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Sympathy Theory

The implication of the discussion so far is that sympathy can be viewed as the grounding of the social in the ‘community of the self’, an aesthetic of feeling which responds to the impossibility of making sense of feeling purely in terms of the embodied individual. The combination of feeling and imagination whereby the self is grasped is simultaneously a grasp of the self in relation to the other, of the modern sense of community in its virtual state. In this sense, sympathy was at the heart of eighteenth-century concerns with these issues, just as it has returned to feature in contemporary debates. In neither area can we anticipate terminological consistency, but some formulations point in helpful directions. Solomon tells us that ‘Sympathy is neither a pleasant nor an unpleasant feeling. Sympathy is *about* the other person, a role that no sensation can play.’¹ This usefully highlights the social significance of sympathy, as does Boltanski’s version, putting a more obviously Kantian gloss on it, claiming that sympathy is ‘the natural faculty without which an individual could not know or be interested in someone else.’² Sympathy is not, then, on these formulations, so much a specific feeling or emotion, as a capacity for emotional response in the presence – real or imagined – of the other, and a response that is somehow affirmative of the other’s existence as a fellow-subject. From this point of view, Ferguson’s description of sympathy as ‘a spontaneous “fellow-feeling” in the spectacle of life’³ is very apposite.

Feeling sentimental

In the light of all this, we can return to the specific grounds on which sentimentality itself has been condemned, and examine them more closely. D. H. Lawrence claims that ‘Sentimentalism is the working off on yourself of feelings you haven’t really got.’⁴ Elsewhere he adds: ‘Sentimentality is the garment of our vice. It covers viciousness as inevitably as greenness covers a bog.’⁵ More

recently, in her sensitive exploration, Sedgwick has listed the attributes of the sentimental as it has been stigmatized and devalued: 'the insincere, the manipulative, the vicarious, the morbid, the knowing, the kitschy, the arch.'⁶ Most of the items on this list incorporate the idea of *deception*. If we return to the model of the modern self as alienated from its feelings, its body, we can make sense of this by observing that this self-consciously 'rational' self is indeed able, in imposing itself on 'feeling', to manipulate the latter, even to the extent of simulating feeling that isn't really there. At the same time, ideas of an 'unconscious' mind, as these have developed since the nineteenth century, paradoxically *reinforce* this sense of the 'knowing' self as a producer of deception – this time, precisely because it is *not* sufficiently master in its own house, does not have the requisite self-understanding (it 'unconsciously' deceives itself *and* others). Again, this manifests a problem about feeling more generally, as we have known since the eighteenth century: that the display of feeling is no automatic guarantee of its authenticity. This line of criticism can perhaps be summed up in this quote from the philosopher Mary Midgley: 'Being sentimental is misrepresenting the world in order to indulge our feelings ... the central offence lies in self-deception, in distorting reality to get a pretext for indulging in *any* feeling.'⁷ And the point here is not so much whether one agrees with this, but that one can see how the very issue itself is a cultural product, a manifestation of the 'feeling wars' made possible by an underlying structure of feeling that characterizes both the site of our problematical ability to relate to each other and to the world, and our discursive options in thinking and arguing about it.

At the same time, a criticism from the other direction is possible. This would emphasize not the quality of the feeling, but its strength: feeling that overwhelms the self, the 'submission response' outlined previously. Thus Tan and Frijda characterize the sentimental as 'an urge to cry or a state of being moved with a strength in excess of the importance we attach to its reason.'⁸ This is the source of the idea that sentimentality is too easy, a superficial response. It makes no demands on us. In an interesting critique of critiques of sentimentalism, Deborah Knight points to the gender dimension again: for its critics, 'Sentimentality is a womanish – and at the end of the day, a sluttish – attitude: indulgent, cheap, shallow, self-absorbed, excessive ...'⁹ And its 'self-absorbed' character entails a deficit of self-understanding: the feeling washes over us, but afterwards, when the tide recedes, may leave us unchanged. So it can, in its way, be deceptive, too, for these rather different but parallel reasons. Only apparently innocent, this seductive feeling is more of a *femme fatale* ...

This, then, is where the two strands of criticism converge: in a thesis about motives. Sentimentalism, it is alleged, purports to involve wider concerns, particularly concerns for the suffering of the other, but it is actually a perversion of this; it is really about the pleasures of emotional self-indulgence, whether brought on deliberately or simply as a by-product of the feeling itself. In the latter case, the potential of the experience for reflexive appropriation makes it more likely that, in future, it will be 'cultivated', for example by placing oneself in a situation that is thought likely to elicit the desired response. Hence, suggests Boltanski, the possibility of 'deliberately seeking out the spectacle of suffering, not in order to relieve it, but in order to obtain from it the precious moment of emotion and ... the happiness it arouses'.¹⁰ And we here rehearse and reproduce the denunciations of sentimentalism that became commonplace in the later decades of the eighteenth century as the 'Age of Feeling' came in for increasing criticism.

All this does, of course, assume that this *is*, indeed, the motivational structure of sentimentalism, and that in condemning it as an alleged abuse of feeling, it is possible to identify a valid alternative, 'proper', location and role for feeling. This may not be so easy, particularly if the alternative again turns out to postulate the simplistic polarity of 'thought versus feeling' that has helped produce the problem in the first place.¹¹ All this suggests, however, that the notion of 'feeling' here, and its relation to other related terms, needs some further examination, particularly in the light of the tension between 'feeling' and 'reason' that has been prominent in modern discourse since the eighteenth century.

Words and problems: Feeling, emotion, thought, imagination

In this culture of sensibility, in this world of subjects and objects related through emotion, feeling and sensation, what is the place of thought? Now, there may be a strong sense – stemming from everyday life over this whole period, then and since – that this is not a problem that has to be posed; that thought and feeling may overlap seamlessly, and even be aspects of a common experience. 'My sentiments, too', can mean 'I agree with you' or 'I feel the same way', and the two are hardly distinguishable, any more than they would have been by eighteenth-century writers, including some philosophers. Hume, for example, uses 'sentiment' to refer to feelings, opinions and judgements, as occasion demands.¹² Even in contexts where these terms are not interchangeable, there can in practice be extensive overlap. This relationship is expressed well by Bell:

The word 'feel', as a near synonym for 'think', suggests, half subliminally, the mixture of the affective and the conceptual in what we call 'thought'. Feeling seems an obscure antecedent to, and therefore perhaps a necessary part of, conceptualization; as if thought has an affective component, or feeling is a form of understanding.¹³

And Michelle Rosaldo adds that 'feeling is forever given shape through thought, and ... thought is laden with emotional meaning'.¹⁴ Clearly it is important to maintain this insight that there are everyday contexts in which these terms can be mutually implicated, rather than opposed, and that there can be an element of *necessary* overlap.

