

SYMPATHY, DIFFERENCE, AND EDUCATION: SOCIAL UNITY IN THE WORK OF ADAM SMITH

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In this article, I examine Adam Smith's theory of the ways individuals in society bridge social and biological difference. In doing so, I emphasize the divisive effects of gender, race, and class to see if Smith's account of social unity can overcome such fractious forces. My discussion uses the metaphor of "proximity" to mean both physical and psychological distance between moral actors and spectators. I suggest that education – both formal and informal in means – can assist moral judgment by helping agents minimize the effects of proximity, and, ultimately, learn commonality where difference may otherwise seem overwhelming. This article uses the methods of the history of philosophy in order to examine an issue within contemporary discourse. While I seek to offer an authentic reading of Smith representative of his eighteenth-century perspective, I do so with an eye towards determining the extent to which Smith anticipated central issues in modern multiculturalism.

The purpose of this article is to articulate Adam Smith's theory of the ways individuals in society bridge social and biological difference. Smith's comments on these matters are found throughout both his published and unpublished works, but there is no central place in which he presents a compact and rigorous argument in support of his position. Although there has been some research on contemporary categories of difference as present in Smith's writing – here I refer to gender, race, and class – little has been done to reconstruct his general theory of overcoming these types of difference. I present his theory here.

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This article is divided into several sections. I first examine Smith's theory of sympathy and show how proximity – both physical and psychological familiarity – forms the foundation of social unity. By social unity, I mean the stability of a society that contains within it significant socially recognized difference, and the possibility of political communication and moral adjudication among members of the society in the face of such differences.¹ Smith most often refers to factionalism when he references a divided public, specifically the effect of political allegiance, economic class, and religion. My discussion is an outgrowth of these comments. Although Smith himself likely did not share diversity concerns as philosophers now understand them, as I show in this paper, Smith's theory of sympathy and education both cultivates and arrests other forms of social difference of contemporary concern, specifically gender and race.

I continue by investigating Smith's moral condemnation of slavery, and then his discussion of the changing role of women in society. In each, I show how social divisions can be overcome through the increased efficacy of sympathy when individuals are educated about difference. I then argue that education, however much it can communicate, has great difficulty informing others of one's most intimate experiences – experiences of love and pain, for example. I suggest, however, that these intimate experiences form the core of moral judgment, and thus provide Smith with a moral theory that balances individuality with group identification.

I conclude that, for Smith, education is the primary means through which perceived otherness is minimized. In this context, education should be understood in its widest form: incorporating both institutional and informal means. Smith uses the term "education" interchangeably to refer to education as socialization or acculturation (*TMS* III.3.7;² *WN* V.1.f.47³), and as institutional education (*TMS* IV.ii.1.10; *WN* V.i.f.), although *The Wealth of Nations* focuses mostly on institutional education and tends to refer to "custom" when it means non-institutional education (*WN* I.ii.5).

¹ This is the same project that motivates many contemporary political philosophers including Kymlicka, MacIntyre, Nussbaum, Rawls, Sen, and Walzer, for example. Whether this was actually Smith's concern is unclear. In any case, it would not have motivated him to the extent that it does modern thinkers. Thus, I am to proceed carefully.

² All references advert to the Liberty Press/Glasgow editions of Smith's work. *TMS* refers to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, *WN* refers to *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, *LJ(A)* refers to *Lectures on Jurisprudence 1762-3* report, and *ES* refers to the fragment *Of the External Senses*.

³ This passage is interesting in this context because Smith uses both meanings in discussing women's education. He writes: "There are no public institutions for the education of women, and there is accordingly nothing useless, absurd, or fantastical in the common course of their education . . . Every part of their education tends evidently to some useful purpose . . ."

This wider understanding of education is broad; one might wonder what would not count as education in this definition. This is a difficulty that cannot be avoided. As will be discussed, Smith is an empiricist. It is unclear how much of a blank slate Smith would have people start with, and thus, it is unclear how wide education must be.⁴ My intent is to start from the broadest possible perspective and move to a more narrow understanding. This helps identify some of the social and political consequences of human learning.

Placing a contemporary gloss on Smith's material, which I do here intentionally, is difficult because not all of Smith's work can be read as one might first be disposed to. The concept of class, for example, is problematic because the term did not develop its contemporary meaning until the early nineteenth century, and *WN*, the later of his two books, ought to be understood as a transitional document in that process.

Smith uses the terms 'rank', 'social character', and 'distinction' where modern writers might use "class." Rank and its associated terms refer to a "calculus of property, privilege, dress, education, honor, obligation, occupation, friendship, beauty, strength and wisdom," while the term 'class', for Smith, categorizes a thing "only as a 'species', 'sort', or 'type'."⁵ The term 'race' also has multiple meanings. For example, Smith uses it as a delineation of a category of person such as, "race of men commonly called men of letters . . ." (*WN* I.x.c.37); as a designator for biological lineage, as in "on account of their descent from a long race of great and illustrious ancestors . . ." (*WN* V.1.53); as ethnicity or sub-culture within a nationality as in, "The French kings of the Merovingian race had all treasures" (*WN* IV.i.30); and, as a people, as in, "The Cape of Good Hope was inhabited by a race of people almost as barbarous and quite as incapable of defending themselves as the natives of America" (*WN* IV.7.186). Only the last example approximates current usage.⁶

⁴ Smith remarks, for example, that, "it seems difficult to suppose that man is the only animal of which the young are not endowed with some instinctive perception . . ." (*ES* 74). And, although he suggests that human dependency is such that people need instinct less than animals, Smith entertains the thought that "some children" do in fact have "some" (*ES* 74).

The quality of different sense capacities is itself a product of learning. For Smith, for example, the inequality of visual ability among people is partially dependent upon "some difference in the original configuration of the eyes," but "frequently" develops based on "different customs or habits which their respective occupations have led them to contract" (*ES* 52). To illustrate, Smith compares a "man of letters" to a mariner to show how the "precision" by which a sailor can see objects in the distance "astonishes a land man" (*ES* 52).

⁵ Here, my conversation follows Wallech (1986: 409–10).

⁶ The contemporary concept of race is itself exceptionally problematic; a vast amount of literature debates its history, propriety and usage. I will not address this discussion here. However, for readers interested in a useful historical discussion of specific philosophers and their approaches to race, I suggest Ward and Lott (2002).

Smith refers to Africans (*TMS* V.2.9) and Native Americans (*WN* IV.7.14; *WN* IV.7.16) in ways that leave little doubt that one can tease our current usage out of his discussion, but this approach must be deliberate and careful.⁷ For this reason, my comments on race will be limited to Smith's discussion of the morality of slavery, a conversation that itself requires reconstruction. I will also limit my remarks to the European and American enslavement of Africans, an era of slavery that Smith emphasized. Race, whether an essential characteristic or not, was a major factor in the development of this particular slave trade. My discussion of class will be wider, focusing on Smith's comments regarding the laboring classes and perceptions of the rich. I do not argue that Smith had the same diversity concerns as contemporary thinkers. Rather, I argue that since Smith was concerned with social unity in general, his discussion can be extended to include those groups of modern concern.

1. SYMPATHY AND PROXIMITY

The Theory of Moral Sentiments offers an eighteenth-century psychology that mixes moral development with identity construction and self-awareness. It is, among other things, an early understanding of what is now termed a relational self. In many ways, therefore, *TMS* is, in contemporary parlance, communitarian, not liberal, where communitarian is understood as acknowledging some priority of the community or society, and liberal is understood as commitment to the priority of the individual and his or her identity.⁸ Briefly, and to foreshadow many of my comments in this paper, Smith argues that humans are by nature social (*TMS* II.ii.3.1, III.2.6). He asserts that morality is the product of social processes, arguing explicitly that morality, even self-identification, is impossible in isolation (*TMS* III.i.3–4). He is also insistent that general moral rules are after-the-fact constructs developing from social interaction (*TMS* III.4.7–8), and that the most basic of these are enabled by education (*TMS* III.5.1). He argues that the state should foster both secular and religious education (*WN* V.i.i.5), and that the sympathetic foundation of morality functions best in small communities.⁹ He also opposes the social contract (*LJ(A)* v.116, v.128, v.118).¹⁰

⁷ I am not suggesting that 'Native American' constitutes a distinct race. I point to this example only as a signal that Smith does, at times, approximate modern usage of racial concepts.

⁸ The phrase "some priority of the community or society" is intentionally ambiguous. My argument is not that Smith is communitarian, but, rather, that some elements of his theory can be seen as such. My intent here is not to offer a strict definition of either liberal or communitarian, but, rather, to suggest, briefly, that Smith's approach may cause us to recast many of the currently accepted definitions. See Weinstein (2004b).

⁹ Nieli (1986).

¹⁰ See also Khalil (1998).

