



**Citation:** de Nittis, G. (2024). Ancient Sources in Adam Smith's Theories of *Sympathetic Morality* and *Imagination: Aristotle's Thought* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Vol. 9: 115-126. doi: 10.36253/ds-15063

© 2024 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://www.fupress.com>) and distributed, except where otherwise noted, under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License for content and CC0 1.0 Universal for metadata.

**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

**Edited by:** Andrea Gatti.

## Articles

# Ancient Sources in Adam Smith's Theories of *Sympathetic Morality* and *Imagination: Aristotle's Thought* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

GIANNI DE NITTIS

*Universita degli studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia*

**Abstract.** This essay considers the profound influence of Aristotle's philosophy on Adam Smith's theories of sympathetic morality and imagination. In particular, it examines how Smith's theories, often seen as Stoic, align with Aristotelian concepts; also, it analyses Smith's interpretation of wonder as more than a philosophical catalyst, but also as a force that enhances sensitivity to virtue and informs moral judgement: which is similar to Aristotle's view of wonder as the genesis of philosophical and scientific inquiry. Consequently, Smith's understanding of imagination is seen as a transformative cognitive faculty similar to Aristotle's idea of it as an innate capacity for mental imagery and sensory perception. This juxtaposition underscores the role of the imagination as a creative dynamics that transcends individual perspective and captures the essence of human experience. Smith's integration of Aristotelian thought represents thus a distinctive and nuanced contribution to the classical legacy within the Scottish Enlightenment, shaping a deeper understanding of moral and philosophical inquiry.

**Keywords:** Aristotelian influence, Sympathetic morality, Adam Smith, Imagination, Moral philosophy.

---

The intellectual movement that developed in Scotland in the 18th century, known as the Scottish Enlightenment, was characterized by a renewed interest in classical Greek and Latin authors – particularly in the Stoics and Cicero, and to a lesser extent in the Epicureans and Sceptics (Harris 2009: 161). Leaving aside the dangers of overlap, invisible influences, and arbitrary inference, it is important to make clear that the influence of Aristotelian, Platonic, Stoic or Neo-Stoic writings on the Scottish Enlightenment should not be seen as a direct adaptation or an unquestioning acceptance. Scottish philosophers eclectically integrated classical elements into their systems), driven by the desire to develop a science of man. There is, of course, a large body of scholarship on the subject of sympathy within the Scottish Enlightenment: consider the latest studies by Jean-François Dunyach, Ann Thomson, Geoff Cockfield, Ann Firth and John Laurent<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Enlightenment in Scotland: national and international perspectives*, ed. by J.F. Dunyach and A. Thomson, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 2015; *New Perspectives on Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by G. Cockfield, A. Firth and J. Laurent, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham 2008.

For example, they adapted Stoic-inspired teachings, on self-discipline, control of emotions and the importance of ethics – or, in the case of the Cambridge Platonists, the concept of the human soul as an integral part of the divine order and as a means of accessing truth and knowledge – to their new philosophical perspectives. They moved towards a syncretic vision that sought to reconcile classical principles with elements of Christianity. A significant group of Scottish thinkers devoted themselves to the challenging task of identifying points of convergence between these two learned philosophical traditions, highlighting the harmony between the moral principles and the ontological vision of man that permeate both Stoicism and Christianity. They felt the need to investigate the essence of both schools of thought in depth in order to draw fruitful conclusions in the realm of moral knowledge and self-awareness.

The process of integration and synthesis of classical currents in the Scottish Enlightenment contributed to a rich and diverse flowering of philosophical, moral, and political thought of the period, leaving a lasting imprint on the Scottish intellectual movement and allowing for creative dialogue and the search for convergence between rationality, virtue, and a new understanding of the human condition. This paper aims to explore the influence of classical philosophical currents in the Scottish Enlightenment, focusing in particular on the relationship between Aristotle and Adam Smith. The classical legacy in Adam Smith and his use of ancient sources – especially Aristotle and his Platonic predecessors – is a fundamental aspect of his thought and philosophical influences. The exploration of Adam Smith's appropriation of Aristotle is, of course, a vast area of research.

In this context, I will focus on one particular aspect, namely the distinctly Aristotelian nature of Smith's moral philosophy. Furthermore, I will also attempt to refine the commonly held view that Smith is closer to the Stoic school than to other classical currents by examining the relationship between Smith and Aristotle on the themes of wonder, intellectual virtues and imagination.

## 1. WONDER

In recent years, there has been a considerable academic debate about the relationship between classical philosophers and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)<sup>2</sup>. Scholars such as Charles Griswold Jr., Gloria Vivenza, and Leonidas Montes have devoted extensive analysis to this topic, helping to solidify the notion

that Smith leaned more towards Stoic moral philosophy rather than Aristotelian<sup>3</sup>. It is important to note, however, as various commentators have pointed out, that Smith should not be regarded as a committed Stoic. This consensus on Smith's preference for Stoicism is based on a careful and detailed examination of his works, where themes and concepts akin to Stoic philosophy are evident. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that Smith does not adopt the entire Stoic system uncritically, but presents a personal and original stance position that departs from some of the key features of Stoicism.

It is important to remember that Smith was a competent classicist. His linguistic skills enabled him to enter the University of Glasgow as a third-year student in 1737, suggesting an early interest in classical languages. It is plausible to infer that Smith was able to read Aristotle in the original Greek, and there is ample evidence to support this hypothesis. Smith's deep appreciation of the intricacies of Greek grammar and literature is thought to have been nurtured during his studies under the tutelage of Alexander Dunlop. A detailed analysis of the catalogue of his private library, documented by James Bonar and Hiroshi Mizuta, reveals a rich collection of texts in Greek and Latin. Of particular note is the complete edition of Aristotle's works, edited by Guillaume Du Val. This collection not only reflects Smith's scholarly interests, but also shows the depth of his engagement with classical literature and philosophy. The presence of such texts in his library provides significant insights into the classical influences that shaped his intellectual development and philosophical perspectives, especially given the breadth and depth of Aristotle's work (*Opera Omnia*, Graece et Latine, ed. W. du Val, Parisii 1729)<sup>4</sup>.

As proposed by Vivenza, the influence of classical thought within the Scottish Enlightenment can be divided into two distinct types: direct and indirect. In the first case, two forms of reminiscence are evident. The first is explicit and conscious reminiscence, which

<sup>3</sup> Ch.L. Griswold, Jr., *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999; G. Vivenza, *Adam Smith and the Classics. The Classical Heritage in Adam Smith's Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001; L. Montes, *Adam Smith in Context. A Critical Reassessment of Some Central Components of His Thought*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2004.

