The Scottish Tradition in Economics and the Role of Common Sense in Adam Smith’s Thought

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This essay examines the notion of a ‘Scottish Tradition’ and the role of common sense in Adam Smith’s thought. It is a contribution to the contemporary literature on the ‘Scottish Approach’ and on the historical investigation of Adam Smith’s intellectual background. It argues that a notion of common sense was behind Smith’s view of science and that it may provide an epistemological foundation for the Scottish Tradition. The essay attempts to show how the notion of common sense may be seen as a way of emphasising the role of reason and judgement in the conceptualisation of phenomena with pragmatic and aesthetic content.

In a matter of common sense, every man is no less a competent judge than a mathematician is in a mathematical demonstration. (Reid, 1785)

1. Introduction
The notion of a ‘Scottish Tradition’ or a ‘Scottish Approach’ to economics, originally raised by Macfie (1955), has been suggested as a foundation for political economy (Dow, 1987; Mair, 1990) and as a precedent to modern developments in the methodology of economics (Dow et al., 1997). Whereas the general characteristics of the Scottish Approach have been closely scrutinised and related to their historical background (see, for example, Campbell & Skinner, 1982; Lehmann, 1960, 1971; Stewart, 1990), little attention has been paid to the notion of common sense, or to the Scottish School of Common Sense, as important constituents of this reconstruction. Yet, it was during the period of the Scottish Enlightenment—the historical intellectual movement upon which

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1 The Scottish Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that encompassed different tendencies present in 17th- and 18th-century Scottish thought, such as the Baconian principle of empirical
the theoretical reconstruction proposed by the Scottish Approach is based—that the general notion of common sense flourished, developing and achieving prominence in many areas of knowledge, such as those which we now define as philosophy, history and economics (Somerville, 1987).

Indeed, it was during the Scottish Enlightenment that common sense became a philosophical term of art and that its influence became so pervasive that it was said that ‘the key-note of Scottish philosophy at this time was its appeal to “common sense”’ (Lehmann, 1971, p. 164). This influence can be seen not only in the writings of Thomas Reid—the immediate successor to Adam Smith in the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow, best known as ‘the father of Common Sense Philosophy’—but also in those of James Beattie, Lord Kames, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, Sir James Steuart and Francis Hutcheson. Things are less clear concerning the influence of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy on the works of David Hume and Adam Smith. What the initial evidence—Reid’s attacks on Hume’s ‘theory of ideas’ associated with Hume’s reputation as a sceptical philosopher (Stove, 1976)—might suggest is that Hume’s writings were anti-common sense. The intellectual closeness between David Hume and Adam Smith (Ross, 1995, pp. 151, 272) also seems to provide a prima facie case for imputing an anti-common sense world-view to Smith. Similarly, Smith’s own emphasis on Isaac Newton’s experimental method (see, for example, Smith’s History of Astronomy, IV. 67 and IV. 76, and his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, ii. 133–134) and his defence of ‘systems of thought’ might also suggest that he was interested in ‘science’ rather than in ‘common sense’.

However, should this be a correct interpretation of Adam Smith’s interest in the notion of common sense, we would arrive at the very intriguing question of how Adam Smith, ‘a seminal mind in the eighteenth-century Scotland, more so probably than anyone else’ (Forbes, 1982, p. 190), could not share with his intellectual peers ‘the key-note of the Scottish philosophy at this time’. Was Smith at odds with the common sense Zeitgeist of his time? This is a relevant issue that needs to be settled not only because of the historical interest concerning the works of Adam Smith, but also because of the implications it might carry for an understanding of the Scottish Approach and of the notion of common sense in economics.

Altogether, there is a set of interdependent issues which should be addressed in order to examine the influence of the concept of common sense on the Scottish Tradition and on Adam Smith’s thought, such as (1) the meaning of the concept of common sense as held by the Scottish School of Common Sense (in particular by Thomas Reid), (2) the apparent antagonism between Reid’s and Hume’s philosophy, (3) the relation between Smith’s views on science and on

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enquiry, the Newtonian conception of science, the comparative method of jurisprudence of Montesquieu, Carmichael’s theory of natural jurisprudence and other tendencies, best discussed in their general aspects by Lehmann (1960, 1971), Campbell & Skinner (1982), Hutchison (1990) and Stewart (1990). A distinction must be made between the Scottish Enlightenment and the Scottish Tradition, which are not used as synonyms in this paper.
common sense, and (4) the relation between the \textit{concept} and the \textit{notion} of common sense in the Scottish Approach. It must be noted that the notion of common sense has not been analytically related to the general characterisation of the Scottish Approach and therefore that it has not really been incorporated into the discussion on the foundations of political economy.

A distinction must be made between the \textit{concept} and the \textit{notion} of common sense. Let us call the \textit{concept} of common sense, the precise formulations of common sense that became a trademark of the Scottish Common Sense Philosophy of Thomas Reid and his peers, and the \textit{notion} of common sense, those underlying principles that developed into a great variety of expressions according to the particular contexts (e.g. historical investigations) handled. Thus, by separating the particular philosophical use of the term (as defined by the Scottish School of Common Sense) from its more general use in other areas, such as history and economics, it might be possible to identify in which sense these two terms either converged or did not in the characterisation of the Scottish Tradition.

The main object of this paper is to examine the role of the concept of common sense in the Scottish Tradition and to investigate to what extent it could be seen as a constituent of Adam Smith’s thought. The paper suggests that a notion of common sense was behind Smith’s view of science and that the concept of common sense may provide an epistemological foundation for the Scottish Tradition. The argument is divided into three parts. The first part (section 2) outlines the concept of the Scottish Tradition, focusing on the main divergences between Macfie’s (1955) original formulation of the Scottish Approach and Dow’s (1987) reappraisal of it, and the consequences which these divergences imply for the role of common sense in linking theory to its application. The second part (section 3) examines Thomas Reid’s notion of common sense and how it relates to David Hume’s sceptical philosophy. It also investigates the relationship between Reid’s and Hume’s notion of common sense and the characteristics of the Scottish Tradition to economics. The third part (section 4) addresses the more specific problem of how Adam Smith’s theory of scientific method and ethical theory relate to the common sense of the Scottish Tradition.

