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Once More With Feeling:

The Scottish Enlightenment, Sympathy, and Social Welfare[1]

I. Introduction

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1984[1759]) Adam Smith advances an explanation of social and moral order in which human sympathy is central. Our capacity to go along, or not, with the feelings of others, is basic to the complex dynamics through which we approve and disapprove of the conduct of others, and of ourselves. But Smith also makes a distinction. While beneficence, benevolence and generosity generally meet with approval and enhance the quality of society, they are not essential to it. All that is required of minimal society is 'justice', the firm knowledge that those who do not play by the rules and wantonly harm others, will be punished, in line with the general disapproval they elicit from their fellows. As Smith puts it:

> Though Nature, therefore, exhorts mankind to acts of beneficence, by the pleasing consciousness of deserved reward, she has not thought it necessary to guard and enforce the practice of it by the terrors of merited punishment in case it should be neglected. It is the ornament which embellishes, not the foundation which supports the building, and which it was, therefore,

sufficient to recommend, but by no means necessary to impose. Justice, on the contrary, is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society, that fabric which to raise and support seems in this world, if I may say so, to have been the peculiar darling of Nature, must in a moment crumble into atoms (1984: 86; II.ii.3.4)[2].

This, taken as an example of Scottish Enlightenment thinking, has implications for what that period might have to say about current debates about social welfare. From Smith's point of view, much would seem to hang on whether social welfare is a matter of optional benevolence, or necessary justice. But either way, sympathy sets the parameters of what is possible. To explore this question further in this essay I will focus on the concept of 'sympathy' as it operates in the work of the two greatest figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume and especially Adam Smith. I will then try to draw out some of the implications this concept might have for current discussions of ethics and social welfare. A vast array of ideas potentially relevant to such discussions were generated in the milieu of the eighteenth century Scottish intellectuals, but 'sympathy' offers us a manageable way in to this world of ideas.

II. Rediscovering the sentimental Scots

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[2] Throughout, for Adam Smith and David Hume I give both a Harvard style citation and the traditional section and paragraph citation used in Smith and Hume scholarship.

There has been a revival of interest in the Scottish Enlightenment in recent decades, and a significant shift in how it and its ideas have been perceived and represented (Broadie 2001, Dwyer 1998). For a long time the accent was on the advent of ideas of science and empiricism, in ways that highlighted concerns with 'reason', downplaying other aspects of that period. Hume was seen primarily as a philosophical ancestor of the 'logical positivists', with his rigorous analysis of perception, cognition, and rational inference. Smith was viewed as the father of modern economics in its scientific guise of discovering 'laws' of economic behaviour. The recent revival has swung in the other direction, rediscovering the pervasive concern with questions of feeling, sentiment, values and morality. Philosophers now avidly read beyond the first book of Hume's *Treatise* (1978[1739]), the one on 'understanding' (that is, epistemology), to books II and III on 'passions' and 'morals', respectively. Economists from Amartya Sen (2011) to Russ Roberts (2014) have turned to Smith's less well-known *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1984[1790]) for new guidance. Recent major biographies of Hume (Harris 2015) and Smith (Phillipson 2010) have done much to redress the imbalances of earlier biographical accounts, placing these two more fully in the current of ideas about the role of sentiment in social life, that were prominent when and where they lived.

In all of this there is a complex mixture of scholarly endeavour to create a more balanced understanding of the Scottish Enlightenment, and these key figures, and a sort of sly inversion of the established order. Hume was not the cold-hearted prophet of scientific reason, but a discoverer of how passion supplies a mainspring to human behaviour. Smith was not the austere analyst of the inevitable laws of the

market, but the warm-hearted champion of our moral sentiments. There is an element of the current intellectual 'left' mischievously appropriating what once belonged more to the 'right', and of finding new moorings for its positions. In a world where the Marxian 'new left' has lost its moorings, and the poststructuralist left has abjured foundations altogether, Smith and Hume provide a safe haven, and a newly respectable lineage of ideas (cf. Fleischacker 2016, Otteson 2016, Rothschild 2001, Smith 2013). Of course, the actual intellectual world of the Enlightenment Scots was complex and not easily captured in terms of such oppositions. Hume consciously sought to cultivate a style of analysis and writing that stood aloof from the dominant political positions of his day (Harris 2015: 19-20, passim). Smith's politics are notoriously difficult to pin down (Winch 1978), but he appears to have been more concerned to widen the intellectual horizons of the new generation of elites in his day, than he was to advance any specific political agenda (Phillipson 2010).

