

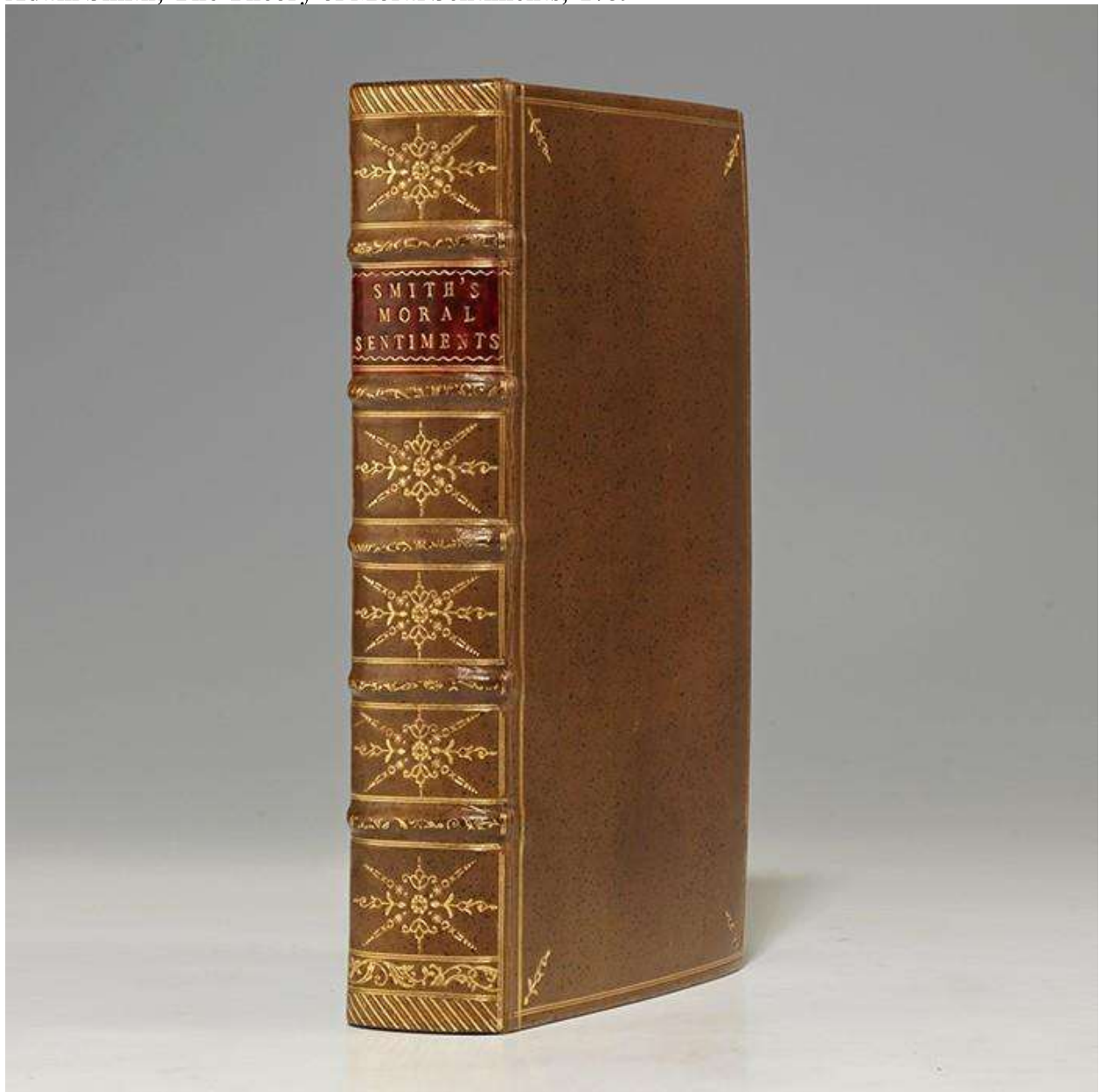
"The Theory of Moral Sentiments" (1759) by Adam Smith: A Canonical Book

Curated by Stephen A Batman

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, 1759



T H E
T H E O R Y
O F
M O R A L S E N T I M E N T S .

