Review of: Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Adam Smith, one of the greatest figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, is the subject of a superb new intellectual biography by Nicholas Phillipson. Phillipson is an eminent intellectual historian: he is an Honorary Research Fellow in History at the University of Edinburgh, founding editor of Modern Intellectual History, associate editor of The New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and a past president of The Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society.

Phillipson starts with a brief overview of Smith’s boyhood in Kirkcaldy, a small port city on the Firth of Forth, from his birth in 1723, through his schooling at the local high school. We get a clear picture of his schooling at the local school headed by an excellent master (David Miller), as well as his family background, noting his very close mutually supportive relationship with his mother, Margaret Smith, and his general family background of minor gentry.

In particular, Phillipson suggests that Smith’s early reading of Greek and Roman classics of ethics taught him that ethical systems are adapted by different cultures and times, as when Cicero adapted the ethics of a Greek slave (Epictetus) to free Roman citizens, and how the writings of the ancients could be applied to a contemporary society.

We then learn about Smith’s work at Glasgow University, from 1737 (as a 14 year old student) to 1740, and as a Snell exhibitioner at Balliol College, Oxford, from 1740 to 1746. Smith arrived when Glasgow was flourishing. The university had two instructors who had a profound influence upon Smith: Robert Simson (Professor of Mathematics) and Francis Hutcheson (Professor of Moral Philosophy).

Phillipson does an excellent job of explaining in detail the crucial role that Hutcheson played in shaping Smith’s views, especially concerning the scope of human sociability and the features of human nature that explained it. Hutcheson conducted an ongoing dialog with thinkers such as Pufendorf and Hobbes, from which his students apparently learned much, and set Smith’s mind to work on a life-long research program to account for cooperative social behavior. I found Phillipson’s review of Pufendorf’s political philosophy and its critique by Hutcheson especially useful.

Also influential on Hutcheson (and by extension Smith) was the optimistic view of human nature offered by Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions and Times* (1711), and the more pessimistic (and cynical) vision offered by Bernard Mandeville in his *The Fable of the Bees* (1711). The former argued that the development of human cultural institutions grew out of the friendship of sociable people, the latter that they grew out of human pride, and the need for social approval. From this dispute we see how Smith inherited a political philosophical issue about the role of innate sociability plays in the sorts of social exchange which are at the core of proper governance and human progress.

Phillipson turns to a brief but important account of Smith’s six years at Oxford (1740-1746). He rightly dwells on the most important development in that period, viz., Smith’s development of a deep, close personal and intellectual lifelong friendship with fellow Scotsman David Hume, whose philosophy was so influential on Smith. I have always found this relationship fascinating, in that Hume’s skeptical philosophy so outraged Smith’s esteemed teacher Hutcheson that Hutcheson worked hard (and successfully) to prevent Hume from getting the Moral Philosophy chair at Edinburgh in 1745.

Phillipson makes it clear that Smith took from Hume a theory of human nature (while remaining silent about Hume’s controversial religious skepticism) and used it to good effect in developing his own views. (This theory, of course, emphasized the moral sentiment of sympathy as the key concept in moral philosophy generally). Moreover, from Hume Smith took away a political philosophy that focused on the role of government as primarily an insurer of justice and protection of life and property, thereby enabling the attempts of citizens to improve their lives upon which social progress is founded.

But unlike Hume, Smith determined to work on the origins of language, and--more significantly--attempt a grand theory of human society (a science of man, so to say).

Phillipson than considers Smith’s return to Scotland in 1746, against the backdrop of the start of the Scottish enlightenment period. Henry Home (Hume’s cousin and future Lord Kames) helped start Smith’s career by arranging for him to come to Edinburgh (which had become the center of Scottish political and cultural life) to give two courses of lectures (one on rhetoric, the other on jurisprudence). This work would expose Smith’s thinking to a wide audience--and pay him well. Phillipson gives us a detailed review of the rise of Edinburgh as a political, economic and cultural center, and Smith’s place in it (which was tied, as it was with so many of the other young Scottish intellectuals, with the arrogant but essential Lord Kames).

Phillipson’s discussion of Smith’s Edinburgh lectures is admirably detailed, as is appropriate: they not only launched his academic--indeed, intellectual--career, they allowed him to formulate some of the basics of his general philosophy. Phillipson admits that his discussion is to some degree speculative, since the original lectures were not published. But from notes taken by his students and later published, it appears that the crucial course of lectures for his later work was that on the origins of language.

Smith’s view was that language was not a divine gift but a tool devised by human beings that goes back to the appearance of the species, and it a crucial tool for survival. His views were apparently developed in reaction to Condillac’s *Essay on the Origins of Human Knowledge*, and Phillipson surveys these in detail. He also reviews in detail Smith’s lectures on rhetoric, showing that Smith had a view of rhetorical style that emphasized modern writers as opposed to classical ones, and that it again indicated his focus on the development of sociability among people.