The very possibility of such a broad scope of concerns, linking morality and the scientific study of humankind, arose out of the most basic premises of the period. I will sketch these out before looking more closely at 'sympathy'. Inspired by the approach of Newton (Kemp Smith 2005[1941]: 53-62) and the programme of Francis Bacon especially (Berry 1997: 52-3), they sought to develop an empirical and scientific understanding of human nature and behaviour. But it is worth remembering that their understanding of 'experience' and 'experimental method' was broad, and could include reflection on one's own processes of thought and feeling, as well as the casual observations of these in others (Harris 2015: 84-86).

The idea of empiricism had not been reduced to systematically replicable experiment on the model of the physical sciences at this point.

This led to a kind of 'naturalism' (re Hume see Mounce 1999, Stroud 1977) that was twofold. First, its primary strategy of explanation was to place all aspects of human social life in an encompassing natural context. Telling comparisons of humans to animals in both Hume and Smith are one sign of this. For instance, Hume notes:

> Everyone has observed how much more dogs are animated when they hunt in a pack, than when they pursue their game apart; and 'tis evident this can proceed from nothing but sympathy. 'Tis well known to hunters, that this effect follows in a greater degree, and even in too great a degree, where two packs, that are strangers to each other, are join'd together. We might, perhaps, be at a loss to explain this phænomenon, if we had not experience of a similar in ourselves (Hume 1978: 398; II.ii.vii, see also Ibid.: 324-8; II.i.xii, and Smith 1981: 25-26; I.ii.2, 29-30; I.ii.5).

Second, humans were understood as having a specific nature—to understand ourselves is to understand what is natural to us as a species. Thus 'nature' is both an encompassing context, and a specifying strategy. Basic to the predominant conception of human nature, and opposed to the reduction of human motivation to self-interest found in Hobbes and Mandeville, was the idea that humans, by their nature, are inherently sociable and concerned with the feelings and evaluations of

others. Hence the central elaboration of a concept of sympathy, which I will come

on to shortly.

Finally, this 'Baconian empirical naturalism' engendered a deep concern with

questions of causation. A central tenet for both Hume and Smith, despite

differences, was that our moral reality is causally organised just as much as our

physical reality, and must be understood in causal terms. No matter how we think

people ought to behave, the causal processes that actually govern behaviour, and

that lead us to denote human behaviour in moral terms, are the nub of the question

for the Enlightenment Scots.

III. Examining sympathy

What did the Scots mean by 'sympathy'? The idea that people are naturally

compassionate and moved by the conditions of others, and that this as much if not

more than our powers of reason accounts for social and moral order, was very

widespread in the eighteenth century Euro-American world (Fiering 1976). While

arising out of common usage of the day (Hume and Smith tended to avoid

neologism), the term nonetheless became customised in Scottish discussions. It is

often glossed as 'fellow-feeling' and denotes a general susceptibility to the feelings

of others. But it was detached from its conventional associations with pity and

compassion, and broadened to include the sharing of all kinds of emotions (Smith

1984: 10; I.i.1.5, Schliesser 2016: 35). Sympathy needs to be distinguished from

'empathy', in the sense of literally participating in another's feelings. Sympathy

means an 'echoing' of the feelings of others, a similar but usually fainter replication.

The notion of sympathy, as a kind 'emotional imitation', sat within a wider discussion

of how we are generally responsive to the feelings of others, but not always

sympathetically. Thus an elaborate display of happiness upon success in some

endeavour may evoke resentment in others, not a simple sharing of the same

feeling. But this was part of the basic inquiry: under what conditions do we share in,

versus react against, the feelings of others? To go further with this it helps to look at

the differences between Hume and Smith in their use of this concept, and how it

articulated with their larger 'social theories' (to use a somewhat anachronistic term).

