

Adam Smith's Common Sense Onto-Epistemology in the Context of Cartesian Scepticism and Humean Agnosticism

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Smith never devoted an exclusive extensive work to epistemological questions. The main subjects of his work may be located in practical philosophy rather than theoretical philosophy. His work is penetrated by an epistemological theory that works in the background rather than in the foreground. But his *Essays on Philosophical Subjects (EPS)* could be read as a programmatic attempt to systematically clarify some of the major questions of modern epistemology. In *EPS* Smith, like Kant, for example, endeavours to provide a solution to questions of modern epistemology - particularly to those raised by Cartesian scepticism and Humean agnosticism. But in his reply, Smith follows an entirely different path. In this paper, I am going to set Smith's epistemology, *first*, in the context of Cartesian scepticism about whether sense perceptions are of any relevance to the theory of knowledge, and *second*, in the context of Humean agnosticism about whether there are universals in both the material and the ideal world. The overall purpose of this paper is to give an overview over some of Smith's major epistemological principles.

1. Smith's theory of sense perception read against the background of Cartesian scepticism

In *Meditations*, the particular question which Descartes investigates is about the origin of knowledge. He formulates therein an essential critique of common sense philosophy. When he criticise it, he has Aristotle's common sense philosophy in mind as it is expounded in *De Anima*. In this work, Aristotle shows how external and internal senses may be employed to develop a sense of reality. He presents thereby a theory of perception that may be described as a common sense theory of perception and explores thereby the question of how sense perception may be located in a theory of knowledge. Descartes attacks this epistemological project of Aristotle's in two closely connected respects. The first critique refers to sense perception and the second concerns the question whether the secondary qualities are relevant for epistemological theory. His critique culminates in his preposition of innate ideas as the source of general ideas prior to any experience. In his epistemological theory Smith seems to reply to both of these critiques and endeavours to develop a new approach to apriorism.

1. 1 Descartes' critique of common sense theory of perception

After having arrived at the 'thinking I' as a result of his meditations, Descartes comes to the conclusion that (the intuition of the) mind is the only reliable source of knowledge. He applies this principle to 'the bodies which we touch and see.'¹ Let us consider, he says, not 'bodies in general – for general perceptions are apt to be somewhat more confused'; let us take instead one particular body: a piece of wax.² It is fresh and therefore still sweet, and retains also the odour of the flowers; its colour, figure and size are apparent; it is hard, cold and if it is struck with the fingers, it will emit a sound. When we however approach fire with this fresh piece of wax, its taste exalts, the smell evaporates, the colour alters, the figure and size are

already changed or destroyed; it no longer hard and cold, but liquid and warm. It can no longer be handled and no sound is emitted. Now, is this still the same piece of wax?, Descartes asks. He affirms that this is the same wax. However, how about all those features perceived by the external senses (that are usually referred to as primary and secondary qualities)? They are all changed; nonetheless, it remains the same wax. When we consider attentively this wax that has undergone considerable changes and abstract from its *all external qualities which do not belong to it*, there will remain nothing except ‘something extended, flexible and changeable’.³

But what is meant here by “flexible” and “changeable”? Is it what I picture in my imagination: that this piece of wax is capable of changing from a round shape to a square shape, or from a square shape to a triangular shape? Not at all; for I can grasp that the wax is capable of countless changes of this kind, yet I am unable to run through this immeasurable number of changes in my imagination, from which it follows that it is not the faculty of imagination that gives me my grasp of the wax as flexible and changeable.⁴

Descartes continues:

And what is meant by “extended”? Is the extension of the wax also unknown? For it increases if the wax melts, increases again if it boils, and is greater still if the heat is increased. I would not be making a correct judgment about the nature of wax unless I believed it capable of being extended in many more different ways than I will ever encompass in my imagination. I must therefore admit that the nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone.⁵

These two passages summarise Descartes' arguments against common-sense philosophy. What he suggests is that our external senses cannot be said to have perception as they provide us solely with changing and unreliable data. Similarly, imagination which is described as *common sense* can also not be said to have the capacity of perception because it admits infinitude of similar changes. Our 'inspecto' (intuition of the mind) is then the only capacity that can be said to have perception⁶ and it is the only *locus* where the general ideas of things can be found prior to any experience.

1. 2 Smith's reply to the Cartesian critique of sense perception

In his epistemological theory, Smith departs from sense perception. He differentiates between external and internal senses. External senses enable to perceive external objects, whereas internal senses help, on the one hand, to combine the data perceived by external senses, and on the other hand, to perceive ourselves in relation to external objects perceived. He draws thereby on Aristotle's theory of perception. Aristotle operates based on a broad and a narrow conception of life. To differentiate between these two conceptions, he refers, on the one hand, to the capacity of 'self-nutrition'⁷, and on the other hand, to the sense of touch. He suggests that self-nutrition is the precondition of life as such and belongs to plants as well as to animals. However, the sense of touch applies only to animals. He asserts that 'some classes of animals have all the senses, some only certain of them, others only one, the most indispensable, touch.'⁸ Like Aristotle, but unlike Reid, for example, Smith refers to the sense of touch as an inseparable feature of animated nature. Reid ascribes to our sense of touch an important role too. But he defines the sense of seeing as the 'noblest' of our five senses.⁹ Similarly, Smith suggests that the sense of touch is not 'confined to any particular organ', it is rather 'diffused through almost

every part of the body; if we except the hair, the nails of the fingers and toes'.¹⁰ But in contrast to Reid, Smith concludes from this assertion consistently that it is the sense of touch that is 'essential to, and inseparable from, the nature of animal life and existence.'¹¹

In Smith's account there is an important difference between external and internal sense perceptions. External sense perceptions are always accompanied by internal sense perceptions. If we see or smell, touch or taste an object, we become aware of it. But our awareness of it is at the same time a self-perception and self-awareness. If we perceive a tasty smell, for example, it excites in us, say, an appetite for the object. As a reaction to this, our internal sense directs us towards the object in question. Therefore, smell 'not only excites the appetite, but directs to the object which can alone gratify that appetite'¹² In short, our external senses are always accompanied by our internal senses and they direct thereby our internal senses.

