

## OTHER BOOKS OF INTEREST

### Our Great Purpose: Adam Smith on Living a Better Life

**Ryan Patrick Hanley**

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019 (176 pages)

In this handbook on living well, Ryan Patrick Hanley makes Adam Smith’s moral philosophy accessible to a general readership. The book contains twenty-nine very short chapters, each of which (with one exception) is a commentary on a quotation from Smith’s *oeuvre*. Most of these quotations are from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and Hanley has arranged the material to “tell a story” about the challenges of human existence and how to live a unified and happy life (7). Major themes include self-interest and other-directedness, love and being loved, dignity and equality, with concluding chapters on Socrates, Jesus, David Hume, and God (in that order). There is, naturally, overlap among the chapters, and it is not always clear what “story” Hanley is telling as the book progresses. That mild criticism aside, Hanley expertly brings Smith’s subtle insights into a modern idiom in a way that is practical and at times profound. In particular, sensitive readers will find much wise guidance here about how to rightly examine and evaluate themselves and their actions. One highlight: In the chapter “On Dignity,” Hanley shows how Smith’s impartial spectator can liberate us from the confines of self-concern and open us up to see what matters to others and that others matter (86). Written for a popular audience, the book shares much in common with Russ Roberts’s *How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life* (2014). Hanley’s book, however, covers more thematic ground and draws on his extensive academic work on Smith. There is also a concluding bibliographic essay to guide readers into further study of Smith and the book’s themes.

## Moral Economies

**Ute Frevert (Editor)**

Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019 (239 pages)

As this book's editor Ute Frevert notes in both her introduction and historical survey, the concept of moral economy is subject to diverse meanings and uses. Whatever the specific connotations have been historically, however, Frevert and the contributors to this volume affirm that "moral propositions and value judgments are firmly entrenched in economic theory and practice" (9). This collection uses the notion of moral economy as a "heuristic lamp post" to understand "the plurality of values shaping various economic systems at different times" (9). The articles in this volume originated from a conference at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin in 2017. Counting the introduction, six articles are in English and three in German. Each essay has an English abstract. Almost all of the articles have a very narrow historical and economic focus. For example, there is an essay on the approaches to poverty expressed in a 1777 French essay contest, one on debt enforcement in eighteenth-century Switzerland, and one on the reintegration of disabled veterans in Germany after World War I. The book will be of most interest, therefore, to specialists in modern European history and political economy. The work of E. P. Thompson features prominently at several points, which is understandable given his famous use of the concept of moral economy. The historical survey by Frevert, "Moral Economies, Present and Past," will be of more general interest. It is a clear presentation of the state of the question on the history of the relationship between economics and morality.

## A Vindication of Politics: On the Common Good and Human Flourishing

**Matthew D. Wright**

Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019 (231 pages)

The two central claims of this study are relatively easy to grasp. First, the common good of political society must include the "distinct and irreplaceable goods of associations like friendship and family." Second, the political community has a "unique and distinctive good" of its own (16). That is, on the one hand the political good is neither the supreme nor exclusive good of a society, but on the other hand there is still a political common good that must be cultivated. Although the central claims of *A Vindication of Politics* are relatively easy to grasp, the wide-ranging and complex political-philosophical arguments for these claims are less so. This is not to say they are not compelling, but only that readers will need to be willing to wade through the specialized subject matter and technical arguments. There is, for instance, a chapter-length critique of John Finnis's view of the political good as instrumental in, not constitutive of, human flourishing. This requires excursions into the thought of Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle. The latter thinker figures prominently in Wright's arguments and method throughout the book. The study does

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repay careful reading, however, as Wright clarifies and defends the familial good and the good of civic friendship on his way to vindicating (as his title suggests) political participation as an intrinsic good. In the conclusion he helpfully broadens the scope of what counts as political, pointing out that participation in politics should not be limited to participation in government and the mere fulfillment of civic duties.