<sup>4</sup> For further exploration, please refer to the relevant academic literature and resources: J. Bonar, *A Catalogue of the Library of Adam Smith*, Macmillan & Co., London-New York 1894; H. Mizuta, *Adam Smith's Library. A Supplement to Bonar's Catalogue with a Checklist of the whole Library*, Cambridge University Press for the Royal Economic Society, Cambridge 1967; H. Mizuta, *Adam Smith's Library: A Catalogue*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2000; D.C. Rasmussen, *The Infidel and the Professor. David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought*, Princeton University Press, Oxford-Princeton 2017, pp. 36-49.

<sup>2</sup> A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by K. Haakonssen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002 (hereafter: *TMS*).

includes direct references, quotations, narrated episodes and parallelisms that indicate a clear awareness of classical influence. The second form of reminiscence is unconscious, but no less significant. For example, Adam Smith occasionally, perhaps without being fully aware of it, echoes phrases or passages from classical texts that he has read and studied assiduously, to the extent that they become embedded in his memory and resurface as his own original expressions.

Despite the predominance of Aristotelian elements in Smith's moral philosophy, it cannot be reduced exclusively to an Aristotelian perspective. Smith also draws on other sources and influences, such as rationalism and the moral thought of European Enlightenment thinkers. His original synthesis of different streams of thought contributes to the uniqueness of his philosophical identity.

An early indication of a "potential affinity" between Aristotle and Adam Smith is to be found in Smith's early work entitled *The Principles which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries; Illustrated by the History of Astronomy*. This text, published posthumously in the 1795 volume *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, and made available to the public through the efforts of his friends and editors Joseph Black and James Hutton, has revealed significant evidence of an early conceptual affinity with Aristotle. This revelation, stemming from Smith's youthful endeavours, offers a nuanced understanding of the philosophical underpinnings that later shaped his more mature work. The posthumous publication of this early manuscript shows the formative stages of Smith's intellectual development and his early engagement with Aristotelian thought.

In the first chapter of his work, Smith provides a comprehensive analysis of human behaviour in relation to passions, focusing specifically on wonder, surprise, and admiration, and examining how these passions interact with each other. Exploring the concept of "wonder"<sup>5</sup>, Smith highlights a distinctive perspective on the role and functions of this emotion. He suggests that in the intellectual pursuit, the human mind delights

in discovering affinities between diverse and multiple objects, classifying them into categories, subdividing them into genres and species, and finally naming them with abstract terms. This exploration of the dynamics of wonder provides insight into Smith's understanding of the cognitive processes underlying human curiosity and intellectual discovery.

This process of categorisation and classification enables a deeper and more articulate understanding of the world around us, enriching our knowledge and contributing to our inner development<sup>6</sup>. Smith writes in *The History of Astronomy* that philosophy arises when «law has established order and security, and subsistence ceases to be precarious, the curiosity of mankind is increased, and their fears diminished. The leisure which they then enjoy renders them more attentive to the appearance of nature»<sup>7</sup>. But, it is above all the sentiment of wonder, and not any expectation of advantage from its discoveries, that is the first principle which prompts mankind to the study of Philosophy, of that science which pretends to lay open the concealed connections that unite the various appearances of nature; and they pursue this study for its own sake, as an original pleasure or good in itself, without regarding its tendency to procure them the means of many other pleasures<sup>8</sup>.

In *The History of Astronomy* Adam Smith explores the role of wonder in the origins of philosophy, offering a critical perspective that enriches interpretations of Plato and Aristotle. Inspired by Hume (whose *Treatise of Human Nature* explores how experience and perception shape human understanding, emphasising the importance of sensory impressions and the role of psychology in interpreting the world), Smith develops these themes, particularly Hume's idea that habits and expectations play a fundamental role in shaping our beliefs and understandings. In the context of wonder, Smith applies Hume's approach to imagination and perception, suggesting that wonder arises when the familiar or expected is disturbed by unusual events. This disruption stimulates the search for explanation, a process which Smith sees as fundamental to science and philosophy, and which is consistent with Hume's views on human psychology and understanding of the world. Smith argues that wonder arises when the normal course of the imagination is interrupted by unusual events. According to Smith, this kind of wonder is alleviated by philosophy or

<sup>5</sup> For further exploration of the theme of "Wonder", see: E. Schliesser, *Wonder in the face of scientific revolutions: Adam Smith on Newton's 'Proof' of Copernicanism*, «British Journal of the History of Philosophy», 13, 2005, 4, pp. 697-732; M.F. Deckard, P. Losonczi, *Philosophy Begins in Wonder. An Introduction to Early Modern Philosophy, Theology, and Science*, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge 2011; P. Zanardi, *Adam Smith e la meraviglia della scoperta*, «I castelli di Yale» VII, 2019, pp. 83-95; A. Gatti, *Dispositivi estetici. Teorie e linguaggi delle forme dal Settecento all'età contemporanea*, Meltemi, Milano 2022, pp. 41-55 (II. «Meraviglia. Facoltà in gioco e stati d'animo complessi»). On the reinvention of wonder in the Enlightenment, see *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. by R.J.W. Evans and A. Marr, Routledge, London 2006; S.T. Kareen, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See *New Voices on Adam Smith*, ed. by L. Montes and E. Schliesser, Routledge, London-New York 2006.

<sup>7</sup> A. Smith, *The History of Astronomy*, in *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. III. *Essay on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. by W.P.D. Wightman and J.C. Bryce, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1980, pp. 31-105: p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51.

science, which shows how the unusual event fits into an ordinary order or system, allowing the imagination to resume its natural flow. Smith recognises the importance of wonder in philosophical thought, a concept already explored by Plato and Aristotle, but he focuses more on the interaction between wonder, imagination and scientific inquiry. For Plato, in the dialogue *Theaetetus*, wonder is seen as a form of perplexity that characterises the true philosopher. Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, interprets wonder not as a passive state but as an active engagement with perplexity that drives philosophical inquiry. Smith therefore offers a synthesis of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, proposing an interpretation of wonder as a bridge between innate curiosity and the systematic pursuit of knowledge. His analysis underscores wonder not only as a starting point, but also as a dynamic and enduring force that drives the ongoing development of philosophical thought. In doing so, Smith enriches the philosophical lexicon by highlighting wonder as an essential catalyst for both personal curiosity and scientific and philosophical inquiry.

