



The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought

Dennis C. Rasmussen

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The story of the greatest of all philosophical friendships—and how it influenced modern thought

David Hume is widely regarded as the most important philosopher ever to write in English, but during his lifetime he was attacked as “the Great Infidel” for his skeptical religious views and deemed unfit to teach the young. In contrast, Adam Smith was a revered professor of moral philosophy, and is now often hailed as the founding father of capitalism. Remarkably, the two were best friends for most of their adult lives, sharing what Dennis Rasmussen calls the greatest of all philosophical friendships. *The Infidel and the Professor* is the first book to tell the fascinating story of the friendship of these towering Enlightenment thinkers—and how it influenced their world-changing ideas.

The book follows Hume and Smith’s relationship from their first meeting in 1749 until Hume’s death in 1776. It describes how they commented on each other’s writings, supported each other’s careers and literary ambitions, and advised each other on personal matters, most notably after Hume’s quarrel with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Members of a vibrant intellectual scene in Enlightenment Scotland, Hume and Smith made many of the same friends (and enemies), joined the same clubs, and were interested in many of the same subjects well beyond philosophy and economics—from psychology and history to politics and Britain’s conflict with the American colonies. The book reveals that Smith’s private religious views were considerably closer to Hume’s public ones than is usually believed. It also shows that Hume contributed more to economics—and Smith contributed more to philosophy—than is generally recognized.

Vividly written, *The Infidel and the Professor* is a compelling account of a great friendship that had great consequences for modern thought.

The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought Details

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From Reader Review The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought for online ebook

Vincent Li says

A great book about two giants of the Scottish Enlightenment. As the introduction notes, more books are written about conflicts than friendships, but sometimes it's good just to read about a great and lifelong friendship (especially between the Bon David, and the absent minded Smith, who had a habit of smiling to himself). In a particularly touching moment, Hume and Smith have a thought experiment, that a person with the power to make tides and suns rise would not be happy until he had a friend to share it with. The book is essentially a dual biography of Hume and Smith, particularly about their views, friendship and a general sketch of their lives. In particular the book (with good arguments and proof) disarms many of the broad arguments made about Smith and Hume's friendship, in particular about their animosity towards each other. The author argues that Smith and Hume actually had similar views on religion (a skeptical view to say the least) but Hume was simply more open about his beliefs [Smith argues that religion could be useful for helping people make good moral choices but does not express a belief that religion is true or untrue]. The book discusses how this impacted Hume's career (twice opposition for his religious views kept him from taking a professorship) and the attempts to expel him from the church. Smith in a posthumously published work argued that science and religion were simply ways that man comforted themselves by bringing order and consistency to natural phenomena, but that these explanations were not necessarily true.

Hume was older than Smith, and while the two were friends, Hume's major literary accomplishments were published before Smith's (there was one charming letter where Hume teases Smith with various digressions before revealing that Smith's work was becoming very commercially successful). The book interestingly shows the particular influence that Hume had on Smith. In Theory of Moral Sentiments, Smith cites Hume (though not necessarily by name) but expanded and disagreed with some of Hume's ideas. For example, while Hume thought that good was defined by utility, Smith argues that people did not consciously consider utility when making moral decisions. Smith was also more critical of commercial society than Hume and foresaw how excessive specialization could lead to the dulling of lives and how inequality could lead to the contempt of the poor (though both thought commercial society was generally positive). While Hume generally had a negative view towards organized religion, being skeptical of miracles, concerned about religious factions and the overly excessive monkish qualities he associated with religion (Smith agreed on this latter point), he thought it wise for the state to support/bribe one organized religion to avoid fanaticism. Smith argued that creating a state orthodoxy also bred extremism, as the unfavored religions become radical as they are oppressed, instead Smith argued that all religions should be recognized and be allowed to compete for followers, checking one another. While Hume argued for a "contagion" theory of sympathy, Smith made a better argument that sympathy was the imagination of one self in another's shoes (which explained why we are ashamed for a man making a scene, the man does not feel shame as it does not make sense that we get the feeling from that, it only makes sense that we imagine ourselves in his shoes and feel ashamed of his behavior).

