

EAST MEETS WEST: THE DALAI LAMA AND ADAM SMITH

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INTRODUCTION

One of the enjoyable aspects of studying the history of economic thought is the identification of reoccurring themes in the development of economics and the study of the economy. This identification of themes can include the identification of recurrent policy themes or recurrent philosophical positions. The reoccurrence of ideas may be made by both economists as well as non-economists commenting upon economic matters. This paper attempts to identify the similarities between some recently published texts, written by an individual easily classified as a non-economist, and the much earlier ideas of a well known economist.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama has recently published four texts. Those texts include: *Ethics for the New Millennium* [4]; *The Art of Living, A Guide to Contentment, Joy, and Fulfillment* [5]; *An Open Heart, Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life* [6]; and *How to Practice, The Way to a Meaningful Life* [7]. In these texts, His Holiness proposes a way by which individuals can live a moral and virtuous life. If these texts are read by an economist, many of the positions and arguments put forth by the Dalai Lama bear marked resemblance to the much earlier ideas of Adam Smith put forward in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [16]. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith's first and in his mind most important book length work, outlined his view of proper conduct and the institutions and sentiments that make men virtuous. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was to be the first book in a planned trilogy that included *The Wealth of Nations* [17] and an unfinished third work [14, p. 87]. In this work, Smith developed the doctrine of the impartial and imaginary spectator whose hypothetical, disinterested judgment could be used to distinguish right from wrong in any given situation. According to Smith, society is held together by sympathy. Smith argued that individuals naturally share the emotions and to a certain extent the physical sensations witnessed in others. Sharing the sensations of others, an individual seeks to maximize his or her pleasures and minimize the pains of others so that one may share in the joys of others and enjoy the affection and approval of others [12, p. 141].

SMITH'S THEORY OF MORAL SENTIMENTS

Smith actually enjoyed a very high reputation among the Scottish population long before his name was known to the greater public by his contributions to literature. In 1759 he published his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and almost immediately and universally was recognized as a first rank contemporary writer throughout Europe and the rest of the world [12, p. 141]. During his lifetime the text went through eight editions, the last appearing in 1790. It was the notoriety of this text that secured for him the position of tutor to the Duke of Buccleugh. While traveling abroad with the young duke, Smith had both the time and inclination to

begin his better known economically work *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* [17]. Unfortunately, economists often forget or do not discuss Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Economists are preoccupied with discussing Smith's contributions as they may be found in the *Wealth of Nations* [19]. In studying Smith, it is important to study both of his major works to compare and contrast the positive side of Smith as an economist and the normative side of Smith as a moral philosopher [11, p. 111]. Likewise, it is important to study both of Smith's works to see the evolution of Smith's ideas, particularly that of his notion of the invisible hand [8, pp. 23-26]. It is also important to study both works so one may distinguish impersonal market exchange discussed in the *Wealth of Nations* from personal social exchange discussed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Efficiency in market exchange is based on somewhat non-cooperative behavior while efficiency in social exchange definitely requires reciprocity [18, p. 8]. Though different, the two texts were part of Smith's bigger system. There was the system of natural liberty and economics proposed in the *Wealth of Nations* and the system of morals sentiments based on sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [10, p. 137]. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was Smith's statement of social psychology as opposed to a mere precursor of the *Wealth of Nation* [1, p. 205].

Adam Smith was the Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. It is probably from his lecture notes on ethics, given for this chair, that he drew the material for *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [15, p. 159]. He may have received his inspiration regarding sympathy as a principle of human nature from the writings of Hume his friend and contemporary [15, pp. 161-162]. In his text, Smith extends the meaning of sympathy beyond the concept of sharing someone's feelings to that of an individual's awareness that he or she is sharing another person's feelings. As mentioned above, Smith contribution to the study of ethics was the development of the concept of the ideal or impartial spectator to account for the formation of individuals' judgements of themselves [15, pp. 164-165]. This internal spectator has been identified as an individual's conscience [1, p. 184]. One gains an understanding of another's situation by role switching. According to Smith, the ability to see the world through the eyes of the impartial spectator becomes a natural attribute of an individual's personality [1, p. 184]. A perspective similar to Smith's philosophical position has recently been advocated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in several written works.

THE DALAI LAMA AND ETHICAL CONDUCT

The Dalai Lama was born on July 6, 1935 to a poor family in Taktser in the Tibetan Province of Amdo. His original name was Lhamo Thondup which literally translates as wish-fulfilling goddess. His parents were small farmers who primarily grew buckwheat and potatoes. When Lhamo Thondup was just three years old, a search party had been sent out by the Tibetan government to find the new incarnation of the Dalai Lama. The search party confirmed Lhamo Thondup as the 14th Dalai Lama when the young boy correctly identified various personal objects belonging to the deceased 13th Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is held to be the reincarnation of each of the previous thirteen Dalai Lamas of Tibet the first having been born in 1351 AD. Each of these Lamas is said to have ties to other spiritual leaders as well as ties to Buddha himself [9].

