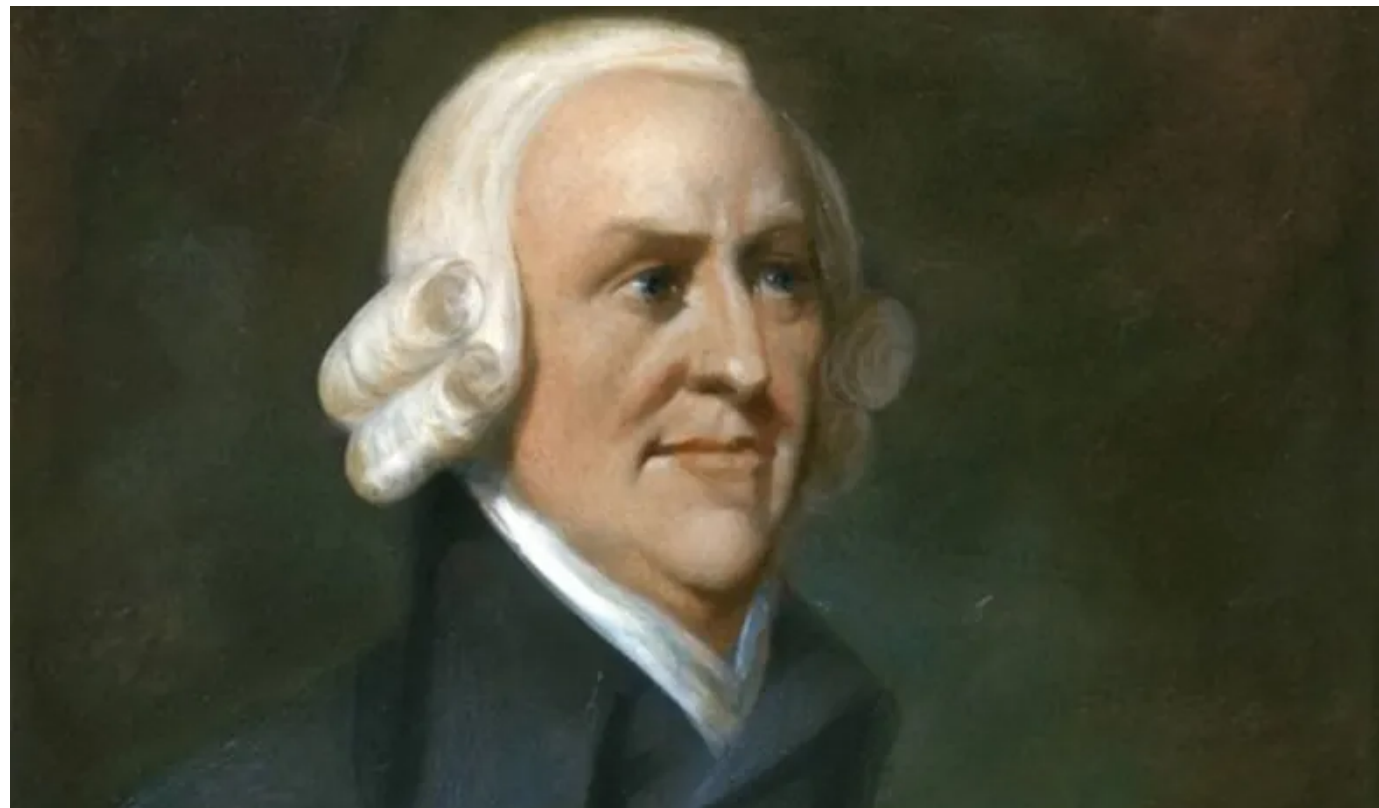


NATIONAL REVIEW | NR PLUS | ADAM SMITH 300

Catholic and Smithian



A portrait of the political economist and philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790) (Public Domain/Wikimedia)

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September 16, 2023 6:30 AM

The father of free-market economics believed society was man's natural state, much like Catholic thinkers before and after him.

Adam Smith was born in 1723. This year he turns 300.

To celebrate, NATIONAL REVIEW Capital Matters offers the Adam Smith 300 series. An essay on Smith will appear monthly throughout 2023, written by various students of Smith's thought. Smith's birthday is June 16, so the essays will appear on the 16th day of each month. Daniel Klein and Erik Matson of George Mason University are helping curate the series for Capital Matters along with Dominic Pino. To read previous months' essays, [click here](#).

DAM SMITH of Kirkaldy, born 300 years ago this year, was no Catholic. But wittingly or not, he wrote on the

A character of the social order in a way that is consistent with Catholic thought.

Reviewing Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1754 *Discourse on Inequality*, and noting its relation to the work of Bernard Mandeville, Smith rejected the anti-social character of their accounts of man. "Dr. Mandeville," Smith wrote, "represents the primitive state of mankind as the most wretched and miserable that can be imagined: Mr. Rousseau, on the contrary, paints it as the happiest and most suitable to his nature. Both of them however suppose, that there is in man no powerful instinct which necessarily determines him to seek society for its own sake." Smith had anticipated the direction of Rousseau's thought and objected to the presuppositions of "social contract" theory before Rousseau's book on that subject was published in 1762.

On Smith's account, society as such needed no apologia, no special theory, because men do seek society for its own sake. In his four-stage theory of societal development, the first stage is small hunter bands, which naturally cling together, like a group of families. Through the ensuing societal stages — shepherds, agriculture, and commerce — society became more complex.

