Deirdre McCloskey is a great economic historian, and a great many other things. At the outset of her project it was described as a theological defence of capitalism, a system she now prefers to call “trade tested betterment” (p. xxi). The first volume, her ethical “revaluation of the bourgeois,” I thought was excellent, though with some flaws. The second, on “economic history,” criticised existing theories and presented her rhetorical explanation of the great enrichment. I thought it was similarly excellent. However this third volume on “social and intellectual history” (p. xvii) left me somewhat disappointed. Too much repetition of the earlier volumes. Not enough of the promised development of the theological aspects of the argument. Too much playing the person rather than the ball. Too much anecdote and quotation and not as much sustained argument. Startling statistics are regularly quoted but there is less of the careful empirical argument her earlier works display. It seemed more disjointed than the earlier volumes. At times it seemed things were being said (often interesting things) because this was the final volume, even when their contribution to the overall argument of the volumes was slight. Reading this third volume felt a bit like an extended 20–20 cricket tournament rather than the test match cricket of her earlier volumes.

The new aspect of the argument Deirdre develops in *Bourgeois Equality* is the threat of the clerisy to the Great Enrichment she so powerfully explained in the previous volume. She describes the threat as essentially “pessimism about growth or consumerism or the environment or inequality” (p. xii), and her point is that past pessimisms have been shown wrong. These include the pessimism of 1848 in which Malthus showed the poor would always be poor, the pessimism of 1916 that only Europeans could escape poverty, of 1933 that the crisis of capitalism was at hand, of 1945 that betterment was finished, of 1968 that consumerism had corrupted betterment, of the 1980s that betterment in the West had to stop because it depended on exploitation of poor countries, and final-
ly the pessimism of the 2000s that the West was declining like previous empires (p. 626). Elsewhere she deals with contemporary environmental pessimism, suggesting it is ill founded because some past prophecies of environmental doom have been shown to be false. Inequality receives extended treatment, perhaps in response to Piketty’s (2013) hit book, and this will be discussed further below.

There is a variety of reasons why the clerisy (the most outspoken of whom she observes have been sons of bourgeoisie fathers, many of them sons of clergy) have been able to peddle these pessimisms. An interesting one is that the length of the lag in enrichment after accepting the bourgeois deal (liberty and dignity for ordinary people in return for riches) allowed the clerisy to convince themselves and others that their view of the world had brought riches (p. 595). Deirdre’s clerisy are sometimes honest but deluded people, and sometimes people who peddle pessimisms to defend their material interests.

She develops her argument about the importance of rhetoric further in *Bourgeois Equality*, though I think it could be developed still further. There are lots of examples of talk that helped and hurt the Great Enrichment: talk of business people, economists, theologians, and especially novelists. There is a spirited defence of rhetoric—a plea in the final pages to revalue this ancient art which has come to be seen as something disreputable (p. 647).

I’d like to take up a few specific issues where I think Deirdre’s arguments are questionable. Or at least ask some questions that may open the way to a deeper understanding of the issues.

First, consider her treatment of Adam Smith as a virtue ethicist. Smith certainly provides an extended treatment of the virtues in Part VI, which was added to the final editions of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The story of the additions is told by Raphael and Macfie in the introduction to the standard Glasgow edition of Smith’s work, and their place in the structure of the argument of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by Raphael’s (2007) book on Smith’s ethics: *The Impartial Spectator*. Does this make Smith a virtue ethicist? The tradition of virtue ethics goes back at least to Aristotle, and has been revived in the 20th century by Alasdair MacIntyre, along with Deirdre’s heroines Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch. Gloria Vivenza (2001, 2009), whose work is strangely ignored by Dierdre, has identified Aristotelian elements in Smith’s work, hardly surprising given the Aristotelian structure of the
education system in Smith’s Scotland and at the University of Oxford. Scholars have been put off the track for many years by all the rude things Smith wrote about the degenerate Aristotelianism of mid-18th century Oxford, but Vivenza rightly observes that the philosopher himself is never criticised. One thing however that Smith resists is describing the good, that to which the virtues are directed, and an essential element of the Aristotelian system of virtue ethics, and indeed an essential element of the 20th century versions. Perhaps this is because the good for Smith is something to be discovered rather than described at the outset of the analysis. Whatever the reason for omitting it, the claim that Smith is a virtue ethicist requires much more than Deirdre’s observation that virtues are discussed. Only then can we take seriously and properly understand her much repeated statement that in Smith all virtue is reduced to prudence.

Second, I note her presentation of optimism and pessimism. She urges us to put away our pessimisms and hope—but a well-grounded hope rests on scepticism (or realism, even perhaps pessimism) about certain matters. Here her ill-tempered dismissal of Augustine and Calvin gets her into trouble (e.g. pp. 200, 208). The claim that Smith is “a secular follower of Aquinas” is absurd. After all, Smith, who is one of her heroes, was theologically shaped by Augustine and Calvin in an 18th century Scotland dominated by the Presbyterian Kirk. Smith followed them in scepticism about human capacities after the Fall that led him to advocate markets as a way of limiting the moral and intellectual effects of human sin. It is only when the effects of the Fall are recognised and contained in some way that we have a well grounded hope for human advancement. The historian of science Peter Harrison (2007) makes this point very clearly. I’ve tried to draw out the implications of the Fall for our understanding of Adam Smith’s work in some of my own writing (2011a, 2011b, 2012). Anthony Waterman (1991, 2002) has written much about these matters. Jacob Viner (1978) knew much better, too. Terry Eagleton (2015) is another who knows the intimate connection between scepticism and hope in a recent book. Deirdre’s simplistic opposition between the two and exhortation to optimism doesn’t cut it in my view, and I think reflects her lack of theological depth.

Third, I consider Deirdre’s engagement with recent debates over inequality. Like her I’m unimpressed by Piketty’s book in spite of the mountains of data he presents. The problem is that Piketty interprets
the data through simplistic macroeconomic ratios and lacks a convincing account of the mechanisms behind the claimed inevitable tendency of capitalism to increase inequality. However, Deirdre’s own analysis is hardly better. Essentially her observation is that absolute poverty rather than inequality matters, and that the Great Enrichment has dealt with poverty over the long term. She dismisses concerns about shorter term dangers of growing inequality in most Western countries. Perhaps I’m being a bit nationalistically sensitive, but for two of the discussions of inequality she singles out for criticism [by fellow Australians Peter Saunders (2011a, 2011b) and Geoffrey Brennan / Gordon Menzies (2013)] I find it hard to square her discussion with their texts. Tyler Cowen’s work cops some unfair criticism in my view, too. The chapters on inequality, like the discussions of environmental concerns, are less well done than other parts of the argument, and I suspect are later additions to her central argument. A pity because these are the most prominent concerns of the contemporary clerisy.

These three areas where I think more is needed, and no doubt other areas where specialists will find the details weak, should not reduce our admiration of Deirdre’s overall achievement in these volumes. She has dealt with a huge and important question, and mostly in my view got it right. Her argument about the causes of the Great Enrichment is hard to resist, her identification of rhetoric as an important element in economic progress reignites and redirects a debate that has been going on at least since Weber, and her willingness to bring theology into this debate opens up new possibilities for understanding economic progress. These volumes are indeed a major intellectual achievement. Not the last word on these matters though. I can’t imagine Deirdre wishing they were; she would want to be part of the vigorous continuing discussions about these hugely important questions.

References