Although no one disputes that Smith is a part of the liberal canon, many question identifying his work as liberal.¹¹ The point, as I see it, is to show that Smith transcends the liberal/communitarian dichotomy, and, as such, may be useful in helping resolve perceived tensions between individuality and the collective good. For our purposes, this is useful because the debate over the nature of group or minority identification in liberal societies often stalls at the point at which one is forced to choose between the priority of the group and the individual; Smith's theory does not require this. Smith argues that moral judgment is impossible in a pre-social scenario. He writes:

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 the beauty and deformity of his own face. (*TMS* III.i.3–5)

According to Smith, no judgment regarding either moral approval or aesthetic beauty is possible without the social structure that evolves around 'sympathy,' the natural capacity that allows for moral judgment and social unity. Smith is less than precise in his definition of this central concept, and he spends much of *TMS* investigating and qualifying its limits. He distinguishes his notion of sympathy from its standard usage, the sharing of "the sorrow of others" (*TMS* I.i.1.5). It is, instead a "fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" aroused in a spectator (*TMS* I.i.1.5). It allows for the "original passions" that makes one person's happiness "necessary" to another, and makes people "naturally" interested "in the fortunes of others," even though a person "derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it" (*TMS* I.i.1.1).

Sympathy is a "cognitive process," inspiring both change of "circumstances" and "personhood" with others.¹² According to Smith, as a result of sympathy, "an analogous emotion springs up . . . in the breast of every attentive spectator" (*TMS* I.i.1.5). It is by "changing places in fancy with the sufferer, that we come either to conceive or to be affected by what he feels" (*TMS* I.i.1.3). This adoption of the perspective of another is, according to many commentators, an attempt to "temper the self-centeredness of our perspective,"¹³ and an effort to "deflect the criticism that sympathy is founded on self-love."¹⁴

A person's self-awareness derives from the socially constructed self-reflection inspired by the judgments of others (*TMS* III.i.3). It is "the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of

¹¹ See Khalil (2002), Letwin (1988), Winch (1988, 1978).

¹² Fontaine (1997: 264).

¹³ Nieli (1986: 617).

¹⁴ Sugden (2002: 75).

other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct" (*TMS* III.1.5). The central point of the social foundation of sympathy is, according to Haakonssen, "that we only become aware of ourselves – gain self-consciousness – through our relationship to others."¹⁵ Or, as Fleischacker puts it, "the process of moral judgment is the means by which individuals most deeply build the views of their society into themselves."¹⁶

Smith is an empiricist, coping with the fundamentally separate nature of human beings. Our physical separation requires a moral theory derived from sensations and events occurring to others.¹⁷ Thus, Smith is explicit about the limits of the connections between individuals. It is only the spectator's own imagination that creates the analogous emotion inspired by sympathy, and as a result, argues Smith, such parallel sentiments are always imperfect. He writes:

It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, *though weaker in degree*, is not altogether unlike them. (*TMS* I.i.1.2, italics mine)

When a spectator experiences a similar sentiment as an observed actor, then he or she is said to *sympathize* with the actor. One can also sympathize with oneself, in which case the lens of sympathy "divide[s] . . . as it were, into two persons" (*TMS* III.1.6) and creates an imagined "impartial spectator" who either does or does not sympathize with the actor who imagines it.¹⁸ Sympathy indicates approval of the sentiment and, by extension, the moral position inherent in the sentiment. When the spectator is unable to adopt the sentiment of the moral actor, this indicates disapproval. The same is true if the imagined impartial spectator disapproves of the actor who created it.

The impartial spectator is exact in his or her judgment and is the final arbiter for propriety (*TMS* I.i.5.4). Actors are said to act appropriately "when the heart of every impartial spectator entirely sympathizes with them, when every indifferent by-stander entirely enters into, and goes

¹⁵ Haakonssen (2002: xiv).

¹⁶ Fleischacker (1999: 49).

¹⁷ Bitterman (1940a: 510).

¹⁸ The nature of the impartial spectator is quite controversial, and some scholars have suggested Smith's account is inconsistent. They have proposed a 'genetic' view, suggesting that *TMS*'s impartial spectator ought to be regarded differently depending on the citation. There is something to be said for this view, but I do not think various descriptions imply inconsistency. For the classic account of the development of the impartial spectator, see Raphael (1975). For a more recent, and more radical account, see Harpham (2001) and Griswold (2001).

along with them" (*TMS* II.i.2.2). The impartial spectator also sets limits upon action. He or she "allows no word, no gesture, to escape it beyond what this more equitable sentiment would dictate" (*TMS* I.i.5.4). This is not to suggest that an ideal impartial spectator actually exists. Rather, the spectator is an "invocation" of an "ideal" of propriety.¹⁹ It is an "idealized form" of the "correspondence of sentiments that is induced by social interaction."²⁰ The spectator "pretends" to be an impartial spectator.²¹

The impartial spectator acts as an ideal for Smith: not in the sense that Smith presents an ideal observer theory; he does not.²² Rather, it provides a metaphor by which Smith can describe the ways agents manage large amounts of information and come to rational decisions regarding the propriety of a particular act. When the actual spectator is in line with the imagined impartial spectator, a person's moral judgment is functioning well.²³ Additionally, it provides Smith with a useful contrast to distinguish between when a person is acting with too limited a scope of understanding – when a person does not incorporate all necessary information – and when a person is acting upon enough information to form a sound judgment.

Since the imagined impartial spectator represents an ideal, its creation may sometimes seem beyond the reach of an agent's capacities. The impartial spectator can do no more than what the spectator can do; the spectator's knowledge-limits are also those of his or her creation. Thus we have an essential tension in Smith. The attempt to attain an ideal is limited by the capacities of those who attempt to attain it. Spectators *try* to achieve an ideal but necessarily fall short. By striving for objectivity, they stretch their own capacities past their previous limits, but they can never fully succeed because no actor can imagine a truly ideal knower. As we will encounter later on in the discussion, if the agent's own sentiments are severely perverted, Smith's readers are forced to wonder whether the creation of an impartial spectator could ever overcome these perversions.

¹⁹ Haakonssen (2002: xvii).

²⁰ Sugden (2002: 78).

²¹ Gilbert Harman (1986: 12). I am ambivalent about the connotations present in the word 'pretend' and would suggest that 'imagine' is more in tune with Smith's own meaning. Since the formation of the impartial spectator is natural, any terms that suggest artificiality is a step away from Smith's original intention. The word 'imagine' and its derivatives appear in *TMS* 143 times, the word 'pretend' and its derivatives, only 34 times. The latter word is never associated with the term impartial and is always used in some negative context. See, e.g., *TMS* I.iii.1.4 and I.iii.3.7.

²² See Campbell: 128–38.

²³ It is useful to see the impartial spectator as analogous to Smith's natural price, a mechanism Smith uses in *WN* to serve as the aggregate for all information relevant to the value of a given product or service. When the market price is in line with the natural price, the market is said to be functioning properly.

Sympathy forms the foundation of moral judgment by devising criteria of acceptable action after repeated similar observations and after determination of community judgment (*TMS* III.4.8). The impartial spectator is the aggregate of a person's experience balanced with what he or she knows of the moderating power of community (*TMS* VI.iii.25).²⁴

Sympathy is both contextual and perspectival; it involves both reconstruction and interpretation of an actor's experience.²⁵ The spectators do not look at actors in a "disinterested light."²⁶ Rather, sympathy respects the differences between people: who one is will greatly influence how one feels about another's actions, decisions, and sentiments. Thus, Smith's sympathy is dependent on context, and one must be aware of as many facts as possible. This is true both in order to understand which sentiment originated where, and in order to have notice of all relevant facts. Attention to detail in this regard is crucial because, according to Smith, the spectator looks at the cause and the context of the agent's emotions more than the emotions themselves (*TMS* I.i.1.10).

There is a further tension here. On the one hand, Smith is insistent that the spectator judges from his or her own perspective. He writes, "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 neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them" (*TMS* I.i.3.10). On the other hand, sympathy does not require simply that the spectator simply put him or herself in the situation of another person. It asks more specifically that the spectator determine the appropriate sentiments based on how, given the facts of the agent's life, this *particular* agent should act in this *particular* situation:

When I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession, should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die: but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters. My grief, therefore, is entirely upon your own account, and not in the least upon my own. (*TMS* VI.iii.1.4)

Thus, sympathy is a constant balancing act between self-knowledge and knowledge of others. To determine the cause, context, and the possible ends of any situation, the spectator must understand the actor. He or she must investigate the actor's reactions to other similar situations and

²⁴ Smith writes, "The wise and virtuous man directs his principal attention to the first standard; the idea of exact propriety and perfection. There exists in the mind of every man, an idea of this kind, gradually formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other people. It is the slow, gradual, and progressive work of the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct."

²⁵ See Griswold (1999: 101) and Marshall (1986).

