The Perception of Value

Adam Smith on the Moral Role of Social Research

August 2014

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ABSTRACT

Recently several prominent scholars have argued that we should conceive of social research as a form of moral inquiry, at least in part, but none have made clear exactly how and why observational research can make a distinctive contribution to moral insight. Turning attention back in time to the era before the modern distinction between social science and the humanities became entrenched, I argue that Adam Smith provided a clear and forceful rationale for the moral role of social research, especially history. Smith believed that moral understanding needs to rely on emotional reactions to richly described cases, preferably cases in which our own interests are not at stake. The person of moral insight is distinguished by her extraordinary ability to perceive the important circumstances relevant to a moral predicament and to react to them with appropriate emotions. These meditations on particular cases, in turn, provide the basis for moral generalizations that can inform future encounters with particular cases, at which point a new cycle of observation and analysis begins. This perspective led Smith (along with his friend David Hume) to the view that historical writing makes a more important contribution to moral understanding than abstract philosophy does. I reconstruct Smith's arguments about the role of empirical observation in cultivating moral sensibility in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, and his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. I then connect his argument to contemporary ideas about the nature of moral understanding in philosophy and cognitive science.

It is a minority perspective, to put it mildly, but a few scholars have argued that we should conceive of social research as a form of moral inquiry. Everyone else believes that social research serves scientific rather than moral purposes—or at best that it serves moral purposes by virtue of its scientific findings, insofar as a clearer understanding of cause-and-effect in the social world dissolves or recasts moral problems. By contrast, the claim that close observation of social life can contribute directly to moral enlightenment—that we gain clarity about what our values should be, not just about the most effective instruments for achieving them, by looking— is foreign to the dominant tradition of contemporary social research, and it seems to violate important articles of its underlying philosophy, such as the supposed dichotomy separating facts from values and the prohibition against deriving "ought" from "is". Nevertheless, that claim has made explicitly by a range of prominent scholars, including Robert Bellah (Bellah *et. al.* 1985; Haan et. al. 1983), Charles Taylor (1985), Bent Flyvbjerg (2001), Alice O'Connor (2007), Philip Selznick (2008), and Philip Gorski (2013). I have made it myself in recent work as well (Thacher 2006).

These claims often remain ambiguous enough to leave us wondering whether they really stake out a distinctive position after all. Philip Selznick, for example, insisted that we cannot define the standards that implicitly regulate every social practice by fiat or deduce them from first principles but instead must infer those standards by observing the practice at close range. He remains vague, however, about how exactly this analysis should proceed, and when he suggests that we should look for some "contribution to survival and flourishing" (2008: 122), he seems to imply an evolutionary or Aristotelian ethic that takes ultimate values as an input to social research rather than an output from it. Charles Taylor brilliantly argued that the most significant social research *must* aim to deepen and clarify the "norms, goods, or values" that particular

social practices aim to serve (1985: 107), but how exactly observation of the world contributes to this task remains obscure. Normative social theory has to be grounded in observation of the practice it analyzes (otherwise it wouldn't be *about* the practice at all), but when it comes to reforming that practice by clarifying its point, what does observation contribute? A skeptic can still wonder whether Taylor has, in spite of his intentions, only provided a defense of traditional armchair political philosophy rather than a morally engaged form of observational social research. These are among the most theoretically ambitious and self-conscious formulations of the conception of social science as moral inquiry. Less formal versions, such as those invoked by some advocates for "public sociology", seem to mean only that social science can inform action (e.g. O'Connor 2007; Burawoy 2005). Even the staunchest advocates for value-neutral inquiry can endorse that. [1]

The gap between moral and social inquiry took shape relatively recently, and we might reasonably look to the more distant past for ways of bridging it. This paper argues that one of the richest approaches appears in the work of Adam Smith—not primarily in *The Wealth of Nations*, but in his extensive writings and lectures about ethics. Though less widely known than his economics, Smith's moral theory has received growing attention among ethicists and moral psychologists over the past three decades (e.g. Harman 2000). As several of his commentators have noted, Smith thought that literature had a central role to play in moral enlightenment. It is less commonly noted that Smith gave the same role to history. I present this aspect of Smith's thought and reconstruct his argument for the moral role of history through a detailed examination of his moral theory, as expressed in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as well as his lectures on

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[1] Burowoy (2005) does explicitly distinguish "reflexive" inquiry that questions the meaning and significance of values from "instrumental" inquiry that takes them for granted, but he implies that this element of public sociology can take the form of open discussion among the members of a scholarly community and the wider public. It seems to be a precursor or sideshow to empirical social research rather than something that research can directly inform.

jurisprudence and rhetoric. This reconstruction of Smith's thought provides an under-appreciated rationale for the conception of social research as a form of moral inquiry.

