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Foreword to Edward Westermarck's Lectures on Adam Smith

Otto Pipatti¹

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Sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher Edward Westermarck (1862–1939) grew up in an academic Swedish-speaking family in Helsinki, Finland, then an autonomous part of the Russian Empire. He studied the humanities, philosophy, and psychology at the University of Helsinki. During his student years, Westermarck became much attracted to British empiricist philosophy, Darwinian evolutionism, freethought, and liberal social criticism, which continued to inspire his work for the rest of his life.

Westermarck's doctoral thesis from 1889 is included in his first major work, *The History of Human Marriage* (1891), published in England. The book became a critical success and a bestseller, and it was quickly translated into French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian and Japanese. In 1890, Westermarck was appointed Docent (lecturer) in Sociology at the University of Helsinki and he spent much time conducting research in London. In 1898, he began his ethnographic fieldwork in Morocco, which lasted in total more than six years.

The completion of Westermarck's second book, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, two volumes (1906; 1908) won him professorships both in Finland and England. Between 1906 and 1918, he served as Professor of Practical (i.e., moral and social) Philosophy in Helsinki, and from then on as Professor of Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University in Turku. Beginning in 1904, Westermarck also lectured at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), and

1. Royal Anthropological Institute, London W1T 5BT, UK

in 1907 he became Britain's first Professor of Sociology (Husbands 2019, xvi, 18).

Westermarck spent a large part of his life dividing his time between Finland, London, and Morocco. His main ethnographic works are *Marriage Ceremonies in Morocco* (1914) and *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (2 vols., 1926). Westermarck never married and there is no information about his intimate relationships. Through his scholarly writings and social activities, Westermarck strove to advocate legal reforms relating to the liberalization of divorce laws, the juridical equality of spouses, the position of unmarried women and adulterine children, animal rights, and the decriminalization of homosexuality (Timosaari 2021a; 2021b).

In Finland, a group of disciples shared his comparative evolutionary approach and interest in anthropological fieldwork. Most of them published their main works through leading British publishers. The Westermarckian school dominated the Finnish social sciences and philosophy until the Second World War. At LSE, Westermarck's closest student and later a colleague was the prominent anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), who recognized Westermarck as his most important influence (Malinowski 1937, xvi).

Westermarck retired in the early 1930s, and in 1932 he published his main philosophical work, *Ethical Relativity*. Westermarck died in 1939, two days after Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland, an event said to have brought on Westermarck's fatal asthma attack (Lagerborg 1951, 366–367). His last major work, *Christianity and Morals*, appeared earlier in 1939.

The 1914 lectures on Adam Smith

Westermarck presented his theory of morality in *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (1906a; 1908). Noticing that his massive anthropological and historical evidence prevented some of his critics from seeing the forest for the trees, he offered his theory in a summarized form in *Ethical Relativity* (1932). Westermarck spent much of the 1890s developing his “general theory of the nature of moral consciousness” (Westermarck 1929, 232). During this time, Westermarck carefully studied Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which played a crucial role in the formative period of his thought (Pipatti 2019, 32–36). Later on, he included Smith among “the three writers who above all others have exercised an inspiring influence on my work in Sociology and Ethics,” the other two being Charles Darwin and James Frazer (Westermarck 1928, 190).

Westermarck lectured on the philosophy of British and Scottish Enlightenment for the first time in the mid-1890s. Between 1912 and 1932, he lectured on these topics regularly in Finland, whereas his teaching at LSE focused on sociology and social anthropology. In his lectures, Westermarck presented and evaluated the

works of Lord Shaftesbury, Joseph Butler, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Smith, among others. He was particularly interested in the “scientific value” of their work (Westermarck 1931, 180). Westermarck approached the history of moral philosophy from the perspective of a social scientist seeking empirical hypotheses about human moral psychology.

Westermarck's two lectures on Smith were delivered in 1914 at the University of Helsinki. The first lecture introduces Smith's life and work. He refers to *The Wealth of Nations*, but only as a great and immensely influential work. Westermarck speaks briefly of Smith's essays “History of Astronomy” and “Imitative Arts,” as well as his lectures on jurisprudence. Westermarck especially appreciated Smith's psychology of science, laid out in the “History of Astronomy.” Westermarck's understanding of the importance of emotions in scientific work was similar to Smith's (Pipatti 2019, 138–140).

The second lecture focuses on *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and touches upon key issues in Westermarck's work on morality. I remark on five. First, Westermarck regarded Smith as a precursor of his empirical research program of morality. For Westermarck, the task of ethics is not to formulate normative rules for human action but to study how and why human beings make moral judgments (Westermarck 2003/1896). In this sense, ethics is a “psychological” and “sociological” discipline (Westermarck 1906b, 192; 1929, 218). However, this does not mean that Westermarck's ethics would lack clear normative dimensions; there are many of them, just like in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Second, Westermarck deals with Smith's theory of sympathy and brings out his own views on the relationship between sympathy and moral judgments. Like Hume and Smith, Westermarck was a theorist of sympathy, and the examination of sympathy permeates both the theoretical and empirical chapters of *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*.