At the same time, the tension is there, particularly when 'thought' becomes narrowed to 'reason'. The term 'sentiment' could be seen as useful for containing the tension between the particularity, the situational specificity, of 'feeling', and the attempt to outline more general principles of human action implicit in the idea of 'reason': in Bell's words, 'Sentiment as "principle" was invoked as if it had the intuitive and spontaneous impact of feeling, while sentiment as "feeling" assumed the universal, impersonal authority of principle'.¹⁵ Increasingly, as this tension became difficult to contain, the distinction came to embody the principle and the practice of separate spheres, with 'reason' coded as public and masculine, and 'feeling' as the arena of the domestic and the feminine, and this can lead us to situate the modern sense of alienation here, in one of its manifestations. The significance of reflexive thought, self-consciousness, as the attempt to understand the basis of our own actions, is both an essential implication of this rationality and a clue to T. S. Eliot's claims about a modern 'dissociation of sensibility', in that it 'embodies' this constantly recreated distancing of feeling,¹⁶ which becomes 'alienated' as that which must be understood, even mastered, even while the impossibility of doing this in any conclusive way reinforces the sense of feeling as fundamental, albeit recalcitrant. Part of this is captured by Charles Taylor's thesis that the modern self is characterized not just by 'the power of disengaged rational control' but also by 'this new power of expressive self-articulation', and that these are in tension, since the first requires the disengagement from feeling that the second refuses.¹⁷

We thus return to the idea of feeling as a 'form of life', a structure or pattern of feeling that we inhabit prior to making analytical distinctions between feeling and thought, and which can be lost to view when we become reflexive and self-consciously 'rational'. From this point of view, exhortations to 'act rationally', for example, can be seen as covert calls to change the emotional register, rather than as implying any real possibility of giving up feeling altogether; and indeed

Hume argued that what we call 'reason' is often just a calmer state of feeling.¹⁸ However much it may ostensibly be exiled, feeling always returns, as it were, even reminding us that it never really went away. Bell concludes that we are encouraged 'consciously to distrust feeling while implicitly depending on it', and that 'There is no alternative within a self-conscious modernity to the primordially of feeling.'¹⁹ If this position can be sustained, then clearly the eighteenth century is still powerfully present ...

'Feeling' can readily be diffuse, unfocused; so let us take the issue further by looking at emotion, which tends to be more concentrated, and more clearly 'psychological', and consider its relation to thought. One way of trying to move round, or beyond, the dualism outlined above is to argue that emotion *is* thought. This has been an influential approach in the cognitivism so influential in psychology in recent decades, an influence apparent in Reddy's formulation, whereby an emotion is presented as 'a type of activated thought material too broad to fit into attention all at once'.²⁰ This converges with the definition offered by Rosaldo, an anthropologist: 'Emotions are thoughts somehow "felt" in flushes, pulses, "movements" of our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin. They are *embodied* thoughts, thoughts steeped with the apprehension that "I am involved"'.²¹ These are both insightful, but we need to develop the implications with care. There is always the danger of rationalist distortion: emotion becomes merely a slightly indirect manifestation of the workings of reason, as it were. A tendency to slide in this direction can be detected in many of these recent approaches. Far from being 'dumb and blind', claims Simon Williams, emotional shifts can be seen as 'intentional, purposive adaptations engaged in by individuals, as embodied sentient and sensible agents';²² Solomon presents emotions as 'ways of coping, products of assessment and evaluation, modes of rational action';²³ and Reddy argues that emotions are goal-oriented, and enable feedback and control, as well as being performative, ways of doing things.²⁴ Clearly there are some important truths here, notably the implication that emotions involve an *active* response to the world; but capturing this as 'intentional', in the sense of 'purposeful', risks merely reflecting the rationalist obsessions and priorities of the modern project.

There is also a risk of this in Campbell's illuminating account of the growth of modern 'autonomous' hedonism, the cultivation of the emotions as sources of pleasure that can provide more diverse and prolonged pleasure than the sensations sought in traditional hedonism.²⁵ This requires the skill and the habit of emotional self-control, the emancipation of emotion from mere reaction to external events. Since 'an emotion links mental images with physical stimuli',

a stronger role for the imagination, whether in day-dreaming, fantasy or reading novels, gives us the power to 'conjure up stimuli in the absence of any externally generated sensations', hence permitting the pleasure of emotional involvement and release, and the intensity of emotional experience, to be enjoyed in a person's own time and own way.²⁶ In this account, reminding us of the 'experimental' approach to selfhood discussed in the previous chapter, there is a danger that too great an emphasis on the element of control, as such, might make this too rational and instrumental, the self's 'internal' version of the project of modernity, part of a 'project of the self'²⁷ that misses the sense in which emotions are *responses*, and cannot be wholly 'determined' by the subject on pain of losing this effect. An element of *lack* of control, of encounters across the borders of self and other, an acceptance of the unpredictability of the onset and development of emotion, also seem crucial. What is present here is a tension, an emphasis on learning selfhood through self-direction and reflexive understanding, attempting to control experience even as one is displaced by it, experience *being* that very displacement. One may learn to 'cultivate' emotional release, just as one learns of the perils and complexities, as well as the pleasures, of the outcome. Certainly one can agree with Campbell and Taylor on the significance of the growth of literacy and the spread of the novel as ways in which this emotional structure of modern selfhood was furthered; literature, after all, shapes and intensifies the capacity for emotional immersion and involvement in the pleasures and pains of the other.

