

The Music of Social Intercourse: Synchrony in Adam Smith

by

Daniel B. Klein, Professor of Economics, George Mason University, dklein@gmu.edu

Michael J. Clark, PhD student, Department of Economics, George Mason University,
mclark4@gmu.edu

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Abstract: Adam Smith often used musical and synchronous figures of speech to convey the notion of sympathy, as when our sentiments “keep time together.” In this way Smith explored social cooperation or “harmony.” Smith’s emphasis on synchrony in treating the social ecology of moral sentiments provides a theoretical touchstone for recent psychology experiments showing that synchronous experience conduces to cooperation. In this paper we report the results of a word search on Smith’s use of synchronous figures in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and explore the important places that synchronous language holds in his works. We relate these matters to the issue of the relationship between *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, and to solidarity and group selection in evolution. Meanwhile, we note that Smith was well aware of society’s inherent disharmonies.

Keywords: Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Synchrony, Coordination, Sentiments, Cooperation.

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[Link to Excel file](#) with passages, coding, and analysis.

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In an article in *Psychological Science* entitled “Synchrony and Cooperation,” Scott C. Wiltermuth and Chip Heath (2009) tell how marching, singing, and dancing conduce to cooperation. They report on three experiments showing that greater cooperation in public-goods games came in the variant in which subjects either had previously been put to marching together (as opposed to walking normally) or were singing or moving in synchrony. They note that “[t]he idea that synchronous movement improves group cohesion has old roots” (1) and cite Emile Durkheim and several more recent works of historical anthropology and psychology.

Here we examine the place of musical or synchronous language in the works of Adam Smith. His first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, 6th ed. 1790) is suffused with the sense that synchrony is fundamental to human sympathy, cooperation, and well-being. We explore the place of synchrony or harmony in Smith’s writings and visions, and discuss the relationship between *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*.

Sympathy as Coordinated Sentiment

Adam Smith’s moral theory considered a number of sources of moral approval and at each turn he posited or invoked an accompanying spectator. In judging an action, at each turn we consult our *sympathy* with a spectator that is proper or natural to the occasion. Smith’s idea of sympathy is mutually coordinated sentiment. The sentiment is shared, it exists as a common experience, much like the beat of a chant or melody of a song, neither mine, nor yours, but ours. To convey this notion of coordination Smith

often used synchronous figures of speech, as when our sentiments “keep time together.”

The terms used by Smith include *keeping* or *beating time*, *concord* and *discord*, *pitch*, and, most importantly, *harmony*. Table 1 shows the number of occurrences of musical or synchronous terms in reference to sentiment coordination.

Table 1: Occurrences in TMS of Musical or Synchronous Terms in Discussing Coordinated Sentiment

Term	Occurrences
Accord	2
Beat(s) Time	4
Concord	14
Dances	1
Discord, Discordant	8
Dissonance	2
Harmony, Harmonious	21
Keep(s/ing) Time	7
Melody (ious)	1
Motion	5
Move, Movement	5
Music, Musical	4
Pitch	7
Sing	2
Song	4
Tone	2
Tune	1
Unisons	1
TOTAL	91

Source: An Excel file ([link](#)) gathers all passages and citations, and lists other terms searched but not found.
Note: More occurrences, such as “tone of temper,” also occur, but are not included in Table 1 because reference to sentiment coordination was not deemed sufficiently explicit.

Synchronous Language Is Found at Important Places in Smith’s Thought

Besides being pervasive in Smith’s first book, synchronous language pertains especially to things most significant in his thought. Smith simply posits the human yearning for sympathy, or coordinated sentiment, the importance of which can hardly be overstated. Smith speaks of a “character ... so detestable as that of one who takes pleasure to sow dissension among friends ...” Smith asks: “Yet wherein does the atrocity

of this so much abhorred injury consist?”

