Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment

A Discussion with Charles L. Griswold

William Desmond: It is a pleasure to welcome Professor Charles Griswold today. I thank him for his willingness to present us with an overview of his new book *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), and to participate in a discussion. Professor Griswold is professor of philosophy at Boston University, where he is also the chair of the philosophy department. His new work on Adam Smith might seem like something of a departure from the concerns of many of his prior publications. In particular I mean his writings on Plato and Platonic themes generally. I refer especially to his book *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, first published by Yale University Press, and recently reprinted by Pennsylvania State University Press. This book is a close reading and interpretation of the *Phaedrus*, and was awarded the Matchette prize by the American Philosophical Association in 1987. Needless to say, Professor Griswold has written extensively on classical philosophy. This, however, cannot be separated from a concern with pressing problems of more contemporary currency, especially the role of philosophy in society, and with respect to ethical and political considerations. Hence his concern with the moderns, by contrast with the ancients, implies no slighting of the former, though the question persists as to what both have to say to us today. So it is not surprising to find him engaged with a very influential modern, Adam Smith: an influential, but also complex modern, in that themes from ancient thought receive their own distinctive configuration in Smith's thought. Enlightenment is often marked by a certain turn from the past, oriented to a putatively better future, via a reformed or revolutionized present. But the contrast with the past is sometimes less stark. This one might guess perhaps from the subtitle to the book, emphasizing the *virtues* of enlightenment. While Smith now is often remembered first as an economist, Professor Griswold's interest is directed to his work as a philosopher, especially his moral and political thought. Many of the themes that Adam Smith explored, and to which Griswold draws our attention, are still very live issues: the virtues, ethical reasoning, sympathy, moral education, the importance of ordinary life and the role of philosophical theory, to name but a few issues. Let me then welcome Charles again, and ask him to first offer us an account of his new work, its purposes and its claims. After that we will begin the discussion with the other participants here.

Charles Griswold: We find ourselves in a curious situation. Never in history have so many enjoyed so high a level of material prosperity, political and economic liberty, and peace and security. The benefits of the flourishing arts, sciences, and humanistic disciplines are within reach of an unprecedented number of people. We may praise the strict virtues of ancient Sparta, or the high artistic and philosophical accomplishments of ancient Athens, but who among us would willingly return to either, or to any of the great medieval cities, let alone to a less distinguished *polis*? We are the children of the Enlightenment and scarcely any of us would gladly claim a different patrimony. Life in pre-modern society strikes us as thoroughly undesirable from both material and ethical standpoints. So widely shared is this conviction that in extraordinary numbers the peoples of the globe vote for it with their feet. The march of the liberal Enlightenment seems irresistible. It has all but destroyed its fraternal enemy, the illiberal Enlightenment fathered by Marx, and pre-modern cultures collapse under its advance with astonishing speed. And yet scarcely any of us still defend our patrimony without heavy qualifications. Criticism of the modern age and the Enlightenment from...
which it stems is a staple of our intellectual and spiritual lives, within academia and outside it. The 'crisis' literature of the last century and a half remains a prominent part of contemporary rhetoric especially among those who would seem to have least need for it. The period's greatest philosophers — Husserl, Heidegger, and Nietzsche among them — and legions of others have distinguished themselves in part by announcing and diagnosing our illness. It may be that the future is always so opaque and the fear of loss so great that given half a chance the imagination will brood on the present with high anxiety. Yet our continuing failure of confidence, and our general despair about who we are in the midst of our plenty, cannot be dismissed with a psychological observation.

We do find ourselves faced with unsettling questions, some especially characteristic of our period, and others _quaestiones perennes_ that now press with particular force. Some are both. I began these introductory comments with the pronoun 'we'; it is very often used in philosophy, especially in ethics, as it is in politics. But the question might immediately be put to my use of the word, whether parochialism does not lurk just beneath the surface. True, 'we' enjoy a high level of material prosperity, of liberty, and other treasured goods; but how many of our brethren toil in misery just outside the palace door? Is there a sense in which their misery is necessarily the price of our happiness?

Put the nasty suspicion underlying these questions another way: might the seeds of our manifold troubles also, paradoxically, be the very same seeds that have yielded the fruits we enjoy? Might the world be structured in such a way that its flourishing is the natural cause of its own decay, thanks to some relentless 'invisibility hand' that, like the divinities invoked by the ancient tragedians, transforms the good into the bad and even the bad into the good? Or stated summarily with reference to several widely discussed contemporary developments: might the apparent devolution of liberty into spontaneity, of pluralism into relativism, of knowledge into technology and thence into the self-vitiating mastery of nature, of science into a 'world-view' produced by a given historical milieu, of culture into vulgarity, of reason into imagination and then into fantasy — in short, the devolution of the Enlightenment into what is widely termed 'post-modernism' — be the natural consequence of the Enlightenment's own premises? And if this disturbing thought persuades, where to go from here?

The answer to the question depends in part on how we analyze the virtues and vices of the Enlightenment. One camp would have us reappropriate the classical Greek heritage. However, a pressing difficulty with any return to the ancients is that, particularly in Aristotle, talk about human excellence or virtue seems tied to a teleological biology, and virtually no one today defends such a biology against the claims of modern science. Hence in MacIntyre, for example, the arguments in favour of an appropriation of classical 'virtue' are explicitly severed from any moorings in a teleological biology. This comes to something like preserving Aristotle while replacing his notion of 'nature' with that of 'culture,' and perhaps finally 'history.' Similar results arise given what is usually taken as the near impossibility of reviving anything like Platonic, Aristotelian, or indeed Stoic metaphysics. It then becomes doubtful that a modern revival of ancient thought can depend on any pre-modern (specifically, any pre-Humean or pre-Kantian) 'metaphysics.' This in turn suggests that ancient _philosophy_ cannot be revived. A now classic criticism of such critiques of modernity maintains that they either accept much more of the ancients than can possibly be justified by contemporary standards, or accept so little as to be, willy-nilly, exponents of a thoroughly anti-ancient modernism. Any effort to revive the ancients begins to look like an exercise in nostalgia.

A second, equally well established camp takes a different tack. In contrast to critiques of the Enlightenment that turn on a contrast between ancients and moderns, more sweeping versions of the critique — such as those of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Richard Rorty — see the Enlightenment as in some way an extension of Platonism,
with Christianity understood as carrying through the basic tenets of Platonism. The story is told in various ways, one thinker stressing the continuity of the theme of ‘self-empowerment’ and the ‘revenge against time’; another the dominion of ‘subjectivity’ culminating in the total eclipse of Sein; and yet another the continuous variations on the theme of the mind as the ‘mirror of nature.’ These global criticisms of the Enlightenment come close to (and often explicitly affirm) a rejection of ‘philosophy’ as such, at least insofar as the term denotes an effort to articulate ‘how things really are.’ If the ancients and moderns are fundamentally one, if the Enlightenment is Platonism by other means, then the return to the ancients is as pointless as satisfaction with modernity is unwarranted.

This sweeping critique of the Enlightenment faces its own quandaries. It undermines key Enlightenment moral and political notions, such as that of ‘natural rights,’ a phrase intimately tied to the political as well as philosophical defence of modern liberal regimes. How are we to retain (we again ask) the praiseworthy political fruits of the Enlightenment while rejecting the philosophical doctrines from which they grew? A formidable problem concerns the standpoint from which the obituary of the ‘Western tradition’ is itself uttered. The problem is famously illustrated in Nietzsche. His announcements about the passing of the whole tradition since Plato struggle with the self-reflexive paradox generated by the fact that such announcements about the ‘death of philosophy’ tend themselves to be articulated in the language of the very tradition being rejected. Having cut out the ground from beneath their feet, global critics of modernity seem left with nothing to stand on. To change metaphors, we are told that we cannot go backward and cannot remain where we are, but the march forward seems to lead into darkness.