²⁶ Marshall (1986: 189).

to the consequence that resulted from them. The farther removed the spectator is from the actor, the more difficult a true understanding of the situation and the agent becomes. This will prove to be a central point in my discussion. For Smith, the more knowledge any person has about the other, the more capacity he or she has to sympathize.

Distance between the spectator and the agent should be understood both literally and metaphorically. Smith believes that both physical and psychological distance affect the ability of people to sympathize. We are most intimately connected with ourselves (*TMS VI.ii.2.1*). Then, we connect with our family (*TMS VI.2.i.2*), then with those with whom we work (*TMS VI.ii.1.16*), then those within our neighborhood (*TMS VI.ii.1.16*), and then those within our “state or sovereignty” (*TMS VI.ii.2.2*). Niele refers to this progression as “spheres of intimacy,” Griswold calls it “circles of sympathy,” and Otteson describes it as a “familiarity principle.”²⁷ In each case, we sympathize most effectively with those with whom we share common living experiences.

For Smith, such proximity emphasizes the tension between self-love and altruism. To highlight this, he offers a thought experiment, suggesting that a person, a European presumably, reading of a terrible earthquake that killed every person in China, would respond with sadness and, perhaps, philosophical speculation, but that he or she would lose much more sleep over a minor personal injury than over the calamity. Smith uses the example of the loss of a little finger. Nevertheless, Smith asserts, no person, no matter how horrible, would ever sacrifice all the Chinese to save his or her own little finger, and “human nature startles with horror at the thought, and the world, in its greatest depravity and corruption, never produced such a villain as could be capable of entertaining it” (*TMS III.3.4*). He then asks:

But what makes this difference? When our passive feelings are almost always so sordid and so selfish, how comes it that our active principles should often be so generous and so noble? When we are always so much more deeply affected by whatever concerns ourselves, than by whatever concerns other men; what is it which prompts the generous, upon all occasions, and the mean upon many, to sacrifice their own interests to the greater interests of others? (*TMS III.3.4*)

In response to this puzzle regarding the balance of self-love and benevolence, Smith appeals to conscience. It is, according to him, “the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters” that prevents us from sacrificing millions of people to protect our own little finger (*TMS III.3.4*). Furthermore, right before he suggests that conscience prevents us from acting so perversely, Smith writes that, “it is not the love of our neighbour,

²⁷ Niele (1986), Griswold (1999), and Otteson (2002).

[and] it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of those divine virtues" (*TMS III.3.4*). In other words, it is precisely not the affection for others that prevents an actor from sacrificing a civilization to save his or her digit. Although this appears to minimize the importance of proximity, Smith qualifies his comments in the next paragraph. He writes:

When the happiness or misery of others, indeed, in no respect depends upon our conduct, when our interests are altogether separated and detached from theirs, so that there is neither connexion nor competition between them, we do not always think it so necessary to restrain, either our natural and, perhaps, improper anxiety about our own affairs, or our natural and, perhaps, equally improper indifference about those of other men. (*TMS III.3.7*)

Here, Smith acknowledges that distance, literally as well as figuratively understood, prevents us from tempering our affairs in a manner that challenges our indifference. Smith uses China in the earthquake example because China is so far away and so different culturally from the Europe that Smith knew. Therefore, he writes as if only the love of what is noble could motivate an actor to give moral consideration to the Chinese. Distance prevents the Chinese from seeming to be our neighbor or our intimate concern. In this case, something independent of familiarity must be operating, since we cannot use affection or care to motivate morality. Smith writes:

It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. It is a stronger power, a more forcible motive, which exerts itself upon such occasions. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls 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. It is from him only that we learn the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves, and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator. It is he who shows us the propriety of generosity and the deformity of injustice; the propriety of resigning the greatest interests of our own, for the yet greater interests of others, and the deformity of doing the smallest injury to another, in order to obtain the greatest benefit to ourselves. (*TMS III.3.4*)

Smith is speaking here of duty, an actor's "reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and

arbiter or our conduct" (*TMS* III.3.4). Smith defines duty as "the regard to those general rules of conduct," and argues that although there may be no passionate sentiment guiding an individual, the person who acts based on a sense of duty does so "without any hypocrisy or blamable dissimulation" (*TMS* III.5.1). To act on duty is to act upon "a serious and earnest desire" to follow the general rules of conduct, and "there is scarce any man, however, who by discipline, education, and example, may not be so impressed with a regard to general rules, as to act upon almost every occasion with tolerable decency, and through the whole of his life to avoid any considerable degree of blame" (*TMS* III.5.1).

When we speak of those who are nearer to us, those with whom we have contact every day, only then does the affection for others become an important factor. Otteson's "familiarity principle" articulates Smith's belief that "people's natural benevolence toward others varies directly with their familiarity with them – the more familiar a person is to one, the greater the tendency to feel benevolent toward him, the less familiar, the less benevolent."²⁸ If this is correct, then Smith must provide examples of alterations in familiarity affecting our apprehensions of another. This, I argue, will be the case, and will become evident in his discussions of slavery, gender, and class. I will begin with these shortly.

Smith's proposal that increased familiarity leads to increased sympathy helps resolve the tension between two different natural tendencies. First, Smith writes of the "natural preference which every man has for his own happiness above that of other people," and that each person is "by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care" (*TMS* III.ii.I.10). Thus, humans have a natural tendency to both prioritize their own needs, and to be the ones who are most aware of and the most capable of achieving their own needs. Second, and in tension with those principles, Smith writes that "nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend his brethren. She taught him to feel pleasure in their favourable, and pain in their unfavourable regard" (*TMS* III.2.6). He also argued that people are "naturally endowed with a desire of the welfare and preservation of society" (*TMS* III.i.5.10).²⁹ Thus, people must naturally care about others and are inclined to cater to their needs.

²⁸ Otteson (2002: 171). Otteson's book uses the familiarity principle to show the illegitimacy of the Adam Smith Problem. Unfortunately, he posits his own version of the problem which is misleading and runs counter to the way this paper sees Smith's corpus as unified. See Weinstein (2004c).

²⁹ Otteson pairs these quotes, and I am grateful for his discussion. However, his purpose for citing them is different than mine. His citations are found in a discussion of the normativity of Smith's standards, and not in his remarks on the familiarity principle (Otteson 2002: 204–05).

There is a conflict between our desires to prioritize ourselves and to please others. We often cannot do both. Thus, I suggest, Smith reconciles this tension by arguing that the closer people are to one another, the more the natural tendency towards others can be combined with the natural tendency towards one's self. Not surprisingly, then, Smith argues that family life is enhanced by proximity (*TMS VI.ii.5–8*), and defines affection as "habitual sympathy" (*TMS VI.ii.1.5–8*). Regarding non-family members, Smith writes:

Even the trifling circumstance of living in the same neighbourhood, has some effect of the same kind. We respect the face of a man whom we see every day, provided he has never offended us. Neighbours can be very convenient, and they can be very troublesome, to one another. If they are good sort of people, they are naturally disposed to agree. We expect their good agreement; and to be a bad neighbour is a very bad character. There are certain small good offices, accordingly, which are universally allowed to be due to a neighbour in preference to any other person who has no such connection. (*TMS VI.ii.1.16*)

For Smith it is not the biological commonalities that make families an emotional unit; it is their day-to-day living conditions. It is the shared standards and shared lives that allow neighbors to care about one another as individuals. Shared life experience will prove essential in Smith's discussion of slavery and his reconciliation of the laboring and aristocratic classes.

Smith identifies the compromise between an individual's self-regarded tendencies and his or her concern for others as a natural disposition. This disposition "accommodate[s] and . . . assimilate[s], as much as we can, our own sentiments, principles, and feelings, to those which we see fixed and rooted in the persons whom we are obliged to live and converse a great deal with" (*TMS VI.ii.1.17*). Thus, we have a tension between multiple natural desires that get mitigated by proximity; the closer we are to people the more we are able to balance our self- and other-regarding interests. Sympathy is the capacity designed to negotiate these two desires, and, as argued above, how well we reconcile them is based, in part, on our capacity to interpret the relevant information.

This search for balance leads Otteson to refer to Smith's whole theory as a "curious and at times confusing mixture of nature and nurture."³⁰ I would suggest, however, that Smith's tensions cease to be confusing when we understand him as anticipating and struggling with issues of diversity, as we tend to understand them in contemporary discourse. Smith's comments are not "curious." They are, instead, an articulation of social difference and its effects, and the relationship between essential and accidental characteristics.

³⁰ Otteson (2002: 203).