But the same cannot be claimed of internal sense perceptions. The internal sense perceptions do not need to be accompanied by external sense perceptions. They may affect, inform and direct our external senses but they do not need to be accompanied by external sense perceptions. If we feel hungry, for example, we hardly perceive at the same time an object or objects that might satisfy our hunger. This asymmetry between external and internal sense perceptions arises from the fact that the internal sense perceptions are above all self-perception rather than perception of an external object. Smith points to this when he asserts that '[t]he word *feeling*, though in many cases we use it as synonymous to *touching*, has however, a much more extensive signification, and is frequently employed to denote our internal, as well as our external, affections. We feel hunger and thirst, we feel joy and sorrow, we feel love and hatred.'¹³ So, if we feel for example hunger or thirst we perceive our body in a certain state affecting our mind we do not necessarily perceive at the same time some external objects; these

internal feelings may direct us to some external objects; but we do not feel hunger or thirst because we perceive external objects; indeed, sometimes ‘the Smell of agreeable food’, for example, ‘excites and irritates the appetite’¹⁴ but we do not feel hungry because we smell an agreeable food. We feel hungry because our ‘stomach is empty’¹⁵. The same principle applies to the perception of higher feelings. If we feel the need, say, of joy or love we feel our mind in a certain state affecting our body. But if we feel the need of these kinds of internal needs we do not perceive at the same time the ‘objects’ of the gratification of these feelings.

1.3 Smith’s reply to Descartes’ dismissal of secondary qualities

The differentiation between primary and secondary qualities has always been a controversial issue. Smith deals with this issue in a rather neutral or perhaps in a slightly critical way. He neither rejects the differentiation explicitly nor does he develop arguments in favour of or against it. However, because this differentiation implies a kind of value judgment in the sense that the secondary qualities are less important than the primary qualities, he seems to suggest that this differentiation should be approached in a value neutral way and ‘speak’ of the secondary qualities ‘more properly’ as other ‘classes of Sensations’.¹⁶ This might have been one of the reasons why Descartes refused to attribute any importance to the secondary qualities.

Smith regards the secondary qualities as important as the primary qualities. In his epistemological theory Smith criticises Hume’s merely phenomenological approach as well as Descartes’ pure universalism. He aims to develop a dialectical theory of epistemology that takes into account universal as well as phenomenological aspects. Accordingly, when he differentiates between primary and secondary qualities he asserts that primary qualities ‘are in reality, inseparable from that idea or conception, and the solid substance cannot possibly be

conceived to exist without them. No other qualities or attributes seem to be involved, in the same manner, in this our idea or conception of solidity.’¹⁷ But he points at the same time out: ‘[i]t would, however, be rash from thence to conclude that the solid substance can, as such, possess no other qualities or attributes. This very rash conclusion, notwithstanding, has been not only drawn, but insisted upon, an axiom of the most indubitable certainty, by philosophers of very eminent reputation.’¹⁸ The first of these passages can be read against Hume’s pure phenomenological approach and the second can be seen as a critique of Descartes’ pure universalism. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that secondary qualities do not belong to the qualities of substances. Rather, in a comprehensive epistemological theory they must be acknowledged as much as the primary qualities.

1. 4 Smith’s common sense theoretical approach to apriorism

One of the crucial and controversial questions in epistemological theory concerns the issues about apriorism – in both of its senses internal and external apriorism. Do we need any prepositions in epistemological theory? If yes, what should they look like? As Smith is quite often placed wrongly in the empiricist tradition, he may be expected to have rejected any form of apriorism. He rejects merely traditional approaches to it. Smith operates for example based on two forms of apriorism. He presupposes, on the one hand, the apriority of external objects, and on the other hand, instinctive perception as self-perception. Davie asserts that ‘Scottish democracy develops on the basis of a two-world view of man as a creature whose cognitive equipments depends on a sort of balance between an instinctive *a priori*, revealed by introspection and reflection to learned and unlearned alike, on the one hand, and the *a posteriori* facts revealed to the systematic observation and experimentations of the expert on the other...’¹⁹ Davie’s reference to ‘instinctive *a priori*’ as man’s ‘cognitive equipment’ points to

what I call internal apriorism and his pointing to ‘*a posteriori* facts revealed to the systematic observation and experimentations’ highlights what I deal with as external apriorism. It may be disputed whether his generalisation applies to all Scottish philosophers. But it is surely valid for Smith’s account of apriorism

1.4.1 Smith’s approach to external apriorism

If we follow Smith we perceive external objects always as external to and independent of us. By senses of touch, taste and sight we perceive shapes, coercion, colours and tastes of external bodies. By using the sense of touch and taste we may perceive the features of their surfaces, their hardness and softness, their solidity and fluidity; by using the sense of sight we can guess the features of the surfaces; but in order to find out how they really feel we must touch them; by the sense of taste we can find whether the objects are savoury or bitter, sweet or spicy. By the senses of sight and touch we can find out the dimensions of the external objects – (in Smith’s view) by the sense of touch three dimensions, whereas by the sense of sight only two dimensions. Moreover, by the sense of sight we perceive also ‘colour, and those modifications of colour’²⁰ which the surface of objects reflect, and can thereby determine our position, i.e. perspective and distance to the objects in question. We can of course gain also a vague notion of perspective and direction to the objects by our senses of hearing and smelling. However, this would remain vague as long as we do not use our sense of sight in addition. But whatever and however we perceive by our external senses we perceive external objects ‘altogether external to us, so we necessarily conceive’ them ‘as something altogether independent of us.’²¹

1.4.2 Smith’s account of internal apriorism

The issues concerning internal apriorism are usually discussed under the heading of ‘innate ideas’ and ‘tabula rasa’. The former claims that there are innate ideas (prior to the birth and experience) implanted in men’s mind and remembered if their corresponding objects are perceived, whereas the latter suggests that there are no such ideas in the mind. Rather, it looks rather like a blank piece of paper and perceives those ideas from external objects.