The two camps of critics are in sharp disagreement as to what the problem of the Enlightenment consists in exactly. We may safely say, however, that the learned and passionately stated obituaries of the modern age urged by both leave us with the pressing challenge of deciding what to do next, whether to rescue some version of pre-modern thought, or whether to abandon the entire effort of justifying the assumptions and projects of an epoch. No matter which direction we take in the debate, we seem blocked by the inevitable difficulties. Correspondingly, the question of the foundations of Enlightenment liberalism (if talk about ‘foundations’ be accepted at all) is now wide open, and is certainly the subject of vigorous debate. The net result is a widespread queasiness about the survival of our enlightened age. We sense that we have spent our moral and intellectual inheritance, and lack the means to generate it anew.

We must make certain that we have mined that ground thoroughly before declaring it exhausted. Are there overlooked or misunderstood resources for self-criticism and justification in the Enlightenment itself, especially ones that also provide for the preservation of desirable aspects of ancient thought? If so, we should examine them with care. Adam Smith is one such resource. Or such is the general thesis of *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment* (ASVE).

Strikingly, it is Adam Smith’s legacy, in part, that we now enjoy as well as question. He was a key figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, and also tied to the French and American Enlightenments. These Enlightenments are crucial chapters in the story of modernity. Smith’s standing and immense influence were established early on. The publication of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) in 1759 quickly made Smith famous, and not long after was translated several times into both French and German. The book earned him high praise and respect from thinkers of the stature of Hume, Burke, and Kant. Smith’s only other published book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (WN, first published in 1776) was similarly received, and won the careful scrutiny of Bentham, Hegel, and Marx, among many others. Gibbon paid tribute to Smith’s work on the evolution of societies; Boswell, Adam Ferguson, William Robertson, John Millar, Lord Kames (Henry Home), Hugh Blair, Dugald Stewart, and Voltaire, learned a great deal from...
him; the list of admirers could go on and on. The Wealth of Nations clearly influenced thinkers in the American Founding, and has served as a touchstone in scholarly discussions about the workings and defensibility of liberal economic arrangements ever since. Scientists and philosophers of science have noted the importance of Smith's work, as have sociologists.

In spite of his tremendous influence and fame, Smith's teachings are rarely studied with care by those enlisting him to their cause. He is seen solely as an economist, to the exclusion of his work in ethics, moral psychology, jurisprudence, rhetoric and belles lettres, as well as political, economic, and intellectual history. Even worse, he is seen as an economist of a particular ideological bent. In short, Smith tends now to be known just as an advocate of crude laissez-faire capitalism and, to add insult to injury, of capitalism understood in such a way as to be inseparable from imperialism and colonialism.

Given the impressive breadth of Smith's work, his interest in political economy rather than economics alone, his insistent moral reservations about the unfettered operation of the free market, and his critique of imperialism, colonialism and various forms of oppression — including slavery — these misinterpretations of Smith are striking. Smith knew the Western philosophical tradition well. He was also versed in ancient and modern languages, history, rhetorical theory, science, jurisprudence, religion, and literature, and these are evident throughout his work. His knowledge would be the envy of anyone claiming a liberal education. Above all, these familiar misinterpretations occlude the fact that Smith was first and foremost a philosopher, educated in philosophy by a great philosopher (Hutcheson), close friend of one of the best philosophers in the history of Western thought (Hume), and widely read and admired by philosophers. While in France he made the acquaintance of a number of the philosophes.

Many of the great themes of the Enlightenment, themes that inspire the modern age, are promulgated by Smith. To begin with, Smith seeks to free us from war and faction. At least since Hobbes, it has become axiomatic that disagreement, conflict, and war are the basic features of human political life that must orient any viable political theory. In contrast to much of ancient political theory, the moderns often regard as fundamental the absence of agreed-upon norms for the good life. The primacy of conflict is important to grasping the special status of justice in much modern political theory, including in Smith. This is taken to be ultimately reflective of 'nature,' of the sort of world we live in; its background story is cosmological, which makes conflict an ineradicable feature of human life. The catastrophic collapses of moral sensibility and the corresponding butchery in our own century lend credence to this view of the world, and render Smith's careful attention to moral sensibility all the more worthy of study.

Smith also takes it as his task to free us from repressive institutions, especially religious institutions. What he polemically calls 'superstition' is frequently subjected to attack, and he provides a compelling analysis of religion as a political problem — i.e., of religious strife and oppression. Smith's advocacy of liberty of religious belief and practice accompanies scorn for theology and associated disciplines of ontology, metaphysics, 'pneumaticks' (the doctrine of the soul or spirit), and indeed philosophy in some of its traditional guises. Long passages in WN and TMS ridicule and unmask institutionalized religion as well as academic philosophy. We are given to understand that most things, including human nature, can be comprehended by the light of properly enlightened intelligence. "Science is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition." Correspondingly, Smith advocates a state requirement that every person pass examinations in the subject before being permitted to "exercise any liberal profession" (WN V.i.g.14). The new science of nature — that of Newton — is, by contrast with the old philosophy, of real use to the improvement of human life.

Freedom is the great moral and political ideal achievable generally and not just by a chosen few.
It is accompanied by a commitment to a doctrine of the basic moral equality of human beings as human. To be enlightened is to understand the centrality of liberty in any moral or political scheme, and Smith is a partisan of what he calls "the obvious and simple system of natural liberty" (WN IV.ix.51), seeing it as part of his task to articulate the principles for the "establishment of perfect justice, of perfect liberty, and of perfect equality" (WN IV.ix.17). He is a moral egalitarian, and his Stoic doctrine of the rule of the passions by conscience or "the impartial spectator" certainly captures something of what is meant by 'autonomy.' Every modern ethical or political system seeks to persuade us by showing that it best captures principles such as liberty and equality. Even attempts to revive classical doctrines of virtue carry weight insofar as they succeed in integrating these modern principles into their framework. Slavery — accepted widely by philosophers and non-philosophers alike until the modern period — is to be condemned, and Smith does so. Like David Hume, Smith points out that slavery was part of ancient doctrines of virtue and of the social systems that appealed to those doctrines (given, among other things, the ancient view that labour is antithetical to the leisured exercise of excellence). They argued that modern market societies could abolish the conditions under which freedom is purchased at the price of slavery. The Wealth of Nations shows how modern commerce may liberate the common worker by developing a distinction between labour and service, work and subservience. The defence of commerce against the animadversions of the ancients — both pagan and Christian — is another Enlightenment theme espoused by Smith. The moral thrust of Smith's political economy lies in good part in its claims to better the lot of the ordinary person.

Smith articulates and defends a notion of 'middling' moral virtue, even while acknowledging that in some ways it is lower than the aristocratic excellence praised by the ancients. This more achievable notion of virtue is taken as reconciled with the pursuit of such basic goods as health, pleasure, betterment of one's condition, reputation, and 'worldly goods.' It is available to nearly every decent adult, and is more democratic and egalitarian. Smith is a devoted and resourceful defender of the standpoint of ordinary life, and a central task of my book is to analyze and evaluate that defence. This basic moral vision, which is characteristic of the Enlightenment's rhetoric, informs every aspect of his thought, including his analysis of the passions, of the virtues, of the free market, and of jurisprudence.

