

Dan Klein's comments at the [EconTalk TMS book club](#)

[Episode 1](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Adam,

Your (and Dan S.'s) critical feedback is appreciated. Your viewpoint is supported by the following passage:

“Let it be considered too, that the present inquiry is not concerning a matter of right, if I may say so, but concerning a matter of fact. We are not at present examining upon what principles a perfect being would approve of the punishment of bad actions; but upon what principles so weak and imperfect a creature as man actually and in fact approves of it.” (TMS, 77)

In my view, this passage from Smith, and the distinction you invoke (between is and ought) is not all that meaningful or useful. In the passage I just quoted, Smith says he is talking about what man in fact approves of it. So we've got man's "oughts" embedded in Smith's "is's." Smith proceeds to evaluate some of those oughts. He comments often and at length, sometimes even in tones of exhortation, that certain oughts (in people's understandings) are misguided, foolish, imprudent, unbecoming, etc. So he is evaluating oughts. It is fine to say that he is correcting their oughts, or explaining what he views as the true or wise oughts. But doesn't that pretty much mean he is saying what their oughts ought to be? I rather like the way Coase puts the matter of distinguishing is's and oughts – it is an affectation. Why is it important to insist that Smith is not expressing his own moral sensibilities? And, since ideological sensibilities are just moral sensibilities as regards issues of government policy, I would then ask: Why is it important to insist that Smith is not expressing his own ideological sensibilities? In as much as, in certain matters, he is telling us his view on what the proper oughts are, why insist that he is not thereby providing moral dispensation for those oughts? Wouldn't that be one of the largest, and most noble, purposes of the entire endeavor? Why should we deny Smith this grandeur and greatness? Hasn't he earned it?

In the final paragraph of the book (p. 341) Smith writes of his plan to address “natural jurisprudence, or a theory of the general principles which ought to run through and be the foundation of the laws of all nations.” He then subdivides that topic as “not only in what concerns justice, but in what concerns police, revenue, and arms, and whatever else is the object of law.” The grouping “police, revenue, and arms” can be seen as what Smith would consider the necessary, expedient, or “politick” policies that governments ought to do even though they violate justice (that is, commutative justice). Thus, the “police, revenue, and arms” are the oughts of government policy aside from (or even in violation of) sustaining justice. All this (including the sustaining of justice) is very much the stuff of WN. So I think it is fair to say that WN addresses “the general principles which ought to run through and be the foundation of the laws of all nations.”

Posted [April 7, 2009 10:30 AM](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Dan S.,

Regarding Hayek and evolution:

As I read Hayek, biological evolution has always been a group-selection kind of process, and even ants and bees, as well as primates, can be said to follow “cultures”, in a broad sense of that term. Hayek clearly sees the hunter-gather band as suffused with a solidaric culture, and thinks that was a key part of the formation and early evolution of “man.” I tend to think that people too readily separate “cultural evolution” and “biological evolution.” Later, as cultures and societies grow more complex, the evolutionary impact of variations in culture becomes power-boosted and social evolution speeds up greatly. So there is a sense in which there is a cultural evolution working upon a certain base “human nature,” say in the past 10 or 20 thousand years (though even in this short span we should not neglect that such developments do affect the pool of genetic material – Greg Clark, for example, argues that even the past few hundred years matter significantly to the genetic pool). But even if we see it over the past 20,000 years (or whatever) being primarily cultural, it still doesn’t make sense to say that “before that” it was only “biological.” I take Hayek to be saying that culture, in a broad but not unreasonable sense of the term, was always a big factor in biological evolution. So the only distinction worth making, it seems to me, is to say that in more “recent” times, biological evolution stopped (at least to a significant degree, such that henceforth there are only relatively minor alterations in the “human nature” one would glean from the extant humanity), not that cultural evolution began.

Posted [April 7, 2009 10:37 AM](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Adam,

Thanks for your reply. My impulse to play up the translatability of "is" to "ought," and of "ought" to "is," and to contend that such translation is quite easy, natural, and proper, is not to deny that when others invoke such distinction they have some substantive distinctions vaguely in mind.

For example, "normative" (offered as being opposed to "positive") often conveys, though without proper clarity, either outspokenness or unconventionality of the judgments made (or a combination of both). Outspokenness is best called outspokenness. Norms against outspokenness are best defended as such. Similarly for conventionality.

