

# IT IS POSSIBLE MORALITY BASED ON SYMPATHY?

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## RESUMO

Segundo a concepção de moral de Adam Smith, a “simpatia” pode ser entendida como um processo de empatia psicológica e emocional por meio da qual conseguimos compreender a posição de um outro. Este processo se dá pela passagem de uma posição baseada em critérios subjetivos à maturidade de uma perspectiva imparcial, respeitosa dos valores implícitos nas relações humanas e que conhecemos por meio de nossos sentimentos. A contribuição de Adam Smith é fundamental para uma nova proposta da ética da simpatia.

**Palavras-chave:** Simpatia. Virtude. Ética. Espectador imparcial.

## ABSTRACT

In accord to Adam Smith’s moral view, “sympathy” could be understood as a process of psychological and emotional empathy by which we reach to comprehend the other’s position. That process is moving from a position of subjective criteria to the maturity of an impartial perspective, respectful of the values implicit in human relations and we know through our feelings. Adam Smith’s contribution is fundamental for a new proposal of ethics of sympathy.

**Key words:** Sympathy. Virtue. Ethics. Impartial spectator.

## 1 Introduction

In contrast with rationalist positions on moral ethics, which find their highest development in the works of Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is a classic on ethical sentimentalism. However, this polarity cannot be conceived as an irreconcilable dichotomy, but rather the adoption of two different routes starting from an explanation of the necessary collaboration between reason and sentiments as complementary aspects of human intelligence. Starting from moral sentiment, Adam Smith’s moral theory succeeds in showing this unity, which, summed up, provides us with an X-ray of our psychological structure developed through human relationships. This process is made possible through sympathy, understood as the capacity of human beings to feel involved in the experiences of others and to act in accordance with adequate reasons to different relational contexts. The aim of this paper is to analyze the

nature of sympathy as the core of the construction of moral identity, represented by the central figure of the impartial spectator.

## **2 The search for a natural moral foundation**

The eighteenth century began with a concern to find a new foundation for morality by appealing to human nature itself, without resorting to transcendence. Questions arose regarding the meaning of "moral", whether there is a specific power by which the moral character of actions can be assessed. Some scholars, such as Francis Hutcheson,<sup>2</sup> predecessor of Adam Smith, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, proposed common sense as the foundation of morality. Other authors, such as Samuel Clarke, however, maintained that human reason was capable of apprehending unchanging moral principles. In contrast with these positions, authors holding empiricistic views, convinced of the inactive nature of reason, argued that feelings move us to act and are, therefore, the referentials that underlie moral concepts.

Adam Smith is one of the classical exponents of ethical sentimentalism. This term can be misleading and give way to the conclusion that his proposal tends towards moral subjectivism. However, nothing is further from his intention as he builds a theory of virtue ethics starting from a morality that finds in sentiments its referential in order to analyze the psychological structure of our moral identity.

For Adam Smith, the first aspect to consider, regarding the moral experience, is its "relational" character. Moral values emerge in the community—in human communication—in the eyes of the other, in whom we test the impact of our actions according to the reactions of the pleasure or displeasure they produce in the other. In this experience we can recognize a gnoseologic process, whereby the perceptions we receive can awaken in us dormant ideas and reproduce feelings that communicate the situation of the other existentially, enabling us to feel (and think) in accordance with the particularity of the other's situation. Memory can also act as a background of personal experiences, enabling us to understand the importance of the situation the other may be going through without the need to exercise sympathy in each case.

On the one hand, sympathy can be defined as a sort of practical knowledge through which we understand the other's situation even though at that moment we cannot remedy or participate in it<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, sympathy consists of a knowledge focused on acting when the subject is

part of the situation and feels a personal involvement in what could happen to the other. The imperative for action is more or less intense depending on the degree of remoteness or proximity to the actor, with a greater responsibility for those more closely related but the more remote the lesser the action.

