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## David Hume e Adam Smith Riflessioni su un libro

Nel 2017 Dennis C. Rasmussen ha pubblicato *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought* (Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press). Si tratta di uno studio destinato a suscitare un vivace dibattito sia per quel che concerne la revisione dell'immagine canonica dei due filosofi, sia per le implicazioni teoriche ad essa inevitabilmente legate. La discussione tra Eugenio Lecaldano e Paul Russell è seguita da una replica dello stesso Rasmussen.

EUGENIO LECALDANO

*Greater attention to the divergences between Hume and Smith rather than the convergences?*

Rasmussen's book provides all the essential information on the friendship between Hume and Smith, and it will certainly become an essential starting-point for all future research on these two philosophers. The book is not only complete, but well-written and fluent, and absolutely up-to-date on the secondary literature listed in the tight-packed apparatus of notes. Rasmussen reconstructs in detail the friendship between the two men, which began in Edinburgh in 1749 and continued until the final months of Hume's life in 1776. There is also further useful information – well documented by Rasmussen (pp. 229-38) – from the last years of Smith's life up to his death in 1790. The work centres on the nature of the friendship of the two men, and their characters are penetratingly reconstructed as they emerge from their letters or the testimony of those who were closest to them. Ras-

mussen does not merely collect all these sources, but rightly enlarges his perspective: «As philosophers and men of letters, much of their lives were dedicated to thinking and writing, and one of the primary forms their friendship took was engagement with one another's ideas and works. These ideas and works will accordingly play a major role in our story» (p. 3). Many of their writings are therefore expounded, with slightly more attention to Smith's, given that the exposition of Hume's main works is crammed into the first chapter «The Cheerful Skeptic» (pp. 18-35) on Hume's intellectual biography before his meeting with Smith. The interpretation of the works, however, aims to further document how much their friendship was also a matter of a deep intellectual sympathy. Rasmussen's subtle and important comparison of them also contains a comparative analysis of their approaches. It seems to me, however, that Rasmussen is mainly concerned to document the harmonious outcomes they achieve rather than bring out the full significance of their genuine differences. I shall try to provide some stimuli for the discussion with Rasmussen on this approach. My objection is that this outcome, which insists on the points of convergence as prevalent, requires us to start from a conception of the history of philosophical ideas that does not put the reconstruction of theories first, as I believe we should, but looks rather at the context in which these ideas were formed. Some of my comments will be influenced by my preference on some specific topics for interpretations that mark the theoretical distance between Hume and Smith. Given the brevity of this piece, which is not seeking to justify these alternative interpretations – which are in any case familiar to scholars of Hume and Smith – they should be seen rather as conjectures put forward for discussion.

Rasmussen claims – and in a certain sense he is right – that the friendship between Hume and Smith has «shaped modern thought». If we start from this, we might wonder if it does not make more sense to insist on their differences to get a better idea of their influence. Insisting more on the divergences is a way of escaping the image that the most fanatical of their ideological and religious adversaries offered of Hume and Smith, flattening the one on the other. Rasmussen himself documents this inclination to a complete unification

of the line of Hume and Smith, citing a passage in which James Boswell, addressing Samuel Johnson, urged him: «you might knock Hume's and Smith's heads together, and make vain and ostentatious infidelity exceedingly ridiculous. Would it not be worth your while to crush such noxious weeds in the moral garden?» (p. v). Demonstrating the presence of profoundly divergent theoretical lines in the works of Hume and Smith is also a way of underlining the fertility of the naturalistic perspective and of the science of man they elaborate, its capacity to generate many different coherent theories of the life of human beings. And also, we might say, a way of documenting the reciprocal tolerance that permeated their friendship.

Rasmussen repeatedly discusses their positions on religion. His interest in this theme is perfectly understandable, given the fact that so many interpreters have counterposed the sceptical radical and atheist Hume to the near-deist, or at most agnostic, Smith. Rasmussen, however, takes the view that the infidel and the professor share a rejection of religious conformity, doubt on the doctrines of theists, and criticism of religion as a source of moral corruption. The differences are merely superficial ones of character, so to speak. That is why the prudent Smith almost always avoids exposing himself publicly to express the irreligious points of his ideas, while Hume seems to glory in displaying these aspects, sometimes provocatively. In this line, then, Rasmussen tends to minimize the divergences such as the glaring one regarding the publication of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. But he may also overstate the anti-religious element in the publication of Smith's letter to Strahan in which he commemorates the Good David shortly after his death (letter reprinted in the *Appendix*, pp. 246-51). Rasmussen's own book documents exhaustively how Smith was already against the publication of the *Dialogues* when Hume was still alive and this opposition drove him even to refuse to try to get the work published after the author's death. As Rasmussen reconstructs it, however, one fails to understand Smith's opposition. The point is that in the *Dialogues* Hume went as far as to reject (through Philo) the argument from design, as well as the theory – dear to Smith – of the positive role for religion in spreading morality in society. But behind this dif-

ference there was perhaps a broader theoretical disagreement, which was confirmed and amplified in the *Dialogues*, on the nature of moral motivation, which – as I shall argue – seems to me to colour the whole story of Hume’s and Smith’s considerations of ethics. I shall also try to bring out differences that are not secondary on other questions that Rasmussen tends to present as converging: the conception of the virtues and the considerations on the main effects of the consolidation of commercial society on economics and politics.

