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Smith's Attitude towards Rousseau

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A review essay for the *Adam Smith Review* on:

Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008; pp. xi, 193. Paperback \$27.50 at Amazon.

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*Abstract:* This piece is a review of Dennis C. Rasmussen's book, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (2008). The book superbly explains Rousseau's criticisms of commercial society and Smith's concern with and response to those criticisms. Rasmussen helps us appreciate that Smith took Rousseau seriously and implicitly used him as a foil, and that our understanding of Smith is greatly enriched by considering him in relation to Rousseau. My chief difference with Rasmussen is that I think he portrays Smith's attitude toward Rousseau as having been much more positive than it was. I contend, for example, that Smith's 1756 praise for Rousseau's dedication (of the *Discourse on Inequality*) to Geneva was satirical.

*Keywords:* Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, commercial society, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *Discourse on Inequality*

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<sup>1</sup> For valuable feedback I think Niclas Berggren, Jason Briggeman, Tyler Cowen, Garrett Jones, Deirdre McCloskey, and James Otteson.

Thus you see, he is a Composition of Whim, Affectation, Wickedness, Vanity, and Inquietude, with a very small, if any Ingredient of Madness. . . . The ruling Qualities abovementioned, together with Ingratitude, Ferocity, and Lying, I need not mention, Eloquence and Invention, form the whole of the Composition.

— David Hume, letter to Adam Smith, 8 Oct. 1767  
(Corr., 135)

The contents of Professor Rasmussen's book are well described by the title, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau*. The author summarizes Rousseau's condemnations of commercial society, and then explores Smith's sympathy with the criticisms and then his response. With an introduction and conclusion, the whole makes a neat treatment of a perennial discussion, focused on two of humankind's principal voices. The book is lucid, learned, and instructive. I highly recommend it.

I have differences with some of Rasmussen's interpretations. But the differences are ones that would merely alter some of the attitudes of the reader who travels through Rasmussen's excellent study. They are not differences that would bring down what he has constructed, for they do not question the solid foundation, viz., that Smith took Rousseau seriously and learned from him, and that Smith's works, at profound moments, are very plausibly seen as contending directly with Rousseau.

My differences follow a pattern. In my Hayekian liberalism, I am, compared to Rasmussen, more inclined to view Rousseau as dishonest, fundamentally foolish, and baleful, particularly in the sense that his works tend to embolden illiberal movements; and more inclined to view Smith as tending toward this view of Rousseau.

Rasmussen motivates the study:

Rousseau's critique of commercial society was one of the earliest philosophic critiques of this kind of society, and even today it remains among the most comprehensive such critiques ever offered. Indeed, ... most of the serious arguments made today against commercial society were anticipated to some degree by Rousseau. ... [A]nyone who hopes to make a persuasive defense of this kind of society will have to take all of the many different aspects of Rousseau's critique into account. And Smith ... attempted to do precisely that. (Rasmussen 2008, 5)

Rasmussen treats of Rousseau's ideas in a single meaty chapter. He provides a rich yet efficient review of Rousseau's criticisms. I will not treat them and instead let his own summary move us along:

Rousseau sees the commercial society that the *philosophes* so lauded as an unmitigated disaster. The division of labor produces great inequalities and makes people weak and ignorant, thereby undermining citizenship. Dependence on the opinions of others encourages a great deal of role-playing, ostentation, deception, and immorality. And the expansion of people's desires results in endless toil, constant postponement of gratification, and misery. Commercial society, in short, produces people who are good neither for themselves nor for others. According to Rousseau, we have procured prosperity at the cost of our goodness and our happiness. (Rasmussen 2008, 40)

To help us understand the Rousseau's appeal, it might be useful to consider Hayek's atavism thesis: that our genes and instincts are still basically Upper

Paleolithic, that we are fish out of water, that the mentality and ethos of the small band, in which inclusive fitness was vital, find foolish expression in modern political notions (Hayek 1967, 120; 1976, esp. ch. 11; 1978; 1979: 153-176; 1988, esp. ch. 1). Also, I see congruence between such Hayekian ideas and Smith's, a congruence explored by Brandon Lucas (2010). It might be fruitful to bring such ideas to bear in treating Rousseau.

