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Theo Whitcomb

Advancing Dialectical Wisdom to the Non-Human World

Adam Smith and
Materialisms of Ecological Collapse.
Introduction

Within the context of the 21st century, there is a pressing need to critically analyze the political economic formation of the past two hundred years and its correlation with ecological collapse. What makes the 21st century unique is not only the scale of ecological devastation, but the popular awareness of both global warming other adverse impacts of a highly industrialized world. Society is faced with the type of existential reckoning which has, for much of my life, been only a looming “what is to come.” Yet over the past 20 years, global warming has claimed drought and geopolitical resource instability, ice sheets and glaciers recession, continually rising sea levels, and uncontrollable wildfires, among many other impacts. Humans are instigating a mass extinction unlike anything the earth has experienced for millions of years.

The following discussion operates within this paradigm. Adam Smith and his 18th century Enlightenment contemporaries played an integral role in shaping modern western thought, which is fundamental to rationalizing ecological wreckage. In this discussion I follow a line of contextual inquiry into Smith’s work, beginning with the concept of “nature,” and then shifting into how Smith built upon his understanding of “nature” to rationalize an economic system both isolated from the non-human world and predicated upon infinite growth.

After discussing Smith’s economics, I then situate his political economic mechanisms with his last edition of The Theory of Moral Sentiments, an often-missed step in understanding Smith. Reviving Smith’s teachings on morality, read as a comment on the political economics of the 18th century, gives room to discuss the material crisis of the 21st century, which I claim comes from the complete separation of humans from the agency of all things, abiotic and biotic. Lastly, I advance Smith’s teachings on dialectical wisdom to incorporate contemporary political ecology in the hopes that amidst a crisis of western imagination he can remain relevant as a caution to those who continue to adopt his mechanisms to rationalize ecological exploitation.

I rely on five main texts as theoretical pillars, reading Adam Smith’s An Enquiry Into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations (1776) and The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1790). In this discussion it is essential to understand Smith as both a moral philosopher and political economist. Dialectical wisdom is from Lorenzo Garbo’s essay Adam Smith’s Last Teachings: Dialectical Wisdom (2016). My contemporary companions are Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter (2009) and Deborah Rose Bird’s essay Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed (2017). Both are examples of western political ecology attempting to articulate the material crisis.

1 It is essential to point out that I am speaking within the paradigm of western imagination. Many humans, and, I suspect, non-humans too, have understood the exploitative relationship the west has imposed on global ecology. In this statement, I mean that dominant culture has come to a point of self-reflective reckoning.

2 In order, a reference to: conflicts in Sudan, Yemen, Syria (and many others driven by expanding deserts and decreasing arability); The rate at which Antarctica is melting has tripled since 2007 and glaciers continue to receding at alarming rates; The west coast of the United States, my home, has had unprecedented wild fire intensity due to the cascading effects of global warming; The mass extinction is being referred to as “the sixth,” as there have been five prior in geologic history.
“Nature” is a concept used frequently in both of Adam Smith’s works. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* the term describes a “natural state” of man, which is a backwards reaching notion implying a universal governing law of Nature. By backwards reaching, I plainly mean reaching towards the past; it is John Locke’s way of articulating something obfuscated by forces of human institution and concentrated power. And by universal law, I refer to a mode of being encompassing behaviors and tendencies that are universal to all humans.

Smith’s predecessors and former philosophers of natural law and human nature, such as Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and David Hume, were principally concerned with the core principles that explained the behavior of man. Only when “shown to possess universality comparable to the laws of motion would a rendition of human nature carry proven explanatory power and the ring of authenticity. If, as Hume held, mankind was presumed ‘much the same’ at all times and in all places, it was realistic to aspire ‘to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature’.” (Porter, 2000, p. 162) Isaac Newton, a massive intellectual force, inspired scientific inquiry “complimented by a new 'mechanical philosophy' which stripped nature of its proposed vitality, reducing it to a machine made up of material particles governed by universal laws, whose emotions could begin in mathematical expression.” (Porter, 2000, p. 52) Once understood the human-machine could transcend the atavistic ignorance of ‘animal’ and become fine-tuned to play its optimal social role.3