Sentimental Ethics

The dominant philosophical tradition in ethics emphasizes the role of reason in ethical judgment. Immanuel Kant illustrates this perspective clearly. Kant believed that ethical rules should be developed entirely through intellectual reflection on what it is to be a rational agent, and he believed we should obey those rules out of a sense of duty rather than moral feeling. To act because of sympathy for others, or in response to other emotional reactions like compassion or resentment, is morally worthless (Kant 1964: 66). Thus he savaged the idea that "men who are unable to *think* hope to help themselves out by *feeling*" (p. 110).

An important dissident strand in ethics has challenged this emphasis on reason. Rousseau, for example, grounded mankind's entire moral sensibility in "an innate repugnance to seeing his fellow men suffer," believing that "from this quality alone flow all the social virtues" (1987: 53-4). Because he believed that this instinct "precedes in [man] any kind of reflection", he insisted that virtue rests on emotional sentiments rather than intellectual analysis of moral principles:

> One is not obliged to make a man a philosopher before making him a man. His duties toward others are not uniquely dictated to him by the belated lessons of wisdom; and as long as he does not resist the inner impulse of compassion, he will never harm another man or even another sentient being (1987: 35).

This compassion "carries us without reflection to the aid of those we see suffering," and so "it is in this natural sentiment, rather than in subtle arguments, that one must search for the cause of the repugnance at doing evil that every man would experience" (p. 55). Indeed Rousseau believed that reason typically damages rather than strengthens our moral sense: "Reason is what

turns man in upon himself," he wrote. "His fellow man can be killed with impunity underneath his window. He has merely to place his hands over his ears and argue with himself a little in order to prevent nature, which rebels within him, from identifying him with the man being assassinated" (p. 54-5).

In this sentimentalist alternative to Kant, moral judgments rest on emotional reactions to immediate experience rather than logical deductions from principles generated by reason (cf. Glover 1999). Among many other contemporaries of Rousseau's who subscribed to this alternative, Adam Smith carried the idea furthest.

Emotions and Morality in Adam Smith

For Smith, like Rousseau, moral judgment rests on empathy. Smith began *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* by commenting on the sense of "pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner" (*TMS* 11),[2] and he went on to define a more general facility for "sympathy" that encompasses "our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" (*TMS* 13). He viewed this sensitivity as a surprising and important feature of human nature: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others" (*TMS* 11).

Smith parted ways with Rousseau, however, about what sympathy is. For Rousseau (1979: 225), sympathy meant sharing another person's sentiments through a sort of emotional contagion. Smith mentioned this view near the beginning of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS* 13) but went on to argue that it was incomplete. First, emotional contagion alone cannot

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[2] All citations of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS)* refer to Knut Haakonsen's edition (Smith 2002).

account for the sympathy we sometimes feel for people who are themselves oblivious to their fate. Smith noted how "we blush for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour" (*TMS* 15), and he poignantly evoked the pity an observer might feel for an elderly man with dementia:

> Of all the calamities to which the condition of mortality exposes mankind, the loss of reason appears, to those who have the least spark of humanity, by far the most dreadful, and they behold that last stage of human wretchedness with deeper commiseration than any other. But the poor wretch, who is in it, laughs and sings perhaps, and is altogether insensible of his own misery. The anguish which humanity feels, therefore, at the sight of such an object, cannot be the reflection of any sentiment of the sufferer (*TMS* 15).

In cases like these we do not simply internalize another person's feelings but develop our own emotional reaction to her predicament.

Second, many emotions are not just disconnected feelings but rather feelings *about* something in the world, so when an observer shares the feeling alone she has not truly sympathized with the person she observes. (A baby might become happy when he sees his mother smile about her promotion, and in this sense the mother's feelings have passed from her to him, but the baby's reaction hardly exemplifies full-blown sympathy [Gordon 1995:729-30].) Developing this thought, Smith suggested that the feeling itself has merely instrumental importance by directing attention to the circumstances that gave rise to it:

> General lamentations, which express nothing but the anguish of the sufferer, create rather a curiosity to inquire into his situation. . . The first question which we ask is, What has befallen you? Till this be answered, though we are uneasy both from the vague idea of his misfortune, and still more from torturing ourselves with conjectures about what it may be, yet our fellow-feeling is not very considerable (*TMS* 14-5).

In this way Smith replaced the idea of emotional contagion with the idea of perspective-taking. "Sympathy," he concluded, "does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it" (*TMS* 15).

This distinction plays a major role in Smith's theory of moral judgment, which holds that we judge the morality of another person's action by asking whether we can endorse the sentiments that motivated it. To make that judgment we must try to see the world from the other person's perspective, but we need not share his sentiments. There is no need to endorse a rich man's distress when he learns that his shipment of peacock tongues won't arrive in time for his dinner party, nor the lack of concern expressed by a starving third-world woman who has internalized her culture's view of what she can legitimately expect (Nussbaum 2001: 309). Smith asks us to put ourselves in another person's shoes precisely in order to gauge whether that person's sentiments are legitimate—whether they take account of all the relevant circumstances, and whether they are appropriate as a response to the situation that evoked them (*TMS* 20-1).