Furthermore, whereas contemporary nomenclature sees a strict divide between 'nature' and 'nurture,' Smith saw no such division. "Nature" had a wide range of meanings for Smith, including the totality of all things, the principles behind all things, and "the result of economic or political conditions."³¹ In all of Smith's uses, society and its influences are natural. Since humans are social by nature, since they cannot make moral judgments outside of society, and since Smith himself is reluctant to suggest that there was a time when humans lived outside society, it makes no sense under Smith's system to compare how people might have been outside of society with what society does to them. Granted, education has a profound effect on individuals, but education is itself natural. It only acts on one's natural capacities. To describe Smith in terms of the nature and nurture debate is to misunderstand the impact of nature in Smith's theory.

There is a further tension between social similarity and difference, but this is epistemological rather than social. First, Smith asserts that humans are in some sense fundamentally similar. He writes, "The difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of. . . . The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom and education" (WN I.ii.4). Second, and in contrast, Smith suggests that the natural sameness that unifies humanity is mitigated by a fundamental separateness. Humans are physically separate and thus we are divided necessarily into spectator and actor. Thus, according to Smith, we know only our own sentiments, and consequently, our ability to understand others is, in some important sense, dependent on our ability to deduce or reconstruct their sentiments; sympathy is built on the imagination. Education cultivates difference but also helps to bridge that difference because it enables spectators to enter into the experience of others. In both of these cases, imagination is the bridge that creates community because it is imagination that allows someone to "enter as it were into [an actor's] body, and become in some measure the same person with him" (TMS I.i.1.2). In both cases imagination is enabled through education.

Moral judgment is a product of interaction, and is enabled by the ability to learn about others. For Smith, thinking for oneself is a group activity. It allows an individual to be constituted at least in part by others, even if persons are, at root, fundamentally separate. It also allows moral agents to use standards of dignity and personhood as criteria for determining how to treat others. It is worth noting that education, in this context, is not simply institutional education. It is the lifelong process of learning. This entails both being taught and figuring things out for oneself. I will return to this topic below.

³¹ Here I follow Bitterman (1940b) especially, p. 705.

2. SLAVERY

Much of Smith's discussion of otherness can be found in his moral condemnation of slavery, a condemnation based upon the impossibility of sympathy in a slave-owning society. To see this, however, requires reconstruction. To begin with, we know that Smith was opposed to slavery.³² He writes:

There is not a Negro from the coast of Africa who does not, in this respect, possess a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his sordid master is too often scarce capable of conceiving. Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished. (*TMS* V.2.9)

We see two claims in this passage. First, the slave owner is "sordid" and the Africans who are being enslaved are "heroes." Second, the master acts to enslave because he or she is "scarce able to conceive" the sentiments of the slave, and in return, the slave owner is faced with the "contempt" of the slave, who is more aware of the injustice than he or she is.

The slave owners are unable to see the sentiments of the slave because of the owners' personal experiences, events that are largely a product of history. Smith is explicit that those people who live and are educated amongst impropriety will regard those immoral acts with which they are familiar as simply "the way of the world" and accept them without protest or disapproval (*TMS* V.2.2). Although there is a fundamental similarity between people, Smith explains that historical context and proximity define both certain aspects of difference and the capacity of people to overcome that difference. He writes:

A man of great fortune, a nobleman, is much farther removed from the condition of his servant than a farmer. The farmer generally works along with his servant; they eat together, and are little different. The disproportion betwixt them, the condition of the nobleman and his servant, is so great that he will hardly look on him as being of the same kind; he thinks he has little title even to the ordinary enjoyments of life, and feels but little for his misfortunes. The farmer on the other hand considers his servant as almost on an equal with himself, and is therefore the more capable of feeling with him. Those persons most excite our compassion and are most apt to affect our sympathy who most resemble ourselves, and the greater the difference

³² It is not uncommon for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political economists to be anti-slavery. In fact, according to David Levy, it is the sympathy for slaves that provoked economics' nickname, "the dismal science." See Levy (2001: 5–35).

the less we are affected by them [the same will be the case with slaves].
(*LJ(A)* iii.109)

As discussed in the previous example of the Chinese, the more personal contact a person has with another, the easier it is to see the other as equal, or to see them at all. It was certainly not uncommon for servants to be invisible to such an extent that the master was actually unaware that they were in the room, or, at least, the servant's presence was irrelevant. This is, in this context, usefully understood as an extreme lack of sympathy and was only possible through elaborate social rules and norms.

For Smith, slavery exists for a variety of reasons. The first, of course, is the perceived economic advantages – but those turn out to be false advantages, and Smith opposes slavery on economic grounds (*WN* III.ii.12). Slavery must, therefore, exist for other reasons. A hint of this is offered in Smith's discussion of authority in *LJ(A)*. This is an imprecise discussion since, he writes, "it is very difficult to define what authority is, but every man has an idea of it in his mind" (*LJ(A)* V.129).

Social stratification is caused by a number of factors:

Several things tend to give one an authority over others. 1st, superiority of age and of wisdom which is generally its concomitant. 2dly, superior strength of the body; and these two it is which give the old an authority and respect with the young, 3d, superior fortune also gives a certain authority, caeteris paribus; and 4thly, the effect is the same of superior antiquity when everything else is alike; an old family excites no such jealousy as an upstart does. (*LJ(A)* V.129)

As specific as it appears, this list is not as helpful as it may seem. First, Smith's terms are vague. What constitutes superior fortune? Is it just money? Why is it that new money excites jealousy while old families do not? Second, this passage is located in a discussion regarding the legitimacy of the sovereign, and it is not altogether clear that authority does not mean "legitimate authority" as it does for other political theorists. Third, Smith claims only that these factors "tend" to give authority over others; this is not all-inclusive nor does it account for those times when these factors do not result in authority over others. There must, then, be other influences.³³

Recall first that, despite our natural similarities, people are different because of "habit, custom, and education" (*WN* I.ii.4). Social norms and customs have influence over social structures. Further, according to Smith, "the pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors" (*WN* III.ii.10), and "Slavery . . . has been universall in the beginnings of

³³ I am positing the third observation rather cautiously since Smith's lectures are known to us only through student notes and are thus not to be taken with as much authority as, for example, the sixth edition of *TMS*, which was subject to over thirty years of Smith's attention.

society, and the love of dominion and authority over others will probably make it perpetual" (*LJ(A)* iii.117). There is something natural in human beings that enjoys authority and motivates one person to subordinate another.

What causes slavery, then? Economic factors, a love of domination, and incapacity to sympathize all combine to support the institution of slavery, despite its inherently unjust nature. Its moral impropriety is determined through the act of sympathy itself, and is further supported by the creation of an imagined impartial spectator who can take the position of the "anyone" and judge the act without bias or conflict of interest. But the judgment of impropriety on the part of the slave owner and society is impeded by the progressive separation of the slave and slave owner. According to Smith, the slave owner is much too far removed from the day-to-day life of a slave to sympathize of his or her own accord with the emotions felt by the slave.

This too is ultimately a form of self-protection, since any attempt to sympathize would only lead towards pain and self-condemnation by the slave owner. Smith writes: "when we see one man oppressed or injured by another, the sympathy which we feel with the distress of the sufferer seems to serve only to animate our fellow-feelings with his resentment against the offender" (*TMS* II.i.2.5). Sympathy carries intentionality with it; it is aimed at something. One sympathizes with a particular sentiment. If suffering is unjustly caused, any fellow-feeling towards those who are suffering will naturally result in disapproval of the cause of the suffering. The slave owner is the person causing the suffering. By sympathizing with the slave, the slave owner adopts the sentiments of the slave, including the profound animosity the slave feels for her or his oppressor. Sympathizing would then be the process of the slave owner adopting the attitude of the slave, the necessary consequence of which would be self-hatred.³⁴

In the muddiness of the interaction between the universal and the subjective, in the confusion inherent in delineating the universal human experience from that of a particular person, self-hatred is the ultimate form of moral condemnation for Smith because it rests upon the impartial

³⁴ There is a potential difficulty given this view. Since analogous emotions are always imperfect, the slave owners' self-hatred would necessarily be of a lesser degree than the original hatred felt by the slave. It is therefore necessary for those who wish to convince the slave owner to change his or her practices to ensure that the information which the slave owner learns is powerful enough that the slave owner will feel enough self-hatred to change his or her ways. This should be taken as a general observation regarding all oppressive relationships. The greatest difficulty is rarely liberation. Escape and violence are often mechanisms with which to achieve freedom (although they do not guarantee permanence). It is much more difficult to convince the oppressors to understand the oppression and to change their ways. With this shift in attitude comes both liberation and prevention of further oppression.

spectator.³⁵ The capacity for the slave owner to sympathize with the slave is based upon his or her ability to adopt the slave's perspective. For Smith, as I have shown, this is easier in earlier forms of society where the slave and master work together in similar circumstances and on a regular basis. As societies develop to separate the two, drama and literature are useful tools to help the slave owner enter into the mind of the slave.

