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## Introduction



What does it mean to “live a better life”? And for that matter, what exactly does it mean to “live a life” in the first place? These are hardly easy questions to answer. And they certainly aren’t easy things to do. But at the very least, it seems to me, living a life requires that we be actively engaged in pursuing a trajectory that we can recognize as “a life”—that is, a trajectory that not only has a beginning and middle and end, but also has a unity to it that enables us to see all its different parts as fitting together in a meaningful way.

Some people are better at this than others. But a lot hangs on whether we can do it well. Each of us, after all, has been given only one life to live. So as we each live this single life that is ours, we have to make all sorts of choices about what paths to follow and not follow. But what makes one path better than another? What standard should we use to judge what choices to make? And where should we turn for guidance on all of this?

This book suggests we can find an excellent guide to these questions in Adam Smith. This is likely to strike many people as surprising. Adam Smith of course is famous today as a founding father of capitalism, not for his ideas on how to live a life. But as I show below, Smith in fact has much to offer us on this front. In particular, Smith’s philosophy of living (and I do think we’re right to speak of his thought in this way) is founded on a synthesis of action and reflection—or, to use Smith’s own words, a synthesis of “wisdom” and “virtue.”<sup>1</sup>

Smith's belief that living a good life requires bringing together action and reflection not only is central to his philosophy of living, but also distinguishes his project from other sorts of efforts in this vein. Modern readers, when they hear talk of living good lives, may expect a self-help book, the sort of thing that outlines (in the words of one recently popular exemplar) a set of "rules for life."<sup>2</sup> But Smith never sought to write a self-help book, even if some of his readers have tried to read him this way. Smith's first biographer once said of his main work in moral philosophy that "with the theoretical doctrines of the book, there are everywhere interwoven, with singular taste and address, the purest and most elevated maxims concerning the practical conduct of life."<sup>3</sup> A century later, no less a figure than the future U.S. president Woodrow Wilson would reiterate the same lesson in some of his university lectures at Princeton, claiming that Smith "stores his volumes full with the sagest practical maxims, fit to have fallen from the lips of the shrewdest of those Glasgow merchants in whose society he learned so much."<sup>4</sup> But for all this we do Smith an injustice if we reduce his concerns with the philosophy of living to practical maxims of the sort one finds in the work of Smith's friend Benjamin Franklin or in today's self-help books. Smith, to put it bluntly, knew that there is all the difference in the world between learning how to get ahead in life and learning how to live life well.

Smith's books then have something to offer to the busy and upwardly mobile.<sup>5</sup> But they have more to offer, I think, to a different sort of reader, after something different than easy advice, quick fixes, and lists of rules. This book presents Smith's wisdom on this front to the sort of readers who will welcome not only an opportunity to see Smith in a new way, but also an opportunity to see how seeing Smith in this new way might lead them to see themselves and their own lives in a new way.

And that we will be seeing Smith in a new way is clear. Smith's philosophy of living has not been a prominent element of the voluminous scholarship on his thought. Some of the very best scholars of his thought in fact have argued that Smith thinks the aim of moral philosophy is merely to provide "an account of the origin and function" of our moral concepts, and as a result, "if we want guidance on how to live the good life, we should look elsewhere."<sup>6</sup> It will be obvious from what follows that I have a different view. But my goal in this book isn't to settle scholarly scores. I've contributed to the scholarly debates in my other books and articles on Smith, which include all the citations and detailed footnotes to the specialized literature that contributions to such debates require. But my goal here is different.<sup>7</sup> In presenting Smith as a wise guide to living a life, I cast some light on some sides of his thought that have received relatively less attention, and I hope this may be of interest to specialists. But more importantly, I hope that by presenting Smith in this way, readers of this book will have an opportunity to spend some time with—indeed live with—a thinker who has a great deal to show us about our own lives and what we do well to think about if we hope to live them as well as we can. I first encountered Adam Smith a quarter century ago, and I know my own life is better for the years I've lived with him. I hope this might in time prove true for you as well.

