

REVIEW ESSAY
PATERNITY DENIED: SELF-INTEREST,
NATURE'S DUPES AND ENLIGHTENMENT
ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY IN
MANDEVILLE, ROUSSEAU, AND SMITH

BY
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Pierre Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. ix + 279, \$65.00. ISBN 0 521 83060 5.

This is an interesting, complex, challenging and significant book. The title does not quite catch the totality of the content, nor of the various related enterprises that are attempted within it. A basic theme (“a” for the work is composed almost like a classical symphony with dominant and minor themes, sometimes inverted, sometimes fighting for dominance) is that of questioning the history of “self-love” and “self-interest” prior to Smith in order to better understand how Smith creates his own synthesis from, among others, the contrasting views of Hume concerning the benefits of commercial society and those of Rousseau concerning its faults. The work, as its subtitle indicates, is hermeneutically informed and it would be appropriate to suggest that, given the long list of *dramatis personae*, a list that stretches from authors from the classical world, through St. Augustine, La Rochefoucauld, Bayle, Pascal, Montesquieu, Mandeville, Hume, and Rousseau, and so on, to Albert Hirschman, to whom the author acknowledges an intellectual debt, and Amartya Sen, what we have is a complex evaluative reading of Smith that takes a number of vantage points. Sen, it should be added, acknowledges Hirschman as an exemplary writer, so the textual sympathies are clear. These evaluations include the familiar notions that *The Wealth of Nations* is both a founding text in the history of economic thought and that it represents the triumph of self-interest as a basis for conceptualizing economic motivation. It is this set of familiar notions that is to be challenged. The

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ISSN 1042-7716 print; ISSN 1469-9656 online/05/040451-8 © 2005 The History of Economics Society
DOI: 10.1080/10427710500370331

hermeneutic intention of the work is that of understanding or “self-knowledge” (p. 4). Force is very clear on this point:

A hermeneutic approach to Rousseau and Smith should start with the familiar image we have of these authors; it should then seek to question this image by making them strange and unfamiliar; in the end we should gain a better knowledge of Smith and Rousseau, but, more importantly, this process should make us more aware of the pre-conceptions that have defined and structured our understanding of these authors (p. 4).

The dramatic tension in the work, from the point of view of say, a mainstream economist, is, or could be interpreted as that between Smith as the “father” of economics, an image of the relationship between Smith’s works and today’s economics, that may have little to do with the historical Smith, as Winch has suggested, and Smith as the creator of an Enlightenment text, influenced by the contrasting insights of, in this case, Mandeville and Rousseau and their differing critiques of human motivation and commercial society (p. 3). The former notion gives a direct line to Edgeworth, to Stigler, for whom *The Wealth of Nations* is “a stupendous palace erected on the granite of self-interest” and to Gary Becker (p. 1). The latter places Smith in the context of philosophical discussion from classical times to that of the Enlightenment and throws up substantial links, suspected by others, such as Pocock, Winch, Hont, and Ignatieff, and Griswold but not subjected to such detailed and sustained analysis before Force, between Smith and Rousseau and hence a potential line from Smith through to economic philosophers such as Hirschman and Sen. The specific links are given by the notion that Rousseau’s “pity” and Smith’s wider notion of “sympathy” cannot be reduced to the single principle of self-interest.

Given this range and the complexity of evidence and arguments required to make the key points, the main title seems less appropriate than the subtitle. The work does not develop historically or chronologically, rather, as the main title would suggest but thematically and dialogically, as the subtitle would suggest. The stages of the discussion are made clearer on page five of the Introduction, and even readers experienced in the primary literature may wish to keep the list of main topics on a chapter-by-chapter basis in mind. What takes place within each chapter needs to be followed with care, as a considerable amount of business is transacted as one text or set of texts is checked against other texts. Force has assembled, it would seem, his evidence as Hirschman self-confessedly did, i.e., “the laborious way” (Hirschman 1997, p. 69). The overall conclusion concerning Smith’s refutation and integration of the “selfish hypothesis” ends in the sort of paradox that Smith and the Enlightenment more widely, would have savored.

