

## Chapter 2

# Sympathy, moral sentiments, and the impartial spectator

Adam Smith's first book was *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), first published in 1759. It went through six editions in his lifetime, all of them revised by him, with the sixth and final edition coming out shortly before he died in 1790. TMS is based on lectures Smith had been giving regularly at the University of Glasgow beginning in 1752. TMS quickly established Smith as a leading moral philosopher, both in Britain and on the European continent, and for the rest of Smith's life—and for some time afterwards—it was one of the single most influential books of moral philosophy. The great philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for example, was deeply influenced by Smith's TMS. He went so far as to call Smith his “Liebling,” or “favorite.” Why did TMS have such a pronounced effect?

The first thing to note about TMS is that Smith's primary goal in it was not to recommend behavior. That is, his primary concern was not in telling people how they ought or ought not to behave. It was thus not a book of *moralism*, but, rather, something closer to an exercise in what we today might call *moral psychology*. Smith wanted to understand how human beings come to form the moral sentiments they have. Almost all human beings have moral sentiments, and forming—and expressing—moral judgments is one of the central things humans do. How do they come to have the moral sentiments they do? How do they come to find some things to be morally required, others morally prohibited, and still others morally indifferent? And what accounts for the changes in people's, and society's, moral sentiments over time? One thing Smith observes is that people develop moral sentiments over the course of their lifetimes. When they are born, they have no moral sentiments whatsoever; they have only wants and desires, which they express by howling

and crying out. Yet as they grow and mature, they come to have an increasingly sophisticated sense of morality that enables them to navigate their way through an increasingly complex set of social experiences.

Another thing Smith observed is that moral sentiments often change. What counts as morally required, prohibited, or indifferent changes over time, both at the individual and societal level. To take a recent example, consider spanking children. It was at one time, and for quite some time, considered not only acceptable but the duty of good parents to use corporal punishment to correct their children's behavior. Then, sometime in the latter half of the twentieth century, sentiments began to change and it was considered a matter of preference. Still later, sentiments changed again, and now the cultural consensus seems to hold that one should not spank one's children. Many other things go through similar changes: same-sex marriage, divorce, obesity, sexual or ethnic chauvinism, and so on. There may be some few things that seem to change little—more on those in a moment—but many matters seem to go through this cycle of moral dynamism. And it is not only ostensibly moral matters that go through similar cycles: think of what is considered appropriate attire for different occasions.

A final observation Smith made is that, despite the dynamic changes over time of our moral sentiments, on a few matters there seems to be overlap among cultures and times. That the dead should be respected, for example (however "respect" is expressed in this case), or that theft (under most circumstances) and murder (properly defined) are wrong, seem to be part of a widespread, cross-cultural consensus. Smith's theory would have to be able to take account of all of these observations. How, then, does Smith proceed?

In TMS, Smith wants to be an empirical scientist, in the fashion of Isaac Newton (1643–1727), whom Smith and many other luminaries of the Scottish Enlightenment took to have established the correct method of scientific investigation. Newton's method, as Smith understood it, was first to observe the phenomena to be explained, next to formulate a hypothesis that captures their patterns in laws or rules, then to tease out of the hypothesis predictions about what would hold in new or future cases, then to make further observations to see whether one's predictions hold, and then, finally, to revise, reformulate, or reject the hypothesis, as indicated or required by the newly observed data. Smith's revolutionary idea was to apply this Newtonian method not to objects moving through space but to human behavior. In the

case of TMS, the behavior Smith focused his attention on was the phenomenon of human moral judgment-making. Are there regularly recurring patterns we can infer from observing how humans judge? Can we formulate hypotheses about what would explain these patterns? Can we test our hypotheses against new observations? Smith's answer to these questions is "yes," and in TMS he offers his hypotheses, buttressed by numerous examples and observations. I called Smith's project in TMS "revolutionary" because he was one of the first to approach human morality the way an empirical scientist might,<sup>2</sup> and the new school of moral thought he inaugurated, which we might describe as empirical moral psychology, transformed the way philosophers thought about human morality. What did Smith believe his new method uncovered about human morality?

A central claim of TMS is that human beings naturally desire what Smith calls a "mutual sympathy of sentiments" with their fellows. For Smith, "sympathy" here was not equivalent to pity; rather, it was a technical term that he used in accordance with its etymological meaning of "feeling with" (TMS: 10). When Smith claims we all desire mutual sympathy of sentiments, he means that we long to see our own judgments and sentiments echoed in others. It gives us pleasure to discover that others judge people, actions, and behavior the same way we do. And it gives us a feeling of displeasure when we discover that others judge differently from the way we do. To illustrate, Smith gives the example of joke-telling and laughing at jokes. Are there jokes you know that would be inappropriate to tell in a business meeting? Are there jokes you know that would be appropriate to tell in the same meeting? The answer to both, no doubt, is "yes." But how did we come to know what constitutes an appropriate or inappropriate joke to tell? Where do these standards come from? Smith is fascinated by the fact that we have an almost innate sense about such matters. But he also notices that our standards change: what might have been appropriate in a given set of circumstances twenty years ago might be inappropriate in the same circumstances today. Why did the standards change—and how did we come to know about the change, as we surely do? Similarly with laughing at jokes: is there such a thing as laughing too long at a joke? Of course there is! Well, when does laughing become "too long"? And, again, how did we come to know this?

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2 Smith's friend David Hume was another principal partner in this new way of examining morality. See Hume (2000 [1740]: bk. 3).