As modern liberty demands moral virtue rather than wisdom, it is frequently built upon a doctrine of the passions rather than on philosophical reason. The Theory of Moral Sentiments is a book that seeks to show how the sentiments or emotions may suffice for morality, virtue, liberty, and in general a harmonious social order. We are creatures of the passions. Smith seeks to understand and justify the passions as a basis for decent ethical life. Passion is not exclusive of reason; but as a basis for human life it displaces 'theoretical' pursuits such as philosophy.

The operative metaphor in 'the Enlightenment' is of course an ancient one. Its most famous classical treatment is to be found at the start of book VII of Plato's Republic. There we learn that there is light both inside and outside the 'cave' of political life. The sun's light will not illuminate its interior, unless a great hole be punched through the roof of the cave. Why could that not be done, we wonder, since the cave is not simply an immutable product of nature but has clearly been fashioned in a number of ways? Socrates calls it a 'prison home' (517b2). As a prison, is it perhaps a structure that we have made? The fire that illuminates the cave is in one way natural, continuous with the sun. But in another way this fire is a creature of artifice, stolen by Prometheus from the gods. It is lit, tended, kept in a particular spot, and used to project shadows shaped by "all sorts of artifacts" held like puppets. A road and a wall separate the puppet-handlers from the rest of the cave; these too are human constructions. Yet few of the cave's residents can look directly at the source of the quasi-artificial
light, and none seems to have his or her own fire. They are ‘prisoners,’ their necks and legs held by bonds or chains. It is easy to mistake this for a depiction of our natural condition. But chains do not grow on trees, they are fabricated, and then placed on us. Socrates says that we are confined ‘from childhood’ (514a5), but this is not to say that we are born enchained. The entire simile suggests that lack of enlightenment is the result of artifice, and therefore that it is an unnatural condition, one for which a historical account is appropriate.

The architects of the modern Enlightenment inferred that what has been made can be unmade, if only we gather the necessary courage. And they also suggested that once the chains are smashed there is no need to leave the cave, for the prison can be transformed into home. In his own way Smith agrees, and offers us a striking and sustained redemption of ordinary, pre-philosophical human life. Enlightenment does not require the hopelessly difficult ascent to the sun outside; fires lit in a cavern that is properly organized will suffice perfectly well. Our destiny is in our entirely visible hands, waiting to be crafted by us.

As thus crafted or constructed, our liberation is not a return to nature or to some self-standing reality ‘outside’ the cave whose pattern serves as a paradigm for harmonizing the soul. The artifactual or ‘poetic’ framework of the Platonic cave governs the modern view of enlightenment as sketched in the previous paragraph, even as Platonic views about the content of enlightenment are rejected. If freedom is a sort of independence and self-legislation in our theoretical, moral, and practical pursuits, then reason tends to have a constructive aspect rather than the passively apprehending or absorptive quality celebrated by Plato. The imagination turns out to be fundamental not only to understanding the world, but to practical reasoning as well. In Smith’s terms, morality requires that we be able to see things from the other person’s point of view. Sympathy or empathy is crucial to his moral system, just as it is a key term in our moral vocabulary. But as he explains in a detailed and fascinating discussion, sympathy is an act of the imagination. Since imagination turns out to be essential to the constitution of morality as well as reason, we are creatures of the imagination no less than of the passions.

In the broad-gauged respects reviewed in the preceding paragraphs, Smith is unquestionably a partisan of the Enlightenment. It therefore comes as a shock to realize that Smith also confronts head-on many of the doubts and qualifications we now have about the period. In crucial respects, he takes positions we associate with the Enlightenment’s denouement. Smith himself takes up important problems that later critics of modernity insisted upon. As I have already indicated above, Smith is acutely aware of the phenomenon of unintended consequences, of the importance of ‘moral luck,’ and in general of the roles that contingency and finitude play in human life. The ‘invisible hand’ is the phrase most commonly associated with Smith. In Stoic language of the sort invoked by Smith, we are like actors in a play whose plot we do not understand and whose ending is not yet revealed to us, but whose propensity for irony is well established.

Consider briefly several paradoxes embedded in the very conditions of our success. These are discussed by Smith in ways that prefigure contemporary critiques. Let us begin with the pursuit of wealth, which The Wealth of Nations is designed to facilitate and promote. That book is undoubtedly the most famous and enduring Enlightenment contribution on the subject. It is obvious that the wealth we pursue has little to do with satisfying our basic needs; we are driven by fears and wants fed by the imagination. Such has been the complaint of moralists in every age, and Smith is not only aware of it but insists on its truth. It is one of his key teachings that the pursuit of wealth is made possible by what he calls the ‘deception’ or ‘prejudices’ of the imagination. Thanks to our self-deception, we associate wealth (as well as power) with happiness. Neither the pursuit nor the
possession of wealth actually produces tranquillity; on the contrary, both jeopardize it (TMS L.iii.2.1-3; IV.1.8-10). Smith describes this picture vividly, and it is bound to unsettle us: how can we affirm a social arrangement devoted to maximizing the 'wealth of nations' when the pursuit of wealth is so deeply misguided? He seems to be arguing, just as we ourselves might, that the conditions of our material prosperity are tied to those of our spiritual poverty. As the continuing litany of complaints about the moral decadence of materialistic Western cultures demonstrates, this problem is still with us.

The generation of wealth is indissolubly connected with the division of labour. This key Smithian claim (WN I.i-ii) is now universally accepted. Yet while our prosperity hinges on the division of labour, we sense that it comes at a cost. Perhaps no philosopher has described these human costs of the division of labour more bluntly and harshly than has Smith, with the possible exception of Marx. Smith laments of the "gross ignorance and stupidity which" which afflicts the workers "in a civilized society" (WN V.i.f.61). A person who spends his life "performing a few simple operations" slowly "becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become," incapable of "any rational conversation" as well as "of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life." Hence expertise is "acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues." This seems to be the lot of "the great body of the people" in "every improved and civilized society" (WN V.i.f.50). Wealth and liberty, wealth and virtue, commerce and human excellence, seem hopelessly at odds with one another. Even liberty appears to undermine social cohesiveness, including the cohesiveness which is communicated through public education.

Consider the key example of religious liberty, to which I devote much attention in ASVE, in part by reconstructing his analysis of the matter as a reply to the classic argument of book X of Plato's Laws for a state-enforced civic religion. The peaceful proliferation of a multitude of religious sects is an accomplishment of which we are rightly proud. And yet we are also troubled by several questions. First, the question of common purpose: if our religious convictions differ fundamentally, and if they express our deepest values and beliefs, what will bind us together in a common polity? Social fragmentation looms once religious liberty is instituted, not to mention the other liberties Smith argues for — those of commerce or trade, of deployment of labour and capital, of philosophical and political belief and expression, of assembly, of movement. The problem of social cohesiveness is among the most pressing now facing us, and some of the most influential philosophers of the moment have devoted considerable attention to it. Smith is, I argue, a neglected resource in the debate.