Here, we can draw on a different sense of 'intentional', stemming from the phenomenological tradition. Sara Ahmed suggests that 'Emotions are intentional in the sense that they are "about" something; they involve a direction or orientation towards an object ... or a way of apprehending the world'; and this sense of being directed 'towards' or 'away', of being 'oriented', is not just feeling; in its immediacy, it involves a kind of appraisal, an attitude of selection, which itself implies thought, or at least 'being aware'. One doesn't just 'feel' angry; one has an awareness of reasons, and implicitly, of justifications. Thus, she continues, 'whether something is beneficial or harmful involves thought and evaluation, at the same time that it is "felt" by the body ...'.²⁸ Thus Crossley can conclude that 'Our emotions form part of our point of view on the world; we do not just have them, we exist in and by way of them'.²⁹

One way of developing this is to suggest that emotions involve *judgements*. Thus Solomon, observing that 'practical reason is circumscribed and defined by emotion', argues that emotions entail a framework of judgement: 'Anger involves judgments of blame; jealousy includes judgments about a potential

threat or loss. Love involves evaluative judgments, typically overblown, but so does hatred ...’ Such judgements can themselves, in turn, be evaluated as well or ill-founded, rational or irrational, but what is important is this initial element of appraisal, this sense of an *active* response. And while this obviously includes the basic sense of judgement as positive or negative evaluation, it also includes a more subtle dimension: that of initial *focus*, of reacting to something as *worth* reacting to, selecting something as being of ‘interest’. Feeling isn’t just an appraisal in terms of good and bad; it also discriminates experience in terms of important and unimportant. This is where it is so easy to overlook the sense in which ‘calm’ emotion is nonetheless still emotion. A good sense of this is conveyed by Solomon: ‘Through our emotions we edit a scene or a situation in such a way that it *matters to us* ...’³⁰ Emotion as a kind of pre-rational ‘editing’ suggests that it makes no sense to think of rationality even as a possibility without this element of emotional involvement in setting the agenda in the first place, and providing the motivation to seek the resultant goal. Our sense of purposive, goal-directed action is dependent on this, not productive of it. And if we note that, on Bateson’s interpretation, Kant’s starting point in the *Critique of Judgement* is that ‘the primary act of aesthetic judgement is selection of a fact’,³¹ then we can see that these ‘felt judgements’ provide a clue to how aesthetics is basic to thought and indeed our immersion in the world, our sensory, embodied experience of it.

Yet it cannot be left here: an active response is still a *response*. At this level, one *suffers* an emotion; it is something that happens to one, not something one does. One can try to ‘get it under control’, but that acknowledges that there is indeed something *there*. Emotion and feeling testify to an essential passivity in experience, to experience as something one lives through, endures. And this has carried considerable resonance in modern culture. At the beginning of *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen informs us that ‘Elinor’s disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong, but she knew how to govern them’: feelings are inherently disruptive, unpredictable, in need of ‘government’.³² Solomon points to the way emotions can be said to ‘violate’ our autonomy: ‘The presumption is that our emotions, unlike our reason, are not truly our own, and they are humiliating rather than ennobling.’³³ Fear of passivity and fear of emotion tend to go together, with emotion seen as somehow ‘beneath’ thought or reason; and this has reinforced the powerful gender coding that has surrounded the contrast.³⁴

It is also important not to lose the sense that emotion may be in some sense ‘inside’, but is also, crucially, *embodied*. This, too, produces problems for ‘control’, because emotion may seem difficult to locate. Ahmed argues that ‘emotions

create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place'; they are not simply something we 'have' – in 'having' them, we find it difficult to *place* them. They are part of the very grounding of the categories of modern experience, contributing to our sense of the other as object, and hence, also, of ourselves as subjects. Such 'objects' become 'sticky', 'saturated with affect', which can carry past histories, of association, tension and communication. Overall, emotions work 'through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds'.³⁵

Drawing these aspects together, then, we might want to characterize emotions as 'expressive judgements', 'felt thoughts', expressing an orientation; and we might add that this expressive dimension seems to come from 'within' the self³⁶ – the 'I am involved', in Rosaldo's formulation, above, or Norman Denzin's description of emotion as 'self-feeling'³⁷ – while yet being 'intentional', pointing 'beyond', other-directed. And (in turn revisiting Reddy) we might suggest – rather speculatively – that when the scanning activity of consciousness is swamped, overwhelmed, we have emotion; or, emotion is what is excessive to consciousness yet somehow present to it, as power or energy, disparate, different in kind, the difference enforcing an orientation (positive or negative). Emotion brings into play the hinterland of consciousness. It may also be that, as Reddy suggests, this sense of being swamped by something 'different' can usefully be seen as involving 'translation', so that what we find here is a failure to translate 'the flow of coded messages an awake body generates',³⁸ a way of putting it that is nicely reminiscent of the 'nervous body' of eighteenth-century science, as we shall see. And it could be pointed out that while there is much sliding around between the three terms 'emotion', 'feeling' and 'sensation', and while there are indeed continuities and overlaps – 'feeling', in particular, seems to embrace either or both terms, depending on context – one might nonetheless want to emphasize a point of contrast between emotion and sensation, as polarity rather than continuum. While of course 'embodied', emotion carries an essential, albeit implicit, reference to a depth model of the self, along with this imputed link to an outside, an 'other', while sensation is more strongly body-focused, primarily a matter of physical impressions, perceptions and reactions.³⁹

What matters at this point, then, is not so much what emotions are, or where they come from, but this very process whereby they are shaped or figured – and, since the eighteenth century, this has been characterized as the arena of the imagination, a mysterious 'place' or 'power' which clearly requires further discussion. This power only exists as embodied, in the shapes and figures that loom up out of the hinterland: a puppet theatre with nobody pulling the strings.

And this hinterland can be 'outside' or 'inside' the self – characteristically, indeed, it implicitly questions or subverts this distinction, inhabits the nebulous boundary zone that makes the distinction both possible and problematical. The eighteenth century witnessed an increasing focus on experience as experience of and by a subject, and the hypostatization of this subject as 'self', with 'mind' as its seat of consciousness, constructed as an internal space that could most appropriately be figured as 'theatre'. Then, and perhaps now, this seemed the term which best captured that sense of process unfolding within a space, a frame, involving a dynamic relation between appearance, semblance, illusion and reality, a drama of sentimental self-construction in which the self is called on to manifest itself through inescapable signs of its own truth, just as those signs are forever unable to deliver incontrovertible proof. Denby describes the mind as 'the theatre of the imagination',⁴⁰ which also reminds us again of the importance of *not* equating 'thought' with 'reason': within the context of thought, it is the imagination, rather than reason, that figures this underlying sense of subjective experience as involved in, even based on, feeling.

