

Reflections on the theory of moral sentiments

Literature



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English Literature (ic and Modern), Book Report/Review Topic: The Theory of Moral Sentiments: Reflections on “ Of Sympathy.” I. Introduction of the subject, scope, and type of book The book, “ The Theory of Moral Sentiments” by Adam Smith was published in the year 1759. The genre of the book is Human Nature and Morality. It is a book by an intellectual, trying to understand what the borders of spirituality are, but unable to reach it. Spirituality is all about experiencing and transcending mind-level reasoning. The book, however, from the secular point of view, is the foundation stone for the later works of Adam Smith on the subjects of ethics, philosophy, psychology, politics, justice, economics, arts and methodological underpinnings. II. Summary of the content of the chosen part: Reflections on “ Of Sympathy.” In “ The Theory of Moral Sentiments” (1759), “ Adam Smith defines sympathy as the effect that is produced when we imagine that another person’s circumstances are our own circumstances, and find their reaction to the circumstances to be reasonable.”(Yupangco) In doing so, we try to experience in our inner world similar feelings though with less intensity. We are not the direct party for that experience and as such we do not share the events that created the response in the concerned individual. It is a sort of ‘ fellow feeling’ according to Smith. Sympathy is the spontaneous passion exhibited by humankind. III. My findings from the reading. Smith’s discussion about sympathy is an aimless wandering. It has to be thus, because intellectuals like him can think only up to the level of mind and such individuals believe that every issue can be solved, every situation can be met through arguments and counterarguments. They try to offer and are desirous to know scientific proof for everything. They fail to appreciate that without the thorough knowledge of microcosm, the

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functioning macrocosm can never be understood. Adam Smith was beset with problems in his efforts to understand issues and Jerry Z Muller argues, "...which he traced to the mind's craving for order and tranquility. This craving was upset by the confrontation with new facts which did not fit into previously accepted explanatory system."(18) Any effort to understand and explain the macrocosm in isolation is an exercise in futility. To elucidate his position Smith makes the hair-splitting arguments. Yupangco writes, " Smith suggests that sympathy arises under two different conditions: first, when we are aware of another person's circumstances, and imagine our response; second, when we see another person's response, and are able to imagine their circumstances."(Yupangco) The basis of this statement is fallacious. Our response to situations may vary in hundreds of similar cases, depending upon the circumstances and the individual concerned and any yardstick to measure it is impossibility. It is futile to fix standards for responses. Smith goes to great length as to how one can know the feeling of others and writes, " By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body..."(1) but this assertion is not acceptable even by fictional standards of human nature and morality. The example tendered by Smith relating to the " angry man without knowing the cause of his rage."(Yupangco) How Smith can assume that we are " likely to sympathize with the individual/people he is raging against," (Yupangco) and not the angry man? This example is self-defeating as without knowing the cause of the rage, one has no business to take a stand on the issue, as the angry man might have total justifications for his anger. Smith's conclusion that sympathy " enlivens joy and alleviates grief" is correct but that is not due to the premises on which Smith is trying

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to build the edifice of sympathy. Smith has failed to establish the yardstick to measure sympathy. The wave of sympathy generating within an individual is a personal issue, and even that can vary from time to time, situation to situation and on getting more information relating to the concerned individual, the earlier opinion may have to be reversed. For example the wave of sympathy that is generated by sighting an old beggar in the first instance, may not be the same in the second instance, when more particulars about his lifestyle are made available, that he is a compulsive drug-addict. Smith's assertion that we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instance to prove it, is also fallacious. What is the principle applied by Adam Smith that he knows the goings on within the minds of others? It is merely his personal assumption. I give the example of the soccer match between two countries, say Brazil and America. Suppose Brazil loses the match, naturally the people of Brazil will drown in sorrow; will the Americans also feel sorry for the plight of the soccer team of Brazil? On the contrary, they will celebrate the American victory, which in turn means they enjoy the sorrow of people of Brazil. So one's sorrow can as well be the source of happiness for the other. Since soccer is a world sport, the question of sympathy from various countries for the defeated team arises and that happens in varied degrees, depending upon the level of attachment of the people from different countries. Conclusion: One's happiness and sorrow is one's property and no third party can measure it. The intensity of happiness or sorrow depends on the level of spiritual progressions, whether philosophers like Adam Smith understand it or not. Sympathy is the consequential action for such pairs of opposites, like happiness and sorrow. It is not possible for one to enter into <https://assignbuster.com/reflections-on-the-theory-of-moral-sentiments/>

the body or mind of others and gather the feelings there and formulate a policy of responsive action of sympathy. So any discussion on the subject of sympathy on the lines pursued by Adam Smith and philosophers like him will not serve any purpose or lead to tangible results. Research on the working of the macrocosm will lead to confusing results with the addition of new facts on the subject and the discussion will never end; investigating and experiencing the reality of microcosm is the method to understand the principle of unity in diversity in the macrocosm, including feelings like sympathy. Works Cited Muller, Jerry Z. Adam Smith in His Time and Ours. Princeton University Press, July 3, 1995. Smith, Adam. The Theory of Moral Sentiments. Empire Books, December 17, 2011. Yupangco, Victoria. philosophyofsocialcognition / Adam Smith's concept of sympathy Accessed on December 24, 2012