On Smith's view, then, morality does require close attention to the experiences of other people, but it does not require accepting their own evaluations of those experiences. By themselves, the feelings that other people actually have are too crude a basis for moral judgment about how to treat them because morality does not always mean doing what others prefer. By contrast, close intellectual relatives of Smith such as Hume and Hutcheson believed that morality involved responsiveness to the sentiments of others, regardless of their justification. Smith's theory did not have this utilitarian implication, with all the problems it famously brings (Harman 1986: 189-190).

Observation and Moral Learning

This way of thinking about sympathy informed Smith's view about moral learning. To judge another person's actions, an observer must "put himself in the situation of the other, and . . . . bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents, and

strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his

sympathy is founded" (*TMS* 26).

Sometimes this task is easy, but sometimes it demands extraordinary powers of

perception. Those cases illustrate the intellectual virtue of moral clarity in a powerful way:

> When the sentiments of our companion coincide with our own in things . . . which are obvious and easy . . . we, no doubt, must approve of them, yet he seems to deserve no praise or admiration on account of them. But when they not only coincide with our own, but lead and direct our own; when in forming them he appears to have attended to many things which we had overlooked, and to have adjusted them to all the various circumstance of their objects, we not only approve of them, but wonder and are surprised at their uncommon and unexpected acuteness and comprehensiveness (*TMS* 24).

That, in Smith's view, is what moral guidance involves: An excellent moral guide highlights

unrecognized but morally relevant features of another person's situation and clarifies the

sentiments appropriate to them.

Smith himself illustrates this form of moral guidance in his critique of slavery. In a series

of lectures to his jurisprudence students, Smith tried to describe what it was like to be a slave by

examining slave life in ancient Rome, and in doing so he aimed to evoke details of the slave

experience that a casual observer might miss (*LJ* 178).[3] He put special emphasis on the

desiccated family life of Roman slaves. Although male and female slaves often lived together in

relationships that resembled marriage to a superficial observer, and which the slaves themselves

treated as marriage, Smith pointed out that their cohabitation is "precarious" because its duration

depends on the master's whim:

> If he thinks that they do not labor so well together, he may send them to different parts of his farm, or he may sell either of them at his pleasure. Or if he thinks he has not the profit he might have by the slaves the female would bear him, he may take her from her present mate and give her to another (*LJ* 179).

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[3] Here and elsewhere where I cite from the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (LJ*)* (Smith 1987) and the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (*LRBL*) (Smith 1983) I have modernized spelling and dropped the extensive editorial notations.

He went on to highlight how the condition of slavery undermined the basis for "parental affection": "Though he be satisfied that [his children] were begotten by him, he knows too that they were not supported nor maintained by him, nor any way protected, which . . . is that which alone constitutes the parental and filial affection" (*LJ* 178). With pointed observations like these, Smith apparently hoped to play the part of the moral guide, providing his audience with a more complete picture of what slavery was like—a picture that called attention to circumstances of the slave's life that many people in his audience might not have recognized.

The Place of Emotion

This account of moral judgment is a long way from Rousseau's idea that morality rests on "an innate repugnance to seeing [our] fellow men suffer." It depends not on a straightforward instinct to promote the well-being of others but on a capacity to discern the important features of their circumstances and react appropriately to them. That capacity requires factual inquiry as much as emotional sensitivity—Smith himself compared it to mathematical or scientific ability (*TMS* 25)—but Smith still placed emotional reactions at the center of moral judgment. Indeed, he believed that emotions provide the ultimate source of meaning for moral claims. In this respect he agreed with his friend David Hume (1998: 73-77) and his teacher Francis Hutcheson (1969) that moral judgments must ultimately rest on emotional reactions like gratitude, outrage, or admiration (*TMS* 377-8).

Smith's conviction about the central role of feeling in ethics led him to rail against the tendency towards abstraction in much moral philosophy, since only the rich texture of vivid observations and experiences can evoke the emotional reactions that moral judgment requires. Thus he complained:

> When a philosopher goes to examine why humanity is approved of, or cruelty condemned, he does not always form to himself, in a very clear and distinct manner, the

conception of any one particular action either of cruelty or of humanity, but is commonly contented with the vague and indeterminate idea which the general names of those qualities suggest to him. But it is in particular instances only that the propriety or impropriety, the merit or demerit of actions is very obvious and discernible. It is only when particular examples are given that we perceive distinctly either the concord or disagreement between our own affections and those of the agent, or feel a social gratitude arise towards him in the one case, or a sympathetic resentment in the other (*TMS* 219).

By contrast, "when we consider virtue and vice in an abstract and general manner, the qualities by which they excite these several sentiments seem in a great measure to disappear" (*ibid*.), and informed moral judgment becomes impossible. Like Hume, Smith viewed "the emotional response to a fully realized situation as moral reflection at its best" (Baier 1994: 64), and he criticized highly rule-bound moralities that focused mainly on abstract principles (*TMS* 343). Similarly—and in diametrical opposition to Kant—Smith insisted that the highest reaches of virtue are reserved for those who not only act rightly but do so because they feel the appropriate sentiments (*TMS* 200).

