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Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments

It seems that apart from its value as witness to the spirit of the time, the importance of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)¹ should have been enhanced by the fame of his later *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), since it is in the prior work that he faced the more fundamental problems of ethics. Only in recent times has the relation between his ethical and economic theories begun to receive due attention.²

Our aim is however a restricted one. Because Smith's Theory is apparently characterized by emphasis on Sentiment, and since Aristotle and Saint Thomas had stressed the role of appetite in practical truth, one might be inclined to view it as a reaction against the extreme rationalism of his time and a return to a more traditional conception of the practical life. Indeed it was, and many of his observations are quite consonant with those of the authors just mentioned. Our purpose is to show that in reality the ethics of Adam Smith does not quite succeed in divorcing itself from the rationalist conception of morality which he aimed to replace. By rationalism, when extended to human actions, we mean the theory which confines practical truth to reason in such a manner that sheer knowledge must provide the ultimate norm of individual conduct.

In Book VI of the *Ethics*, chapter 2, Aristotle defines practical truth by the conformity of reason, not with *what is* absolutely, but with right appetite. "What affirmation and negation are in thinking, pursuit and avoidance are in desire ; so that since moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just what the former asserts. Now this kind of intellect and of truth is practical ; of the intellect which is contemplative, not practical nor productive, the good and the bad state are truth and falsity respectively (for this is the work of everything intellectual) ; while of the part which is practical and intellectual the good state is truth in agreement with right desire."³ This means that while truth is formally in the intellect, the truth of what one does depends nevertheless upon the dis-

1. We have used the edition entitled : *Essays on Moral Sentiments*, etc., London, Alex. Murray and Son, 1869. — The most authoritative biography of Adam Smith is that of John RAE, *Life of Adam Smith*, London, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1895.

2. Glenn R. MORROW, *The Ethical and Economic Theories of Adam Smith*, Cornell Studies in Philosophy No.13, New York, Longmans, Green and Co., 1923.

3. In Book VI of the *Ethics*, ch.2.

position of the appetite with respect to the end.¹ In other words, the truth of fully practical knowledge consists, not in knowledge alone, but in the very act of directing toward an end in conformity with a principle that is appetite. And therein lies the difficulty of right action. It is precisely this difficulty which so many philosophers have tried to side-step by inventing a moral "system" that in the end would be adequate to the contingent situations of life and ensure the rightness of our actions no matter what the temper of our desires — a moral science which would dispense with prudence as a distinct intellectual virtue.²

There is a further distinction to be borne in mind before we examine Smith's theory. Moral virtues are acquired. How, then, can a person act according to virtue before it is acquired? In this respect all men are largely subject to contingency. However, it is known from experience that if a young person is reared in the proper surroundings, by people who are themselves virtuous and who, by example, instruction and discipline, train that young person to learn and do what is right and avoid what is wrong, such a person has a chance of becoming virtuous and so achieve happiness. In other words, the *particular* norms of human behavior are first extrinsic, embodied in customs, regulations, literature, and the person of our neighbour. These norms may be right or wrong, in whole or in part. What, then, is the criterion? There's the rub. Whatever doctrine moral philosophy may be, it will differ widely, not only from the mathematical, but also from the natural sciences. It will require a vast amount of experience as recorded by persons whom we consider to be wise in such matters. That one must do what is right and avoid the wrong is known to every responsible agent. But this does not take one very far. Besides, just when is an agent responsible? The greatest of ancient philosophers realized, uncommonly, that moral knowledge and the achievement of virtue are matters which cannot be settled by abstract reasoning, as one can see in Plato's

1. In his commentary on the above-quoted passage, Saint Thomas raises an obvious difficulty and answers it, in the following terms: "Videtur autem hic esse *quoddam dubium*. Nam si veritas intellectus practici determinatur in comparatione ad appetitum rectum, appetitus autem rectitudo determinatur per hoc quod consonat rationi verae, ut prius dictum est, sequitur quaedam circulatio in dictis determinationibus. Et ideo *dicendum est*, quod appetitus est finis et eorum quae sunt ad finem: finis autem determinatus est homini a natura, ut scilicet in tertio habitum est. Ea autem quae sunt ad finem, non sunt nobis determinata a natura, sed per rationem investiganda. Sic ergo manifestum est, quod rectitudo appetitus per respectum ad finem est mensura veritatis in ratione practica. Et secundum hoc determinatur veritas rationis practicae secundum concordiam ad appetitum rectum. Ipsa autem veritas rationis practicae est regula rectitudinis appetitus, circa ea quae sunt ad finem. Et ideo secundum hoc dicitur appetitus rectus, qui prosequitur quae vera ratio dicit." *In VI Ethicorum*, lect.2, (ed. Pirotta) n.1131.

2. Cf. Charles DE KONINCK, *La révolte contre la vérité prudentielle*, *Semaines sociales du Canada*, XX^e session, Montréal, 1943, pp.109-121.

Laws and Aristotle's *Ethics*. According to the latter, the study of virtuous activity, let alone the acquisition of virtue itself (in no way *per se* produced by ethics), is far less a matter of knowledge than his master had thought.

The human condition being what it is, no wonder the Age of Enlightenment became impatient with the problems that any man or society has to face in point of right and wrong.

