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DOI:

[10.1080/09608788.2016.1263598](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2016.1263598)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Sagar, P. (2017). Beyond sympathy: Smith's rejection of Hume's moral theory. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 25, 681-705. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2016.1263598>

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# Beyond Sympathy: Smith's Rejection of Hume's Moral Theory

Paul Sagar  
King's College, Cambridge

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## Introduction

Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*) was a publishing success in its author's lifetime, going through six authorised editions in Britain, and gaining appreciative readers in France and Germany as well. Its fortunes after Smith's death were not, however, sustained. For a long time *TMS* lay largely forgotten, before being press-ganged into the so-called 'Das Adam Smith Problem' associated with German scholars of the latter 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>1</sup> Happily, matters have recently once again been reversed. The 'Das Adam Smith Problem' has largely been left behind as an interpretative wrong turn, and Smith's moral philosophy is today the focus of healthy interest in its own right.<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite this welcome redux a core feature of Smith's moral theory in *TMS* remains largely unappreciated. This concerns the nature of Smith's engagement with the account of moral foundations put forward by his friend and philosophical forerunner, David Hume. Certainly, the relationship between Smith and Hume on this score has attracted scholarly attention. But with regards to the foundations of morals, this has so far focused upon Smith and Hume's rival accounts of 'sympathy' (Raynor 1984; Darwall 1998, 264-70; 1999, 141-5; Otteson 2002, 30-9; Broadie 2006; Fleischacker 2012; Sayre-McCord 2013; for a holistic overview, Hanley 2016). Yet as I will show, disagreement over sympathy is only the starting point of Smith's engagement with Hume's account of the foundations of morals. My central contention is that the argument of *TMS* can be

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<sup>1</sup> For a classic formulation of the 'Problem', Oncken 1897. Despite the misguided nature of the original 'Problem', it may nonetheless constitute the historical origin of serious contemporary analysis of Smith (Tribe 2008).

<sup>2</sup> This may be illustrated by reference to the sheer number of monographs now available concerning Smith's moral-philosophical thought, for example Campbell 1971; Brown 1994; Griswold 1999; Fleischacker 1999, 2004; Otteson 2002; Raphael 2007; Hanley 2009; Forman-Barzilai 2010.

understood as in part a rejection of Hume's division of the virtues into 'artificial' and 'natural'.<sup>3</sup> Although both thinkers agreed that morality was fundamentally a purely human construction – the product of imaginative psychological processes combined with the capacity to share the sentiments of others (Griswold 1999, 155-73) – Smith's vitiation of Hume's bifurcation was the backbone of an attempt to reject the older philosopher's central system, replacing it with that of *TMS*. Whilst Smith thought that Hume was working with the right materials in attempting to construct an account of morality based in the passions, and in particular the operations of sympathy, he judged that Hume's way of assembling these materials was not correct. Smith's ambition was not only to offer a moral theory that he thought was correct, but to stake a claim to having offered the most plausible sentimental theory then available. In practice, this meant one that was superior to Hume's. Doing so, however, would require moving Hume's theory off of the philosophical territory that it had staked, claiming it for Smith's instead. Thus a major ambition of *TMS* was to reject and replace Hume's earlier sentimental account.

My argument proceeds in four main sections. The first recapitulates Hume's theory of the virtues in the *Treatise of Human Nature*. The second examines Smith's claim that even the supposed 'natural' virtues have to be understood in terms of fundamental social composition. The third examines Smith's treatment of justice – Hume's paradigm artificial virtue – and presents the younger Scot's treatment as a technical modification within sociability theory, revealing an ineliminable natural foundation. The fourth considers the place of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and his emphasis

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<sup>3</sup> Istvan Hont suggests that 'Smith applied the explanatory mechanism offered by Hume's theory of the origin of justice to the rise of moral rules in society in general', the implication being that Smith rendered all of the virtues artificial (Hont 2015, 35). As we shall see, this is not quite right: Smith is better read as fundamentally problematizing any artificial/natural distinction, and thereby moving beyond Hume's terms of analysis. Similarly, James Otteson suggests that Hume imperfectly anticipated Smith's emphasis on the emergence of spontaneous order in moral affairs (Otteson 2002, 120-1). But this does not, I aim to show, adequately capture the extent of Smith's ambition and corrective. Furthermore, as Ryan Patrick Hanley has pointed out to me, Smith seems to take over wholesale Hume's distinction between the awful and amiable virtues, which renders their relationship even more complex. This paper, however, will focus only on their disagreements about moral foundations, leaving discussion of the typology of virtues for another time.

there on the centrality of utility to moral appraisal, presenting Part IV of *TMS* as a critical response to Hume in the context of the corrective that Smith had already laid down in Parts I-III. I conclude by indicating the wider significance of these readings.

### Hume: Natural and Artificial Virtues

Hume famously dismissed the possibility that moral distinctions are founded in any operation of reason, insisting instead that they arise from our ‘impressions’ rather than ‘ideas’, meaning that ‘Morality...is more properly felt than judg’d of’ (Hume 2007, T3.1.2.1; SBN 470).<sup>4</sup> Hume offered a sophisticated psychological hedonism whereby ‘An action, or sentiment, or character is laudable or blameable...because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind’. However, Hume did not think that we denote something virtuous simply because it pleases (or vicious simply because it pains), but rather that if something pleases ‘after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous’. Although he is notably under-spoken with regards to what exactly this ‘particular manner’ consists of, Hume is clear that moral distinctions are effectively a form of taste, operating in an analogous manner to judgements of ‘beauty, and tastes, and sensations’, where ‘our approbation is implied in the immediate pleasure they convey to us’ (T.3.1.2.3; SBN 471).

Central to Hume’s explication of morality is his positing of the human capacity for ‘sympathy’. A technical term, sympathy denotes the process of turning the ‘idea’ of another’s affective state into an ‘impression’: we literally come to share each other’s sentiments, transforming the imagined passions of another ‘into the very passion itself’ (T.2.1.11.3; SBN 317; cf. Darwall 1999, 144). This capacity underpins all morality, because it is by coming to hold the idea of another’s pain or pleasure as our own that we

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<sup>4</sup> I here give only a schematic overview of Hume’s theory. For more detailed treatments see the relevant chapters in Cohon 2008, Wright 2009.

can get outside of our private viewpoints and have affective – and hence, moral – responses to the doings of those who do not directly impact us. Furthermore, however, for Hume judgements of moral taste are not ultimately trained on *action*, but on the underlying motive or character that actions are taken to be signs of (Hume 2007, T.3.2.1.1-4; SBN 477-8; T. 3.3.1.4; SBN 575). When we observe others, we take their actions to reveal their motives or characters, and if *those* give us pleasure or pain after a ‘particular manner’, we pronounce the action to be good or bad, the motive or character virtuous or vicious.

