



Review of Leonidas Montes and Eric Schliesser, eds. *New Voices on Adam Smith*

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Leonidas Montes and Eric Schliesser, eds. *New Voices on Adam Smith*. London: Routledge, 2006. Pp. xxi + 364. ISBN 0-415-35696-2, Cloth, \$145.

Recent years have seen a great upsurge in scholarly interest in Adam Smith. This exceptionally wide-ranging and thought-provoking collection of essays, by a group of scholars who have recently finished doctoral dissertations on Smith or a closely related topic, is perfectly timed to complement the more authoritative *Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith* (2006). The multidisciplinary diversity of their various contributions once again confirms that Smith is much more than the father of political economy, with just five economists amongst the fourteen—this despite the volume’s rather counter-intuitive inclusion in Routledge’s *Studies in the History of Economics*. As Knud Haakonssen points out in a lucid foreword, such diversification is entirely appropriate to Smith himself, for whom “moral philosophy is first of all a grand anthropological theory within which language and literature, arts and sciences, politics and law, and, of course, economics are to be studied with the aim of establishing empirically—mainly historically—the balance between nature and culture” (xviii).

After a concise introduction in which Montes and Schliesser summarise Smith scholarship to date, emphasising their own interdisciplinary approach and handily signposting potential areas of future research, the volume is divided into four parts. These deal successively, though rather arbitrarily as the editors admit, with Smith’s sources and influence, his moral theory, economics, and theory of knowledge.

Part 1 kicks off with an engaging revision of the view that Smith was a latter-day Stoic by Ryan Patrick Hanley, who argues that Smith’s emphasis on the education of character was actually heavily influenced by his reading of Aristotle. Edith Kuiper focuses instead on Smith’s relationship with more recent writers, assessing his positions on gender, work, and education in a comparative framework provided by the “feminist” texts of Mary Collier, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Priscilla Wakefield, Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft—though admitting that there is no evidence that Smith actually read any of them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, Kuiper argues that Smith largely ignored their claims in his own work, thereby losing sight “of the division of labor in the family and the contribution of women’s economic work more generally” (56). Robert Mitchell turns in chapter 4 to Smith’s influence on a diverse group of British Romantics, arguing that Smith’s comments on “systems” had a formative impact on the way writers like Burke, Coleridge, and Godwin conceived the role of “systems” in political and literary thought and action. Mitchell highlights Smith’s own evolving views on the matter through close analysis of the 1790 edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

The essays in part 2 reveal the extent to which Smith's writings can contribute to fundamental topics in contemporary moral theory. Fonna Forman-Barzilai explores the strengths and weaknesses of Smith's account of cultural impartiality, speculating how Smith might have come to terms with what she sees as the cultural relativity that emerges from his description of moral judgement. Carola von Villiez takes a quite different track, interpreting Smith's account of moral judgement as a forerunner of the method of reflective equilibrium developed by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. In the most imaginative essay in the collection, Patrick Frierson explores how Smith's ideas can be profitably recycled in contemporary environmental ethics, while Chad Flanders asks what his account of the incipient rationality of our moral sentiments might contribute to contemporary debates on moral luck. Also in part 2, Lauren Brubaker argues that Smith rejected both Stoic resignation and utopian hubris, explaining that his complex understanding of nature requires the prudent assistance of philosophical and political statesmanship.

Though it is pointedly the least substantial section, the essays in part 3 undertake a substantial re-reading of Smith as economist, arguing that he is less familiar and more profound than traditional economic theory would have us believe. Jimena Hurtado-Prieto exploits the student notes on Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* to argue that Smith's well-known antipathy to Mandeville was based not simply on moral, but also on economic arguments. Leonidas Montes issues a passionate plea for the re-evaluation of Smith's Newtonianism, and consequently for a revision of the view that Smith was the founding father of general economic equilibrium theory. Meanwhile, Maria Pia Paganelli explains why Smith does not recognise the full potential of public credit as an instrument of policy—even though contemporaries like David Hume did.

Finally, part 4 focuses ostensibly on Smith's metaphysics and epistemology. Craig Smith explains how two of Smith's most familiar theories, his four stages theory of social change and his analysis of the progressive force of the division of labour, combine with his under-appreciated account of the growth and effective use of human knowledge. Estrella Trincado illuminates the role of time in Smith's metaphysics, while Eric Schliesser argues that his conception of philosophy is best understood in light of his engagement with Rousseau's rhetorical challenge to the worth of commercial society.

The collection as a whole is most stimulating when explaining why Smith is still relevant today (and not just for his economics, as will be clear from this review), but there is very little sense throughout of what contemporaries made of his works. Occasionally the contributors touch on what Smith's ideas meant to specific authors. But they don't tell us how and why contemporaries more generally read *The Wealth of Nations* or *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which after all numbered

amongst the best-selling works of the Scottish Enlightenment, nor do they attempt to explain why the latter may initially have been more widely read than its more celebrated younger sibling. More urgently, the essays (with a few notable exceptions) are generally quite thin on the kind of contextual historical perspective that most now accept is of critical importance to understanding the great texts of intellectual history. Hanley's assertion that Smith developed "an alternative approach to ethics, one which directs attention away from moral rules and refocuses it on the education of character" (17) is typical, overlooking the extent to which this was a cultural phenomenon, with Scottish moralists like Henry Mackenzie, Hugh Blair and Henry Home advocating similar principles. Even Kuiper's discussion of feminist discourse of the eighteenth century is remarkably unsympathetic to Smith, while too many contributors treat Smith's ideas in a historical vacuum, as if he was indeed still alive today to be conversed with, debated with and argued with. In this respect, it is to be hoped that the contributors will have benefited from each other's approaches—just as Smith himself benefited from the advice and support of Lord Kames and others.

The rather narrow focus and occasionally abstruse subject matter of some essays will certainly alienate most generalist readers, while I feel some of the contributors tend to overstate their case for the sake of argument alone. The writing style is also highly variable, with some contributors getting the balance between analysis and readability just right but others leaning too far towards near-impenetrable technical jargon. Nevertheless, this collection represents a worthy addition to scholarship on Smith, bringing together some of the best young talent working on his thought from across the world and benefiting from their varying cultural and intellectual perspectives. As such, *New Voices on Adam Smith* will become essential reading for all Smith specialists, and will also prove stimulating for those working on the Scottish Enlightenment and eighteenth-century thought more generally—though they should be ready to tease out some of the broader contextual links for themselves.

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