Why, then, should moral rules exist at all? For Smith one of the fundamental problems plaguing morality was the problem of personal bias—the problem of escaping the myopia imposed by our own position in life, from which it appears that our own interests matter much more than others' (cf. Fleischaker 1991). In his critique of slavery, for example, he despaired that "the persons who make all the laws in that country are persons who have slaves themselves," and their stake in the question blinds them to the immorality of slavery (*LJ* 182).

Smith introduced the problem of myopia by reflecting on the visual scene from his window. "In my present situation an immense landscape of lawns, and woods, and distant mountains, seems to do no more than cover the little window which I write by, and to be out of all proportion less than the chamber in which I am sitting." But we easily overcome such visual illusions by "transporting" ourselves "to a different station, from whence [we] can survey both at nearly equal distances, and thereby form some judgment of their real proportions" (*TMS* 156; cf.

Smith 1980). Smith argued that this aspect of visual perception provides a model for moral

judgment:

> To the selfish and original passions of human nature, the loss or gain of a very small
> interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance, excites a much more
> passionate joy or sorrow, a much more ardent desire or aversion, than the greatest
> concern of another with whom we have no particular connection . . . Before we can make
> any proper comparison of those opposite interests, we must change our position. We must
> view them, neither from our own place nor yet from his, neither with our own eyes nor
> yet with his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has no particular
> connection with either, and who judges with impartiality between us. Here, too, habit
> and experience have taught us to do this so easily and so readily, that we are scarce
> sensible that we do it (*TMS* 156-7).

Smith personified this perspective in his celebrated concept of the "impartial spectator"—the

voice of conscience that he variously dubbed "the man within the breast", "that great inmate of

the breast", and other personifications of the moral point of view. The spectator corrects "the

natural misrepresentations of self-love" by "call[ing] to us, with a voice capable of astonishing

the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better

than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we

become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration" (*TMS* 158).

Smith believed that humanity's innate desire to be understood and affirmed by other

people motivates us to try to internalize this detached, third-person perspective (*TMS* 17). As

soon as we leave our families for school, we learn that our new classmates will mock and shun

us unless we learn to rein in our most selfish tendencies (*TMS* 167-8). In this respect, the

reactions of others give us a new vantage point on our own behavior; life in society provides us

with a kind of moral "mirror" (*TMS* 129). To gain the favor of our companions, we must learn to

see ourselves "in the light in which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all" (*TMS* 184) and adjust our sentiments so that others find them understandable.[4]

Smith believed that moral rules help us to achieve this detached perspective on our own behavior. Rules serve as generalizations about our reactions to other people's behavior: "The general maxims of morality are formed, like all other general maxims, from experience and induction. We observe in a great variety of particular cases what pleases or displeases our moral faculties, what these approve or disapprove of, and, by induction from this experience, we establish those general rules" (*TMS* 377; cf. 186). We can then consult these generalizations to guide our own behavior; they help us identify what we would do if we could take a detached perspective on our own lives. Smith's account is worth quoting at length because it fits so closely with the view about the role of observation in moral understanding that I want to develop:

> Our continual observations upon the conduct of others, insensibly lead us to form to ourselves certain general rules concerning what is fit and proper either to be done or to be avoided. Some of their actions shock all our natural sentiments. We hear every body about us express the like detestation against them. This still further confirms, and even exasperates our natural sense of their deformity. It satisfies us that we view them in the proper light, when we see other people view them in the same light. We resolve never to be guilty of the like, nor ever, upon any account, to render ourselves in this manner the objects of universal disapprobation. We thus naturally lay down to ourselves a general rule, that all such actions are to be avoided, as tending to render us odious, contemptible, or punishable, the objects of all those sentiments for which we have the greatest dread and aversion" (*TMS* 184).

These rules provide especially useful advice in difficult cases. Thus Smith notes that they serve as standards of appeal in moral disputes about "actions of a complicated and dubious nature" (*TMS* 186), and individuals trying to determine the right thing to do find them to be "of great use

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[4] This account may sound too strategic to be truly moral, but it can be viewed as a pragmatic twist on a contractualist morality, particularly given Smith's pointed insistence that we strive not to be loved, but to be *worthy* of love (*TMS* 132). Harman (1986) discusses what makes Smith's theory a moral theory rather than detached psychology.

in correcting the misrepresentations of self-love concerning what is fit and proper to be done in our particular situation" (*TMS* 186). Smith saw the distinctive role of moral philosophy as the development of these moral rules (*TMS* 345).

Through this complex and indirect process, Smith believed that we rely on our observations about the conduct of others to guide our own. We use our judgments about appropriate and inappropriate behavior in others to refine our moral convictions, since those judgments are (hopefully) less partial than the judgments we make about our own choices. By allowing these evolving convictions to guide our sentiments and our behavior, we moderate them in a way that makes them acceptable to others, who now judge us from roughly the same vantage point we judged them when developed the rules.