In the light of this analysis, Smith identifies two forms of wonder: one derived from the grandeur and beauty of things, and the other from the novelty and the unexpected. They both represent different emotional and cognitive experiences of the individual in the face of the surrounding world. The first form of wonder, is associated with admiration for the exceptional, the sublime, and the extraordinary. Smith argues that wonder arises when we encounter something that not only exceeds our expectations, but also touches us deeply and gives raise to our aesthetic pleasure: a sublime work of art, the grandeur of a mountain range, or the magic of a sunset.

Conversely, the wonder of novelty and the unexpected emerges in the presence of events or circumstances that break the patterns of our understanding and expectations, arousing our intellectual curiosity and prompting us to seek rational explanations. For instance, we might experience wonder in the face of a surprising scientific discovery or an extraordinary natural phenomenon, inviting us to explore the unknown, deepen our knowledge, and attempt to understand the hidden mechanisms behind what appears unexpected.

In the second section of his *History of Astronomy*, entitled *Of Wonder, or of the Effects of Novelty*, Adam Smith delves deeply into the connection between wonder and natural science. He suggests that there is an intrinsic satisfaction in finding analogies between different elements. A botanist, for example, tends to classify plants into classes and species, refining distinctions far beyond what a less experienced observer would see. However, Smith proposes that when confronted with

something completely new and unique, the inability to place it in a pre-existing category and the resulting emotion give rise to what he defines as a sense of wonder. This feeling is characterised by a kind of cognitive disorientation and manifests itself in recognisable physical signs such as an intensely fixed gaze, unusual eye movements, breathlessness and a feeling of chest expansion: signs which, according to Smith, are expressions of an unfinished process of reflection.

*When one accustomed object appears after another, which it does not usually follow, it first excites, by its unexpectedness, the sentiment properly called Surprise, and afterwards, by the singularity of the succession, or order of its appearance, the sentiment properly called Wonder. We start and are surprised at seeing it there, and then wonder how it came there. The motion of a small piece of iron along a plain table is in itself no extraordinary object, yet the person who first saw it begin, without any visible impulse, in consequence of the motion of a loadstone at some little distance from it, could not behold it without the most extreme Surprise; and when that momentary emotion was over, he would still wonder how it came to be conjoined to an event with which, according to the ordinary train of things, he could have so little suspected it to have any connection<sup>9</sup>.*

This mental state can be likened to what we might today term “perplexity,” a condition that extends beyond mere curiosity. To overcome this cognitive barrier, the scientist might feel compelled to expand existing categories or even invent new ones to accommodate the extraordinary object, as in the case of an anomalous fossil that fits no known classification. Similarly, when an event breaks our sense of normality or expectations of how things should unfold, we experience both surprise and wonder.

Although Smith did not explicitly compare his concept of wonder with that of Aristotle, we can see some similarities between the two philosophers in their recognition of the importance of wonder in the process of knowing and understanding of the world. For Aristotle, wonder (θαυμάζειν, *thaumazein*)<sup>10</sup> is the beginning of philosophical and scientific inquiry; for Smith, it is an emotional and cognitive experience that stimulates aesthetic pleasure and intellectual curiosity.

It is pertinent to recall that within the Aristotelian context, the concept of *thaumazein* holds a promi-

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *The History of Astronomy* II 6, cit., p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> For further exploration of this theme, see Griswold, *Adam Smith and the virtues of enlightenment*, cit.; New Voices on Adam Smith, cit.; C. Mercer, *Seventeenth-Century Universal Sympathy. Stoicism, Platonism, Leibniz, and Conway*, in *Sympathy. A History*, ed. by E. Schliesser, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015; E. Schliesser, *Adam Smith. Systematic Philosopher and Public Thinker*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

ment position, being considered the catalyst of philosophical and scientific inquiry. The etymological root of *thaumazein* lies in the Greek verb *thaumazō*, which translates as “to wonder” or “to be amazed.” For Aristotle, it is precisely wonder that marks the beginning of the desire for knowledge and philosophical reflection. This experience arises in response to phenomena or events that contravene our expectations or our prior understanding, eliciting a sense of astonishment that incites us to question, to ponder the nature of the phenomenon in question, and to seek rational explanations for it. Wonder is understood by Aristotle as an intellectual virtue, one that not only reveals the limits of our knowledge but also stimulates the pursuit of deeper understanding.

In the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle claims that the highest form of knowledge is contemplation, detached from any utilitarianism. He argues that the pursuit of knowledge is driven by wonder rather than practical utility. This notion is echoed in his historical-evolutionary view presented in the *Metaphysics*, where he claims that people turn to philosophy when their material needs are satisfied, thus allowing the luxury of leisure. Wonder, then, arises from encounters with the unknown; at first, everyday phenomena provoke this reaction, but gradually attention shifts to more abstract matters, such as the mysteries of astronomy, the challenges of geometry, and the origins of the universe. This wonder suggests a partial awareness: one knows something, but also recognises the incompleteness of that knowledge. For Aristotle, there is a lack of understanding of causes, and science is realised by overcoming wonder through causal knowledge. In contrast to Plato, who considered wonder to be the “emotion of the philosopher” and the starting point of philosophy, Aristotle follows the path from wonder as an *initium* to the knowledge of causes that satisfies it. While Plato ascribed a primary role to wonder in subjective experience, for Aristotle it is the engine that shifts attention from the immediately accessible to the whole, and disappears with the understanding of causes. The absence of wonder in Plato's description of the exit from the cave in the *Republic* can be interpreted as a link between subjective confusion and the feeling of wonder; but it is Aristotle who recovers the theme of wonder and incorporates it into the narrative of Plato's cave, presumably in his lost treatise *De Philosophia*.

In *Metaphysics* I, Aristotle poignantly says: «It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too, e.g. about the changes of the moon and of the sun, about the stars

and about the origin of the universe»<sup>11</sup>; which underlines the fundamental role of wonder as a catalyst for rational speculation and the search for truth. Wonder thus acts as a motor for learning and cognition, serving as an impetus to explore, to formulate questions, to seek solutions, and to advance understanding of the world.

In Aristotle's philosophy, wonder is seen as a fundamental element of philosophy, interpreted as a love for wisdom and a pursuit of truth. This passion represents the first step towards the discovery and understanding of the real world. Wonder, as such, is essential for philosophical and scientific investigation, as it stimulates a questioning model that challenges pre-existing assumptions and promotes a pathway of knowledge that proceeds through rational and critical thinking.

In the works of Adam Smith, wonder takes on a different but complementary meaning. It manifests in the individual's ability to sympathize with others and to marvel at the displays of virtue, creating a sense of moral obligation to respond with acts of kindness and justice. For Adam Smith, wonder is less about questioning the physical world and more about appreciating the interconnections of social life and admiring the spontaneous order that governs human relationships. In this context, wonder becomes a force fueling social and ethical understanding, connecting people through a shared sense of astonishment and admiration for the dynamics of social and moral life.

