



## Foreword to “Examination of Dr Smith’s System”

Daniel B. Klein<sup>1</sup>

Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) appeared early in 1759, and there soon followed three warm and highly favorable (albeit unsigned) notices, by David Hume in Tobias Smollett’s *Critical Review* (1759), Edmund Burke in the *Annual Register* (1759), and William Rose in the *Monthly Review* (1759). Those three notices seem to be emblematic of the warm regard and reputation that TMS enjoyed during Smith’s life.

The only bit of criticism of TMS published during Smith’s days, it seems, appeared 20 years after TMS first appeared, in the third edition of Henry Home, Lord Kames’s *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1779). Four paragraphs there attack TMS as a “system that resolves every moral sensation or sentiment into sympathy.” “Had not morality a more solid foundation in our nature, it would give very little obstruction to vicious desires or unjust actions” (Kames 2005, 70, 72).

But Kames was not alone in such sentiments. Thomas Reid and Adam Ferguson, too, had quietly penned criticism of TMS during Smith’s life. And after Smith’s death in 1790, a battery of overlapping criticisms came forth, from yet more Scotsmen—Dugald Stewart, Thomas Brown, and James Mackintosh—and a bit later from the Frenchman Théodore Jouffroy (1848), and the Englishman James Anson Farrer (1881). Their dissatisfaction with TMS centered especially on Smith’s proposition that moral approval always involves or depends on a sympathy, a proposition that I have elsewhere dubbed Smith’s organon.<sup>2</sup> We also find TMS diminished in remarks by Henry Thomas Buckle (1861, 895), Alexander Bain

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1. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030.

2. For Smith’s affirmations of the organon see TMS, 17.3—meaning page 17, paragraph 3—46.9 n.\*, 110.2 (“some secret reference”), 163–165.4–5, 193.12 (final sentence), 306.21 (final sentence), 311.10, 325.14 (last three sentences), and also see Smith 1987, 49.

(1868, 642), Walter Bagehot (1876, 12–15, 24), and Leslie Stephen (1876, 71–78). Harold Laski (1920, 291) said that TMS was “written with sufficient power of style to obscure its inner poverty of thought.” As late as 1985, Samuel Brittan said that TMS “would not be studied today except by a few specialists in the period if Smith had not gone on to write [*The Wealth of Nations*]” (51–52).

So the swings in TMS’s fortunes have been quite extraordinary. First TMS was warmly embraced by the likes of David Hume and Edmund Burke; it seems to have solidified Smith’s persona as an ethical authority, able to morally authorize the pursuit of honest income and “the liberal plan of equality, liberty, and justice” (Smith 1976, 664). Then, soon after Smith’s death, the influentials Reid, Ferguson, and Stewart sent TMS into “oblivion,” as Glenn Morrow put it (1927, 336). There it stayed until sometime in the 1980s. Nowadays TMS is once again widely admired, and its allure seems to continue to grow.

It is my impression, however, that the battery of criticisms running through Kames, Reid, Ferguson, Stewart, Brown, Mackintosh, Jouffroy, and Farrer, have never been addressed head-on by those who might defend Smith; no one has ever mounted a defense of Smith’s organon. Their critiques, and other items including the notices by Hume and Burke, are gathered in John Reeder’s truly invaluable 1997 collection *On Moral Sentiments: Contemporary Responses to Adam Smith*.

Reproduced here is a selection from Thomas Brown’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (4 vols.), first published in Edinburgh in 1820.<sup>3</sup> A brief biography of Thomas Brown (drawn from Stewart-Robertson 2004) follows the selection below. Brown’s work was well received and reprinted many times in Britain and the United States, so it, too, helped to send TMS into the oblivion from which it has only recently re-emerged.

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3. The selection comes from volume 4, 112–145 ([link](#)). Nearly the same selection appears in Reeder (1997, 139–158), but here we also include the paragraph immediately prior to the start of Reeder’s excerpt. We thank Erik Matson and Eric Hammer for their assistance in reproducing the text.

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# Examination of Dr Smith's System<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Brown

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

After this examination of the various systems, which may be considered as more or less directly opposed to the belief of that principle of moral feeling—the original susceptibility of moral emotion on the contemplation of certain actions—for which I have contended, there is still one system which deserves to be considered by us, in relation to this belief—not as being subversive of morality, in any one of its essential distinctions, but as appearing to fix morality on a basis, that is not sufficiently firm; with the discovery of the instability of which, therefore, the virtues that are represented as supported on it, might be considered as themselves unstable; as the statue, though it be the image of a God, or the column, though it be a part of a sacred temple, may fall, not because it is not sufficiently cohesive and firm in itself, but because it is too massy, for the feeble pedestal on which it has been placed.

The system, to which I allude, is that which is delivered by Dr Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*,—a work, unquestionably of the first rank, in a science, which I cannot but regard, as to man, the most interesting of sciences. Profound in thought, it exhibits, even when it is *most* profound, an example of the graces with which a sage imagination knows how to adorn the simple and majestic form of science, that is severe and cold, only to those who are themselves cold and severe,—as in those very graces, it exhibits, in like manner, an example of the reciprocal embellishment which imagination receives from the sober dignity of truth. In its minor details and illustrations, indeed, it may be considered as presenting a model of philosophic beauty, of which all must acknowledge the power, who are not disqualified by their very nature for the admiration and enjoyment of intellectual excellence,—so dull of understanding, as to shrink with a painful consciousness of incapacity at the very appearance of refined analysis—or so dull and cold of heart, as to feel no charm in the delightful varieties of an eloquence, that, in the illustration and embellishment of the noblest truths, seems itself to live and harmonize with those noble sentiments which it adorns.

