

I Love Myself, Why Not?—Adam Smith in Debate with Confucianism and Christianity

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PROLOGUE—Am I Praising a “Wrongdoing”?

This was all about a routine lecture, not until a rare occasion arose which made me lost in meditation: Am I praising a “wrongdoing”?

Oh, I nearly forget to introduce myself—my name is Adam Smith. I am a professor at Glasgow University teaching logic and moral philosophy. Today I was giving lectures as usual while I noticed two girls whom I am not quite familiar with audited my lecture.

“Good morning students.” I started off the lecture with a warm greeting.

“Kid, tell me,” I pointed at one of those two girls auditing my lecture and gently asked, “Did you have slices of bread, or ham, or even a nice mug of beer for breakfast today?”

“Yes I did, Professor,” she smiled and nodded without hesitation.

“That’s great!” I replied with joy. I like students with prompt responses like her.

I posed another question to her. “But obviously you’re not a butcher, a brewer, nor a baker, are you? So tell me, girl, where did you get your wonderful breakfast from?”

“Professor, my name is Christine,” the girl told me her name.

She continued, “Of course I have to pay for them—it’s an exchange between money and goods.”

“Precisely answered, Christine.” I said in a complimentary tone.

“Now, think deeper.” I managed to initiate a discussion in lecture.

“Here’s the question—WHY do you exchange goods?” I stepped onto the teaching stage, asking all my students in a loud and confident voice.

“Mmm... I don’t know...” Christine mumbled.

“Never mind, let me tell you.” I started to propose my view to the class.

“People exchange goods because they are self-interested. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. (*The Wealth of Nations* 194) In other words, self-love is the motivation for exchange and induces men to produce a greater part of mutual goods, which people are in need of, according to their different talents. For instance, a baker bakes more so he can exchange the loaves for necessities; a brewer brews more so he can exchange the beer for money—each of them regards only to his own interest.”

“Christine, try to think of the moment you bought your breakfast this morning,” I added. “You are also concerning your self-interest—you wanted nice food with a low price!”

“Humans have the natural propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another (193).” I continued. “Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want (194). This is how the free market

functions to reach a market equilibrium, and eventually leads to a better and wealthier society.”

“All these happen because all of us are self-interested.” I concluded.

“Sorry to interrupt but I’m afraid that you’re wrong, Professor Smith,” said the girl sitting next to Christine, with her right hand in air asking for a permission to raise questions.

“What’s your name and, why do you say so, girl?” I was surprised by a sudden challenge from an auditing student.

“Professor, my name is Jade. ‘Jade’ is a precious gem in China and it symbolises a virtuous man, so you can easily tell that I’m very enthusiastic in Chinese culture and Confucianism,” she introduced herself in a courteous manner.

She continued, “I find your assertion of self-love inappropriate as it extremely contradicts with the intrinsic values of Confucianism. Sorry to say so, but you’re actually praising a wrongdoing to students, Professor.”

Meanwhile, Christine raised her hand.

“Professor, I have the same feeling as hers. I disagree your claim about self-love,” said Christine.

She explained, “I’m a devout Christian since I was young. I have been taught to be kind and benevolent in Church. I’m sorry that I find your claims improper as you’re inducing us to adopt self-love. Oh my God, I can’t agree with you at all!”

I was astonished as my ideas about self-love suddenly provoked the two girls. For one moment, I couldn’t help thinking—Am I really praising a “wrongdoing”?

“Well, we can discuss the inquiries one by one. So... why don't we start with yours, Jade?”

“Sure!” Jade answered with a passion for a debate.

I then sat down and listened to her patiently.

EPISODE I—On the NATURE of Self-love: When Adam Smith Meets Confucianism

Jade started by addressing the core value of Confucianism—Benevolence.

“Confucius interpreted benevolence to be a virtue that a righteous gentlemen should possess¹. One of his students, Fan Ch'ih, once asked the meaning of benevolence. Confucius replied, '[i]t is to love all men.' (12.22) Confucius explained benevolence means to love others, which contradicts your claims. I strongly agree with Confucius that if, and only if, people are benevolent can we make a better society together. However, being self-interested, people will consider only the well-being of their own, resulting in an indifferent lifestyle and a pathetic society (4.2)—absolutely not a better nor a wealthier one as you had proposed.”

“Jade, I understand your thinking, but I find you have misinterpreted the nature of self-love. I have emphasised the importance of self-love, yet I have never denied benevolence. ‘Self-love’ is not necessarily ‘selfish’. Bernard Mandeville, an English Scholar who had also proposed ideas on the division of labour, celebrated selfishness as a virtue. I totally disagreed with him and regarded his view as ‘licentious’. (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* 306–314)

1 James Legge translated 仁 as “benevolence” and 君子 as “righteous gentlemen”.

Being self-interested denotes people can be highly concerned with their own interest, at the same time they can care about the others as well!” I gave Jade a firm answer.