The young boy, Lhamo Thondup, was first taken to the Kumbum monastery, also in the Amdo Province, to begin his education. Later he moved to the capital city of Lhasa where he was installed as the spiritual leader of Tibet in 1940. His Holiness began to receive an education in Buddhist studies. His curriculum included: logic, Tibetan art and culture, Sanskrit, medicine, and Buddhist philosophy. His study of Buddhist philosophy was considered the most important of these topical areas.

In November of 1950, at the age of fifteen, the Dalai Lama was enthroned as the temporal leader of Tibet. Shortly after this rise to power, the 15-year-old Dalai Lama found himself the leader of six million people facing the threat of war with China. For nearly nine years the Dalai Lama struggled with the possibility of a full-scale military takeover of Tibet by China on the one hand and the growing resentment among Tibetan resistance fighters on the other. In March of 1959, under the advisement of government and spiritual leaders, the Dalai Lama fled Tibet along with other high ranking Tibetan officials. The Dalai Lama fled to India where he, to this day, resides with his government in exile [9]. Though he travels the world widely, his home is now considered to be in Dharamsala, India [4, p. xiii].

In his book, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, the Dalai Lama discusses positive ethical conduct. He attempts, however, to approach this subject from what he calls universal rather than religious principles [4, p. xiii]. He states that he has come to the conclusion that whether or not a person is a religious believer does not matter much in his or her ethical conduct. Far more important in that consideration is that he or she is a good human being [4, p. 19]. Yet, he does base his discussion on the Buddhist perspective that all individuals strive to be happy and avoid suffering. In his narrative, everything people do, not only as individuals but also at the level of society, can be seen in terms of this fundamental aspiration [4, p. 4]. This approach is consistent with that of most world religions that direct their attentions to helping human beings achieve lasting happiness [4, p. 20]. Indeed, the Dalai Lama wants to show that there are some universal ethical principles that could help everyone achieve the happiness to which they aspire [4, p. 22]. According to the Dalai Lama, it is important for all to practice ethical principles because everything perceived and experienced arises as a result of an indefinite series of interrelated causes and conditions [4, p. 40]. The Dalai Lama [4, p. 41] writes, “[i]t also becomes apparent that our every action, our every deed, word, and thought, no matter how slight or inconsequential it may seem, has an implication not only for ourselves but for all others, too.”

His Holiness stresses that those living in the materially developed countries for all their industry, are in some ways less satisfied, are less happy, and to some extent suffer more than those living in the less developed countries of the world [4, p. 5]. As an equal concern, he argues that individuals sense that their futures are dependant not on their neighbors but rather on their jobs or employers. He is concerned that individuals suppose that others are not important in their life and therefore their happiness is not important. He states that individuals now live in a society where people find it harder and harder to show one another basic affection [4, p. 8]. He posits that individuals may no longer know how to act in a moral sense [4, pp. 11-12]. Though individuals are basically kind and compassionate, they are capable of cruelty and hatred. Therefore, people must struggle to have better conduct in their dealings with others [4, p. 70]. It is in the Dalai Lama’s discussion of good conduct and his recommendations for dealings with others that the economic reader sees a similarity to the writings of Smith.

The Dalai Lama stresses that most individuals have a ‘spiritual’ side of their character that actually has a level of concern for the well-being of others. He argues that individuals do not like to see others suffering [4, p. 65]. He further argues that people’s experience with suffering connects them to others. These experiences are the basis for an individual’s capacity for empathy [4, p. 133]. The Dalai Lama’s position is quite similar to Smith’s discussion of man’s ability to show or understand the concept of sympathy. In the words of the Dalai Lama [4, p. 143] “[b]ut to the extent that our experience of suffering reminds us of what all others also endure, it serves as a powerful injunction to practice compassion and refrain from causing others pain.”

In his text, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, [4] the Dalai Lama asks for a radical reorientation away from the habitual preoccupation with self and an adoption of the characteristics mentioned above [4, p. 23]. To show ethical restraint, according to the Dalai Lama, one adopts love, compassion and the qualities of sympathy mentioned above. Returning to this Buddhist roots, the Dalai Lama [4, p. 28] states “... establishing binding ethical principles is possible when we take as our starting point the observation that we all desire happiness and wish to avoid suffering.” An act that harms another individual or does violence to another individual is potentially an unethical act. Ethical acts refrain from causing harm to others’ experiences or expectations of happiness [4, p. 61]. The more people develop compassion, the more genuinely ethical their conduct will be [4, p. 74]. According to His Holiness, in order to act in a consistently compassionate manner, one must develop an ethic of virtue [4, p. 101].

