

Smith and Merit

(Excerpt from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*)

I. Preliminary Remarks

[Adam Smith](#) (1723-1790) is most famous for his work on political economy titled *The Wealth of Nations*. However, Smith was also an observant and thoughtful moral philosopher, who published a book titled *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The excerpts that these notes are on, come from that book.

At the center of Smith's moral thought we can find the notion of sympathy. Although this notion is not entirely his—he most likely borrowed it from his friend and fellow countryman, the Scottish philosopher David Hume—he made interesting uses of it. We can think of what both Smith and Hume call 'sympathy' to be very similar to what we nowadays call 'empathy' in ordinary language. Sympathy, in other words, is what both Smith and Hume describe as the human capacity to imagine someone else's emotions in such a way that we can almost feel what they are feeling. Smith, of course, knows that the emotions felt by means of sympathy are not the same as feeling our own emotions. In this sense, Smith is very aware that this requires the use of imagination. Nevertheless, Smith (as well as Hume) suggest that this form of imagining the emotions of others is as if hardwired in us—it is a fundamental part of human nature. And it is our capacity for sympathy, to a great extent, what makes us the moral creatures that we are. We will see, for example, that a crucial feature of Smith's moral thought is what he calls the 'impartial spectator', which can be briefly described as an imaginary spectator who observes our own capacity to feel emotions, and which aids our moral judgment. For Smith, much of our moral judgments rely on the mechanisms of sympathy and the impartial spectator we carry within us. This means, then, that our judgments regarding merit and demerit, also rely on these two mechanisms of the mind.

As in previous weeks, our prime interest when reading Smith are his remarks on merit and demerit, which come only at the end of the assigned excerpt. However, in order to make our way to his comments on merit and demerit, we first have cover, in a bit more detail, a few important notions and aspects of his moral thought.

II. Moral Sentiment as a ground for Merit and Demerit

The first thing that we must be clear about is that, at least when it comes to moral thought, Smith is what is known in philosophy as a moral sentimentalist. In brief, moral sentimentalists, like Smith or Hume, are interested in figuring out where moral judgments come from. The two primary candidates for them tended to be either reason or feelings. In this course we can use Plato as a fair example of a philosopher who thought that our moral judgments are (or at least should be) grounded on reason. Plato can be described as arguing that sound moral judgment comes from the exercise of human reason, and anything counter to reason probably deviates from what is morally upright. Smith, however, believes more or less the opposite of this. Smith, in very general terms, argues that human nature relies on emotions and certain psychological mechanisms (like sympathy) to serve as the basis for our moral judgments. In other words, Smith believes that when we approve or disapprove an action, and judge it in moral terms, our judgment is grounded on emotion and not rational thought. However, and this is important to emphasize, Smith is not suggesting that our emotions are a disorganized mess of inner experiences. He thinks, instead, that there is a certain amount of consistency regarding how and what humans feel regarding certain actions. Part of what his moral theory is about, is examining how this consistency is possible without the aid of reason.

Smith opens with an important distinction: He wants to make clear that the mechanism that allows us to judge whether someone or some action deserves reward or punishment is not the same as the more basic emotions that inform many of our other moral judgments. Suffice it to say that Smith uses the terms ‘propriety’ and ‘impropriety’ to refer to the two basic options of moral judgment available to the human mind: those actions which we morally approve of are *proper*, while those that we disapprove of are *improper*. And at the heart of our moral approval of someone, or some action, Smith argues that we find the emotions of *love* and *hate*. However, merit and demerit are grounded on somewhat different emotions, which are distinct from love and hate. Smith suggests that merit and demerit are grounded on *gratitude* and *resentment*. These, he says, are different mechanisms of what he calls ‘approbation’ and ‘disapprobation’—which are simply two words that mean approval and disapproval. In short, then, the pairs love/hate and gratitude/resentment are two different mechanisms of moral approval or disapproval.

The basic difference between these two pairs is that love and hate are felt towards an individual, while gratitude and resentment—although they are also felt towards a specific

individual—focus on the possible reward or punishment we might feel that person deserves based on his or her actions. In other words, love or hate focus on the amount of sympathy we can establish with regards to another person, and whether the feelings associated to this individual are agreeable or not. We might find an individual’s personality, or even his actions towards others, disagreeable, and in this sense we might develop a feeling of hate.¹ Moreover, we might develop this feeling even if this person has never wronged or harmed us, or someone close to us (a friend or family member)—our disapproval is mostly a dislike for this person and his or her habits, character, personality, etc. In this sense, my dislike for this individual doesn’t initiate any desire to take action against him or her—I merely feel a general sense of disapproval, i.e., “hate”. However, if this person harms me or someone close to me, it is *then* that I might want to take action against this individual. At this point, Smith argues, the sentiment felt is no longer only hate, I now feel resentment too. And resentment is what will drive my mind to judge this person as deserving some sort of punishment or not. The same can be said about the difference between love and gratitude: I might feel love and admiration towards an individual—but unless this person does something that benefits me, I will not feel the gratitude that will lead me to judge his or her actions as deserving reward.