Third, Westermarck gives Smith credit for his insight on what Westermarck called “the retributive character of the moral emotions.” For Westermarck, this emphasis makes *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* “the most important contribution to moral psychology made by any British thinker” (Westermarck 1932, 71). Westermarck even regarded his own work partly as a matter of putting Smith's theory of morality to an empirical test. In his view, a “comprehensive study of the moral ideas of various nations and in various ages confirms the ingenious hypothesis set forth by Adam Smith, that resentment and gratitude belong to the root-principles of the moral consciousness” (Westermarck 1900, 185).

Fourth, Westermarck follows Smith in his examination of the characteristics that distinguish the moral emotions from gratitude and resentment. In this regard, Westermarck's lecture provides clues to how he interpreted Smith's concept of impartial spectator. For Westermarck, Smith's impartial spectator primarily repre-

sents how people in practice make moral judgments of others. It is about what kind of emotions people feel when they observe the actions of others from the position of a non-involved bystander. The gist of Westermarck's reading is that it is by contemplating the reactions of the spectator that researchers can best understand and describe the nature of the moral emotions (Pipatti 2019, 133–136). The emotions of moral approval and disapproval are characterized by “disinterestedness”—because they are felt as independent of any benefit to oneself; “apparent impartiality”—because we feel that we do not favor any of the parties involved; and “a certain flavor of generality”—because we assume that most other people in our social group would respond the same way in a similar situation (Westermarck 1906a, 100–105). Westermarck treats moral emotions from both the proximate (the “how”-questions) viewpoint and the biological and evolutionary (the “why”-questions) viewpoint.

Fifth, Westermarck brings out his highly critical attitude towards Kant, who is criticized at length in *Ethical Relativity*. Westermarck stresses that the special merit of Smith's work is that it helps to understand why moral judgments are directed at the will of the person judged. Westermarck was very interested in why we hold people responsible only for such actions that we consider to be directly or indirectly caused by their will, and he also considered how different circumstances influence moral evaluation. Following Smith, Westermarck traces the solution directly back to what kind of emotions the moral emotions are. Westermarck devotes to moral responsibility nearly half of the theoretical chapters of *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*.

From Westermarck's lectures, it becomes clear why he became, during his student years, fascinated by the “clearness and a sense of reality” that he found in work of British sentimentalists. “Even if [their] hypotheses were not unfailingly true”, he writes, “in every case it seemed possible that they could be corrected by a deeper search into the facts of experience” (Westermarck 1929, 30).

Notes on the text

The lectures were held in Swedish. The manuscripts are in the archive collections of the Åbo Akademi University Library in Turku, Finland. The lectures consist of 24 typed pages. A scanned copy of the 24 pages is available online directly from Filosofia.fi ([link](#)); in the translation below, the page numbers marked in pencil in the upper right corner of the manuscript pages are noted in brackets. In the typescript Westermarck used dashes to indicate paragraphing, and I have added a few other paragraph breaks. The typescript contains plenty of handwritten additions which are sometimes very difficult to read. I have tried to interpret them

as best I can, but I have had to leave some of them out. In translating the key concepts that Westermarck uses in his own moral theory, I have used the works that he wrote and published in English. Westermarck provides an account of Smith's life. Sometimes he reports things the accuracy of which is either uncertain or now doubtful in light of subsequent scholarship, in which case I insert a footnote to alert the reader. Also, when Westermarck quotes Smith or other sources, I have translated the quotations as stated in Westermarck's text, giving the source in a footnote and, in most cases, the original text as well.

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About the Author



Otto Pipatti studied sociology at the University of Helsinki, where he defended his doctoral thesis in 2017. His first book, *Morality Made Visible: Edward Westermarck's Moral and Social Theory*, was published by Routledge in 2019. Currently, Pipatti is a visiting researcher at the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) in London, where he is working on a book, “The Origins of Human Social Nature: Westermarckian Sociology and Social Anthropology,” contracted with Palgrave Macmillan.

The study is based on his book published in Finland in 2023 on the Westermarckian school. Pipatti has also contributed to the collection *The Sociological Heritage of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh University Press, in press). His email address is otto.pipatti@gmail.com.

Lectures on Adam Smith

Edward Westermarck

Lecture I [195]

Next to Hume whose philosophy I discussed previously stands, both as a writer and a friend, a man whose influence has not been lesser than Hume, if partly of a different kind. The name of Adam Smith has gone down to posterity as the father of economics, but he also made significant contributions to ethics. This remarkable man was born in 1723 in Kirkcaldy in Scotland where his father was a respected citizen. Father died only a few weeks after the son's birth, whereas mother lived to an old age and received in the son's extraordinary affection ample reward for her maternal care. When Adam was a small boy, an event occurred that could easily have thrown his life into a completely different direction from that of the philosopher and economist. One fine day when he was playing in the open air, he was abducted by a group of wanderers, but fortunately the incident was discovered in time and the boy was recovered. In school he soon raised attention for his love for books and for extraordinary memory, but also for his absent-mindedness and habit to think high—idiosyncrasies that he preserved throughout his life.

