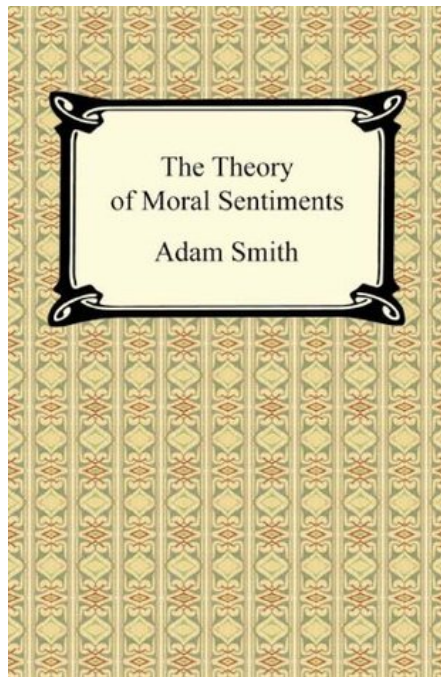




The Theory of Moral Sentiments

Adam Smith

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The Theory of Moral Sentiments

Adam Smith

The Theory of Moral Sentiments Adam Smith

Written in 1759 by Scottish philosopher and political economist Adam Smith, "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" provides much of the foundation for the ideas in his later works, most notably in "The Wealth of Nations." Through this initial text, Smith expresses his general system of morals, exploring the propriety of action, reward and punishment, sense of duty, and the effect of numerous factors on moral sentiment. In so doing, Smith devised innovative theories on virtues, conscience, and moral judgment that are still relevant and accessible today. Though somewhat surprising to find a philosopher of Smith's abilities discussing aspects such as luck and sympathy and how they affect self-image or relationships, "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" never loses its critical excellence in its good-natured understanding of the human exploration for the meaning of being good.

The Theory of Moral Sentiments Details

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From Reader Review The Theory of Moral Sentiments for online ebook

Alexander says

Adam Smith is a curious figure in the history of thought; economists don't read him because they view him as a philosopher, but philosophers don't read him because they view him as an economist. This curious dichotomy is represented in the Theory of Moral Sentiments, Smith's work on moral virtue. In many ways, Smith's work is a return to the "virtue theory" school of moral philosophy best represented in the ancient tradition by Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics.

Theory of Moral Sentiments is very readable (the edition I read was the Glasgow edition published by Liberty Fund) and well-annotated. As an attempt to reconcile a theory based on virtue with living in a capitalist society, the TMS is fairly unique in ethical philosophy and well worth reading.

Bob Nichols says

The "Theory of Moral Sentiments" is based on Smith's assertion that we are both social ("mutally sympathetic") and self-interested beings, and that social order must be based on these two fundamental classes of moral sentiments.

On this foundation, Smith derives three virtues that promote social order. The first is propriety, which is self-command over the passions. This virtue is based on Smith's observation that, as individuals seek their own freedom, the freedom of one is not more important than the other's. Self-command therefore generates admiration ("approbation") and its lack generates disapproval. Smith writes at considerable length about the "the manhood of self-command," admiring in particular the Stoics (and the North American "savage") who, in Taoist fashion, control what is in their own power and accept what is not. The central thrust of self-command is the negative form of justice, which is to do no harm (i.e., to respect the freedom of others). Given the length Smith spends on this virtue, he may regard it as the most important of the three. The second virtue is prudence. Here, Smith acknowledges with the Epicureans that we seek pleasure and avoid pain, and that prudence involves accepting pain now for greater pleasure later or foregoing pleasure now to avoid pain later, which is in essence the same thing. We also avoid, for example, ostentatious displays so that we don't incite envy. The third virtue is beneficence which is - and this is not so clear in Smith - promoting the generic happiness of humankind because god is said to command it (not because we are especially inclined to do so). This involves the positive form of justice which is to actively promote the happiness of others. Our task (and that of our leaders) is "to produce the greatest quantity of happiness." These three virtues work together as too much of one detracts from the other. Too much self-command neglects our softer side; too much self-love ignores the "amiable" side; too much beneficence lacks the discipline to protect one's self-interest.

