



Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

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Abstract

This review identifies at least six different kinds of fellow-feeling in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The six kinds are (i) the mirroring of emotions; (ii) altruism; (iii) judgment of pitch of emotions/actions; (iv) judgment of merit of emotions/actions; (v) friendship-and-love; and (vi) aspiration that leads to admiration. Smith does not list them side-by-side. This side-by-side listing promises to help thinkers to see how to assemble them to construct a coherent and systematic framework on how to amalgamate three moments of behavior: the emotional, the rational, and the moral.

Keywords Mirroring of emotions · Altruism · Judgment of pitch of emotions/actions · Judgment of merit of emotions/actions · Friendship-and-love · Aspiration and admiration

The sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [TMS] was published with great anticipation. However, it turned out a disappointment. Professor Adam Smith failed to fill the lacuna of the previous editions, namely, construct the needed systematic framework that links together TMS' diverse sentiments and phenomena such as beneficence, friendship-and-love, self-aggrandizement, malevolence, justice, love of country, love of humankind, and conscience. He also failed to explain if the approbation of preferences and actions relating to friendship-and-love differs from the approbation of other preferences and actions. These failures are regrettable, as the sixth edition is definitely the last. Smith died a few months after its publication.

Still, TMS promises to attract a wide audience beyond the lovers of philosophy. Diverse thinkers will find TMS a useful springboard on how to think about human behavior. It is difficult to study such behavior as it is usually the outcome of the amalgamation of three moments: the emotional, the rational, and the moral.

This review cannot show how TMS could be the springboard regarding the emotions-rational-moral nexus. It has a less ambitious aim: it aims to demonstrate that TMS contains at least six basic kinds of fellow-feeling. These six

kinds promise to become indispensable blocks for any effort to formulate the emotions-rationality-morality nexus that characterizes almost all behavior.

While Smith uses the term “sympathy” to denote all these six kinds of fellow-feeling, the review prefers “fellow-feeling” to act as the portmanteau term. This review reserves the term “sympathy” to denote only one out of the six kinds of fellow-feeling.

The task of identifying the six kinds of fellow-feeling buried throughout TMS is not an easy one. Once identified, however, it becomes easier to notice them. Luckily, Smith uses different terms to denote them, but uses these terms briefly and stealthily. Here are the different terms that Smith uses:

- i) “transfused” passions, supposed to denote mirrored feelings;
- ii) “beneficent tendency”, meant to denote altruistic preferences;
- iii) “propriety or impropriety” of action to which the term “sympathy” is restricted, presumed to highlight the approbation of pitch or proportionality of the observed emotions/actions given the incentive;
- iv) “merit or demerit” of action, assumed to signify the approbation of the merit or value of the preferences behind the observed emotions/actions;
- v) “mutual sympathy”, taken to indicate the preferences related to friendship-and-love; and

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- vi) “peculiar sympathy”, regarded to suggest the preferences related to the adulation of the rich-and-powerful.

At the start of TMS, Smith explicitly distinguishes the transfusion of passion (i) from the propriety-of-action approbation (sympathy) (iii). He also, at the start of TMS, delineates the propriety-of-action approbation (iii) from the merit-of-action approbation (iv). However, Smith never lists side-by-side these six kinds of fellow-feeling. This review hopes that the proposed side-by-side listing would sharpen the mind in the effort of formulating the emotions-rationality-morality nexus, or at least aid the attempt to reconstruct the missing systematic framework in TMS.

1 First: “transfused” Passions as Mirrored Passions

At the start of TMS, Smith (1976, p. 11) uses the term “transfused” passions to denote the copying or mirroring of passions from one person to another. The term “transfused” passions follows a discussion, from the 2nd to the 4th paragraphs at the start of TMS, of the automatic nature of this kind of fellow-feeling. Agreeing with David Hume, without mentioning his name, Smith states that fellow-feelings involve the copying or mirroring of the original emotions in the sense of mimicking, i.e., without any examination, reflection, or thinking.

