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Adam Smith's Sympathetic Imagination: A Reply to Lennon

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In her insightful review of *When Adam Met Sally: The Transformative Potential of Sympathy*, Kathleen Lennon (2016) claims that Adam Smith's concept of the sympathetic imagination is problematic as a resource for thinking through how to intervene in damaging social imaginaries.¹ First, Smith's account reinforces in her view a picture of the sympathetic imagination as the means through which we access the experiences of others, which are otherwise inaccessible to us. This picture presupposes a conception of minds as 'hidden realms,' which she rejects (21). Second, she interprets Smithean sympathy as requiring a "shedding of one's own positionality" in the process of understanding others' experiences. The notion that we can somehow escape our situated standpoint when engaging with others has, she thinks, been rightly rejected by theorists such as Gadamer, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty (21).

In Lennon's view, we would do better to look to the work of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty instead of Smith's model, insofar as these theorists provide a more accurate and less problematic account of the workings of the imagination in our embodied encounters with others, which doesn't rely on "inference to something supposedly lying behind the expressions" in order to make sense of and to feel for others' experiences (23). Generally speaking, for these theorists the process of grasping and responding to the lived experiences of others involves directly perceiving others' feelings as expressed on their bodies, and seeing these bodily expressions "in a way that makes their position in the life of the subject, and ourselves, clear" (23).

On this model, we directly perceive the expressive content of others' bodily gestures as requiring a certain response from us. As Lennon puts it, "[m]y body takes a responsive shape during my interactions with others, and the shape it takes reveals the expressive content the body I am encountering has for me" (22). In our encounters with difference, she notes that we can fail to read and respond to others' bodies appropriately, owing to the influence of damaging and distorting social imaginaries. This problem calls, in her view, for us to develop and improve "our capacity to see the bodies of others in certain ways" (23). She concludes that a better way to conceptualise the transformations that take place in contexts of transracial parenting and engagement with literature is in terms of a shift with respect to the way in which individuals see the bodies of others via a change in imaginaries; a shift which "transform[s]... our own bodies in response" (23).

Our Selves, Our Consciousness

First, I will address Lennon's claim that Smithean sympathy appears to presuppose a picture of minds as essentially private. In this picture, we only have immediate access to our own subjective experiences; the experiences of others remain obscured or 'hidden' from us. A closer inspection of Smith's work reveals a different picture, however. For Smith, we have no immediate or direct grasp of our emotions and desires; our understanding of these things and their significance is always mediated through our embodied interactions with others. As Smith scholars such as Charles Griswold have rightly pointed out, we err in thinking of

¹ Lennon, Kathleen. "Changing Imaginaries: A Reply to Churcher." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5, no. 5 (2016): 19-23.

Smith's sympathetic imagination as an explanatory model for "how an actor gets 'out' of his or her own self and 'into' another self, as though selves were separately constituted as isolated monads to begin with, as though the theory were intended to solve a Cartesian problem of other minds." Smith's view is that "we always see ourselves through the eyes of others and are mirrors to each other. We are not transparent to our own consciousness."² As Smith himself notes in the below passage, we only come to know our own minds through our embodied encounters with others, who reflect our feelings and desires back to us in ways that enhance or diminish them:

To a man who from his birth was a stranger to society, the objects of his passions, the external bodies which either pleased or hurt him, would occupy his whole attention. The passions themselves, the desires or aversions, the joys or sorrows, which those objects excited, though of all things the most immediately present to him, could scarce ever be the objects of his thoughts...Bring him into society, and all his own passions will immediately become the causes of new passions. He will observe that mankind approve of some of them, and are disgusted by others. He will be elevated in the one case, and cast down in the other; his desires and aversions, his joys and sorrows, will now often become the causes of new aversions, new joys and new sorrows: they will now, therefore, interest him deeply, and often call upon his most attentive consideration (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [TMS], III.1.4).

In other words, for Smith there is no distinct or fixed 'self' waiting to be discovered prior to our interactions with those in our social community: our self-conception is always mediated through others' embodied responses to us, whether these 'others' be actual spectators or imagined impartial spectators.