Hume divides the virtues in turn into ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’. The ‘natural’, despite coming later in the *Treatise* presentation, are the easiest to account for. They are those that, upon observing, we receive a sense of pleasure, and thus immediately feel a corresponding approbation towards the relevant agent(s) regarding. Due to our capacity to sympathise we can easily attribute virtue (or vice) to others, even when their actions in no way affect us personally. A paradigm case might be benevolence: observing Agent A do a good deed to Agent B, and inferring that A’s motivation was simply to aid B, this gives rise to a feeling of pleasure via sympathy with both the motive of the agent and the benefit of the recipient, and thus we denominate such behaviour virtuous. In other words: natural virtues are those that upon simple observation give rise to the sentiments of pleasure peculiarly associated with moral approbation (Hume 2007; T.3.3.1.1-12; SBN 574-80).

The artificial virtues are more complex. These cover cases where simple observation of a putative act of virtue would not generate the feelings of pleasure required to constitute virtue, absent some relevant established background convention. Although Hume lists ‘allegiance...the laws of nations...modesty, and...good-manners’ as instances of artificial virtues, his paradigm case is justice (T.3.3.1.9; SBN 577). Imagining a putative act of justice – say, returning a sum of money owed to another – if one

considers the act in isolation, it is not clear why doing such a thing would be virtuous. What if the creditor is an enemy, or a miser, or intended to do wicked things with the money; or the debtor a poor and desperate person in great need of the sum owed? Hume claims that regarding such cases, if taken in isolation, we cannot say why an act of putative justice would indeed be a virtue, insofar as the motive underlying the act of repayment may give rise to *pain* rather than pleasure. To account for the virtue we must post an established *background convention* whereby such acts of justice have come to be seen as required, and hence the contemplation of their fulfillment gives pleasure in a virtue-denoting manner.

Hume's explication of how the background convention of justice comes into being is complex, and not without interpretative difficulty, but its main features can be summarised as follows.<sup>5</sup> Although lacking any notion of justice in primordial conditions of small-scale family living, primitive humans learned that unrestrained indulgence of self-interest (capaciously understood to include that of kin) led to violations of the holding of possessions, which created a general instability that disadvantaged all. Realising that each would benefit by reciprocal abstention from seizing the goods of others, men developed conventions of forbearance, although these arose spontaneously and without explicit agreement (in Hume's famous example, like two men rowing a boat without express agreement to cooperate: T.3.2.2.10; SBN 490). Justice was thus originally a convention rooted in self-interest, and was attended only by what Hume called a 'natural' obligation, i.e. regard to one's own specific interest in upholding the convention. Over time, however, the 'natural' obligation was supplemented with a 'moral' one, which made reference not to the self-interested advantages of adherence, but to belief in its normative validity. This was a function of sympathy: human beings came to sympathise

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<sup>5</sup> For an effective summary of Hume's theory of justice, which helpfully corrects some common misreadings, Baldwin 2004.

with the pain of those who suffered violations of the conventions of justice, and also with the hurt inflicted on society *tout court* by convention-violating behaviour. Pain at the violation of the conventions of justice, and pleasure at their being upheld, meant that what started out as a convention rooted in self-interest transitioned into fully-fledged moral virtue (T.3.2.2.23-6; SBN 498-501).

Hume's account of the artificial virtues was not a sceptical or debunking one.<sup>6</sup> Although justice (and the other artificial virtues) had a genetic origin in conventions of self-interest, and only later achieved the status of moral virtue proper, this genetic history had no bearing on present normative validity – not least because it was entirely natural for mankind, an 'inventive species', to develop artifices (T.3.2.1.19; SBN 484). The natural and the artificial virtues were on a par when considered in ordinary life, insofar as all virtue could ultimately be captured via a four-fold classification of whatever was either useful or agreeable to self or others (T.3.3.1.29-30; SBN 590-1). Furthermore, Hume claimed that individuals eventually came to make assessments of virtue from 'some *steady* and *general* points of view', abstracted from their specific situations or sentiments, which enabled him to account for the typically disinterested and universalist nature of ordinary moral judgements (T.3.3.1.15; SB 581-2). Ultimately, the only thing that distinguished the artificial from the natural virtues in daily practice was that whereas every instantiation of a natural virtue gave rise to utility or agreeableness to oneself or another, and hence always generated the pleasure required for the ascription of virtue, isolated instances of the artificial virtues might not, and it was only against the background existence of the relevant convention that the requisite pleasure could arise (T.3.3.1.12; SBN 579). In both cases, however, our capacity to sympathise with the pains and pleasures of others underwrote the ascription of virtue or vice.

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<sup>6</sup> It was thus, at least in part, a rejection of the sceptical debunking theory of Bernard Mandeville. Hume denied both that 'politicians' could be the primary source of our distinctions between vice and virtue or that revealing the artificial genesis of (some of) our virtue concepts impugned their normative validity. For detailed treatments see Hundert 1994, 75-86; Wright 2009, chapter 9; Harris 2015, 121-41).