Smith marshals a few examples in the 3rd paragraph: spectators automatically shrink and draw back their leg or arm when they “see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person”; and men “of the most robust make” start to have “sensible soreness” in their eyes (start crying) when they look at someone with “sore eyes”.

Starting with the 6th paragraph, Smith starts to qualify his support of Hume’s view. The “transfused” passions are not the exclusive meaning of fellow-feeling. They are the case only “upon some occasions”.

Smith proceeds in the 7th paragraph to advance another meaning of sympathy, what is discussed below as the “propriety or impropriety” of action judgment. What concerns us regarding the function of sympathy as mirroring, i.e., the diffusion of passion, is that it might help us explain why people go to parties, prefer to mingle with people who are in a good mood, and avoid people who are in a bad mood. Such interaction and mimicking can be seen as the basis of the spread of fashion, mob behavior, and the constellation around a single supplier of a good as opposed to an equally effective, or even better, supplier of the same good.

2 Second: “Beneficent Tendency” as Altruist Preference

The second meaning is when Smith (1976, p. 73) employs the term “beneficent tendency” or “beneficence” (1976, pp. 78–91) to denote the function of fellow-feeling as altruism. Altruism is destined to be a confusing term as it can denote philanthropy, love of one’s children, acting with generosity to capture the warm glow of altruism, or acting with generosity to capture the applause of the audience. The function of beneficence for Smith, and what “altruism” should be restricted to denote, expresses the preference of the benefactor regarding the wellbeing of a potential beneficiary. It does not even necessarily indicate the act of sharing a resource.

We attain the beneficent sense of fellow-feeling at the famous commencing paragraph of TMS: “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 1976, p. 9).

Contrary to the premise of the so-called “Adam Smith Problem” (ASP) (see, e.g., Dickey 1986), the beneficent tendency toward others, i.e., altruism, does not stand as an appendage, an afterthought, or a superfluous preference to self-interest. Both self- and other-interest are two side of the same coin, namely, the interest-based preferences continuum (Khalil, 1990, 2023a). Thus, the focus is the advancement of wellbeing, and how decision makers (DMs) go about such advancement, irrespective of the focus on whether the beneficiary is the self or the other.

It is obvious, from the standpoint of efficiency, that Nature appoints the decision maker (DM) to take care of his or her interest, as the DM is most knowledgeable of such interest. Once the DM sufficiently attends self-interest, the DM can attend the interest of the most familiar DMs, and then the interest of less familiar DMs, i.e., acquaintances. That is, the DM is not ordained to take care of self-interest as a matter of scripted law. Rather the DM is recommended to do so out of efficiency consideration: the pertinent information regarding the interest of, say, Samuel is mostly available to Samuel. Likewise, the pertinent information regarding the wellbeing of Samuel’s neighbor is more easily available to Samuel than to far-away neighbor. To wit, Smith titles the chapter in Part VI in which he discusses how to prioritize the individuals that fall under our care as issue of the order of importance: “Of the Order in which Individuals are recommended by Nature to our care and attention.”

From this discussion, the order is just what is “recommended by Nature”—as if the matter is decided by what is best for Nature as the maximizer. The main criterion in this order determination is efficiency: Each DM is primarily

assigned to worry about self-interest because he or she knows more about the situation and, hence, “fitter and abler to take care of himself than of any other person” (Smith 1976, p. 219). After focusing on the self, the DM attends the wellbeing of family members not because of some instinct, but because they are more impacted by his or her actions than far away others (Smith 1976, p. 219).

Smith (1976, pp. 308–313) reserves the severest critical comments for the system of “Dr. Mandeville”, who is incidentally a physician by training. Smith faults him for conflating self-interest with selfishness. Smith went to a great length to defend self-interest, namely, as an act commanded by Nature to take care of our own welfare. Meanwhile, he regarded selfishness as something else, namely, the act where the DM gives more weight to his or her own self-interest than justified or warranted.