It is difficult for us to realize nowadays the extent to which an utterly fictitious clarity held the intellectuals in bondage since the Renaissance. It all appears to have begun with an optimistic humanism, of which Pico della Mirandola is a fine example. But even this is seen to have been preceded by the Latin variety of Averroism — a dualism which left man free sway. At any rate, it was Descartes who expressed the shape of the spirit of his times. He reminds us of what Aristotle said in Book II of the *Metaphysics* : “ Thus some people do not listen to a speaker unless he speaks mathematically . . . ” Descartes was an outstanding mathematician, even though he speaks of mathematics with disdain. But he did not underestimate the power of this discipline when applied to the study of nature. On the other hand, even when he philosophizes in a more general way, he expects one to do so with a lucidity quite like that one finds in mathematics. This is plain in his assumption that what is most knowable in itself must be equated with what is most knowable to us — which is indeed the case of mathematics whose subjects we ourselves construct. To put it another way : he identified the certainty of fact, the *an est* of a thing, with exact knowledge of what the thing is ; the *quid nominis* with the *quid rei*. Of course we are quite certain that there is motion, but this does not mean that we know plainly and exactly what motion is. The Cartesian *idées claires et distinctes* are without exception characterized by hopeless confusion. Meantime, people felt good about this way of thinking. The real world was believed to be utterly proportioned to the human intellect, inasmuch as it was conceived as a vast though intricate machinery. Even human bodies achieved dubious clarity by being just machines in the way of clocks. All the other animals, as well as the plants, were no more than machines. It was Descartes' view that gave rise to the conception of soul as a ghost in the machine. The attempt to reduce nature to sheer mechanism is a type of anthropomorphism that has become less attractive to modern physics, but which one still encounters among biologists who believe that in mathematical physics and chemistry the world is entirely accessible to the human mind.

The way Descartes had placed man in two utterly distinct compartments, one of machinery, the other of a self-intuiting soul, soon made of philosophy an analysis of mind and of the elements of consciousness ; the mind now had a direct hold upon itself which had never, not even in Platonism, been claimed before. On the other

hand, the mathematisation of nature, which reached a successful, though temporary, climax with Isaac Newton, produced a world image far more simple than even that of Democritus.

Now the whole point is that this world-machine fiction had aroused, prior to Newton, new hope in the unwieldy realm of moral philosophy. After all, Hobbes, who identified reasoning with arithmetic computation, intended his moral philosophy to be "more arithmetico demonstrata;" later, Spinoza's *Ethica* was meant to be "ordine geometrico demonstrata." Theirs was in fact the age of moral 'systems.' The intellectuals became convinced of an irrefutable certainty that man could become the absolute maker of his own perfection and that the one sure method of achieving this was that of sheer science, the science that stands for construction and for practical achievement; a science where man is principle, either in the order of thought alone as in logic and mathematics where the constructive role of reason is preponderant, or in such experimental sciences as will give us increasing power over nature. We find this attitude anticipated in the following passage from Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode* :

car elles m'ont fait voir qu'il est possible de parvenir à des connaissances qui soient fort utiles à la vie ; et qu'au lieu de cette Philosophie spéculative qu'on enseigne dans les écoles on en peut trouver une pratique par laquelle connaissant la force et les actions du feu, de l'eau, de l'air, des astres, des cieux, et de tous les autres corps qui nous environnent, aussi distinctement que nous connaissons les divers métiers de nos artisans, nous les pourrions employer en même façon à tous les usages auxquels ils sont propres, et ainsi nous rendre comme maîtres et possesseurs de la Nature.¹

The xviiith Century was indeed an age that rejected fancy and desired to be guided by reason. It wished to understand, not to imagine. If there was one emotion which seemed to it suspect, out of place, bordering on madness, it was enthusiasm whether that of faith or that of Metaphysics.²

The self-satisfaction which characterized the achievements of this century may be seen in the words of G. B. Buhl in his history of philosophy written in 1797 :

We are now approaching the most recent period of the history of philosophy which is the most remarkable and brilliant period of philosophy as well as of the sciences, and of the arts and of the civilization of humanity in general. The seed which had been planted in the immediately preceding centuries began to bloom in the eighteenth. Of no century can it be said with so much truth as of the eighteenth that it utilized the achievements

1. René DESCARTES, *Discours de la Méthode*, Paris, Librairie A. Hatier, sixième partie, p.76.

2. Émile LEGUOIS and Louis CAZAMIAN, *A History of English Literature*, translated from the French by Helen Irvine and W. D. MacInnes, New York, The MacMillan Co., 1935, p.197.

of its predecessors to bring humanity to a greater physical, intellectual and moral perfection. It has reached a height which, considering the limitations of human nature and the course of our past experiences, we should be surprised to see the genius of future generations maintain.¹

It was indeed an Age that rejected fancy and all claims of the emotions and desired to be guided by reason alone. As a result of Newton's celestial mechanics, and a universal application of it which he himself never intended, man fell into place amidst this newly ordered world and, as Randall observes, he and

his institutions were included in the order of nature and the scope of the recognized scientific method, and in all things the newly invented social sciences were assimilated to the physical sciences.²

Newton was acclaimed as the greatest mind of all ages and Pope wrote of him :

“ Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night :
God said, let Newton be ! and all was light.”³

Since Nature was considered to be thoroughly orderly and humanly rational it followed that whatever was natural was rational and Nature and the Natural were interpreted as Reason and the Reasonable and became the ideal of man and of human society.

This rationalistic outlook, then, did not confine itself to any particular sphere of activity but invaded all fields. The opening years of the xviiith Century were astir with religious controversies. As reason grew bolder and gained ground it attempted to shed natural light upon the obscure parts of religion. The alleged conflict between revealed dogma and scientific discoveries as well as the rivalries of sects and their mutual persecution, led the people to lose respect for the traditional churches and follow the rationalistic tendency of their age, seeking a belief that would conform to their vague ideas of Reason and Nature. Therefore we find an attempt to find a natural religion which would admit a God but not a creed, a reasonable religion which would do away with all mysteries and be based upon understanding rather than on revelation. Both morality and religion were examined in the light of reason and made to conform to it. The philosophy of empiricism as taught by Locke had added its influence to rationalism and severed the connection between the mind and objects of reality. A subjectivism resulted which made the human mind the measure of

1. Friedrich PAULSEN, *A System of Ethics*, 4th ed., New York, Charles Scribner & Company, 1899, p.147. Quotation from G. B. Buhl.

2. John Hermann RANDALL, *The Making of the Modern Mind*, New York, Houghton, Mifflin Co., Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 1926, p.255.

3. Ernest C. MOSSNER, *Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason*, New York, The MacMillan Co., 1936, p.XI.

reality itself in the fields of practical philosophy such as ethics, politics and economics. Since he is not born with knowledge of the distinction between good and evil, "man forms by reason out of experience moral values which, at least theoretically, are capable of demonstration as incontestable as mathematics itself. Experience shows that things are good or evil only in reference to pleasure or pain and man's sole guide to choice of action is his reason."¹ Thus the individual was conceived as law unto himself — which in a sense is true of the virtuous man.