With regard to internal apriorism, Smith endeavours to establish a new pattern. He rejects both of these theories; because they both, though starting from opposite presuppositions, seem to reduce the clarification of epistemological questions to the investigation into the mind (the former more than the latter) and reduce cognising subjects to passive percipients; the former by assuming fixed *a priori* categories prior to perception and the latter disregards the fact that cognising subjects always somehow interested in the object they approach. Unlike these two approaches, Smith wants, on the one hand, to take into account that cognising subjects are never naïve if they approach an object, and on the other hand, he aims to show that the exploration of the questions concerning internal apriorism cannot be reduced to the investigation into the mind. In his exploration of the question whether there are *a priori* categories, or ‘preconception[s]’ as Smith calls them, he takes into account the whole body with all its functions and capacities, and discusses the issue in question in relation to external and internal senses, intellectual and bodily capacities. He does not limit his discussion to adults and he does not restrict his observations to human beings as is common in epistemological theories. Rather, he provides us with comparative discussions about the commonness among and the differences between human beings and animals (including the ‘young’ of other animals and human children).²² Smith is therefore rather critical of the concepts of ‘innate ideas’ and ‘tabula

rasa'. In his epistemological theory, Smith prefers to take into account the whole complexity of the human constitution and situation.

In his theory of perception Smith differentiates between remote and contact senses. This differentiation is very crucial and originates in the nature of these senses. The objects that are perceived by remote senses are mediated by light and air, whereas that of the contact senses are perceived by direct contact with the objects. Touch and taste perceive objects by direct contact. Therefore, contact perception cannot be said to be instinctive perceptions or preconceptions. The conception that is developed by direct contact may not be fully developed but they cannot also be said to be instinctive perceptions or preconceptions. He refuses, therefore, to ascribe to the senses of touching and tasting any kind of instinctive perception. Smith does not presuppose *a priori* categories, but he is prepared to ascribe to remote senses (seeing, smelling and hearing) a kind of 'instinctive perception'²³ or a 'vague notion'²⁴ or even a 'preconception' of 'some external thing or place which is the cause of those respective sensations'²⁵.

It follows that, as opposed to Descartes, Smith does not place 'preconception' in the mind. He ascribes it to a certain state of the whole body. He asserts therefore that 'all the appetites which take their origin from a certain state of the body, seem to suggest the means of their own gratification; and even *long before experience*, some *anticipation* or *preconception* of the pleasure which attends that gratification.'²⁶ When Smith ascribes to human beings a kind of 'anticipation' or 'preconception' *'long before experience'* or elsewhere *'antecedent to all experience'*²⁷ he seems to operate here based on a rather narrow conception of experience, namely experience with external objects. However, his conception of experience is much broader and includes one's experience with oneself too. So for example if we feel that our 'stomach is empty', then we experience our stomach in a certain state. Hence, what Smith

seems to suggest when he ascribes to human beings a kind of ‘anticipation’ or ‘preconception’ ‘*long before experience*’ is that our ‘preconception’ is *a posteriori* to our experience of our empty stomach but prior to the experience of the object of gratification. This certain state of the body forces men to move towards a certain object. Therefore, if men approach a remote object they have always a ‘vague notion’, ‘instinctive perception’ or ‘preconception’; they are never naïve. Rather, they have already some expectations and therefore also some kind of preconceptions.

2. Smith’s common-sense epistemology and Humean agnosticism

2. 1 Hume’s agnostic challenge to modern epistemology

Smith reply to Cartesian pure universalism shall not be seen in the light of Hume’s critique. Because of his close intellectual relationship to Hume, Smith uses very often the same terms and concepts. But his definition of these terms and concepts are often contrary and in his critique of Cartesian pure universalism, Smith aims at the same time to reply to Hume’s agnostic challenge.

Hume’s agnosticism with regard to the universal is built upon two fundamental assumptions. The one refers to his natural atomism implying that there is no substance in the external world – neither in form of ‘original matter’ nor in that of ‘substantial form’, which he develops in his critical account of peripatetic philosophy.²⁸ The other points to his rejection of general ideas which are according to Hume ‘in themselves individual’ though they ‘may become general in their representation’.²⁹ He concludes therefore that ‘[e]very quality being a

distinct thing from another, may be conceiv'd to exist apart, and may exist apart, not only from every other quality, but from that unintelligible chimera of substance.³⁰

In *Treatise*, he explains the origins of general ideas by referring explicitly to custom and implicitly to the rules of the association of the ideas. Abstract or general ideas are productions of custom. 'When we have found a resemblance among several objects', he asserts, 'that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them. After we have acquired a *custom* of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances and proportions.'³¹ In *Enquires*, however, he refers to custom implicitly, whereas he mentions the rules of the association of ideas explicitly. But despite this shift in his argument, Hume keeps to his original agnostic position.

Smith and Kant belong to those major philosophers who took Hume's challenge very seriously. Both want to develop a synthesis of empirical and rational philosophy and aim to overcome Hume's epistemological agnosticism. But how this synthesis was to be developed and how Humean agnosticism was to be overcome, they take entirely different approaches. Kant follows a transcendental path, whereas Smith prefers to reply on common-sense philosophy. Smith's approach to the questions concerning cognition and knowledge is *ontological*, whereas that of Kant aims at the replacing of ontology by an 'Analytic of pure understanding'³². Accordingly, they differ in their answer to the above-formulated philosophical task crucially. Kant does not question Hume's atomist theory of nature³³ and takes into account only the challenge at the level of the cognising subject. Following Descartes, he wants merely to prove that there are *a priori* general concepts or categories in the mind. Smith, on the

contrary, replies to both of Hume's challenges and employs a methodological device which may be called a *relational approach*.