In short, the imagination shifts the emphasis away from sensation, towards the imaging of feeling as experience, making sense of what is in us and yet what we are part of, the otherness within that is also the otherness of those we encounter and address as fellow subjects of the community of sensibility. 'Inner space' thus emerges as the imaginary theatre of the self, a figuration through which we encounter the play of others, and the self as other, projected as image, simultaneously inside and outside, the legible but always disputable 'sign' of the inner theatre. It is a space of precarious autonomy, 'guaranteed' by the self-reflection that also renders it provisional, inconclusive – a 'work of art' like the tableau it can readily contemplate, criss-crossed as it is by the same constitutive relations and tensions.

We can let Bell conclude, by returning us to sympathy, and thereby pointing us forward. Following Adam Smith, he suggests that sympathy is 'an imagined arena in which the subjectivities of all human others, and of the self, are reconstructed in a manner which has to be both emotional and judgemental at once ...'⁴¹

Adam Smith and the sympathetic imagination

Along with his older colleague, David Hume, one of the twin pillars of the Scottish Enlightenment, and the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, the founding text of political economy: until recently, that was the entirety of Adam Smith's

reputation. Over recent decades, however, that has been changing. There is even a case for arguing that the earlier *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is the key text, providing the essential context for the later one: the economy is one part, albeit crucial, of modern life, but the latter has to make prior sense in ‘moral’ (we might say, social and cultural) terms. This is the Adam Smith we draw on for this discussion.⁴²

An initial challenge about the very definition of ‘sympathy’ needs to be confronted here. In both Hume and Smith, the term seems to be used in a way that contrasts with standard usage today; and both authors are aware that they are diverging in some degree from standard usage in their own time, too. Hume suggests that the ‘soul or activating principle’ of other passions, of whatever kind, is sympathy;⁴³ hence sympathy is not just one feeling or emotion among others, it is the lynchpin. Smith suggests that while sympathy may originally have meant something like pity or compassion, now it may legitimately be used ‘to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever’. Later on, however, he writes that the word sympathy, ‘in its most proper and primitive signification, denotes our fellow-feeling with the sufferings, not with the enjoyments, of others.’⁴⁴ The immediate contradiction here can perhaps be viewed strategically: that is, Smith is implicitly acknowledging the ‘normal’ use of the term, and accepting that the bulk of his discussion and examples must therefore be drawn from this area. Indeed, we do generally invoke the term in contexts where people are experiencing difficulties or disasters, and this *practical* (moral, political) use of the term has been central to its everyday cultural significance.

I can feel sorrow at your grief, even to the point of shedding tears; this would seem to be a textbook case of sympathetic fellow-feeling. But I can also feel joy at your good fortune, again even to the point of shedding tears; and there is an evident similarity of response here, whatever the obvious difference in the precipitating cause or context. Both seem to qualify as manifestations of ‘fellow-feeling’. This could reinforce the idea that, in this broad sense, perhaps sympathy simply *is* ‘fellow-feeling’, feeling *as* other-oriented; it is a condition for, and an aspect of, more specific other-oriented feelings – other-oriented feeling in its virtual state, perhaps. It is both a general capacity, and a more specific realization, although even in the latter form it retains its more unclear, unspecific associations: ‘grief’, ‘fear’, ‘joy’, seem specific enough emotions, but ‘sympathy’ hardly fits in the list. In discussing Smith, Alexander Broadie makes the interesting suggestion that ‘sympathy’ indicates ‘the way that the spectator has the feeling – he has it *sympathetically*. It is the way he is angry, or is joyful, and so on ...’ He adds that, as in Hume, ‘it is a feeling to which the mechanism

of sympathetic communication has made an essential contribution,' as in the spectator's anger or joy.⁴⁵ And the 'other-orientation' can perhaps be clarified here. There seems to be an element of mimesis, or at least of sharing, in what is involved. If you are grieving, my sympathy will be expressed in similar terms; if you are joyful, my sympathetic reaction will also be upbeat. (Of course, I may also react unsympathetically, in either case.) Hence Sutrop's prescient suggestion that 'Sympathy is for Smith not an emotion but the correspondence of emotions.'⁴⁶ Sympathy, one might say, is the affect of homology, a perspective that will need further elaboration. It is both the capacity, and the underlying pattern, that permit the more specific emergence of sympathy as the feeling of mutuality, of a 'being together', rather than being locked into totally separate subjectivities, even though this is expressed indirectly, through other feelings and emotions. It is important, then, to respect these insights of Hume and Smith into the wider resonance of 'sympathy', which may give insight into links with other cultural experiences that are not immediately apparent.

What, then, is involved in this act of sympathy? To ensure 'some correspondence of sentiments' when witness to misfortune, Smith suggests that the spectator should try to 'put himself in the situation of the other', adopt the 'whole case' of the sufferer, and 'strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded.'⁴⁷ If sympathy 'does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it', as Smith puts it, this makes it clear that what is crucial here is the capacity of the imagination to grasp the position of the other, rather than the ability of our feelings to share in, or be directly influenced by, the other's feelings. Indeed, until we know more, anger may merely exasperate us, rather than provoke sympathy, and lamentation may merely provoke curiosity at first.⁴⁸ In a celebrated passage at the beginning of his book, Smith expands on this:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination alone that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. 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.