In this sense, Smith, despite the long explanations of his text, is suggesting that love doesn’t lead to gratitude, and hate doesn’t lead to resentment. Moreover, he is also suggesting that *reward* and *punishment* (the specific types of merit and demerit he is interested in exploring in these passages) are the product, not of love and hate, but of gratitude and resentment. When talking about the difference between hatred and resentment, Smith provides an example that illustrates the distinction he wants to make clear. Imagine you feel hate towards someone (hate of the sort Smith talks about); that is, you feel a general sense of disapproval towards this person, even if he didn’t do anything wrong to you or your loved ones. The dislike is merely grounded on character traits that this person possesses, which you simply disagree with, or find distasteful. Imagine, then, that you hear, one day, that this person dies in a seemingly accidental way. Initially you might be fine with this person’s death—after all, on Smith’s account, you did not like this person, no connection of sympathy was ever established—“Good riddance!” might be a your reaction. However, imagine that you realize that the death of this person was brought about by an accident caused by your

¹ It is very likely that Smith didn’t mean ‘hate’ with the strong connotation that word has nowadays. By ‘hate’ he meant a general feeling of dislike.

negligence—that is, now you learn that you are somewhat responsible for this person’s death. Smith argues that, if the only feeling you had towards this person was dislike (i.e., hate), then the thought of being responsible for this person’s death will come as a terrifying revelation. In fact, Smith argues that you will not feel any sort of agreeableness regarding this person’s death, since he did nothing to you. You might have hated him, yes, but you never intended to kill him out of mere disagreeableness. In contrast, if this person *did* do something to you—for example, if this person murdered your father—then you no longer feel hate, now you feel resentment. And *now* you will feel that this person does *deserve punishment*—and what is more, if you can deliver the punishment yourself, Smith suggests, even better. Smith points out, however, that in most cases punishment will not be delivered directly by the person who feels resentment, which means that resentment is never really satisfied. Moreover, Smith gives so much importance to the feeling of resentment itself, that he declares that: “The natural gift of this passion tends, of its own accord, to produce all political ends of punishment; the correction of the criminal, and the example to the public” (p. 25). Which is Smith’s way of suggesting that resentment helps shape the notion of justice on which laws regarding the punishments of crimes are grounded on.

III. Sympathy and the Impartial Spectator

Smith argues that these emotions, and the moral judgments that emanate from them, are felt more strongly when backed up by the figure of the *impartial spectator*. The impartial spectator seems, initially, a tricky notion to understand, but perhaps the following explanation of it clears up what it is and how it works. Smith knows that moral judgment is not limited to our own selves. That is, when we feel the emotions that guide our moral judgments, these are felt the strongest when an event happens to us—there is no doubt of that. If my father is murdered, I will feel strong resentment towards whomever killed my father, and I will more quickly arrive at the thought that the murderer deserves punishment. However, we are constantly witnesses to the actions of others, and, as witnesses we also feel emotions and execute moral judgments grounded on these. If I learn that my neighbor’s father was murdered, I might not feel the pain and resentment as strongly as if my father had been murdered, but the mechanism of sympathy allows me to imagine what *that* would feel like, and thus it would allow me produce a similar judgment regarding the possibility or need of punishment. Now, Smith argues that, just like the mechanism of sympathy is shared

among humans, as humans we also carry within us something like an imaginary impartial witness in our minds. It is as if, grounded on my experience witnessing and judging the actions of others, I can imagine myself playing the role of being witness to my *own* actions, or actions done to me. It is almost as if Smith imagines that we are psychically split: on the one hand we have our regular self, the self who experiences emotions first hand; but on the other hand, we have something like a secondary or imaginary self, which is “impartial” enough to evaluate whether what we feel and what we judge is fitting with what others would feel and judge. If my ‘impartial spectator’ is aligned with what *I* feel and judge, then my judgment is as if validated by others as appropriate. In this sense, both sympathy and the impartial spectator, aid in the forming of moral judgment—and there is a sense in which Smith believes that both sympathy and the impartial spectator behave more or less the same in everyone. (This, of course, is arguable.)

