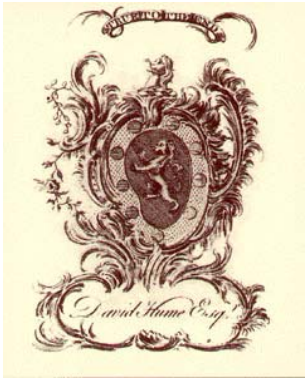

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CHARLES L. GRISWOLD, JR. *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xiv + 412. ISBN 0-521-62127-5,. $59.95, cloth.

In this book, Charles Griswold attempts to make Adam Smith speak to a postmodern generation by taking an extended detour through antiquity. The frames of reference that pervade his long, thoughtful, unfailingly engaging, though not concisely written book include next to nothing about the significance of a "sympathy" theory for modern social psychology, or about evolutionary theory (see James Q. Wilson's suggestive 1993 *The Moral Sense*) or modern economic theory. Nor is much effort made to pin down the eighteenth-century context of Smith's enterprise. (The contemporary resonance of eighteenth-century terms is sometimes missed: *philosophes* are confused with "philosophers," police with a constabulary, "moral"-as-prescription with "moral"-as-description; cf. 9, 36, 46.) Instead, the book takes Smith primarily as a moral philosopher in the grand Western tradition (there are roughly three times as many references to Plato and Aristotle as to Hutcheson and Hume),while nonetheless arguing for the deep meaningfulness of such a Smith to a postmodern audience.

Griswold's first book was a study of the *Phaedrus*, and he here views Smith very much through the lens of Plato's dialogic tradition. He rejects the notion—popularized by Cambridge-school writers such as Pocock and others—that there may be some kind of tension between discourses of "civic humanism" and of "natural jurisprudence" in Smith's thought. Instead, deploying an interpretive "principle of charity" that is more redolent of 1950s-vintage New Criticism than of any of the prominent postmodern schools, he sees Smith's entire enterprise as unfolding "in a dialectical and balanced manner" (26, 229 n. 3).

Though the book's argument is complex and nuanced, and moves confidently and authoritatively over topics ranging from religion to aesthetics to rhetoric (the discussion of religion on 266–292 is particularly searching), its essential claim may be summarized as follows. Smith's moral philosophy is not an attempt to apply Newtonian method to human affairs, nor a Stoic adaptation of eighteenth-century natural law, but rather a dramatic, even literary exercise in criticism—best compared to theater criticism. The role of the critic (signaled in the figure of the "impartial spectator") brings the moral philosopher inescapably into the framework of common life, however; there is no real escaping the "cave." Instead, in a fashion that should be understandable to us postmoderns, there is a continual "interplay of voices" that keeps the critic engaged in conversation and that weans us from the expectation of simple or final answers (40, 52, 68–69, 73–74). Unlike Plato, too, Smith is a skeptic (of a

certain kind) who draws relentlessly and inevitably upon the resources of common life for whatever partial insights are available about our shared moral condition.

Griswold wants to suggest that such an approach to moral philosophy could help us to answer a crucial question we all face: namely, how are we to preserve the offspring of the Enlightenment that we all enjoy—such as the prosperity of a market economy, the blessings of a free and limited government, and the openness of a progressive system of science—while rejecting the naively optimistic Enlightenment philosophy that historically came with it? "We sense that we have spent our moral and intellectual inheritance and lack the means to generate it anew," Griswold writes (7). Adam Smith's moral philosophy is one way, he argues, to regenerate that inheritance (cf. 361).

But how can the supposed "interplay of voices" that Griswold sees at the heart of Smith's enterprise bring about such a large benefit? How, for example, can definitive and convincing closure ever be brought to moral argument by Griswold's Smith? The historicist or relativist tendencies of a sympathy-based theory seem, Griswold allows (following other commentators), to be in tension with the more universalist requirements of normative morality. The author's answer is that although there is circularity in such a theory, it is largely overcome by the "suppleness and porousness" of Smith's conception of the resources that daily life can bring to the moral conversation that is at the heart of ethical theorizing (196–197).

He cites the example of slavery, writing that "if a slave owner were insensible to all appeals of humanity," of justice, and of the economic disutility of the system, "he would fall outside the sphere of ethical conversation . . . discussion would come to an end" (201). But surely the slave owner would fight sympathy with sympathy in such an argument. He might tell rending stories of the barbarism of the African tribal life from which his slaves came, or uplifting tales of redemption associated with the Christianization many slaves underwent, or heart-warming accounts of the civilizing of "house-slaves" under a frankly paternalistic plantation regime. They would not be, and were not, closed out of the circle of conversation as easily as Griswold's Smith imagines. However wise and deep a moral philosopher Adam Smith may have been—and Griswold shows convincingly that he was considerably more complex a thinker than is often allowed—it is still not likely to be clear to most readers where the claims of sympathy need to yield to the claims of reason.

Still, Griswold is clearly right to distinguish the current, postmodern "interplay of voices" from the moral dialogue that Smith had in mind. By labeling the former an "actor-based" ethics (the privileging of subjective perspectives so characteristic of our "identity politics"), he puts Smith's "spectator-based" ethics in a fresh light (99 ff., 105, 108, 109, 153). The spectator is both indefeasibly engaged in the rhythms and commitments of the common life of his neighbors and detached from the most vital or visceral responses to

which all of us are subject. In ways not unreminiscent of the Hume who appeared in Donald Livingston's *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, Griswold's Smith is suspicious of the corrosive and reductive tendencies of mere "philosophy" against these mundane resources (202, 245). As such, the spectator model at least attempts to provide some discipline upon the tendencies toward solipsism and narcissism that continually threaten a civilization committed to the pursuit of individual happiness, tendencies of which Smith himself was certainly aware.

Griswold's *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* is for this and other reasons likely to be of considerable interest to students of Adam Smith's moral theory for some time to come.

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