Smith was not even fifteen when he became a student at the University of Glasgow, the large Scottish city of commerce and industry. He stayed there for three years, and even if this time was too short for completing the bachelor's degree, it was of great importance for his further development. He came there under the influence of Hutcheson, then a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow. [196] Adam Smith always talked with the highest admiration about Hutcheson, "the unforgettable Dr. Hutcheson" as he put it.¹ Smith received impulses from him both in his moral philosophy and economics (although the disciple in each of these branches would far outshine the teacher). Hutcheson truly was an influential person: free-spirited and fearless in religious questions, liberal in politics, the man of initiatives and humane reforms, a social optimist and philanthrope whose greatest aim in life was to promote human happiness through the spreading of useful truths and drawing out corrupting delusions. And in all these circumstances Adam Smith became the faithful follower of his appreciated teacher. When

1. Smith's original wording is "the never to be forgotten Dr Hutcheson" (*Corr.*, 309). The only other instance of such phrase in materials from Smith is "never to be forgotten friend" David Hume (*ibid.*, 220).

one reads Hutcheson's works it is difficult to understand that this philosopher, whose style in writing suffers from a suspicious lack of both juice and elegance, had extraordinary gift of speech, as testified by all his students unanimously, and through which he could assert his influence on to the degree that his time as a professor in Glasgow became an epoch in the cultural history of Scotland.

The reason Adam Smith left the University of Glasgow already at the age of seventeen was that his mother wished he would educate himself in theology in the Church of England, where lucrative positions were available to those who engaged in its service. With the help of the scholarship from the university young Adam was sent to Oxford [197] to study at the famous Balliol College for the new calling. The change of university was bitter. The young Scot felt and was treated by others there as a stranger, and he did not have much good to say about the teaching. The University of Oxford had at that time sunk deep in intellectual lethargy, laziness, ignorance, and luxury, and those who went through it would then sink even deeper into all sorts of civil and ecclesiastical sinecures. At Oxford, Adam Smith wrote much later, most of the professors had long ago given up any attempt to teach. They could only stand in the way of one who sought his spiritual education on his own. This is what Adam Smith would experience. He had brought to Oxford a copy of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, which he had received from Hume himself in recognition of the analysis of this work which Hutcheson had made him write during his student days in Glasgow.² When the Balliol men caught Smith reading the work, the book was confiscated, and Smith was fined for his interest in such a godless writer as Hume. At Oxford he took his degree, became a Bachelor of Arts, but no longer thought about continuing the ecclesiastical path. He returned to Kirkcaldy determined to continue his studies, without any definite plans for the future.

During his stay there he wrote the essay "History of Astronomy," which was intended to be part of a large work on the history of philosophy.³ This early work [198] is quite remarkable due to the opening chapters on surprise and wonder, two emotions that are treated in a surprising and insightful way. My friend Dr. Shand, who is the foremost specialist in the psychology of feeling, told me how his eyes fell by chance in a used bookstore on Adam Smith's completely forgotten work on the history of astronomy, and to his surprise noticed how psychologically significant some of the ideas in the work are.⁴ Another interesting work of slightly

2. Scholarship now concludes that Smith did *not* acquire Hume's *Treatise* from Hume. Westermarck repeats here a mistaken reading of "Mr Smith" in a 1740 letter from Hume to Francis Hutcheson (see Rasmussen 2017, 267 n.23).

3. It is uncertain though probable that Smith substantially drafted *The History of Astronomy* during his time at Oxford or shortly thereafter; the original manuscripts were not preserved.

4. The English psychologist Alexander Faulkner Shand (1858–1936) published in 1896 an influential

later date is Smith's essay "Of the Imitative Arts," where he shows his acumen and originality in the field of aesthetics. Among other things, he aims to show that a significant part of our enjoyment of art stems from our admiration for the artist's skill in overcoming the difficulties in creating a work of art, and he emphasizes that the basis of the beauty of the artwork lies in the *difference*, not similarity, between the imitative work and the depicted natural object. To strive for too great a resemblance makes the work of art ugly and unsuccessful.

In 1750, at the age of 27, Smith received a job that reconnected him to the University of Glasgow, where he now became the professor of logic. For the traditional logic and metaphysics, however, he had little interest: he claimed that philosophers often gained their reputation by concealing with words a lack of clear ideas. For this reason, he wanted to change his professorship in logic to another in ethics, and he also expressed the wish that his friend Hume would succeed him in his former professorship.⁵ [199] But this wish did not come true. Hume, the most important contemporary epistemologist, was considered too ungodly to hold a professorship in philosophy at the University of Glasgow, which thereby missed out on the unique honor of being able to count Hume and Smith as simultaneous members of its faculty.

Adam Smith had great success as a lecturer. He himself attributes this success to his habit of carefully performing in his auditorium. "During the entire term," he says, "I used to carefully observe a certain student in my audience, who sat directly in front of me. If I saw him reach forward and listen, I knew that everything was as it should be. But seeing him fling himself squarely into a posture of inattention, I immediately felt that something was wrong, and that I must change either my subject or the way I presented it."⁶ As professor of ethics, Smith lectured on natural theology, but nothing has survived from these lectures. From passages in his published writings, however, it appears that he was a theist in his religious views, but admittedly anything but orthodox. He believed in a wise providence, which arranges everything in the world so that humanity may flourish and progress in

article "Character and the Emotions" in *Mind* (Shand 1896) and later his main work *The Foundations of Character: Being a Study of the Tendencies of the Emotions and Sentiments* (Shand 1914).