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1. From the *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (Edinburgh, 1820), vol. 4, pp. 112–145. The excerpt here presented picks up in the middle of “Lecture LXXX. Examination of the Selfish System Concluded; Examination of Dr Smith’s System.”

It is chiefly in its minor analyses, however, that I conceive the excellence of this admirable work to consist. Its leading doctrine I am far from admitting. Indeed, it seems to me as manifestly false, as the greater number of its secondary and minute delineations appear to me faithful, to the fine lights and faint and flying shades, of that moral nature which they represent.

According to Dr Smith, we do not, *immediately*, approve of certain actions, or disapprove of certain other actions, when we have become acquainted with the intention of the agent, and the consequences, beneficial or injurious, of what he has done. All these we might know thoroughly, without a feeling of the slightest approbation or disapprobation. It is necessary, before any moral sentiment arise, that the mind should go through another process,—that by which we seem, for the time, to enter into the feelings of the agent, and of those to whom his actions have related, in its consequences, or intended consequences, beneficial or injurious. If, by a process of this kind,—on considering all the circumstances in which the agent was placed, we feel a complete sympathy with the passions or calmer emotions that actuated him, and with the gratitude of him who was the object of the action,—we approve of the *action* itself as *right*, and feel the *merit* of the *agent*;—our sense of the propriety of the action depending on our sympathy with the agent; our sense of the merit of the agent on our sympathy with the object of the action. If our sympathies be of an opposite kind, we disapprove of the action itself as improper, that is to say, unsuitable to the circumstances, and ascribe, not merit but demerit, to the agent. In sympathizing with the gratitude of others, we should have regarded the agent as worthy of *reward*; in sympathizing with the resentment of others, we regard him as worthy of *punishment*.

Such is the supposed process in estimating the *actions of others*. When we regard our *own conduct*, we in some measure reverse this process; or rather, by a process still more refined, we imagine others sympathizing with us, and sympathize with their sympathy. We consider how our conduct would appear to an impartial spectator. We approve of it, if it be that of which we feel that *he* would approve; we disapprove of it, if it be that which, we feel by the experience of our own former emotions, when we have ourselves, in similar circumstances estimated the actions of others, would excite his disapprobation. We are able to form a judgment as to our own conduct, therefore, because we have previously judged of the moral conduct of others,—that is to say, have previously sympathized with the feelings of others;—and but for the presence, or supposed presence, of some impartial spectator, as a mirror to represent to ourselves, we should as little have known the beauty or deformity of our own moral character, as we should have known the beauty or ugliness of our external features, without some mirror to reflect them to our eye.

In this brief outline of Dr Smith's system, I have, of course, confined myself to the leading doctrine, of which his theory is the developement. If this doctrine of the necessary antecedence of sympathy to our moral approbation or disapprobation be just, the *system* may be admitted, even though many of his minor illustrations should appear to be false. If this primary doctrine be *not just*, the system, however ingenious and just in its explanation of many phenomena of the mind, must fail as a *theory of our moral sentiments*.

To derive our moral sentiments,—which are as universal, as the actions of mankind that come under our review,—from the occasional sympathies, that warm or sadden us with joys and griefs and sentiments which are not our own, seems to me, I confess, very nearly the same sort of error, as it would be to derive the waters of an ever-flowing stream from the sunshine or shade which may occasionally gleam over it. That we have a principle of social feeling, which, in its rapid participation of the vivid emotions of others, seems to identify us, in many cases, with the happy or the sorrowful, the grateful or the indignant, it is impossible to deny. But this sympathy, quick as it truly is to arise, in cases in which the primary feelings are *vivid and strongly marked*, is not a perpetual accompaniment of every action of every one around us. There must be *some vividness of feeling* in others, or the *display of vividness of feeling*,—or at least such a situation as usually excites vivid feeling of some sort, in those who are placed in it, to call the sympathy itself into action. In the number of petty affairs which are hourly before our eyes, what sympathy is felt, either with those who are actively or those who are passively concerned,—when the agent himself performs his little offices with emotions as slight as those which the objects of his actions reciprocally feel; yet, in these cases, we are as capable of judging, and approve or disapprove,—not with the same liveliness of emotion, indeed, but with as accurate estimation of merit or demerit,—as when we consider the most heroic sacrifices which the virtuous can make, or the most atrocious crimes of which the sordid and the cruel can be guilty. It is not the absolute vividness of our emotion, however, but its mere correspondence in degree with the emotion of others, which affects our estimates of the propriety of their actions; and it must be remembered, that it is not any greater or less vividness of our sympathetic feeling, but the accuracy of our estimation of merit and demerit, whether great or slight, by the sympathetic feelings supposed, which is the only point in question. There is *no* theory of our moral distinctions, which supposes that we are to approve equally of *all* actions that are right, and to disapprove equally of all actions which are wrong; but it is essential to *our* theory—that theory which we are considering—that there should be *no feeling of right or wrong, merit or demerit*,—and, consequently, *no moral estimation whatever*, where there is no *previous sympathy in that particular case*. The humblest action, therefore, which we denominate right, must have awakened our sympathy, as much as those glorious actions which we are