Locke's statement that the reason "must be our last judge and guide in everything"² was the motto of the Deists. He gave to Deism its philosophical basis by limiting human knowledge to the empirical and thereby denying the possibility of establishing fundamental principles of morality. This religion of reason held firmly to the belief that Nature contained a law which was to be discovered and followed exactly like all the other laws pointed out by Newton. It was taken for granted that the natural law of human behaviour were identical in kind with those of physics. It became the vogue to glorify the savages and Indians as the pure types of human nature who were uncorrupted by tradition and following a universal, primitive and socially useful order of morals. The philosophy built around Newtonian science was destroying the Christian concept of God with its wealth and depth of feeling, to formulate a philosophical religion which appealed only to the cool and deliberate reason of the truly rational man. The great Saints and mystics were bitterly criticized for being primarily concerned with mysteries which they could never hope to explain or understand, instead of contemplating man who answered to set rules and had a definite standard of life and morals entirely within his reach. To a great extent Christianity was looked upon as the enemy of moral virtue because it influenced "the mind by fear of God, not by love of good."³

The mind of the XVIIIth Century was so attracted by the idea of general laws and universal fixity that it no longer considered it possible to draw a distinction between the spiritual and the natural.

The revolt from theology had blinded men to the deeper meanings veiled in theological teachings and led to a contemptuous estimate of the great moving forces which had uttered themselves in theological language as mere fanaticism, enthusiasm and superstition.⁴

1. Ernest C. MOSSNER, *op. cit.*, p.43.

2. LOCKE, *Essay on Human Understanding*, Bk.IV. ch.XIX, a.14.

3. John Henry Cardinal NEWMAN, *The Idea of a University*, 8th ed., London, Longmans, Green & Company, 1888, p.197.

4. Sir Leslie STEPHENS, K.C.B., *History of English Thought in the XVIIIth Century*, London, John Murray, Albemarle St., 1927, Vol.II, p.98.

As science ascertained more and more clearly the inadequacy of ancient notions concerning the Universe, the place of the earth itself and, accordingly, the spacial position of man in the Universe, there was increasing doubt about the religious doctrines that had been held.

It became daily more difficult to identify the god of philosophy with the God of Christianity. How could the tutelary deity of a petty tribe be the God of the Medieval imagination, the God worshipped by the Christians when Christendom was regarded as approximately identical with the Universe be still the ruler of the whole earth, in which Christians formed but a small minority and of the universe in which the earth was but as a grain of sand on the seashore? ¹

After substituting the abstract metaphysical deity identified with Nature, for the personal Ruler and God of the Christians man found himself faced with the problem of explaining any restrictions or evils in nature. If God is Nature, He must sanction all instincts and all forces alike.

This rationalism was in some measure gradually tempered by a wave of sentimentalism. We recognize traces of a reaction which showed an instinctive and obstinate preference for the rights of morals and sentiment. Lord Shaftsbury was prominent in his support of this active opposition against the rationalistic interpretation of nature which used the mathematically balanced line as its ideal, employed diagrams instead of images and a system of axioms instead of rich mythology. He returned to the ancient classical notions of harmony and aesthetic beauty in the universe as found in the Neo-Platonic schools which stress the importance of the relation between the beautiful and the good. Rejecting the ideas which opposed the state of nature to the social state he insisted upon man's ability to live outside society. He continually refers to "a uniform consistent fabric" and to "a universal mind" by which the whole is animated. He used the term "moral sense" to indicate "that natural tendency to virtue which is implicitly denied in the dogma of human corruption."² Moreover, he attributed to it the power to admire the noble and the good, and to penetrate into the evil and to arrive at a proper harmonious balance in distinguishing the character of an action.

Virtue for Shaftesbury was its own recompense and just as the music lover gets full satisfaction from indulging his taste, so the virtuous man contemplates virtue in all its aesthetic beauty without dreaming of further reward than that deep enjoyment felt by him at the sight of such perfect proportion and harmony. Shaftesbury attributes divinity to human nature itself and thus tries to avoid the difficulty of having his "moral sense" influenced by our selfish instincts.

1. STEPHENS, *op. cit.*, Vol.I, p.81.

2. STEPHENS, *op. cit.*, Vol.II, p.29.

Those moralists who followed Shaftesbury may be considered as successfully modifying or developing his theory.

There is, it is maintained by them all, a certain mysterious harmony or order in the Universe which reveals itself to the divine faculty or conscience. With Shaftesbury the faculty is almost identified with the aesthetic perceptions and is rather a sentiment than a power of intellectual intuition. By his followers the doctrine takes a moral formal shape. The sense of harmony is made more definite as a perception of final causes.¹

This change of attitude was further developed by Francis Hutcheson, the immediate predecessor of Adam Smith and to whom the latter was deeply indebted.² Hutcheson too likens the moral sense to an internal sense that perceives moral excellence or turpitude as external senses perceive colours, sounds, and so forth. In him we find strongly marked the Newtonian concept of God as a skillful contriver of an harmonious system which works with machine-like precision. The moral sense, in concord with this, points by a prearranged harmony to the course productive of the greatest happiness; actually it is "nothing but the approval of such affections and consequently of such courses of action, as are most conducive to the public welfare."³ In a final analysis it appears that utility is for him the sole and sufficient guide to and measure of virtue. It seems too "that the standard of moral goodness was the promotion of the happiness of others;" and that "we could have a knowledge of good and evil without and prior to a knowledge of God,⁴ which is no doubt true. But when he does turn to God, we see that Hutcheson belonged to an era we are back to the deity of the xviith century, who lived only for human welfare and whose will was not to be known from mysterious signs and providence, but from a broad consideration of the greater good of mankind — the greatest happiness of the greatest number."⁵

Adam Smith, who was born in Kirkcaldy, 1723, in an age of religious doubts and philosophic curiosity, reacted to this environment by formulating an ethical system of his own. He shared the general enthusiasm in regard to Newton and held the latter's discovery to be the greatest ever made by man. He looked upon him as the only natural philosopher whose system, instead of being a mere invention of the imagination to connect otherwise discordant phenomena,

1. STEPHENS, *op. cit.*, Vol.II, p.78.

2. "In the scope of his philosophy, in temper and practical aim, Smith may be called the spiritual descendent of Hutcheson." Francis W. HIRST, *Adam Smith, English Men of Letters*, London, Macmillan & Company, Ltd., 1904, p.7.

