



Samuel Fleischacker, *Being Me Being You: Adam Smith and Empathy*

University of Chicago Press, 2019, 248 pp., ISBN: 978-0226661759

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With *Being Me Being You*, Samuel Fleischacker provides a reconstruction and defense of Adam Smith's account of empathy, and the role it plays in building moral consensus, motivating moral behavior, and correcting our biases, prejudices, and tendency to demonize one another. He sees this book as an intervention in recent debates about the role that empathy plays in our morality. For some, such as Paul Bloom, Joshua Greene, Jesse Prinz, and others, empathy, or our capacity for fellow-feeling, tends to misguide us in the best of cases, and more often reinforces faction and tribalism in morals and politics. These utilitarians, as Fleischacker refers to them, propose that empathy take a back seat to cost-benefit analysis in moral decision-making. As an intervention, the book is largely successful. Fleischacker's defense of empathy is nuanced and escapes the myopic enthusiasm to which many partisans of empathy are prone. Anyone looking to understand the relationship between empathy and morality would do well to grapple with *Being Me Being You*. Still, Fleischacker overlooks that Smith would most likely be less convinced of the idea that greater empathy can help us overcome the great challenges of our time.

In Chapter 1, Fleischacker clarifies the concept of empathy. He distinguishes empathy from sympathy: 'we use 'empathy' for the sharing of feelings, and 'sympathy' for caring for others' (p. 2). According to Fleischacker, empathy is a "sharing of feeling that comes about via either contagion or projection" (p. 3). Contagion is an unreflective process whereby we "catch" the sentiments of others; projection is the process by which we place ourselves "in the shoes" of another via imagination (p. 3). He labels the empathy of contagion "Humean empathy" and the empathy of projection "Smithean empathy"

(p. 4). His aim in *Being Me Being You* is to sketch out and defend an account of Smithean empathy by considering recent work in cognitive psychology, ethics, and social philosophy.

In Chapter 2, Fleischacker sketches an account of Smithean empathy and argues it is a 'condition for respectful, sensitive, and nuanced forms of caring' (p. 47). To genuinely care for others, and to "respect the *differences* between ourselves and others," one must be able to put themselves in the shoes of another (p. 47). Through Smithean empathy, we are pushed to reckon with the irreducible distinctiveness of others. As Fleischacker points out, 'we are aware of the fact that the person with whom we are empathizing has a distinctive perspective from which she experiences her feelings. If she comes into fellow-feeling with me, she is likewise aware of my distinctive perspective' (p. 30). In this experience of empathizing with one another, we also develop a shared sense of our common humanity, as beings who both "have a perspective" and the ability to 'enter one another's perspectives by way of empathy' (p. 31). In this manner, to be a human being is to be aware of one's own perspective and one's ability to step outside this perspective and enter into another's through one's imagination.

In Chapter 3, Fleischacker discusses a few points that 'Smith missed or dealt with inadequately' (p. 49). First, do nonhuman animals have a capacity for Smithean empathy (p. 56–60)? He argues that nonhuman animals have less individuated perspectives than human beings and so cannot partake of Smithean empathy. As such, Fleischacker claims, they are not afforded the same treatment as humans. Second, does Smithean empathy always lead to a sympathetic concern for others or is the connection between the two contingent (p. 60)? The world is hardly bereft of Elmer Gantry-type characters who are adept at "perspective-taking" but use this ability to manipulate others (p. 61). Fleischacker responds that is a difference between 'Cold perspective-taking, without an attempt to feel what it would be like to be another' and Smithean empathy, which is tied to a concern for others (p.