never weary of extolling,—in the very commendation of which we think not of the individual only with thankfulness, but with a sort of proud delight of ourselves, of our country, of the common nature of man, as ennobled by the virtue, that, instead of receiving dignity from the homage of our praises, confers dignity on the very gratitude and reverence which offer them. If we were to think only those actions *right*, in which our *sympathy* is excited, the class of *indifferent actions* would comprehend the whole life, or nearly the whole life, of almost all the multitude of those around us, and, indeed, of almost all mankind. A few great virtues and great iniquities would still remain in our system of practical ethics, to be applauded or censured; but the morality of the common transactions of life, which, though less important in each particular case, is, upon the whole, more important, from its extensive diffusion, would disappear altogether, *as morality*—as that which it is *right* to *observe*, and *wrong* to *omit*,—and though it might still be counted *useful*, would admit of no higher denomination of praise. The supposed necessary universality then, in our moral sentiments, of that, which, however frequent, is surely far from universal, would of itself seem to me a sufficient objection to the theory of Dr Smith.

Even if the sympathy for which he contends were *as universal*, as it is absolutely necessary for the truth of his theory that it should be, it must still be admitted that our sympathy is, in degree at least, one of the most irregular and seemingly capricious of principles in the constitution of the mind; and on this very account, therefore, not very likely to be the commensurable test or standard of feelings, so regular upon the whole, as our general estimates of right and wrong. But though it would be very easy to show the force of this objection, I hasten from it, and from all objections of this kind, to that which seems to me to be the essential error of the system.

This essential error, the greatest of all possible systematic errors, is no less than the assumption, in every case, of those very moral feelings, which are supposed to flow from sympathy,—the assumption of them as necessarily existing before that very sympathy in which they are said to originate.

Let us allow, then, every thing which we can suppose it possible for the author of the theory to have claimed,—let us admit, that the sympathy of which he speaks, instead of being limited to a few cases of vivid feeling, is as universal as he contends,—that it is as little variable in kind, or in degree, as our notions of right and wrong,—and, in short, that it is in perfect accordance with our moral sentiments;—even though, with all these admissions, we were to admit also the very process which Dr Smith supposes to take place exactly in the manner which he supposes,—it would be very evident, that still, after so many important concessions, the moral sentiments could not be regarded as having their source in the sympathy, but as *preceding* it; or, if no moral sentiments of any kind preceded it,

the sympathy itself could not afford them—more than a mirror, which reflects to us, from the opposite landscape, the sunny hill, the rock, and the trees, gleaming through the spray of the waterfall, could of itself, without any external light, produce all that beautiful variety of colour with which it delights our vision, as if it were the very scene on which we have loved to gaze.

Let us consider, then, with a little nicer analysis, the process of which Dr Smith speaks,—admitting the sympathy for which he contends, and admitting it in the fullest extent which can be conceived necessary to his theory.

In this theory, as you have seen, he has separated our feeling of the propriety or impropriety of the action from our feeling of the merit or demerit of the agent,—ascribing the one to our sympathy with the emotions of the agent in the circumstances in which he was placed—the other to our sympathy with the gratitude or resentment of those who have been affected by the action. I have already endeavoured to show you, that we have only one feeling of *approvableness*, arising on the contemplation of an action, which, as variously referred—to the agent, or to the action considered abstractly—is at once the felt propriety of the action and the felt merit of the agent. Indeed, it seems to me as absurd to suppose that we can conceive an action to be wrong, in the moral sense of that word, without any notion of the demerit of the voluntary agent—or conceive the demerit of the voluntary agent, without any notion of the impropriety of his action, as it would be to suppose that we can imagine a circle without a centre, or a centre without a circle. But let us adopt, without objection, the supposed analysis which Dr Smith has made of our moral sentiments; and admit, that, in the constitution of these, there are two distinct feelings, that give occasion to corresponding moral notions of *propriety* and *merit*,—which one of these feelings alone could not have produced;—in short, let us admit, that we might have conceived an action to be morally *wrong*, without any demerit on the part of the agent, or have conceived the *greatest demerit on his part*, without any *moral impropriety in his action*.

The first supposed sympathy which we have to consider, is that which is said to give occasion to our moral estimates of actions as *proper* or *improper*, without regard to the merit or demerit of the agent, that are felt by us only through the medium of another sympathy.

This notion of moral propriety or impropriety, we are told, could not have been produced in us by the most attentive consideration of the action, and of all its circumstances; another process must intervene. We feel the propriety of the action, only because we sympathize with the agent. We make his circumstances our own, and, our passion being in unison with his, we regard it as suitable to the circumstances, and, therefore, as morally proper.

If we have, indeed, previous notions of moral right and wrong, or some other source in which they may be found, this belief of the propriety of certain feelings

that accord with ours, might be sufficiently intelligible; but the most complete sympathy of feelings, the most exact accordancy, is not sufficient to constitute or give rise to the *moral* sentiments of which we are treating,—when there is nothing more than a sympathy of feelings, without that previous moral sentiment, which, in Dr Smith's system, we must always tacitly presuppose. In the very striking emotions of taste, for example, we may feel, on the perusal of the same poem, the performance of the same musical air, the sight of the same picture, or statue, a rapture or disgust, accordant with the rapture or disgust expressed by another reader, or listener, or spectator;—a sympathy far more complete than takes place in our consideration of the circumstances in which he may have had to regulate his conduct in any of the common affairs of life,—in which our secondary emotion, if it be at all excited, is excited but faintly. If mere accordance of emotion, then, imply the feeling of moral excellence of any sort, we should certainly feel moral regard for all whose taste coincides with ours; yet, however gratifying the sympathy in such a case may be, we do not feel, in consequence of this sympathy, any morality in the taste that is most exactly accordant with our own. There is an agreement of emotions,—a sort of *physical* suitableness, that is felt by us of the *emotions* as *effects*, to the *works of art* as *causes*, but nothing more; and, if we had not a principle of moral approbation, by which, independently of sympathy, and previously to it, we regard actions as *right*; the most exact sympathy of passions would, in like manner, have been a proof to us of an agreement of feelings, but of nothing more. It proves to us more, because the emotions, which we compare with our own, are recognized by us as *moral feelings*, independently of the mere agreement. We do not merely share the sentiments of the agent, but we share his *moral* sentiments, the recognition of which, as moral sentiments, has preceded our very sympathy.

