

SMITH'S ANALYSIS OF HUMAN ACTIONS

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Abstract

In this article, Adam Smith's ethics are explored; it is demanded how tenable some of his conclusions are. § 1 is focused on Smith's treatment of selfish and non-selfish acts. In § 2, the consequences of the conclusions presented in § 1 for ethics are dealt with, describing Smith's position and the problems it entails. § 2.3 consists of an attempt to present an alternative for Smith's theory, in which some of Hobbes's thoughts are helpful. It appears that Smith's method is commendable, but some of the consequences of his theory are problematical.

Keywords: *Ethics, Selfishness, Altruism, Smith, Hobbes*

Introduction

Adam Smith's ethics, as expounded in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, have led to a great number of questions. The relation of ethics to the economic ideas, which are treated in another work, and the role of religion in Smith's thought are examples of themes which have given rise to many commentaries.

The theme of selfishness, too, has often been discussed. It is important to give this some attention, in order to investigate to what extent acting unselfishly is possible. Smith offers many starting-points for this. A comparison with some other thinkers, accompanied by a reflection on the way in which Smith deals with their ideas, may illustrate what problems arise in Smith's approach.

These problems point to the necessity of an alternative to this approach. I will present this in § 1.2. This may also serve as a beginning for answering the question which sort of ethics Smith defends. This will be demonstrated in § 2.1, partly by comparing Smith's ethics with the approaches of others. Here, too, Smith's ideas are examined critically. In § 2.2, some elements which are problematic in his ethics will be given attention. These are issues which not only apply to Smith's thought, but are present in most ethical approaches. § 2.3 is mainly focused on offering a possible solution for this. The goal will be to present a consistent train of thought. One of Smith's opponents, Hobbes, will offer some starting-points.

1 - 'Selfishness': meaning and extent

1.1 - Selfishness according to Smith

In order to present an exposition on selfishness, it must first be determined what this means. The notion needs to be defined here; still, one should be careful not to take the definition as a basis. If it were

to serve as a guiding-point and one were to present a proof based on this, the proof would be worthless.

A first analysis distinguishes selfish actions, which are directed at self-interest, from altruistic ones, which don't have self-interest as their motivation. Now, what do 'self-interest' and 'selfishness' mean?

Thomas Hobbes states that self-interest serves as a guideline in every action: "[...] No man giveth, but with intention of Good to himselfe; because Gift is voluntary; and of all Voluntary Acts, the object is to every man his own Good [...]"¹. One may understand this 'good to himself' as a direct own interest: direct self-interest is a guiding principle. This means that one is led by the idea that one personally profits from the action. Examples given by Smith illustrate that this explanation is insufficient. Smith mentions a soldier in the army willing to sacrifice himself for his country (in this case for his officer)². A wise man will put the interests of "his own particular order or society" before his own³. He further indicates that one is, when one sympathises with someone else, completely focused on the other person and that there are no selfish elements in his attitude: "Sympathy [...] cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle"⁴.

These examples make it clear that a notion of selfishness in which only the *direct* self-interest is at stake is inadequate. The soldier who sacrifices his life, or at least takes a life-threatening risk (example 1), doesn't do this with his direct interest in mind. He can't reap the benefits of his action, since he will (presumably) die. The interests of his country are at stake for him. This is also the case for the wise man (example 2). Sympathising with someone else (example 3) does not take place because one is paid to do so or obtains another reward. In fact, the other person is the focus of attention and direct self-interest is no issue.

Smith refers to Hobbes's starting-point by distinguishing between *selfishness* and *self-love*; the first is not acceptable, but the second is⁵. Self-interest may be served; this may even be praiseworthy: "Regard to our own private happiness and interest [...] appear upon many occasions very laudable principles of action"⁶. This appears in economy: "By pursuing his own interest [every individual] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it"⁷. As long as there is attention for the needs of others as well, it is not wrong to let the own interests be a motive when acting.

Smith discerns two moral levels at which one may act: "Adam Smith does not hold that there is no ethics other than that turning on the outworking of the self-interest motivation, but only that the ethics of the economic process and of the state jurisdiction is of this sort. It is merely true that the ethics of benevolence moves on another and a higher level – the virtue of justice a real virtue – the virtue of benevolence equally real, but of a superior sort"⁸.

