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Sarah Otten

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Review

Adam Smith: His Life, Thought and Legacy

Ryan Patrick Hanley (ed). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. 571pp.

Sarah Otten*

Since the publication of the Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith by Oxford University Press in the 1970s and 80s, there has been increasing interest in the philosophical aspects of Smith's writings. While in the public mind, he is associated with economics through his second book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (*Wealth of Nations*) Adam Smith was a professional philosopher, holding the chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University for eleven years. It was a period he regarded as "the most useful, and, therefore, as by far the happiest" (Smith 1977, 1987: 309) of his life.

Scholarship in recent decades has turned to Smith's other writings, both published and unpublished. There has been an avalanche of publications looking particularly at Smith's moral theory as found in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the first book he published, but also mining his writings for political, social and even educational insights. Into this multiplying and increasingly specialised Smith world, Ryan Patrick Hanley offers a collection of essays on Smith written by specialists in their respective fields. The aim of *Adam Smith: His Life, Thought, and Legacy* is "to provide nonspecialist readers with introductions to [Smith's] key ideas, and to provide advanced readers with suggestions as

* **Sarah Otten** is a lecturer in ethics and political philosophy at Carlow College, Ireland. She completed her doctorate on Adam Smith at Trinity College Dublin in 2016. She lectures in political philosophy and applied ethics. Her areas of interest are in the moral philosophy of Adam Smith, feminist philosophy, and the critical theory of Horkheimer.

to how certain of these ideas might productively inform and contribute to current live debates in the contemporary academy as well as the contemporary public sphere" (preface, ix–x). In this aim, the book largely succeeds. The specialist writers have endeavoured to explain their topic in a clear and accessible manner. The essays are generally written in a plain, engaging style with a limited (some more than others) number of endnotes and academic language. They explain key concepts and themes in Smith's philosophy, as well as looking at practical applications and uses of Smith's ideas in today's world. The book contains essays on a wide variety of topics in Smith's work: from his position on women, to his use and abuse by supporters of the political left and right. Specialist readers of Smith are bound to find some interpretation or use of Smith's writings amongst the variety that had not crossed their paths before.

The book is divided into five parts, each exploring a particular theme in Smith's writings. Part I examines the historical and biographical context of Smith's life as well as his writings, both published and unpublished. Part II has chapters examining Smith's view of society, and part III looks at various influences on Smith's approach to economics. Part IV explores how Smith's thought has been used in contemporary academic disciplines other than economics, and part V examines how Smith has been used to speak to contemporary issues in the public sphere.

What is interesting about the collection is that many of the essays, in various ways, notice the importance of our sociable human nature to Smith. While Smith, in the public imagination, and particularly in relation to his economic writings, is associated with a conception of human nature that is autonomous and independent, motivated by the self-regarding desire to better his own condition, this is but one of a variety of impulses or instincts that motivate our behaviour, according to Smith. Equally important is our desire to be viewed with approval by others, and to share in their feelings, and have them share ours. These desires are tied to our sociable nature, our interest in other humans and our desire that they be interested in us. This understanding of our nature underpins Smith's economic treatise, *The Wealth of Nations*. In a chapter discussing *The Wealth of Nations*, Jerry Evensky argues that the economic is but one dimension for thinking about the human condition. Progress in any dimension is dependent on complimentary progress in the social and political dimensions.

I would add that Smith takes it as given that our faculties (of reason, speech, imagination), as well as our values, both social and moral, are developed through

socialisation. He holds that each individual is formed through socialisation in the family, in education, and through the work they do. Thus he famously holds that the difference between a philosopher and a street porter "seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and, education" (Smith 1982a: 28). Several philosophers notice this aspect of Smith's work as highlighting his egalitarian view of the value of all humans, but more writers are coming to realise the importance this view places on the social circumstances the individual inhabits. Smith realises that repetitive work will dull a labourer's reasoning ability, that their poor circumstances will not give them an alternative to develop their minds, that the rich are usually are engaged in more interesting and varied work, and furthermore have the leisure time to improve their minds. From Smith's discussion, it is evident that he is well aware of the importance of our social surroundings to forming the individual's abilities and life chances. This awareness, and Smith's sense of the unfairness of it leads him to regard it as part of the duty of government to ameliorate the harm of his proposed economic system. While none of the essays in this book pushes the political significance of Smith's awareness of the importance of socialisation upon our characters to any radical degree, they certainly draw interesting conclusions from this shared insight.