Thus it is by 'changing places in fancy' that we can have 'fellow-feeling for the misery of others.' In one of his examples, Smith refers to a mother with a sick infant, superimposing her own imaginative consciousness on to the sense of its helplessness to form 'the most complete image of misery and distress'.⁴⁹

Perhaps we can say that to *try* to share the other's feelings, in some direct and purposeful way, is to court failure: the 'trying' interferes with the objective. It is the indirectness of the imagination that is important here, coupled with the emphasis on situation: it is not the other so much as the *place* of the other, the other *in relation to* context. So, on this approach, it is the imaginative grasp of situation that is critical, not because it draws us away from feeling, but because it can produce or deepen it. It is likely to have this result because – as we just saw with Smith's example – it can be said to superimpose an element of understanding, working to strengthen feeling, and increasing the likelihood of some *shared* feeling. And it is the understanding, projected *within* the imagination, an aspect of it, that does this, by bridging – not closing – gaps, by imaging relationships: in this case, self and other. And this helps make sense of the productive tension in Smith's account: in sympathizing with the other, to what extent do we remain ourselves?

Smith suggests that what is involved is both an 'imaginary change' of circumstances and something more fundamental, a change of 'persons and characters'.⁵⁰ This seems to make it both not-real and real, yet the paradox is only apparent; taken with the 'as it were' of the extended passage above, it is clear that we are in the realm of the vicarious, in the guise of the other. In this realm, distance is maintained, both self-distance and distance in that we are not 'really' being the other; it is a reflexive 'knowingness' rather than knowledge as such. The boundaries that separate may be in abeyance, but the 'distance' remains; we are not on the other side, either. Hence Howard can appropriately claim, of Smith's formulation, that 'The vicariousness so often criticized in sentimentality is here seen more neutrally as one of its structural elements'.⁵¹ And the (external) circumstances are relevant here in that the vicarious gives us *perspective*, a view of the world from a different angle, relative to the difference in position. The vicarious both exhibits and lives this experience of distance, of distance *as* experience, thereby enacting the simultaneous inseparability and mutual irreducibility of self and other.

This also reminds us that there is a fictive dimension to the expression of emotion and feeling, together with the implication that 'expression' is not a mere extra, but an essential dimension to their culturally embodied reality. In short, two formulations by Charles Griswold, discussing Smith, point up the tension here effectively: "Sympathy" articulates the fundamental fact of our already being, at least to some degree, "in" each other's world, while 'Our fundamental separatedness ... is not obliterated by the imagination.'⁵² The term 'distance', after all, has both spatial and emotional connotations; and 'sympathy' attempts to show how the individuals of our modern world can both 'be together' while yet 'standing apart'.⁵³ And here, in this sense that the sympathetic imagination involves a degree of distance, rather than identification, we find a certain convergence with another influential writer on these themes: Rousseau – at least in Derrida's interpretation of the latter. Derrida argues that, in Rousseau, pity requires a degree of non-identification, that 'we neither can nor should feel the pain of others immediately and absolutely', and this in turn invites the imagination to play a crucial role. It is the power of imagination that raises mere affect to emotion: 'Without imagination, this pity does not awaken of itself in humanity, is not accessible to passion, language, and representation.'⁵⁴

When can I sympathize? Under what conditions is the sympathetic imagination most likely to engage? Using the term 'passion' in a broad sense, to encompass the range of emotions, desires and feelings (as did Hume), Smith argues that the 'passions of the body' either do not provoke sympathy, or only do so to a limited extent.⁵⁵ The classic case would seem to be physical pain. 'I feel your pain' has become an expression that is widely used satirically because it is so difficult to give it credence if taken literally.⁵⁶ And if I can't feel your pain, it is difficult to see how I can imagine it, either; the experience of severe pain, for either of us, just seems to block out 'imagination' altogether. Smith implies that pain is *pure* body, hence inaccessible to imagination; and certainly it is true that our culture, with its strong tradition of mind-body dualism, insists upon pain as the unmediated voice of body, often linked to claims about embodiment as the grounding reality of the individual and individualism. The 'cultural work' of pain is to emphasize our separateness, our irreducible individuality, our identity *as* body.⁵⁷ Thus, the spectacle of sympathy addresses feelings through imagination, imagined roles, situations and predicaments, not the embodied reality of pain and suffering as such. The latter, we might say, is appropriated by the language of the circuit of sensation, and is more likely to produce 'visceral' reactions (terror, horror, revulsion) that may well be unaccompanied by sympathy. It is not that pain defies our capacity to connect with it, but that

any such connection is direct, unmediated, a visual or visceral stimulus (as 'sensation'). And indeed the 'unmediated' voice of the body is all too available for media appropriation in the spectacle as it becomes sensationalized. To *emphasize* pain, or pain as *body*, is *already* to sensationalize it, encouraging a visceral impact on us, while making it readily available for spectacle as the thrill in horror: sensation as *entertainment*.⁵⁸ Conversely, if we encompass pain as feeling or emotion, embodied but also available to us as a resource for imaginative thought, we can engage with it 'sympathetically'. Pain accompanied by feeling and emotion is pain situated, contextualized, available for incorporation in the spectacle of sympathy.

It is 'passions which take their origin from the imagination,' argues Smith, that produce the conditions for 'normal' sympathetic response. 'A disappointment in love, or ambition, will, upon this account, call forth more sympathy than the greatest bodily evil. These passions arise altogether from the imagination.' These passions characteristically include grief, anxiety, fear and joy. I can readily sympathize with a friend who has lost a son; and whereas pain may pass quickly, this is not so with an unguarded word from a friend. 'What at first disturbs us is not the object of the senses, but the idea of the imagination.' And this can linger. If we sympathize with Tom when he is beaten by Legree in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or with Sethe's 'tree of scars' in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, it is the anguish, fortitude and resilience of the sufferers, rather than the pain itself, that engages us; and it can also be when pain is coupled with danger, and hence provokes fear, that we are more likely to sympathize with it, as the fear gives our imagination something to work on. In a somewhat different example that is, shall we say, delightfully of its time, Smith suggests that while the loss of a mistress is less grave than the loss of a leg – mistresses are clearly two a penny, while the loss of a leg is serious stuff, a 'more real calamity' – it is the loss of the mistress that would provoke the writing of a fine tragedy, whereas one based on the loss of the leg would be merely 'ridiculous'.⁵⁹ But finally, such 'passions of the imagination' also need to fall within the broad bounds of the 'reasonable': the passions of two lovers can appear ludicrous to everyone else, whereas secondary passions that can arise from this (such as envy or remorse) can be more readily sympathized with, as can qualities inherent in the situation when not pushed to excess (generosity, kindness).⁶⁰

