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The Virtue in Vice: Short-Sightedness in the Study of Moral Emotions

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Abstract

Emotions that are motivated by self-interest, such as jealousy, pride, and revenge, are considered to be vices. We examine the long-term consequences of such states, and suggest that, in addition to promoting immediate individual rewards, they may ultimately function to enhance collective well-being and, as such, contribute importantly to the stability of moral systems.

Keywords
emotion, morality

How selfish 'soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others.
Adam Smith (1759/1966)

By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.
Adam Smith (1776/1981)

Pride, jealousy, vengeance—three of the most objectionable vices known to humankind. Emotions to be avoided, lest eternal damnation be your goal. A functionalist perspective of emotion, however, maintains that these emotions help solve important adaptive problems (Keltner & Haidt, 2001). It's not difficult to see why they may hold benefits; states that motivate self-interested ends such as status acquisition (i.e., pride), relationship protection (i.e., jealousy), or remedies of wrongs (i.e., vengeance), can certainly lead to positions of strength. A more interesting proposition, however, is that these vices also contribute to *collective* well-being. If true, it raises the question: Is there any virtue in these vices? Could it be that the experience of "selfish" emotions, those that render us indifferent to the immediate interest of others, ultimately enhance overall welfare? And could their functionality, at least in part, derive from such effects?

Ever growing evidence suggests that emotions play a central role in the construction and maintenance of moral systems—that is, systems characterized by cooperative and flourishing social life (c.f. Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). For example, "moral" emotions such as gratitude (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006) and compassion (Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010; Valdesolo & DeSteno, in press) interest us in the well-being of those around us and motivate us to build and strengthen important social relationships. We suggest that affective mechanisms *promoting* immediate self-interest also contribute to the evolution of flourishing cooperative societies, and as such they might also be considered within the moral domain. Indeed, long-term collective well-being may be best achieved by societies of individuals expressing a suite of emotional states promoting both immediate self- and other-interest.

A growing body of research speaks to the importance of the evolution of other-interested motivations. These states serve as a kind of social glue, binding individuals into mutually beneficial units of reciprocal exchange that capitalize on the nonzero-sum game of human interaction. Social cohesion is a means through which such ends as resource sharing, protection from enemies, and access to mates are met. Oftentimes, these ends are temporally removed from the experience of the emotions that function to promote them. For example, gratitude today might only lead to reciprocity a year later. However, by solving the commitment problems involved in assuring long-term

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rewards, these emotions foster stability in the building of social and economic capital (Frank, 1988).

In a similar vein, emotions associated with self-interested motivations may also contribute to long-term social cohesion and, consequently, collective well-being. Research into the function of vengeance (McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, in press) suggests it motivates punishment of and aggression towards transgressors, with the ultimate function of deterring future transgressions. Importantly, these theorists argue that revenge increases the costs associated with transgressing not only against a victim but a victim's allies as well. Vengeance can elicit third-party punishment (Lieberman & Linke, 2007), enhancing social cohesion and stability by providing a mechanism designed to ensure that group members act in accordance with accepted norms (c.f. Boyd & Richerson, 1992). This desire to punish wrongdoers certainly is not governed by the principle of other-interest—indeed it seems driven by a desire to deliver an individual message to the transgressor (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009)—yet it ultimately promotes group welfare over time, making it unclear whether it is an emotion that we would be better off stifling.

Counterintuitively, jealousy might also ultimately strengthen relationships. Jealousy has been shown to result from threats to the self, motivating aggression as a means to address the source of the threat (DeSteno, Valdesolo, & Bartlett, 2006). Though the immediate impetus to punch a rival in the face may not seem like a socially valued attribute, it serves as an honest signal to partners of a strong degree of psychological investment in a relationship. Although the motivation the emotion elicits may lead to the selfish protection of a resource, its experience might be a powerful contributor to the stability of social bonds over time.

Long-term welfare might also be achieved in ways beyond promoting social cohesion. For societies to flourish, they not only need to be united but advanced—technologically, intellectually, and materially. Wealth and strength, broadly defined, would not only provide a competitive advantage relative to other groups, but also allow for a wider and richer distribution of resources within a group. Of course, this idea is not new. Adam Smith's theorizing on the power of free markets suggests that it is precisely the drive for self-advancement that helps societies grow. Specialization and trade within groups are the mechanisms of collective well-being (Smith, 1904). Bettering oneself, and having motivations and emotions which foster such an end, may ultimately benefit the community by focusing individual efforts on areas of comparative advantage.

Importantly, these emotions need not be selflessly motivated. Pride, for example, has been shown to motivate perseverance on tasks and increase dominance and status within groups (Williams & DeSteno, 2008, 2009), and is preferentially elicited in domains for which individuals have an advantage in skills or expertise (c.f. Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010). By providing psychological reinforcement for socially valued achievements, pride may not only serve the immediate goal of ascending a social hierarchy, but also ultimately contribute to communal welfare by maximizing the creation of material and social value.

In sum, cooperative and flourishing social life may depend on a balance between the drive for individual gain coupled with the drive to share the fruits of such gains with others. Emotions relevant to both could contribute to the realization of other-interested ends, and, consequently, to the stability of moral systems. A consideration of the long-term consequences of self-interested motivations sheds light on the social value of emotional states that have otherwise seemed to lead to only individual gains. There may be virtue in the protection of one's relationships. There may be virtue in aggressing towards enemies, and there may be virtue in striving for status and power. In line with the Aristotelian ethic of moderation, if moral emotions are those that ultimately lead to cooperative social living and the maximizing of human welfare, then virtue may lie in identifying a "golden mean" for the experience of each emotional state, whether immediately selfless or selfish.

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