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BOOKSHELF

Adam Smith: Guide to a Happy Life

Society doesn't enslave us, as Rousseau suggested. According to Smith, it liberates us from the worst part of ourselves.

By **DANIEL AKST**

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Poor Adam Smith. The great Scot was among the most important thinkers who ever lived, yet in the mind of fan and foe alike he survives as little more than a disembodied “invisible hand.” Then again, Smith would have been the first to remind us that our sympathy for the dead is wasted; he did this very thing in his first book, “The Theory of Moral Sentiments,” which established his reputation as a major thinker when it came out in 1759.

Little wonder: Read it and you will discover a far more interesting writer—and penetrating observer—than the caricature so carelessly invoked in contemporary discourse. Smith was a moral philosopher and social psychologist as much as the political economist we know from “The Wealth of Nations” (1776). What unites his two great works is an insight neatly summarized by the historian Jerry Z. Muller in “Adam Smith in His Time and Ours” (1993): “It is the influence of society that transforms people into moral beings.”

Smith wrote in the stately and verbose style of his day, which has helped to sequester his genius from the mass of modern readers. The economist Russ Roberts, in “How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life,” sets out to remedy this difficulty by offering a layman's guide to Smith's moral philosophy in plain English. A clear and focused writer, Mr. Roberts meets the challenge ably enough, and most people who read his gloss on “The Theory of Moral Sentiments” will be better off for doing so even if their lives do not change dramatically.

Inevitably, some of the richness of Smith's work gets lost in translation, and the lessons Mr. Roberts distills from Smith's book, unassailable though they may be, won't seem very different from the ones most of us have heard from our parents. Envy is pernicious. Our love for the latest and greatest consumer products, often divorced from their usefulness, leads us to needless expense. It is much better to be wise and virtuous than rich and powerful. “There is something ineffable about fame that

Opinion Journal Video

Hoover Institution Research Fellow Russ Roberts on his new book, "How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life." Photo credit: Getty Images.

HOW ADAM SMITH CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

By Russ Roberts

Portfolio, 261 pages, \$27.95

draws us to it," Mr. Roberts tells us at one point, rather anti-climactically. Elsewhere he says, "Smith makes it abundantly clear that money and fame don't lead to happiness."

Still, Mr. Roberts offers newcomers a nice taste of the banquet Smith has to offer. Open "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" almost anywhere and you will gain insight into some aspect of the human condition: why poets but not mathematicians tend to form cabals (the former rely on public approval), for example, or what makes romantic comedies so much fun (other people's amours are ridiculous and yet produce interesting complications). Smith saw that we rate pain more potent than the equivalent amount of pleasure and that imagination is crucial to morality—so we can see how our actions will look to others and what the future will be like depending on what we do now. In not quite as many words, Smith observes that form follows function, that crowds can have wisdom, and that what social scientists now call "hedonic adaptation" (our tendency to adjust quickly to good and bad news alike) will soon wash away the pleasure that we gain from material good fortune. His advice to mourners of all kinds—"return, as soon as possible, to the daylight of the world"—remains sound.

All this comes as part of Smith's effort to derive a basis for virtue, the key feature of which is self-command. His premise is that our desire for the love and regard of others makes us behave in accord with their preferences and expectations, enabling us to rise above our baser selves. Society doesn't enslave us, as Rousseau and others have suggested; rather, according to Smith, it liberates us from the worst part of ourselves and allows us to thrive in concert. All of us, Smith says, judge our behavior against the standard of an impartial spectator within who develops as we mature, a kind of embodied conscience who can hold us to the straight and narrow even if our fellow humans are reprobates or monsters. Not that this spectator can't be fooled. Smith warns of the rationalizing to which our species is prone and, in doing so, places a modern-sounding emphasis on the problem of self-deception.

Yet we have also learned a thing or two since the 18th century, and Mr. Roberts might have spent more time testing Smith's arguments against recent findings in the social sciences. For example, there is evidence that rich people (and rich countries) are happier than poor people (and poor countries), suggesting that Smith underestimated the extent to which money can indeed buy

happiness. Smith may have also underestimated the importance of status. Since the 1960s, the oft-cited Whitehall studies have found that British civil servants have had longer lives the higher they were on the job ladder, so maybe people have good reason to worry about rank. Likewise, the claims of evolutionary psychology and cognitive science—concerning sex, disgust, celebrity worship and other topics that Smith covers—offer explanations for our actions and moral impulses that might confirm some of the master’s ideas but undermine others.

“How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life” is an earnest, accessible introduction to Smith’s ideas on the nature of virtue and happiness. Those wanting to delve deeper should plunge into Mr. Muller’s book, an unusually eloquent work of scholarship. And all of us might help ourselves by reading “The Theory of Moral Sentiments” itself before invoking its author to justify or condemn the latest thing we’re riled up about. Chances are that Adam Smith had something relevant to say—and that there was a lot more to it than the invisible hand.

Mr. Akst, who writes the Journal’s weekly news quiz, is the author of “We Have Met the Enemy: Self-Control in an Age of Excess.”