Literature and History as Sources of Moral Judgment

The discussion so far crystallizes into two points: First, moral understanding for Smith develops best through reflections on particular cases; philosophical abstractions fail to engage the emotional reactions that comprise an essential element of moral judgment. Second, we make the most reliable moral judgments when our own interests are not at stake; the viewpoint of the moral spectator is less precarious than the viewpoint of the moral actor.

These two convictions led Smith to conclude that literature and history made outstanding contributions to moral education, since they could combine the evocative emotional detail of particular cases with a perspective that is potentially detached from important aspects of personal bias. Immediately after arguing that we develop moral rules based on "our continual observations upon the conduct of others" (*TMS* 184), Smith suggested that the vicarious observations provided by "history or romance" (*TMS* 185) can play this role.

First, as many of his interpreters have noted, Smith refers to literary authors much more often than moral philosophers in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and he repeatedly praises their contributions to our understanding of virtue while criticizing the blindness of moral philosophers (e.g. *TMS* 165). He illustrated the idea repeatedly in his rhetoric lectures at the University of Glasgow, explaining, for example, how satirists like Lucian and Jonathan Swift clarify moral vices. The stock characters in satire are people who think too highly of their own importance and express great admiration for ridiculous things (*LRBL* 48-9), and skilled satirists draw detailed portraits of such people and strategically call attention to the incongruity of their sentiments (*LRBL* 42-3). (In this respect satire perfectly illustrates Smith's analysis of moral disapproval as a judgment that someone's sentiments are inapt.) In the process, the satirist evokes readers' contempt for specific actions and sentiments (*LRBL* 43), and they can then bring those judgments to bear on other contexts. He concluded with a swipe at the more pedantic moral codes developed by philosophers, writing that Swift and Lucian "together form a system of morality from whence more sound and just rules of life for all the various characters of men may be drawn than from most set systems of morality" (*LRBL* 51; cf. 41).

Smith gave a comparable role to history. Although his commentators have mainly emphasized his literary references, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* repeatedly refers to history as source material for moral judgment (*TMS* 87-89, 174, 185, 281-284), and Smith relies heavily on historical material for his own analyses of justice in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (for example, in his discussion of slavery). Like great drama, great history engages our passions by vividly portraying specific experiences, but it allows us to remain in the role of a spectator rather than a self-interested actor. At its best, it provides the kind of richly described situations that

philosophical abstractions cannot, evoking the emotional reactions like contempt, resentment, and admiration that moral judgment ultimately rests on. Thus Smith wrote:

> When we read in history concerning actions of proper and beneficent greatness of mind, how eagerly do we enter into such designs? How much are we animated by that high-spirited generosity which directs them? How keen are we for their success? How grieved at their disappointment? In imagination we become the very person whose actions are represented to us: we transport ourselves in fancy to the scenes of those distant and forgotten adventures, and imagine ourselves acting the part of a Scipio or a Camillus, a Timoleon or an Aristides. . . . When we read in history concerning the perfidy and cruelty of a Borgia or a Nero, our heart rises up against the detestable sentiments which influenced their conduct, and renounces with horror and abomination all fellow-feeling with such execrable motives. . . . When we bring home to ourselves the situations of the persons whom those scourges of mankind insulted, murdered, or betrayed, what indignation do we not feel against such insolent and inhuman oppressors of the earth? Our sympathy with the unavoidable distress of the innocent sufferers is not more real nor more lively, than our fellow-feeling with their just and natural resentment (*TMS* 87-9).

Smith offered Livy as an example of this kind of historical writing, for in reading his histories "we enter into all the concerns of the parties and are almost as much affected with them as if we ourselves had been concerned in them" (*TMS* 96). Smith went on to praise the ancient historians as a group, noting how "the ancients carry us as it were into the very circumstances of the actors, we feel for them as it were for ourselves" (*TMS* 96). In these passages Smith attributes the same qualities to historical writing that he attributed to literature, and elsewhere he insists that a great historian like Tacitus shares the same virtues as the French dramatists he had praised in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*LRBL* 112). Both genres portray vivid experiences that can either serve as moral touchstones in their own right—as paradigm cases of right and wrong action—or provide essential input into more abstract moral deliberation.

In all of these discussions Smith clearly has in mind a particular variety of narrative history; abstract historical writing and history of ideas cannot do the job he describes.[5] As he put

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[5] J.G.A. Pocock discusses this and other aspects of Smith's view of history, noting that the canonical form of history in Smith's time was narrative history, focused on "the narration of exemplary actions . . . including the

it in his rhetoric lectures, the best history focuses on "the actions of men that are . . . most apt to draw our attention and make a deep impression on the heart," particularly actions that inspire "uneasiness" (*LRBL* 85). By doing that it "produce[s] a good effect on the minds of his readers to soften and humanize them" (*LRBL* 88), and in that respect it "has in view the instruction of the reader" (*LRBL* 90)

