

# Dynamism in Smith's Moral Theory

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One of the more striking features of Jesse Norman's *Adam Smith: Father of Economics* is its emphasis on the "dynamic" character of Smith's philosophy. By my count, in the 150-plus pages dedicated to explicating the content and outlining the impact and applicability of Smith's thought, that particular expression appears at least eleven times (pp. 166, 186, 174, 201, 212, 213, 221, 293, 295, 304, 335), and similar ones appear at least nine (pp. 179, 182, 205, 213, 240, 294, 298, 299, 329). Norman consistently reminds us that Smith's theories, whether they be of language, morals, law, or trade, always depict continuous, ongoing processes instead of static endpoints.

Norman's main purpose in stressing this feature of Smith's philosophy is to contrast Smithian "political economy" with contemporary mainstream economics. Norman contends that in their focus on matching the "objectivity of the exact sciences" by developing a "single abstract model," contemporary mainstream economists tend to forget that economic activity is always embedded in lived human life in all its complexity and changeableness (p. 243). One lesson these economists should learn from Smith, Norman argues, is that it is impossible to develop a truly worthwhile "economics hermetically sealed from history, sociology, or philosophical reflection" (p. 222), let alone "politics" or "moral evaluation" (p. 325). Thus, Norman implies that economists should temper their interest in universal formalisms that apply only to fixed ideal circumstances with more careful attention to historical context, the nuances of human psychology, and other such messy contingencies.

I lack the expertise to comment productively on whether Norman's critique is fair to contemporary mainstream economists. The same goes for the question of what a more Smithian version of contemporary economics would look like. However, I would like to highlight a tension in Norman's overall project, albeit one that it inherits from Smith. Norman believes that in thinking more like Smith, we can make progress towards solving some of today's most pressing social and political issues. Given his Smithian critique

of contemporary mainstream economics, it is easy to see broadly why he would think this: to the extent that economics impacts policy, better, more Smithian economics will yield better policy. But as Norman is aware, what we even mean by "better" in this context will be shaped by our values. As he makes clear, Smith's own values underlie many of his policy prescriptions. Norman tells us that Smith was not an "advocate of self-interest" in any crude sense (pp. 181-84), that he was more pro-poor than "pro-rich" (pp. 184-86), that he was "egalitarian in outlook" (p. 186), that he was not (that much of) a misogynist (pp. 217-220), that he objected morally to slavery (p. 233), and that he valued commerce both because it tends to improve people's lives and because "it creates freedom" (pp. 235-36). Presumably, doing economics in a more Smithian-style will involve doing economics in a way that is shaped by moral positions like these Smithian ones. But does Smith provide the resources to *recommend* these or any other positions over alternatives? Why would turning to Smith help us not just improve our knowledge of how the economy works but also employ this knowledge in the service of the right ends?

We need to answer questions like these if we are going to read Smith as an ethicist or moral teacher as well as a theoretician who combines what we have perhaps mistakenly separated into fields like sociology, psychology, history, politics, and economics. The obvious place to look for such answers is in Smith's moral theory. But here is where we see the tension in both Smith and Norman's study of him. Norman points out that this theory is primarily "naturalistic and descriptive, not prescriptive—almost a theory of moral and social causation" (p. 296; also see p. 308). If this is the whole truth, then Smith cannot provide any fundamental insight on what we should value; he can only explain how we come to value the things that we do. Additionally, if we take seriously the dynamism to which Norman calls attention, the fact that we value certain things is perpetually subject to change; thus, we could not even argue on Smithian grounds that certain values are psychologically unavoid-

able, regardless of whether there are reasons why we should hold them. However, fortunately for those who want Smith to give us *something* normative and unfortunately for those who value interpretive ease, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is filled with indications that some of the value judgments it explains are actually good and/or right because they are “natural” or conducive to human flourishing or divinely ordained or simply intrinsically compelling. Norman expresses sensitivity to this general feature of Smith’s work when he points out that “Smith never quite cuts his moral worldview away from the workings of providence,” which would provide his moral views with some normative basis (p. 318). Thus, perhaps confusingly, Smith’s moral philosophy seems to be both descriptive and normative at the same time.