In particular, I found the sections about Hume's History of England fascinating. At the time, Hume's history was a practice of his deep belief in empiricism (trying to learn lessons from experience), and made him unpopular amongst Whigs for not sufficiently vilifying the Tudors and arguing that the Elizabethan age was filled with the use of the divine right of kings and set the stage for later conflicts. Interestingly, despite Hume's avowed near atheism and dislike for organized religion, Hume argued that during the age of

divine right, the church and the religious protected liberties by resisting the crown. Hume also argued that as luxury goods became available, feudal lords wasted their money on such goods instead of fending for their serfs, essentially freeing their serfs and allowing the centralized administration of the crown to take hold and enact law, a story that Smith expanded on in *Wealth of Nations* to other contexts and to the more current issue of national debt.

Interesting as well was Hume's quarrel with the paranoid Rousseau, culminating with Hume publishing a pamphlet to defend himself while Smith thought better for Hume to just let the controversy die in silence. One of the most touching aspects of their friendship was Smith's posthumous defense of Hume. Since Hume was a well known agnostic but very famous, people were curious to see how he would face death without the comfort of religion. Hume seemed to have lived his last days in contentment, not acting differently, enjoying his life and companionship. Smith published a letter publically detailing Hume's good natured last days for the public and claimed that Hume was the most virtuous man he knew (with a direct allusion to the death of Socrates). This was interesting for the usually cautious Smith, and he was attacked by many for letter but he never repudiated this letter.

History is full of good conflict and fights, but its sorely lacking in good stories of friendship and good cheer. This book starts to correct that issue.

Alex Zakharov says

Quick and enjoyable dip into Hume and Smith – Rasmussen uses their friendship as a vehicle to trace out the outlines of their life stories and philosophies. While the premise sounds perfectly banal and boring, the book's real beauty is the nuance with which the differences in their ideas are explored. Yes, their views on markets, morals and religion are directionally in sync, but if the subtlety of their divergences doesn't nudge your priors you aren't paying attention.

Morals.

Their respective theories of virtue empathize sentiment and sympathy/empathy. This runs contrary to both the religious view (morality as God-given), and the classical enlightenment view (morality as deduced from reason). Smith avoids controversy by being merely guilty of omission (God is absent in his story of morality), while Hume is quite explicit in rejecting religion's role in genuine virtue, in fact in his story religion detrimentally distorts natural empathetic impulse.

The mechanics of empathy are quite different. Both have a quasi-Rawlsian angle where we must to adopt a **“disinterested observer”** view to explore sentiment. In Hume, independent observer's empathy is triggered by observation (think mirror neurons in today's terms), but Smith's impartial observer “projects” himself into the situation to accommodate the context. If you are familiar with Paul Bloom's argument in “Against Empathy”, then you would say that Bloom is arguing against Hume much more than against Smith.

Of course, both properly distinguish between justice and morals, and their justice is rule-based system for **negative rights** (i.e. no coercion, respect for individual liberty, and private property). Interestingly for Hume the rules are reason-based, but Smith argues that the rules can be plausibly derived from moral sentiment. In effect **Smith out-Humes Hume!** Either way it seems like their natural sentiment-based morality requires a reasonably-developed civilization as a necessary precondition.

Markets.

It was a bit of a surprise to me that when it comes to advocating free trade (in contrast to then-prevailing mercantilism), and praising **commerce as a virtue-inducing** activity, Hume was actually writing before Smith! Smith does make a beautiful case for how commerce advances security and liberty (feudal lords drop serfs in search for luxury).

