

Chapter 12

Sympathy and the Past:

Our “Stock in Dead People” Reconsidered

After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers; and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by-and-by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people.

Mark Twain *Huckleberry Finn*

Sympathy and the Past

A major theme of this book is that we are obliged to treat those distant from us as moral equals. We have argued that the Classical economists' device of sympathy provides the source of moral obligation that enables individuals to move from self- to group-interests. To the extent that we sympathize with others, we become willing to offer them something in return for something else. We have also argued that these "things" may include material wealth, resources, or approbation, what we might refer to, today, as respect.

We finish this book with two, related claims. First, as sympathy may extend to those who are presently distant from us, it may also extend to those of the past. Second, there are benefits to be gained from extending sympathy to those in the distant past. So, we hold that we are under obligation to the past as a matter of reciprocity. As we offer this scholarship for reflection and correction, so, too, we reflect on the works of scholars of the past, both learning and offering suggestions for correction.

We make these claims, knowing that sympathizing with those of the distant past is not easy. They are, after all, mostly dead people, and as Huckleberry Finn put it so colorfully, "After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers; and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by-and-by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people." (1885, p. 626). Many economists echo

Huck's sentiments, finding the past too lifeless for sympathy, filled with only dead and fruitless ideas.

Like the presumption that the "expert" knows best, this may be a final and the most widespread form of hierarchy that persists today.¹ Today, we fail to sympathize with the past, because it is unfamiliar and, *besides*, we need not give it attention because, today, we have outperformed the past. Our analysis reflects our superior capacity. This is nothing more than Smith's "vanity of the philosopher" applied across time.

We have made this claim repeatedly above, that *direction* of sympathy was a key issue in the debates we study. And we have, we hope, made it clear that on this issue we follow the Classical economists who held that sympathetic judgements were to be made by individuals, rather than directed by their "betters". We do not wish to contradict ourselves, here, by suggesting that "we" know best how sympathy should be directed. But we have identified ourselves with the moral imperative of the Golden Rule. Our point here, is simply that, today, we violate the principles of equality and reciprocity that Smith (and we) hold to, when we dismiss the thinking and lives of the past without reflection. If we presuppose the past has nothing to teach us, and we do not we share Galton's ability to simultaneously present his presuppositions and the counter-example, we are unlikely to

¹In fact, the presumption that we know best, today, is a form of the presumption that the expert knows best. Today, we are the experts, relative to the past.

find anything worthwhile in the past. And then we fail to learn.²

What is to be gained by extending sympathy to those in the past? While there are no material resources we can transfer to them, those who offer up respect for the past can learn surprising, sometimes useful insights. We began this project fully disagreeing with the arguments favoring hierarchy in Carlyle and others. Yet only through the course of working out the logic of the position of Classical economists, did we come to realize that analytical egalitarianism extends to the position of the “expert” relative to the subject, and did we come to appreciate the full significance of the device of sympathy in their system.

In disagreement, as well, we learn. We are grateful to Carlyle for his instruction that the utilitarians with whom he dined proposed to make social decisions by counting heads. Our differences with the “science” of eugenics and our obligation to Galton’s teaching that one can move smoothly from sampling theory to political theory ought to be equally transparent. We have fewer obligations to those we have found to have bent their doctrine in service of their desires, but even as we recognized such practices, we were led to consider the incentives faced by the “expert” and the subject more deeply.

This book has also presented evidence that the utilitarian economists of the past analyzed the social world through majoritarian devices. We have shown that such devices are rarely used today. The question, of course, arises as to why. If there had been

²We have made the case in more detail, that the past is a public good, in Peart-Levy 2004.

a discussion in which the comparative advantages of these traditional estimators of location – the median and the average – had been debated, then we would have nothing to contribute with our history but history. But such a discussion didn't take place. And once the profession moved from one estimator to the next, the memory of the older form of utilitarianism was lost.

The only text we have found that compares the merits of counting people and weighting benefits is Edgeworth's, *Mathematical Psychics*. And, as we have seen, Edgeworth dismissed counting people as "unscientific", a pre-Darwinian prejudice and proceeds to develop an alternative. Because we have lost the context of this debate, we now read it as a contest in which technical economics won over the non-technical Classical economists' methods. We entirely miss the context, examined above, in which the "science" Edgeworth relied on is the science of natural selection. In our account, such "science" was turned into a form of theology in which the voice of Providence purportedly trumped human happiness. Here, we are not concerned with Edgeworth's arguments. We have said enough on that above. Instead, our point is that a literature that follows Edgeworth without awareness of the alternatives or perhaps even the consequences, is at best uninformed.

The past is distant from us. We can't touch or experience it directly. We have to imagine it, and, as Adam Smith suggested, we have to learn how to imagine. We suspect it is no coincidence that by the time the story ends Huck has learned to judge distance

better. He learns how to sympathize, and discovers than an escaped slave can be fully human.³ And he comes to learn that if the choice is between material interest and the obligations of reciprocity⁴, J S Mill had it right.⁵

³“And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now ...” (Twain, 1885, p. 834)

⁴“So I was full of trouble, full as I could be; and didn't know what to do. At last I had an idea; and I says, I'll go and write the letter -- and *then* see if I can pray. Why, it was astonishing, the way I felt as light as a feather right straight off, and my troubles all gone. So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote:

Miss Watson, your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send.

HUCK FINN.

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking -- thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking.”

“It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

“All right, then, I'll *go* to hell” -- and tore it up.

“It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. (1885, pp. 833-4)

⁵“If, instead of the “glad tidings” that there exists a Being in whom all the excellences which the highest human mind can conceive, exists in a degree inconceivable to us, I am informed that the world is ruled by a being whose attributes are infinite, but what they are we cannot learn, nor what the principles of his government, except that “the highest human morality which we are capable of conceiving” does not sanction them; convince me of it, and I will bear my fate as I may. But when I am told that I must believe this, and at the same time call this being by the names which express and affirm the highest theological morality, I say in plain terms that I will not. Whatever power such a being may have over me, there is one thing which he shall not do: he shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow-creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.” (1865, p. 103)