

The Friendship between Two Great Thinkers: David Hume and Adam Smith

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Dennis Rasmussen, *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford, 2017, 336 pp.

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One of the long-lasting controversies concerning the adequate interpretation of philosophical works is the one about whether or not it should focus only on the argumentative content of the respective work, or it should also take into consideration the way in which the biography of its author could shed some light on the ideas comprised in it. While the dominant view is the one according to which philosophy should be treated as an activity that must be appraised only in relation with its rational intrinsic worth, there are also important attempts to emphasize that a philosopher's line of reasoning cannot be fully understood without a reference to the broader context of its formation and evolution.

A remarkable contribution along these lines is the recent book of Dennis Rasmussen, *The Infidel and the Professor:*

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David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought, published at the prestigious Princeton University Press in 2017. The main objective followed in the book, as should be obvious from the title, is the one of „telling the story” of the „friendship which had played a role in the lives of two of the history’s most significant thinkers”, as Rasmussen announces on the first page of the *Introduction*. And, in his opinion, this aim is even more significant if we take into consideration the fact that it is the first book on this topic, which he believes to be a „remarkable” thing, if we reflect on David Hume’s and Adam Smith’s „stature and influence”.

The main reasons why the topic didn’t got the necessary attention are, in his view, the fact that information about their relation and their lives (and especially Adam Smith’s life) are scarce, because they were not too eager to publish personal information, and the fact that friendships are much harder to bring to life than quarrels (pp. 3-5). Hence, in order to compensate for the scarcity of information regarding their relation, Rasmussen relied not only on the fifty-six existing letters between Hume and Smith (fifteen from Smith to Hume and forty-one from Hume to Smith), but also on their scientific and philosophical works, on biographies, on contemporaneous sources, on the correspondence of their acquaintances, and even on periodicals and book reviews (pp. 4-5).

In order to justify the significance of the subject matter of his book, Rasmussen refers to Aristotle’s classification of friendship in three categories: those motivated by utility, those motivated by pleasure, and, „the highest and the rarest of the three – those motivated by virtue and excellence”. In his opinion, Hume’s intellectual relation with Smith is „a nearly textbook model of this kind of friendship: a stable, enduring reciprocal bond” which arises from „the shared pursuit of a noble end – in their case, philosophical understanding” (p. 6). Moreover, he adds that this is „a philosophical friendship of the highest level in action” and even „the higher example of a philosophical friendship in the entire Western tradition” (p. 6). And, as Suzanne Smith, one of the reviewers of this book remarked „philosophy takes friendship (*philia*) as its roots” and in the Western tradition there is an „extensive perceived

overlap between fitness for friendship and fitness for philosophy” (Smith 2017).

Rasmussen’s argumentation is developed in a chronological way covering a period between 1711, the year of David Hume’s birth, and 1790, the year of Adam Smith’s death. He carefully presents the political, cultural, educational and religious context of the formation and the evolution of their line of thought in direct connection with the evolution of their friendship and of the wider political and cultural circumstances. Therefore, the twelve chapter of the book (which are followed by an *Appendix* containing Hume’s text *My Own Life* and Smith’s *Letter to Strahan*) are centred on what Rasmussen regards as the most important moments, encounters, events, or changes in their professional or personal life.

The first chapter of the book, „The Cheerful Sceptic” is dedicated to the first four decades of Hume’s life and formation between 1711, the year of his birth, and 1749, the year of his first encounter with Smith and the beginning of their friendship. He presents Hume’s childhood, his typical Presbyterian upbringing and his formation beginning with the four years experience at Edinburgh University, the several years of intensive independent study and the completion of his formal education in France at the University of Rheims (one year) and the La Flèche College (for two years). During these three years he has developed his philosophical project, the „science of human nature” based on the experimental method. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to a brief presentation of Hume’s *Treatise* and his main philosophical works published before his encounter with Smith.

The second chapter „Encountering Hume” is focused on Smith’s formal education at the universities of Glasgow and Oxford. The main experience was his encounter with Hume’s philosophy, which had a long lasting influence on his work, and with Hume himself (in 1749). An interesting analysis is the one concerning the difference between their personalities: Hume is portrayed as cheerful and kind, with a sparkling personality, great social and conversational abilities, while Smith is described as a more reserved and absentminded man (pp. 46-49). A similar discrepancy is also manifest in their attitude

towards religion: Hume was unambiguous and out-spoken in his sceptical attitude (which led to his failed attempt to become a university teacher in Edinburgh, in 1745), while Smith was more circumspect and less disposed to reveal his religious beliefs.

Therefore, their different attitude towards religion and towards their more pious contemporaries is another key topic of the book, one that is reflected by the two portrayals used in the title. Hume was labelled as the „Great Infidel” and Smith as a respected professor of moral philosophy, although, as Rasmussen rightfully underlines, their religious attitude was much more similar than it is assumed in this common image of the two thinkers. One important notice made by Jon Rick in his review on Rasmussen’s book, is that „religion is the book’s most consistent thematic thread” which is appropriate given the „significant role that religiosity played in shaping Hume and Smith’s lives as well as their contemporaneous reception” (Rick 2018).

