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‘so weak and imperfect a creature as man’

Introduction

How do human societies hold together? What are the minimum conditions for their continuance? *Moral Sentiments* addresses these questions. Although Smith does much more, our focus necessarily must be narrower than that of a comprehensive account of his entire corpus. I discuss in plain language selected ideas from Smith’s moral philosophy without showing the development of his ideas in the context of past and contemporary philosophers, thereby unavoidably missing out a great deal of the contents of *Moral Sentiments*.

*Moral Sentiments* discusses what constrains individuals to certain minimal standards of conduct while living with, and as, relative strangers in close proximity in society. The net effect of his imaginative construct, the impartial spectator, is to show that people can and do live in relative harmony, or at least in the absence of general murderous violence common in all kinds of societies in the distant past, and because nothing is perfect that emanates from ‘so weak and imperfect a creature as man’ (TMS77), Smith’s explanations maintained their credibility when he stepped outside 18th-century Europe to explain the process of moral formation in societies devoid of the habits, institutions and religious teachings with which he and his readers were familiar.

If religious precepts and pulpit exhortations are not enough to induce people to behave morally in societies that share the same precepts, what replaces exhortation in societies where people do not share common religious precepts or are entirely ignorant of them, including those earlier pagan societies throughout prehistory? Did they have any binding moral force within them? Smith’s theory explained what curbed unruly and vicious passions arising from greed and selfishness. If exhortations to
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The looking-glass

Smith asserts that we approve or disapprove of our conduct according to how we imagine others see, or are likely to see, our behaviour. In other words, we try to anticipate the views of a ‘fair and impartial spectator’ by examining our behaviour, ‘as it were, with his eyes and from his station’, and because we can ‘never survey our own sentiments and motives’ or ‘form any judgement concerning them’ unless we view them ‘as at a certain distance from us’, we can do this ‘no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them’. We only approve of our conduct if it receives ‘the approbation of this supposed equitable judge’, the impartial spectator, and ‘if otherwise, we condemn it’ (TMS110).

It is from the social pressures of living in society that we judge the merits or demerits of our behaviours. It would be easy to overlook this observation. Smith dramatised it neatly. Suppose a person grew to adulthood without contact or communication with fellow members of the human species. In these circumstances, ‘he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face’ (TMS110). Why not? Because he does not have a ‘mirror to present them to his own view’. But ‘bring him into society, and he his immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before.’ And the ‘mirror’ in this sense is Smith’s powerful metaphor for what living in society does to a person’s sense of character and beauty. Society mirrors our person, giving us feedback on what is and what is not acceptable in our behaviour. The people we live with show in their ‘countenance and behaviour’ what they think of our behaviour, and as children we notice when relatives approve and disapprove of our conduct, and it is here that we first view the ‘propriety and impropriety’ of our own passions. But for the man ‘outside’ society, in Smith’s example, whatever are the objects of what pleases or hurts him occupies ‘his whole attention’ and his passionate reactions would ‘scarce ever be the objects of his thoughts’ (TMS110).

Bring this outsider into the society of others and all his ‘passions immediately become the cause of new passions’ because some of them will