The Enlightenment scheme for religious liberty requires that religious teachings ought not to claim political power enforced by the state, and the Enlightenment attack on superstition entails that natural phenomena are the province of science. Religion ought to be a fundamentally private affair, a social but certainly not a political matter. Does all this not in turn dismember or at least dilute what is involved in a true religious teaching? Smith himself expresses the hope that liberty of religious belief will eventually lead to "that pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism, such as wise men have in all ages of the world wished to see established" (WN V.i.g.8). True religion is the privatized religion of morality or conscience beloved of Enlightenment thinkers. We may wonder whether this is still religion at all, and therefore whether it will support the beneficial social consequences Smith hopes for it, especially that of reinforcing one's sense of moral duty as well as cementing ties of responsibility and care for one's fellows. Does not "pure and rational religion," or what Kant called "religion within the limits of reason" or "the pure religion of reason," lead to the death of religion? If so, Smith's arguments for freedom of religion are just more fodder for MacIntyre's characterization of the modern age as that of
liberal individualism." The spectre of an 'invisible hand' looms, and with it the possible self-undermining of the Enlightenment.

We may think of sympathy as that which holds us together. Smith's treatment of sympathy lies at the heart of his moral psychology, and is among the best ever written, building upon and improving Hume's analysis. And yet while sympathy may bind together, might it not also split apart? One may 'understand' and 'identify' with one group and therefore dismiss or detest some rather different group — why should sympathy be universal? — and one person or group can always claim with some conviction that only others similarly situated could ever 'understand.' So long as sympathy is the basis for mutual understanding, we are open to the claim that we could not possibly imagine the circumstances of the other without actually belonging to the other's circle, and that since we do not, mutual understanding is impossible. As I discuss in detail in chapter two of ASVE, 'identity politics' and consequent social fragmentation might be an unintended result of a doctrine of sympathy whose intent was to explain and produce social cohesiveness. And yet we are faced with just that phenomenon. Smith's analysis of sympathy, imagination, and the passions helps us to understand the possible internal instability of sympathy and what is required to avoid it.

Because of his own keen awareness of the Enlightenment's ironies and shadows, Smith offers us especially insightful ways of understanding why liberal Enlightenment social and institutional arrangements and ideals are not altogether at odds with the tradition of the virtues and the communities based on virtues. His antidotes to the problems sketched in the preceding paragraphs include, strikingly, commerce, religion, education, and other 'mediating institutions' (as we now call them). He has a great deal to say about virtue, including civic virtue, and of the ways in which it can give ethical shape to our efforts to improve our lot, as unphilosophical as those efforts may be. What one might call the mechanics of freedom, i.e., liberal social and political arrangements, can nourish and in turn be sustained by virtues such as honesty, moderation, prudence, and judgement. It is one of the chief tasks of my book to explore and evaluate Smith's subtle and dialectical efforts to promote the key themes of the Enlightenment in the face of his — and as it turns out, our — own doubts. His efforts are informed by a deep understanding of both the virtues and the vices of modernity as well as of its classical competitors. Reconciliation with imperfection is a key aim of Smith's thought, and as a result I discuss his reconciliatonist strategies at length.

My comments about a modern interpretation of the Platonic simile of the cave suggest that an ancient debate about the true meaning of 'enlightenment' may be seen as lying at the heart of Smith's enterprise. The debate partly concerns the meaning of philosophy and its relation to ordinary life. I have characterized Smith as a defender of ordinary life, the nature of that defence being a central theme of the present inquiry. Part of what common life needs defending from is philosophy itself, in Smith's view: for philosophy, as understood by Plato for example, may place the wrong sort of demands on human life. Hence the meaning of 'philosophy,' and the relation between philosophy and ordinary life, are also central themes of this book. I treat Smith as a philosopher who should be considered as forming part of a long conversation about these matters.

Today, 'constructive reason' has evolved into 'creativity,' understood to be historically localized, and perhaps inflected by race, class, and gender, or perhaps simply by the individual's genius. Science, once the great paradigm of objective knowledge, edges toward being understood in terms of its sociology and aesthetics, each way of accounting for its grip on us rather than on the world. All this ultimately implies that our 'arguments' in favour of one notion of 'enlightenment' amount to the expression of our particular persuasion. That is, they would amount to rhetorical edification and polemic, and this undermines not only the rationality of our critique of the alternatives, but also the rational basis of our own stance.
Here again, Smith's position is complex, for even as he defends the modern Enlightenment and ordinary life, he also rejects the confident rationalism often associated with the period. Smith is a skeptic of a philosophically subtle sort, and discerns the productive work of the imagination at all levels of human life. Philosophy and science themselves are, on his Humean account, kinds of synthesizing and demiurgic activities of the imagination. The imagination's work is partly explained by him in terms of notions of the beautiful, proportional, harmonious. Surprisingly, he ascribes to the love of beauty a pervasive role in human life. Yet in spite of its apparently Platonic hue, Smith's strikingly aesthetic view of the world announces a deep break with classical philosophy. Concerning the nature of 'philosophy,' its ability to grasp 'the world,' and the imagination, Smith may even seem to be a post-Enlightenment thinker.

The famous Platonic quarrel between philosophy and poetry remains with us, and viewed from a Platonic perspective, Smith has inclined to the side of the poets. As such, from that Platonic perspective, there may be some concern that a slide into self-vitiating skepticism cannot be avoided once we incline to that path. Smith provides a powerful and multi-layered response to that Platonic suspicion. His lucidity about the fundamental problems of modernity makes his efforts to save the period from itself all the more deep and intriguing. He attempts to synthesize views many now find unavoidable (such as the rejection of intuitionistic Platonism) with others we would gladly see defended (such as the superiority of liberal economic and political structures, and the centrality of the virtues and 'sympathy' to ethics).

In the Epilogue, I assess the successes and shortcomings of Smith's ambitious project with the venerable history of the debate much in mind.

William Desmond: The last section of Charles's book is very much on my mind. He brings many strings of the discussion together towards the end, and especially in the Epilogue. He very appropriately quotes Nietzsche on page 366 (n. 5) and the passage helps me crystallize my first question. The quotation runs:

"Have we not exposed ourselves to suspicion of an opposition — an opposition between the world in which we were at home up to now with our reverences that perhaps made it possible for us to endure life, and another world that consists of us — and inexorable, fundamental, and deepest suspicion about ourselves that is more and more gaining worse and worse control of us Europeans and that could easily confront coming generations with the terrifying Either/Or: Either abolish your reverences or 'yourselves!' The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be nihilism? — That is our question mark."

I take it that this observation means that according to the reverences of ordinary moral consciousness there is some ground that is not simply our own construction or projection. Reverence entails some relation to something other to ourselves that we acknowledge. But if that something is just our construction, then the reverence also seems to be abolished. I think this is the issue that is taken up in the discussion at the end — the tension between the theory that Smith produces (one which can have the effect of deconstructing our reverences) and Smith's own respect for the common sense reverences that in other ways ground the moral theory.

I could maybe put the point this way: God and nature, we are now told, seem not to have given us the authority on which ordinary moral consciousness depends. Such seems to be the teaching of modern moral philosophy. And yet, is not the tale of post-Kantian morality also this now: that we have turned to ourselves as the ground of value, a radical equivocity reappears? The conflict of interpretations is not now over God or nature, but over ourselves. When we turn to ourselves we produce a multiplicity which has the potential to produce wars as much as humanistic agreement. Is this turn to ourselves as putative makers of value, in fact, coming to consciousness now as incapable of sustaining what it proposed to sustain?

