On The Wealth of Nations is a book that tries to render Adam Smith's rather difficult work more accessible to the general public and to explain the circumstances of his life. P.J. O'Rourke is known not as an economist or a philosopher, but rather as a satirist, journalist and writer, as well as a political observer with a keen sense of humor. His convictions shifted in time dramatically, from the leftist views of the hippie that he was as a student to the anti-leftist, conservative but libertarian options toward which he turned during the '70. An author with such a profile is likely to address a large readership and manage to explain in layman terms – and with humor – a work that is hard to digest even by specialists. In the preface to his more biographical book, James Buchan claims that "One illustrious British economist once boasted he had never opened The Wealth of Nations. Another had done so, but not The Theory of Moral Sentiment on the report that it contained some psychology." Buchanan also explains how important politicians, like present-day Prime Minister Gordon Brown or the former chairman of the United States central bank or Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan can, in a given context, misinterpret Smith's words. If first rank economists, financiers and politicians find it hard to give an accurate image of Smith's thinking, it is quite improbable for an ordinary reader to grasp all the subtleties in his voluminous work. Moreover, how can a contemporary reader cope with the impact of the media and still find time and patience for a book of incredible length and density?

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This is in fact what one of O'Rourke's reviewers emphasizes: "Before we had radio, telephones, television, the Internet and iPods, we had books. Long books. Complicated books. Books that got read, their length and complexity notwithstanding, because before talk shows and chat rooms, what else was there to do? [...] Today, however, almost no one other than the obsessed (or the assigned) is likely to read Smith's book, which runs more than 900 pages; the author's convoluted prose makes it seem even longer than that." The same reviewer, actually, confesses never to have been able to get more than 50 pages into Adam Smith, although he is a long time business writer specialized "in unearthing journalistic nuggets buried in lengthy financial documents that even lawyers find dull."

A few things about the history of the book. O'Rourke was asked, to his great amazement, by the editors of Grove Atlantic, to write a book on Adam Smith for a series they were preparing, "books that changed the world." In the same series there are essays on Marx's *Kapital*, Plato's *Republic*, and Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. In O'Rourke's words, this series "is kind of like that 'Idiots Guide' series, except it is not for idiots. It is for smart people." This might answer one of the obvious questions, which I render here as it was stated by one of the book's reviewers: "why a writer of P.J. O'Rourke's talents would wish to apply his wit and charm to the 'dismal science' of economics"? Well, it appears it was not his idea, but the editors'. All the books in the series are difficult and known by most of the people only by title. *The Wealth of Nations* makes no exception, and the project required an author – a reviewer, in fact, because O'Rourke's book is in many ways a very long review of Adam Smith's work – with a huge readership and capable of bringing to life a work of genius written for a different type of reader a couple of centuries ago. O'Rourke took the challenge because he "needed the money," he claims with a smile, but he certainly wanted to help as many readers as possible to understand some of Adam Smith's ideas that he himself feels very comfortable with and also the human being beyond those ideas. He was aware of the risks of such and enterprise, but was willing to take them. He is no idealist or dreamer, and he knows very well that such a book is a product of a certain type of culture, or lack of: "TV ushered in the age of post-literacy. And we have gone so far beyond that. I mean, what with the Internet and Google and Wikipedia. We have entered the age of post-intelligence. We will live to see the day when a person of learning and cultivation is spoken of as being well-blogged." The editors of Grove Atlantic Press are also
anything else but idealistic day-dreamers: the book was bound to sell well. In fact, in order to insure a good sale to a book which actually costs 2 dollars more than the other ones in the series, they chose to place O'Rourke's smiling a well-known face on top of the front cover. Adam Smith's name is mentioned only in small letters in the bottom-left corner of the same cover. As one displeased reviewer puts it, "While a picture of Marx graces the cover of Marx's *Das Kapital*, a wise-looking bearded fellow in a toga the cover of Plato's *Republic*, and some Arabic script for *The Qur'an* (no need to go looking for trouble there!), the cover of *On the Wealth of Nations* leaves out the name of Adam Smith entirely and has a picture of P.J."

Nevertheless, P.J. O'Rourke being a very serious writer – witty, quite humorous but a very thorough professional writer – he manages to review not only Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, but also his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, to which he dedicates the third chapter of his book. He attempt to find a connection between these two works and comes to the conclusion – seen as fallacious by some reviewers – that the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is about loving our neighbor, while *Wealth of Nations* is about loving ourselves. If his position on several points, including this one, is debatable, the targeted readership is given a workable key for understanding Adam's Smith's writings and vision.