Newton and Smith both attempted to draw out a universality that would hopefully lead to a better society. Dugald Stewart, Smith’s first biographer, wrote that Smith’s lifelong study was of “human nature in all its branches, more particularly of the political history of mankind.” He was mainly interested in the “principles of the human mind,” the “principles of the human constitution,” and the “natural progress of the mind.” (Rothschild, 2001, p. 7)

Specifically, for Smith, mechanizing and applying the “state of nature” was about shedding oppressive intellectual structures and democratizing the agency of society. Agency, or the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power, was part-in-parcel with mastering the human motor, an application of political economy and moral philosophy with the aim of disembedding people from the power structures that oppressed them – progressive, to say the least.

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3 For intellectuals at the time, humans were the main subject of enquiry after an intellectual divorce from a long history of bibliolatry and moral asceticism. Enlightened minds rationalized Protestant anti-Catholicism, “The perverse apotheosis of self-abasement and slavish submission to tyranny, Popery sanctified theological dogmatism, ritualized idolatry, drilled windows into men’s souls and denied the post-Gutenberg duty of all believers to read God’s book by the candle of Reason.” (Porter, 2000, p. 49)
Allowing humans’ agency to flourish, enlightenment intellectuals saw themselves alleviating what plagued political-economic life at the time: regulations, fear, aristocratic landownership and political dominance, overbearing governance, and the general mercantilist embedment of the economy, which worked mainly for powerful few. Emma Rothschild refers to the enlightenment as a movement away from dependency, and one where society becomes less subject to the fear of sudden destitution. “The most heroic outcome, in this history of human spirit, was ... the slow vanquishing of fear.” Smith’s political economy “was a “very violent attack ... upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain.” But it is also a history of the “general disposition to truck, barter, and exchange.” It was both social and political-economic analysis, a refutation of the commercial system and an application of the “necessary [(or natural)] consequence of the faculties of reason and speech.” (Rothschild, 2001, p. 7)

In this discussion, what becomes most important about the enlightenment imagination is specifically how disconnected it is from non-human forces – ecosystems, or non-human institutions, which humans were never able to emancipate themselves from. Smith, and his contemporary’s and predecessors, were focused solely on the human forces that overshadowed society. The unlocking of human potential through mechanizing human nature was entirely an individualist pursuit. Unsurprisingly, given the era and location, there is no calculation of humans as one small part of a far from human world, which, I show, is the root of the ecological destruction occurring now.

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Ecological Catastrophe and the Disconnect of Human History

To reiterate: there is little to do directly between Adam Smith’s political economy and the current crisis of ecological collapse, which, in many popular readings of Smith might be tied to free-market capitalism. It is only reasonable to draw tangential correlation between the mechanisms of wealth creation Smith pioneered and the resulting acceleration of capital accumulation and wealth concentration of the following centuries. “Capitalism,” as a term, was conceived nearly a century after Smith’s first publication. A reading of Smith that sees him as ‘the father of capitalism’, and therefore, the material spark for ecological ruin, is taking him out his own work, time, and context. Smith’s moral philosophy, an under-read and applied aspect of his theories, has the room to radically alter the ecological sensibilities of his mechanisms of wealth creation, fundamentally changing the moral calculus applied to his political-economic system.

The jump in time presented is for one main argumentative reason: to use Adam Smith as a main entry point into Enlightenment imagination, political economy, and moral philosophy. It is a pivotal intellectual movement, and critically examining Smith’s lasting effects on the planet becomes the core of this discussion.
I say this with ecology in mind, as I am mainly concerned with the evident constraints of the non-human world on the accumulation of capital. The broad context of a warming atmosphere has begun to trigger cascading instability. For example: mass extinction and ecological devastation under profit motive, climate migration and political instability due to global-warming driven resource scarcity, and the continued concentration of power and wealth into the hands of those who are driving the crisis. Power structures are calcified in their relationship to fossil fuel resources, and the energy industry remains globally the largest one among all.

