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Adam Smith on Education: Socialization and Acculturation

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Education may be the most important aspect of Smith's work that gets the least attention. When people do write about it, they tend to narrow their comments to the use of market incentives in school performance. This falsely suggests that education is tangential to Smith's larger discussions or that it isn't a core concern. It is. By treating education as a topic rather than a theme, commentators miss a central unifying element of Smith's corpus.

Education is foundational to Smith's work in three ways: it enables acculturation, it improves human capabilities, and it cultivates knowledge. By acculturation, I mean the process of learning what a given society considers acceptable both morally and interpersonally, and of developing the skills necessary to adjust one's behavior to those norms. It denotes the socialization a child receives as he or she grows, and the process by which agents encounter and internalize norms and experiences they might find foreign to them. Acculturation is distinct from formal education, which takes place both in the home and in institutions, the product of parents' and teachers' thoughtful design.

One way of conceptualizing this difference is to think of socialization as *passive* pressures that come from society and to think of education as *active* teaching, aimed at specific individuals or groups. Smith strategically relies on this difference, emphasizing community norms in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), and training and expertise in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (WN). In other words, TMS tells readers how to cultivate self-awareness and imagine others' perspectives while WN outlines how industry and the government create and disseminate skills useful for manufacturing and citizenship.

In our time, the study of socialization is the purview of anthropology and sociology, but neither discipline existed for in the eighteenth century. Anthropology wouldn't take shape for another seventy-five years, and Smith's account is so revolutionary that many consider *TMS* to be the founding document of sociology. As such, while Smith's concern for this kind of passive education is interwoven throughout both of Smith's published books, it takes a keen eye to isolate the discussions. In contrast, his comments on formal education are compartmentalized and easy to spot. WN can be understood as the next installment in a long tradition of philosophical investigations into schooling, from Plato through Erasmus, Locke, and even Rousseau, who published *Emile* in the years between the releases of Smith's two books.

Education as socialization and acculturation.

We are acculturated by parenting, peer pressure, institutional education, the desire for approval, the need for a good reputation, and material reward (this is not an exclusive list). Each mechanism has its own pedagogies, with their own implicit and explicit curricula. Ultimately, for Smith, socialization is the prerequisite for both moral agency and economic success. Morality demands that people attend to culturally specific details, even things that might seem trivial to an outsider. One such example is Smith's attention to clothing. He recognizes that since social approval is a basic need, people in commercial societies need not just any shoes and shirts, but specifically *leather* shoes and *linen* shirts. Without these items, candidates will not be regarded seriously enough to be offered jobs. Imagine, for a moment, going to a formal job interview in cargo shorts and a concert t-shirt, and you have a sense of what Smith has in mind.

Knowing social expectations, therefore–understanding cultural semiotics and behavioral norms—is a complex and lifelong task that begins in infancy, but gathers momentum when the child starts school. As Smith writes, a child is born to parents who treat him or her as special, yet:

> When [a child] is old enough to go to school, or to mix with its equals, it soon finds that they have no such indulgent partiality. It naturally wishes to gain their favour, and to avoid their hatred or contempt. Regard even to its own safety teaches it to do so; and it soon finds that it can do so in no other way than by moderating, not only its anger, but all its other passions, to the degree which its play–fellows and companions are likely to be pleased with. It thus enters into the great school of self–command, it studies to be more and more master of itself, and begins to exercise over its own feelings a discipline which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection (TMS III.3.22).

Notice that for Smith, self-knowledge is not the result of classroom-based curriculum, but rather the day-to-day interactions of children and their peers. Experience, reward and punishment, and both fulfilled and unfulfilled desires, are all stern and lifelong schoolmasters, distinguishing one person from another, at all levels, not just in terms of material accomplishment. Notice also that this difference is individualistic and not a form of group identification. Smith did not subscribe to any form of caste system. He did not think that aristocrats were superior in any way, nor did he think of poverty as the result of inferior physiology, sex, or race.

For Smith, there is no "natural difference" between people. Differentiation,

…seems to arise not so much from nature as from habit, custom, and education. When they came into the world, and for the first five or six years of their existence, [children] were perhaps pretty much alike, and neither their parents nor their play fellows could observe any remarkable distinction. About that age, or soon after, they come to be employed in very different occupations. The difference of what we call genius comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is scarce willing to acknowledge any resemblance (WN I.ii.4).

