

## Adam Smith on Gender

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Justman, Stewart. *The Autonomous Male of Adam Smith*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Pp. xv + 220. ISBN 0-8061-2542-X.

In this review article I want to look at a recent book on Adam Smith's views of gender: Stewart Justman's *The Autonomous Male of Adam Smith*. My interest in it arises from my long term research on Adam Smith, rather than from any interest in feminism. Although I do not claim to be an expert in the latter field, I certainly know a good deal more about it now than I did a year ago having recently read works by Shapiro (1993), Cole (1991), and others.

While Justman's book actually discusses many more issues than those related to gender, the latter is the topic covered in greatest depth. As far as I can tell, neither Justman nor anyone else discusses Smith's views on the question of homosexuality. Whenever there is any criticism of Smith by Justman, it is always from the perspective of late twentieth century feminism. One might assume that Justman intends to deliver a contemporary feminist denunciation of the dead, white male, Smith. Unfortunately, this is what one finds in some recent writings (see Cole 1991). But Justman is more thoughtful than this.

Justman says that "[t]he aim of this study ... is to stir thought" (p. 23). He says that he "take[s] the conventional view that contradictions matter," and is "interested in Smith's use of verbal patches to cover [the contradictions]" (p.15). This is a much sounder method of investigation than that which some other commentators on Smith have adopted in recent times. For example, the postmodern Shapiro, sets out to "confront" Smith from the postmodern perspective (see Shapiro 1993, xxv, xxvi, xxix, xxxiii). Justman at least claims that he is seeking to understand Smith before confronting him with the views of contemporary feminism.

Indeed, Justman seems to have considerable regard for Smith. He refers to Smith's "acuity and cool philosophical reserve," and to his "conceptual richness" (pp. 16, 23). Justman considers Smith as "interesting," "so interesting," and "richly interesting" (pp. 18, 61, 77). Smith is treated seriously; even his views on women are examined with some care. Justman argues that, for Smith, "the pinnacle of patriarchy was reached years ago" in the shepherding age (p. 30). Smith "believed in progress" and his "theory of progress towards commercial civilisation supposes the weakening of patriarchal rule" (pp. 23, 11). Smith escapes the disparaging assessments made of some others: Justman says that Juvenal is "virulently antifeminist," and Nietzsche is "an ultrareactionary on the subject of women" (pp. 64, 116; see also p.121, 198 n. 53). Smith fares better from the feminist confrontation than one might anticipate.

Nevertheless, Smith still does not come up to the standard of contemporary feminism. According to Justman, Smith fell victim to "the fallacy of essence" with respect to women. "The fallacy of essence enables it to be said that while men may happen to be vain and luxurious, women are these things essentially, by nature" (p.5). Hence, by becoming "[v]ain and ostentatious, [men] take on what are essentially traits of women. They become effeminate" (p. 5). According to Justman, Smith's "gender-coding" is also seen in his view

that the warrior, the statesmen, the philosopher, and the legislator represent "the solid and masculine virtues" (p. 6 citing *Theory of Moral Sentiments* I.iii.3.6). This is compatible with the traditional view that reasoning and ruling are activities of men and that women, lacking sufficient reason and self-control, must be ruled by men: "it is just because women allegedly cannot govern themselves that men claim the right to govern them" (p. 62). Smith deviates from the tradition by holding that most commercial men exercise little reason or self-control:

Smith appeals to old values, notably stoic values, to lend gravitas and stability to new [commercial] ways. He employs the traditional language of male supremacy to make up for the prudent [commercial] man's lack of such traditional goods as reason, nobility, generosity, and in fact self-mastery. In other words, Adam Smith adheres to the tradition of male supremacy that his own theory reduces to the status of prejudice ... Smith was temperamentally conservative and no evidence suggests that he wanted to discard so customary and consoling a fiction as the superiority of men.... [T]he wry philosophy of Adam Smith endorses the gender prejudices of his culture... Smith never intended to erode the distinction between able men and feeble women. (p. 10)

Similarly, Justman says that Smith "is stuck in traditional gender categories" (p. 53). "Smith's views on women are narrow and conventional"; he did not hold "unconventional views on gender" (pp. 155 n. 27, 92; see also p. 12). Justman traces Smith's anti-feminism to a number of sources. One is Smith's republicanism; another is his Stoicism.

Justman refers to the "republican tinge of [Smith's] values"; Smith has "affinities" with the "republican tradition"; he is a man of "republican sentiment" (pp. 13, 128, 140; see also p. 80). But "the republican tradition was deeply biased in favor of men" (p. 13). Hence republicanism leads Smith to antifeminism. Secondly, and more importantly, in Justman's story we see the influence of Stoicism on Smith's thinking on gender. One of the central claims of Justman's book is that Smith incorporated a good deal of Stoicism into his writing, particularly throughout much of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and by doing so imported into his work a "male bias ... [that] bordered on the absolute" (p. 80). We will return to Stoicism momentarily but first we need to return to an earlier point, to show that Smith's "conventional" views on gender are not simplistic.