In order to bridge the gap between the acting subject and the person at whom his actions are directed, Smith introduces the idea of the impartial spectator. This presents the opportunity to take some distance from one's own interests, and to indicate which action is appropriate: "We must view [opposite interests] neither from our own place nor yet from [another [']s, J.D.] with whom we have no particular connexion], neither with our own eyes nor yet with his, but from the place and with the eyes

of a third person, who has no particular connexion with either, and who judges with impartiality between us”⁹. One does not only leave one’s own position, but that of the other person as well, in order to assess impartially which is the proper action.

1.2. Consequences and problems

Now that it has been sketched how Smith reaches the conclusion that not all actions are motivated by selfishness, and what standard (the impartial spectator) one should use, an evaluation of this approach can be presented.

I will comment partly on the basis of his own examples (as expounded in § 1.1). A soldier who sacrifices himself for his country may do this by not thinking about his direct self-interest and may efface himself altogether. He is not concerned about posthumous medals and the memories others will have of him which will make him ‘immortal’. The same applies to the wise man who wants to serve his country; he realises that he is a mere individual and only one element in society.

A problem is that the issue at stake here is a whole of which one is a part (one’s country) and whose interests may be one’s own, be it indirectly. The soldier fights for a country in which he may have a wife and child in whose interests he risks his life. He may also identify with his country: he feels connected with it. If this is his motive to fight and the interests of his country are his concern, in the sense that he wouldn’t fight for another country if it made an appeal to him, the motive is selfish. This may, at first sight, seem to be a strange rendering: he does risk, or even sacrifice, his life and doesn’t live on *himself*. It is important to distinguish selfishness (egoism) from self-centredness (egocentrism) here: one is self-centred when one’s direct interests are the only motives for one’s actions; one is selfish when one focuses on one’s interests or those of other living beings or institutions with whom or which one feels connected.

This doesn’t seem to apply to situations in which one unconditionally sympathises with someone else, as Smith indicates. Here, however, the same problem is present. If one sympathises with someone else, what is the basis of this sympathy? One puts oneself in the other’s position and makes his or her suffering one’s own. This, subsequently, is the suffering on which one focuses.

This argumentation is, in my view, convincing, but one problem remains: once one sympathises with someone else and wants to alleviate his or her suffering, one wants to do this because the interests of the other person have become one’s own. However, why would one approach the other person in the first place? One may, after all, go through life completely individualistically. Apparently, one seeks out others. Only if this action is selfish as well may the idea be entertained that the entire process is one of selfishness. I think this may be defended, as it is in this process the person acting in whom the motive arises, which is sufficient to characterise the action as selfish¹⁰.

‘Selfishness’ has acquired a negative connotation, since selfish actions are often dubbed ‘bad’. This identification is, I think, problematical; I will deal with this matter in § 2.2. For now, it may be said that Hobbes’s explanation doesn’t suffice, the more so since he states that one can’t do anything which

ends one's life, which is, according to him, a law of nature¹¹. Smith, on the other hand, admits so-called altruistic motives, in which case the own interests play no role. This is problematic in view of the fact that 'own interests' should be understood more widely than 'direct own interests'. In the beginning of § 1.1, the necessity of defining 'selfishness' was pointed out. As long as it is not clear what the 'own' interests are, one debater may use the same word as the next but each with a meaning of his own, so that they are really talking across one another.

Hobbes and Smith are both quite clear, which rapidly brings the problems to light. Both discern selfishness as serving one's *direct* self-interest. Smith opposes altruism to this, in which an action which is partly motivated by *self-love* and partly by a consideration from the perspective of the impartial spectator is not dismissed and one which is merely motivated by *selfishness* is. Hobbes states that direct self-interest is always the motivation and leaves no room for altruism.

