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Adam Smith, David Hume, and the Problem of Moral Relativism

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Abstract

Despite the considerable attention paid to Adam Smith's ethical theory over the past quarter of a century, at least one area of his thought remains outstanding for the lack of interest it has received: Part V of The Theory of Moral Sentiments, *"Of the Influence of Custom and Fashion upon the Sentiments of Moral Approbation and Disapprobation." This is unfortunate, however, insofar as there are good reasons for thinking that Part V is important to Smith's project. This essay substantiates this importance by placing Smith's intervention in the context of David Hume's earlier attempts to wrestle with the problem of moral relativism. The connections between Hume and Smith on this matter have not previously been explored, yet doing so is crucial for gaining a more complete appreciation of Smith's moral thought. Beyond this historical intervention, however, I also contend that neither Smith nor Hume offer satisfactory answers to the philosophical challenge posed by moral relativism. Despite remaining the two outstanding theorists in the tradition of ethical sentimentalism, both Smith and Hume fall short on this score. Insofar as moral relativism remains a challenge to ethical sentimentalists today, proponents of this tradition must look elsewhere for solutions.*

Keywords: David Hume; Adam Smith; moral relativism; ethical sentimentalism; custom

Introduction

In roughly the past quarter of a century, Adam Smith's ethical thought has received a welcome expansion in critical attention. Few today could bemoan that he is remembered only as an economist, with his pioneering and highly sophisticated moral philosophy going unfairly neglected.[1] And yet, despite this welcome development, there remains at least one area of Smith's moral thought that

[1] For examples of the attention he has received in this dimension, see Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008); Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (Cambridge

is notable for the *lack* of attention it has received: Part V of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "Of the Influence of Custom and Fashion upon the Sentiments of Moral Approbation and Disapprobation."[2]

To be sure, this section of Smith's oeuvre has not gone entirely unnoticed. Insofar as it has been discussed, however, this is typically as part of an attempt to establish Smith's wider account of aesthetics or in the service of recruiting Smithean insights to address issues of concern to moral and political philosophers today regarding contemporary questions of cultural influence and ethical relativism.[3] What is so far lacking, by contrast, is a sustained treatment of Part V in its own right, in terms of the role it plays in Smith's moral thought as well as the intrinsic philosophical interest of the content therein. Yet if we reflect on this scholarly lacuna, we should be dissatisfied with it—not least because there are good reasons for thinking that Part V was important to Smith's project in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.* If we want to understand that project as fully as possible, this is a gap we must endeavor to close.

This essay attempts to do so by presenting Part V as a conscious response by Smith to the account of moral relativism offered by David Hume. This is a connection that has not previously been explored, but which I aim to show is important for better understanding the relationship between Hume's and Smith's moral philosophies as well as what the latter was trying to achieve in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.* Second, however, I also contend that neither Hume *nor* Smith offer adequate responses to the challenge posed by moral relativism, thus revealing important limitations to the ideas put forward by two of the most prominent and accomplished philosophers in the tradition of ethical sentimentalism. Insofar as ethical sentimentalists today find themselves perturbed by

University Press, 2009); Jerry Evensky, *Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective on Markets, Law, Ethics, and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2] References in what follows are to The Glasgow Edition of the *Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith.* Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. A. L. Macfie and D. D. Raphael (1776; repr., Oxford University Press, 1976).

[3] Hiroyuki Furuya, "A Language of Taste in the Moral Philosophy of Adam Smith," *The Kyoto Economic Review* 79, no. 1 (2010): 40–65; John R. Harrison, "Imagination and Aesthetics in Adam Smith's Epistemology and Moral Philosophy," *Contributions to Political Economy* 14, no. 1 (1995): 91–112; Robert Fudge, "Sympathy, Beauty, and Sentiment: Adam Smith's Aesthetic Morality," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2009); Samuel Fleischacker, "Adam Smith and Cultural Relativism," *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics* 4, no. 2 (2011); Samuel Fleischacker, *Being Me Being You: Adam Smith & Empathy* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 77–88; Fonna Forman-Barzilai, "Smith on 'Connexion', Culture and Judgment," in *New Voices on Adam Smith*, ed. Leonidas Montes and Eric Schliesser (Routledge, 2006), 89–114; Fonna Forman-Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy: Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 160–95; Michael B. Gill, "Moral Pluralism in Smith and His Contemporaries," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 269, no. 3 (2014): 275–306; Jack Russell Weinstein, "Sympathy, Difference, and Education: Social Unity in the Work of Adam Smith," *Economics and Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2006): 79–111. For partial exceptions that focus more directly on some of the issues raised below, see James R. Otteson, *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 252–58; David Golemboski, "The Impartiality of Smith's Spectator: The Problem of Parochialism and the Possibility of Social Critique," *European Journal of Political Theory* 17, no. 2 (2018): 174–93; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 43–52.

matters of moral relativism—and as I will try to show, they ought to be—they will need to look elsewhere for philosophical succour, showing how contemporary accounts can overcome the difficulties encountered by Hume and Smith. Furthermore, reflecting on Part V may also shed light, albeit indirectly, on *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. In the course of that far-reaching work, Smith considers what can be learned from the experiences of a vast array of different peoples, in different times and places: ancient Romans, medieval Mongols, early modern conquistadors, contemporary Chinese, and many more besides. Yet that apparent diversity may strike the reader as revealing. Smith clearly takes it for granted that no significant differences between human groups exist that might make intercomparison between different peoples and epochs problematic. This raises a question: Was this simply an unreflective assumption on Smith's behalf—perhaps a product of his age that later periods would call into severe question—or did his approach in the *Wealth of Nations* rest upon an independent philosophical foundation? My suggestion is that the latter is much closer to the truth, and a careful consideration of Part V of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* brings out why.[4]

The essay proceeds by first reviewing the contributions made by Hume on the question of moral relativism, in particular "A Dialogue," which closes *The Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, but also his essay "Of the Standard of Taste." It then proceeds to consider why Smith would have been particularly alert to the challenge of moral relativism, given the position stated in Part III of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and why Hume's proposed solutions would have been unacceptable from his perspective. With these important contextual considerations in place, I then offer a detailed analysis of Part V, attempting to explicate the specific philosophical positions that Smith stakes, and which I suggest are both more dense and more sophisticated than is typically recognized. Nonetheless, I will also argue that Part V is a candidate for the least successful aspect of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: not only does it raise notable puzzles of interpretation, only some of which admit of satisfying resolution, but it also fails to adequately address significant problems faced by Smith's account.

Hume on moral relativism

It is a matter of biographical record that Smith read Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* while an unhappy visiting student at Balliol College, Oxford in the early

[4] First published seventeen years before the *Wealth of Nations*, Part V is notable insofar as it is one of the few aspects of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that Smith subjected to almost no revisions (and none of any significance) between the first (1759) and sixth editions (1790). He clearly considered this aspect of his philosophical corpus in good shape, both before and after he published the *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, indicating that he thought his second masterpiece, at least in this regard, continuous with the first. In turn, the supposition that Smith radically changed his mind between the two books —a central contention of the so-called "Das Adam Smith Problem"—receives yet another, albeit subsidiary, nail in its coffin.

1740s, at which point he may well have begun formulating his philosophical disagreements with the older thinker, who would later become a friend.[5] Yet Smith must also have been familiar with Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, published in 1751, eight years before the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.* In both, Hume contends that virtue ultimately consists in that "which is useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others," with vice being the reverse.[6] On this matter at least, whatever the technical differences between the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*—the latter, for example, appearing to give even greater importance to the role of utility—from Smith's perspective, they are both crucially mistaken. Utility does *not* play a foundational role in the moral sentiments in the way Hume claims, and hence arguments deployed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* target both works.[7] By contrast, at least one thing that *does* distinguish the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* is the latter's "A Dialogue," which has no direct equivalent in the earlier work.