Yet another way to formulate the question
would be this: two major presences in Charles's book I think are Plato/Socrates on one side, and Nietzsche on the other. Many of the epigrams that begin chapters are, in fact, very well chosen citations of Nietzsche. From Smith's perspective the point might be that there is both a certain extremism of Eros in the Platonic context in relation to some sense of transcendent, and an extremism of Eros in the Nietzschean context but not in relation to any transcendent good. Smith is somewhere in between these extremes. Smith seems to be a defender of the 'middle' or 'mean' or 'moderation' of everyday life; and yet according to the philosophical analysis of the underlying poiesis and imagination, there is an inherent instability in ordinary life that in the end does not seem to be able to immunize itself entirely against the extremism of Eros, whether on the Platonic side or the Nietzschean. The Platonic extremism seems antithetical to Smithian modernity. But the Nietzschean extremism — that there is no source of value outside ourselves, that we are and must become the sources of value — seems to lead to the result that finally dawns, namely, that we are only whistling in the dark when we claim ourselves to be the source of value. And that Nietzschean view seems to be the outcome of the modern project.

I felt a certain pathos at the end of the book. Charles shows an attraction to moderation and judgement in ethics, yet there is a slight sense of doom generated by his view of the culture of postmodernism — a culture of extremism. Indeed modernity itself has its extremist dimension in that it is, as Charles points out, a project that aims to rethink the totality of the human situation in nature and in relation to the divine.

Charles Griswold: Thank you. Naturally, I regret having inflicted such a sense of doom on you! And yet, I have to agree with Nietzsche's diagnosis in the passage you've quoted. At the same time, I think that the gloom could in turn provide us with a motivation for thinking seriously about Adam Smith, not just because if my interpretation is correct he helps us to understand clearly what the problem is — that is immensely valuable in and of itself — but because his philosophy may also provide us with responses to the problem. I go through some of them in the Epilogue. Smith is a philosopher of moderation, of balance, of judgement, of virtue, among other things. My sense is that if in a postmodern age we are to recover something like a sense of moderation and balance and judgement, it's going to be through a complicated set of reflections, some of which are philosophical, some historical, some psychological, some drawn from political economy. Some will already assume your being placed within a decent moral outlook. The best way to look at this problem of recovery is going to be through a set of interrelated considerations that will reach outside of academic philosophy. We must try to understand how these complex considerations bear on each other theoretically and practically and then build up a case for a liberal society and its virtues in full awareness of its vices and pitfalls. That's just the sort of thing Adam Smith excels at doing. But as I argue in the Epilogue, there are deep theoretical problems here, problems that Smith understood, and I am uncertain as to whether they can be solved at that level.

To be perfectly honest with you, the dim prospects of accomplishing this task in a politically effective way (rather than in the pages of an academic journal) supply another source of pessimism. If Smith's basic way of understanding what a defence of a liberal society would be is correct, then he demands a significant level of wisdom on the part not only of philosophers but also of fellow citizens. The exact character of that wisdom is both very hard to formulate (because it's so messy from the conceptual standpoint) and very hard to hold together as sound political programme, especially under current conditions. In the book I offer various proposals as to how this wisdom might be effectuated in practice, but I am the first to admit that prospects for preserving it against the very forces of modernity that Smith helped unleash are questionable. At the same time, our assessment of the situation must exhibit the qualities of judgement
and balance in question: the virtues of the Enlightenment are remarkable and, as I claim at the start of the book, scarcely any of us would willingly trade them for any of the going alternatives.

Antoon Vandevelde: Let me congratulate you for this very clear and indeed incredible exposition of the main themes of Adam Smith and especially of the coherence of Smith's thought. Your interpretation of Smith is in line with recent insights in political economy, as well as with the contemporary literature about Hume (especially about the problem of skepticism). It fits very well into recent literature on various issues of moral psychology as well as general ethics. Your book also contains very interesting comparisons between Smith's thought and ancient Greek philosophy. I tend to agree with a great deal of your Smith interpretation, for instance with your treatment of the central difficulty which you explained at the end of your lecture today. It is the central difficulty of Smith's thought, namely that of reconciling ordinary experience (and its assumption that moral judgement is totally impartial and objective) on the one hand with the conception of sentiments as being the primary source of morality and moral judgements on the other hand. I think you're right in rejecting the reproach of subjectivism so often directed against Smith, a reproach that makes the mistake of holding that only if moral values and judgements refer to a social reality outside the grip of individual persons can they have a kind of social objectivity.

However some aspects of Smith's thought remain very problematic to me and I have the impression that these problems have not perhaps received full attention in your book. First of all there's a problem of the scope of Smith's analysis. It is a very interesting and useful description and analysis of personal moral decision-making, but is such an ethics of propriety very helpful in judging macro social problems, for instance, policy questions? Do mere sentiments offer a sufficient ground for stabilizing solidarity between members of societies in the contemporary world? For me that's a big question. Smith describes fairly well the learning processes towards more abstract forms of sympathy, but is this sufficient to teach us forms of solidarity which transcend the boundaries of nation and community? Can we ever really understand on this basis why it could be rational and morally obligatory for members of a community to silence loyalty towards familiar persons in favour of the development of solidarity with strangers? I don't see very clearly how one could find the solution to this kind of problem by extending (as you suggest in the Epilogue) Smith's notion of conversation into a genuine Socratic dialogue. So let me count those as my first line of questioning.

Then I have a second line of questioning which is more or less closely related to the first. On page 10 of your book you suggest that Smith's analysis of moral sensibility could contribute to a better understanding of what you call the catastrophic collapses of moral sensibility and the corresponding butchery in our own century. Now, I'm not sure about this. Undoubtedly Smith teaches us a lot about how, for instance, the principle of sympathy works and also about how a sophisticated moral sensibility may arise. But isn't this too optimistic or, as you indicate at the end of the book, really too weak to effect the sort of emendations necessary to counter the collapse of moral sensibility? I have the impression that for Smith cosmic and social harmony is so evident, such an evident point of departure that all these problems are in effect eliminated from his standpoint. In a sense you could say this is the originality of Smith. He offers us not just one but several decentralized mechanisms contributing to the coherence of society. As you show in your book, he takes the problem of social cohesion in exactly the opposite direction that Hobbes does. Hobbes told us that in an individualistic society one should interrupt the face-to-face relations between people; we should divert them from glancing at each other and teach them to absorb their gazes in a common fascination. According to Hobbes, face-to-face relations induce envy, resentment, conflict and
violence. Smith on the contrary shows us that sympathy and the desire of the desire of others contributes to the moderation of our passions. In a way, that's what is highlighted as the originality of Smithian 18th-century thought: a solution to the long debated problem of how the taming of the passions could become thinkable and feasible.

However, the price of his solution is the systematic elimination of ambivalence from human relations. When people look at each other, at the rich and powerful for instance, they can develop sympathetic feelings, admiration of the willingness to contribute to the happiness of each other. But as Smith highlights in his book, it's also possible that they will develop envious or resentful feelings. Now the second possibility is explored by Hobbes. Sometimes Smith mentions the second possibility but he nowhere analyzes it. For instance on page 45 of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he says: “I will venture to affirm, that, when there is no envy in the case, our propensity to sympathize with joy is much stronger than our propensity to sympathize with sorrow.” Here Smith recognizes that envy is a possibility; he mentions it, but there is nowhere an analysis of envy. You could say that the possibility of envy and negative feelings is sometimes mentioned but nowhere could I find an exposition of mechanisms explaining in what circumstances people will envy the rich and successful people and in what circumstances they will sympathize with their joy. Especially the lack of this kind of analysis means for me that you can't really use Smith as an elucidation of why at some times, for instance in Nazi Germany, you had this collapse of moral sensibility and moral feeling.

