

The Infidel and the Professor

D C Russmussen

10 32 The judicial murder of alleged witches continued well into the century: the last woman to be convicted for witchcraft in Scotland was burned alive in 1727 for having turned her daughter into a pony (always a dead giveaway).³³

13 For much of the twentieth century Smiths philosophical writings were deemed to be little more than a series of footnotes to Humes, and as an economist Hume has long been regarded as a minor predecessor of Smith, insofar as he is taken notice of at all. Ironically, we will see that putting the two side by side serves to highlight the importance of Smiths contributions to moral philosophy and Humes to political economy.

14 Hume was neither a believer nor an out-and-out atheist, but rather what we might call an agnostic, or what in the eighteenth century was called simply a skeptic (the better term in any case).⁴² He never denied outright the existence of a higher power, but he deemed the principal arguments on behalf of one highly implausible, and he considered the effects of religion to be mostly pernicious. As one scholar has written, Humes critique of religion and religious belief is subtle, profound, and damaging to religion in ways that have no philosophical antecedents and few successors.⁴³

17 With regard to how Hume and Smith were viewed and treated by their contemporaries, the subtle theoretical distinction between Humes skepticism and Smiths skeptical deism was far less consequential than the much bigger practical divergence between Humes forthrightness and Smiths studied reticence.

20 In other words, Humes encounter with the defenses of theism in the works of John Locke and Samuel Clarke had the effect of undermining his faith rather than bolstering it.

25 Not content with simply showing that religion is superfluous for philosophy and morality, he (= Hume) had commenced what would become a lifelong effort to highlight its deleterious effects.

60 In stark contrast to those who worried that commerce and luxury distract people from their more important duties to God and to country Hume posits that ages of refinement are both the happiest and most virtuous. In his view, commerce encourages industriousness, helps to augment knowledge of all kinds, and renders people more sociable and humane. Indeed, he maintains that industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and, what are commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages.

82 The penultimate chapter of the work is quite bluntly titled Bad Influence of Popular Religions on Morality....

Hence, Hume writes, the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion: Hence it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of a mans morals from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises.

90 While the structure and underpinning of Smiths moral theory are much the same as Humes, there are four major topics on which he deviates from or modifies his friends views: sympathy, utility, justice, and religion.

96 We not only confuse the means (wealth and power) for the ends (true happiness) but unwittingly sacrifice the ends for the sake of the means. Smith thus builds on Humes claim about the beauty of utility to make a **decidedly un-Humean point**, calling attention to an important drawback of the commercial society that Hume admired so unreservedly.⁴⁴

112 Altogether, Humes response to The Theory of Moral Sentiments the mixture of praise, critical engagement, and unconditional support was entirely characteristic of Humes interactions with his friends. Smith had paid Hume the ultimate compliment by making him the key (even if unnamed) interlocutor in his first book, and Hume returned the favor by boosting Smiths spirits on its release, helping to publicize his book, and pushing him to refine his ideas. What more could one want from a philosophical friendship?

115 Alexander Carlyle reports that in September Hume and Smith both attended a dinner at William Robertsons house in Edinburgh that included Benjamin Franklin, among others.⁶ Franklin was in the middle of a jaunt through Scotland with his son, a trip that he deemed

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Six Weeks of the densest Happiness I have met with in any Part of my Life.
In *The Wealth of Nations* Smith cites Hume by name five times, and at another point he transcribes four full paragraphs from *The History of England*, calling its author by far the most illustrious philosopher and historian of the present age.⁷ **One of the five explicit citations, to be discussed in the next section, appears in what may be the key paragraph of the entire book.**
While Playfair does not specify what these innumerable occasions were, one area in which Smith deviated notably from Hume was his much greater readiness to acknowledge the potential drawbacks of commerce and commercial society.
Smith echoed Hume, though in far more detail, on both counts. The devastating chapter on colonies is one of the longest of *The Wealth of Nations*, and Smith too concludes his book with a warning about the costs of imperial conquest.
As Smith scholar the present author included dare forever fond of pointing out, he stressed the drawbacks of commercial society far more than might be expected from the figure who is now widely hailed as the founding father of capitalism.⁴⁶ One of the deepest such drawbacks had already come to the fore in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where
fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it. This last phrase is key: Smith holds that **government can help to prevent** this problem through compulsory, state-supported education aimed especially at the children of the poor.⁶⁰ Thus, while the mental mutilation caused by the division of labor is one of Smith's great worries, as his harsh language demonstrates, this is a danger that he believes can be largely avoided. Still another important drawback of commercial society, one much less easily avoided, is its tendency to **produce massive economic inequalities**.⁶¹ Indeed, Smith holds that wherever there is great property, there is great inequality.
Moreover, Smith suggests that our admiration for the wealthy is especially problematic because the **wealthy do not in fact tend to be terribly admirable people**. On the contrary, he portrays the superior stations of society as suffused with vice and folly, presumption and vanity, flattery and falsehood, proud ambition and ostentatious avidity.⁶⁵ Hence Smith's striking claim, added in the sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, that the disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition is the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.⁶⁶ While Hume occasionally touches on the potential drawbacks of economic inequality, in general he was far more complacent on this score than Smith was.⁶⁷
But Hume knew that this was wishful thinking; Smith quotes him as declaring, I am dying as fast as my enemies, if I have any, could wish, and as easily and cheerfully as my best friends could desire.
Smith concludes the Letter with one of the most fateful sentences that he ever wrote: Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as **approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man**, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit.²⁴ There is a clear echo here of Plato's epitaph for Socrates in the concluding sentence of the *Phaedo*,
Above all, the Letter was an attempt to vindicate Hume's reputation and secure his legacy in a world that was frequently hostile to him and almost always hostile to his ideas. In the context in which Smith wrote the work this meant affirming, in the face of nearly universal sentiment to the contrary, that **a skeptic could both live and die well**. Smiths
At least implicitly, then, the Letter is also a defense of the possibility and morality of a life without religion. In
Though Smith later commented that the Letter brought on him ten times more abuse than *The Wealth of Nations*, he never retracted the claims he made in it, never expressed regret for having published it, and never responded to the critics. As Greig writes, he had delivered his opinion of le bon David, and **he stood by it**, without another word. Adam Smith knew his man.⁵³
In the meantime, the influence of the book continued to grow. Smith was by no means the first to advocate free trade, as he would have been the first to stress, but he helped to give the idea a prominence and dignity that it had previously lacked. Smith's greatest literary

efforts during these years, however, were devoted to his earlier book. The sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which was published in 1790 more than three decades after the first edition, and just months before Smith's death incorporated a great many revisions and additions, including an entirely new Part 6, titled *Of the Character of Virtue*.
Smith's death excited little of the fascination and commotion that Hume had.