Smith is clear that the study of literature is necessary for moral education.³⁶ His own continual uses of literary references throughout *TMS* highlights its importance; his first reference to tragedy and romance is in the fourth paragraph of the book (*TMS* I.i.1.4). As Griswold points out, for Smith, "learning how to judge and how to feel are, though distinguishable, inseparable."³⁷ Literature lets us enter into the perspective of another, and, as such, Smith praises Voltaire's *Mohamet* as "perhaps the most *instructive* spectacle that was ever introduced upon any theatre" (*TMS* III.6.12, italics mine). Smith tells us that even when Greek plays try to communicate physical pain, it is always the other *circumstances* such as solitude or mortality, and not the pain of them that are the focus of the spectator imagination (*TMS* I.ii.1.9). Consistent with Smith's comments about sympathizing with pain in general, this reminds us that the more abstract imaginative sentiments are the more communicative. As such, literature may be the ideal vehicle for character study, since it presents all the necessary context, or, in Smith's language, it presents us with, "the different shades and gradations of circumstance, character, and situation, to differences and distinctions which, though not imperceptible, are, by their nicety and delicacy, altogether undefinable" (*TMS* VI.ii.1.22). In the case of slavery, Smith's appeal to literature proved to be prophetic, since history now shows us how influential sentimental abolitionist literature such as Harriet Becher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* turned out to be.³⁸

³⁵ We must remember that the impartial spectator is the product of the imagination (which is why the impartial spectator can inspire *self-hatred*), and the imagination is subject to the limits of our knowledge. Because we can only imagine what others feel, there is a core acknowledgment that social and moral interactions are imperfect. They are made more imperfect as social and institutional education deteriorates, because so much of our identities are learned from the culture around us.

³⁶ Griswold (1999: 215–17).

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 215.

³⁸ There is a wave of recent interest in Smith's work to explain the theory of sentimentality in nineteenth-century American literature. For example, June Howard writes: "*Uncle Tom's Cabin's* famous injunction to the reader to 'feel right' marks a moment when the relationship between [moral philosophy] and antebellum American sentimental fiction was close to the surface" (Howard 2001: 227). Citing Howard, Lori Robison adds, "readers will actually *feel*, as a bodily response, what is 'right' as a result of vicariously experiencing the pain of others echoes the philosophical notion, articulated by Adam Smith, that imaginative identification with the experiences of another could serve as the foundation for moral thought." See Robison (2004).

Without the assistance of education, literature, and drama, the slave owner may never sympathize with the slave, and may never change his or her ways. Moreover, sometimes attempts to instill morality in others simply fail. Griswold asserts that there may be a point after which no further discussion can elicit a response from a spectator.³⁹ There is no doubt some truth to this claim, and this is a major problem for Smith. He never explicitly responds to the case of a spectator who simply refuses to see the pain of another.

Smith argues that spectators are less likely to sympathize with unpleasant emotions than pleasant ones; that “mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than with our sorrow” (*TMS* I.iii.2.1). And, at the same time, as Gilbert Harman argues, sympathy is always “skewed in the direction of the conventional reactions.”⁴⁰ Thus, the combination of these two facts means both that sympathy – all else being equal – runs counter to change, and that spectators are even more reluctant to sympathize with those common occurrences that are painful to notice. In short, non-‘oppressed’ peoples, if I may use contemporary terminology, find it more difficult by nature to acknowledge and share the pain of those who are experiencing oppression.⁴¹ In the case of slavery, certainly, as well as in the case of women, this presents an even steeper battle towards social equality than one might otherwise think.

Smith’s most likely solution would be that the long-term progression of history and the unintended consequences of the market will eventually resolve this issue. Smith, for example, argued that the market enforced order and quality government on European towns, and introduced personal property to feudal subjects (*WN* III.iv.4, III.iv.10, III.iv.17). For Smith, new laws and practices will evolve, moving individuals towards greater equality. As John W. Danford writes, “it appears, on Smith’s understanding, that historical progress has been a story not only of the spread of general opulence, but also of a gradual transformation in the prevailing moral textures of societies.”⁴² Space prevents me from examining this possibility in detail. However, as we will see, Smith’s comments on the status of women certainly bear out this suggestion, since he is quite explicit that historical change has been beneficial to their treatment by men.

³⁹ Griswold (1999: 201).

⁴⁰ Harman (1986: 10).

⁴¹ Emma Rothschild associates the term ‘vexation’ with the modern term “oppression” and articulates a long list of relationships that oppress moral and commercial actors (27). She writes, “vexation is indeed a particular personal form of the abuse of power, characteristic of the enforcement of commercial and fiscal rules” (33). See Rothschild (2001).

⁴² Danford (1980: 686).

3. GENDER

Race and gender are common areas of focus in the discourse of difference because they investigate ambiguities regarding the distinction between social norms and biological impact, and because they are fault lines on which power has been exerted historically. Debates about gender, in particular, emphasize the distinction between nature and nurture, debates that have been used both to justify subservience of one gender to another, and to argue for gender equity. They ask whether or not women are more “naturally” suited to certain tasks than others (again, ‘nature’ in this usage is not the same as Smith’s). In the above discussion of slavery, race is only an accidental feature. All of Smith’s comments would apply equally if slaves were Asian or Caucasian; thus the power is economic or situational and not inherently tied to race. In discussing the role of women in society, however, biology is not accidental, and investigations of biological impact are more likely to slip into some form of essentialism.⁴³ Thus, if Smith truly believes that sympathy can overcome group difference then this must also be the case in his discussion of women.

Stuart Justman argues that Smith’s own theories challenge traditional gender roles by reversing the characteristics that are commonly regarded as belonging to men and women. He claims that Smith makes men more feminine while simultaneously protecting their masculine self-image using male-coded Stoic philosophy. For example, he writes:

Perhaps because capitalism lives and trades on “vices” long imputed to women – such as limitless desire and the projection of false but alluring images – Adam Smith finds that the men of commercial society act like aldermen’s wives, admire fops who are less males than unsexed “things”, and give themselves up to their ruling passion of vanity, the folly of “weak” minds.⁴⁴

This is an interesting claim, for our purposes. That Smith might be able to reverse traditionally gendered behavior already suggests that the divide between men and women is as artificial as the divide between slave and slave owner.⁴⁵ Ultimately, Justman admits that, “in a sense, all Adam Smith

⁴³ Of course, many of the problems in gender-based oppression are taking biological issues to be relevant when they are not. There is nothing in fecundity that prevents a woman from being a bus-driver or a CEO, for example.

⁴⁴ Justman (1995: 4).

⁴⁵ Unfortunately, Justman (1995) is not as convincing as he would like to be. He states explicitly that Smith acted unintentionally, but writes as if Smith were deliberate in his actions (10). He has little in the way of an ordered argument, and his discussion of Stoicism seems disconnected from his larger point. Justman’s attack assumes numerous forms, including poisoning the well with a false accusation of anti-Semitism and the claim that Smith approves of the belief that rape “dishonours the victim, no matter how innocent she may be” (86–87). The charge of anti-Semitism is a case of guilt by association. It is based upon the remarks of another writer who wrote 145 years after Smith’s death and is

is doing . . . is playing out the old language of gender, which makes courage male and vanity female. Without doubt he is stuck in traditional gender categories" (53).

It should come as no surprise to anyone that Smith's time was, by contemporary standards, sexist. That Smith's writing is couched in such language is unfortunate but not particularly damaging since the essence of his theory is not dependent on it. As I shall argue, there is nothing inherent in Smith's work that either demands a distinction between the genders or that must be construed as sexist.

In contrast to Justman, Vivienne Brown argues that Smith has designated all of his readers male.⁴⁶ She asserts that his use of the possessive pronoun excludes women, referring to his readers as male in one key moment: "The fair-sex, who have commonly much more tenderness than ours, have seldom so much generosity."⁴⁷ This is worth noting, especially since Smith was, for so long, a professor of rhetoric, and because his continual use of "we" throughout *TMS* is designed specifically to pull the reader closer to Smith's own position.⁴⁸

Despite the male coding of his audience, however, we know that many of Smith's most avid readers were women, and that he was surprisingly sensitive to women's issues. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft cites Smith several times, including using his comments on the rich in *TMS* I.iii.2.1 to make an identical point about women.⁴⁹ Additionally, as Kathryn Sutherland points out, Smith argues explicitly that women's work, particularly spinning, "never enters the public registers of manufactures" (*WN* I.viii.51) and that these women laborers are "commonly scattered about in all different parts of the country, without

meant to show the "dark side of irrationalism." The charge that Smith equates rape with dishonor is clearly taken out of context. The comment about rape is enclosed within his remarks on distinguishing between casuistry and jurisprudence and is discredited, albeit somewhat ambiguously (*TMS* VII.iv.13).

⁴⁶ Kathryn Sutherland extends this argument to suggest that capitalism as a whole is gendered male. See Sutherland (1995).

⁴⁷ Brown (1994: 32 n 17).