In order to take into account both the shortcomings of Hobbes's explanation and the line of thought expounded above, I suggest conceiving 'selfishness' as serving one's self-interest, in which the self-interest may be the direct self-interest as well as indirect self-interest.¹²

2 - Consequences for ethics

In § 1.2, an exposition has been presented of selfishness, which demonstrates that every action one performs is directed at self-interest. This conclusion is peculiar as long as one considers a situation in which one acts *merely* selfishly as morally unacceptable. Selfish actions are allowed (according to Smith), but one must also be directed at other people. Pure selfishness, in other words, is wrong. The goal of this section is to indicate that this thought is untenable. In order to maintain it, a number of assumptions in ethics are necessary which are problematical. I will expound which notions are concerned and which problems arise for Smith.

2.1. *The form of Smith's ethics*

In the first sentence of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith states that man, though he often be focused on (direct) self-interest, is interested in the fortune of others¹³. This seems to me to be correct. The interests of others are indeed often the motives of actions. I have already explained that this is indirect self-interest. To what extent may one understand being directed at someone else as 'good', morally correct? Smith doesn't, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, inquire into the notions 'good' and 'bad'. He places the criterion in man, but doesn't give a meaning: "What is agreeable to our moral faculties, is fit, and right, and proper to be done; the contrary wrong, unfit, and improper. The sentiments which they approve of, are graceful and becoming; the contrary, ungraceful and unbecoming. The very words, right, wrong, fit, improper, graceful, unbecoming, mean only what pleases or displeases those faculties"¹⁴.

He does indicate what acting rightly and wrongly entails. In order to show what this looks like,

a comparison with some other thinkers may be illustrative. The idea that there is a link between 'good' and reality is expressed by, for instance, Thomas Aquinas. He states that the good expresses the same as being¹⁵. A bad action is, according to this interpretation, literally a negative act. That Smith's explanation differs from this one is clear from the fact that the standard lies, according to him, in man.

A second approach places the good or bad quality of an action in its results. Smith mentions David Hume as a representative of this point of view¹⁶ and criticises him: virtue is identified with utility, whereas utility is accidental. Since one has continually seen correct behaviour being accompanied by positive results, one has conceived a connection between them. Smith dismisses this. He does leave room for the idea that performing an action is important to God: "By acting according to the dictates of our moral faculties, we necessarily pursue the most effectual means for promoting the happiness of mankind, and may therefore be said, in some sense, to co-operate with the Deity, and to advance as far as in our power the plan of Providence"¹⁷.

The most important feature is the role sympathy plays for Smith: "The only difference between [that system which places virtue in utility] and that which I have been endeavouring to establish, is, that it makes utility, and not sympathy, or the correspondent affection of the spectator the natural and original measure of [the proper degree of all the affections]"¹⁸. Here, too, utility has no decisive meaning *for man*; it may be the ultimate reason why one should act virtuously, but at a human, individual, level, when one is actually acting, this shouldn't be taken into account: "The idea of the utility of all qualities of this kind [namely, the "intellectual virtues", J.D.], is plainly an after-thought, and not what first recommends them to our approbation"¹⁹. Consequently, this second approach is rejected by Smith as well.

A third option is to let intentions determine the moral quality of an action. This idea has found much appeal. Kant is perhaps the best-known representative of this approach. The will is the decisive element for him²⁰. Here, it is not important what (random) results an action produces; what is important is that one has the right intention when one acts. Smith seems to agree with this. If one is praised for an action, it is not the praise as such which is enjoyed; one is only interested in appropriate praise, namely when it is a supplement to praiseworthy behaviour²¹. The right motives determine the outcome: "Actions of a beneficent tendency, which proceed from proper motives, seem alone to require reward [...]"²².

He presents a possibility to adjust this thought by pointing out the role the results play: "[...] Though the intentions of any person should be ever so proper and beneficent, on the one hand, or ever so improper and malevolent, on the other, yet, if they fail in producing their effects, his merit seems imperfect in the one case, and his demerit incomplete in the other"²³. He nonetheless dissents from this: "[...] So unjust are mankind in this respect, that though the intended benefit should be procured, yet if it not procured by the means of a particular benefactor, they are apt to think that less gratitude is due to the man, who with the best the best intentions in the world could do no more than help it a little forward"²⁴. There is no contradiction here: Smith did indicate that the merit merely *seems* imperfect.