The imagination, one might say, is best equipped to explore itself, within certain broad limits that we might recognize as 'normal'. There is, in effect, some model here of a range of comprehensible human responses to problems and situations, 'normality' characterizing the relation between feeling, emotion

and thought that occurs here, ‘thought’ in turn encompassing a relation between imagination and reason that provides for the appropriate exercise of judgement. This is also implied by the requirement that the imagination not be slave to the passions, that it have the necessary independence to respond to the latter rather than be in thrall to them. When these conditions are met, our capacity for sympathetic engagement in the other’s situation is enhanced. And while there is an obvious risk of social or cultural bias in this category of ‘normality’, it is important to register the fact that this is intended to refer to the relationship between the faculties, as indicated, *not* to cultural values, which will of course vary considerably, without necessarily challenging the fundamentals of the model. One must remember that the aspirations of Smith, as of his fellow Enlightenment theorists, was to ground the possibility of response to the predicament of the other in ways that are *not* restricted by particulars of class, status or culture – responses that could indeed rise to the challenge of ‘difference’ itself.

Approaching the heart of Smith’s theory, we can now take up the part that pleasure plays in sympathetic response. What is at stake here is important, and the issue comes to the fore rather dramatically in a footnote to the second edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which Smith replies to a criticism of his position made in a letter from Hume. Directing his fire at Smith’s assumption that sympathy is *always* a pleasurable feeling, Hume argues that it may actually be experienced in negative terms by the spectator: one is affected by the other’s feeling, for good or ill, in an immediate way, rather like catching an infection. He takes the instance of ‘An ill’humored Fellow ... always *ennuié*, sickly, complaining,’ someone who ‘throws an evident Damp on Company, which I suppose would be accounted for by Sympathy; and yet is disagreeable.’⁶¹ In response, Smith accepts that while it is agreeable to sympathize with joy, we struggle against ‘sympathetic sorrow’ when seeing a tragic play at the theatre, since ‘it is painful to go along with grief, and we always enter into it with reluctance,’ but then proceeds to defend his main point in a passage that requires extended quotation:

I answer, that in the sentiment of approbation there are two things to be taken notice of; first, the sympathetic passion of the spectator; and secondly, the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned. This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful. The other may either be agreeable or disagreeable, according to the nature of the original passion, whose features it must always, in some measure, retain.⁶²

On this account, the 'original passion' in the agent is reflected, in some quasi-automatic way, in the 'sympathetic passion' of the spectator; in effect, this retains something of the element of immediacy, even contagion, that Smith has absorbed from Hume but is generally trying to play down. The 'second' emotion, however, derives from observation, a self-observation that is also an observation of the relation *between* one's own emotion and that of the other person. This shift in emphasis is momentous. It seems to introduce a distance into the situation, the distance of observation (in contrast to involvement, participation) emerging after or beyond the initial impact, or somehow superimposed on it. And it is a moment of *reflexive* awareness, simultaneously constitutive of the self and incorporating a relation with the other. This second emotion is said to be what the 'sentiment of approbation' properly consists of. This is a feeling of approval, carrying an element of judgement with it, that is, in effect, a response to a *relationship*, a harmony, a 'perfect coincidence' between self and other. My feelings about your situation are mapped on to your feeling about your situation: this is a relationship between two relationships; there is a homology between these two relationships, between two sets of 'intentional' feelings. The response is a response to form, to congruence beyond content: it can thus be characterized as a properly *aesthetic* response. It is this that provides the rationale for Smith's universality assumption, that 'agreeableness' is inherent in this second-order response. At its most basic, this is *disinterested* pleasure;⁶³ it is 'response', as such; issues of motivation are not raised. As Griswold summarizes it, 'The pleasure we take in mutual sympathy is understood by Smith aesthetically, as a disinterested attraction to harmony, concordance, system, and balance. It is not "mere pleasure".'⁶⁴

Nevertheless, we can observe here that this second level of response is one that can, in principle, be lingered over. Since it is a source of pleasure, this feeling can be indulged. Here lies the source of one of the most widely observed features of sentimentalism, as it is also one of the most widely criticized. Hume's party pooper, apparently spreading melancholy, could also be spreading the possibility of *pleasure* in melancholy, as a response to this second-order congruence. The pleasures of lamentation – Diderot's 'sweet pleasure of being moved and shedding tears'⁶⁵ – apparently so paradoxical, can be seen in this light. Indeed, this enables us to account for the way in which the person *not* suffering the original distress can, through rehearsing it, repeating it vicariously, get something out of it.⁶⁶

To return to Smith, one can recall his insistence that sympathy involves putting ourselves in the place of the other, in the other's *situation*: that is, it is

the relationship between the other and his problems or circumstances that we are trying to grasp, rather than the essence or distinctiveness of 'the other' as such. Sympathy is inherently *structural*. 'Fellow feeling' does not require that we 'know' the other person; it is simply that we can have a meaningful relationship, based on responsiveness to his predicament. The element of 'distance' is irreducible. But there is also a sense in which this distance is a distance from self, incorporated into the self. The process whereby the self grasps itself *in* this relation to the other, is mapped on to the process whereby the self expresses its own feelings, 'manifests' them in recognizable, culturally variable ways. And this grounds the dimension of the *vicarious* in feeling, the process whereby feeling is given imaginative form, is projected, clothed, in the vestments that constitute its public garb; in this spectacle of sympathy, the self in its public guise manifests itself as inherently theatrical.⁶⁷