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61). The Elmer Gantry types of the world are only capable of the former, not the latter. Third, does Smithean empathy help reinforce ‘local norms, and all the prejudices they may contain’ rather than correct them (p. 67)? If the perspectives to which we have access are morally confused, Smithean empathy will further ensnare us in this web of confusion. Fleischacker claims that Smithean empathy ‘does no worse in practice...than explicitly universalist theories’ in combatting “uncritical conventionalism’ (p. 67). After all, Smithean empathy ensures that our own perspective is responsive to new evidence and circumstances. Lastly, does Smithean empathy contribute to epistemic injustice, given that “testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are likely to infect our empathy” (p. 73)? To ensure our empathy is not skewed by prejudice, Fleischacker argues that we must already be aware of our tendencies towards injustice and be inclined to overcome them. However, he points out, this problem is one any moral theory faces.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Fleischacker explores two criticisms often made of Smith’s moral theory: that it is relativistic and unduly partial. First, Fleischacker argues that the impartial spectator allows us to engage in cross-cultural comparisons. From these comparisons, we can develop ‘our conception of general human nature,’ providing us with a standard to judge both our culture and that of others (p. 87). Over time, Fleischacker imagines that we gain a deeper appreciation of our “shared humanity,” which encourages an openness in our interactions with others (p. 88). Still, one might worry that empathy could support bias and faction. As Fleischacker notes, ‘our empathetic concern notoriously goes out far more readily to members of limited social groups—our family, our religion, our nation— than to humanity at large’ (p. 89). Fleischacker’s response is twofold. He argues that universalist moral theories fare no better in biasing local groups, pointing to the failures of cosmopolitanism to make his case (p. 96–97). He also maintains that Smithean empathy gives us the tools to develop a general concern for humanity, even if this concern does not outweigh our affection for those near and dear. Still, Fleischacker argues, these local attachments “implicitly entail a respect for all humanity” (p. 101). Through empathy, this respect becomes explicit.

In Chapters 6–8, Fleischacker considers the utilitarian critiques of empathy, which ‘urge us to eschew empathy in favor of utilitarian cost-benefit analysis as the main basis of our moral decision-making’ (p. 102). The aim of Chapter 6 is to show “they miss their target if directed at *Smithean* empathy” (p. 102). After all, Smith ‘embeds empathy in a wider moral theory in which it is shaped and checked by the judgments of an impartial spectator, the application of general rules, and a realistic, careful appreciation of the often utilitarian workings of large-scale social institutions’ (p. 111). In Chapter 7, Fleischacker argues that cost-benefit analysis provides insufficient moral guidance. Outside of “death, physical harm, and

hunger,” he claims that empathy is needed to register harms, especially those which are difficult to measure, like a harm to one’s dignity, or a harm that is dependent on a worldview that is not shared (p. 177; 122–123). In Chapter 8, Fleischacker claims that Smithean empathy allows us to develop a shared moral consensus by triangulating our perspectives on what matters to us. In this way, he argues, ‘empathy can provide an attractive foundation for moral theory’ (p. 148).

In the final chapter of *Being Me Being You*, Fleischacker examines the phenomenon of “demonization,” or our propensity to ‘refuse all *empathy*’ to people who we see as “inhumanly evil” (p. 151; 149). For Fleischacker, demonization is the largest threat to the moral project of humanism: refusing empathy to another is ‘the refusal to acknowledge that I could have been him, and he could have been me. We cut off all humanity with people we demonize’ (p. 161). In this way, Smithean empathy affords us the tools to combat demonization, provided we are watchful of these tendencies. Through Smithean empathy, we leave ourselves open to the experiences of others and lay the foundation for respect and mutual concern. Without empathy, we endanger the possibility of moral understanding.

There is much to appreciate about *Being Me Being You*; however, Fleischacker is unclear about whether empathy is meant to be the *foundation* of morality or a *contribution* to moral practice. At times, he claims that empathy is the former (p. 148). Other times, Fleischacker points out that “empathy alone may be an inadequate foundation for morality and politics. But it nevertheless contributes a crucial element to our moral and political thinking – crucial, in particular, to the humane treatment of people we might otherwise ignore or condemn” (p. 115). Many scholars would agree that while empathy contributes to our moral *consideration* of others, it remains silent as to the *content* of moral norms and fails to provide us with adequate moral *motivation*.