Why is it that we regard emotions which do not harmonize with our own, not merely as unlike to ours, which is one view of them,—but as morally *improper*, which is a very different view of them? *It* must surely be, because we regard our own emotions which differ from them as morally *proper*; and, if we regard our own emotions as proper, before we can judge the emotions, which do not harmonize with them, to be *improper on that account*, what influence can the supposed sympathy and comparison have had, in giving birth to that moral sentiment which preceded the comparison? They show us only feelings that differ from ours, and that are improper because ours are proper. The sympathy, therefore, on which the feeling of propriety is said to depend, assumes the previous belief of that very propriety;—or if there be no previous belief of the moral suitableness of our own emotions, there can be no reason, from the mere dissonance of other emotions with ours, to regard these dissonant emotions as morally unsuitable to the circumstances in which they have arisen. We may, perhaps, conceive them to be *physically* unsuitable, in the same manner as we regard the taste as erroneous, which approves of poetry

as sublime that to us appears bombastic or mean; but we can as little feel any moral regard in the one case as in the other, unless we have *previously* distinguished the one set of emotions as *moral* emotions, the other set as emotions of taste.

With respect to the former of the two sympathies, then, which Dr Smith regards as essential to our moral sentiments, the sympathy from which he supposes us to derive our notions of actions, as right or wrong, proper or improper,—that is to say, as morally suitable or unsuitable to the circumstances in which the action takes place,—we have seen that it assumes, as independent of the sympathy, the very feelings, to which the sympathy is said to give rise.

Let us next consider the latter of the two sympathies, to which we are said to own our notion of *merit or demerit in the agent*, as distinct from the *propriety or impropriety of his action*.

These sentiments of merit or demerit arise, we are told, not from any direct consideration of the agent, and of the circumstances of his action, but from our sympathy with the gratitude or resentment of those who have derived benefit or injury; or at least whom he is supposed to have wished to derive benefit or injury, from that good or evil which he proposed. If, on considering the circumstances of the case, we feel that our emotions of this sort would in a similar situation, harmonize with theirs; we regard the agent in the same light in which they regard him, as worthy of reward in the one case, or of punishment in the other, that is to say, as having *moral merit or demerit*.

If our sense of merit were confined to cases in which the action had a direct relation to others, with whose gratitude we might be supposed to sympathize, this theory of merit would at least be more distinctly conceivable. But what are we to think of cases, in which the action begins and terminates, without a thought of the happiness of others, in the amelioration of the individual himself,—of sacrifices resolutely but silently made to the mere sense of duty,—the voluntary relinquishment of luxurious indulgencies,—the struggle, and at last the victory over appetites and passions that are felt to be inconsistent with the sanctity of virtue,—and over *habits*, still more difficult to be subdued, than the very appetites or passions which may have given them their power. In such cases, our sense of the merit of the victor in this noble strife,—when we do not think of the gratitude of a single individual, because there is in truth no gratitude of which to think,—is, notwithstanding, as vivid, as if we had around us whole families and tribes of the grateful to excite our sympathy, and to continue to harmonize with it. The world, indeed, the great community of individuals, it may be said, is truly benefited by every increase of virtue, in any one of the individuals who compose it; and it may be possible, in this way, to *invent* some species of gratitude of the whole multitude of mankind, that may be supposed to awake our sympathy, and thus to make us feel a merit even in such cases, which otherwise we should not have felt. But, though it may

be possible for us, with due care and effort of thought, to invent this abstract or remote gratitude with which ours may be supposed to harmonize; can it be imagined by any one, but the most obstinate defender of a system, that this strange sympathy, of which no one, perhaps, has been conscious in any case, truly and constantly takes place whenever we thus approve,—that we do not feel any merit whatever in the voluntary privations which virtue makes, till we have previously excited ourselves to admire them, by reflecting on a grateful world? Such a reflex thankfulness, if it occur at all, does not occur to one of many thousands, who require, for their instant perceptions of the merit, only the knowledge of the sacrifices of present enjoyment which have been made, and of the pure emotions which led to the sacrifices. It is not only the Hercules who freed the world from robbers and monsters that we admire. We admire, at least, as much, in the beautiful ancient allegory, the same moral hero when he resisted the charms and the solicitations of Pleasure herself. The choice of Hercules, indeed, is fabulous. But the choice which he is fabled to have made, has been the choice of the virtuous of every age; and, in every age, the sacrifices internally and silently made to duty and conscience, have been ranked in merit with the sacrifices which had for their direct object the happiness of others, and, for their immediate reward, the gratitude of the happy. Why is it that we look with so much honour on the martyr in those early ages of persecution, which, collecting around the victim every instrument of torture, required of him only a few grains of incense to be thrown before a statue,—more noble, indeed, than the imperial murderer whom it represented, but still only a statue,—the effigy of a being of human form, who, under the purple which clothed him, with the diadem and the sceptre, and the altar,—far from being a god, was himself one of the lowest of the things which God had made! When, placed thus between idolatry and every form of bodily anguish,—with life and guilt before him, and death and innocence,—the hero of a pure faith looked fearlessly on the cross or on the stake, and calmly, and without wrath, on the statue which he refused to worship, and on all the ready ministers of cruelty, that were rejoicing in the new work which they had to perform, and the new amusement which they were to give to the impatient crowd,—do we feel that there was no merit in the magnanimity, because we cannot readily discover some *gratitude* which we may participate?—or, if we do feel any merit, is it only on account of some gratitude which we have at last *succeeded* in discovering? We do not think of any thankfulness of man. We think only of God and virtue,—and of the heroic sufferer, to whom God and virtue were *all*, and the suffering of such a moment *nothing*.