Smith, unlike Hume, was concerned with possible dangers of commerce **-crony capitalism** in today's terms. When unchecked, cronyism can lead to unnecessary levels of inequality, which distorts natural empathy that is so central to Smith's morality. This would offset the net positive that free commerce brings about both in terms of improved standards of living and virtuous behavior.

Also, ironically, late in life Smith was appointed as commissioner of customs for Scotland, and despite the caricatures of his reputation, he actually favored small tariffs. Smith argued that economic growth necessitates division of labor, which begets stupidity (performing repetitive specialized dumb thing in the more mundane professions), so public works and education for the poor has to be provided by state. Small tariffs under certain conditions is one of the reasonable ways to fund this.

All in all, while Smith out-Humes Hume in morals, **Hume out-Smiths Smith in markets!**

Faith.

Smith is quite reticent and cryptic on the subject. But Russ Roberts, in one of his podcasts, makes a clever argument about *invisible hand*. He points out that "Wealth Of Nations" mentions the term barely once, in passing. The term is however used in Smith's "Theory of Moral Sentiments" when talking about human inclination for sympathy. So Russ Roberts proposes that *invisible hand* for Smith is the natural moral vector we are born with (God-given perhaps?).

In Smith religion can "buttress" the morals (albeit not a requirement for it). In Hume, religion distorts empathy by inducing people into virtue-signaling rather than virtue itself. And of course Hume creates a lot of enemies in Presbyterian Scotland by systematically attacking the intelligent benevolent creator argument for God's existence (Don't attribute **more cause than warranted** by the observed effects). Same for judging miracles (more, rather than, less scrutiny is called for).

Religion.

Despite the above, Hume is actually in favor of state-supported monopoly of religion (reduces religious completion, improves stability). In contrast Smith favors competition in religion, and argues that state-supported religious monopoly would increase intolerance in the non-supported sects. In modern terms I read this as evidence that Hume was more aware of Arnold Kling's civilization-barbarism axis than Smith was.

Fun biographical details.

- While in Scotland Hume was widely considered a religious radical (infidel), in France Helvetius & Co poked soft fun at him for being a religious moderate.
- Unnecessarily even-handed coverage of Hume-Rousseau incident, the man was a paranoid clown indeed (see Paul Johnson's "Intellectuals" for a much more entertaining Rousseau angle)
- Smith getting exponentially more grief for "he was a perfectly wise and virtuous man" one liner in the Letter to Strahan, than for the 1000-page take-down of England's economic system.

Emily Adler says

This was a good mix of biography and philosophy - I learned something about both men's writings and philosophies without being overwhelmed. The more biographical sections, which also touch on the historical context in which they lived, are very readable.

Dschreiber says

The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought

by Dennis G Rasmussen

For historical writers, a feud is a gift—lurid attacks, entertaining insults, factions, court cases—all guarantee drama. Love affairs are even easier with ecstasies, cries de cœur, torrents of letters, the language heated and glowing, rising sometimes into poetry. But friendship, what is there to write about in a friendship? What will the emotional highlight be, a letter of congratulation, a heartfelt testimonial? The author can note the times and places of their meeting, but even if Boswell were on the sideline recording every word, it would likely consist of little more than good-humoured banter mixed with shop talk. In *The Infidel and the Professor* political science professor Dennis C. Rasmussen tries, quite successfully, to bring to life the friendship between the two premier figures of the eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment: David Hume, about whom Isaiah Berlin wrote “no man has influenced the history of philosophical thought to a deeper and more disturbing degree,” the infidel, the great skeptic, whose far-reaching doubts unnerved the religious establishment; and Adam Smith, the professor, the placater of the establishment, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, which has been described precisely as “the one book between Newton’s Principia and Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* that actually, substantially, and almost immediately started improving the quality of human life and thought” and extravagantly as “probably the most important book that has ever been written.”

