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Adam Smith's discussion on the corruption of moral sentiments

Hisanori TSUGE

In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith discusses not only the nature of moral sentiments but also their corruption. But his discussion on the corruption of moral sentiments is not clear and raises some problems. The aim of this paper is to clarify its substance and to point out two significant problems in it.

Smith does not define clearly the meaning of the 'corruption' of moral sentiments. According to Smith, (i) the respect, which is due only to virtue, is often bestowed to wealth and greatness, because of the disposition of human beings to admire the rich and the great, (ii) though the respect for wealth and greatness is different from that for virtue, these sentiments seem to be so closely similar, that the former is frequently mistaken for the latter, and, (iii) in the case of the rich and the great, the contempt for vice is diminished or extinguished by the respect for wealth and greatness. I think that the 'corruption' means the situation (iii), in a narrow sense, and, the process from (i) to (iii), in a wide sense.

One of the significant problems in Smith's discussion, is concerned with the impartiality of moral sentiments. Smith derives the disposition to admire the rich and the great from his observation that the propensity to sympathize with joy is stronger than that to sympathize with sorrow. If so, for instance, where the rich and the poor are opposed to each other, moral sentiments cannot be by nature impartial.

The other problem is concerned with the inevitability of the corruption of moral sentiments. Smith does not think that it is inevitable, but in the case of 'prudence', which he considers as a cardinal virtue, the respect for wealth and greatness is so firmly united with that for virtue, that it is impossible to distinguish the one from the other. If so, the corruption of moral sentiments may none the less be inevitable.