For Hume, sympathy is not a feeling, or 'passion' per se, but a kind of psychological

mechanism that concerns the passions. Hume's epistemology, laid out in Book I of

the *Treatise*, had made a strong distinction between 'impressions', our immediate

perceptions, whether arising from stimuli external or internal to our bodies, and

'ideas', the relatively stable abstract representations (and recombinations) of all

kinds of stimuli that our minds generate and weave together through the faculty of

imagination. To simplify a complex argument, 'sympathy' is the process by which we

convert our 'impressions' of others (a cry, a tear, a smile, a laugh) first into an 'idea'

(of pain, sorrow, mirth, joy, etc.), and then back into a new, if usually somewhat

fainter 'impression' within our own bodies. Thus in reaction to the states of others,

our pulses race, our hearts sink, we wince, we instinctively recoil, and so on. As

Hume puts it:

I pretend not to have exhausted this subject. It is sufficient for my purpose if

I have made it appear, that, in the production and conduct of the passions,

there is a certain regular mechanism, which is susceptible of as accurate a

disquisition, as the laws of motion, optics, hydrostatics, or any part of natural

philosophy (Hume's *A Dissertation on the Passions* (1757), quoted in Klever

1993: 56).

Years later when Hume tried to put the ideas of the *Treatise* in a more popular and

accessible form in the *Enquiries* (1975[1777], first published in two parts in 1748 and

1751), he largely abandoned this mechanistic 'model', making do with the more

general and uncontentious claim that we naturally reflect the feelings of those

around us in many circumstances. But the earlier version exemplified the

characteristic desire to construct a fuller causal account of moral processes.

So basically, for Hume, when we call some thing, or some act, 'good' or 'virtuous',

we are saying that the process of sympathy yields a pleasurable sensation when we

regard it, and when we denote the same 'bad' or 'wicked', we are saying sympathy

gives us an unpleasant feeling. (Thus Hume is sometimes viewed as a forerunner of

utilitarianism.) One effect of this approach is that processes of morality and

aesthetics are very similar for Hume. Both rest on a kind of subjective response to

external stimuli. He gets this view from the early influence of Shaftsbury and

Hutcheson on his thinking (Harris 2015: 35-77). However, for them it was attributed

to a faculty, a moral 'sense' that functioned rather like our other senses, perceiving

right and wrong, good and bad. For Hume on the other hand, moral and aesthetic

judgements were more a matter of social convention than direct perception. Nonetheless, they re both fundamentally sentimental rather than rational processes. Either way, this might seem like a recipe for endless dissent about moral matters, if right and wrong are just a matter of taste. But fortunately, human beings are so constituted that as a general rule, the sentiments we take pleasure in are relatively constant from person to person, and are conducive to well-being. For Hume much moral controversy concerned historically contingent surface variations in social conventions, under which lie much more constant moral attitudes (see 'A Dialogue' appended to the end of his *Enquiries*, 1975: 324-343).

Hume recognised the need to stabalise such sentiments in larger and more complex forms of society. Thus he regarded 'justice' as an 'artificial virtue', that is, a social convention that generalises the natural benevolence of the parental family to a wider arena of society. For Hume, our desire for justice is rooted in the principles of sympathy and pleasure:

> The same principle produces, in many instances, our sentiments of morals, as well as those of beauty. No virtue is more esteem'd than justice, and no vice more detested than injustice; nor are there any qualities, which go farther to the fixing of the character, either as amiable or odious. Now justice is a moral virtue, merely because it has that tendency to the moral good of mankind; and indeed, is nothing but an artificial invention to that purpose. The same may be said of allegiance, of the laws of nations, of modesty, and of good manners. All of these are human contrivances for the interest of

society. And since there is a very strong sentiment of morals, which has always attended them, we must allow, that the reflecting on the tendency of characters and mental qualities, is sufficient to give us the sentiments of approbation and blame. Now as the means to an end can only be agreeable, where the end is agreeable; and as the good of society, where our own interest is not concern'd, or that of our friends, pleases only by sympathy: It follows that sympathy is the source of the esteem, which we pay to all the artificial virtues (1978: 577; III.ɪɪɪ.i).

In short, we live in a social web of feelings, rendered generally similar and congruent by sympathy. We approve of and support institutions of justice, because they render society more conducive to the virtuous sentiments and behaviours that give us sympathetic pleasure, and of which we naturally approve. Hume's notion of justice is different from Smith's presented at the outset. Both saw justice as primarily a matter of rendering complex social relations consistent and reliable, by upholding established patterns of ownership and obligation (e.g. contracts). And both saw this as of fundamental benefit to society as a whole. However Hume tended to treat justice as an extension of the less formal sentimental government of the family, while Smith saw it as more sharply divided from the benevolence of interpersonal relations. Smith's justice is more austerely impersonal, with the accent more firmly on punishing infraction.