Hume, twelve years senior to Smith, is remembered today for his philosophical works, with John Locke and George Berkeley as a founder of British empiricism, for his famous analysis of causality as merely the “constant conjunction” of events, and for his skeptical examination of arguments for religion. But in his essays and in his six-volume *History of England* he wrote about much more than philosophy, including political economy, where Smith would make his mark. Rasmussen spends a good deal of time tracing—with a light touch, thankfully—the pervasive intellectual influence Hume exerted on Smith, presenting the first of Smith’s two books, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as a quiet dialogue with Hume. Even *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith’s magnum opus, his most original work, was influenced in critical ways by Hume’s writings.

Intellectual influences aside, however, depicting the friendship remains problematic. Because Hume was a regular letter writer, Rasmussen does what he can by quoting Hume’s invitations to Smith to join him in Edinburgh or meet him in London or Paris. And he reveals in detail their itineraries as they move about, even from house to house, showing how their paths crossed, or might have crossed, even when he can offer nothing about whether they did in fact meet or what happened if they met. He quotes their expressions of

esteem and describes the small favours they did for each other in the business of publishing and book promotion. It is all gentle and civilized, entirely fitting for major thinkers of the Enlightenment. But it does not stir the blood.

To add pizzazz to the book, Rasmussen makes set pieces of the few incidents which were dramatic(-ish). The oft-told story of Hume's encounter with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, gets its own chapter. Rousseau, fleeing arrest warrants in France and Switzerland for his radical ideas, and frightened by the mobs that had stoned his house, accepted an offer from Hume to help get him out of France and find him shelter in England. Friends of Hume warned "you are warming a viper in your bosom," and, sure enough, the edifying spectacle of a great, disruptive writer coming to the aid of a fellow great, disruptive writer soon fell to pieces. Rousseau, unstable and delusional, accused Hume of leading a conspiracy to silence him and bury him in obscurity. Upon Rousseau's returning to France incognito, Hume published documentation of the affair and, in his private correspondence, made several waspish comments about Rousseau, probably, given his genial personality, the only remarks of that nature he ever made in his life.

For twenty years after finishing his *History of England*, Hume stopped publishing. "Too old, too fat, too lazy, and too rich," he explained to friends. "When I see my bulk on a shelf, as well as when I see it in a glass, I would fain prevent my growing more corpulent either way." It was during and after his final illness that Smith's part in the friendship was put to the test. Hume asked Smith to oversee the publication of his yet-unpublished *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. It would be his most thorough (and skeptical, of course) discussion of the rational arguments for religion. Despite their many years of friendship and despite the poignant timing of the request, Smith refused. Although Smith was probably a Deist, if not an atheist, almost certainly not a Christian, he had lived his whole life hiding his true beliefs to avoid the hornet's nest of the religious establishment. Hume did not press him and found another acquaintance to take on the job. In the end, however, Smith redeemed himself somewhat and was roundly condemned as a result. While the establishment eagerly waited to hear of Hume's deathbed conversion to Christianity or, just as good, of his dying in spiritual agony, Smith published a tribute that described Hume dying serenely and concluded with a sentence that caused an uproar: "Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit." It generated the eighteenth century equivalent of a Twitterstorm.

The *Infidel* and the *Professor* may offer no new revelations or overturn big theories, but it makes for a thoroughly enjoyable read. Rasmussen's prose is transparent and easy, free of the usual academic clunkiness. And, luckily for the reader, we hear much more from witty and good-humoured Hume than from serious and reserved Smith, giving us, for example, this account of Hume's visit to Maria Theresa, the Holy Roman Empress: "After we had a little conversation with her Imperial Majesty, we were to walk backwards, through a very long room, curtseying all the way. And there was very great danger of falling foul of each other, as well as of tumbling topsy-turvy. She saw the difficulty we were in and immediately called to us, 'Allez, allez, messieurs, sans ceremonies. Vous n'êtes pas accoutumés à ce mouvement et le plancher est glissant.' ("Go on, go on, sirs, without ceremony. You are not accustomed to this movement and the floor is slippery.") We esteemed ourselves very much obliged to her for this attention, especially my companions, who were desperately afraid of my falling on them and crushing them."