2. 2 Smith's reply to Hume's agnostic challenge at the level of the object

Smith discusses the issues concerning the relation between 'original matter' and 'substantial forms' under the heading of 'subject-matter' (or 'stuff') and 'specific essence' (or 'essentials'), which he utilises in the tradition of Aristotle. The former refers to Smith's broad and the latter points to his narrow conception of the universal. Smith discusses some of the main questions concerning the relationship between broad and narrow conceptions of universals in his essay on 'Ancient Logics and Metaphysics'. There he criticises the 'ill-grounded foundation'³⁴ of Plato's theory of ideas. He asserts that what 'seems to have misled those early philosophers, was, the notion [...] that those things, out of which any object is composed, must exist antecedent to that object.'³⁵ Therefore, Plato and many other ancient Greek philosophers ascribed to universal matter and specific essence 'a separate existence from all eternity.'³⁶ Smith can, however, understand and explain that Plato and other ancient Greek philosophers adopted this kind of hypothesis (apriorism) 'in the very first dawnings of science'³⁷. But he can hardly understand that 'after more than two thousand years'³⁸ philosophers such as Locke, who thought of universals as external to particulars, and Malebranche who was a 'Cartesian philosopher'³⁹ and 'had recourse to the enthusiastic and unintelligible notion of the intimate union of the human mind with the divine', and 'to so strange a fancy'.⁴⁰ It is interesting that in this passage Smith mentions critically a rationalist and an empiricist philosopher at the same time. Probably implying both rationalist as well as empiricist forms of dualism and Humean agnosticism, Smith asserts that: '[t]o explain the nature, and account for the origin of general Ideas, is, even at this day, the greatest difficulty in abstract philosophy.'⁴¹

Smith regards general matter as always embedded in specific essence. He asserts: ‘...the things out of which all particular objects seem to be composed, are the stuff or matter of those objects, and the form or specific Essence, which determines them to be of his or that class of things.’⁴² Hence, after having refuted agnosticism and ancient and modern forms of dualist approaches to the theory of the object, he refers to Aristotle having discovered the impossibility of conceiving of universal and specific matter as entirely separate forms of matter. According to Smith, Aristotle assumes ‘that all sensible objects were made up of two principles, both of which, he calls, equally, substances, the matter and specific essence.’⁴³ Therefore, according to Aristotle, as Smith reads him, the general matter cannot exist ‘without being determined by some specific Essence, to some particular class of things, nor any specific Essence without being embodied in some particular portion of matter.’⁴⁴ The universal is always embedded in the particular; it is never external but always internal to it.⁴⁵

This dialectical approach to the object as a unity of identity and non-identity, has very important implications or consequences for his theory of the object in particular and for that of nature in general. Unlike Hume and Kant, for example, Smith is not obliged to deal with objects merely as isolated particular appearances; rather he is interested in grasping them as particulars and universals in their internal and external relations to one another. Smith is merely interested in knowing essential aspects of objects. On the contrary, he criticises merely essentialist and phenomenological approaches to knowledge. Smith regards the opposition between essentialism and relativism as well as between ontology and phenomenology as an artificial opposition. He aims to integrate both of these principles into one comprehensive theory of epistemology and develop a three dimensional theory of the object consisting of general essence, specific essence, and phenomenological qualities.

Smith refers to the object as a ‘Solid Body or Thing’ that has the ‘power or quality of resistance’ which ‘we call Solidity’. ‘We consider it, therefore, as what we call a Substance, or as a thing that subsists by itself, and independent [not only of us but also,- DG] of any other thing.’⁴⁶ This substance occurs in space in the forms of gas, liquid, solid and light, and it occupies in space always a certain place. Smith suggests that everything that we meet in space has the quality of solidity which has to be discovered. Our knowledge of the substances is always historically conditioned. ‘There was a time, as we may learn from Aristotle and Lucretius, when it was supposed to require some degree of philosophy to demonstrate that air was a real solid body, or capable of pressure and resistance. What, in ancient times, and in vulgar apprehensions, was supposed to be doubtful with regard to air, still continues to be so with regard to light...’⁴⁷ The same principle applied to the qualities of water until Archimedes.⁴⁸ Therefore, even though a substance such as air or water appears not to possess those qualities of a substance (because it admits ‘into the same place another solid and resisting substance’⁴⁹ without removing it from its place by a third), it has the qualities of a substance and this can be demonstrated by experiments. Therefore, there is no emptiness in space; rather it is full of specific essences standing somehow in relation to one another.

Smith differentiates between external and internal qualities of substances. The former refers to particular and accidental qualities, whereas the latter points to general qualities. Like Aristotle, Smith has a broad and a narrow conception of the universal. The broad conception refers to the quality which is supposed to be the same in all substances. Smith discusses this under the heading of ‘Stuff’ or ‘Subject-Matter’⁵⁰. He discusses the narrow conception under the heading of ‘Specific essence’. It refers to those qualities which are supposed to be the same in a *particular* class of substances.

