

Liberal Read

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Empathy as a Pillar of Liberalism

BOOK REVIEW

Adam Smith

The Theory of Moral Sentiments

Edited by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie

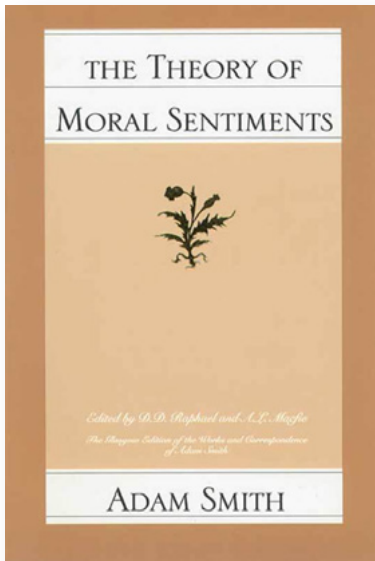
Liberty Fund, 1982

by Patrick Van Schie

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

Empathy as a Pillar of Liberalism



The Theory of Moral Sentiments is not Adam Smith's best-known work among the general public – that, of course, would be his economic analysis, *The Wealth of Nations*, whose (abbreviated) title many know, even if they are unfamiliar with its contents – but it is certainly a standard liberal work. Although Smith owes his enduring fame to *The Wealth of Nations* – it is thanks to this book that he is considered the founder of (classical liberal) economics – he considered *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to be his best work.

The irony goes even further: Smith is remembered as an important economist, which he certainly was, but his bread and butter was moral philosophy. Between 1752 and 1764, he was Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University. It was during this period that he produced the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which was published in 1759. Five more editions would follow.

The Theory of Moral Sentiments and *The Wealth of Nations* are the first two instalments of a trilogy that Smith had intended to publish. In the first part – *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* – he laid down the foundation of his vision of humanity and society. In the second – *The Wealth of Nations* – he elaborated on the virtue of prudence, which for him meant the relations between people in the private sphere of the economy. It was his plan to further elaborate on the virtue of justice in the third book. In the sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith announced that, despite his advanced age, he hoped to get around to writing a book on 'the general principles of law and government, and of the different revolutions undergone in the different ages and periods of society'. Smith worked hard on it and had already amassed sixteen notebooks full of text. However, a few days before his death, he ordered a friend to burn them. Unfortunately for us, his friend kept his promise. In the course of the nineteenth century, fragments of Smith's ideas on this subject did surface in the form of notes taken by students during his lectures, which were published as *Lectures on Jurisprudence*.

The fact that *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is relatively unknown cannot be explained by the style in which the book is written. Today's readers, who may expect this more than 260-year-old philosophical work to be hard going, will be pleasantly struck by both the fluent use of language and the avoidance of woolly or lofty jargon. Smith, in fact, had an aversion to grandiloquence, as shown in the book's passages on vanity.

The theme of this book concerns feelings to a large extent. Smith was a typical representative of the Scottish Enlightenment. Like some English philosophers such as John Locke, this branch of the Enlightenment attempted to comprehensively map the

emotions to which people are subject, as well as how these emotions relate to each other and how they can be classified. At first glance, this would seem to explain the low level of interest shown by liberals today in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. After all, from a liberal perspective, politics should steer well clear of such extremely personal matters as feelings. But the work is not a mere inventory of feelings. Instead, Smith links these feelings to the emergence of moral judgements. If he had to market his work now, he might have given it a title along the lines of 'Where do our values and norms come from?'

His book caters to a certain long-held need, as it offers a fitting liberal rebuttal to Christian thinkers, church leaders, and politicians. After all, their answer to the question of the origin of morality is that it comes from above, given to us by God. For Adam Smith, however, morality does not come from above. People form their own opinions about good and evil. If there is a god, then he has at least not decreed a moral system for us. According to Smith, morality is a product of social intercourse between people. As was typical for a Scottish Enlightenment thinker, Smith preferred to take observable reality as his philosophical point of departure and was not looking for a prescription of how people should live. Rather, he was trying to find out where people actually got their system of values and norms from. This is also an important distinction from Christian – and many other contemporary – thinkers on morality.