### Smith: The Social Composition of Virtue

With this schematic summary of Hume's moral theory in place, we can turn to compare Smith's alternative in *TMS*. Like Hume, Smith made a capacity for sympathy central to his theory of morals. But as is well recognised, their accounts differed in important ways (Darwall 1998, 264-70; Otteson 2002, 30-9; Fleischacker 2012). The main points of contrast may be summarised as follows.<sup>7</sup>

Smith's conception of sympathy is more wide-ranging than Hume's, denoting 'our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever' (Smith 1976, I.i.I.5). This can range from Hume-esque cases of imagining that the pains or pleasures of another are one's own (e.g. in cases of simple observation and transference, such as recoiling at the blow about to hit another) to much more complex cases of imaginative interchanging, such as sympathizing with the dead by picturing what the dead *would* feel were they conscious of being buried in the cold, wet, worm-filled ground. Crucially, Smith insists that sympathy is not primarily about imagining what an observed agent is experiencing and replicating that affective state as an observer, but about imaginatively changing places with the agent and considering what we would feel were we them, in their situation: 'Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it' (I.i.I.10). Darwall has suggested that this difference can be captured by saying that whilst for Hume sympathy is 'third-personal' and based always on a spectatorial standpoint detached from those one is observing, for Smith sympathy is 'second-personal' insofar as we imaginatively project ourselves into the situations of others. On Hume's account, we mechanistically transform the 'idea' of another's emotive state into an 'impression' of our own, but for Smith we project ourselves into the

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<sup>7</sup> For more detailed discussions of Smith's account of sympathy: Broadie 2006; Brown 2012; Fleischacker 2012; Griswold 2006, 1999; Nanay 2010; Otteson 2002; Sayre-McCord 2013.



circumstances of another, and examine what we would feel were we actually them (Darwall 1998; 1999).

Smith builds his moral theory on what he takes to be a crucial upshot of our capacity to imaginatively trade places with others. He tells us that ‘nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary’ (Smith 1976, I.i.2.I). When we enter imaginatively into the situation of others, if we find a correspondence between the way that we imagine we would feel were we them, and the way we believe that they actually feel, then this correspondence automatically pleases. By contrast if we find that there is a lack of congruence between how we imagine we would feel, and how we think that they do feel, then we are pained (as in both cases is the other party). Smith claims that this specific form of pleasure or pain via mutual or absent sympathy is the basis of moral approbation or disapprobation (I.i.2.1-6; I.iii.I.9).

It is worth noting that in offering this explication Smith was providing a more thorough account of the ‘particular manner’ by which pleasure grounds moral taste than Hume had provided. Yet Hume famously disagreed with Smith’s account of sympathy, claiming that despite being the ‘hinge’ of the younger man’s system, it was false insofar as it could not make sense of the phenomenon of painful sympathy (Hume 1932a, 313). I shall touch on this matter in the conclusion, but for now I put aside Hume’s complaint about the technical workings of Smith’s sympathy theory and suggest that Smith’s ‘hinge’ opened the door to a thoroughgoing rejection of Hume’s account, extending beyond a rival account of fellow-feeling alone.

We can begin to see this by first briefly reviewing Smith’s own moral theory. Smith divides moral judgement into two general parts:

[T]he sentiment or affection of the heart, from which any action proceeds, and upon which its whole virtue or vice depends, may be considered under two different aspects, or in two different relations: first, in relation to the cause or object which excites it; and

secondly, in relation to the end which it proposes, or to the effect which it tends to produce. (II.i.Introduction.2; cf. I.i.3.5-7)

The first class of virtues falls under the heading of ‘propriety’, the second under ‘merit and demerit’. Smith dedicates Parts I and II of *TMS* to the analysis of each respectively, claiming that judgements of the personal comportment and moral desert of others track processes of imaginative situation-switching, and the presence or absence of mutual sympathy that arises thereby. Part III aims to show how we come in turn to judge *our own* conduct, by adopting the perspective of an ‘impartial spectator’: that in Smith’s memorable phrase, ‘I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined and judged of’ (III.I.6). In all cases, essential to Smith’s analysis is the process by which we imaginatively enter into the situation of others (or ourselves considered *as* another) and examine the extent to which a correspondence of feelings arises, with moral approbation or disapprobation the result of mutual or discordant sympathy.

We can now begin to appreciate the subtle but significant differences that Smith proposes as compared to Hume’s theory. In the first instance, on Smith’s account the capacity to construct a complex, third-personal perspective such as the impartial spectator – as well as the more basic capacity to bring one’s sentiments into line with what others can be expected to go along with as in cases of propriety and merit – requires moral agents to have considerable experience of judging and being judged by others. From the outset Smith insists that both judging others, and modulating one’s sentiments in response to or anticipation of being judged, requires awareness of differing perspectives, achieved via repeat social interaction. He insists that ‘Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love’ (I.i.3.10) Because we can have no

direct experience of other people's experiences, we can only learn what they think of us by honing the faculty of the imagination through repeat social interactions, which informs us of the accuracy or shortcomings of our own judgements, from the physical-sensory right through to the complexly cognitive-evaluative (Griswold 2006). Agents are 'continually placing themselves' in the situation of spectators, 'and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs' (Smith 1976, I.i.4.8). It is through this constant process of judging and being judged that men are all insensibly aware of what Smith calls, in a subtle modification of, and supplement to, Christianity's golden rule, 'the great precept of nature': 'to love ourselves only as we love our neighbour, or what comes to the same thing, as our neighbour is capable of loving us' (Smith 1976, I.i.5.5).

Already this marks an important contrast with Hume, for whom neither the natural nor the artificial virtues required judgement pertaining to the perspective of other agents, but simply observation coupled with the capacity to transform the idea of another's affective state into an impression (Sayre-McCord 2013). Yet Smith goes further than simply suggesting an alternative theory of morals to that offered by Hume. He challenges the basic viability of Hume's account.

We can see this by turning to *TMS* Part III, considering Smith's claim that:

Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. All these are objects which he cannot easily see, which naturally he does not look at, and with regards to which he is provided with no mirror which can present them to his view. Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror he wanted before (III.1.3).

This passage is best read as Smith's applying to all of the virtues the thought experiment that Hume in the *Treatise* employed with regards to justice: imagining a hypothetical state

of nature, and asking whether a virtue concept could there have any coherent content. Hume was clear in his discussion of justice that the state of nature was a ‘mere philosophical fiction’ (T.3.2.2.14; SBN 493): in reality humans had originally subsisted in families and tribes, never as isolated competitors. But the state of nature was nonetheless a useful thought experiment precisely because it so clearly illustrated the artificial nature of virtue. Absent relevant background conventions a savage in such a condition could have no comprehension of justice – proof that it was artificial in provenance, even if the state of nature had never actually obtained.