All has been a consequence of industrialization in the global north, whose intellectual, social, and economic foundations are the progeny of the western enlightenment. Global capitalism is diving blindly into the multiple constraints posed by the intersections of ecology-inequality-instability. Now, humanity is forced to reckon with the economic habits of the past 200 years, and the economic system which has, in many ways, launched an offensive with what modernity calls nature.

What is generally referred to as Capitalism has, in many critical examinations, been fundamentally blamed on Smith’s philosophy and political economy. How did Smith, who was fundamentally an advocate for a more harmonious view of society, imagine such a profoundly unequal and destructive economic structure? Obviously, he had no ability to predict the future, however, there is reason to wonder how a movement towards the state of Nature alienated humanity from the actuality of natural process.

First, it is important to note how enlightenment “Nature”, that of universal law of man, and “nature” in contemporary vernacular share little in their common uses. Smith’s concepts of nature, human-nature, natural tendencies, and natural propensity are, in general, place holders for a broader meaning relating to anatomized individualism. Nature in the 18th century was strictly about people, stripped away of the human institutions that might inhibit the observer from detecting their innate characteristics. There was notably little reference to external institutions, materialisms, and laws that might bear down on human materialisms, institutions, and behavior.

In contemporary imagination, nature refers to a range of other concepts, primarily referencing non-human spaces that have not yet been visibly encroached on by humans. Nature and natural spaces are defined as strictly non-human. The enlightenment view is inward looking, imagining humans in their own contextual vacuum. The contemporary view is outward, imagining natural spaces as external to the human world, drawing upon notions of civilization, development, modernity in opposition to nature, wilderness, and the external “environment.”

Both see humans and nature as separate, or able to separate. Enlightenment Nature wants to awaken the human mind to its own potential and metaphysically fine tune the “human-animal machine”; modern nature sees natural space as external to the human-animal machine, which has effectively separated itself from the wilderness from which it came. Modern nature is the overdeveloped result of the imagination of separate-ness, built upon the tenants of the enlightenment.
This is what Dipesh Chakrabarty argues as the separation of human history and geologic history. (Chakrabarty, 2009) Nature, in both 18th century and contemporary uses, is a container for a range of other definitions, and is used to refer to a modality of non-encroachment—either by human or non-human institution. Human-made law is separated from natural-law, and each institution highlights aspects of the other, quarantined to their respective behaviors. For Smith, draconian power structures opposed the potential of the universality of man; now, civilization opposes and seeks to control the wilderness. Nature, in both senses, conceives of humans as different from the non-humans in the world. Smith’s political-economy applies the “natural” universality of human behavior to an “unnatural” system, while contemporary use is trying to preserve, enjoy, and look at “natural” spaces as alternatives to “unnatural” civilization, which is built along the periphery of nature.

Chakrabarty says that enlightenment philosophers were principally concerned with “how humans would escape the injustice, oppression, inequality, or even uniformity foisted on them by other humans or human-made systems.” (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 208) Constraints of geologic time, ecological limits, and non-human oppression remained out of scholars’ imaginations.

It is a fractured relationship from inception: the potential for liberty and freedom were never only isolated to humans and human made systems. As writer and scholar Amitav Ghosh states, “Non-human systems had no place in this calculus of liberty: indeed, being independent of [—either contemporary, or environmental—] Nature was considered one of the defining characteristics of freedom itself. Only those peoples who had thrown off the shackles of their environment were thought to be endowed with historical agency; they alone believed to merit the attention of historians- other peoples had a past but they were thought to lack history, which realizes itself through human agency.” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 119)

In 19th and 20th century imaginations, The Wealth of Nations becomes an application of the Natural laws of man, or the ‘human-laws’ referenced earlier, in the pursuit of what Smith calls liberty. The ideal society for Smith is one of perfect liberty; it is a state where no firm, politician, or institution has power to limit market incentives. Market exchanges, along with ideas, flow freely throughout human civilization. Liberty was his objective, and only in these absolute terms, to allow humans to freely practice their “natural tendencies.”