3. STEPHENS, *op. cit.*, Vol.II, p.61.

4. John RAE, *Life of Adam Smith*, London, Macmillan & Company, 1895, p.13.

5. *Ibid.*, p.12.

appeared to contain in itself "the real chains which Nature makes use of to bind together her several operations."¹

Although he was deeply imbued with the rationalistic tendencies of his age, he yielded nevertheless to the influences of the sentimental school, and endeavored to work out a system which would explain man and society in terms of both reason and instinct. He did not concede to the rationalists in their teaching that man's reason alone is sufficient to guide and control his destiny but insisted upon certain impulses implanted in every man by Nature, which are wiser than human reason and which cooperate with nature's designs for man and society.

As already mentioned, the two great works in which Adam Smith presents his philosophical doctrines are *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. The former, written during his early years while a professor of Moral philosophy in the University of Glasgow, deals with the development of the psychological theory of the origin of the moral judgment. In discussing the moral faculty by which we distinguish between right and wrong, he also reveals his theological convictions. A thorough representative of an optimistic Deism he despises anything that savours of religious zeal or enthusiasm.

His second work was written many years later. During the interval he had travelled extensively and spent much of his time in France where he became acquainted with the teachings of the French Physiocrats. It is evident from his work that he shared their faith in a strictly rational order in society even while allowing all men to follow their innate instincts and to work for their own selfish interests.

In his critical review of the older "systems" Smith says that there are two questions to be considered :

First, wherein does virtue consist? Or what is the tone of temper, and tenor of conduct, which constitutes the excellent and praiseworthy character, the character which is the natural object of esteem, honour, and approbation? And secondly, by what power or faculty in the mind is it, that this character, whatever it be, is recommended to us? Or, in other words, how and by what means does it come to pass, that the mind prefers one tenor of conduct to another, denominates the one right and the other wrong; considers the one as the object of approbation, honor, and reward, and the other of blame, censure, and punishment?²

His answer to the first question is that the character of virtue must be ascribed indifferently to all our affections when under proper government and direction, or to some one class or division of our affections. Here there are two general classes of affections; the

1. John RAE, *Life of Adam Smith*.

2. Adam SMITH, *Essays*, London, Alex Murray & Son, 1869, p.236.

selfish, regulated by what Smith calls "prudence", and the altruistic, regulated by benevolence.

According to Smith, Plato, Aristotle and Zeno, in different ways found the character of virtue in propriety. Propriety is said of all our affections when they are under proper government and direction. After a somewhat sketchy and faltering account of this doctrine, he conveys his evaluation in very significant terms. The ancient Greeks tried to show that happiness was either entirely (Stoics) or to a great extent (Platonists and Peripatetics) independent of fortune and based more on the enjoyment of "the complete approbation of (the virtuous man's) own breast." He commends their "spirit and manhood" and contrasts it to "the desponding, plaintive and whining tone of some modern systems". But this propriety, Smith holds, is but one part of virtue.

He then goes on with a criticism of certain contemporary systems which also confine the character of virtue to propriety. However, he says, « None of those systems either give, or even pretend to give, any precise or distinct measure by which this fitness or propriety can be ascertained or judged of. That precise and distinct measure can be found nowhere but in the *sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator.* »¹ Smith's reactions to these systems is well expressed in his own words :

The description of virtue, besides, which is either given or at least meant and intended to be given in each of those systems, for some of the modern authors are not very fortunate in their manner of expressing themselves, is no doubt quite just, so far as it goes. There is no virtue without propriety, and wherever there is propriety some degree of approbation is due. But still this description is imperfect. For though propriety is an essential ingredient in every virtuous action, it is not always the sole ingredient. Beneficent actions have in them another quality by which they appear not only to deserve approbation but recompense. None of those systems account either easily or sufficiently for that *superior degree of esteem* which seems due to such actions, or for that diversity of sentiment which they naturally excite. Neither is the description of vice more complete. For, in the same manner, though impropriety is a necessary ingredient in every vicious action, it is not always the sole ingredient ; and there is often the *highest degree of absurdity and impropriety in very harmless and insignificant actions.* Deliberate actions, of a pernicious tendency to those we live with, have, besides their impropriety, a peculiar quality of their own by which they appear to deserve, not only disapprobation, but punishment ; and to be the objects, not of dislike merely, but of resentment and revenge ; and none of those systems easily and sufficiently account for that *superior degree of detestation* which we feel for such actions.²

1. Adam SMITH, *Essays*, p.259. Italics ours.

2. *Ibid.*, p.260. Italics ours.

Then he begins to take up those systems which make virtue consist in what Smith calls "prudence." The first of these is Epicureanism, which made bodily pain and pleasure the criteria of virtue. Smith rejects this materialism of Epicurus and insists that there are spiritual values which are overlooked in this system. However, careful examination of Smith's own theory and his criticism of Epicurus and others might make us wonder if Smith's notion of the spiritual does not require the same careful examination as his notion of "prudence."

He then concerns himself with a system which he claims was espoused by the Eclectics and later Platonists, whereby virtue consists in imitating the benevolence and love which influenced all the actions of the deity. Smith says that according to Dr. Hutcheson virtue consists in pure and disinterested altruism. Hutcheson himself uses such expressions as "the greatest possible good," "the general happiness of mankind." Failing to distinguish between virtuous love of self and egoism, Hutcheson said that "self-love was a principle that could never be virtuous in any degree or in any direction."¹ On this score Smith wisely observes that "in the common judgments of mankind, however, this regard of the approbation of our own minds (which Hutcheson rejects) is so far from being considered as what can in any respect diminish the virtue of any action, that it is often rather looked upon as the sole motive which deserves the appellation of virtuous."² He adds that such a system does not seem to explain the "approbation of the inferior virtues of prudence, vigilance, circumspection, temperance, constancy and firmness."³

For Smith these three systems which place virtue in propriety, prudence and benevolence respectively are fundamental positions on this question and all other systems are reducible to these. All the same, it is very difficult to see how Smith's moral sentiments are related to these three systems. He himself does not tell us.

