

The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1790)

Part I: Sympathy and Propriety

1. Discuss the opening passage of the TMS. (p. 9) Who is Smith addressing?

2. What is sympathy?

3. What is the role of imagination in Smith's theory?

4. What is approbation?

5. What might it mean to characterize Smith's theory of sympathy as a theory of judgment? And what criteria do we use when we judge another, according to Smith?

6. What is propriety? And what is the difference between “mere propriety” and “perfect propriety” (which Smith also refers to at p. 25 as “virtue”)?

7. What is the impartial spectator?

8. Why are we more inclined to sympathize with joy than with sorrow? What are the sociological consequences of this, according to Smith?

9. What is the greatest cause of the “corruption” of our moral sentiments according to Smith?

Part II: Demerit and Justice

1. What does Smith mean that justice is a “negative virtue”? Do you agree with him?
2. What role does “merited resentment” play in Smith’s account of justice?
3. What are the differences between justice and beneficence? Why is the distinction so important to Smith?

Part III: Conscience

1. How does Smith's subject matter shift from Parts I & II to Part III?
2. Discuss the significance of Smith's discussion of society as a "mirror" on pp. 110-13. What role does this play in Smith's understanding of human nature and of the nature of society?
3. Why does Smith distinguish praise from praise-worthiness, blame from blame-worthiness? And what is the difference? How do we know? What role does God play in Smith's argument here? (pp. 113-134)
4. What is "conscience" for Adam Smith? Where does it come from? What does it do? Pay particular attention to the description of conscience in the Chinese earthquake discussion at p. 137.
5. Who or what is the "Author of nature" referred to through this book, and relied upon so heavily in Part III.3? Is Adam Smith a religious thinker? Does he need God for his system to cohere?

6. Explain Smith's discussion of the Chinese earthquake example at pp. 136-41). Is he advocating that we disregard distant suffering, especially on p. 140?
7. What is "self-command"? (145-153) How is it acquired? What role does it play in Smith's theory? Is Smith advocating a Stoic moral philosophy?
8. Why does Smith emphasize "tranquility" in his discussion of self-command?
9. Discuss the passage at III.3.38 (p. 153) about "feeling too strongly" and the discussion that follows (pp. 154-56) about international conflict and domestic faction. What produces conflict and faction and fanaticism for Adam Smith? How can it be tempered? Compare with Smith's discussion of nationalism at pp. 228-230.
10. What is self-deceit? (pp. 156-9) Why is it a problem for Smith?

11. What are general rules (pp. 159-70), and why are they important for Smith? Where do they come from? Once again, what is the role of God in Smith's theory? Does he need God for his system to cohere?

Part IV: Utility

1. Discuss Smith's description of the poor man's son. (pp. 181). What does Smith intend to demonstrate here?
2. And yet, explain the transition in IV.1.10 that "it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner." What does this mean? What is the "love of system" for Adam Smith? What do deceptions about the "pleasures of wealth and greatness" enable?
3. Discuss Smith's reference to the "invisible hand" at pp. 184-5. Explain what Smith means by "invisibility" here.
4. Adam Smith speaks about "promoting the public welfare" at IV.1.11 (p. 185-6). This will become a major issue in Part V of the Wealth of Nations. What do we learn here in the Moral Sentiments about the appropriate role of government in promoting public welfare?

Part V: Custom and Fashion

1. How do custom and fashion affect our aesthetic sensibility? Discuss Smith's examples.
2. How do custom and fashion affect our moral sentiments? Discuss Smith's claim at V.2.1 (p. 200) that the moral sentiments "may be somewhat warped" but not "entirely perverted." Discuss some of his examples.
3. Discuss Smith's fascination with "savage" virtue. Why does he value it in the savage? How do the moral sentiments of the savage compare with those of the "civilized" European? And what is Smith's view here on the superiority of European morality?
4. Discuss Smith's account of Athenian infanticide? What point does he seek to make with this example?
5. Is Smith a relativist?

Part VI: Character and Virtue

1. What is prudence? To what extent does Smith value prudence as a mark of human character? (pp. 213-17)
2. What is benevolence? To what extent does Smith value benevolence as a mark of human character? (pp. 218-37)
3. How is the chapter on benevolence organized (pp. 218-37, and why is this significant?)
4. In what order do we exhibit benevolence to particular individuals? (pp. 219-227)
5. In what order do we exhibit benevolence to particular societies? And what are the dangers of excessive or extreme benevolence toward particular groups? Pay particular attention to Smith discussion of nationalism. (pp. 227-34).

6. What is universal benevolence? What is wrong with it? (pp. 235-37).

7. What is propriety/self-command, and how does it differ from the virtues of prudence and benevolence? (pp. 237-62). Discuss with reference to Smith's description of the "great demigod within the breast" at p. 247.

Part VII: Systems of Moral Philosophy

1. How does Smith evaluate classical systems of moral philosophy grounded in Propriety (pp. 267-94) notably those of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics?) What particularly is flawed in the Stoic system, according to Smith?

2. How does Smith evaluate classical systems of moral philosophy grounded in Prudence (pp. 294-300), notably that of Epicurus?

3. How does Smith evaluate systems of moral philosophy grounded in Benevolence (pp. 300-6), notably that of Hutcheson?

4. What is a licentious system, and how do they differ fundamentally from the previous sorts of systems discussed? (pp. 306-14) Why does Smith find Mandeville so objectionable? Discuss Smith's rejection of Mandeville.

5. Why are our first principles of right and wrong not derived from reason, according to Smith? What's wrong with reason? Are we not reasonable creatures? What is the role of reason in Smith's moral philosophy? (pp. 319-21).

6. In the last paragraph of the *Moral Sentiments*, Smith promised a future treatise on the “general principles of law and government” – but he never completed such a treatise. Given Smith’s account in the *Moral Sentiments*, why might such a project have been difficult?