Smith took this insight but applied it to all of the virtues, including the putatively natural ones. Like Hume, Smith was conjecturing a ‘mere philosophical fiction’, but one which nonetheless had important theoretical payout. In actuality, man was naturally indigent and needy, requiring group support to achieve maturity (II.ii.3.1). Smith’s locution ‘Were it possible...’ should be read as an indication that it was *not* possible for solitary humans to successfully grow up to ‘manhood’. (cf. Otteson 2002, 69). But imagining such a hypothetical creature allowed Smith to make two points. First, and as he explicitly stated, that having no experience of being judged or judging in turn, this creature would lack the concepts of vice and virtue, the ‘natural’ as much as the ‘artificial’. But secondly, and connectedly, even if such a solitary creature were brought into society and provided with the ‘mirror’ required to make sense of his own conduct and character, such an individual would not possess the active capacity to use this mirror, because it would be lacking in the background experience of judging and being judged that constituted a necessary pre-requisite of knowing what the mirror is, let alone how to use it.

Smith was here making an analytic point about the necessary preconditions for possessing moral capacities, not a literal causal claim about how a solitary man could acquire concepts of virtue and vice and the capacity for moral judgement. In reality all

normal humans first learned to regulate their sentiments, and thus to grasp the concepts of propriety and merit – and eventually personal duty – as children, where they ‘enter the great school of self-command’ beginning ‘to exercise over [their] own feelings a discipline which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection’ (III.3.22):

We become anxious to know how far we deserve their censure or applause, and whether to them we must necessarily appear those agreeable or disagreeable creatures which they represent us. We begin, upon this account, to examine our own passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to them, by considering how they would appear to us if in that situation. We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct. (III.1.5)

It is only by experience of living in society that we can become sensitive to the sentiments of others, and learn to engage successfully in the complex social codes that have already accreted on that foundation, after the passing of many generations, and long before we as individuals learn to live morally in the here and now. Nonetheless, hypothesizing a solitary individual in the state of nature revealed that morality could only be understood as fundamentally social in composition. It thus made no sense to talk of ‘natural’ virtues. In a state of *nature*, virtues could no more be ‘natural’ than ‘artificial’.

It might be tempting to conclude that Smith therefore rendered all of the virtues artificial, especially given that he took over Hume’s state of nature procedure but applied it more widely. This, however, is best resisted. First, Smith never describes the virtues as artificial (or, for that matter, natural), which is significant given that he knew Hume’s earlier account, and thus had such a distinction readily available to him. Second, although Smith insists that virtue concepts are irreducibly rooted in experience of social phenomena, this process is not best described as ‘artificial’ because (and taking the Humean spirit to its logical conclusion) it is, Smith thinks, natural for humans to engage

in the interactive social processes that gave rise to morality. Third, just because all of the virtues presuppose social composition, this does not mean that they are founded in *conventions* of the sort that Hume posited with regards to the artificial virtues in the *Treatise*, which are (for him at least) the hallmark of artificiality. Finally, and as the next section will attempt to show, Smith expressly problematizes Hume's paradigm case of justice as an artificial virtue, arguing instead that it must have a foundation in the natural impulse of resentment.

### Smith: The Natural Foundations of Justice

Before considering Smith's treatment of justice in *TMS* Part II, it is important to bear in mind two things. First, that Hume's account of justice in the *Treatise*, when placed in its proper eighteenth century context, is not simply an explication of how justice can be made sense of as a moral virtue, but is simultaneously a theory of human sociability for large and lasting conditions, situated in a debate inherited from Hobbes and transmitted with especial force and provocation by Mandeville (Hundert 1994, chapter 2; Robertson 2005, chapter 6). Second, that despite some commentators representing Smith's relationship to Hume on the question of justice as one of overall disagreement (e.g. Shaver 2006; Pack and Schliesser 2006), Smith was in fact *in broad agreement* with Hume's theoretical position regarding sociability, even if he thought that technical aspects of Hume's argument needed alteration. As a result, Smith's reply to Hume on the question of justice in *TMS* is Janus-faced. On the one hand, it contains a sharp technical corrective regarding the details of Hume's case in sociability theory, but which Smith nonetheless endorsed overall. On the other, the upshot of Smith's technical corrective was to undermine Hume's foundational distinction between the natural and artificial virtues, and in turn serve to reject Hume's theory of the foundations of morals in favour of Smith's. This will become clearer in what follows.

Hume's treatment of justice should be read, following Hont (1994, 2005a), as a theory of 'commercial sociability'.<sup>8</sup> This constitutes a halfway house between the pride-centered accounts of Hobbes and Mandeville that denied any natural sociability for large and lasting conditions, and theories such as those of Shaftesbury, Butler, and Hutcheson, that posited a natural capacity to form large-scale human groupings out of natural sentiment alone. Hume denied Hobbes and Mandeville's claim that humans were incapacitated for large-scale living by the ravages of competitive esteem-seeking (what Rousseau would later label *amour propre*): 'All the other passions, besides this of interest, are either easily restrain'd, or are not of such pernicious consequence, when indulg'd. *Vanity* is rather to be esteem'd a social passion, and a bond of union among men (Hume 2007, T.3.2.2.12; SBN 491). But he agreed that large-scale society could not be generated out of natural materials alone without the aid of artifice. Limited generosity and reasonable self-interest would generate co-ordination problems whereby self-interested seizure of the goods of others, if left unchecked, would destabilize the capacity for large-scale group living. Large and lasting society was thus not undermined (as Hobbes and Mandeville contended) by the pursuit of the satisfaction of pride (competitive status-seeking), but of material advantage. The solution to this predicament was the invention of the conventions that first gave rise to justice, in turn generating the institutions of magistracy (originally learned through primitive international war), and eventually government *tout court* (Hume 2007, T.3.2.6-7; SBN 526-39). Large and lasting society rested on artifice, but not that suggested by either Hobbes (overawing sovereign power) or Mandeville (deception by legislators redirecting pride into socially-beneficial pursuits through the invention of counterfeit morality and codes of honour). It was the artificial virtue of justice that rendered humans fit for large and lasting society.

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<sup>8</sup> This is neither Hume nor Smith's term, however, and it is interesting to note that neither of them explicitly uses the language of sociability. Why this might be is a good question, but I nonetheless agree with Hont that both are theorists of sociability (and part of a quasi-Hobbesian legacy).