Maybe it is enough for Norman’s purposes simply to catalog Smith’s particular moral positions and commitments. At least doing so reveals that a person can both champion free markets *and* hold non-economic values. But then again, one would hope that since Smith is a philosopher, he would provide us with more than just ungrounded, *ad hoc* moral opinions. Furthermore, Norman himself wants to avoid reading Smith as licensing a “moral free-for-all” (p. 319), despite the “relativity” that comes from Smith’s explanation of moral values as originating from concrete human social relationships (p. 296). Thus, it is worth trying to find some stable normative line of thought in Smith’s moral philosophy.

It would help to start with a quick overview of Smith’s account of the development and internalization of moral norms, which Norman helpfully characterizes as “an explanation for the positive moral norms and values that knit society together” and “the outside-in moral development of the individual” (p. 308). According to the former aspect of the account, the natural desire to be in sentimental harmony with each other leads us all to modify our sentiments through a process of perspectival negotiation. In short, I imagine how I would feel if I were you, you imagine how you would feel if you were me, and we meet in the middle. Repeated negotiations of this kind establish society-wide standards of appropriate ways to feel about things. We then internalize these standards when we realize that others are employing them to judge us. This process of internalization generates a conscience once we also realize that others can make mistakes in judging us. We respond to this realization by prioritizing the judgment of an impartial, well-informed version of our neighbors. Thus, the moral point of view be-

comes that of a person applying the perspectively-negotiated public standards of propriety with good information and without bias.

The insight in Norman’s stress on the dynamism of Smith’s theory becomes clear here because the process of interaction that generates the moral point of view never really ends. Thus, though shaped by some relatively stable features of human nature, our moral values are never static. Furthermore, the fact that they emerge from our desire for “moral community” with our neighbors means that they will vary to some extent from community to community (p. 296). The first obstacle, then, to treating Smith as a moral teacher is to find an explanation in this account for how we might come to criticize our values. The problem is that if our values only arise as tools for helping us get along with our neighbors, we might not even have the psychological resources to criticize them. Are we fooling ourselves in thinking that such a critique is even *possible*, let alone a good idea?

If we think that a response to this worry must take the form of pointing to robustly substantive, universally held norms that we can employ to evaluate more locally held ones, we likely will not get anywhere with Smith. But perhaps a response need only involve a certain perspective, stance, point of view, or attitude—something other than a static, detailed norm that would halt the dynamism that Norman rightly sees at the heart of Smithian moral life. The best candidate for filling this role is a commitment to the value of impartiality, understood very generally. As Norman suggests, this commitment leaves our norms and values “always potentially subject to review,” in that we can be perpetually open to the possibility that they mask some form of partiality, perhaps only made evident to us when we adopt the perspective of the party against which they are partial (p. 318). Of course, important questions remain for this strategy, not least of which being about the psychological mechanisms that would lead us to take seriously this perspective, to see it as containing a voice that “should be able to be heard”; why wouldn’t the sentimental harmony we have with all the other voices be satisfying enough (*ibid.*)? But at least we can see an outline of how a Smithian explanation for a truly critical perspective might work.

Even if we were to fill in this outline, harder, deeper questions still remain. These would be questions about why we *should* adopt this truly critical perspective. Norman is likely right to imply that certain answers would off the table for Smith, answers like, “because this perspective tracks the ex-

tra-human truth.” Norman is also likely right to imply that answers like, “because God said so” *might* be on the table for Smith, though such answers would be unsatisfying for many of us. That leaves answers like, “because doing so will make us happier,” “because doing so will facilitate peaceful interaction with as many different kinds of people as possible, interaction that is increasingly impossible to avoid today,” or “because consistency demands that we do so, as some respect for this point of view is built into our respect for more locally-applied forms of impartiality.” All answers of this kind are surely in need of reconstruction and defense, but none of them is so foreign to Smith as to make them non-starters.

Obviously, it would be unfair to demand that Norman’s book, which meets its own distinct aims, develop and grapple with these sorts of questions. Thus, I point to them in the spirit of pointing to work that remains to be done in interpreting and applying Smith. It is one thing to celebrate his accomplishments as a progenitor for today’s social science. It is another to point out that he held moral views and values that we might think are lamentably absent from the work of his descendants. But it is a third thing entirely to point out that he holds these views and values on a philosophically interesting, defensible basis. It is reassuring to learn that important historical figures hold moral opinions that we want them to hold. But it is better to learn from them good reasons for holding these opinions. How turning to Smith can help us in this regard remains an open question.