After a discussion of what he terms "licentious systems", where he criticizes Dr. Mandeville for attempting to "impose on our credulity" with a system so preposterous that no man in his right mind could accept it, Smith begins to determine the position of the other moralists as regards the second question, namely, by what power or faculty in the mind is it, that this character, whatever it be, is recommended to us. Here again we have three opinions: [1] We approve or disapprove of our own actions and those of others from self-love only, from some view of their tendency to our own happiness or disadvantage. [2] Reason enables us to distinguish between the fitting and unfitting in both actions and affections. [3] The distinction between fitting and unfitting is the effect of immediate sentiment and feeling

1. *Ibid.*, p.268.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.268-269.

3. *Ibid.*, p.269.

and arises from the satisfaction or disgust with which the view of certain actions or affections inspires us.

In regard to the first, he says that some, like Hobbes, hold that society is necessary and that virtue is necessary to maintain society. While agreeing in part with the position, he says that "This account of the origin of approbation and disapprobation, runs into that principle which gives beauty to utility..."¹ In this same passage he refers to human society not only as "the production of human art," as Aristotle had said, but as a "beautiful and noble machine." His disagreement arises from the fact that Hobbes' explanation of virtue fails to show how we approve of the actions of the ancients whose society was not ours. He insists that "when these authors deduce from self-love the interest which we take in the welfare of society, and the esteem which upon that account we bestow upon virtue, they do not mean, that when we in this age applaud the virtue of Cato, and detest the villainy of Cataline, our sentiments are influenced by the notion of any benefit we receive from the one, or of any detriment we suffer from the other."² For him it was not self-love but rather its opposite, benevolence, which was responsible for our interest. He says,

The idea, in short, which those authors were groping about, but which they were never able to unfold distinctly, was that indirect sympathy which we feel with the gratitude or resentment of those who received the benefit or suffered the damage resulting from such opposite characters: and it was this which they were indistinctly pointing at, when they said, that it was not the thought of what we gained or suffered which prompted our applause or indignation, but the conception or imagination of what we might gain or suffer if we were to act in society with such associates.³

He says further that this whole notion of self-love arises from "some confused misapprehension of the system of sympathy." For Smith, sympathy appears in no way based upon self-love.

In regard to the second system, namely, that the principle of approbation is reason, he says that in opposition to Hobbes, whose doctrine made right and wrong depend on the arbitrary will of the ruler, some thought to place the foundation of all law in the mind. These writers, he says, felt it necessary to prove "that antecedent to all law or positive institution, the mind was naturally endowed with a faculty, by which it distinguished in certain actions and affections, the qualities of right, laudable, and virtuous, and in others those of wrong, blamable, and vicious." He refers to a Dr. Cudworth as proving that law could not be the original source of these distinctions

1. *Ibid.*, p.280.

2. *Ibid.*, p.280.

3. *Ibid.*, p.281.

“ since upon the supposition of such a law, it must either be right to obey it, and wrong to disobey it, or indifferent whether we obeyed or disobeyed it. That law which it was indifferent whether we obeyed or disobeyed, could not, it was evident, be the source of those distinctions; neither could that which it was right to obey and wrong to disobey, since even this still supposed the antecedent notions or ideas of right and wrong, and that obedience to the law was conformable to the idea of right and disobedience to that of wrong.”¹ He admits that the fact “that virtue consists in conformity to reason, is true in some respect, . . . by reason we discover those general rules of justice . . . we form those more vague and indeterminate ideas of what is prudent, of which is decent, . . . The general maxims of morality are formed like all other general maxims, from experience and induction. From reason, therefore, we are properly said to derive all those general maxims and ideas.”²

For him, while reason is the source of general rules, the particular cases from which these general rules are formed are the objects, not of reason, but of sense and feeling. He says that “pleasure and pain are the great objects of desire and aversion : but these are distinguished, not by reason, but by immediate sense and feeling. If virtue, therefore, be desirable for its own sake, and if vice be, in the same manner, the object of aversion, it cannot be reason which originally distinguishes these different qualities, but immediate sense and feeling.”³

Then he goes on to the position that the principle of approbation is found in sentiment. Here we have two opinions : [1] Sentiment is of a peculiar nature, distinct from any other, called a “moral sense” ; [2] Sympathy is sufficient to account for all the effects ascribed to the above faculty. He says that among those who attribute the principle of approbation to a moral sense there is Dr. Hutcheson who called this new power of perception a moral sense. He objects to this for the reason that the qualities belonging to the object of the sense cannot be ascribed to the sense. But a man can be driven so as to approve of vice, and would thus have a bad moral sense.

Others said that the moral sense was a peculiar sentiment which answers a given purpose and no other. He has several objections to this. In the first place, just as there is a common perception of anger in all its varieties, so there should be a common perception of approbation, but this is not so since we have entirely different feelings, for instance, of a “tender, delicate and humane sentiment” and one “that appears great, daring and magnanimous.”⁴ We are softened by the one and elevated by the other. And again he asks :

1. *Ibid.*, p.282.

2. *Ibid.*, p.283 (only selected significant passages).

3. *Ibid.*, p.284.