The reasons Smith likely took special notice of "A Dialogue" will be presented below. It is first necessary to have a clear sense of what Hume achieved (and crucially, did *not* achieve) in that work. Although more complex a philosophical contribution than it first appears, "A Dialogue" may nonetheless be summarized as follows. Presented as an exchange between an unnamed narrator and his friend Palamedes, the latter launches into a description of a foreign land, Fourli, he has allegedly just returned from visiting. He tells of a people not only engaged in the most outrageous practices—infanticide, treason, parricide, and suicide, to name but a few—but who consider them as *virtuous* and in various ways to be applauded. When the narrator objects that his friend should stop trying to make a fool of him by getting him to believe in a land that is plainly unbelievable, Palamedes reveals he has been using pseudonyms to describe myriad practices associated with the ancient Greeks and Romans. After more ground clearing, Palamedes stakes his central claim: "[T]o represent the uncertainty of all these judgments concerning characters; and to convince you, that fashion, vogue, custom, and law, were the chief foundation of all moral determinations." But if this is indeed granted, then severe consequences would seem to follow: "What

[5] Nicholas T. Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (Allen Lane, 2010), 64–71; Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Paul Sagar, "Beyond Sympathy: Smith's Rejection of Hume's Moral Theory," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2017): 681–705; Paul Sagar, "Smith and Rousseau, After Hume and Mandeville," *Political Theory* 46, no. 1 (2018): 29–58.

[6] Hume, EPM 9.12; SBN 277; cf. T 3.3.1.12; SBN 579; T 3.3.1.27; SBN 589–90. References to Hume are as follows: EPM = *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume: An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford University Press, 1998); T = *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford University Press, 2007); E = *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Liberty Fund, 1987). On the relationship between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, see esp. Remy Debes, "Has Anything Changed? Hume's Theory of Association and Sympathy After the Treatise," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2007): 313–38; Remy Debes, "Humanity, Sympathy, and the Puzzle of Hume's Second Enquiry," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2007): 27–57.

[7] Smith, TMS IV.2.1–12; Sagar, "Beyond Sympathy: Smith's Rejection of Hume's Moral Theory," 695–70.

wide difference, therefore, in the sentiments of morals, must be found between civilized nations and Barbarians, or between nations whose characters have little in common? How shall we pretend to fix a standard for judgments of this nature?"[8]

But with Palamedes's position stated, the narrator immediately hits back:

> By tracing matters, replied I, a little higher, and examining the first principles, which each nation establishes, of blame or censure. The Rhine flows north, the Rhone south; yet both spring from the *same* mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the *same* principle of gravity. The different inclinations of the ground, on which they run, cause all the difference of their courses.[9]

This is the crux of "A Dialogue." The narrator purports to show that all moral judgments are ultimately derived from the principles of being either agreeable or useful to self or others.[10] Making this move is potent as a way of replying to Palamedes's challenge. In the first instance, if all moral judgments have a single common source, just as both the Rhine and the Rhone spring from the same point in the Alps, then this has the effect of reducing apparent disparities between different moral practices in different times and places. Yes, on the surface they may look radically different, but the philosopher is able to trace things to "first principles" and see what they more fundamentally have in common, while in the process refuting the claim that there is nothing more to morality than fashion, vogue, custom, and law.

Furthermore, the narrator takes himself to be able to explain *why* moral practices differ, despite their common source. Different societies will inevitably develop different ways of combining usefulness and agreeability, given that there are many ways in which these can be balanced, traded, and offset. Hence, the French tend to licentiousness with regard to adultery and gallantry, and the Athenians to prudish severity. It is also quite possible that different societies get the balance *wrong*, actually hindering agreeableness and/or utility. The French go too far in one direction, the Athenians in the other. Similarly, the different circumstances that different societies find themselves in will likewise alter judgments and practices regarding utility and agreeableness: "It is not surprising, that, during a period of war and disorder, the military virtues should be more celebrated than the pacific, and attract more the admiration and attention of mankind."[11] Likewise, whether a society is governed according to the principles of a republic or a monarchy, is rich or poor, and so on, will also affect how it configures the virtues. In more favorable circumstances, societies will be apt to configure the virtues *better*, that is, in terms of promotion of the useful and agreeable over the harmful and the disagreeable.[12]

[8] Hume, EPM D.25; SBN 333.
[9] Hume, EPM D.26; SBN 333.
[10] As just argued for in the main body of the *Enquiry*; see Hume, EPM D.37; SBN 336.
[11] Hume, EPM D.39; SBN 336–67.
[12] Hume, EPM D.51; SBN 340–41.

"A Dialogue" presents the case of the narrator as thoroughly compelling. On the one hand, it is not "incumbent" for the philosopher to show that all peoples in all times and places "reason aright with regard to this subject, more than with regard to any other." When it comes to morality, "[i]t is sufficient, that the original principles of censure or blame are uniform, and that erroneous conclusions can be corrected by sounder reasoning and larger experience," as the narrator claims to have shown.[13] On the other, not only is it false that there is nothing more to morality than custom, fashion, vogue, and law. It is also possible to assess and make judgments about where morality is doing what it should—that is, promote usefulness and agreeableness—and where it is failing in those precise regards, as in some cases, the narrator happily admits, it can, and hence is in need of reform. But what this does *not* lead to is the conclusion that just because moral difference can be observed both between different societies and across different eras, this somehow reveals morality as a fraud, arbitrary, or otherwise impugned. Both the Rhine and the Rhone flow across different terrain, but the mere existence of the Rhine does not somehow impugn the status of the Rhone. They are both rivers, and the mere fact they may manifest differently, in different times and places, does not alter the fact that they spring from the same source and are governed by the same principle of gravity. Likewise holds for the status of morality.

At this point, it is germane to ask: But is the argument *successful*? The (surprisingly) small number of commentators who have focused on "A Dialogue" overwhelmingly conclude that it is.[14] I would agree with them—but only to the extent that we keep the debate within the remit that Hume himself lays down. The problem, however, is that this remit is unduly narrow and fails to take account of the most pressing objections. This can be seen as follows.

As reconstructed above, "A Dialogue" clearly engages with the challenge of what we now call moral relativism. Yet the version of the challenge that Hume constructs, as voiced by Palamedes, and that the narrator comprehensively engages with is a relatively superficial and comparatively easy one to address. A far more serious objection would go as follows:

> *Persistent Palamedes*: I am sorry, dear friend, but your example of the Rhine and Rhone simply does not allay my worries. Imagine I were to grow up on the banks of the Rhine, where we use its delicate water to lovingly take care of infants, feeding them, cleansing them, and ensuring their good health. What should I think were I to discover that on the banks of the Rhone, those

[13] Hume, EPM D.36; SBN 336.

[14] See esp. Kate Abramson, "Hume on Cultural Conflicts of Values," *Philosophical Studies* 94, nos. 1–2 (1999): 173–87; Henrick Bohlin, "Universal Moral Standards and the Problem of Cultural Relativism in Hume's 'A Dialogue'," *Philosophy* 88, no. 346 (2013): 593–606; Mark Collier, "The Humean Approach to Moral Diversity," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2013): 41–52; Timothy M. Costelloe, *Aesthetics and Morals in the Philosophy of David Hume* (Routledge, 2007), 87–94; Christopher J. Berry, "Hume's Universalism: The Science of Man and the Anthropological Point of View," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 550. For a partial exception, though on different grounds to those advanced below, see Lorne Falkenstein, "Moral Disagreement," in *Hume's an Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical Guide*, ed. Esther Engels Kroeker and Willem Lemmens (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 238–55.