Although tedious and difficult to read, Smith is better than other classical writers about identifying who we are and how we operate. At times, writing 100 years before Darwin's Origin, he sounds as though he is a modern NeoDarwinian as our most basic life impulse is not just survival but replication ("...self-preservation, and the propagation of the species, are the great ends which nature seems to have proposed in the formation of all animals.") Freedom to pursue self-interest serves as the means to these life ends. When we each pursue our self-interest, we conflict with others who do the same, thereby necessitating the three Smithian virtues to preserve order. Overseeing our application of these virtues is the fictitious impartial spectator who in conscience-like fashion reminds us that our freedom is, in the grand cosmic scheme, not more important than another's. That self-control is a challenge, Smith is well aware. Unlike most other writers, but like Veblen

later, Smith identifies the prevalence of rank and reputation as driving forces because these have a direct bearing on our ability to command resources to survive, including garnering the assistance of others. Also, unlike most other theorists, Smith discusses throughout this long book the importance of looking good to one's community. This conformist tendency, which foreshadows Darwin's assertion about our tribal nature, has survival value as we receive benefits and avoid harm when we maintain ourselves as group members in good standing.

Also better than most theorists, Smith identifies the role of imagination in magnifying pleasure and pain. The body, he says, experiences both in an immediate way. With mind and imagination, we can hold vast amounts of past pain and we can entertain vast hopes for future pleasure. Interestingly, Smith gives us a beginning theory of boredom when he writes that "Our imagination, which in pain and sorrow seems to be confined and cooped up within our own persons, in times of ease and prosperity expands itself to every thing around us." This hope for "the pleasures of wealth and greatness" is a "deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind."

Smith, like most other theorists, lodges "motive" in the external world so that we react to stimuli. He refers seamlessly to "objects of fear" and to "objects of self-interest" but this somewhat misrepresents the dialectical exchange between the self and the world. Why do objects create fear if we do not first have the capacity for fear inside? Is the motive - that which moves us - inside or outside? It is the same question with the more general notion of self-interest. Why do we seek food, sexual mates, conformity to the group, and rank and reputation unless we have an internal need for such things because they serve our self-interest? After all, Smith does say that the passions of pride and resentment and "ambition, animosity, the love of honour and the dread of shame, the desire of victory, superiority, and revenge" all "defend us against injuries," and that the passions "founded in love of pleasure" all "provide for the support and necessities of the body."

Smith takes human nature as it is in all its flaws (e.g., we live for the opinions of others, to be loved and admired; we admire the rich and indulge them in their excesses and sins because they are industrious as compared to those good-natured people who are slothful or to "the effeminate man") and Smith builds on that weak foundation by specifying what we ought to be (follow the three virtues). Where Smith's theory breaks down is in his assumption that we are all the same. That is at odds with the variability of human nature that lies at the heart of Darwinian evolution. We are not all the same. Self-regard and other-regard both serve self-interest, but we all have more of one than the other. That's particularly true of self-interest, which is relatively void of other-regardness, particularly for those who are not of our group. If the rich and powerful, or Joe Blow, can screw others and get away with it, what do they care about benefice or what the impartial spectator thinks? And that's the problem with free markets and unfettered capitalism.

Trey Malone says

It really is a shame this book wasn't the cornerstone of economics instead of its more famous counterpart. While I truly appreciate the insights delivered in "Wealth of Nations" and have read sections of it countless times during my PhD studies, I find this book to be more informative of the type of economics I want to study. I strongly recommend this book for anyone who is interested in how individuals make decisions, as

many of the insights "discovered" in behavioral economics actually came from this text.

Lynn says

This book is not easy to read. At times the book is tedious and somewhat difficult to understand. It is long and it sometimes seems wordy. That said, it contains some of the best prose in philosophy, and the numerous insights are incredible.

Most people have heard the common defense of capitalism in the Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."

They assume Smith is the prototypical defender of man as primarily selfish, materialistic, and concerned only with the utilitarian and practical aspects of economics. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even in the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith shows that man is much more than *homo economicus*, the economic man.