Eric Bottorff says

Just a delightful book

Kåre says

Hyggelig, men lidt lang bog om venskabet mellem David Hume og Adam Smith. Bogen er sikkert for kendere og derfor skal der jo dokumenteres og gås i detaljer, langt ud over min interesse. Hver en sten vendes, hvis den har bare det mindste at gøre med deres venskab. Forskelle og ligheder mellem deres filosofier bliver heldigvis også tegnet klart op, dog uden at der går meget i detaljer. Sjov nok med sådan en tæt beskrivelse af bestemte begivenheder i ca midten af 1700 tallet. Vi præsenteres for tidens store tænkere, Roussau, Gibbon, Burke m.fl. plus flere, jeg ikke kender. Vi får lidt historie, fx Amerikas løsrivelse og en del ide-historie. Og det er godt skrevet.

Michael G says

A book about an abiding friendship between two great Scottish philosophers? I had my doubts; they've been dispersed. A very enjoyable read.

Lee says

Meh.

This book has some interesting information about these two philosophers, but so much of it is just speculation. At the beginning of the book, the authors wonders that no one has written a book on the relationship, but as he get deeper into his narrative, it becomes clear why. Despite their friendship, there really is not that much documentary evidence that remains to write about. Certainly, their friendship affected their philosophies, but so much of the book is Rasmussen saying "this letter is not available" or "they certainly met up for the three months they were in town together, though we have no evidence of that" or things like that (sorry, these are not exact quotes).

This is not Rasmussen's failure, but this is a book that probably should not have been written.

Read 65%.

Ray Kluender says

I had no idea Hume and Smith had such a strong influence on each other! Hume may be my favorite philosopher and Smith's ideas have shaped my worldview and career path arguably as much as anyone in

history so it was interesting to discover they were best friends.

It was also neat to see the areas where they disagreed, and how much Hume actually influenced The Wealth of Nations -- it suggests to me he may be underrated!

That being said, they're both sedentary academics and lifelong bachelors so there's not much of interest in the historical narration of their friendship. An awful lot of historical footnotes as the author accounted for time (e.g. "sadly, we do not have any letters from this period...") that diminished the experience a bit for me.

Dan Graser says

This is a wonderful, engaging, erudite, and intellectually investigative work of biography of two figures deserving of such examination and their equally deserving friendship, that of David Hume and Adam Smith. While feuds and strife between great thinkers is usually philoprogenitive, friendships are normally ignored due to the boredom of mutual respect and agreement. This is certainly not the case with Hume and Smith.

Frequently presented as an odd couple, an irreligious skeptic and mostly-reserved economic philosopher, the two actually had much more in common as their correspondence shows. Their friendship, formed by mutual respect and admiration and nurtured through sustained honest critique of each other's work, is one that is born out by the honest and sincere completion of Hume's life that Smith wrote (reproduced here in the appendices).

Perhaps the most interesting and of course most controversial topic covered is religion, more specifically the lack of it in Hume and his unflinching views on the subject right up to his death. Though this of course created periods of disagreement between the two, the differences were quite minor and the "charge" of skeptic was one that Smith himself would endure, merely due to their affiliation. At a time when large communities of people were gleefully looking forward to his expiration and hopeful for a deathbed recantation, perhaps the best testament to the honesty of the friendship the two shared is provided by the slightly more religious Smith who, with great clarity and honesty, detailed Hume's pleasant and affable yet godless final days while at the same time declaring Hume was, "approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature human frailty will permit."

Anyone with a passing interest in either of these thinkers will definitely enjoy this work.