5. In a November 1751 letter to William Cullen, Smith writes cryptically about the possibility of Hume's getting appointed at Glasgow: "I should prefer David Hume to any man for a colleague; but I am afraid the public would not be of my opinion; and the interest of the society will oblige us to have some regard to the opinion of the public" (*Corr.*, 5–6). Westermarck's description, therefore, is somewhat misleading.

6. This anecdote is told by Smith's student Archibald Alison: "During one whole session a certain student with a plain but expressive countenance was of great use to me in judging of my success. He sat conspicuously in front of a pillar: I had him constantly under my eye. If he leant forward to listen all was right, and I knew that I had the ear of my class; but if he leant back in an attitude of listlessness I felt at once that all was wrong, and that I must change either the subject or the style of my address" (quoted in Sinclair 1875, 9; Rae 1895, 57).

perfection, and he calls conscience the representative of God within us, which punishes the guilty with internal torment, and rewards the virtuous with happiness and peace of mind. But no revelation is necessary for human beings to learn their duties. In all his texts, there is not a single line that could be interpreted so that he would have identified himself with Christian dogmatics. [200] With regard to freedom of belief and thought, he believed that the state should show unlimited tolerance. The more religions there are in the state, he says, the more impossible it is that they would disturb the peace within the same; each of these religious communities becomes too insignificant to make its weight felt within the state.

The most important fruit of Adam Smith's lecturing activity was *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the first edition of which appeared in 1759. When this extraordinarily important book was published in London, Hume was there and sought in every way to contribute to its success. And success came immediately. Hume writes Smith as follows: "I have to tell you the sad news that your book has had a terrible misfortune, for the public praises it immensely."⁷ Hume was not so wrong in that an author has every reason to be suspicious if his work is received with general praise; this is by no means always a good sign, for original thoughts and new discoveries require time to be recognized. But in this case the success was well deserved. Burke, the author of the excellent work on the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful, rightly emphasized that Adam Smith in his book took a new path in ethical speculation. The work was truly groundbreaking. That it was received with such great and unanimous admiration by the contemporaries, not only in England and Scotland but also abroad and especially in France, is explained by the fact that the author managed to confirm his conclusions with such convincing evidence that a generation of thinkers who stood on the same [201] unprejudiced basis could not fail to recognize and admire the new insights laid down in this book.⁸ This work is Smith's most important contribution to philosophy, and it would have been quite enough to spread glory around his name, even if he had not written his second great work, *The Wealth of Nations*. It is safe to say that Adam Smith's reputation as a moral philosopher would have benefited if the second star had not slightly dimmed the first one's glow.

To the third edition of his work on the moral sentiments, Smith added a treatise on the origin of languages, which also is rich in ideas and bears witness to

7. "I proceed to tell you the melancholy news that your book has been very unfortunate: for the public seem disposed to applaud it extremely" (*Corr.*, 35).

8. It is understandable that Westermarck would tell his pupils that Smith's *Moral Sentiments* was received with "unanimous admiration by the contemporaries" and convinced "a generation of thinkers." However, it is now better understood that many of Smith's contemporaries and the following generations harbored great reservations, rarely expressed in print during Smith's lifetime, but abundantly in the decades following Smith's death (Klein 2018).

the rare versatility of its author. Not so long ago in 1896, an extensive manuscript of notes from Smith's lectures on jurisprudence was discovered. Smith mentions the lectures himself and promises a book on the same subject. But the book was never published, and it was assumed that nothing was preserved from the lectures when the discovery was made, more than 130 years after Smith delivered the lectures. He emphasizes in these lectures that the task of natural jurisprudence is to study the general principles that should form the basis of the laws of nations. He opposes the theory that society would be founded on an original contract or agreement and instead points out that people tend to form societies partly because of the instinct of obedience, their tendency [202] to submit to the authority of others, and partly because of the instinct of self-preservation. "Ask a driver or day laborer," Smith writes, "why he obeys the authorities, and he replies that it is right that he should obey them, that he sees others do it, that he would be punished if he disobeyed them, or perhaps that it is a sin against God to disobey authority. But he would never claim that a contract or agreement was the foundation of his obedience."⁹

In these lectures, Smith examines the legal relationships that have existed at different times and in different countries between husband and wife, parents and children, and master and servant. Here we have the beginning of comparative legal history. He acts passionately against slavery, which then flourished in the colonies of the European countries. He condemns severe punishments that were common in his time, insisting that they are not based on considerations of social utility, but are simply rooted in the desire to take revenge on the wrongdoer and in the sympathy for the person wronged. In addition, several economic questions are dealt with here, which were taken up in greater detail in the work on the wealth of nations, and on which I shall not delve into here.

