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HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

ADAM SMITH
The Theory of Moral Sentiments

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ADAM SMITH

The Theory of Moral Sentiments

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Introduction

The nature of Smith's moral theory

Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is apt to confuse, perhaps
startle, the modern reader who approaches it with expectations formed by
recent moral philosophy. Though profoundly different in many respects,
the moral philosophies which have dominated the debate for the last
fifty years, utilitarianism and Kantianism, have a common concern with
an ultimate criterion for right action. Even the doctrine which in recent
years has mounted the most serious challenge to these two, so-called virtue
ethics, is devoted to establishing criteria for what constitutes the morally
good character. In other words, modern moral philosophy is primarily
the hunt for a universally normative doctrine, a theory of what is right or
good for humanity as such. Furthermore, it is commonly backed up by
meta-ethical ideas of moral judgment which presuppose such a view of
philosophical ethics. Smith's idea of moral philosophy was very different,
and that is one good reason for studying him; he is a challenge to our
common ways of thinking.

For Smith the most basic task of moral philosophy is one of explanation;
it is to provide an understanding of those practices which traditionally
are called moral. Like his close friend and mentor, David Hume, Smith
saw moral philosophy as central to a new science of human nature. To
this purpose Smith analysed those features of the human mind and those
modes of interaction between several minds which gave rise to moral
practices in the human species. Furthermore, he traced the different
patterns which these practices assumed in response to different social,
economic and political circumstances. He thought that this procedure

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enabled him to say something about which features of morality appeared to be universal to humanity and which ones appeared more or less historically variable. The universality in question was entirely a matter of empirically observable generality; Smith was simply suggesting that without certain elementary and quite general features we would not be able to recognize an existence as a *human* life. Smith was, in other words, not interested in any metaphysics of morals.

Generally Smith analysed our moral practices in terms of the qualities of human agency, or character, but he found ways of accounting also for our tendency to follow rules and for our inclination to give moral weight to the consequences of actions. It is this comprehensiveness that has made Smith's theory an appealing reference point for all three of the dominating schools in modern ethics, as mentioned above, despite the fact that he did not raise the question of a validating foundation for morality.

Morality was, in Smith's eyes, to be approached as a matter of fact about the human species' history, but this does not mean that there is *no* normative significance to his theory. It is just a very indirect normativity. For one thing, as a naturalist Smith sees it as his task to detail how facts guide our actions by setting limits to what we can do, and among the facts about humanity which it would be futile to ignore are such things as the constant presence of both egoistic and altruistic attitudes or the claim to some degree of individual integrity. For another thing, as a humanist Smith obviously believed that his students and readers would gain insight into their moral potential through his portraits of the complexity, even contradictions, of moral lives and moral judgments. Somewhat like a novelist, he presents a wide variety of moral characters who often judge each other but who rarely are judged directly by the author, except in his capacity as a representative of 'common opinion'. For the rest, judgment is up to the reader.

Smith came to the conclusion that there was a great dividing line running through human morality in just about any of its forms that were recorded in history. This division was between the 'negative' virtue of justice, which concerned abstinence from injury, and the 'positive' virtues such as benevolence or prudence, which concerned the promotion of good for others or for oneself. The indirect normativity of Smith's theory is very different for these two categories of moral virtue. No recognizably human life can be without either type of virtue but what we can say about each in general terms and, hence, what kind of guidance such accounts can yield,

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differ significantly between the two. Because of the individuality and, not least, the uncertainty of man's life, it is impossible to formulate a universal idea of the highest good or, more generally, the good life. As a consequence, the virtues that promote the goods of life can be characterized only in very general terms and, across cultural and historical divides, this may amount to little more than family resemblance.

By contrast, injury is considered an evil in any type of life and this lends a certain universality to the virtue of abstaining from injurious behaviour, that is, the virtue of justice, because we have the ability to recognize what is harmful to another even when we know little or nothing about that person. In other words, the action–guiding power of the positive virtues – outside of our intimate life – is much more uncertain than that of the negative virtue of justice and only the latter is so rule-bound that it can be the subject of systematic treatment, namely the 'science of jurisprudence'. Attempts to extend such system to the positive virtues are harshly rejected by Smith as 'mere casuistry', a broad category which no doubt was meant to include a great deal of traditional moralizing literature and not just theological casuistry.

The precision of justice that enables it to be the basis for law does, however, come at a cost, as it were. The feature of justice which makes it so important in human life is its ability to regulate behaviour between entire strangers who do not know anything else about each other than that they are capable, as we all are, of injury and of being injured. However, what *counts* as injury is not a universal matter; it varies dramatically from one type of society to another. True, Smith acknowledges that every known society recognizes violence to the body, denials of personhood, and prevention of access to the surrounding world as injuries and he is ready to recognize claims against such behaviour as 'natural rights'. However, his many tales of different cultures indicate that not even bodily integrity or standing as a moral agent were universal concepts and, most importantly, the nexus between the individual and the environment was subject to variations. There were moral facts, such as private property in land, which guided people in their social intercourse in one type of society but which were simply unknown and hence irrelevant to behaviour in other societies. Smith's 'natural jurisprudence' was, therefore, very much an historical jurisprudence; you would have to know what society you were talking about if your detailing of rights and duties were to be of any use.