In short, the APS will end as a footnote in the history of ideas, as the opposition of self- and other-interest is banal. As the economists (e.g., Becker 1978) have shown, the economics way of thinking is about efficiency. That is, economics is not about the content of preferences, which can be self- or other-oriented. The way the economists overcome the self- contra other-interest dichotomy is by adding an extra element regarding the wellbeing of the beneficiary in the DM’s utility function. Simply put, self- and other-interest run along a continuum that contributes to utility.

3 Third: “Propriety or Impropriety” of Action Approbation as Sympathy

As noted above, starting with the 7th paragraph of TMS, Smith directly criticizes the view, without mentioning Hume’s name, that fellow-feeling is exclusively about “transfused” passions, i.e., the copying and diffusion of emotions. Smith states: “This [Hume’s view] however does not hold universally.”

For Smith fellow-feeling is additionally about *approbation*. The DM does not only engage in unreflective mimic of the observed emotion/action. The DM, in fact in many occasions, also judges whether the observed emotion/action is an exaggeration given the cause or incentive.

Let us restrict the term “sympathy” to denote the fellow-feeling in this sense of the judgment, i.e., regarding the proportionality of the effect relative to the cause. In this sense, sympathy is not about the raw emotions, but rather about approving the raw emotions.

Smith starts in earnest, in the 6th paragraph at the outset of TMS, to be decisive, namely, distinguishing the “transfused” passions from the judgment of propriety of emotions and feelings. Smith clearly departs from Hume’s narrow view of fellow-feeling as almost exclusively about

mirroring, i.e., the “transfused” passions. For Smith, fellow-feeling is not *exclusively* a mechanism that allows for the mimicking, replication, correspondence, and propagation of sentiments through the population, as best epitomized in mob behavior mentioned above. Rather sympathy allows the DM to judge his or her own decisions, which is the origin of self-command.

Smith (e.g., 1976, p. 25) discusses “self-command” or “self-government” as the outcome of the act of the DM to ensure that his or her reaction to incentive is not extravagant or disproportional. Self-command ensures propriety in the sense of the moderation of the pitch of reaction. In many occasions, he calls “self-command” a virtue. However, he must not have regarded it a virtue that stand symmetrical to virtues such as benevolence, magnanimity, and so on (Smith 1976, p. 25). Smith continues to say that we admire virtue even when we do not approve of its excess, i.e., does not pass the propriety judgment (Smith 1976, p. 25).

Hence, mere propriety—or what Smith (1976, p. 67) calls “propriety or impropriety” of action—is not a judgment of the worth or merit of action. It is a judgment only of whether the action is *proportional* to the stimulus or incentive—regardless of its worth or merit. Whatever is the worth of the preference, even when it is non-worthy as when motivated by malicious preferences, the question is whether the choice is an over-reaction: did the DM “reduce the violence of the passions to that pitch of moderation” (Smith 1976, p. 26).

But how does sympathy work as the mechanics behind mere propriety, i.e., self-command? The mechanics is simple. If the DM over-reacts in response to incentive, say, eats more than is justified by hunger, the impartial spectator cannot enter into the emotions of the DM under focus, i.e., his or her appetite for food. In order to entice the sympathy, which amounts to approbation, of the impartial spectator, the DM eats what is proportional to hunger. Likewise, in order to entice the sympathy of the impartial spectator, the DM has to lower the pitch of anger, as this allows the impartial spectator to travel and enter the station of the DM under focus. Such entering is the sympathy mechanics, which means that the DM is moderating the expression of anger.

In effect, sympathy is this role does the heavy lifting of ensuring efficiency, the moderation of pitch of reaction (Smith 1976, pp. 25–26).

Here it is assumed that the impartial spectator knows the DM’s incentive, which is hard to assume in the case of hunger. However, this assumption turns out to be innocuous: the impartial spectator is the DM himself who watches the self from a distance. Smith states this clearly when he likens self-judgment to the judgment of others: they are the same because the impartial spectator in both cases stands in

the same station, the station of the “equitable judge” (Smith 1976, pp. 109–110).