O'Rourke opens the book with "An Inquiry into The Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations," stating, in a few subchapters, "Adam Smith's Simple Principles," his "Less Simple Principles" and his "More Complicated Principles." The simple ones solve the mystery of economics in one flash: "Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production." *The Wealth of Nation*, claims O'Rourke, argues three basic principles, and proves them through many examples and plain thinking. These three principles are the pursuit of self-interest, division of labor and freedom of trade. These principles become "less simple" when we consider that in *The Wealth of Nations* Adam Smith – who is a moral advocate of freedom – uses arguments that are "uncomfortably pragmatic": "Smith opposes most economic constraints: tariffs, bounties, quotas, price control, workers in league to raise wages, employers conniving to fix pay, monopolies, cartels, royal charters, guilds, apprenticeships, indentures, and of course slavery." On the other hand, he was in favor of countless restraints on persons, so that brute force should not become the ruling solution in a lawless land. As for the "more complicate" aspects of Smith's principles, his "logical demonstration of how
productivity is increased through self-interest, division of labor, and trade disproved the thesis [...] that bettering the condition of one person necessarily worsens the condition of another." The wealth of a nation is not a fixed amount of gold, a treasure. If some people get more of it, this does not mean that all the rest of the people will get less. But if wealth is not a given, how can we measure it? In the first sentence of the introduction to The Wealth of Nations, Smith gives an answer to this question: "The annual labour of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life which it annually consumes." In one stroke, Smith created the concept of gross domestic product, a concept without which "modern economics would be left with nothing much to say."6

The second chapter of the book starts with a question: "Why is The Wealth of Nations So Damn Long?" O'Rourke's answer seems more like a joke, but it does underline a specific type of behavior: "The simplest reason for Adam Smith's lack of economy with words was, aptly, economic. When Wealth was published it sold for one pound sixteen shillings. By Smith's own estimate the 'ordinary wages of labour' at the time were ten shillings a week. Consumers, even well-off consumers of intellectual luxury goods, demand good weight. Hoist Bill Clinton's apologia pro vita sua, which could have been summed up in a few words."7 And how does the reader cope with such an extensive book of economics? By finding in it some of the nuggets of thinking of an author constantly willing to stray from strictly economic points, nuggets "that make the 892½ pages of Wealth […] worth reading."8 O'Rourke, always offering contemporary counterpoints, gives in this chapter an example that shows "why Angelina Jolie makes a discreditable amount of money." And here is the example: "There are some agreeable and beautiful talents of which the possession commands a certain sort of admiration; but of which the exercise for the sake of gain is considered … as a sort of public prostitution … the exorbitant rewards of players, opera-singers, &c are founded upon … the rarity and beauty of the talent, and the discredit of employing them."

Ultimately, Smith's aim was to better the world, and free market was the means to do it. Not very much is needed for progress. "Little else … but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice," he writes in The Theory of Moral Sentiments. "But those three things were then – and are now – the three hardest things in the world to find," O'Rourke adds.9
As I wrote before, O'Rourke managed to review not only Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, but also his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. He does this in the third chapter of his book. Comparing Smith's two books, he says that "In *Wealth*, Smith insisted that in order to take care of ourselves we must be free to do so. The *Theory of moral Sentiments* shows us how the imagination can make us care about other people." We are not innately good or innately rich, but Smith believed that "we are endowed with the imaginative capacity to be both, if we're free to make the necessary efforts." Thus, Smith gives us, in his two books, a plan, a blueprint, but one "for the soul rather than society."

The next eight chapters of O'Rourke's review analyze each book in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. The last one of these, Chapter 11, is showing us the human side of the philosopher. It focuses on Book 5 of *The Wealth of the Revenue of the Sovereign or Commonwealth.* Here, Smith "yielded to the temptation to slide down Olympus" and enmeshed himself in the bureaucratic details of public policy. O'Rourke notices that by doing this, he was forgetting his own advice in *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*. There, "he warned against thinkers who reduced their own doctrine into a … technical system of artificial definitions, divisions and subdivisions.' Smith called this 'one of the most effective expedients, perhaps, for extinguishing whatever degree of good sense there may be in any moral or metaphysical doctrine.'"