At any rate, Smith appears to want to involve the possible disadvantages of acting for someone at whom the actions have been focused in the deliberation: "When the negligence of one man has occasioned some unintended damage to another, we generally enter so far into the resentment of the

sufferer, as to approve of his inflicting a punishment upon the offender much beyond what the offence would have appeared to deserve, had no such unlucky consequence followed from it”²⁵.

2.2. *The contents of Smith's ethics*

The foregoing shows that Smith is not a purely deontological thinker: not only the motives are decisive in his approach. A problem he nonetheless shares with Kant follows from the fact that he doesn't make it clear what makes a good action good. Kant doesn't give any further indications concerning the foundation of the notion 'good'. Smith seems, from the intersubjective nature of his ethics, to say that the education forms the notion in man; without an education, one wouldn't be able to decide whether an action is to be approved or disapproved of²⁶. He presents a bridge to ethics, but this is, as will be pointed out, problematical.

Another matter in which Smith deviates from Kant concerns the status which is attributed to moral rules. For Kant, moral notions are notions which have their seat a priori in reason²⁷. Smith doesn't believe in such universality: “[...] It is in particular instances only that the propriety or impropriety, the merit or demerit of actions is very obvious and discernible”²⁸. This is connected with Smith's emphasis on sympathy. If one were to follow a general rule, one wouldn't really be concerned with the person at whom the action is directed. By sympathising, the right attitude arises. This may only be realised after one has learned how to act: “The general rules which determine what actions are, and what are not, the objects of each of [the love, the respect, or the horror of the spectator], can be formed no other way than by observing what actions actually and in fact excite them”²⁹.

Smith evades, in this way, the problem that 'good' becomes an empty notion, a possibility which is ever present in Kant's approach. The question remains, however, whether sympathising can be described as a 'good' action. Smith gives some clues which illustrate the problems. A natural aptitude to the good may be found in man: “Nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend his brethren”³⁰. This does not mean that one will continually direct his actions towards the interests of others; the reason this aptitude is necessary lies in the fact that the self-interest is the most important motive³¹. The problem is, in my view, that this natural aptitude can't produce a good (or bad) action; one performs an action which proceeds from one's character. The rebuttal that someone with a good character will act properly and someone with a bad character improperly is no adequate solution³².

An example may clarify this. Smith brings to mind the situation in which a child is in pain³³. This invokes sorrow in most people. It has been indicated in § 1.2 why this doesn't point to sympathy. The question may now also be answered what the moral value of an action which is focused on alleviating the child's pain is. Smith may be reacting to Bernard Mandeville, who points to the same situation in order to illustrate another train of thought. If one wants to alleviate the child's pain, one wants to do this in order to alleviate one's own suffering (the sorrow of seeing the child's pain): “There is no Merit in saving an innocent Babe ready to drop into the Fire: The Action is neither good nor bad, and what

Benefit soever the Infant received, we only obliged ourselves; for to have seen it fall, and not strove to hinder it, would have caused a Pain, which Self-preservation compell'd us to prevent [...]”³⁴. This also follows from, for example, Edmund Burke’s definition (although he doesn’t himself reaches conclusions such as Mandeville’s): “[...] Sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected [...]”³⁵.

These considerations lead to the question whether naturalistic ethics is possible. Meanwhile, one must, of course, adhere to certain standards, because living together in a society would otherwise be impossible. How does one solve this problem without appealing to a natural notion of ‘good’ and ‘bad’? This will be the topic of § 2.3.

2.3. Moral grounds

In his discussion of philosophical systems, Smith criticises Mandeville, because the latter indicates that private vices are public benefits,³⁶ which, in Smith’s view, means that he denies the existence of a distinction between vain and honourable actions³⁷. Smith is correct in that one needs to distinguish between various grounds of actions. Still, from Mandeville’s perspective, this distinction is, albeit real, irrelevant. Mandeville does claim that ‘bad’ things may have their advantage: “It is in Morality as it is in Nature, there is nothing so perfectly Good in Creatures that it cannot be hurtful to any one of the Society, nor any thing so entirely Evil, but it may prove beneficial to some part or other of the Creation [...]”³⁸.