In the same lectures Smith discussed *how* historical writing can cultivate moral sensibility.[6] Because moral clarity requires an ability to apprehend "every little circumstance" that historical actors confronted and then judge whether the actors' sentiments were appropriate, an excellent historian must accomplish at least three things: She must thoroughly describe the situation the historical actors found themselves in, she must convey the sentiments they actually felt, and she must help the reader to judge those sentiments by comparing them to those an impartial spectator would feel. An historian who successfully accomplishes the first two tasks carries the reader into the perspective of the historical actors—not simply through a "bare narration" (*LRBL* 86) but by evoking the emotional impact the events had on the people who participated in them. Smith finds this ability in Livy, whose writings allow us to "enter into all the concerns of the parties and are almost as much affected with them as if we ourselves had been concerned" (*LRBL* 95-6). As his discussion of moral guidance in *TMS* indicates, the best historian-cum-moral guide must call attention to underappreciated details of the historical situation he describes (as Smith himself tried to do in his discussion of Roman slavery).

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actions to be avoided" (2006: 271). Smith himself complained that historical writing had increasingly moved away from narrative towards an excessive concern for evidentiary documentation (*LRBL* 101-2).

[6] The lecture notes never explicitly frame Smith's argument in this way, but his repeated analyses of how historical writing can convey the sentiments felt by participants and evoke them in readers unmistakably recall a central element of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith had just finished the heavily-revised second edition of that book the year he delivered the rhetoric lectures we have notes for.

Smith does not explicitly discuss how the historian (or the dramatist, for that matter) can accomplish the third task, but several of his strictures for good historical writing may have been directed towards it. Again, a key idea in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* holds that the firmest moral judgments issue from moral spectators rather than moral actors, who are handicapped by self-interested myopia. Readership itself is a spectator's role, and that is precisely why it is a useful vantage point for moral education, but Smith repeatedly refers to spectators *within* historical dramas, and he insists that excellent historians should evoke their sentiments as well as the participants' (eg. *LRBL* 86, 87, 112), presumably to help the reader see things from an appropriately judicious perspective.

In all of this Smith once again echoed Hume's views. Hume argued that one of the major contributions of history was to sharpen the moral senses: "The historians have been, almost without exception, the true friends of virtue, and have always represented it in its proper colours, however they may have erred in their judgments of particular persons." He went on to explain the moral value of history in terms that exactly parallel Smith's views, attacking philosophical abstraction and highlighting the benefits of the spectator's position:

> Nor is this combination of historians in favor of virtue at all difficult to be accounted for. When a man of business enters into life and action, he is more apt to consider the characters of men, as they have relation to his interest, than as they stand in themselves; and has his judgment warped on every occasion by the violence of his passion. When a philosopher contemplates characters and manners in his closet, the general abstract view of the objects leaves the mind so cold and unmoved, that the sentiments of nature have no room to play, and he scarce feels the difference between vice and virtue. History keeps in a just medium betwixt these extremes, and places the objects in their true point of view. The writers of history, as well as the readers, are sufficiently interested in the characters and events, to have a lively sentiment of blame or praise; and, at the same time, have no particular interest or concern to pervert their judgment.

Hume illustrated the value of historical discipline in a discussion of Machiavelli. In what Hume calls his "political" writings, Machiavelli condoned acts like assassination and perjury, but in his history of Florence, Machiavelli reverted to a more proper appreciation of virtue when he

confronted particular examples of these tactics (Hume 1985: 562). Hume himself wrote far

more pages of history than he did of philosophy, and in doing so he apparently hoped to

contribute to political ethics (Sabl 2002).

Feeling without Reason?

Since it first appeared in 1759, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* has attracted the

criticisms common to all sentimentalist approaches to ethics. One French commentator captured

the main objection shortly after Smith's death:

> If we place virtue in sympathy, sympathy being, in effect, involuntary and fatal, then it
> follows that virtue would necessarily be involuntary and fatal, and it would no longer
> depend on us to be virtuous or vicious. There would be no virtue at all in Smith's system,
> since, according to him, virtue resides in sympathy, and it is obvious that sympathy is
> involuntary (M. de la Roquette, 'Notice Sur Adam Smith'; cited in Dawson 1991)

Criticisms like this one assume that for Smith, emotional reactions are all there is to moral

judgment, and that these emotional reactions simply happen to us; they are a species of

psychological compulsion, and no one can be held responsible for sensations they cannot control.

Such critics read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as pure moral psychology—an attempt to map

a set of involuntary sensations that human beings typically have. At best, such an analysis must

remain agnostic about whether the sentiments we experience provide valid moral guidance. At

worst, it pulls the rug out from under them by locating their source in uncontrollable instincts.

Today biological analyses of ethics raise this concern most sharply. Insofar as they

represent our moral understanding as a set of biologically conditioned emotional responses that

lie outside of reflective control, biological analyses may encourage us to view morality as an

atavistic emotional instinct that no longer deserves allegiance. [7] As some widely discussed

evidence from brain scans suggests, we may be hardwired to find it appalling to harm someone

face-to-face but unconcerned about doing less direct and visible damage. Such instincts may

have served mankind well in prehistoric times dominated by close-knit groups, but they are

outdated in the interdependent society we inhabit today (Greene et al 2001; Singer 2005). These

emotional reactions do not really instruct us about which actions are right or wrong; at best they

signal which actions allowed our ancestors to reproduce. No one has a moral obligation to

promote the genetic fitness of the species, much less to act in ways that would have promoted the

genetic fitness of her ancestors.