One can imagine Smith drawing inspiration from the outward gaze trained on nature’s separate-ness: ecologies maximizing utility with scarce resources, all without micro and macro-management. Yet notions of ecology did not exist then. It was not until Naturalists of the 19th and 20th century arrived that science escaped man as the only object of study and re-trained its gaze outward.
Enlightenment intellectuals sought to allow human agency, the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power. What Ghosh refers to as historical agency is primarily seen in the human capacity to effect large scale environmental change. Adam Smith shows how the mechanisms of human-nature, which are promoting human agency, increase the human capacity to create wealth, and therefore, I argue, effect environmental change. First, and most notably, the division of labor, and second, the innate desire to better one’s position. Both are central to the creation of wealth.

This division of labour, from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends that general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another. (Smith, 1776, p. 25)

There are two main points to take away for the argument developed in this paper. Smith makes it clear that the wealth of nations, or general opulence, is given “occasion” to through the mechanism of the division of labor. Second, he states that human nature has “in no view such extensive utility” as to the general opulence of society. Smith places the division of labor solely on the effect of a “certain propensity in human nature … the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.”

The opulence of society is built upon the aggregate of individuals’ natural behavior, tendencies which, if left unimpeded, would continue to function without any thought or foresight and generate wealth. In the discussion of bettering one’s condition, Smith continues his discussion of wealth creating “natural tendencies.”

With regard to profusion, the principle, which prompts to expense, is the passion for present enjoyment; which, though sometimes violent and very difficult to be restrained, is in general only momentary and occasional. But the principle which prompts us to save, is the desire of bettering our condition, a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate, comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave. … there is scarce perhaps a single instant in which any man is so perfectly and completely satisfied with his situation, as to be without any wish of alteration or improvement, of any kind. An augmentation of fortune is the means by which the greater part of men propose and wish to better their condition. (Smith, 1776, p. 28)
The two tendencies, dividing labor and saving to better one’s position, when combined, are a positive feedback loop in the accumulation of capital. Dividing labor arises from the natural tendency for humans to truck, barter, and exchange with each other, creating more opportunities for specialization. As division happens, and individuals appear to have more than enough, they seek ways to better their condition. In doing so, they save, and invest in bettering their condition through the accumulation of capital, which creates more opportunities to divide labor further. The feedback loop continues, and in Smith’s view, is the economic formula to disembodied humans from the subjugation of oppressive human forces through naturalized growth, eventually increasing consumption for all and forever. However, absent from this calculus is mention of any non-human constraints, primarily because there was no perception of any at the time. While in a contemporary framework, it is exactly where one begins to see the immediate flaws in Smith’s initial mechanisms.

In a world where an object’s scarcity continues to define its value, humans are just now beginning to realize the damage of their consumption habits. Only now do we see rapidly receding forests characterized by their economic contributions; only now are areas of immense biodiversity seen as an ‘economic agent’, a term that attempts to liken ecological contributions to human economic activity. Yet in the 18th century, resources were seemingly infinite and had little economic value. The new world was characterized by its endless abundance, and colonized lands were primed for exploitation, their relatively limitless natural resources up for ‘development’. According to the engines of wealth accumulation, human agency was only obtainable through subjugating these landscapes to the whims of civilization; the possibilities of ecological control and subjugation were perceived as infinite.

Smith’s mechanisms articulate wealth as a Natural tendency of humans, and because the accumulation of capital is fundamentally reliant on non-human systems, as wealth grows, so does the human capacity to affect those non-humans. Due to the separate-ness of non-humans and humans, which is due to the enlightenment emancipatory focus, non-human systems are a constant, infinite source. As they impress no constraint in the imagination of a liberal economy, potential ecologic impacts are non-existent. Impact, or as we see now, ecological devastation, is a result of the absence of non-humans in the calculus of wealth creation. Non-human as constant, or resource as infinite, becomes a defining characteristic. That which is abundant and infinite, in a liberal economy, has no value. Therefore, growth is also infinite. In a theoretical framework absent of any mechanisms to inform resource consumption, it becomes inevitable that impact grows positively with the increase of wealth creation.