⁴⁸ Griswold labels Smith's use of the rhetorical 'we' 'protreptic.' It is a word of his own creation. Etymologically, it is Greek: *pro* means toward, and *treptic* means turn. The definition, then, would be a turning towards something. In this context, Smith is turning the reader towards the community of 'we,' but also guiding the reader towards a set of ethical principles (Griswold (1999), especially pp. 48–58).

⁴⁹ In *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she writes: "When do we hear of women who, starting out of obscurity, boldly claim respect on account of their great abilities or daring virtues? Where are they to be found? – 'To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which they seek.' – True! my male readers will probably exclaim; but let them, before they draw any conclusion, recollect that this was not written originally as descriptive of women, but of the rich. In Dr. Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments, I have found a general character of people of rank and fortune, that, in my opinion, might with the greatest propriety be applied to the female sex" (ch. 14, par. 20).

support or protection”(WN IV.viii.4).⁵⁰ As Jane Rendall observes, Smith noted that changes in social roles were “the contrivance of man” and not the natural order (in this context, ‘man’ means humanity and is not gender-specific).⁵¹ She highlights one of Smith’s most explicit comments regarding the inequality between the sexes: “The laws of most countries being made by men generally are very severe on the women, who can have no remedy for this oppression” (*LJ(A)* iii.13).⁵² Observations of this sort are almost indistinguishable from contemporary condemnations of male-dominated society by many feminists and Smith’s moral disapproval is evident in his phrasing. If cross-gender communication were impossible, Smith could not be sympathetic to the historical plights of women, yet clearly, he is. His response is to educate, first his students, then his readers, to the unjust plight of women. Consistent with his own theories, Smith always took a pedagogical approach to social change.

In *LJ*, Smith provides an explicit account of the impact changing societies have on women’s status. Chris Nyland presents a clear account of the ways in which women’s lives improve according to Smith’s stage theory, although the account emphasizes the economic and pays little attention to the role of sympathy in social change. Economic, social, and political progress bring with them improvement in women’s lives and rights. Nyland argues that Smith’s account “provided a substantive theoretical challenge to the belief that male social domination was natural and that women would always remain the subservient sex.”⁵³ Furthermore, as Nyland shows, as far as Smith was concerned, the only innate differences between men and women are “strength and fecundity.”⁵⁴

These theorists show that, ultimately, gender distinctions in Smith’s work are superficial at most. This is important, since Smith’s context was one in which gender contributed significantly to social, political, and educational difference. If his theory – whether intentionally or not – develops so as to minimize the difference between the genders, then it shows significant promise in providing a foundation for social unity and social change even in the face of sophisticated historical institutions designed explicitly to separate men and women. His theory suggests that there is little that could not be understood between the sexes. For Smith, a man can even sympathize with a woman in childbirth, the most exclusive of female experiences (*TMS* VII.iii.I.4). It may be argued that Smith is simply incorrect, that no man can ever accurately know childbirth, but one who objects to Smith on such grounds forgets that

⁵⁰ As quoted in Sutherland (1995: 99–100).

⁵¹ Rendall (1987: 61).

⁵² As quoted in Rendall (1987: 64).

⁵³ Nyland (1993: 618).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 637.

all sympathy is imperfect, not just the fellow-feeling between men and women.⁵⁵ Sympathy results in analogous emotions in the spectator, but that emotion is *always* less in degree, no matter what sentiment is being sympathized with. Smith writes:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them . . . so to conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, in proportion to the vivacity or dullness of the conception. (*TMS* I.i.1.2)

That a man attempts to sympathize with a woman giving birth and fails to do so exactly is typical of every other act of sympathy any spectator engages in. Smith refers to the original sentiment as the “substance” and the imagined sentiment as its “shadow” (*TMS* VI.ii.1.1). Women who engage in easier deliveries are also unable to have direct knowledge of difficult childbirth since they did not have the same experience; all women are not identical. Their common experience may bring them closer to the pain of labor, but it can never be *exact* because sympathy is the product of the imagination and does not provide privileged access. Furthermore, since sympathy is the product of the imagination, the question, ultimately, is not whether a man ever experiences such pain, but whether a man can ever *imagine* it. It is for this reason that Smith can consistently suggest, as he does, that a spectator can sympathize with the dead (*TMS* I.i.1.13).⁵⁶ If a spectator’s ability to sympathize were dependent on the ability to be or have been something, than it would be impossible for us to create analogous emotions about death since, presumably, any living spectator has not yet died.

For Smith, the fundamental separateness that humans experience is no different between genders than it is within a particular gender.

⁵⁵ Smith was probably unaware of the phenomena known as “*couvades*,” men having sympathy pain in response to childbirth. But anthropologists have observed extensive systems of *couvades* in many different tribal situations, and their conclusions are certainly compatible with Smith’s. There is little suggestion that *couvade* is artificial or a disrespectful “put on.” See Hall and Dawson (1989).

⁵⁶ This is, Smith suggests, an “illusion of the imagination.” He writes, “We sympathize even with the dead, and overlooking what is of real importance in their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them, we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike our senses, but can have no influence upon their happiness. It is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations. Surely, we imagine, we can never feel too much for those who have suffered so dreadful a calamity . . .”

Justman, who is critical of Smith, admits, “the distinction between men and women in the thinking of Adam Smith is wholly specious and artificial, prefiguring ‘the artificiality of the binary logic’ of Victorian thinking about the sexes.”⁵⁷ And, Jane Rendall argues, Smith’s writing “formed an important theoretical stage in that redefinition of public and private spheres which is crucial to our understanding of the relationship between the sexes in an industrial world.”⁵⁸

4. EDUCATION AND INTIMATE EXPERIENCE

My argument so far has emphasized the effects of social education and proximity on persons in society. My purpose is to show that, for Smith, education can overcome social differences, at least in part because these differences are themselves the product of historical developments and social and political structures. In this section, I argue that, for Smith, education is itself a product of historical development, but that implicit in Smith’s argument is a claim regarding certain aspects of experience that cannot be communicated. I contend that this intimate experience gives added weight to the normativity Smith seeks. My discussion in this section emphasizes both contemporary multiculturalism and Smith’s discussion of beauty. I emphasize these topics because both highlight the tension between the context and normativity. Smith’s theory of beauty emphasizes the role “fashion” and “custom” play in certain decisions, whereas multiculturalism helps understand how this difficulty translates into a social concern.

As I have emphasized, for Smith, the ability to sympathize rests on either pre-existing commonalities or the ability to create commonalities by learning the contexts and perspectives of others. Smith starts with the presumption of natural equality. Again, as I have argued, for Smith, there is no “original difference” between individuals (LJ(A) vi.47–48). Children, in their younger years, are “very much alike, and neither their parents nor their play-fellows could perceive any remarkable difference” (WN I.ii.4). Significant change comes about when children are employed in different occupations. He writes:

The difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labour. (WN I.ii.4)

Smith rejects the notion that there are different types of people with “fundamentally different ‘types’ of human psychologies which are not

⁵⁷ Justman (1995: 19).

⁵⁸ Rendall (1987: 44).

reducible to each other."⁵⁹ For Smith, non-physical, racial, gendered, class, and other differences are learned, not biologically determined.

Modern multiculturalism can be understood to suggest that those members of a group who are bound by similarity – whether it be a culture, a tradition, or a common history – are bound by their own judgments through a lived normativity. They, in some sense, assent to the standard that binds them; they are subject to their own conclusions. For example, if a Scot morally condemns another Scot, it may hold more weight than if the Scot is condemned by the British colonial power that has imposed itself on Scotland – or so some would argue. We can see anticipations of multiculturalism in Smith's slave/slave owner example, moral condemnation is also more authentic when it comes from within an individual. In this case, it is the slave owner who condemns him- or herself, and it is this particular condemnation which is the most damaging. It is not the external judgment of the community that condemns the slave owner to self-hatred; it is the slave owner's own imagination – the impartial spectator. The slave owner determines that the act is wrong, and the slave owner must then act on it or violate his or her own self-respect. What Smith seems to suggest is that because condemnation comes from that part of the identity that is most intimate, this condemnation has more power than any social judgment the slave owner may find him- or herself subject to. I do not mean to suggest that Smith negates community influence. This would run counter to my entire argument so far. Instead, I only mean to propose that community, however influential, is limited in power.

At the core of Smith's discussion is an unarticulated claim that central to human understanding is an undeniable experience. The community cannot erase that experience, nor prevent it from influencing a person's sentiments or impartial spectator. By undeniable, I do not mean unfalsifiable. Clearly, in many cases the community can alter an actor's sense of, or valuing of, an experience, and the community can also make an actor change the meaning of an experience. For example, one friend may show another that what is apparently love is really lust, or a therapist may convince a patient that his or her fear is really paranoia, but no one can challenge the presence of an experience. No one can challenge that we feel *something*, even if how we articulate what we feel is culturally defined. In fact, it is precisely because these experiences are emotional – it is precisely because Smith roots his moral psychology in sentiment – that these experiences have power. The reaction to some sentiments simply will not change.

