**Our Great Purpose: Adam Smith on Living A Better Life.** By Ryan Patrick Hanley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 157p. $17.95 cloth.

Michael L. Frazer, *University of East Anglia*

michael.frazer@uea.ac.uk

In *Our Great Purpose*, Ryan Patrick Hanley offers a practical guide to human life. One might be tempted to say that this book is written for a non-academic audience. To do so would be to forget that academics are human beings, with lives to lead outside their narrow research agendas, lives that can go as well or badly as any others. As such, it would be better to say that this is a book for everyone.

The idea that moral and political philosophy should direct our everyday existence has both a proud lineage and many reputable defenders today. Unfortunately, guides to life have acquired something of a bad reputation of late, and rightly so. This tension is illustrated in Hanley’s first two footnotes. After expressing his debts to Alexander Nehamas and Pierre Hadot in his first note, Hanley then goes on to acknowledge the inevitable comparisons his book will draw to Jordan Peterson’s bestselling *12 Rules for Life* (2018) in his second.

In form, though not in content, Hanley seems to have modelled his work on evangelical pastor Rick Warren’s even better-selling *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002). Like Warren’s, Hanley’s book consists of a long series of very short chapters, each expounding the practical implications of an epigraph. Here, Adam Smith substitutes for scripture; *The* *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (henceforth TMS) is the source for all but three of Hanley’s epigraphs, with two from *The* *Wealth of Nations* and one from Smith’s letter on the death of his friend David Hume.

Smith is as good a candidate as any for a canonical philosopher who can help guide our lives today. Many have noted Smith’s extensive debts to the Stoics and Epicureans. As religious rituals cease to structure our increasingly secular lives, many find themselves turning to practices explicitly modeled on Hellenistic ones; think only of the role of the current Stoic revival and its influence on cognitive behavioral therapy. Smith’s revisions to Hellenistic ethics, detaching their principles from metaphysical foundations and applying them to life in early modern commercial societies, mean his ideas speak even more directly to our current predicament.

Smith has already been put to this purpose in Russ Roberts’ *How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life* (2014). An economist, Roberts read TMS for the first time shortly before writing about it. His story about uncovering this “secret” and “forgotten” text makes short shrift of the work of the vibrant scholarly community that has built itself around TMS for decades. One gets the sense that Roberts may not only be unfamiliar with this scholarship, but with ethics, political philosophy, and their history more generally. Perhaps this is why he describes not only TMS but also Bernard Mandeville, Francis Hutcheson and even the Stoics as “long forgotten” (p.9).

Someone who has been conducting first-class research about Smith for decades is better equipped to apply Smith to our practical lives than someone who has not. While reading Roberts is like joining a TMS reading group led by a bright PPE first-year, reading Hanley is like enrolling in an introductory course with an accomplished professor. Studying with the professor is preferable not only because he is more knowledgeable—though the importance of expertise here is not to be underestimated—but also because he has been living with the material for decades. When he says that his life is better as a result, we are more inclined to believe him.

Of course, not every accomplished scholar is an excellent teacher. Lost in the minutiae of academic debates, it is easy to forget that most undergraduates are not looking to enter our strange vocation. The key to meeting their more practical needs is not to ignore the relevant research, but to keep its details in the background while extracting its best insights. That is exactly what Hanley does here, providing a thorough introduction to the current state of Smith scholarship in a bibliographic essay appended to the end of his text.

Those whose work is mentioned in the appendix will not find much to disagree with in the main text. By and large, Hanley succeeds in clearly communicating the consensus interpretation of Smith and applying it to daily life in the twenty-first century in insightful ways. His theme is that the main struggle of human life is to reconcile the competing demands that are inherent in every human psyche but exacerbated by modern society. Both nature and nurture lead us to care about both ourselves and others. We can only integrate these demands successfully if we adopt the virtues that are recommended to us when we learn to see ourselves as others see us, through the eyes of an imagined impartial spectator.

There is one topic where Hanley departs from the scholarly consensus. It is one thing to say that human happiness is impossible unless we successfully meet the needs of both the self and others. It is another claim entirely, however, to insist that this is our purpose in the robust sense of our being “creatures who have been made for a purpose” (p. 22). Providential, teleological language is present throughout TMS, but commentators strongly disagree about whether it is the keystone of Smith’s ethics, a mere rhetorical flourish, or a deliberate sop to orthodoxy meant to protect Smith from Hume’s infamy as a heretic. Given the near-absence of any appeals to Christianity in Smith’s work, the decline in appeals to even deistic providence in *The* *Wealth of Nations* and later editions of TMS, and Smith’s encomium for Hume, Hanley’s decision to portray Smith’s philosophy as thoroughly theistic is highly controversial, as Hanley himself admits.

Just as Hanley realizes a practical guide to life is not the place to settle the question of Smith’s religiosity, I will not try to litigate the matter in this review. A pious Smith, however, is less useful as a guide to modern life than a secular Smith would be. For example, Hanley argues that the main lesson of Smith’s eulogy for Hume is that we should be kind to those who do not share our faith, an unobjectionable if anodyne recommendation. Yet since Smith explicitly says that Hume is as close to a perfect human being as has ever existed, elsewhere rejecting even Socrates as too much of a religious enthusiast, Smith implicitly prefers Hume to Jesus. The eulogy’s provocative practical lesson might therefore be to model ourselves on Hume’s life and philosophy in lieu of the gospels.

What is more, if Smith’s ethics depends on religion, then it is much less suited to offer guidance to those most in need of it. Believers can always turn to their local pastors, or to the televangelical-industrial complex that produced Rick Warren. Those without faith have fewer sources of practical wisdom available. They are left in danger of being taken in by the intellectual hucksters readily available on YouTube. If secular academics are unwilling to follow Hanley’s lead, and to explain how a meaningful life can be built from the resources of the world’s many and varied philosophic traditions, then there are many unsavory characters who be willing to do this work in their stead.