This is the material crisis western thought has attempted to deal with for the past century of environmental activism. Attempts to correct market failures are situated in the attempt to use the very same rational Smith argues for: with proper regulation, a free-market prospers, and the agency of humans to make rational economic decisions is fundamental. Yet liberal markets will always see nature as a separate entity, either a resource for growth, or a resource to be appreciated based upon its intrinsic value.

4 Another instance of separate-ness, as mentioned prior.
An Answer to Smith’s Material Crisis:
Advancing Sympathy to the Non-Human World

Smith’s calculus, like other enlightenment moral-philosophers, was predicated on the notion that human institutions existed outside of non-human systems. The goal of studying moral-philosophy was to unlock the potential of strictly humans, isolating their natural tendencies and institutions to pursue a free and just human civilization. The impact of humans on the non-human world is a result of Smith’s mechanisms for creating wealth – natural resources, then, seemingly infinite, were not a factor in the market systems that manipulated them. This impact, now felt, can be deconstructed with Smith’s dialectical wisdom. The framework, which essentially informs wise conduct and character, can be updated to comment on the materialisms of today.

Within the multiple volumes of both political-economy and moral philosophy, it is apparent that Smith was chiefly concerned with a moral existence. His writing on political-economy coexisted with his writing on moral sentiment, and neither existed without the other. In The Theory of Moral Sentiments, the corruption of moral sentiments is the conflation of wealth and greatness with wisdom and virtue. The ultimate desire of the human being is to receive approbation and external social approval as well as being approbation-worthy, an internal self-reflective judgment. Receiving approbation is different than being approbation-worthy, and approbation is easy to receive when one acts like ‘the great mob of mankind’.

Within the context of the turn of the century, Smith’s last publication of The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1790) reads as a comment on what Neil McKendrick calls the very first consumer revolution. (McKendrick, 1982) Smith introduces superior prudence, and with it, a process which Lorenzo Garbo describes as dialectical wisdom. The “bustle and business of the world” is where wisdom is learned, and man trains at the great school of self-command. (Smith, 1790, p. 146) “The candidate for wisdom has to learn discernment, objectivity, and equanimity in the midst of recurrent challenges.” (Garbo, 2016, p. 48) Only the person who has been thoroughly “bred in [this] great school of self-command” deserves the highest level of our approbation. The key point is that this candidate of perfect wisdom and superior prudence does not exist. Superior prudence, an ultimate goal, is a reference point for an ideal self. It is a dialectical pursuit to what Smith calls “the demi-god within the breast,” an ultra-conscious, or super-ego which, through sympathy, informs the morality of actions. One engages, judges, and learns – an eternal progression towards bettering one’s character.

As humans engage with the material world, and are offered countless opportunities for moral challenges, they are forced to mediate with all levels of spectatorship. Through sympathy and self-interest, the natural sources of internal conflict, humans continually judge themselves in all engagements. By consulting all levels of spectators, the demi-god within as well as external approbation, they will deem their approbation-worthiness. The solution of such conflicts may make one wiser. Smith responded to the consumer revolution by showing that the path towards wisdom was a conflictual existence within the sympathetic mechanism, a
mediation between passion and virtue that has potential to domesticate self-interest, or at least make self-interest less myopic.

How do Smith’s theories on morality inform ecological materialism? Well, they didn’t. Smith, as it has been established, was functioning strictly in the constraints of human institutions. His political-economy, as a function of its time, did not consider the potential ecological constraints and moral challenges that infinite consumption and growth presented towards the non-human world.

At the time, dominant culture failed to build in an awareness of the non-human systems that they were never able to truly emancipate from, and Smith only focused on the moral repercussions of conspicuous consumption. Even Smith, who was progressive in his dissent from authoritative structures of embedded economies, was unable to see the deeply interconnected systems of ecology.