The partiality of an approach that seeks to bring out the theoretical convergences between the two friends is already clear, then, as regards the theory of morals. Rasmussen himself recognizes this: «In Smith’s view all moral theories prior to his own were not so much incorrect as one-sided, seeking to base right and wrong too exclusively on a single feature of our moral lives. He regarded Hume’s theory as the most accurate yet developed, but still a bit reductive or incomplete. He thus sought to correct and extend Hume’s views in order to provide a more comprehensive picture, one that would do full justice to the complexity our moral lives» (p. 88). Hume would not have agreed that his reconstruction of morality was inadequate as it ignored some essentials. His approach may have been alternative to Smith’s as it was not interested in achieving a «comprehensive picture», but an overall reformulation of the conception of ethics in previous culture. It was precisely on this question that the theoretical projects of the two thinkers sharply differed. For Hume the primary task was to show that with the «science of human nature» the conception of the moral life could not be reduced to what theoreticians of natural law or Christian rationalism had defined. Those of Hume’s theories on ethics that Rasmussen presents as secondary differences compared to what Smith had endorsed were actually positions that marked sharply differentiated philosophical approaches. For example, on the plane of what is now called meta-ethics, Hume’s sees a much more decided connection of moral judgments with the sentiments and a tendency to regard them as an artificial creation with no realistic or rational basis, as a sort of projection that human beings make of the qualities they approve in conduct: as is well known, the recent current of «naturalist expressivism» sees Hume as its precursor, while it

certainly does not consider Smith as such. Quite apart from this theoretic diversity, other – sometimes profound – differences on sympathy between the two thinkers may also be explained. For Hume sympathy was an emotionally neutral mechanism for transmitting impressions and ideas, while for Smith it was charged with its own specific pleasures when it allowed a convergence with other people's feelings. Rasmussen seems to underestimate this difference while recognizing that «the first and most fundamental of Smith's divergences from Hume concerns the nature of sympathy» (p. 90). But he then continues: «Hume and Smith both use the term "sympathy" in a rather expansive sense to denote a kind of "fellow feeling" without any emotion, not just suffering or sorrow. Sympathy is thus broader than compassion or pity, for Hume and Smith; it is closer to what we generally refer to as 'empathy', though that term fits Smith's conception of sympathy somewhat better than Hume's. They are also in agreement in regarding this faculty as a fundamental feature of human makeup» (p. 90). But, if we consider what Hume writes on sympathy in the *Treatise*, his conception seems close to what we now call «empathy». In addition, the two distinct processes of sympathy give form to two very different procedures of forming and criticizing moral judgments. They are what Hume crystallizes theoretically by appealing to a «general point of view» and Smith by appealing to the decisive role of an «impartial spectator». On this too Rasmussen is happy to conclude that the two processes «have similar purposes and play similar roles in their respective moral theories» (p. 89). To me, however, Smith's appeal to the impartial spectator was functional to his need to construct a theory of ethics that would be as comprehensive as possible towards the main categories present in past culture. Indeed, his very recourse to a sympathy that was open to seeking the approval of an «impartial spectator» enables Smith to give free rein in his analysis – particularly throughout Part III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* – both to the motivating role of «conscience» and to the strong centrality of the «sense of duty» in ethics. Hume, by contrast, notoriously assimilated «conscience» to the «moral sense» in the *Treatise* and explained the space of the «sense of duty» in the moral life as artificial and derivative. On the one hand, then, we have a

theory such as Hume's, which resorts to sentiments and the associational resources of the imagination to account for a morality radically unlike that of the Christian tradition; on the other, an approach like Smith's, which seems more concerned to show how his theory can safeguard all the foundational results that past thought claimed to have reached. These are profound differences, which led the two philosophers to very different conceptions of the list of the main virtues, including on the applicative plane, the diagnosis of the economic and political effects on a commercial society, and the solution to great questions such as the acceptability of suicide. On this last point I am therefore very dubious about Rasmussen's minimalist approach: «Smith's discussion of suicide was likely occasioned by Hume's posthumous essay on the subject: though he does not go as far as Hume had in defending the morality of suicide, he does agree that "the unfortunate persons that perish in this miserable manner are the proper objects, not of censure, but of commiseration. To attempt to punish them, when they are beyond the reach of human punishment, is not more absurd than it is unjust"» (p. 233). As I have already argued, I would tend to consider the differences between Hume and Smith as anything but secondary<sup>1</sup>. Hume did not simply hope that the laws on suicide would be revised, but morally approved of it in many cases, regarding it as the expression of the natural freedom of human beings and – in his characteristically subdued way – as in some cases a genuine duty.