By ADAM SMITH,
PROFESSOR of MORAL PHILOSOPHY in the
University of GLASGOW.



L O N D O N :
Printed for A. MILLAR, in the STRAND ;
And A. KINCAID and J. BELL, in EDINBURGH.
M D C C L I X .

MUTUAL SYMPATHY. Part
t, is a situation in which in-
much more apt to fail. On
the contempt of mankind,
are easily supported.

PART II.

Of MERIT and DEMERIT; or, of
the Objects of REWARD and Pu-
NISHMENT.

SECTION I.

Of the sense of merit and demerit.

INTRODUCTION.

PART
THERE is another set of qualities
ascribed to the actions and con-
duct of mankind, distinct from
their propriety or impropriety, their de-
cency or ungracefulness, and which are
the objects of a distinct species of approba-
tion and disapprobation. These are me-
rit and demerit, the qualities of deserving
reward, and of deserving punishment.

It has already been observed, that the
sentiment or affection of the heart, from
which any action proceeds, and upon which
its whole virtue or vice depends, may be
con-

go along with the effort which
 makes to support himself in his
 . They exert their whole
 greatness of mind, to overcome
 this irregularity of human
 and endeavour to regard his
 magnanimity in the same
 had it been successful, they
 t any such generous exertions
 ly been disposed to consider

P A R T III.

Of the foundation of our judgments
 concerning our own sentiments and
 conduct, and of the sense of duty.

S E C T. I.

Of the consciousness of merited praise or
 blame.

IN the two foregoing parts of this dis-
 course, I have chiefly considered the
 origin and foundation of our judgments
 concerning the sentiments and conduct of
 others. I come now to consider the ori-
 gin of those concerning our own.

The desire of the approbation and esteem
 of those we live with, which is of so much
 importance to our happiness, cannot be
 fully and intirely contented but by render-
 ing ourselves the just and proper objects of
 those sentiments, and by adjusting our own
 character and conduct according to those
 measures and rules by which esteem and
 approbation are naturally bestowed. It is

R 3 not

P A R T VII.

Of Systems of MORAL PHILOSOPHY.

S E C T. I.

Of the questions which ought to be examined in a theory of moral sentiments.

IF we examine the most celebrated and remarkable of the different theories which have been given concerning the nature and origin of our moral sentiments, we shall find that almost all of them coincide with some part or other of that which I have been endeavouring to give an account of; and that if every thing which has already been said be fully considered, we shall be at no loss to explain what was the view or aspect of nature which led each particular author to form his particular system. From some one or other of those principles which I have been endeavouring to unfold, every system of morality that ever had any reputation in the world has, perhaps, ultimately been derived. As they are all of them, in this respect founded
upon

**A CORNERSTONE OF ANY ECONOMICS COLLECTION AND THE FIRST
APPEARANCE OF THE "INVISIBLE HAND": FIRST EDITION OF ADAM SMITH'S
RARE AND IMPORTANT FIRST WORK, *THEORY OF MORAL SENTIMENTS*, 1759**

*Exceedingly rare first edition of Smith's pioneering first book, a work he himself ranked above *Wealth of Nations* and which served as its foundation, here proposing the theory to be repeated in the later work: that self-seeking men are often "led by an invisible hand... Smith's ethics and his economics are integrated by the same principle of self-command, or self-reliance, which manifests itself in economics in laissez faire" (Spiegel), a splendid copy.*

Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, his first book, is "one of the truly outstanding books in the intellectual history of the world" (Amartya Sen). It laid the foundation on which *Wealth of Nations* would be built and proposed the theory repeated in the later work: that self-seeking men are often "led by an invisible hand... without knowing it, without intending it, to advance the interest of the society."

"The fruit of his Glasgow years... *Theory of Moral Sentiments* would be enough to assure the author a respected place among Scottish moral philosophers, and Smith himself ranked it above *Wealth of Nations*... Its central idea is the concept, closely related to conscience, of the impartial spectator who helps man to distinguish right from wrong. For the same purpose, Immanuel Kant invented the categorical imperative and Sigmund Freud the superego" (Niehans, 62).

