

April 1981

Adam Smith as A Moral Philosopher: A Comment

David E.R. Gay
University of Arkansas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/sbr>



Part of the [Business Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gay, David E.R. (1981) "Adam Smith as A Moral Philosopher: A Comment," *Southern Business Review*. Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/sbr/vol7/iss1/8>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Southern Business Review by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

**ADAM SMITH AS A MORAL PHILOSOPHER:
A COMMENT**

David E. R. Gay

In a recent issue of this *Review*, Professor Douglas Y. Thorstein summarized some of the arguments for treating Smith's works, *in toto*. This was an ambitious undertaking that is potentially rewarding¹ and the author's efforts should be applauded. This comment finesses the record cited and introduces complementary arguments to strengthen such a viewpoint.

First, the record on a holistic approach to Smith's work which appears as "A strong theme of the bicentennial scholarship . . . [whereas] the earlier tendency, particularly among economists, has been to given autonomy to *The Wealth of Nations*, and to neglect Smith's other contributions"² has not been neglected, as the author alleged, by the profession. For example there are substantive articles by Viner³ and Morrow⁴ in the sequicentennial volume on Smith's *magnum opus*. Other similar comments are widely available. Professor Thorstein's criticism is partially on target since a better question is not has a holistic approach been overlooked by *some* of the profession, but what do you gain and at what cost using such an approach? Smith's use of the impartial spectator to explain how an individual's actions may be modified by the urgency of seeking social approval from peers, and thus the realization that the self-interest axiom can be shaped by other forces, may be important. But the previous article in this *Review* does not address this question, raised by Viner nearly 55 years ago, whereby "I will further endeavor to show that the *Wealth of Nations* was a better book because of its partial breach with the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and that it could not have remained, as it has, a living book were it not that in its methods of analysis, its basic assumptions, and its conclusions it abandoned the absolutism, the rigidity, the romanticism which characterize the earlier book."⁵ Surely one would have to argue that the additional search would add sufficient insights to justify it. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* isn't quickly read or understood. Agreeing with Viner's assessment one is more likely to be better off by reading portions of *The Wealth of Nations* instead.

Secondly, the author's view of Smith's "moral philosophy" is too narrow. When Smith moved from teaching logic and accepted the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow he divided the subject into natural theology, ethics, jurisprudence, and economics. Thorstein's article concentrated on the second and fourth one. To develop moral philosophy in Smith's tradition one should refer to natural theology and jurisprudence. The former topic remains underidentified in Smith's writings. The latter topic was promised in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, whereby "I shall, in another discourse, endeavor to give an account of the general principles of law and government . . . not only in what concerns justice, but in what concerns police, revenue, and arms, and whatever is the object of law."⁶ But the promise remained unful-

filled as his manuscripts were destroyed while on his death bed. However, there are lecture notes from the 1762-63 session and probably the 1763-64 sessions. The latter version was edited by Edwin Cannan and published in 1896, while the former was discovered in 1958. Both versions were related⁷ and have been recently published as *Lectures on Jurisprudence*.⁸

To argue that the exegesis of Smith's thought as a moral philosopher must include the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* would be strengthened by including the jurisprudential section as well. Both sets of jurisprudence notes reinforce each other and one infers that they are generally reliable transcriptions of Smith's classes. In particular, to understand Smith's moral philosophy, the jurisprudence section should be included. Briefly, the jurisprudential section included justice ("security from injury"), police ("Cheapness of commodities, public security, and cleanliness"), revenue ("the proper means of levying revenue"), and arms (defense) as well as international law, "the privileges of aliens, and proper grounds for making war."⁹ One needs to understand the origin and evolution of codified relations that we call laws and our legal system. In the *Wealth of Nations* the administration of justice with a court system is readily described by Smith as the second duty of the sovereign,¹⁰ but is not fully developed there. In short one needs a theory of state behavior, the administration of justice, the management of government affairs and revenues.

FOOTNOTES

¹Douglas Y. Thorstein, "Adam Smith As a Moral Philosopher," *Southern Business Review*, Spring 1980, pp. 31-35.

²*Ibid.*, p. 31.

³Jacob Viner, "Adam Smith and Laissez-Faire," *Adam Smith 1776-1926*, reprinted, A. M. Kelley: New York, 1966, pp. 116-155. Especially see 119-120, 120-26, 137.

⁴Glenn R. Morrow, "Adam Smith: Moralism and Philosopher," *Adam Smith, 1776-1926*, pp. 156-179. Especially see p. 162, 166-67, 173-78.

⁵Viner, note 3, p. 120.

⁶Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Liberty Press: Indianapolis, 1976, p. 537.

⁷R. L. Meek, "New Light on Adam Smith's Glasgow Lectures on Jurisprudence," *History of Political Economy*, Winter 1976.

⁸Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. by R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein, Oxford U. Press: Oxford, 1978.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 398-99.

¹⁰Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Consequences of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. by E. Cannan, Modern Library: New York, 1937. p. 651. See Book V, Chapter I, Part II, "Of the Expense of Justice." Also see David E. R. Gay, "Adam Smith and the Courts,"

David E. R. Gay is a Visiting Associate Professor of Economics at Texas
A&M University and Associate Professor of Economics at the University
of Arkansas.