

# The Correspondence of Sentiments

*by Vincent Boyer*

---

**Can morality be grounded in the sense of sympathy? According to Adam Smith, sympathy with the sentiments of others is precisely what allows for self-command, a cardinal virtue that enables us to act from a sense of duty.**

---

About: Laurent Jaffro, *Le miroir de la sympathie: Adam Smith et le sentimentalisme*, Paris, Vrin, 2024, 287 p., 13 euros.

The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation.<sup>1</sup>

The above is one of the first examples of the sense of fellow-feeling that Scottish philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790) describes at the opening of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790)<sup>2</sup> and that he refers to with the technical term “sympathy.”<sup>3</sup>

As Laurent Jaffro clearly explains in *Le miroir de la sympathie* (The mirror of sympathy), sympathy as conceived by Smith cannot be identified with a sentiment (moral or not) or with imagination—even though it originates precisely in imagination. Sympathy is the correspondence or similarity of sentiments, a

---

<sup>1</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, 1984, 1.1.1. p. 10 (my emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> This is the last edition published during Smith’s lifetime.

<sup>3</sup> On the philosophical use of the word “sympathy” before Hume and Smith, see the recent issue of *Les Études philosophiques* (148, 2024/1), “La sympathie avant la sympathie”, edited by Jacques-Louis Lantoine and Francesco Toto.

correspondence that we observe within ourselves when it is complete and “that is produced in circumstances created by the representation of the situation of the person concerned” (p. 44)—in the above example, the situation of the dancer on the rope as the spectators imagine it.<sup>4</sup> In order to feel what the other feels or, more precisely, what the other *ought to feel*—pleasure or pain, joy or sorrow, pride or shame—we must make the effort to imaginatively put ourselves in his place.<sup>5</sup> As Smith points out: “Sympathy [...] does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, out of sympathy, we may blush “for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behavior,”<sup>7</sup> for the simple reason that we, the spectators, judge that in such a situation the other *ought to experience shame*. This last example shows—and this is not without consequences—the extent to which for Smith “sympathizing” is not about feeling what the other feels, but about projecting what we would have felt or done in his place in a given situation.

## An Analysis of Evaluative Life

Given the title of Smith’s work, the question arises as to whether our evaluative attitudes toward both others and ourselves—especially our so-called “moral” evaluations—can be attributed to this single principle of human nature. In other words, can sympathy always be taken as the primary element of our moral evaluations, as Smith seems to claim? And more generally, how do we move from our imaginative projections to “morality” itself?

---

<sup>4</sup> The intellectualist conception of sympathy, understood as requiring an imaginary exchange between people, was severely criticized by Smith’s successor at the University of Glasgow, Thomas Reid (1710-1796). According to Reid, I can put myself in someone else’s shoes and “see myself undergoing a serious surgical operation and I can imagine that it is accompanied by excruciating pain without feeling that pain in the least” (E. H. Duncan and R. M. Baird, “Thomas Reid’s criticisms of Adam Smith’s *Theory of the moral sentiments*”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38 (3), 1977, pp. 509-22). See also Jaffro’s presentation of Reid’s text in “Leçon sur la théorie des sentiments moraux du Dr. Smith”, transl. by Laurent Jaffro, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 109 (2), 2021, p. 240.

<sup>5</sup> It appears that Smith does not clearly settle the question of when putting oneself imaginatively in someone else’s shoes occurs spontaneously and when it requires effort on the part of the spectator.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *op. cit.*, 1.1.1, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* As young people today would say, the spectator views this type of situation as “embarrassing” or “cringe”.