*Charles Griswold:* Thank you very much for your excellent questions, I very much appreciate them. I don't know if I'll be able to satisfy you, given the brevity of the time, and I shall certainly have to give more thought to the points you raise.

Your two questions I think are, as you indicated, related to each other. The second has to do with the issue of Socratic dialogue which I discuss in the Epilogue. What resources are required when it comes to social policy matters and, in particular, the question of solidarity with strangers? Let me start with the issue of solidarity with strangers: does Smith offer us any help here? Sympathy allows us to identify with others, even small groups of others, but does it somehow provide us with a way of identifying with strangers whose lot is not a matter of immediate concern to us? I think the answer is affirmative. I believe that he thinks that justice and the sense of resentment against the doing of injustice to others is something that can provide a basis (yet not the only one) for the moral identification with the lot of others. I think he also wants to tell us that the moral imagination is crucial to our feeling the moral weight of the unjustified suffering of others. So the theory of sympathy is really a theory of the imagination. The verb ‘identify’ is actually the verb that he uses in precisely this context and which is also used widely in contemporary contexts, for example by Charles Taylor in his discussion of cosmopolitanism and sympathy with the plights of others (Taylor comes up in my discussion, in chapter two, of ways in which ‘sympathy’ could, against Smith's intentions, actually undercut social cohesion). I think this vocabulary comes very naturally to Smith, but it hinges on a view about the possibility for the educability of the moral imagination, such that you learn to care morally about injustice which is being done to others. And I think he has a lot to say about this that's very interesting (and very contemporary), including about the role of literature in the education of the moral imagination. Literature can situate the reader in a complex world that seems at first quite alien because it is set in some totally different context. But the reader can learn to grasp the complexity of what is initially foreign so that, by analogy, the proper training of the moral imagination can be furthered by reading and reflecting on great literature. Smith mentions a variety of plays, but he is particularly fond of those which require one to understand a person or situation that is very different from one's own, and also those which criticize a ‘fanatical’ resolve to resist such understanding.

Further, Smith understands well that empathetic
grasping of the situation of another can sometimes be immensely complicated. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians might serve as a contemporary example of an immensely complicated conflict, one that while not perhaps touching your life in any immediate or narrow sense ought nonetheless to touch your moral life. I think Smith does have ways of explaining how that might come to pass, what it would take to make it matter and what it would take to help us think imaginatively and critically about it.

As you were setting out your first line of questioning, I thought of Smith's discussions of slavery. As you know, I treat slavery as a sort of test case of what his theory can handle. Here you have a social institution that was still widespread in his time, and that has been pervasive throughout human history. I think Smith's discussion here is quite revealing in terms of the question that you put. First because like many other Enlightenment figures he's explicit about the evilness of slavery (others are, unfortunately, not so critical), and his moral condemnation of it is resounding. He does of course cite economic grounds for criticizing the institution, and that does not involve an exercise of sympathy; but in addition to the economic argument he also has a moral argument which does involve sympathy and I think it fits the pattern that I'm suggesting. Perhaps you recall this passage that I quote (on p. 198) where he talks about the nobility of the enslaved African and the decadence of the European enslavers: he speaks of the "nations of heroes" of Africa being enslaved by "the refuse of the jails of Europe" and so forth. What he does in this rhetorically powerful passage — actually one of the most ringing denunciations of slavery you'll find among Enlightenment philosophers — is to try to bring your sympathetic imagination to bear on the scene of the particulars so as to help you to understand the injustice of the institution of slavery. He brings the scene to life in order to help you sympathize appropriately. This kind of example shows how solidarity with complete strangers can be brought about, and presumably enslaved Africans qualify, for most of his readers, as absolute others. You're able to sympathize with them and identify with them appropriately and are led to this judgement about the injustice of the system that does that to them.

On the issue of Socratic dialogue, the context I had in mind was different. It's not so much a question of how to identify sympathetically with people who may be very distant from us, but of what sort of conversation might be required to sustain a modern liberal commercial republic of the sort that Smith himself is advocating. My point was that given where we are at the end of the twentieth century, given that we're in a so-called postmodern age, and given that the cat is out of the bag — skepticism, and indeed relativism are now widespread, no longer just remote academic doctrines — the fairly moderated and often prudent reflection which you find in Smith needs at least on occasion to be enriched with a head-on Socratic attack of the sort so famous in the Republic. Smith is perfectly capable of that, as The Wealth of Nations shows. It's easy for us now to forget that it's a revolutionary book. Smith says in a letter that he meant it to be an attack on the whole of the British economic system, including its colonialism and imperialism. Of course the book created a monumental controversy as a result. So he's perfectly capable of launching a direct attack on an entire social system. I'm suggesting that maybe we need more of this, given what's happened in terms of our moral discourse, one which is so much more dissolved, fragmentary, not to mention vulgar, than even Smith foresaw (and as his remarkable analysis and defence of religious pluralism shows, he understood perfectly well that under conditions of modern liberty, a large variety of competing discourses and communities would be the norm).

I can hear an objection that you might enter here, to wit: how can we have Socratic dialogue without the metaphysical tenets which Plato himself indicates are its presuppositions? That question puts us back in the soup in terms of the tenability of anything like a pre-modern notion of the 'givenness' of being and value. (In the Epilogue, I rather baldly assert that no such reversion is
defensible.) So the revived Socratic dialogue would somehow have to be severed from at least the orthodox construal of Platonic metaphysics in order to make it a plausible model of public rhetoric. My concluding suggestions about how that might be done are sketchy, and I hope to pursue them elsewhere.

You also ask whether, given that we live in a society of strangers (Smith uses almost this phrase at one point), Smith has a sufficiently rich account of sentiments such as envy or resentment. I think that the answer is affirmative. There is a lot of talk about resentment in the book (granted, resentment and envy aren't necessarily quite the same thing). Resentment is one of the emotions to which he gives a great deal of attention when he talks about justice in particular. His moral sentiments account of justice actually bases that virtue on the sentiment of resentment. He's also worried about resentment when he talks about religious fanaticism in particular. It is important to note that he says that of everything which corrupts the moral sentiments, religious resentment is the worst; what he has in mind here is easily understood as a kind of anger and resentment at others on account of their views. So there's certainly discussion of resentment in his work.

Does he also provide a discussion of envy? I think so; we would have to go through the text and see exactly how many times he uses the word. He does touch on the matter when he talks about wealth-getting. He gives several different accounts of why the poor try to become rich. One occurs around page 50 of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and it essentially an envy account. That is not necessarily the same as an appeal to resentment, for it's possible on his view for the poor to want to be like the rich and to envy the rich for being rich but not to resent the rich because they are rich. But there's another account of wealth-getting which comes up in Part IV of his book, and there the account has to do with the assumption made by the less rich to the effect that the rich are happy because they're attended to. The idea is that as one contemplates the seemingly luminous lives of the rich and the famous, the wonderful things that they own, and the attention that is bestowed upon them, it is very hard not to imagine that they must be tremendously happy and to want that for oneself. That sort of explanation of the overwhelming desire that most of us feel to become wealthier and more powerful might be quite continuous with envy.

Antoon Vandevelde: My point is rather that for a very long time passions were seen as dangerous and disruptive for society. Smith offers a kind of mechanism that makes passions innocent, one that allows the passions to become an instrument of social cohesion. But of course to do that in one way or another — let's say the normal way in contemporary liberalism — is to make sure that people don't look at each other, don't look at the rich, don't even see them, and for the rich in our society to try to make themselves invisible. That's the way social engineers in our society (even from Hobbes on) would treat this question. Here with Smith you have something special. Smith has a whole thesis according to which people have to look at each other with sympathy, but this same mechanism also holds out the possibility of envy, and in most of the contemporary liberal literature envy is the worst thing that can happen. In Smith's theory there is a very dangerous possibility that envy exists, and he acknowledges it in some passages of his text, but I always have the impression that you don't really have an analysis of it and especially not an analysis as to why people in certain circumstances develop sympatiche feelings and in other circumstances develop envious feelings.