That our feeling of merit, then, is not a reflected gratitude, but arises from the direct contemplation of the meritorious action, might, if any proof were necessary, appear sufficiently evident from the equal readiness of this feeling to arise in cases in which it would be difficult to discover any gratitude with which we can be sup-

posed to sympathize, and in which the individual himself, and the circumstances of his action, are all that is before us. But though this, and every other objection to Dr Smith's theory of our feeling of merit were to be abandoned, there would still remain the great objection,—that the sympathy which he supposes in this case, as in that formerly examined by us, proceeds on the existence of that very moral sentiment which it is stated by him to produce.

We discover the merit of the agent, in any case, it is said, by that sympathetic tendency of our nature, in consequence of which, on considering any particular action, we place ourselves in the situation of those who are benefited by the action, when, if we feel an emotion of gratitude like theirs, we of course consider the agent himself as *meritorious*,—worthy of the reward of which *they* consider him to be worthy; and in like manner, on considering any action of injustice or malevolence, we feel the demerit of the agent, by sympathizing with the resentment of those whom the action has injured.

Such is the process asserted. But what is it that is truly supposed in this process, as distinguishing the sympathetic and secondary feelings, from the primary feelings of those who were directly concerned?

We place ourselves in the situation of others—or, rather, without willing it, or knowing the charge till it is produced, we feel ourselves, by some sudden illusion, as if placed in their situation. In this imaginary sameness of circumstances, we have feelings similar to theirs. They view their benefactor as worthy of reward. *We*, therefore, considering for the moment the benefit as if conferred on us, regard him likewise as worthy of reward:—or if they consider him worthy of punishment, we too consider him worthy of punishment. Their gratitude or resentment is founded on real benefit received, or real injury. Our gratitude or resentment is founded on the illusive momentary belief of benefit or injury. But this difference of reality and illusion in the circumstances which give occasion to them, is the only difference of the feelings; unless indeed, that, as the illusion cannot be of very long continuance, and is, probably, even while it lasts, less powerful than the reality, our sympathetic feelings, however *similar* in *kind*, may be supposed to be *weaker* in *degree*.

The effect of the sympathy, then, being only to transfuse into our breasts the gratitude or resentment of those who have been immediately benefited or injured, by any generous or malevolent action;—if the original gratitude imply belief of merit in the object of the gratitude, and the original resentment imply belief of demerit in its object, *we may*, by our sympathy with these direct original feelings, be impressed with similar belief of merit or demerit. But, in this case, it is equally evident, that, if *our reflex* gratitude and resentment involve notions of merit and demerit, the original gratitude and resentment which we feel by reflection, must in like manner have involved them; and must even have involved them with more vivid feeling, since the difference of vividness was the chief or only circumstance

of difference in the direct and the sympathetic emotions. The sympathy, then, to which we are supposed to owe our moral sentiments of merit and demerit, presupposes those very sentiments; since the feelings which arise in us by sympathy, only from the illusion by which we place ourselves in the situation of others, must, in those who were truly in that very situation, have arisen directly with at least equal power. It is some previous gratitude with which we sympathize; it is some previous resentment with which we sympathize; and merit is said to be only that *worthiness of reward* which the gratitude itself implies,—and demerit that worthiness of punishment which is implied in the primary resentment. If the feeling of gratitude implied no notions of any relation of worthiness, which our benefactor's generosity bears to the reward which we wish that we were capable of bestowing on him,—and our resentment, in like manner, implied no notion of a similar relation of the injustice or cruelty of him who has injured us, to that punishment of his offence which we wish and anticipate,—we might then, indeed, be obliged to seek some other source of these felt relations. But if the actual gratitude or resentment of those who have profited or suffered, imply no feelings of merit or demerit, we may be certain, at least, that in whatever source we are to strive to discover these feelings, it is not in the mere reflection of a fainter gratitude or resentment, that we can hope to find them.

After admitting to Dr Smith, then, every thing which he could be supposed to claim, or even to wish to claim, with respect to the universality, the steadiness, and the vividness of our sympathetic feelings, we have seen, that in both the sympathies which he supposes to take place,—that from which we are said to derive our moral sentiments of the propriety or impropriety of actions, and that from which we are said, in like manner, to derive our moral sentiments of merit or demerit in the agent,—the process to which he ascribes the origin of these moral sentiments cannot even be understood, without the belief of their previous existence. The feelings with which we sympathize, are themselves moral feelings or sentiments; or, if they are not moral feelings the reflection of them from a thousand breasts cannot alter their nature.

