**Adam Smith and the Emergence of General Rules**

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* Smith’s starting point: our delusional self-love
  + “The violence and injustice of our own selfish passions are sometimes sufficient to induce the man within the breast to make a report very different from what the real circumstances of the case are capable of authorizing” (TMS, 157).
    - Smith adds that after the act, and after some time has passed, we “can enter more coolly into the sentiments of the indifferent spectator.”
    - But even then, we struggle to come to terms with the fact that we once acted unjustly and end up learning nothing
  + Behavioral economists have taken note of this (Ashraf, Nava, Colin F. Camerer and George Loewenstein. 2005. "Adam Smith, Behavioral Economist.")
  + But they don’t really see the system which Smith is building
* The solution: “Nature, however, has not left this weakness, which is of so much importance, altogether without a remedy; nor has she abandoned us entirely to the delusions of self-love. Our continual observations upon the conduct of others insensibly lead us to form to ourselves certain general rules concerning what is fit and proper either to be done or to be avoided.” (TMS, 159)
  + The process of general rule formation is inductive:
    - We observe an action
    - This action inspires certain feelings
    - We reflect on these feelings and form general rules, recognizing that all such actions of a similar kind should be similarly praised or blamed
  + These general rules come to constrain us in future actions and combat our self-love
* When general rules become widely shared in a community, then they become standards of judgment
  + The existence of such general rules is helpful in determining the rightness or wrongness of an action without having to review all the reasons for why the action is right or wrong
  + This sometimes gives the impression that they are the ultimate foundations of right and wrong (as if they were created a priori – as if we first consider the general rule and then whether or not an action aligns with it)
  + Ultimately, general rules give some regularity to society; people aren’t regularly nasty and brutish!
* Smith’s account seems useful and illuminating, but it leaves some open questions
  + Smith doesn’t consider very much how general rules change
    - Or what happens when different sets of general rules collide with one another
  + Nor does he really evaluate general rules
    - Smith rules out the possibility that societies could persist long if most people are frequently trying to fight with one another
    - He seems to believe that the general rules of each society are well-suited to the problems they face
    - Some have alleged that Smith is a relativist
  + He hints at these two problems in his discussion of infanticide:
    - Argues that infanticide makes sense in primitive societies when parents must choose between dying with their child or living to see another day
    - But that infanticide might outgrow its usefulness
    - He notes that even Plato and Aristotle condoned the practice (which I think might be his way of saying that we can’t overcome bad customs through top-down engineering)