In order to foreground sympathy as an explanatory principle of moral phenomena, Smith follows in his work a pattern of increasing complexity. This pattern “shapes the structure of the *Theory*” (p. 15), particularly Parts 1 and 2, which are devoted, respectively, to the “propriety” and to the “merit and demerit” of action. Jaffro offers a sustained and detailed commentary on the first two parts of the *Theory* (pp. 39–83 and pp. 121–156). Smith, he points out, distinguishes between two ways of evaluating human action because “[t]he sentiment or affection of the heart from which any action proceeds [...] may be considered under two different aspects, or in two different relations.”<sup>8</sup>

First, our (moral) approval of another’s emotion or action—such that we judge it appropriate or fitting—stems from the observation of a perfect coincidence between what the agent feels or does and what we would have felt or done had we been in his place. As Smith argues using the example of the feeling of indignation approved by a spectator: “The man who resents the injuries that have been done to me, and observes that I resent them precisely as he does, necessarily approves of my resentment.”<sup>9</sup> The correspondence of sentiments and the observation of that correspondence (that is, sympathy) result in the spectator’s approval: The indignation is deemed appropriate, as is the action (if there is one) that results from it. Second, a human action can be judged according to the beneficial or harmful effect it produces: The issue is one of merit, since this action merits either reward or punishment. Here one must take into consideration the consequences of the action on others—not only the consequences foreseen by the agent, but also those intended by him (what may be called “intentional consequences”).

Jaffro specifies that these two “perspectives” (p. 123) on the value of a same action are not equal: The sense of propriety has logical priority over the sense of merit (p. 125). Jaffro sums it up as follows: For Smith, “a person X has merit if and only if Y’s gratitude for X’s beneficial action is appropriate,” just as X has demerit, so to speak, if and only if Y’s indignation toward X’s harmful action is appropriate. The notion of merit presupposes that of propriety, and therefore that of sympathy, since the sense of propriety is made possible by that of sympathy. It follows from this that sympathy is the primary element of moral evaluation.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1.3, p. 18. See also *ibid.*, 2.1. Introduction, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1.3, p. 16. I shall leave aside the difficult question of the degrees of approval, which Jaffro addresses on pp. 65–71.

Using terms unknown to the Scottish philosopher, Jaffro nevertheless shows on several occasions that the relationship between the “deontological” aspect (i.e. the propriety of the action) and the “consequentialist” aspect (i.e. the merit of the action) of moral evaluation is far more complex than that in Smith’s work. According to Smith, the consideration of consequences and the sense of merit do not, or should not, always coincide. One may think of the punishment of heinous crimes like murder, where for Smith indignation and anger “bypass any consequentialist consideration” (p. 138) to the point that the merit of the action is no longer evaluated in terms of the utility of the punishment (p. 137). One may also think of what Jaffro calls the “consequentialist bias,” which consists in the spectator’s tendency to underestimate the merit or demerit of an action when that action accidentally fails due to a stroke of bad luck (p. 146).

## The Experience of Weakness and the Sense of Duty

As Jaffro points out, considerable space is devoted in *The Theory* to the psychological limits of moral evaluation. In particular, Smith notes that criminal intention is not (or less) punished when the intended action fails (pp. 268–269, this being precisely a case of “consequentialist bias”). Thus, he writes:

Our resentment against the person who only attempted to do a mischief, is seldom so strong as to bear us out in inflicting the same punishment upon him, which we should have thought due if he had actually done it. [...] His real demerit, however, is undoubtedly the same in both cases, since his intentions were equally criminal; and there is in this respect, therefore, an irregularity in the sentiments of all men [...].<sup>10</sup>

In other words, grounding the rationality of moral evaluation in sentiments (which is one possible definition of Smith’s rational sentimentalism<sup>11</sup>) necessarily sets limits on this rationality—even though, in the case of punishment, these limits are providential since it is useful for the human species that God or “nature cares about consequences” when we fail to do so (p. 269).

However, our practical irrationality can become even more problematic, particularly when inconsistencies occur between our evaluations and our actions, that is, when the problem of motivation arises. Jaffro therefore devotes an entire chapter

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.3.2, p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> On the nature of Smith’s moral sentimentalism, see Jaffro’s concluding chapter (pp. 231-270).

