

This post is part of a series on the 'history of human sciences'.

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✘ OK, I admit. Adam Smith never talked about [mirror neurons](#). So why am I bringing this topic up? Because Smith actually did, in a way, tackle the debate about mirror neurons and empathy.

What is this debate? In recent years, [empathy](#), understood as the capacity to recognize and, to some extent, share feelings (such as sadness or happiness) that are being experienced by another sentient being, has received more and more interest. In particular, the study of the neural underpinnings of empathy has received increased interest following a Behavioral and Brain Sciences target article published by Stephanie Preston and Frans de Waal, following the discovery of mirror neurons in monkeys that fire both when the creature watches another creature perform an action as well as when they perform it themselves. In their [paper](#), they (as well as others like Gallese) argued that perception of the object's state automatically activates neural representations, and that this activation automatically primes or generates the associated autonomic and somatic responses, unless inhibited.

But what does any of this have to do with Adam Smith? Like modern psychologists and anthropologists, Smith thought that our capacity to experience feelings about the feelings of others was the basis of social life. In fact, his Theory of Moral Sentiments starts with these words:

"How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it."

And for those who are tempted to doubt the connection between Smith's view of sympathy and its modern counterpart, he immediately adds that it is automatic:

"As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations."

So does this mean that we should see Smith as the 'big ancestor' of the modern mirror neuron theory? Not so fast. Actually, my point is that Adam Smith had anticipated some of the weaknesses of the mirror neuron theory.

Although Smith agrees with modern advocates of empathy that humans have a unique capacity to be moved by the feelings of others, he disagrees about the actual mechanism. We do not feel pain for others because their emotions automatically activate similar emotions in us. Instead, it is because we understand their situation:

"Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it. We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality."

Indeed, says Smith, we are sometimes moved by others' situations while not sharing the same emotion:

"We blush for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour; because we cannot help feeling with what confusion we ourselves should be covered, had we behaved in so absurd a manner."

If the advocates of mirror neurons were right, we should experience the same emotions as others. But this is not the case. We do not automatically imitate others' emotions. Instead, we experience our own emotion, which depends on our interest in the other's situation: if a friend is in a bad situation, whether or not he feels bad at the time, we will be sad; in contrast, if an enemy, someone for whom we have some antipathy, is in a bad situation, we may actually be happy; and if a friend feels, say, jealous of his partner, we won't be jealous as well, we will, depending on our opinion of the situation, be sad as well, or maybe angry at our friend who is unjustly jealous. In all these cases, others' emotions do not automatically generate similar emotions in ourselves (a point that is well emphasized in Anderson and Keltner's reply to Preston and de Waal). In other terms, it is not clear that humans have a capacity for empathy (to share someone else's emotions) rather than a capacity for sympathy (to share someone else's interests).

Of course, this capacity for sympathy (and antipathy!) requires some intuitive psychology (Theory of Mind, face detection, etc.) and some social knowledge, to be able to understand others' interests (why they are sad, how much they suffer), but this intuitive psychology does not imply experiencing others' emotions.

To nail down his conclusion, Smith provides quite an original example. See, says, Smith, we even sympathize with the dead, who obviously do not experience any emotions!

"We sympathize even with the dead, and overlooking what is of real importance in their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them, we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike our senses, but can have no influence upon their happiness. It is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations. Surely, we imagine, we can never feel too much for those who have suffered so dreadful a calamity. The tribute of our fellow-feeling seems doubly due to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by every body; and, by the vain honours which we pay to their memory, we endeavour, for our own misery, artificially to keep alive our melancholy remembrance of their misfortune."

The evidence from the dead! I wonder, dear readers, what you think of this kind of evidence. I agree that psychology has made immense progress in the last two centuries and that the advances of experimental methods have generated invaluable data. However, I sometimes think wistfully of another time when it was possible to use simple and yet elegant arguments to defend or attack a

theory...

That's all for Adam Smith. But there is more for those interested. After having written this post, I discovered Ashraf, Camerer and Loewenstein's [paper](#) on Smith as a behavioral economist. another example of present-based history of social science where you find out how notions such as loss aversion, intertemporal choice and overconfidence were already emerging in the XVIIIe century!