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SMITH AT 300: EMPATHY AND SYMPATHY: LESSONS FOR OUR TIME

BY
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> "Sympathy, however, cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle. When I sympathize with your sorrow or your indignation, it may be pretended, indeed, that my emotion is founded in self-love, because it arises from bringing your case home to myself, from putting myself in your situation, and thence conceiving what I should feel in the like circumstances. But though sympathy is very properly said to arise from an imaginary change of situations with the person principally concerned, yet this imaginary change is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize. When I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die: but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters."
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> *TMS* VII.iii.4.317

For the twenty-first-century-student of sympathy, the excerpt above is an obvious reminder that the history of ideas is not just a history of words. *Empathy* does not appear in that passage, or in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* ([1759] 1984; *TMS)* in general, which has often caused confusion among commentators, and yet the "imaginary change of situations" with another looms large in Adam Smith's analysis of sympathy.

In an era where "lovers" and "haters" command center stage, whose alleged concern for others can reasonably be regarded as selfish, it may be useful to be reminded of the distinction between sympathy and empathy. Outside the discipline of psychology, indeed, "empathizers" attract less attention than "sympathizers" and their nameless opposites.

In this short piece, there is no need to rehearse Smith's effort to detach sympathy from one's concern for oneself, even if it says something of his analytical difference with

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many of his contemporaries. It is more important to notice Smith's convoluted description of the "imaginary change of situations" with another. What does it mean to say that it "is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize?" Is this just an unhappy way of saying that it is more than a change of circumstances—that it involves not just imagining the loss of a son but imagining being someone I connect with losing his son? Or is it a case of twisting a bent stick exaggeratedly in the opposite direction in order to straighten it? If so, Smith would mean to shift emphasis away from the empathizer towards the empathizee, so as to direct the reader's attention to their relation. Once the imaginary change has taken place, indeed, the empathizer's former self is less relevant, as is that of "the person principally concerned." What matters, on this read, is what can be described as a "system of sympathy" that goes beyond the parties concerned, and rests on what we have come to recognize as *empathy* since the early twentieth century.

Now, what difference does it make if the "imaginary change of situations" with another involves changing circumstances only or more than that—changing persons and characters?[1] People are not necessarily aware of the difference between the expressions "If I were in your place" and "If I were you in your place," but they experience its consequences every day. Changing only circumstances with another may change the spectator by adding lessons learned from a thought experiment to lessons learned from experience, but it does not help much in the way of understanding how the person with whom she empathizes *feels.* It can also affect the person principally concerned who may feel misunderstood, may doubt the legitimacy of his feelings, and question his connections with others.

Trying to take on the person and character of another, on the other hand, may change the spectator on a deeper level, because it momentarily sets aside her own person and character. Such an imaginary change affects the way the spectator feels by confronting her with an approximation of what another feels. In other words, empathetic identification in general produces sympathy, but only *full* empathetic identification produces connection with and understanding of others. It may be that the spectator cannot experience another's emotions in the same degree, but because of her personal change following the imaginary change of circumstances, persons, and characters, she becomes closer to another as much as the latter may gain a better understanding of the spectator as a result of witnessing her unavoidably imperfect empathetic efforts.

Whether or not the imaginary change of persons and characters with another is practicable—and we know that it is perilous—it affects the person who attempts it as well as the person who is its object. In my introduction, I referred to "lovers" and "haters," but I should have included all people who are prompted to pass judgment on others yet seem unwilling to change circumstances, persons, and characters with them. Smith teaches us that if these people are not prepared to change themselves, then they have little reason to expect others to be different. The intolerance of conflicting perspectives, not their unbridgeability, is the problem. Society is not a spectacle: we need empathy much more than false sympathy and antipathy.

[1] On the distinction between partial empathetic identification and full empathetic identification, see Fontaine (1997).

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