2. The Scottish Tradition

Macfie’s (1955) thesis that there is a specific and individual doctrine or approach in Scottish economic thinking raises two issues. The first issue (which received almost all the attention generated by his contribution) concerns the methodological virtues of this ‘Scottish attitude’, which Macfie characterised as the philosophical or sociological approach. He argues that because the Scottish method aims at providing a comprehensive and well-balanced critical picture of social reality, it emphasises investigation based on broad actual facts and comparative historical–institutional excursions. He points out that what gives economics practical usefulness is a tendency to focus on the ‘methods that are proper to the particular’ (Macfie, 1955, p. 97). Furthermore, he claims that this tendency gives rise to a tolerant attitude towards a science that privileges eclectic
examinations of social forces. The second issue addressed by Macfie, which has received neither as much nor enough attention in the subsequent literature, refers to a tension between the different methods in the Scottish Approach. Macfie’s interest in this is partly a consequence of his reflection on the Scottish practice of his day—of teaching the orthodox line but simultaneously using the historical–sociological framework—and partly a result of his analysis of the internal tensions in Smith’s writings between analytical and sociological methods. Commenting on the use of mathematics to carry out analysis, he argues that individual and actual events are not suitable to a pure deductive logical treatment and that ‘the obvious explanation is that the Scottish philosophical and the mathematical methods do not blend’ (Macfie, 1955, p. 85). However, when he discusses the Bentham–Marshall analytical tradition, he observes that his paper ‘may at times have seemed critical of that tradition, but this is not intended’ (Macfie, 1955, p. 99). It is clear that Macfie considers the analytic method as an invaluable element in the ‘balanced picture of the whole social adventure’ that the Scottish approach aims to provide. His criticisms seem to be directed against the analytical method being considered as more than a simple stage of ‘tool making’ and not against the use of the method *per se*.

Similarly, when Macfie analyses Adam Smith’s approach to economics he recognises the blend between the analytical, the historical and the sociological methods in his work, suggesting that ‘it was also Smith’s genius which started the modern analytical method on its conquering course’ (Macfie, 1955, p. 95). The important point to be made here is that the comprehensive picture of the Scottish approach provided by Macfie is far from being harmonic; it might well present inconsistencies arising from the union of so many different methods. For instance, he argues that there is a tension in Smith’s writings between a mechanistic psychology, used to produce a static equilibrium theory, and a moral theoretical framework, inherited from the Scottish school, that cannot be accommodated without inconsistencies. But if this is an inevitable result of trying to produce a ‘balanced picture’ of our social experiences, Macfie’s answer to this problem is that inconsistencies should not be seen as anathema. As he puts it:

To the modern method they represent failure. But to the philosopher they reflect the facts of our experience. It is part of wisdom to recognize, accept and be able to carry such inconsistencies. While we should of course try to reduce them, we should not insist on avoiding them in our critical descriptions, for then we omit the crux of our fate, and also the practical human problems. (Macfie, 1955, p. 84)

Macfie does not delve into the concrete problems of the inconsistencies generated by the combination of methods. He chooses to reinforce the virtues of the historical, institutional and social characteristics of the Scottish Tradition by relating them to the Scottish universities and to the tastes, the bent and nature of Scotsmen (Macfie, 1955, pp. 100–102). This attitude might explain why the inconsistencies issue was subsequently eclipsed in the literature by a defence of the ‘virtues’ of the Scottish Approach.

It is interesting to note that 32 years after Macfie’s contribution, Dow (1987) reinstated Macfie’s case but within a different framework. Addressing the context of the Kuhnian idea of ‘crisis’, Dow gives a new
dimension to the original concepts delineated by Macfie. Instead of the analytical method, she refers to ‘orthodox economics’ and in place of the ‘sociological method’ she puts forward the more general concept of ‘political economy’. She describes a situation of ‘crisis’ in orthodox economics and the possibility of political economy as an alternative approach and a solution to this crisis. She resorts to the Scottish Approach in order to make more precise the concept of political economy.

But while Dow provides an illuminating update of Macfie’s original contribution and a deeper understanding of the shortcomings of orthodox theory, she sets up a dichotomization of the alternatives as incommensurate paradigms. Orthodox economics is portrayed as inadequate and problematic and the Scottish Tradition is seen as mostly free of tensions or problems. As a result, Macfie’s inconsistencies issue is overlooked in favour of an argument supporting the notion of a ‘unity derived from first principles’ that would promote ‘a systemic, or organic view of economic relationships within the history of society’ (Dow, 1987, p. 344). Dow associates this organic view with a ‘policy-oriented multi-disciplinary approach’ and solves the problem of providing precise answers to policy questions through an analytical emphasis on historical, sociological and psychological facts allied to a concern with practical issues and to a strategy of arguing from first principles. As she defines it:

Political economists thus start with policy issues rather than theoretical curiosa, they consider the historical background to these issues, they study institutional arrangements and they study the history of economic thought in order both to understand theory and to adapt it for application to particular contexts. (Dow, 1987, p. 338)

Political economy, thus characterised by the Scottish Approach, is defined by Dow (1987) and Dow et al. (1997) in terms of eight features abstracted from the Scottish Enlightenment environment. But because these features have in these papers been accommodated within a harmonic framework, there is neither emphasis on the analytic aspects of political economy nor a discussion of the difficulties involved in providing a balanced picture of reality with practical application.

In other words, because Dow’s characterisation of the Scottish approach mainly promotes its qualities, an important element regarding the problem of linking factual aspects to analytical ones, or simply linking theory to reality, is missed. Yet, the logical priority of practical reason over theoretical reason—so strongly emphasised by the Scottish Approach—cannot be discussed without addressing the inconsistencies resulting from linking two logically distinct realms, the factual and the analytical. Within a harmonic framework there is not much scope for addressing the inconsistencies and tensions produced by the attempt to relate theory to reality that is at the very core of the Scottish Approach. This problem was best stated by Edward Caird in a public lecture in which he claimed that:

The abstraction of science will always be necessary for thorough knowledge of [the] economy, as of everything else; but when we isolate part of human existence, it is more important than in relation to any other subject to
remember that we are abstracting—i.e. that we are dealing with fragments of a whole, of which no final account can be given by anatomy. The practical value of the social science of the future will depend not only on the way in which we break up the complete problem of our existence into manageable parts, but as much and even more upon the way in which we are able to gather the elements together again, and to see how they act and react upon each other in the living movement of the social body. (Quoted by Macfie (1955, p. 100); first two emphases in the original)

Caird emphasises the importance of being aware that we are abstracting when dealing with the analytical realm, and of relating back from the analytical to the practical realm. This constitutes the basis of the far-reaching contribution of the Scottish Approach to the practical foundations of political economy. It might be suggested that the strength of the Scottish Tradition lies in its ‘marked tendency, even on high theoretical levels, to keep one’s feet on the ground’, following ‘a tendency to base theory always on the facts of everyday experience and to apply that same theory to the practical conduct of life’ (Lehmann, 1960, p. 94).\(^2\) It might also be suggested that a methodological approach which emphasises the historical, psychological and sociological features of ‘the real goings-on in the world’ is based on a common sense epistemological view.

An investigation of the practical foundations of the Scottish Tradition must (1) recover the inconsistencies issue raised by Macfie (1955) and, perhaps more importantly, (2) look at the underlying principles behind these practical foundations. Tackling point (2) means complementing the description of the characteristics of the Scottish Tradition with an explanation of their logical basis as a whole. I propose to do so first by examining the meaning of common sense in the Scottish Tradition in the next section, and then by narrowing the focus to a discussion on the role of common sense in Adam Smith’s thought.

