

## SELF-LOVE AND BENEVOLENCE

RECENTLY I HAVE BEEN READING Adam Smith and some of the scholarship connected with Smith's works. One problem that continually crops up is something that might be called the "problem of self-love." The problem, in its barest form, stems from an argument like the following: (1) Self-love is a socially destructive passion. (2) Smith (or the "capitalist") argues for a society founded on self-love. (3) Therefore, the kind of society advocated by Smith (or the "capitalist") will be [is] fundamentally antisocial.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars on Smith have various ways of dealing with this problem of self-love. Critics emphasize the problem and try to show that a market society is therefore fundamentally immoral, that Smith cannot reconcile the conflict between his *Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, or that the social virtues are lost in favor of such merely commercial (and individualistic) virtues as thrift, prudence, and rational calculation.

Admirers of Smith who care about moral issues try to show that Smith seeks to harness the dominant passion of self-love for the good of society. In this case, self-love is not necessarily antisocial. Indeed, self-love can be an extremely potent tool for achieving sociality. Nevertheless, both groups share the basic conviction that self-love is a problem because of its inherent antisocial properties.<sup>2</sup>

My aim here is not to debate the pros and cons of interpretations of Adam Smith. Nor is my aim to offer a new interpretation of Smith or in any way to discuss Smith's social philosophy. Instead, I wish only to make an observation about the basic problem of self-love as it is described above.

Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that self-love can be an anti-social passion. I will discuss why this might be so in a moment. In the light of this first assumption, let us also grant that self-love needs to be checked, so that it does not become a socially destructive force. Depending on one's philosophical commitments, self-love could be checked by reason, law, custom, benevolence, markets, or some combination of these regulatory devices. We may disagree on which of

these devices is most effective and on the relative merits of a society based on one or more of them, but we are agreed that some check on self-love is necessary.

Let us also, again for the sake of argument, assume that we want a society based on the passion of benevolence (“love of others”) rather than one based on self-love. We now believe that the more people are moved by this passion, the more sociality there will be. Benevolence is an inherently *social* passion.

The argument of the last paragraph works only if we are prepared to admit that benevolence is always (or inherently) a social passion. The plausibility of that assertion stems from the fact that benevolence seems (almost analytically) to be other-regarding, whereas self-love is self-regarding. Surely the mere fact that a passion is inherently other-regarding qualifies it for the adjective *social*; for it *means* “with respect to others.”

It seems to me, however, that the argument for the inherently social nature of benevolence needs analysis. In the first place, whether a passion is self- or other-regarding seems to be logically irrelevant to its social characteristics, despite the argument given above. My passion to take your life is “other-regarding,” yet it surely is a “social” passion only in the formal sense that satisfying the desire requires the presence of another person. Thus, to say that benevolence is connected to the concept “social” because it is inherently other-regarding is not yet to say what we want to say about the social character of benevolence.

Obviously, some equivocation about the term *social* is going on here. Benevolence is not a social passion *merely* because it is other-regarding. It is a social passion because it involves love or kindness toward others, and one would not harm another in an act of love or kindness. Yet surely this last claim is dubious, at best, if not just plain false. We are all familiar with those who make pests of themselves in their concern for our “welfare.” And there are numerous examples of social programs that are motivated by benevolence but that actually harm the very people they are designed to help. By the same token, the self-love that motivates a person to accomplish something of worth in his profession is certainly not an antisocial passion. It may even be a directly social one. Moreover, Smith may be right in arguing that self-love can actually strengthen social bonds if used properly. He is certainly right in holding that actions motivated by pure self-love have often led to socially beneficial consequences.

It now seems that we are drawn to the conclusion that there is no more a problem of self-love than there is a “problem of benevolence.” Both passions can have their problems and for the same reason—they are both passions. Passions by themselves are neither good nor bad, social nor antisocial. But by themselves they are a problem, since any and all unregulated passions can become antisocial. That is why we say that the passions must be checked, or regulated. What separates

human beings from other creatures is that we have or develop mechanisms for regulating our desires. For the Humeans, regulation may take the form of custom. For the Aristotelians, the passions are humanized by reason. To avoid having to choose among competing theories here, let us say that passions must be minimally regulated by justice. I have chosen "justice," because (1) it is a peculiarly human concept that gives rise to peculiarly human institutions; and (2) whatever one's more metaphysical preferences, the enforcement of justice is agreed to be minimally necessary for social life (which is not to say that all agree on what justice is).

The point, of course, is that unguided passions pose problems for social life. But this is not a problem peculiar to self-directed desires. Smith, for example, thought that benevolence is too weak to be relied on for social policy. He also did not believe that any social structure can do away with the dominant passion of self-love. However, even if we were to suppose that benevolence is or could be the more dominant passion, that would do little to alleviate concern about it as a passion. The "problem" of self-love can therefore only be called a *special* problem (compared to the "problem of benevolence," the "problem of lust," etc.) if: (a) we agree with Smith about the dominance of self-love and then hold that self-love is special because it is most important or most forceful and thus deserving of most attention; or (b) we claim that some other passion is the legitimate basis for social life.

Under (a), self-love would *not* be a "special problem" because only one institutional arrangement (i.e., capitalism) is grounded in an anti-social passion; for (a) actually implies that capitalism could not be singled out for being grounded in the (vicious) passion of self-love, because *all* social systems are so grounded. Thus under (a), capitalism is in the same position as all other social systems and has the same "special problem" with self-love as they do. Retaining this use of *special problem*, there is no reason to subject capitalism to particular abuse.

What about under (b), where one denies that self-love is the most forceful passion and instead claims that the social structure compatible with one's own vision of the good society would foster or be grounded in some *other* passion (e.g., benevolence)? Under these conditions, one may have a new set of problems to tackle (e.g., paternalism), but not the right to claim *a priori* that this new passion is necessarily any less socially troublesome than the one it replaced. Thus, although self-love may be special to capitalism in the sense of being uniquely related to it, self-love and capitalism would not be special in the sense that only they have the problem of antisocial tendencies. Here again the advocate of capitalism is not conceding very much. The proponent of the new order must show not only that self-love will be replaced or suppressed but also that whatever passion(s) becomes dominant is less subject to antisocial excesses than the one it replaced. Surely that is a tall order if not a fanciful one.

There has been too much uncritical rhetoric by scholars and lay persons alike about the "problem of self-love." This rhetoric has been misleading, because it creates the impression that all that is needed for social harmony is to replace self-love with a more benevolent passion, or that self-love is a passion that uniquely requires regulation. I would suggest, in contrast, that although self-love unchecked by justice is bestiality, benevolence unchecked by justice is tyranny.

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1. Although this is not a discussion of Adam Smith, I was originally motivated to think about the problem of self-love in connection with what has traditionally been called "das Adam Smith problem." The most recent article on this traditional problem is by Richard Teichgraeber III, "Rethinking *Das Adam Smith Problem*," *Journal of British Studies* 20 (Spring 1981): 106-23. Some contemporary examples of those who make the error about self-love discussed here are cited by Antony Flew, *The Politics of Procrustes* (New York, 1981), pp. 138-48.

2. Almost any secondary source on Adam Smith devotes attention to the role of self-love in Smith's thought. For a balanced bibliography of writings on Smith see J. Ralph Lindgren, *The Social Philosophy of Adam Smith* (The Hague, 1973). For a helpful discussion of the historical concerns about self-love, see A. O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton, 1977).

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