> who inhabit such lands use the river water not to take care of innocent infants, but to drown them? What would I care, to be told that both Rhine and Rhone flow from the same source? What would I care, to be reminded that both are rivers? What the inhabitants of the banks of the Rhone do is plainly evil, and ought to be condemned as such! Indeed, any attempts to downplay the differences between Rhine dwellers and Rhone dwellers, rather than allaying my worries, only accentuates them. You appear to be obfuscating on a point of utmost moral seriousness by talk of tracing things up to higher principles. Is it, or is it not wrong, to drown babies, *regardless* of whether the residents of the Rhone believe this to be somehow useful or agreeable for reasons known only to them? Surely, you must think such conduct wrong come what may, but I cannot see from your principles what the *basis* for such a judgment would be.

At the very least, Hume's narrator would need to say something in reply to an objection of this kind. But the philosophical seriousness of the challenge goes deeper:

> *Persistent Palamedes:* The more that I reflect upon your example, the more disturbed by it I become. Upon your account, had I been born alongside the banks of the Rhone, I would think it entirely permissible, perhaps even required, to drown infants, should this somehow promote utility or agreeableness. Yet it is a matter of purest chance that I grew up beside the Rhine rather than the Rhone. Wherein the justification for my sincere, and perhaps deepest, moral belief that to drown infants is always wrong? Indeed, how can I even continue to believe that to be *true*, once I know that over there, on the banks of the Rhone, they do the exact opposite, for no better reason but that they were born into another society? Even merely becoming aware of the existence of the Rhone dwellers means everything cannot remain where it once was.[15] I appear threatened by the following conclusion on your account: Whether I think drowning infants be wicked or virtuous is ultimately a matter of accident of birth. But if so, then moral judgments are contingent upon where one happens to be born. But if contingent, then surely they are *arbitrary*. And if arbitrary, whence their authority, yet which I take it moral judgments are supposed by their nature to possess?

This is the serious challenge from moral relativism that a sentimentalist account like Hume's must ultimately say something in reply to. And yet, "A Dialogue" has nothing to offer on this score. Its success, therefore, is at best limited.

Disagreement in ethics versus aesthetics

Before turning our focus to Smith, it is worth considering an important difference between "A Dialogue" and Hume's most famous statement on what we

[15] Persistent Palamedes has perhaps been reading Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Routledge, 2006), 156–60.

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would now call aesthetics, his 1757 Essay "Of the Standard of Taste," which Smith must surely also have known (a point to which I will return).[16] Although itself a highly complex philosophical contribution, one way to read the essay on taste is as applying roughly the same strategy as deployed in "A Dialogue."[17]

On the one hand, when it comes to questions of what Hume calls "criticism," all seems ultimately to lie in the eye of the beholder. Insofar as, for example, beauty and quality by definition cannot reside in external objects but only in the minds, and therefore opinions, and therefore *tastes*, of perceivers, then it would appear that disagreement here simply lies outside the domain of rational disputation[18]—or as the saying goes, "*de gustibus non disputandum est*" ("there is no disputing taste"). On the other hand, were someone to suggest (and here I update Hume's somewhat unhelpful examples) that William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is no better than the sitcom *Friends*, they would be found to "defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe."[19] Thus while it is often maintained that there is nothing to say when tastes clash, that disagreement must simply be accepted, this seems incompatible with our widespread conviction that taste *can* vary in quality, that criticism is *not* all of the same order, and that the statuses of various things subjected to criticism legitimately differ, with some things (paintings, dramas, poetry, and so on) rightly considered better than others of their kind. But how to explain this conviction, if we are to grant—as Hume, the sentimentalist, does and must—that such qualities lie not in objects themselves, but in the minds of perceivers, and hence ultimately in matters of (nonrational) taste?

Notice here the parallel between claiming that there is no disputing with taste when it comes to judgments of criticism—that is, nothing further can be said beyond reporting that people's tastes differ, and simply accepting this—and claiming that there is nothing to morality other than custom, vogue, fashion, and law. In both cases, the philosopher can try to show that this is *not true*, that much more can be said to account for observed differences beyond simply observing that such differences exist. And indeed, this is (at least one) strategy Hume adopts in "Of the Standard of Taste." He proceeds to demonstrate the importance of factors such as constancy of shared judgments over time, delicacy in relevant faculties of taste, repeat practice and experience in particular domains, deferring to the acknowledged wisdom of others, being free from prejudice and other distorting influences when making judgments, and so forth, when it comes to

[16] Unlike "A Dialogue," "Of the Standard of Taste" has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. For some helpful discussions, albeit constituting only a small fraction of the available literature, see Simon Blackburn, *How to Read Hume* (Granta, 2008), 95–106; Costelloe, *Aesthetics and Morals*, 1–22; Peter Kivy, "Hume's Standard of Taste: Breaking the Circle," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 7, no. 1 (1967): 57–66; James Shelley, "Hume's Double Standard of Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 4 (1994): 437–45. The word 'aesthetics' did not enter the English language until Thomas Carlyle's use of it in his 1825 *The Life of Friedrich Schiller*, although its original inception was as a neologism by German thinker Alexander Baumgarten in 1735 (whose work neither Smith nor Hume were likely to have known).

[17] Costelloe, *Aesthetics and Morals*, 89.

[18] Hume, E 229–30.

[19] Hume, E 231.

matters of criticism. There is a great deal more to say about taste, Hume shows, beyond simply observing that tastes often differ. As a result, we can make sense both of the idea that some people's tastes are more refined than others, but also that some people's criticisms are more insightful than others, hence why we routinely rank objects of criticism as of better and lower quality—and that to do so is unobjectionable and makes perfect sense. In other words, by tracing matters higher, to "first principles," the philosopher demonstrates the intelligibility of there being *standards* of taste, notwithstanding the fact that beauty, quality, and other aspects of criticism are ultimately founded in the subjective tastes of perceivers.

Yet here is where a crucial matter of divergence between "A Dialogue" and "Of the Standard of Taste" arises. While Hume contends that it is manifestly the case that criticism can vary in quality, he also allows that there are circumstances in which the appropriate response when it comes to what we would now call aesthetics is, as the saying goes, to "agree to disagree." If we control for factors such as delicacy, refinement, freedom from prejudice, experience, and so on, and find that two well-calibrated judges nonetheless *still* have sincere differing opinions as to the quality of some object of criticism, then it may turn out that there is nothing further to say other than that two well-qualified people disagree. There would then be no final supreme standard one can appeal to in order to decisively claim superiority of judgment.[20] This will not *always* be the case, and indeed we will not necessarily know in advance which cases turn out to be like this, although Hume indicates that the different idiosyncratic humors of men, age, cultural differences, and the epoch in which one lives play significant roles. Nonetheless, Hume allows that it manifestly *is* the case that sometimes disagreement gives out into rival matters of taste, and there is nothing more to be said. And here is where we can mark an important divergence with "A Dialogue": namely, that in matters of aesthetics, there seems no equivalent to the sort of challenge raised by the figure of Persistent Palamedes. Assuming that we are both competent judges in the ways Hume explicates, above a baseline of plausibility if you and I disagree about the merits of, say, Shakespeare's comedies versus his tragedies, or the music of Wolfgang Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven, we may well be perfectly happy—in a way that we *won't* when it comes to *Hamlet* versus *Friends*—to say that here the appropriate response is for us to agree to disagree. For indeed, at *that* level there really is no disputing with taste. Yet things seem importantly disanalogous in ethics. Should you claim infanticide to be permissible, perhaps even sometimes required, then *even if* I were informed that you reason sincerely from principles of usefulness and agreeableness to self and others, at source the very same ones that I use, it seems entirely *unacceptable* to simply shrug and say, "Oh well, we must agree to disagree—it's a matter of taste, and there's no disputing with that!"