The links between Rousseau and Smith, according to Force, exist in a number of elements. Both had read Mandeville and taken him seriously, even if only to refute him. Both work with two principles: Rousseau with *amour de soi* and *amour propre*; Smith with self-interest or rather “self-love” and “vanity” taken by Force to be the equivalent to *amour propre*, Mandeville having introduced the notion of “pity.” In common with Mandeville, both see humankind as seeking society for its own sake, and both share Mandeville’s concern for the gradual progression of society. All are concerned with what Smith calls “customs and manners.” Rousseau sees a development that goes from the primitive through the savage state and on to

commercial society. In the state of nature, *amour de soi* and pity are in operation. In the savage state, *amour proper* takes hold with pity based on “identification” (similar to Smith’s “sympathy”) whereas in commercial society the predominant motivation is based on the operation of reason and the calculation of interest. *Amour de soi* carries with it the idea of an instinctual drive to self-preservation and to immediate gratification.

According to Force, Smith shares this notion. Vanity is a drive no longer based simply or directly in material gratification, but in social approbation, and is the equivalent to *amour proper*—self-regard through the approval of others. Smith sees that in the rude stages of society, the desire for present gratification is fundamental, whereas in developed society a desire to better our condition through an orientation towards deferred gratification is dominant. The move is from pleasure-now to pleasure-postponed. Like Rousseau’s insights, Smith’s notion concerning the force of vanity is socially situated and “is a historical consequence of the development of commerce and the division of labour” (p. 47). Both *amour proper* and vanity are the products of society and both incline individuals to have a greater esteem for themselves than for others. Smith satirizes vanity and the future orientation to some considerable comic effect, particularly in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and also in *The Wealth of Nations*. These satirical elements, or rather, I think, situational ironies imposed by nature and explicated by Smith in his social thought are to some extent shared with Mandeville, Rousseau, and Pascal. But the implication of the kind of future orientation satirized by Smith, is as Force shows in chapter three, the indefinite postponement of pleasure.

Force’s next task is to place Mandeville on the one hand and Smith and Rousseau on the other within a wider set of concerns. This move allows Force the opportunity to draw in other authors and texts, such as Helvétius, before, and Bentham, after. Mandeville has been called variously an Epicurean and an Augustinian. Force cuts through any potential debate: “Most of the notions that Rousseau and Smith criticize in Mandeville could indifferently be called Epicurean or Augustinian. In particular it is Epicurean/Augustinian doctrine of self-interest that Rousseau and Smith attack from a Stoic point of view” (p. 49). The basis for each school of thought may differ. St. Augustine is concerned, after all, with the Fallen nature of humankind, a minor though recurrent theme in Force’s analysis and one used to poke a little bit of fun in Becker’s direction. But the “psychological analysis of pleasure” is, according to Force, the same (p. 57).

For the Epicurean/Augustinian camp, all motives reduce to self-interest, for neo-Stoics, there is always the possibility of virtue. Unlike Mandeville, both Rousseau and Smith are concerned that “virtue is within the reach of human power” (p. 63) and therefore resist the notion that all human behaviors can be reduced to self-interest, even if self-interest dominates in commercial society. In the search for approbation and praise, some of the behaviors will be “praiseworthy.” Force argues that Smith seems to have reconciled self-interest and virtue partly by borrowing the sport metaphor from Stoic thought. It is only partly, because in the desire to be praised more widely, some behavior is undoubtedly worthy of praise. Play to win the competition, but stick honorably to the rules of the game, including paying attention to notions such as discretion, application, and prudence and so on. In such a context, “virtuous actions” can proceed from self-interest (p. 83).

In the context of life or the economy as sport, we look to our own, but only as far as we may without injury to another's interests. Smith in this respect, according to Force, follows Cicero. In the Augustinian tradition, cooperation based on self-interest is likely to be unstable. In the Stoic tradition the rules of the game, including honorable behavior, make it otherwise. When combined with sympathy, as in Smith's account, order is to be expected (p. 86). English is, on reflection, an interesting medium through which to develop a sporting metaphor. Think of the hierarchy of conceptual opportunities created by the presence or absence of the articles as in: "a competition", "the competition", and "competition," a set of ideas exploited in the language of economics and noted by linguists.