The Theory of Moral Sentiments sometimes gets classified as a progenitor of this

scientific and explanatory approach to ethics (e.g. Campbell 1971), and even though Smith

himself did not draw deflationary conclusions from it, others may be tempted to do so. But both

this interpretation of Smith and the critique of emotional judgments that follows from it fail to do

justice to the complexity of his analysis.

Smith did believe that our moral judgments rely heavily on our emotional reactions to

concrete experiences, but he explicitly denied that those emotional reactions are "involuntary and

fatal." In our everyday experiences we constantly reflect on our emotional reactions and criticize

them, and when an unfamiliar situation confronts us we frequently puzzle over what it is

appropriate to feel (Scruton 1997: 56; Williams 1976: 224; Gross 1999; Pizarro 2000). We

conclude that an apparent compliment was really an insult worthy of anger, that an apparent

insult was really an unintentional slight that we can't legitimately resent, that we should be

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[7] Obviously not all contemporary commentators influenced by biological treatments of ethics intend that treatment as deflationary; see, for example, Wilson (1997) and Damasio (1995). I intend the argument that follows to be consistent with theirs.

grateful for a favor we barely noticed, or that winning a hot-dog eating contest isn't really the sort of thing that grownups ought to be solemnly proud of. If we do not reach these conclusions on our own, other people may join the deliberations by criticizing our feelings; parents and educators often respond this way to children, trying to teach them what to fear, what to be angry about, what to admire, and so on (Williams 1976: 225). These reactions all illustrate how our emotions, no less than our beliefs, respond to reflection and critique. We may not always revise our feelings successfully in response to these judgments—we often find ourselves unable to change our beliefs in response to relevant evidence as well—but often we do, and even when we don't we recognize that we should. Smith makes room for this feature of our everyday experience by distinguishing the feelings we actually have from the feelings a sympathetic but impartial spectator thinks we *should* have. The distinction follows from either of two central elements of his analysis.

First, because emotional reactions must be well-suited to the situation someone actually faces, they require an accurate understanding of the nature of that situation. Even factual information provides a basis for these assessments, as Smith stresses in his discussion of the moral guide who "appears to have attended to many things which we had overlooked" (*TMS* 24). An overly stylized view of another person's circumstances makes a defensible judgment about his actions and sentiments impossible. For that reason perspective-taking and attention to detail are essential ingredients of moral insight; emotional sensitivity alone is not enough because even a fine tuned emotional register may end up responding to an incomplete picture of the relevant circumstances.

Second, even if you and I notice precisely the same features of my situation, you may justifiably criticize my emotional reaction as too strong or too tepid. My feelings are

accountable to norms about *apt* feelings—the kinds of feelings that anyone ought to have in specific circumstances (Gibbard 1990).[8] Those norms provide a standard that we can use to criticize the sentiments of others and to reflect on our own. They do not appear out of nowhere. They are, according to Smith's analysis of moral rules, simply a distillation of our reflections on other cases—preferably cases in which our own interests are not at stake—and we can criticize and adjust them in response to consideration and discussion of new cases (for example, by pointing out our interlocutor's inconsistency: "You didn't—or wouldn't—feel that way in such-and-such a situation").

In these ways Smith made room for what Hume called "the correction of sentiment" (1969: 633). Either by pointing out unacknowledged features of someone's situation or by arguing about the norms that govern appropriate sentiments in such situations it is possible to engage in rational critique of moral judgments. At the same time, both men remained firmly within the sentimentalist fold, as contrasted with the thoroughgoing rationalism of someone like Kant. As Annette Baier put it in an insightful discussion of Hume, "what controls and regulates feeling will be a wider web of feelings, which reason helps us apprehend and understand, not any reason holding authority over all feelings" (1994: 57; cf Hume 1998: 75-6; *TMS* 377-8).

In this respect, the moral faculty described by Smith is not a fixed set of instinctive emotional responses but a body of commitments that continually evolve in response to observation, reflection, and feeling; it has little in common with the moral sense envisioned by the "biological ethics" I alluded to earlier. Like human understanding in many other fields, our

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[8] These norms apply to relativistic moral positions as well as more substantive ones. We may find the emotional detachment and insouciance that relativism involves—the sense that nothing really is at stake in deciding whether or not to condemn an action—inapt, or even outrageous. Obviously people will sometimes disagree about whether such relativistic detachment is an appropriate reaction to particular cases, just as they may disagree about more substantive emotional attitudes. Such disagreement does not, however, pose a fundamental challenge to moral inquiry (or so I have argued in Thacher 2006: 1653-4).

current ethical understanding is the culmination of a history of reflection, in which individual thinkers criticize and build upon the conclusions their predecessors had reached. In Thomas Nagel's words, it is "the result of a human capacity to subject innate or conditioned pre-reflective motivational and behavioral patterns to criticism and revision, and to create new forms of conduct" (1978: 230). Like every other human capacity, this one has some biological basis; we are biological beings. Biology may therefore tell us something about what Nagel calls the "perceptual and motivational starting points" of ethics. But the ethical convictions we hold today are a product of the "thinking process which these starting points are transcended", and involuntary biological instincts do not determine the upshot of that process on their own (*Ibid.*).