It is in depriving them of that friendship itself, in robbing them of each other's affections, from which both derived so much satisfaction; it is in disturbing the HARMONY of their hearts, and putting an end to that happy commerce which had before subsisted between them. These affections, that HARMONY, this commerce, are felt ... to be of more importance to happiness than all the little services which could be expected to flow from them. (*TMS*, 39)

(Throughout this essay, when quoting Smith, we highlight synchronous terms by putting them in CAPS.) Smith elaborates an example of a man who has suffered an offense:

He longs for that relief which nothing can afford him but the entire CONCORD of the affections of the spectators with his own. To see the emotions of their hearts, in every respect, BEAT TIME to his own, in the violent and disagreeable passions, constitutes his sole consolation. (*TMS* 22)

Smith explains that our yearning for sympathy leads us to modulate our own sentiments and passions. Continuing from the preceding quotation:

But he can only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that PITCH in which the spectators are capable of going along with him. He must flatten, if I may be allowed to say so, the sharpness of its natural TONE, in order to reduce it to HARMONY and CONCORD with the emotions of those who are about him. (*TMS* 22).

Early in *TMS*, Smith distinguishes two sets of the virtues. The virtues of modulating our passions belong to “the great, the awful and respectable” virtues “of self-denial, of self-government.” The other side of the human spiral consists of “[t]he soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues,” from which we indulge the sentiments and passions of others:

And hence it is, that to feel much for others and little for ourselves, that to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature; and can alone produce among mankind that HARMONY of sentiments and passions in which consists their whole grace and propriety. (*TMS* 25)

The title of the book's third chapter indicates the prominent place that synchronous figures have in Smith's thinking: "*Of the manner in which we judge of the propriety or impropriety of the affections of other men, by their CONCORD or DISSONANCE with our own*" (*TMS* 16).

Such concord is not mere grease on the wheels of society, but part of the stuff of human fulfillment:

The great pleasure of conversation and society, besides, arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain HARMONY of minds, which like so many MUSICAL instruments coincide and KEEP TIME with one another. But this most delightful HARMONY cannot be obtained unless there is a free communication of sentiments and opinions. (*TMS* 337)

Synchronous figures, finally, are used in Smith's vision of a complex commercial society. The latter is developed in *The Wealth of Nations* but also plays a crucial part in *TMS*. In a famous passage, Smith faults "the man of system" "who seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board":

He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it. If those two principles coincide and act in the same direction, the game of human society will go on easily and HARMONIOUSLY, and is very likely to be

happy and successful. If they are opposite or different, the game will go on miserably, and the society must be at all times in the highest degree of disorder. (*TMS* 233)

The Wealth of Nations under *TMS*'s Umbrella

The vision of complex commercial society as a harmonious system runs us into old issues about the relationship between *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. It has long been said there are significant tensions between the two works. Certain nineteenth century German scholars highlighted or even exaggerated some of the differences, creating what became known as “*das Adam Smith problem*” (see the editor’s introduction to *TMS* by D.D. Raphael and Alec L. Macfie, pp. 20ff). There are major differences in the tone and feeling, and, as highlighted by Peter Minowitz (1993, 2004), the talk of providence that pervades *TMS* all but disappears in *WN*.

The difference in tone and feeling is confirmed by examining whether *TMS*'s synchronous terms occur in *WN*. Remarkably, they, too, all but disappear. Of the 18 *TMS* synchronous terms reported in Table 1, the occurrence of like usage in *WN* for 16 of them is a *big fat zero*, while “concord” has one occurrence and “discord” two. One of those passages emanates the warmth of *TMS*:

By such [mercantilist/protectionist] maxims as these, however, nations have been taught that their interest consisted in beggaring all their neighbours. Each nation has been made to look with an invidious eye upon the prosperity of all the nations with which it trades, and to consider their gain as its own loss. Commerce, which ought naturally to be, among nations, as among individuals, a bond of union and friendship, has become the most fertile source of DISCORD and animosity. (*WN* 493).