As Rasmussen documents (pp. 16-171), Hume's and Smith's ideas on the changes introduced by the rise of commercial society converged wholly when it was a matter of rejecting the approach of the mercantilists. But there was no shortage of difference on many other points. And Rasmussen recognizes this: «As usual though, Smith diverged from his friend's view in important respects [...] one area in which Smith deviated notably from Hume was his much greater readiness to acknowledge the potential drawbacks of commerce and commercial society» (p. 169). Rasmussen goes further, developing an interesting thesis, by which we can trace

<sup>1</sup> E. Lecaldano, *Hume on Suicide*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. by P. Russell, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 660-70.

a profound difference in their conception of happiness at the root of these differences. In fact: «Hume maintained that action is a key ingredient of happiness and hence in commercial societies, where people are “kept in perpetual occupation”, they “enjoy as their reward” not just the fruits of their labour but also “the occupation itself”. Smith maintains in stark contrast, that “happiness consists in tranquillity and enjoyment” and he insists – even in the WN – that labor is “toil and trouble” and it requires an individual to “lay down (a) portion of his ease, his liberty, and his happiness” [...]. For Smith, then, very much unlike for Hume, the wealth of nations is made possible only by a massive self-deception about the true nature and source of happiness» (p. 170). In effect, what are at stake here are the profound differences that I have tried to describe in relation to ethics. More specifically, the dispute here concerns the formulation of different theories of virtue. What distinguishes the two conceptions is the different space they recognize for the legacy of the formulation of virtue in stoicism and Christianity. Hume generally stands aloof from the stoic-Christian tradition, criticizing the «monastic virtues», while Smith in his *TMS* aimed to set out a theory that might also embrace the leading virtues of that tradition. One need only think of the importance Smith gives to the virtue of self-command.

Finally, we need to seek more profound theoretical reasons for Hume’s greater optimism as to the outcome and effects of commercial society, compared with Smith. Rasmussen rightly notes how their analyses differ (pp. 169-70), but he certainly does not seem interested in providing a more structured account of these differences. And yet he did just this in one of his previous works, comparing the ideas of Smith and Rousseau, remarking not only the differences but carefully reconstructing various lines of influence that the French thinker had on Smith<sup>2</sup>. And one might claim that an account of the vicissitudes of this influence could be an ideal litmus test for bringing out more clearly how close and how distant Hume and Smith were in how they viewed the consequenc-

<sup>2</sup> D.C. Rasmussen, *The Problem and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith’s Response to Rousseau*, University Park (PA), Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.

es of commercial society. Not only divergences in recognizing the extent of the corrupting power of commercial society, but also concerning the role of conscience, duty and piety in human life could be derived from Smith's reading of Rousseau, unlike what happened (partly for chronological reasons) for Hume.

As for the changes that commercial society generates in governments and political authority, especially in the contexts of international relations, Rasmussen documents with his usual care the differences between Hume and Smith. Here too I wonder if he can accept the profounder theoretical differences that I shall try to indicate here. Hume in his political philosophy always seems to me to be trying to distance himself from any form of contractualism and to advance a sharp alternative to it in terms of a conventionalist and sentimental theory on the origin, change and bases of the political order, while though Smith, as Amartya Sen puts it, rejects transcendental institutionalism, he is concerned – once again perhaps under the influence of Rousseau – with finding room in his analysis for less apriori forms of contractualism. This theoretical diversity may help account for some diversities in the specific solutions preferred by Hume and Smith to the political questions, including economic policy, of their time. Here I want simply to mention a case of diversity that is well documented by Rasmussen himself. He shows us (pp. 177-80) that Hume and Smith «were both firmly in radical camp» in the conflict between Great Britain and the American colonies. But he then characterizes Hume's position as wavering between the radicalism that drove him to declare, «I am an American in my Principles and wish we would let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper», and acceptance of independence for pragmatic reasons. As Rasmussen explains, at bottom «Hume believed that they [relations] were an economic, political and military burden and that all sides would benefit from ending the colonial relationship and setting up a system of free trade» (p. 178), while when Smith dealt with the question in greater detail in Book IV of *WN* in 1776, and the war had already been in progress for a year, he suggested various solutions and criticized the position of those who appealed to the abstract principle of freedom as that of «enthusiastic visionaries». He



preferred a union between the Americas and Great Britain similar to that of 1707 between Scotland and England, and ended up accepting the voluntary separation of the American colonies, forced to recognize that the English project of constructing an empire had failed (pp. 179-80). They are the different results that one might expect from two thinkers who formulated two different theories of politics. For his part, Hume's sentimental conventionalism saw political institutions as generated by weights and counterweights that have been accidentally created in social relations, while Smith tended to reconstruct an autonomous space for political institutions that therefore operate as distinct and easily recognizable causes and principles of changes in social conduct and that cannot be explained as a mere sentimental convergence. In this case too, following Hume and Smith in their friendship and discussions may enable us to identify their involvement in formulating distinct theoretical approaches – ones of great influence in the following centuries – rather than a simple confluence on converging positions.

PAUL RUSSELL

*Titolo*

«All I can do is to urge on you to regard friendship as the greatest thing in the world; for there is nothing that so fits in with our nature, or is so exactly what we want in prosperity or adversity»<sup>3</sup>. This lesson, taken from Cicero, was not lost on either David Hume or Adam Smith. The friendship between these two great thinkers is elegantly and lucidly presented in Dennis Rasmussen's *The Infidel and the Professor*. The subtitle of this work is *David Hume, Adam Smith and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought*, which is in most respects an accurate and uncontroversial way of presenting the story that unfolds. It is certainly true, for example, that both these thinkers rank among the greatest philosophers and writers of any age, and their major works, which are lightly described and reviewed in this study, have indeed shaped modern thought. There is, however, another ques-

<sup>3</sup> Cicero: *On Friendship, or Laelius*, para. 5.

tion raised by the subtitle and that is to what extent their *friendship* served to shape their thought and the enormous influence that their writings enjoyed. That these two thinkers enjoyed a close and admirable friendship is beyond doubt. That their friendship was of importance to the development of their thought is a matter that requires a more qualified assessment.