Lennon's description of Smithean sympathy as a causal, quasi-mechanistic process also merits attention. She writes that on Smith's model, "[w]e seem to use the imagination to provide us with, to conjure up, some kind of phenomenological data, namely access to the experiences of others...and then such imaginative data (causally) produces the appropriate reactions in us" (21). Such a description seems to me to be more aligned with a certain empiricist model of sympathy, in which we as observers move inferentially from the effects or signs of an emotion in another person to the idea of the emotion that person is feeling; an idea we form on the basis of having repeatedly witnessed or experienced a causal conjunction between a certain bodily expression or set of expressions and a particular emotion.

This idea is then converted into the same emotion within us.

Smith, on my reading, offers a less mechanistic and non-inferentialist account of the process by which we enter into and feel for others' experiences. Sympathy for him is primarily a matter of imaginatively simulating the other's circumstances and experiences; of 'throwing' oneself into the other's shoes and taking on his or her particular standpoint, as it were. This

² Charles Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 104-105.

kind of immersive imaginative engagement draws on individuals' capacities for perception and feeling, as well as her cognitive resources.

Sympathy and Positionality

Lennon observes that Smithean sympathy, as I have presented it, appears to require a problematic shedding of one's own positionality. This point presents me with the opportunity to clarify and expand on an important aspect of Smith's account. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith is clear that when imagining ourselves as the other (with his or her particular values, history, and beliefs) and not merely imagining ourselves in his or her situation, we never shed our particular standpoint. Even though Smith takes us to be capable of immersive acts of imagination when sympathizing with others, he observes that what we come to feel in response typically fails to exactly mirror what the other feels. Smith notes:

... when we condole with our friends in their afflictions, how little do we feel, in comparison of what they feel? We sit down by them, we look at them, and while they relate to us the circumstances of their misfortune, we listen to them with gravity and attention. But while their narration is every moment interrupted by those natural bursts of passion which often seem almost to choak them in the midst of it; how far are the languid emotions of our hearts from keeping time to the transports of theirs? (TMS, I.iii.1.12).

Smith thinks that this failure to experience the intensity of what the other feels can be attributed to the fact that we retain a "secret consciousness" that we are not the other (TMS, I.i.iv.8). Yet he also attributes it to the fact that we, as spectators, retain a degree of critical distance from the other's feelings, which enables us space in which to make a judgment about whether or not the other's response to her circumstances is appropriate. If, after imaginatively "bringing home" the other's case "with all its minutest incidents," (TMS, I.i.iv.6) we do not find her response to be warranted, we will not second her feelings through a full-blooded display of fellow-feeling. As Smith explains:

To approve of the passions of another, therefore, is to observe that we entirely sympathise with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathise with them (TMS, I.i.3.1).

If we were to completely immerse ourselves in the other's experience and fully identify with her perspective, we would lose the kind of self-awareness and capacity for critical reflection that from a Smithean standpoint enables us to recognize difference and to make moral judgments grounded in fellow-feeling.

The Turn to Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty

Having addressed Lennon's two main criticisms of Smithean sympathy as a social resource, I now turn to her suggestion that the work of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty provides a better framework for conceptualising how it is that individuals come to understand and

recognize others' embodied experiences through the exercise of imagination. One of the main advantages of their accounts, she claims, is that they do not rely on individuals having to conjure up an idea of what another person is feeling on the basis of her bodily gestures and expressions. Rather, individuals automatically and immediately recognize the other's emotional state *in* the bodily expression or gesture itself. This kind of "perceptual sensitivity" is developed over time through participation in one's cultural community (21).

On my account however, what is chiefly at stake in drawing on Smithean sympathy as a foundation for building harmonious communities across difference is not to offer a precise account of how it is that individuals identify or recognize the emotions that others are experiencing. In short: my primary concern in this context is not with how we come to develop and exercise our capacities for emotional recognition (I think besides that there are various ways in which we might develop and exercise this capacity). Rather I am interested in the unique capacity of the sympathetic imagination to generate an understanding of others' feelings and experiences that has a deeply recognitive and transformative aspect.

Several passages from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* inspire the thought that Smithean sympathy has this recognitive aspect in part when observers carefully attend to the meaning and significance of others' feelings in the context of their particular lived histories and socio-cultural positioning.³ The contextualized, embodied understanding that is generated by sympathy of this kind elicits a degree of fellow-feeling that is conducive to the formation of harmonious social communities, even in the absence of absolute consensus or shared agreement about the propriety of others' responses to their circumstances—or so Smith's remarks imply.⁴ In *When Adam Met Sally*, I suggested that exercises of the sympathetic imagination may also be deeply transformative for observers, by generating a form of knowledge that is embodied, and which implicates their sense of self and will to act in a way that mere knowledge of facts about the other and their circumstances does not (428).

