

REVIEW OF STEFANO FIORI, *MACHINES,
BODIES AND INVISIBLE HANDS. METAPHORS OF ORDER
AND ECONOMIC THEORY IN ADAM SMITH,*
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Stefano Fiori's new book sets out to perform a singularly useful task, one which adds to our understanding of Adam Smith, his methodology, and his arguments. Fiori sets out to examine the use of metaphor in Adam Smith's work. While several scholars, notably the late Gavin Kennedy, have remarked on Smith's interest in metaphor as a presentational and rhetorical device, none has so far sought to place Smith's use of metaphor squarely in the focus of an examination of his explanatory project. In this book Fiori does just that: he considers metaphor as a substantive item in the conceptual armoury of thinkers such as Smith. Instead of a literary flourish, the metaphor becomes central to helping readers conceptualise the points that Smith wants to make.

The book begins with two master questions: How did Smith deal with the explanation of economic order in eighteenth-century commercial societies? And how did Smith use metaphors as cognitive tools to direct research and conceptualise phenomena? It addresses these questions by exploring three main metaphors: machine, body, and invisible hand. All of these have been noted by previous commentators, but by linking the discussion of them together Fiori allows us to see a common approach that Smith uses in each case. These are not merely deployed for stylistic convenience. These metaphors are substantive. They are what Fiori calls "conceptual metaphors" (p. 3) "used as heuristic tools" (p. 4) to explore the nature of complex phenomena. To use a Smithian locution, metaphors render ideas familiar to the imagination, and in so doing they are conceptually substantive rather than merely elocutionary. The claim that metaphors are "constitutive of theories" is perhaps taking things a little too far, but it is

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made abundantly clear how they become “useful tools” (p. 12) in the better formulation of systems of ideas.

The book begins with a chapter dedicated to the place of metaphor in science in the early modern period and to Smith’s account of metaphor in his own writing. The contextual examination of early modern ideas of science and the link to metaphor is interwoven with a treatment of more contemporary theories of the nature of metaphor. This chapter sets the scene in an admirable fashion, but may well have benefitted from a little more in the way of analysis of Smith’s own thinking on metaphors in the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* or the literature on that by, inter alia, S.J. Mckenna or G. Kennedy. This is followed by three chapters dealing with each of the main metaphors: machine, body, and invisible hand.

The machine chapter also covers the idea of ‘balance’ as a metaphor (in the case of the balance of trade). Fiori argues that Smith did not use balance as part of the machine mechanism as Hume and many of his contemporaries did. Instead Smith re-created the machine metaphor taking on board the created nature of machines and the idea of harmony between parts in his discussion of systems. But for Fiori Smith’s innovation comes in noting that systems evolve and change over time. They “improve” (p. 50) becoming “simpler and simpler” (p. 51) in a Newtonian fashion. Smith’s innovation with the machine metaphor is to take a previously static metaphor and make it dynamic: orders evolve and they do so over time, so questions of development are opened up (pp. 58-59). Our machines get better and thinking about this in metaphorical terms helps us to conceptualise intellectual progress.

As Fiori points out, machine metaphors have their limitations as they fail to adequately capture the notion of internal processes that lead to improvement. This leads us to the next metaphor, that of the body. After sketching the status of body metaphors in the early social sciences, Fiori goes on to explore how Smith uses the idea of the body as self-adjusting, naturalistic and inviting ideas of health or proper functioning (an image Smith inherited from the Physiocrats). Bodies are intrinsically purposeful not extrinsically purposeful (p. 81), they take us beyond a made machine, but they do so at the expense of losing ideas of deliberate agency. Society is like a body, but it is a body composed of individuals each of which has its own principle of motion.

This leads to the third metaphor. The invisible hand metaphor for orders helps us to conceptualise order that is “(1) endogenous, beneficial, and exhibits self-organizing properties, (2) the result of movements and choices of independent individuals” (p. 87). As a metaphor the invisible hand made it possible to interpret the order of the market as the result of a process – not an analysis from a predetermined equilibrium (Smith, as Fiori points

out, was not an equilibrium thinker and so needed something to move him beyond the limits of mechanical and bodily metaphors).

