

How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life: An Unexpected Guide to Human Nature and Understanding

Russell Roberts. 2014. New York: Penguin. ISBN 978-1-59184-684-0. \$27.95.

Reviewed by Paul D. Mueller, George Mason University

Have you ever overheard a casual conversation about *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*? Well, after Russ Roberts' new book, *How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life*, you are much more likely to. Roberts' popular book distills several important ideas from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS). Although Smith is famous for his treatise on political economy, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (WN), Roberts has set the stage for a public resurgence of interest in Smith's "other book."

In some respects, Roberts does for Smith what Max Eastman did for Friedrich Hayek. *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) was written for intellectuals. But Eastman wrote a condensed and simplified version for the average American, which appeared in *Reader's Digest*. The condensed version became an instant hit, selling millions of copies and making Hayek into something of a celebrity. Eastman's condensation proved tremendously important in spreading Hayek's ideas. I hope Roberts' book will do the same for Smith. But Roberts also applies Smith's ideas to modern everyday life—which makes his book more valuable than a simple condensation of TMS.

Smith spent a lifetime wrestling with the ideas in TMS, which he thought to be his more important book. It was first published in 1759, over a decade before WN appeared in 1776, and the last and most extensive revisions in a sixth edition came shortly before Smith died in 1790. Yet TMS receded into the background over the following centuries. Roberts has changed that by writing this book, in which he simplifies many of Smith's ideas and demonstrates their continuing relevance for the 21st century.

There are two main themes in Roberts' book. First, he emphasizes that happiness consists of being loved and being lovely. Although I doubt Smith would disagree, he thinks of happiness a little differently: "Happiness consists in tranquillity and enjoyment. Without tranquillity there can be no enjoyment; and where there is perfect tranquillity there is scarce any thing which is not capable of amusing" (TMS 149.30). For Smith, happiness comes from inner tranquility, which is a Stoic or Aristo-

telian idea. Still, with regard to loveliness, Smith talks a great deal about the importance of “approval,” “praise,” and “praiseworthiness.”

A second theme in Roberts’ book are three essential virtues: prudence, justice, and beneficence. He says that “prudence means, in modern terms, taking care of yourself, justice means not hurting others, and beneficence means being good to others” (Roberts, p. 145). These definitions capture Smith’s sentiments well. Prudence stems from the proper care that people naturally take of themselves. In fact, not taking care of oneself is blameworthy because it reveals laziness or foolishness, and because it creates new demands on other people to take care of you.

Justice is a foundational virtue for Smith. It is the pillar of society, without which the chaos and destruction of a Hobbesian state of nature will quickly ensue. Unlike many modern conceptions of justice, Smith’s view is a negative one that entails leaving others alone (i. e. not stealing from or harming them). But both Smith and Roberts acknowledge that a world with only prudence and justice would be a rather grim and unhappy place. Beneficence, therefore, is an important motive and end of our actions. It provides the beauty, warmth, and affection in life.

Robert’s book is structured along self-help lines. His first chapter is titled “How Adam Smith Can Change Your Life.” The rest of the book is a litany of “how tos:” How to Know Yourself; Be Happy; Be Loved; Be Lovely; Make the World a Better Place; Live in the Modern World. There are also two chapters in which Roberts explains how *not* to do something: How Not to Fool Yourself and How Not to Make the World a Better Place. Roberts and Smith are both excellent writers—as one can see by comparing the parallel passages in which Roberts interprets and applies Smith’s ideas.

Roberts’ chapter on self-knowledge is nicely captured in two mantras: “know thyself” and “the unexamined life is not worth living.” To be a good person, you must know yourself well:

If you want to get better at what you do, if you want to get better at this thing called life, you have to pay attention. When you pay attention, you can remember what really matters, what is real and enduring, versus what is false and fleeting. Thinking of an impartial spectator can help you know yourself and help you become a better boss, a better spouse, a better parent, a better friend. (p. 35)

The “impartial spectator” helps people make good moral judgments. But

we need something more, to help us consider what an impartial spectator would think. Smith says that it is:

reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it. (TMS 137)

This “man within” reminds us of what an impartial spectator would think of our emotions, behavior, or judgments. It is this person within who prevents us from acting on our selfish and sordid passions. But we need to “awaken” our conscience within (TMS 253)—that is what Roberts’ means by “paying attention.”