What then does the rational pursuit of self-interest mean? This is Force's next key concern and the question is considered by means of a temporal displacement as the ideas of modern theorists, Stigler, Becker, Hirschman, Elster and Sen, are read into and through Enlightenment concerns. Force, as someone who is language-sensitive, is well aware of the dangers of the moves that he makes over time:

Any attempts to translate the language of economics science and rational choice theory into the language of early modern moral philosophy (and vice versa) should be carried out with caution. This book is based on the premise that such translations are not only possible, but also, enlightening, because they help reveal the axiomatic choice of both languages. The exercise is authorised by the practice of economists themselves, who never fail to invoke the authority and language of an eighteenth-century moral philosopher, Adam Smith, when they discuss the first principles of their discipline (p. 101).

The "never" may be an exaggeration. Force is clear about the problems, given the need to understand Smith in a historical as well a philosophical context. Force is driven by the hermeneuticist's desire for understanding. What he explores is the link between "reason" and "self-interest."

The analysis made by Force is complex. I found it useful, once I had read the chapter through, to work backwards from the concluding paragraph of the chapter and both forwards and backwards from the Table 3.1 on page 121 that sets out four notions associated with paired philosophers, of what the links between reason and self-interest can be considered to be in the works of those concerned. As this review is based upon the well-tried but simple method of summarization and simplification, I do not intend to present the entire story though I hope that I have not in the process done too much violence to a key concern of the chapter. Take the pairing of Becker and Bentham and Smith and Sen. Force traces Becker's ideas back through Bentham to those of the Epicurean philosophers, such as Helvétius, the key principle involved being the pleasure principle. Augustinians find it difficult to maximize utility because original sin prevents consistent desires. In the eighteenth century the idea of consistency emerged and this is the line of philosophical development that connects Bentham and Becker. Both say "yes" to the pleasure-pain principle and to stable preferences. Smith and Sen, according to Force, say "no" to both. For Smith, vanity and the drive to better our condition places us within a situational irony within which we continuously defer gratification (Force puts it as a preference for saving over consumption) and then, on aging, re-evaluate our personal histories only to discover that we have been duped. Over time, then, our preferences are not consistent.

In Sen's case, the notion of "commitment" can transform preferences and selfish reasoning in particular contexts. For Smith, the more we are committed to modern commercial society the more we are committed to bettering our condition and hence the more we are committed to making rational calculations in the context of deferred gratification. Of course, given the propensity "to truck, barter and exchange," this orientation to self-betterment must exist even in simple society. The strength of the commitment to self-betterment is significantly enhanced by changed historical circumstances. Force's overall conclusion to the chapter is that, "When economists talk about the rational pursuit of self-interest, they refer to a notion that is grounded in two different, and in many ways incompatible traditions" (p. 134).

Smith, in Force's view, does not develop a notion of countervailing passions, the basis of Hirschman's conceptualization of the "Montesquieu-Steuart doctrine," but rather assimilates passion and interests within the notion, based on a potentially unwarranted admiration of the rich, of working to better one's condition as a general condition in commercial society. Smith is of course aware of the possible contradictions between wealth and virtue, though he thinks that the class from which he comes can overcome such contradictions by reason and reflection, including reflection on the attributes of a neo-Stoic philosopher. The self-regard of the middling classes of society as a class that avoids the excesses found in other stations in life is an eighteenth century view not confined to Smith. The assimilation of passions to interests, inspired by Rousseau, and calculation contributes to the admirable harmony of commercial economy under, it must be said, conditions of natural liberty. Force makes some play of the fact that Smith seems to reverse his earlier judgments in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* about the futility of accumulation. This is undertaken in a passage that refers to "splenic philosophy" and which Force takes as a counter-argument to Rousseau (p. 159). It may well be, but what is written at this point in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* does not refute what Smith earlier argues. It is a necessary aspect of being duped by nature that there is some natural influence to sustain the deception. It seems to me to be useful to see Smith in all of these passages as explicating a situational irony imposed on us by nature. What I find problematic is Smith's concept of "nature" that in context seems to imply something more than "human nature" and this raises questions about the intended/unintended status of the outcomes. An optimistic view, when we are all feeling good, provides a natural motive for the continuation of the situational irony that I see as the main force of Smith's views of wealth accumulation and a means of convergence of social forces into a harmonious order of improvement. The explanation that it is a backward reference to feelings of despair in old age does not necessarily prohibit the idea that it is also a reference to Rousseau. Force's point is that we better understand Smith when he is read through Rousseau's ideas on economic motivation. Smith searches in his writing, Force argues, to reconcile an issue that Rousseau had forced open.

