



## Posh boys and mirror neurons

### Description

Last week the BBC [reported](#) renegade UK Tory back bencher Nadine Dorries's assertion that not only are the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer **two posh boys who don't know the price of milk, but they are two arrogant posh boys who show no remorse, no assion to want to understand the lives of others.**



It seems that top politicians are in the company of senior banking executives and

high-salaried CEOs who command privilege, power and economic control but lack **empathy** with ordinary people. It's also a damning criticism of their economic prowess.

It's all about empathy. Adam Smith (1723-1790), pioneer of economic theory, begins his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* with a chapter on *Sympathy*.

**When we see a stroke [of a hand] aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer** (p.10).

He continues with the observation that an audience will writhe and twist with the motions of a dancer poised on a slack rope, similar sympathies to those that **enliven joy and alleviate grief** (p.14) when observing the fortunes of a friend.



In his later work *The Wealth of Nations*, for which he is most

famous, Smith insists we have to consider the interests of our potential collaborators, business partners, clients, service providers and constituents, ie those from whom we want something, or wish to persuade.

We need to **address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of *our own* necessities but of *their* advantages** (p.22).

Empathy makes economic sense.

Economics (the "dismal science" according to Thomas Carlyle) turns to an analysis of brain function for a key to understanding the important area of empathy, at least according to articles published in the *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*. The interest is not in the division of (mental) labour, so much as the brain as an organ of mimicry and habits, and motor mimicry at that (ie copying of other people's movements).

## Mirror neurons

Brain researchers have developed the hypothesis that the brains of higher primates, such as apes and us, contain many neurons specialised in replicating what they observe in others as if in support of Smith's proposition about empathy. So if I observe a person lifting a cup to her mouth then the same pattern of neural activity that appears in her also takes place in my brain. I carry out the same action mentally.

Fortunately, there are other processes that generally, but not always, inhibit the operation from getting as far as my motor system. (Imagine the chaos of a race of overly empathic mimes, if they could ever feed or reproduce themselves.) Apparently this kind of mimetic neural activity is going on all the time. We are copycat organisms by nature.



The neurons responsible for this motor mimicry are known as “mirror neurons,” and cluster in vast number in the “premotor cortex,” a region found in the brains of primates, and concerned with eye and body movement coordination (the visuomotor system).

Mirror neurons are most pronounced in humans. According to neuroscientists (Rizzolatti and Craighero) this mimicry in the motor system is the start of a series of parallel neural processes that also deliver fellow-feeling, emotion, and language competence.

They also contribute to your ability to put yourself in the minds of others, ie to guess what they are thinking, interpret their gestures, believe in minds other than your own, and be “self aware.”

Apparently the mirror neuron system (MNS) is less active in some people than in others, hence Asperger syndrome and the difficult case of autism – the limited ability of some people to socialize and experience empathy.

For a narrative version of the syndromes think of Commander Spock in *Star Trek*, Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory*, and Detective Saga NorÅ in *The Bridge*. From a Dawinian perspective, perhaps any community needs a spectrum of empathisers and detached thinkers to function.

Consider too the un-empathic toffs in the novels by Evelyn Waugh and PG Wodehouse, for whom getting rained on during a jolly day out in the countryside is a global catastrophe, but the Great Depression is a minor inconvenience. Analysts might explain this form of “economic Asperger” via theories based on cultural conditioning. But perhaps neuroscience will reveal how the motile inertness of the stiff upper lip extends into the mirror neuron system, and human insociability.

## Do as I do

The economic lesson from the MNS hypothesis is that those who call the shots ought to exhibit the behaviour they want of others. Considering our propensity to mimicry, there’s not much use in demanding austerity in others if we don’t practice it ourselves. Is there something here for “posh boys” to emulate?

## Bibliography

- Barr, Ann, and Peter York. 1982. *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook: The First Guide to What Really Matters in Life*. London: Angus and Robertson.
- Khalil, Elias L. 2011. The mirror neuron paradox: How far is understanding from mimicking? *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, (77)86-96.
- Ramachandran, V.S. 2011. *The Tell-Tail Brain: Unlocking the Mysteries of Human Nature*. London: William Heinemann.
- Rizzolatti, Giacomo, and Laila Craighero. 2004. The mirror-neuron system. *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, (27)169-192.
- Smith, Adam. 1998. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published in 1776.
- Smith, Adam. 1984. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund. First published in 1759.

## Notes

- According to Rizzolatti and Craighero the ability to mimic movement is not a primitive capability. Dogs and cats won't instinctively wave their paws about to copy your hand movements (unless trained), but advanced primates can. But see Roger Caillois on involuntary mimicry in insects ([post](#)).
- On Adam Smith and his detractors within the arts and the design community (notably John Ruskin) see: Coyne, Richard. 2005. *Cornucopia Limited: Design and Dissent on the Internet*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Elias L. Khalil makes the link between Adam Smith's concepts of the bodily basis of empathy and the mirror neuron system. He also develops and critiques Smith's ideas about emotional *pitch* a nice resonance with [tuning](#).
- Smith also writes about the propensity of the poor to emulate the rich. See also a social theory based on this by Thorstein Veblen (1998) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus. First published in 1899.
- Motile mimicry is also a matter of habit, in that we are apparently most inclined to mimic what we are already practiced at doing: When observers see a motor event that shares features with a similar motor event present in their motor repertoire, they are primed to repeat it (Rizzolatti and Craighero p.180). An accomplished (or practiced) dancer is most inclined to bob around in their seat at the sight of others dancing, and be inclined to join in.
- Also read blog post by Scott Maxwell, [Mirror Neurons and Dasein](#), and an [article](#) by Marco Frascari on architectural drawing.

## Category

1. Economics

## Tags

1. Adam Smith
2. body
3. brain
4. economics
5. empathy
6. mirror neurons

- 7. neuroscience
- 8. posh
- 9. Sloan Ranger

**Date Created**

May 12, 2012

**Author**

rcoyne99

*default watermark*