

## The Theory of Moral Sentiments

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To read Adam Smith is a pure pleasure. He writes with a wit and an elegance, which makes you think of his contemporaries Hume and Gibbon. It is a limpid prose that proceeds elegantly, and you can almost behold in front of you the practised flow of his longhand, as he commits his thoughts to paper, only intermittently stopping to refill his quill. To read Adam Smith is also an unremitting pain. He seems mesmerized by his own oratory, and goes on and on. His beautiful observations do not seem to get anywhere, they do not accumulate, but seem instead to cancel each other out. He simply does not present a sustained argument, he proposes no thesis, but seems content to dwell in his vivid speculation, one idea following upon another for almost four hundred pages. The result is that although you are constantly charmed by his insights, you are also chagrined by their refusals to stick. You seem to retain nothing. As I read I am constantly marking down notable passages in the book. It is as if I do not pin them down physically, they will for ever be mentally lost. All of this is very puzzling, because after all the text is ostensibly structured into different parts, each of which is divided into sections consisting of chapters. Everything comes with a caption, but the captions are not particularly helpful, and the division is more like the formal national boundaries set down on maps, but with no relevance to the actual physical terrain. In the case of the text, there simply are no divisions, it flows on uninterruptedly. Clearly this is not a book to be read systematically, but one into which you dip at random, not unlike picking up pralines from a big candy box, abstaining from gorging yourself on the whole content. Remarkably though, at the end there is an appendix, in which Smith outlines a theory of how languages have evolved. I would claim that his theory is fatally flawed, but nevertheless it is interesting, and more to the point, his presentation of it is clear. He has a thesis, he has a purpose, and his arguments build up to a conclusion. It is easy to remember. Why should a theory of moral sentiment be so much more difficult than a theory of language? Can it simply be that Smith finds himself in a logical circle, and thus his argument can spin on in an infinite loop until either the author or the reader drops down from exhaustion?

It may be circular, because there seems to be no natural beginning, as there will be no natural end. It is symptomatic that what you would expect at the beginning, an introduction to previous moral theories, comes at the very end. So what are the points?

First is there a natural morality, or is what is right and just only a matter of formality? Secondly could one prescribe what is moral, or is it like language? As to the latter there are the rules of grammar as opposed to the suggestions of style. The same with moral behavior? Some things cannot simply be done, but there are also the finer shades of morality. How far are you supposed to go beyond the call of duty so to speak. Maybe some things can only be expected from the truly refined? Those are natural questions which Smith seems only to skirt around without ever getting any purchase.

Basically Smith is a stoic, or rather his attitude is a variant of stoicism. This becomes

clear in the introductory chapters when he discusses sympathy. He notes that, especially when it comes to pain, our powers of sympathy are feeble. What we are able to conjure up in our imagination, is but a feeble shadow of what the sufferer actually feels. In fact, and this is noteworthy, our imagination is more apt to be sympathetic to a pain related to the imaginative evocations rather than physical sensation. The deep sorrows are really those that pertain to the imagination. The cutting off of future prospects. The fall from riches to relative poverty. Even the pain we feel physically is sharpened by the context provided by the imagination. A pain that we know is temporary and will result in no permanent damage is much easier to endure, than one actually milder which portends to permanent injury. Even in torture, the physical pain must be subordinate to the fear induced by the possibility that even something far worse may be in the wings, and that there is no limit to the malice of your tormentors, and that you are entirely at their mercy. So I would suspect that a man of less imagination may be more liable to withstand pain, not necessarily because of greater courage and fortitude, but simply because he is spared the full effect of the horrors<sup>1</sup>. Smith also notes that there is an asymmetry. We are more liable to share the joys of another human beings than his sorrows. Part of it may be due to the fact that joys are usually the joys of the imagination not of the body. I would suspect that the pleasure that the body can enjoy pales besides the horrors that pain can inflict. This also goes for the grosser passions, as Smith refers to them, when gratified. This can be turned around. Smith shows contempt for the man who makes much of his physical discomfort. The point of the dignified stoicism of Smith is simply to view yourself as others view you. It does not mean that pain should not allowed to pain you, but you should not acknowledge more pain than the outside spectator can imaginatively sympathize with. In other words your pain should not be more to you, that it is to others, unaffected by it. This is not a kind of stoicism that asks that you be indifferent to suffering, only that you should not pay more heed to your own suffering than outsiders do to it.