3. Common Sense Philosophy in the Scottish Tradition

What is here called ‘the common sense of the Scottish Tradition’ consists in a broad representation of some of the notions of common sense held by authors of the Scottish Enlightenment. It could be said that there were as many different notions of common sense as there were different philosophers and historians, but it would be more precise to say that there were more notions than philosophers because some philosophers used more than one notion of common sense. What makes the identification of these notions difficult is that philosophers and historians have used them not only in a variety of ways but also in a variety of contexts. In order to identify these different notions of common sense, the concept of common sense, as conceived by Thomas Reid, is examined in what follows. Then, its characteristics are compared with those of the notion of common sense in the literature on the Scottish Tradition.

Thomas Reid was the first philosopher after Aristotle to extend the notion

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\(^2\) This tendency is historically well documented and explained and it is part of a wider movement of thought characterised by realism. Lehmann (1960, p. 94) calls it ‘Scottish Realism’, a blend of empiricism, realism and idealism.
of common sense beyond ordinary conceptions (Somerville, 1987, p. 418). His two main books, An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense (1764) and Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man (1785), constitute good examples of how the concept of common sense can be used in a variety of ways. In the Inquiry more emphasis is given to conceptions of common sense arising from original principles of the mind. Reid believed that all human judgements must come from first principles, for which no basis can be given other than the constitution of human nature. He argued in the Inquiry that no one can reason or prove anything unless some principles are taken for granted. As he puts it:

Such original and natural judgments are, therefore, a part of that furniture which Nature hath given to the human understanding. They are the inspiration of the Almighty, no less than our notions or simple apprehensions. They serve to direct us in the common affairs of life, where our reasoning faculty would leave us in the dark. They are a part of our constitution; and all the discoveries of our reason are grounded upon them. They make up what is called the common sense of mankind. (Reid, 1764, p. 118)

Reid’s defence of common sense is a result of his desire to provide an alternative to the ‘Ideal Theory’, which was Reid’s name for theories which postulated the principle that ideas are the only immediate objects of our knowledge. Reid’s criticisms were mainly directed at David Hume’s associationist epistemology and philosophical scepticism. Broadly speaking, Reid refuted Hume’s theory of representation, claiming that impressions and ideas can be represented only if subject to a conceptualisation. Reid also rejected Hume’s scepticism, criticising reason as the ultimate standard of judgement. Reid pointed out that because there is no particular justification to trust only reason, we should either trust all our faculties or distrust them all; that is to say, our faculties are fallible but not unreliable, a claim which Reid believed undermined Hume’s appeal to reason as an ultimate judge of other faculties. Reid’s alternative to Hume’s philosophy consisted in assuming the existence of the notion of mind as an active power based on the workings of the innate principles of our constitution. In summary, Reid believed that these first principles consisted in the common sense of humankind, which reflected the powers of conception and judgement: the foundations of our sense of reality.

Reid’s view of Hume’s philosophy must be considered not only in the context of particular epistemological discordances but also in the wider context of 18th-century Ireland and Scotland, and the contest between common sense and philosophy. As argued by Davie (1976), the development of Scottish philosophy owed much to the earlier Irish Enlightenment, in particular to the pioneering works of Francis Hutcheson and George Berkeley who—through their divergences and tensions—put forward what Davie (1976) ‘the central

3 Reid’s doctrine of common sense came as an ‘answer’ to the scepticism of Hume’s theory of ideas, which Reid viewed as problematic. Grave (1960, p. 13) points out that ‘Nothing like what Reid thought of as “the common theory of ideas” was held by anybody of any consequence, except Malebranche and Berkeley’.
problem of Scottish Philosophy’: the problem of reconciling the vulgar and the learned. While Berkeley’s Cartesian rationalism suggested that ‘the instincts of the farmer [should be set aside] in favour of the sophistication of the philosopher and [that we should] think with the learned while we talk with the vulgar’ (Davie, 1976, p. 44), Hutcheson’s sympathy for Shaftesbury’s common sense intuitionism led him to advocate that ‘we are to respect the instincts of the farmer against the sophistication of the philosopher and initiate a sort of dialogue between the vulgar and the learned, instead of talking down to the farmer from the standpoint of the philosopher’. Hutcheson believed that as long as the vulgar and the learned were able to enter into the other’s point of view (the concept of sympathy), they would acquire the sense of objectivity important for science and daily affairs. Berkeley, however, believed that a detachment from practical life was essential for objectivity and philosophy. Thus, the important bequest of ‘Hutcheson’s social philosophy of common sense’ to future generations of Scottish intellectuals was, according to Davie (1976, pp. 61–62), that:

In course after course of lectures, professor after professor—Reid, Stewart, Brown, Hamilton, Ferrier, and Adam Smith, in some ways the greatest of them all—sought to overcome the tension between the common sense of Hutcheson and the paradoxes of Berkeley by producing a system that would harmonize the standpoint of the vulgar with the standpoint of the learned in a moderate philosophy of modern progress.

Hutcheson’s social philosophy of common sense is very much alive in Thomas Reid’s works. Reid criticises philosophers for their excessive faith in reason and dismissive attitude towards ordinary beliefs that guide ‘the credulity of the vulgar’. He points out in the Inquiry that

In this unequal contest betwixt Common Sense and Philosophy, the latter will always come off both with dishonour and loss. But, on the other hand, Philosophy has no other root but the principles of Common Sense; it grows out of them, and draws its nourishment from them. (Reid, 1764, p. 7)

Reid strongly criticised the philosophers’ denial of the existence of a material world, arguing that their attempts to demonstrate a priori that elements of the material world could be nothing but sensations in the mind were condemned to failure for being in direct opposition to common sense beliefs of a material world—beliefs that were older and had more authority than any principles of philosophy. He rejected the supremacy of the learned over the vulgar if this involved a denial of common sense principles. Rather, as he puts it (Reid, 1764, p. 53), ‘If this is wisdom, let me be deluded with the vulgar’. In practice, he supported Hutcheson’s reconciliation of reason with common sense on the ground that philosophy must be based on the first principles of common sense.

It is interesting to note that despite his criticisms of Hume’s epistemology,4 Reid was aware that ‘the author of the “Treatise of Human Nature”’—as he referred to Hume in the Inquiry—‘every now and then and then relapsed into the faith of

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4 Reid’s general opinion of Hume’s work is ambivalent. On the one hand, he strongly criticises Hume’s associationist epistemology and everything related to it. On the other hand, he is complacent about all other aspects of Hume’s theory. Because of this ambivalence it is important to distinguish between the different parts of Hume’s theory discussed by Reid.
the vulgar, and could hardly, for half a dozen pages, keep up the sceptical character’ (Reid, 1764, p. 9). This suggests that from the perspective of ‘the central problem of Scottish Philosophy’, Reid and Hume were not at opposite ends of the spectrum of the debate. Indeed, Hume (1739), in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, argues for the role of experience based on the assumption that in philosophical reasoning experiments must be gleaned ‘from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world’ (Hume, 1739, p. xix). What Hume meant was that human faculties should be judged according to human standards and that any arguments which do not respect the fallible nature of human judgements are not much use in explaining men’s ordinary conduct of life. He criticised the ‘scholastic head-pieces’ and logicians, arguing that they ‘shew no such superiority above the mere vulgar in their reason and ability’, once there were ‘no natural nor essential difference betwixt high and low’ methods of thinking (Hume, 1739, pp. 175, 434). Hume was, as much as Reid, concerned with the real connections and existence of relations rather than with the abstract properties of ideas.