The act of approbation or disapprobation of pitch turns out to be the core meaning of rational choice for standard economics: choices are rational if they are proportional to their respective incentives (Becker 1978). Sympathy in the role of judgment of pitch amounts to what Smith (1976, p. 67) later calls the “propriety of action” judgment, where the term propriety here strictly denotes efficiency.

The mere propriety judgment is orthogonal to the issue of whether the DM is judging the propriety of the action of the self or the propriety of the action of another person. Both judgments—viz., whether judging the self or the other—lie along the same continuum. At the start of Part III, Smith (1976, p. 109) shows why both judgments lie along the same continuum. He argues that we judge our own passions and actions in the same way we judge the passions and actions of others.

It would be naïve to suppose that people are not motivated in self-judgments. To wit, Smith (1976, pp. 156–161) dedicates a full chapter discussing self-deceit. He defines self-deceit as the tendency to use double-standards that favor our own interest or view, and then cover it up from the self. He explained the origin of many “general rules” as measures undertaken by humans to staves off self-deceit.

When Smith mentions for the first time the propriety-of-action judgment at the start of Part I (Smith 1976, p. 18), he mentions it in juxtaposition to another judgment that was already intimated above. Namely, it is the merit-of-action judgment. He repeats the juxtaposition at the very beginning of Part II (1976, p. 67). So, it is apt to turn our attention to the merit-of-action judgment.

4 Fourth: “Merit or Demerit” of Action Approbation as Empathy

While we restricted Smith’s favorite term “sympathy” to denote the propriety-of-action judgment, we may invent the term “empathy” to denote the merit-of-action judgment. This shall prove not to be an arbitrary assignment of the term, as empathy in everyday language connotes support and understanding of the principal’s motive. There is no empathy with the principal’s feeling if it conveys self-aggrandizement and, worse, hate and other dark emotions. However, there is empathy, without judging the pitch of the emotions (i.e., sympathy), if the principal’s feeling conveys the usual joy and pain associated with wellbeing.

When the impartial spectator empathizes with the emotions/actions of the principal, he or she is judging that the preference behind the principal’s choice is non-repulsive. It would be non-repulsive in two senses for Smith. First, when

the preference does not spring from the active pursuit of ego enlargement, what is known as “self-aggrandizement”. Second, when the preference does not spring from malevolence (Smith 1976, p. 67), such as the “malicious pleasure”, i.e., *schadenfreude* (Smith 1976, p. 68). The impartial spectator simply cannot empathize with emotions/actions that are based on repulsive preferences, even when the consequences of the emotions/actions happen to be accidentally beneficial.

To be clear, empathy differs from altruism, i.e., what Smith calls “beneficent tendency.” Empathy is the *judgment* of an act along the issue of whether the preference behind it is valuable or what Smith calls “meritorious”: is the action intended to improve wellbeing? Smith calls it the “merit of action” judgment, where the term merit here strictly denotes worthiness of the preference.

In contrast, altruism is the motive behind the action itself. The motive is meritorious by definition.

In short, while altruism may lead to a beneficent act, empathy does not, as one motivates and the other judges.

Smith noted that we “sympathize”, i.e., in the sense of “empathize,” with the joy of others when they experience prosperity, irrespective of the cause of the good fortune (Smith 1976, p. 70). Likewise, we “sympathize” with the sorrow of others, irrespective of what has occasioned the distress (Smith 1976, p. 70).

In fact, we become angry, demanding retribution if not vengeance, when the sorrow is inflicted by a murderer, who denies the innocent person prosperity. In this case, we feel what would the slain person feel if he or she was alive (Smith 1976, p. 71).

Smith calls such sympathies “natural sympathy”—and such fellow-feeling should not be confused with “sympathy” in the sense of the mechanics behind the propriety-of-action judgment, i.e., what is behind self-command that moderates the pitch of the emotions. It becomes clear that Smith (1976, p. 67) calls such natural sympathy the “merit of action” approbation.