Smith argues that the answers to these questions ultimately comes from our desire for mutual sympathy of sentiments. When we tell or laugh at a joke, and others laugh as well, it gives us pleasure, and that response gives us valuable positive feedback. By contrast, when we tell or laugh at a joke, and others do not laugh, that gives us displeasure, which, too, is valuable feedback, even though negative. In both cases they help us develop and hone our judgment about the standards of propriety regarding joke-telling and laughing. Smith writes: “A man is mortified when, after having endeavoured to divert the company, he looks round and sees that nobody laughs at his jests but himself. On the contrary, the mirth of the company is highly agreeable to him, and he regards this correspondence of their sentiments with his own as his greatest applause” (TMS: 14). What Smith here calls “correspondence of their sentiments” is the “mutual sympathy of sentiments,” and our pleasure in the former case and displeasure in the latter are, Smith thinks, important clues to understanding human psychology and the development of behavioral standards.

Because we all seek out this “sympathy” (TMS: 13–16)—or “harmony,” “concord,” or “correspondence” of sentiments (other terms Smith uses)—much of social life is a give-and-take whereby people alternately try, on the one hand, to moderate their own sentiments so that others can “enter into them” and, on the other hand, try to arouse others’ sentiments so that they match their own. This process of mutual adjustment results in the gradual development of shared habits, and then rules, of behavior and judgment about matters ranging from etiquette to moral duty. This process also gives rise, Smith argues, to an ultimate standard of moral judgment, what he calls the “impartial spectator,” whose imagined perspective we use to judge both our own and others’ conduct. The “impartial spectator” is not, according to Smith, a mysterious entity: it is the amalgamation of our lifetime of experiences of judgment. When we see how people judge other’s behavior and our own, when we see how we ourselves judge others’ behavior and our own, this is data on the basis of which we slowly develop our judgment. Over time we construct a set of principles upon which we rely to judge both ourselves and others. As we mature, this set of principles gradually coalesces into an increasingly coherent picture of virtue and vice, of propriety and impropriety. It becomes the standard against which we judge human behavior. When we use it to judge our own conduct, it constitutes what we call our conscience.

Smith thus envisions what we might call an “impartial spectator procedure.” Here is how it works. When we are young, our first step in becoming morally mature is to ask ourselves how other people around us will perceive our conduct—what we do and don’t do, what we say and don’t say, and so on. On the basis of our past experience, we develop the ability to predict how others will react to, respond to, or judge future cases. The more experience we have, the better our predictions get. But one experience all of us inevitably have is being misjudged by others. Perhaps they do not know the full circumstances of our situation, or perhaps they do not even bother to try to put themselves in our shoes. In those cases we do not achieve a mutual sympathy of sentiments—we have instead an “antipathy” of moral sentiments—and this is emotionally displeasing. It is like the case where we told a joke to our friends that we thought was funny but no one else laughed. That awkwardness creates an unpleasant feeling in us, which helps us hone our judgment for the future. But when we are misjudged, we sometimes believe that if people just knew the full story, or took the time to consider our situation fully, they *would* sympathize with our moral sentiments—even if, in actual fact, they did not sympathize. Such unpleasant experiences lead us, Smith thinks, to consider not how *actual* spectators to our conduct judge us—spectators who, after all, are often biased, uninformed, or simply otherwise occupied—but instead to ask ourselves how a fully informed and impartial spectator, were such a person present, *would* judge us. This is the perspective of the “impartial spectator.” The fully morally mature person, Smith thinks, will judge himself by this imaginary and idealized perspective, which will give us more reliable guidance than the often biased actual spectators around us will.

The misjudgment we often face from actual spectators can also go in the other direction, however. Whereas people who do not know us are often disinclined to bother to try to fully understand our situation, our family and friends can often be too partial to us. Because they love or are fond of us, they might be too indulgent when judging our behavior. In such cases their feedback is not what we need, because it does not give us good information about how people outside our close circle of family and friends would judge us. Here too, then, asking ourselves what a fully informed but disinterested and impartial spectator would think of our conduct can help correct the biased and partial information we get from actual spectators. So Smith’s “impartial spectator procedure” becomes the process by which we can more accurately

assess our own conduct, and it acts as a heuristic device we can use whenever we are considering doing something and wonder whether we should.

In practice, we engage this process simply by asking ourselves what a fully-informed but disinterested person would think about our conduct. If such a person would approve, then we may proceed; if he would disapprove, then we should desist. If we heed what we imagine would be this impartial spectator's judgment, then we feel a pleasurable satisfaction based on an imagined sympathy between our own moral sentiments and the impartial spectator's imagined sentiments. This pleasure reinforces our behavior, and helps develop our judgment in good directions. By contrast, if we disobey or depart from the impartial spectator's imagined judgment, then we feel an unpleasant guilt based on the antipathy between our sentiments and those of the impartial spectator. This provides a disincentive for the behavior that, again, helps develop our judgment properly.

Morality on Smith's account is thus an earthly, grounded affair. Although Smith makes frequent reference in *TMS* to God and the "Author of Nature," the actual process Smith describes develops as a result of our lived experiences as we seek to achieve mutual sympathy of sentiments, and avoid antipathy of sentiments, with the other people we actually encounter. The fundamental building block of Smith's moral anthropology is the desire for mutual sympathy of sentiments, which, because Smith believes all humans have it, thus acts like a centripetal social force, drawing us into community with others. Although there are other needs and desires that can be satisfied only by interacting with other human beings—like goods and services produced and exchanged in economic markets, for example—nevertheless the desire for mutual sympathy, and the pleasure it affords when it is achieved, is, for Smith, the glue that holds human society together. Without it, we would have no community, and thus no morality; with it, both community and shared moral standards are enabled.