What follows is a nice summary of the critics of the invisible hand as a metaphor (pp. 90-91). Here Fiori is right to criticise those who dismiss it as a 'mere' metaphor because they don't understand how vital metaphor is to Smith's conceptual method. To say the invisible hand is a metaphor is to concede that it is significant in Smith's thinking not just a literary flourish (p. 93). It also allows a reader to begin to think beyond interpretations of Smith as a providential thinker. The hand isn't that of God, but it is a metaphor that helps us to conceptualise the complexity of unintended consequences in the social realm.

For Fiori metaphors help us to conceptualise but are not "embodied in a theoretical view" (p. 88) in the sense of a fully worked out system of ideas. In the case of the invisible hand, the metaphor helps us to think through how the local intentions of agents create an order that looks, but is not, planned. The complexity of unintended consequences is smoothed out for the reader because metaphor helps Smith to convey an idea and helps us think through complexity in a way that analysis cannot (p. 98). Instead of becoming bogged down in detail we can take the image and understand the explanation that it seeks to convey.

In the second part of the book Fiori goes on to explore visible and invisible orders. Chapter 6 examines the context of ideas of visibility and knowledge in the seventeenth-century and sets the contextual scene from science to the economics of the physiocrats. Chapter 7 returns to the ideas behind Smith's use of metaphor and 'resemblance' in the imagination and the idea of bridges over gaps in Smith's thinking in the *History of Astronomy*. The focus on visibility and explanation allows for interesting discussions of nature's deception as the gap between our intentions and the beneficial order we achieve without planning (p. 151) and how we can "clarify through a system of metaphors" the nature of this experience (p. 160). Chapter 8 deals with invisibility in life sciences in late eighteenth-century and how ideas of the invisible, vitalist principles of living beings impacted on the texts Buffon and Diderot.

Fiori then returns to the invisible hand in Chapter 9. Here the focus is on time and social order. Examining the distinctions between long-term change and short-term adaptation through the lens of how visible they are to the human mind. The most important aspect of this for Fiori's reading of Smith is the idea that we can stabilise our expectations through conventions like the law. In a nice discussion of the prudent man Fiori shows how he plans for the future, but his vision of it is "circumscribed and easily manageable" (p. 197). Time allows us to "gradually construct" (p. 198) expectations (savings drive development), but the 'future' in view is immedia-

te (retirement) not long term (capital re-investment and long-term national growth).

The book does well to set each metaphor in its historical and conceptual context. It also shows that the approaches are not mutually exclusive – mechanistic and organic metaphors can be used in a complementary way by the same author, a position often obscured by the either/or of reading Smith through mechanistic or vitalist traditions. Using metaphor allows Smith to explore complex phenomena without becoming a slave to the metaphor. It also allows him to capture different aspects of complex phenomena. The image of machines captures the idea of orders that are modified by outside hands. While that of bodies allows us to conceptualise that which is self-organising and self-preserving. Finally the invisible hand allows us to conceptualise orders that are self-generating and self-regulating, but not pre-determined in the behaviour of their component elements like the body.

And here we do meet with a question for this approach of Fiori's. He provides a detailed and convincing case for his accounts of Smith's conceptually substantive use of metaphor, but that does leave us with the question of how to think about the other metaphors in Smith's work. Is it worth distinguishing between Smith's literary use of metaphor and his conceptual use of metaphor? Is Smith always talking in the same register? If not, how do we tell when he is being conceptually substantive? Are there other conceptually weighty metaphors in Smith's work and what more can these tell us about his methodology? The machine, the body and the invisible hand are clearly important for Smith, but so too are the idea of society as a mirror or of the spectator from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Both of these seem ripe for a similar exploration as examples of Fiori's conceptually rich discussion of Smith and metaphor.