The details that Rasmussen provides his readers with concerning the origins and nature of the Hume-Smith friendship help to make clear why there is some difficulty in gauging the role of this friendship in the development of their thought and writings. Hume and Smith did not meet until the autumn of 1749. By that time Hume was already in his late thirties and had published his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) nearly a decade earlier. Hume had already written and published the first *Enquiry* (1748) and his second *Enquiry*, on morals, was published shortly after this, in 1751. For this reason these works by Hume could not have been significantly influenced by Smith, who did not publish his first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, until 1759 – almost a decade after he first met Hume. Although Hume and Smith became regular correspondents – material that serves as the basis of much of Rasmussen’s book – they saw each other only at irregular intervals, sometimes not seeing each other for a period of years and rarely for any extended period of time. Considerations of this kind make clear that their friendship had to exist mostly on the basis of separation and intermittent contact. At the same time, as Rasmussen makes clear, their personal relations were close and warm and they shared a great many intellectual interests – including a high regard for each other’s work. Nevertheless, none of this should obscure significant differences between the two thinkers, both in terms of their character and personalities and in terms of their intellectual commitments and orientation.

Hume and Smith not only shared Scottish origins and identity, they also both grew up fatherless and with strong attachment to their mothers. Both were educated at Scottish universities – Hume at Edinburgh and Smith at Glasgow – that were flourishing at this time. Unlike Hume, Smith went down to study at Oxford, an experience that he found less than rewarding. Both these thinkers also experienced a sort

of «mental crisis» in their early years, probably due to excessive study. Although in all these respects they had much in common, their personalities were very different in several respects. Hume, as Rasmussen presents him, was engaging, gregarious and «one of the best-natured philosophers who ever lived» (pp. 46, 48). Smith, on the other hand, was a more awkward character, who was both absent-minded and rather mild natured. These differences in their personal manner and style did not, however, prevent them from enjoying each other's company and, according to Rasmussen, «there is arguably no higher example of a philosophical friendship in the entire Western tradition» (pp. 6, 221). All this makes for pleasant reading and, as Rasmussen notes, a welcome point of contrast with books devoted to «feuds and quarrels» (p. 5). Perhaps for this reason there is a slight tendency in this study to present a sentimental and, in places, oversimplified account of these two thinkers. This is especially true as concerns Hume, who encountered more serious conflicts and problematic relations with a number of other thinkers who were out to challenge and discredit him. In Hume's case, this brought out some tougher and steelier character traits, which Rasmussen, like some other biographers and historians, tends to downplay in favour of the preferred image of *le bon David*. Although Rasmussen is concerned to avoid any 'caricatures' or clichés in his account of these two thinkers he does not always follow through on this. Nevertheless, if this is a (minor) failing in Rasmussen's book, it is much less pronounced than it is in most other studies of this kind.

The foundation of the Hume-Smith friendship was, as Rasmussen's work makes clear, that they enjoyed similar intellectual interests and pursuits. This is most apparent if we consider Smith's two books: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. These two books were the only works that Smith published in his lifetime. Unlike Hume, Smith wrote slowly and with some difficulty. His philosophical range was also somewhat narrower and more limited. Whereas it is difficult to identify or confirm any significant debt that Hume owed Smith in his major works, there is strong evidence that Smith engaged with Hume's views and doctrines in both *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and in *The Wealth of Nations*. From this we may conclude – although

Rasmussen does not emphasize this a great deal – that the *importance* of the relationship between Hume and Smith was *asymmetrical* as regards the *development* of their thought and works. With respect to Smith's debts to Hume, Rasmussen suggests that there is stronger evidence in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* than there is in *The Wealth of Nations* of Smith engaging directly with Hume's views and arguments (pp. 87, 162). At the same time, Rasmussen also maintains that Hume's importance and influence is still evident in both works and that there is «much to suggest that Hume also played a key role in the development of Smith's views on political economy» (p. 161).

While there are points of obvious overlapping interest, it is no less clear that Hume's philosophical and intellectual orientation was very different from Smith's. In particular, unlike Smith, Hume's early contributions focused heavily on metaphysics and epistemology – subjects that Smith wrote little about. Hume also enjoyed a huge reputation due to the success of his *The History of England*, published in several volumes during the period of 1754-1761. Given these various points of contrast in their philosophical orientation and intellectual interests, as well as their asymmetrical relationship with respect to the development of their views, it is important not to *overstate* the significance of the Hume-Smith relationship – especially as a basis for understanding of Hume's thought and concerns. It remains true, nevertheless, that even if their views and interests diverged in significant ways, and the extent or degree of direct influence they had on each other varied, a *comparison* of their views and outlooks is of considerable interest and illuminates their thought and the times that they lived in.