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This book is of course about Smith's thoughts on living a life. As such, it does not aspire to provide a full treatment of Smith's own life or his thought. But insofar as the story of his life and the broader themes of his thought are not irrelevant to our focus, a very brief introduction to his life and his ideas may be useful.<sup>8</sup>

Smith was born in 1723 in the coastal town of Kirkcaldy, just north of Edinburgh. His father died before he was born, leaving him to be raised by his devoted and loving mother. After receiving an excellent early education at his local parish school, he was sent to study at the University of Glasgow. Here he completed his undergraduate studies, in part under the tutelage of his beloved teacher Francis Hutcheson, widely regarded today as the father of what has come to be known as the Scottish Enlightenment. After finishing at Glasgow in 1740, Smith received a scholarship to Oxford to continue his studies in preparation for a career as a minister. But Oxford disappointed him, and he returned to Scotland in 1746.

Back in Scotland, instead of pursuing a career in the church, Smith delivered a series of public lectures on rhetoric. These earned him sufficient attention to be considered for a professorship at Glasgow, a position that he was awarded and began in 1751. At Glasgow Smith lectured on subjects ranging from rhetoric and belles lettres to natural theology and logic and jurisprudence. But it was chiefly as a teacher of moral philosophy that he came to be known. Smith's career at Glasgow as both an admired teacher and an able administrator continued until 1764, when he resigned his university post in order to take up a position as traveling tutor to the Duke of Buccleuch. In the company of the duke, Smith spent the next two years in France as the duke's guide on his Grand Tour. It would be his only trip outside Great Britain, but for the francophile Smith it was momentous, especially as it enabled him to meet and talk with many of the leading figures of the Enlightenment.

While in France, Smith started writing a book. This continued to occupy him for the decade after his return to Scotland in 1766. And after its completion and publication, Smith went on to hold a civil post in Edinburgh, serving the Crown as a collector of customs, a post he held until his death. In these

final Edinburgh years, Smith lived a happy life as a man of letters, meeting with his friends and hosting visitors in the home he shared with his mother and cousin. This residence, Panmure House, still stands in Edinburgh, and it was here that Smith would end his days in 1790, shortly after sending to press his final revisions of his first book.

Smith led a quiet life. We do have a few funny anecdotes about him—including one about the time he fell into a tanning pit while expostulating on the benefits of specialized labor, another about the time he was lost in thought and tried to make tea out of bread, and another about the time he went wandering about in the countryside, oblivious to the fact that he was still in his nightclothes. These have fostered an image of Smith as the classic absent-minded professor. And in truth, unwed and childless, modest and retiring, Smith's life really was one of books and ideas. We get a sense of this from the engraving on the stone marking his burial place in Edinburgh's Canongate churchyard, steps from Panmure House. In its entirety it reads, "Here are deposited the remains of Adam Smith, author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*: He was born, 5th June, 1723. And he died 17th July, 1790." The inscription captures the essential truth of Smith's life: namely that it lies mainly in his two published books, which together compose the essentials of his system.

Smith's second book, the *Wealth of Nations*—the one begun in France and published in 1776—is the one for which he is known today. Smith intended it first and foremost as an intervention in the most prominent debate in political economy of his day, the debate over free trade, and specifically the system of trade protectionism known as mercantilism. The *Wealth of Nations* is adamantly hostile to mercantilism, arguing it serves merely to line the pockets of wealthy and well-connected special interests, at a direct cost to the interests of less elite and less

well-to-do consumers. Yet the *Wealth of Nations* was hardly just a tract for its times. Smith's critique of protectionism was founded on his belief in the efficiency of the "system of natural liberty," and indeed it is as a defense of this system that the book has left its lasting mark. As a result, Adam Smith's name has been, for generations of students of economics, synonymous with the defense of such doctrines as the superior productivity of specialized labor, the mutual gains between buyers and sellers (and indeed nations) that free exchange makes possible, and the dangers of excessive government intervention in market processes.