According to the Dalai Lama, for one to be genuinely happy he or she must have inner peace. He argues that his own sense of inner peace comes from a concern for others [4, p. 55]. As a natural consequence of this concern, one should develop a sense of altruism [4, p. 61]. One must guard against those factors that obstruct inner peace and cultivate those factors that are conducive to inner peace [4, p. 58]. What brings individuals the greatest joy and satisfaction in life are those actions that are undertaken out of the concern for others [4, p. 120]. The reader is again reminded that this is similar in nature to the concept of sympathy advanced in Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

The Dalai Lama calls for a sense of universal responsibility. As part of universal responsibility he argues that individuals must commit themselves to honesty [4, p. 167]. If people develop an attitude of responsibility toward others they can begin to create the kinder and more compassionate world that His Holiness is seeking [4, p. 173]. In summary, he suggests that individuals should learn to treat everyone as if they were a close friend [4, p. 236].

Similar arguments are put forward in the text *The Art of Living, A Guide to Contentment, Joy, and Fulfillment* [5]. The basis for this book was taken from a series of public lectures given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama at Wembley Conference Centre in London, England in May of 1993. The Dalai Lama, in this text, again stresses that “... all sentient beings, particularly human beings, want happiness and do not want pain and suffering” [5, p. 11]. He goes on to argue that good conduct by an individual is the way in which life becomes more meaningful, more constructive, and more peaceful [5, p. 35].

In this work there are several comments by the Dalai Lama that bear sharp resemblance to comments one might find in Smith’s work discussed above. Those comments include:

Compassion is the most wonderful and precious thing. When we talk about compassion, it is encouraging to note that basic human nature is I believe, compassionate and gentle [5, p. 95].

It must be said that genuine compassion is not like pity or a feeling that others are lower than yourself. Rather, with genuine compassion you view others as more important than yourself [5, p. 101].

By nature, especially as a human being, my interests are not independent of others [5, p. 107].

Human compassion, or what I sometimes call human affection, is the key factor for all human business [5, p. 116].

For a third time the position of the Dalai Lama is repeated in *An Open Heart, Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life* [6]. In August of 1999 His Holiness the Dalai Lama was invited by the Tibet Center and The Gere Foundation to give a series of talks in New York City. This book is drawn from those talks. While in New York, the Dalai Lama gave presentations at Beacon Theatre, Madison Square Garden, and a final presentation in the East Meadow of Central Park. The final Central Park speech given by the Dalai Lama drew an estimated crowd of 200,000 people.

Several comments in this text also show a marked similarity to the earlier writings of Smith. Those comments include:

We thereby recognize that our own future happiness and welfare is dependent on the many other members of our society [6, p. 7].

Caring for our neighbors' interest is essentially caring for our own future. Today the reality is simple. In harming our enemy, we are harmed [6, p. 10]

Compassion is the wish that others be free of suffering [6, p. 91].

In order to develop such closeness, we must reflect upon the virtues of cherishing the well-being of others [6, p. 92].

Knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, that it is surmountable, our sympathy for their inability to extricate themselves leads to a more powerful compassion [6, p. 102].

The last work of the Dalai Lama to mention for this paper is *How to Practice, The Way to a Meaningful Life* [7]. In this work the Dalai Lama again emphasizes that "we want happiness and do not want suffering" [7, p. 4]. Of the four Dalai Lama books mentioned in this paper, this text is the most prescriptive. In this text the Dalai Lama suggests a series of Tibetan traditions that are intended to help an individual gain a warm heart, a respect for others, and a general concern for the welfare of others [7, p. 10]. Showing compassion, however, is still the underlying theme of this text. The Dalai Lama [7, p. 12] states, "I believe that the practice of compassion and love - a genuine sense of brotherhood and sisterhood - is the

universal religion.” The Dalai Lama goes on to state that “the morality of concern for others - called the morality of Budhisattvas (being primarily concerned with helping others) - is mainly practiced by restraining the mind from falling into selfishness” [7, p. 28]. The Dalai Lama advocates that compassion is the key to achieving a deeper level of morality [7, p. 95].

CONCLUSION

Adam Smith’s writings in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [16] are still being discussed today as evidenced in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article [2]. The sheer volume of books authored by the Dalai Lama is evidence that his work is being discussed. Obviously there is not complete agreement between the positions and propositions put forward by the Dalai Lama in the four texts mentioned in this paper and Adam Smith’s much earlier work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Furthermore, the author of this paper does not wish to imply that the Dalai Lama in anyway derived his arguments from Smith’s writings or for that matter is familiar with the writings of Smith. Likewise, the author does not wish to imply that Smith anticipated the Buddhist pronouncements of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. One interested in the evolution of economic ideas, particularly the early classical economists, should find a great deal of similarity between the particular writing of Smith discussed in this paper and the recent publications of the Dalai Lama.

This paper has attempted to show the similarities between Smith’s theory of sympathy and the Dalai Lama’s theory of compassion. Though the pronouncements may appear similar, there is one fundamental difference. For Smith, the theory of sympathy is developed to explain human behavior. For the Dalai Lama, compassion is a state of being that should be developed and cultivated to lead to a better life. Smith’s comments appear to be descriptive in nature and those of the Dalai Lama prescriptive.

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