One of the notable merits of Rasmussen's enjoyable and valuable study is that he places heavy and appropriate emphasis, throughout his book, on the issue of religion as it concerns both these thinkers (pp. xi, 9, 14). The tendency of Rasmussen's analysis is to push their views close together, suggesting that the main difference between them was rooted in Smith's preference to conceal or keep quiet about his real views (pp. 11-17, 29, 53, 101, 109, 196-98). Neither thinker, Rasmussen plausibly suggests, was a believing Christian but beyond this there is considerable disagreement about

the exact nature of the positions they actually embraced. Early on in this study Rasmussen informs his readers that «religion was one of Hume's primary preoccupations» (p. 14). This leaves some wiggle room concerning just *how central* religion was or was not to Hume's thought. Having said this, Rasmussen goes on to note Hume's *systematic* irreligious aims and concerns – a theme that dominates much of his presentation of Hume's work and reputation. At the same time, Rasmussen endorses the familiar claim that Hume was not an atheist but rather a skeptic or agnostic (p. 14 – see also pp. 25, 77, 125, 221-22). In partial contrast with this Rasmussen presents Smith as more of a «skeptical deist» (pp. 16-17 – see also pp. 101-103). None of these distinctions, Rasmussen maintains, would have mattered much to their orthodox contemporaries – since skepticism, deism and atheism all imply disbelief in Christianity.

I am not persuaded by Rasmussen's claim that Hume was an agnostic, even though this is, arguably, the dominant view among Hume scholars. (Hume biographers and 'intellectual historians' seem especially attracted to this view and, over the years, have done much to obscure and confuse some of the issues related to understanding this matter.) I have argued elsewhere that Hume's views on this subject are much less neutral or disengaged than any description of him as a mere skeptic or agnostic would suggest. His views are deeply hostile to theology, the Church and clergy, and to religion in general. His general outlook is better described as «irreligious» – a term that Rasmussen also uses in various contexts – and, as such, falls much closer to «atheism» under any reasonable interpretation<sup>4</sup>. To what extent, then, was Smith (similarly) «irreligious»? Rasmussen rightly points out that this is a difficult matter to gauge because Smith was not only «prudent» but timid and evasive about expressing his views on this subject in an open manner. There is, however, little evidence – and Rasmussen cites none – that Smith

<sup>4</sup> Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Paul Russell, "Hume's Philosophy of Irreligion and the Myth of British Empiricism", in P. Russell, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Hume* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 109-37.

shared Hume's «strong aversion» to Christianity or that this was a matter of deep importance to Smith, in the way that was for Hume. Having said this, as Rasmussen points out, later in life Smith made some revisions to the final edition of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, removing some passages that had appeared in earlier editions that presented religion in a more favourable light (pp. 15, 103, 233). Rasmussen remains undecided about whether these changes late in Smith's life reveal «increased skepticism or reduced caution».

One of the pieces of evidence Rasmussen cites that make it especially difficult to arrive at a clear picture of Smith's (mature) thoughts about religion concerns an early essay by Smith – *The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries* – which was posthumously published. This work is, perhaps, Smith's most irreligious contribution (pp. 40-44) and Rasmussen notes the «almost eerie degree» to which his treatment of religion in this early essay anticipates some of the more notable and aggressively irreligious doctrines and arguments that Hume subsequently presented in his *Natural History of Religion* (1757). Although Smith's *Principles* was composed before Hume's *Natural History of Religion* Hume did not learn about the existence of Smith's work until 1773 and so, as Rasmussen notes, we have no reason to believe that this was a case of Smith having some direct influence on Hume's writings. Nevertheless, if the *Principles* is representative of Smith's (mature and sincere) outlook then his hostility to religion approaches more closely to Hume's and what separates them is largely rooted in the practical question about how open an author should be in expressing irreligious views of this kind.

There is at least one important consideration, of a more substantial kind, that may help to explain why Hume and Smith diverged on the practical question concerning how openly and publicly they should express their irreligious (or atheist) views. One of the central debates at this time concerned the relationship between religion and morality – an issue that is fundamental to Hume's overall philosophical outlook and agenda. As Rasmussen points out, Hume's position was that not only is religion not necessary for morality, it tends to corrupt and pervert moral conduct (pp. 101-03). Whatever Smith's *earlier* views may have been (i.e.

in the *Principles*), in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith suggests that religious faith has important practical benefits and, in particular, it serves as a support to morality. Given this difference, we can make better sense of Smith's very different attitudes to openly expressing irreligious opinions of any kind. On this reading, Smith's disagreement with Hume is not simply a matter of prudence or timidity but rather a matter of philosophical and ethical principle – since attacking religion would constitute an indirect attack on morality. This view of things would place Smith in a much more conservative and conformist position than anything Hume would endorse and suggests that there was some real *distance* between these two thinkers on this subject<sup>5</sup>.