Like Aristotle, Adam Smith considers wonder as the catalyst for philosophical inquiry and a starting point for discovery and reflection. However, from Smith's work, an evolutionary approach to philosophy emerges: rather than converging towards dogmatic conclusions, it presents itself as an ongoing intellectual journey. His theories are not seen as conclusive but as a basis for further inquiry, transforming each philosophical acquisition into a new starting point for subsequent questions and discoveries.

In Smith, wonder thus assumes a broader dimension: it is not merely an emotional reaction but emerges as a key element in the construction of the moral and social fabric<sup>12</sup>. This approach demonstrates that wonder is more than just a simple emotion; it becomes a driving force for continuous research and the expansion of

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b, Engl. transl. by H. Tredennick, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1933, vol. I, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> In response to the scientific and economic developments of his day, Smith extends the concept of wonder beyond the boundaries of traditional philosophy. In his thought, wonder becomes not only a stimulus for moral inquiry and the appreciation of human virtues, but also a motor for scientific exploration and understanding of economic and social dynamics, thus adapting the Aristotelian concept to a modern context.

human understanding. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith explores the multifaceted nature of sympathy, describing it not only as an emotional sharing, but also as the ability to appreciate and admire the virtuous deeds of others. In this context, wonder manifests when we witness acts of generosity, justice, or integrity that exceed what we normally expect in human conduct: «The sentiment of complete sympathy and approbation, mixed and animated with wonder and surprise, constitutes what is properly called admiration, as has already been more than once taken notice of»<sup>13</sup>.

Admiration for the way individual actions can influence the social fabric and collective progress reflects Smith's wonder at the human capacity for organisation and cooperation. For Smith, wonder not only enhances our aesthetic and moral sense, but is also a key element of *sympathy*, which is central to his view of morality and ethical behaviour. The ability to marvel at the abilities and achievements of others is a prerequisite for what Smith defines as «the invisible hand»<sup>14</sup> that reconciles individual interests with the common good.

So while Aristotle sees wonder as the initial spark of the philosophical journey, Smith interprets it as an ongoing force that fuels moral and economic inquiry. For Aristotle, wonder is rooted in the desire for knowledge and understanding; for Smith, it expands into a desire for active participation in social and economic life. In any case, they both share a view of wonder as a powerful stimulus to human inquiry and understanding. In the context of a rapidly changing society and an increasingly complex economy, wonder for Smith is both a sentiment and a cognitive function, enabling us to examine and appreciate the emerging order.

Indeed, Adam Smith and David Hume observe that the transition from a mystical or religious interpretation of marvelous events to a rational and scientific explanation is closely linked to the economic and intellectual progress of a society. This epistemological shift from the attribution supernatural causes to a more systematic and causal understanding of phenomena reflects a broad process of cultural maturation. As economic conditions improved, people not only gained more leisure time for study and reflection, but also developed a greater demand for logical and verifiable explanations,

in keeping with the growing spirit of inquiry and scepticism characteristic of the Enlightenment. Smith's *History of Astronomy* illustrates how scientific theories were formulated to resolve the confusion and curiosity aroused by previously unexplained phenomena. Similarly, Hume highlights the gradual overcoming of religious and superstitious beliefs in favour of a more rational and empirical approach to understanding the world. This transition marks not only a change in the methods of explaining natural phenomena, but also a substantial change in the nature of beliefs and social practices, indicating a significant evolution in human thought and culture. Wonder, then, becomes less an appeal to the supernatural and more a catalyst for inquiry and discovery, a view that Smith and Hume see as the product of a society that has reached a certain level of economic and cultural sophistication, such that: «Those who delight in the discovery and contemplation of final causes, have here ample subject to employ their wonder and admiration»<sup>15</sup>.

His interpretation of wonder, therefore, can be seen as an extension of the Aristotelian concept, adapted to the realities of the modern world, where wonder becomes a sort of social glue and a driver of economic progress.

In this line of thought, the thinker from Kirkcaldy, continuing the implicit dialogue with Aristotle, dedicates himself to exploring how philosophy can clarify and resolve the astonishment that arises in the face of natural phenomena that appear chaotic or exceptional. According to Smith, this process reaches its apex not merely in interpreting an unusual phenomenon, but in succeeding to outline a new understanding of the natural order. This comprehension, while being more adherent to innate intellect, often proves to be more radical and surprising compared to the anomalies it seeks to explain, thereby highlighting the capacity of philosophy to transcend appearances and unveil a deeper reality:

*For, though it is the end of Philosophy, to allay that wonder, which either the unusual or seemingly disjointed appearances of nature excite, yet she never triumphs so much, as when, in order to connect together a few, in themselves, perhaps, inconsiderable objects, she has, if I may say so, created another constitution of things, more natural indeed, and such as the imagination can more easily attend to, but more new, more contrary to common opin-*

<sup>13</sup> TMS I.i.4.3, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> «The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity [...]. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species» (TMS, IV.i.10, pp. 215-216).

<sup>15</sup> D. Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* V 2, in *The Philosophical Works*, Pr. for A. Black, W. Tait and Ch. Tate, Edinburgh-London 1826, vol. IV, p. 65. For further exploration, see D.A. Reisman, *Adam Smith's Sociological Economics*, Routledge, London 2015; E. Lecaldano, P. Russell, D.C. Rasmussen, *David Hume e Adam Smith. Riflessioni su un libro*, «Rivista di filosofia» 3, 2018, pp. 477-500; A. Sutcliffe, *Hume, History, and the Uses of Sympathy*, «History and Theory», 62, 2023, pp. 62-87.

ion and expectation, than any of those appearances themselves<sup>16</sup>.

This principle resonates with Aristotelian thought, where wonder is the driving force that pushes the human intellect beyond the boundaries of the known and conventional towards a deeper understanding of reality.

Despite their differences, it is then possible to trace a common thread between Aristotle's and Adam Smith's conceptions of wonder as a powerful stimulus to explore, to seek explanations, and to expand our understanding of the world<sup>17</sup>.

The connection between wonder and the moral fabric of society is a theme that runs through Smith's thought, demonstrating how our emotional response to extraordinary events can influence and shape our ethical behaviour. The precise influence of Aristotle on Smith, particularly in relation to the concept of wonder, remains an area that benefits from in-depth study. Their ideas, though separated by centuries, are part of a philosophical continuum that enriches our understanding of human nature and the search for meaning.