With *Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations* Smith created "not merely a treatise on moral philosophy and a treatise on economics, but a complete moral and political philosophy, in which the two elements of history and theory were to be closely conjoined" (Palgrave III, 412-13). To Smith, when man pursues "his own private interests, the original and selfish sentiments of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he will, in the economic realm, choose those endeavors which will best serve society. Herein lies the connection between the two great works which make them the work of a single and largely consistent theorist" (Paul, "Adam Smith," 293).

In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith develops an ethics based on a "unifying principle—in this case, of sympathy—which would shed light on the harmonious and beneficial order of the moral world. As such it was of considerable interest to Smith's contemporaries who were groping for an ethics that would flow from man's impulses or sentiments rather than from his reason, from 'innate ideas,' or from theological precepts."

Both *Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations* reflect Smith's "attempt to anchor the new science of political economy in a Newtonian universe, mechanical albeit harmonious and beneficial, in which society is shown to benefit from the unintended consequences of the pursuit of individual self-interest. There is thus a considerable affinity between the structure of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and that of *Wealth of Nations*. Each work is integrated by a great unifying principle. What sympathy accomplishes in the moral world, self-interest does in the economic one. Either principle, in its respective realm, is shown to produce a harmony such as the one that characterizes Newton's order of nature... Smith's ethics is one of self-command or self-reliance, just as is his laissez faire economics" (Spiegel, *Growth of Economic Thought*, 229-231).

First edition: published in London in April 1759 with a recorded "print run of 1000 copies" (Sher, "Early Editions of Adam's Smith's Books," 13). With half title. Kress 5815. Goldsmith 9537. ESTC T141578. Light occasional marginalia, most in pencil.

SMITH, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. London: Printed for A. Millar, in the Strand; And A. Kincaid and J. Bell, in Edinburgh, 1759. Octavo, period-style full speckled calf gilt, marbled endpapers, elaborately gilt-decorated spine, raised bands, red spine label.

Interior fresh with expert gutter-edge reinforcement to half title, archival paper repairs to two leaves minimally affecting text. A handsome near-fine copy.

Introduction

"The Theory of Moral Sentiments" (TMS), published in 1759, represents Adam Smith's first major work and laid the philosophical foundation for his later economic theories. This seminal text emerged during the Scottish Enlightenment, a period of extraordinary intellectual ferment that emphasized empirical observation, rational inquiry, and human progress. Smith wrote TMS while serving as a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, where he had been appointed in 1751. His motivation stemmed from a desire to understand the psychological and social foundations of human morality, challenging the prevailing notions that moral behavior derived primarily from reason or self-interest alone¹².

The cultural and intellectual climate surrounding the book's publication was marked by vibrant debate about human nature and the foundations of morality. Smith's contemporaries, including his friend David Hume, were exploring similar questions about the origins of moral judgment. Smith's approach, however, was distinctive in its emphasis on sympathy (closer to modern empathy) as the cornerstone of moral development⁹. The economic context of mid-18th century Scotland was one of emerging commercial society, with growing trade networks and changing social relations, which influenced Smith's observations about human interactions in increasingly complex social environments³.

Politically, Smith wrote during a period when Britain was consolidating its position as a global power, with the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) occurring during the composition of TMS. This broader political context informed Smith's interest in how societies maintain order and harmony despite competing individual interests. The book's publication marked Smith's emergence as a significant intellectual figure, bringing him wide esteem and establishing his reputation well before his more famous economic treatise, "The Wealth of Nations," would appear seventeen years later³¹.

The Author

Adam Smith (1723-1790) was a Scottish philosopher and economist who became one of the most influential thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Born in Kirkcaldy, Scotland, Smith was educated at the University of Glasgow where he studied under Francis Hutcheson, a prominent

moral philosopher. He later attended Oxford University, though he found the intellectual environment there less stimulating than in Scotland³.