Our person within helps us live in harmony with others. Roberts explains:

If my singing voice is louder than yours, our duet won’t sound very nice. I drown you out, and your singing fails to enhance mine. Because I know you can’t feel my pain the way I feel it, I soften my grief in your presence. Rather than expecting you to sing as loudly as I do, I lower my voice instead. You, in turn, try to sing a little louder. I calibrate my emotional response to what I think is your potential level of sympathy. (p. 126)

Sympathy with the feelings and views of others moderates our own emotions. It causes us to reduce emotions that we feel more keenly than an observer does, while also causing us to stoke emotions that are less than what an observer would feel.

Roberts’ chapters about how to be loved and how to be lovely hinge on what Smith called “praiseworthiness.” Happiness comes from genuine, earned praise. Roberts states that although the “wise man may reject the praise he does not deserve. . . . it’s so hard to be wise. And it’s our own praise that’s hardest to reject” (p. 51). Smith says that when we are praised for something we did not do, the praise “applauds not us, but another person” (TMS 115). Even though we are hearing the praise directed towards us, it is not ours because we have not earned it. That is why Roberts claims “Undeserved praise is a reprimand—a reminder of what I could be” (p. 47).

Only self-deception would cause us to want applause that we have not earned. Roberts quotes Smith's explanation of why we are often not willing to deal with past mistakes or with our character flaws:

He is a bold surgeon, they say, whose hand does not tremble when he performs an operation upon his own person; and he is often equally bold who does not hesitate to pull off the mysterious veil of self-delusion, which covers from his view the deformities of his own conduct. (TMS 158)

Seeing our own depravity and ugliness is hard and unpleasant. Many people either avoid looking at them, or try to put a positive spin on them. But both strategies corrupt our moral sentiments.

Roberts' penultimate chapter deals with politics. He quotes a famous passage in Smith describing the destructive "man of system" who tries to remake society along his own idealistic plans:

The man of system, on the contrary, is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. . . . He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon the chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own . . . If they are opposite or different, the game will go on miserably, and the society must be at all times in the highest degree of disorder. (TMS 233–234.17)

This caution undergirded Smith's own political views, and explains why he allowed some exceptions to liberty in his works while still having a strong presumption in favor of it (Mueller 2014).

All of the problems and difficulties Smith and Roberts have been warning us about show up in the "man of system:" lack of self-knowledge, conceit, pride, self-deception; a lack of prudence, of justice, and of beneficence. Roberts emphasizes that we should avoid becoming "men of system." He writes:

By reminding us of the perils of the man of system, Smith is reminding us to be wary of hubris. We think we can move those chess pieces where we want. We think we know what's best for them. Smith is saying that even when we're right, even if we think we know what's best for others, sometimes it's best to leave them alone, because our efforts won't just fail or fall short of the idea. Sometimes they'll do more harm than good. Sometimes it's best to walk away from the board and set our sights on smaller, better fields of play than the chessboard of society. (pp. 214–215)

If we want to help society, we should avoid falling into these traps and dangers.

Roberts concludes that we can make the world a better place by focusing on our local situations and networks, rather than on trying to plan the lives and actions of those around us. It is a fitting reminder of how the Apostle Paul told the Thessalonians to live quiet lives minding their own business so that they could win the respect of outsiders and not be dependent on anyone (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12).

Roberts claims that one does not have to believe in God to find this account of moral sentiments compelling. Smith himself can be read multiple ways on this topic. He does refer to the “Author” of “Nature” and to divine “Providence,” but it is easy to get the impression that these are not essential to his theory. Either way, neither Smith nor Roberts exhorts us to lift our eyes to heaven. But they have authored thoughtful, interesting, and engaging books nonetheless. Roberts has captured many important themes from Smith's book, while at the same time giving us a useful guide for how to live industrious, happy, and even good lives. For practical wisdom and for an introduction to Smith's ideas, I recommend this book wholeheartedly.

References

- Hayek, F. A.** (2007 [1944]). *The road to serfdom: Text and documents: The definitive edition*. B. Caldwell (Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Mueller, P. D.** (2014). Adam Smith, politics, and natural liberty. *Journal of Private Enterprise*, 29(3), 119–134.

- Smith, A.** (1981 [1776]). *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Eds.), *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Vol. 2). Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Smith, A.** (1982 [1759, 1790]). *The theory of moral sentiments*. In D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Eds.), *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Vol. 1). Indianapolis: Liberty Fund. ■