This leads to the central fact that morality is a social phenomenon. Take away the context of society, and let each man be isolated unto himself. Then the notions of beauty and moral behavior simply fades away. When there are no outsiders to set limits, all virtues become impossible. And of course this leads to the central role of people around you, namely to act as a mirror. And Smith clearly thinks of conscience as being a social construct rather than being something God-given. Your conscience does indeed force you to look at yourself and the world as a third person. This is what makes it possible for us to put the happiness of the many above that of our own. This seems to us a rather exalted claim, and I wonder whether modern, pampered individuals are capable of such stoicism. But even if they are not, they may not be immune to the prickings of their conscience nevertheless. Still the third person perspective tend to prevail. A man who meets with a misfortune, say losing a leg, may initially be extremely upset at the prospects of humiliating inconveniences it will entail in the future. But sooner or later he gets used to it, and start to view it with the detachment of an outsider, getting resigned to the fact that it is part of the way things are. Agony cannot be made permanent. Social intercourse also helps, Smith advises, the one who is confined in a solitary position is much more likely to be engrossed

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<sup>1</sup> A man like Galileo, of remarkable imagination, only needed to be shown the instruments of torture to break down.

in himself, and everything that has happened to him tends to loom large. Simply talking to a friend is usually enough to shift the perspective.

The social nature of your conscience is highlighted by the fact that the further away that third and impartial spectator is situated from you, the weaker his constraints. If you are surrounded by people constantly indulging your acts, those are no longer subjected in the same high degree to the censure of your conscience. Thus in war considerations of justice play a very little role, and if your ambassador dupes a foreign minister, rather than being censured he is applauded. This does of course point to a dilemma, as much if not even more so, relevant in the modern age as it was back at the time of Smith. To what atrocities are we capable, when supported by all of those close to us? Does this act as an extenuating factor in assuaging our guilt, or should it be seen as a stern warning of what we are capable of, if our behaviour is subjected to just ordinary social conscience. Smith stresses that there are no general moral laws, but that rules of conduct are based upon experience. This allows, at least in principle, a great latitude of moral systems, each of which benefiting from the illusion of being innate.

Your highest aspiration, beyond the satisfaction of your animal needs, is to gain the approbation of your fellow beings and to evade their censure. Incidentally your power to satisfy your basest needs will be severely compromised would you fall into bad grace. Thus all our social interaction has but one goal, namely to impress our worthiness on our fellow beings. In particular to remain in their gaze and thus to be confirmed. As we say the need to be seen. You are praised for your praise-worthy deeds and blamed for your blame-worthy. We all want to be praised and avoid being blamed. But this can be seen as merely a manifestation of self-love. Morality must surely go beyond this? Smith makes the distinction between wanting praise and wanting to do praise-worthy deeds. The man who is satisfied with the former but not needing to do the latter is merely vain. The noble man wants to do the praise-worthy thing even if he gets no praise. It is enough for him to know that praise is his due, without it actually is bestowed on him. In other words, if we so desire, we can see this as a higher abstraction. Smith reminds us that there are people who willingly throw away their lives in order to acquire a post-mortem renown, the fruits of which they will never be able to directly enjoy, only anticipate in their imagination. What should we make of that? Indeed is it so different from doing a good deed and not be recognized for doing it? Does it not illustrate the fact that people may well be happy with having done something that ought to be appreciated, without actually benefiting from that appreciation? As an example he points to mathematicians. Those usually have the utmost assurance of the worth and importance of what they are doing, and thus they tend to be rather indifferent to reception they meet with the general public.