“What do you mean by ‘care about the others at the same time’, Professor?” Jade pushed up her glasses as if she could spot more mistakes on me.

“Well, let me give you an example.” I tried my best to give her a full picture on the nature of self-love.

“With regard to his own interest, a baker bakes more loaves and a brewer brews more to exchange for necessities and money. This is only part of the story, but this already results in a wealthier society because a free market trade and the division of labour are induced.”

I continued. “Meanwhile, if the baker can’t sell all his bread, he can definitely give them to the needy for free. This is the second part of the story that I haven’t mentioned previously but I have not denied it. ‘Man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only.’ (*The Wealth of Nations* 194) I believe it is of no use for people to rely just on others’ help, but I have never rejected benevolent actions. Remember this: being self-interested and being benevolent are not mutually exclusive. I have no rebuttal of Confucian thoughts with regard to the attitudes towards benevolence.”

“I’ve got it! I can be a self-interested-and-caring person, right?” Jade replied with a smile of inspiration.

“Sure, why not?” I smiled too.

EPISODE II—On the GOAL of Self-love: When Adam Smith Meets Christianity

“The conversation is really inspiring. I’ve never thought to interpret self-love in this way,” said Christine.

She continued, “I have no objections about this interpretation of self-love, but I’m in doubt where this interpretation can really bring us to. Professor, what I mean is, the ultimate goal of your idea. From Bible, Jesus Christ praised a widow who put only two small copper coins in the temple treasury but not the rich people who put in large amounts (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Mark 12.41–44). It is not about the quantity of money the widow gave, but her attitude and benevolence which sacrificed everything she had despite poverty. Jesus said, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ (Mark 12.31) Benevolence, love and faith are the spirits every Christian should uphold, not self-love, Professor. We must follow Jesus as He is the light of the world. Anyone who follows Him will never walk in darkness (John 8.12).”

“Well...” I was stunned by her feverish piety to Christianity. “Before I speak of my arguments, let me first ask you a question. Why do you believe in Him?”

“It’s because I uphold my faith in Him,” she replied with confidence.

“Faith for what?”

“Faith in believing that Jesus is the light and will bring a better community with faith, love and hope if we all follow Him. Whoever believe in Him shall not perish and have eternal life. (John 3.16)”

“Yes, you’ve got the point. In a down-to-earth perspective, the goal of Christianity is for a better community with holy values such as faith, love

and hope. In a spiritual perspective, the goal is for an eternal life. You can see, the ultimate goals between you and me are no difference—a better self and society. Most Christians, in my opinion, are somehow self-interested too as they believe in God often for reasons. Some wanted an eternal life, some wanted a harmonious family or community, and some wanted emotional supports from religion. My claim to self-love does not necessarily contradict your view!

Only if people are self-interested would they completely utilise their geniuses and talents to contribute to the better accommodation and conveniency of the species (*The Wealth of Nations* 196). Imagine the following example. From a regard to their own interest, people produce goods that they are mostly capable to. The baker will devote his time to bake more instead of learning how to brew beer; the brewer will endeavour to brew more beer instead of buying new ovens and flour to bake. Do you know why? This is because they know it is more worthy to spend time on the things they are more capable to! Therefore, they will have bigger personal benefits because they can produce more goods for exchange. After all, it's all about self-love. In this case, self-love not only benefits the privileged but generates a general opulence for everyone. (193) The total production is boosted and a division of labour occurs, which results in a more effective, wealthier and better society.”

“Christine, you have to know that being self-interested is not the final destination of what I have proposed. Self-love is the background and a method to achieve a better community for all of us.” I concluded.

“Thank you so much Professor Smith! Your explanation is really inspiring,” said Christine in an excitement.

She continued. “Although your method to reach a better society does not completely comply with Jesus’s, they do not contradict. If men can understand the essence of self-love, the whole society can benefit.”

“Yes, I’m sure that they will!” I replied in contentment, with a smile on face showing satisfaction in explaining my ideas to my students.

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Teacher’s comment:

People sometimes negatively misinterpret the concept of self-love of Adam Smith as selfishness in Chinese culture. In this essay, Ching-him, without following this misinterpretation, gives a very good explanation when comparing it with the concept of benevolence in the *Analects* and the

purpose of faith in the *Bible* and he indicates that there is indeed no contradiction among them. As a teacher, I personally like the teacher-role played by Smith and his inner response when listening to the critiques of students. Maybe, it is also what I have to learn from my students! Finally, in this essay, I am glad to see that *The Wealth of Nations* leads Ching-him to go further to read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, another great book of Smith. I wish this course can serve as a stepping stone for his further reading of other classics. (Yu Chi Chung Andy)