To elaborate: consider my argument articulating Smith's assertions that distance adds difficulty to the sympathetic process, and that a person sympathizes more easily with those with whom he or she is familiar. The

⁵⁹ Danford (1980: 682).

reverse, then, must also be true, that closeness makes sympathy, at least as a general rule, easier. Thus, the actor most easily sympathizes with him- or herself. This is perfectly consistent with Smith's claim that,

every man, as the Stoics used to say, is first and principally recommended to his own care; and every man is certainly, in every respect, fitter and abler to take care of himself than of any other person. *Every man feels his own pleasures and his own pains more sensibly than those of other people.* (TMS VI. II.1.1, italics mine)

As an "unarticulated claim," this is hard (by definition) to prove. Yet, evidence for this view is available by focusing on Smith's discussion regarding those sentiments that are easily sympathized with and those that are not. Smith argues, for example, that spectators tire of hearing lovers discuss each other since the spectator cannot enter in the particulars, even though the spectator understands full well that it is possible for actor X to love person Y and that this situation is an instantiation of that relationship (TMS I.ii.2.1). Smith also claims that physical pains are virtually impossible to communicate, so much so that they are easily forgotten, even by the sufferer soon after the pain has subsided (TMS I.ii.I.8). The difficulty in remembering pain shows how important the imagination is, that after the pain is finished, a person may have trouble sympathizing with him- or herself. Notice, the more intimate or central an experience is, the less communicable the experience is. For Smith, the ability to communicate is the indication of, and the precondition for, social interconnectedness; this is also an anticipation of multiculturalism.

The consequence of this intimacy of experience is important, although Smith himself does not articulate this point. A slave and slave owner may be convinced that slavery is morally correct, that it is just, and that each person deserves his or her place in the social structure, but the slave cannot be convinced that he or she *likes* the experience or that it does not cause pain – again, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* comes to mind.⁶⁰ This central

⁶⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe's contemporaries were known to argue that slaves were, in fact, happy, sometimes citing the slaves' dancing and singing as proof. Even at the time, the response to this was vehement. Frederick Douglass argues that the songs can only be understood as expressions of happiness when one does not understand the word. In contrast, Douglass, for whom the songs are not "unmaning jargon," writes: "I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do." See: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, ch. 2. Richard Whately showed that what was often called dancing was, in fact, misinterpreted in the first place. He asks, "What is the meaning of the countless advertisements, offering rewards for the apprehension of runaway slaves, to be recognised by marks sufficient to prove the 'happy' state they left, and which they were too dull or too ungrateful to appreciate?" He also compares calling slaves being happy with the assertion that a woman who was abducted "wished in her heart to be

conviction is ever present in the slave's life, and reaffirmed time and time again. For Smith, it is an outgrowth of the fundamentally discrete nature of the individual. It is this pain that the slave owner must imagine when he or she adopts the perspective of the slave, and it is this which causes the consequent self-hatred. Yet pain, as was shown, is the hardest of all sentiments to sympathize with. It is precisely that the slave feels *pain*, that the community cannot make him or her positively value the experience. Again, even if one convinces the slave that he or she deserves the pain, it is still pain that he or she thinks is deserved, not pleasure, and not joy.

Self-hatred is a link between education and undeniable experience. Self-hatred is possible in Smith's system because self-image is quite pliable: the community can influence an individual to dislike him- or herself even when the individual is reticent to do so. This pliability can both inform and misinform the individual. Self-deceit, for example, the self-persuasion that our acts are appropriate when they are not, is, according to Smith, the "fatal weakness of mankind" and "the source of half the disorders of human life" (*TMS* III.4.6).⁶¹ This is made more complicated by the fact that, according to Smith, self-awareness is quite easily deformed:

Unfortunately this moral looking-glass is not always a very good one. Common looking-glasses, it is said, are extremely deceitful, and by the glare which they throw over the face, conceal from the partial eyes of the person many deformities which are obvious to every body besides. But there is not in the world such a smoother of wrinkles as is every man's imagination, with regard to the blemishes of his own character. (*TMS ed.1*, III.i.5)

Recall that for Smith, judgments about beauty, identity, and moral matters are all intertwined. Smith unites them explicitly in his discussion of the social foundation of our capacity for judgment (*TMS* III.1.3–5) but also implicitly throughout *TMS*. The language of beauty is the language of morality and vice versa. For Smith, fashion and custom "define" beauty and heavily influence the impartial spectator. Regarding beauty, he writes: "Neither is it only over the productions of the arts, that custom and fashion exert their dominion. They influence our judgments, in the same manner, with regard to the beauty of natural objects . . ." (*TMS* VI.8). Regarding morality, he writes that our sense of moral approbation can never be "entirely perverted" by custom (*TMS* V.2.1), but that caution is still necessary:

But though the influence of custom and fashion upon moral sentiments, is not altogether so great, it is however perfectly similar to what it is every where else. When custom and fashion coincide with the natural principles of right

carried off," and the Romans, when invaded by the French, "in their hearts wished for the overthrow of the Republic . . . and were glad of the coercion." Whatley (1852: esp. 248–50).

⁶¹ For a more detailed account of self-deception, see Mitchell (1987).

and wrong, they heighten the delicacy of our sentiments, and increase our abhorrence for every thing which approaches to evil. Those who have been educated in what is really good company, not in what is commonly called such, who have been accustomed to see nothing in the persons whom they esteemed and lived with, but justice, modesty, humanity, and good order; are more shocked with whatever seems to be inconsistent with the rules which those virtues prescribe. Those, on the contrary, who have had the misfortune to be brought up amidst violence, licentiousness, falsehood, and injustice; lose, though not all sense of the impropriety of such conduct, yet all sense of its dreadful enormity, or of the vengeance and punishment due to it. They have been familiarized with it from their infancy, custom has rendered it habitual to them, and they are very apt to regard it as, what is called, the way of the world, something which either may, or must be practised, to hinder us from being the dupes of our own integrity. (*TMS* V.2.2)

Notice that for Smith, continuous cultural immersion in impropriety makes a person more likely to misjudge morality. Persistent images of immorality create difficulties for access to any objective moral judgments.

The same is true of beauty. Smith postulates first the objectivity of beauty (*TMS* VI.8) then counters it with an argument regarding its changing standards. Finally, he concludes:

I cannot, however, be induced to believe that our sense even of external beauty is founded altogether on custom. The utility of any form, its fitness for the useful purposes for which it was intended, evidently recommends it, and renders it agreeable to us, independent of custom . . . But though I cannot admit that custom is the sole principle of beauty, yet I can so far allow the truth of this ingenious system as to grant, that there is scarce any one external form so beautiful as to please, if quite contrary to custom and unlike whatever we have been used to in that particular species of things: or so deformed as not to be agreeable, if custom uniformly supports it, and habituates us to see it in every single individual of the kind. (*TMS* VI.9)

Thus, Smith's mixed and cautionary conclusion is that even if there is an objective standard of beauty – perhaps based on utility – there is probably no object that is so objectively beautiful that it can counter a fashion or custom explicitly aimed against it. In other words, the standards of beauty, and the forces that influence self-image are as complex and as interwoven as those forces that influence our perceptions of others. Art, literature, and custom – the raw material of a liberal education – can overpower any objective aesthetic. To consider this in terms of the multicultural perspective, one is forced to wonder whether there is any position that is powerful enough to overshadow the influence of culture.

This is a central difficulty in Smith. Smith implies a universal ethic throughout his work, yet he adopts a context-dependent moral psychology. He switches back and forth from asserting that acts and institutions such as slavery are wrong, yet he relies on culture and context to justify his

claims. He does, famously, appeal to the impartial spectator upon which he grounds his normative claims, but the spectator is limited by the human imagination and is an imperfect ground. Thus, moral judgment must somehow be a combination of universal and contextual forces – a grand compromise that Smith seems to believe is an accurate depiction of the human experience.⁶²

Smith argues that education solidifies the moral lessons stemming from our judgments that are the result of our capacity to sympathize. Consider the passage discussed earlier regarding the sacrifice of the Chinese people for the actor's little finger. In this same section, immediately following his comments about acting towards those with whom we have no connection, he writes:

The most vulgar education teaches us to act, upon all important occasions, with some sort of impartiality between ourselves and others, and even the ordinary commerce of the world is capable of adjusting our active principles to some degree of propriety. But it is the most artificial and refined education only, it has been said, which can correct the inequalities of our passive feelings; and we must for this purpose, it has been pretended, have recourse to the severest. (*TMS* III.3.7)

Here Smith argues that education can be a substitute for familiarity when parties are so distant that we can feel no affection for them. Then, he writes:

Those general rules of conduct, when they have been fixed in our mind by habitual reflection, are of great use in correcting the misrepresentations of self-love concerning what is fit and proper to be done in our particular situation. The man of furious resentment, if he was to listen to the dictates of that passion, would perhaps regard the death of his enemy, as but a small compensation for the wrong, he imagines, he has received; which, however, may be no more than a very slight provocation. But his observations upon the conduct of others, have taught him how horrible all such sanguinary revenges appear. Unless his education has been very singular, he has laid it down to himself as an inviolable rule, to abstain from them upon all occasions. (*TMS* III.4.12)

Here Smith argues that education runs counter to self-love. As quoted above, Smith also indicates:

There is scarce any man, however, who by discipline, education, and example, may not be so impressed with a regard to general rules, as to act upon almost every occasion with tolerable decency, and through the whole of his life to avoid any considerable degree of blame. (*TMS* III.5.1)

⁶² Smith writes that *TMS* is “not a matter of right . . . but concerning a matter of fact” (*TMS* II.i.5.6 ff.). In other words, here Smith is being descriptive rather than prescriptive, and thus the main question is whether his theory is an accurate depiction of how humans actually are. Certainly, much of *WN* fits these criteria as well.