Smith does not understand sympathy as a mere effect of the contamination of emotions<sup>4</sup>, as in David Hume's theory in which the subject is moved by the expressive force of the experience of a third person.<sup>5</sup> Adam Smith sees sympathy as a process by which the agent locates himself/herself imaginatively in the place of another, without actually leaving his/her position as spectator. In other words, the subject asks himself/herself what he/she would do in the other's situation, not having necessarily to be like the other, but bearing in mind one's own circumstances.

The Smithian concept of sympathy shows feelings as a result of a process of unfolding of the consciousness of the subject, which creates an externality from which one can perceive his/her ethical position when brought face to face with the demands of others. In this dynamics, the spectator acts as if he/she were simultaneously placed in the position of agent and patient of the action, adjusting, in a synchronized way, the reasons of the ones and the reactions of the others in the light of their respective sentiments<sup>6</sup>.

For Smith, exercising sympathy, which enables us to project ourselves in the situation of the other as an ontological space of moral reflection, involves a double movement: first, we analyze the situation from the outside and then we consider our subjectivity open to the gaze of others, thus establishing a process of mutual affectation which defines the nature of our moral responsibility<sup>7</sup>. As he elaborates in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, we cannot remain indifferent to what happens to others, as their fate or misfortune affects us as individuals.

Morality is a capacity for empathy, that is, subjective projection on another individual and at the same time projection on all the other subjects that are part of the interactive context, enabling us to understand their motives and their reactions in terms of two directions: direct sympathy with the actors and indirect sympathy with those who are affected by their actions.

Human emotions are experienced as a complete unit within each relationship. Hence, when one sees the generous action of one person towards another, he/she experiences satisfaction, but if one becomes aware that, for example, this action reflects a very superficial reason such as making a donation to an anonymous person just because the two have the same

name, he/she feels little sympathy for that initiative. However, if this generosity is motivated by the needs of the other, we would consider it correct. On a reciprocal basis, we expect the response of the recipient to be one of gratitude to his benefactor. If, therefore, he is found to be arrogant and does not acknowledge the favour, resentment on the part of the agent would be understandable. The same can be said with regard to negative actions, because when one is an unjustified victim of another, it would be sympathy with the victim that would move us against the agent. Thus, morality requires reciprocal adjustment of both the reasons for and the effects of an action<sup>8</sup> and culminates in a process that combines direct sympathy for the agent with indirect sympathy for the patient. In this way, moral evaluation takes into account the propriety of the behavior of the former, with his/her reasons, as well as the latter's reaction in terms of the impact the effects the first action may produce.

In the process of practical reflection, at first there exists an element of centrality of the idiosyncrasy itself and the individual's own interests<sup>910</sup>. However, psychological maturity will gradually lead him/her to move toward positions in which he/she will find a balance between her/her own interests and the interests of others based on permanent, stable references from the outside and which will no longer be the preferences of one or the other, but those established by the nature of the relationship itself.

In the same way that we adjust the size of a large mountain that we perceive through a small window, according to reality itself, we must also proceed to adjust our "moral eye." On the plane of moral judgement we must learn to consider the importance of different human experiences in their own right, without mixing them with private interests that can introduce disproportionate preferences.

According to Smith, this becomes a spontaneous exercise of moral correction thanks to a sort of "centre of gravity" of morality developed out of a series of personal experiences in which the individual had learned to differentiate between the weight of "human subjectivity" and his/her own subjective motives. In another words, for Smith the nuclear position of moral sentiment is represented in the figure of the impartial spectator. In our view, the appeal of such heuristic action, compared to other rationalist-type resources lies in its dynamic, "sympathetic" nature since the reasons for actions are comprehended solely within relationships.

It is a matter of knowing—in practice not theoretically—the situation of the other and of the human emotions involved. Moreover, such knowledge is mediated through the idiosyncrasies

of the cultural practices of each community, making it necessary for sympathy to go beyond external signs, inviting us to enter the deeper meanings of events. On the other hand, sympathy becomes more intense when the subject has undergone in first person similar situations and can evoke similar experienced feelings.