In 1751, Smith was appointed professor of logic at the University of Glasgow, and shortly thereafter, he became professor of moral philosophy. It was during this period that he developed and refined the ideas that would become "The Theory of Moral Sentiments." His academic career at Glasgow was highly successful, and he was well-regarded as both a teacher and a scholar³.

Following the publication of TMS in 1759, Smith's reputation grew considerably. The book's success attracted the attention of Charles Townshend, who offered Smith the lucrative position of tutor to his stepson, the young Duke of Buccleuch. Smith accepted this offer in 1763, resigning his professorship at Glasgow. This arrangement provided Smith with financial security and the opportunity to travel throughout Europe, where he met leading intellectuals of the time, including Voltaire and the French physiocrats led by François Quesnay³.

During his travels and subsequent retirement to his hometown of Kirkcaldy, Smith worked on "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations," published in 1776. While this later work brought him enduring fame as the father of modern economics, Smith himself considered TMS his most important contribution and continued to revise it throughout his life, publishing six editions with the final version appearing shortly before his death in 1790⁶¹.

Smith never married and lived with his mother for much of his adult life. He was known for his absent-mindedness and somewhat eccentric habits, but also for his warmth in friendship and conversation. Throughout his life, he maintained a deep commitment to understanding human nature and social interactions, creating a comprehensive moral and political philosophy that integrated both historical observation and theoretical insight²¹².

Why this is a Canonical Book

"The Theory of Moral Sentiments" merits inclusion in the canon of essential works that reflect America's political, economic, and cultural foundations for several compelling reasons. First, Smith's moral philosophy provides the ethical underpinning for the market economy that would later be more fully articulated in "The Wealth of Nations." His concept that self-interest, properly understood within a framework of sympathy and social approval, can lead to socially beneficial outcomes became a cornerstone of American economic thinking⁵⁷.

Smith's notion of the "invisible hand" first appears in TMS, suggesting that individuals pursuing their own ends often promote social welfare unintentionally. This idea profoundly influenced American economic thought and policy, supporting the development of market-based approaches that balance individual liberty with social cohesion⁸. The American economic system, with its emphasis on entrepreneurship within a framework of rules and norms, reflects Smith's insight that moral sentiments create boundaries for self-interest⁵.

Furthermore, Smith's emphasis on the importance of impartiality in moral and political judgment resonates deeply with American constitutional principles. His concept of the "impartial spectator"—an internalized third-party perspective that helps individuals judge their own

conduct objectively—parallels the American legal tradition's emphasis on impartial justice and the rule of law rather than arbitrary authority⁴⁹. The American judicial system, with its emphasis on impartial judgment and procedural fairness, embodies Smith's moral insights.

Smith's moral philosophy also supports the American value of limited government. By demonstrating how moral order can emerge spontaneously through human interaction rather than top-down direction, Smith provided intellectual justification for the American preference for civil society solutions over government intervention⁵. His work suggests that government should focus on essential tasks like administering justice while allowing the moral order created by sympathy to guide most social interactions—a perspective that aligns with America's constitutional design of enumerated powers.

Additionally, Smith's approach to moral development through social interaction rather than abstract reasoning reflects America's pragmatic cultural orientation. His emphasis on learning morality through experience rather than pure theory mirrors the American preference for practical wisdom over abstract ideology⁹. This aspect of Smith's thought has influenced American educational philosophy and approaches to character development.

While some aspects of Smith's thought have been challenged by those advocating more collectivist approaches to social organization, his balanced view of human nature—recognizing both self-interest and social bonds—has provided a middle path that has helped America navigate between extreme individualism and collectivism. His work remains canonical precisely because it offers a nuanced framework for understanding the moral foundations of a free society that values both individual liberty and social cohesion¹⁰².

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "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."

This opening line from TMS establishes Smith's fundamental insight that human beings naturally care about others' well-being, not merely as a means to self-interest but as an end in itself¹¹. In our current age of hyper-individualism and social fragmentation, this quote reminds us that empathy is not merely a cultural construct but a natural human capacity. For business leaders, it suggests that creating value for stakeholders is not opposed to self-interest but aligned with our deeper nature. For policymakers, it indicates that appeals to pure self-interest will be less effective than those that also engage our social nature. This perspective offers a corrective to both extreme individualism and collectivism by recognizing our dual nature as both self-regarding and other-regarding beings⁵.