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While jurisprudence has its foundations in ethics, it is, in other words, a separate discipline. Smith planned to deal with this in a sequel to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as he explains in the Preface below, but he never published what he wrote; he destroyed his manuscript shortly before his death. Even so, we have a reasonable idea of what he had in mind thanks to two sets of students' notes from his lectures on jurisprudence at the University of Glasgow in the 1760s. Smith's basic course consisted of four parts, natural theology, moral philosophy, natural jurisprudence, and political theory, including political economy. Next to nothing is known about the first part which was a traditional element in the curriculum and seems to have been very brief in Smith's hands. The moral philosophy was published as the present work in 1759, while the lectures on political economy were the basis for Smith's magnum opus, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Just as the virtue of justice is the foundation for natural jurisprudence, so the virtue of prudence is the basis for political economy. But while the former discipline is concerned with those characteristics or qualities which individuals acquire as rights in different societies, the latter study singles out just one quality, self-interest, without specifying its content and then works out how people based upon this one quality deal with each other. Political economy is, in other words, an attempt to work out the *relations* between 'abstract' individuals, individuals about whom nothing more is assumed than that they are self-interested, or 'prudent'. Prices, profits, interest rates, divisions of labour and so on, are, in the famous phrase, the unintended outcome of individual actions, that is, of actions whose specific intentions are irrelevant to the explanation of these phenomena. In this connection it should be pointed out that Smith did not mistake self-interest for selfishness; the content or object of self-interest did not seem to be of much interest for explanatory purposes.

Just as Smith never pretended that there was nothing more to human life than the assertion of rights, so he never suggested that the serving of self-interest was exhaustive of man's endeavour. In both cases he was explaining facets of the natural history of the human species which he thought instructive about the range of our possibilities. And in both cases he was utilizing the theory of moral personality which he had formulated in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

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In tracing law, politics and economy to their basis in the operations of the human mind, Smith was in effect suggesting that these moral institutions are natural to humanity. The question is, in which sense natural? One of the most fundamental disputes in ancient philosophy had been between the Stoics and the Epicureans over this issue. The former taught that morality is natural to humankind in the sense that man has the capacity to govern his life in accordance with the orderliness, or logos, that underlies the whole of the world. The Epicureans, by contrast, saw people as naturally self-interested and suggested that morality is a device invented to regulate self-interest so that it does not become self-defeating, especially through conflict with others or through opposition between immediate and long-term interests.

The conflict between these two schools of thought was revived with great vigour in early modern philosophy. A wide variety of thinkers worked on the idea of morality as 'natural' to humanity, not only on Stoic but also on Platonic (or combined Platonic–Stoic) or Aristotelian grounds, but always Christianized so that the basic idea was that natural morality was a divine gift. In Smith's immediate background one can mention the Cambridge Platonists (Benjamin Whichcote, John Smith, Ralph Cudworth), Lord Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson with their idea of a special moral sense as a feature of the mind, and the so-called ethical rationalists (Samuel Clarke, William Wollaston) with their view of morality as a form of rational inference. The arguments of these thinkers and their predecessors were forcefully met by a less numerous succession of neo-Epicureans who, across their many differences, agreed on the basic point that morality was a human contrivance, or artifice, to control or regulate self-interest and they often formulated this artifice as the outcome of agreements or contracts to set up political institutions to reinforce the rules of morality. Representative and particularly influential were Thomas Hobbes, Pierre Gassendi, Samuel Pufendorf, Bernard Mandeville and David Hume.

In the hands of the last mentioned philosopher, the Epicurean argument received a development that was of particular importance to Smith. Hume conceded that there was a certain natural morality in humanity, namely what we above called the positive virtues, but argued that this would at best sustain small social groups, such as families, while the big society, civil society, required justice to regulate people's pursuit of self-interest.

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What is more, Hume indicated that justice, although artificial, developed spontaneously as a practice among people.

Smith took hold of this idea of Hume's – which also had interesting antecedents in Mandeville with which both Hume and Smith were familiar – and with one bold move he set aside the ancient divide over the issue of nature versus artifice in morality. This is perhaps his most original contribution to moral philosophy. Smith suggested that artifice is natural to humankind, that is to say, there is no condition in which people do not generate moral, aesthetic and other conventions. Smith therefore completely rejected the traditional idea of a state of nature that is antecedent, whether historically or conceptually, to a civil condition and accordingly he had no room for a social contract as a bridge between the natural and the artificial (civil) life of man. At the same time, he saw morality as something conventional in the sense that it is part of humanity's adaptation to the circumstances in which it happens to find itself. While a scientist of human nature, such as Smith, may divide these circumstances into types of society and may be able to discern the basic features of the human mind and personal interaction which are involved in social adaptation, he does not have access to a universal morality nor is an underlying logos any part of his concern.

