) writes "… to such frivolous objects that our conduct is influenced by this principle; it is often the secret motive of the most serious and important pursuits of both private and public life". The son's narrative is an example of this type of improper enticement of the impartial spectator that fuels our secret motives regarding the utility of the wealthy.

4.2 The impartial spectator, the utility of the wealthy and the beauty of systems

The focus on utility and beauty, as mentioned above, places the discussion of the son's narrative in the wider context of Smith's understanding of the functioning of the development of moral sentiments, sympathy, the impartial spectator, and propriety. The sentiment of approbation involves a complex cognitive process of evaluating the utility of things using mental constructions of the assumed perceptions of others and the consensus regarding the natural propriety of machines and systems. Smith believes that the utility of a watch or the neatness of a room or other trinkets can result in sentiments that enhance the beauty of utility due to the nature of aesthetic sentiments of order and arrangement outside the utility of the space (TMS IV.i.1-7). In this regard, it is not only the inherent qualities of objects of beauty or their usefulness that are important; it is also that beauty is good, and systems are beautiful when the common good is enhanced.

The narrative provides a critique of wealth based on the secret motivations of people for happiness or acquiring wealth without recognition of the beauty of the commercial system. The effort of the son to acquire material goods with his wealth fails to see the beauty of the system that, through an invisible hand, supports the common good. Consequently, the son becomes disenchanted with his ordinary life and seeks wealth, riches, and comfort. Smith (TMS IV.i.8) laments that the son "thinks if he attained all these, he would sit still contentedly, and be quiet, enjoying himself in the thought of the happiness and tranquillity of his situation". Unfortunately, the son's labour and the things he acquired did not provide him joy or sentiments related to the beauty of utility (the machine's characteristics) or the system's beauty. Instead, his acquired possessions were a means to satisfy some "secret motive" or ambition for happiness. As a spectator of the wealthy, the son adored their "means of happiness", which he consequently desired. It created an impression of beauty due to the "ingenious and artful adjustment of those means to the end for which they were intended, that is the principal source of admiration" (TMS IV.i.8). In other words, the systematic arrangement that provides comfort and luxury.

Later, in old age, sick and despondent, the son "finds that wealth and greatness are mere trinkets of frivolous utility" (TMS IV.i.8). The reason for this, Smith notes, is linked to the sentiments of the spectator: on a desolate island, for instance, the frivolous utility will not be necessary, but in society, we are concerned with how things will appear to others rather than with the beauty and goodness of the system. The adoration of others, not our appreciation of beauty, influences our choices. In the same way, trinkets are technologies and artefacts for the sake of possessing without admiring their utility and qualities that enhance their goodness, over and against the passion of these machines to impress others, e.g. owning an Apple Mac for its brand name and not for its capabilities. In this regard, machines have socio-cultural significance due to the influence of the impartial spectator in the construction of meaning. Smith (TMS VI.i.8) concludes as follows:

> Power and riches appear then to be, what they are, enormous and operose machines contrived to produce a few trifling conveniences to the body, consisting of springs the most nice and delicate, which must be kept in order with the most anxious attention, and which in spite of all our care are ready every moment to burst into pieces, and to crush in their ruins their unfortunate possessor.

From this perspective, the narrative becomes a literary device that turns the reader into the spectator of the poor man's son's misguided view of the machines that money can buy, which, in the case of the son, leads to meaningless labour that ends in anguish without recognising the beauty of the system.

Smith notes that the son's anguish is a form of splenetic philosophy that becomes evident in "times of sickness or low spirits", in which we "depreciate those great objects of human desire" (TMS IV.i.9), as has happened to the son. The spectator enticed the son, and he earnestly acquired wealth and utility because, according to Smith, we are enticed by the "harmonious movement of the system" but without appreciating the beauty and goodness of the system (TMS IV.i.9). For the son, it was the arrangement of the means of happiness and the machines that stirred his imagination without acknowledging the harmony of the commercial system. Smith points out that we naturally confound material objects and other forms of utility in our "imagination with order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine or economy by means of which it is produced" (TMS IV.i.9). From this perspective wealth and greatness of commercial activities are deserving of our labour to produce positive results. Still, the inherent goodness of the system and its beauty have unintended consequences that far outweigh our limited vision. Consequently, nature imposes on us this ambition that "keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind", which distributes the necessities of life led by the invisible hand (TMS IV.i.10). Therefore, utility is a function of a harmonious system represented by material and other goods as part of the system of commerce. Still, the beauty of the system is the appreciation of its moral advancement and propriety, e.g., the common good. It is the beauty of the system and the nature of the spectator that lead to labour that promotes the happiness of others rather than only obsessing on my own happiness. Smith (TMS VI.i.11) states:

> From a certain spirit of system, however, from a certain love of art and contrive, we sometimes seem to value the means more than the end, and to be eager to promote the happiness of our fellow-creatures, rather from a view to perfect and improve a certain beautiful and orderly system, than from any immediate sense or feeling of what they either suffer or enjoy.