Hume’s general principles of resemblance, contiguity and causation—which, according to him, explain the association of ideas—are all based on his views on people’s ordinary experience. They do not belong, as Hume would put it, to the philosopher’s realm of spiritual and refined perceptions. On the contrary, they belong to the realm of experience and the matter-of-fact of everyday affairs. Therefore, it is not surprising that for Hume ‘the philosophical system acquires all its influence on the imagination of the vulgar one’ and that ‘the true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar’ (Hume, 1739, pp. 213, 222–223). While Hume believed that refined or elaborate reasoning is important for all science and philosophy, he shared with Hutcheson and Reid the view that it must not have precedence over what is ‘commonly done and believed’ in the common affairs of life. For Reid, the reconciliation between the vulgar and the learned was above all an epistemological issue. For Hume, this reconciliation was a practical issue. He tried to distance himself from the philosophers’ speculative reasoning, not because he considered it incorrect but because he thought it might not help to illuminate the practical aspects of people’s common conduct and experience. He believed that abstract speculations

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5 In a more direct and intriguing statement, Reid (1764, p. 56) argued that ‘The author of the “Treatise of Human Nature” appears to me to be but a half-sceptic’.

6 Moreover, the *Treatise* is full of expressions such as ‘in common discourse’ (p. 124), ‘in common life’ (pp. 189, 236, 267, 408, 428), ‘in our common way of thinking’ (pp. 253, 437), ‘in the common offices of life’ (p. 544), ‘in common life and conversation’ (pp. 599, 609), ‘the ordinary course of human actions’ (pp. 531, 553) and ‘the common sense and judgment of mankind’ (p. 558), all of which are used to support Hume’s arguments.

7 Hume was well aware of the conflicting views concerning the learned and the vulgar. Referring to the problem of the existence of a material world, he argues in the *Treatise* that ‘whatever convincing arguments philosophers may fancy they can produce to establish the belief of objects independent of the mind, ’tis obvious these arguments are known but to very few, and that ’tis not by them, that children, peasants, and the greatest part of mankind are induc’d to attribute objects to some impressions, and deny them to others. Accordingly we find, that all the conclusions, which the vulgar form on this head, are directly contrary to those, which are confirm’d by philosophy’ (Hume, 1739, p. 193).
concerning human nature had to serve the individual’s practical morality. It is in this context that Hume (in an often quoted passage) argued that:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterates all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour’s amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (Hume, 1739, p. 269)

This comparison between Reid and Hume could be summarised by distinguishing between the different roles that common sense played in their theories. While for Reid common sense was an important epistemological principle which enabled him to emphasise the role of judgement in the conceptualisation of empirical phenomena, for Hume common sense was an important criterion needed to produce theory with pragmatic content. The upshot of this comparison is that Reid and Hume should not be considered as antagonists as far as ‘the central problem of Scottish philosophy’ is concerned. Obviously, there is more to be said on this issue but this is enough to enable us to examine the concept of common sense in Reid’s second book, the Essays (Reid, 1785).

In the Essays emphasis is given to conceptions of common sense that are related to features of language and to common opinion. According to Reid, language is framed to be convenient in the common affairs of life, so that when words correspond to their common usage they fulfil the role for which they were created. He argues that common opinions of mankind provide a foundation for the structure and grammar of all languages: ‘This similarity of structure in all languages, shews an uniformity among men in those opinions upon which the structure of language is found’ (Reid, 1785, p. 149). As Lehrer (1989a, p. 81) observes, this shift in emphasis—from innate principles to common understanding—went ‘from those processes that are original and irresistible to those that are acquired and reflective’. This is manifested in Reid’s attention in the Essays to the proper use of ordinary language in philosophical inquiries and to the role of social operations manifested in acts of speech.

This adds to the evidence that Reid’s concept of common sense has no unique meaning for him. It can express a set of innate principles, common understanding, a power of the mind, a principle of self-evidence, a source of certainty in our judgements, average intelligence or, simply, reason. This is why

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8 The above comparison emphasises aspects closely related to what was named ‘the central problem of Scottish Philosophy’. There are other similarities between Reid and Hume that could be mentioned such as (1) their belief in a principle of resemblance among all human creatures (see, for example, Hume, 1739, pp. 318, 575–576), (2) their agreement on the use of the categories of time and space to organise empirical reality (Hume, 1739, p. 427) and (3) their emphasis on the limits of human understanding (Hume, 1739, p. 64). It must be noted that the principle of association of ideas was not intended by Hume to be a compelling principle (as Reid understood it). It was, as Hume (1739, p. 10) put it, ‘not to be consider’d as an inseparable connexion’, but rather as a ‘gentle force, which commonly prevails’. 
some authors, like Somerville (1987, p. 420), consider Reid’s account of common sense to be ‘somewhat confused’. However, there is a high degree of complementarity among Reid’s different accounts that is best explained by Marcil-Lacoste’s argument that Reid’s different uses of the term ‘common sense’ reflect his commitment to the experimental method. Marcil-Lacoste (1982, p. 76) argues that ‘Reid’s basic methodological credo is an attempt to substitute an accurate description of our intellectual powers arrived at through inductive analysis for deductive conjectures and hypotheses’. Marcil-Lacoste’s (1982) argument is supported by the fact that the origins of Reid’s understanding of the experimental method can be traced to the writings of Bacon and Newton. Reid’s commitment to an experimental science of the mind explains why the basic data organised through our innate principles, our perceptions (the metaphysical aspect of common sense), are the basis for further reflection, abstraction and common judgement (the descriptive aspect of common sense).

Descriptions of Reid’s philosophy usually tend to focus on negative aspects related to its critical views of Hume’s theory (see, for example, Coates, 1996, pp. 14–15). There is a tendency in this context to see common sense as a simple reaction to Hume’s empiricism. But, as noted by Lehrer (1989b, p. 108), ‘Reid is not a mere modus tollens critic of Hume’. There are some positive and constructive aspects of Reid’s theory that remain largely unexplored. Perhaps the most important of these aspects concerns Reid’s theory of how we form general conceptions based on common sense principles. Drawing on his theory of perception, Reid explains how we form, initially from our sensory input, the original representational processes which serve as foundations for our conceptions of the individual qualities of objects. This conception of individual quality, which has the feature of intentionality, gives rise to an ontology of particulars that inductively provides our conceptions of the universal. Generalisation is therefore a result of the processing (which has its own rules) of individual qualities. What this implies is that universals are not supposed to enter into the process of conception of other universals. Reid’s theory is characterised by ‘an elegant combination of a moderate nominalism in metaphysics combined with psychological realism in the philosophy of mind’ (Lehrer, 1989a, p. 22). Its ultimate meaning is that behind our general conceptions we have notions of existing particular things that are apprehended by our common sense judgements. Reid does not show how this transition between particular cases and general propositions occurs. This could be interpreted, as argued by Marcil-Lacoste (1982, p. 113), as ‘his conviction that it is in particular instances that self-evident principles are most universally—although implicitly—acknowledged’. In other words, the more we base our judgements on particular instances, the greater will be the probability of them being correct.