Differences between Hume and Smith of this kind are of further importance or significance because they also help to explain one of the most famous episodes that tested their friendship. In early 1776 Hume, knowing that he would not live long, asked Smith to ensure that Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* would be published after he died. Smith was unwilling to do this, a decision that certainly occasioned some disappointment and frustration on Hume's end. It was Hume's nephew who eventually saw to it that the *Dialogues* were published. Given that Smith had earlier asked Hume to ensure that *The Wealth of Nations* was published, if Smith's health failed, it is at least puzzling why he refused to agree to Hume's request about a matter of such importance to his friend. Rasmussen is inclined to explain – and excuse – Smith's decision in terms of Smith's sincere worries about both his own tranquility and about Hume's posthumous reputation (p. 196). Rasmussen is not persuaded that Smith was «overly troubled by Hume's skepticism» – since their respective religious views were, he claims, fairly close. There remains, however, the real possibility that there was substantial and significant disagreement between these two friends on the subject of the relationship between religion

<sup>5</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the contrast between Hume and Smith on this subject can be characterized as the difference between a “strong” and a “weak” irreligious ethical system: “*L'irreligione e lo spettatore imparziale nel sistema morale di Adam Smith*” [Irreligion and the Impartial Spectator in Smith's Moral System], translated by E. Lecaldano, *Rivista di Filosofia*, 3 (2005), 375-403.

and morality (a possibility that Rasmussen is certainly alive to). If this is correct, then Hume and Smith stood further apart on issues of religion than Rasmussen's presentation suggests.

It might be said, by way of reply to all this, that although Smith refused to publish the *Dialogues*, shortly after Hume died he did publish a *Letter to Strachan* (Strachan was Hume's publisher). In this much cited letter Smith praised Hume in the strongest and most unqualified terms. In doing this Smith makes it very clear that a person, such as Hume, could lead a moral life without religion (p. 222). Rasmussen helpfully catalogues the hostile response that Smith's letter aroused among the orthodox, who continued to hound and smear Hume even in death. On the face of it, therefore, there is some inconsistency or tension in the decisions that Smith took in dealing with Hume's death and his final legacy. This may indicate that Smith's own views and attitudes, as they concerned the subject of religion, were less stable and settled than Hume's and that this led Smith in different directions in his dealings with such matters, both in his writings and practical affairs.

Rasmussen's book covers many other details and episodes relating to the lives of these close friends and great thinkers that I have not mentioned. In this brief review it is not possible to do full justice to this lively and lucidly presented study. It is fair to say, I think, that the considerable merits of this work rest primarily with its intelligent and reliable selection of material, most of which is already available and familiar. This study does not aim to challenge any orthodoxies or present new material of some significant kind. Rasmussen does not need to do this since his real concern is to tell a story about two great thinkers in an engaging manner – a task which he achieves with great success. This is a book that scholars will thoroughly enjoy and appreciate and which will also find many appreciative readers well beyond these boundaries.



DENNIS C. RASMUSSEN

A Response to Lecaldano and Russell

I would like to begin by expressing my deep appreciation to Professor Lecaldano for proposing this discussion of *The Infidel and the Professor*, and to both Lecaldano and Professor Russell for their rich, thoughtful, and generous comments. My primary aim in writing the book was simply to tell the story of Hume and Smith's friendship – including both their personal interactions and the impact that each had on the other's outlook – in an accessible and engaging manner, and I am particularly pleased that Lecaldano and Russell both seem to think that I managed to achieve this objective. Their queries regarding my interpretations of Hume and Smith overlap a great deal, so I will do my best to reply to them in tandem, though space does not permit me to respond to every point in their fertile remarks.

The overarching criticism in both sets of comments is that I overemphasize the convergences and downplay some of the important differences between Hume and Smith. I must admit that, if anything, I worried that I had done the reverse – that is, that I had dwelled too much on the divergences between the two at the expense of bringing out the deep underlying commonalities – especially given that I was seeking primarily to convey the basic outlines of their thought to a general audience, and only secondarily speaking to Hume and Smith specialists. For instance, in the chapter on Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I spend only a few paragraphs (pp. 88-90) on the broad structural similarities between Hume's and Smith's moral theories, including the fact that they both treat morality as an eminently practical and human phenomenon rather than one based on any kind of sacred, mysterious, or otherworldly authority; they both hold that morality derives from the sentiments rather than reason; and they both posit that right and wrong are established by the sentiments that we feel when we adopt the proper perspective, one that corrects for personal biases and misinformation. I then devote most of the remainder of the chapter (pp. 90-103) to four key areas where Smith diverged from Hume's views, namely with regard to sympathy, utility, justice, and religion. More generally, throughout the

book I insist that Smith never «simply adopted Hume's views wholesale. On the contrary [...] he modified almost everything he touched» (p. 11). For someone encountering Hume and Smith for the first time – and I take it that many of the book's readers have been in this situation – all of this probably *overstates* the differences between the two in the broad scheme of things (say, in comparison to a Locke or a Rousseau or a Kant).

As experts on the thought of Hume and Smith, however, Lecaldano and Russell are of course right to highlight what they regard as my flattening out of some of the important differences between the two. They both point, in particular, to the relationship between morality and religion as a key area of divergence. Lecaldano writes that «Hume generally stands aloof from the stoic-Christian tradition, criticizing the “monastic virtues” while Smith in his *TMS* aimed to set out a theory that might also embrace the leading virtues of that tradition». Similarly, Russell contends that «Hume's position was that not only is religion not necessary for morality, it tends to corrupt and pervert moral conduct», whereas «in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith suggests that religious faith has important practical benefits and, in particular, it serves as a support to morality [...]. This view of things would place Smith in a much more conservative and conformist position than anything Hume would endorse and suggests that there was some real *distance* between these two thinkers on this subject». The fact that Smith saw greater practical benefits – or at least *potential* benefits – in religion than Hume is one to which I return repeatedly in the book (see, for example, pp. 15, 16, 101-103, 109, 174-77, 196), though clearly Lecaldano and Russell regard the point as sufficiently fundamental that it should have been given even greater weight. I concede that Lecaldano is probably right to suggest that I could have made more of the important role that the conscience plays in Smith's moral theory, along with its relative absence in Hume's; I do mention it on p. 90, but only in passing. And I agree entirely with Russell that there is «little evidence [...] that Smith shared Hume's “strong aversion” to Christianity or that this was a matter of deep importance to Smith, in the way that it was for Hume».