After twelve years as a professor of ethics at the University of Glasgow, Smith resigned. He had received an offer from a young duke's guardian to become his private tutor and accompany him in that capacity to France. It was common at the time to send a young nobleman on a journey rather than to study at university. It was considered that this way they would at least learn a couple of foreign languages, while in Oxford or Cambridge they only learned [203] laziness and other vices. In 1764, Smith thus set off with the young duke for France, first to Paris and then to Toulouse, where they stayed for a long time. However, life in Toulouse became boring and monotonous. Smith writes as follows: "The life I led in Glasgow was a life of hustle and bustle compared to the one I lead here. I have started writing a book to pass the time."¹⁰ This book was his great work on the wealth of nations.

9. Westermarck's rendition is very close to the original passage (*LJ*, 402–403).

10. The actual passage reads: "The life which I led at Glasgow was a pleasurable, dissipated life in comparison of that which I lead here at present. I have begun to write a book in order to pass away the time"

Later during his stay in Paris Smith was amply compensated for the entertainments he missed in the southern French country town. As a friend of Hume and the famous writer of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he had access to the salons and became personally acquainted with practically all the stars of France in politics, economics, and philosophy. He socialized with Turgot and the Physiocrats as well as with Holbach, d'Alembert, and Helvetius. After a couple of years in France, he returned to London and then to his hometown of Kirkcaldy, where he lived with his mother, eagerly engaged in his work on economics, which was not completed until some nine or ten years later. It was published in 1776. The full title of the book was *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. The success was great and immediate. Adam Smith had the pleasure of seeing several of his dearest ideas turned into reality already during his lifetime. He had frequent conferences with William Pitt, England's prime minister and the leading statesman. The following anecdote may serve as an example of the extraordinary reputation he enjoyed. [204] Smith arrived a little late for the dinner where the prime minister was also present. The moment he came into the room, the whole company stood up. Smith asked them to sit down, but the prime minister replied: "we intend to stand until you sit down, because we are all your disciples."¹¹ On another occasion Smith proclaimed: "What an extraordinary man he [Pitt] is, he understands my ideas better than I do myself."¹² What these ideas were, is a question I shall not enter into here. They hardly belong to the history of philosophy, and are, in their main features, very familiar to anyone who has even a little familiarity with the theories of economics. The deep impression this work of economics made on contemporaries and the immediate posterity is manifested in a letter a German student wrote to a friend the evening before the Battle of Jena, when Napoleon stood outside the city gates. Because of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, he wrote: "Next to Napoleon Adam Smith is now the mightiest monarch in Europe."¹³

A few years after the completion of the aforementioned work, Smith moved to Edinburgh where he obtained a job at the customs office. His biographer Dugald Stewart laments that this great man was drawn away from science by practical considerations. But his work at the customs office was also relevant to economics; for it is certain that many of the most instructive additions to *The Wealth of Nations* would never have been written if Smith had not had this practical experience to draw upon. For the rest, it gave him great social satisfaction through

(*Corr.*, 102).

11. The original printing of this anecdote is as follows: "No, we will stand till you are seated, for we are all your scholars" (Kay 1842, 1:75).

12. Westermarck's source here was likely Rae (1895, 405), who cites Pellew (1847, 1:151).

13. Westermarck's source was evidently Hirst (1904, 234), who identifies the German student as Alexander von der Marwitz but does not provide a source for the quoted remark.

the income it provided. Like Hume, he was a great friend of company, dinners, and guests. At his house, which was one of the finest in Edinburgh, the whole intelligentsia of the city congregated, and his Sunday dinners lived long after his death as grateful memories. In London, he had belonged to several dinner clubs, and in Edinburgh he was involved in the founding of a similar club, the so-called Oyster Club; however, this must not be interpreted as if the great national economist was a worshipper of the material pleasures of the table; it is asserted, on the contrary, that the only thing for which he had a real passion was sugar cubes. But the people of that time in England and Scotland understood the value of the kind of conversations that come most easily at the dinner table with good wine. After some time of illness, which he bore with the same courage and self-control as his previously deceased friend Hume, Adam Smith died in 1790. Like Hume and many other philosophers, Adam Smith refrained from marrying, without this seeming to have made any inroads on his happiness in life. In the next lectures, I will give an account of Adam Smith's ethics.

Lecture II [207]

In my last lecture I dealt with Adam Smith's life and literary activity with a promise to return and give an account of the essential content of the work by which Smith occupies a place in the history of philosophy, namely, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which stands worthily by the side of his other great work on the causes of wealth of nations. But ladies and gentlemen must be prepared, for it is not easy to produce a summary which does Smith's moral psychological theory full justice. His work contains a great number of extraordinarily fine observations concerning the details and many examples that aptly illustrate his theories, and there is no room for all this in the summary. But I hope that at least some of you will familiarize yourself with the work. It would be very appropriate for those who know English to read the work in your advanced studies.

