

CREATE YOUR OWN ECONOMY

THE PATH TO PROSPERITY IN A DISORDERED WORLD

Tyler Cowen

ALSO BY TYLER COWEN

Discover Your Inner Economist



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gradually to greatness." Or: "It is often more mortifying to appear in public under small disasters, than under great misfortunes." Or: "It is the loss of this easy empire over the affections of mankind which renders the fall from greatness so insupportable."

The sections on sympathy strike me as written by a brilliant man who could only understand the concept, as it is practiced in the society of his time, by observing and classifying it in every manner possible. I often felt, while reading, that Smith had no typical understanding of sympathy but rather came to terms with the concept through a very careful observation of others. It's an outsider's view and that is why it is so perceptive. It's as if Smith felt he had to understand sympathy to survive in the world and so he studied it more intensely than any person had before him. Note also that Smith wrote down many observations about sympathy but he doesn't seem to show an intuitive understanding of which points are brilliant insights and which are ordinary observations shared by every man on the street.

When thinking about Smith, I am struck by Jared Blackburn's web discussion of the autistic theory of mind. Jared is a self-described autistic and he opined that many autistic people obtain exceptional insight into others by drawing upon their cognitive skills and approaching the topic of other people from different angles. Even if autistics have slower response speeds in understanding non-autistics, their understanding is not necessarily inferior and it may in some regards be superior.

Smith is not interested in sympathy alone but rather he also stresses how interactions with strangers bring about more objective forms of behavior and move society toward a greater emphasis on rules. Parents for instance are too indulgent with their children and

most people behave too loosely with their friends. It is only with some amount of distance that we develop objectivity and most of all it is strangers who help us develop self-command and an objective sense of the virtuous. Modern commercial society, in Smith's view, is well-suited for helping to create this necessary sense of distance among people.

So was Smith autistic in the sense discussed in this book or might he fit other descriptions of Asperger's or neurodiverse? The correct answer is "I don't know and neither do you." The bigger specific lesson is that you don't have to see people on the autism spectrum as "the other." The more general lesson is to read texts, whether the text of a Sherlock Holmes story or the text of intellectual history, with a sensitivity to the uniqueness of the individual and the fundamental principles that guide that person or character's actions. For instance whether or not Smith has a relationship to the autism spectrum, that ambiguity, and the accompanying need for embrace and tolerance, is more important than whatever judgment you might end up passing on his neurology.

If you're looking to create your own economy, literature is one good place to pick up inspiration and heroes. You'll find some characters who love information in deep and interesting ways. It's common to think that an "age of Google" is eclipsing the literary classics, but a closer look shows we still can learn from plain, good ol'-fashioned books. Technology and the web can make our lives richer, but they are hardly the only places to look for important and indeed revolutionary cultural ideas.