There are differences between the character of Hume and that of Bentham. But I would describe those differences in terms of confidence in alterability, hope for significant revision in attitudes and understandings, zealousness, activism, outspokenness vs. reserve, etc. I would not describe it in terms of is vs. ought, or positive vs. normative.

Posted [April 7, 2009 12:21 PM](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Dear Eric H.,

Your moral cartography metaphor seems fruitful. I think that Smith is both instructing us -- as do critics who lay down helpful though loose, vague, and indeterminate pointers for what is sublime or elegant in writing -- in how to do moral cartography in general, and at the same time he is mapping out major landmarks of the moral universe he sees us living within. The two teachings - how to improve your skills in moral cartography, and the mapping of major landmarks of our moral universe -- are developed together. The latter often illustrate or instantiate the former. The former often explains or helps to justify the specific mappings of the latter.

He would not sympathize with an urge to separate the art of moral cartography from concrete illustration of major landmarks. I think he offers the art and his mappings as parts that ultimately entail much mutual constitutiveness; they have to be considered together. But still, one can take the whole that Smith offers and see some aspects cohering more as the abstract art and other aspects as sketchy mappings of concretes in our universe.

After all, the art's purpose would be to enhance the concrete mapping of our universe, and so judgments about how that universe looks will not be separable from judgments about the propriety, beauty, and wisdom of the art.

Posted [April 8, 2009 2:28 PM](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Recent comments by John Strong, David S., Adam, and Eric H. prompt the following:

Saying that the impartial spectator is like the conscience is a start, but we find that it is the conscience's conscience, etc.

We also find that, unlike conscience, it is interpersonal, perhaps universal. I hope Russ and I get to dwell on para 11 page 215.

I find that "propriety" turns out to be very contextual, situational, elastic. How well can one square "propriety" of para 5 page 188 with the "exalted propriety" of para 11 page 192?

Prudence, too, seems to be rather contextual. Some significant "prudence" pages, in my view, are 174-76, 189, 327, 212-17, 262. (Both "prudence" and "propriety" are indexed in the book.)

Truth be told, I think that each virtue is a complex involving both a way of viewing and the referent behavior viewed. What I mean is that a referent behavior can be viewed alternatively

through, say, prudence lenses, justice lenses, beneficence lenses, temperance lenses, propriety lenses, amiable lenses, respectable lenses, and so on.

A parallel: A state of the world (or pattern of behavior) can be viewed differently as an equilibrium in relation to alternative models -- or for that matter as disequilibrium in yet others.

For some purposes it will be most useful to view one way, for some purposes, another way.

But some models will make more sense, will be more focal, than others, so we muddle through. But there is no definitiveness.

So what's the point of it all? Well, I tend to read the whole as a deep argument for the presumption of liberty, for degovernmentalization, based on the situational particularism, complexity, and dynamics of moral life, learning, and responsibility.

Maybe that's just my robo-libertarianism.

RE social democracy and the collective configuration of ownership ("our own"): David S., I'm not saying that soc dems are for nationalization. I'm just saying that, regardless of their view on the minimum wage, they do not see it as the initiation of coercion. It would not be inconsistent or illogical for someone to maintain consistently soc-dem semantics and libertarian policy positions, or vice versa, just peculiar.

Culture is semantics. Semantics carry presumptions. Presumptions locate burdens of proof. Liberalism is a cultural system that turns on the meanings of the most important words -- liberty, freedom, property, contract, rights, justice, equity, equality, rule of law, and liberalism. The liberal lexicon became confused about 100 years ago, and now we have cultural confusion. Hayek quotes Confucius: "When words lose their meaning, people lose their liberty."

RE Hume's ideas on the sentiments, sorry, I'm just not versed enough to say.

Posted [April 10, 2009 6:04 PM](#)

[EPISODE 2](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Dear John Strong,

Regarding your immediately preceding comment:

I don't feel comfortable delving into the question raised about manners vs. morals, but your last graf prompts me to write.

I am uncertain, but it sounds like you are suggesting a tension in Smith between spectatorial-sympathy and deference to higher utility -- which you associate with the 4th source of moral approval. (Again, the 4 sources are at graf 16 on pp. 326-27.)

If so, that is not the way I see it. Rather, as I see it, Smith quite insists on saying there is ALWAYS spectatorial-sympathy. The 4th source is no different in that respect. At the 4th source we again conjure a being who sees beauty in the larger utility of the great "machine", and so the immediate or proximal sense of moral approval is a kind of sympathy with that spectating being. It seems to me that Smith always wants moral judgments to be mediated by some kind of spectatorial sympathy. It's like at every turn there's a spectator between you and moral judgment, or, alternatively, with you as you ponder moral judgment.