**Lecture LXXXI. Examination of Dr Smith's System Concluded;  
Recapitulation of the Doctrines of Moral Approbation.**

My last Lecture, Gentlemen, was chiefly employed in considering a theory of our moral sentiments which has been stated and defended with great eloquence, by one of the profoundest philosophers, whom our country and our science can boast—a theory which founds our moral sentiments, not on the direct contemplation of the actions which we term virtuous; but on a sympathy, which it is impossible for us not to feel, with the emotions of the agent, in the circumstances

in which he has been placed, and with the emotions, also, of those to whom his actions have been productive of benefit or injury;—our direct sympathy with the agent, giving rise to our notion of the propriety of his actions,—our indirect sympathy with those whom his actions have benefited or injured, giving rise to our notions of merit or demerit in the agent himself. Both these supposed sympathies I examined with a more minute review, than that to which they have usually been submitted; and, in both cases, we found that, even though many other strong objections to which the theory is liable were abandoned; and though the process for which the theorist contends were allowed to take place, to the fullest extent to which he contends for it; his system would still be liable to the insuperable objection, that the moral sentiments which he ascribes to our secondary feelings, of mere sympathy, are assumed as previously existing, in those original emotions with which the secondary feelings are said to be in unison. If those to whom an action has directly related, are incapable of discovering, by the longest and minutest examination of it—however much they may have been benefited by it, or injured, and intentionally benefited or injured—any *traces* of *right* or *wrong*, merit or demerit, in the performer of the action; those whose sympathy consists merely in an illusory participation of the same interest, cannot surely derive, from the fainter reflex feelings, that moral knowledge which even the more vivid primary emotions were incapable of affording,—anymore than we can be supposed to acquire from the most faithful echo, important truths that were never uttered by the voices which it reflects. The utmost influence of the liveliest sympathy, can be only to render the momentary feelings the same, as if the identity of situation with the object of the sympathy were not illusive, but real; and what it would be impossible for the mind to feel, if really existing, in the circumstances supposed, it must be impossible for it also to feel, when it believes itself to exist in them, and is affected in the same manner, as if truly that very mind, with whose emotions it sympathizes.

If, indeed, we had *previously* any moral notions of actions as right or wrong, we might very easily judge of the propriety or impropriety of the sentiments of others, according as our own do or do not sympathize with them; and it is this *previous* feeling of propriety or impropriety which Dr Smith tacitly assumes, even in contending for the exclusive influence of the *sympathy*, as itself the original source of every moral sentiment. The sentiments of others could not fail, indeed, in that case, to appear to us *proper*, if they coincided with sentiments which we had before, in our own mind, recognized as *proper*, or *morally suitable to the circumstances*—*improper* if they differed from *these*. But, if we have no previous moral notions whatever, the *most exact sympathy* of feelings can tell us only that *our* feelings are *similar* to the feelings of some other person,—which they may be, as much when they are vicious as when they are virtuous, or when they are neither virtuous nor vicious;—the *most complete dissonance*, in like manner, can tell us only that our feelings are *not* similar

to those of some other person. When another calls *scarlet* or *green* what we have previously felt to be *scarlet* or *green*, we think that *his* vision and *ours agree*; but we presuppose, in him as in ourselves, that visual sensibility which distinguished the colours; and we do not consider him an object of moral regard, because his vision coincides with ours. When he is affected with a delightful emotion, similar to ours, on the contemplation of a work of art, we acknowledge mentally, and are pleased, perhaps, with this coincidence of taste. But the coincidence does not seem to us to be that which constitutes the emotions of taste. On the contrary, it presupposes, in both, an independent susceptibility of these emotions, by which we should, individually, have admired what is beautiful, and distinguished from it what is ugly, though no one had been present with us to participate our sentiments. When, in like manner, we admire, with vivid approbation, some generous action,—that is to say, according to Dr Smith's language, when we sympathize with the feelings of any one in the circumstances in which he has been placed,—we have a coincidence of feelings, indeed, as exact, though probably not more exact, than in a case of simple vision, or admiration of some work of art, in which no moral sentiment was felt;—and this very coincidence, in like manner, presupposes a capacity of distinguishing and admiring what is *right*,—without which, there would have been a similarity of feelings, and nothing more, precisely as in the other cases. It is not a mere coincidence of feeling, however, which we recognize in our moral sentiments, like that which we recognize in the most exact coincidence of taste. We feel, not merely that another has acted as we should have done, and that his motives, in similar circumstances, have been similar to ours. We feel, that, in acting as he has done, he has acted properly;—because, independently of the sympathy which merely gives us feelings to measure with our own, as we might measure with our own any other species of feelings, we are impressed with the *propriety* of the sentiments, according to which we trust that we should ourselves have acted;—so thoroughly impressed with these *previous* distinctions of right and wrong, that, in the opposite case of some act of atrocious delinquency, no sympathy in vice of one villain with another, can make the *common crime* seem a *virtue* in the eyes of his accomplice,—who is actuated by similar motives and therefore by similar feelings, in a sympathy of the finest unison,—when he adds his arm to the rapine, and afterwards to the murder, which is to conceal and to consummate the guilt.