From the outset Force tells us that his intention is to render the familiar, unfamiliar. The outcome of his reflections on interested and disinterested commerce, for example that of economics and that of, under certain assumptions, friendship, is that "when at the end of the nineteenth century, economists set out to enunciate the first principles of their discipline, they adopted Hobbes's (and Mandeville's) "selfish hypothesis," a principle that Smith (along with Hume and others) had adamantly rejected" (p. 201). Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* is fundamentally neo-Stoic in its mode of

argument rather than Epicurean, though Force is careful to refer to the Epicurean elements in some aspects of Smith's thought. However, if economic behavior is self-interested, the implication is that moral behavior "must be disinterested," a notion that Hutcheson, though Force does not say this specifically in chapter five, himself held (p. 204). Force is now ready to consider the relationship between self-interest and the public good.

Force asks, "Is it legitimate to trace the economics/politics dichotomy to Smith?" (p. 207). His analysis starts with Hume who makes no distinction—politics and economics march to the drum of self-interest regulated by convention (justice and property rights). Rousseau objects to the notion that the public good is best achieved by the selfish hypothesis. For Rousseau, once vice is in play it can only result in further corruption. There are no conventions that harness private interests to public good. Whereas Hume encourages the development of wealth and the toleration of "luxury," Rousseau argues for economic equality as a means of contriving "duty" (pp. 224–25). Smith's views are interpreted as an attempt to "reconcile the apparently incompatible positions of Hume and Rousseau" (p. 225). Smith's solution, according to Force, is to look both to self-interest and "the cultivation of public spirit" (p. 229). The pursuit of individual self-interest will normally produce the public good but, in addition, humans have reason as well as commercial instincts and reason combined with education and deliberation will help those prone to partial points of view to see the wider issues. Smith does not accept, according to Force, the Montesquieu-Steuart doctrine. There is no simple mechanism for ensuring that the interests of rulers and the interests of society are in harmony. Nor is there any simple mechanism for ensuring that the self-interest of groups, as opposed to those of individuals, can be harnessed for the public good. It is only through public dialogue and open debate, through the exercise of wisdom and virtue, that a harmony can be achieved. Hence, persuasion is central to Smith's approach at all levels and persuasion is only really possible through the capacity for "sympathy" (to see the one in the other) and hence for moral and political judgements. Force's closing moves in this chapter are, in the old sense of the term, nice.

Reviewing a work of this complexity and erudition is a humbling, as well as an enriching experience. For much of the time, I was in the theoretical role of naïve reader, as constructed by Umberto Eco, attempting to understand the text in order to make a reduced translation of its contents, aware, as a potential reviewer that I may have little to offer with respect to the possibility of useful deconstruction. This is a big book with complex set of themes, calling upon a range of literature that may or may not be familiar to historians of economic thought. It achieves the aim of disrupting comfortable views of the relationship between past and present understandings of the force of "self-interest" in Smith's writing and it draws upon evidence from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, showing how the former relates to the latter, whilst putting an interesting spin on the "Adam Smith problem" (p. 261).