4. *Ibid.*, p.288.

how is it "that, according to this system, we approve or disapprove of proper or improper approbation"? Smith says that "when the approbation with which our neighbour regards the conduct of a third person coincides with our own, we approve of his approbation, and consider it as, in some measure, morally good."¹

After this he offers an objection which is for him very important. Why has this moral sense never been given a name? The term, he says, is relatively recent. Even "approbation" was too young to be entitled to much consideration. He considers the term "conscience" but decides that it does not immediately denote a moral faculty but rather "supposes, indeed, the existence of some such faculty, and properly signifies our consciousness of having acted agreeably or contrary to its directions."²

Finally he considers the attempts of some

to account for the origins of moral sentiments from sympathy, distinct from that which I have been endeavouring to establish. It is that which places virtue in utility, and accounts for the pleasure with which the spectator surveys the utility of any quality from sympathy with the happiness of those who are affected by it. This sympathy is different both from that by which we enter into the motives of the agent, and from that by which we go along with the gratitude of the persons who are benefited by his actions. It is the same principle with that by which we approve of a well contrived machine. But no machine can be the object of either of those two last mentioned sympathies.³

Earlier in this book he had made the distinction when he spoke of beauty and utility.⁴ When we consider virtue and vice in an abstract and general manner they present an appearance of utility which in turn gives rise to the perception of a "species of beauty." Still he is not prepared to agree with those who would identify this perception of beauty, which admittedly is pleasant, with our sentiment of the approbation of virtue. To do this would make the approbation of virtue a sentiment of the same kind with that by which we approve of a convenient and well-contrived building. Another consideration is that the sentiment of approbation of virtue always involves in it a sense of propriety which is quite distinct from the perception of utility.⁵

1. *Ibid.*, p.289.

2. *Ibid.*, p.289.

3. *Ibid.*, p.290.

4. *Ibid.*, p.165ff.

5. *Ibid.*, pp.167-168. "The qualities most useful to ourselves are, first of all, superior reason and understanding, by which we are capable of discerning the remote consequences of all our actions and of fore-seeing the advantage or detriment which is likely to result from them: and secondly, self-command, by which we are enabled to abstain from present pleasure or to endure present pain, in order to obtain a greater pleasure,

Virtue is defined by Smith as "excellence, something uncommonly great and beautiful which rises far above what is vulgar and ordinary."¹ He refuses to allow anything below excellence to be termed virtue: "As in the common degree of the intellectual qualities there is no ability, so in the common degree of the moral, there is no virtue."²

or to avoid a greater pain in some future time. In the union of those two qualities consists the virtue of prudence, of all the virtues that which is the most useful to the individual.

"With regard to the first of those qualities, it has been observed on a former occasion, that superior reason and understanding are originally approved of as just and right and accurate, and not merely useful or advantageous. It is in abstruser sciences, particularly in the higher parts of mathematics, that the greatest and most admired exertions of human reason have been displayed. But the utility of those sciences, either to the individual or to the public, is not very obvious, and to prove it, requires a discussion which is not always very easily comprehended. It was not, therefore, their utility which first recommended them to the public admiration. This quality was but little insisted upon, till it became necessary to make some reply to the reproaches of those, who, having themselves no taste for such sublime discoveries, endeavoured to depreciate them as useless.

"That self-command, in the same manner, by which we restrain our present appetites, in order to gratify them more fully upon another occasion, is approved of, as much under the aspect of propriety, as under that of utility. When we act in this manner the sentiments which influence our conduct seem exactly to coincide with those of the spectator. The spectator, however, does not feel the solicitations of our present appetites.

"To him the pleasure which we are to enjoy a week hence, or a year hence is just as interesting as that which we are to enjoy this moment. When for the sake of the present, therefore, we sacrifice the future, our conduct appears to him absurd and extravagant in the highest degree, and he cannot enter into the principles which influence it. On the contrary, when we abstain from present pleasure, in order to secure greater pleasure to come, when we act as if the remote object interested us as much as that which immediately correspond with his own, he cannot fail to approve of our behaviour: and as he knows from experience, how few are capable of this self-command, he looks upon our conduct with a considerable degree of wonder and admiration. Hence arises that eminent esteem with which all men naturally regard a steady perseverance in the practice of frugality, industry, and application, though directed to no other purpose than the acquisition of fortune. The resolute firmness of the person who acts in this manner, and in order to obtain a great though remote advantage, not only gives us all present pleasures, but endures the greatest labour both of mind and body, necessarily commands our approbation. That view of his interest and happiness which appears to regulate his conduct exactly tallies with the idea which we naturally form of it. There is the most perfect correspondence between his sentiments and our own and at the same time, from our experience of the common weakness of human nature, it is a correspondence which we could not reasonably have expected. We not only approve, therefore, but in some measure admire his conduct and think it worthy of a considerable degree of applause. It is the consciousness of this merited approbation and esteem which is alone capable of supporting the agent in this tenor of conduct. The pleasure which we are to enjoy ten years hence interests us so little in comparison with that which we may enjoy today, the passion which the first excites is naturally so weak in comparison with that violent emotion which the second is apt to give occasion to, that the one could never be any balance to the other, unless it was supported by the sense of propriety, by the consciousness that we merited the esteem and approbation of everybody, by acting in the one way, and that we became the proper objects of their contempt and derision by behaving in the other."

1. *Ibid.*, p.24.

2. *Ibid.*, p.24.

For him the virtues are divided into two types, the first of which he refers to as the soft, gentle and amiable virtues, and the second as great, awful and respectable. The first set is founded upon the spectator's efforts to enter into the feelings of another person, while the second arises from the person's efforts to restrict his emotions to the level of the spectator.

All virtue for Smith must have its roots in sympathy. He establishes this sympathy or participation in the feelings of others as the basis of morality. However, he qualified sympathy by saying that in order to have ethical value it must be the sympathy experienced by an *impartial and well-informed spectator*.

The only faculty that can be used to awaken and sustain these sympathetic sentiments is the imagination, since it alone enables us to go out of ourselves and for the time being, at least, to place ourselves in another's predicament so as to experience his joys and sorrows. Experience proves that this and this alone is "the source of our fellow feelings for the misery of others."¹ This sympathy must pass beyond the limits of individuality and we must by exercising our imagination attempt to place ourselves in the exact position of the person to be judged, and feel as much as we possibly can the same sentiments and emotions that he is experiencing. This is looked upon by Smith as a very natural process and he gives examples of the way in which we instinctively shrink when we witness a scene in which someone is receiving an injury of some description, and adds that we seem to actually feel the pain of the victim in our own bodies. He also mentions the common experience of having one's eyes water in a sympathetic reaction to seeing another person's eyes water.