'Sympathy'

Smith's analysis rests on the concept of what he calls 'sympathy'. He uses the word in the sense of our ability to put ourselves in another person's shoes and feel what they feel. In this sense, the fact that we empathise with someone does not necessarily mean that we have warm feelings for them. An example that Smith himself uses to illustrate the concept of sympathy makes this clear. Many people feel an itch when they see a homeless person covered with sores. This is because they put themselves in the other person's shoes and makes the connection between their physical condition and feeling itchy. Thus, a sense of affection is not necessarily part of our experience. The feeling of itching could just as well be accompanied by a feeling of dislike or even contempt.

In the British empiricist tradition of Newton, Locke, and Hume, Smith tends to espouse the conviction that we can only acquire knowledge through our senses. I can, he begins, sympathise with the pain my brother endures when he lies on the rack, but only after I have seen him lying on the rack; as long as I remain ignorant of his situation, I do not feel his pain. We can sympathise with certain emotions just by seeing them expressed. This is the case with pain, sadness, and joy. With other emotions, perception is not enough. When we see that someone is angry, we do not spontaneously feel anger growing in ourselves. We might first try to find out why that person is angry. If we know the cause and judge the anger to be justified, we approve of it and feel anger rising in us as well, but if we deem it to be misplaced, we do not.

The degree to which we sympathise never actually keeps pace with the feelings of the person we are observing. On the one hand, our capacity for sympathy can go so far that a person's behaviour, or the situation they are in, can evoke a feeling that even the person themselves do not experience. For example, it is possible to be ashamed of the behaviour of someone, even if that person is not even aware of how indecently they are

behaving. On the other hand, when we as observers experience a feeling vicariously, we usually feel it less strongly than the person we are observing does. We are least able to share in the physical pleasure or pain of another: we do not feel the intense pleasure of a delicious meal if we do not eat it ourselves. We can empathise more with mental pleasure and suffering, and to a greater extent the more fully the pleasure or suffering is a product of the imagination. Smith gives the example of a man in love. We cannot go along with the feeling of the infatuation itself, even if we are warmly disposed toward the phenomenon. This is because when we look at the woman with whom he is smitten, we might not see in her the resplendent beauty that he apparently sees and so we deem his attentions to be out of proportion. In general, however, we can go a long way to understanding his romantic feelings, because we can imagine the happiness born of a loving relationship with a woman.

Perceiving and empathising with the other is the first stage of the process from which our morality arises. Our appreciation or disapproval arises from the comparison between the other person's feelings and our own. When we share the other's feelings to a great extent, our judgement is that they are acting correctly, while when there is a vast difference between our feelings and the other's, our judgement is that they are acting wrongly.

The second stage in the process originates not in our perception of others, but in the realisation that we ourselves are also being perceived. Just as I have 'sympathy' with another person, which informs my judgement of them, so they have 'sympathy' with me and judge my behaviour. Once we realise this, we adapt our behaviour accordingly.

When I am sad, I moderate my expressions of this in the hope that those around me will then be able to understand my sadness more easily. If I were to express my pain loudly after stubbing my toe, those around me might think I was merely posturing. However, if I were to lose a loved one, I would automatically evoke pity and – paradoxically – the more I manage to pull myself together, the more pity I would evoke. Furthermore, I would try to hide my grief more from strangers than from friends, because I can count on less sympathy from strangers.

The third stage in the emergence of our morality is born of the realisation that the other person does not always know what lies behind our emotions and may therefore judge us wrongly. Here, we imagine what an imaginary, impartial observer would think – impartial except that they are familiar with the

underlying reasons for our behaviour. We divide ourselves, as it were, into two persons: our actual self – the acting self – and an imaginary self who resides within us and, in the role of judge, decides whether our actions are good or bad. This is the 'supposed impartial and well-informed spectator, [...] the man within our breast, the great judge and arbiter' of our own behaviour. This voice from within teaches us not only to exhibit behaviour for which we are actually praised, but more importantly, to exhibit behaviour worthy of praise, regardless of whether praise will actually be given.

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'The Wealth of Nations' Contradicted?

It was long held that Smith himself embodied not only the duality he described – the acting person versus the impartial observer who resides within us – but also the duality of being the author of two great works that were considered diametrically opposed to each other. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was seen as the work of a social, dare I say sympathetic Smith, while *The Wealth of Nations* was thought of as the output of an egotistical Smith, who would condone selfishness as beneficial to the common good (thanks to an 'invisible hand').¹ This view, however, cannot be maintained by anyone who has read and properly understood Smith's works. Firstly, self-interest, which indeed occupies a central place in *The Wealth of Nations* as the driving force behind human action, should not be confused with egotism. Secondly, self-interest also figures prominently in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as one of the motives behind human action (alongside benevolence, for example). And thirdly, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith does not identify 'sympathy' as the major driving force behind human action, but as the source of our moral judgements.