The impartial spectator

This space, or tension, between reflection and passion, mapped onto the relationship between self and other in the context of sympathy, has wider ramifications. Smith presents us with a distinction between what he calls the 'amiable' and the 'respectable' virtues, between 'indulgence' and 'self-command'. To understand this, we need to develop the rather static account given so far, remembering that sympathy involves a process of interaction. Just as the spectator tries to meet the feelings of the potential recipient of sympathy, in an expansive move of self towards other, so too the latter moderates his feelings so as to meet the spectator halfway: 'while the spectator seeks to approve, the agent seeks his approval', as Broadie puts it,⁶⁸ and the two can evolve towards a position of mutuality. In the first case, that of the spectator, Smith argues that we encounter 'the soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues, the virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity'; in the case of the sufferer, we find 'the great, the awful and respectable, the virtues of self-denial, of self-government', showing the need to 'command' the passions, in the light of 'honour' and 'propriety'.⁶⁹ After all, 'clamorous grief', for example, counts for less than 'noble and generous resentment' in swaying the spectator. Overall, then, we are called on to 'restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent affections', thus revealing the 'perfection of human nature' and potentially producing 'harmony of sentiments and passions'.⁷⁰ The amiable virtue, 'humanity', thus consists in 'exquisite fellow-feeling', and actions based on this require no self-denial; in

contrast, the respectable virtue, 'generosity', calls on us for self-sacrifice.⁷¹ Yet there is no ultimate incompatibility here: sensibility to the feelings of others is the principle on which self-command is founded, after all. Thus does Smith attempt to fuse the nobility of ancient Stoic ethics with the sentimentalism of the eighteenth century, in the process further revealing the potential tension within the dichotomous self, carrier of the civilizing process and emergent modernity.⁷²

This reflexive dimension, with its implied self-division, enables us to consider the nature of spectatorship in relation to judgement. In self-examination, argues Smith, 'I divide myself, as it were, into two persons', and 'I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined and judged of'. This latter 'character' is referred to as the 'man without', motivated by desire for actual praise, and the avoidance of blame; but we can appeal beyond him, to the 'man within', who desires 'praise-worthiness' and is averse to 'blame-worthiness'.⁷³ Thus can men listen to 'the appeal of their own consciences, to that of the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator, to that of the man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of their conduct'. Only in this way can we make 'any proper comparison between our own interests and those of other people'.⁷⁴ It is only this 'impartial spectator' who can show us 'the propriety of generosity and the deformity of injustice', who can persuade us, through 'reason, principle, conscience', that we should be concerned about the victims of an earthquake in China; who can, in short, show us 'the real littleness of ourselves' and lead us to realize that 'we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it ...'.⁷⁵

This line of argument could appear to be quite strongly rationalist, an impression that could be strengthened by Smith's claim that 'Our continual observations upon the conduct of others, insensibly lead us to form to ourselves certain general rules concerning what is fit and proper either to be done or to be avoided'.⁷⁶ And some of the glosses by commentators could be seen in these terms, such as: 'To become the spectator is not to be possessed by the passion of others, but to be the arbiter of all sentiments'.⁷⁷ But the whole way Smith has set the situation up should make us pause. He refers, after all, to 'persons' or 'characters', and to the spectator as 'representing' one of these characters. This is not the language of rationalist philosophy; it is the language of role play, of the theatre, of actor and audience. It can certainly, without contradiction, include elements of the drama of the courtroom ('judging'). It is Griswold who notices this most clearly: 'The theatrical relation is thus internalized; we become our own public'.⁷⁸ Hence 'the spectator is the personification of the public'.⁷⁹

In effect, we can see two alternatives polarized here. First, rationalism: judgements about whether cases deserve sympathy should be based purely on general principles, applied through universally valid rules to the cases in question. On this model, feeling becomes essentially irrelevant; the Age of Sentiment has truly disappeared into the Age of Reason. Second, it is our passionate response to particular people in particular situations that is our sole guide; the language of tears, the dictates of the heart, tell us all we need to know. This is full-blown sentimentalism, the foundation of our present-day notion of sentimentality, allowing no place for thought at all. Clearly Smith rejects the latter, but it is important to see that he also rejects the former. In effect, Smith inverts the rationalist argument, and radically transforms it in the process; we go from particular cases to more general rules, but the former cannot, anyway, be derived from, or subsumed under, the latter. The process is actually inductive, not deductive. Virtue does indeed entail 'conformity to reason.' And reason is indeed the source of the 'general rules' of morality, and hence of our moral judgements. Yet, crucially, reason is not the starting point.

Confronted with a situation that is one of potential moral engagement, our initial response depends on *feeling*, not reason. It is feeling that responds to the particularities of person, action, and context. Our 'first perceptions', as Smith calls them, 'cannot be the object of reason, but of immediate sense and feeling,' since 'nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling.'⁸⁰ This is a significant formulation: such immediate response to an object or situation *in itself*, without reference to utility or other goals, can appropriately be characterized as *aesthetic*, in the broad, foundational sense of the term, whereby feelings that are positive or negative include a potential for an ethical response, as yet undifferentiated. And, as we have seen, this arena of feeling, of emotional response, includes an implicit element of judgement, in that it registers *what really matters*, what is of central relevance in the situation. One might add here that the imagination, too, must have an active involvement, through that initial grasp of the specificity and integrity of the situation-in-itself.

It is at this point – and it is only at this point – that reason becomes important, in that it enables *reflective* judgement to weigh in, considering the wider context and other similar cases.⁸¹ Feelings, then, are *basic*, but not *decisive*; they are in principle open to assessment and re-evaluation. If we sympathize with someone's actions, we take pleasure both in his actions and in the response of others his actions benefit, but we also, argues Smith, 'observe that his conduct has been agreeable to the general rules by which these two sympathies generally act'. And

these 'general rules' function as generalizations about 'appropriateness' in 'types of situations', rather than as premises in an inflexible rationalist deduction. In the end, the 'impartial spectator', the 'demigod within the breast',⁸² can only do his best: as demigod, he remains part-mortal, and hence, in principle, fallible.⁸³ Even so, this might qualify him to be regarded as 'a hero of the Enlightenment', in Broadie's striking phrase.⁸⁴