What is going on here is that in matters of aesthetic criticism, once we control for quality of judgment, any disagreements that remain simply do not appear sufficiently important for us to be perturbed by them. The stakes just aren't that

[20] Hume, E 243–45.

high. By contrast, in ethics, there are cases where even if we control for quality of sincere underlying judgment—for example, on the basis of usefulness and agreeableness to self and others—remaining disagreement *does* seem sufficiently important to be disturbed by it. In fact, more than disturbed. Given what we believe to be right and wrong, it seems required not only that we be perturbed by other people doing something we hold to be immoral, but that we ought to condemn it, and quite possibly condemn them, too. (Note, however, that it is a yet further question what we might practically do in the light of such condemnation: intervene, begrudgingly tolerate, consider whether we should in fact be like them, and so forth; those are precisely *further* matters.) In other words, in ethics the stakes appear—sometimes at least, as for example in the case of infanticide—dramatically higher than in aesthetics.[21] And because they are sometimes dramatically higher, there are cases in ethics such that even when the philosopher has traced matters to higher first principles, and even if granting that we *agree* with those principles, we are *not* content simply to agree to disagree. What oftentimes seems acceptable in the "criticism" of aesthetics is importantly different in the "criticism" of morals, Hume's running the two together, as he does at the outset of "Of the Standard of Taste"[22] notwithstanding. In turn, his strategy for constructing a "standard" in matters of aesthetics is not straightforwardly transferable to matters of ethics.

The role of custom in Smith's moral sentimentalism

With these appraisals of Hume in place, we are now better equipped to turn to Part V of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, noting at least two reasons why Smith is likely to have felt it incumbent upon himself to dedicate an entire part to the influence of custom and fashion upon the moral sentiments. The first is that no matter how sympathetic Smith might have been to Hume's strategy of tracing matters to higher first principles, he could not endorse *Hume's* account. Having attempted to show in Part IV of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that Hume's utility-orientated sentimentalist account was inadequate and needed to be replaced by his own version, at the very least he would need to supply an alternative explanatory matrix to Hume's "utility and agreeableness" framework, should he take up the challenge of explaining the role of custom and fashion vis-à-vis the moral sentiments. But why take up that challenge? Because Smith's own account was vulnerable to precisely the kinds of worries noted above. This can be seen as follows.

At the outset of Part III, Smith makes clear that all moral judgments are ultimately socially composed. While we judge of the propriety of the action of another by imagining ourselves into their situation and seeing whether the sentiments we would feel in such a situation correspond with theirs, this would be impossible had we not already been socialized into prevailing standards of

[21] Louise Hanson, "Moral Realism, Aesthetic Realism, and the Asymmetry Claim," *Ethics* 129, no. 1 (2018): 69.

[22] Hume, E 227–30.

what it is and is not appropriate to feel. The same is true when it comes to assessing our own conduct. When we "divide" ourselves "into two persons" and attempt to assess our own sentiments from the perspective of an impartial spectator, this would be impossible had we not grown up in a society in which we first learned to take on board the imputed estimations of others (TMS III.i.6). In Smith's evocative phrasing:

> Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. (TMS III.i.3)

As he goes on in the concluding chapter:

> To be amiable and to be meritorious; that is, to deserve love and to deserve reward, are the great characters of virtue; and to be odious and punishable, of vice. But all these characters have an immediate reference to the sentiments of others. Virtue is not said to be amiable, or to be meritorious, because it is the object of its own love, or of its own gratitude; but because it excites those sentiments in other men. (TMS III.i.7)

Yet if this is the case, the challenge Palamedes raises in "A Dialogue" can be raised against *Smith's* position.[23] What counts as, say, propriety in ancient Athens appears to differ radically from what counts as such in modern France. How to explain this? On Smith's account, it must be that the underlying sentiments in each society are different. But how to account for *that*? One potential answer, given apparently widespread evidence of considerable sentimental disagreement across various times and places, is that at base our moral sentiments are themselves the product of, as Palamedes would put it, "fashion, vogue, custom, and law," which seems especially likely if (as Smith claims) we only *have* these sentiments as a result of being socialized amid some particular group of humans, among whom we happen to have been born. But if that is granted, then the original Palamedes challenge bites: "How shall we pretend to fix a standard for judgments of this nature?" (The implication is that there isn't one.) As we would put it in modern terminology, is Smith not committed, at root, to conceding the relativity of morality, given its allegedly socially composed basis in sentiment?[24]

[23] Fleischacker, "Cultural Relativism," 24–25, 28–29.

[24] For helpful discussions regarding why Smith's impartial spectator must ultimately be a product of local socialization and cannot be read as offering access to moral verdicts somehow independent of such socialization (which would thereby deliver Smith from the problems of moral relativism), see Golemboski, "Smith's Spectator"; Griswold, *Virtues of Enlightenment*, 135–46, 157–62; Forman-Barzilai, "Culture and Judgment," 94–100; Forman-Barzilai, *Circles of Sympathy*, 161–75. For attempts to interpret Smith as a proponent of moral universalism, see, e.g., Stephen Darwall, "Equal Dignity in Adam Smith," *The Adam Smith Review* 1 (2004); Samuel Fleischacker, "Philosophy in Moral Practice: Kant and Adam Smith," *Kant-studien* 82, no. 3 (1991): 249–69; Fleischacker, "Cultural Relativism," 31–36.

In sum, from Smith's perspective, the position taken by the narrator in "A Dialogue" would have been unacceptable insofar as it relied upon Hume's wider utility-based account of the moral sentiments. Yet this would have mattered to Smith precisely because the challenge raised by Palamedes potentially applied to his *own* position.[25] An alternative to Hume's "A Dialogue" was therefore required. The proper roles of custom and fashion needed to be properly accounted for in a satisfactory theory of moral sentiments. Hence, we have Part V of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.*

But furthermore, I suggested above that "A Dialogue" is lacking over and above any technical rejection of Hume's utility matrix, insofar as an even more serious challenge to ethical sentimentalism can be mounted than the one Hume considers—that which I put into the mouth of Persistent Palamedes, and which applies even if we *accept* Hume's appeal to utility or agreeableness to self or others. Hume's essay shows no awareness of or engagement with this more serious challenge. Yet it extends equally to Smith's version of ethical sentimentalism. If all moral judgments are ultimately socially composed, doesn't that mean that they are therefore all relative to the society that composed them? But if so, that seems to impugn the status of moral judgments per se for the reasons articulated above. In what follows, it is therefore worth asking to what extent (if any) Smith was aware of this further challenge, and to what extent (if any) he engaged with it.