All morality is based on sympathy and how we interpret the perceptions of others, including the impartial spectator that Adam Smith claims is part of us. That is the essence of Smith's morality and it doesn't conflict with the *Wealth of Nations* as he expands and extends these ideas in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. There is a lot of information and a lot of insight throughout the book. As I was reading the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* I also was reading, *Born to be Good*. It was striking how Adam Smith, sitting in his armchair, had a better understanding of human nature than the PhD author of this popular psychology book. It brought to mind Richard Feynman's view of social science which you can see on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_EZcpT...). It doesn't appear social science has advanced much since the times of Smith, but maybe I'll change my opinion about that since I'm now reading a much better book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*.

I also watched some of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* while reading the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. People think of Adam Smith as being cynical about morality based they remember him from of his defense of classical liberalism and capitalism in *Wealth of Nations*. Like the author who wrote *Born to be Good*, they assume Ayn Rand and Adam Smith share the same philosophy. I have not yet read *The Wealth of Nations* from beginning to end, and it has been a while since I have read major portions of it, but I'm pretty sure anyone who understands Adam Smith would not hold this opinion. Woody Allen is the real cynic. Although Adam Smith recognizes that men are not perfect and society cannot be perfected, he believes there is a moral sense inherent in man and that guilt, regret, and remorse are indicators. I think Smith would say Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov is a more accurate depiction of man than Woody Allen's Judah. However, this doesn't mean there are no Judah's.

I really enjoyed the insights in the passages about the Chinese earthquake and how similar they are to current psychological research regarding active versus passive acts in moral decision making (the railroad switch). I also loved reading about the man of system and how relevant it is to today's current political economy. Even though it is hard, it is worth reading at least some of Adam Smith, so I will provide these short two passages to give you a taste of his genius:

The Chinese Earthquake - Part III chapter 3

"If he [this man:] was to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep tonight; but, provided he never saw them [i.e, the people of China:], he would snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred million of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less

interesting to him than this paltry misfortune of his own

...

To prevent, therefore, this paltry misfortune to himself, would a man of humanity be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them? Human nature startles with horror at the thought, and the world, in its greatest depravity and corruption, never produced such a villain as could be capable of entertaining it."

...

Human nature startles with horror at the thought, and the world, in its greatest depravity and corruption, never produced such a villain as could be capable of entertaining it.

The Man of System – Part VI chapter 2

"The man of system, on the contrary, is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it... He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it...."

see <http://www.scottmooreart.com/gallery/...> for an artist's rendition of this idea).

thethousanderclub says

Adam Smith's magnum opus and perhaps the first work of modern economics is *The Wealth of Nations*. For those who know of Smith it is *The Wealth of Nations* and not his earlier *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that receives all of the attention and commentary. After having read both books I think this is a mistake. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is an incredible work of observation and commentary which I believe will more directly impact my thinking than Smith's more well known work.

What I found so impressive about *The Theory of Moral of Sentiments* is Smith's unparalleled ability to observe and comment on the human condition without the assistance of modern science, statistical significance, regressions, data dredging, and the multitude of other tools—some more useful and honest than others—with exceptional precision. His writing is clear but challenging (especially for a modern reader), and his insights are deeply provocative. As an example of his expert insights long before the advent of modern science, see the several selections below:

"We suffer more ... when we fall from a better to a worse situation, than we ever enjoy when we rise from a worse to a better." (See *Nudge and Influence*)

"Of all the corrupters of moral sentiments, therefore, faction and fanaticism have always been by far the greatest." (See our current political and national condition)

"We are all naturally disposed to overrate the excellencies of our own characters." (See *Thinking, Fast and Slow*)

"The man who feels the most for the joys and sorrows of others, is best fitted for acquiring the most complete control of his own joys and sorrows." (See *Emotional Intelligence*)

These are but a few examples of what Adam Smith has accomplished in this incredible book. Much more

than many books, The Theory of Moral Sentiments requires and compels deep reflection. Is Smith overly influenced by his particular culture to write broadly about the human condition? Are his insights universally applicable, regardless of culture, nation, race, or language? If they are, then there is more than enough to pay attention to in this book. Furthermore, The Theory of Moral Sentiments shows unequivocally that Smith's critics who focus solely on The Wealth of Nations and Smith's role as "the father of capitalism" to be missing a great deal of nuance in his viewpoints and arguments. (Most have not read The Wealth of Nations anyway, so their critiques are generally lacking).

