

## INTRODUCTION

---

# DEAREST FRIENDS

AS DAVID HUME lay on his deathbed in the summer of 1776, much of the British public, both north and south of the Tweed, waited expectantly for news of his passing. His writings had challenged their views—philosophical, political, and especially religious—for the better part of four decades. He had experienced a lifetime of abuse and reproach from the pious, including a concerted effort to excommunicate him from the Church of Scotland, but he was now beyond their reach. Everyone wanted to know how the notorious infidel would face his end. Would he show remorse or perhaps even recant his skepticism? Would he die in a state of distress, having none of the usual consolations afforded by belief in an afterlife? In the event Hume died as he had lived, with remarkable good humor and without religion. The most prominent account of his calm and courageous end was penned by his best friend, a renowned philosopher in his own right who had just published a book that would soon change the world. While *The Wealth of Nations* was, in Adam Smith's own words, a "very violent attack . . . upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain," it was on the whole quite well received.<sup>1</sup> Smith was to suffer far more opprobrium on account of a short public letter that he wrote later that year describing—even flaunting—the cheerfulness and equanimity of Hume's final days. He concluded the letter by declaring that his unbelieving friend approached "as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit."<sup>2</sup> It was the closest that Smith ever came to openly antagonizing the devout, an act for which he would pay dearly but that he would never regret. It was, moreover, a fitting conclusion to a friendship that had played a central role in the lives of two of history's most significant thinkers. This book tells the story of that friendship.

## INTRODUCTION

---

It must be admitted that the two main protagonists of this book might have objected to its very existence. Though Hume and Smith attained fame and relative fortune during their lifetimes, they were both averse to having their unpolished writings and their private lives made public. Hume worried that his correspondence might “fall into idle People’s hands, and be honored with a Publication,” and Smith remarked that “I never suffer my name to appear in a Newspaper when I can hinder it, which to my sorrow, I cannot always do.”<sup>3</sup> Their solicitude was not just for their privacy, but also for their posthumous reputations. After Hume’s death their mutual publisher, William Strahan, contemplated issuing a collection of Hume’s letters, but Smith quickly thwarted the idea, fearing that others “would immediately set about rummaging the cabinets of those who had ever received a scrap of paper from him. Many things would be published not fit to see the light to the great mortification of all those who wish well to his memory.”<sup>4</sup> As they approached their ends Hume and Smith both enjoined their executors to burn all but a select few of their papers, a request that was fulfilled in Smith’s case though not in Hume’s.<sup>5</sup>

Smith was well aware, however, that “the smallest circumstances, the most minute transactions of a great man are sought after with eagerness,” and he himself seems to have shared in the fascination.<sup>6</sup> The inventor of the modern biography, James Boswell, who was a student of Smith’s for a brief time, justified the exhaustive detail of his memoirs of Samuel Johnson on the grounds that “everything relative to so great a man is worth observing. I remember Dr. Adam Smith, in his rhetorical lectures at Glasgow, told us he was glad to know that Milton wore latches in his shoes instead of buckles.”<sup>7</sup> Even more significantly, Hume called attention to his life story by composing a short autobiography during his final illness. Titled it *My Own Life*, Hume asked Strahan to use it as the preface for all future collections of his writings. Smith evidently approved, as he supplemented it with a narration of Hume’s last days in the form of a *Letter from Adam Smith, LL.D. to William Strahan, Esq.*—the public letter that provoked such an outcry. (Both of these delightful works

DEAREST FRIENDS

are included in the appendix of this book.) This is the closest thing we have to a joint work by the two of them, and Smith's contribution conspicuously calls the reader's attention to their friendship; he uses the word "friend" no fewer than seventeen times in the space of around a half dozen pages. Furthermore, even geniuses are seldom the best judges in their own cases. While Hume and Smith worried that the publication of their letters might tarnish the reputations that they had earned through their more carefully composed works, in fact a greater appreciation of their characters and their friendship with one another can only heighten our sense of admiration. Nor, finally, does this book draw exclusively on their unpublished writings. As philosophers and men of letters, much of their lives were dedicated to thinking and writing, and one of the primary forms their friendship took was engagement with one another's ideas and works. These ideas and works will, accordingly, play a major role in our story.