Smith agreed with Hume that it was utility, not pride, that needed to be artificially regulated in order to establish large and lasting society, and that this could be accounted for only by the conventions of justice (Hont 1994, 2005b). Although a society bounded together by mutual benevolence would be the happiest, nonetheless ‘though among the different members of the society there should be no mutual love and affection, the society, though less happy and agreeable, will not necessarily be dissolved’. This was because a ‘Society may subsist among different men...from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection’ (Smith 1976, II.ii.3.2). The regulation of possessions allowing mutual interactions for reciprocal gain was central to the promotion of mutual utility, and thus the capacity for forming large and lasting societies. Smith agreed with Hume that justice, insofar as it facilitated this process, was ‘the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society...must in a moment crumble into atoms’ (II.ii.3.3).<sup>9</sup> Certainly, Hume did not think that justice operated in isolation when it came to complex advanced societies: the artificial virtue of allegiance undergirded the stability of stratified systems of rule (Hume 2007, T.3.2.7-10; SBN 534-67; Sagar 2016), whilst artificial codes of politeness enabled individuals to engage with each other in mutually tolerable fashion (Hume 2007, T.3.3.2-3; SBN 592-606; Harris 2015, 51-65, 121-142). Nonetheless, justice was necessary for achieving successful group living and could only be furthered by, but not replaced with, these other artifices – something Hume sought to make clear when he asserted that whilst ‘it be possible for men to maintain a small uncultivated society without government, ’tis impossible they shou’d maintain a society of any kind without justice’ (Hume 2007, T.3.2.8.3; SBN 541). Smith essentially agreed with this point, whilst incorporating and refining a view of socially-composed artificial politeness in his discussion of the virtues

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<sup>9</sup> For more extensive discussions of Smith’s view of justice, see Griswold 1999, chapter 6; Fleischacker 2004, chapter 8.



headed under 'propriety'. This was signaled by his calling justice the 'main pillar' that upheld the whole social edifice, even if other factors (such as the willingness to defer to established patterns of authority) were also relevant (Smith 1976, I.iii.2.1-9).

Where Smith disagreed with Hume was in the technical foundations of the claim that justice was necessary for the maintenance of large and lasting society. Against Hume he argued that there must be certain in-built checks to men's pursuit of self-interest, not just the artificially developed external checks Hume located in group conventions. This must be the case, or else large-scale society would never have been possible at all. 'Men, though naturally sympathetic, feel so little for another, with whom they have no particular connexion, in comparison to what they feel for themselves', that if presented with opportunities to dispose others of their goods, they would do so most readily if the principles of justice 'did not stand up within them' and 'overawe them into respect' for the innocence of others *prior* to the establishment of any external rule. On Hume's picture – although Hume himself had failed to see this – in advance of the emergence of the conventions of justice, 'a man would enter an assembly of men as he enters a den of lions' (II.ii.3.3). But this meant that the very conventions Hume posited could never have emerged in the first place, and hence his theory fell short of an adequate explanation.

There must, Smith contended, be some pre-conventional internal corrective to the pursuit of self-interest, upon which the conventional structure of operative justice was ultimately built. Smith identified two such foundations. The first grew out of his wider conception of the virtues as irreducibly socially composed. Although every man 'is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man', no individual would dare look another in the face and affirm that he 'naturally prefers himself to all mankind', and act according to this principle (II.ii.2.1). Long experience of judging and being judged caused men to modify their conduct with regards to self-interest. Thus although every individual would in the

abstract like to take whatever he pleased from others if it promoted his own ends, in practice the sympathy of spectators with the victims of dispossession rebounded upon the perpetrator, who came to feel remorse if judged by others to have engaged in such behaviour. Accordingly men came to view such behaviour as impermissible, with intuitively grasped collective rules set down regarding permitted conduct in matters of self-promotion. Smith illustrated this via the metaphor of a race in which each is allowed 'to run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrip his competitors' but is not permitted to 'jostle, to throw them down'. Doing so would incur the condemnation of the 'spectators', who readily 'sympathize with the natural resentment of the injured' – the ultimate source of the rules of the great race of self-advancement (II.ii.2.1).

The second foundation Smith identified grew out of his observation that a sense of demerit was originally and always conjoined with a desire for the punishment of wrongdoers (merit, conversely, was annexed to the idea of reward) (II.i.1.1-7). This was a basic psychological fact about socialised human beings, but it had special import with regards to justice. 'Nature has implanted in the human breast that consciousness of ill-desert, those terrors of merited punishment which attend upon its violation, as the great safe-guard of the association of mankind, to protect the weak, to curb the violent, and to chastise the guilty' (II.ii.3.4). Acts of self-preferment that issued in acquisitive aggression, and hence violated the rules of proper conduct, were automatically viewed by spectators as instances of demerit. Those spectators desired, and would typically seek, the punishment of perpetrators. This punishment (spontaneous and collectively-sanctioned in more primitive conditions) would itself be an effective check against such behaviour. But furthermore, the psychological experience of judging and being judged would mean that most individuals would internalize a desire not to engage in illicit acquisition because of their own experience of negatively judging others who did so, desiring their

punishment, and concluding that they would likewise deserve punishment if engaging in such behaviour, which they spontaneously sought to avoid.

Hence there was a two-fold, mutually reinforcing, foundation to the virtue of justice, which existed in men's hearts after they were living in groups and morally socialised, but prior to the establishment of external conventions of self-interest for regulating property. In failing to appreciate this Hume confused the 'efficient' with the 'final' cause when explaining the origins of that virtue (II.ii.3.5). He mistakenly inferred that because justice was the most fundamental prerequisite of, and facilitator for, the collective pursuit of utility, so a direct regard for utility must be the main causal explanation for the phenomenon of justice. As we saw above, Hume tried to make this claim more plausible by suggesting that individuals sympathized with public utility when approving of the relevant conventions. Smith likened this explanation to believing that because a watch tells the time, all the individual parts that enable it to do so conspire consciously in this end – which of course they do not (II.ii.3.5). Justice was certainly the pillar that upheld the mutual pursuit of utility, and thus of large and lasting society, but the individual 'parts' that made this possible did not have this end in view. 'All men, even the most stupid and unthinking, abhor fraud, perfidy, and injustice, and delight to see them punished. But few men have reflected upon the necessity of justice to the existence of society, how obvious soever that necessity may appear to be' (II.ii.3.9).