Smith’s disregard is justified only within the context of the time. The gaze of inquiry was inward, human systems were under interrogation, and a world of seemingly infinite resources were ready for consumption. The colonial north was inculcated in the promise of civilization and economies formed around imperial systems promoting the enrichment of like-societies. Within western imagination, there was little thought of the potential damage caused towards the natural world, yet, it is imperative to note that not all humans discounted non-human agency. There was never a lack of available ecological sensibility, as many societies before 18th century Scotland had incorporated non-human agency within their political-economic structures – societies that long pre-dated modernity and enlightenment economics.

Deborah Rose Bird spent many years with Aboriginal Australians, and out of her studies and observations developed the concept of shimmer.\textsuperscript{5} Shimmer manifests itself in the interconnectedness of life, between organisms carefully adapted to the others’ behavior, or to systems which create life for an array of organisms. It is the brilliance of ecological connections, and the articulatable state of a world we don’t rule, but rather participate in.

Bird notes how Shimmer is only noticed when one pays attention and that modern societies have lost something that her interlocuters have recognized for millennia. Paying attention, or seeing connectivity’s and non-human participation, is akin to Smith’s listening to the demi-god within, the mediation between passion and virtue. For Smith, paying attention is the avoidance of moral corruption. But if paying attention is extended only to humans, we lose sight of the complexity of larger connectivity’s, or, ancestral power. Bird calls this “the Western mechanism”, and writes:

\textsuperscript{5} Shimmer, or brilliance, is one’s actual capacity to see and experience “ancestral power.” This is to say that when one is captured by shimmer, one experiences not only the joy of the visual capture but also becomes more knowledgeable of ancestral power as it moves actively across the world.
The legacies of Western mechanism have manifested through repeated assertions of human exceptionalism—that man is the only animal to make tools; that man is the only animal with language, a sense of fairness, generosity, laughter; that man is the only mindful creature. In an ecologically attentive recursion, we find that man is the only animal to voraciously, relentlessly, and viciously wreck the life world of Earth. Man is the only animal systematically to torture members of its own species, as well as members of countless other species, and to engage in seemingly and list and often wildly indiscriminate killing. (Bird, 2017, p. G51)

In hindsight, Bird is right, man is the only animal to display such voracious wreckage of other life worlds. I argue enlightenment materialisms failed in one key area: to incorporate non-human agency into the calculus of morality. Yet, Smith offers a dynamic process that could save us today from this pitfall.

I argue that dialectical wisdom can, when firmly situated in the theoretical frameworks of the agency of all things, promote a superior-prudence that approbates the wise conduct of human-to-human and human-to-object relationships, not just human to human-made objects. It is “engaging with the bustle and business of the world” in concert with “noticing” shimmer that promotes what I call a “sympathy” for non-humans. However, sympathy for non-humans requires understanding the vibrant materiality of all things.

This vision is corroborated by Jane Bennett’s theory of vibrant materiality, which is a ‘way of seeing’ within western notions of political ecology and materiality. Bennett's political project is to encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things. By vitality she means "the capacity of things--edibles, commodities, storms, metals--not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." Her aspiration is "to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analysis of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due." (Bennett, 2009, p. viii)