If sympathy for Hume was a kind of social 'mechanism' for the communication of feelings, for Smith it is captured more by the idea of 'performance'. On the first page of the *Theory of Moral Sentiment* he announces:

> How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it (1984: 9; I.i.1.1).

Smith does not bother with the psychological twists and turns of impressions and ideas turning into one another. For him it is sufficient to note that we naturally pick up on the feelings of those around us, and desire others to reciprocate. But I want to draw attention to the last few words of that first sentence. Smith could have said '…except the knowledge of it', but instead says '... the pleasure of seeing it.' This signals a certain 'dramaturgical' mode of analysis that runs through Smith's writings. For Smith, sympathy is not a matter of the 'contagion' (Kahlil 2010) of sentiments, but rather of the imagination placing our 'selves' in the circumstances of others and inferring how we would feel in those circumstances. If through these imaginings we tend to identify with the emotions being expressed by the other, we can go along with those feelings. If we think, 'I wouldn't react that way', then we are unable to sympathise. We are constantly creating little dramas (too fleeting to be really conscious) in our heads that enable us to compare our emotions with those of others. So if others are happy for reasons that have no bearing on my personal self-

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interest, I will nonetheless enjoy a measure of their happiness, simply because the display of it is agreeable.

Smith's approach here is again somewhat different from Hume's. For Smith sympathy is not just a direct response to, but also an appraisal of, the behaviour and motives of others. For Hume it is more a matter of an automatic response to the emotional signals we receive from others, less immediately judging. Hume believed that it is ultimately the social value, or 'utility', of people's behaviour that we approve or disapprove of, and this reflects back on what we think of them. We approve of the caring parent because of their good effects on their children and the wider society, not because their motives and actions meet some standard of social duty (cf. Mounce 1999: 91-92). This is somewhat different from Smith's emphasis on putting ourselves into the shoes of others, and finding it, more immediately, agreeable or disagreeable. A key indicator of where Hume's and Smith's ideas of sympathy diverge is the question of whether we can sympathise with the insane and the dead (Broadie 2006: 163, 167-8; Khalil 2010: 183). For Hume, it would not really be possible to sympathise in his sense with someone whose emotional states appear disconnected from reality, or one whose sentient being has ceased altogether. They cannot generate the original feelings with which to sympathise. For Smith however, the impulse to sympathise is so strong, that we often find ourselves imagining what it would be like to be in either of those unfortunate situations, even while this can only be considered from our external position, and involves the contradiction of imbuing the objects with feelings they cannot have. As Smith says in revised

versions of the TMS, consciously responding to criticism received from Hume on the first edition:

> Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it. We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality (1984: 12; I.i.1.10).

Now Smith and Hume recognised that this general, natural process that they both described was imperfect and could go awry. For instance deep bitterness might lead one to despise the happiness of others, and take pleasure in their misery. But the fact that generally, we find it difficult to sympathise, to go along with such bitterness, is evidence that this is a local pathology of the sentimental system, which will tend to run itself into the ground. The predominant tendency is toward sentimental congruence. In Smith especially, there is a strong sense that while not all feelings of sympathy are agreeable, the sense of agreement arrived at through sympathy is intrinsically pleasurable. He believed humans have a strong drive to reach concord and agreement (Broadie 2006: 170-174, 178).

This question of the more detached general point of view relates to the other signal difference in Smith's approach to sympathy. With Hume, as we have seen, it is tied up with the idea of justice, as a social institution, for Smith, it is linked more to conscience, or what he called, 'the impartial spectator' (Smith 1984: 82-85; II.ii.2.1-4;

Schliesser 2015: 39-42). We know that the closeness of ourselves or others to the circumstances generating emotions, especially strong and even violent ones, can distort our judgement, and exaggerate the communication of sentiments. The wisest judge of whether certain feelings and behaviours are truly appropriate, is one who can achieve some distance from the particular circumstance. Sympathy can operate, and often operates best, at some remove. We seek to set up 'impartial spectators' to deal with controversial judgements all the time, in juries, special inquiries, and so on. But Smith's point was that we all, to some degree, develop a kind of alternate self, that attempts to judge the sentiments and actions of others, and whether they are appropriate to the given context, from some distance. And part of becoming balanced, well-rounded individuals, involves being able to look at ourselves in this way. But Smith also recognised how difficult this is, and that not all will be equally able to achieve this higher standard of internalising the position of the 'impartial spectator'.