This passage represents Smith's faith in education, his belief that there are few who could not be impacted by it. Notice Smith's language in the first two quotes. The first refers to "vulgar" education, while the second refers to "singular" education. In each of these quotes education is taken at its worst, not at its best, yet it still holds the power to morally educate. Of course, "vulgar" means "common," in this context, but, Smith means 'basic' or 'spare' and these are not compliments. Only minimal education is required to provide a foundation for moral judgment, but in such cases, moral judgments will also be basic and spare. The more complex education is, the more complex moral judgments can be.

We see this further in Smith's assertion that education is so fundamental to the development of moral judgment that one can judge the quality of a society's educational system by examining the moral activities of those who have learned from it. Smith highlights this relationship by comparing the ancient Greek and Roman methods of education: two cultures that are used to represent excellence, so much so, that "our prejudice is perhaps rather to overrate them" (WN V.i.f.54). Smith then presents, as usual, an historical account of changes in education. By doing so, he once again shows how changes in education have resulted in changes of moral standards. Without proper education, Smith argues, moral development is severely impeded.

According to Smith, the lack of education is as much a barrier to being sympathized with as being able to sympathize. Those without education are both looked upon with contempt and are denied happiness (WN V.i.f.61). Comparing two individuals, one who is "mutilated and deformed in his mind" and one who is mutilated in his or her body, Smith writes that the one who is mutilated of the mind "is evidently the more wretched and miserable of the two..." (WN V.i.f.60).⁶³ For Smith, education is necessary for happiness (WN V.i.f.60). The person who is denied education is denied ease of sympathy. Since Smith considers happiness to be the "natural and ordinary state of mankind" (TMS I.iii.1.7) and since those who are denied education are denied happiness, then those who are denied education are denied the ease of mutual sympathy and the opportunity to live life as a normal person.

⁶³ This passage is a confusing one. Ostensibly, Smith is discussing the "martial spirit" and order in Greece and Rome. The sentence preceding the comments regarding mutilation of mind and body refer to the capacity of a person to defend him or herself, and to avoid cowardice. There is nothing in this passage that suggests liberal education. However, Smith's readers ought to notice, first, how intertwined moral and educational claims are in his writing. Bravery is a virtue in this context, and it is not unfounded to see these comments in terms of the unity of the virtues. The sentence that follows refers to happiness and misery, healthfulness, and asks us to consider the mind as a whole. Second, Smith implicitly asserts that mental health is a precondition for physical health.

5. CLASS

Some of Smith's most explicit comments on education occur in his discussion of the effects of repetitious labor on the working classes. Smith argues that industrialization and regular employment only complicate matters. Constant repetition makes poor workers unnecessarily ignorant. He writes:

the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur . . . But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it. (WN V.i.f.50)

Once again emphasizing the impact of historical progression on social structures, Smith argues that in less advanced societies – those that precede “the improvement of manufactures, and the extension of foreign commerce” (WN V.i.f.51) – institutionalized education was not as necessary as in his own time. In earlier societies, each person did a wide variety of activities and cultivated numerous skills. Consequently, in those societies, “invention is kept alive, and the mind is not suffered to fall into that drowsy stupidity, which, in a civilized society, seems to benumb the understanding of almost all inferior ranks of people” (WN V.i.f.51). Each person in these societies is part warrior and part statesman and can “form a tolerable judgment concerning the interest of the society, and the conduct of those who govern it” (WN v.i.f.51). According to Smith, although there is variety in the lives of the individual in this society, there is not much variety in the lives of the various members of society as compared with one another. “Every man does, or is capable of doing, almost every thing which any other man does, or is capable of doing” (WN V.i.f.51). Thus, in non-commercial societies it is easy for a spectator to sympathize with an agent since he or she will always be familiar with the situation of those whom he or she encounters. The spectator does not face wide gaps in experience, beliefs, or actions.

Compare this with the structure of commercial society as described by Smith: “In a civilized state . . . though there is little variety in the occupations of the greater part of individuals, there is an almost infinite variety in those of the whole society” (WN V.i.f.51). In other words, an individual will always have a uniform day, but it may differ radically from the uniformity that others experience. For example, of two neighbors, one may spend the entire day working in a nail factory while the other may spend the entire day working on a fishing boat. Neither switches their

occupation, neither knows what the other encounters. This infinite variety of uniformity makes sympathy much more difficult and makes education that much more necessary. Here Smith is developing a philosophy of education that argues that the more diversity a person is exposed to, the more capable he or she is of seeing others. Diverse education is a bulwark against ignorance and prejudice; it finds commonality without erasing otherness. I must temper this last point. Smith does not mean diversity in the modern sense. He refers to multiplicity of activities but not ethnic, racial, or cultural pluralism. Yet, one can see how his foundation might lead to a justification for diversity in the more modern sense of the term.

Smith's solution to social unity in the face of difference rests on his faith in the ability to learn about others and their lives. Sympathy is the foundation for moral development; it is also the foundation for society. Without sympathy, and without a proper education, a society will be divided into as many factions as there are traits or cultural concerns. Women would be unable to sympathize with men, the rich would be unable to sympathize with the poor, and the British would be unable to sympathize with the Scots. There is no indication that Smith saw such differences as insurmountable, but there is every indication that he was aware of the divisions that traditionally occur near such complicated fault lines.⁶⁴

6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to articulate Adam Smith's theory of overcoming social and biological difference. In doing so, I have concluded that Smith presents a consistent account of how education allows people to develop sympathy for others, and this, at least Smith believes, will help bridge differences that have proved most fractious.

I have emphasized that Smith's theory is fraught with tension. Individuals are fundamentally separate but exist in community. Agents have a natural propensity towards self-interest, yet also care for others

⁶⁴ The reader may desire a more detailed discussion of the *type* of education Smith suggests, as well as a discussion as to whether or not Smith has a preferred pedagogy or an account of educational content. Smith's comments on education are spread out through his works and are of many different types. He argues, for example, that philosophy and science are necessary to temper the divisive effects of religion (WN V.I.g.6.14); that women's education is, and ought to be, practical in nature (WN V.i.f.4); that the quality of teachers is best maintained through market forces (WN V.i.f.4); that sending students abroad during and after schooling is a mixed blessing (WN V.i.f.36); that university education is of poor quality but the only option in many courses of study (WN V.i.1.f.46); and, that education is a public good. A precise account of his argument, and his philosophy of education, would have to be the sole topic of an article or book. Space does not permit such a discussion here. For two versions of a modern "Smithian" approach to education, see Weinstein (2004a) and Nussbaum (1995).

by nature. Education both creates division and resolves it. My intent has been to emphasize these conflicts by focusing on contemporary areas of difference, specifically gender, race, and class. My conclusion is that for Smith, education is a prerequisite for social unity since an agent's moral concern can be cultivated to extend to those who may seem alien. I have shown that according to Smith, slaves and slave owners, men and women, and the rich and the poor can all sympathize with those whose experiences differ radically from their own. A reason for this is the ability to strengthen the imagination. For Smith, no agent can enter perfectly into the experience of others or imagine perfect impartiality, but he or she can imagine enough. For a political theory, enough may very well be all one needs.

Smith would have been quite unfamiliar with the cosmopolitan multicultural urban societies that many of us take for granted. Yet, as Emma Rothschild writes, his disputes are our disputes.⁶⁵ My hope, in this paper, is not only to offer a closer look at Smith's theory, but also to suggest that his work is more contemporary than it might at first seem; his moral theory may be useful in adjudicating some of the more complicated debates we face today.⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ Rothschild (2001: 47–48).

⁶⁶ For a full-length defense of the contemporary relevance of Smith's work see Weinstein (2001).

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