A noble man, unlike a weak one, is but embarrassed if praise is showered on him and he does not feel that he deserves it. If so he goes to great lengths to remove the illusion, and usually he does not need to do so, it is enough to indicate the state of affairs to be believed. Remarkably it is very different with the opposite experience. If you are falsely accused and thus blamed un-necessarily, the good man is mortified. While it is comparatively easy to rid yourself of undeserved praise, it is far harder to wash yourself clean of undeserved blame. Even the noble man is so dependent upon the good office of his fellow human beings. One would expect, Smith assumes citing Cicero, that being undeservedly blamed

would not be taken as a personal affront, after all it is directed against a different being than yourself, a being that has erred. Just as in a masked ball, if you encounter your friend dressed up as his enemy, you suffer his abuse with good humor, finding it more in the nature of a diversion than an offense. After all his venom is not directed to you, but to his enemy, who has nothing to do with you. Why this inconsistency he asks, and concludes that it might simply be part of human nature. In fact Smith repeatedly refers to human nature or simply Nature, just in the same way we nowadays refer as something having been brought about by natural evolution. In both cases the context is the same, namely that everything is arranged in such a way that it works. Occasionally Smith refers to God and his inscrutable ways. It is not clear whether one can entirely attribute this to being a figure of speech, or whether some conventional pieties are still at work.

Justice is indeed a key concept of morality, not only in the writings of Smith. It is tempting to see it as the moral analogue of truth. Injustice seems to engender the same kind of indignation as falsehood, and that indignation is provoked by considerations of principles rather than practicality. The falsehood may involve something trivial, or the injustice committed have no deeper implications, still we want to set the record straight. A man may instigate a law-suit in order to prove that he is right, in so doing he would never think of bribing the judges. On the other hand would his motivation be gain, bribing would be a natural option. Thus, Smith argues, would we be more concerned with the praise than the praise-worthy act itself, getting it with unfair means would certainly be a strong temptation. Still this idea of justice as being innate is at variance with the social construction of conscience which Smith has presented as well. Yet he seems to believe in it, and even suggests that the idea of an after-life is not so much based on the hopes of future rewards, as a way of getting rights and wrongs in the life here and now, rebalanced.

Vanity is a favorite target of Smith. The vain man only strives for the dressing not the substance, and ridiculous indeed are the objects to which he aspires. Yet, Smith sadly reflects, the emptiness of his ambition provide fodder for the economy. He makes a useful distinction between the proud man and the vain. The proud man has a very high opinion of himself and becomes offended and disdains you if you do not share it, while the vain man seeks your high opinion of him, and becomes mortified when it is not given. The proud man invites respect if seldom affection, while the vain man only contempt but is usually indulged as harmless. In fact there is a certain generosity in the vain man, his desire to make himself loved and his solicitation of your good opinion, will rather endear him to you than anything else. He himself, seems to value tranquility of mind higher than anything else, and thus see that as the ultimate purpose of gratification, achieved mainly through self-command of the baser passions. This is of course very consistent with his stoic attitude, the idea of stoicism being that nothing should be worthy of upsetting your peace of mind, least of all your own misfortunes. Without tranquility, Smith argues, there can be no real enjoyment, with it there is scarce nothing, in the words of the author, which is not capable of being amusing. Tranquility is in fact the ultimate goal, and the secret of life is that it is within reach of everyone. He recounts the tale of the ancient king of Epirus who explained to his favorite in great detail the number of conquests he was about to undertake. And what will you do then, the favorite asked his master. To sit down and enjoy myself and share a bottle with my friends. What is stopping you from doing this

now, he was asked.

One can go on and on picking up various tidbits. What is the difference between merely designing as opposed to actually accomplishing a mission? If a friend plans to do you a favour but fails to bring it about, you may be appreciative of his efforts, but the gratitude you feel would be incomparably greater would he succeed. Also a crime that has been merely planned but not brought about grates on us much less than one actually executed. The only exception possibly being high treason, Smith muses. Yet, this is somewhat illogical, his demerit should be the same in both cases, as sharing the same intention, and that his plans may be crossed is a case of fortuitous good luck, for which he deserves no credit. Then we have the opposite case, of someone causing harm unintentionally, through some unfortunate accident. We expect the hapless fellow at least to offer his apologies, even if he is unable to provide compensation, but why should he be singled out, his responsibility and guilt is hardly greater than that of a bystander? In a way the misfortune fell as much on himself as the victim. The conclusion is that justice in this life can only meted out as to actual actions, maybe it will be different in the lie hereafter, Smith speculates, supposedly tongue in cheek.