I think the 4th source does carry a sort of deference to larger utility, but it is not in a way that makes for a tension with the spectatorial-sympathy per se. Yes, the 4th source may make for tensions with spectating specific to any of the three other levels (or sources) of moral approval, but not with the notion of spectatorial-sympathy per se. The 4th source entails its own spectatorial-sympathy. It is sympathy with a spectator emergent from our understandings about what makes for larger utility; we then find beauty in what is conducive to utility, we infuse an imaginary being with such aesthetic, and then we experience sympathy with such being. That may seem like a pallid distinction, an unnecessary contrivance, nonetheless it seems to be true to Smith's organon of seeing moral judgment as always enshrouded in sympathies.

For my part, I am undecided on Smith's organon (assuming I am right that it is his organon). I don't think it is so crazy to think that we do create implicit, tacit beings, constellations around focal judgments and insights, and that in the moment we have to judge we judge based on things "feeling right", much like a kind of actual spectatorial-sympathy with someone whose judgment we respect. Rather than trying to think through all I've learned the last 20 years I ask myself: Would Milton Friedman ever say that?

"Milton Friedman" is after all a sort of fiction in your head. You've seen images on tvs and computers, you've read words written by him in books. But we still think it is meaningful to talk in terms of "Milton Friedman says this" or "Milton Friedman says that." In a sense, that is an imaginary being. And we look for sympathies with that being. (We free-marketeers, that is.)

Does this makes sense?

Posted [April 15, 2009 9:47 PM](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Pietro, yes, I see great parallel between Hayek and Smith, though Hayek never did any moral analysis like TMS, and scarcely refers to TMS (in fact, hardly any of the epic classical liberals of the renaissance period, say 1947-1990, seem to have much grasp of TMS). You suggest that in TMS Smith is trying to do a 'supply and demand' of sympathy. I'd caution against drawing too strong a parallel between the moral dynamics and market dynamics. Yes there are some important parallels, and exit and innovation play key roles in both, and arguably in both a

presumption-of-liberty punchline stems from knowledge's richness and particularism, but, as you note, the moral ecology is without money and prices -- or at least goes much farther beyond money and prices. The "culture market" -- from the arts to the most deep-seated, existential sources of meaning and identity -- really is a lot different from the toothpaste market.

Adam, yes, I think propriety has to do with fit with community norms, customs, rules, while (becoming) virtue with *going one better*. These, however, are frames of analysis. When we go one better we identify or imagine a higher community, and it is *propriety to that higher community* that makes for (supposedly) praiseworthy becoming virtue *in the frame of the lower community*. See for example the "exalted propriety" on p. 192.

Adam, yes, I think Smith has a vision (a hope?) of a moral ecology wherein people are prompted to take an ever more impartial view of matters, and in this way continually approach a better sense of moral aesthetics, perhaps like an infinite sequence that converges toward a limit. Arguable, Smith's impartial spectator is that limit, a being of universalist wisdom. I understand that Kant somewhere says that Smith was his favorite among the British moralists. Remember, "the man in the breast," the conscience, is not the impartial spectator, but rather the *supposed* impartial spectator, the *representative* of the impartial spectator, etc.

But we never get close to the limit. Moreover, one might argue that as we go along the limit in fact changes. James Otteson's book *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life* (Cambridge 2002) interprets Smith's moral ecology as an invisible hand process.

Eric H., I like your sentence, "Basically Smith is saying that society is protected by imagination." I find that your comment is getting at the notion that the impartial spectator -- in the sense of a being universally emanating universalist wisdom (though with mixed success) -- corresponds somehow to the being whose hand is invisible.

I now better see, John Strong, your point. Yes, when we disagree significantly with someone over deeper beauties (4th source), we typically moderate in the situation, we temper, we show courtesy, maybe showing more respect for him than we would in other situations. We do this partly out of regard for proprieties at the 1, 2, and 3 sources.

Incidentally, I feel that Smith is somewhat partial toward such bargainers, as opposed to challengers. The challenger is respectful to the opponent, but not deferent. The challenger -- think Thomas Paine, Jeremy Bentham, Frederic Bastiat (often), Lysander Spooner, Ludwig von Mises, Murray Rothbard, Thomas Szasz, Robert Higgs -- challenges the opponent's fundamental judgment -- deeper root judgment (hence "radical") -- and doing so challenges the opponent's claim to eminence, and hence challenges the cultural system that confers eminence on the opponent. I find that, at least from our contemporary viewpoint, Smith gives short shrift to challengers.