Adam Smith's theory of the moral emotions adheres in important points to the teachings of some earlier Scottish moral philosophers. We have seen that the English-speaking moral philosophy during the Enlightenment arose in essentially different forms. We have the intellectualist tendency represented by Cudworth, Clarke, and Wollaston, according to which moral judgments are based on acts of reason. These judgments, according to them, express moral *truths* just as our mathematical judgments express mathematical *truths*. According to another tendency, moral judgments are based on feeling. This includes Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, [208] Hume, and Adam Smith. According to Shaftesbury, we perceive the good with a special reflective feeling, "reflex affection," that arises when we

reflect on the instincts or tendencies and find that they are in harmony; this harmony is what virtue consists of; and this emotional faculty is the same as the moral sense. Shaftesbury, however, did not concern himself to any great extent with this moral sense—his primary task was not to investigate the origin and nature of moral judgments, but to establish the objective characteristics of virtue. In contrast, the moral sense became the cornerstone of Hutcheson's philosophy.

According to Hutcheson, moral concepts are derived from the fact that certain actions produce immediately within us pleasure and others immediately pain. We feel pleasure when observing a virtuous action and pain when witnessing a vicious action. And this is because we possess a specific moral sense, which is *sui generis* and cannot be explained by means of other faculties. Hutcheson did not give a clear answer how this moral sense should be understood, but it is nevertheless clear that it is the tendency to feel pleasure or pain when observing certain actions, and thus the moral sense works through emotional expressions. In Hume's ethics, we no longer find a moral sense as a specific attribute of the soul, *sui generis*. The moral sentiments are not attributed by him to any feature of the soul, they are not irreducible. Moral approval is assumed by Hume to be based on sympathy. Morality has evolved in social life; people's moral judgments about other persons are more [209] original than their judgments about themselves, i.e., conscience, which also is a product of sympathetic feelings which have their prerequisite in social life.

Adam Smith agrees with Hutcheson and Hume that moral judgments are based on feeling, not reason. But he does not assume, like Hutcheson, the existence of a moral sense that would be *sui generis* and irreducible. In this respect, he agrees with Hume, and for him as well as for Hume, moral judgments are based on sympathy. But Adam Smith was not on that account a reiterator of Hume's moral psychology but advanced his own theory, partly built on Hume's but partly also in conscious opposition to him, and in any case perfected that which his predecessors only hinted at.

Smith begins his work with an analysis of sympathy. People, says Smith, have an inborn instinct to imitate the expressions and gestures of others. When people see an acrobat balancing on a rope, they involuntarily move and balance in a similar way as the acrobat does; if someone sees another laughing, he is infected by the laughter, and a sad face produces a similar expression in the spectator. But it is not only the external gestures and expressions that we have a tendency to imitate: the spectator also feels similar *emotions* as the person being observed. When he sees another person laughing, he not only begins laughing himself, but also experiences the feeling of joy which is manifested in laughter. Not even the most selfish person can avoid feeling, at least under certain circumstances, similar emotions as their fellow human beings. And yet our sympathy with the joy [210] or sorrow of others

is quite imperfect if we only observe its expression without knowing its cause. When we hear a person wailing, we rather experience a curiosity to find out what the matter is about, alongside the tendency to sympathize with the person wailing, than an actual feeling of sorrow. For us to feel lively sympathy for the feelings of our fellow human beings, we must know the cause of their joys or sorrows. The beggar's wooden leg evokes more pity in us than his troubled face. It may happen that we feel sympathetic joy or sorrow, even though the person does not seem to feel it himself: we place ourselves in his situation and experience the emotion we would feel in the same situation. It often happens that we blush with shame on behalf of another person, although he himself seems to be completely untroubled. [210a]

Smith emphasizes that we do not sympathize just as easily with every sort of feeling in our fellow beings. Thus, we proceed with greater difficulty in another's feeling if it arises from his bodily condition than if it arises from his imagination—thus more easily with hope and fear than with physical desire and pain. Toothache and gout are very painful, yet they excite comparatively little sympathy, whereas dangerous diseases, though accompanied by little pain, arouse a much stronger degree of sympathy. Smith further emphasizes that we sympathize more easily with things that evoke pleasant feelings than with things that evoke unpleasant feelings—more readily with cheerful people than with sorrowful people. This, he says, certainly seems to be contrary to the general opinion, according to which it is precisely grief that arouses our compassion more easily than the joy of others. But if this is the case, it is only because the happiness of others arouses our envy, which works as a barrier to sympathy. If envy does not raise its head, we are more inclined to sympathize with joy than with sorrow. Why are we ashamed to cry in front of others, but not ashamed to laugh? Precisely because we have a feeling that the spectators sympathize much more easily with our laughter than with our tears. Our sadness at a funeral is often somewhat affected, a requirement of decency. But our joy at a happy event, such as a wedding or a newborn-baby party, is natural and free. And when we express our sympathy for our friends in their sorrow, how small is our sympathetic sorrow in comparison with their own? It seems that nature, when it burdened us with our own sorrows, considered these of [210b] our own a sufficient burden, and therefore did not command us to share the sorrows of others to a greater degree than is necessary to help them in their need. Small misfortunes often arouse hilarity in the spectator, while great happiness easily arouses envy. However, great sufferings and small joys are always sure to arouse our sympathy. [back to p. 210]