An important characteristic of Reid’s concept of common sense, as formulated in his Essays, is its practical nature. In his view, common sense is a common degree of judgement that is shared by men with whom we can

\[9\] While universals do not enter into the process of conception of other universals, they certainly participate in their process of transmission. Most of the generalisations we use come from other people’s use of generalisations: they are conceptions of conceptions of others.
‘converse and transact business’. Common sense understanding is behind the performance of practical tasks such as playing a game, following the rules of law, communicating with others and riding a horse, etc. This means that common sense is not optional but a precondition for life in society. For Reid, because conduct is based on unanalysable principles and language, it does not involve any sort of abstract and demonstrative knowledge. As he puts it, ‘A man who knows nothing of the theory of vision may have a good eye; and a man who never speculated about evidence in the abstract may have a good judgment’ (Reid, 1785, p. 200).

From this perspective, there are no divergences separating Reid from Hume, who also attributes to common sense an important role in our conduct (Broadie, 1990). Common sense is not Hume’s epistemological theory, but when he is arguing against moral sceptics he appeals to the ultimate authority of common sense. Yet, in his Essays, as in the Inquiry, Reid also criticises Hume’s epistemological position, this time for using a language with a different structure from the common. He accuses Hume of abusing words by giving the name of a perception to any passion or emotion and of confounding ‘all distinction between the operations of the mind and their objects’ (Reid, 1764, p. 140). But if Reid finds fault with Hume’s phraseology, the fault can be attributed to Hume’s associationist epistemology and not to the practical aspects of his theory.

Underlying their appeal to common sense there is a shared view that philosophy and science must be about facts, observation and experiences and not about hypothetical cases. The empirical side of common sense is revealed through its connection with an inductive and experimental methodology. It is because common sense principles are a means of differentiating between facts and conjecture that they serve as empirical guides to our daily conduct. This is the reason why Reid claimed that Newton’s rules are ‘maxims of common sense’. This issue is discussed in depth by Marcil-Lacoste (1982, p. 124), who argues that ‘it is from Newton that Reid borrows the most important of his tenets concerning the experimental method’. This refers to Newton’s first rule which states (1) a reality condition (explanatory variables must be real) and (2) an adequacy condition (explanatory variables must be adequate to the effects). In Reid’s opinion there is overemphasis by the philosophers on (2) at the expense of (1). Only through the observance of the reality condition can people avoid deceiving themselves with hypothetical reasonings (Cohen & Westfall, 1995, p. 111). And for Reid the only way people can observe this condition is through their use of common sense as a starting point for their judgements. One of the main stratagems used by Reid to meet this condition was to refer ‘to particular cases of assent and by sticking to such cases as much as possible in stating the general law from which they proceed’ (Marcil-Lacoste, 1982, p. 130).

The practical nature of Reid’s experimental method produced a tension, between common sense principles inductively obtained and common sense

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10 As Norton (1982, p. 135) observes, there can be no doubt ‘That Hume maintains that any conflicts between moral theories and our common-sensical views of morality are always to be resolved in favor of the common-sense view’. Both Reid and Hume support the practical view that common sense has an important and decisive role in the conduct of people’s practical affairs.
principles experimentally applied, that very much resembles Caird’s and Macfie’s acknowledgement of the importance of ‘the way in which we break up the problem’ and ‘the way in which we gather its elements again’ issues, which are ignored by the contemporary reading of the Scottish Approach (Dow, 1987; Dow et al., 1997). In this context, Caird’s and Macfie’s answer to this tension—the Scottish Approach—parallels Reid’s answer to it: common sense, expressed either as a set of first innate principles or as common judgement through the use of language. In order to provide support for this statement, a broad comparison between the characteristics of Reid’s concept of common sense and the notion of common sense implicit in the Scottish Tradition to justify their association. The fact that the Scottish Common Sense Philosophy is not framed as a historical movement and that the Scottish Approach is not discussed as an epistemological claim should not impede an attempt at investigating their relationship. It is suggested that they might complement each other in that the concept of common sense may provide an epistemological foundation for the historical claims of the Scottish Approach or Tradition.

The characteristics of the Scottish Approach follow from Dow’s (1987, p. 342) and Dow et al.’s (1997) list of features of ‘the environmental influence’ on the Scottish approach. The elements in the column on Common Sense Philosophy were set out to match the Scottish Approach’s characteristics as described by the above authors (see Table 1).

A comparison of these two columns reveals that the similarities between them outnumber the differences. As long as it is kept in mind that the comparison involves putting together two distinct logical realms, with their corresponding specific phraseology, we can show that most items of the Scottish Approach can be interpreted in the light of the characteristics of Common Sense Philosophy. To avoid repetition of what has already been shown in the table, we simply note of the Scottish Approach and Common Sense Philosophy the following.

- Their concern with conduct in practical affairs (item (3) in the table) involves a balance between ‘the vulgar and the learned’ that stimulates an association between theory and practice. This is not the same as just giving an empirical foundation to their theories. It is the whole process of combining the analytical and practical sides of the problem, facing the inconsistencies and tensions discussed by Macfie. In both cases, this ‘crossing-borders’ between two distinct logical realms involves an appeal to a moderate nominalism (item (7)), which in the Scottish Approach appears as an individuation of situations according to their historical setting.
- Their recognition of the psychological aspects of theory appraisal (item (2)) implies, in the case of Common Sense Philosophy, a non-solipsistic element in its criterion of objectivity—along Hutcheson’s lines—that is matched by the Scottish Approach’s recognition of the sociological aspect of theory appraisal.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Scottish Approach to economics</strong></th>
<th><strong>Common Sense Philosophy</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Acceptance of the limitations of theory</td>
<td>(1) Acceptance of the principles of common sense as guidelines for the limits of the epistemological domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Recognition of the sociological and psychological aspects of theory appraisal</td>
<td>(2) Recognition of psychological realism in the philosophy of the mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Concern with practical</td>
<td>(3) Concern with conduct in practical affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Consequent preference for breadth of understanding of the background to these issues, over depth of analysis of isolated aspects, based on direct observation</td>
<td>(4) Consequent preference for basing understanding on the powers of all faculties over any one isolated aspect, with emphasis on experimental observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Preference for drawing on several disciplines in an integrated manner to provide that depth</td>
<td>(5) Preference for drawing on several senses in an integrated manner to provide judgement and conceptualisation of perceptions and sensations</td>
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<tr>
<td>(6) Preference for arguing from first principles</td>
<td>(6) Preference for arguing from first principles</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7) Preference for approaching a subject’s first principles by discussing their historical and contextual development</td>
<td>(7) Preference for approaching a subject’s first principles by appealing to the particular circumstances of the situation as a strategy to meet the reality condition; moderate nominalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Specification of first principles in terms of non individualistic representation of human nature, with a consequent emphasis on conventional behaviour</td>
<td>(8) Specification of first principles in terms of a common understanding on judgement and the innate and universal principles of our constitution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Their preference for arguing from first principles (item (6)) is expressed in both cases in terms of a common, non-individualistic representation of human nature (item (8)). In both cases knowledge is organised through categories of thought such as space, time and the peculiarities of each different situation. It is important to note that these first principles are shared by all individuals, so that knowledge is prevented from having an obscure metaphysical status.