Perhaps more than any other observation made by Smith in his book I was most impressed by the following: "Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love." This alone can and should initiate a host of conversations and debates regarding the nature and definition of love and what it means to be lovely. As a proponent and believer in a universal truth I think it's possible to answer those questions, but others of a more relative bent may find it much more challenging or believe it impossible. So let the debate begin! It is no accident that though The Theory of Moral Sentiments was published in 1756 it continues to be read and its influence has extended through many generations.

A small but significant complaint against the book is its latter portion, which is Smith's response and critique of other philosophical perspectives. It's tiresome, and I lacked the needed background to truly understand and appreciate the critique. In addition, the last 30 or so pages is Smith's treatise on language and its origins. Again, I lacked the necessary educational background to appreciate what I was reading.

The Theory of Moral Sentiments is a brilliant and challenging book. Smith's observations are captivating, provocative, and I think for the most part true. Smith is among some of the greatest thinkers and writers of all time; The Theory of Moral of Sentiments is the most compelling case for him to be so honored.

<http://thethousanderclub.blogspot.com/>

Zahwil says

a difficult book to read, but I was inspired by a series of podcasts that Russell Roberts and Dan Klein (George Mason U) did in the summer of 2009. An idea in the book that I liked is that, counterintuitively, an "impartial spectator" is better company when you're downtrodden than a friend or relative. What you need is not necessarily sympathy but the ability to look at your situation as an impartial spectator would. In the company of strangers, our natural tendency is to bring our emotions down to the level at which others can tolerate. People are inherently selfish (as Smith says, the foreknowledge of losing a single finger is more disruptive to our peace of mind than a horrible calamity in a far-away place), and it is other people and their unwillingness to indulge our self-love that gives us our moral characters. I see this with my 2 year old son, who is relatively even tempered, and self-controlled when interacting with his peers and teachers in pre-school, and impatient, wild, and tantrum-prone when with me and my wife.

Victoria Hawco says

Say approbation one more time... also that last chapter wasn't even relevant.

AC says

Along with On The Wealth of Nations, I re-read this every couple of years. It is Smith's predecessor and guide book to the ideas in On The Wealth of Nations. It is the moral underpinning that needs to be present for a capitalist nation not to become a nation of exploitative, money hungry, soulless power mongers using people as economic ends to gain superiority by an over-valuing of wealth. Alas, we did not take heed.

Brett Ellingson says

Probably the most mind-blowing book I read when I was an undergrad and one of the few that I find myself going back to again and again. Smith does for morality what Darwin did to biodiversity - took a phenomenon widely assumed to have been bluntly imposed from above and showed it to be rather something that naturally emerges from the interaction of individuals endowed with certain properties (in this case, instincts both for self-preservation and empathy/sympathy). I finished with an exciting way to conceptualize human relations, and greater skepticism for claims that morality is "just a cultural construct" that can be discounted or arbitrarily molded.

Edward says

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--The Theory of Moral Sentiments

--Considerations concerning the first formation of languages

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Vadim says

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suffering of someone who's injured, we feel happiness for our friends, we are glad when someone likes the book that we love. Inadequate sympathy is repulsive to us: we consider callous one who doesn't mourn his loved one, and we consider it odd when person who laughs too much at a joke.

We feel less sympathy for feelings that come from the body such as pain, or hunger and we admire people who can control them e.g people who will not flinch when they are in pain. We feel more sympathy for the feelings that come from imagination but only if we ourselves can imagine having that feeling.

But we sympathize most for feelings that Smith calls social passions: love, gratitude, kindness. Those passions cannot be repulsive even when taken to the extremes: a too caring mother, a too kind uncle or a too grateful man won't be thought badly. The social passions are contrasted with unsocial ones such as anger, those passions make us usually more sympathetic to the victim of the feeling and not the feeler. A third category of passions - selfish passions such as grief and joy - are neither social nor unsocial.

Smith understood that we feel more sympathy for our family members, neighbors and acquaintance than to people we do not know. We feel more sympathy for the famous and the rich than to the poor - even as he explains that we shouldn't consider riches as a proxy for morality.

Propriety of conduct depends on whether or not we can sympathize with the motives of person performing the deed. To analyze morality and ethics, Smith introduces an impartial observer (The Man Within the Breast). As the author puts it - as with vision sometimes to see clearly we need to consider something from a distance. Although self-love is a natural feeling, from the perspective of an impartial observer, we shouldn't sacrifice our neighbor for our gain because we are indistinguishable.