Given their stature and influence, it is remarkable that no book has heretofore been written on Hume and Smith's personal or intellectual relationship.<sup>8</sup> One likely reason for this is that their lives—especially Smith's—are not as well documented as one could wish. Hume was not a particularly prolific writer of correspondence, though his surviving letters make up for in wit and charm what they lack in length and number. His published corpus, on the other hand, is vast, including not just his many philosophical treatises but also a six-volume *History of England*, essays on seemingly every conceivable topic, a few pamphlets on current events, and of course *My Own Life*. Smith was an even more negligent correspondent than Hume, apparently due in part to the fact that he found writing physically painful.<sup>9</sup> His aversion to putting pen to paper was a habit for which Hume sometimes chided him, as when he opened his letters, "I can write as seldom and as Short as you . . ." or "I am as lazy a Correspondent as you . . ."<sup>10</sup> Smith also published only two books, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. We have a set of essays that his executors published after his death and student notes from some courses that he taught, but the sum total is still dwarfed by Hume's output. Indeed, Smith's biographers frequently lament that he seems to have gone out of his way to make things difficult for them. In addition to composing few letters, releasing only two books,

## INTRODUCTION

and ensuring that most of his papers were burned before he died, Smith also avoided writing about himself to an unusual degree. As one scholar has commented, in terms of self-conscious self-revelation he was about as far from his contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau as it is possible to be.<sup>11</sup>

Happily for our purposes, Smith was a slightly less inattentive correspondent with Hume than with others, especially in the later years of their friendship. There are a total of one hundred seventy known letters that Smith either wrote or received dating from the period between when he met Hume and Hume's death. Of these, we have fifteen letters from Smith to Hume and forty-one from Hume to Smith—far and away the most for any of Smith's correspondents during this period. (Hume, for his part, wrote more letters to Smith than to anyone except his publishers, William Strahan and Andrew Millar, at least among those that survive.) The fifty-six extant letters between Hume and Smith cover all manner of topics, including their ideas and arguments, the fortunes and misfortunes of their publications, current events and recent books, and their families, friends, adversaries, health, job prospects, travels, and future plans. Some are fairly short and mundane, but others are quite humorous, intellectually substantial, or revealing about their characters. The growing warmth of their relationship can be traced not only in the contents of the letters but also in the salutations themselves. The earliest of the letters open with a formal "Dear Sir," but it was not long before they transitioned to the more affectionate "Dear Smith" or "My Dear Hume," then "My Dear Friend," and finally "My Dearest Friend"—an epithet that neither of them used with any other correspondent during the course of their friendship.<sup>12</sup>

There are also numerous references to Hume, both explicit and implicit, throughout virtually all of Smith's writings. The reverse is less true, as Hume had composed almost all of his works before Smith's first book appeared, though Hume did publish an anonymous review of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* soon after its release. As a result of their renown during their lifetimes, moreover, many of their contemporaries recorded stories about them. One can thus find comments and reminiscences relating to their friendship in a number of contemporaneous and near-contemporaneous sources, including Dugald

DEAREST FRIENDS

Stewart's biography of Smith; the myriad writings of James Boswell; the autobiography of the Moderate minister Alexander Carlyle and the journal of the playwright John Home, both of whom traveled in the same circles as Hume and Smith; the private correspondence of a number of their acquaintances; the periodicals, book reviews, and obituaries of the day; and the anecdotes collected by Henry Mackenzie and John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, among others. This book draws on all of the available evidence to provide the fullest possible account of Hume and Smith's friendship.