It is good also to be reminded of basic moral issues, especially in a world system in which monopolization, alienation, and a comparative lack of dialogue, threaten the international economic "order." Smith's system of "natural liberty" also requires persuasive dialogue and moral behavior. To the Hume-Steuart-Smith "triangle" (to borrow a metaphor from the established literature), Force has added, and I think

convincingly, the Mandeville-Rousseau-Smith triangle (though of course this metaphor establishes fixed boundaries, which would not be in the spirit of Force's hermeneutics and the differentiation and melding involved in "synthesis"). Smith while sharing aspects of Rousseau's analysis of wealth and the expenditure patterns of the rich and their love of "trifles" does not wish to prohibit production that goes beyond that which is strictly necessary. Smith's economics writing is often depicted as a "synthesis" but the question "synthesis of what?" is rarely specifically asked anew. If Smith's work is essentially a synthesis, then the "of what" and the "how" concerning ways in which the synthesis is textual achieved while producing essentially a new work are, in themselves, also significant questions. Force, in effect, demonstrates a way of performing such an investigation.

Force refers to the satirical aspects of Mandeville, Rousseau, and Smith but does not specifically build upon this insight. Satirical elements in Smith's writing made his work available to literature and hence to imaginative readings that had little to do directly with the formal writings of future economists, more influenced by the analytical aspects of his work. The satire also helps Smith achieve his instructive aims. Smith was aware that to explain and instruct, it is essential also to engage the reader emotionally, a point Force makes, indirectly, by way of Smith's admiration for the combination of emotion and reason in Rousseau's writing (p. 24). It could be argued that there are elements of satire and irony, too in Hirschman. Though this is perhaps to digress, there may well be a need for further investigation of irony in Smith and its relationship to "surface" and "deep" interpretations of economic agency and hence its role in Smith's hermeneutics. The interrogation of irony conducted in this work between Force's views and those of Rothschild as well as Rothschild's views themselves need, I think, further reflection.

I have never found the idea that Smith's "invisible hand" is predictive of neo-classical general equilibrium theory very convincing, and the disruption of understanding that Force provides with respect to first principles may be helpful in re-assessing this contention as well as those that he has set out, more directly, to explore. Smith's notion of harmony, on Force's evidence, is not that of general equilibrium theory. Force does not make enough detailed analysis of the situated aspects of economic agency in Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* or, rather, he does for monarchs but not for shepherds. Smith's primary economic agent in *The Wealth of Nations*, is "every man" but some close observation of how Smith handles particular instances at the micro-level of that work may have helped nuance any trade-off between wealth and virtue or vanity. Smith often refers to "interests," and it may have been helpful had Force speculated further on the objective/subjective divide, touched upon most significantly on the case of kingship, though the analysis may work as well for Smith's tribal pastoralists. Further reflection on the differences made by later theorists between theory as predictively useful rather than as descriptively true may also have helped. This is touched upon in various places, including in his discussion of Hume (pp. 214–15), but it may need further reflection.

Force's book is a significant contribution to the history of self-interest and to the more general movement of reclaiming Smith as an Enlightenment thinker, someone in dialogue with his predecessors and contemporaries and enmeshed in modes of thinking that tend to be overlooked by ideas that gather around issues of economic paternity. It is, however, also the case that Smith's insights into economic life are

not necessarily bounded by the historical context of his synthesis. Economists, even those who would not classify themselves as “mainstream,” continue to use images and quotes from Smith as a means of persuading others (say) of the positive aspect of globalization and international trade. Smith is also fought over and repossessed in ways that have current significance and not just in academia but also in newspapers such as *The Economist*. His work continues to have both analytical and, for liberals and neo-liberals, symbolic relevance in ways that other eighteenth century literature does not. Picking cherries out of a bun, however useful for given persuasive purposes, academic or otherwise, is not a means of achieving full textual understanding, as Force’s analyses demonstrates.

This book will stimulate and inspire further discussion and research within and beyond its immediate context. Within the context, it will help me to reflect further on the sources and linguistic means that Smith uses to shape his synthesis. Beyond the specific context, it will also help me reflect upon the socio-economic criticism made in the nineteenth century by John Ruskin. The combination of interests, virtue, and concern would put Ruskin, who owed more to the eighteenth century than we might imagine, or that he was prepared to admit, much closer to Smith than were some of the political economists whom Ruskin criticized. For the wider community it will stimulate discussion in the same way as Rothschild’s *Economic Sentiments*. This rewarding and stimulating book is worthy of careful reading and is likely to receive high levels of critical attention.