The role of Part V in Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Smith opens Part V of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as follows:

> THERE are other principles besides those already enumerated, which have a considerable influence upon the moral sentiments of mankind, and are the chief causes of the many irregular and discordant opinions which prevail in different ages and nations concerning what is blameable or praise-worthy. These principles are custom and fashion, principles which extend their dominion over our judgments concerning beauty of every kind. (TMS V.1.1)

He thus clearly avows the importance of custom and fashion to the moral sentiments and immediately draws attention to their role in doing damage by causing "irregular and discordant opinions," the reader being primed for the argument that is to follow. Yet despite this opening paragraph being focused on the moral sentiments, what follows in Chapter 1 of Part V constitutes a discussion of the role of custom and fashion entirely with regard to beauty in (what we

[25] To put matters another way, Smith simply cannot have been as relaxed about the problem of "historicism" as, e.g., Griswold suggests; Griswold, *Virtues of Enlightenment*, 349–54. Certainly, his contemporary readers could see this line of objection. See, e.g., Thomas Reid's criticism of Smith's system as falsely grounding the standards of right and wrong in "the variable opinions and passions of Men" or James Mackintosh's complaint that Smith "renders all morality relative." Reid and Mackintosh are quoted in Daniel B. Klein, "Dissing the Theory of Moral Sentiments: Twenty-Six Critics, From 1765 to 1949," *Econ Journal Watch* 15, no. 2 (2018): 208, 221.

now call) *aesthetics.* By contrast, the discussion with regard to (what we still call) *morality* is delayed until Chapter 2. Smith therefore makes a move that, as we saw above, Hume does not: separating out for different and distinct treatment questions of aesthetics and ethics. To be sure, Smith retains the language of beauty in both cases, a feature of the fact that he maintains both to be a function of sentiment.[26] But he clearly indicates, via his separation of topics in Chapters 1 and 2, that the *analysis* of each needs to be conducted separately. It is often claimed that a clear distinction between aesthetics and morality does not arise in the Western tradition until Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*,[27] and indeed this may well be true, facilitated in part by Kant's wholesale removal of ethics from the realm of sentiment. But it should be appreciated that Smith had already begun to take very deliberate steps toward such a separation, and from within a wholly sentimentalist perspective. Did he do this as a response to perceiving the disjuncture between "A Dialogue" and "Of the Standard of Taste" noted above? Here we can only speculate, but it is certainly possible.

Chapter 1 proceeds as follows. Smith begins by considering beauty in questions of human artifice: dress, furniture, poetry, architecture, music. These appear entirely governed by prevailing norms of custom, of which fashion is really just a subspecies.[28] But what about "the beauty of natural objects," for example, flowers, horses, and human bodies (TMS V.1.8)? Here, Smith considers at length the suggestion by Jesuit philosopher Claude Buffier that this, too, is the product of only custom and fashion, and hence why different human societies seem to have radically different estimations regarding what counts as beauty. In China, women's feet are bound into the tiniest dimensions possible; in North America, some tribes use wooden boards to turn skulls into square shapes, aesthetic appearances that in the West are deemed ugly, but in these places are considered beautiful. The reverse, of course, is also true of the practice of squeezing European women into ill-fitting, health-ruining corsets, Smith undercutting any complacent sense of superiority potentially held by his readers. Smith, however, resists Buffier's claim that aesthetic beauty in natural objects is a product of custom all the way down. Like Hume,[29] Smith maintains that some aspects of beauty are recommended to us by nature prior to and independent of, custom. These include the utility of particular forms, the immediate agreeableness of certain colors, a preference for the smooth over the rough, for variety rather than tedious uniformity, and particularly for sequences of variety that appear connected to each other in significant ways as opposed to "a disjointed and disorderly assemblage of unconnected objects" (TMS V.1.9).

Nonetheless, Smith concedes that, despite these reservations, when it comes to aesthetic beauty, the roles of custom and fashion appear overwhelmingly

[26] For further discussion, see Griswold, *Virtues of Enlightenment*, 330–36; Harrison, "Imagination and Aesthetics"; Fudge, "Aesthetic Morality."

[27] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

[28] For Smith on fashion in general, see Craig Smith, "Adam Smith's 'Collateral' Inquiry: Fashion and Morality in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*," *History of Political Economy* 45, no. 3 (2013): 505–22.

[29] Hume, E 233–34.

important. Though he "cannot admit that custom is the sole principle of beauty," nonetheless it is so powerful 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 V.1.9)

When it comes to aesthetics, therefore, custom and fashion appear overwhelmingly to determine what is considered beautiful or ugly, and hence what deserves praise or disapproval. But what about when it comes to morality? Here, things are different.

Chapter 2 of Part V is, even by Smith's standards, dense. This is easily underappreciated, however, so it is worth carefully examining how he proceeds. Smith opens by first conceding that because morality is a function of sentiment, and therefore rightly assessed in terms of beauty, it must to *some* extent be influenced by custom and fashion, so extensive are the power of these (as just established in Chapter 1). And yet, "[t]heir influence here, however, seems to be much less than it is every where else" (TMS V.2.1). When it comes to aesthetics, there is perhaps nothing so ridiculous that custom cannot reconcile us to it, fashion perhaps even render agreeable. But when it comes to morals—to "character and conduct," for example, that of Nero and Claudius—some things lie forever beyond the pale, regardless of custom and fashion. Why? Because there is a category difference between aesthetic sentiments and moral sentiments:

> The principles of the imagination, upon which our sense of beauty depends, are of a very nice and delicate nature, and may easily be altered by habit and education: but the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation, are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warpt, cannot be entirely perverted. (TMS V.2.1)

We will need to return to Smith's use of the language of morality as being something that can be "warpt" but not "perverted." (On what basis can he even intelligibly talk of morality in such terms?) But for now, let us consider the argument Smith proceeds to make in the rest of Chapter 2, composed of the following strategies.

First, Smith concedes that in those cases where custom and fashion *do* have an impact on the moral sentiments, although this is never as pronounced as it is in cases of aesthetics, the mechanics of how things work are essentially the same. "When custom and fashion coincide with the natural principles of right and wrong, they heighten the delicacy of our sentiments, and increase our abhorrence for every thing which approaches to evil," with the reverse also being true —again leaving aside, for now, Smith's striking use of the language of "natural principles of right and wrong" (TMS V.2.2). Those who are well brought up amid

justice, humanity, and modesty, are especially shocked when these virtues are absent or violated, whereas those brought up in harsh conditions are rendered by customary habits far less shocked by acts that are properly considered of enormity and rightly deserving punishment. Similarly, under the rein of Charles II licentiousness became *fashionable*, insofar as it served to mark gentlemen out as not being puritans, a function of the context of the era.

Having conceded that custom and fashion *can* influence moral sentiments, Smith next however goes on to replicate a strategy found in "A Dialogue": that the philosopher can explain many of the ways in which custom and fashion work their influence beyond simply stating that morality is a function of them, with no further elaboration (the original Palamedes challenge). Where Smith differs from Hume is that he makes no appeal to a single higher "first principle" that allegedly explains all downstream moral difference, and certainly not any appeal to utility and agreeableness. Nonetheless, he contends that there are multiple factors we can account for regarding why morality differs in different times and places. First, different professions will inculcate different characters in people. We expect clergymen to be sober and serious as befitting their spiritual burdens, but soldiers (a little paradoxically) to be gay and lively, a function of their needing to cope with the psychological stress of military service. Similarly, we expect the old and the young to display different characters (and for our own characters to change over time as we age) because the different stations of life properly influence the way we act and feel. Likewise, the circumstances that different societies find themselves in, given varying historical contexts as well as differing economic and political situations, ensure that which sentiments are deemed appropriate must fluctuate to some degree as per local conditions. In Russia, the generally tougher circumstances mean that a moderate degree of politeness would be interpreted as intolerable effeminacy, whereas in France, where things are much more luxurious, the same degree of politeness would be received as barbarity. Generally speaking, Smith maintains that it is inevitable that in "barbarous" conditions the harshness of life ensures that virtues of self-denial are more highly praised than those of humanity, whereas in more "civilized" nations the reverse will be true, a function of how the moral sentiments have to adapt to the realities of different socioeconomic contexts.