Furthermore, we must point out that these feelings should not be understood as spontaneous emotional states, but rather as the expression of an emotional structure implicit in human relationships. For this reason, a psychological analysis of the causes and effects of our actions will help us to understand the logic of feelings that make us act in one way or another, provided that we establish the correlation between motives and merits. In this way we will succeed in basing feelings on a cognitive structure that enables us to realize the meaning of morality, whose nature would then move along firmer terrain.

The structure of subjective feelings also requires the construction of a subjectivity that tells us what human virtues the moral *persona* possesses —a task Smith provides us with in his account of the impartial spectator.

### **3 Sympathy and the impartial spectator**

Moral awareness emerges from the attentive gaze of what Smith describes as "the inhabitant of the breast, the man within,"<sup>11</sup> the knower —"the great judge and arbiter"— of the real motives and reasons for our actions and therefore of their merit or demerit. It is the sentiment of the moral condition of the agent himself/herself that concedes the greater weight to the character of moral action. The subject wishes to act in accordance with a sense of the virtuoso that goes beyond mere pleasure-seeking social applause. This deeper level of authenticity and self-control defines the core of moral sense.

According to the interpretation of Luigi Bagolini<sup>12</sup>, it would not be unreasonable to say that for Smith the inner man ("the man within") is a call to the interiority of the human conscience, which, formed within the very experience of relationships, develops an axiologic density of human emotion. The virtue of the so-called "self-command" in Smith is to make use of this wealth of experience as practical knowledge applied to new situations. For this reason, Smith's position is close to the Aristotelian idea that morality is developed by experienced people who reach a high degree of practical knowledge to respond adequately to each situation.

Knud Haakonssen also believes that Smith's great contribution is the reversible nature of the psychological process between agent, patient and spectator, creating a multidirectional flow, which requires each one to take into consideration the other's position.<sup>13</sup> In the same way that sympathy places us in the position of the other, we expect the other to do the same regarding our external position and exert self-control over his/her own affectation. As a result, a dialectical process is established that contributes to both assuming the position of the other in order to adjust their claims to the limits to which each one can exercise his/her sympathy with respect to the other.<sup>14</sup>

However, this is not an artifice of reason, as could be assumed, but rather an emotional balance that develops within this logic of propriety between the reasons for and effects of an action, which admits correction coming from a "gaze" beyond the position of the involved subjects<sup>15</sup>.

The very experience of moral situations leads to the discovery of patterns of moral reasoning that enable the individual to "disentangle" himself and thereby create a more general structure that underlies emotional relationships. This constitutes the third movement of sympathy, that is, the moral movement of putting oneself in the scenario of the impartial spectator<sup>16</sup>, which in turn allows for a more accurate measurement of the motives and effects of those involved in order to act conscientiously.

The dynamics of inter-action would establish a homogeneous space of affection by which the subject observes both his/her position and that of those involved in the action. This process leads to an approximation of all the participants in relation to an equidistant point with respect to one's position and that of another, generating thereby an alignment of the respective positions. The subject develops the ability to see himself/herself through others, knowing that his/her actions and reactions will in turn produce new attitudes and opinions in different spectators.

Morality is founded on human sentiment. People have an emotional structure that can only be experienced through relationships with others. This "splitting" of the human psyche is the basis of morality and reveals the constitutively intersubjective character of a person's nature.

#### 4 Conclusion

Sympathy may be conceived as the ability to communicate our reality as individuals, which enables us to cope with the situations of others and thus participate with our support in accordance with given circumstances. If we did not have this capacity, the actions of others would have no moral reason for us. Through sympathy, a link is established that goes beyond the solipsism of subjects locked up within their own mind, because with sympathy the gestures of the other give life to our own experiences and they produce reactions in us as if they were present impressions, though with lesser intensity. It is not the mere vicarious adoption of the psychological position of the other, but rather a moral position that invites the individual to take a stand regarding how he/she would act in the other's situation, as a spectator, and therefore to assess from the adequate distance and proportionality the other's motives in a given situation. Such a justification cannot be "private", but must be shared by virtue of the very logic of the situation analyzed.