Smith capped his critique with a series of further examples to prove that a direct regard for utility was not the proper explanation, even if the promotion of utility was the ultimate function of the rules of justice. These included the regard we have for individuals quite independent of their relationship to a wider multitude; the relative unusualness of punishing solely for the regard to aggregated consequences (such as executing the sleeping sentinel *pour encourager les autres*); the outrage we feel at a murderer or thief who goes unpunished yet does not again go on to harm society; and the universal

human religious belief that there must be ‘a Tartarus as well as an Elysium; a place provided for the punishment of the wicked, as well as one for the reward of the just’, reflecting men’s desire that wrong-doers who get away with their crimes be punished even after they are dead and can no longer obstruct society’s pursuit of utility (II.ii.3.12). Yet Smith’s central criticism of Hume’s theory of justice as an artificial virtue was that it neglected the inbuilt pre-conventional checks to rapacious behaviour that were located in human moral capacities, and that made men aware of the virtue of justice long before the establishment of self-interested conventions, and indeed made such later conventions possible at all. Hume’s flagship case of justice could not properly be considered as artificial all the way down.

This generated at least two consequences. First, Smith’s corrective indicated that if Hume’s wider commercial sociability framework was to pass muster at the level of technical detail, then the natural/artificial heuristic would have to be abandoned when attempting to correctly explain the origin of justice, and hence of large and lasting society. Second, and in part as a consequence, Smith should be read as fundamentally problematizing the coherence of any natural/artificial bifurcation *tout court*. Not only were there no ‘natural’ virtues in the state of nature, but justice, the paradigm case of an ‘artificial’ virtue, turned out to be explicable only through appeals to non-conventional features located in natural human affections (especially resentment and the desire to punish). In other words, explaining the foundations of morality required a level of integrated complexity that went beyond Hume’s division of natural and artificial. But given that the natural/artificial distinction was central to Hume’s account of the foundations of morals, the corresponding implication was that Hume’s theory was not able to achieve what was ultimately required.

It might be objected that I have thus far focused exclusively on Hume's theory of morals as presented in the *Treatise*, but that Smith would also have been familiar with Hume's argument in the 1751 *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, which does not make central a distinction between artificial and natural virtues, and which at least appears to change, or even substantively abandon, Hume's account of sympathy (e.g. Van Holthoon 1993; Abramson 2001; Vitz 2004). Can it be right to read the *TMS* of 1759 as (at least in part) a worked-out reply to the *Treatise*, rather than the *Enquiry*?

Several things should be said on this score. First, that although it is true that Smith would have known the *Enquiry* by the time he published *TMS*, it is also probable that he had begun to work out his own positions long before that work appeared. We know that Smith read the *Treatise* whilst an unhappy visiting undergraduate at Balliol College, Oxford from 1740-6, and it is therefore unlikely that his response to Hume would have been trained, at its core, exclusively on the later iteration of Hume's theory (Phillipson 2010, 64-5). Second, it is anyway incorrect to claim that Hume radically changed his positions between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. As Remy Debes has shown in an important pair of articles, although Hume altered his presentation and emphasis in the *Enquiry*, the underlying moral theory – especially with regards to the functioning of sympathy – remains continuous with that of the *Treatise* (Debes 2007a, 2007b). Similarly, although Hume abandons the *terminology* of natural and artificial virtues in the *Enquiry*, it does not follow that he changed his fundamental account. Section 3, 'Of Justice', and 'Appendix 3: Some Farther Considerations with Regard to Justice', maintain the same fundamental account of the origins of justice versus that of 'benevolence and its subdivisions'. Hume continued to affirm that justice was founded in conventions, and understood as '*a sense of common interest; which sense each man feels in his own breast, which he remarks in his fellows, and which carries him, in concurrence with others, into a general plan or system of actions, which tends to public utility*' (Hume 1998, A3.5; SBN

306). He likely dropped the terminology of ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’, however, because despite attempts to forestall misunderstanding this had led his readers into confusion, as his famous letter to Francis Hutcheson illustrates.<sup>10</sup> In any case, Hume’s settled position, clearly stated in the *Enquiry* as in the *Treatise*, is that whatever their particular genesis, all virtue could at root be defined as that ‘which is *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*’, with vice the reverse (Hume 1998, 9.12; SBN 277; cf. 9.1; SBN 268).

Where the *Enquiry* perhaps does differ is with regard to the emphasis Hume puts on utility as the source of moral approbation. In addition to an entire section entitled ‘Why Utility Pleases’, Hume states that utility is ‘the sole origin of justice’ and the sole foundation for our moral approval for that virtue (3.1; SBN 183); that public utility is the primary reason we believe there to be ‘a natural beauty and amiableness’ even amidst ‘uninstructed mankind’ with regard to the social virtues (5.4; SBN 214-5); and that the extent to which we find things agreeable to ourselves is in fact rather limited, and we are more frequently interested in what is useful (Section 7, *passim*). In the *Enquiry* Hume stresses that the bulk of our moral judgements are generated by a sense not of the agreeable, but of the useful, where our capacity for sympathy ties us together through an ability to take pleasure in the attainment of utility not just for ourselves, but our peers.

We should perhaps be wary of overstating the differences between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* on this matter.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, if we grant that in the later work Hume committed himself more fully to an endorsement of utility as the main foundation of moral approbation, we can see Part IV of *TMS*, ‘Of the Effect of Utility on the Sentiment of Approbation’, not only as a corresponding rejection of Hume’s specific

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<sup>10</sup> See especially Hume 2007, T.3.2.2.19; SBN 484 and T.3.2.6.11; SBN 533-4, which make clear that the distinction between artificial and natural virtues is a heuristic device, without independent normative import. In a letter replying to an original correspondence that is now lost, Hume wrote Hutcheson ‘I have never called justice unnatural, but only artificial’ – indicating that Hutcheson rather refused to take the point (Hume 1932b, 33).