Man "stands at all times in need of the co-operation and assistance of great multitudes," he wrote in the *Wealth of Nations*. "In almost every other race of animals each individual, when it is grown up to maturity, is entirely independent, and in its natural state has occasion for the assistance of no other living creature. But man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren." From the fact of dependence, Smith focused on the division of labor and how it was organized through exchange, a uniquely human inclination, consequent upon "the faculties of reason and speech." "The propensity to truck, barter, and exchange . . . is common to all men," Smith wrote, "and to be found in no other race of animals."

To see how much Smith shared with Catholic thought, consider the 13th century Thomas Aquinas, who, following Aristotle, argued in a similar manner:

It is natural for man, more than for any other animal, to be a social and political animal, to live in a group. This is clearly a necessity of man's nature. For all other animals, nature has prepared food, hair as a covering, teeth, horns, claws as means of defense or at least speed in flight, while man alone was made without any natural provisions for these things.

Instead of all these, man was endowed with reason, by the use of which he could procure all these things for himself by the work of his hands. Now, one man alone is not able to procure them all for himself, for one man could not sufficiently provide for life, unassisted. It is therefore natural that man should live in the society of many.

Aquinas then moved from the necessity of society to the necessity of specialized knowledge and human activity — a division of occupation, if not also of labor. Whereas "all other animals are able to discern by inborn skill, what is useful and what is injurious, . . . [m]an, on the contrary, has a natural knowledge of the

things which are essential for his life only in a general fashion, inasmuch as he is able to attain knowledge of the particular things necessary for human life by reasoning from natural principles.”

Society is man’s school and culture is the lesson. Aquinas continues: “But it is not possible for one man to arrive at a knowledge of all these things by his own individual reason, to make different discoveries — one, for example, in medicine, one in this and another in that.”

Another medieval Italian Catholic, Catherine of Siena, picked up on the same theme, declaring in 1370 that God “could well have supplied each of you with all your needs, both spiritual and material,” but evidently He “wanted to make you dependent on one another.” She argued that God had given His gifts such that the virtues of social life would be incumbent upon us. Whether we want society or not, we cannot avoid acting as agents of God’s Providence.

But there is yet another reason why the primeval state of mankind is already “the man in society.” Both accounts of creation in Genesis locate the beginning of human society in the origin of man and woman and the first commandment: “Increase and multiply.” So, Pope Leo XIII explained in his 1891 riposte to the socialists, “We have the ‘society’ of a man’s house — a society very small, one must admit, but none the less a true society, and one older than any State. Consequently, it has rights and duties peculiar to itself which are quite independent of the State.”

From this Leo concluded that the “the right to property . . . proved to belong naturally to individual persons, must in like wise belong to a man in his capacity of head of a family; nay, that right [to property] is all the stronger in proportion” to his duty to provide “food and all necessaries for those whom he has begotten.” Because fathers have a duty to provide for their offspring, they have a right to seek — and keep — honest income from “remunerative labor, the impelling reason and motive of [which] is to obtain property . . . to hold it as [their] very own” and finally to “increase [their] resources and better [their] conditions in life.” A father’s interest in providing for himself cannot be separated from his interest in providing for his children — striving to give them the good things he is driven by nature to give them.

We might then, on the terms of *Rerum Novarum*, now render Smith’s most famous passage thus: It is not from the benevolence of the butcher with his three kids, the brewer with his six, or the baker with his dozen that we expect our dinner — but from regard to their own interest in providing for their families. Why did Smith himself not render it so? Perhaps because it didn’t need to be said. The typical family in Smith’s day would have given birth to eight children.

Adam Smith and Pope Leo agreed that the sociability of man — manifested in the drive to secure provision for himself and his family through trade — would lift all boats. Near the end of the “Digression on the Corn Trade” in the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith writes:

The natural effort of every individual to better his own condition, when suffered to exert itself with freedom and security, is so powerful a principle, that it is alone, and without any assistance, not only capable of

carrying society to wealth and prosperity, but of surmounting a hundred impertinent obstructions with which the folly of human laws too often incumbers its operations; though the effect of these obstructions is always more or less either to encroach upon its freedom, or to diminish its security.

Pope Leo for his part described the path away from prosperity to its negation. Depriving parents of property and the right to earn and secure income would “destroy the structure of the home,” introduce a “hateful slavery,” and open the door “to envy, mutual invective, and to discord.” Leo warned that “the sources of wealth would run dry, for no one would have any interest in exerting his talents or industry; and that ideal equality about which they entertain pleasant dreams would be in reality the leveling down of all to a like condition of misery and degradation.”

In an age overrun with political theories, reactions, and revolutions, Adam Smith offered none of those. Not because he wasn't interested in the common good and the nature of government — on the contrary, his most significant works, the *Wealth of Nations*, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, are all about those things. But his works aren't theories about why people come together to cooperate for the good. Rather, resonant with the deepest commitments of Catholic thought, Smith looked to the nature of human institutions and the divine ordering of things, to supply the ends — and the limits — for the political domain.

We do not know very much, today, about Smith's religious views. We know he was not fastidiously devout in any form of worship. But whatever he believed, he did not believe that God is a vicious God — implanting in human nature conflicting inclinations to reproduction and survival — the necessary conclusion of Malthus' population principle. The free society is ordered to growth and abundance because man is ordered to the society of the family, the family to increase and multiply, and the father to provision. Smith believed at once in a harmony of economic interests across peoples and nations, as well as a harmony of the laws of nature and of Nature's God. As one chapter title in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* affirms, “The general Rules of Morality . . . are justly regarded as the Laws of the Deity.”

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