In items (4) and (5) there is no straightforward result of the comparison between the concept of common sense, as formulated by Common Sense philosophers, and the notion of common sense, as used by other philosophers and historians. Yet, an examination of the overall picture suggests that there is no apparent contradiction, even among the items that cannot be easily matched.

At this stage, the usefulness of the exercise of trying to establish an epistemological foundation (Common Sense Philosophy) for a set of applied rules and principles (Scottish Approach)—which are anything but new—might be called into question. The answer to this possible query is that, if the doctrine behind the Scottish Approach is common sense, then a thorough understanding of the underlying common sense principles of this tradition might: (1) facilitate relating the Scottish Approach to other traditions with a similar philosophical background and, in turn, this might further promote the use of the methodology of the Scottish Approach as a contemporary guide to economics; and (2) prove useful in addressing the inconsistencies issue, in focusing also on the ‘vices’ of modern political economy rather than exclusively on its ‘virtues’ (and thus illuminate the concrete aspects of the practical foundations of the Scottish Tradition).

The argument so far has been developed at a general and abstract level. I now focus my attention on a more concrete and particular framework. Adam Smith’s thought is the natural choice for an investigation of the relation between the Scottish Approach and common sense for two reasons. First, he is one of the most influential minds of the Scottish Enlightenment. Secondly, he is the inspiration for Dow’s list of the features of the Scottish Approach. As Dow (1987, p. 342) puts it, ‘it is Smith who represents the crystallisation of the Scottish approach to political economy’. In what follows, I try to assess to what extent it can be said that a notion of common sense was behind Smith’s view of science.

4. The Role of Common Sense in Adam Smith’s Thought

As previously mentioned, a technical use of the notion of common sense only came with Thomas Reid’s philosophy. Indeed, many Scottish philosophers and historians were using this notion in different contexts, albeit unconcerned with its conceptualisation as common sense. For this reason it might be expected that if common sense is to be found in Adam Smith’s thought, it would appear under a different denomination than in Reid. The grounds for identification of the notion of common sense and its role in Smith’s thought could be based on any particular concept of common sense formulated by 18th-century Scottish Common Sense philosophers. However, given that Reid was the most important
philosopher of the Scottish Common Sense School, his is the formulation of common sense chosen as the base for comparison.

The idea behind this investigation is that an unelaborated notion of common sense pervaded the Scottish Enlightenment and that this notion was expressed in a variety of ways, among which Reid’s philosophy of common sense and Smith’s thought are part of this same Zeitgeist. In order to argue for this, two questions need to be answered. First, did Smith use any notion of common sense in the formulation of his theories? Secondly, if he did, what was the role of common sense in his theories? It is argued here that there are many parallels between Reid’s and Smith’s thought that can be reconstructed from an elaboration of the notion of common sense.

Both Reid and Smith, although very much influenced by Hume’s language of associationism, argued that the mind plays a more active role than Hume allowed.11 Their emphasis on the role of reflection and judgement has direct implications for their views on science. For them there is no such thing as a raw perception of reality because reality is conceived according to the active powers of the mind; the mind ‘organises’ our views of reality not as a mere unintended result of habit or custom (as it is for Hume) but as a consequence of our conscious efforts to frame expectations and beliefs. According to Brown (1988, p. 52), reason for Smith is adequate to reality in the sense that it is ‘that informed “low level” judgment working through innumerable instances’. Therefore, what is empirical or not needs to be contextualised with regard to our framework of judgement. As Brown (1988, p. 36) puts it, for Smith ‘science takes place within the nexus of metascientific preconceptions and assumptions underlying the model in question’. Brown compares Smith’s metascientific world-view with Lakatos’s negative heuristic and with Newton’s principle of gravity. But, as we have seen, Reid’s principles of common sense have the same metascientific methodological status as those of the authors mentioned above: the function of these preconceptions is to organise our views of reality. These concepts are responsible for our understanding of empirical reality and the principle of the diversity of manifestation of phenomena.

Do these metascientific principles have, in Smith, any relation to Reid’s appeal to the innate principles of human nature? Do they have any association with the features of language and to common understanding? In short, do Smith’s metascientific principles have any relation to Reid’s conceptions of common sense? In order to answer these questions we need, initially, to examine characteristics common to Smith’s and Reid’s writings and, then, to look into Smith’s views on science and common sense.

In addition to Reid’s and Smith’s emphasis on the active role of reflection and judgement, there are two other similarities in their writings that are worth noting. First, Reid and Smith shared the Scottish Enlightenment goal of searching for a general science of human nature (Young, 1997, p. 6). While Reid’s

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11 Raphael & Macfie (1976, p. 10), in their introduction to The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), comment that ‘Smith rejects or transforms Hume’s ideas far more than he follows them, but his own views would have been markedly different if he had not been stimulated to disagreement with Hume’. As discussed above, the same could be said of Reid’s ideas in relation to Hume’s.
contribution to this project was made through his characterisation of the general elements of human nature as innate and common sense principles, Smith’s contribution was made through his emphasis on the systemic elements of this science of human nature.

Smith’s interest in philosophical history, in which the basic principles of human nature were used in the explanation of a wide variety of facts, is commented on by Skinner (1972, p. 308), who observes Smith’s debt to Newton in ‘the role fulfilled by the “constant principles of human nature” in the explanation of the social’. Similarly, Campbell (1975, p. 78) argues that Smith’s belief in the uniformity of human nature influenced the conception of ‘necessary cause’ in his theory. Likewise, Raphael & Skinner (1978, p. 3) remark that ‘Smith assumes that all men are endowed with certain faculties and propensities’ as a condition for his philosophical inquiries. Therefore, it seems that Smith and Reid, as with most of their Scottish intellectual peers, were engaged in the project of building knowledge from the basic principles of human nature.

Secondly, they both shared the view that through language we could achieve the expression of the first principles needed for scientific thought. According to both Reid and Smith, there is a link between language and our perception of reality that, not coincidentally, follows a process of construction of concepts built from particular notions. The difference between their approaches is that while Reid emphasises the epistemological dimensions of experimental inquiries, Smith focuses on the psychological aspects related to those inquiries. Because their approaches resort to language and other common principles shared by human beings, Smith’s psychological account of the scientific construction of theories may be conceived of as a counterpart to Reid’s epistemological account of the preconditions for the validity of the experimental method.

Raphael & Skinner argue that Smith’s notion of imagination draws on an application of Hume’s view of common sense to the hypotheses of science and that ‘Smith thinks that philosophy or science is an enlargement of commonsense belief as represented by Hume’ (Raphael & Skinner, 1978, p. 18). It must be kept in mind that Reid’s criticism of Hume’s ‘ideal theory’ referred to the same critical aspect raised by Smith about Hume’s lack of consideration of the active powers of the mind, which means that as far as practical aspects are concerned the statement by Raphael & Skinner above could be applied to Reid.