From his analysis of sympathy, Smith proceeds to his theory of morality, which is based specifically on sympathy. When we observe the actions of others, we have a tendency to place ourselves in the same situation in which they find

themselves: we experience a feeling of how we ourselves would have acted in the same situation. At the same time, we also experience a reflection of the agent's frame of mind and more or less accurately understand the emotion which provided the motive for his action. We approve of the action when the emotion we imagine we would feel in the same situation corresponds to the agent's emotion. On the other hand, we disapprove when the emotion we imagine we would feel differs [211] from the emotion that motivates the agent's action. This sounds a bit complicated, but I will illustrate it with an example. When I see someone giving alms to a beggar, I experience the feeling of charity towards the beggar and imagine that the motive for the agent's almsgiving was also the feeling of charity. Here we have a correspondence between my emotion and the emotion I assume to motivate the agent's action, and I approve of the action because of this correspondence. In short, we approve of the action when we sympathize with the agent's motive, and we disapprove when we do not sympathize with his motive. It must be counted to Smith's credit that he emphatically brought out the agent's motive as the subject of moral judgment; Hume had fastened himself too much on the *external* act and its consequences.

However, there is more to Smith's moral theory than this. When we observe an action, we put ourselves in the agent's place, but we also put ourselves in the place of the person who is affected by the action. If I see a person giving alms to the poor, I put myself in the position of the giver, but I also put myself in the position of the receiver, i.e. I feel as if I were the recipient myself, and I experience an emotion of gratitude. I sympathize [212] with the agent's motive on the one hand and with the recipient's gratitude on the other, whether real or imagined. This leads to a final moral judgment, and nothing can interfere with the approval I feel via sympathy for the actor's motive. In the case of benevolent affections, this double sympathizing strengthens our emotions and the approving final judgment. If I am witnessing a noble act, my emotion of approval or admiration increases, because I not only sympathize with the agent's motive but also have a fellow-feeling or share the gratitude experienced by the object of the act—more precisely, I experience a reflection of the gratitude I would feel if I were the object of a noble deed (it may well be that the poor man does not experience any gratitude, but this does not affect the emotion assume I would feel if I were in his place).

But the judging observer can also find himself in a more difficult position. This is the case when the action does not spring from benevolent passion but malicious passion, the emotion of resentment. Suppose I see a person hitting another. I put myself in his situation. It may happen that I am inclined to sympathize with the motive of this action, it may happen that I feel I would have acted the same way, because the person being hit gave reason for indignation. But when I situate myself in the position of the person being hit, it may happen that his pain

also arouses my sympathy. Here arises a conflict, and the final judgment is the result of weighing both these sympathetic emotions. Then thus the moral emotions depend not only on the spectator's tendency to sympathize or not with the agent's motive, but also [213] on his tendency to sympathize with the emotions of the person acted upon. And through the latter, the moral emotions come to bear a considerable resemblance to the emotion of resentment or gratitude experienced by those who are the object of an act.

I consider for my own part that Adam Smith's foremost merit as a moral psychologist is that he tied moral approval to gratitude and moral disapproval to resentment. In this way, they are not only feelings of pleasure and pain, but emotions with a strong conative element. Resentment means a desire to inflict pain on someone who has inflicted pain on another, and gratitude a desire to produce pleasure in the person who himself was the cause of pleasure. They are retributive emotions; and this is also the case with *moral* approval and disapproval.¹⁴ The moral emotions are also retributive emotions, and moral approval is akin to the emotion of gratitude and moral disapproval to resentment.

This significant circumstance, that the moral emotions are closely related to resentment and gratitude, had already been hinted at before Adam Smith. This had been done by the English associationist psychologist David Hartley, who says that resentment and gratitude are "intimately connected with the moral sense." And already some thousand years ago the Greek thinker Polybius made the following notable statement: "If a man has been rescued or helped in an hour of danger, and, instead of showing gratitude to his helper, seeks to do him harm, it is clearly probable that [214] other people will be displeased with and resentful of the ungrateful one, since they sympathize with the helper and imagine themselves in his place. Hence arises the general notion of duty, which is the beginning and end of justice."¹⁵ This statement clearly anticipates one important or even the most important aspect of Adam Smith's moral theory, but it does not diminish the importance of Smith's work. For he was the first to make the retributive nature of moral emotions the cornerstone of the theory of moral sentiments.

Those of you who read my own work on moral concepts shall notice the

14. Westermarck, even in his written English, uses the term "retributive emotions" in a broad sense to denote both positive and negative emotional reactions. Moral approval is a form of "retributive kindly emotion," and moral disapproval or indignation is a form of "resentment" (Westermarck 1906, 21).