Immediately after this passage, however, an important addition follows: “[...] So that things are only Good and Evil in reference to something else, and according to the Light and Position they are placed in”³⁹. One may, therefore, question whether the criticism that Mandeville turns around Shaftesbury’s thesis, that vice has been taught and virtue is original⁴⁰, is justified. Mandeville does, indeed, criticise Shaftesbury⁴¹, but he doesn’t maintain Shaftesbury’s basic idea, that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are absolute notions, where the latter claims that one needs to consider the entire universe and see everything in this context in order to answer the question whether something is good or bad⁴².

Only if this were the case, this criticism would be justified. Mandeville relativises the notions, but his explanation is not elaborated. A more systematic approach is Hobbes’s; he examines how these notions could have arisen. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ are merely the signs of the commands respectively prohibitions which have been stated in (positive) law. Without a law being in force, the words have no general meaning: “To [the, J.D.] warre of every man against every man, this [...] is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no Law: where no Law, no Injustice”⁴³.

Smith states that a moral basis must be present here: one needs to consider obeying a law as something right and disobeying it as something wrong⁴⁴. Hobbes solves this problem by accepting a law of nature, which determines how man will inevitably act, and which will cause man to do in every instance what is to his advantage⁴⁵. Because one benefits from a safe and stable society, one will obey

the (human) laws, as such a society is impossible without this⁴⁶.

A downside to Hobbes's approach, in which all elements are reduced to factors of power, is that there is no room for a number of nuances. Smith's distinction between praise and praiseworthiness, for example, is absent from Hobbes's analysis. 'Honourable' is for him 'whatever possession, action, or quality, is an argument and signe of Power'⁴⁷. He seems to keep the analysis as one-sided as he does in dealing with self-interest, as was pointed out in § 1. Still, his contemplation of ethics is credible.

The question must be put forward whether Hobbes isn't affected by the fact that 'good' and 'bad' are random notions, which leads to relativism. This problem isn't present for him, since his ethics differ considerably from Smith's. (One may even maintain that Hobbes doesn't defend *any* kind of ethics.) In the state of nature, there is no common standard of 'good' and 'bad'⁴⁸. Within the community, an absolute standard of 'good' and 'bad' is accomplished, namely the law, to which everyone is to adhere – and *will* adhere, as the law has the same content as the natural law⁴⁹. In this way, the problem that every opinion may constitute separate morals is solved⁵⁰. Hobbes's analysis is, in my opinion, more convincing than Smith's.

The link between selfishness on the one hand and the deconstruction of naturalistic ethics on the other is now clear. The moral distinctions between various actions have become irrelevant. A cowardly soldier who runs away as soon as the battle starts, will do this with his direct self-interest in mind. A brave soldier, on the contrary, will fight with direct (to obtain honour) or indirect (for example the interests of his country or of those of his family) self-interest in mind. One action is not, in an absolute sense, better than the other. In order to discourage people to perform the first sorts of actions and encourage them to perform the latter, however, moral judgements have been associated with them in society. For society as a whole, it's important that there are soldiers willing to fight for it, so this behaviour is encouraged. The brave soldier nevertheless merely acts as he thinks he should, which means that of all the actions he might possibly perform, he performs the one he thinks should be brought about.

In order to prevent anarchy, the artificial notions 'good' and 'bad' may be propagated. If one should want to speak of ethics in this situation, it will at least be artificial; this issue may, in a process in which accepted, clear frameworks of moral thinking have disappeared, not be ignored and needs to be taken seriously.

Conclusion

This enquiry has mainly focused on two topics. In §§ 1.1 and 1.2, some problems in Smith's explanation of the motivations for performing actions were presented. He distinguishes actions which are performed from self-interest from those which are brought about by the interest of others, a distinction which cannot be maintained. A reduction to direct selfishness, as expounded by Hobbes, is not satisfactory, however, and somewhat too simplistic.