Adam, regarding the invisible hand of the moral ecology, you write: "communities that approve of destructive behavior will not last long and those that don't will persist." I'm not sure how widely you mean "communities." Say we distinguish between communities within Britain and Britain as but one community within humanity. Within Britain, yes, by and large, to what you

say, so long as we confine such communities to voluntary means; the king or civil magistrate, on the other had, might, by other means, do destructive things and prosper by it. At the level of Britain as a "community" among humanity: This very broad "survival of fittest" type mechanism is perhaps more relevant to WN where Smith writes of the stages of society and the emergence of "our present sense of the word Freedom" (WN p. 400). But in TMS, it seems to me that he focuses more on mechanisms internal to a single moral ecology, and ascribes melioristic tendencies to its internal workings. There is very little in TMS that speaks to a successful nation exporting its culture and norms, or morally colonizing its neighbors. And there is little about the global selection of national communities on the basis of the success of their moral ecology -- in fact, at the moment, I can't think of anything along such lines in TMS -- please correct me if I am overlooking anything.

A very important question, in my mind, is the kind of setting TMS is assuming for the moral ecology. Perhaps in some settings the meliorism, the set of moral/cultural invisible-hand mechanisms, is overmatched by counter mechanisms?

Do the invisible-hand mechanisms have the upper hand in the moral ecology of America 2009?

Posted [April 17, 2009 11:11 AM](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

In the recording, about 55% in, I was off when I suggested that the propriety/virtue distinction (p. 25 graf 7) lines up with the grammar/aesthetics distinction (175, 327).

Russ is correct, propriety is a recognized mediocrity -- acceptability -- within the community (see p. 27), whereas virtue is better than that.

The following drives it home: "In the practice of ... virtues ... [other than justice], our conduct should rather be directed by a certain idea of propriety, by a certain taste for a particular tenor of conduct, than by any regard to a precise maxim or rule" (175).

The propriety/virtue gradient exists only for virtues other than (commutative) justice, or the becoming virtues.

Justice, on the other hand, is a grammar, and an adherence to justice is so precise and indispensable that it would be inappropriate to flatter it as propriety, and a violation is so serious that it would be inappropriate to forbear it as mere impropriety.

Posted [April 18, 2009 3:46 PM](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Adam, we were mistaken about TMS nowhere suggesting evolutionary selection for societies that avoid destructive conduct. The following is from p. 211:

"There is an obvious reason why custom should never pervert our sentiments with regard to the general style and character of conduct and behaviour ... There never can be any such custom. No society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men's conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice I have just now mentioned [infanticide]." [[par. V.I.26](#)]

BTW, I find it significant that Smith calls this reason "obvious."

Posted [April 19, 2009 2:37 PM](#)

[EPISODE 3](#)

[No comments by Dan Klein worth reproducing here.]

[EPISODE 4](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Mike,

What you write in the preceding doesn't quite feel like a resolution to me. First off, the pinky thought experiment is not clearly defined, but if an evil genius says he is going to kill many others unless you cut off your pinky, I would not call declining to cut off your pinky a violation of commutative justice.

But, at any rate, I don't think that the egalitarianism in the graf (p. 137) is narrowly confined to matters of commutative justice.

I still feel that the graf's element of superiority (at the very end) and element of egalitarianism (about 14 lines above that) pose somewhat of a paradox.

Perhaps the egalitarianism is not that we all have the same rights, but that we all have the same duty to do what is right by the whole of humankind. You are not superior in that you are no more excused from this duty than anyone else, and hence will not be excused if you fail to cut off your pinky. When we cut off our pinky, we feel superior in fulfilling this duty, a duty that bears equally on everyone.

Or something like that?

Posted [May 1, 2009 7:41 PM](#)

[EPISODE 5](#)

[Daniel Klein](#) writes:

I want to elaborate a bit on my criticism of TMS. Smith writes (160.9) that the general rules of propriety “are formed from the experience we have had of *the effects* which actions of all different kinds naturally produce on us” (italics added).

Consider actions of public policy (as well as of Wal*Mart, “Big Pharma,” “sweatshops,” etc).

The effects of such actions have to be *interpreted*, and those interpretations have to be *propagated* in the culture.