It is only after imaginatively placing ourselves in this situation that we are able to express our approval or disapproval of another man's judgment or action. If we feel that we can enter into his feeling with sympathy and not find it revolting in any way, we are then moved to give our approval, but if we are not in agreement with his emotions but feel that he is allowing himself to be too much influenced by some situation, then we disapprove. "Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another."²

In trying to discover what approval or disapproval we can give to our own actions, we must have recourse once again to the idea of the impartial spectator. It becomes necessary to divide oneself into two persons, as it were; one representing the judge and the other the one to be examined. In this way we can, in a certain sense, place ourselves at a distance from ourselves to allow a more unprejudiced review of our deeds or misdeeds and see if we can feel justified in

1. *Ibid.*, p.10.

2. *Ibid.*, p.18.

sympathizing with them when we look at them from the viewpoint of an outsider.

Since his moral system demands a constant changing of places and balancing of judgments in so far as we must continually place ourselves in other people's situations to judge their conduct as well as our own, Smith is quite emphatic about the necessity of man living in society if his actions are to be provided with a norm or standard by which they can be classified as proper or improper. Society is the mirror in which we see ourselves as other human beings see us and therefore it enables us to regulate our conduct in conformity with the general judgment. If a man could grow up to maturity in complete isolation in some solitary place, with no means of communication whatsoever with the members of his own species, he would be absolutely incapable of thinking of merit or demerit in reference to his own character ; he could no more think of the beauty or deformity of his mind or conduct than he could judge of the beauty or deformity of his own face. Man needs his fellow creatures as reflectors and models by which he can measure his own perfection or imperfection. In this way we can always have a means of testing to see if our actions are such that other people can sympathize with them and use them as a standard for themselves. Our interest in beauty and morals consists wholly and solely in the effect that will be produced upon those around us ; " Virtue is not said to be amiable, or to be meritorious, because it is the object of its own love or of its own gratitude, but *because it excites those sentiments in other men.*"¹

As well as the propriety or impropriety of actions we must also consider the qualities of merit and demerit which make us deserving or either reward or punishment. The sentiment which seems to prompt us most immediately to do good to another is gratitude, and the one which leads us to punish is resentment. The impartial spectator can enter with sympathy into either situation. " As our sense, therefore, of the propriety of conduct arises from what I shall call a direct sympathy with the affections and motives of the person who acts, so our sense of its merit arises from what I shall call an indirect sympathy with the gratitude of the person who is, if I may say so, acted upon."² In the case of resentment, nature itself has endowed men with " an immediate and instinctive approbation of the sacred and necessary law of retaliation " ;³ thereby not leaving it to man's reason to determine the proper means of revenging great crimes.

To be the complete and proper object of either the sentiment of gratitude or of that of resentment, three different qualifications are

1. *Ibid.*, p.102 (italics ours).

2. *Ibid.*, p.68.

3. *Ibid.*, p.65.

needed in a person : (1) he must be the cause of pleasure or pain ; (2) he must be capable of feeling those sensations himself ; and (3) he must not only have produced these sensations but must have done so from design. Regardless, however, of the intention of the agent a certain amount of approval or of disapproval falls on his actions themselves. "That the world judges by the event, and not by the design, has been in all ages the complaint, and is the great discouragement of virtue."¹ If the consequences of an action are favorable, whether due to fortune or to the actual intention or plan of the agent, praise is given which is often far beyond what the person really deserves ; whereas if the action fails to produce the proposed and successful effect and appears bad and a failure in the eyes and judgment of the onlookers, regardless of the loftiness or of the praiseworthiness of the agent's interior purpose, he becomes the object of blame and demerit.

Even this unjust arrangement, however, seems to have been planned by Nature for the happiness and perfection of the human species. If it were otherwise, we would be continually attributing blamable and even evil intentions to many persons regardless of the outcome of their actions. Our resentment would be easily aroused and "we should feel all the furies of that passion against any person in whose breast we suspected or believed such designs or affections were harboured, though they had never broke out into any actions."² For this reason Adam Smith teaches that only actions which produce actual evil or attempt to produce it are the proper objects of punishment. Sentiments and intentions are only known to the "great Judge of hearts" and are reserved for the "cognizance of his own unerring tribunal."³ We can only base our approval or disapproval on what is evident to our senses and it then happens that "To approve of another man's opinions is to adopt those opinions, and to adopt them is to approve of them."⁴

According to Smith, it is perfectly natural for man to desire to be approved of and to wish to make himself worthy of this approval, therefore a real love of virtue and a hatred of vice is natural. We do not act in an honourable fashion because of our great love of our neighbour or of mankind in general, but rather because of a stronger love which is that of the grandeur and dignity and superiority of our own characters. However, we must cover up this self-love since it would make us the object of the scorn and indignation of society and this is a situation that we must avoid at all costs. "As to love our neighbour as we love ourselves is the greatest law of Christianity,

1. *Ibid.*, p.96.

2. *Ibid.*, p.96.

3. *Ibid.*, p.96.

4. *Ibid.*, p.17.

so it is the great precept of nature to love ourselves only as we love our neighbour, or what comes to the same thing as our neighbour is found capable of loving us." ¹ Inclined as we are to be prejudiced in our own behalf, our judgments concerning our own actions are likely to be out of focus and therefore, when it is a question relating to personal interest that has to be answered, we must step outside of ourselves and adopt a purely neutral and impartial position. Small affairs of great personal interest mean much more to us than the most important affairs of great nations. A disaster which would cost the lives of thousands of the inhabitants of a faraway country would cause less real disturbance to an ordinary man than the loss of his little finger or an unfortunate business deal. The only thing capable of overcoming this inordinate self-love is a respect and reverence for "reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct." ² Upon all occasions when there is a conflict between the judgment given by the spectator within and those without it is necessary to have recourse to a higher tribunal, "to that of the all-seeing Judge of the world." ³ If we act otherwise we are eventually overcome by qualms of conscience and are victims to remorse from which frightful condition society is powerless to save us.