The theory of the mind

David Hume had put forward a theory of the imagination which Smith developed as the core of his own theory of the mind. Elements of it are scattered through *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* but one must also turn to some of his *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, especially the 'Principles which lead and direct philosophical enquiries; illustrated by the history of astronomy', and to the notes taken by a student from his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. For both Hume and Smith the imagination is a mental faculty by means of which people create a distinctively human sphere within the natural world. It is the imagination that enables us to make connections between the perceived elements of both the physical and the moral world, ranging from binary relations between particular events and things to complex systems such as the national or international economy, the idea of the cosmos or of humanity as a whole. The activity of the imagination is a spontaneous search for order, coherence

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and agreement in the world; satisfaction of it carries its own pleasure, while frustration brings 'wonder and surprise' and, if prolonged, anxiety and unease.

Smith talks of this imaginative striving both in moral terms as a wish for agreement and in aesthetic terms as a concern with beauty and harmony. This reflects a distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of imagination; one is concerned with persons – both oneself and others – as agents, while the other has as its object things and events. We may call them – though Smith does not – practical and theoretical imagination, respectively. It is through the practical imagination that we ascribe actions to persons and see persons, including ourselves, as coherent or identical over time. In other words, the practical imagination creates the moral world. This form of imagination Smith calls sympathy, using the word in a somewhat special sense that has led to much confusion both in his own time and subsequently.

The theoretical imagination is, in Smith's view, the foundation for all the arts and sciences. It accounts for our ability to bring order and system into things and events around us so that we can orient ourselves in life. Smith is particularly good at explaining aesthetic elements of daily life, such as the craving for order and the passion for arranging things for no other purpose than that the order and the arrangement please by bringing a quietness of mind, and he uses the same principle to explain why people have a desire for machinery, gadgets and other organized systems. Works of art, as well as of technology, are, and are appraised as, works of imaginative order. Not least, philosophy and science are products of the imagination's attempt to create order in the flux of experience. In fact, experience can only function as evidence, or be 'understood', if it fits into an orderly system of beliefs. Smith underscores this view of knowledge by his frequent and self-conscious use of machine analogies as the most useful representations of the natural world and of society. Furthermore, he suggests that the human mind has a tendency to extend and secure the perceived orderliness of the world by assuming that there is a supreme ordering agent with a purpose. In short, Smith sees art, technology, science, deistic religion, including natural providence, as parts of the explanatory web that the imagination creates to satisfy its desire for order.

Such desire for order is in many ways more urgent in our dealings with people, in contrast to the rest of nature, and the imagination with which

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the desire for order is pursued in this case has a special quality. When we observe the behaviour of people, we do not simply experience events, we ascribe actions to agents; we pin some change in the environment on a person as an action and we do so because we think we see the person's point in making the change. We spontaneously see people as purposeful and this is the central act of the practical imagination. Smith calls this sympathy and, as mentioned above, this was a troublesome terminology. Smith does not mean that we, when we think that we see another person's point in doing something, accept or approve of that point. We cannot get to the stage of either approving or disapproving of a standpoint until we see that it *is* a standpoint. Sympathy in the most important Smithian usage is this latter process which is preparatory to any assessment of people; it is not the assessment itself. Smith expresses this by saying that while there is a pleasure in the mere act of understanding another's point of view, as there is in any understanding, this pleasure is distinct from whatever sentiments we may have about the object of our sympathetic understanding, sentiments which may be either pleasing or displeasing. It seems that Smith himself only came to complete clarity about this matter in the light of David Hume's criticism of his handling of it in the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as we see from Smith's response in a note to 1.iii.1.9. What is more, Smith himself is far from consistent in his terminology; often he uses 'sympathy' in both the traditional sense of 'approval' and in the more original sense explained here.

Sympathy is characterized as an act of the imagination because we do not have access to another person's mind. What we have access to is the other person's observable circumstances, including his or her behaviour. The act of sympathetic understanding is a creation of order in the observer's perceptions by means of an imagined rationale for the observed behaviour. As agents or moral beings, other people are, therefore, the creation of our imagination. But the most remarkable feature of Smith's theory of sympathy is that the same can be said of ourselves; as moral agents we are acts of creative imagination. The central point is that we only become aware of ourselves – gain self-consciousness – through our relationship to others. When we observe others, we notice that they observe us, and one of the most urgently felt needs for sympathetic understanding is to appreciate how they see us. This need is heightened by the inevitability that we and our fellows have different views of our relations to each other, to third persons, and to the environment. Our imagination

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craves order in these actual or potential conflicts and that means a workable
degree of agreement about personal relations and things, as in questions
of who is boss and who owns or has the use of what. Our understanding
of how others see us in these circumstances shapes our view of who we
are and how we stand in such relationships in life.

Through sympathy we so to speak try to anticipate the assessment
by others of ourselves, thus enabling us to adjust our behaviour before
conflict arises. We internalize the external spectator and respond to this
figure of the sympathetic imagination. The internal spectator has the force
to prompt such adjustment of behaviour as would otherwise be demanded
by external spectators in order to satisfy the inclination to or the need for
agreement or conformity. In other words, one only learns to see oneself as
a person and as a member of a moral universe of agents through sympathy
with others' view of one's identity and situation in the world. Society is,
as Smith says, the mirror in which one catches sight of oneself, morally
speaking.