## 2. INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES

Adam Smith's emphasis on wonder not only marks continuity with the Aristotelian tradition, but also introduces a significant innovation: the emphasis on the social dimension of scientific inquiry. This perspective raises pertinent questions about how intellectual virtues, such as φρόνησις (*phronesis*) or practical wisdom, not only relate to ethical behaviour, but also influence the generation and systematisation of scientific knowledge. Φρόνησις, a central concept in Aristotle's philosophy closely related to moral virtue, takes on a dimension in Smith that transcends the individual and embraces the community, suggesting that practical wisdom is not only a matter of personal ethical choice but also a means by which scientific knowledge can be improved and disseminated in society. The novelty introduced by Smith in comparison to Aristotle is that he emphasises that scientific research has an intrinsic social value, mediated

by the emotion of wonder. This raises the question: how do the virtue of φρόνησις and the role of the impartial spectator contribute positively to the process of scientific discovery and its organisation? The figure of the impartial spectator, central to Smith's ethics, may offer an innovative key to understanding how ethical evaluation and aesthetic appreciation of wonder interact with the process of knowledge, promoting an approach to discovery that is both rigorous and open to the emotional and ethical dimensions of exploring the world.

We will begin by considering the fact that if Adam Smith gives greater epistemological importance to the role of human passions in shaping moral behaviour, and develops a nuanced and detailed analysis of the social and economic dynamics that influence ethical behaviour and social welfare, Aristotle emphasises intellectual virtues such as φρόνησις (*phronesis*) or practical wisdom, a concept closely linked to ethics and moral virtue<sup>18</sup>.

Smith recognises Aristotle as a model moral critic: «Aristotle in the practical parts of his Ethics, points out to us the different habits by which he would have us regulate our behaviour, such as liberality, magnificence, magnanimity, and even jocularly and good-humour, qualities which that indulgent philosopher has thought worthy of a place in the catalogue of the virtues»<sup>19</sup>. Adam Smith's admiration for Aristotle, despite the profound philosophical differences that separate them, raises questions about how the former sought to incorporate ethical elements from the latter into his own system<sup>20</sup>. While recognising significant similarities between his own views and Aristotle's description of virtue, Smith focuses on the fundamental interrelationship that underpins conceptions of ethical methods and ends, thereby

<sup>18</sup> In this context, it is crucial to understand that in Aristotle's ethical philosophy, virtues are a critical element in the concept of εὐδαιμονία (*eudaimonia*), which means happiness or human flourishing. Aristotle distinguishes two main types of virtues: *ethical* (or moral) virtues, which concern the character and dispositions of the individual, and *dianoetic* (or intellectual) virtues, which concern wisdom and knowledge. This distinction is essential for understanding Aristotle's vision of a well-lived life, in which the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue is the key to achieving *eudaimonia*. (activity of the soul according to virtue). For more on this topic, see A. Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, Longmans, Green & Co, London 1885, 2 voll.; J. Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, Methuen, London 1900; S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1933; T. Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles*, Oxford University Press, New York 1988; R. Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1989; N. Sherman, *Aristotle's Ethics. Critical Essays*, Rowman & Littlefield Publ., Lanham 1999.

<sup>19</sup> TMS VII.iv.5, ed. cit., p. 388.

<sup>20</sup> «Just as Smith agrees with Aristotle that we cannot understand ethics from an external perspective and that ethics is not an exact, rule-bound science, so he seems to agree with Aristotle that lectures on ethics cannot be expected to make the vicious into good persons» (Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, cit., p. 50).

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *The History of Astronomy* IV 33, cit., p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> For further exploration, refer to the following sources: S. Skinner, *Adam Smith: Philosophy and Science*, «Scottish Journal of Political Economy», 19, 1972, pp. 307-319; S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999; R.P. Hanley, *Aristotle on the Greatness of Greatness of Soul*, «History of Political Thought», 23, 2002, pp. 1-20; K. Richard, *Aristotle on Greatness of Soul*, in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. by R. Kraut, Hoboken (NJ), Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, pp. 158-178.

allowing a deeper understanding of the subject. In the final section of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith offers an in-depth analysis of the role of ethics in the formation of human character. Here the author examines the appropriate methods, stating that: «In treating of the rules of morality, in this manner, consists the science which is properly called Ethics, a science which, though like criticism it does not admit of the most accurate precision, is, however, both highly useful and agreeable»<sup>21</sup>.

In parallel with Aristotle, Smith stresses the importance of ethics in inspiring people to do what is noble, reflecting the practical commitment that Aristotle places on the perfection of the individual<sup>22</sup>. Smith also shows a strong interest in the practical outcomes of ethical inquiry. He laments the dominance of «abstract and speculative reasonings»<sup>23</sup> in the intellectual climate of his time, which had limited applicability to practical sciences such as politics and ethics. This invites a deeper reflection on Smith's understanding of the appropriate methods for each.

Smith's assertion that ethics lacks extreme precision reflects Aristotle's understanding of the inherent limitations of the discipline. Aristotle recognised that, given the subjective and variable nature of ethics, it is not possible to achieve the same methodological precision characteristic of the more exact and rigorous sciences<sup>24</sup>.

Both authors agree that the purpose of ethics is not so much to establish general rules of action as to cultivate practical judgement, or the wisdom needed to act correctly in specific situations. In particular, Aristotle emphasises the principle of *phronesis*, understood as the

ability to find the right middle ground between extremes and to balance the various interests at stake. This principle is based on balance and reason and also implies the ability to consider different perspectives and to take a rational approach to solving ethical problems<sup>25</sup>.

Smith, in his concept of the *impartial spectator*<sup>26</sup>, suggests that virtue lies in the balance between self-interest and consideration for others. Both authors recognise the importance of the *golden mean* and the balance between extremes for ethical living. More specifically, the aim of this paper is to compare Aristotle's concepts of *φρόνιμος* (*phronimos*) and *φρόνησις* (*phronesis*) with those of the impartial spectator and sympathy in Adam Smith, not so much to claim some kind of Aristotelian influence in Adam Smith's philosophical production, but rather to put into evidence the contribution of the Aristotelian paradigm as a fundamental integrative element in the formation of Smithian morality, exploring the conceptual analogies and nuances that emerge from their ethical analysis and understanding of human behaviour.

It is interesting to note that for Aristotle, *phronesis* is defined as a «habitual state, accompanied by reason, directed towards action, concerning what is good and what is bad for human beings». This virtue is considered the highest of the calculative part of the rational soul, that is, practical reason. It is the highest intellectual virtue in terms of practical discernment and moral judgement. *Phronesis* enables the individual to deliberate appropriately and to calculate accurately the means necessary to achieve a good end. The *phronimos*, one who embodies this virtue, is characterised by moral balance and guiding wisdom. In contrast, Adam Smith bases his ethical theory on the role of the *impartial spectator*.