Since there are times when the violence and injustice of our selfish passions throw off the true report of the impartial spectator, there are certain precautions to be observed. It is always necessary to observe ourselves under two different aspects or at two different times : first, when we are about to act ; and second, when we have completed the action. The first often proves extremely difficult because of the overwhelming strength of our passions, and even in the second case we are inclined to be prejudiced in our own favor and to try to throw a protecting cover over our misdeeds. No one enjoys thinking ill of himself and therefore pride prompts us to turn away from any unfavorable circumstances and to be most lenient in our judgment of our own conduct. It is far from hard to find plausible excuses for our deeds.

To correct these misrepresentations of self-love, general rules have been formulated. "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." ⁴ A careful observation of the conduct of others teaches man what it is fitting for him to do and what he should avoid doing in order to be a suitable member of the society in which he lives. Mankind ex-

1. *Ibid.*, p.24.

2. *Ibid.*, p.120.

3. *Ibid.*, p.116.

4. *Ibid.*, p.139.

periences an awesome respect and reverence for these rules that serve to check passions that are too violent and to temper unbridled impetuosity. This regard for the general rules is known as a sense of duty, "a principle of the greatest consequence in human life, and the only principle by which the bulk of mankind are capable of directing their actions."¹ The very existence itself of human society depends upon the faithful observance of these rules, and the deep reverence for them is "further enhanced by an opinion which is first impressed by nature and afterwards confirmed by reasoning and philosophy, that those important rules of morality are the commands and laws of the Deity, who will finally reward the obedient and punish the transgressors of their duty."² He reinforces this argument with the observation that in addition to these reasons it is really for the personal good and happiness of the individual to follow the designs and commands of duty since virtue is rewarded in this world as well as in the next. A strict observance and faithful carrying out of the injunctions of duty will in the majority of instances result in the attainment of wealth, confidence, esteem and love; in his way of looking at things there is little more to be expected in this life since he feels that there is little to be added to the happiness of a man who is "out of debt and has a clear conscience."³ Nature is continually working through her own rules and laws for the perfection and happiness of mankind and it only remains for man to cooperate with her by following her inspirations and commands. Even in those cases or circumstances in which man is overcome by misfortunes, he is still able to maintain a free conscience in this life and he is rewarded with the hope of happiness and security in a future life. Although his attitude towards religion often leaves us in a puzzled frame of mind as to exactly what he does believe in personally, at least in this part of his work it seems fairly evident that he did believe that "religion enforces the natural sense of duty,"⁴ and is therefore an aid to man and society.

This does not mean, however, that the sense of duty is the sole principle by which we guide our conduct but "it should be the ruling and the governing one, as philosophy, and as indeed, common sense directs."⁵ We must allow for the great influence which sentiment or affection has on our own conduct and on our relations with others. The general rules are in themselves too broad or loose to be the only criteria and for this reason they must be made more exact and precise by taking into consideration the various circumstances which affect

1. *Ibid.*, p.142.

2. *Ibid.*, p.144.

3. *Ibid.*, p.43.

4. *Ibid.*, p.150.

5. *Ibid.*, p.151.

an action. "No action can properly be called virtuous, which is not accompanied with the sentiment of self-approbation,"¹ but common experience shows that man often acts from a false sense of duty and when we are condemning such a one we cannot keep ourselves from sympathizing with him since we know that he has acted according to his principles and therefore in his own mind he can give himself his unstinted approval and even praise. We are inclined to admire a man who is faithful to his principles even though we cannot find it in our hearts to approve of those principles. Therefore, as well as regarding the dictates of the general rules of morality, we must also take into account the "natural agreeableness or deformity of the sentiment or affection which would prompt us to any action independent of all regard to general rules."² The only general rule which allows no looseness or free interpretation in its application to particular cases is that of justice, which is rigorous in its determinations.

By what faculty then are we to give the final judgment concerning right and wrong? Adam Smith says that in some sense we may if we wish consider reason as "the source and principle of approbation and disapprobation and of all solid judgments concerning right and wrong,"³ since it is reason that discovers the general rules of justice and regulates the greater part of our moral judgments to the extent that "the general maxims of morality are formed, like all other general maxims, from experience and induction... and induction is always regarded as one of the operations of reason."⁴ Moreover, it gives a much more stable foundation for our moral judgments since such insignificant factors as different states of health and humour do not directly affect reason whereas they are capable of completely altering sentiment and feeling. However, though in some sense or in some respects reason may be given the credit for being the source of our moral judgments, Adam Smith will concede no more to it and refuses to allow that the first perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from it. "These first perceptions as well as all other experiments upon which any general rules are founded, cannot be the object of reason, but of the immediate sense and feeling. It is by finding in a vast variety of instances that one tenor of conduct constantly pleases in a certain manner, and that another as constantly displeases the mind, that we form the general rules of morality. But reason cannot render any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake."⁵ All vice and virtue, pleasure

1. *Ibid.*, p.158.

2. *Ibid.*, p.151.

3. *Ibid.*, p.283.

4. *Ibid.*, p.283.

5. *Ibid.*, p.283.

and pain are, therefore, not distinguished by reason but by immediate sense and feeling. Smith is convinced that Dr. Hutcheson had made this distinction sufficiently clear for any earnest reader to grasp, however he is not himself in complete agreement with this famous teacher for whom he feels the deepest respect.

Instead of the "moral sense" advocated by Dr. Hutcheson or the "conscience" as taught by Bishop Butler, Adam Smith substitutes the "man within the breast" or the "great judge and arbiter of conduct." Therefore, for him as Morrow explains, the "moral judgment is based, not upon inner intuition of rational truth nor upon a divine revelation, but upon the reflected sentiments of other individuals; and the moral sentiments of himself and of those of his fellowmen, mutually supporting and influencing one another, produce the objective order of moral standards. At the same time this objective moral order is not a transcendent rational order, like the order of immutable truth to which the intellectualist moralist appealed but an order immanent in human experience, and varying with the conditions of experience."¹

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(*To be continued.*)



1. Glenn R. MORROW, *The Ethical and Economic Theories of Adam Smith*, New York, Longmans, Green & Company, 1923. Cornell Studies in Philosophy, No. 13, p.33.