We judge ourselves as we judge others - by assuming the role of an impartial observer. Therefore, we are only really happy for the praise that is merited (only the weak and vain people are satisfied by unearned praise). As humans we don't strive for praise but praiseworthiness, to embody some virtue even if it doesn't benefit us directly. A soldier tries to embody sacrifice or bravery when he dies valiantly in battle. People deduce rules of conduct by analyzing the cases which were agreeable (or which were not).

Smith believes we were given those mechanisms (sympathy, the feeling of justice and other feelings) to be able to live in society, but whether or not the causality is reversed isn't central to his argument.

Reading philosophy is always a chore for me, but The Theory of Moral sentiments wasn't half bad. Despite the dated language Smith writes cleanly and presents his arguments well. My only complaint is that different parts of the books aren't cohesive and there's no natural flow to the reading. All in all, I'm happy for the experience, it tickled my brain and it's always fun to reconsider and rethink things taken for granted.

David Gross says

If you've heard of Adam Smith, it's probably because of his book The Wealth of Nations, which launched the study of economics, or his concept of "the invisible hand" by which individuals, each looking out only for their own personal gain, end up unwittingly contributing to the prosperity of society as a whole.

I have not read The Wealth of Nations, but I'm currently reading Smith's earlier book, The Theory of Moral Sentiments.

When people argue about the application of moral values, usually implicit in their arguments is the theory that morality either arises from a *system* or that it *ought* to be systematized. In these arguments, showing that

some ethical assertion or other is unsystematic or is systematically inconsistent seems equivalent to showing it to be disproven or wrong.

Therefore much ethical philosophy has involved systematizing morality in various ways and then trying to test the soundness of the resulting systems.

“Experimental” ethical philosophy takes a different tack: taking human moral judgement as a pre-systematization given and trying to describe its contours rather than force it into a rationally-invented mold.

The Theory of Moral Sentiments is in this camp, though Smith’s “experimentation” isn’t very rigorous — mostly amounting to introspection and examination of the opinions of well-considered men of his time, place, and class.

Anyone writing a book of experimental ethics today would spend a little time writing a prelude like this one that explains the difference in outlook and goals that motivates such a project and distinguishes it from most other ethical philosophy. Smith, though — curiously — just jumps in and starts describing human moral judgement without any such throat-clearing.

It is not until part two of the book, in a footnote that looks as though it were added to respond to critics who misunderstood this very nature of his project, that he makes things explicit:

...[T]he present inquiry is not concerning a matter of right, if I may say so, but concerning a matter of fact. We are not at present examining upon what principles a perfect being would approve of the punishment of bad actions; but upon what principles so weak and imperfect a creature as man actually and in fact approves of it....

To Smith, the instinct to make moral judgements, like the instincts that make us hungry or horny, is built-in. And like those, the acts it prompts us to do tell us something about human nature and about how our creator (or Creator) intends to guide us.

We feel hunger to prompt us to sustain our bodies; we feel lust to prompt us to reproduce. Our feelings of resentment, gratitude, and other such moral emotions, Smith feels, must also have been implanted in us for the purpose of guiding our behavior toward certain ends. Rather than assuming the ends ahead of time and then trying to systematize an ethics that conforms to them, wouldn’t it be wiser (Smith feels) to carefully examine these emotions and try to derive these ends from what we find?

In every part of the universe we observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce; and in the mechanism of a plant, or animal body, admire how every thing is contrived for advancing the two great purposes of nature, the support of the individual, and the propagation of the species. But in these, and in all such objects, we still distinguish the efficient from the final cause of their several motions and organizations. The digestion of the food, the circulation of the blood, and the secretion of the several juices which are drawn from it, are operations all of them necessary for the great purposes of animal life. Yet we never endeavour to account for them from those purposes as from their efficient causes, nor imagine that the blood circulates, or that the food digests of its own accord, and with a view or intention to the purposes of circulation or digestion. ... But though, in accounting for the operations of bodies, we never fail to distinguish in this manner the efficient from the final cause, in accounting for those of the mind we are very apt to confound these two different things with one another. When by natural principles we are led to advance those ends, which a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us, we are very apt to impute to that reason, as to their efficient cause, the sentiments and actions by which we advance those ends,

and to imagine that to be the wisdom of man, which in reality is the wisdom of God.