Charles Griswold: Now I see what you're driving at. I'm afraid that we shall have to disagree about the adequacy of Smith's account of envy.

Antoon Vandevelde: Do you state in your book that Smith has an analysis of envy?

Charles Griswold: Yes. He is defending the passions or emotions, and so is trying to provide an account of what moral emotions would be. But I
don't think he has domesticated them to the point that there are no dangerous emotions, including none in a liberal commercial society. Quite to the contrary. Remember that the emotions become moral — civilized, if you like — only when, first of all, they meet the relevant criterion as specified by the impartial spectator. So the picture is not at all that if we simply liberate the passions from the absurd demands of a religious morality and that somehow it's all going to flow smoothly like some kind of well-oiled machine that's just there by nature. That's not his view at all, in my opinion. Rather, it's only the emotions that are virtuous, as determined from the standpoint of an impartial spectator, that are judged to contribute to the fruitful cooperative interaction of human beings. So there is certainly plenty of scope in the theory for emotions and passions that are very disruptive; these include the philosophical passion for systematic completeness and wholeness which can lead to a very dangerous Utopianism.

Don't forget too that when Smith talks about the rich and wealth-getting for the first time (around page 50 of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*), the discussion is immediately accompanied by an analysis of the corruption of the moral sentiments. So Smith is keenly aware of the corruption of the moral emotions that can result from, say, taking the short path to wealth, from an overly enthusiastic desire to better one's condition. His discussion of corruption brings the first part of the book to a close. Each of his endings of the first six parts of the book have this dialectical quality: a thesis is put forward and then shown to lead naturally to difficulties. In Part II, for example, after talking about justice, he turns to the 'irregularity' of the moral sentiments, by which he really means their irrationality. In Part III he talks about the importance of duty to moral life and about a form of religion that naturally grows out of and supports this sense of duty, thus supplying a useful counterweight to the corruption and irrationality earlier discussed in the book. Yet Part III ends up with a discussion of religious fanaticism, of a kind of passion that takes the sense of duty to extremes.

This points to the importance of understanding the conditions under which the sentiments can be productive and social. Among other things, the proper social, political, and legal institutions are required to achieve that end.

*Bart Pattyn*: In a certain sense my question goes in the same direction as some of the preceding ones. I'm not so reluctant to express the idea that when people look at each other they can have a strong feeling of solidarity. Solidarity has a big emotional component and can even be dangerous if our sympathy for a particular situation is not balanced by other sympathies. But if it is true that we need institutions, if we need education to refine our sentiments, can we still believe, as Smith seems to do, that our moral standards are based on these sentiments?

If we look at current problems in international politics you could say that we have to educate people to have more feelings of solidarity with people in other countries. But if you do so you must have some reasons for creating an atmosphere wherein people can have sympathy for human rights, international solidarity. That's what's happening with the media: they are showing videos of terrifying events elsewhere, and so they are helping us to feel something of their pathos. If one defends the idea that we must refine our sentiments then there is a kind of reasoning required, but that reasoning is not linked to that spontaneous feeling as such. So how does Smith deal with that problem of the relation between reason and spontaneous (and perhaps uninformed and misleading) sentiment?

*Charles Griswold*: Smith certainly is offering a sentiments-based theory, but it is so intertwined with a conception of practical rationality that at the end of the day it is very hard to understand it as a version of emotivist theory. Even though technically you would classify the theory as emotivist, it is so interwoven with a certain conception of reasoned feeling that it's not an either/or matter. The very conception of the emotions is one
according to which the emotions are not just raw 'feelings' or impulses but already involve, or at least often involve, judgement and beliefs. So there is a cognitive component to the emotions from the outset. Hence the whole opposition between reason and sentiment is already made much more complicated than one might expect. In some cases your sympathy with another person can be communicated instantly, as he describes toward the beginning of the book. These are what could be called examples of a 'contagion' of feeling. If you're walking down the street and you see a parent hit a child hard you instantly experience resentment or anger. But even there I think you could argue that there's a cognitive aspect present, one that has to do with a sense of the impropriety of an adult physically abusing a child and an understanding of the existence and relevance of certain kinds of standards.

When you get to a much more complicated case involving justice and therefore involving the feeling of resentment (which is for Smith the feeling on which the sense of justice depends), the process of reasoning may be multilayered and complicated. My example mentioned above is that of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. Smith points out that in complex situations you are sometimes reluctant to sympathize either with the agent or the recipient until you've examined both their cases in detail to find out whether the sentiments of each party are proportionate to the causes or objects that incite them. Until you've undertaken that rational process as well as an imaginative process, you can't say whether the one side is to be blamed or not. So in these ways rationality and feeling are intertwined with each other.

Nonetheless Smith wants to say that at the end of the day if you ask yourself for the justification of certain moral rules you ultimately have to appeal to the relevant particulars, and that is an appeal that may well require an imaginative grasp of the specifics of the situation. Consider a possibility I discuss in the book, namely that you are having an argument with a pro-slavery advocate in the United States in the 1840s and the 1850s. Suppose this advocate is highly intelligent, and capable of countering arguments with sophisticated counter-arguments. Suppose that you went through the usual strategies of trying to show the injustice of slavery, say, by appealing to the natural rights of slaves, to their moral equality with their owners, but that appeal to such moral principles failed to persuade your interlocutor. (Perhaps he's a practised Skeptic who deconstructs the very notion of 'natural rights'.) At the end of the day, as Smith says, one has to revert to looking at the particulars and entering into the scene of the particulars. Place your argumentative interlocutor at the scene of a slave auction, where families are forcibly split up and carted off screaming to their miserable lot, whips descending harshly on their backs. What is his reaction? At least a certain kind of moral rationality that is captured in moral rules or standards is derived from experience of the particulars of the situation. The judgement lies in the perception, to recall Aristotle's phrase (one well known to Smith!). Of course, some people are, thanks to the viciousness of their souls, incapable of moral perception. They are morally blind and deaf.
Luk Bouckaert: Two questions: one is linked to the problem of Smith's theoretical skepticism and the other is about the lack of a theory of distributive justice in.

In your interpretation, Smith is a non-dogmatic skeptic on a theoretical level, and the reason is that theories are constructions made by our imagination and further that observation is a kind of interpretation. Nevertheless, he has written an essay on the leading principles of direct philosophical inquiry where he tries to show how progress in science and towards truth is possible. He gives us three criteria as indicators for progress in science and towards truth: coherence, simplicity and familiarity. I have the impression that Smith is working with a kind of aesthetic theory of truth and progress in science, and that an aesthetic theory of knowledge is sustained by an ontology that explains why he accepts that nature is a harmonious system. Because nature is a system of harmony, the world is a system of harmonious (or harmonizable) theories that can be evaluated by the criterion of coherence. The more the theory is coherent, the more the theory gives us an idea of the harmony of the world. Therefore I think there is a way to avoid attributing to Smith the kind of skepticism in question. Smith himself tries to avoid skepticism.