Moral competence, such as language, develops in the degree the reality to which it is applied is apprehended. In the same way that we do not learn language first and then words, but we become linguistic beings through words, neither do we acquire moral capacity outside the framework of relations that constitute our moral experience. Morality is the condition of personal development. Sympathy is the awareness of this condition and its application in order to act with moral criterion in relation to another's reality, which in a way is not always akin to ours.

Moral development suggests an equilibrium of feelings that affect the parties involved. Using the subjective nature of actions as a starting point, one can establish an "objectivable" scheme to measure the psychological process by which we consider things to be right or wrong, thus creating a close collaboration of all the intellectual faculties of the human being. Reason without feelings would be unconceivable, nor can we understand feelings as free emotional states since they relate to human relationships and are pre-rational, though not independent or unrelated but the anchor point.

In Smith's proposal, reason acts as a tool at the service of human sensitivity; it helps us to draw conclusions regarding the desirability and obligation to maintain certain behaviours, since the feeling of rational coherency is an integrating criterion of other feelings in the light of a life plan. In this sense, one can speak of a "feeling of rationality", as proposed by William James.

In conclusion, Smith offers an overall examen of sympathy that ranges from the subjective conditions of the individual spectator, as a measurement of the correct, to a criterion of objectivity of "human subjectivity," in order to establish the grounds of merit or demerit of our actions.

In this article we have tried, on the basis of the Smithian proposal, to defend a model of morality based on the concept of sympathy, based on the conditions of human relations as a psychological structure of the moral, which are enhanced thanks, precisely, to the ability to empathize with the other.



## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> S. Cremaschi, *L'etica moderna. Dalla riforma a Nietzsche*, Carocci, Roma, 2007, p. 127: "Hutcheson introduse l'idea che le nostre idee morali derivino da un genere ulteriore di esperienza: un «senso o istinto» o «facoltà morale»"

<sup>3</sup> For example, when we know that a stranger has just lost his father: "Both he and his father, perhaps, are entirely unknown to us, or we happen to be employed about other things, and do not take time to picture out in our imagination the different circumstances of distress which must occur to him. We have learned, however, from experience, that such a misfortune naturally excites such a degree of sorrow, and we know that if we took time to consider his situation, fully and in all its parts, we should, without doubt, most sincerely sympathize with him. It is upon the consciousness of this conditional sympathy, that our approbation of his sorrow is founded, even in those cases in which that sympathy does not actually take place; and the general rules derived from our preceding experience of what our sentiments would commonly correspond with, correct upon this, as upon many other occasions, the impropriety of our present emotions." A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Edited by Sálvio M. Soares. MetaLibri, 2005, v1.0p., p 13.

<sup>4</sup> "There are some passions of which the expressions excite no sort of sympathy, but before we are acquainted with what gave occasion to them, serve rather to disgust and provoke us against them", *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (THN). Oxford Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978. (edited by L. A. Selby Bigge & P. H. Nidditch). For a comparison with Hume's concept of sympathy, see: F. L. VAN HOLTHOON, "Adam Smith and David Hume: With Sympathy", *Utilitas. A Journal of Utilitarian Studies*, 5.1 (1993), 35-49; and J. L. MACKIE, *Hume's Moral Theory*. Londres: Routledge & Kegan, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> "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.", *Ibid.*, p.66.