The merit-of-action approbation amounts to the assessment of whether the content of choice, and not its pitch, is conducive to wellbeing. This can be debatable, depending on the diverse opinions of the order of preferences. The most obvious disagreement can occur regarding intertemporal discounting, i.e., how far-sighted one should be and, hence, abstain from present entertainment and luxury. However, the approbation is swift and clear, i.e., not the subject of opinion, in the cases of repulsive preferences. The role of the impartial spectator in these cases is to abstain from according approval, on the basis that the preferences are non-meritorious.

In such approbation, the judgment concerns the content, i.e., not the pitch, of the choice. If the content is not

repulsive, i.e., found to be conducive to wellbeing, we empathize with it in the sense of approving its merit.

Empathy is indicative of non-repulsiveness, which should not be conflated with squeamishness. Smith calls squeamishness “excessive sympathy,” as when the DM faints upon watching amputations. He explains that squeamishness arises from the “novelty” of the experience (Smith 1976, p. 30).

Smith immediately digresses and wonders that the repeated watching of tragedies on the stage does not, in comparison, weaken out sensibility as the case of watching many amputations (Smith 1976, p. 30). Smith does not explain why this is the case. The difference probably lies with the difference between empathy, which is the concern with interest-based emotions, and mutual sympathy, discussed next, regarding love-based emotions that inform tragedies.

5 Fifth: “Mutual Sympathy” (“Habitual Sympathy”) as Friendship-and-Love

Smith (1976, p. 13) explicitly uses the term “mutual sympathy” in the title of Chap. 2 at the outset of TMS and twice again (Smith 1976, p. 220) when he discusses affinity and love among members of the same family. The term denotes friendship-and-love (see Khalil 2023b). Smith (1976, pp. 220–221) uses an equivalent term, “habitual sympathy”, when such fellow-feeling becomes entrenched among the members of the same family.

A careful reading of the said Chap. 2 (Smith 1976, pp. 13–16) reveals that Smith views the pleasure of friendship-and-love to be qualitatively different from the pleasure of consuming ordinary, pecuniary goods. He notes an apparent anomaly: how come the consolation of a friend for a loss, say, the loss of a child, gives rise to a pleasant emotion? One can understand the pleasant emotion of friendship when the substrate is positive—as in the case of congratulating a friend for, say, a promotion or winning an award. But how can we explain the anomalous pleasant feeling of sharing an emotion with a friend when the substrate emotion is negative, i.e., when the emotion is grief as in the loss of a child?

Smith solves the puzzle by a simple thesis: no matter what the original or substrate emotion is, *the mere fact of sharing that emotion with friends* always gives rise to a pleasurable satisfaction. The fellow feeling of mutual sympathy obviously differs from the fellow-feeling of “transfused” passions. If only “transfused” passions are operating, the spectator would only feel sad, i.e., never experience the pleasant feeling of friendship, upon mirroring the principal’s original sadness.

Moreover, mutual sympathy differs from sympathy as defined above, namely, as strictly about propriety judgment. As judgment, sympathy amounts to approval, and hence associated with a pleasant feeling, when the spectator judges that the observed sadness or observed joy is proportional to the stimulus. Otherwise, sympathy amounts to disapproval, and hence associated with unpleasant feeling, when the spectator judges that the observed sadness or observed joy is disproportional to the stimulus. Thus, while mutual sympathy is always pleasant, sympathy is associated with pleasant feeling only if it amounts to approving the pitch of the observed emotions.

To wit, Smith (1976, p. 31) explicitly argues that mutual sympathy is about friendship and, hence, should not be conflated with sympathy-as-judgment. Smith (1976, pp. 38–40) continues to link friendship with love—but without mentioning the term “mutual sympathy”. He only mentions the term again in a much later part of TMS when, as noted above, he discusses the love among family members, i.e., “habitual sympathy”. For Smith, habitual sympathy is repetitive mutual sympathy—i.e., when the love between friends is stretched over a long period of time.