Smith generally expresses optimism about such interpretations and propagation. He generally affirms that the invisible-hand mechanisms will have the upper-hand in culture.

Smith’s affirmation can be put this way: He sees a chain linking the following three:

Approbation – Propriety – Utility

The first two, Approbation and Propriety, are necessarily connected: Approbation is enshrouded in spectatorial sympathy, which is based on common notions of propriety or beauty. Again, this linkage is simply Smith’s organon. I am happy to go along with Smith here.

But what of the second linkage? Smith asserts a natural linkage between Propriety and Utility. But what makes this connection? What are the mechanisms connecting Propriety and Utility? Can this connection break down?

When we think hard about the mechanisms of forming and propagating interpretations of effects, of propagating notions of Propriety, Smith’s optimistic conclusions hardly seem ensured.

Actions that are at variance with people’s notions of propriety are regarded by them as *offensive*. Criticism (and implied disapprobation) directed at actions or characters that onlookers feel deserve approbation is *offensive* to the onlookers.

Today, suggesting that the minimum wage law is the initiation of coercion is *offensive*. Suggesting that the ban-till-permitted system of pharmaceutical control is a bane to humanity and should be abolished is *offensive*. Suggesting that occupational licensing is a bane to humanity and should be abolished is *offensive*. Suggesting that the welfare state is a bane to humanity and should be abolished is *offensive*. Suggesting that we live in world of wholesale coercions perpetrated by government is *offensive*.

We need to think about the mechanisms by which interpretations are formed, validated, and propagated. And then we need to think about America 2009: K-12, the universities, the bullsh-t you see on TV (from Bill Maher to Bill O’Reilly), the huge government sector, the social-democratic culture generally. Do we believe that we have a setting in which invisible-hand mechanism in culture have the upper-hand?

I’ve always felt that the cultural optimism of TMS does not fit our age. I’ve always felt that he gives short shrift to the maverick who *challenges* received sensibilities, received notions of

propriety. I've always felt that TMS treats "pride," "presumption," "arrogance," "insolence," and the like in a way that is blind to the trade-offs one may face when the cultural institutions need challenging at their roots. There is little in TMS that appreciates the Thomas Paine, William Lloyd Garrison, Lysander Spooner, Ludwig von Mises, Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, Thomas Szasz, Robert Higgs, and so on. (Smith had a huge admiration in this for Voltaire, but it is not expressed in TMS; indeed, at 215.10 Smith knocks the challenging style of Voltaire, calling it "the most improper and even insolent contempt of all the ordinary decorums of live and conversation".)

I grant that Smith's counsel is not simply *knuckle under*. But the counsel is too one-sided: He encourages bargaining and discourages challenging.

James Otteson's book *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life* (Cambridge UP, 2002) does a great job with Smith's doctrine of an invisible-hand in culture. I think Jim gets Smith right. But I felt a need to *criticize* Smith for neglecting the possible usurpation of cultural mechanisms.

Smith says that "False notions of religion are almost the only causes which can occasion any very gross perversion of our natural sentiments" (176.12).

Well, what of political religions that have the coercive power of the state behind them? What happens when the state dominates the political culture and uses the cultural institutions to propagate *its* interpretations? What happens when children are indoctrinated with false notions of political propriety?

In matters of political opinion, political beauty, political propriety, in all such matters classical liberal sensibilities have in the United States been largely marginalized for well over 100 years. Around 1900 is when the subversion of the liberal lexicon really began to set in. If the invisible-hand mechanisms in culture have the upper-hand, how long will it take for that upper-hand to start revealing itself? After the postwar liberal renaissance culminating perhaps in the 1980s, we again seem to be losing what little cultural ground we have had.

The questions I ask about TMS: What *setting* is Smith assuming when he affirms an invisible hand in culture? Does that setting match that of America 2009?

Posted [May 13, 2009 10:40 AM](#)

[EPISODE 6](#)

[Daniel Klein](#) writes:

PURSUING HONEST PROFIT AS DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Russ and I touched on pursuing honest profit as a form of Smith's libertarian distributive justice. Here I elaborate a bit.

On pp. 269-70 Smith says distributive justice "consists in proper beneficence, in the becoming use of what is our own."

Does pursuing honest profit qualify as the becoming use of what is one's own?

Suppose Jim pursues honest profit by owning and running a Dunkin Donuts store.

BECOMING: To interpret "becoming" in a proper Smithian way, I think we may invoke Smith's four sources of moral approval (pp. 326-327).

