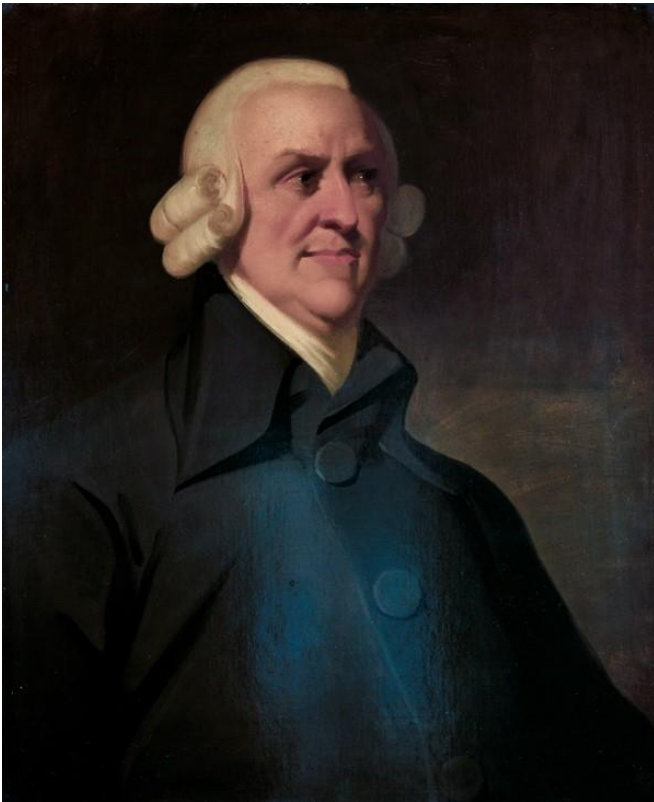


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Sympathy (in Adam Smith's moral philosophy)

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Mots-clés

Benevolence

Conduct

Imagination

Morality

Sympathy

Résumé

Adam Smith is best known as the author of *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, where, to most readers, he is the champion of the free market and the pursuit of economic self-interest. Much less appreciated, however, is his first work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which paints quite a different picture of human sociability. Instead of relating to each other solely out of self-interest, Smith's political economy also recruited moral notions, like sympathy, which Smith thought were absolutely essential for the individual's development into a responsible agent who could act appropriately in commercial society.

‘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.’¹ Few other statements in history have ever been received as so self-evident in their meaning. Written by Adam Smith in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776 (hereafter *WN*), the isolated interpretation of these lines still shapes how Smith’s legacy persists in the public imaginary. Often hailed as a founding father of capitalism, Smith, we are told, is not just a champion of the free market, but also of the unrestrained pursuit of individual self-interest. Insofar as human beings are sociable creatures in Smith’s thought, this line of thinking would say they relate to each other only transactionally. By anachronistically dressing Smith in a utilitarian garb, this reading sees his view of individuals as interest-maximising agents to whom it is of little import whether their counterparts mutually benefit from their interactions, or whether the agents themselves believe their actions morally appropriate so long as their individual interests are served.

Although pervasive, the egotistical characterisation of man Smith is often given credit for sits uneasily against the principles of Smith’s lesser-known first work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter *TMS*).² Originally published in 1759, in *TMS* Smith develops his ideas not only about self-interest, but also about the propensity for humans to sympathise with others (a term, as we shall see, that held a very different meaning to Smith than the one we would ascribe to it today).

To the historian, of course, it is of no surprise that Smith’s first major work should have concerned moral psychology, and not the nature of wealth and economic development for which he is better remembered. From 1751, Smith worked at Glasgow University, where he eventually became a professor of moral philosophy. Thoroughly engaged in the debates of his day, Smith did not agree that human sociability was characterised solely by the pursuit of self-interest or vanity, as Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville would have it, but neither did he agree with his mentor, Francis Hutcheson, that humanity harboured an innate moral sense characterised by benevolence. Instead, Smith wanted to offer an account of human morality that could accurately explain our everyday experiences of moral decision-making, whether self-interested or benevolent.³ This account is given in *TMS*, where Smith argues that humans are not only naturally sociable creatures, but that this sociability produces an outward sense of morality that involves, but nevertheless goes beyond, individual self-interest. Indeed, we need not look further than the opening pages of *TMS* to complicate the egotistic picture of man so easily derived from *WN*. As Smith tells us:

‘How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.’ (Smith, *TMS*, 13)

For Smith, it was simply self-evident that the ‘original passions of human nature’ – of which he mentions sentiments like pity and compassion – meant that human sociability often involved mutual happiness and the consideration of others beyond the individual’s own wants and desires (Smith, *TMS*, 13). But how is it, Smith asks, that humans came to form sentiments like pity and compassion, how is it we relate to the experiences of others? Since, Smith reasoned, we cannot directly experience what our companions feel – i.e., we cannot inhabit their body and physically feel as they feel – we instead imagine ourselves into their situation, then we divine what we would experience in their circumstances (Smith, *TMS*, 13-14). Smith called this process ‘sympathy’, but it goes far beyond simply recognising the sorrow of others as we would through moral sentiments like pity or compassion (Smith, *TMS*, 15).