(pp. 189–229) to the “sense of duty,” which he defines as “the recognition of the practical authority of general rules of conduct” (pp. 189–190) that helps to remedy a lack of motivation. Smith, he recalls, analyzes the sense of duty in Part 3 of the *Theory*, which begins with the following imaginary example:

The man who has received great benefits from another person, may, by the natural coldness of his temper, feel but a very small degree of the sentiment of gratitude. If he has been virtuously educated, however, he will often have been made to observe how odious those actions appear which denote a want of this sentiment, and how amiable the contrary. Though his heart therefore is not warmed with any grateful affection, he will strive to act as if it was [...].<sup>12</sup>

In short, this man will act gratefully toward his friend out of duty, and therefore through making an effort, because he lacks the strong spontaneous feeling of gratitude that would be more appropriate to the situation.<sup>13</sup> As Smith observes, this friend may not be the best of friends, but he is certainly not the worst. Smith also makes clear that the general rule of gratitude—one must repay the benefits received—is social in the sense that it is acquired in society (“he will often have been made to observe how...”). Given how fallible our sentiments can be, he finds it providential that we are endowed with this capacity to learn general rules through experience (p. 204). For Jaffro, this raises the question of how the role of sympathy—even in its complex form—should be interpreted when the general rules determine with the greatest exactness what certain virtues require, foremost among them the virtue of justice (p. 190, note 1).<sup>14</sup> Is sympathy then still the primary element of moral evaluation?

Our weakness can also take other forms, such that the sense of duty may be better understood as “a capacity to resort to general rules in order to remedy the difficulty in reducing the temporal inconsistencies of evaluations that are grounded in the sense of propriety and the sense of merit” (p. 26). These inconsistencies may take the form of self-deception or blindness—the “disposition not to apply to oneself the moral evaluations one applies to others” (p. 198)—or of *akrasia*, where we perform a (sometimes diachronic) action “that we know to be bad” (p. 211).<sup>15</sup> Jaffro then examines

---

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *op. cit.*, 3.5.1, p. 162.

<sup>13</sup> In conceiving duty as a second-best solution or a motivational support when feeling is lacking, Smith follows the analyses of his friend David Hume which are presented in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), namely in the second part of Book 3 devoted to justice. Unlike Hume, however, Smith considers that “religion enforces the natural sense of duty” by giving a sacred character to general rules (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *op. cit.*, 3.5.12, p. 170 and p. 206 in Jaffro’s book).

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *op. cit.*, 3.6.10, p. 175.

<sup>15</sup> For example, I may have committed not to succumb to a certain temptation in the past, yet I succumb to it today.

in detail—though the reconstruction is complex—Smith’s attempt to show how taking into account the sentiments of others through sympathy is what makes self-command possible. For Smith, he writes, “a very high degree of self-command enables one to excel at observing moral rules” (p. 218):

Respect for what are, or for what ought to be, or for what upon a certain condition would be, the sentiments of other people, is the sole principle which, upon most occasions, overawes all those mutinous and turbulent passions into that tone and temper which the impartial spectator can enter into and sympathize with.<sup>16</sup>

We strive to master our excessively strong passions so that they may be approved by the ideal spectator of our actions—Smith’s “impartial spectator”—as we represent him to ourselves. Let us conclude by saying that this may explain the relationship between sympathy and the sense of duty: In some situations, sympathy is what allows for self-command, a cardinal virtue that enables us to act from duty when necessary, that is, when we must comply with what the other virtues require of us.<sup>17</sup> Viewed in this way, sympathy is not so much the primary element of our moral *evaluations* as it is that of our moral *motivation*. This is, however, only a hypothesis about Smith’s *Theory*—a hypothesis no doubt inspired by Jaffro’s book, which is extremely rich in the philosophical themes and problems it addresses.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), 27 March 2025. Translated by Arianne Dorval, with the support of [Cairn.info](http://Cairn.info). Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 12 May 2026

---

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *op. cit.*, Conclusion of Part 6, p. 263, quoted by Jaffro p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> One can, of course, imagine a man who is capable of controlling his passions but who nevertheless fails to respect the requirements of the virtue of justice. Self-command is a necessary but not sufficient condition for meeting these requirements.