With regard to external qualities, Smith differentiates between primary and secondary qualities. He deals with the former implicitly, whereas with the latter explicitly. The primary qualities are ‘extension, divisibility, figure and mobility, or the capacity of motion or rest’.⁵¹ These *four* qualities are substantial for all solid bodies and therefore ‘necessarily involved in the idea or conception of a solid substance’.⁵² The secondary qualities are heat, cold, taste, smell, sound and colour.⁵³

Smith’s theory of the object should not be interpreted in the sense of schematism. His qualification is not meant to be static. On the contrary, his view of nature is a dynamic one. That is to say that he adopts Aristotle’s theory of the object in particular and nature in general against the background of modern scientific theories of nature. Smith finds, for example, Aristotle’s conception of the ‘first mover’ or the ‘unmoved mover’, which is supposed to have no ‘magnitude’⁵⁴, mystical and ‘indeed obscure and unintelligible in the highest degree’⁵⁵ When Smith develops his conception of the object he relies on Aristotle’s categories of potentiality, actuality, and privation, which suppose a dynamic theory of nature: ‘In the system of the universe, at least according to the imperfect notions which we have hitherto been able to attain concerning it, the great difficulty seems to be, not to find the most enormous masses in motion, but to find the smallest particle of matter that is perfectly at rest, with regard to all other surrounding bodies.’⁵⁶

To sum up, arguing against Humean agnosticism (and indeed against any dualist approach to the relationship between the universal and the particular), Smith suggests that every particular is at the same time a universal; no universal can be conceived of without being particular and no particular can be conceived of without being universal at the same time.

2.3 Smith's solution to Humean agnosticism at the level of the cognising subject

Smith's most direct reply to Hume's agnostic challenge at the level of the cognising subject may be found in his philosophy of language. According to his explanation, the genesis and progress of language and that of general concepts originates in the genesis and progress of society. To prepare the ground for what I am going to say let me point to some preparatory methodological considerations of Smith's.

2.3.1 Smith's "functional approach" to philosophy as the 'connecting principle'

To reply to Humean challenge Smith employs a realist relational approach. Hume's conception of the object implies that there is no universal. As I have shown above, in his reply to Humean agnosticism, Smith differentiates between a broad and a narrow conception of the universal. He regards the general or original matter as always contained in all specific essences in the same form. If all specific essences (essentials) share some general qualities the task of philosophy is then to find out how they relate to one another. He defines philosophy as 'the science of the connecting principles of nature'⁵⁷ and explains what he means: 'Philosophy, by representing the invisible chains which bind together all these disjointed objects, endeavours to introduce order into this chaos of jarring and discordant appearances...'⁵⁸ Smith formulates this principle in relation to nature should not be taken in the narrow sense of the term. In Smith's view, a relational approach is a universal principle. In passage just quoted, he suggests that this principle of 'the clear discovery of a connecting chain of intermediate events'⁵⁹ addresses itself also to the survey of 'the great revolutions of the universe'.⁶⁰

2.3.2 Smith's sociological approach to epistemological questions

At the level of the cognising subject, philosophy needs, in Smith's account, to deal with knowledge as the mirror of social relations. To give an account of the knowledge in a given society in a certain age would require reconstructing somehow general social relations. This would mean in consequence that the limits of the category of abstract "I" (which is a central category of methodological individualism) must be overcome. A passage from his essay "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages" ("Languages") may reveal the background of his considerations when he refuses to use this category. The "I" as a category, he says, '...is far from being the name of a species, but, on the contrary, whenever it is made use of, it always denotes a precise individual, the particular person who then speaks.'⁶¹ Because of this consideration, Smith uses a three-person conception, i.e. he starts with a real existing "micro social relation". Two of these three persons are supposed to be real, whereas the 'third person' is sometimes supposed to be an imagined person. The third person does not exist sometimes as a real individual but does exist in form of conscience in all inter-subjective communicative situations. However, this third person can also exist in some inter-subjective situations as a real individual judging two individuals in a communicative situation of action. The difference between the starting point of all the traditions which use the abstract conception of 'I' and that of Smith is this: whereas the former remains in the process of its consideration within the boundaries of the abstract consideration of "I" (divested of all his/her social relations), the latter (proceeding from abstract-concrete to concrete whole) aims to unfold its considerations gradually to more complex and general social relations.

2.3.3 Smith's utilisation of the concept of labour in epistemology

If we follow Kant epistemology deals with subject-object relation. The epistemological aim of the subject is to appropriate the object. At the end of epistemological activities the subject must be able to say: the '*object is for me*'⁶² The same principle applies to Smith's approach to epistemology too. But since he has an inter-subjective approach he would probably say: at the end of our epistemological activities we must be able to say: the *object is for us*.

In other words, epistemology reflects on the preconditions for the subject's appropriation of the object. The question about general concepts arises exactly in this context and it refers to the question whether there is something that can be called the *thing in itself* and whether it can be known. Unlike Hume and Kant, Smith thinks that there is something that may be called the *thing in itself* (original matter) and that it can be known by means of the appropriation. But what means does the subject use to appropriate the object? Many philosophers in the 18th century, like Kant for example, referred to the capacity of imagination as a mediating THIRD.⁶³ Smith seems to have some strong reservations about the universal application of the capacity of imagination in epistemology. He refers to the capacity of imagination as a mediating third between subject and object only in a restricted sense. Beside some other categories, it occupies a central position in Smith's moral philosophy, social and political theory and in his theory of history. Unlike Descartes but like Kant, Smith regards the capacity of imagination as indispensable. In his essay 'History of Astronomy' he describes it as a capacity of motivation for cognition. As such it differs from the capacity of perception. Whereas our capacity of perception remains within the boundaries of *is*, the capacity of imagination has also the potentiality of carrying us beyond *is* to *ought*.

Unlike Kant, Smith thinks that the *thing in itself* cannot be known by the capacity of imagination. For in theories of perception and imagination we deal only with the knowledge of

external qualities such as colour and shape and with spatial relations but not with the knowledge of ‘what is in itself visible’, that is, neither of that of ‘substratum’ which ‘underlies colour’ nor of that which causes the very visibility, which the very ‘substratum contains in itself.’⁶⁴ We may see this more clearly from the following considerations: subject-object relation is necessarily a relation of ‘acting and being acted upon’⁶⁵ as Aristotle suggests; in both of its senses that the object affects the subject and the subject acts upon the object. In the theories of perception and imagination, we consider only how the object affects the subject by its external qualities but not the aspect how the subject acts upon the object. If we deal with subject-object relation merely within the framework of perception and imagination, we divert the subject therefore necessarily into the object and the object into acting agent. For the mediation between the subject and the object does not cease by sense perception and imagination. It implies a real involvement and mediation to know not only external but also internal qualities. It is exactly this comprehensive knowledge which enables us to say that the objects are for us.