A great deal more could be said about the (often intricate) details of Smith's examples, all aiming to examine in greater depth the influence of custom and fashion upon the moral sentiments in different times and places. But for present purposes it is most fruitful to focus on the conclusion that Smith aims to draw from the many examples of moral divergence he spends the bulk of Part V discussing: namely, despite the fact that there are many differences that are a function of custom and fashion, the vast majority of these *do not matter.* While it may be true that barbarous societies are deficient regarding the humane virtues, they are not *incapable* of them. Likewise, polished civilized societies may struggle with the virtues of self-denial, but they can *acquire* them, for example, in times of military conflict. While we expect the old and the young to conduct themselves differently, this applies only to what are ultimately trivial matters. By contrast, we expect the rules of "truth and justice" to apply equally to both, as indeed we do when it comes to soldiers and clergymen (TMS V.2.13). In sum, Smith adopts a

different central strategy from Hume. Rather than trying to trace observable differences to higher first principles, Smith mounts what is ultimately an empirical claim: insofar as custom and fashion produce moral differences, these are *all minor*, and need not trouble us:

> We cannot complain, therefore, ... that the perversion of natural sentiment is very great. Though the manners of different nations require different degrees of the same quality, in the character which they think worthy of esteem, yet the worst that can be said to happen even here, is that the duties of one virtue are sometimes extended so as to encroach a little upon the precincts of some other. ... In general, the style of manners which takes place in any nation, may commonly upon the whole be said to be that which is most suitable to its situation. Hardiness is the character most suitable to the circumstances of a savage; sensibility to those of one who lives in a very civilized society. Even here, therefore, we cannot complain that the moral sentiments of men are very grossly perverted. (TMS V.2.13)

We might term this strategy of Smith's an attempted *deflation* of the challenge posed by moral relativism. Hume's narrator in "A Dialogue" engages in this strategy, too, but makes it subservient to the agreeableness and utility framework. By contrast, Smith makes it the linchpin of his argument.

Smith, however, cannot stop matters there. For an evident reply can be made that he himself acknowledges: it is all very good appealing to the examples that he does, but there are surely others that plainly tell against him. The following, surely, is a difference in morals that is anything but trivial: the ancients routinely practiced infanticide, as do "all savage nations" in his own time, and both consider it entirely morally permitted (in the case of the Athenians, for no better reason than to avoid inconvenience). For modern Europeans, by contrast, there can be no "greater barbarity ... than to hurt an infant" (TMS V.2.15). When moral sentiments can differ *that* much, isn't Smith's suggestion straightforwardly refuted?[30]

Yet Smith still has cards left to play. The most important of these is an alleged distinction between "the general style of conduct or behaviour" and that "[w]ith regard to particular usages." Concerning the former, Smith reasserts his empirical claim. When it comes to that which is "general," custom and fashion do not authorize important departures from what all epochs and societies agree is fundamentally morally acceptable. By contrast, when it comes to the "particular," here is a realm in which custom and fashion's "influence is often much more destructive of good morals, and it is capable of establishing, as lawful and blameless, particular actions, which shock the plainest principles of right and wrong" (TMS V.2.14). Infanticide, Smith declares, exists in the latter category of cases.

As it stands, however, this distinction does not get Smith very far. A critic might easily reply: "Well, so what? What you call 'particular' cases appear awfully important. Indeed, they appear to arouse precisely the kind of worries that you have been trying to deflate." Hence, Smith is required to make further

[30] For discussion, see Pitts, *Turn to Empire*, 48–50.

moves to defend his position. These go as follows. First, he offers another variant on the deflation strategy. Infanticide must have arisen, he claims, in the most barbarous periods of society. It could only have originated as a response to situations of extreme scarcity and danger, in which keeping an infant alive would merely condemn both the child and its parent to death: "One who, in flying from an enemy, whom it was impossible to resist, should throw down his infant, because it retarded his flight, would surely be excusable; since, by attempting to save it, he could only hope for the consolation of dying with it" (TMS V.2.15). Hence, it was only in conditions of extreme savagery that the practice of exposure could have arisen; only the most desperate of external circumstances could have overpowered the natural tendency to love and care for children universally instilled in human nature. But if so, there are two things to note. One implication of Smith's position is that exposure of infants is not something we need to be worried about in modern conditions, because our civilized situation is such that circumstances will never overwhelm *our* natural principles of humanity and love for infants. The second implication is that Smith is warning his readers not to be too hasty in judging those in circumstances so perilous they feel the need to expose their young. If such circumstances really do obtain, then infanticide is "undoubtedly more pardonable than in any other." Although Smith does not himself spell out the further implication, we might well go that extra step on his behalf. Notice that if *you* were living in such savage circumstances, then *you* would think that exposure of infants was permissible, too (TMS V.2.15). Killing children only (approaches) permissibility in the most extreme of circumstances, which we moderns will never find ourselves in, so there is less to be alarmed about than first appears. Furthermore, we can recognize even by our *own* standards that infanticide, at least in certain circumstances, is not as morally outrageous as it seems prior to careful reflection. There is less moral disparity, even in this case, than there may have seemed.

This is all well and good, except that it fails to account for the stand-out example: Athens, at the height of its civilization in the ancient world, where citizens not only practiced exposure, but apparently did so for reasons as trivial as avoiding inconvenience. *That* was not a savage society subsisting in extreme circumstances, so Smith must make yet another move. The problem, he claims, is that after the establishment of exposure among the primordial Greeks, "uninterrupted custom" saw this practice passed down as "authorized" to societies even as advanced as Athens. Indeed, the power of custom in this regard was so extreme that it shaped not just the "loose maxims" of ordinary people, but also the conclusions of philosophers as great as Plato and Aristotle. By their own moral standards, however, the ancient Athenians—or at the very least, the reflective, philosophically minded among them—ought to have seen that the practice of exposure was no longer authorized, but a relic of customs passed down from a previous primordial age. Instead, even philosophers appealed to "far-fetched considerations of public utility" (TMS V.2.15) as post hoc rationalizations for a "horrible practice" (TMS V.2.16) that they should have recognized as such for themselves.[31] But such was the power of custom that when it came to infanticide, it could authorize an immoral phenomenon even among a sophisticated people.

This seems to serve Smith's deflationary purposes well. It turns out the ancient Athenians were not all that different from us; they were just led astray by inherited customs. Had they reasoned correctly and by their own lights, they would have condemned the practice of exposure on the same grounds that we do. Unfortunately, however, this in fact lands Smith straight back into the problem noted above. As he himself puts it: "When custom can give sanction to so dreadful a violation of humanity, we may well imagine that there is scarce any particular practice so gross which it cannot authorise" (TMS V.2.15). And so here, Smith plays his final card. While it is sadly true that with regard to specific practices, custom may authorize terrible departures from what all would otherwise consider to be morally acceptable—see ancient Athenian infanticide—these are the exceptions, not the rule. When it comes to "the general style and character of conduct and behaviour," custom can never "pervert our sentiments" to the "same degree" regarding "particular usages." Why? Because "[t]here never can be any such custom. No society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men's conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice I have just now mentioned" (TMS V.2.16). So ends Part V.

