

Adam Smith: Systematic Philosopher and Public Thinker

Eric Schliesser

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In a famous passage in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith attacks what he calls the “man of system.” Many Adam Smith scholars, myself included, have puzzled over the intended target of this lately added and studiously allusive passage. Could it have been a veiled reference to the radical Whig Richard Price, the Stuart King James II, Frederick the Great of Prussia or (as I have argued) a combination of George Washington and the Marquis de La Fayette? What all of us have agreed on is that the phrase “man of system” was intended as a pejorative.

One of the defining features of Eric Schliesser’s book *Adam Smith: Systematic Philosopher and Public Thinker* is that it takes Smith himself seriously as a man of system. Schliesser, a Dutch philosopher who teaches at the University of Amsterdam, discusses in detail not only the famous texts from Smith’s corpus, namely the two published treatises *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), but also smaller and lesser-known works such as “The Origins of Language” and “The History of Astronomy.”

Schliesser does not pay much attention to Smith’s “Lectures on Jurisprudence,” those lengthy compilations that modern scholarship has retrieved from not one, but two sets of student notes taken during different academic years in the early and mid-1760s, despite the fact that these notes have been eagerly utilized by recent Smith specialists for their insights into his economic, historical, and especially his elusive (because unfinished) political thought. That deliberate omission points to the second distinctive element in Schliesser’s monograph: his conviction that Smith took seriously his role as a public thinker, drew a sharp distinction between his published and his unpublished works, and knew what he was doing in ordering the wholesale burning of most of the latter. The major payoff of this methodological choice on Schliesser’s part is that Smith comes across as a serious public thinker who thought not only about moral philosophy and political economy but about a whole range of topics including epistemology, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of mind and of language, among others.

If the book endorses the idea that Smith might himself have been a man of system, it must be said that the “system” of thought that emerges into view here is not exactly distinguished for its seamless unity. Chapters on science and mathematics flank the chapter on the *Wealth of Nations*, the chapters on Smith as a philosopher *per se* appear toward the end of the book, and a chapter on virtue appears in part two on society—the latter perhaps because the author has told us that the word *moral* for Smith “conforms closely to our notion of the ‘social’” (9).

There are probably two main reasons for this feature of the book’s organization. The first concerns the circumstances of its publication. Its bibliography lists no fewer than sixteen scholarly papers authored or coauthored by Eric Schliesser over a nearly fifteen-year period, on topics covering Newton, Spinoza, Huygens, Hume, and especially Adam

Smith. The book itself assembles some of the material in these papers into a whole. The second and perhaps more important reason for this diversified agenda no doubt relates to the parameters of intellectual interest in Enlightenment Europe, especially among its leading figures. At that level, Schliesser's monograph is no more loose or eclectic than the actual range of interests pursued by the Scotsman himself over the course of an authentically eighteenth-century life.

Summoning Smith's thought to a tribunal that will be recognizable to any typical academic audience circa 2017, the author arrives at a mixed verdict. He finds, to take a couple of examples among many, that Smith was consistently sympathetic with the working poor, but also that he was "systematically biased against non-white subjects" (22, 169–74, 224, and *passim*).

Although the author draws inspiration from economists and from other academic specialists, this book is ultimately a work of philosophy. Generously acknowledging his debts to others and candidly confessing the provisional character of his own conclusions—partly by abandoning earlier ones that he had arrived at (18)—Schliesser begins each subsection in each chapter with an explicit statement of the problem to be posed, the conclusions to be argued, and the trajectory to be traveled. This is a work by a professional academic philosopher for other philosophers, and as such, it is certain to be received with the respect that it deserves.

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Greed, Self-Interest and the Shaping of Economics

Rudi Verburg

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Common to pre- and post-Smithian economic thought is a union of normative and empirical analysis. Economic theories that sought to expand commerce, for instance, were coupled with moral concerns about poverty, inequality, and justice. This union of the normative and the empirical, however, was not to last. The advent of positivism and the social sciences marked the divorce of normative and empirical thinking in the modern discipline of economics. While contemporary economics has increased the complexity by which it can model human behavior, it does so without questioning the morality of the behavior it seeks to explain.

What was the intellectual context that made the separation of moral and empirical analysis possible? Should the jettisoning of moral categories in contemporary economics be a source of concern? And finally, does an economic science that sidelines moral categories rid itself of a valuable means to address market pathologies? These are a few questions that animate Rudi Verburg's *Greed, Self-Interest and the Shaping of Economics*.

Verburg believes that a closer investigation of greed across several centuries of economic thought can help to illuminate all three of these questions. *Greed, Self-Interest and the*