More generally, for Smith it is not just that we are caught in this web of mutual appraisal, but that we are aware that we are being watched, that we are 'on stage' as it were, and we desire to win approval, to put on a worthy performance. This can degenerate into superficiality and insincerity, and a disconnect between the outward performance and the inner motivations. This definitely happens, but it is somewhat checked by the 'impartial spectator' that we each carry within us. This is because we usually know when we are being false, and what we actually desire most is not simply to win public approval, but to feel within ourselves that we deserve that

approval. Not just to be loved, but to be genuinely lovable. Not just to be praised, but to be praiseworthy.

In their analyses of sympathy, both Hume and Smith, inspired by the work of Francis Hutcheson (1994), were concerned to oppose the thesis that all human behaviour is at root motivated by 'self-love', by self-interest and egotism. This idea had been powerfully advanced by Bernard Mandeville (1988[1732], see Horne 1978) who had tried to make sense of the rising commercial society in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by claiming, counter-intuitively, that the virtues and benefits of such an expanding and prosperous society rested on the vice of self - interest. What was narrowly good for the merchant and his (rarely her) business was good for society, and it was pointless to moralise against or oppose the characteristically self-interested orientation of this sector of society. Both Hume and Smith saw great advantages in commercial society and its capacity to generate prosperity, improve living standards, refine tastes, and promote human interdependence through an ever more complex division of labour. But they didn't see these as virtues perversely arising simply out of the vice of egoistic self-interest. For them, while it was a basic part of human nature, self-interest was balanced and complimented by natural sociability. Our capacity for sympathy makes us also fundamentally interested in the greater good of society, and in the 'happiness of others'.

IV. Limits and disorders

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Hume and Smith also saw downsides implied in the naturalistic accounts of our moral lives that they were offering. Let me address two further important issues, that can be found in both of their treatments of the wider implications of the sympathetic principle. First, propinquity matters. The closer we are to others, in terms of both physical and social distance, the more able we are to naturally sympathise with them. Hume further observed that similarity in manners, language and culture also facilitate our powers of sympathy (1978: 318). Smith has a famous passage where he notes that most of us would be much more deeply distressed by the proposal we had to lose a finger, than by the tragic news that an earthquake had just killed a multitude on the other side of the planet in China (Smith 1984: 136-7; III.3.4). We might cognitively grasp the disproportion (with some help from our internal impartial spectator), but our feelings would be another matter. However with that help, if some fantastic causal connection could be made such that we could save all those lives by sacrificing that finger, many of us would do it, though under great personal distress. In the last revisions to the sixth edition of the TMS, published in 1790, Smith added a long discussion about this issue, about how our capacity to care for others begins close to home, and fades out the further you go. This is one reason why the capacity of markets to align needs and interest in an expanding world economy was important to him. It provided another mechanism to compensate for the limited capacity of human sympathy to coordinate our actions (see Forman-Barzilai 2010, Hill 2010, Hearn 2015: 403).

Secondly, not only does sympathy come more easily among those who are socially close, and habituated to mutual concern, but because it involves an act of

identification with the other, and we are attracted to pleasurable scenarios that we can go along with, we find it much easier to sympathise with the circumstance of prosperity and good fortune, than with miserable conditions. Hume and Smith emphasised that sympathy is enabled not just by propinquity and similarity, but also by enviableness. Unfortunately, sympathy tends to promote identifying with the rich, famous and powerful, and leans away from the poor, uncelebrated, and weak. As Hume put it in a section of the *Treatise* entitled 'Of our esteem for the rich and powerful' (1978: 357-365; II.II.v), again invoking the dynamic of impressions and ideas:

> Upon the whole, there remains nothing, which can give us an esteem for power and riches, and a contempt for meanness and poverty, except the principle of *sympathy*, by which we enter into the sentiments of the rich and the poor, and partake of their pleasures and uneasiness. Riches give satisfaction to their possessor; and this satisfaction is convey'd to the beholder by the imagination, which produces an idea of the original impression in force and vivacity. This agreeable idea or impression is connected with love [i.e. admiration, attraction, JH], which is an agreeable passion. It proceeds from a thinking conscious being, which is the very object of love. From this relation of impressions, and identity of ideas, the passion arises, according to my hypothesis (1978: 362; II.II.v, emphasis in original).