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6 One in which Smith can only be really seen as one small part.
7 Dialectical wisdom, and the tension between passion and virtue that the sympathetic mechanism presents, has room to incorporate the non-human agency Bird describes. It is evident that Smith’s theories on superior-prudence missed this key point. To reiterate, dialectical wisdom is the continual movement towards superior prudence, described in Smith’s 1790 edition of The Theory of Moral Sentiments. “Wisdom deepens as individuals who train at the “great school of self-command” learn to mediate between materialistic stimuli and the voice of conscience arising from the demigod within the breast.” (Garbo, 2016, p. 49) In summary, while engaging with the world, individuals must make consumptive decisions that lead towards a greater wisdom, or superior-prudence, and therefore receive a higher approbation than the immediate gratification of passion. It is the only way to avoid the corruption of moral sentiments, and in return, we are rewarded with the greatest serenity, the deepest, least threatenable happiness.
8 Advancing Smith’s sympathy, the process of placing oneself in the place of another, and then judging oneself, to incorporate all things.
Actions must consider all actants at play, forcing decisions into collaborative projects with all things, biotic and abiotic. Realizing agency places humans within the ecological materiality of the planet, attempting to shed prior hierarchies. I argue that this is synonymous with seeing the materials we consume as objects of our sympathy. As a subject of sympathy, vibrant materiality changes the very nature of dialectical wisdom and advances Smith to the ecological crisis we see today. Engaging with the world becomes not only a project of human-human morality, it transforms into a completely ecological project to promote thoughtful and wise conduct in an already damaged planet.

Smith’s superior prudence was a response to the materialistic nature of conspicuous consumption – that is, to see the human-made objects as signifiers of ones’ wealth rather than wisdom – and an attempt to articulate the importance of paying attention to the virtues that deem internal, lasting approbation, not immediate gratification and wealth-based approbation. Today, wealth and greatness still operate as the dominant, ubiquitous approbation-receiving mechanisms. It has been the moral dilemma of humanity, and Smith proposes a solution.

Read through the contributions of Bennett and Bird, Smith’s dialectical wisdom can serve to benefit from notions of shimmer and vibrant materiality. If the objects and relationships of all abiotic and biotic life-worlds can participate in the sympathetic mechanism, allowing for the self-other approbation of social mirroring, then we might have a path to drastically change our relationships with all beings. “The bustle and business of the world” is no longer limited to engaging within human society, but rather, is an ecologically centered notion that sees all objects as actants, deeply interconnected with the process, materials, and life forms which brought them into existence.

If humans practice the pursuit of superior prudence while training at “the great school of self-command”, every engagement with any object places them in the position to look beyond human civilization and into the connectivity’s of all things. In an age of ecological devastation, as Smith’s time was of human devastation, noticing is the most important thing we can do. Realizing the sympathetic connection between humans and all abiotic/biotic objects is one way to begin the pursuit of an ecologically attentive wisdom.

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Conclusion

The post-enlightenment world saw an unmatched acceleration of human generated wealth, technological advancement, and globalization. In some ways, the progression of ‘unlocking’ human potential, or, applying the ‘universality’ of man, was a framework which has permeated the dominant western imagination for the last two hundred years, and with it, came the utter devastation of the planet’s ecology. For critics, Smith’s economics are a scapegoat, mechanisms guised as the same capitalism which has exploited the planet. Although Smith theorized systems that undoubtedly increased human capacity to affect the planet, his morality can be continually advanced to incorporate sustainable materialism. It was the separation between
‘nature’ and man, geologic history and human history, dark and light, barbarism and civilization, that alienated our understanding of what humans were never able to emancipate from.

Smith never tried to incorporate the constant power of the non-human, the incalculable other, or that which we cannot measure, study, or imagine, into his remedy for a quickly corrupting world. Birds ‘shimmering world’ and Bennett’s ‘vibrant materiality’ are theoretical tools which allow Smith’s superior prudence to comment on the corrupt consumption rationalized through his economic mechanisms.

As discussed, perfect wisdom and superior prudence do not exist, and for that matter, perfect sustainability may not as well. Rather, they lay as a reference points for the dialectical pursuit of wisdom. It is communication with the demi-god within that informs the morality of actions. In the 18th century Smith responded to the tremors of the consumer revolution; now, we see another manifestation of such behavior. With the help of Bird and Bennett, humans can incorporate all things into their pursuit of wise action. Each action within the material world offers opportunity for moral challenge, and with each action, one is forced to mediate with all levels of spectators, non-human, and human. Through noticing chains of material connectivity and acknowledging the distributed agency of all things, biotic and abiotic, the pursuit of wisdom continues to be a constant challenge.
References