While it is natural for people to use their sympathetic imagination as
spectators of others, to form ideas of the identity of others and themselves,
and to adjust their behaviour in the light of such insight, there is obvi-
ously no guarantee that they will always succeed. The process of mutual
adjustment through sympathetic search for a common standpoint often
fails and this leads to moral and social disorder. When this happens, we
are led to seek order in a different way, namely in our own mind. We tend
to imagine how a spectator would judge us and our behaviour if he or she
was not limited by prejudice, partiality, ignorance, poor imagination and
lack of ordinary good will in the way in which the actual spectators of us,
including we ourselves, are limited. We imagine an ideal judgment and
an ideal judge. But of course this imagination is itself an act of mutual
sympathy; we try to 'enter into' the way in which an ideal impartial spec-
tator would sympathize with us and thus be able to appraise us. With this
imagined ideal of an impartial spectator Smith gives a social explanation
for the traditional core of man's moral and religious being, namely his
conscience. What is more, he suggests that our imagination commonly
tends to transpose the authority of conscience to a higher plane by sup-
posing that it is the voice of God in us. The divinity itself is a function
of our imagination, the pinnacle of the dialectic of mutual sympathy that
starts when we first become aware that our neighbour watches us as we
watch him or her.

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As Smith explained in the last Part of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, these explanations of our moral personality in terms of empirical features of the mind were meant to set aside theories such as those of his teacher, Francis Hutcheson, that we are issued with a special moral sense. In this he agreed with David Hume, just as he did in rejecting the suggestion of Samuel Clarke, William Wollaston, and others, that moral judgment and moral motivation are forms of rational inference. Finally, whatever his personal religious sentiments may have been – of which we have no evidence – he dramatically ignored all traditional religious ideas of conscience as either an infusion, an inspiration, by God or a response to the might of the deity, namely fear.

Morality

By means of this account of the human mind, its extension into its environment and, especially, its interaction with other minds, Smith provides an analysis of the structure of moral life. The central concept is that of propriety. We first of all judge an agent, whether oneself or another, in terms of whether a motive or an action is proper to the given situation of that agent; if it is, we say that the motive or action has moral merit, otherwise demerit. We do this irrespective of whether the situation is past, present or future. One judges in the first instance as a direct spectator and, in case of disagreement about what is proper, one then appeals to other spectators, real or imagined, and in the end to one's ideal of an impartial spectator. People do likewise with the persons who are the 'object' of the motive or action in question, those towards whom the agent directs an action. Those people, the 'patients', will have ideas of the merit or demerit of the agent's action towards them and as a moral observer one judges of the propriety of their response. The moral assessment of a total moral situation of action and reaction is a compound, as it were, of these spectator judgments of the propriety of both action and reaction, of both agent and 'patient'.

Smith is at pains to make clear the relationship between moral assessments in terms of propriety and in terms of merit. People judge in the former way when they consider whether a motive is suitable or proportionate to the situation which occasions it; they judge in the latter way when they consider the good or bad effects which the motive aims at. In general we look both forward and backward in our moral judgments.

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However, judgment in terms of merit or demerit is, according to Smith, derivative from judgment in terms of propriety. When we say that some behaviour has merit or demerit, we are saying that it deserves gratitude or resentment, which are the basis for reward or punishment. However, these reactions – gratitude and resentment – are themselves matters of propriety in their respective situations and the crucial factor in their situations is the moral quality of the original behaviour considered in abstraction from its merit or demerit (otherwise we would be reasoning in a circle) and that is a question of its propriety.

Smith is trying to show that the moral standing we give to gratitude and resentment is dependent upon their propriety and that this in turn is dependent upon the propriety of the behaviour upon which they are bestowed. This structure of our moral assessments is shown by the fact that we generally take it as valid criticism of reward and punishment (gratitude, resentment) that the behaviour for which they are given does not spring from a proper motive. The most extreme cases are those where there simply cannot be any motive, for instance, when we 'punish' a stone for being in our way. A more common situation would be one in which we find gratitude for, say, acts of charity unwarranted because the motive for the acts was in fact self-aggrandisement rather than perception of need.

This discussion also shows that, as Smith sees it, when we scrutinize our moral judgments, we consider the motivation for behaviour to be the ultimate object of our assessment. But as a matter of fact, we commonly find it difficult to reach such purity of judgment; the actual actions with their perceived merit and demerit, what Smith more generally calls 'fortune', always intervene. Indeed, it is only through actions that we have any empirical material by means of which the imagination can create ideas of motivation. The fabric of moral life is thus by no means seamless, according to Smith, for it has to be stitched together continuously from, on the one hand, the empirical evidence of a world of fortune, that is, a world of change in which all application of standards must be uncertain; and, on the other hand, a world of minds which can only be a *common* world when the creative imagination sets up common standards for how to assess motives for action, that is for what counts as a proper motive for action. The ultimate act of imaginative creativity – or the highest step in our moral development – is the ideally impartial spectator of humanity, including of ourselves.