Smith's explanation of the origins of our morality may suggest that the 'sympathy' we feel for others is essentially based on self-interest. After all, why do people put themselves in others' shoes? Because they want to know how they are perceived by others. This allows them to adjust their behaviour in the hope that in the future they will be judged more favourably. Another reason is that, in the conversation with the impartial observer within, they like to hear the inner voice declare that they are acting correctly, or even better, that they are good. In this way, it can be argued that behind all acts of compassion and self-sacrifice lies the desire to feel good about oneself; all altruism can then be reduced to self-interest.

Smith himself rejects such reasoning, however, giving the example of men who feel 'sympathy' when seeing the pain of a woman giving birth. It is quite clear that they will never themselves have to suffer the same pain. So what such men imagine is not the pain they would suffer if they were to give birth; rather, they put themselves in the woman's shoes and imagine that they are she, occupying the same position in which they perceive her. Such sympathy is aimed at identification with the other person and is therefore anything but selfish.

Smith on Wealth and Vanity

The Wealth of Nations also gave Smith a reputation for sanctioning the pursuit of wealth. Drawing from Smith's economic classic, an entrepreneur would no longer have to feel inhibited in satisfying their thirst for wealth as they could justify their behaviour by asserting that the whole nation would benefit from their actions. This is yet another thought that is based not on what Smith actually wrote but on what has been misattributed to him. This idea is undermined not only by *The Wealth of Nations*, but also by *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

¹ As cited and contested by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (1982), 'Introduction', in D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (eds.), *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics), pp. 20–22.

The real motivation underlying the desire for wealth is the desire to gain the admiration of others. People are inclined to admire the rich and powerful, and even to assume that because they are rich and powerful, they are wise and virtuous.

Why does one strive for wealth, according to Smith? The advantage it affords over the comfortable but not lavish standard of living already enjoyed by the average citizen (in eighteenth-century Scotland, but all the more today in the West) is not primarily the additional material resources or opportunities for consumption. The real motivation underlying the desire for wealth is the desire to gain the admiration of others. People are inclined to admire the rich and powerful, and even to assume that because they are rich and powerful, they are wise and virtuous.

It is worth emphasising once again that when Smith writes that wealth evokes admiration, this is not a normative statement but a descriptive one. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* clearly shows that Smith sees this human tendency to admire the rich as foolish. Smith also finds it preferable to live a virtuous life in peace as opposed to a vain life. It is better to be a thoughtful person who studies in order to understand rather than to display their knowledge, and who derives their (unsought)

reputation from the substance of their knowledge and abilities: 'he does not always think of cultivating the favour of those little clubs and cabals, who, in the superior arts and sciences, so often erect themselves into the supreme judges of merit; and who make it their business to celebrate the talents and virtues of one another, and to decry whatever can come in competition with them'.

Contemporary Importance

Apart from the pleasure and insights to be derived from reading such descriptions of human characteristics and motives, how can *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* be of any use to us liberals in the twenty-first century?

First of all, a reading of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* serves to debunk the supposition that liberalism promotes an 'atomistic' view of humanity – a base accusation often made by socialists and Christian democrats. In this view, liberals are seen as lacking solidarity, as liable to drift apart as grains of sand are. Such individuals would not care about others unless they could use them to their own advantage, often at the others' expense. This is a misrepresentation. Smith's liberal theory illustrates this well; it is a social theory par excellence of individuals who relate to each other and empathise with each other's positions, all the while keeping their own interests at heart.

Secondly, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* counters the Christian claim that values and norms given by a 'higher' power (god) or source (the Bible) should be imposed on society and enforced on people to prevent moral derailment. Smith offers a liberal alternative in the form of his 'impartial observer', which leaves much room for individuals to live virtuously with each other based on their own sense of responsibility.

Thirdly, on a related note, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* contains several explicit warnings against moralists of all kinds. Many of these moralists would have us feel as much for others as we do for ourselves. Not only does this go against human nature, but Smith also questions the point of being miserable all the time simply because some people in the world are miserable. 'Does it help?' he asks. Smith has even less regard for those who seek to prescribe exactly how we should or should not behave in particular scenarios.