Smith, in his History of Astronomy (1795) (hereafter HA), establishes the foundations of scientific inquiry on psychological principles largely influenced by ‘the ordinary train of things’, ‘the natural course of things’, ‘the things agreeable to experience’ and ‘the things [with which] we are most familiar’. According to his perspective, the object of science is to eliminate psychological discomfort or ‘embarrassment’ caused by unfamiliar phenomena that cannot be explained by the familiar harmonic principles of our imagination. Smith’s argument that unfamiliar phenomena cause psychological discomfort is based on his view that the mind has pleasure in observing resemblances between different objects (HA II.i). When new and unexpected phenomena contradict the customary connections employed by the mind, individuals react with wonder and surprise.
Smith’s discussion of the things with which we are most familiar conveys a notion of common sense consisting of psychological principles shared by all mankind, and closely connected by ‘the reality of which we have daily experience’ (HA IV.76). He claims that ‘no system, how well soever in other respects supported, has ever been able to gain any general credit on the world, whose connecting principles were not such as were familiar to all mankind’ (HA II.12). This sounds very much like Reid’s innate principles providing an epistemological realm for the experimental method. The difference is that Reid does not conceive of these principles as psychological sources of ‘harmony and order’ and ‘tranquillity and repose’ as Smith does. However, the Smithian idea that scientific enterprise as an ‘invention of the imagination’ must refer to our familiar principles and daily experience is, to a large extent, the same in both authors. Science is an extension of our common sense and the demarcation between the two fields is as problematic as it is unnecessary. As Reid (1764, p. 186) puts it, ‘All that we know of nature, or of existences, may be compared to a tree, which hath its root, trunk, and branches. In this tree of knowledge, perception is the root, common understanding is the trunk, and the sciences are the branches’.

It seems, then, that Reid and Smith shared a belief in a common human nature, but that they expressed this belief in different ways: Reid, from an epistemological perspective and Smith from a psychological perspective. From their different perspectives they elaborated their theoretical systems along similar lines, attributing the same standards of judgement to the learned and the vulgar. Reid and Smith each applied his own particular set of universal principles to the descriptions of the drives behind our ordinary affairs and our scientific activities. Although there is no defined concept of common sense in Smith’s thought, common sense has a place in his view of science as a psychological drive which works as a first principle of analysis. Therefore, it might be claimed that Smith’s psychology and Reid’s epistemology—as long as they are based on similar principles used to organise scientific inquiry and on a common appeal to the ‘familiar’ and widely shared ‘things agreeable to experience’—convey the same message about the relation between science and common sense.

In The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) (hereafter TMS), Smith organises experience concerning moral phenomena through concepts (e.g. of ‘sympathy’, and the ‘impartial spectator’) based on principles familiar to all mankind. Sympathy, for Smith, means the capacity for fellow-feeling, the ability to put oneself in other people’s shoes. As such, it is an essential element in the explanation of how moral judgements are formed, working as a principle and not as a determinant of moral discrimination (see Macfie, 1967, pp. 91–92). It has the methodological status of a first principle, relevant for individuals’ conceptualisation of their experiences. More specifically, it has similar methodological

12 Of course there are differences in principles held by human beings but, as Smith has argued, they ‘arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom and education’ (Wealth of Nations, I.i.4).
13 Wilson (1976, pp. 73–77) has called attention to the nature of the concept of sympathy, which in Smith is used in a wider sense than mere pity or compassion. Indeed, in Smith the meaning of sympathy goes beyond affinity also, echoing Hume’s use of this notion in A Treatise of Human Nature.
status to Reid’s common sense principles and Newton’s concept of gravity, that is, it is a familiar, simple and shared concept used to organise scientific thought. This way of organising scientific inquiry involves explaining a wide diversity of phenomena based on a small set of first principles.

The concept of sympathy alone cannot produce moral judgements, but it is part of the way in which judgements are formed in a variety of situations. To bridge the ways in which the concept of sympathy may be expressed in the complexity of ordinary affairs of life, Smith used the notion of impartiality in his doctrine of the ‘impartial spectator’. This notion, which was used to explain individuals’ moral judgements about themselves and others, represents conscience, reason, ‘the man in the breast’, which takes the attitudes of other individuals into account in order to produce a sound judgement. Thus, the spectator, when he or she is ‘impartial’, is not predisposed either to agree or to disagree with the agent’s judgement (Young, 1997, p. 34). The notion of impartiality emphasises the role of the rational over the emotional side of moral theory. As Macfie (1967, p. 68) observes:

It was Smith’s special genius to hold together different propositions under one formula which he used to explain social life. We, when we see ‘sympathy’ and ‘impartial spectator’ linked together, tend to stress the difference between the ideas and their functions. Adam Smith, on the contrary, saw them as two aspects of one practical working function which emerged in practical judgements based on experience.

It is important to emphasise the distinct logical nature of the concepts of sympathy and the impartial spectator, and how they are used to operationalise theoretical concepts through a more concrete method of thought. Whereas the concept of sympathy is a theoretical concept, used to represent the conceptualisation of factual information concerning moral phenomena, the concept of impartial spectator is a fact-laden concept, used to ‘connect’ the particular principles of nature to the general ones. It would be a mistake, as Skinner (1972, p. 310) warns us, to think that for Smith science consists in explaining isolated phenomena or particular events. Rather, ‘the ultimate purpose is to find and state general principles linking a wide range of appearances’. Appearances should be interpreted in association with the theoretical system to which they belong. This combination of the theoretical and the empirical is at the heart of the ‘balanced judgement’ of Smith’s theoretical works.

Skinner (1972, p. 315) relates this aspect of Smith’s view of science to ‘the classical method of the School of Padua’, in which the whole issue consists of ‘breaking up the problem’ and then ‘gathering its elements again’. Science was for Smith a combination of these two procedures and these two distinct logical realms. Formal analytics was as much a part of his system as historical contextualisation of theoretical results. In the context of TMS, this combination

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14 The concept of impartiality assesses the degree of comprehensive consideration of the causes and consequences of action. In the case of inductive and descriptive arguments, this concept has the status of the empirical moral judgements of an impartial spectator. However, in the case of normative arguments, this concept has the status of analytic moral judgements of an ideal spectator. See Macfie (1967, p. 80).
of different realms is reflected in Smith’s sense of ‘propriety’, which comprises both an analytical and an empirical aspect: emotion and reason, feeling and thought (Macfie, 1967, p. 65).15

This is a crucial issue for an understanding of Smith’s thought and of the whole Scottish Tradition. When the tensions and inconsistencies resulting from the amalgamation of different logical realms are confronted, the practical nature of knowledge flourishes and develops. When they are ignored, practical knowledge is seen as an imperfect and flawed aspect of theories. Smith’s commitment to practical knowledge in his writings may be interpreted as a consequence of many particular influences, such as Newton’s experimental methodology and Hume’s moral theory, that are difficult to disentangle. On the other hand, it seems clear that all these authors shared a (Hutchesonian) belief in a dialogue between the vulgar and the learned which produced theoretical systems in harmony with the experience of everyday life.16 Thus, the important point in Smith’s commitment to practical knowledge was that it was founded on principles familiar to all human beings.

