

## SMITH AT 300: THE DIGNITY OF TRADE

BY

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“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. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages.”

WN I.ii.2

There is something in this passage that its most common interpretations hide: the dignity of trade.

The sentence is possibly the most quoted and well-known sentence from Adam Smith. And its most common interpretation is somehow a commemoration of the driving power of self-interest, whatever that may mean (Smith uses “self-love,” not “self-interest”) and regardless of its beneficial or damaging consequences, however people wish to interpret it.

But this sentence comes with a sentence before and one after it. All three sentences deal with dinners.

Smith tells us we have three different ways of getting our dinner: to be like a dog, to be like a beggar, or to trade.

In the same paragraph, right before our famous butcher, brewer, and baker, we have a description of a puppy fawning to get the attention of its master and get dinner, and sometimes, we are told, people do the same (“A puppy fawns upon its dam, and a spaniel endeavors by a thousand attractions to engage the attention of its master who is at dinner, when it wants to be fed by him. Man sometimes uses the same arts with his brethren”). Still in the same paragraph, right after our famous butcher, brewer, and baker, we have the description of a beggar, begging for his dinner (“Nobody but a beggar chuses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow citizens”).

So, for Smith, we have three ways of getting dinner. Two of these ways are not only unreliable but, most importantly, degrading. In one case we have to behave like animals; in the other we have to beg. We either have to be treated like dogs or humiliated like beggars to get our dinner. In either circumstance there is someone above us, there is a master who determines if we can get dinner or not. We are in state of “servile

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doi:10.1017/S105383722200075X

dependency,” as Smith calls it. As dogs or beggars, we are deprived of our dignity as human beings. We can be kicked or ignored. In either case we are degraded to lesser beings, forced to look up to our masters, from under the table or the side of the street. We are forced to be at the feet and the mercy of someone else. We are forced to lose our dignity.

But the third alternative, trade, is different. It is dignifying. The third alternative to get dinner that Smith tells us is to address ourselves to the self-love of the butcher, brewer, and baker. To do this, we have to speak to them as peers and we have to be addressed by them as peers. We stand at the same level of the other when we tell them: “give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want.” We stand in front of who gives our dinner with equal dignity and pride.

The appeal to the self-love of the butcher, brewer, and baker is thus the most powerful statement of the equal dignity that all individuals have. When we can trade, we don’t have to be like dogs or like beggars. It is not just an effective way of getting dinner. It is also a moral claim of equality among human beings. Depriving someone of the opportunity to trade means depriving them of their dignity as human beings. Allowing people to trade is to recognize their moral equality and equal dignity.

So whenever we read that famous sentence again, I hope we can also think of the respect and dignity that are exchanged every time we buy our dinner.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

## REFERENCE

Smith, Adam. [1776] 1981. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Edited by R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner. Two volumes. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.