The Four Stages

Long before Smith sat in awe in Dr. Hutcheson’s class and heard him on the ‘Stages of Society’, he was already familiar with the Bible’s allegory for the origins and ages of mankind in the fable of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the paradise of the Eden Garden for eating the fruit of a forbidden tree.\(^1\)

Smith learned his Old Testament from his mother’s knee. Cain, Eve’s first born, ‘a tiller of the ground’, murdered Abel, his younger brother, ‘a keeper of sheep’. Encapsulated within the Bible fable, the ‘Garden of Eden’ represents the age of the Gatherers (Adam and Eve), followed by Abel’s age of the Shepherds and Cain’s age of Agriculture.\(^2\)

God ended the mythical ‘Golden Age’ and its ‘easy’ lifestyles; Cain murdered the Shepherd, and Cain’s Agriculture flourished in a land called ‘Nod, east of Eden,’ where he was exiled.\(^3\) The Bible gives a religious motive for the murder – a jealous dispute over God favouring Abel’s to Cain’s offering. A more likely motive for the violent discord between the shepherd and the farmer was a murderous row after sheep ate the crops, an event sure to strain brotherly relationships.

Cain also prospered in Nod and built the ‘City of Enoch’,\(^4\) symbolically significant, because agriculture led to permanent settlements, which led to Smith’s fourth age, the Age of Commerce. But the Bible’s authors implausibly compressed a process lasting many hundreds of millennia – from gathering to shepherding to farming – into a single generation from Adam and Eve to their adult sons.

Smith taught a stages theory in Hutcheson’s classrooms confident that they were confirmed by Biblical evidence. His four stages (Hunters, Shepherds, Agriculture and Commerce) thematically underlay jurisprudence and political economy.\(^5\) However, Smith did not originate the theory of stages – he derived ‘vague hints’ of it from attending Dr Hutcheson’s lectures (who derived his ideas from Pufendorf.)\(^6\)

Lord Kames, Smith’s patron and leading Scottish Judge, published his *Historical Law Tracts* in 1758, in which he advanced a Four Stage theory,
causing a minor academic problem of scholarly precedence.\textsuperscript{7} The precedence dispute turns on whether Smith used a Four Stages theory in the lectures he began in the early 1750s (for which there is only conjecture and circumstantial evidence), or whether Kames’ publication in 1758, or even Dalrymple’s in 1757, is decisive proof of their precedence. Some attribute precedence of Kames or Dalrymple, some to Smith,\textsuperscript{8} but the anonymous authors of Genesis trumped them all.

The stages in the literature had the benefit of real world examples, and numerous versions of them were circulating (e.g., Rousseau, who was closest to an evolutionary theory of mankind long before Darwin and hominid fossil data were available).\textsuperscript{9}

**Smith’s island of stages**

Smith’s exposition of the age of hunters shows his acquaintance with 18\textsuperscript{th} century literature – from voyages, travellers and explorers – and he quotes from Charlevoix’s description of societies of North American ‘Indians’ and a few African tribes.\textsuperscript{10}

Smith invented a story to show what people in each stage might have done. This is fine for his purposes (and for the attention span of his young audience) but it tempts him into gross simplification.

He supposes that a dozen people of both sexes settled on an uninhabited island and co-operated to support themselves. What would they do? Smith says that initially they would rely only upon ‘wild fruits and wild animals’. ‘Their sole business would be the hunting of wild beasts or catching of fishes.’ It is the age of the (male) hunters; the (female) gatherers were disregarded, though providing most of their band’s diets.

A nation of hunters had ‘no government at all’. It consisted of a few independent families, living in the same camp and speaking the same language. When disputes broke out the whole society deliberated on the alleged offence and, where possible, reconciled the parties, but failing reconciliation it could banish the miscreants, kill the arguers or permit a party to obtain violent redress. But this was not government, because any deliberate action required the entire society’s consent, and they lived, according to the laws of nature.\textsuperscript{11}

Population growth on the ‘uninhabited island’ drove humans through the four stages. As ‘their numbers multiplied,’ he noted, ‘they would find the chase too precarious for their support.’\textsuperscript{12} In contrast to Smith’s imagination, in real islands dispersed across the Pacific, when isolated communities faced population pressures they resorted to infanticide and quasi-judicial murder (meaningless ‘taboos’ caught the unwary for which ‘offences’ the careless were killed). The chiefs also engaged in stylised warfare, using surrogate ‘soldiers’, who killed each other (almost like gladiators), thereby limiting populations to what could be sustained on the islands.\textsuperscript{13}