The moral sentiments which we have as yet considered, are those which relate to the *conduct and feelings of others*. The same inconsistencies which are found, on the theory of *these*, is to be found, as might be supposed, in the application of the principle to other species of supposed sympathy which we have still to consider,—in the sentiments which we form of *our own moral conduct*. That we should be capable, indeed, of forming a moral estimate of our *own actions*, from the direct contemplation of the circumstances in which we may have been placed, and

of the good or evil which we may have intentionally produced, would evidently be subversive of the whole theory of sympathy; since, with the same knowledge of circumstances, and of intention, if we could form any moral judgment of our *own* actions, we might be equally capable of forming some moral judgment of the actions of *others*. It was absolutely necessary, therefore, for Dr Smith to maintain, that we have no power of judging of our own actions directly,—that, knowing the choice which we have made, and all the circumstances which led to our choice, and all the consequences of benefit or injury to individuals, and to the world, which our choice may have produced,—it is yet absolutely impossible for us to distinguish, *without the aid of the real or supposed sentiments of others*, any difference of propriety or impropriety, right or wrong, merit or demerit, or whatever other names we may use to express the differences of vice and virtue;—though our vice had been the atrocious fury of plunging a dagger in the heart of her who had been our happiness in many connubial years, and who was slumbering beside us on the same pillow in the calmness of unsuspecting love; or our virtue, the clemency of drawing back from the bosom of the assassin whom we had laid at our feet, the dagger which we had wrenched from his murderous hand. Even of actions so different as these, it would be absolutely impossible for us, we are told, to form any moral distinction, if we were to look on them only with our own eyes, and measure them by the feelings of our own heart. Before the one can appear to us less virtuous than the other, we must imagine some witnesses, or hearers, of what has been done, and sympathize with their sympathy. Such is the process which Dr Smith believes to take place. But, surely, if our original feelings, on the consideration of all the circumstances of an action, involve no notion of right or wrong,—the sympathy with our feelings, or our sympathy with that sympathy, or even an infinite series of reciprocal sympathies, if these should be thought necessary, cannot afford the moral notions of which the original feelings, themselves more vivid, afforded no elements. If the impartial spectator be able to discover merit or demerit, by making our case his own, and becoming conscious as it were of *our* feelings; our feelings, which he thus makes his own, must speak to *us* with the same voice of moral instruction, with which, during his temporary illusion, they speak to *him*. If, considering our action and all its consequences, we cannot discover any merit or demerit, they, considering our action in all its circumstances as theirs, must be alike insensible of any merit or demerit:—or, if they have feelings essentially different from ours, they have *not* made our case their own;—and what is misnamed *sympathy* has not been *sympathy*. Unless we presuppose, as I before said, on their part some moral notions of what is right or wrong, meritorious or worthy of punishment, by which they may measure our conduct and feelings,—all the knowledge which the most complete system can afford, is merely that they have certain feelings, that we have had certain feelings, and that these feelings are similar to each other; as our

feelings have coincided before in various other emotions, perceptions, judgments that involved or suggested no moral notion whatever.

We have now then considered, both in its relation to our sentiments of our own moral conduct, and in its relation to our sentiments of the conduct of others, the very celebrated theory of Dr Smith,—a theory, which I cannot but regard as involving, in morals, the same error that would be involved in a theory of the source of light, if an optician, after showing us many ingenious contrivances, by which an image of some beautiful form may be made to pass from one visible place to another, were to contend, that all the magnificent radiations of that more than ethereal splendour which does not merely adorn the day, but constitutes the day, had their primary origin in *reflection*,—when reflection itself implies, and cannot be understood but as implying the previous incidence, and, therefore, the previous existence, of the light which is reflected. A mirror presents to us a fainter copy of external things; but it is a copy which it presents. *We* are, in like manner, to each other, mirrors, that reflect from breast to breast joy, sorrow, indignation, and all the vivid emotions of which the individual mind is susceptible; but though, as mirrors, we mutually give and receive emotions, these emotions must have been *felt* before they could be communicated. To ascribe original moral feelings to this mental reflection, is truly, then, as much an error, in the theory of morality, as the doctrine of the production of light by reflection without the previous incidence of light, would be an error in the theory of catoptrics.

The argument, after the fuller views of it which I have given, may be recapitulated in very brief compass.

There are only two senses in which sympathy can be understood; *one* having immediate relation to the *feelings*, the other to the *situation*, of him with whom we are said to sympathize. We partake his emotions *directly*, as if by instant contagion; or we partake them indirectly, by first imagining ourselves in the circumstances in which he is placed; the emotion, in this latter case, being similar, merely because the situation, in which we imagine ourselves for the moment, is similar, and arising in us when the situation is imagined to be ours, precisely in the same manner, and according to the same principles, as it arose in the mind of *him* who truly existed in the circumstances in which our imagination has placed *us*. In either case, it is equally evident, that sympathy cannot be the *source* of any *additional knowledge*:—it only gives a wider diffusion, to feelings, that previously exist, or that might have previously existed. If it *reflect* to us the very emotions of others, as if by contagion, without any intervening influence of imagination on our part; it reflects feelings that have been *directly excited* in *them*, the primary subjects of the feelings, by their real situation; and which *they* would not the less have had, though no one had been present to sympathize with them, or even though the tendency to sympathy had not formed a part of the mental constitution. If, on the other hand, sympathy do

not reflect to us the very emotions of others, but make us first enter, by a sort of spiritual transmigration, into *their* situation, and thus, indirectly, impress us with their feelings; it still, in making their situation ours, while the illusion lasts, excites in us only the feelings, which we should have had, if the situation had been really ours; and which the same tendencies to emotion that produce them *now*, would *then* have produced, though no sympathy whatever had been concerned in the process. All which is peculiar to the sympathy is, that, instead of one mind only, affected with certain feelings, there are two minds affected with certain feelings, and a recognition of the similarity of these feelings—a similarity which, far from being confined to our moral emotions, may occur as readily, and as frequently, in every other feeling of which the mind is susceptible. What produces the moral notions, therefore, must evidently be something more than a recognition of similarity of feeling, which is thus common to feelings of every class. There must be an independent capacity of moral emotion, in consequence of which we judge those sentiments of conduct to be right, which coincide with sentiments of conduct previously recognized as right—or the sentiments of others to be improper, because they are not in unison with those which we have previously distinguished as proper. Sympathy, then, may be the *diffuser* of moral sentiments, as of various other feelings; but, if no moral sentiments exist previously to our sympathy, our sympathy itself cannot give rise to them.