Why should we be happy when so many people are in misery. Smith scoffs at such admonishments. Partly because the misery is usually not known to us, and thus unable to engage our sympathetic imagination, but more importantly, according to the authors conviction, because to any one miserable there are twenty people happy and filled with gaiety and joy, or at least in tolerable circumstances, why should we not rejoice with them instead? In fact, as noted above, to sympathize with good fortunes, is far easier, at least as far as envy does not intervene. In fact Smith deplores the human tendency to admire, not to say worship, the fortunate, the powerful and the rich. Another kind of excessive affection, at least so censured by the moralists, is that we feel to our children. This is clearly human nature. Thus in the Bible we are admonished to honor our father and mother, but no such obligations are imposed on us as regards to our progeny. It is simple assumed that this is automatic. Yet we may regret this natural affection at least as to its excessive manifestation, but we never detest it and find it it easy to pardon.

The case of religion, especially as to its moral significance, is an issue it would be hard for Smith entirely to avoid. Invoking religion has many advantages. It would give an authoritative and canonical choice among the many competing claims based on different experiences. The laws of conduct would almost have the same force as the laws of nature, especially if one being is supposed to have laid down both. But this leads to other problems. Do we do good things just out of duty because we have been commanded to do so. Should a moral action not be performed out of the love we feel for it, not because it has been ordained? If course it points to the basic and more or less universally recognized problem of a all-pwerful deity. Does he really command our innermost thoughts and impulses? If so, the idea of rebellion would not be possible. In fact only because of our capability of rebellion and disobedience are we able to good things, even if those are not more than conforming and obedience itself.

So one can pick up the one piece of candy after the other, being amused with the way Smith distinguishes between avarice and ambition, both being born out of the same source, differing only by the scale of their objects. The miser indeed being as furious about

a half-penny as the man of ambition is concerned with the conquest of a kingdom. Or smile condenscendnngly on Smith voicing the prejudices and conventions of his day, as pointing out that humanity is the virtue of a owman, while generosity is that of a man.

As to the question of applicability of science and doing good to mankind as a whole, Smith shows great insight in observing that in those matters, the means usually takes predence over the ends. A King that is asked to benefit his subjects with the fruits of a good society, would be much better served for that ambition, would he not be made to dwell so much on the future happiness of people he may not be concerned with and thus find abstract, as to be shown the beautiful intricacy of a well-run state, how the one institution fits with the other into a beautiful whole. Is this not what I have always expected. A medical man devotes himself not so much out of his passion to help humanity, as out of the passion engendered by his curiosity. The former is a most commendable virtue and one which he certainly would not deny but rather exalt as the ultimate motivations, yet it is incapable of permanently stimulating the imagination.

His final appendix on the theory of language acquisition is quite interesting and as noted memorable. He imagines that language is like any technological invention, something that came piecemeal and with subsequent improvements. Thus in a state of nature man did not know how to speak. Then he invented names for objects, and gradually come to understand that a proper name so to speak could stand for a more general thing. Thus mother need not be your own mother, but could denote any kind of mother, just as cave did not need to only refer to your own habitat but anything that looked like it and was used for similar purposes. With the abstraction of nouns came the need for qualification, and thus the various adjectives, which started out abstract directly. Then there was a certain concordance between qualifying adjective and noun, which he explained by a musical principle. Also nouns started to have intrinsic endings just to denote their function in a sentence. Hence the highly inflected character of ancient tongues as Latin and Greek, But with the diversification of language and the contact between different groups came the need to learn other languages as an adult. This led to an inevitable simplification, The foreigner could not be bothered by all the inflections and resorted to the use of prepositions, which constituted in Smith view the pinnacle of abstraction in language, and arrived at the very end. Hence Italian formed out of Latin essentially as a pidgin, to use modern terminology. Smith regrets this trend, he finds the old languages such as Latin and Greek greatly superior to the modern languages such as English. In the old and inflected languages you were able to express yourself with much more economy, what in English requires a lot of words, can be very succinctly said in Latin. Or even worse, the inflected structure of say Latin (Greek was even more inflected) allowed you to connect different words in a sentence, without having to pay any attention to word order, something that is impossible in English. Hence they were capable of sentences of far greater complexity. With the beauty of the old the new cannot compete, because in the inflectional patterns, there is natural music embedded. Maybe he had a point.

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