But such moments in *WN* are rare.¹ The difference between the feeling of *TMS* and that

¹ E.g., “... the good cheer of private families...” (*WN*, 440).

of *WN* is perhaps best summed up by the fact that in *WN*, the word *sentiment(s)* occurs just twice – in the famous passage on the enfeebling effects of routine specialized labor (782), and in a passage on teacher motivation (760) – and *sympathy/sympathetic* occurs not at all.

Vivienne Brown (1994, 46) has observed that one of the most central ideas in *TMS*, the *impartial spectator* – the idealized universal spectator, whose characterization is incomplete, uncertain, and disputed, yet represented in some way as our conscience – makes no appearance in *WN*. Does the impartial spectator’s presence in *TMS* but absence from *WN* speak of a conflict between the two works?

We are inclined to say – as most Smith scholars today do – that there is no fundamental conflict between *TMS* and *WN*. Despite its cooler feeling and handling of social affairs, *WN* is, in our view, part of *TMS*’s broader ethical plexus. *WN* comes within *TMS*’s umbrella.

In a key passage of *TMS*, Smith summarizes the ethical plexus of his work as involving “four sources” of moral approval. We highlight here only the fourth and broadest source:

... we approve of any character or action ..., last of all, when we consider such actions as making a part of a system of behaviour which tends to promote the happiness either of the individual or of the society, they appear to derive a beauty from this utility, not unlike that which we ascribe to any well-contrived machine. (*TMS* 326).

With reference to promotion of the happiness of the society, Smith here throws ethics open to consequences wide and abstract. Most of the morality plays in *TMS* are of

a private nature, interaction among neighbors or “equals,”² where the wide social view plays little role. That is why the impartial spectator is usually thought to be a personal moral advisor, not a political economist. *WN*, however, was an annex to *TMS*, making together a more extensive system of moral sentiments. *WN* explores the broad view in *TMS*’s fourth source especially as concerns commercial behavior and public policy.

In explicating the fourth source, Smith did not use synchronous language. But elsewhere he invokes similar imagery and does: “Human society, when we contemplate it in a certain abstract and philosophical light, appears like a great, an immense machine, whose regular and HARMONIOUS MOVEMENTS produce a thousand agreeable effects” (*TMS* 316).

In *TMS*, Smith enlarges on how “regard to the beauty of order, of art and contrivance, frequently serves to recommend those institutions which tend to promote the public welfare” (*TMS* 185). Only by pondering and studying the workings of society that do we learn to see, in an abstract way, the larger unintended consequences of individual action. “Nothing tends so much to promote public spirit as the study of politics, of the several systems of civil government, their advantages and disadvantages, of the constitution of our own country, its situation ... its commerce...” (186). Thus, “political disquisitions, if just, and reasonable, and practicable, are of all the works of speculation the most useful” (187).

In that sense, contrary to what Vivienne Brown observes, perhaps the impartial spectator *does* appear in *The Wealth of Nations* – as *the author*. For, if the inmate within

² As noted by the *TMS* editors D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (p.40), from the fourth edition (1774) on, the title page included a description of the work: “The Theory of Moral Sentiments, Or An Essay towards an Analysis of the Principles by which Men naturally judge concerning the Conduct and Character, *first of their Neighbours*, and afterwards of themselves” (emphasis added).

the reader's breast is its representative, and if "To direct the judgments of this inmate is the great purpose of all systems of morality" (*TMS*, 293; see also 329), then the author of such a system, if edifying and properly so, would be akin to the impartial spectator. *The Wealth of Nations*, then, strives for greater harmony among us as we contemplate political systems, public policy, and commercial activity.³ In *WN*, Smith never speaks of sympathy. It is for the reader, in his encounter with Smith's mind, to discover sympathy, or not.