Part I looks at the historical context and biographical studies of Smith's life. It also explores Smith's writings, both published and unpublished, in individual essays. The main insight that emerges from this section is Smith's use of psychological traits to explain human institutions such as art, knowledge, economic practices, social norms and even rhetoric. Vivienne Brown, in her chapter on the "Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres" starts with the premise that "the sociality of human life is fundamental for Adam Smith's writings" (17). Nicholas Phillipson in another chapter argues that this grounding of human institutions in human nature is part of the Enlightenment project, the foundations of which were laid by Hume. Smith developed the superstructure of Hume's insight through his investigation of the phenomenology of human moral development. In part II, which deals with "Smith's Social Vision," the idea that innate psychological propensities incline us towards living in society is continued. Ryan Patrick Hanley argues that Smith's view of our nature and happiness means that we are directed towards virtues that enhance our ability to live with others. While self-love is one trait of our nature, it is not an over-riding one. Hanley believes that Smith envisaged our human characteristic of forming virtues would counteract the deleterious consequences Rousseau criticised in the nascent commercial system Smith championed in *The Wealth of Nations*. Remy Debes looks at

Smith's account of sympathy and argues that Smith's account of our innate instincts makes us not only want to fit into society, but to be really fit for society.

In part III, "Smith and Economics," three of the four essays work off the assumption that Smith's economic theory is intertwined with social and moral connections. Vernon L. Smith, writing as an economist, realises that Smith answers the question why people co-operate instead of acting from pure self-interest. He finds the answer in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the creation of social rules of interaction that precede interaction in a legal or political framework. This view has political implications contrary to the traditional liberal readings of Smith's political position. In another essay, Amartya Sen goes so far as to argue that in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith is not assuming self-interest or the market is the only mechanism for ordering society. Government has a role too and may act for reasons that are different to market reasons.

Part IV includes nine essays on a wide variety of topics under the catch-all title of "Smith Beyond Economics." These include discourses on Smith and religion, Smith and feminist ethics, Smith and Rhetoric, Smith and Enlightenment Studies that variously place Smith within the context of a specific field of study or look at a specialised interpretation of Smith. The essays on ethics, politics and jurisprudence pick up the importance of Smith's understanding of human nature as being socialised through the various human institutions of family, law and politics. In her essay, Lisa Herzog looks at the tension between Smith's insistence on the importance of socialisation for the development of moral judgement, and his equal insistence on the independence of the individual conscience or impartial spectator. She reaches the interesting conclusion that Smith's moral theory directs us beyond "the traditional focus on the moral individual" to look at questions about social practices and social structures. While Smith was aware how enmeshed individuals are in social networks (and must be for their proper development), he was not aware, contends Fredrik Albritton Jonsson of our enmeshment in the environment. Smith's assumption that the market will respond to ecological crisis and that nature is a common resource for humanity is a danger to the protection and existence of the environment today.

The essays in part IV try to debunk old assumptions about Smith's writings and try to classify them along the left/right divide in politics. Gavin Kennedy examines four traditional misreading of Smith's work; notions such as that Smith supported *laissez-faire* politics, or that he held a contradictory view of human nature, assuming it to be selfish in our economic activities and benevolent in our moral endeavours. Other essays look to

Smith's writing to provide advice for contemporary problems in areas as diverse as shareholder capitalism, free trade or the changing social and economic realities in China.

Parts IV and V are less unified than the first three sections of the collection; the essays dealing with disparate topics in distinctive ways and often only loosely connected to the section topic. This, however, is not necessarily a flaw in a collection of essays. The editor, Ryan Patrick Hanley, lays out the aims of the book in his preface. He concludes with the hope that the book, like a travelogue, will tempt its readers to further exploration of Smith. In this, Hanley's book has succeeded. The lively and lucid writing styles and the variety of themes and topics presented in the book are bound to invite the tourist to look further, while the variety of topics on offer will draw seasoned travelers to explore by-ways they might have missed on earlier voyages into Smith territory.

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