All actions appear to be focused on self-interest; direct and indirect self-interest need to be distinguished here. This means, in a consistent train of thought, that all human actions are selfish. The

conclusion that every action is bad is, however, not justified. In order to demonstrate this, an analysis of some of the basic notions in ethics is required. In § 2, an attempt to do so was undertaken. Smith's ethics, it turned out, can't simply be qualified as being consequentialistic (the results determine the quality of the action) or deontological (the motivation is determinative); according to Smith, motives play a part, but the consequences of actions for the people at whom they are directed need to be considered as well.

The way one reaches the right attitude is treated from different perspectives. On the one hand, there is a natural basis in man to act in the right way; on the other, education is an important element. The elaboration which results from these deliberations is balanced and takes many things into consideration which present themselves in society, but is insufficient in a number of aspects. Some notions which have a central position in it can't be maintained without appealing to assumptions which, in the end, can't be justified. This has been pointed out mainly in § 2.2.

§ 2.3 was primarily focused on presenting an alternative for Smith's ideas, which consists in explaining the principles of ethics artificially, by demonstrating that one doesn't perform 'good' or 'bad' actions naturally and that these notions don't come to the fore until positive laws make their appearance.

Notes

¹ Hobbes 1968, 209 (Chapter 15).

² Smith 1978b, 191.

³ Smith 1978b, 235.

⁴ Smith 1978b, 317.

⁵ Manenschijn 1979, 220.

⁶ Smith 1978b, 304.

⁷ Smith 1978a, 456.

⁸ Davenport 1925, 603.

⁹ Smith 1978b, 135.

¹⁰ If the process takes place unconsciously, one can't speak of altruism; one may debate here whether an *action* is performed at all. If one acts consciously, a selfish motive is determinative; altruism is never determinative.

¹¹ Hobbes 1968, 189 (Chapter 14).

¹² In the latter case, various possibilities present themselves: some are merely concerned about their family or friends (as far as they don't yield advantages, for else it would be a matter of direct self-interest), others engage in charity, in which case the *direct* self-interest plays no part (excluding cases in which one engages in this in order to alleviate feelings of sympathy).

¹³ Smith 1978b, 9.

¹⁴ Smith 1978b, 165.

¹⁵ Aquinas 1891, 343 (Quaestio 54, article 3).

¹⁶ Smith 1978b, 188.

¹⁷ Smith 1978b, 166.

¹⁸ Smith 1978b, 306.

¹⁹ Smith 1978b, 20.

²⁰ Kant 1903, 393.

²¹ Smith 1978b, 114.

²² Smith 1978b, 78; cf. 93.

²³ Smith 1978b, 97.

²⁴ Smith 1978b, 98.

²⁵ Smith 1978b, 102.

²⁶ Smith, 1978b, 193.

²⁷ Kant 1903, 411.

²⁸ Smith 1978b, 187, 188.

²⁹ Smith 1978b, 160.

³⁰ Smith 1978b, 116; cf. 86.

³¹ Smith 1978b, 86.

³² Cf. the problem outlined in § 1.1; in this case, one would, in order to explain the notion, refer to an element in which the notion appears. (If one should say that a good action is performed on the basis of a good character, no content has been given of the notion and the problem hasn't been solved but conveyed.)

³³ Smith 1978b, 209, 210.

³⁴ Mandeville 1924, 56.

³⁵ Burke 1997, 220, 221.

³⁶ Smith 1978b, 312, 313.

³⁷ Smith 1978b, 309.

³⁸ Mandeville 1924, 367.

³⁹ Mandeville 1924, 367.

⁴⁰ Manenschijn 1979, 166.

⁴¹ Mandeville 1924, 323, 324.

⁴² Shaftesbury 1773, 9, 10; 20, 21.

⁴³ Hobbes 1968, 188 (Chapter 13).

⁴⁴ Smith 1978b, 318.

⁴⁵ Hobbes 1968, 189 (Chapter 14).

⁴⁶ Hobbes 1968, 190 (Chapter 14).

⁴⁷ Hobbes 1968, 155 (Chapter 10).

⁴⁸ Hobbes 1968, 120 (Chapter 6); 216 (Chapter 15); cf. note 43.

⁴⁹ Hobbes 1968, 314 (Chapter 26).

⁵⁰ Hobbes 1968, 686 (Chapter 46).

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