Though Smith agrees with Descartes that the *thing in itself* cannot be known by the capacity of imagination, he does not refer to the capacity of intuition. Rather, he points to the concept of *labour* as the mediating *third* between subject and object, which includes sense perception and imagination. This particular form of human activity enables subjects to appropriate the objects and constitute human life as opposed to animal life. It serves as the foundation of human life and as such it serves as the *ontic* foundation of all other social practices. He formulates thereby an anthropological principle which may be described as ‘eccentric positionality’ of human beings as Hans Heinz Holz calls it.⁶⁶ Smith suggests that other animals ‘have no *conception* that it [food,- DG] would be improved by cookery or rendered more agreeable or more nourishing by a sauce.’⁶⁷ However, thanks to the ability to develop conceptions, human beings make tools, and appropriate natural forces such as fire for

example. They apply them ‘to the preparation of’ their food and find the ‘beneficial effects of the change it produces. The food thus prepared’ they soon relish ‘as more agreeable’ (sic), and find ‘by experience that it more easily submits to the operation of’ their ‘feeble and puny stomach[s] than the coarse and unprepared...’⁶⁸

Thus human beings transform natural objects from pure natural categories into natural-social categories; we do this for example when we work the pure natural category “tree” into natural-social category “table”. Smith formulates this idea explicitly in *Lectures on Jurisprudence*: ‘[t]he natural (sic) temperature of the air is altogether adapted to the condition of the other animals (sic), who seem to feel very little inconvenience from the several (sic) vicissitudes of the weather. But even this soft and subtle fluid is too severe for his [human’s] tender and delicate frame.’⁶⁹ Smith continues: ‘[o]ne should imagine that this subtle and fleeting element would not submit to any change from his [human’s] hands, but he even forms to himself around his body a sort of new atmosphere, more soft, warm, and comfortable than that of the commoncircumambient air. For this purpose he furnishes himself with cloaths which he wraps round his body, and builds himself a house to extend this atmosphere to some greater distance around him.’⁷⁰ This enables human beings to establish habitation and culture of their own, because, say, without ‘glass window which lets in the heat and the light, and keeps out the wind and the rain, with all the knowledge and art requisite for preparing that beautiful and happy invention, (...) these northern parts of the world could scarce have afforded a very comfortable habitation...’⁷¹ Smith describes this process at the same time as a ‘progress of society’.⁷²

Philosophy in general (and metaphysics in particular) originates in this process. ‘A savage’, for example, ‘whose subsistence is precarious, whose life is every day exposed to the

rudest dangers', says Smith, 'has no inclination to amuse himself with searching out what, when discovered, seems to serve no other purpose than to render the theatre of nature a more connected spectacle to his imagination. Many of these smaller incoherences, which in the course things perplex philosophers, entirely escape his attention.'⁷³ He defines accordingly everything even wisdom and virtue, as subservient to the satisfaction of needs.⁷⁴ But thanks to the development of the productivity of labour 'subsistence ceases to be precarious' and 'the curiosity of mankind is increased, and their fears are diminished'. Due to this development some classes of men have 'leisure' that 'renders them more attentive to the appearances of nature, more observant of her smallest irregularities, and more desirous to know what is the chain which links them all together.'⁷⁵

2.3.4 Smith's historical account of the genesis and progress of general concepts and metaphysics as the mirror of the progress of society

Smith sees a close connection between 'the origin and progress of language'⁷⁶ and the genesis of general concepts such as substantives, adjectives, nouns adjective, numbers and personal pronouns. An examination of his approach to singular personal pronouns may show that there is an agreement between Hume and Smith. Smith describes especially the "I" as '... far from being the name of a species, but, on the contrary, whenever it is made use of, it always denotes a precise individual, the particular person who then speaks.' This description may indeed coincide with Hume's claim that general ideas are 'in themselves individual' though they 'may become general in their representation'. However, there is also an essential disagreement too.

Let us take a "table" for example. If there is only one table we would describe by the word table only that table. If one says "table" without any further qualification by using adjectives, every one around him/her would understand what is meant, because there is only one table. But if there is more than one table, we would refer to the general concept of table, because all tables have now been collected under the same name (general concept) because they *share some general characteristics*; otherwise we would not have been able to collect them under a 'common name'⁷⁷ or 'general name'⁷⁸. If there is more than one table, to make others understand which table is meant we would need to further qualify by using adjectives and/or referring to the spatial relation it stands in. It is probably this "paradox" that led Hume to dismiss the general concept.

But in Smith's view, the process of the extensive and intensive appropriation of nature by human labour described above mirrors itself also in the structure and progress of society. This, in turn, mirrors itself in the structure and progress of language as a process 'of arrangement or classing'⁷⁹ and 'of abstraction and generalisation'⁸⁰. The 'progress of society', its growing complexity, enriching structure of external and internal needs and accumulation of the means satisfying these needs mirror themselves also in the 'progress of language'. This process of classification or generalisation takes place based on the principles of *resemblance* or *similarity* and *dissimilarity* and *familiarity*. The principles of resemblance or similarity and dissimilarity refer to the relationship between natural phenomena, existing independently of the cognising subjects, whereas the principle of familiarity refers to the discovery of these similarities or resemblances. The more this process of familiarity, i.e. the appropriation and explanation of natural phenomena progresses the more occasions they have to collect them under some classes or 'common name[s]'⁸¹ or general concepts which are permanently enriching and building sub-classes and sub-concepts.