The next two chapters describe the decade between 1749 the year of their encounter and 1759 the year of the publishing of Smith’s first major book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a decade marked by the developing of their „budding friendship”, but also by Smith’s successful attempt to become a university professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow (in 1751) and Hume’s failed attempt to fill the Chair of Logic in the same university, due to their different religious attitudes. However, shortly after that, Hume was appointed keeper of the Advocates’ Library in Edinburgh. This position gave him access to a great library and the opportunity to write the *History of England* in a well-documented and impartial style that assured him fame and a relative prosperity. But, the same religious reason led to another important biographical event of that decade: the unsuccessful effort made in 1755 by the Kirk (the Scottish Presbyterian church) to excommunicate Hume on a charge of heresy.

The fifth chapter offers an extensive analysis of Smith’s book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which was profoundly influenced by Hume’s moral philosophy, but also contains some original contributions. In Rasmussen’s opinion, there are two

main divergences between Smith and Hume on the subject of moral life. The first has to do with their explanation of the faculty of sympathy: Hume describes it as a passive emotional contagion, while in Smith's view it presupposes a more active projection into the situation of the other. The second divergence has to do with the foundation of justice: for Hume justice is an artificial virtue which is valued based on its utility for public interest, while for Smith it is a natural virtue based on our sympathy with the injured party.

Rasmussen underlines that in Hume's view the moral approval for an action is deriving from a judge's understanding of the usefulness and agreeableness of an agent's action, and not simply from a mechanical view of utility, as Smith is suggesting. Therefore, Smith misrepresents Hume's theory (p. 109). In his review to Rasmussen's book, Erik Matson argues that Smith's misrepresentation of Hume's moral theory is *intentional* and is *greater* than Rasmussen acknowledges (Matson 2017).

The chapters six and seven are dedicated to presenting Hume's very successful stay in France as a private secretary of the ambassador Lord Hertford, which gave him the opportunity to meet all the major figures of French Enlightenment (except Voltaire), and to be celebrated by them and by the French aristocracy. However, Rasmussen also presents Hume's conflict with Rousseau, who is unjustly described as a paranoid and „wild philosopher“. The chapter eight depicts the last decade of Hume's life and Smith's isolation years in Kirkcaldy, while writing his major work *The Wealth of Nations*.

One of the most consistent chapters of the book is the next one which provides an inquiry in the main ideas of Smith's celebrated work, but also in the way in which Hume's political economy anticipated many of them. Nevertheless, Rasmussen also underlines Smith's original theses concerning the division of labour and his concerns regarding the negative effects of commercial society (pp. 166-173). However, as Erik Matson points out, Rasmussen's statement according to which for Smith the wealth of nations is made possible only by a massive self-deception about the true nature and source of happiness is

an overstatement: acquisition of wealth and happiness are compatible for Smith (Matson 2017).

The last three chapters focus on the last year of Hume's life, the conflict caused by Smith's refusal to be his literary executor and to publish the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume's stoic and peaceful death, the consequences produced by Smith's *Letter to Strahan*, which unleashed the fury of his religious contemporaries, and the last years of Smith's life. Hence, in this last part of the book, Rasmussen revisits in a very expressive way the theme of the philosophical friendship between Hume and Smith. And he describes it by focusing on their last days together, on Hume's serene and dignified way of dying, and especially on Smith's description of it from the *Letter to Strahan* in which he depicts his friend as „approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit” (p. 220).

Therefore we can declare that Rasmussen's book is indeed a successful attempt to tell the story of this philosophical friendship in an inspirational and sensitive way. Nevertheless, there are some objections that could be raised against some of his statements and even against his overall approach. To the remarks that were already mentioned above I will add another two objections. The first is that the presentation of Hume's works is too brief and doesn't account for many of his main sources of inspiration (like Locke, Berkeley, Bacon and others) or for the way in which he distinguishes his view from those of other significant modern philosophers (like Descartes or Malebranche). For example, it is obvious from his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and the posthumous work *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* that he mentions several times some of the theses of Malebranche and even cites extensively from his work *De la recherche de la vérité*, which proves that Hume read his works and has taken them into consideration in the process of developing his philosophical project.

Another objection has to do with the fact that Rasmussen's description about how the friendship between Hume and Smith helped to shape modern thought is not as

extensive as one would expect. Moreover, he practically does not address some of the most important ideas supported by the two famous authors: Smith's theory about the invisible hand of the market and Hume's is-ought problem (Knee 2017). To this I would also add that Hume's well-known arguments against the idea of causation, against induction and other important epistemological ideas do not receive as much as necessary attention from Rasmussen in his line of reasoning.

Nevertheless, despite these objections, Rasmussen's book is a very insightful investigation on a difficult but meaningful topic: the friendship and the philosophical relation between two great thinkers presented against the background of the cultural, religious and political context they lived in. Hence, it is a successful attempt to reveal the way in which the historical and cultural contexts are intertwined with biography and the development of philosophical ideas. For these reasons, I believe that this is a book which will become, without a doubt, an important basis for future investigations on the relation between Hume and Smith, on the correct interpretation of their works, but also on the wider topic of understanding the nature and characteristics of the Scottish Enlightenment.

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