Smith (TMS IV.i.8) observes that the poor man's son was impressed by the means of happiness of the wealthy and the "ingenious and artful adjustment" of those means. Utility as the source of beauty of the system for happiness was the important point of departure for his labour, which served the greater system of commerce. The system's beauty is important, not merely the individual material goods. Therefore, the narrative critiques the empty search for meaning in wealth without appreciating the beauty of meaningful existence (TMS IV.i.8), not that the son was immoral, as Paganelli (2020:4-5) highlights. The sentiments associated with a meaningful existence and happiness are beyond the superficial meaning created by the mere ownership of machines and the enticement of systems without comprehending their moral beauty.

As an impartial spectator, the reader becomes engaged in Smith's cynicism regarding the son's motivations and, more importantly, his ignorance of systemic beauty and morality. From this perspective, the failure of the son's labour and the loss of aesthetic meaning contribute to the mechanics of commerce and the common good as a function of the invisible hand. This is for Smith due to the sentiments related to the love of art that utility ignites. We value the means more than the end, like a government that is valued in proportion to the happiness it brings about but without recognising the unintended consequences for others that may not always benefit all people at the same time (TMS IV.i.11). Rather than appreciating a government for the improvement of the beauty and order of the system, we instead want the political machine to benefit us The son's labour drove the engine of commerce and the common good.

4.3 Aesthetic naturalism

The narrative accentuates that for Smith, beauty is a matter of recognition and appreciation of the natural, harmonious and effective functioning of things in the world, and their morality and not subjective appreciation (e.g. Shaftesbury and Hume). Smith was opposed to the influence of the subjectivity of custom on what is regarded as appropriate and beautiful because beauty associated with custom is temporary (TMS V.i.2). In the preface to the son's narrative it is characteristic of the machine or systems and its propriety that is the source of beauty for Smith. The focus is similar to Aristotle's empirical approach to beauty.

However, this differs from the relationship between beauty and deformity drawn from the shape and appearance of others (TMS III.i.4). People compare themselves to others and, from the natural similarity, find approbation in their appearance. A person with no contact with others will not be bothered with a deformity until the mirror of society reflects the differences in physical features (TMS III.i.3). Divergence from others represents the natural form and harmonious functioning of a person in the world. For example, using both eyes instead of using only one eye may increase a person's visual faculties. However, a very thin body may be accepted as beautiful in some cultures but not in others, or its acceptance may depend on fashion and changes in custom.

In the same way, the utility of fashionable items bestows beauty upon artefacts due to the presumed pleasure and approbation they provide. Smith explains that the utility of an object pleases the owner (or "master" according to Smith) due to its convenience and expectation of future pleasure: "The spectator enters by sympathy into the sentiments of the master, and necessarily views the object under the same agreeable aspect" (TMS IV.i.2). In other words, the nature of utility is related to the pleasure and beauty it bestows. Therefore, Smith's argument provides a sceptical perspective on the notion of beauty and utility within the historical and cultural context of the 18th-century enlightenment. Hume explicitly references the subjective dimension of beauty, or – stated differently – an object influences a person's sentiments. Fudge (2009:133) notes that aesthetics plays an essential role in the propriety of machines and systems in Smith's moral theory beyond subjectivism.

Fudge (2009:133-146) proposes that there is a naturalistic basis to Smith's aesthetic that does not fall into the trap of relativism found in subjective theories of beauty. Lyons (1993:42-48), Haakonssen (2006:16), and Harrison (1995:109-110), however, argue that Smith's descriptive morality can end in solipsism, which is also circumvented by Fudge's suggested naturalism in Smith's work. It also does not return to a notion of beauty based on the natural characteristics of objects or art but to a notion of its role in harmonious systems. This focus on the role of utility in larger systems, like the economy, is informed by mutual sentiments of approbation and the impartial spectator based on agreement of the nature of systems.