Smith describes the progress of society (including ideal world) as the 'natural history of mankind'⁸², as Smith pupil John Millar phrased it. In his essay "Languages" for example he asserts: if '[t]wo savages who had never been taught to speech, but had been bred up remote from the society of men, would naturally begin to form that language by which they would endeavour to make their *mutual wants* intelligible to each other, by uttering certain *sounds*, whenever they meant to *denote* certain objects.'⁸³ This passage contains at least three methodological elements of Smith's approach. *Firstly*, he endeavours to reconstruct general social relations by making use of an inter-subjective. He explains the genesis of society at the same time as the genesis of language and begins his considerations with a hypothesis of two savages. *Secondly*, the 'mutual wants' Smith refers to (which is just another expression for

needs) points to his concept of internal apriorism. *Thirdly*, in his epistemology, Smith employs a realist approach. Accordingly he deals with external objects as external to and independent of us (external apriorism). As expression of this principle, Smith refers to sounds (words are a much later invention) and ‘substantives’⁸⁴ or ‘nouns substantive’⁸⁵ as denoting ‘certain substances’⁸⁶ or ‘particular objects’⁸⁷. They obtain their contents from the objects they denote. Without any recourse to the denoted objects ‘figures of speech’ could ‘have no intrinsic worth of their own.’⁸⁸ However, the invention or as Smith puts it the ‘institution’ of substantives ‘would be *amongst* the first contrived by persons who were inventing a language’⁸⁹ and this ‘would probably, be one of the first steps towards the formation of language.’⁹⁰ These

Two Savages who met together and took up their dwelling in the same place would very soon endeavour to get signs to denote those objects which most frequently occurred and with which they were most concerned. The *cave* they lodged in, the *tree* from whence they got their food, or the *fountain* from whence they drank, would all soon be distinguished by *particular names*, as they would have frequent occasion to make thoughts about these known to one another, and would by *mutual consent* agree on certain signs whereby this might be accomplished.⁹¹

Smith describes here how ‘two savages’ invent in mutual agreement certain names or substantives to denote certain objects that they are familiar with. The substantives *cave*, *tree* and *fountain* do not only describe particular objects but also the natural “circle” that surrounds and provides them the means of the satisfaction of their needs because these natural objects are ‘most familiar to them’ and therefore ‘they had most frequent occasion to mention’ them.⁹²

If we remain in this stage of the ‘primitive jargon’⁹³ of these two savages, Smith might have agreed with Hume’s claim with some negligible reservations, because in this ‘primitive language’ each substantive describes a particular object. However, in Smith’s view, Hume’s failure is to take these particular concepts as absolute and not to see them in their historical development. Smith’s objection to Hume’s claim begins here and this is the stage, in Smith’s view, where metaphysics begins to arise.

Afterwards, when the more *enlarged experience* of these savages had led them to observe, and their necessary occasions obliged them to make mention of other caves, and other trees, and other fountains, they would naturally bestow, upon each of those new objects, the same name, by which they had been accustomed to express the similar object they were first acquainted with. The new objects had none of them any name of its own, but each of them exactly resembled another object, which had such an appellation.⁹⁴

Therefore,

It was impossible that those savages could behold the new objects, without recollecting the old ones; and the name of the old ones, to which the new bore so close a resemblance. When they had occasion, therefore, to mention, or to point out to each other, any of the new objects, they would naturally utter the name of the correspondent old one, of which the idea could not fail, at that instant, to present itself to their memory in the strongest and liveliest manner. And thus, those words, which were originally the proper names of individuals, would each of them insensibly become the common name of a multitude.⁹⁵

As a result of this further development of society in its appropriation of nature as mirrored in the structure of language there arise ‘common names’ or ‘general names’⁹⁶. However, from this point on Smith’s explanation of the genesis of general names or concepts as a reply to Humean challenge faces a big difficulty. A certain substantive that originally described a particular object describes now as a general name merely the *resemblance* of a multitude of particular objects as a species, because ‘[w]hat constitutes a species is merely a number of objects, bearing a certain degree of resemblance to one another, and on that account denominated by a single appellation, which may be applied to express any one of them.’⁹⁷ But Smith wants to take into account not only the universal but also the particular, it does not want only investigate ‘several parts (...) as a whole’ but also ‘relations and respects, which those parts have to each other.’ The particular question that Smith has now to address is how the particular objects can be referred to by using these general names that describes merely the general aspect of a particular object.

When the greater part of objects had thus been arranged under their proper classes and assortments, distinguished by such general names, it was impossible that the greater part of that almost infinite number of individuals, comprehended under each particular assortment or species, could have any particular or proper names of their own, distinct from the general name of the species. When there was occasion, therefore, to mention any particular object, it often became necessary to distinguish it from the other objects comprehended under the same general name, either, first, by its peculiar qualities; or, secondly, by the peculiar relation which it stood in to some other things.⁹⁸

This ‘enlarged experience’⁹⁹ with nature gave rise to a further increase of metaphysics and as a result of this there arise a number of other sets of words, namely to ‘nouns adjective’, ‘prepositions’ and ‘numbers’. Here I am dealing with first mentioned two sets of words, namely with nouns adjective and prepositions. In Smith’s view the former express the quality, whereas the latter the relations. In Smith’s view neither quality nor relation can exist in abstract, though they may be abstract in themselves. Let us take *green* for example. It ‘expresses a certain quality considered as qualifying, or as in concrete with, the particular subject to which it may be applied. Words of this kind, it is evident, may serve to distinguish particular objects from others comprehended under the same general appellation. The words green tree, for example, might serve to distinguish a particular tree from others that were withered or blasted.’¹⁰⁰ Similarly, prepositions (of, to, above, below) express certain relations ‘in concrete with the co-relative object.’¹⁰¹ If however neither noun adjective nor preposition is sufficient to refer to a certain object we may use both sets of words at the same time in the same sentence. ‘When we say, the green tree of the meadow, for example, we distinguish a particular tree, not only by the quality which belongs to it, but by the relation which it stands in to another object.’¹⁰²

In conclusion, in the progress of society’s appropriation of nature as soon as there have been established classes of objects the substantives that originally described a particular object express now, in Smith’s view as opposed to that of Hume’s, a class of the same object and become a general concept. And we perceive these qualities only by means of external senses and establish their relations to one another by means of our capacity of imagination. Therefore, in Smith’s account unlike to that of Descartes’, we can refrain neither from external sense perception nor from our common sense or imagination.