Lennon recommends Merleau-Ponty's account of how we grasp and relate to others' embodied experiences on the basis that it does not involve any kind of "intellectual interpretation" (22). On this model we come (over time and with training) to 'blindly recognise' the gestures of others as expressing a particular emotion, where these bodily shapes and gestures are "directly perceived as requiring or facilitating certain responds" from ourselves or others. "Expressions of pain or grief," she writes, "prompt responses of comfort and solicitude from others" (22).

As I have explained, what is at stake for theorists like Smith who are centrally concerned with the role of sympathy in building moral communities (rather than with, say, sympathy as an epistemic mechanism for grasping what others are feeling) is working towards an

³ See for example TMS Liv.7 & V.2.9.

⁴ Smith implies that imaginatively entering into the other's perspective does not necessarily entail whole-hearted identification or agreement with that perspective. Being in sympathy with another (in terms of emotionally resonating with their feelings) does not necessarily require that one also be approving. In other words, Smith's account leaves room for the fact that while fellow-feeling often incorporates a judgment of approval, it may not always do so. A judgment of approval serves to intensify our fellow-feeling with the agent, as evidenced by Smith's qualification that when we approve of another's response we 'entirely' sympathise with her (TMS, I.i.3.1).

embodied understanding of the particular meaning of another person's grief or pain in a given context. Without this kind of understanding—an understanding that often relies heavily on our capacities for reason, critical interpretation and self-reflection—our responses of comfort and solicitude may risk being inappropriate or obtuse. It is through regularly exercising our capacity for a more reflective, educated, and disciplined mode of sympathy that we begin to weave a shared space in which others' feelings can be properly recognized and to enlarge the scope of our ethical concern.

Of course, it might be the case that with a sufficient amount of experience and practice we can come to directly perceive others' experiences in such a fine-grained, contextually-sensitive way that we automatically respond in ethical ways without the need for the conscious, deliberative exercise of our intellect and capacity for critical self-reflection. But this is entirely consistent with what Smith says about the development and cultivation of virtue. Smith writes that the wise and virtuous man

... does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He readily adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel (TMS, III.3.25).

Here, and in other passages, Smith plausibly suggests that with practice over time, we may come to educate and refine our critical standpoint to such an extent that our feelings automatically reflect a moral viewpoint. On the basis of the foregoing considerations, it is not clear what recommends the work of Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein over Smith's account as a better way of thinking through what is involved in the process of understanding and relating to others' lived experiences.

Seeing the Bodies of Others

I return now to Lennon's closing remark that in racist societies, what needs changing is our capacity to see the bodies of others in certain ways. This change, she notes, occurs through a shift in damaging imaginaries (23). What I have argued is that individual exercises of the sympathetic imagination, as well as social movements and institutional initiatives that appeal to our capacity for sympathetic imagination, are key to changing the way we see and thus relate to others and their experiences. In other words, exercises of the sympathetic imagination help to facilitate or advance the kind of 'seeing-as' that Lennon identifies as being so important for meliorating patterns of social agency. On this basis, it is unclear where the disagreement between our accounts lies. If we can accept that Smith's model of sympathy does not presuppose a problematic conception of individual minds, it is not overly clear what is to be gained in rejecting Smithean sympathy as a social resource in favour of the models proposed by Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein.

I take it that there can be many possible ways of grasping and relating to others' feelings and experiences, and that there can be many ways of altering patterns of social understanding and response. What I have suggested is that Smithean sympathy provides *one* possible (and important) route to this end. Smith offers us, in my view, a powerful illustration of an

imaginative practice that is key to establishing and sustaining sociability across difference; but this is not to say that the imagination cannot function in other ways to alter the way in which we relate to others and their experiences.

Indeed, Smith recognized that there are various ways in which we may come to be affected and moved by others' sentiments and circumstances. These include instances of emotional contagion as well as instances of imaginative self-projection, where we imagine what we ourselves would feel in the other's situation. Without a more detailed explanation of why and how Smithean sympathy "sits in tension" (20) with the practices and structures I have identified as being important for shifting collective ways of imagining others and their circumstances, I see no reason to reject the view of Smith's account of sympathy as a rich resource for thinking through how to intervene in damaging social imaginaries.

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