6 Sixth: “Peculiar Sympathy” as the Adulation of the Rich-and-Powerful

Smith (1976, p. 51) employs the term “peculiar sympathy” only once in TMS. He employs it to denote the odd emotion of awe that people express toward kings, greats, and others perceived to occupy a station above their own. The “peculiar” fellow-feeling turns out to be important: It is the kernel of the origin of the “distinction of Ranks”—as the title of the pertinent chapter announces (Smith 1976, p. 50; see Khalil 2019). In fact, the “peculiar” fellow-feeling turns out to be of critical importance: It is the core of Smith’s concept of the state (see Khalil, 2005).

Why is the peculiar fellow-feeling of such importance? It rather captures why we tend to imagine the condition of people of higher rank in “those delusive colours”, as if the condition is “a perfect and happy state” (Smith 1976, pp. 51–52).

For Smith, this fellow-feeling is “peculiar” because it cannot be related to any of the other five kinds of fellow-feeling. Here, the peculiar fellow-feeling is neither concerning the transfusion of emotions, the tendency of beneficence (altruism), judging the propriety of action, judging the merit of action, nor the expression of love-and-friendship. This peculiar fellow-feeling makes us celebrate the inclinations of the higher-rank people and think it is cruel that they die like the rest of mortals (Smith 1976, p. 52).

For Smith, this peculiar fellow-feeling is the “eastern adulation” of the great, where we wish that the “Great King” lives

forever. Any injury that befalls the king “excites in the breast ... ten times more compassion” than comparable injury that befalls other men. It is as if “pain must be more agonizing ... to persons of higher rank, than to those of meaner stations” (Smith 1976, p. 52).

However, what is the source of the peculiar fellow-feeling, the adulation of people of higher rank? Smith makes it clear that the expected benefits from our superiors, although it can be a factor, is not what distinguishes our obsequiousness. The source of this fellow-feeling is rather the admiration of their station (Smith 1976, p. 52).

Although the admiration can become deformed into the peculiar “easter adulation”, it needs not be exaggerated. If admiration is not deformed into “peculiar” fellow-feeling, it is rather welcomed. Admiration stems from a deep-seated drive to excel and to achieve, i.e., to aspire. People admire others who have distinguished themselves and achieved what one desires. For Smith, people would rather be dead than be robbed of the desire of aspiration (Smith 1976, p. 50).

Most people, sooner or later, realize that they cannot reach the desired higher station. So, they adopt a compensatory emotion: admiration. They start to imagine that the glories of the higher-station are happening to their own station. They enter vicariously the station of the higher-ranked man, what Smith calls “peculiar sympathy”, to experience the “joy and exultation” that the man of rank and distinction is supposedly experiencing (Smith 1976, p. 51).

While admiration cannot be reduced to the quest after comfort or pecuniary benefit, a question arises. Is wanting to be admired the source of aspiration? This question is outside the scope of this review (see Khalil 2024). It is sufficient to state that Smith acknowledges vanity. But if one is ultimately driven by vanity, and hence aspires to higher goals and works hard, why would one, in the face of frustration and failure, be ready to admire those who achieved their goals, which implicitly assumes the inferior station that is so dreaded? That is, it is self-defeating to use vanity to explain why most poor people admire the rich-and-powerful.

In short, while the sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is disappointing, the book per se is uplifting. The sixth edition is disappointing because the reader wants more. The reader wants a systematic framework that links the diverse fellow-feelings, on one hand, and wants to know if there are different kinds of approbation, each suited to the different kinds of fellow-feelings, on the other hand. However, the book per

se is uplifting. This review uncovers six basic kinds of fellow-feeling. These kinds can keep thinkers busy for a long time as they attempt to assemble them into a coherent and systematic framework, the emotions-rationality-morality nexus.

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