Smith is an empiricist. For him, knowledge is acquired through experience both in the Lockean model of the mind being a passive receptacle for sense data, and in the contemporary understanding that agents learn by gleaning meanings from our interactions with people and the world. Yet, Smith rejects Locke's notion that people are blank slates. He lists a few inborn "principles," that guide human action, most famously identifying the perennial desire we all have for bettering our own condition. He also suggests that universally, people want to be happy, receive social approval, and sympathize with one another. For Smith, people need to be connected with the community. As he puts it, the "great purpose of human life" is "to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation" (TMS I.iii.2.1). Education is foundational in that it teaches us both what it means to be happy—what a better life might look like—and how both are to be achieved.

In essence, Smith is combining *Genesis*'s observation that it is not good for humans to be alone (Gen 2:18), with Aristotle's two opening observations —from *Politics* and *Metaphysics*, respectively—that humans are political animals and that everyone has a natural desire to know. Education is the mechanism by which people learn, both individually and collectively, as well as the means by which they achieve social cohesion. As we live our lives, Smith observes, we become exposed to more people, and learn how to interact in the face of difference. While Smith is insistent that we have a much easier time identifying with those closer to us (scholars frequently refer to this as "circles of sympathy"), he has faith that attention to detail and genuine concern for others' circumstances allow us to enter into even foreign perspectives. We are all capable of learning to show people proper respect and to see our own actions through their eyes. And, on those occasions when people are just too distant—when the difference is too great, the information is too limited, or the time is too short to really attend to the others we encounter—Smith thinks social, political, and economic structures such as justice and the rules of the market guide people towards proper moral action.

Smith's empiricism is paired with a generous Enlightenment optimism about education. He believes that all human capabilities are improvable with training. A sailor, to take a simple example, has a capacity for sight that would "astonish" a landman, because the "custom and habit" that comes from being at sea teaches the sailor how to distinguish details at tremendous differences (ES 52). Here, again, Smith is being Aristotelian, this time in his perfectionism and his virtue ethics. Proper socialization, paired with just institutions, creates *excellent* people and societies. It also cultivates individuality and liberty, because the more educated people are, the more they are able to make informed decisions for themselves. Smith wants all actors to have keen intellects, because we are first and foremost in our own care. He wants us to make good and successful decisions.

Anyone who tries to treat people like pieces on a chessboard and move them according to his or her own pre-established system will only create discord. Human beings are "made for action" (TMS II.iii.3.3) and rely on their intellect to choose their own profession (where profession is understood in the widest sense of aims and goals). It may be for this reason that Smith laments those who do not cultivate their minds, arguing that a person "without the proper use of the intellectual faculties of a man, is, if possible, more contemptible than even a coward" (WN V.i.5.61).

TMS's account of human intellectual growth is founded on the imagination, the ability to conceive of things other than they are. This applies whether a spectator is trying to reconstruct the perspective of an actor he or she is observing from afar, or a worker is developing a mechanical design for a labor-saving device. Yet, knowledge is so vast and people are so limited, that all individuals must focus their educational efforts on a few concentrated disciplines and activities. We have to choose what and who we care about, we have to specialize.

Specialization creates experts who improve behavior and character, in the case of TMS, and technology and efficiency, in the case of WN. Innovation, in turn, leads to even more intellectual development, which then adds to empathy and understanding (in TMS), or expertise and more innovation (in WN). This may be why Smith argues early in WN that mechanical improvements come from the workers themselves:

> A great part of the machines made use of in those manufactures in which labour is most subdivided, were originally the inventions of common workmen, who, being each of them employed in some very simple operation, naturally turned their thoughts towards finding out easier and readier methods of performing it … In the first fire-engines [coal-fueled machinery], a boy was constantly employed to open and shut alternately the communication between the boiler and the cylinder, according as the piston either ascended or descended. One of those boys, who loved to play with his companions, observed that, by tying a string from the handle of the valve, which opened this communication, to another part of the machine, the valve would open and shut without his assistance, and leave him at liberty to divert himself with his play-fellows. One of the greatest improvements that has been made upon this machine, since it was first invented, was in this manner the discovery of a boy who wanted to save his own labour (WN XX).

Institutional education is only one small part of the learning process and, in fact, even schooling is to a large part internally motivated. The teacher presents material, explains what it means, answers questions, and tests student progress. As anyone who has spent any time in front of a classroom can attest, the power of an instructor is meaningless in the face of obstinate students who refuse to engage. Smith even suggests that such stubbornness may be well-informed rebellion. Students are so adroit at determining which university lectures are worthwhile, he writes, that attendance is a reliable indicator of quality (WN V.i.f.15). This both underscores Smith's faith in the natural desire to learn and implies that a teacher ought to consider an absent pupil to be an indicator of his or her own teaching skills. A thoughtful teacher will regard his or her students as stand-ins for impartial spectators.