

Adam Smith's Moral Sentiments

ORMONDE

ADAM SMITH, the "father of political economy," was also a professor of moral philosophy. Though *The Wealth of Nations* is the chief work by which he is remembered, he did not conceive it as an isolated piece but as part of a general system.

An earlier and less known work of Smith's is *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.^{*} This too was part of his system, based upon his lecture course which was divided into four parts: 1, natural theology; 2, ethics; 3, jurisprudence; and 4, expediency. Out of the fourth part came *The Wealth of Nations* and the second part was expanded into *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The other two were not completed and unfortunately for posterity, Smith had his notes destroyed at his death.

Smith has been credited - and sometimes discredited - with creating "economic man", an artificial sort of creature who acts only in selfish response to his economic wants. In *Moral Sentiments*, however, he presents man as motivated by sympathy. How could the same author propose two such opposites?

The answer is that Smith had an analytical mind. In discussing a subject he extrapolated what was pertinent to it in order the better to examine it. He did not mean that man was either exclusively a sympathetic or a selfish being, but that these (and other qualities) co-existed in him and that we might better understand them by looking at them one at a time.

In *Moral Sentiments* is a clue as to what led Smith to *The Wealth of Nations*; he points out that while sympathy produces the best results in society, it is still possible for society to survive even if every one simply pursued his own interests. The "invisible hand" would lead to their harmonious association.

Despite its title, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is not a sentimental work. Smith was a sharp observer and analyst. He announced that in this work he was more interested in the facts of the behaviour of imperfect man than in what was right as seen by a "perfect being," and that he would describe how men act and react in terms of crime and punishment, insult and resentment, benevolence and gratitude, etc. He sought to be objective and supposed an "impartial observer" looking on.

An interesting feature of *Moral Sentiments* is its

^{*} *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith, Arlington House, New Rochelle, New York.

conclusion that approbation is of the greatest importance in human conduct and that people seek to merit praise from others and to avoid blame. This theme recurs in Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* wherein it is put forth that the desire for approbation is one of the strongest motives of human nature.

There are strong suggestions in Smith's writings of a broader philosophic basis which deserves further exploration. We know he came under the influence, among others, of Lord Kames and Quesnay (both of whom also influenced Thomas Jefferson). The philosophy of the Enlightenment figures in Adam Smith. Among its postulates are that understanding is to be reached by studying the laws of nature; that these laws are harmonious; that human reason may attain to this understanding; that human freedom is essential to the fulfillment of these laws.

The Wealth of Nations is one fruit of a tree of which *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is another fruit. Instead of studying and judging each as a separate entity, we would do well to examine the tree. Political economy should again be restored to being a discipline linked to a better understanding of the world and ourselves and the pursuit of human happiness - instead of the crotchety, esoteric, isolated and boring subject it too often is in modern times.