<sup>21</sup> TMS VII.iv.6, ed. cit., p. 389.

<sup>22</sup> «So knowing about virtue is not enough, but we must also try to attain and exercise it, or become good by any other available route» Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.9.1179b, Engl. transl. and ed. by R. Crisp, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 199.

<sup>23</sup> «Another circumstance that will tend to confirm this opinion is that the thoughts of most men of genius in this country have of late (inclined) to abstract and Speculative reasonings which perhaps tend very little to the bettering of our practice» (A. Smith, *Lecture 8*, in *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. IV. *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. by J.C. Bryce, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1983, p. 41).

<sup>24</sup> «But we must bear in mind what we said above, and not look for the same precision in everything, but in each case whatever is in line with the subject-matter, and the degree appropriate to the inquiry. A carpenter and a geometrician approach the right-angle in different ways: the carpenter in so far as it is useful for his work, while the geometrician seeks to know what it is, or what sort of thing it is, in that he aims to contemplate the truth. We should therefore do the same in every other case, so that side-issues do not dominate the tasks in hand. Nor should we demand an explanation in the same way in all cases. A sound proof that something is the case will suffice in some instances, as with first principles, where the fact itself is a starting-point, that is, a first principle» (*Nicom. Eth.* I 7, 1098b, ed. cit., pp. 12-13).

<sup>25</sup> «Since we have already stated that one should rationally choose the mean, not the excess or the deficiency, and that the mean is as correct reason prescribes, let us now analyse this prescription. In all the states of character we have mentioned, and in the others as well, there is a sort of target, and it is with his eye on this that the person with reason tightens or loosens his string. There is also a sort of standard for the mean states, which, as we say, lie between excess and deficiency and are in accordance with correct reason» (*Nicom. Eth.* VI 1, 1139a, ed. cit., p. 103).

<sup>26</sup> The concept of the impartial spectator in moral philosophy finds its roots in the ideas of Francis Hutcheson and David Hume, but it is Adam Smith who fully develops it. Hutcheson introduces the idea of an innate moral sense, While Hume recognises the importance of emotional responses and sympathy in the formation of moral judgements. Smith, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, elaborates the concept of the impartial spectator as an internal mechanism that allows us to assess our actions from an objective perspective, thus integrating personal morality into a broader social context. This evolution reflects a deepening in the understanding of human nature and its role in society, highlighting a balance between personal introspection and consideration of others' perspectives in moral judgment.



This imaginary being assumes a neutral and objective perspective to judge the rightness of our behaviour and actions, regardless of their consequences. *The impartial spectator* is essential to understanding the concept of *sympathy*<sup>27</sup> in Smith. Sympathy is understood to be the ability to put oneself in the shoes of others on an emotional level, to understand their experiences and to share their feelings.

Smith argues that sympathy<sup>28</sup> is fundamental to moral judgement because it enables us to perceive the approval or disapproval of impartial bystanders. These bystanders thus serve as objective moral judges, while sympathy provides us with the means to understand and perceive the reactions of others to our actions. In this way, Smith aims to establish an ethical theory based on intrinsic principles and empathy towards others. This innovative philosophical perspective differs from consequentialist ethical theories, which evaluate actions according to their consequences, and from deontological ethical theories, which are based on absolute moral rules and duties. Instead, Smith offers a rich and complex view of human morality, highlighting the importance of motivation and intention behind actions, and focusing on virtue and empathy as the basis for balanced moral judgement.

Although Smith does not explicitly use the term *phronesis*, conceptual convergences between Aristotelian *phronesis* and the concept of the *impartial spectator* can be traced in the shared idea that practical wisdom and *sympathy* are essential qualities for promoting the common good, in the careful evaluation of acting responsibly for the benefit of others, and in the orientation towards specific ethical actions<sup>29</sup>. Whereas Aristotelian

*phronesis* focuses on calculating the means necessary to achieve the good, Smith tends to underline *sympathy* and understanding of others' experiences as fundamental to building solid social relationships and collective well-being.

If the Aristotelian *phronimos*: «exercises an imagined moral presence in our conscience, guiding us to achieve the kind of moral vision that would produce virtuous decision-making, reflecting the kind of moral reasoning that dictates human excellence of the type a *phronimos* would respect»<sup>30</sup>, then the *impartial spectator*<sup>31</sup> would represent our inner conscience, a rational basis in moral judgments capable of giving approval to actions; and since such approval is the essence of the individual's conscience, conscience is thus seen as a social product. Smith himself describes this process in the context of prudent behaviour: «In his steadily sacrificing the ease and enjoyment of the present moment for the probable expectation of the still greater ease and enjoyment of a more distant but more lasting period of time, the prudent man is always both supported and rewarded by the entire approbation of the impartial spectator, and of the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast»<sup>32</sup>. In this context, Smith illustrates how self-control and prudence are not only rational behaviours from the individual's point of view, but also receive the moral approval of the impartial spectator, who is both an external presence and an internal voice, thus reflecting the social nature of conscience and moral judgement.

Ryan Patrick Hanley points out how Adam Smith illustrates a significant and specific benefit of exercising self-control. According to Smith, a prudent person who seeks to maximise his gains over time learns to place less importance on immediate desires. This self-control

<sup>27</sup> Scholars such as D.D. Raphael (*The Impartial Spectator. Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2007), and R.P. Hanley (*Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009) have explored the influence of Aristotelianism on Smith's thought and highlighted the convergence of Aristotelian concepts, such as virtue and morality, within Smith's ethical theory. In particular, they highlight the centrality of sympathy and ethics in his moral and economic theory.

<sup>28</sup> For more on this topic, see also: S. Songhorian, *Three Conceptions of Sympathy in Adam Smith*, «Rivista di filosofia», 3, 2022, pp. 397-420.

<sup>29</sup> There are significant conceptual convergences between Aristotelian practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and Smith's concept of the *impartial spectator*. In Aristotle's philosophy, *phronesis* refers to the ability to act with practical wisdom, correctly assessing circumstances in order to realise virtuous actions. This form of wisdom focuses on contextual understanding and the ability to make appropriate moral decisions based on careful evaluation of situations. In *TMS* Smith introduces the idea of the impartial observer, arguing that the ability to put oneself in the shoes of others and consider one's actions from the perspective of a neutral observer is fundamental to moral judgement. This concept implies an empathetic understanding and careful consideration of the impact of one's actions on the well-being of others. Both concepts, while belonging to different philosophical traditions, underline the importance of a

balanced and considered approach to ethical action. Whereas Aristotle's *phronesis* focuses on practical wisdom and virtue, Smith's *impartial sympathy* promotes empathy and consideration of others' viewpoints as the basis for moral decisions. This convergence reflects a common interest in promoting the common good and guiding responsible ethical action, and shows how similar ideas can emerge from different philosophical frameworks.

