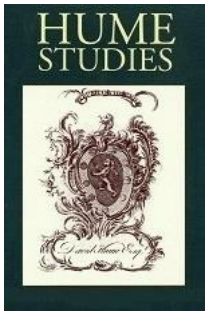

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The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought by Dennis C. Rasmussen (review)

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Dennis C. Rasmussen. *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought*. Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. xiii + 316. Cloth ISBN 978-0-691-17701-4, $29.95.

In reading biographies or accounts of figures with which one agrees and sympathizes, there is a tendency that needs to be avoided, that is, of *over*-identifying with the figures in question and of too closely mapping one's own life and aspirations onto them.

As such, there is some risk involved for a person like me in reading about the friendship between David Hume and Adam Smith. Dennis C. Rasmussen's excellent new volume, *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought*, chronicles that friendship in an engaging and compelling narrative. The work is thoroughly researched and entertainingly written. Rasmussen uses the extant correspondence between Smith and Hume—as well as their extensive correspondence with others—as the frame, over which he lays chapters devoted to important periods and works during the time of their friendship. (The first chapters cover the time before their meeting and an epilogue covers the time between Hume's passing and Smith's.)

As might be expected for a book that works its way linearly through the history, the chapters can be somewhat uneven. Chapter 8, "Mortally Sick at Sea," for instance, is a transitional chapter. It comes after the engaging story of Rousseau's quarrel with Hume, which is related well through the lens of Smith's advice to Hume on it and without ignoring the fact that Rousseau's behavior was probably due to untreated mental illness. And it comes before Rasmussen's thorough treatment of *The Wealth of Nations*, which works through not just the genesis and reception of the book, but primarily—as with Rasmussen's earlier treatment of Smith's *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*—its disputes and agreements with Hume. Chapter 8, though, is dealt a rough hand: letters from the period it covers primarily consist of Hume imploring Smith to visit him in Edinburgh and Smith being too busy writing and getting lost in the countryside thinking about his book to do so. Still, though, there is engaging color here, such as the fact that Hume gets too seasick—hence the chapter's title—to make the trip to visit Smith in nearby Kirckaldy. None of the chapters overstay their welcome, either, and the book is a quick read, overall.

Rasmussen has given himself a difficult task. As he says in the book's preface, "Although I am a professor and hope that this book will contribute to the scholarly study of Hume and Smith, it was written not just for academics but for

anyone interested in learning more about the lives and ideas of these two giants of the Enlightenment, and about what is arguably the greatest of all philosophical friendships." The book thus tries to serve two masters: the academic and the popular. The book does an admirable job of the latter: its engaging style and broad, clear glosses on the positions and arguments offered by the two figures will serve to enlighten and entertain a popular audience. (I have already sent a copy to my father, an intellectual history hobbyist.) And I have no doubt that the historical and intellectual contributions of the thorough research job that Rasmussen has done will immediately start to inform scholarship on these figures and how they are situated in the Scottish Enlightenment. Further, Rasmussen's early biographical chapter on Hume would serve as a good introduction for students to the period of Hume's life when he wrote most of his major philosophical works.

How much Rasmussen's working-through of the philosophical positions will be of value to professional philosophers is unclear. If one is unfamiliar with the basic arguments, for instance, of Smith's *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* or Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, then these glosses appear to me to be clear, uncontentious explications of the main points to be found there. If one already has a professional understanding of these works, this facet of the book will be of little use in deepening that understanding (though through no fault of its own).

As the title suggests, the work focuses heavily on the religious aspects of their lives and friendship. It does so both insofar as these points help to show what distinguishes them philosophically from each other and in their community, and also as it provides the motivation for several of the book's most compelling episodes: Smith's reticence to support Hume's nomination for his recently vacated chair of Logic at Glasgow University (chap. 3), their disagreement over the publishing of the *Dialogues* (chap. 10), and Smith's account of Hume's death in his *Letter to Strahan* and the ensuing blowback on Smith (chap. 11). (The book includes the complete texts of Hume's autobiography *My Own Life* and Smith's completion of it, his *Letter to Strahan*. These do not amount to more than twelve pages of text, but their inclusion—given the appropriately outsized role they play in the book's later chapters—is a nice addition.)

The reader is left with the sense that these religious reactions are the most important aspect of Hume's reception, especially as these are the primary philosophical points about Hume's *oeuvre* that get treated. At every point where a religious topic could be treated, Rasmussen treats it. But in the end, this is worthwhile. Other than the book's careful collection and deployment of the letters—both between the two and their letters to others—this may be the most important contribution it makes: to remind us that one reason that our professors today can be avowed atheists and agnostics, skeptics and, indeed, infidels, is that Hume and, eventually, Smith were more concerned with honest argumentation and presenting themselves truthfully to the world than they were with their standing in light

of the religious objections they would face. In some sense, the story of the book is the story of Smith coming to see this: the first chapter where they both appear features Smith's timidity to support Hume in the face of religious challengers, and the last one features Smith trumpeting to the world that his friend's atheistical tendencies did not trouble him in the least as he faced his demise.

This is also what gives rise to the danger I mentioned above: it is tempting to see those that vocally criticized Smith's *Letter* as a danger to the public's moral fabric as small-minded bigots and fools. (Samuel Johnson seems particularly terrible, only slightly outpacing James Boswell, who, as the book relates, pressed a bed-ridden Hume on his lack of fear in the face of death.) It is in these moments that I found myself most drawn to Smith's defense, seeing in him the same trouble we all, as intellectuals and teachers, face when determining how forthright we should be in publicly airing our principles, especially when they might bring criticism, censure, and disapprobation.

Hume, for the most part, seems to need less defending. Perhaps this is why Hume remains a friend to us all, a guide to us in the same way he was to Smith. One that occasionally overreaches, who stirs the pot too aggressively sometimes, but who otherwise, as Smith said in his *Letter*, was "approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit." This books tells the story of the first professor to benefit from Hume's example, though certainly not the last.

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