



Sympathy with Adam Smith and reflexions on self

David Haig*

Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology, Harvard University, 26 Oxford Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 May 2009

Received in revised form

24 December 2009

Accepted 10 January 2010

Available online 21 September 2010

Keywords:

Reciprocity

Sympathy

Moral sentiments

Evolution

Adam Smith

Self

ABSTRACT

Adam Smith's account of the moral sentiments resonates with modern themes in evolutionary biology. His distinction between our reasons and the reasons for these reasons recalls the evolutionary biologist's emphasis on different levels of causal explanation. In this view, the proximate goals of our psychological motivations are different in kind from the ultimate reasons why we have evolved these motivations. Sympathy was central to Smith's account of the moral sentiments and he discussed two principal forms of sympathy. Second-person sympathy is putting ourselves in another person's situation to see the world from their perspective. Third-person sympathy is viewing ourselves from the perspective of an impartial observer. In recent discussions of the evolution of cooperation, second-person sympathy facilitates cooperation via direct reciprocity, *I behave well by you so that you will behave well by me*, whereas third-person sympathy facilitates cooperation via indirect reciprocity, *I behave well by you so that others will behave well by me*.

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1. Introduction

This year marks the 250th anniversary of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the 150th anniversary of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. The essay you are reading contains the reflections of one 21st-century Darwinist on the passions, reason, and morality, inspired by his re-reading Adam Smith's 18th-century masterpiece. Smith centered his account of the moral sentiments on the concept of sympathy: we understand others by putting ourselves in their situation; and we judge our own conduct by viewing ourselves from the perspective of an impartial spectator. Our faculties of sympathy are both reflexive, automatic responses beyond the control of our wills, and reflective, reasoned contemplation of others and our relations to them. Smith's prose matches his subject, adopting multiple perspectives and switching voices, at times intimate and passionate, and at others distant and reserved. There is a rhythm to his prose that resonates in the mind of the reader and there is, to my mind, a playful seriousness that invites a serious playfulness in reply. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is not only a work on sympathy but also a work that evokes a sympathetic response in the reader.

My essay attempts an explication of the moral sentiments that melds the insights of Darwin and Smith. It has three main sections. Section 2 discusses the multiplicity of guides to individual action under the broad categories of instinct, reason, and culture, and discusses different kinds of answers to the question why we act the way we do. Section 3 explores different kinds of reflections (and reflexions) back upon our internal self image. Section 4 uses the arguments of the preceding sections to discuss the nature of our moral faculties. Our moral choices are viewed as emerging from a nexus of conflicting agendas of different entities with different ends. I will suggest that a locus of moral responsibility, and a sense of self itself, emerges as we flip back and forth between our own perspective and the perspectives of others, and as we attempt to reconcile and adjudicate among the different springs of internal action.

* Tel.: +1 617 496 5152; fax: +1 617 495 5667.

E-mail address: dhaig@oeb.harvard.edu.

In thinking about sympathy, my mind kept returning to the metaphor of mirrors reflecting mirrors: we see ourselves through others' eyes who see themselves through our eyes. In keeping with this theme of reflection, and reflections upon reflections, I have attempted to give my essay a recursive structure in which the text constantly reflects back upon itself. As a work of sympathy with Adam Smith, I have not attempted to achieve complete clarity in the text, nor within myself, about when I speak in Smith's voice and when I speak in my own. Such ambiguity seems fitting when discussing a topic that blurs the boundaries between individuals and their not-so-distinct points of view. My views depart most from Smith's treatment of sympathy when I allude to the usefulness of sympathy in manipulating and exploiting others for selfish ends. Perhaps Smith did not consider that instrumental uses of sympathy came under the purview of the *moral* sentiments or perhaps he had more faith than I in the beneficence of creation.

2. Teleology

"In every part of the universe we observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce; and in the mechanism of a plant, or animal body, admire how every thing is contrived for advancing the two great purposes of nature, the support of the individual, and the propagation of the species. . . . But though in accounting for the operations of bodies, we never fail to distinguish in this manner the efficient from the final cause, in accounting for those of the mind we are very apt to confound these two different things with one another. When by natural principles we are led to advance those ends, which a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us, we are very apt to impute to that reason, as to their efficient cause, the sentiments and actions by which we advance those ends, and to imagine that to be the wisdom of man, which is in reality the wisdom of God." (Smith, 1976, p. 87)

Smith recognizes two levels of causal explanation in this passage: our reasons and the reasons for these reasons. The specific question to which he alludes is the source of our approbation of the punishment of individuals who violate moral laws. In Smith's opinion, we punish, and approve of punishment, out of our indignation against the offender, not because of a reasoned consideration of the value of punishment for the proper ordering of society. Our indignation, however, has been contrived as an efficient means of advancing the latter end. We act out of passion, but the preservation of society is the reason why we have been endowed with this passion.

Smith's grounding of final causes in God's wisdom could be considered an orthodox appeal to natural theology, but his ontological stance on the nature of final causes is not altogether clear. When he wants to, Smith writes clearly, and his lack of clarity on teleological questions is, I suspect, deliberate. A hundred years later, Darwin provided a naturalistic account of the appearance of purpose in nature: spontaneously-arising variation modifies the properties of organisms; some of these modifications benefit the organism in its struggle for existence and these modifications are thereby perpetuated in the organism's offspring; thus, an *effect* of a modification of the organism is a *cause* of that modification appearing in subsequent generations.

Darwin's understanding of the hereditary material was inchoate. He would have accepted support of the individual, and even the tribe, as the 'goal' of the adaptive process, but many now prefer to view the genetic material itself, rather than the individual or group, as the beneficiary of the fruits of natural selection (Dawkins, 1982). This, however, is a subject of ongoing debate in the philosophy of biology, with most of the polemic heat concerning semantic rather than substantive issues. From a gene-centric perspective, a gene's functions (or purpose) are those of its *phenotypic effects* that have a *causal role* in the gene being preserved and proliferated.

The recognition of different levels of explanation is familiar to evolutionary biologists (Mayr, 1961; Tinbergen, 1963). Consider a serial philanderer who copulates with multiple women by making false promises of commitment. He does not copulate to pass on his genes, but to experience sexual pleasure at little personal cost. The sexual gratification he receives after each successful seduction serves to reinforce the seductive behaviors (intrapersonal recursion). But, the system of sexual desire, seduction, gratification, and reinforcement exists, in part, because he had ancestors who passed on their genes because they consummated their desires by seduction (evolutionary recursion). The philanderer does not copulate to transmit his genes, rather to experience sexual pleasure, but copulation is pleasurable because the promise of pleasure has been the means whereby our ancestors were induced to copulate.¹

Two levels of *teleology* can be recognized in this example. Sexual desire, and the behaviors it motivates, is the means that achieves the end of sexual pleasure for the philanderer, and the means that achieves the end of open-ended replication for his genes. That psychological motivation and evolutionary function are not the same thing is clearly illustrated by the observation that the philanderer prefers that copulation does not result in conception whereas his genes 'prefer' that it does.

¹ Mayr (1961) distinguished proximate explanations (mechanisms; How?) from ultimate explanations (adaptive function; Why?). Tinbergen (1963) recognized four kinds of explanation: physical causation, survival value, evolutionary history, and ontogeny. I prefer to treat psychological motivation as a fifth kind of explanation, complementary to the others, rather than as a special kind of proximate mechanism or physical cause. When I wish to understand *why* you behaved as you did, I am usually asking a question about the *telos* of your psychological motivations. When I wish to persuade you to do something you might not otherwise do, I am interested in *how* your psychological motivations can be used as a means to my ends.

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