---

Another likely reason why Hume and Smith's friendship has not received sustained analysis is that friendships are more difficult to bring to life than feuds and quarrels: conflict makes for high drama, while camaraderie does not. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that there have been many books written on philosophical clashes—think of David Edmonds and John Eidinow's *Wittgenstein's Poker* and Rousseau's *Dog*, Yuval Levin's *The Great Debate*, Steven Nadler's *The Best of All Possible Worlds*, Matthew Stewart's *The Courtier and the Heretic*, and Robert Zaretsky and John Scott's *The Philosophers' Quarrel*, to name only a few recent titles—but far fewer on philosophical friendships.<sup>13</sup> Even biographies of Hume tend to devote less attention to his long friendship with Smith than to his brief quarrel with Rousseau, which, sensational as it may have been, was not nearly as central to Hume's life and thought.

The relative lack of attention paid to philosophical friendships, while understandable, is unfortunate. Friendship was understood to be a key component of philosophy and the philosophical life from the very beginning, as even a cursory reading of Plato or Aristotle should remind us. The latter famously claimed that friendship is the one good without which no one would choose to live even if he possessed all other goods, and Hume and Smith clearly concurred.<sup>14</sup> Hume held that "friendship is the chief joy of human life," and Smith proclaimed that the esteem and affection of one's friends constitutes "the chief part of human happiness."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Hume proposed a small thought experiment to prove Aristotle's point. "Let all the powers and elements of nature conspire to serve and obey one man," he

## INTRODUCTION

suggests. “Let the sun rise and set at his command: The sea and rivers roll as he pleases, and the earth furnish spontaneously whatever may be useful or agreeable to him. He will still be miserable, till you give him some one person at least, with whom he may share his happiness, and whose esteem and friendship he may enjoy.”<sup>16</sup> The notion of friendship plays a surprisingly large role even in Hume’s *History of England*, where, as a leading Hume scholar notes, he treats the “capacity for friendship . . . almost as an acid test of character.”<sup>17</sup>

Aristotle divides friendships into three types: those motivated by utility, those motivated by pleasure, and—the highest and rarest of the three—those motivated by virtue or excellence. Smith draws a similar distinction in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, though he insists that the latter alone “deserve the sacred and venerable name of friendship.”<sup>18</sup> Smith’s relationship with Hume represents a nearly textbook model of this kind of friendship: a stable, enduring, reciprocal bond that arises not just from serving one another’s interests or from taking pleasure in one another’s company, but also from the shared pursuit of a noble end—in their case, philosophical understanding. An examination of Hume and Smith’s personal and intellectual relationship thus allows for a different kind of reflection on friendship than is found in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Michel de Montaigne, Francis Bacon, and the like.<sup>19</sup> Whereas these leading philosophers of friendship tend to analyze the concept in the abstract—the different forms that friendship takes, its roots in human nature, its relationship to self-interest, to romantic love, and to justice—a consideration of Hume and Smith allows us to see that rare thing, a philosophical friendship of the very highest level in action: a case study, as it were.

Indeed, there is arguably no higher example of a philosophical friendship in the entire Western tradition. It takes some effort, in fact, to think of who the closest rivals would be. Socrates and Plato? Given the four-decade age disparity between them, their relationship was probably more one of teacher and student, or perhaps mentor and protégé, than one of equals, and in any case the record of their personal interactions is scant. Ditto for Plato and Aristotle. John Locke and Isaac Newton admired one another, but could hardly be said to be close friends. Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt had more of a (stormy) romantic relationship than a friendship, as did Jean-Paul

DEAREST FRIENDS

Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (with somewhat less drama). As for Michel de Montaigne and Étienne de La Boétie, Gotthold Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn, Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, G. W. F. Hegel and Friedrich Schelling, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, in each of these cases at least one member of the pair falls considerably below Hume and Smith in terms of impact and originality. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau approach closer to their level, if we choose to count them as philosophers rather than literary figures. The leading contenders among philosophers are probably Erasmus and Thomas More, but in terms of influence and depth of thought most would give the clear nod to Hume and Smith.<sup>20</sup>

---

The context in which Hume and Smith's friendship took place was just as remarkable as the friendship itself. The Scotland into which they were born, in the early eighteenth century, had suffered for untold generations from poverty and disease, ignorance and superstition, incessant religious conflict and occasional military occupation. Hume himself remarked that Scotland had long been "the rudest, perhaps, of all European Nations; the most necessitous, the most turbulent, and the most unsettled."<sup>21</sup> Yet Hume's and Smith's lifetimes saw the arrival of a vibrant new age of economic prosperity and cultural achievement, a transformation that was palpable—indeed, startling—to contemporary observers. Hume once again captured the feeling well. "Really it is admirable how many Men of Genius this Country produces at present," he commented to a friend in 1757. "Is it not strange," he asks, "that, at a time when we have lost our Princes, our Parliaments, our independent Government, even the Presence of our chief Nobility, are unhappy, in our Accent & Pronunciation, speak a very corrupt Dialect of the Tongue which we make use of; is it not strange, I say, that, in these Circumstances, we shou'd really be the People most distinguish'd for Literature in Europe?"<sup>22</sup> Dugald Stewart, Smith's first biographer, marveled at "the sudden burst of genius, which to a foreigner must seem to have sprung up in this country by a sort of enchantment, soon after the [Jacobite] Rebellion of 1745."<sup>23</sup> Writing in the early nineteenth century, Walter Scott



## INTRODUCTION

looked back with nostalgia on the days of Hume, Smith, and their compatriots, “when there were giants in the land.”<sup>24</sup> Nor was it only Scots themselves who noticed this development. Perhaps the most “enlightened” Englishman of the age, Edward Gibbon, admitted in 1776 that he had “always looked up with the most sincere respect towards the northern part of our island, whither taste and philosophy seemed to have retired from the smoke and hurry of this immense capital [i.e., London].”<sup>25</sup>

The Scottish Enlightenment is now widely regarded as an intellectual golden age, the rival of Periclean Athens, Augustan Rome, and Renaissance Italy. There is even a best-selling book recounting *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*.<sup>26</sup> Some of the leading men of letters of the period, in addition to Hume and Smith, included Hugh Blair, Adam Ferguson, Henry Home (Lord Kames), Francis Hutcheson, John Millar, Thomas Reid, William Robertson, and Dugald Stewart. This Scottish renaissance also comprised natural scientists such as the founder of modern geology, James Hutton, the chemist Joseph Black, and James Watt of steam engine fame, as well as artists like the painter Allan Ramsay, the playwright John Home, and the architect Robert Adam. Hume and Smith knew all of these figures personally, and they will each play a role in our story. The Scottish “literati,” as they were often dubbed, were not disaffected intellectuals at war with the establishment and the elite of their society, as their counterparts in France so often were, but rather widely admired and deeply engaged members of their communities. With only a few exceptions—the most notable being Hume—they were employed in one of the learned professions: the university, the law, the church, or medicine. In part as a result, perhaps, their outlooks generally lacked the subversive edge that was so conspicuous among the Parisian *philosophes*, causing the more radical side of Smith’s and especially Hume’s thought to stand out in starker relief.<sup>27</sup>

How did a nation that began the eighteenth century as a poor, backward outpost on the fringe of Europe manage to become such an intellectual powerhouse by the middle of the century? There were a variety of factors involved, including the innovative system of parish schools that had made Scotland one of the most literate societies in the world; the universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and



DEAREST FRIENDS

St. Andrews, which grew to be some of the very best in Europe; the emergence of numerous clubs and debating societies; the thriving publishing industry; and the progressive Moderate ministers who eventually came to lead the Kirk (the Church of Scotland).<sup>28</sup> Also crucial, surely, was the union of 1707 that created Great Britain.<sup>29</sup> Scotland had not had a separate monarchy since the Union of the Crowns in 1603, but the merger of its parliament with England's near the outset of the eighteenth century bound the nation still closer to its powerful southern neighbor, offering the promise of greater security, greater stability, and greater access to the markets of England and its colonies. The Scots gave up much of their political power in the bargain—they held only 45 of the 558 seats in the newly constituted House of Commons—but they retained a great deal of control over their legal, religious, and educational establishments. Though it took longer than its supporters hoped it would, the union did eventually lead to the promised economic boom, along with increased personal freedoms and opportunities. To be sure, not all Scots were pleased with the new order, as the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745 amply demonstrated. Yet few of the leading Scottish literati ever questioned the benefits of the union. Hume and Smith, in particular, embraced it with open arms, even as they resented the continued prejudices of the English toward all things Scottish.

All in all, Hume and Smith's friendship took place during a period of political stability in Britain. In fact, it fell neatly in between the more turbulent eras that preceded it and followed it: they first met in 1749, a few years after the last of the major Jacobite uprisings, and Hume died in 1776, just as the conflict with the American colonies began to escalate. The only real political disturbances during this period were the Seven Years' War with France (1756–63) and the "Wilkes and Liberty" riots of the late 1760s and early 1770s. While the latter, in particular, alarmed Hume at the time, these episodes were both fairly tame by most standards—certainly compared to the upheavals that opened and closed the century, those connected with the Glorious Revolution and the union of 1707, on the one hand, and the American and French Revolutions, on the other.

Also relevant to our story is the religious climate of the time. One result of the Glorious Revolution settlement was that the Presbyterian

## INTRODUCTION

Kirk was reinstated as the established church of Scotland in 1690, while England retained its Anglican establishment. The character and practices of the Kirk were, however, to be a source of continual and often bitter conflict throughout much of the eighteenth century. During Hume's and Smith's youths the Kirk was "as rigid and intolerant as any church in Europe," as one scholar puts it.<sup>30</sup> It promulgated a particularly grim and unforgiving form of Calvinism, including belief in predestination and the utter depravity of human nature, and it forbade such activities as dancing, merriment at weddings, and walking idly on the streets on Sundays. Voltaire, after visiting Britain in the late 1720s—when Hume was a teenager and Smith a young boy—described the typical Presbyterian minister as one who "affects a serious gate, puts on a sour look," and harangues his flock with "grave and severe exhortations."<sup>31</sup> Only a few decades earlier, in 1697, an eighteen-year-old student at Edinburgh University named Thomas Aikenhead was hanged for some blasphemous remarks that he had boastfully made to friends.<sup>32</sup> The judicial murder of alleged witches continued well into the century: the last woman to be convicted for witchcraft in Scotland was burned alive in 1727 for having turned her daughter into a pony (always a dead giveaway).<sup>33</sup>

As the eighteenth century wore on, a group of progressive clergymen known as the Moderates made a concerted effort to drag the Kirk, kicking and screaming, into the modern, polite, enlightened world.<sup>34</sup> They preached a softer brand of Calvinism, emphasizing conduct over creed, and insisted on the importance of tolerance and humanistic learning. The Moderates included many of Edinburgh's preeminent literati: they were led by William Robertson and Hugh Blair and also included Adam Ferguson and John Home among their ranks. These individuals were all friends with Hume and Smith, although in Hume's case, in particular, this was more a testament to their mutual civility than a sign of a genuine meeting of the minds: no minister, however liberal-minded, could altogether approve of Hume's more or less open irreligiosity. The Moderates' agenda was opposed, at every step along the way, by a rival faction within the Kirk known alternately as the Popular Party, the Evangelicals, or the High-Flyers.<sup>35</sup> This latter group attached great importance to the maintenance of strict orthodoxy and sought to retain or restore the more

DEAREST FRIENDS

severe—some would say repressive—doctrines and practices that had characterized the Kirk since the days of John Knox and the Reformation. Their intransigence and broad base of support among the populace ensured that the process of liberalization was a slow and fitful one. Even after the Moderates gained the upper hand within the Kirk in the second half of the century, the Popular Party could (and did) continue to make life uncomfortable for nonbelievers and nonconformists. As we will see throughout the book, Hume and Smith took rather different approaches to living and writing in this atmosphere.

---

That Hume and Smith adopted such contrary stances toward their more pious contemporaries is all the more striking in view of the fact that the similarities between their outlooks were so broad and so deep on so many other fronts. Hume was the older of the two by a dozen years, and he got off the blocks quickly, composing almost all of his works before Smith even began to publish his. As a result, Smith's thought was shaped by Hume far more than Hume's was by Smith. Smith certainly drew on many thinkers besides his close friend—he has been described as "*the great eclectic*"—yet almost all Smith scholars recognize the pervasive influence of Hume on nearly everything he wrote.<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Phillipson's recent biography of Smith, for instance, dubs him "a committed Humean" and even "a perfect Humean" whose "task would be to develop the implications of Hume's philosophy and extend its reach into territories he was to make his own."<sup>37</sup> None of this is to say, however, that Smith simply adopted Hume's views wholesale. On the contrary, we will see that he modified almost everything he touched. The noted Smith scholar Samuel Fleischacker describes their intellectual relationship well: "Smith's thought circles around Hume's: there is virtually nothing in either *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* or *The Wealth of Nations* without some sort of source or anticipation in Hume, although there is also almost no respect in which Smith agrees entirely with Hume."<sup>38</sup> Fleischacker reiterates the point elsewhere, remarking that "to fail to see Smith's debt to Hume is to miss the sources of many of his major doctrines. But to fail to see Smith's *revisions* of Hume—his incessant,

## INTRODUCTION

almost obsessive refusal to accept anything Hume says as is—is to miss what is distinctive, and most interesting, in Smith.”<sup>39</sup>

The idea that the intellectual affinities between Hume and Smith were this broad and deep might seem to be belied by a series of common caricatures of the two. According to the caricatures, Hume was a philosopher interested primarily in abstract metaphysical and epistemological questions, while Smith was a hardheaded economist focused on more practical matters; Hume was a conservative Tory in his politics, while Smith was a liberal Whig; and Hume was a skeptic with regard to religion or perhaps even an atheist, while Smith was a confirmed believer. The first of these three supposed divergences is easily disposed of. It is true that Hume began his career by investigating metaphysical and epistemological questions, and it is this part of his corpus that still receives the lion’s share of attention from academic philosophers. Yet even within the pages of his first book, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume transitioned from these fairly abstract issues to more practical discussions relating to psychology and morality. Moreover, he then proceeded to write essays on a huge range of subjects, from politics to polygamy and from economics to eloquence, as well as several works on religion and a monumental *History of England*. Indeed, Hume was regarded for much of his lifetime and for many generations thereafter as a historian first and a philosopher second.

Similarly, while Smith is often hailed as the “founding father” of capitalism, he was in fact, as his modern interpreters never tire of pointing out, far more than an economist who theorized the invisible hand and championed free trade. Instead, he was a professor of moral philosophy who included political economy as just one of his many intellectual interests, and he recognized—to a greater degree than Hume, as a matter of fact—a number of potential dangers and drawbacks associated with commercial society. Smith taught courses on ethics, jurisprudence, and rhetoric, and he wrote essays on the development of language and the history of astronomy, among other topics. When one moves beyond Book 1 of Hume’s *Treatise* and the most famous handful of passages from *The Wealth of Nations*, then, it becomes clear that Hume’s and Smith’s interests overlapped a great deal, in part because they were both interested in, well, pretty much everything.

DEAREST FRIENDS

For much of the twentieth century Smith's philosophical writings were deemed to be little more than a series of footnotes to Hume's, and as an economist Hume has long been regarded as a minor predecessor of Smith, insofar as he is taken notice of at all. Ironically, we will see that putting the two side by side serves to highlight the importance of Smith's contributions to moral philosophy and Hume's to political economy. Smith followed Hume in developing a moral theory based on human sentiments, but his version of moral sentimentalism incorporated several significant improvements on Hume's. Conversely, Hume argued for free trade and stressed the moral, social, and political benefits of commerce several decades before *The Wealth of Nations* appeared, and it is striking how much of that work builds on Hume's insights.

The second purported dichotomy between the two is similarly misleading. Hume's political thought does have its conservative aspects, and Smith is unquestionably a key member of the liberal tradition, but the reverse is equally true: Hume too is a liberal in the broadest sense of the term, and Smith's liberalism too has a distinctly conservative bent. More concretely speaking, both of these thinkers embraced the core ideals associated with the liberal tradition, stressing the benefits of the rule of law, limited government, religious toleration, freedom of expression, private property, and commerce. They were thus both generally supportive of the modern, liberal, commercial order of the Britain of their time. On the other hand, they both distrusted large and sudden innovations in politics. Given the fallibility of human reason and the complicated, variable nature of the political world, they held, we should be wary of grand schemes for radically restructuring society. Hence, while they advocated certain reforms to the society of their day—freer trade and greater religious toleration, for instance—they always insisted that these changes should be implemented in a gradual, measured way.

As for terms like "Tory" and "Whig," neither Hume nor Smith can accurately be described as a partisan in any straightforward sense: neither had much faith in either of the main political parties of eighteenth-century Britain. One prominent scholar of the Scottish Enlightenment, taking his cue from one of Hume's letters, labels them both "sceptical Whigs": Whigs because they supported the constitution that resulted

## INTRODUCTION

from the Glorious Revolution, judging that it did a reasonable job of providing individual liberty and security, but “sceptical” because they pointedly eschewed the ideological baggage that so often attended Whiggism.<sup>40</sup> They might be even better described as pragmatic liberals, given that they embraced the core ideals of the liberal tradition but also emphasized the importance of moderation, caution, flexibility, and attentiveness to context in applying these ideals.<sup>41</sup> At any rate, the political divergences between the two were relatively minor, matters of detail and emphasis rather than general outlook.

The third and final dichotomy implied by the common images of these two thinkers—that concerning their religious views—is worth pausing to consider a bit more carefully, especially as it will play a major role in our story. Religion was one of Hume’s primary preoccupations. Nearly everything he wrote touched on the topic in one way or another: the credibility of the arguments in its favor, its psychological origins and consequences, its history, its effects on morality and politics. While there is naturally debate at the margins, the basic outlines of his stance are relatively clear: Hume was neither a believer nor an out-and-out atheist, but rather what we might call an agnostic, or what in the eighteenth century was called simply a skeptic (the better term in any case).<sup>42</sup> He never denied outright the existence of a higher power, but he deemed the principal arguments on behalf of one highly implausible, and he considered the effects of religion to be mostly pernicious. As one scholar has written, “Hume’s critique of religion and religious belief is . . . subtle, profound, and damaging to religion in ways that have no philosophical antecedents and few successors.”<sup>43</sup> Hume sometimes presented his arguments in an artful or oblique manner—by attributing them to a character in a dialogue, for instance, or by clothing skeptical conclusions in the garb of fideistic wonder at the mysteries of God’s ways—but the smoke screens were usually fairly transparent. His contemporaries were not fooled, nor did he particularly mean them to be. On the contrary, Hume often delighted in the prospect of eliciting “a murmur among the zealots.”<sup>44</sup>

Smith preferred to play his cards much closer to the vest. In both his writings and his personal life he generally went to great lengths to avoid revealing his religious beliefs—or lack thereof—and to steer