Pursuing honest profit clearly satisfies Smith's fourth source of moral approval--that is, contributing to the grand concatenation that is beautiful in its promotion of social betterment.

But is the fourth source sufficient for "becoming"? The fourth source does *not* subsume sources 1, 2, and 3.

The first source concerns the motives of the actor; the second the sentiments of those affected; the third the ways those two sympathies generally or properly interact.

Pursuing honest profit certainly may satisfy sources 1, 2, and 3, but it is difficult to ascertain that it has.

Source 1: We don't know a lot about Jim's motives; maybe they are merely mercenary. We don't know much about the alternatives to which Jim could have put his resources. If Jim merely follows (commutative) justice and a narrow prudence, we don't feel that his motive is particularly becoming.

Source 2: Jim's customers will say "thank you" when they are served their donuts, but the sympathetic connection at the counter is perfunctory and impersonal. Again, there is not a lot here to warrant the word "becoming."

Source 3: Again, like most commercial establishments, Dunkin Donuts is merely perfunctory and impersonal. The sentiments of Jim and his customers conform to an ordinary propriety, but no expansive beauty.

So it is hard to determine whether Jim's pursuit of honest profit is becoming.

Those best able to make such a judgment will be those who live with or work with Jim. They will know more about Jim's motives (the spirit with which he carries on the trade), the alternative uses to which Jim may have put his resources, and the nature of his prudence (e.g., what he does with his profits--is he a good father, is he a good neighbor, etc.).

Smith repeatedly emphasizes that one's moral life resides most meaningfully in his relations with "those we live with". (The phrase "those we live with" appears 10 times in the book.) Distributive justice is really an affair among those we live with.

In itself, pursuing honest profit is not becoming at all four levels, and hence is not necessarily becoming, and hence not necessarily a form a distributive justice.

BUT IT MAY BE. Pursuing honest profit *in a becoming way* is a form of distributive justice.

As was said in the first episode of the series, Smith wrote WN to give *moral authorization* to the pursuit of honest profit. He wanted us to understand that the pursuit of honest profit satisfies the fourth source of moral approval, and does not typically offend sources 1, 2, and 3. That may not add up to becoming, but it does add up to a moral authorization as beautiful in its utility if only prudent in its motives and perfunctory in its experience.

Posted [June 1, 2009 8:00 AM](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Eric,

Unquestionably, Jim's honest work in selling donuts is respectable, it satisfies the first three moral sources *adequately*, it meets propriety, but I think one needs to go beyond customary propriety to be "becoming," and to be earn admiration in terms of distributive justice, which Smith also dubs "proper beneficence".

In deeming Jim's efforts in terms of distributive justice, I think that Jim's alternatives to entering the donut business are relevant. Distributive justice is a matter of becomingly *distributing* one's social resources. Jim has distributed his capital (including time, energy) on an honest donut business. Is that a becoming distribution? Well, to judge that we would need to know what else Jim may have done with his resources. What if Jim could have done something of much greater significance and utility? Wouldn't that make us disinclined to see proper beneficence, the becoming use of what is Jim's own, in his pursuing and performing the donut business?

Again, I don't think that the pursuit (or even attainment) of honest profit necessarily qualifies as distributive justice. To qualify it must, further, be becoming, and that is very hard to determine.

Of course you are right that common notions of private enterprise tend to be vulgar in their over-readiness to doubt the honesty of profit, to rule out the possibility of Jim achieving a benevolence that is actually becoming, and even to begrudge it ordinary propriety or decency. But don't go overboard by claiming that Jim's honest profits necessarily qualify as proper beneficence.

Posted [June 5, 2009 9:07 AM](#)

Daniel Klein writes:

Eric,

Well put.

Look, distributive justice/proper beneficence/becoming use of what is one's own is not a political or economic matter. It is quite personal and moral.

Sure, regardless of Jim's potentialities, now or previously, running an honest and profitable donut shop is thoroughly respectable and even sedately admirable. But we must admit that, shy of greater information to the effect that Jim's motives and efforts were especially beneficent, we have no grounds for glorifying or greatly admiring Jim.

Moreover, we are rarely sure how honest Jim's profits are. Knowing that Jim's motives and efforts were becoming is extremely difficult. Knowing that his profits are basically honest is only a little less difficult. We generally don't know whether we should call Jim's business becoming/distributive justice.

Posted [June 7, 2009 1:41 PM](#)