¹ Rene Descartes, *Meditations*, in: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), vol. 2, 20 § 30.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., § 31.

⁴ Ibid., 20/1 § 31.

⁵ Ibid; the ‘piece of wax’ by which Descartes illustrates his philosophy occurs already in Aristotle’s *De Anima* (Cf. for example: Aristotle, *On the Soul*, in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton/New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), vol. 1, Book II, 412b 5-10; cf. also Descartes, *ibid*, 59 § 86 and 59n).

⁶ *Meditations*, 21-23 § 30-34.

⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *op. cit*, 413a 20 - 413b 5.

⁸ Ibid, 414^a 1-5.

⁹ Thomas Reid, *Philosophical Works*, ed. W. Hamilton (Edinburgh, 1895, reprinted Hildesheim, 1967) vol. 1, 132.

¹⁰ Adam Smith, “Of the External Senses” [*External Senses*], in: *EPS*, 135 §2.

¹¹ Ibid., 150 §49.

¹² Ibid., 165 §80.

¹³ Ibid., 140 §19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 164 §78.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 144 §25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 137 §13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ George Elder Davie, “The Social Significance of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense”, in: *The Scottish Enlightenment and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), 63.

²⁰ Ibid., 149 §47.

²¹ Ibid., 136 § 8; cf. also 142 and 143 §§ 22, 23 and 24.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 161-165 §§70-78.

²³ Ibid., 161 §69.

²⁴ Ibid., 167 §85.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 165 §79 (*italics added*).

²⁷ Ibid., 161-62 §70.

²⁸ David Hume, *Treatise*, with an Analytical Index by L. A. Selby-Bigge, with text revised and notes by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978), 222.

²⁹ Ibid, 20; cf. also: David Hume, *Enquiries*, Introduction and Analytical Index by L. A. Selby-Bigge, with text revised and notes by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989), §§124-125.

³⁰ *Treatise*, 222.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Immanuel Kant, I., *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998), 355, B 303 15-23.

³³ Kant's claim that there is no 'third' implies clearly an atomist theory of nature. Cf. *ibid.*, 375, B 315 25-35.

³⁴ Adam Smith, Ancient Logics and Metaphysics, in: *EPS*, 125 §5.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 126 §6.

³⁷ Ibid., 125 §5.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 123n.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 125/6.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indiana Polis: Liberty Fund 1984), 11 § 8.

⁴⁶ *External Senses*, 136 §8.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 138 §15.

⁴⁸ *Ancient Physics*, 108/9 §5.

⁴⁹ *External Senses*, 139 §17.

⁵⁰ *Ancient Logics and Metaphysics*, 118 §1.

⁵¹ *External Senses*, 137 §13.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 144 §25.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Physics*, in: op cit., vol. 2, Book 8, chapter 10 267^b 15-20.

⁵⁵ *Ancient Physics*, 115 §10; cf. also editor's foot note to this passage.

⁵⁶ *External Senses*, 137 §12.

⁵⁷ Adam Smith, "The Principle which lead and direct Philosophical Enquiries; illustrated by the History of Astronomy", in: *EPS*, 45 § 12.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 45/6 § 12.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 42/3 § 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 45-47 § 12.

⁶¹ Smith, "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages" [*Languages*], in: *LRBL*, 219 § 32.

⁶² *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 156, B138; 182, B138 § 26.

⁶³ Cf. *ibid*, 240, B177 § 10.

⁶⁴ *On the Soul*, book 2, chapter 7, 418^a 26 - 418^b10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, chapter 5, 417^a1.

⁶⁶ Cf. Hans Heinz Holz, *Dialektik der Widerspiegelung* (Köln, 1983), 128-140.

⁶⁷ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence* [*Lectures Jurisprudence*], eds. R. L. Meek, D. D., Raphael and P. G. Stein (Indiana Polis: Liberty Fund 1982) 334 (italics added).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 334/5.

⁷¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, eds. R. H. Campbell and A. L. Skinner, textual ed. W. B. Todd (Indiana Polis: Liberty Fund, 1981), voll, 23.

⁷² *Languages*, 217 §29.

⁷³ *History of Astronomy*, 48 § 1.

⁷⁴ *Lectures Jurisprudence*, 338.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 50 § 3.

⁷⁶ *LRBL*, 9.

⁷⁷ *Languages*, 204 § 1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 205 § 3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 207 §7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 206 §7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 204 §1.

⁸² John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (Bristol /Tokyo, 1990), 11.

⁸³ *Languages*, 203 §1 (italics added).

⁸⁴ *LRBL*, 9 § 18.

⁸⁵ *Languages*, 203 §1.

⁸⁶ *LRBL* 9 § 18.

⁸⁷ *Languages*, 203 §1.

⁸⁸ *LRBL*, 26 § 57.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 9 § 18.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 203 §1.

⁹¹ *LRBL*, 9 § 18 (italics added).

⁹² *Languages*, 203 §1.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 203/4 §1 (italics added).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 204 §1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205 § 3.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 205 § 2.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205 § 3.

⁹⁹ *Languages*, 203 §1

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 205 § 4.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 206 § 5.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*