<sup>30</sup> D.K. Glidden, *Moral Vision, Orthos Logos, and the Role of the Phronimos*, «Apeiron», 28, 1995, pp. 103-128.

<sup>31</sup> «In the steadiness of his industry and frugality, in his steadily sacrificing the ease and enjoyment of the present moment for the probable expectation of the still greater ease and enjoyment of a more distant but more lasting period of time, the prudent man is always both supported and rewarded by the entire approbation of the impartial spectator, and of the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast. [...] He cannot therefore but approve, and even applaud, that proper exertion of self-command, which enables them to act as if their present and their future situation affected them nearly in the same manner in which they affect him» (*TMS* VI.i.9, ed. cit., p. 252).

<sup>32</sup> *TMS* VI.i.11, ed. cit., p. 252.

not only leads to greater long-term material benefits, but also earns the esteem and admiration of others. Furthermore, by practising self-control, the prudent individual begins to evaluate himself, both in the present and in the future, with the same consideration as an external observer who cannot directly perceive the feelings of others<sup>33</sup>. However, it is important to stress that Smith's concept is much more complex and elaborate, and ultimately different from Aristotle's. In Aristotle's view, practical wisdom is the ability to find the *golden mean*, since moral virtue consists in finding the right balance between excess and deficiency. Only practical wisdom, through its capacity for discernment, can identify this relative mean and adapt it to specific circumstances.

In Adam Smith the concept of the *golden mean* is not explicitly mentioned as such. However, Smith addresses the theme of balance and harmony in the context of his ethical and economic theories. In his seminal work, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith's focus is on the importance of the balance between individual and collective interests for the benefit of society as a whole. He argues that an economic system based on free competition and individual interest can lead to a situation where benefits are distributed fairly and maximised for all members of society.

But even in his earlier work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith explores the concept of sympathy as a force that helps to establish a just balance in human interactions. Thus, his concepts of "harmony", and "consideration of the interests of others" are closely related to Aristotle's notion of virtue. Both thinkers are concerned with achieving a balance and harmonious proportion in human decisions and actions, their approaches may differ, and both agree on the importance of an element of control alongside subjective judgement, whether derived from reason or emotion. For Aristotle, this element of control resides in practical wisdom, in its ability to judge and guide actions towards virtue. Smith, on the other hand, delves deeper into the role of sympathy and reason in moral judgement, emphasising the wisdom of the upright man, which includes a critical analysis of one's own emotions and the ability to consider objective and impartial perspectives.

<sup>33</sup> «Smith describes a very specific but very important positive externality that the exercise of self-command generates. The prudent man, seeking only to maximize his returns over time, trains himself to devalue his present passions. Yet his exercise of self-command reaps not only greater material gains in the long run but also esteem and admiration of spectators. For the prudent man, in exercising his self-command, comes to regard his future self and his present self as of equal value in precisely the way that a spectator, who has no direct access to the sensations of others, would be compelled to regard him» (R.P. Hanley, *Adam Smith on self-command. Utility, dignity, and sympathy*, in *Adam Smith and Modernity 1723-2023*, ed. by A. Burgio, Routledge, New York 2023, pp. 51-67: p. 53).

Both philosophers stress the importance of an external reference in moral judgement: the *phronimos* for Aristotle and the *impartial spectator* for Smith, both of which function as guides to ethical discernment and human rectitude.

### 3. IMAGINATION

As we have seen, there are various questions and arguments relating to the possible influence of Aristotelian thought within the philosophical framework of Adam Smith. With this in mind, it is worth attempting to identify a possible indirect influence of Aristotle on Adam Smith's concept of imagination.

In his conceptual architecture, Adam Smith emphasises the active role of the mind in shaping 'nature' and perceived reality, explores the challenge of obtaining objective and stable knowledge of external reality, and stresses the crucial role of the imagination in our perception and understanding of the world. This view suggests that the human mind is not merely a passive receiver of information, but an active participant in the construction of its own reality, such that: «to sooth the imagination, and to render the theatre of nature a more coherent, and therefore a more magnificent spectacle, than otherwise it would have appeared to be»<sup>34</sup>.

For Smith, imagination thus becomes a fundamental means of interpreting and making sense of experience, enabling us to deal with and understand complex and variable situations. Through his theory of the impartial spectator, Adam Smith proposes an anti-Platonic interpretation of knowledge and morality. In this perspective, imagination is a vital force in human thought, essential for structuring and making sense of reality, especially in the face of unexpected or exceptional events. These moments, which interrupt daily routines and challenge pre-existing expectations, require flexible and creative thinking, for which imagination proves indispensable. It allows us to reinterpret and reorganise our understanding of the world in new and unexpected ways, pushing the mind to make new connections and patterns to fill gaps in understanding and to seek constant order and coherence. Smith points to the importance of the imagination, not only in categorising surprising events within known frameworks, but also in interpreting extraordinary events that transcend such classifications. In this way, imagination guides human inquiry in fields as diverse as philosophy, science, art, politics, economics and religion.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *The History of Astronomy* II 12, cit., p. 46.

Thus, according to Smith, there is no external standpoint from which to observe and judge human behaviour. On the contrary, we constantly reflect on ourselves and our inner being because: «This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinise the propriety of our own conduct»<sup>35</sup>. Our moral understanding and worldview are influenced by the “inventions of the imagination”, the mental representations we create; in this way, the impartial spectator imagined by Smith would act as a mirror in which we see ourselves. Self-knowledge thus becomes a fundamental element, as we are inevitably turned inwards in the search for understanding and evaluation.

In this way, even when we theorise and reflect on external phenomena, we do so through the filter of our imagination and subjective perceptions. In summary, Smith advocates a skepticism that questions objective knowledge and external reality, and instead stresses the importance of imagination and self-awareness in shaping how we perceive and form moral concepts.

Indeed, Adam Smith attributes an important role to the imagination for shaping our cognitive and ethical perceptions, and on this point he seems to diverge from Aristotle<sup>36</sup>, but it is worth seeing whether it is possible to identify some conceptual similarities between their views.