Smith's failure to meet the challenge of moral relativism

Part V is thus a dense and sophisticated component of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.* As I will begin to explore in this section, however, it is also a candidate for the most puzzling, and indeed ultimately unsuccessful, aspect of Smith's moral oeuvre. To see why, we can begin where Smith ends: his strikingly underdeveloped claim that the style and character of conduct and behavior can never severely depart from core, widely agreed-upon, human universals in the same way that "particular usages" can.

What Smith appears to have in mind is the same basic argument developed in Part II regarding justice. Given baseline facts about human nature and the conditions therefore required for humans to live successfully in groups, limits will inevitably be placed on how they can do so[32]: "If there is any society among robbers and murderers, they must at least, according to the trite observation, abstain from robbing and murdering one another" (TMS II.ii.3.3). In other words, it is a fact about human beings that *any* society will need to have *some* conception of justice organizing its internal relations, if it is to continue as a society. While the exact rules of justice may differ according to circumstances, they can only differ so much before society falls apart, the rules thus failing *as* rules of justice. At the close of Part V, despite being notably under-spoken about the details, Smith appears to be generalizing this strategy to something like morality *tout court.* Given baseline facts of human nature and our need to live successfully in

[31] Smith may thus be read as an early progenitor of "immanent critique." Golemboski, "Smith's Spectator," 185–86. See also Griswold, *Virtues of Enlightenment*, 201–2.

[32] For wider discussion, see Forman-Barzilai, "Culture and Judgement," 100–110; Forman-Barzilai, *Circles of Sympathy*, 218–37.

groups over time, there are necessarily going to be limits placed on what can be established regarding permissibility of moral conduct. Hence, although it might be possible in certain circumstances for a *subset* of innocents within a society to be permissibly (or "permissibly") killed according to local standards—for example, (some) babies in savage conditions (or in ancient Athens)—it will never be possible for a society to declare that *all and any* innocents may permissibly be killed, because to adopt such a general principle would lead to the destruction of any such society itself. Hence, hard limits are imposed upon the extent to which moral systems in different times and places can vary, given underlying facts about human nature and the stability requirements of any society able to persist over time.

A particular advantage of reading Smith this way is that it makes much less puzzling his otherwise striking use of language. As noted above, Smith discusses morality as something capable of being warped or perverted, likewise invoking "natural principles" of ethics, while condemning infanticide as a "horrible practice" in a tone that appears independent of the judgment being somehow relative to the context of any given society. Yet how is Smith entitled to speak in such terms? Given his claim in Part III that moral distinctions are inherently socially composed, is he not straightforwardly contradicting himself by adopting such apparently nonrelativistic terminology? By what right, if any, can he use such language? The trick here is to avoid the natural temptation (at least, natural to readers today) of interpreting Smith's language as a species of objectivism, and specifically of what we would now call moral realism, that is, somehow claiming that moral principles exist prior to and/or independent of the mental states (the moral sentiments) of moral practitioners (that they are, to use modern terminology, stance-independent). If this were what Smith was trying to claim, then he would indeed be using language to which he is not entitled, given Part III, and which would generate self-contradiction. Instead, I take it that Smith's use of language *presupposes* the correctness of his own wider theoretical commitments. We must take as given Smith's contention that human nature, combined with the practical limits imposed upon all successful societies that persist over time, generates upper bounds regarding the extent to which moral practices can differ across different times and places. If *that* is true, then it is entirely comprehensible to talk, for example, of general moral principles as capable of being *warped*, but never entirely *perverted*, that is, that there is only so much alteration they can exhibit. Likewise, that there are "natural principles" of morality is simply a function of baseline facts about how human nature necessarily is, plus the practical realities of social living in groups over time, but neither presupposing nor being committed to *any* metaethical principles one way or the other. Similarly, to speak of infanticide as a horrible practice, and in unqualified terms, is unproblematic if the default assumption is that *all* normal human beings—that is, excluding those corrupted by local customs—will simply agree on this due to the very fact that they are human. Smith need neither invoke nor surreptitiously help himself to any metaethical principles incompatible with the position taken in Part III (or indeed, any at all). He need only claim that universal facts of human nature prescribe the limits of how much morality can in practice differ. As

striking as Smith's language in these regards may at first appear, this is a puzzle that can be resolved in his favor.

Smith's account, however, faces much more serious difficulties. As we have seen, Smith bets the house on what is ultimately an empirical claim: that the vast majority of differences in observable moral practices fall into the category of *not mattering*, and any that do matter belong to a particular subset of cases that can be bracketed-out, and hence need not perturb us. Of course, Smith adds a further layer of complexity, purporting to be able to explain this alleged empirical uniformity as being due to underlying facts about human nature plus the constraints imposed upon any society able to persist over time. But be that as it may, all ultimately stands and falls with Smith's insistence that the overwhelming majority of observable human moral differences are not sufficiently significant to matter. Yet here, Smith is on shaky ground.

To twenty-first-century readers this will seem particularly evident. Given now-widespread knowledge of profoundly incompatible practices such as, for example, female genital mutilation versus Western standards of gender equality, or of state-sanctioned persecution of homosexuality (leaving aside for now the fact that not so long ago *Western* societies engaged extensively in such behavior), Smith's gambit appears hopeless. The empirical record tells firmly *against* the claim that the vast majority of moral differences do not matter. Abundant examples indicate that it very often does—and in significant ways. Furthermore, even if we grant Smith's supposition that the facts of human nature, plus the constraints of social living for creatures like us, necessitate that certain things can never be instantiated as morally acceptable in any feasible human context, this falls well short of lending support to the claim that the vast majority of moral differences do not matter. Whatever the facts of human nature might dictate regarding the limits of moral difference, these are just not substantive enough to guarantee a sufficiently high degree of convergence across epochs and cultures to allay the concerns generated by observable cases, *as the empirical record itself proves.* Upon closer inspection, Smith's empirical gambit, and his suggestion that human nature sets limits to how much moral difference is possible for the species, are not mutually supportive in the manner he supposes.

In response to this, it might appear only fair to excuse Smith on grounds of historical ignorance, to plead that he could not know then what we know now about the empirical extent of severe moral difference. Yet this lets Smith off the hook too easily. Given the wealth of traveler reports that had been flooding into Western Europe throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of which claimed astonishing levels of moral difference, and thus incompatibility, found in places such as North America—dubious tales of which Smith himself repeatedly appeals to in Part V—it seems highly unlikely that Smith could have expected his contemporaneous audience to react with easy acceptance. Even if granting that many traveler reports were unreliable and exaggerated, the picture painted by European societies' encounters with other cultures, by the time that Smith was writing, was not one of convergence in moral affairs, but of profound *divergence.*[33] Furthermore, Smith's readership hardly needed to resort

to traveler's reports of varying quality to find his empirical claim suspect. Their own Bibles contained Old Testament evidence of extensive polygamy in ancient Hebraic societies, a significant moral difference with the present, and which was at the forefront of ethical debate in the eighteenth century.[34] Similarly, infanticide was hardly the only practice conducted by the ancient Athenians that was deeply shocking. Although it might be too impolite to openly discuss it in print, eighteenth-century readers were well aware that the Athenians practiced institutionalized pederasty, and considered this unproblematic, at least in various circumstances (they, too, read their Plato). This, if anything, was even worse than infanticide. In other words, it is not at all clear that readers in the eighteenth century would have found Smith's empirical gambit any more persuasive than it appears today.[35]