2. "The wise and virtuous man is at all times willing that his own private interest should be sacrificed to the public interest of his own particular order or society."

This quote captures Smith's understanding that virtue involves the capacity to subordinate immediate self-interest to broader social goods⁶. In contemporary America, where debates about

corporate social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and civic duty often center on the tension between individual rights and collective responsibilities, Smith's insight remains profoundly relevant. It suggests that true wisdom includes recognizing when personal sacrifice serves greater goods. For business leaders, it provides a framework for ethical decision-making that goes beyond short-term profit maximization. For citizens, it offers a vision of civic virtue that balances rights with responsibilities. This perspective helps address the growing concern that excessive individualism undermines social cohesion and collective action on pressing problems.

3. "Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love."

This profound psychological insight reveals Smith's understanding that we desire not merely approval but deservedness of approval¹¹. In today's social media environment, where the pursuit of likes and followers can become divorced from genuine merit, Smith's distinction between being loved and being "lovely" (worthy of love) offers a crucial corrective. It suggests that authentic self-esteem comes not from external validation alone but from knowing we deserve the esteem we receive. For educators, this provides a framework for character development that emphasizes internal standards rather than mere conformity. For individuals navigating digital culture, it offers a standard for distinguishing between superficial popularity and genuine worth. This perspective helps address contemporary concerns about narcissism and the erosion of substantive achievement in favor of image management.

4. "Justice, though due to God, is due to men also; it is their food, their nourishment, their life and existence."

Smith's emphasis on justice as fundamental to human flourishing speaks directly to contemporary concerns about social justice and institutional fairness⁶. In a time of growing inequality and debates about systemic injustice, Smith reminds us that justice is not merely a legal nicety but essential to human well-being. For policymakers, this suggests that ensuring fair institutions and equal treatment under law is not optional but fundamental to social health. For business leaders, it indicates that fair treatment of employees, customers, and communities is not merely good public relations but essential to legitimate enterprise. This perspective helps bridge ideological divides by grounding justice in human nature rather than particular political theories.

5. "The great source of both the misery and disorders of human life, seems to arise from over-rating the difference between one permanent situation and another."

This insight about the human tendency to exaggerate differences in circumstances remains remarkably relevant to our status-conscious society¹¹. In an era of conspicuous consumption and social comparison facilitated by social media, Smith's observation helps explain why increasing affluence has not necessarily increased happiness. For individuals, it suggests that contentment depends less on objective circumstances than on managing expectations and comparisons. For policymakers, it indicates that addressing relative deprivation and status anxiety may be as important as absolute economic growth. This perspective helps explain contemporary phenomena like "deaths of despair" among those who feel left behind despite historical standards

of material comfort, and offers wisdom for addressing the psychological dimensions of inequality.

Five Major Ideas

1. Sympathy as the Foundation of Morality

Smith's most fundamental insight is that morality arises from our natural capacity for sympathy—our ability to imagine ourselves in others' situations and share their feelings. Unlike moral systems based primarily on reason or divine command, Smith grounds ethics in human psychology and social interaction. He argues that we naturally desire the approval of others and learn to judge our own conduct by imagining how an impartial observer would view it [12](#). This process of mutual sympathy creates shared moral standards without requiring top-down authority. In Smith's view, moral development is inherently social, occurring as we interact with others and internalize their perspectives. This explains both why moral standards show remarkable consistency across cultures in some areas while varying in others. Smith's approach anticipates modern psychological research on empathy and moral development, making it remarkably prescient [10](#).