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Smith does not mean to say that he can specify a figure known as the Ideal Impartial Spectator who has the last word on what is truly proper to be done in a given situation. He is, as already mentioned, not putting forward that type of directly normative theory. Rather, his concern is to explain how people make moral assessments of the merit of their own and other people's motives and behaviour and he suggests that this happens by an implicit invocation of their notion of ideal propriety. If he had meant this to be a *criterion of right action*, as opposed to an analysis of the structure of people's judgment of right action, then it would clearly have been circular and quite vacuous. The theory would in that case have said that the right action is the proper one and the proper one is the one judged to be so by the Ideal Impartial Spectator – who, however, is identified as the character who judges in the aforesaid manner. This type of criticism is often directed at modern virtue ethics, and since Smith sometimes is invoked as a virtue theorist, he is being tarred with the same brush. However, leaving virtue ethics to fend for itself, we can safely say that Smith was not a virtue theorist of the sort who could have such a problem.

While situational propriety is the basis for people's moral judgment, it is far from enough to account for the full variety of such judgment. In the very dynamics of judging in terms of propriety lies the source of a complicating factor. When we search for an ideally impartial view of propriety, we inevitably begin to see the particular situation which we are trying to assess as one of a type: we tend to categorize, generalize, and, ultimately, universalize. This is the source of rules in our moral life; they are the unintended outcome of our actual behaviour. At the same time moral rules tend to carry a sense of obligation because they are, so to speak, a summary of our moral experience in trying to get to the standpoint of the fully impartial spectator, with whom we sympathize in so far as we are moral beings at all. Our sense of duty is, therefore, a fear of the displeasure of the ideal impartial spectator for breach of the rules of morality – except when there are overriding rules or moral reasons. This theory of the sense of duty was crucial for Smith's idea of contract in his jurisprudence.

Smith's interesting analysis of the psychology and sociology of rule following shows how such behaviour is found to be valuable because of its capacity for creating order and predictability in the formation of motivation and choice of action. But while action in accordance with

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a rule commonly is found morally praiseworthy, Smith is, again, not suggesting that this is a criterion of moral rightness; it is a feature of how people judge of moral rightness. What is more, the feeling of obligation to rules is only one factor among several; apart from the basic sense of situational propriety, custom and the consequences of actions play a role. These factors will often be in tension when we try to achieve clarity about our moral standpoint. Sympathetic propriety ties us to the particularity of the situation, while the impartial spectator calls for the generality of rules. This becomes even more complicated when we recognize our tendency to take into account what the actual consequences, or 'utility', of actions may be.

Smith's idea of the role of utility in moral judgment is an extension of his analysis of merit and demerit of action which we looked at above. His central point is that while utility certainly is a factor, it is not so much utility in the sense of the end or outcome of action as in the sense of the *means* to some end, often an end that is unspecific or entirely outside of one's consideration – in other words, utility in the sense of functionality. In this connection Smith draws ingenious comparisons between aesthetic and moral judgment in terms of utility. We appreciate the utility of a gadget such as a minutely precise watch, not because we need it to be so precise but because such precision functions in an orderly system. In the same way we appreciate acts of benevolence or justice not so much because they promote the greatest happiness as because they are of 'local' utility in their specific context. But Smith's main use of this analysis of the role of utility in our practical judgments is political. He suggests that while people commonly judge in terms of situational propriety, in the manner indicated above, and let such judgments be influenced by their liking for how things – policies, institutions, individual politicians – function, or 'fit', in a given situation, there are two types of people in particular who either misunderstand or try to go beyond this feature of ordinary moral judgment. One is the speculative philosopher who thinks that his own ingenuity in analysing and categorizing actions in terms of their utility is also the justifying ground for agents to bring about these actions. This is the central point in Smith's criticism of David Hume's moral theory. Much less benign, let alone subtle, are the political entrepreneurs who fancy that they can think in terms of some overall goal for society, some idea of public utility or happiness. Since the latter requires a sort of knowledge that rarely, if ever, is available, it often has unfortunate political

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consequences, many of which receive acute analysis in Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

Smith himself practises a subtle balancing act between philosophical theory and common-life practice in morality. He often adopts the elevated standpoint of the philosophical sage who assesses the moral and social ideas that make the world go round. In this role Smith bases himself upon an ideal of tranquillity as the end of moral life which he found equally in the Stoic and the Epicurean traditions. At the same time, his account of moral psychology showed that everything distinctive about the life of the human species was due to man's inability to live in tranquillity. The exercise of our productive powers which is portrayed in the *Wealth of Nations* and the social striving through emulative vanity which we find in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* were only the most dramatic illustrations of an inescapable restlessness pervading our lives. A dialectic tension between tranquillity and activity is thus bound to be a permanent feature of human life, and the implication is clearly that it would be entirely futile for the philosopher to defend the one over the other. Accordingly, Smith's authorial voice assumes a tone of role-playing in these contexts; on the one hand there is the world-weary, nearly cynical, philosophical spectator to the world's folly, on the other there is the practical man of action with his disdain for the futility of theoretical speculation.