15. The Polybius quotation is found in *The Histories of Polybius, Book VI: Origin of Morality and Rule* (1889, 1:462). Westermarck's representation is not misleading but for the record I reproduce the quotation: "If a man has been rescued or helped in an hour of danger, and, instead of showing gratitude to his preserver, seeks to do him harm, it is clearly probable that the rest will be displeased and offended with him when they know it, sympathizing with their neighbor and imagining themselves in his case. Hence arises a notion in every breast of the meaning and theory of duty, which is in fact the beginning and end of justice." The passage is also quoted by Westermarck in *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (1906, 42).

crucial role I assigned to the retributive character of the moral emotions, how much of the different expressions of moral consciousness can be explained by this, and that the general moral concepts derive their content from it; why the subjects of moral judgments are what they are is the result of the retributive nature of the moral emotions. Retributive emotion is a friendly or hostile attitude of mind towards a person perceived as the cause of pleasure or pain, and a person is perceived as such if the effecting of pleasure or pain has its basis in his will.

Adam Smith argues against Hume that the approval which virtue arouses cannot be a feeling of the same sort as approval we accord a well-built house, and when we praise a person's morals we must do it in fact on other grounds than when we utter our delight over comfortable furniture. Moral approval [215] and disapproval are not simply aroused by everything that is useful or harmful, but they are emotions that are aroused by human acts of will. Why this is the case was a question Hume did not answer, nor did he meddle with it. Nor did Kant, who wrote the much admired but rather simple sentence that "nothing but the will can be good" without trying to explain, or not being able to explain from his standpoint, *why* only the will is good. The retributive nature of moral emotions thus throws light, in my opinion, on the deepest shafts of the moral consciousness, and that is mainly why I appreciate Smith's work so highly.

But although the moral emotions are closely akin to resentment and gratitude, they are not identical. When we pass moral judgments on the actions of others, our judgments depend, at least in part, on our sympathy or lack of sympathy with the emotions of those most closely affected by the action. We pass our judgments as impartial spectators. It was clear to Adam Smith that the retributive emotions which can be called moral emotions have to be disinterested and impartial, and thereby they differ from ordinary anger and gratitude, which are not impartial in character. And this disinterestedness and impartiality arises through sympathy we experience for the person affected by the action, sympathy with his emotions.

The impartial spectator also appears in Smith's theory of conscience. He agrees with Hume, and with good reason, that our first moral judgments do not concern ourselves but other people, whose actions we observe as impartial spectators. But we also soon learn to observe and judge our own actions as if we were external spectators of our own conduct. [216] We divide ourselves into two persons, as the spectator and the agent, and the inner spectator continues to be only a representative of the external spectators. However, we naturally grant him more information about ourselves than other people can possess. Thus, we consider him as an inner judge whose superior wisdom and righteousness we may invoke when the environment judges us shortsightedly and unjustly. This inner judge is the conscience, which Smith calls the representative of God within us.

Falckenberg emphasizes that Adam Smith's impartial spectator is a precursor to Kant's categorical imperative.¹⁶ Even Kant, in his own way, stressed the impartial character of moral judgments, but this property in moral judgments is due to a circumstance which Kant does not even notice, namely the psychological nature of the moral emotions. Kant derived the moral judgments not from emotions but from practical reason, but I have no doubt that the real foundation of his categorical imperative lies in the impartial character of the moral emotions.

I have been able to present only the main points of Smithian ethics, omitting many extremely interesting details. I could add a criticism of quite a few points in Smith's theory. It suffers [217] from unclarity and lack of precision. The conception of a duplicated sympathy, with on the one hand the motive of the actor and on the other gratitude or resentment of the person who is affected by the action, is of doubtful worth. It seems to me that the moral emotions arise through a much simpler process. Our retributive moral emotions are surely due in great measure to the motive we ascribe to the agent, but I cannot believe that in general we put ourselves in his place and reproduce the act, with ourselves as the agent, in the complicated way Adam Smith seems to assume we do. Also, Smith's description of our sympathy with the person who is the object of an act is insufficient as an analysis of the retributive moral emotions. There are many expressions of moral emotions in which sympathy with the pain or pleasure of others plays no role at all. Many moral judgments are based on instinctive aversion or disinterested likings. For example, the condemnation of certain sexual acts, such as incest, is founded on the instinctive aversion they arouse. Finally, Smith has not shown how one gets from the moral emotions to the different moral concepts, and in particular as far as the concept of duty is concerned, he is not clear that it is grounded on the emotion of disapproval, not approval. But because this is about Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I prefer to dwell upon the points in which I have learned from him rather than the points on which I depart from him. I recognize with gratitude that of all moral philosophers or moral psychologists there is none from whom I have learned anything like as much as from Adam Smith.

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16. Westermarck refers to the German philosopher Richard Falckenberg's *History of Modern Philosophy from Nicolas of Cusa to the Present Time* (1893/1886).

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About the Author



Edward Westermarck (1862–1939) grew up in an academic Swedish-speaking family in Helsinki, Finland. He became, at the London School of Economics, Britain’s first professor of sociology. Very famous in his own day for taking an evolutionary view of marriage and morality, he published (in English) many works: *The History of Human Marriage* (1891), a critical success and a bestseller, quickly translated into many other languages; *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (1906; 1908); *Marriage Ceremonies in Morocco* (1914); *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (1926); *Ethical Relativity* (1932); and *Christianity and Morals* (1939). He also taught philosophy in Finland, in Helsinki and Turku.