Smith observed that the assumption that people in such happy circumstances are likely to be happy (and that we would be too in their situation) is often false. But he

also saw this illusion as a spur to the pursuit of prosperity, something that no matter how false, helps drive people to improve their personal, and less directly their collective, circumstances. In a chapter of TMS entitled 'Of the origin of Ambition, and of the distinction of Ranks' (1984: 50-61; I.iii.2.1-12), Smith examines this tendency he sees to sympathise more readily with the fortunate than the unfortunate. After noting that even those of quite modest means are normally supplied with all life's basic necessities, he asks:

> From whence, then, arises that emulation which runs through all the different ranks of men, and what are the advantages we propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition? To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it. It is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us. But vanity is always founded upon the belief of our being the object of attention and approbation (1984: 50; I.iii.2.1).

Here again, and throughout this chapter, the language is dramaturgical, society a constant stage on which everyone is both actor and audience at once.   Smith sees the absurdities. A page or so on he invokes his version of the proverbial observer from Mars, remarking sardonically:

> A stranger to human nature, who saw the indifference of men about the misery of their inferiors, and the regret and indignation which they feel for

the misfortunes and sufferings of those above them, would be apt to

imagine, that pain must be more agonizing, and the convulsions of death

more terrible to persons of higher rank, than to those of meaner stations

(Ibid.: 52; I.iii.2.2).

Towards the end of this chapter Smith concludes that only those few who are either

sufficiently wise to see through the social charade, or sufficiently degraded to have

become indifferent to it, are able to stand outside of it (Ibid: 57; I.iii.2.8). However,

the vast bulk of humanity is driven on by the entwined forces of sympathy and

vanity.

Now it could be that Smith is too embedded here in his own particular historical and

cultural context. He lived in a society defined by traditional ranks and statuses,

aristocrats of various degrees, albeit in contention with some *nouveau riche*

merchants of modest backgrounds, vaunting ambition, and eclipsing wealth.

Perhaps in our own more egalitarian age (in theory if not in practice) things are

different. We have more recent conventions of celebrating the 'average' person, the

'hard-working middle class'. And there are new political discourses of social and

economic levelling, although these were anticipated by more religiously framed

levelling discourses long before Smith's day. Surely we are not as enamoured of

rank as the mid-eighteenth century Scottish philosopher thinks all people must be?

But before we rest easy in this dissent from Smith's analysis, we should reflect.

Whatever some of our popular critical discourses may say, ours is a highly stratified

society, even though the legitimating principle of inheriting wealth and social status

is downplayed in relation to supposedly achieving these (Piketty 2014). And

although our popular culture includes discourses that celebrate and lift up the

unfortunate and downtrodden, it equally includes those that gaze admiringly on

wealth, success, and celebrity. Even within an egalitarian ethos, many of us orient

our behaviour towards the achievement of higher status within our own sphere of

life and the enhancement of our powers of consumption, looking 'upward' to find a

preferred image of ourselves. It may be that the routine public conventions of rank

in Smith's day enabled him to see more easily an enduring side of human nature that

is now obscured to us by our own egalitarian ideology.

V. Implications for social welfare

What might all this tell us about questions of ethics and social welfare today? First it

has to be acknowledged that what we mean by welfare has changed dramatically

from then to now. We have much higher expectations about what the state can

achieve and provide, in the wake of the full development of the industrial welfare

state, no matter how beleaguered that vision may be at present (Castles 2004).

Nonetheless we should also remember that Hume and Smith were far from simple

advocates of what would come to be called *laissez faire* (Rothschild 2001). They

both regarded justice, in the sense of a working system of fair and enforceable laws,

as absolutely necessary to society, and not as something that could be substituted

for by the market. And it is well known that in the final Book V of *The Wealth of*

Nations (1981[1776]) Smith discusses the importance of a broad system of public

education to help relieve people from the sheer dehumanising drudgery of repetitive work.

To elaborate on this point, it is clear that Smith thought that all people (across classes) had the same basic human capacity to develop as moral agents, through the processes of sympathy and impartial spectatorship. As he says near the beginning of WN:

> The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education. When they came into the world, and for the first six or eight years of their existence, they were, perhaps, very much alike, and neither their parents nor play-fellows could perceive any remarkable difference. About that age, or soon after, they come to be employed in very different occupations. The difference of talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance (1981: 28-9; I.ii.4).

