

On Adam Smith



Jack Russell Weinstein is first and foremost a political philosopher.

"Justice is an elusive concept," he explains. "It's not just about people, and it's not just about governments. It is the core of morality and the very groundwork for human society."

Yet to clarify the meaning and nature of justice, Weinstein advocates looking towards the 18th century, and more specifically, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Smith.

"Most people know that *The Wealth of Nations* led the way to modern capitalism and heavily influenced the American founders," he explains, "but they don't know that it is actually an elaboration on a complex moral theory articulated in his first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*." For Smith, the economic requires the moral and vice versa.

Weinstein made this argument in *On Adam Smith* (2001) and extends it in his latest book, *Adam Smith's Pluralism*, a manuscript currently under review. The pluralism in the title references the struggle with differences that Smith inherited,

an issue that was never resolved. "Pluralism is the modern problem," Weinstein asserted in a piece for *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (2004): "We must therefore ask, not whether such diversity can be avoided...[but] how we, as modern people, are to understand the idea of community without place."

Weinstein suggests that the key to a society that is both stable and diverse is a civic education that is built on pluralism but not relativism. As he writes in an article for *Thought and Action* (2004): "Equality and universal access to education, noble and important goals, have been confused with equality of opinion and universal epistemic authority. In other words, the political commitment to ensuring that all people have a right to equal opportunities in the realm of education is now understood by some to mean that each person's answers are of the same value as every other person's. The Enlightenment thinkers thought that each person, given education and training, had equal access to the truth, but they never would have suggested that all answers are equally truthful."

Thus, Weinstein's return to the enlightenment is an attempt to balance diversity with universal standards, and he sees in Smith's writing a mechanism through which individuals can overcome radical cultural difference and construct a common sympathetic position.

"Smith's moral theory shares its method of discovery with modern science, at least as constructivists and sociologists understand that method," he explained during his recent stint as a Visiting Fellow at the Center for the Study of Scottish Philosophy in Princeton, N.J. "It allows for the possibility of moral Realism while recognizing the social and diverse nature of the inquiry that uncovers it." Weinstein is developing this point in a manuscript tentatively titled *Liberal Sympathies*. "*Adam Smith's Pluralism* offers an interpretation of Smith that is compatible with a more contemporary understanding of diversity. *Liberal Sympathies* will build on that foundation to present a modern political theory complete with an epistemology and an account of justice."

Since Smith's approach incorporates emotion as well as reason, Weinstein explains, it is more representative of the actual human condition than is Kant's, the philosopher that most political theorists rely on today. Smith's use of sentiment also means that people can see the world differently, even relying on different rationalities, and still communicate and cultivate a common society.

Weinstein defends the position that different cultures create different rationalities in his 2003 book *On Alasdair MacIntyre*, and he focuses on Smith's use of education to manage diversity in multiple articles and as the guest editor for a symposium in *The Adam Smith Review* 3 (2007).

"A good education is a prerequisite for justice," he asserts. "It is necessary for political participation in liberal democratic societies, but it also cultivates the skills people need to make self-critical judgments about their values and priorities. It creates an environment where people can communicate their own experiences and learn about others. Ultimately, it brings individuals and humanity as a whole closer to actualizing our potential and realizing justice whatever that may turn out to be."

Weinstein pauses as he thinks about this last comment. "I guess like Smith, I too am an enlightenment scholar. As *passé* as it may be, I still believe in progress."