Moving from theory to contemporary examples doesn't necessarily help to better society. As O'Rourke aptly points out, "The mundane political issues of Smith's time were – it is sad to discover – exactly the same as ours: law and order, political pork, failures of the educational system, religion in policies, Byzantine tax code, burgeoning national debt, and runaway defense spending. Two and a quarter centuries of intractability in these policy matters would seem to indicate a certain... intractability." But Smith, a phenomenal thinker but also just a human being, couldn't resist the temptation to reduce his own doctrine into a simple technical system. In a sense, this can only make him more likable, as humans are more likable than machines.

A very brief Chapter 12 is dedicated to "Adam's Smith's Lost Book," a book on politics that he intended to write. "There were a number of reasons that the third part of Smith's betterment trilogy, his work on 'jurisprudence,' was never finished. He was busy making revisions to *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*. He became a government official in Scotland. He died." Beside these surface reasons, O'Rourke thinks there was yet a deeper one. Smith was a moral
philosopher and it is possible that "at some point he realized politics isn't a good place for philosophy and is no place for morals." Political systems are founded upon paradoxes too deep for philosophy, adds O'Rourke. As for the politicians – here is the image of a more successful politician, as rendered in a section of Moral Sentiment added in 1790, more than thirty years after the book was first printed: "They have little modesty; are often assuming, arrogant, and presumptuous; great admirers of themselves, and great condemners of other people … their excessive presumption, founded upon their own excessive self-admiration, dazzles the multitude … the frequent, and often wonderful, success of the most ignorant quacks and imposters … sufficiently demonstrate how easily the multitude are imposed upon by the most extravagant and groundless pretensions."

"An Inquiry into Adam Smith" is an attempt to show the man behind the work. Smith's life was not a spectacular one, so there is little to say about it. For instance, O'Rourke mentions the only domestic anecdote that came down to us from Sir Walter Scott, who was, around 1788, an Edinburgh University student. At tea time, Smith gave Janet Douglas "some confusion, by neglecting utterly her invitation to be seated, and walked round and round … stopping ever and anon to steal a lump from the sugar basin, which the venerable spinster was at length constrained to place on her own knee, as the only method of securing it from his most uneconomical depredations."  

As for the philosopher's romantic life, O'Rourke writes that "There is a disturbing aspect, to a modern reader, about romantic scandals involving Adam Smith: there weren't any." Even less scandalous information about his love life is scarce. However, O'Rourke quotes one such story: "In the early part of Mr. Smith's life, it is well known to his friends that he was for several years attached to a young lady of great beauty and accomplishment … What the circumstances were which prevented their union, I have not been able to learn; but I believe it is pretty certain that, after this disappointment, he laid aside all thoughts of marriage. The lady to whom I allude died also unmarried … I had the pleasure of seeing her when she was turned eighty, and when she still retained evident traces of her former beauty."

O'Rourke gathers some of the more significant details of Smith's life in this chapter, down to quoting his last recorded words, "I believe we must adjourn this meeting to some other place." Such glimpses into Adam Smith's life couldn't help us very much in understanding his philosophical views, but it is always a good thing to be able to see a human face behind abstract ideas.
The appendix of O'Rourke's book, entitled "An Adam Smith Philosophical Dictionary," is a collection of some of the philosopher's "adages, aphorisms, epigrams, insights, observations, maxims, axioms, judicious perceptions, and prejudiced opinions." This selection shows us the scholar and the man, with the good and the bad things that come from being one. The last example I will give here, taken from this useful and pleasant book, is also the last entry in the "Dictionary." As the appendix is ordered alphabetically, this entry, placed under the heading "Wives," comes last in the "dictionary" and is, most certainly, a "prejudiced opinion" rather than a "judicious perception": "The fair-sex, who have commonly more tenderness than ours, have seldom so much generosity." And that is the lonely man speaking, rather than the thinker, thinking. We can just smile and return to reading *The Wealth of Nations*, if we haven't done that yet.

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1. James Buchan, *Adam Smith and the pursuit of perfect liberty*, Profile Books, 2007 p. 4. A short, but quite telling biography that would deserve a review of its own. A mere 140 pages, without preface, chronology or index. But writing many pages about Adam Smith is nobody's yen. Even more so when it comes to his life. Like Kant, he lived the life of a recluse. Like Proust, he dreaded illness and disease. Biographems, in his case, are really relevant only when linked to a pattern of thinking. And this is what Buchan wants to do – find a short but very solid link between life and thinking.


8. *Ibidem*, p. 16.

9. *Ibidem*, p. 27.

10. *Ibidem*, p. 36.