Three of the themes in Justman's account of the gender stereotypes are: "Women ... [are] emotional, men rational";<sup>1</sup> women are "frivolous," "vain," and "luxurious," in short, they "have excessive desires" which they cannot control; and as a consequence of these two factors "[w]omen are confined to the domestic realm, while men venture hardily into public affairs" (pp. 3,4). In Justman's view, Smith is complicated because he argues that most men in commercial society take on the characteristics of women: they have defective reason, give themselves up to their ruling passion of vanity, and are absent from public life. These three points are made over and over (see pp. 3-5, 8-12, 17, 22, 25, 30-3, 37). Hence, the actual condition of most commercial men is rather feminine (see pp. 5, 8-9, 12-4, 17, 19, 25-6, 28, 36). Indeed, "the male of Smithian society has more in common with his own image of woman than he, or Adam Smith, cares to admit" (p. 19). There is even more merit in presenting Smith as being moderate concerning the status of women when one considers the praise that Smith heaps on certain private activities and virtues that are traditionally said to be feminine. Prudence, modesty, and propriety (in both men and women) are all greatly praised by Smith, yet these virtues have been usually attributed to women only (see pp. 9, 19, 22, 36-7, 42, 48).<sup>2</sup>

Even though Justman is more balanced than one might have expected, he did not take sufficient care with his topic. For example, Justman seems to have missed the lengthy

treatment of polygamy in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. Smith shows at some length there how the institution of monogamy greatly benefits women specifically, and citizens generally, by promoting political freedom (*LJ* (A)iii.23-52; *LJ* (B)111-8). An analysis of Smith's teaching on this point would also have been helpful in showing how his scheme of history promotes greater gender equality.

Further, and more importantly, Justman did not notice the following passage: "The laws of most countries being made by men generally are very severe on women, who can have no remedy for this oppression" (*LJ* (A) iii.13 emphasis added; see also *LJ* (B) 109). Nor did Justman notice Smith's assertion that the "real reason" for the punishment only of wives for adultery "is that it is men who make the laws with respect to this; they generally will be inclined to curb the women as much as possible and give themselves the more indulgence" (*LJ*(A) iii.15-6). Had Justman noticed such passages, he might have had to revise still further his criticisms of Smith. The latter seems to quietly accept some of the feminist critique, of which he is alleged to have been ignorant.

Let me now return to the anti-feminist Stoics who are said to have been so influential on Smith's outlook, including his views on gender equality. Perhaps the most interesting part of Justman's book is its sixty page treatment of Stoicism. "Smith ...felt for the stoics a kind of veneration"; he "really honored the stoic ideal"; Stoicism is "the primary influence on Smith's ethical thought" (pp. 24, 26, 28). Further, apart from its negative "male bias," Stoicism also has a positive impact. "[S]toicism performs . . .[an] ennobling function in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*" (p. 54). Stoic self-command keeps "Smithian [commercial] man" from being seduced by "luxury - a vice traditionally personified as a woman - and preserves him from the depravity of the moral sentiments that is general in commercial society" (p. 14; see *Wealth of Nations* V.i.f.50-1). Smith:

portrays the industriousness, frugality, and steady habits of the prudent man as a kind of lesser stoicism<sup>3</sup> - stoicism on a human scale.... The stoic virtue of self-command lends a 'sober lustre' to the minor virtues of prudence.... 'The moral quality of prudence,' that cardinal Smithian virtue, 'depends on its association with the Stoic virtue of self-command' (p. 7 emphasis added, citing *Theory of Moral Sentiments* VI.iii.13, and Ed. Intro. p.9)

Unlike Vivienne Brown (see Brown 1994), Justman sees prudence as an important element in Smith's list of moral virtues. Still, prudence and kindred virtues, like the "habits of economy, industry, discretion, attention, and application of thought," were second order virtues (*Theory of Moral Sentiments* VII.ii.3.16; see also VI.i.13-5): "Smith was of the opinion that the prudential virtues were distinctly second best" when compared to the "public" virtues of the statesman and the legislator (pp. 38, 99). The hierarchy is Stoic. Stoicism plays an important part in Justman's interpretation of the moral teaching that underpins all of Smith's works. Despite this, in the end, Justman says that Stoicism plays merely "a rhetorical or honorific role" in Smith's works (p. 29). Genuine Stoicism requires public action in support of the public good, but commercial men contribute only through slow "private improvement" or acquisition (pp. 34-5).<sup>4</sup> "[T]he unacknowledged theme of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*" is "the displacement ... of the more illustrious and active virtues by the prudential virtues of capitalism" (p. 39; see also p. 99).