Such, in outline, is the great objection to Dr Smith's theory, as a theory of our moral sentiments. It professes to explain, by the intervention of sympathy, feelings, which must have existed previously to the sympathy;—or at least, without the capacity of which, as original feelings, in the real circumstances supposed, the illusive reality, which sympathy produces, would have been incapable of developing them. It is on a mere assumption, then,—or rather on an inconsistency, still more illogical than a mere assumption,—that the great doctrine of his system is founded; yet, notwithstanding this essential defect, which might seem to you inconsistent with the praise that was given when I entered on the examination of it, the work of Dr Smith is, without all question, one of the most interesting works—perhaps I should have said the most interesting work,—in moral science. It is valuable, however, as I before remarked, not for the leading doctrine of which we have seen the futility; but for the minor theories which are adduced in illustration of it,—for the refined analysis which it exhibits in many of these details,—and for an eloquence which, adapting itself to all the temporary varieties of its subject,—familiar with a sort of majestic grace, and simple even in its magnificence,—can play amid the little decencies and proprieties of common life, or rise to all the dignity of that sublime and celestial virtue which it seems to bring from heaven, indeed, but to bring down, gently and humbly, to the humble bosom of man.

That his own penetrating mind should not have discovered the inconsistencies that are involved in his theory, and that these should not have readily occurred to the many philosophic readers and admirers of his work, may, in part, have arisen,—as many other seeming wonders of the kind have arisen,—from the ambiguities of language. The meaning of the important word *sympathy*, is not sufficiently definite, so as to present always one clear notion to the mind. It is generally employed, indeed, to signify a mere participation of the feelings of others; but it is also frequently used as significant of *approbation* itself. To say that we sympathize with any one in what he has felt or done, means often that we thoroughly approve of his feelings; and, in consequence of this occasional use of the term as synonymous with approbation, the theory, which would identify all our moral approbation with sympathy, was, I cannot but think, more readily admitted, both by its author, and by those who have followed him; since what was not true of *sympathy*, in its strict philosophic sense, was yet true of it in its mixed popular sense. Indeed, if the word had been always strictly confined to its two accurate meanings,—as significant either of the mere direct participation of feelings previously existing, or of the indirect participation of them in consequence of the illusive belief of similarity of circumstances,—it seems to me as little possible that any one should have thought of ascribing to sympathy original feelings, as, in the analogous cases which I before mentioned, of ascribing to an echo the original utterance of the voices which it sends to our ear,—or the production of the colours which it sends to our eye, to the mirror which has only *received* and *reflected* them.

Of all the principles of our mixed nature, sympathy is one of the most irregular,—varying not in different individuals only, but even in the same individual in different hours or different minutes of the same day; and varying, not with slight differences, but with differences of promptness and liveliness, with which only feelings the most capricious could be commensurable. If ever virtue and vice, therefore, or our views of actions as right and wrong, varied with our sympathy, we might be virtuous at morning, vicious at noon, and virtuous again at night, without any change in the circumstances of our action, except in our greater or less tendency to vividness of sympathy, or to the expectation of more or less vivid sympathies in others. How absurd and impertinent seems to us, in our serious hours, the mirth that, in more careless moments, would have won from us, not our smile only, but our full sympathy of equal laughter; and how dull, when our mind is sportive, seems to us the gravity of the sad and serious,—of the venerable moralizers on years that are long past, and years that are present,—to whose chair, under the influence of any sorrow that depressed us, we loved to draw our own, while we felt a sort of comfort as we listened to them, in the slow and tranquil tone, and the gentle solemnity of their fixed but placid features. What is true of our sympathy with mere mirth, or sadness, is true of every other species of sympathy;

original temperament, habit, the slightest accident of good or bad fortune, may modify, in no slight degree, the readiness, or, at least, the liveliness of moral sympathy with which we should have entered into the feelings of others,—into their gratitude, or anger, or common love or hate; and if, therefore, our estimate of the propriety or impropriety of actions had been altogether dependent on the force of our mere sympathetic emotion, it would not have been very wonderful, if the greater number of mankind had regarded the very propriety or impropriety, as not less accidental than the sympathies from which they flowed.

## About the Author



**Thomas Brown** (1778–1820) was a Scottish philosopher and poet. As a teenager studying at Edinburgh under Dugald Stewart, he took to metaphysics and pondered moral and mental experience as psychological or physiological phenomena. At age 20 he published a challenge to Erasmus Darwin’s materialism. Brown studied medicine, participated in the early years of the *Edinburgh Review*, published poetry, and wrote on Hume’s views of causality. Beginning in 1808 Brown assisted Stewart and then co-occupied the moral philosophy chair at Edinburgh, where he developed lectures that students found captivating. But Brown did not enjoy a solid esteem among his peers. In 1820, the year of his death at age 42, he published several works, including his four-volume *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, from which an extract is here presented.

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