Yet even though Smith owes his fame to the *Wealth of Nations*, it is his other book that is our focus in what follows. In 1759, Smith published the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The book had its origin in Smith's lectures to the students in his moral philosophy class at Glasgow. Some trace of this is evident in the text, which concludes with a long chapter on the history of various moral theories: an approach to the history of ideas common enough today though novel for its time. Yet the real significance and originality of the book lies elsewhere. In particular, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith developed an original theory of moral judgment, the cornerstone of which is his concept of sympathy: the sentiment that leads us to feel, in some measure and to some degree, what other people feel, and which Smith thinks is inherent to human nature. Sympathy, in turn, is assisted by another mechanism: the figure Smith called the "impartial spectator," an ideal judge whose judgment is unclouded by distorting feelings, and thus deliberates calmly and coolly about right and wrong. But as we will see, alongside this theory of moral judgment, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* also lays out a philosophy of living founded on a particular understanding of what it means to have a virtuous character—a philosophy of living



that is much indebted to ancient reflections on virtue going back to Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics, but which is very consciously tailored for our modern world.

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To present Smith's philosophy of living as effectively as possible, what follows is organized into a series of short chapters. Each focuses on a single line from one of Smith's writings (most often *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) and after presenting this line I offer a short commentary on it. In so doing I hope, among other things, to allow Smith's genius as a writer to shine through. A student of classical rhetoric and a lover of modern literature, Smith wrote beautiful prose. And while he didn't set out to write aphorisms, his sentences are often subtle and sophisticated, and in many cases merit sustained reflection. In any case, by presenting his thought in this way, I offer an accessible point of entry to those encountering his writings for the first time, as well as a new lens through which veterans might reencounter his texts and thought. Also, each of these quotations stands on its own, and can be read independently of the others. But both my presentation of them and my commentaries on them have been arranged and ordered in such a way as to tell a story that starts with the first chapter and ends with the last.

In selecting these quotations I have been guided by my sense of what Smith took to be the key challenges to living a life today. Speaking broadly, these challenges fall into two groups. First are those that come from the way we as human beings have been made. On this front, Smith frequently returns to the idea that we are by nature often led in two very different directions. On the one hand, we are naturally led to be concerned with ourselves and our own well-being. On the other hand, we are naturally led to be concerned with the well-being and happiness of others. A second set of challenges

comes from the world that we live in today. Like the challenges that come from our nature, these challenges involve competing demands that pull us in different ways. As we all likely know very well, our world rewards efforts to get ahead, bestowing upon the successful wealth, status, and power. Yet even today we value behavior that sacrifices self-interest, especially when this advances the well-being of others. All of this is to say that both our natures and the nature of our world pull us in different directions, all at once. These competing demands raise key challenges to the project of living a single and unified life, and thus one of the recurring themes in what follows is division and unity.

But diagnosing the challenges to living well is only half of Smith's insight into living a life. Thus in selecting these quotations I have also been guided by my sense of what Smith thought we need to do, in our lives, if we hope to overcome these challenges. First, in his view, we need to adopt certain virtues. Some of these are virtues that have to do with our feelings toward ourselves; the virtues of prudence and self-command play important roles in this process. Others have to do with our feelings and actions toward others, with justice and benevolence playing especially important roles here. Another set of recurring themes in what follows then are the two sets of virtues that enable us to live a good and unified life: what Smith calls the "awful virtues" of magnanimity and self-command, and the "amiable virtues" of benevolence and love.

At the same time, living a life, Smith teaches, requires more than adopting certain virtues—as tough a task as that is. For in order to adopt these virtues, we need to be able to see ourselves anew, Smith thinks. In particular, we need to develop a critical distance from ourselves. By so doing, not only do we come to see ourselves in a new and impartial light, but we also learn how to see ourselves as others see us. It is no exaggeration to

say that Smith thinks that liberal commercial society depends on the ability of its citizens to do this. But the claim I make here is both more modest and more ambitious. For Smith, living a life requires the capacity to see and reflect on our lives. Living a life requires then more than just the activity of living. It also requires us to step outside ourselves from time to time so that we can see ourselves in that impartial light in which the rest of the world sees us. This is important, as scholars have long realized, if we hope to tamp down some of our selfishness. But this act of critical reflection is also what enables us to see ourselves as a self, engaged in the project of living a life of virtue and flourishing, of unity and coherence, and thus, hopefully, of purpose and meaning.