<sup>11</sup> Hume, after all, is clear in the *Treatise* that it is utility, rather than agreeableness, which ‘determine all the great lines of our duty’ (T.3.3.1.27; SBN 589-90).

arguments (as is already well recognised), but, when coupled with Smith's earlier rejection of the distinction between artificial and natural virtues, as an attempt at the rejection of Hume's earlier theory so as to make room for Smith's rival account.<sup>12</sup>

Part IV of *TMS* is a direct reply to Hume, that 'ingenuous and agreeable philosopher' who has 'of late' attempted to explain 'why utility pleases' (Smith 1976, IV.1.2). Chapter 1 sees Smith begin by taking issue with Hume's claim that we desire external objects for the actual utility that they bring, in turn offering his own alternative theory in its place. Smith argued that a quirk of human psychology causes us to be excessively dazzled and preoccupied with the *means* of promoting utility, rather than with utility itself. Furthermore, what we sympathize with in others is not the actual utility derived from their goods and circumstances, but the pleasure we imagine that others *should* feel given that they are equipped with extensive and well-contrived means of pleasure-promotion. We admire the rich and powerful not because, as Hume had claimed, we sympathize (in the 'ideas' into 'impressions' sense) with their actual pleasures, but because we take pleasure in the correspondence of sentiments with what we imagine they *ought* to feel when entering imaginatively into their situation (compare Hume 2007, T.2.2.5.13-14; SBN.362 with Smith 1976, IV.1.3-9). This explained why, despite the fact that the rich and famous are typically not in fact made happy by their riches and fame, most people nonetheless esteem and emulate their social and economic superiors. (It also leads to the strange irony that 'the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possess the security which kings are fighting for' (Smith 1976, IV.1.10)). Yet according to Smith it is 'well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind'. Esteem and emulation arising from the imagination of pleasure that could be attained (and *not*

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<sup>12</sup> Whether Smith added Part IV of *TMS* as a result of reading the *Enquiry*, or whether he would have written and included it even if Hume's later rendering had never appeared, is a question we cannot answer given the known historical sources. Fortunately, it does not bear upon the present argument either way.

from the actual securing of utility) was the great spur to human industry. It was what prompted men to leave the indolence of their primitive conditions, and eventually to ‘found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life’ (IV.1.10). Human civilization was founded upon not just unintended consequences (Otteson 2002, 121-2), but a quirk of human psychology that the cold reason of sober philosophy struggled to endorse, and yet which constituted the lynchpin of collective human material progress.

Smith’s diagnosis of the neuroses of economic consumption was highly original, and indeed he himself claimed that the phenomenon he identified ‘has not, as far as I know, been yet taken notice of by any body’ (Smith 1976, IV.I.3). It certainly went beyond anything found in Hume, and meant that Smith’s attitude towards economic consumption, and its ties to moral psychology and in turn the capacity for, and manifestation of, virtue, also played out differently (Diatkine 2010; Sagar forthcoming). In particular, Smith went on to be more preoccupied and troubled than Hume had been by the dynamics of, and possibilities for, moral corruption in commercial society. Whereas both thinkers analysed it, Smith went much further in critiquing it. In particular, Smith worried more than Hume about the tendency for sympathy to make us unduly deferential and submissive to the whims of the rich and powerful, in turn helping to generate the socially corrosive contagion of vanity, and not just the more benign effects of deference to authority (Smith 1976, I.iii.2.III; cf. Hanley 2008, but also Sagar forthcoming).

Having set out his own stall in Chapter 2 of Part IV, Smith trained his sights on Hume’s specific arguments, presenting his own account of propriety and merit as better equipped to explain approbation or disapprobation than Hume’s arguments from utility (Smith 1976, IV.2.4-11). Underlying Smith’s series of case-by-case counterexamples, however, was a reaffirmation of his central claim from Part III: that all virtue was socially



composed, rooted in experience of repeat interactions with judging others. Smith again redeployed Hume's procedure of hypothesizing a state of nature situation to explore the coherence of a value concept, this time applying it specifically to the connection between utility and approbation:

[So] far as the sentiment of approbation arises from the perception of this beauty of utility, it has no reference of any kind to the sentiments of others. If it was possible, therefore, that a person should grow up to manhood without any communication with society, his own actions might, notwithstanding, be agreeable or disagreeable to him on account of their tendency to his happiness or disadvantage (IV.2.12).

But if men really were solitary (this again being a heuristic device, not a literal claim about how men might ever have been), they would in fact *not* form the ideas of vice and virtue, even though they might have the idea of utility:

As these perceptions, however, are merely a matter of taste, and have all the feebleness and delicacy of that species of perceptions, upon the justness of which what is properly called taste is founded, they probably would not be much attended to by one in this solitary and miserable condition. Even though they should occur to him, they would be no means have the same effect upon him, antecedent to his connexion with society, which they would have in consequence of that connexion...All such sentiments suppose the idea of some other being, who is the natural judge of the person that feels them; and it is only by sympathy with the decisions of this arbiter of his conduct, that he can conceive, either the triumph of self-applause, or the shame of self-condemnation (IV.2.12).

In other words, utility could only have the effects Hume wished to claim for it if something like Smith's account of the virtues was already in place. But if that account was in place, Hume's explanation of utility as the dominant feature in our moral judgements was redundant. What did the work was imagining our self into the situations of others and comparing sentiments, with approbation and disapprobation arising accordingly.

It might be thought with Raynor (1984, 59-60) that Smith unfairly misrepresents Hume by focusing in Part IV exclusively on utility, when Hume is clear that

agreeableness is also a part of virtue. But this is to fail to appreciate the deft pincer maneuver Smith has deployed. Parts I-III of *TMS* sought to establish that with regards the foundations of morals Hume had no viable independent theory of the immediately agreeable to self or others: any working account of that phenomenon must adopt Smith's account of the fundamental social composition of the virtues. Granting Smith's case from Parts I-III, all that Hume could have left was the suggestion that considerations of utility form the bulk of the explanations for our moral sentiments. What Part IV seeks to establish is that this is not a viable explanation of the foundations of morality, either: the role of utility can be coherently admitted only on the terms established by Smith's alternative moral theory, which operates by repudiating Hume's central distinction between the natural and artificial virtues. The result that Smith leaves his readers to infer is that Hume's theory must be abandoned in favour of the one they are simultaneously being presented with. Smith thus sought to reject, and then replace, Hume's arguments, whilst operating on the same theoretical ground, and with the same basic materials, that the older philosopher had first put forward.