Our moral emotions serve us. They sustain us and help us to propagate by prompting us to actions that strengthen useful friendships and discourage human enemies, predators & parasites. For example, our acts and declarations of gratitude, prompted by our moral emotions, further encourage those who have shown themselves to be able & inclined to do us useful service.

Smith, — remarkably, in 1759 — had written a book of evolutionary psychology. He didn't know that was what he was doing, of course (Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was still a century away), but his book is agnostic enough about the nature of this creator who "implanted the seeds of [moral emotion] in the human breast" — sometimes it is "Nature," other times "the author of nature," other times "God" or "the Deity" — that it is not particularly awkward to fill in the blank today, now that we know the answer. Smith at times comes awfully close to this himself, as for instance when he describes the different emotional bonds that connect parents and children:

Nature, for the wisest purposes, has rendered in most men, perhaps in all men, parental tenderness a much stronger affection than filial piety. The continuance and propagation of the species depend altogether upon the former, and not upon the latter.

The edition I got from the library was published by Regnery Publishing for the "Conservative Leadership Series" of the "Conservative Book Club." It's not a very good advertisement for that brand, being riddled with typographical errors, misspellings (applause ringing in our "cars," for instance), missing words, and other awkwardnesses that demonstrate that optical character recognition software is no substitute for a dutiful editor. I suspect that a book club selection like this is meant more for ostentatious display than for reading, however, so perhaps such niceties are superfluous.

In some ways, Adam Smith is a sensible choice for the conservative pantheon. His free-trade / free-market viewpoints, once considered *de rigueur* for good liberals, are now mostly honored (and mostly in the breach) by American conservatives. But this book doesn't seem to harmonize well with contemporary American conservatism: Moral descriptivism is far too godless. I expect most Conservative Book Club members would be horrified if their children were being taught by some liberal professor about how morality was implanted in us by nature to promote the survival of the individual and the propagation of the species, and that you could derive morality from human ethical emotions without any reference to preexisting moral absolutes.

But back to Smith: When I first read Smith's description of conscience, I was lulled by how sensible it seemed and at first I didn't notice what an unusual explanation (for its time, anyway) it was. To Smith, "conscience" isn't the insight by which we discern good & evil or the nagging voice prompting us to resist temptation, but is instead the faculty by which we simulate the perspective of an impartial observer who observes our own headspace and behavior, using the same criteria we naturally use when judging others. It is an application of the same, innate judgements we already have access to by virtue of being human, but using a difficult and specialized variety of imagination in which we cast that judgement through a point of view that is not our own and not (as) prejudiced by self-interest.

Because this process is so difficult, especially when our minds are distracted by particularly strong temptations or crisis circumstances of quick change and the need for rapid action, we tend to supplement our consciences by inventing and memorizing heuristics that we can apply to situations so that we can quickly flag those that require conscientious scrutiny. This process of inventing heuristics, Smith believes, is the source of the ethical philosopher's suspicion that ethics is or ought to be systematized:

It is thus that the general rules of morality are formed. They are ultimately founded upon experience of what, in particular instances, our moral faculties, our natural sense of merit and propriety, approve, or disapprove of. We do not originally approve or condemn particular actions because, upon examination, they appear to be agreeable or inconsistent with a certain general rule. The general rule, on the contrary, is formed by finding from experience that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstanced in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of.

When these general rules, indeed, have been formed, when they are universally acknowledged and established by the concurring sentiments of mankind, we frequently appeal to them as to the standards of judgement, in debating concerning the degree of praise or blame that is due to certain actions of a complicated and dubious nature. They are upon these occasions commonly cited as the ultimate foundations of what is just and unjust in human conduct; and this circumstance seems to have misled several very eminent authors to draw up their systems in such a manner as if they had supposed that the original judgments of mankind with regard to right and wrong were formed like the decisions of a court of judicatory, by considering first the general rule, and then, secondly, whether the particular action under consideration fell properly within its comprehension.