What is key here is to recognise that sympathy does not simply replicate the passions of another in our own mind but involves *imagining ourselves into their situation*. It is not necessary, for example, that we experience the same passion as our companion when sympathising with them. As Smith notes by way of example, we often ‘blush for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour’ (Smith, *TMS*, 16). This may be because we ourselves regard the other’s action as inappropriate given the specific context, whereas the other does not. Or perhaps we have better understood the situation and the socially acceptable responses to it, whereas the other, had they known better, would have acted differently. Sympathy, in this way, does not replicate the sentiments of another in our own mind, but helps us understand the situation, passions, and motivations of others.

Indeed, through the imaginative act of placing ourselves in the situation of another, Smith thought the process of sympathy ultimately helped individuals come to proper moral judgement. As we ‘spectate’ upon another’s situation, we begin to judge whether we deem their feelings appropriate based on how we ourselves would react to it. Should their passions ‘be in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator’ they appear ‘just and proper’, but when the spectator ‘finds that they do not coincide with what he feels, they necessarily appear to him unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes which excite them’ (Smith, *TMS*, 22). By so adjudicating the passions of our fellow man, we in turn pass judgement on whether those passions themselves constitute a justified basis for conduct.

Of course, Smith also thought sympathy could cut both ways. In Smith’s moral psychology, sympathy not only allows us to judge the conduct of others, but it also helps us reflect on and regulate our own. We do this, Smith says, by imagining how other people would likely experience, and therefore judge, our actions. And in our attempt ‘to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it’, we effectively divide ourselves in two (Smith, *TMS*, 133-136). On the one hand, we have the individual agent, and on the other, Smith’s ‘impartial spectator’, the individual’s imaginative attempt to gauge the expectations and likely reaction of their peers toward their own conduct. The spectator, in this way, is the imagined norms and moral codes of society made real by the individual’s moderation of their own actions to heed them.

Through the process of sympathy and the impartial spectator, therefore, Smith adopts much of the stoic tradition’s emphasis on duty and self-command, but he rejects stoicism’s

characterisation of a natural, rational, or providential moral universe. Indeed, for Smith, moral norms are not universal nor are they divined by reason. Just as our sympathy with another changes according to the particularities of their situation, we imagine different expectations and norms at work based on our past experiences of what is deemed socially acceptable in the particular context at hand. This, for Smith, is more of an emotional capacity than a calculative one, and he thought it made perfect sense given our everyday experiences (Smith, *TMS*, 52-53). We know, for example, that we should not laugh at a funeral, but this is not because we have catalogued and processed all of our prior experiences of events involving death and sorrow to figure out how we should respond to them. Instead, we do not laugh at a funeral because it simply *feels* like the wrong thing to do. This feeling, Smith would nevertheless recognise, is a product of our particular prior experiences and sentiments, but years of calling upon the spectator by way of our imagination have made this process instinctive and habitual – an internalised emotional sense – rather than a product of calculated reason.

Both sympathy and the impartial spectator, in this way, are emotional capacities acquired through social experience, not innate, rational faculties. Indeed, Smith goes as far to say that should an individual grow up outside of society, ‘some solitary place, without any communication with his own species’, they would not be able to reflect on their internal motivations, nor judge proper conduct, at all (Smith, *TMS*, 133-134). Much like how Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw mankind in a rudimentary, infantile condition in the state of nature, but without John Locke’s provision for natural moral law, Smith thought individuals needed to relate to one another to form moral sentiments. Indeed, without the reaction of his peers, the solitary man has no ‘mirror’ through which he can judge his own conduct. But ‘bring him into society’:

‘[...] and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind.’ (Smith, *TMS*, 133-134).

So for Smith, humans not only attempt to sympathise with their fellow-men by way of their imagination, but they also constantly estimate and seek to adhere to the moral codes of the particular society of which they are part. But why, we should ask, did Smith think we are so interested in the passions that motivate both ourselves and others? What is it that drives us to understand and judge our respective situations? Well, according to Smith, sympathy is initially motivated by a form of self-interest, but it comes to perform an entirely social function. In the first instance, we want to sympathise with others, Smith says, because ‘nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary’ (Smith, *TMS*, 18). In other words, we seek concord, companionship and like-mindedness for the comfort and pleasure that accompanies them. But through this search for affirmation,

indeed, in the pleasure of finding mutual agreement and the displeasure of differing passions and opinions, Smith thought individuals come to develop interpersonal systems for judging proper conduct and establishing moral norms in society.

As detailed regarding the impartial spectator, we can never truly stand as an objective judge of our own conduct; we can only remove ourselves from our situation and imagine how our peers – how the broader society in which we inhabit – would judge our actions. It is in this effort to moderate both our own conduct and the conduct of others that moral norms, imagined in the process of sympathy, come to be established in society. But where other philosophers like Rousseau saw society's norms as corruptive of and oppressive to the individual, Smith believed individuals willingly tempered their conduct to socially acceptable levels out of a natural desire to please others and, in turn, be praised themselves. As Smith argues, 'nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend his brethren. She taught him to feel pleasure in their favourable, and pain in their unfavourable regard' (Smith, *TMS*, 140).