In the context of Aristotelian philosophy, imagination (φαντασία, *phantasia*) is understood as a fundamental faculty of the soul in the process of knowledge and in the elaboration of sensory experiences. In his treatise *De memoria et reminiscentia*<sup>37</sup>, Aristotle explores

in depth the relationship between imagination and memory, insisting that memory is a phenomenon associated with sensation rather than thought. The images (εἰκόνες, *eikones*) used in the cognitive process, although distinct from mental reflections themselves, are indispensable tools for the elaboration of thought. Aristotle distinguishes between the inner image (φάντασμα, *phantasma*), which is dependent on φαντασία, and the state of the soul that manifests both as the possession (ἔξις, *hexis*) and the affection (πάθος, *pathos*) of a remembered object.

Aristotle interprets the imagination as an entity that bridges intellect and sensation, enabling humans to perceive sensible objects as specific types of entities. This conception of the imagination, often referred to as the deliberative imagination, marks a clear departure from the position of modern philosophers, who see the imagination primarily as a tool for interpreting reality and guiding human inquiry. Furthermore, Aristotle distinguishes between two types of φαντασία or imagination: the sensible, which is common to all animals, and the rational or calculative (*logistikè*), which is uniquely human. This distinction underlines the human ability to understand individual entities as part of a common nature, fusing the faculty of sensibility with the universal intellect<sup>38</sup>. Aristotle sees the imagination as an

<sup>35</sup> TSM III.i.5, ed. cit., p. 131.

<sup>36</sup> In Aristotle's philosophy, imagination (φαντασία - *phantasia*) is a key concept that manifests in two main forms. The first is tied to particular objects perceived through external senses. This form of imagination, closely linked to memory (μνήμη - *mneme*), allows the individual to recall mental images of objects or events previously experienced, playing an essential role in the preservation and recall of sensory perceptions. The second form of imagination deals with the formation of mental representations of universal and abstract concepts. Although Aristotle does not use a specific term that corresponds exactly to this modern categorization, this process can be associated with his concept of intellect (νοῦς - *nous*), which is responsible for the understanding of universal principles. Imagination, in both its manifestations, is fundamental for knowledge and concept formation. It allows for the manipulation and combination of mental representations to acquire new information and understanding. Through imagination, we are capable of conceiving hypothetical situations, making predictions, and generating new ideas. Aristotle also explores the use of imagination in the artistic creative process in his work *Poetics*. He recognizes that artistic imagination is a crucial capability for artists, allowing them to represent reality in creative and symbolic ways. Artistic imagination transforms sensory impressions into works of art, generating new visions and interpretations of reality.

<sup>37</sup> For further exploration, please refer to the relevant academic literature and sources: G.E.R. Lloyd, *Aristotle. The Growth and Structure of*

*his Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1968; D. Bloch, *Aristotle on Memory and Recollection*, Brill, Leiden 2007; Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*, cit.; Id., *Skepticism and imagination: Smith's Response to Hume's Dialogues*, in *New Essays on Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*, ed. by W.L. Robinson and D.B. Suits, Rochester Institute of Technology Press, Rochester (NY) 2012.

<sup>38</sup> In his exegesis of Aristotelian thought, Thomas Aquinas offers a profound and Christianly integrated reading of Aristotle's notion of *imaginatio* (*phantasia*). In his commentary on *De Anima*, Aquinas examines *phantasia* (φαντασία) as an essential faculty that mediates between sensory perception and intellectual thought. He interprets imagination not only as the ability to form mental images based on sensory perceptions but also as a bridge that connects the physical, sensory world with the intellectual and spiritual realms. According to Aquinas, imagination, while rooted in bodily perceptions, transcends mere sensoriality to enter the realm of the intellect. This makes it a fundamental component in human understanding, acting as a force that enables the processing of sensory perceptions into more abstract and conceptual forms. The ability to generate, store, and manipulate mental images thus becomes crucial for memory, learning, and reasoning. Aquinas further exposes the importance of φαντασία in the context of the human soul. While imagination is intrinsically linked to the body and its perceptions, it plays an important role in intellectual activity, which is more closely associated with the rational soul. This link between imagination and intellect is essential to understanding how, according to Aquinas, the human soul integrates and harmonises bodily and intellectual functions. For further exploration of this theme, see T. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Engl. transl. by K. Foster and S. Humphries, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) 1951; L. Berns, *Aristotle and Adam Smith on Justice: Cooperation between Ancients and Moderns*, «The Review of Metaphysics», 48, 1994, pp. 71-90.

intrinsic human ability to generate mental images and evoke sensory uniqueness; Smith, on the other hand, sees it as an essential means of organising and interpreting reality, especially in unexpected or extraordinary contexts. In this way, imagination emerges as a creative and interpretive force that enables us to transcend the limits of our individual perspective and grasp the essence of human experience in its totality.

In Adam Smith's philosophy, the imagination plays a central role in moulding our perception and interpretation of the world. Through his theory of the impartial spectator, Smith explores the idea that our understanding of external reality and moral issues is deeply influenced by our mental representations, or inventions, of the imagination, simultaneously critiquing the notion of objective and unchanging knowledge and highlighting how the imagination helps to shape our moral conceptions and our worldview.

In light of this comparative analysis, it becomes clear that the concept of imagination, as articulated by Aristotle and Smith, serves as a central and transformative faculty within human cognition. Aristotle's perspective treats imagination as an innate human faculty that enables the formation of mental images and the evocation of sensory experiences even in their physical absence. This view emphasises the role of the imagination in creating an internal panorama of experience, independent of external stimuli.

Conversely, Smith's interpretation of the imagination highlights its role as a determinant in the formulation of our mental representations, suggesting that it acts as a lens through which reality is subjectively filtered and understood. Here the imagination is not just a repository of mental images, but a dynamic processor that forms our perception and understanding of the world, illustrating the subjective nature of human experience.

Integrating these perspectives, it becomes clear that the imagination is not merely a passive container of images or a simple reflexive response to sensory input. Instead, it emerges as a powerful, creative and interpretive tool, instrumental in weaving the fabric of our moral and existential understanding. It transcends the limits of individual perspective and enables us to grasp the essence of human experience in its full spectrum. This conceptual synthesis reveals that both Aristotle and Smith, despite their temporal and philosophical distance, converge on the notion that imagination is a cornerstone in the edifice of human thought, playing a cardinal role in bridging the gap between the empirical world and the vast terrains of moral and philosophical inquiry. Both Aristotle and Smith attribute a significant role to the imagination in the formation of our percep-

tions and moral conceptions, underlining its importance in the structuring of our understanding of the world and our human experience.