Still, I remain committed to my broader argument on this score: Smith's religious views were substantially closer to Hume's – which is to say, substantially more skeptical – than is usually assumed, and his position on the relationship between morality and religion was probably closer to Hume's than, say, to that of his teacher Francis Hutcheson. Throughout the book I cite abundant evidence from Smith's life, correspondence, and writings that suggests that he was suspicious of most forms of religious belief and devotion. I cannot replicate all of the evidence here, of course, but I will include a few representative examples from each category. While the anecdotal record regarding Smith's private life is sparse, much of it points to a general lack of piety. For instance, he was famously caught and punished for reading Hume's *Treatise* while a student at Oxford, so his *interest* in skeptical philosophy certainly started early; contemporaries frequently noted that he was «very guarded in conversation» when the topic of religion came up; and one of his first actions upon taking up his position as a professor at Glasgow University was to ask to be freed from the customary duty of opening each day's class with a prayer – and while the request was denied, he did manage to dispense with Hutcheson's usual practice of delivering a religious lecture to his students every Sunday (see pp. 15, 39-40, 51-52). Similarly, Smith's correspondence – which is also rather sparse – contains numerous offhand statements and ironic asides that seem to indicate a less than favorable view of religion. Here I will confine myself to just two examples, both connected to Hume. When Smith wrote to Hume to introduce him to a Genevan friend, one Charles Bonnet, he described Bonnet as «one of the worthiest, and best hearted men in Geneva or indeed in the world; notwithstanding he is one of the most religious» (letter to Hume, 9 May 1775). As Hume approached his death, Smith informed one of their mutual friends that «poor David Hume is dying very fast, but with great cheerfulness and good humour and with more real resignation to the necessary course of things, than any Whining Christian ever dyed with pretended resignation to the will of God» (letter to Alexander Wedderburn, 14 August 1776).

Still further evidence comes from Smith's writings beyond *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. One of his earliest works,

*The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries*, examines the rise of religious belief in thoroughly naturalistic terms. Smith does not explicitly rule out the possibility of there being an ordered world or an intelligent designer, but the whole work has a distinctly deflationary character, providing unflattering psychological and sociological explanations for beliefs that were widely assumed to emanate from reason, if not from God himself (for discussion, see pp. 40-44). It is, as Russell notes, probably «Smith's most irreligious contribution». Likewise, Smith's most famous work, *The Wealth of Nations*, is strikingly secular in language and outlook; there are no references to «God», «providence», or «the author of nature» (Smith's favorite term for the deity) anywhere in the lengthy book, and Smith's scattered comments on the moral, social, and political effects of Christianity are generally quite critical. For instance, in a passage reminiscent of Hume's derision of the useless and disagreeable «monkish virtues» in the *Second Enquiry*, Smith contrasts «the liberal, generous, and spirited conduct of a man» with «penance and mortification» and «the austerities and abasement of a monk» (WN V.i.f.30). At one point he goes so far as to proclaim that during the Middle Ages the Catholic Church constituted «the most formidable combination that ever was formed against the authority and security of civil government, as well as against the liberty, reason, and happiness of mankind, which can flourish only where civil government is able to protect them» (V.i.g.24). Finally, Smith's public account of Hume's last days, death, and character, the *Letter from Adam Smith, LL.D. to William Strahan, Esq.*, aroused as much religious controversy as anything Hume himself published (for discussion, see Ch. 12). Smith's description of Hume as a paragon of wisdom and virtue and his constant references to Hume's cheerfulness in his final months and days are difficult to read as anything other than a deliberate challenge to the devout.

In some respects, then, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* appears to be something of an outlier in Smith's corpus on this score. In this work he repeatedly invokes the idea of a providential order and frequently depicts the belief in God and an afterlife as having important practical benefits, above all in providing consolation and buttressing morality. As Lecaldano and Russell rightly note – and as I myself empha-

sized in my book – this aspect of Smith’s thought *does* distance him somewhat from Hume. On the other hand, it is also worth noting that none of Smith’s core arguments in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* ultimately depend on religious premises; in every instance in which he has recourse to «the author of nature» to explain a point, he also offers a more worldly explanation as well. Indeed, one of the central purposes of his moral theory, like Hume’s, was to show that morality comes from human beings themselves rather than from the word or will of God. Moreover, when Smith ventures onto religious terrain in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* his writing frequently becomes evasive or equivocal; he repeatedly declares that «we suppose» God thinks this or «it seems» that God does that. And most of these passages focus less on God than on our *beliefs* about God; at bottom it is a theory of human nature that Smith puts forward in these passages, a commentary on our emotional and intellectual needs.