Fourthly, Smith strongly opposes systems thinkers who wallow so much in satisfaction with the supposed beauty of the system of government they have designed that they cannot tolerate any deviation from it. Such a person 'seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board'. However, such systems thinkers ignore the fact that in real life every 'chess piece' has its own principle of locomotion, its own will.

Objection

For all the appreciation Smith still deserves for his work today, it should not pass without criticism, either. My main doubt concerns the supposed universal presence of the 'great inmate of our breast', the impartial observer. Smith, being an Enlightenment thinker, optimistically claims that such an impartial observer lies in every human being. But the question remains as to whether this 'judge' is always so impartial. In his book, Smith gives examples of a tendency to self-deception that is often present, by which we, as acting individuals, try to deceive the impartial observer. In such cases, the judgement of the 'impartial observer' may become coloured, distorted. That we are thus encouraged to go deeper to find out whether this 'impartial observer' always fulfils its role perfectly is perhaps as much a merit as it is a shortcoming of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

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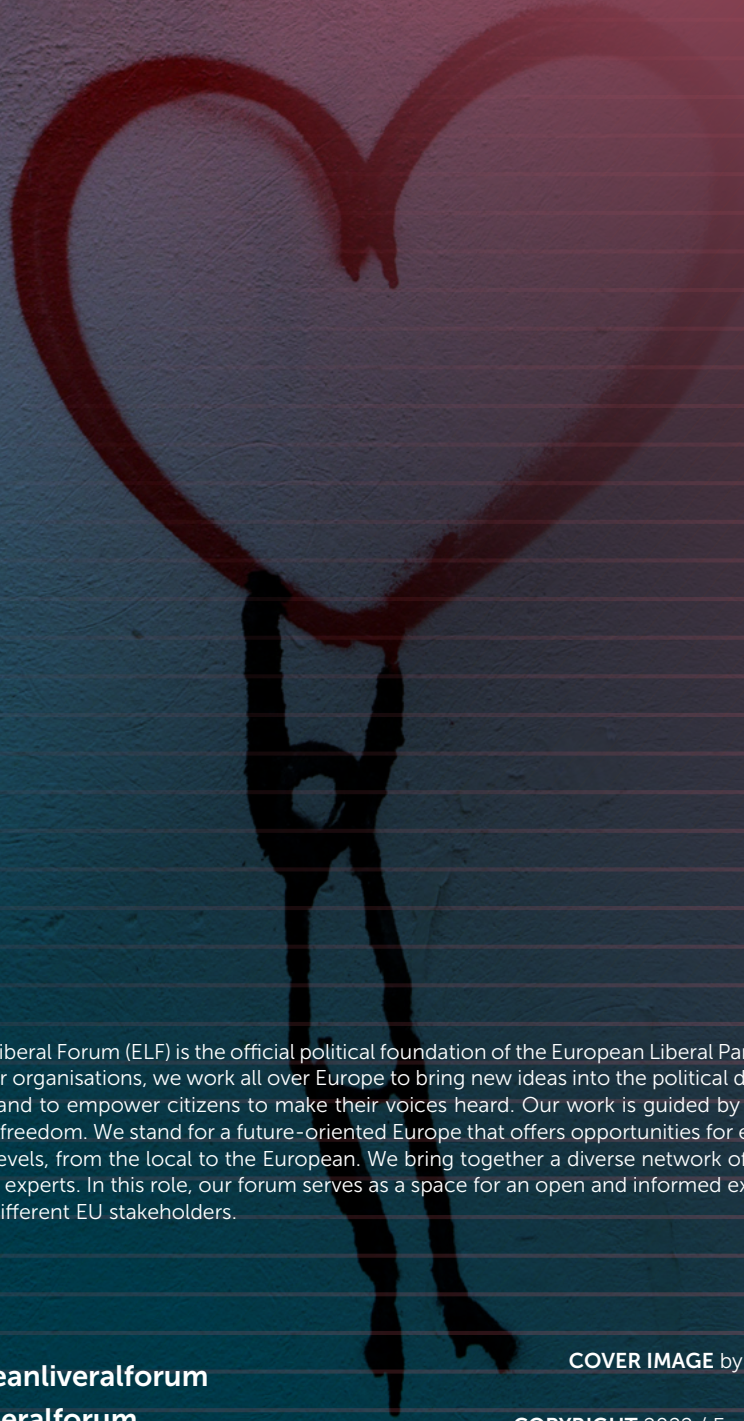
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