The book has some flaws. For one thing, Smith is wordy and repetitive. He seems to think if a point is worth making, it's worth making three times just to make sure. I've never read a book that cried out more for a Readers' Digest abridged edition. But aside from points of style, the major flaw is Smith's insistence that an examination of human morality is equivalent to an examination of the opinions of well-bred, enlightenment-minded, well-to-do English men of the 18th century. His curiosity isn't sufficient to consider other points of view as also being manifestations of human nature, or as anything but inferior versions of the mature morality of his fellows. Some of his conclusions follow comfortably and obviously from his biased choice of exemplars, and are unconvincing to the modern, more cosmopolitan reader.

But it's ahead of its time and thought-provoking, and a well-needed perspective on ethical philosophy that ought to be more influential today than it appears to be.

Xander says

After reading *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), I decided to read Smith's work on ethics - *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. I read that this book has to be read in order to fully understand the moral implications *The Wealth of Nations*.

But after making it halfway through *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), I couldn't bear it any longer. What a terrible book this is! It is written in prose, which is supposedly appreciated by many readers commenting on Goodreads, but in my opinion this whole book is not worth the effort. Prose is all fine, but Smith takes page after page after page to make his points. His theory of ethics can be summed up in 20 pages; but he decided to write 350. After working my way through more than 1000 pages of *Wealth of Nations*, this was a bit too much for my patience.

Smith's conception of ethics is rather revolutionary - in his time. He sees our morality as a product of nature. Smith, in other words, uses social psychology to understand morality, as opposed to most other philosophers (ancient as well as contemporary) who saw morality as a product of reason.

We, says Smith, are social animals, and are dealing with fellow human beings each and every day. The interaction between human beings is guided by feelings of propriety, merit and praise. We try to be the

object of propriety, merit and praise; we try to avoid being the object of impropriety, demerit and disapproval.

But this according to Smith, is not enough, we also have this inner voice - our conscience - that leads us to really want to be proper, meritorious and approvable. This is independent of the judgment of other people. For example, we can try to be proper to score points in the eyes of our fellows, but this is not true morality - we WANT to be proper, whether others notice it or not.

To judge the conduct of others and ourselves, we apply the concept of 'the impartial spectator'. According to Smith, we try to envision how a neutral person would view a particular action. We strive to act in such a way that this impartial spectator can be content with the action. This 'yardstick' we apply to ourselves, as well as others, in our everyday lives. So, in a sense, this mechanism of the impartial spectator is some sort of invisible hand that guides our moral decisions. When we follow our conscience, we promote human happiness - according to Smith.

Smith clearly follows David Hume (or is it the other way around?) in claiming that our morality derives from sympathy with our fellow human beings. Ethics is sympathy: we try to project ourselves in the situation of another person and are able to feel the joy or sorrow of that particular person, albeit in a lesser degree. When we see a person who is sad (for example, he/she just lost a loved one), we feel sad too; when we see a person who is happy (for example, he/she just got a promotion), we feel happy too. This was a revolutionary standpoint at the time, since almost all preceding moral philosophy dealt with duty, virtue, and reason. For Smith (and Hume), ethics is nothing but human nature - no need for a reasonably designed system of rules.

One of the major insights of Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments, is the fact that law is ineffective as a means to promote morality. Smith clearly argues that morality has to come from within: prudence is the driving force. We WANT to behave in such a way that the impartial spectator is happy with our behaviour, whether our conduct is noticed by others or not. Without a conscience, morality wouldn't exist. We can formulate laws and promote justice, but this will only prevent us from, or limiting us in, harming others: it will NOT provide a guide for ethical behaviour. Beneficence cannot be forced.

It is only a logical conclusion for Smith to claim that freedom is the way to go. We should be free to do what we want, being led by the impartial spectator (i.e. our conscience) all the way. If we, as human beings, all do this, a happy society will emerge. Just like in pursuing our desires and needs the market economy will emerge.

Smith's message: we don't need reason to be moral: it's in our nature. If we all just follow our nature, the world will be a happy place. Maybe that's a bit naive, but at least it's a break with the equally naive view that ethics (or law) is something altogether different from humanity. Montesquieu showed in his *d'Esprit de Lois* that a system of law is void if viewed independently from culture, traditions, accepted modes of conduct, and sociological factors. Smith does the same for morality. Viewing morality as an independent system of rules - thought up by moral philosophers using their reason - is void; only by accepting morality as part of human nature do we truly understand it.

