BOOK REVIEW


Griswold’s book is first and foremost a large-scale study of Smith’s moral and political thought. It is excellently written, lucid, admirably argued, and clearly organized. One may perhaps raise a minor criticism against the title on the grounds that it is slightly misleading in two respects. First, it is not until the Epilogue that the true meaning of the phrase ‘virtues of the enlightenment’ is explained. Only here does one learn that what is at stake is not the concept of virtue in any technical sense, though that too is one of the major topics of the book, but rather that the expression refers to the positive achievements of the period (p. 360). The book is based on the supposition that Smith was motivated, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, by a desire to improve human life, that he sought to free mankind from war and faction as well as from repressive institutions, especially religious ones, that he wished to critically examine traditions and dogmas, and that his ethical stance aims at liberty and autonomy (pp. 10–12). However, and this is the second point of criticism, in the course of the book the merits and demerits of the Enlightenment and even Smith’s stance towards it recede into the background. This is already apparent from the comparisons, which are made with Smith’s thought: the ancients, especially Plato and Aristotle, but also the Stoics, receive far more attention than does, e.g. Hume. The author discusses some of the more general criticisms of the Enlightenment as well as Smith’s own misgivings about it only in the Introduction. But perhaps this is just as well, given that Smith’s reservations about some of the ‘virtues of the enlightenment’ are only peripheral to the agenda of the counter-enlightenment. Griswold does deal with them at some length, e.g. with the problem of dehumanisation resulting from the division of labour or with the question of the sense of wealth and its relationship to moral values (pp. 16–18, 127–128, 222–226, 292) as well as with Smith’s own attempted fixes such as education (pp. 20, 265). But it is important to realize that this book is essentially about Adam Smith, not about the context provided by the Enlightenment.

The author presents a detailed analysis of Smith’s ethical theory, taking into account the great complexity of Smith’s thought. Aside from dealing with virtue and justice at some length he especially focuses on the role played by the imagination and sympathy, also on the interplay between the passions and reason as well as on the idea of the impartial spectator. Throughout he finds the metaphor of the theatre and of the theatre critic useful for explaining Smith. He claims that for the latter “human life is fundamentally theatrical”, given that we internalise the standpoint of the spectator and that we therefore are only if known by the spectator: “spectatorship is the condition for the possibility of agency” (p. 106). In sum, we are dependent on others for our self-conception, we always see ourselves through the eyes of others, we are mirrors to each other (pp. 105–109). The metaphor of the theatre helps to explicate the precise role of the impartial spectator whose point of view takes precedence and is privileged over that of the actor (p. 82). The concept of sympathy is also clarified. The different meanings of the term are examined extensively, especially the question under what circumstances sympathy is unselfish (ch. 2); this allows Griswold later on in the book to tie in Smith’s Wealth of Nations into his moral philosophy as he can point to the fact that commerce requires precisely such an examination of the other person’s situation from their point of view (p. 297). A further crucial point of Smith’s account is the fact that the impartial spectator achieves a measure of objectivity not by suppressing emotional response, but by carefully reflecting on his evaluative responses; this corrects the “misrepresentations of self-love” (pp. 68, 136, 142). Along with the theatre Griswold greatly stresses the role of rhetoric, which he does not see as mere ‘window dressing’ (p. 40). He thinks that not only Smith’s use of the pronoun ‘we’ is protreptic, but that in general his writings are intended to persuade both philosophers and the wider public (p. 49); thus he also stresses the value of literature and drama (p. 59).

Griswold wishes to read Smith as one of the inventors of the concept of autonomy (pp. 196, 314). For Smith moral values do not exist as Platonic forms (p. 145), nor are they God given, nor can he unreservedly agree with the Stoics that the ideal of living in accordance with nature is a worthy one (pp. 314–329, 361), nor yet can beauty serve as a reliable guide to morality (pp. 334–335). Rather he points to the way in which the creative human imagination shapes moral values by enabling us to place ourselves into the position of the other and to “reflect on the self from the standpoint of the spectator” (pp. 115, 339–342).

As the book deals mostly with the Theory of Moral Sentiments and comments only relatively briefly on the Wealth of Nations, it omits nearly