Yet if individual morality only rests upon the desire for praise, have we not arrived at a Mandevillian morality, where private vice leads to public benefit, where we only act virtuously because we desire the esteem that accompanies it? Smith accepts this can indeed occur, but it is 'only the weakest and most superficial of mankind who can be much delighted with that praise which they themselves know to be altogether unmerited' (Smith, *TMS*, 140). In most cases, Smith believes a natural desire for praise still allows man to be truly virtuous, because the praise we seek is not only from others, but from ourselves. By habitually spectating and judging our own conduct through the impartial spectator, Smith thought individuals came to internalise society's expectations, essentially making them one's individual conscience (Smith, 60). In this way, the individual's desire to be praised for good conduct is not simply 'a desire of being approved of' but also 'a desire of being what ought to be approved of; or of being what he himself approves of in other men.' (Smith, *TMS*, 140). We are simply not satisfied, says Smith, 'to be loved', we must also be 'lovely' (Smith, *TMS*, 136).

A far cry from the apostle of selfishness he is so often branded, we have seen how Smith characterised sympathy as a deeply interpersonal and sociable endeavour. Through a process of sympathising with others by way of the imagination, Smith thought humans constantly estimate, judge, and attend to others by either imagining what it would be like to experience their situation or, through the impartial spectator, reflecting on the motivations and consequences of their own conduct. This process, moreover, is made possible by human socialisation and in turn becomes key to the proper functioning of society. It establishes moral norms and serves as a means by which we can judge good conduct from the bad.

At this point, however, Smith's ideas may seem problematic. If we have a deeply sociable creature derived from *TMS*, and a deeply individualist one apparent in *WN*, do we not have a contradiction, inconsistency, or simple change in Smith's thought? How could the author who emphasised the instrumental role of sympathy and the impartial spectator also be he who appealed to the selfishness of the butcher, the brewer, and the baker?

These were indeed some of the first questions put by Smith's German readers in the early nineteenth century, leading to what has been termed 'The Adam Smith Problem' in Smithian historiography.⁴ Essentially, the problem hinges on whether *WN* can be understood separately from *TMS*, or whether they must be taken together as single project. Given Smith published *WN* in 1776, some twenty-seven years after the *TMS*, it may be tempting to see a transition in Smith's attentions from the social to the economic, and consequently a shift in his view of man from the sympathetic to the selfish. What this view misses, however, is that whilst the *TMS* was first published in 1759, it underwent six editions through to 1790, signalling Smith's ongoing commitment to the text. And as many scholars have pointed out, reconciling the Smith of *TMS* with the Smith of *WN* is not so difficult when we take account of Smith's 'larger project' – acknowledged by Smith himself in the advertisement to the sixth edition of *TMS* – which reveals Smith intended the *TMS* to be read not only alongside *WN*, but also Smith's unwritten history of jurisprudence (Hodder 34).⁵

In this reading, the workings of sympathy can be seen as operative even in the most often deployed examples of selfishness in Smith's work. Let us return to the infamous lines of *WN*:

'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 own necessities but of their advantages.' (Smith, *WN*, 19)

When read through the principle of sympathy, we can see here that Smith is not arguing for the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest but highlighting the instrumental role of evaluating another's self-interest to engage in commercial exchange. We must imaginatively adopt the other's situation, gauge their needs and desires based upon what we imagine we would want ourselves, and determine how we might satisfy them with what we have to offer. Some desires will be unpalatable to us based on our own judgement of their situation, or what we have learned is commonly expected in such business, and the exchange may fail. Other desires we can justify, and in the process of mutual sympathy we come to an exchange that is mutually beneficial. This is how each individual, by pursuing their own self-interest by way of the self-interest of others, can eventually 'produce an end which was no part of [their] intention', the entire prosperity of society (Smith, *WN*, 445). This is how, for Smith, the free pursuit of individual self-interest, and the sympathetic principle harboured within, serves to promote the social good.

1. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* [1776] Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2011), Book 1, Chapter 2, p. 19.

2. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [ed. Duglad Stewart, London: Henry G. Bohn, 1759] (London: Penguin, 2009).

3. For a more systematic and fuller exploration of Smith's project in *TMS*, see Craig Smith, 'Morality and Sympathy', in *Adam Smith* (Newark: Polity Press, 2020), p. 40-66.

4. For more on the historiography of the 'Adam Smith Problem' and how it has developed over time, see: Doğan Göçmen, *The Adam Smith Problem: Human Nature and Society in The Theory of Moral Sentiments and The Wealth of Nations* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007); Leonidas Montes, 'Das Adam Smith Problem' in *ibid.*, *Adam Smith in Context* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 15-56; Christopher Hodder, *A Structured Approach to the Adam Smith Problem*. PhD thesis (University of York, 2016), p. 21-34; Smith, Adam Smith, p. 155-178.
 5. Eric Schliesser, 'The Theory of Moral Sentiments' in Ryan Patrick Hanley (ed.), *Adam Smith: His Life, Thought, and Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 33-34.
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[Of The Love of Fame \(1734\)](#)