Liam says

"Hume's stunning diminution of the role that reason plays in human life is thus matched by a great expansion of the roles played by custom, habit, the passions, and the imagination." (23)

"He [Adam Smith] later remarked that the professors there had 'given up altogether even the pretense of teaching,' and he was also clearly thinking of Oxford when he wrote that the best endowed universities often served as 'sanctuaries in which exploded systems and obsolete prejudices found shelter and protection, after they had been hunted out of every corner of the world.'" (38)

"One of his interlocutors responded that Hume reminded him of a notary public he knew who was convicted

of forgery and 'lamented the Hardship of his case, that after having written many Thousand inoffensive Sheets, He shou'd be hang'd for one Line.'" (77)

"In the end, however, Hume gave William Strahan four good reasons why he had determined to resist such entreaties [to extend his history beyond 1689]: 'Because I'm too old, too fat, too lazy, and too rich.'" (153)

"Here am I, who have written on all sorts of subjects calculated to excite hostility, moral, political, and religious, and yet I have no enemies; except, indeed, all the Whigs, all the Tories, and all the Christians."
(quoting Hume, 206)

Matt McCormick says

This delightful and well written book not only describes an intimate and charming friendship but develops the philosophies of two important thinkers who had a significant impact on economic theory. While Smith became the more renowned of the two in the concepts of free trade and taxation, Hume's multi-disciplined development of philosophical thought is more consequential for the history of philosophy. Rasmussen does an excellent job setting the characters in their time and describing how their writings were received by others.

He evoked in this reader several emotions. I was envious of a simple time when person to person relationships could be so fulfilling. Rasmussen describes the gathering of friends for regular weekly dinners in which the participants shared good food, wine and discussion. I admired the effort it took to maintain a relationship - the time to write letters, the necessity to travel in order talk face-to-face. After reading of the care, respect and attention Hume and Smith gave to one another I was a bit ashamed that I haven't put the same time and energy to my most important friendships.

This is a relatively easy read (a few dense pages in the early part of the book excepted) that will leave the reader better informed, pleasantly impressed and not unimportantly - introspective.

Ivor Armistead says

Yes, this book requires more time and thought from the reader than most. But, the effort is rewarded brilliantly. The story of the long friendship of these two giants of political philosophy is engaging and makes me envious. How marvelous it would have been to spend a few evenings with them.

Nevertheless, the real joy of reading *The Infidel and the Professor* is being reacquainted with work of these extraordinary men and inspired to take down long-shelved volumes or their works and revisit them.

Dennis Rasmussen's books reminds us of how important works of Hume, Adams and their contemporaries are to our 21st century political and economic systems. Their thoughts and words are harbingers of today's headlines. Our politicians should all be required to read Hume and Adams (as well as a few others of their ilk). Since that's unlikely, perhaps they could be convinced to read *The Infidel and the Professor*. It would improve them immeasurably.

Phi Beta Kappa Authors says

Dennis C. Rasmussen
ΦBK, Michigan State University, 2001
Author

Shortlisted for the ΦBK Ralph Waldo Emerson Award, 2018

From the publisher: David Hume is widely regarded as the most important philosopher ever to write in English, but during his lifetime he was attacked as "the Great Infidel" for his skeptical religious views and deemed unfit to teach the young. In contrast, Adam Smith was a revered professor of moral philosophy, and is now often hailed as the founding father of capitalism. Remarkably, the two were best friends for most of their adult lives, sharing what Dennis Rasmussen calls the greatest of all philosophical friendships. *The Infidel and the Professor* is the first book to tell the fascinating story of the friendship of these towering Enlightenment thinkers--and how it influenced their world-changing ideas.

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Vividly written, *The Infidel and the Professor* is a compelling account of a great friendship that had great consequences for modern thought.

Sabine says

A charming, witty, well-executed book that never trails off from its central intention: to document the extraordinary friendship between two great men. The story of their friendship is funny and interesting, but it also lays out the evolution and explanation of their ideas. They agreed on many things, disagreed on many others, and more importantly were often inspired by one another. I encourage anyone interested in Hume, Smith, or simply epic historical friendships to read this book. I enjoyed it thoroughly!