In addition to the analysis of moral judgment, Smith structures morality through a complex account of moral virtue. This became especially clear in the final edition of the work where he added a whole new part, Part VI, devoted to the topic of virtue. He revised the traditional schema of the cardinal virtues which in his hands become prudence, benevolence, justice and self-command. Of these, benevolence is, as we have already seen, too individual or idiosyncratic – too 'personal', as it were – in its exercise to be constitutive of any regular social forms (which, of course, does not detract from its moral value). Self-command is a sort of meta-virtue that is presupposed in all the other virtues. Prudence and justice are different in that they both are the basis for social structures which can be accounted for in empirical terms. Prudence is concerned with the pursuit of our interests and this is the subject of political economy. Justice is concerned with the avoidance of injury to our interests and this is the subject of jurisprudence. In both cases history plays a crucial role, as we have indicated, because interest is an historically determined concept; the hunter-gatherer cannot have any interest in the stock-market and,

consequently, can neither pursue nor be injured in that interest. This analysis of the four basic virtues tallies with the division between positive and negative virtues which we discussed in the first section above. In this way Smith provided a conceptual niche both for prudence, which he took seriously as a virtue and whose main social effects he worked out in the *Wealth of Nations*, and for the strong theory of justice and the spectator theory of rights which provided the basis for his natural jurisprudence, as we indicated above.

The life of a moral philosopher

As we have seen, Smith's overall project in moral philosophy may be seen as an attempt to go beyond the traditional opposition between Stoicism and Epicureanism. This is not surprising when we look at the matter from the point of view of Smith's life. After schooling in his native Kirkcaldy, Smith went to the University of Glasgow (1737–40) where the main influence upon him was Francis Hutcheson who was one of the leading representatives in the English-speaking world of a Christianized Stoicism. However, in his twenties when he was a free-lance public lecturer in Edinburgh (1748–50), Smith formed the most important friendship of his life with David Hume, the most sophisticated heir to a mixed Epicurean and sceptical tradition. What is more, while he was a student at Balliol College, Oxford, from 1740 to 1746, Smith seems to have prepared himself very well for this intellectual confrontation by extensive studies in recent French literature and criticism where such disputes were prominent. In view of such a mixed background, which presumably has found expression in his Edinburgh lectures, it is hardly surprising that Hutcheson's former students received Smith less than enthusiastically when the latter took up his former teacher's professorship at Glasgow. Smith taught at Glasgow from 1751 to 1764 and was succeeded by the Common Sense philosopher Thomas Reid who was an important critic of Smith as well as of Hume. The most distinguished student of Smith's, from an intellectual point of view, was John Millar who, as professor of law in the same university, developed Smith's analysis of social authority and law.

Smith resigned his professorship in order to accept a lucrative position as travelling tutor for a nobleman's son, a common career move by intellectuals at the time. This entailed a couple of years' travel, mainly in France where he made valuable connections with many of the leading

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philosophers and social thinkers, including Voltaire and physiocrats such
as Quesnay and Turgot. The latter acquaintances obviously stimulated
Smith in the major work he was already engaged in, namely a development
of the political economy section of his Glasgow lectures to a comprehen-
sive study of the modern economic system seen in the light of his history
of civil society. The tutorship carried with it a life-pension and after his
return to Britain, in 1766, Smith could work undisturbed as a private
scholar first at his home in Kirkcaldy and then in London while finishing
his huge project. The *Wealth of Nations* appeared in 1776 and it soon
overshadowed Smith's name as a moral philosopher; from now on he was
the great political economist. He advised governments on such matters
as trade and taxation and on relations with America and Ireland. He also
took public office, namely as commissioner for customs in Edinburgh, a
well paid position which he diligently occupied for the rest of his life.
At the same time, Smith had become a famous man of letters. He was
a leading figure in the flourishing of intellectual culture which we now
call the Scottish Enlightenment, he was well connected in literary circles
in London and, although he never went abroad again, he retained good
contacts in Paris.

The basis for this fame was *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the
Wealth of Nations, for apart from a few minor pieces Smith published
nothing else in his lifetime. He did, however, write a good deal. First of
all, he revised his books for new editions. The moral philosophy had six
editions in Smith's life. Of these the second (1761) was significant, con-
taining, among other things, replies to criticism from David Hume, and
the last was a major recasting of the work. The interpretation of Smith's
revisions, all the most important of which are included in the present
edition, is a complex and open question. Here we may mention just three
points of interest. It is clear that Smith gets to greater clarity, especially
in the last edition, about our tendency to transpose the impartial social
spectator to become an idealized judge, but whether this is a sign of grow-
ing influence from Stoicism or whether it has a more complex motivation
remains doubtful. Another notable change which we noted above is the
inclusion in edition six of a whole part, Part vi, devoted to an analysis of
virtue. Finally, it is clear that the tone of Smith's treatment of the role
of religion in morality becomes distinctly cooler and more sceptical in
the late edition. He was widely taken to be of dubious religiosity, partly
because of his association with Hume, but especially because of the warm

endorsement of Hume's moral character which Smith published soon after his great friend's death.