When it comes to the content of our moral norms, Fleischacker argues that through Smithean empathy we can triangulate our distinct perspectives and develop a ‘common moral currency’ (p. 145). He imagines that this currency is the natural result of a “fair, rational, and empathetic conversation” whereby we attempt to persuade one another of our conception of the good. Setting aside any worries about procedural accounts of normativity, particularly in the absence of respectable non-ideal theory, and the logistics required for a fair discussion between parties, I am not sure Smith would agree with Fleischacker’s optimistic assessment. In the final sections of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith claims that ‘the desires of persuading, of leading and directing other people, seem to be one of the strongest of all our natural desires’ (TMS VII.iv.25). Our desire leads us to seek “real superiority, of leading and directing the judgments and conduct of other people” by way of speech (Ibid.). For Smith, speech is a vehicle for persuasion, the driver of which is an agonistic desire for

victory. In non-ideal conditions, the “moral currency” that results from any triangulation will be “common” in name alone.

But one might ask, what about the impartial spectator? We not only develop a common moral currency through our process of empathetic triangulation, but we also learn to remove ourselves from our own point of view and take on the perspective of the impartial spectator. Surely, the spectator checks our desire to persuade others, ensuring we are neither cruel nor unjust in our search for superiority. Even in this case, our connection to the impartial spectator is not motivated by our empathetic relation to others but to our aspirational self. Smith describes our journey to the impartial spectator as the gradual shedding of our reliance on the esteem or applause of others (TMS III.3.24). Instead, we come to view our own ‘self-approbation’ as a guide to our conduct (TMS III.3.28) and turn to ‘Time, the great and universal comforter’ to assist us with any hardships along the way (TMS III.3.32).

The narrative of TMS III tells of how we come to achieve our independence by enjoying the pleasures of self-approbation that follow from one’s seeking propriety with the impartial spectator. On this view, our guiding motive is hardly the warm fellow-feeling that Fleischacker attributes to Smith:

It is not the love of our neighbor, it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of those divine virtues. It is a strong love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place upon such occasions; the love of what is honorable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters (TMS III.3.5).

The promise of humanism is realized here only in a weak sense. From the perspective of the impartial spectator, we come to see that “the happiness of mankind” depends on our adherence to general rules, which help check our self-love (TMS III.5.7). In this way, we learn to be a caretaker of humanity by following the dictates of our conscience and avoiding the cruelty to which we are prone when we do not consider the value of others. Still, the connection between empathy and humanism is hardly airtight, especially when it comes to grounding humanistic motivations or the content of a humanist ethics. I also suspect that Paul Bloom, Joshua Greene, and Jesse Prinz would not take issue with the idea that empathy is an important moral capacity, insofar as it enables us to share in the sentiments of others. Their claim is that we should also be watchful of this capacity, and Smith tends to agree.

To conclude, empathy could play one of three possible roles in morality. First, it could contribute to our seeing people as worthy of moral *consideration*. Without empathy, we are likely to disregard those with whom we disagree or are not otherwise connected. This view of empathy is not particularly controversial. Second, it helps us establish the *content* of our moral norms, perhaps through the process of triangulation that Fleischacker describes in his book. On a strong reading—whereby empathy is the primary factor—Smith disagrees and Fleischacker seems to disagree as well. On a weaker reading—where empathy is one amongst several factors—it becomes unclear what role empathy is playing in the story, and Fleischacker does not clarify its role. Third, it is the source of moral *motivation*. Smith agrees, though he argues that it is our empathy for the impartial spectator, not for individuals, that motivates us to act morally. In one sense, Fleischacker’s appraisal of empathy goes beyond what Smith would be willing to say in its favor. However, Fleischacker does not distinguish Smith’s account from the views of many other scholars, who hold that while empathy plays a crucial role in moral consideration, it does not provide moral content or moral motivation.

Fleischacker’s *Being Me Being You* is an important contribution to scholarship on Adam Smith, as well as to contemporary ethical theories about the moral value of empathy. The book provides one of the more sophisticated and careful treatments of empathy I have encountered in recent years and ought to reignite interest in a debate that has gone stale. Furthermore, *Being Me Being You* brings together many of the themes in Fleischacker’s work and therefore is a worthy addition to his stellar collection of monographs. I remain less convinced than Fleischacker, and I suspect Smith, of the ability of empathy, in its Humean or Smithean form, to ground a humanistic ethics. In a world where the comfortable existence of some is made possible by the sacrifices of those with whom we rarely meet, either by choice or by circumstance, we need more than empathy to realize the promise of humanism—we need full-blooded justice.

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