2. The Impartial Spectator

Central to Smith's moral theory is the concept of the "impartial spectator"—an internalized third-party perspective that allows us to judge our own conduct objectively. As we interact with others, we learn to see ourselves as others see us, gradually developing an internal moral compass that represents not merely social convention but a genuinely impartial viewpoint [49](#). This impartial spectator becomes our conscience, guiding our actions even when no actual observers are present. Smith's concept explains how individuals can develop moral autonomy while remaining connected to social standards. It provides a middle path between moral relativism and abstract universalism by grounding moral judgment in a perspective that transcends individual bias while remaining rooted in human experience. The impartial spectator concept has influenced fields ranging from psychology to jurisprudence, offering a framework for understanding how objective moral judgment is possible without appeal to supernatural authority.

3. The Harmony of Self-Interest and Social Good

Smith challenges the view that self-interest necessarily conflicts with social welfare. In TMS, he introduces the idea (later developed in "The Wealth of Nations") that individuals pursuing their own ends often promote social welfare unintentionally, as if guided by an "invisible hand" [812](#). However, Smith's understanding of self-interest is more nuanced than often portrayed. He recognizes that humans naturally desire not only material gain but also the approval of others and the consciousness of being worthy of approval. This desire for mutual sympathy moderates pure self-seeking and aligns individual interests with social norms. Smith's insight helps explain how market economies can produce social benefits despite being driven by individual choices rather than centralized planning. It also explains why purely self-interested behavior that violates social

norms tends to be self-defeating in the long run, as it undermines the trust and cooperation on which markets depend.

4. The Moral Virtues

Smith identifies several key virtues that emerge from the operation of sympathy and the impartial spectator. These include prudence (proper care for oneself), justice (refraining from harming others), beneficence (actively promoting others' welfare), and self-command (controlling one's passions)⁴⁸. Smith's account of these virtues is distinctive in being both descriptive and normative—he explains both how these virtues naturally develop through social interaction and why they are essential to human flourishing. His approach avoids both the relativism that sees virtues as merely conventional and the absolutism that divorces virtues from human psychology. Smith's virtue ethics offers a framework for character development that recognizes both universal human tendencies and cultural variation. His emphasis on self-command—the ability to moderate one's passions in light of the impartial spectator's judgment—is particularly relevant in our age of immediate gratification and emotional reactivity.

5. The Limits of Moral Sentiment

While Smith grounds morality in sympathy, he also recognizes its limitations. He acknowledges that factors like geographical distance, cultural difference, and social bias can distort our moral judgments²⁴. We naturally sympathize more readily with those close to us or similar to us, potentially biasing our moral judgments. Smith also worries that established custom, political faction, and religious fanaticism can "pervert" our moral feelings². These insights about the potential distortion of moral sentiment remain highly relevant to contemporary concerns about tribalism, polarization, and moral blind spots. Smith does not fully resolve the tension between the psychological foundations of morality and the need for impartial standards that transcend particular perspectives. This tension in his work has sparked ongoing debates about how to correct for biases in moral sentiment while remaining grounded in human psychology rather than abstract principles divorced from experience.

Three Major Controversies

1. The Adam Smith Problem

One of the most enduring controversies surrounding Smith's work has been the perceived contradiction between the sympathy-based ethics of TMS and the self-interest-driven economics of "The Wealth of Nations." Critics have questioned how the same thinker could emphasize altruistic sympathy in one work and self-interested market behavior in another⁹. This "Adam Smith Problem," as German scholars termed it, has generated extensive debate about the consistency of Smith's thought. Some critics have argued that Smith abandoned his earlier moral concerns when developing his economic theory, while others suggest he recognized different motivations operating in different spheres of life.

Modern scholarship has largely resolved this controversy by demonstrating the fundamental consistency between Smith's works. Both books recognize that humans are simultaneously self-

regarding and other-regarding, with different aspects of this complex nature becoming more salient in different contexts⁵. TMS provides the moral framework within which self-interest operates in "The Wealth of Nations," showing how sympathy and the desire for approval create boundaries for acceptable market behavior. This controversy reflects broader tensions in liberal thought about the relationship between economic freedom and moral restraint—tensions that continue to animate American political discourse about the proper balance between market forces and moral considerations.