Smith devoted similar care to his *Wealth of Nations*, revising it repeatedly for the five lifetime editions, of which the third was particularly significant. But he also undertook new projects. One was a 'sort of theory and history of law and government', which he kept announcing in the preface to all editions of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Another was 'a sort of Philosophical History of all the different branches of Literature, of Philosophy, Poetry and Eloquence' (*Corr.* p. 287). It was presumably drafts of these works which took up most of the sixteen manuscript volumes which Smith asked his close friends, the chemist Joseph Black and the geologist James Hutton, to burn a few days before his death. The former project was undoubtedly a development of the lectures on jurisprudence, part of which Smith had realized in the *Wealth of Nations*; the latter was obviously related to the early *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, published posthumously in 1795 by Black and Hutton, and to the Glasgow lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres. Both these and the jurisprudence lectures are known to us from students' reports on them, but in the absence of Smith's own words, the overall coherence of his work remains a controversial matter of reconstruction.

Such reconstruction of a fuller image of Smith has been a task for scholarship, especially in the last generation, whereas the popular view of Smith has been that of the father of political economy. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* did, however, have an independent legacy, though one that is ill charted. Together with the work of Hume, it had established sympathy as a central moral concept for any attempt at a naturalistic ethics, and we find this reflected – though with few explicit acknowledgments – in the many discussions of sympathy by the utilitarians of the nineteenth century. What is more, Smith's use of sympathy to account for the emergence of morality in the human species was taken up by Charles Darwin in his evolutionary theory in *The Descent of Man*. Smith's ideas were also given continued attention, both in Britain and in France, through their discussion in the widely popular work of the Common Sense philosopher Dugald Stewart.

In Germany Smith's moral philosophy was received with interest, if limited understanding, by Immanuel Kant. In the nineteenth century German scholars conjured up one of the most enduring points of debate about Smith when they saw a rank contradiction between his two major

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works, the moral work being based upon sympathy, the economic one on self-interest. These two ideas, of course, only contradict each other if Smithian sympathy is misinterpreted as benevolence and self-interest wrongly is narrowed to selfishness and then taken to be the reductive basis for all human motivation, but it has taken an immense amount of debate to set '*das Adam Smith Problem*' aside and it is still good for another round. In contemporary ethics, Smith has often been seen as little more than a disciple of Hume though his spectator analysis of moral judgment, his theory of justice, and his supposed virtue theory have attracted attention. But perhaps the real interest of Smith is that he challenges the whole idea of modern moral philosophy, namely that it has to justify a criterion for right action.

Chronology

1723	Born at a date unknown (baptized 5 June) in Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland, the son of a customs officer who died before Smith was born. Went to the burgh school in Kirkcaldy.
1737–40	Student at Glasgow University. Among his teachers was Francis Hutcheson in moral philosophy.
1740–6	Student at Balliol College, Oxford, on a valuable fellowship, the Snell Exhibition.
1748–51	With the patronage of Henry Home, Lord Kames, gave courses of public lectures in Edinburgh, first on rhetoric and belles lettres, then also on jurisprudence and the history of philosophy. Became a member of the leading Enlightenment circles in Edinburgh and formed his most important friendship, with David Hume.
1751–2	Professor of Logic at Glasgow University, substituting also in moral philosophy.
1752–64	Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University.
1755	Published two articles in the first *Edinburgh Review*, on Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, on the French *Encyclopédie*, and on Rousseau's *Second Discourse* (in *EPS*).
1759	Published *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*; 2nd edition, significantly revised, 1761; 3rd edition 1767; 4th edition 1774; 5th edition 1781; 6th edition with major revisions 1790.
1761	Published 'Considerations concerning the first formation of languages' (in *Rhetoric*).
1764–6	Travelling tutor to the Duke of Buccleuch, staying mainly in France and making the acquaintance of major figures in the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire and the leading physiocrats, including Quesnay and Turgot. Received a life-pension for the tutorship.

Chronology

1767–73	Working on the *Wealth of Nations* in his old home in Kirkcaldy.
1773–6	In London finishing the economic work and seeing it through the press. Became a member of leading literary and intellectual circles, such as the Johnsonian 'The Club'; admitted to fellowship of the Royal Society 1773.
1776	Published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*; 2nd revised edition 1778; 3rd edition with significant revisions 1784; 4th edition 1786; 5th edition 1789.
1778	Appointed Commissioner of Customs in Edinburgh, a lucrative position, occupied until his death. Wrote a memorandum for the Solicitor-General on the conflict with America, recommending separation for the colonies (in *Corr.*).
1779	Advised the government in favour of a union with Ireland.
1787	Founding fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.
1790	Died at his home on 17 July; buried at Canongate churchyard in Edinburgh.
1795	*Essays on Philosophical Subjects* published on Smith's instructions by Joseph Black and James Hutton.

Further reading

The standard edition of Smith's works and correspondence, including the students' notes from his lectures, is *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, 6 volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976–83; paperback edition Indianapolis, IN: The Liberty Press 1982; with an *Index to the Works of Adam Smith*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2001; paperback edition Indianapolis, IN: The Liberty Press 2002.