After reviewing the criticisms, Rasmussen reads Rousseau's works for possible remedies or escapes from the problems of commercial society: "*The Social Contract* and Rousseau's other political works show how to surmount these problems through citizenship in a virtuous republic; his autobiographical works show how to escape them through a life of solitary reverie and contemplation; and *Emile* shows how to retain a measure of natural goodness through the proper kind of education" (41). Rasmussen concludes that "even Rousseau himself ultimately seems to hold out little hope that any of these solutions are truly possible in the modern world" (41). He sums up Rousseau's conclusion: "Escape is impossible and the misery of commercial society is our fate" (48).

A sensible reader of Rousseau knows that he fails to address responsibly how we might better accommodate ourselves to our fate. Yet Rousseau's irresponsibility is often over-indulged, and doing so is probably conducive to one's success as a Rousseau scholar. Even though Rasmussen comes down with Smith in favor of commercial society, he is indulgent toward Rousseau. As Smith might have put it (TMS, 270), Rasmussen does Rousseau more than justice.

As he turns to Smith, Rasmussen devotes a chapter to Smith's sympathy with Rousseau's criticisms, and then two to Smith's response. Again the treatment is instructive, but I have some differences. Here I use much of my allotted space to consider Smith's attitude toward Rousseau.

John Rae (1895, 196) surmised that Smith and Rousseau likely met during the December 1765 fortnight they were both in Paris. Rasmussen revisits the question and concludes otherwise (p. 54). I suspect that Smith would not have wanted to meet Rousseau.

Although Smith never refers to Rousseau in TMS or WN, he does, first, and most importantly, in his 1756 letter to the *Edinburgh Review* (EPS, 246, 250-4), in the 1761 language essay (which was appended to TMS from the 1767 third edition onward) (LRBL, 205), in the Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (LRBL, 9), in the essay on the imitative arts (EPS, 198-99), and in three letters addressed to Hume (Corr., 112-14, 125, 132).

After bringing out two issues (in August 1755 and March 1756) *The Edinburgh Review* shut down, “due to a violent outcry from narrow churchmen over the theological views contained in notices of religious works” (Bryce 1980, 229-30; see also Mackintosh 1818, xii-xvi). Edited by Smith’s friend Alexander Wedderburn, the *Review* contained much sly writing. The first issue contains Smith’s waggish review of Samuel Johnson’s dictionary; I cannot relate the joke here, but the pinch comes with “but by which the determination is rendered easy” (EPS, 241).

“A Letter to the Authors of the Edinburgh Review” is the second and only other contribution known to have been authored by Smith (in Mackintosh’s reprint of 1818, which is available in cheap paperback, he leaves eight items anonymous; see 26-27, 45-49, 67-68, 71-78, 95-96). In the Letter, Smith encourages the *Review* to expand their coverage, and then makes meandering comments about literature in several countries, but dwells especially and peculiarly on Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*. Smith translates three passages, filling nearly three pages. Then he writes:

I shall only add, that the dedication to the republic of Geneva, of which Mr. Rousseau has the honour of being a citizen, is an agreeable, animated, and I believe too, a just panegyric; and expresses that ardent and passionate esteem which it becomes a good citizen to entertain for the government of his country and the character of his countrymen. (EPS, 254)

Rasmussen rightly puts great importance on the Letter. The passages that Smith translated contain challenges that Smith later responded to, and in at least two instances TMS phrasings hark back to phrasings in the translated passages, and thus constitute subtle allusion to Rousseau.

