

PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy
Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology

Spring 2013

Professor JeeLoo Liu

[Handout #16]

Adam Smith, selections from *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*

Section 3. The different systems that have been formed concerning the source of approval

Approval – *the power or faculty of the mind that*

- (i) makes certain characters agreeable or disagreeable to us,
- (ii) makes us prefer one tenor of conduct to another, calling one ‘right’ and the other ‘wrong’, and consider one as an object of approval, honor, and reward and the other as an object of blame, censure, and punishment.

§ What is the Source of Approval?

Three accounts:

- (1) **Self-love:** we approve and disapprove of actions – our own and other people’s – purely from what we think about their tendency to lead to our own happiness or disadvantage.
- (2) **Reason:** the faculty by which we distinguish truth from falsehood enables us to distinguish what is fit from what is unfit, both in actions and affections.
- (3) **Sentiment:** we approve and disapprove of actions from immediate sentiment and feeling, arising from the satisfaction or disgust that certain actions or affections produce in us.

§ Systems that trace the source of approval back to self-love – Hobbes, etc.

- 1. According to this theory, society becomes *necessary* for a man, and anything that favors the support and welfare of society he regards as having an indirect tendency to promote his own interests; and anything that is likely to disturb or destroy society he regards as to some extent harmful or pernicious to himself.
- 2. Virtue is the great support of society, and vice its great disturber.
- 3. This is why virtue is agreeable to every man and vice is offensive to him; he sees virtue as pointing to the prosperity of the society that is so necessary for the comfort and security of his existence, and vice as pointing to its ruin and disorder.

*** Smith’s Critique:**

1. We praise or condemn the virtue of historical figures, but our sentiments are not influenced by any thought about getting benefit or being harmed by these people.
2. Rather, these moral sentiments of ours are influenced by the thought of the help or harm *we might have received if we had lived at that time in that place*, or by the thought of *help or harm that might still come our way if we encounter characters of the same kinds*.
3. So really the idea that those authors were groping for, but were never able to get hold of firmly, was the idea of the indirect *sympathy* that we feel with the gratitude or resentment of those who received the benefit or suffered the damage resulting from such opposite characters.
4. There is nothing selfish about sympathy, since we are imaging others' plight or joy.
5. Therefore, the whole account of human nature, which derives all sentiments and affections from self-love, seems to have arisen from some confused failure to grasp what sympathy is.

§ Smith on Sympathy

* **Note:** What Smith means by “sympathy” here is really *empathy* in contemporary usage.

Although it's true that sympathy arises from an imaginary change of situations with the person principally concerned, **this imaginary change is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but to me in the character of the person with whom I sympathize.**

When I sympathize with you over the death of your only son, in order to enter into your grief I don't think about what I, a person of such-and-such a character and profession, would suffer if I had an only son who died.

What I think about is rather what I would suffer if I were really you. In this thought I don't just switch your circumstances with mine; I change persons and characters.

So my grief is not in the least selfish: it is entirely on your account, and not in the least on my own. . . .

§ Systems that make reason the source of approval

1. In order to refute Hobbes' self-preservation doctrine, it was necessary to prove that in advance of any law or man-made institutions the human mind was naturally endowed with a faculty by which it distinguished in certain actions and

- affections the qualities of right, praiseworthy, and virtuous, and in others those of wrong, blameworthy and vicious.
2. This faculty is human reason, which distinguishes right from wrong in the same way that it distinguishes truth from falsehood.
 3. Therefore, right and wrong is based on human reason, not on any humanly established laws or conventions.
 4. Therefore, reason is the original source and driver of approval and disapproval.

Cudworth's Argument:

Suppose that there is a law: then either

- (1) it is right to obey it and wrong to disobey it, or
- (2) it makes no moral difference whether we obey it or disobey it.

If (2) is correct, then there's a law that obviously couldn't be the source of the distinction between right and wrong;

and if (1) is right, then this presupposes that there is a standard for right and wrong independently of this law, a standard in terms of which we can say that obedience to the law squares with the idea of right, and disobedience squares with the idea of wrong.

Therefore, right and wrong are not determined solely by law.

*** Smith's Critique:**

1. It is altogether absurd and unintelligible to suppose that our first or most basic perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason, as these first impressions must be matters of immediate sense and feeling.
2. Reason can help us generalize from particular instances, but reason can't make any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake.
3. Reason can show that this object is a means to getting something else that is naturally either pleasing or displeasing, and in this way reason can make it either agreeable or disagreeable for the sake of something else.
4. But nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake unless it is made to be so by immediate sense and feeling.
5. So, if virtue in each particular case necessarily pleases for its own sake, and if vice equally certainly displeases the mind, then what reconciles us to virtue and alienates us from vice can't be reason; it has to be immediate sense and feeling.

§ Systems that make sentiment the source of approval

Two kinds of theories:

[A] Moral Sense theory – Hutcheson

___ Our approvals express a sentiment of a special kind; we have a particular power of perception that the mind employs when it encounters certain actions or affections. Some of them have an agreeable effect on this faculty, and they are given the labels ‘right’, ‘praiseworthy’, and ‘virtuous’. Others have a disagreeable effect on the faculty, and are labeled ‘wrong’, ‘blameworthy’, and ‘vicious’.

___ Hutcheson called this ‘supposed’ new power of perception a moral sense, and thought it to be somewhat analogous to the external senses. Just as the bodies around us, by affecting our external senses in a certain way, appear to possess the different qualities of sound, taste, odor, colour; so the various affections of the human mind, by touching the moral sense in a certain manner, appear to possess the different qualities of likeable and odious, of virtuous and vicious, of right and wrong.

*** Smith’s Critique:**

1. Positing an extra faculty violates the principle of economy.
2. Furthermore, our disapprovals on various occasions are accompanied by different emotions (anger, contempt, etc.), and so are our approvals.
3. We also find it natural to approve or disapprove of people’s approvals and disapprovals. How can it be the same moral sense that is responsible for the second-order approval/disapproval?
4. Finally, *any* account of approval that makes it depend on a special sentiment distinct from every other is open to the following objection: why isn’t there a special name for this faculty if we truly have it?

[B] Smith’s proposal: Sympathy

1. We can account for the business of *approving* without having to suppose any new power of perception that has never been heard of before. All the effects ascribed to this peculiar faculty of ‘moral sense’ can be explained in terms of *sympathy*, a power that we obviously *do* have and that has always been known and noticed.
2. When you approve or disapprove of someone’s conduct, *your frame of mind coincides with mine*; and so I approve of your approval or disapproval and consider it as to some extent morally good. And when your approval or disapproval creates a mis-match between your frame of mind and my own, I disapprove of it and consider it as to some extent morally evil.
3. It must be granted that at least in this one kind of case, where A (dis)approves of B’s (dis)approval of C, what constitutes A’s moral (dis)approval is the coincidence or opposition between A’s sentiments and B’s.
4. Sympathy is the faculty by which we approve or disapprove someone else’s judgments or actions.