The most detailed biography is Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995. See also John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith* [1895], with an Introduction . . . by Jacob Viner, New York, NY: Augustus M. Kelley, 1965.

For the immediate reception of *TMS*, see *On Moral Sentiments: Contemporary Responses to Adam Smith*, edited by John Reeder, Bristol: Thoemmes Press 1997. *Adam Smith: Critical Responses*, edited by Hiroshi Mizuta, 6 volumes, London: Routledge 2000, is a comprehensive collection that covers a much longer time-span. The international reception of Smith is discussed in *Adam Smith: International Perspectives*, edited by Hiroshi Mizuta and Chuhei Sugiyama, New York: St Martin's Press 1993.

An attempt to reconstruct Smith's overall system is Knud Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981. Most aspects of Smith's thought are discussed in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, edited by Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

The best discussions of the connections between morals, politics and economics in Smith are Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, and his *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Further reading

Smith as systematic social, or 'moral', scientist is discussed in T. D. Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*, 1971, and A. S. Skinner, *A System of Social Science: Papers Relating to Adam Smith*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn 1996.

Modern studies of Smith as moral philosopher include C. L. Griswold, Jr, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, Vincent Hope, *Virtue by Consensus: The Moral Philosophy of Hutcheson, Hume and Adam Smith*, Oxford University Press 1989, and Samuel Fleischacker, *A Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment and Freedom in Kant and Adam Smith*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1999.

Basic introductions are Jerry Z. Muller, *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours: Designing the Decent Society*, New York: The Free Press 1993, and David D. Raphael, *Adam Smith* ('Past Masters'), Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985.

The following provide background and context: Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1997; *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*, edited by Roy H. Campbell and Andrew S. Skinner, Edinburgh: John Donald 1982; Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996; *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, edited by Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983; *Adam Smith Reviewed*, edited by Peter Jones and Andrew S. Skinner, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1992; *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, edited by Alexander Broadie, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

Other works of interest are *Essays on Adam Smith*, edited by Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975; Richard F. Teichgraeber, *'Free Trade' and Moral Philosophy. Rethinking the Sources of Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1986; Vivienne Brown, *Adam Smith's Discourse: Canonicity, Commerce and Conscience*, London: Routledge 1994; Athol Fitzgibbons, *Adam Smith's System of Liberty, Wealth and Virtue: The Moral and Political Foundations of the Wealth of Nations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995; *Adam Smith* ('International Library of Critical Essays in the History of Philosophy'), edited by Knud Haakonssen, Aldershot, Hants, Brookfield, Vt: Dartmouth Publishing Co. 1998; E. Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2001; G. Vivenza, *Adam Smith and the Classics: The Classical Heritage in Adam Smith's Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001.

Note on the text

The text presented here is that of the sixth and last edition to appear in Smith's lifetime. Smith made very considerable revisions for this edition which has become the standard text. However a great deal can be learnt from the earlier editions and I have made a generous selection of the most important variant readings from these editions. These variants are included in the editorial notes and clearly marked. A full and detailed collation of all six editions is to be found in the definitive scholarly edition by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie who have also made a number of minor emendations of the text of the sixth edition, mainly in the light of the errata list to the second edition and through comparisons of the various editions; most of these emendations concern punctuation and spelling. In by far most cases I have silently accepted these excellent suggestions in the present text. Smith's English is so close to modern usage that I have not modernized his spelling or punctuation, but some readers may occasionally find some forms archaic. I have followed the now universal practice of numbering each paragraph of the text consecutively within each chapter. I have also modified the references in Smith's own footnotes to conform with the style of the series. Thus Latin abbreviations such as 'lib.' have been changed to English; if titles are not readily identifiable from accompanying editorial notes, they have been spelled out in English; and titles have been set in italics.

As far as annotation is concerned, I owe a considerable debt to previous editors. The pioneering effort was Walther Eckstein's German edition, *Theorie der ethischen Gefühle*, 2 vols., Leipzig 1926, followed by Raphael and Macfie's thorough work for the Glasgow Edition. To these must now be added a fine French edition, *Théorie des sentiments moraux*, by Michaël Biziou, Claude Gautier and Jean-François Pradeau, Paris: Presses universitaire de France, 1999. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the lessons I have learnt from these works. Editorial notes are marked by numbers, while Smith's own notes are marked by letters. Cross

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Note on the text

references to the text of *TMS* are given by part, section, chapter and paragraph, for example: VII.iii.1.3.

I have benefited greatly from comments by Desmond Clarke, Åsa Söderman and Donald Winch. I am grateful to Elizabeth Short for preparing the index.

Abbreviations

All the following works form part of *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, 6 volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976–83; paperback edition Indianapolis, IN: The Liberty Press 1982.

Corr.	*The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, edited by E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross, Oxford 1977
EPS	*Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, edited by W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce, Oxford 1980
LJ(A)/*LJ*(B)	*Lectures on Jurisprudence*, edited by R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and P. G. Stein, Oxford 1978
Rhetoric	*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres*, edited by J. C. Bryce and A. S. Skinner, Oxford 1983
WN	*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, edited by R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, Oxford 1976