2. The Limits of Sympathy as a Basis for Justice

A second major controversy concerns whether Smith's sympathy-based ethics can adequately ground principles of justice, particularly regarding marginalized groups. Critics have noted that if moral judgment depends on sympathy, and sympathy is influenced by social proximity and similarity, then moral judgment may systematically favor dominant groups². Smith himself worried that "established custom" could distort moral judgment and that nature might lead people to "admire the rich and despise the poor." However, he did not fully develop a corrective for these biases.

This controversy has particular relevance for American debates about systemic injustice. If our moral sentiments are shaped by our social position, how can we develop truly impartial standards of justice? Some critics argue that Smith's reliance on sympathy makes his moral theory too dependent on existing social relations, potentially reinforcing rather than challenging unjust arrangements. Others contend that Smith's concept of the impartial spectator provides resources for critiquing biased sympathy by encouraging us to adopt increasingly impartial perspectives. This debate connects to broader questions about whether liberal individualism can adequately address structural injustice—a tension that continues to animate American political discourse about race, gender, and class.

3. The Role of Reason in Moral Judgment

A third controversy concerns Smith's emphasis on sentiment rather than reason as the foundation of morality. By grounding moral judgment in sympathy rather than rational principles, Smith challenged rationalist approaches to ethics that were influential in his time and remain so today². Critics have questioned whether sentiment alone can provide a stable and coherent basis for morality, suggesting that rational principles are necessary to correct biased or inconsistent sentiments.

This controversy connects to enduring tensions in American moral and political thought between emotion-based and reason-based approaches to ethics. Those emphasizing reason argue that principles like justice require rational justification independent of sentiment, while those emphasizing sentiment contend that abstract principles divorced from human feeling become empty formalism. Smith's position offers a middle path by suggesting that moral sentiments naturally develop toward greater impartiality through social interaction and reflection, but some critics remain unconvinced that this process can yield truly universal moral standards without more explicit rational principles. This debate continues to shape American approaches to moral

education, jurisprudence, and political theory, with different traditions emphasizing either principled reasoning or cultivated sentiment as the primary basis for moral judgment.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" because it offers profound insights into the moral foundations of a free society that balances individual liberty with social cohesion. In an era of increasing polarization and fragmentation, Smith's nuanced understanding of human nature—recognizing both our self-interest and our natural capacity for sympathy—provides a framework for bridging ideological divides that often characterize contemporary American discourse⁵¹⁰.

Smith's work is particularly valuable for those seeking to understand the moral underpinnings of market economies. While often cited as a champion of free markets, Smith's complete thought reveals that functioning markets depend on moral sentiments that restrain pure self-interest and foster trust, fairness, and cooperation. This perspective helps citizens navigate between uncritical market fundamentalism and excessive state control, recognizing that markets work best within a framework of shared moral norms⁷¹².

For those concerned with civic education and character development, Smith offers insights into how moral judgment develops through social interaction rather than abstract reasoning alone. His approach suggests that character formation requires not merely teaching principles but creating environments where individuals learn to see themselves through others' eyes and develop their capacity for impartial judgment⁹. This has implications for how we approach education, parenting, and community building in a diverse society.

Smith's recognition of both the power and limitations of sympathy also offers wisdom for addressing contemporary challenges of diversity and inclusion. He helps us understand why moral concern naturally extends more readily to those similar to ourselves, while also providing resources for expanding our moral horizons through imagination and impartial reflection²⁴. This balanced perspective can help Americans navigate between uncritical celebration of difference and unrealistic expectations of immediate universal sympathy.

Finally, Smith's emphasis on the importance of justice and institutional fairness reminds us that functioning societies require not merely good intentions but well-designed institutions that align individual incentives with social welfare⁶. His insights about how institutions shape character and how character shapes institutions remain relevant to contemporary debates about institutional reform and civic renewal.

In sum, "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" offers civic-minded Americans a rich resource for thinking about how free individuals can form cohesive communities, how markets can serve human flourishing, and how moral judgment can develop in ways that balance particular attachments with universal principles. Its enduring relevance lies in its recognition of the complexity of human nature and social life—a complexity that simplistic ideologies often fail to capture but that citizens of a diverse republic must understand to maintain their experiment in ordered liberty.

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