

Cambridge University Press

0521830605 - Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science

Pierre Force

Frontmatter

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SELF-INTEREST BEFORE ADAM SMITH

A Genealogy of Economic Science

Self-Interest before Adam Smith inquires into the foundations of economic theory. It is generally assumed that the birth of modern economic science, marked by the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, was the triumph of the “selfish hypothesis” (the idea that self-interest is the motive of human action). Yet, as a neo-Epicurean idea, this hypothesis had been a matter of controversy for over a century and Smith opposed it from a neo-Stoic point of view. But how can the Epicurean principles of orthodox economic theory be reconciled with the Stoic principles of Adam Smith’s philosophy? Pierre Force shows how Smith’s theory refutes the “selfish hypothesis” and integrates it at the same time. He also explains how Smith appropriated Rousseau’s “republican” critique of modern commercial society, and makes the case that the autonomy of economic science is an unintended consequence of Smith’s “republican” principles. This book sheds light on some classic puzzles of economic theory and is a major work from an outstanding scholar.

PIERRE FORCE, Nell and Herbert M. Singer Professor of Contemporary Civilization and Professor of French at Columbia University in New York, is the author of *Le Problème herméneutique chez Pascal* (1989) and *Molière ou Le Prix des choses* (1994).

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The topic of this book has been with me for a long time. I first touched upon it in a 1989 article.¹ It was in the background of my 1994 book on Molière.² The colloquium I organized at the Maison Française of Columbia University in 1994 was dedicated in great part to these issues.³ Some of the arguments developed in chapter 1 were presented in a *Yale French Studies* article in 1997.⁴ Many of the ideas present in this book were tested in the seminar I taught in 1996, “The Commerce of the Self from Montaigne to Adam Smith,” and in the seminar I co-taught with Allan Silver in 2000, “Self-Interest before Capitalism in Literature and Social Theory.” The questions and comments from students in these seminars greatly helped me to clarify my thinking. This work owes a lot to the many conversations I had with Allan Silver, a colleague who is also a true friend. I thank another friend, Kathy Eden, for helping me find my way in the complete works of Augustine. Thanks are also due to Charles Larmore for several useful suggestions, and to Knud Haakonssen for his generous advice on how to navigate the waters of Smith scholarship. I also wish to acknowledge the comments, suggestions and criticisms from colleagues and friends who read parts of the manuscript. I had the opportunity to discuss chapter 1 with the members of the Chicago Group on Modern France. Chapter 2 has benefited from Jean Lafond’s unmatched expertise on the Augustinian tradition in the early modern period. Incisive comments by Jon Elster and John D. Collins have led me to reformulate some key passages in chapter 3.

¹ “What Is a Man Worth? Ethics and Economics in Molière and Rousseau,” *Romanic Review* 1 (1989), pp. 18–29.

² *Molière ou Le Prix des choses. Morale, économie et comédie*, Paris: Nathan, 1994.

³ *De la morale à l'économie politique. Dialogue franco-américain sur les moralistes français*, edited by Pierre Force and David Morgan, introduction by Pierre Force, Pau: Publications de l'Université de Pau, 1996.

⁴ “Self-Love, Identification, and the Origin of Political Economy,” in *Exploring the Conversible World: Text and Sociability from the Classical Age to the Enlightenment*, edited by Elena Russo, *Yale French Studies* 92 (1997), pp. 46–64.

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My wife Christel Hollevoet was completing a book of her own when this one was being written. Being able to share the toils and the joys of scholarship has strengthened our love. I dedicate this book to our beloved children Charlotte and Eliot.