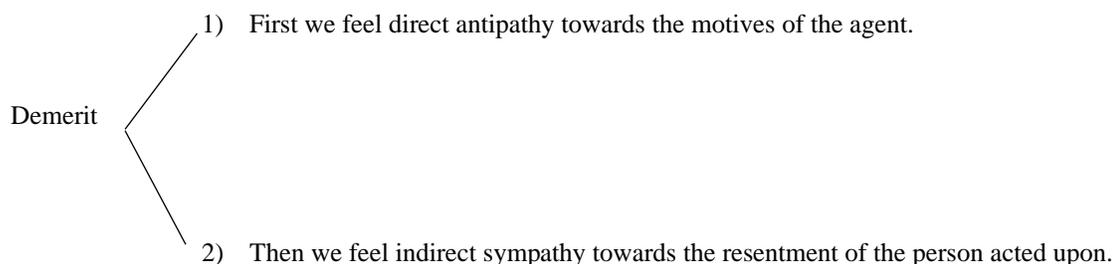
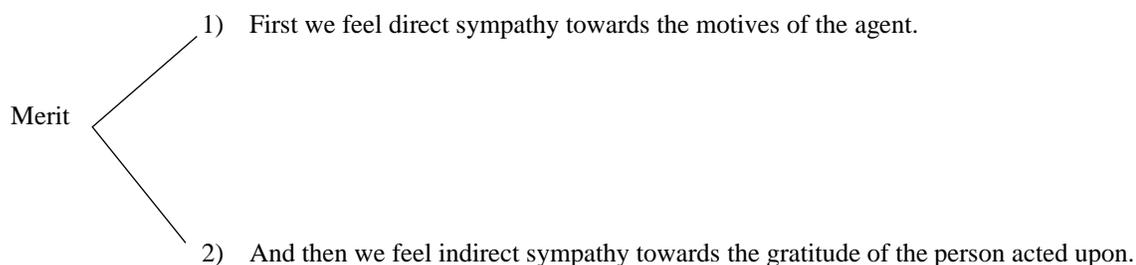
IV. Merit and Demerit

Returning, then, to our regular role as witnesses of the actions of others, Smith makes clear that having knowledge of the intentions of someone’s actions also aids in the formation of moral judgment, since it helps the appropriate emotion to be felt. For example, if I suddenly see that a man shoving a woman on the sidewalk with such force that he knocks her down (imagine we just arrived at the scene and don’t know why he did it), Smith points out that the mechanism of sympathy would probably lead me to imagine the surprise and pain of the woman. I might imagine what it is like to be a victim of the man, and in identifying with her position, I might feel resentment towards the man who shoved her. I might then feel that he deserves some sort of punishment. However, if it is revealed to us that the intention of the man was not to harm the woman, but to save her from, say, a speeding cyclist which would have crashed into her, then my emotion and judgment will be different. I might still sympathize with her surprise and pain, but I will also sympathize with the man’s intentions. Instead of feeling resentment, I will feel some amount of gratitude (although never as much gratitude as the woman feels), and thus I will judge the man as deserving reward for saving the woman from certain injury, or even death. It is in this sense that the revelation of intention or motive, whenever possible, also aids in the formulation of the appropriate moral judgment: Does a person deserve punishment or reward?

In this sense, Smith’s analysis of merit and demerit, which are informed by gratitude and

resentment, reveals how much more complex these emotions are than love and hate. As spectators of an action—an action not done to us, but done to another person—we are witness to a relation between at least two individuals: the agent and the sufferer (or recipient). This means that the mechanism of sympathy will really have two individuals to focus on, and thus it is split into two “types” of sympathy: *direct sympathy* and *indirect sympathy*. Briefly put: direct sympathy focuses on the sentiments and the intentions of the agent, and indirect sympathy focuses on the sentiments of the recipient (who feels either gratitude to resentment). In this sense, as spectators, merit is what Smith calls a *compounded sentiment*. What he means by this is that, unlike love or hate, which are sentiments directly felt by the mind without mingling with any other sentiment, merit and demerit rely on two experiences of two emotions: direct sympathy or antipathy towards the agent, and indirect sympathy and antipathy towards the recipient.

Seen in even more detail, then, merit and demerit can be broken down in the following way: A judgment of merit, and therefore the desire to give reward, is grounded on the direct sympathy and approval (love) we feel towards the motives or intentions of the agent *and* on the indirect sympathy and gratitude of the person acted upon. A judgment of demerit, and therefore of possible punishment, is grounded on the direct antipathy and disapproval (hate) we feel towards the motives or intentions of the agent *and* on the indirect sympathy towards the person who suffers along with an approval of her resentment. This diagram might help:



It is, then, by compounding the two types of sympathy (or its opposite, antipathy), one directed towards the agent, and the other directed towards the recipient, that we can judge a person as deserving reward or punishment. It is important never to forget that although this might appear to be rational procedure, for Smith this internal process of judgment is grounded on sentiment. It is our capacity to feel, and our capacity to imagine the feelings of others, that permits us to gauge whether punishment and reward are really deserved.