My other question concerns the lack of a theory of distributive justice. He has a theory of commutative justice, but not of distributive justice. Why do we not find the former kind of theory in Adam Smith? You give an argument in the text, which you say is an argument from Smith, to the effect that distributive justice is not a promising candidate for exact administration. That is not a very convincing moral argument.

Further, I have the impression that for Smith there is no theory of market failures, or rather, maybe there is a partial theory. You mention one problem, the dehumanization of workers, but you don't find in Smith an analysis of how the market generates inequalities, external effects, or that kind of thing. I think he has a very optimistic vision of the market as a kind of self-regulating, open, transparent system. But in fact it is not such, and because there is no good or well developed theory of market failure in Smith, you get from him a kind of misplaced optimistic vision. I have the impression that just as in his theory of knowledge, there is always a kind of natural harmony and that kind of ontological belief gives Smith such an optimistic climate when you read his book.

Charles Griswold: Thank you very much. It seems that we disagree a bit on what Smith actually said. To address the first question about the philosophy of science: what are the principles governing enquiry in the natural sciences, for Smith? They turn out to be principles of what you might call intellectual sentiments (the phrase was coined by Joseph Cropsey in his book on Smith). They're not metaphysical principles. There's no talk about objective (mind-independent) truth here, but instead about the expectations — if you like, disposition — of inquiries into the order of nature. As you said, the criteria of coherence, simplicity and familiarity are crucial to the account: but these are clearly understood here as psychological dispositions of the imagination's strong need for the tranquillity derived from the perception of order.

Luk Bouckaert: But the criteria are more epistemological: he used the criteria to compare different philosophical systems, Newton and Kepler and others.
Charles Griswold: That's correct, but they're founded on a set of psychological predispositions and not on any harmony of nature which he never mentions. Rather, it's the inescapable demand for an elegant and coherent explanation, thanks to the attractiveness to the human mind of such an explanation, which generates the epistemological criteria. From a classical Platonizing perspective, Smith has really subjectivized epistemology. Since you mention the word 'skeptic,' let me call attention to his one use of the word — indeed, the sole use of the word or its cognates in all of Smith's published work — which is found in his essay on the history of astronomy. It's in the very impressive passage in which he is talking about the person who was from his standpoint the greatest thinker in natural science to date, and who developed a system of extraordinary subtlety and power. What does Smith say, even after he's been analyzing the appeal of Newton's system? He says that even we — including himself — as we've been discussing and describing Newton's system in terms of the principles of the imagination, even we have been talking as though what Newton's system describes are the real connecting chains out there in nature. The impulse to attribute to the independent external world the structure that Newton has posited is so overwhelming that as you go through the system you begin to talk as though you're articulating what is simply and mind-independently out there. But then Smith says that in doing so we have made a mistake. The attribution of the system's unifying concepts to nature is a kind of illusion of the imagination. It is precisely here that he uses the word: “even the most skeptical cannot avoid feeling this” urge to ascribe to nature the unifying principles posited by our intellectual creations.

He is not saying that nature is a fantasy but rather that nature understood as an intelligible whole is something that we make, of course under certain constraints, namely the phenomena. I take it that his narration about science and its history is really of a piece with the general skeptical view as I analyzed that view. Again, none of this means that he denies objectivity altogether; it doesn't follow from skepticism that everything is subjective (in the sense of arbitrary, or relative to the individual, or non-rational), either here in the context of his account of scientific theorizing or in the context of his account of morals. But the account — including the approach to the philosophy of science through the study of the history of science — does seem to me to be precisely of the sort that a skeptic of Smith's variety would give. It is a typical move for a skeptic who denies that there's a direct access to the objective structure of the world to talk about the history of attempts to explain the world and then about the logic that underlies that history of enquiry. That's a very different sort of enterprise than just trying to give a straightforward philosophical account of scientific realism. In chapter four of the book I attempt to specify just what sort of skeptic Smith is, and thus what sorts of 'realism' he can and cannot allow for. Obviously the topic is a complex one. That said, I sense that we continue to disagree about the issue of the harmony of nature and the role that it would play.

If I may turn then to your second question. The exact administration of justice is only one of the big battery of arguments I think he has in favour of his views about distributive justice. These by the way are not entirely original (Smith does not claim originality for them all, either); for the most part they're in Hume, among others. The matter of the exact administration of justice would be a worry to someone who was thinking of the concrete application of a theory of distributive justice, on account of the many incentives and possibilities for distortion, misapplication, corruption, and the sheer epistemic difficulties of getting the distribution right. Consider the difficulties Americans have encountered in applying principles of affirmative action. This argument is not, however, meant to carry the whole burden of the reservations about distributive justice.
Let me add that Smith is not at all insensitive to the aims of distributive justice; on the contrary, the *Wealth of Nations* is, as one commentator has put it, “the greatest working-man's tract ever written.”

I don't think that Smith relies heavily here on an optimism about the free market, though certainly he does rely to some extent on the successful working of the market in order to distribute wealth fairly and widely, and he does hold that it will tend to do so only if the market is constrained by principles of (commutative) justice. Nonetheless it seems to me that he's actually quite pessimistic at a number of levels about the free market and its social effects. I think not just of the discussion of dehumanization, but also the tendency of participants in the free market to work against the freedom of the market. You may recall his famous statements to the effect that no two business people ever meet except to conspire against the public good. His statements about the corruptibility of public officials, and in general his unblinkered, harsh, and almost disillusioned perception of public life, make one wonder how conditions of economic liberty could possibly survive for long.

*Luk Bouckaert:* But those monopolies don't play by the rules of the game.

*Charles Griswold:* That's why the free market is not a self-regulating mechanism. It requires state intervention to make sure that the people who heavily influence the free market — namely the business people — don't do what they really want to do, which is to destroy the free market so as to promote their own self-interest. So it can't be a self-regulating mechanism, it requires the impartial justice of the state to function adequately.

You remember too his view that economic development goes through (or at least ought to go through) a series of stages. He's not saying that you can take the free market and just inject it into any society, as though it were some miraculous drug. A lot of people say that Smith's putatively optimistic and libertarian view of the free market is one according to which you can take “the natural system of liberty” and jam it into any society and that everything will go wonderfully thereafter. But I don't think Smith has any such starry-eyed view. He's well aware that an attempt to force the free market into a society at the wrong historical period can produce catastrophic results. So even if the free market is relatively self-regulating, it's only so under the appropriate historical conditions.

**Notes**

1. J.-F. Lyotard remarks that at the core of ‘postmodernism’ is a skepticism towards the ability of philosophy to ground or ‘legitimate’ itself, to provide what Lyotard calls a ‘metanarrative,’ or in the current jargon a ‘story’ that explains and justifies the enterprise in question. Hence Lyotard's remark: “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.” This is just to say that scientific progress is self-vitiating. *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. xxv and xxiv.


4. The problem is discussed by MacIntyre in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Ethical Perspectives* 7 (2000)1, p. 71
5. The six editions of TMS were published by Smith in 1759, 1761, 1767, 1774, 1781, 1790; and editions of WN in 1776, 1778, 1784, 1786, and 1789.
7. C. Taylor rightly remarks that the "affirmation of ordinary life" (the 'life of production and the family') is one of the major themes of Christianity "which comes to receive new and unprecedented importance at the beginning of the modern era, and which has also become central to modern culture," being "one of the most powerful ideas in modern civilization." Other ideas include the "importance of suffering" and that of autonomy. Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 14-15.
9. The bulk of these comments is drawn (with the kind permission of Cambridge University Press) from the unedited draft to the Introduction to my Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment.