

Reading Smith Through the American Founding

Overview

The intellectual movements of the Scottish Enlightenment, American Revolution, and American Founding took place within a lifetime of one another, and it is clear that the American Founders were at least familiar with Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as of 1776, and some had certainly read the *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* by the time of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. This is not to say that Smith's ideas directly influenced the Founders, but rather that the Founders' ideas were formed, considered, and disseminated through a series of overlapping academic, political, and social circles. Simply put, they were contemporaries of one another, and so it is a worthy exercise to explore connections between them, using Smith as a lens through which to consider the American Founding.

First, we will consider a single line from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. This single sentence is to be read and considered for only for what it says, and what it seems, therefore, to mean. Based on the quote, write a draft answer to the Focus Question.

After you have completed a draft answer, you will be provided with American Founding Era documents, which you should read.

Once you have read the founding documents, turn to the provided excerpted selection from Smith, from which the initial sentence was drawn. This selection will provide context and a more complete meaning for the quotation you originally had to consider out of context.

After reading both the Founding Era documents and the Smith quotation in-context, revisit your draft answer to the Focus Question. If needed, revise it based on the additional understanding you gained through the complete readings.

Finally, consider both sets of documents together, and work to formulate answers to the Follow-Up Questions provided after the Smith excerpts.