Readers’ disregard for Smith’s concern with the practical aspects of economic phenomena often results in a poor understanding of his work. This is manifested in the view that there is antagonism between the notion of agency in the TMS and in An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (hereafter WN) (the Adam Smith problem), and in reading the static analysis of Book I of the WN while skipping the dynamic and historic accounts of Books II and III. Smith’s analytical system, ‘which treats the economy as a type of model analogous to some kind of machine’, is the foundation for the more pragmatic and down-to-earth side of the WN, as in Book IV, which provided Smith with the practical conclusions that made his work acknowledged and respected (Campbell & Skinner, 1976, p. 34).

In Smith’s Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1762–63) (hereafter LRBL) we find his defence of a conception of discourse that he calls the ‘didactick stile’.17 According to it, arguments must be organised so as to put before us ‘both sides of the question in their true light, giving each its proper degree of influence, and has it in view to perswade no farther than the arguments themselves appear convincing’ (LRBL i.149). A ‘didactick writer’ is the one who not only compares ‘the evidence that is brought for the proof of any fact and way the arguments on both Side <s >’ (LRBL ii.14) but who also maintains impartiality in his narration through the use of a plain, neat, clear, simple,

15 Macfie (1967, p. 67) comments that ‘it seems true to say that Smith specially stressed the rational rather than the emotional side. Reason links the emotion with impartiality or conscience. Feeling will not make you “well informed” or “impartial”. Only reason can do that—the practical reason’.
16 As observed by Cohen (1990, p. 126), Newton’s method had a tacit postulate that ‘any reasonably skilled man or woman should be able to reproduce an experiment or observation, provided that the report of that experiment or observation was given honestly and in sufficient detail’. A consequence of this postulate was that scientific inquiry should be, according to Newton, as accessible to the vulgar as to the learned.
17 Smith believed that style was a very important element in discourse for expressing not only the thought but also the spirit and mind of the author (LRBL, i.v.47). Bryce (1983, p. 25) comments on how the primacy Smith gives to language ‘rests on his vision of language as the embodiment of the mind’.
concise and direct style of discourse which aims at avoiding ambiguity and pursues a just and natural order of expression of ideas. For Smith there is a close link between the procedure of thought suggested by the ‘didactick style’ and aesthetics. According to him, the beauty of language comes from using words that properly express the thing to be described, conveying the sentiment of the author and producing an agreeable sense to others (LRBL i.v.56–57, i.96) and not from the figures of speech used to deliver it. The most beautiful passages ‘are generally the most simple’ (LRBL i.73).

Smith tells us that this is the method of the ‘Plain man’ who gives his opinion bluntly, considering evident and plain his reasons for his doings (LRBL i.85–86). This is also the method of Jonathan Swift, whose ‘easy and plain writing’, free of parentheses and superfluous words, conveys ideas with a precision and property that they ‘flow naturally upon our mind’ (LRBL i.10). It contrasts with the rhetoric and ornamental method of Lord Shaftesbury, whose style is ‘removed from the common manner’, is abundant in figures of speech and promotes a distortion of arguments in order to persuade the public. It is interesting to note that Smith is criticising Shaftesbury for distancing himself from common sense when he argues that ‘it is plain this author had it greatly in view to go out of the common road in his writings and to dignify his stile by never using common phrases or even names for things, and we see hardly any expression in his works but what would appear absurd in common conversation’ (LRBL i.14). By comparing the styles of Swift and Shaftesbury, Smith is addressing what Davie called ‘the central problem of Scottish Philosophy’, pointing out that ‘We in this country are most of us very sensible that the perfection of language is very different from that we commonly speak in. The idea we form of a good stile is almost contrary to that which we generally hear’ (LRBL i.103). Bryce (1983, p. 16) refers to this last statement as the ‘immediate context’ of Smith’s lectures, observing in a wider context that ‘Periodically throughout the history of style there occur combats between the respective upholders of the plain and the elaborate’. Thus, Smith’s support for the ‘didactick stile’ can be interpreted along similar lines as Hutcheson’s answer to the contest between ‘the vulgar and the learned’.

It is appropriate to observe that while historical discourses have something of the character of the didactic style (see Skinner, 1996, p. 21; LRBL ii.14), they are not expected, according to Smith, to make use either of the oratorical or of the didactic style, for the simple fact that it is not the business of a historian to bring proofs for propositions but to narrate facts (LRBL ii.39). Similarities between historical and didactic compositions emerge from their respect for the common order of ordinary discourse (LRBL ii.31, ii.39) and from observance of the same aesthetic rules concerning simplicity and impartiality (LRBL ii.43, ii.65). Apart from that, the didactic style is best suited to ‘all matters of Science’, applied either through the Aristotelian method (going over different branches in the order they appear and giving new, different principles to different phenomena), or through the Newtonian method (laying down few principles which are then used to explain and connect several phenomena), which Smith praises for its ‘great superiority’ in being the ‘most philosophical’ and ‘vastly more ingenious and engaging’ of all methods (LRBL ii.133–135). The Newtonian
method is considered by Smith to be the best vehicle for the didactic style because it favours scientific progress with its plain, concise, proper and direct argumentation.

It might be said that Smith’s didactic style serves the purposes of scientific discourse because it is based on the common sense of mankind. Indeed, Smith observes about the didactic style that:

This you’ll say is no more than common sense, and indeed it is no more. But if you’ll attend to it all the Rules of Criticism and morality when traced to their foundation, turn out to be some Principles of Common Sense which every one assents to; all the business of those arts is to apply these Rules to the different subjects and shew what their conclusion is when they are so applied. (LRBL i.133)

It seems clear, then, that a notion of common sense was behind Smith’s view of science—the same view that provides inspiration for the list of the features of the Scottish Approach. This notion, albeit unconcerned with the conceptual aspects involved in Common Sense Philosophy, presents noticeable similarities with Reid’s formulation of common sense. Support for this claim lies in Smith’s appeal, first, to a notion of common sense in the use of first principles as a way of emphasising the role of reason and judgement in the conceptualisation of phenomena, and, secondly, to an understanding of common sense in the urge to produce theory with pragmatic and aesthetic content. In addition, common sense provides Smith with the grounds for (1) choosing theoretical concepts on the basis of their degree of psychological familiarity, (2) operationalising theoretical concepts through more concrete methods of thought and (3) promoting a continuity between scientific and ordinary knowledge. Thus, it might be concluded that Smith was less at odds with the common sense Zeitgeist of his time than it might initially seem. If the evidence discussed above is considered conclusive, it could perhaps be said that Adam Smith provides a good illustration of the use of the notion of common sense in economics and that common sense may be interpreted as an epistemological foundation for the methodological claims of the Scottish Tradition.

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