This process of refinement plays a central role in Smith's understanding of morality. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* left this element implicit, but Smith made it explicit in the scattered comments he made on justice in his lectures on rhetoric and on jurisprudence, which incorporate masses of historical detail about the evolution of legal rights. Smith asserted that far back in history judges had to "trust to the natural feeling of justice he has in his own breast and he expects to find in others" (*LJ* 314) because "they have at first no precedents" (*LJ* 287). But at that stage justice is precarious because "it takes time and repeated practice to ascertain the precise meaning of a law" (*LJ* 287). In particular, Smith argued that the best courts adopted the common law model: "The common law [is] much more equitable than that which is founded on statute only, for the same reason as what is founded on practice and experience must be better adapted to particular cases than that which is derived from theory only" (*LRBL* 175). In this way Smith viewed the evolution of the common law as a sustained attempt to "find the standpoint of the impartial spectator," as Knud Haakonssen (1989: 153) put it.

Conclusion

Smith's theory of moral judgment clarifies how a continual effort to observe and reflect on a wide range of experiences can deepen our understanding of normative ideals. It may be helpful to contrast this model with a common view in modern thought, which conceives of an ideal like justice as a set of principles adopted once and for all at the moment when society is first established (perhaps hypothetically). By contrast, Smith insisted that moral understanding cannot be determined all at once under perfect conditions but must emerge as the product of exploration and reflection over the long sweep of history. Justice is an ideal that real people approach over time as they struggle to identify apt feelings about particular cases in the light of the intellectual and emotional resources they have inherited from their predecessors. The same holds for other aspects of morality. Moral standards cannot be defined at one moment by any individual thinker, but must refined continually through a historical process of exploration by a community of thinkers committed to continual reflection about novel experiences. The enterprise of social research contributes directly to a society's ability to press this investigation forward—a point that Smith made explicitly in his discussion of the moral role of history.

Smith had in mind a vividly narrated and morally engaged variety of history. Unlike social scientific histories that step outside of the perspective of the people they study to identify external factors that drive the course of events, those that Smith has in mind ask us to consider choices from the inside—by bringing into view the situations and sentiments that historical actors themselves had. Smith insists, however, that we need not be bound by the judgments those actors made. We can reconsider their choices in the light of the situations they actually faced, whether or not they fully grasped all the nuances they should have grasped. But it is *their* choices we are considering, not the choices made by God or Nature when they established the laws that

historical actors must follow. The forks in the road that Smith's kind of history studied involve different paths that historical actors might (and perhaps should) have chosen. Their experiences help those of us who study them to think about ethical choices in general, and when we feel that some aspect of our social practices has led us to a dead end, they allow us to retrace our steps and rethink them.

Obviously forms of social research other than history can play a similar role. Smith wrote at a time when contemporary social science disciplines did not exist (many view him as the founder of one of them), so history may have been the only significant form of social inquiry near at hand for him to consider. Today ethnography and case study research in a variety of fields can—and sometimes do—provide portrayals of human predicaments that are at least as vivid as those of the best narrative history, yet they offer the same potential for critical distance from the biases of a first person perspective. All of these forms of social research can inform the complex process of progressive moral clarification that Smith elucidated.

Smith's own account of how exactly this process of moral evolution unfolds is not the only possible one. He was no fan of principle-driven morality, but when it came time to explain how history, literature, or direct experience might prepare a person to deal with moral predicaments in the future, Smith's only sustained discussion focused on the use of rules, conceived as codifications of the scattered judgments we have made about more specific cases. This principle-driven morality may not capture all aspects of moral evolution. An alternative familiar from legal reasoning relies on analogies and disanalogies among particular cases in a way that cannot be reduced entirely to abstract principles (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988). Another, discussed at length by the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch (1997), locates the impact of

particular observations on our moral understanding not in the general moral rules we endorse but in the value-laden concepts that organize our perceptions.

Smith offers all of these perspectives an account of the moral importance of observation. Moral understanding may leave its sediment in a variety of intellectual resources—general rules, analogies among particular cases, value-laden descriptive concepts, or something else entirely— but to understand how it can *originate* in observations, we need a defensible account of how vivid observations can carry some kind of moral authority. Smith's theory provides the most plausible account I know of. In that respect it identifies an important foundation for the claim that we learn about values by looking. In the process, it provides a rationale for the conception of social research as moral inquiry that ultimately rests on that claim.

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