However, as this suggests, it is also evident that he recognised that this human potential could be stunted by circumstances, by what we would call social structural conditions (1981: 781-2). This raises thorny questions about what a few decades ago was known as the thesis of 'the culture of poverty' (Lewis 1966, for an early critique see Stack 1974). In its most objectionable form, it tended to reduce the

causes of poverty to personal or communal failings in the cultivation of proper values. But in more nuanced forms (see Small, Harding and Lamont 2010), to which I am suggesting Smith might be construed as a precursor, it poses the question of the need to address the structural conditions that tend to induce cultural patterns of adaptation to impoverishment and limited possibilities. This is not a matter of 'blaming the victims', as if people could be expected to step outside their cultural contexts, but a matter of acknowledging that the real constraints that people live under take both structural and cultural forms. One might also note here that Smith didn't seem to think that wealth, privilege and power were necessarily conducive to moral development either. He was often quite disparaging of the upper classes. He was instead a champion of the hard-working, moderate Presbyterian of the middling ranks (1981: 810; V.i.g.38).

The issue of social distance raised above (I leave physical distance aside for the moment) also presents itself. Presumably public support for social welfare programmes concerns not just the efficiency with which they deliver services, but also the capacity of those who support such services through their taxes to identify with the recipients of those services. Now of course, a large proportion of what we pay into social programmes comes back to most of us sooner or later. But there is the issue of the perception. Some sectors of society are regarded by others as heavy users of some forms of social welfare (e.g. unemployment benefits), as 'alien', whether as 'chavs' or 'foreign welfare tourists'. Beyond the problem of sheer misrepresentation of reality, there is a deeper issue of the more everyday capacity to

identify with others, when there are profound differences in education, life experience, class 'taste', and so on.   There are two distinct issues here.

First, the actual social distance as shaped by life circumstances and opportunities. The differences in daily experience of reality for people in very different situations in a system of social stratification can be a profound obstacle to mutual understanding. Between the privileged and fortunate, and the underprivileged and unfortunate, profoundly different horizons of realistic possibility, and time frames within which practical action must be carried out, make for serious obstacles for the imaginative placing of oneself in the other's position.   And poor mutual understanding may perversely be exacerbated by a broad egalitarian ethos, that endows all equally with self-worth and self-determining agency, obscuring the realities of inequality and its material constraints.

Secondly, such social distance, the basic gap in how people experience and perceive their lives, also becomes distorted and exaggerated through symbolic representations, particularly in the news media and in figurative dramatic portrayals in popular culture. Our capacity to sympathise gets steered by these processes of representation. Obviously the tendency to glorify the 'rich and famous' and denigrate and belittle (or simply ignore) the poor and unknown in popular representations have this effect. But if Smith is right, even attempts to represent those more in need of social welfare (in the specific sense of exceptional support), in a more positive light, with 'sympathy', will be pushing against a strong underlying current in human nature. The pity and compassion that can be elicited for the poor

and unfortunate through some portrayals is a weak force compared with the attractions of 'greatness'. This Smithian analysis can be read in two ways: fatalistically ('you have the poor with you always'), or stringently—if one wants to see change, one must not rely on sympathy itself, but alter the structural conditions that frame our sympathetic perceptions and actions.

VI. Conclusion

In light of the opening discussion, it is tempting to view the shift from 'rationalist' to 'sentimental' interpretations of the Scottish Enlightenment as somehow paralleling the general trajectory of the welfare state and the social sciences from the mid-twentieth century to the present. From a period of expansion and confidence in our capacity to improve society through rationally designed policy, often crudely characterised as programmes of 'social engineering', we have arrived at the rather entrenched attitude in public discourse that people are by nature intractable to such social programming. They are constituted as autonomous moral agents, but perhaps frequently defective ones at that, making centralised programmes of improvement seem pointless. I do not support this view. But the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment that I have been exploring here suggest that any programme of social welfare will ultimately have to grapple not just with the rational design of society, but with our emotional natures, including dynamics of vanity, envy, pride, resentment and emulation. It is not just malfunctions of economic and political systems that underlie chronic maldistributions of social power and opportunity. From the perspectives of Hume and Smith, these problems lie also in our 'hearts', in

the ways basic processes of sentiment and affinity, of sympathy, construct social distance and mutual evaluation, affecting our understandings of inclusion and entitlement. As I have just suggested, this not to say that we can alter the human heart *en masse*, but we can perhaps take a cue from Hume and Smith, and factor its operations into our attempts to understand why generosity towards the less fortunate is so difficult to cultivate, despite the relative affluence of wider society.

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