

SMITH AT 300: READING AND REREADING “THE CORRUPTION OF MORAL SENTIMENTS”

BY
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“This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.”

TMS Liii.3.1 (Smith 1982)

This is one of my favorite passages from the works of Adam Smith. It is striking, surprising, provocative, and puzzling at the same time. It also raises more questions than it answers; for me, that is what makes this passage so interesting and worth reading.

One reason I love these opening lines of Smith’s chapter on the “corruption of our moral sentiments” so much is because they catch new readers off guard. Especially for people who have never read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS)*—or people who might not even know that Adam Smith wrote a book called *The Theory of Moral Sentiments!*—seeing this passage can be disarming. When I teach Smith to undergraduates, for example, one of the most common reactions to this chapter of *TMS* is, “This is such a different side of Adam Smith that I didn’t expect. How could *Smith* have written *this!*!” And I think these reactions are indicative of just how wide the gulf still is between Smith’s popular reputation as the father of free-market economics and his much more complex and multifaceted personality.

Another reason why this passage is so fascinating has to do with *when* Smith wrote it. Smith added this entire chapter to the sixth and final edition of *TMS*, published in 1790. That Smith returned to *TMS* not just once but *five* more times during his lifetime and, critically, after the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 has been the source of many questions for scholars throughout the ages: Why did Smith choose to add this discussion suddenly? What is the meaning of this very charged language of “corruption”? Did Smith change his mind about the nature, causes, and consequences of wealth in a modern society? Why does he seem so critical about our admiration of

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wealth and greatness, and so pessimistic about our capacity for wisdom and virtue? “They are the wise and the virtuous chiefly, a select, though I am afraid, but a small party, who are the real and steady admirers of wisdom and virtue,” Smith writes, while “the great mob of mankind are the admirers and worshippers ... of wealth and greatness” (*TMS* I.iii.3.2).

These passages have attracted quite a bit of attention among contemporary scholars and stirred debate around Smith’s concerns about inequality. Dennis Rasmussen has argued that the corruption of our morals is the core problem with inequality in modern commercial societies; it is not simply that wealth and poverty exist but the inequality and “distortion” of our sympathies that they give rise to that makes inequality so concerning for Smith (Rasmussen 2009, Rasmussen 2016). Similarly, Ryan Hanley and Elizabeth Anderson have argued that such passages—as well as many others scattered throughout Smith’s works—evoke a Rousseauvian critique of the love of recognition as both the “animating passion” and the source of corruption in commercial societies (; Hanley 2009; Anderson 2016). Such readings have been the inspiration for a new wave of interest in Smith as both a champion *and* critic of “commercial society” and, at some remove, modern capitalism. These thought-provoking interpretations have enabled many readers to consider Smith as more relevant than ever.

On my reading, Smith here is not so much lamenting the moral consequences of commercial society (and still less capitalism) and inequality so much as he is providing a provocative illustration of a universal feature of the human psyche. As Paul Sagar has recently emphasized, this disposition to admire the rich and neglect the poor is not just the greatest but the *most universal* cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments and the complaint of moralists *in all ages* (Sagar 2022, p. 158). We desire the recognition of others, and we especially desire and enjoy the *idea* of all the admiration and respect of others. “To deserve, to acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind, are the great objects of ambition and emulation” (*TMS* I.iii.3.2), Smith writes. But there are two roads by which we can obtain the object of our desires: one, “by the study of wisdom and the practice of virtue,” and the other, “by the acquisition of wealth and greatness.” The latter is more “gaudy and glittering in its colouring”; the other, much harder to attain. But Smith does *not* say that one is strictly better than the other, and neither does he make an explicit character recommendation. Rather, he says something peculiar. Even though the respect we feel for the wealthy and great is of a different nature from the respect we feel for the wise and virtuous, those sentiments “bear a very considerable resemblance to one another,” so much so in fact that most “inattentive observers” are “very apt to mistake the one for the other” (*TMS* I.iii.3.3). Try as we might to separate our respect for wealth, on the one hand, from virtue, on the other, we often conflate the two. This, to me, is not so much a *moral* problem confined to the context of modern commercial societies as it is a more general epistemic problem: How do we know whether the sentiments of respect and admiration that we feel are because of someone’s wealth, or true wisdom and virtue?

Setting aside my own reading, though, this chapter of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* has much to offer for both new and experienced readers of Smith. It beckons us to make sense of the relationship between *TMS* and the *Wealth of Nations* and the arc of Smith’s intellectual trajectory. It also asks us to critically reflect on the ideals and values that Smith himself might have held, and the ideals and values we project on to him.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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