

Adam Smith Proto-social psychologist

A year on from the appearance of the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith on the £20 note, Sandy Lovie offers a new perspective on his life

Adam Smith is one of those historical unfortunates who are chiefly remembered for just one work (in his case, *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776), but who were nevertheless highly prolific. He produced many articles and collected works during his lifetime, as well as publishing at least one other major work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which first appeared in 1759. It is this latter book that I want to recommend to you as a modern and highly sophisticated treatment of the mind and the self, based essentially on social and collective principles (see modern commentaries by Haakonssen, 2002, and Seigel, 2005).

Social psychologists have, of course, long pointed to the writings of early 20th-century figures, such as George Mead, as the source of ideas on the social or mirror self; that is, of a self built up of others who have been internalised for the purposes of social role playing, or who act as external reflections for the adaptive shaping of one's own actions and beliefs. But, as I will show, Smith also had several useful and insightful things to say about the construction and activity of this social self much earlier than Mead.

Adam Smith, together with his mentor, friend and near

contemporary the empiricist and associationist philosopher David Hume (1711–1776), were the twin pillars of the Scottish Enlightenment. Geographically based in the Scottish central belt cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow but surprisingly international in its sources and influence, this aggressively secular and scientifically empirical movement was also keen to extend science to areas of cultural life hitherto untouched by its systematising hand – hence Smith's claim that his *Wealth of Nations* represented a scientific reworking of traditional forms of political economy.

There were, however, other aspects of the Scottish Enlightenment that had

profound implications for the study of areas such as morality, which were not so obviously open to scientific analysis as the discipline of economics. Thus the movement reduced the importance of established authority and of the philosophical *a priori* in general, while the status of individual and personal experience, systematically collected and arranged, was raised. Also, arguments could now be legitimately grounded in the concrete reality of everyday objects and events.

Smith made use of all of these newly granted freedoms to fashion a morality based on the lived experiences of actual people. As his recent biographer James Buchan put it: 'Henceforth, the chief territory for moralising will be not the sermon or the philosophical tract but the dressing-table novel' (2006, p.52). This also means that morality was now open to the analytical attack of a kind of anthropological psychology which drew on culturally defined beliefs and actions as explanations for moral beliefs and actions. Although I do not want to say anything more directly about Smith's moral work, I will of necessity use his thoughts on this topic indirectly, since the theory of mind embedded in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, together with its system of social perception, comparison and action, all deal with how people arrive at moral judgements about themselves and others.

But let me at this point say a little about Smith's life, and the historical context in which he worked and had his being. He never knew his father (who had died before Smith's birth), but Adam Smith Snr had been a prominent lawyer and a leading Scottish Whig who had supported the unhappy Union in 1707 between England and a bankrupt Scotland (an arrangement greased by 'English gold', to quote Robert Burns). This treaty was to change the political geography of Scotland for ever, and hastened the fall from power of the Highland Catholic aristocracy, in spite of the best efforts of Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745. Adam Smith broadly followed his father's politics, but not his Protestant religion, becoming, like him, a member of the emerging Scottish middle class that looked beyond Scotland for its inspiration. Such

references

- Buchan, J. (2006). *Adam Smith and the pursuit of perfect liberty*. London: Profile Books.
- Haakonssen, K. [Ed.] (2002). *Adam Smith: The theory of moral sentiments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seigel, J. (2005). *The idea of the self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

turbulent times seem to have had little effect on him, except over the originality of his work. His professional life was similarly serene: after studying at both Glasgow and Oxford Universities, he returned to Glasgow to the chair of logic and rhetoric in 1751. Smith's final official position was that of Commissioner of the Customs Board in Edinburgh in 1778, where his tasks included the collection of taxes on imported goods and the suppression of smuggling. He never married, but lived with his mother until her death in 1784 at what was then the remarkable age of 90.

Two central notions in Smith's theorising about the social self are sympathy and propriety, which, in 1769, took on slightly different meanings from those that they have today. Thus sympathy for Smith meant empathy, and with it a positive identification with the other, rather than its modern take of a slightly detached and sentimental feeling for another's troubles. Propriety here means the correctness or rightness of the action or expressed belief, which differs from the modern, somewhat ironised, definition of propriety as social acceptability. Smith also assumed that the person would invariably exhibit a positive liking for others, and a desire, in return, to achieve their reciprocated approval. The final component is the so-called 'Impartial Observer', which consists of a collection of socially grounded and evaluative judgements of the rightness or wrongness of actions and expressed views. Note that the Impartial Observer is a cultural construct with a distant resemblance to Freud's superego, not one rising from some built-in moral archetypes of the Lockean variety.

All of these elements combine in the adult to form a system of morality based on what other people are perceived to be doing and saying, not on what seems *a priori* correct for oneself; that is, from some internal, inbuilt sense of right and wrong. However, while James Buchan's biography of Smith argues persuasively for this somewhat counterintuitive source of personal morality, thus strongly suggesting the existence of both a social basis for judgements of right and wrong and a socially constructed self, I also believe that Smith went beyond this in that he allowed for a kind of developmental or internalising stage in moral growth whereby 'a child surely conceives itself as accountable to its parents, and is elevated or cast down by the thought of their merited approbation or disapprobation...' (see Haakonssen,

2002, p.130). The mirror metaphor of the self is made more concrete (and more interactively complex) on the same page where even the adult is seen to be adaptively sensitive to the opinions of others: 'We examine our persons limb by limb, and by placing ourselves before a looking glass...endeavour...to view ourselves at the distance and with the eyes of other people.' Smith goes on to argue that if this appraisal is positive then

'we can more easily support the most disadvantageous judgements of others', but a poor assessment means that 'every appearance of

[other people's] disapprobation mortifies us beyond all measure'. Notice the implication of the differential effects of high and low feelings of self-esteem on how one deals with adversity!

Thus both the development of morality and the form that it takes in maturity are based on a series of complex, interwoven and adaptive social interactions between the person and their collective world. Smith also argues that people are capable of making nice judgements about the appropriateness, or otherwise, of the actions and opinions of others, in return using them to guide their own actions and opinions. Thus the person 'who is hurt if either the cook or butler have failed in the least article of their duty...will seldom meet with much sympathy' (quoted in Buchan, 2006, p.57). This emotionally based judgement helps to fine-tune a person's evaluation of other's actions and expressed views, thus enabling them to vary their own behaviour according to how they think others will judge them in turn.

Finally, in another indication of Smith's standing as proto-social psychologist, the examples that Smith cites are not those culled from the classical authors, although he does provide a summary of such ancient authorities at the end of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*; rather he draws on familiar domestic examples such as the reprehensible and undignified behaviour of the wives of aldermen who, when dining together en masse, competitively scramble to secure the chair at the head of the table for themselves.

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