<sup>7</sup> "in the same manner, we either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station, we either can or cannot entirely enter into and sympathize with the sentiments and motives which influenced it. We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. [...] We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. If, upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influenced it, we approve of it, by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed equitable judge.", A. Smith, *Op. cit.*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> "It has already been observed, that the sentiment or affection of the heart, from which any action proceeds, and upon which its whole virtue or vice depends, may be considered under two different aspects, or in two different relations: first, in relation to the cause or object which excites it; and, secondly, in relation to the end which it proposes, or to the effect which it tends to produce: that upon the suitability or unsuitability, upon the proportion or disproportion, which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it, depends the propriety or impropriety, the decency or ungracefulness of the consequent action; and that upon the beneficial or hurtful effects which the affection proposes or tends to produce, depends the merit or demerit, the good or ill desert of the action to which it gives occasion.", *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> "Every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care; and as he is fitter to take care of himself than of any other person, it is fit and right that it should be so. Every man, therefore, is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man: and to hear, perhaps, of the death of another person, with whom we have no particular connexion, will give us less concern, will spoil our stomach, or break our rest much less than a very insignificant disaster which has befallen ourselves.", *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> “To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them.”, *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> L. BAGOLINI, *La simpatia nella morale e nel Diritto*. Torino: Giappichelli, 1966. Bagolini makes the following statement regarding the impartial spectator: “L’uomo interno è lo spettatore imparziale. Si potrebbe aggiungere, senza falsificare il pensiero di Smith, che l’uomo esterno è invece lo spettatore immediato. Solo il giudizio dell’uomo interno può acquistare l’obiettività che gli deriva dall’essere pronunciato da uno spettatore imparziale”. (...) “L’appello di Smith al “man within” è un appello all’interiorità della coscienza umana. Si potrebbe pensare a questa interiorità come indipendente, in se stessa, dalla realtà e dalla esperienza dei rapporti con gli altri, come ad una evasione sentimentale nei confronti di tale realtà così spesso piena di conflitti e di drammi. Senonché, secondo Smith, non si tratta di evasione. L’interiorità del man within ha per “Smith il senso che le deriva dai rapporti sociali attraverso i quali si esplica. E il senso che le deriva dalla intensa partecipazione alle situazioni a cui si riconnettono i sentimenti e gli interessi altrui. Soltanto sulla base di questa partecipazione è possibile giudicare se un’azione è intrinsecamente degna di approvazione. In rapporto al “self-command” Smith pensa chiaramente che soltanto chi riesce a sperimentare e a interiorizzare in se stesso le gioie e i dolori altrui può dominare se stesso e le proprie impressioni”. (p. 53). Chapter III offers an interesting analysis of the objective character of moral evaluation through the process of sympathy.

<sup>13</sup> Knud Haakonsen explains the importance of this process in the following terms: “Irrespective of the fact that men are naturally searching for agreement with their fellows, as mentioned earlier, they are forced by their social circumstances, by their merely being together, to give sympathy in the neutral sense of trying to understand each other. But the important thing is, that men will immediately discover by this means that their fellows are watching them in the same way.” (...) “We soon learn, that other people are equal with regard to our own (character and conduct). Once we realize this, we become aware for the first time of ourselves as persons with a certain physical and, more importantly, moral appearance which can be the subject of evaluation. The awareness of other people’s observation and evaluation of us makes us see that there is something to be observed and evaluated, and we naturally try to imagine what it can be, or how we suppose we look to other people. It is thus the perceptions or, in my earlier terminology, the reception of other men’s sympathetic endeavours that makes us conscious of our own mind. And if man, *per impossibile*, grew up outside society, such consciousness simply would not develop”. K. HAAKONSEN, *The Science of a Legislator. The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 52-53.

<sup>14</sup> “Reciprocity, as a space of interaction where conscious dialectics of the position of each individual in contraposition to the considerations of a third party is produced, is the mechanism that allows us to observe the communicative character of practical thought.” He adds: “It is of the very greatest importance to understand exactly what role *others*, as spectators, play in the development and character of men’s standards for moral self-evaluation. So far we have seen how they are a necessary condition for men’s catching sight of themselves and their behaviour as objects of moral evaluation, and we have seen that this brings men to judge themselves by the same standard as they use for others, the standard of propriety”. K. HAAKONSEN, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> “We must view them, neither from our own place nor yet from his, neither with our own eyes nor yet with his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has no particular connexion with either, and who judges with impartiality between us. Here, too, habit and experience have taught us to do this so easily and so readily, that we are scarce sensible that we do it.”, A. Smith, *Op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> “When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view”, *ibid.*, p. 101.

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