Fudge (2009) writes that Smith supports an aesthetic morality in which sympathy, impartial spectators, and moral sentiments are paramount and anchored in nature, such as aesthetic naturalism. This is present in Smith's references to the beauty of systems and in the postscript to the narrative (Fudge, 2009:134). Consequently, Fudge (2009:134) argues that Smith "quite plausibly suggests that our nature determines to a large degree the kind of actions and character traits we naturally find beautiful/good and others we find odious/bad". The implication is that what is naturally beautiful is also suitable and morally appropriate. Therefore, the assessment by the impartial spectator has a natural aesthetic foundation based on propriety that goes beyond relativism or solipsism. However, the reader and spectator of the narrative cannot judge the son's ambitious activities as immoral (Paganelli 2020:4-5) because he failed only to recognise the beauty of the commercial system and the moral good it perpetuates. Conversely, the natural appreciation of the precision of machines or the tasteful decoration of a home underscores the beauty of utility and systems and their propriety that others agree with.

From this point of view, assessing the impartial spectator and the approbation of others is not a form of social determinism or cultural relativism because the review aligns with the nature of systemic order and harmony, and not with the cultural or ideological prescriptions of others. The impartial spectator can also go against the opinions of others, or as Smith notes, it refers to the difference between praise and praiseworthiness (TMS III.i.1-35) and/or doing what is noble (a sense of character). Nevertheless, others may be resentful (TMS III.i.3). The beauty of order and non-prescribed social conventions is the basis for what is good. A further implication is that beauty is also the order of utility. The pleasure of the usefulness of artefacts, technologies or objects makes them suitable. In the son's case, the pleasure of a meaningful existence eluded him due to the failure of significant labour and wealth. Fudge (2009:138) notes that utility is secondary in propriety. The beauty of utility is in its telos, and virtue can also be viewed as an aspect of beauty because it promotes social harmony and the common good. So, the son's anguish is also part of the enticement of commerce and the limits of appreciating the full scale of the beauty of systems and their moral implications.

Ultimately, as suggested in the postscript, the beauty, order, and common good supported by commerce as a system was not understood, and he became a victim of it due to his admiration of the means and not the telos (TMS IV.i:9-11). Smith (TMS IV.ii.11) notes that the beauty of virtue is different because it is great and noble. Fudge (2009: 143) states that a system of mutual sympathy is a "beautiful social order" that "promotes the end of human happiness". According to Fudge (2009), Smith prioritises natural usefulness of object that is independent of custom such as agreeable colours, texture and appearance that is generally agreeability. This natural agreeability is not an object's essence but is associated with the utility, appreciative characteristics thereof, and the happiness it stirs which others agree with.

The influence of Smith's theory of beauty therefore delivers an interpretation of the son's story that resolves the tension between Smith's social and commercial values. Hill (2017:133-134) highlights Smith's focus of the beauty of acommercial system; while at the same time elevating the narrative beyond Brown's (1994:7-8) argument that Smith endorses benevolence in the narrative. The relationship between beauty and utility in the preface supports the fact that ambition and labour are not merely means to an end but part of a systemic process in which beauty and morality are beyond personal gain, happiness, or meaning.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to analyse the narrative of "The Poor Man's Son" from the perspective of the interrelationship between beauty, utility, and commerce in the wider context of the narrative. The focus on this connection is informed by the broader argument of part IV of TMS, namely the relationship between utility and beauty or, more specifically, the influence of utility on perceptions of beauty and commerce. This signifies a more nuanced understanding of Smith's enlightenment worldview that debunks reductionist theories of beauty and limits the beauty of utility to functionality or usefulness.

The analysis highlights that the narrative is more complex and nuanced than generally accepted in contemporary scholarship; it also introduces the new theme of utility and beauty in the preface of the narrative. The interplay between the preface, narrative, and postscript is essential to expand the interpretation of the narrative beyond beneficence or critique of commerce. From this perspective, the beauty of systems and telos gains more salience. It emphasises the systemic nature of commerce as the backdrop of the narrative that involves the beauty of labour and aesthetic sentiments. The implication is that the relationship between aesthetics and morality in Smith's work is an essential interpretative aspect of the narrative that goes beyond traditional scholarly research of the story. Therefore, the

son's failed ambition is not merely about Smith's possible endorsement of beneficence or an example of the morality of commerce. The son's aesthetic poverty led to a life of strife without meaning or failed aesthetic sentiments that were hailed to mean more than he initially thought his labour could accomplish due to the advancement of the common good through the commercial system.

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