But I think Rasmussen misreads Smith's Letter. Rasmussen says that the Letter is "on the whole respectful and at times admiring" (56; see also 60). Of Smith's praise for Rousseau dedication to Geneva, Rasmussen writes: "While most of Smith's statements on Rousseau are relatively neutral, this final comment adopts a much more admiring tone" (66). Further: "Perhaps, then, Smith praises Rousseau's dedication so highly because while the Discourse as a whole might seem to endorse revolutionary change (given its radical critique of all existing societies), the dedication tempers this appearance by adopting a much more moderate stance ..." (68).

I'm sorry, but I feel little doubt that Smith's praise for Rousseau's dedication is satirical. It comes after three long and lurid passages about the wretchedness and deceit of our social world. In the final quoted sentence, the sentence which directly precedes Smith's praise, Rousseau holds that "... in the midst of so much philosophy, so much humanity, so much politeness, and so many sublime maxims we have nothing but a deceitful and frivolous exterior ..." (EPS, 253-54). With those words ringing in your ears, move directly to Smith's praise. And reread

Rousseau's dedication, "which some readers have considered suspiciously fulsome" (Cranston 1984, 9).

Seeing the praise as satirical makes understandable, indeed amusing, what is otherwise oddly desultory, just as does seeing the joke in the review of Johnson.

After praising the dedication, Smith resumes with but one final paragraph, which soon says that "Mr. Voltaire, the most universal genius perhaps which France has ever produced, is acknowledged to be, in almost every species of writing, nearly upon a level with the greatest authors of the last age, who applied themselves chiefly to one" (EPS, 254). Smith then works in a mention of Voltaire's "letter to Mr. Rousseau of Geneva," which had been published in France. In that 30 August 1755 letter, thanking Rousseau for sending the *Discourse on Inequality*, Voltaire jovially criticizes the work and to some extent chastises Rousseau. It seems to me that here, in championing Voltaire and bringing up Voltaire's letter, Smith is digging in against Rousseau. Other features of the Letter not treated here also support reading the praise as satirical.

Rasmussen sees the possibility that Smith's Letter is aimed against Rousseau. He offers insightful comments about Smith's "philosophical chemistry" remark; he mentions that some scholars (most notably Hundert 1994, 220) regard the Letter as an attack on Rousseau; and he says that Pierre Force "drastically overestimates" (65) Smith's agreement with Rousseau. But, still, I think Rasmussen's reading is off. On the matter of whether Smith's praise is satirical, I admit that, after checking most of the English-language secondary literature cited by Rasmussen, I have not found that specific interpretation on offer. But, in peculiar remarks, James Mackintosh calls "Smith's commendation of Rousseau's eloquent dedication" "an instance of the seeming exaggeration of just principles ..." (1818, x).



Rasmussen also mishandles some of Smith's other references to Rousseau. Smith frequently calls Rousseau "eloquent," and Rasmussen seems to overrate the significance of that. As related at the head of this piece, Hume, too, noted Rousseau's "Eloquence." In TMS, Smith says that Mandeville's "eloquence ... enabled him to impose upon his readers" (TMS, 310). In the language essay, Smith speaks of Rousseau as "ingenious and eloquent" (LRBL, 205), and, in the 1756 Letter, of the Cartesian system as "ingenious and elegant, tho' fallacious" (EPS, 244). Many remarks in *LRBL* (esp. 106, 144-45, 138, 196) make clear that Smith does not necessarily endorse those he deems eloquent.

Rasmussen notes that, in a letter to Hume, Smith calls Rousseau a "Rascal" and a "hypocritical Pedant," but, in treating Smith's published references to Rousseau, he underplays the critical element. In the language essay, "M. Rousseau of Geneva," though "ingenious and eloquent" fails to see something quite obvious (LRBL, 205; cf. Rasmussen, 56). In the essay on imitative arts, Smith writes that "Mr. Rousseau of Geneva" is "more capable of feeling strongly than analysing accurately" (quoted by Rasmussen, 56) and then quotes and criticizes Rousseau's contention that music "imitates, however, everything, even those objects which are perceivable by sight only" (EPS, 198-99). Rasmussen quotes Smith writing to Hume "I am thoroughly convinced that Rousseau is as great as a Rascal as you, and as every man here believes him to be," but he does not consider the possibility that here Smith chides his friend for ever having indulged such a character (cf. Ross 2010, 224).