Still further, even Smith’s claims about the moral benefits of religion are regularly hedged with important qualifications. For instance, in one famous passage he suggests that «the world [...] justly places a double confidence in the rectitude of the religious man’s behaviour» – but only when a large number of conditions are satisfied: «wherever the natural principles of religion are not corrupted by the factious and party zeal of some worthless cabal; wherever the first duty which it requires, is to fulfill all the obligations of morality; wherever men are not taught to regard frivolous observances, as more immediate duties of religion, than acts of justice and beneficence; and to imagine, that by sacrifices, and ceremonies, and vain supplications, they can bargain with the Deity for fraud, and perfidy, and violence» (TMS III.5.13). As I note in the book, Hume himself may not have disagreed with this claim; he would merely point out that these requirements are rarely all met at once (p. 103). In the following chapter Smith goes on to note, once again in a Humean vein, that «false notions of religion are almost the only causes which can occasion any very gross perversion of our [moral] sentiments» (TMS III.6.12). While Smith holds that belief in God and an afterlife often supports morality, then, he certainly does not conclude that it always does so. Elsewhere he

criticizes, in quite mocking fashion, the idea that «the duties of devotion, the public and private worship of the Deity» are the most important of virtues. He suggests that God is not so weak and craven as to need constant adulation, and – in another echo of Hume’s critique of the «monkish virtues» – he ridicules «the futile mortifications of a monastery» as inconsequential compared to «the arts which contribute to the subsistence, to the conveniency, or to the ornament of human life» (TMS III.2.34-35).

The idea that Smith saw religion as unnecessary to live a moral life is strongly reinforced by the *Letter to Strahan*. His (in)famous concluding declaration that Hume approached «as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit» suggests that his model of wisdom and virtue was not a Christian saint, but rather his unbelieving friend. Again, none of this is to say that Smith was as skeptical as Hume was, that he deemed religion as thoroughly harmful as Hume did, or that the ills of religion were as central to his thinking as they were to Hume’s – I insist the contrary throughout *The Infidel and the Professor*. But I do believe that the differences between them on all of these scores were more shades of gray than black and white, and that Smith’s outlook was much closer to Hume’s than has generally been recognized.

Neither Lecaldano nor Russell seems to have been persuaded by my case that Smith’s refusal to posthumously publish Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* was perfectly understandable, and need not be read as indicating any kind of discomfort with Hume’s skepticism (see Ch. 10). To a certain extent this is to be expected, insofar as that was perhaps the book’s most controversial argument, one in which I sought to overturn an overwhelming scholarly consensus. However, neither Lecaldano nor Russell mentions the most important piece of evidence that I adduce in making my case, namely that Hume himself refrained from publishing the *Dialogues* for a full *two and a half decades*, and moreover did so for *exactly the same reasons* that Smith refused to do so after Hume’s death. Smith explained in a letter to his and Hume’s publisher, William Strahan, that he was wary of the public «clamour» that the book would provoke and the effects that it would have on his own «qui-

et» and on Hume's posthumous reputation (letter to Strahan, October 1776). Though Hume completed the first draft of the *Dialogues* in the early 1750s, he did not so much as mention the work to Strahan until a few months before his death, and when he did he explained why he had not published it long ago: «I have hitherto forborne to publish it, because I was of late desirous to live quietly, and keep remote from all Clamour» (letter to Strahan, 8 June 1776). Even the wording of their explanations is nearly identical.

The more perplexing question, I suggest, is not why Smith refused to publish the *Dialogues* but rather why Hume was suddenly so adamant about publication after holding the work back for twenty-five years, and even more why he sought to foist this obligation on Smith. Hume may have reckoned that he had little left to lose at that point, with one foot almost in the grave, but obviously Smith was not in the same position. Moreover, Hume knew full well that Smith was always anxious to preserve his privacy and tranquility – his «quiet». It would not have taken a great feat of sympathy to realize that Smith would be averse to the public «clamor» that Hume himself foresaw would be provoked by the *Dialogues*. Nor should it be forgotten that Hume asked Smith to bear this burden only a month and a half after *The Wealth of Nations* was published. Given the many years of painstaking effort that Smith had poured into the book, the great anticipation that surrounded its release, and Smith's high hopes that its arguments would prove influential in both thought and practice, this was among the worst possible times for him to become mired in public controversy. All things considered, then, I argue that Hume's part in this exchange is more difficult to account for than Smith's.

One final point about the book's subtitle, *David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought*, which Russell uses as the point of departure for his comments and which Lecaldano also mentions. I confess that the subtitle was chosen by my editor at Princeton; my original subtitle, which was simply *The Friendship and Philosophy of David Hume and Adam Smith*, was deemed insufficiently sexy. I worried that the flashier subtitle might misrepresent the book somewhat, insofar as the main focus is Hume and Smith's personal and intellectual relationship, rather than how that rela-

tionship «shaped modern thought». I ultimately consented to use it, however, because I think the point it conveys is indisputable: Hume and Smith's friendship deeply shaped Smith's thought, and Smith's thought in turn deeply shaped modern thought – indeed the modern world more generally. This remarkable friendship seems to me eminently worthy of further examination, and I conclude by thanking Lecaldano and Russell once again for joining me in this pursuit.

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