The only question, of course, is if Smith is talking about morality in a descriptive or a prescriptive way. He doesn't make this distinction very clearly and at many times seems to mix them, and this is problematic. If Smith means to say that morality is a part of human nature and that we are (so to speak) programmed to behave in a certain way with regard to our fellow human beings, he is absolutely vindicated by modern day evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. If he means to derive morals from this story, he clearly makes the naturalistic fallacy (deriving norms from facts). So, for example, when Smith is talking about beneficence or justice, is he describing human behaviour? Or is he giving a moral judgment on what is the right human behaviour? He seems to explain how human beings behave towards each other, but at the same time he contrasts these terms with their opposites (malevolence and injustice respectively), implying with these

labels that there is a 'good' and 'bad' way to behave.

Anyway, this is 'all' that I have got out of this book. I'm glad I tried it and made it halfway through, but I'm also glad I decided to put it down. I cannot bear a single sentence in prose anymore. Maybe I'm too impatient a reader, but I have an antipathy to authors that cannot formulate their points in a clear and concise way...

Hence, I cannot recommend this book. It is badly written, it is dry, it is way too long, and it is unnecessarily complicated. Too bad...

James says

Reading Adam Smith, like Hume or Gibbon, takes you into a century where the prose styles were more classical than today. I was fortunate to study Latin in high school, but Smith had Greek and Latin studies from an early age. His references to Aristotle, Plato, the Stoics and Cicero are central to his work. But his immediate predecessor was Francis Hutcheson of the University of Glasgow, who divided moral philosophy into four parts: Ethics and Virtue; Private rights and Natural liberty; Familial rights (called Economics); and State and Individual rights (called Politics). In contrast to Hutcheson, Smith, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, divided moral systems into: 1) Categories of the nature of morality: These included Propriety, Prudence, and Benevolence; and 2) Categories of the motive of morality: These included Self-love, Reason, and Sentiment. Hutcheson had abandoned the psychological view of moral philosophy, claiming that motives were too fickle to be used as a basis for a philosophical system. Instead, he hypothesised a dedicated "sixth sense" to explain morality. This idea, to be taken up by David Hume (see Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*), claimed that man is pleased by utility.

Smith rejected his teacher's reliance on this special sense. Starting in about 1741, Smith set on the task of using Hume's experimental method (appealing to human experience) to replace the specific moral sense with a pluralistic approach to morality based on a multitude of psychological motives. Throughout the work the Smith demonstrates a superior ability to observe in detail the human experience. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* begins with the following assertion:

"How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrows of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous or the humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it."

Smith departed from the "moral sense" tradition of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume, as the principle of sympathy takes the place of that organ. "Sympathy" was the term Smith used for the feeling of these moral sentiments. It was the feeling with the passions of others. It operated through a logic of self projection, in which a spectator imaginatively reconstructed the experience of the person he watches. This process allows a person to build and maintain a sense of propriety which sense is of utmost importance for Smith's theory. Also important is the relevance of this book for Smith's more famous tome, *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. P. J. O'Rourke has this to say about this connection:

"The *Wealth of Nations* was part of a larger enterprise in moral philosophy. The first installment of Adam Smith's great undertaking was *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published 17 years before *Wealth*. Smith finished an extensive revision of *Moral Sentiments* the year before he died. He considered it his most important work. The book is not much read or referred to nowadays, but his theories in *The Wealth of Nations* cannot be understood without *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

"Smith devoted most of his career to the project of bettering human existence. A modern person_or a modern person who doesn't wear Birkenstocks_is tempted to laugh. It is a hilariously big job. But most of us have undertaken hilariously big jobs such as raising children. We were lured into the enterprise by the, so to speak, pleasures of conception. New beginnings are always fun. And the prospect of making wholesale improvements in ordinary life was as novel and fascinating in the 18th century as the prospect of making life simpler and less stressful and blocking e-mail spam are today." (P.J. O'Rourke, "Smith's Law," The Weekly Standard July 17, 2006).

Adam Smith's book was well-received and sold well. More importantly it influenced thinkers from political philosophers to literary stylists. Just read Jane Austen (*Sense and Sensibility*) to get a flavor of Smith's influence. This is an important and original book to read for all who are interested in the development of the philosophy of the enlightenment.
