

Chapter 3

The solitary islander and moral objectivity

We saw in the previous chapter that Smith believes our moral sentiments develop over time by an almost evolutionary process that depends on interactions with others. There are two other important elements of Smith's argument that will fill out his account of the origins of human morality.

The first is found in a remarkable thought experiment Smith describes. Smith asks us to imagine a person who had grown up entirely outside of human society, with no contact with other humans—a solitary islander, perhaps (TMS: 110–11). Would such a person, were he able to survive on his own, have any sentiments we could call properly “moral”? Smith's answer is no: he might develop likes or dislikes (this tastes good, this doesn't; this hurts, this doesn't; and so on), but such a person, Smith contends, would not develop notions of propriety or impropriety—no “I should not have done that,” or “I acted unjustly.” The reason, Smith thinks, is because he has not had experience with the “mirror” on his own conduct that society with others provides. He has thus never had the feedback, both negative and positive, from the judgment of others, which means he never had his desire for mutual sympathy of sentiments triggered, which in turn means he never had the opportunity to develop his specifically moral sentiments. How could such a person develop moral sentiments? Smith: “Bring him into society, and all his own passions will immediately become the causes of new passions. He will observe that mankind approve of some of them, and are disgusted by others. He will be elevated in the one case, and cast down in the other; his desires and aversions, his joys and sorrows, will now often become the causes of new desires and new aversions, new joys and new sorrows: they will now, therefore, interest him deeply, and often call upon his most attentive consideration” (TMS: 111).

When once brought into society, this person would begin the process that for most of us began in childhood, which Smith calls “the great school of self-command” (TMS: 145). It is upon being judged by others, and having the pleasant or unpleasant (as the case may be) experience of realizing that we enjoyed a sympathy or antipathy of sentiments with others, that we begin striving to consciously direct our own behavior to achieve more of the former and less of the latter. Only then do we begin developing and exercising the virtue Smith describes as “not only itself a great virtue, but from it all the other virtues seem to derive their principal lustre” (TMS: 241)—namely, “self-command,” or controlling our behavior so that it comports with others’ expectations and judgments. Only then do we begin the long process of becoming fully moral agents. Being in the company of others is, therefore, necessary not only because it might enable us to become wealthy—more on that later—but in the first instance because it enables us to become moral.

The second important aspect of Smith’s account relates to his claim about what he calls our desire “not only to be loved, but to be lovely,” “to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love” (TMS: 113). Even further, Smith argues that we “desire both to be respectable and to be respected” (TMS: 62). We desire, Smith thinks, not only praise but also to be worthy of that praise, and he argues that, just as unmerited disapproval is unpleasant, so is unmerited approval: an “ignorant and groundless praise can give no solid joy” (TMS: 115). Why? Because we know that a properly informed impartial spectator would not in fact praise us. When we imagine how such an impartial spectator would judge us, and we realize he would not praise us as much as actual spectators might, we realize a failure to achieve mutual sympathy of sentiments with the impartial spectator. Thus the desire for mutual sympathy of sentiments, which on Smith’s view accounts for so much of our moral personalities, functions here too: it endows us “not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of; or of being what [we ourselves] approve of in other men” (TMS: 117).

Why is this important? Smith is trying to reconcile two claims about human morality that otherwise seem to fit ill with one another. First, his observations have led him to believe that an individual’s moral sentiments develop over time as an interaction between his own motivations—including in particular his desire for mutual sympathy of sentiments—and the experiences he has with others with whom he has come in contact. On this account, one’s mature moral sentiments are dependent on one’s experiences

and environment. Second, however, Smith has also observed that on a few specific matters there seems to be significant overlap across cultures about what constitutes the core of human virtue. Moreover, while some of our moral sentiments seem variable across cultures and over time, some of them we hold with an almost unshakeable certainty. The first point suggests a kind of moral relativism; the second, a moral objectivity. How can both be true?

Smith's claim that we desire not only to be "loved" but to be "lovely" is the beginning of an answer. Our desire for mutual sympathy of sentiments leads us, as we have seen, into community with others. In addition, one central element of happiness is loving relations with others. Smith writes, for example, that "the chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved" (TMS: 41). Smith further claims that man "can subsist only in society": "All the members of human society stand in need of each others assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. Where the necessary assistance is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem, the society flourishes and is happy. All the different members of it are bound together by the agreeable bands of love and affection, and are, as it were, drawn to one common centre of mutual good offices" (TMS: 85). Thus our desire for mutual sympathy of sentiments, because it is mutual—meaning that each of us desires it—draws all of us into society with one another. Because, in addition, we need one another not only to supply our "mutual good offices" to one another but also for love, friendship, and esteem, we are strongly, and naturally, motivated to find ways to behave that we find mutually agreeable. Thus the patterns of behavior that we discover, and that get positively reinforced by achievement of mutual sympathy of sentiments, become a set of real moral standards. They are created by human beings, but they are not arbitrary or subjective: they must meet with others' approval as well and are thus subject to external, social correction. And given that we have similar psychological and material needs that can be met only in society with others, there is bound to be some commonality across cultures, even if some details vary. The impartial spectator standard would then allow some variability with matters that are less central to human survival, and be more fixed regarding other matters that are more central.

If Smith is right, then there should be some aspects of human behavior that are indeed society- and cultural-specific, and others that hold across societies and cultures. Are there? The former are easy to find, but what about the latter? That brings us to Smith's discussion of the rules of justice.