He also reviews what is known about Smith’s lectures on jurisprudence, arguing that Smith crafted his views in great measure as a response to Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* and Hume’s *Three Essays: Moral and Political* (both published just before Smith’s lecture courses). Many of Smith’s thoughts that later appeared in *The Wealth of Nations* were apparently formulated by him in preparing these lectures.

Besides being seminal for his later work, Smith‘s lectures had another more practical consequence: they brought him credibility and renown needed to land an important professorship which would support him in his most important research.

Phillipson surveys Smith’s tenure as a Professor at Glasgow from 1751 to 1763. (Smith was first elected to the chair of Logic and Metaphysics, and then in 1752 moved to the newly-vacant chair of Moral Philosophy). Glasgow at the time was rising rapidly in wealth and influence, and Smith’s stay was remarkably productive. In 1754-5, he began writing the first of his two great treatises, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (published in 1759). Phillipson’s discussion of the development and structure of this work is excellent. He covers in detail the major role that Hume’s work--especially Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751)and *Political Discourses* (1752)--played in Smith’s own work, as well as two books upon which Smith published reviews: Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality* (1756). Rousseau’s thought in particular looms large in Smith’s book.

After the publication (to considerable acclaim) of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith remained at Glasgow University for four more years. Phillipson shows that during those years Smith was beginning to assemble his thoughts for the second major treatise, now considered his masterwork, and Phillipson reviews the period (from 1764 to 1766) Smith spent as tutor to the young Duke of Buccleuch. This appointment allowed Smith to leave his professorship and the substantial call upon his time it involved, and offered him a substantial income for life. It was also a wise choice in that it afforded Smith to travel abroad, spending considerable time with the Duke in France. It was there he met Voltaire (whose writings Smith deeply admired) and other major intellectuals (though not Rousseau, that arch-critic of capitalism and the Enlightenment generally).

Especially important for Smith (who may have already been working on *The Wealth of Nations* during this period) were his discussions with the *economistes* (Quesnay and his group). Smith’s critique of their views is a prominent part of his later treatise. Phillipson covers this intellectual exchange with admirable lucidity.

Phillipson discusses the decade (from 1766-1776) that Smith--having returned first briefly to London and then to Kirkcaldy--wrote his masterwork. He then gives us a masterful survey of the book itself, as well as its quite favorable reception. In his survey of Smith’s book, Phillipson number of thought-provoking points, such as “For in the last resort, Smith was proposing to treat Quesnay as he had treated Condillac, Montesquieu and Rousseau in developing his rhetoric, jurisprudence and ethics--as the author of a brilliant, provocative but flawed contribution to the science of man.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

As Phillipson discusses in the penultimate chapter of his book, Hume--whose thought was so essential in developing both of Smith’s major treatises, and whose friendship was so important in life--presented Smith with a dilemma when he was dying. Hume had met with Smith in 1776 when Hume knew he was dying, and made Smith his literary executor. But Hume wanted Smith to see to it that upon Hume’s death the skeptical *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* would be published. This Smith declined to do, so Hume eventually sent a copy to his nephew and his publisher, and his nephew saw to it the book saw the light of day. Phillipson is puzzled at this, but I think the reason is likely this: Smith was a believer--not in orthodox Christianity, but perhaps a kind of deism--and a very tolerant one, and knew his great friend was an atheist. Smith simply didn’t want to be the man responsible for doing what he thought would destroy Hume’s reputation. Smith did write an obituary letter describing in glowing terms his friend’s brave acceptance of his illness and death, one that brought Smith some attacks. In his epilogue, Phillipson says that the people around Smith knew he was (like Hume) a skeptic, but he acknowledges Smith had signed a profession of faith in 1751 for his first appointment as professor, and--given Smith’s intellectual integrity--I doubt he would have done this without some degree of genuine religious belief.

Phillipson concludes his work with an account of the last dozen years of Smith’s life. Smith lived as a renowned and prosperous intellectual, but he did serve for a time as the Commissioner of Customs. His last scholarly work was a wide-ranging revision of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which he started in 1787 and completed in 1789. He died the following year.

In his epilogue, Phillipson incisively surveys the views the thinkers immediately following Smith (such as Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart) had of the Hume/Smith project of a “science of man.”

My only slight quarrel with this book--and it is minor, indeed--is that it doesn’t delve very deeply into Smith’s intellectual engagement with the uber-critic of the Enlightenment, Rousseau, a thinker who influenced profoundly every subsequent leftist opponent of capitalism form Marx on to this day. Here the reader may wish to look at Dennis Carl Rasmussen’s recent book, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith’s Response to Rousseau* (2008)*.*

But all in all, Phillipson’s book is simply brilliant.

I cannot resist a plug for an estimable organization, the Liberty Fund. This company has reprinted at a very affordable cost the key works by all the authors in the period of the Scottish Enlightenment, including all the writers pertinent to the book under review: Smith himself, of course, but also Hume, Hutcheson, Lord Kames (Henry Home), Mandeville, and the Earl of Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper).

**Gary James Jason**

**Department of Philosophy**

**California State University, Fullerton.**

1. Phillipson, Nicholas *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (2010) 346 pages. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.,* p. 218. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)