Rasmussen (56) also relates Saint-Fond's 1787 remembrances of conversing in 1782 with Smith about Rousseau. Here I say only that I think Rasmussen gives those remembrances too much weight and neglects the negative aspect of the sentence, even if perfectly accurate, about *The Social Contract* avenging Rousseau's persecutions.

I have left myself little space to treat the final two thirds of Rasmussen's book, on Smith's sympathy with and usage of Rousseau's criticism, and then Smith's responses. These chapters, too, are excellent. Rasmussen justly elaborates Smith's worries about commercial society, some shared with Rousseau.

On the parable of the poor man's son, I felt that perhaps Rasmussen does not give sufficient consideration to the reading that sees the parable as Smith's dwelling especially in what is only one view, namely the "splenetic" one. Indeed Smith leaves us in doubt about whether he makes the splenetic view paramount – rendering ambitious projects "what they are, enormous and operose machines" (TMS, 182), impelled by nature's "deception" (TMS, 183) – or as merely one among multiple views, each coming and going and none clearly paramount. Even if Smith did not mean to suggest the splenetic view as paramount, however, the fact that he dwelled so much on it is testimony to Rasmussen's central contention that Smith is engaging Rousseau.

On the matter of happiness, Rasmussen nicely contrasts Smith's emphasis on avoiding misery and on improvement or betterment, with Rousseau's anguish over some sublime happiness denied (Rasmussen, 47f, 82f, 137f, 168f). Rasmussen gradually develops the contrast between Smith's pragmatism, based on sensible formulation of an issue and responsible consideration of relevant costs and benefits, and Rousseau's "naïve and utterly impracticable" antonyms (161). Rasmussen even twice zeros in on what I've heard called the Thomas Sowell question, "Compared to what?" (161, 174), which, of course, should always be the first question. Rasmussen allows that Rousseau's ideas ultimately invoke irrelevant and impracticable comparisons, whereas Smith is rooted in meaningful comparisons (92f, 160f).

Rasmussen's treatment of Smith on the costs and benefits of commercial society, and of the liberty principle as brought to bear on policy issues (98-99),

which is really the heart of the book, is rich, instructive, and, to my mind, reasonably complete. Rasmussen nicely discusses Smith's views on how commercial society raises all boats (101f), encourages ordinary virtues such as probity and punctuality (121f), and improves political institutions (136f). Especially good is his treatment of how Smith sees market forces and free competition as affording personal independence (125, 140, 147). Rasmussen explains Rousseau's denial of the desire for praiseworthiness, and Smith's rejection of that denial (114f). "For Smith, the good outweighs the bad in commercial society with respect to morality, just as it does with respect to economics, especially in comparison with previous forms of society" (129). One point which Rasmussen might have picked up on is Smith's regard for the multiplication of the species.

In all this, Rasmussen elaborates just what Smith intends, a public spirited perspective on the industriousness of the poor man's son and commercial society generally, a perspective that can now be entered into by the son himself.

Rasmussen ends the book with an discussion of what Smith means for us today; he admirably shrugs off objections to "presentism." Some of Rasmussen's representations of Smith's policy judgments are misleading in a left-Smithian way (106-107, 110, 113, 163, 172). In relating matters to present concerns, Rasmussen, sometimes citing Samuel Fleischacker, takes Smith into some left turns that he (Smith) may not go along with (107, 156f, 163-72). Throughout the book Rasmussen disabuses us of unnamed phantoms who have Smith a doctrinaire of laissez-faire, etc. But, again, these differences are ones that readers will easily adjust for. *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society* is a very fine book, one that makes us realize how important it is to consider Smith in relation to Rousseau and that guides us profitably in that consideration.

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