


3-31-2016

## Adam Smith for Our Times, II: Of Sympathy and Selfishness

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### Recommended Citation

Gavin, Michael (2016) "Adam Smith for Our Times, II: Of Sympathy and Selfishness," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 42: Iss. 1, 119–121.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol42/iss1/10>

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**ADAM SMITH FOR OUR TIMES, II:  
OF SYMPATHY AND SELFISHNESS**

Charlotte C. S. Thomas, ed., *Of Sympathy and Selfishness: The Moral and Political Philosophy of Adam Smith*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2015. Paper, \$24.00. ISBN: 978-0-88146-529-7.

Very few topics in humanities research are funded by conservative think tanks, but Adam Smith's philosophy is just such a topic. Reading such scholarship often has a through-the-looking-glass feel: arguments that begin with rationality and clarity seem inevitably to take, at some point, a turn for the ideological worse. So it goes with the recent volume, *Of Sympathy and Selfishness: The Moral and Political Philosophy of Adam Smith*, an odd assortment of essays edited by Charlotte C. S. Thomas and published by Mercer University Press. Thomas is codirector of Mercer University's The Thomas C. and Ramona E. McDonald Center for America's Founding Principles, which hosts an annual meeting named the A. V. Elliott Conference for Great Books and Ideas, and which lists among its sponsors The Walmart Foundation, The Jack Miller Center for the Teaching of America's Principles and History, The Apgar Foundation, and The Charles G. Koch Foundation. The book's front matter announces the center's grandiosely narrow mission: "Guided by James Madison's maxim that 'a well-instructed people alone can be permanently a free people,' the McDonald Center exists to promote the study of great texts and ideas that have shaped our regime and fostered liberal learning." This is not a very promising beginning to a historical study. Few readers will pay much attention to the essays published here, and that's probably just as well, both for them and for the collection's contributors.

Single-author studies always entail a risk of devolving into idol-worship, but the problem seems particularly acute with Adam Smith, one of the very few canonical British writers whose work can be made to fit twenty-first century conservative orthodoxy. Whether scholars proudly embrace this fit or try, sophisticatedly, to argue it away, the scholarship produced under a Smithian banner is often distorted and simply *weird*.

Call it “*Die Adam Smith Geistesgeschichte* Problem.” Smith wrote two brilliant books of philosophy, both of which offer compelling and comprehensive accounts of human behavior, but which are very different in their emphases and conclusions. Smith’s failure to integrate his theories left innumerable questions in its wake. Perhaps the least interesting of these questions—but the one which Smith’s apologists most concern themselves with—is the question of whether “markets” are consistent with “morality.” The answer to this question must be “yes,” of course, or donors like Charles Koch would have little interest in funding conferences that ask it. In her introduction to the volume, Thomas describes her understanding of the intellectual context this way:

There is little serious debate whether individual rights, private property, stable institutions, and the rule of law are important to the development of nations. Instead, debate rages regarding how to negotiate the cultural and spiritual costs of wealth, how to establish and maintain a legal and institutional context that promotes liberty and equal opportunities for all, and how to manage the inequalities that inevitably emerge from those equal opportunities. (1)

Thomas’s comfort with the inequalities that “inevitably”—“naturally,” Smith might say—arise from the equalities she prizes is odd and off-putting, but it tells you a lot about her horizon of expectations. I am not among the intended readers for *Of Sympathy and Selfishness*, nor are, I imagine, most readers of *Studies in Scottish Literature*.

A similar tone-deafness infects nearly everything that follows. The essays resist synthesis. They are a strange hodgepodge and share little except their ideological blind spots. They range from mundane and unreflective summary (chapter 1, “Grounded in Nature: An Essay on Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*” by Stuart D. Warner) to politicized claptrap (chapter 6, “Serenity and System in Smith and Hayek,” by Art Carden, and chapter 7, “Adam Smith’s Juggler and Its Practical Relevance Today,” by Scott Beaulier), to bizarre speculation (chapter 9, “Is Adam Smith a Buddhist? Contemplative Inquiry and Political Philosophy,” by Eduardo Velazquez).

The intellectual paucity of its contents is mirrored by the book’s sloppy construction. It seems to have been slapped together with little care. It has a glaringly obvious pagination error in its front matter, which suggests no one reviewed final page proofs before publication. It lacks both index and bibliography, as if the editor were deliberately disguising the narrowness of the essays’ argumentative range and their lack of

engagement with serious scholarship. Every contribution has the feel of a conference paper padded with fluff. At one point, a contributor actually footnotes Wikipedia as a source for the serenity prayer (128). I cannot imagine an editorial policy that would allow this. I can only surmise that it reflects the McDonald Center's clumsy effort to reinforce a worldview rather than contribute to intellectual history.

In any case, it is not incumbent on a reviewer to put more effort into reading a book than was put into making it. *Of Sympathy and Selfishness* is a poor work of scholarship.

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