Concords: "all that is wanted or required"

We should be mindful that, as noted by Frederick Maitland (1875, 132), Smith was well aware of society's inherent disharmonies: "What are the common wages of labour depends every where upon the contract usually made between [workmen and masters], whose interests are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little as possible" (*WN*, 83). Disharmonies arise also in rivalrous competition and man's impulse toward creativity and improvement. Yet Smith saw a preserve of sentimental concord "sufficient for the HARMONY of society." "Though they will never be UNISONS, they may be CONCORDS, and this is all that is wanted or required" (*TMS*, 22).

Charles Griswold (1999), who explores the musical metaphors in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*,⁴ argues that Smith sought a larger enlightened frame within which we could sufficiently harmonize our toleration and testing of lower-frame disharmonies, a

³ Klein 2010 explores the idea that there is a duality between the impartial spectator and the being whose hand is invisible; Cf. Otteson 2002; Craig Smith 2006.

⁴ In Griswold (1999), see 74-5, 111-2, 120-7, 183, 196-7, 211-3, 327-48, 373-5.

larger frame that emphasized commutative justice and natural liberty. To represent Smith's aesthetic aspiration of higher harmony by means of enlightenment, Griswold (75, 332) aptly quotes from Smith's essay on the imitative arts (which discusses music at length):

In the contemplation of that immense variety of agreeable and melodious sounds, arranged and digested, both in their coincidence and in their succession, into so complete and regular a system, the mind in reality enjoys not only a very great sensual, but a very high intellectual, pleasure, not unlike that which it derives from the contemplation of a great system in any other science. (EPS, 204-5)

Griswold nicely captures the dialectic element in Smith's vision of social harmony: We consider "actions as being parts of a larger unity and system because of the imagination's restless drive for order" (339).

Evolutionary Origins?

Smith said we feel benevolence towards some people more than others—Sandra Peart and David Levy (2005) aptly refer to the "sympathetic gradient" in Smith's moral ecology. First comes oneself. Next come one's family members, who when living in the same house "are more habituated to sympathize" with one another. After the self and the family, Smith proceeded to friendships, neighborhoods, "orders and societies" within civil society, the nation, and finally "universal benevolence" or humanity (*TMS*, 219-37). Our concern for others is based on social bonds or social distance, measured in terms of shared experiences and likenesses.

Smith (*TMS*, 237, 77) suggests that nature has thusly directed our concern to where it can be most helpful, for with social nearness comes *better knowledge and understanding* of how to make benevolence effective. In the experiments conducted by Wiltermuth and Heath the synchronies *did not* enhance any knowledge about how to increase joint payoffs in subsequent play. But Smith is describing our instincts or psychological tendencies, and the mere fact of having been “more habituated to sympathize” with one another, strengthening social bonds, would naturally prompt greater cooperation.

Wiltermuth and Heath say that “existing hypotheses about why synchrony works seem limited” (1). Smith’s point about local knowledge might figure into an evolutionary explanation. If the human being depended on group selection (Hayek 1988; Sober and Wilson 1998; Zywicki 2000; Field 2004), one who cooperated with those who were socially near would tend to prosper, particularly if expulsion, stoning, withholding of food, or other forms of punishment were visited upon the non-cooperator. The beings that survived are ones for which synchronous behavior habituates sympathy, increases social nearness, and conduces to greater cooperation.

Other Metaphors in *TMS*

Although synchrony pervades *TMS*, the primary idea is coordinated sentiment. That idea is developed by several kinds of metaphor. Foremost is an imagined face-to-face expression of agreement or sympathy, between the one who is to render judgment and the supposed companion who also sees the actions judged of. That is, in judging the actions of Timothy, you consult, as it were, an imagined spectator, and it is a sense of

face-to-face agreement with this accompanying spectator that is most distinctive to Smith. Also pervasive in *TMS* are the metaphors of “entering into” or “going along with” another’s sentiments. While synchrony suggests hearing and timing, spectatorship suggests seeing and vision, and “enter into” and “go along with” suggest little narratives of making company. Thus, Smith invokes many modes of common experience in developing the idea of coordinated sentiment. But synchrony is certainly central.

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