There are many interesting remarks on Stoicism in Justman's book. While I am not an expert on Stoicism, I found the following remark intriguing:

[S]toicism itself looks enough like Christianity - what with the resemblances between Epictetus and the New Testament, between Boethius and medieval

Church doctrine - that Adam Smith passes for more of an orthodox Christian than perhaps he really is. (p. 48)

Certainly there is a gap between Christianity and Stoicism, and Smith is generally presented by recent commentators as being closer to the latter than the former. So one wonders whether Smith's deviations from Christian orthodoxy would have been very visible at the time when he wrote. It seems to me that the connections between orthodox eighteenth-century Christianity and Stoicism warrant more attention than they have received thus far. While Sher (1985) deals with this theme briefly, a fuller account is needed.

Before closing, let me make a few miscellaneous points. Justman seems to have a knack for summarizing key Smithian themes and consequently there are many passages worth quoting from his book. Like Michael Shapiro (Shapiro 1993), Justman refers to Smith's use of a "linear model of progress of human society from the hunting stage to the commercial stage, a model popularized in the Victorian creed of progress" (p. 128). In reference to the four-stage theory of history, Justman refers to the "gradual advance of society as it reaches the commercial or *Smithian stage*" (p. 122 emphasis added). On the basis of this conclusion, and others, Justman colourfully labels Smith "the most renowned theorist of commerce," a "philosopher of frugality," "the philosopher of free trade," "a philosophical founder of capitalism," and a "charterer of capitalism" (pp. 29, 55, 56, 107, 147). He refers to Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as "the closest thing to an authorized version of the morality of bourgeois society," as "a kind of philosophical charter of the commercial way of life," and as "one of the foundational texts of capitalism" (pp. 3, 26, 87, see also p. 16). These characterisations are a little too strong, as even Justman concedes on occasion.<sup>5</sup>

Justman has carefully, and correctly, assessed a good deal of Smith's writing style. He frequently refers to Smith's use of irony (pp. 11, 14, 16, 19, 49, 51, 57, 66, 133, 146, 150) and rhetoric (pp. 29, 51, 62). Justman claims that Smith is the "author of the highly polemical *Wealth of Nations*" (p. 107). The concluding few sentences of Justman's book are worth quoting here:

[Smith's] highly contentious *Wealth of Nations* [was] a masterpiece of polemic. Maybe he thought that once natural liberty of trade was established, no such argumentative assault would have to be launched again. Maybe he thought of the *Wealth of Nations* what Burke thought of the Revolution of 1688: that it was an act that would never have to be repeated. (p. 151)

While I would have liked more evidence leading up to this conclusion, this is a powerful ending to the book. It would be rare for most economists to think of Smith as a rhetorician in the league of Burke (even if they knew who the latter was). Justman's provides a strong contrast to many accounts which see Smith as a scientific writer who began modern economic analysis.

Will Justman's book continue to have an impact on Smith scholarship in twenty years time? My suspicion is that it may not have great staying power, not because feminism is a fad, but because the attempt to criticize old books on the basis of their failure to endorse the current views of feminism is tiresome and prejudices one's reading. Instead of being open to views outside of one's own perspective, one is closed at the outset to certain possibilities. I believe that it is the ideological nature of the 'reading' that led Justman to miss several of the points mentioned above. The faddish nature of Justman's enterprise surely will undermine the longevity of his book.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Of course, some feminists now accept the view that women are less rational than men but dispute the value of rationality. If one values rational discourse, as I do, this new type of feminism appears especially dangerous.
- <sup>2</sup> In another account of Smith's views on gender, Clark (1993) shows the impressive range of virtues which are equally open to women and men.
- <sup>3</sup> Justman also refers to Smith's advocacy of "[m]iddling stoicism" (p. 40; see also p.39). He elaborates thus: "With too little stoicism men might lose the habit of submission and resignation; with too much they would see through the deceptions that keep commercial society going. With too little they might become politically restive, and with too much, economically quiet. Hence the middling, Smithian stoicism that somehow allows for the 'bustle' [*Theory of Moral Sentiments* L.iii.2.8] of an orderly society where the guiding motives, such as the pursuit of a fantasy of happiness, seem anything but stoic" (p. 65).
- <sup>4</sup> "Smith envisions prudent men whose 'inferior' virtues . . . and sheer constancy build the wealth of the nation" (p. 143 citing *Theory of Moral Sentiments* VII.ii.3.15).
- <sup>5</sup> Justman notes that there are other "Adam Smith problems" than *Das Adam Smith Problem*. For example, he refers to "the problem of how a man filled with contempt for wealth and status should have certified a commercial way of life in which, on his own showing, people strive for these things above all" (p.84). Similarly, Justman sees a problem with "Adam Smith's disdain for the scramble for happiness" and "his lament over 'the corruption of our moral sentiments' caused by the worship of the rich" (p. 84). Justman concludes that "such attitudes as these do not make for a very hearty and positive endorsement of the commercial way of life" (p. 84). It is the paradoxical nature of Smith that has been the focus of my research and it is always gratifying to read someone dealing with some of the problems in Smith that have troubled me.

## References

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