### Conclusion

Why did Smith leave these results to be inferred, rather than stating them directly? We will never know for sure, but at least three likely explanations are available, which also give us reason to think that the above reading is not impugned by the fact that Smith never explicitly affirms it. The first is that Smith did not wish to draw too much attention to his engagement with – and by turns, potential proximity too – Hume's ideas, given the latter's unwelcome status in Scottish intellectual circles, the misunderstandings that tended to attach to Hume's arguments, and Smith's desire to retain a professional university post of the sort conspicuously denied to Hume. Smith's attempted rejection of Hume operated by emphasizing the irreducible social construction of morality – and

hence potentially put Smith closer to the *bêtes noir* of Mandeville and Hobbes, in the eyes of his contemporaries, than even Hume had been taken to be. From Smith's perspective it was surely better not to call explicit attention to this, although Thomas Reid certainly noticed the rough trajectory of Smith's thought when he (erroneously, but revealingly) declared *TMS* to be 'only a Refinement of the selfish System' (Reid 1997). Smith never mentions Hume by name in *TMS*, despite it being clear to an informed and attentive reader that he engaged thoroughly with Hume's ideas. Given Smith's unwillingness to even mention Hume by name, it is hardly surprising that he left the implications of his rejection of Hume's controversial moral theory to be inferred.

The second reason is simply that the two thinkers were friends, and Smith may have preferred not to state publicly or explicitly his view that the other's framework was fundamentally untenable. Sufficiently informed and intelligent readers (including Hume himself) could work this out; the rest did not need attention drawing to the matter in a way that might generate animosity or allegations of an open rift. Third, Smith may not have wanted to draw attention away from criticism of other thinkers he thought more misguided than Hume, and that he opposed more directly. Smith didn't think that *anybody* had adequately theorized our moral sentiments before *TMS*, and Hume had at least gotten further than the rest, and been using the right materials. Hence, better not to slow the progress of wider learning by focusing too much attention on a mistaken account that had at least helped make Smith's cutting-edge intervention possible, undue focus upon which might distract from Smith's positive interventions which were anyway designed to get beyond the problems Smith had identified in Hume's account.<sup>13</sup>

If the reading suggested by this paper is correct, there are both philosophical and historical consequences to consider. On the historical side, the most important upshot is that Hume's foundational moral theory turns out to have been answered in his own

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Robin Douglass for this final point.

lifetime by a powerful and accurate philosophical interlocutor, one who both understood and accurately engaged Hume's positions, not just piecemeal but systematically and in the round. Although Hume's moral theory was subsequently subjected to attack by James Balfour (1753) and James Beattie (1770), as well as (somewhat) less splenetically by Thomas Reid (1783), their engagements do not address the true nature of Hume's arguments, but concentrate fire on caricatures and misreadings, generating little of philosophical substance. Smith, by contrast, understood Hume's theory very precisely, and constructed a response that was a serious and profound challenge to its viability.

In philosophical matters, implications are generated for how we respectively place Hume and Smith as pioneers of ethical sentimental theories, and what that means in turn. One thing that I have tried to indicate is that the differences between Hume and Smith are not exhausted at the level of specific disagreements over sympathy, or the nature of justice, or of the role of utility, taken in isolation, but that these together are facets of a more fundamental attempt by Smith to reject Hume's moral theory, in order to replace it with his own.<sup>14</sup> Yet this suggests that conventional assessments of Hume and Smith may mistakenly give pride of place to an inferior, and near-contemporaneously surpassed, moral theory. It is still Hume, and not Smith, who takes precedent on undergraduate reading lists in ethics and the history of moral philosophy, and who is treated by many contemporary scholars as the greatest historical exponent of sentimental ethics, serving as the primary inspiration for more recent attempts to

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<sup>14</sup> In particular I have left aside the question of whether Hume was right that although Smith's revised conception of sympathy was the 'hinge' of his system, it was nonetheless a false account – the implication perhaps being that Smith's entire system failed in turn (e.g. Raynor 1984). As it happens, I agree with Fleischacker (2012, 300-3) that Smith has the resources to answer Hume (whose criticisms are misplaced), and that the younger Scot has the better of things with regards the plausibility of his theory of sympathy. This stands against the more prevalent view that Hume has identified a crucial flaw in Smith's apparatus (Raynor 1984, 56-9; Blackburn 1998, 203-4; Broadie 2006, 170-4). But in any case what I hope to have indicated is that *even if* Hume was right that Smith's account of sympathy suffered from a specific technical failing, Smith still had at his disposal a much wider theoretical reconfiguration that served as a systematic rejoinder to Hume. On the challenges in making good on Smith's theory as an empirically viable account of fellow-feeling, however, see Heath 1995 (but also Otteson 2002, 128-33); McHugh 2011.

produce ethical theories based on the passions rather than reason.<sup>15</sup> Yet if the above is correct, this may be a mistake. That it was Smith, not Hume, who offered the Enlightenment's most advanced – and perhaps in turn most plausible – sentimental ethical theory. If so, we ought to seriously reconsider both how we teach, and how we research, both moral philosophy and its history.

Acknowledgements: This essay was first drafted whilst I was a visiting scholar at the University of California at Berkeley in early 2016. I am extremely grateful to Kinch Hoekstra for supporting that visit, and thus providing the time and space for me to work through my ideas. He, Mark Fisher, Nick Gooding, Dan Lee, Johan Olsthoorn, and Rosie Wagner, all provided helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. Special thanks must also go to Hallvard Lillehammer, who provided generous and insightful feedback at every stage of this argument's gestation. Robin Douglass (once again) offered me critical direction of the highest caliber. Ryan Patrick Hanley offered helpful comments and support. I would also like to thank the Journal's anonymous reviewers for their direction and support. More unusually, I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, who (rightly) rejected a much earlier and very inadequate version of these ideas, but in the process helped me to see how to put right what I was getting wrong. Finally, I thank the Provost and Fellows of King's College for their continued generosity, collegiality, and support.

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<sup>15</sup> To pick a few examples: Blackburn 1998; Prinz 2007; Joyce 2007; Slote 2010. A recent work which starts from something like Smith's second personal approach is of course Darwall 2006, although I would contend that the motivation and goal in that work is ultimately Kantian and rationalist, not Smithean and sentimentalist.

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