Similarly, Smith's attempt to shore up his gambit by appealing to a distinction between general moral practices and "particular usages" appears implausible when subjected to scrutiny. Infanticide, after all, was not somehow insulated from wider Athenian beliefs about the family, the nature of death, the duties of parenting, civic responsibility, and so on. In other words, there simply *is no* bright-line distinction between general moral practices on the one hand and "particular usages" on the other. The latter are derived from, indelibly conditioned by, and bound up with the former. Smith's distinction here looks suspiciously like it is invoked not because it tracks how things are, but because it would be very helpful for Smith's deflationary strategy if it were so—which rather implies it is damned twice over. Furthermore, there is the point touched on above that even were Smith able to separate out general practices and particular usages in a principled and consistent manner, the empirical record would appear to show that *even if* we somehow grant that "general practices" are hemmed in by the constraints of human nature, this just is not enough to deflate relativistic worries generated by the remaining "particular usages." The extent of severe moral differences observable between "particular usages"—just think of infanticide!—across the species and throughout history, mean that such usages are too significant a feature of social reality to be safely boxed off and put aside in the way Smith proposes. They are rather *precisely the problem* on many occasions, not merely a regrettable subissue we can safely put to one side. What does it matter to find out that the Athenians perhaps shared with us certain general structural features

[33] For a classic study of early modern encounters with profound moral difference generating ethical skepticism, with far-reaching political-theoretic implications, see Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[34] Colin Heydt, *Moral Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain: God, Self, and Other* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 203–27.

[35] Interestingly, however, Smith's most immediate critics seem not to have raised objections on this score. Likely, they already found enough to disagree with in Parts I–III, in particular the appeal to sympathy and concomitant lack of independent ethical foundations provided, such that they never got as far as objecting to the details of the subsidiary argument of Part V. For illustration, see the sources collected in Klein, "Dissing the Theory of Moral Sentiments." At any rate, the neglect of Part V appears to be a long-standing feature of engagement with *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.*

regarding their beliefs in justice, prudence, beneficence, and so forth, once we find out they thought it acceptable to *kill babies*?

Part V is thus deeply puzzling. It is not only that Smith's empirical strategy appears unsuccessful, given its implausibility. It is that its implausibility appears so *evident* (then as well as now), such that one struggles to understand how a thinker as sophisticated and accomplished as Smith could have stood by it. And yet he did, across six editions and thirty-one years, subjecting this part of the work to only the most inconsequential of later editorial changes. Smith appears to have remained happy with the position he took in 1759, feeling no need to revise it (unlike many other aspects of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) for the rest of his life. Accounting for why constitutes, I suggest, an outstanding puzzle of Part V.

Concluding thoughts

It was noted above that it is worth considering the extent to which Smith was more sensitive than Hume to the destabilizing worries raised by relativism, which I put into the mouth of Persistent Palamedes. In particular, that mere awareness of moral difference between different cultures and epochs can have the effect of destabilizing one's own moral commitments; moral difference can lead to awareness of moral contingency, which appears to threaten moral *arbitrariness.* By way of drawing matters to a conclusion, we may ask: How does Smith fare on this score?

No better, or so it would seem, than Hume. Smith does not explicitly discuss this kind of existential challenge, nor how it might be alleviated, and yet he comes extremely close to being required to. Recall his discussion of how, in sufficiently savage conditions, the exposure of infants was "undoubtably more pardonable than in any other" (TMS V.2.15). As noted above, however, the logic of Smith's position seems to generate a different and more unsettling conclusion: In sufficiently harsh circumstances infanticide *is* permissible, and we would agree with this should we ever find ourselves in the same unfortunate position as such "savage" peoples. But if *this* conclusion is granted, then it immediately engages the anxieties of Persistent Palamedes: that our moral principles are a function of social context, and therefore of accident of birth, and that infanticide is not somehow wrong *simpliciter*, but only in sufficiently advantageous circumstances. But if *that* is granted, then how can we say, with any further confidence, that it *is wrong*? Destabilizing skepticism threatens.

At least two possibilities might be at play here. The first is that Smith simply failed to see the full implications of his position, thus explaining why he did not in turn address the sorts of existential concerns that his argument regarding infanticide generates. Yet this explanation is unsatisfying insofar as it relies on Smith exhibiting a theoretical myopia that appears inconsistent with his otherwise clear and consistent level of philosophical genius. Hence, a second possibility is that Smith *was* aware of the relativistic logic of his own position, but shied away from stating it outright, leaving this matter for the astute reader to discern themselves. Why might he have done this? One possibility is that while

Smith may have been aware of the kind of challenge posed by Persistent Palamedes, he did not know how to *answer* it, and so opted to leave that can of worms unopened. A second, related possibility is that Smith feared that openly admitting the (ultimately) relativistic underpinnings of his argument would seriously undermine the attempt at deflation that Part V otherwise constitutes. Rather than allaying a reader's worries about the roles of custom and fashion, these might be seriously exacerbated, should Smith in the end openly concede that moral judgments are irreducibly context-dependent. Hence Smith perhaps deliberately stopped short of doing so outright, for broadly prudential reasons. "Smith, unlike Hume, did not have the temperament of an iconoclast," after all, and potential caution on his behalf fits with what we know about his wider aversion to courting controversy.[36] On the other hand, postulating that Smith hid what he truly thought from sight, deliberately presenting an incomplete version of his own argument in order to make it more palatable to the average reader, invites an interpretative approach regarding which extreme caution should be exercised.[37] In any case, what exactly Smith is attempting at the close of Part V remains, once again, puzzling.

This essay has attempted to address the scholarly lacuna currently surrounding Part V of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* by placing Smith's discussion in the context of a complex intellectual inheritance bestowed by Hume. Despite occupying a relatively short portion of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (a mere eighteen pages in the Glasgow edition), Part V is a dense and sophisticated intervention. And yet, as I have also tried to show, it is a candidate for the least successful as well as most puzzling feature of that work.

Why does this matter? If the above readings are correct, then one consequence is that we must accept that neither Hume nor Smith offered satisfactory engagements with the problem posed by moral relativism. Despite remaining the two preeminent theorists in the tradition of ethical sentimentalism, both fall short on this matter. Smith, it seems, keenly felt the need to improve on Hume, but ultimately did not fare well on this score, his steps toward facilitating a conceptual distinction between ethics and aesthetics notwithstanding. The wider lesson is that sometimes even world-historical geniuses, who knew each other's work and confronted the same problems, did not get it right. More time, and future perspectives, can be required for progress.[38]

Be that as it may, Part V has lain unduly neglected for too long. This essay seeks to have shown that this situation is unsatisfactory, while also attempting to

[36] Heydt, *Moral Philosophy*, 124; Samuel Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 3–11; Phillipson, *Enlightened Life*, 242–48.

[37] Adrian Blau, "Anti-Strauss," *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 1 (2012): 142–55.

[38] Here, we are better off looking to the late-twentieth century rather than the mid-eighteenth for guidance. Two helpful places to start are Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 279–310; Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 180–99. See also Matthieu Queloz, *The Ethics of Conceptualization: Tailoring Thought and Language to Need* (Oxford University Press, 2025), chaps. 2–3; Paul Sagar, "Bernard Williams and the Relativism of Distance: A Defence," *European Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (2025): 839–53.

change it. Indeed, even if every aspect of the reading offered above is ultimately rejected, insofar as this encourages closer engagement with Part V and with the underlying challenges to ethical sentimentalism that moral relativism poses, such rejection is only to be welcomed.

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