DEAREST FRIENDS

clear of confrontations with the pious. Contemporaries frequently noted that Smith was “very guarded in conversation” when the topic of religion came up.<sup>45</sup> He also wrote far less than Hume did on the subject, and the little that he did write points in multiple directions. On the one hand, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith periodically invokes the idea of a providential order, and he generally describes the religious impulse in fairly sympathetic terms. Far more than Hume, he depicts the belief in a higher power as having important practical benefits, above all in providing consolation and buttressing morality. On the other hand, none of Smith’s core arguments about morality, politics, or economics ultimately depend on religious premises; in every instance in which he has recourse to “the author of Nature” to explain a point, he also offers a more worldly explanation as well. Indeed, one of the central purposes of his moral theory, like Hume’s, was to show that morality comes from human beings themselves rather than from the word or will of God, and hence that religion is not a precondition of virtue. The revisions that Smith made to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* later in life served to soften the religious undertones of the early editions, but even the first edition was sufficiently ambiguous to leave many readers unsure of his ultimate convictions. For instance, one of Smith’s former students, the Reverend James Wodrow, recommended the book to a friend soon after its publication, commenting equivocally that “the Author seems to have a strong detestation of vice & Love of Virtue & perhaps a regard for Religion at least it does not appear to me that the book has any licentious tendency like the most part of David Hume’s writing on those subjects tho’ perhaps the Principles are at the bottom the same.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Smith’s other book, *The Wealth of Nations*, is strikingly secular in language and outlook, and some of his posthumously published essays are deeply skeptical in character.

There is no more consensus today than there was in Smith’s own time as to his religious views. The conjectures range from sincere Christian belief to closet atheism, though the majority of scholars come down somewhere in the middle, reading Smith as a deist of some kind.<sup>47</sup> Long reflection on Smith’s friendship with Hume cannot help but push one’s interpretation toward the skeptical end of the spectrum. Emma Rothschild rightly remarks that their correspondence reveals



## INTRODUCTION

a sense of “intimacy and complicity” that seems “difficult to reconcile with the presumption of serious religious differences.”<sup>48</sup> They frequently joked about religion in their letters to one another, and Smith’s irony on the subject was just as pronounced and transparent as Hume’s. It is true that Smith refused to take on the responsibility of posthumously publishing Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, thereby creating some discord between the two during Hume’s final days. This is often taken as an indication that Smith disagreed with or disapproved of Hume’s skepticism, but we will see in chapter 10 that this episode was in fact less acrimonious and philosophically charged than is generally assumed. Moreover, Smith’s glowing praise of Hume’s wisdom and virtue in the *Letter to Strahan*, written only a few months later, should be sufficient to gainsay the idea that he was disturbed by his friend’s lack of belief.

It is impossible to determine, at a remove of well over two centuries, what prompted Smith to be so much more reticent than Hume on this score, though it is easy to imagine a number of possibilities. For instance, it is possible that Smith was simply temperamentally predisposed to be more circumspect; or that he had greater concern for his reputation and for career and professional success; or that he saw religion as less important, or less dangerous, of a phenomenon; or that he believed the dangers of religion are better combated through quiet neglect rather than open confrontation; or that he wanted to avoid offending his pious mother, with whom he was especially close; or that he had learned a lesson from Hume’s unhappy encounters with the devout.<sup>49</sup> (These possibilities are not, of course, mutually exclusive.) Regardless, as a result of his caginess it is difficult to avoid a degree of speculation when considering Smith’s personal faith. If forced to apply a label to Smith’s religious views this observer would describe him as a skeptical deist (as opposed to an outright skeptic like Hume).<sup>50</sup> Smith was almost certainly not a believing Christian—he showed no sign of having accepted the divinity of Jesus, for example—and he seems to have been suspicious of most forms of religious devotion. Yet it is distinctly possible that he retained a belief in a distant, perhaps benevolent, higher power.

Of course, this would not have mattered a whit to the pious of Smith’s time: atheism, skepticism, and deism—all of which implied

DEAREST FRIENDS

disbelief *in Christianity*—were considered to be of a piece, and all of these terms were used regularly as marks of opprobrium. With regard to how Hume and Smith were viewed and treated by their contemporaries, the subtle theoretical distinction between Hume’s skepticism and Smith’s skeptical deism was far less consequential than the much bigger practical divergence between Hume’s forthrightness and Smith’s studied reticence. These contrary postures led to equally contrary reputations: Hume was christened “the Great Infidel” and was deemed unfit to teach the young—he twice sought professorships, but in both cases the clergy opposed his candidacy decisively—while Smith became a respected professor of moral philosophy. All of this, we will see, occasioned much teasing and bantering between them, but did not dampen their esteem and affection for one another in the slightest.