Overall, then, it seems fair to say, with Griswold, that 'sentiment, imagination, and understanding, not philosophical reason, are the basis of sympathy',⁸⁵ and hence the spectator emerges as the 'reasonable' person, 'the person of reflective and informed imagination and appropriately engaged emotions, suitably detached from the actor ... so as to allow perspective'.⁸⁶ This 'perspective' again reinforces the point that detachment from the viewpoint of the actor does not mean detachment from *any* viewpoint. This is not a transcendental spectator, free of any conceivable role. Rather, spectatorship *is* a role: that of the 'concerned citizen', the actor in the 'public' sphere, in the broadest sense of the latter – the sense in which it implies our general rights and responsibilities in society. Boltanski takes the argument further, by noting that the figure of the 'impartial spectator' permits and encourages the possibility of communication *about* sympathy and suffering. I react to the situation of the other; then, in my capacity as 'impartial spectator', I also react *to* my reaction, and can gain 'perspective' on it. This is inherent in what has been said about the role of the imagination and reflective judgement. The introduction of reflexivity here, suggests Boltanski, 'makes it possible to introduce a symmetry which reduces the tension between an aperspectival objectivism and moral involvement',⁸⁷ and the outcome is that compatibility between the responses of different spectators becomes more likely, just as it may also make it more likely that there will be greater convergence between the perspectives of the spectator and the sufferer.⁸⁸ Precisely because the 'impartial spectator' is *not* just a synthesis of the opinions of others, it follows that 'Coordination between the reactions and emotions of distinct spectators cannot then be imputed solely to the gradual contagion of opinions and affects'.⁸⁹ And this implicitly provides us with a model of 'involvement plus distance' that could serve to guide the reporting of situations that provoke sympathetic engagement in a world that has become increasingly one of media spectacle.

Sympathy and the critique of modernity

We can explore this further by elaborating what is, in effect, Smith's theory of modernity. In a powerful, prescient passage, he writes:

The poor man goes out and comes in unheeded, and when in the midst of a crowd is in the same obscurity as if shut up in his own hovel ... The man of merit and distinction, on the contrary, is observed by all the world. Every body is eager to look at him, and to conceive, at least by sympathy, that joy and exultation with which his circumstances naturally inspire him ... Scarce a word, scarce a gesture, can fall from him that is altogether neglected ... and if his behaviour is not altogether absurd, he has, every moment, an opportunity of interesting mankind, and of rendering himself the object of the observation and fellow-feeling of every body about him.⁹⁰

The amendment one might want to make to this, as an age of established social ranks slides towards an age of spectacle and celebrity, is to substitute '*particularly* if his behaviour is altogether absurd', but then we find that Smith himself seems to do this, as he moves into more overtly critical mode. He observes that 'this disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition' is 'the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments'. The rich can thereby set 'what is called the fashion', and the rest of us follow, slavishly. 'Even their vices and follies are fashionable; and the greater part of men are proud to imitate and resemble them in the very qualities which dishonour and degrade them.' Finally, we note that, in comparison to the pleasures of basking in the public gaze, 'all other pleasures sicken and decay'.⁹¹ Thus do we encounter a world in which the spectacle of sympathy slides readily enough into the spectacle of consumerism.

What seems to happen is this. Initially we respond, through feeling, to the joys or griefs of others. Both the situations we respond to, and how we respond, have already been shaped – but not determined – by previous experience. Then an element of reflection kicks in, providing the stage on which the impartial spectator can make his appearance. This figure enjoins us to sympathize with the joys of those who are entitled to them, and with the griefs of those who do not deserve their misfortune. This sympathy can be manifested as admiration or as indignation, respectively; in other words, once again, sympathy characteristically reveals itself in the guise of other emotions. Now, in the first case, admiration, it is all too easy to mistake sign for substance – this, as we have

seen, being an abiding problem both in the culture of sentimentalism and in the civilizing process. It is as though we feel that those whose situations are pleasurable, the rich and powerful, those of 'rank and distinction,' must surely, in some broad sense, deserve their positions; hence we can justifiably engage the sympathetic response. The apparent 'merit' can be read backwards, as it were: effect becomes cause, and the signs become the substance. We forget that actually it is not wealth or greatness *in themselves* that we should admire, but wisdom and virtue; and 'inattentive observers are very apt to mistake the one for the other.'⁹² The superficial signs are there for us all to see, after all, in the age of publicity and the mass media, whereas the reality 'behind' – which may involve obscure motives, etc. – can be mysterious, difficult to penetrate. Indeed, Smith takes this further, looking forward to a later cult of 'authenticity' that is already emergent in the culture of his time. Commenting on the importance of a 'free communication of sentiments and opinions' he adds: 'We all desire ... to know how each other is affected, to penetrate into each other's bosoms, and to observe the sentiments and affections which *really* subsist there.' In producing the theatre of manners, the civilizing process also reminds us that manners can be deceptive, and this, too, reinforces Smith's point.⁹³

It is the 'parade of our riches,'⁹⁴ the spectacle of consumerism, that dominates, though, and seems to invite us in, suggesting that we can all share in it. Sympathetic participation slides into vicarious identification: if we can vicariously share our friends' good fortune, take pleasure in their pleasure, then no great step is needed to ensure our participation in this wider spectacle. If they have worked to achieve the pleasures of their position, then this result is not unmerited. We can thereby legitimize our aspirations, allowing our own emulation of their lifestyle. And the imagination plays a significant role here. 'Our imagination,' writes Smith, 'which in pain and sorrow seems to be confined and cooped up within our own persons, in times of ease and prosperity expands itself to every thing around us.'

Here, in 'the mysterious veil of self-delusion,' where we encounter 'self-deceit, this fatal weakness of mankind,'⁹⁵ a further crucial slide can occur, from an accurate perception that there is frequently a link between the possession of objects, riches and status, and the life of pleasure, to the assumption that the latter consists *in* the former, is reducible to it: that luxury possessions bring happiness, and that mere contentment is necessarily inferior. In Griswold's words, 'The deception consists in the belief that by attaining all of those good things we strive for we will be happy and tranquil', whereas actually we are merely condemning ourselves to hard work, both directly and indirectly: work

to maintain the appearance, the image of success that will enable us to keep our place in the 'parade of riches' and give us the illusory esteem we seek, and perpetuate our hope that there is happiness at the end of the rainbow. Thus is social improvement accompanied by self-deception; a potential for dissatisfaction and unhappiness both drives and results from social progress. Hence 'The pleasure of vulgarized sympathy leads to the nearly universal toils of emulation'⁹⁶ and the resulting culture of frantic but ultimately ineffectual hedonism. And thus does Smith's dissection of the possibilities and tensions of the spectacle of sympathy propel him into the front rank of critics and theorists of the modern condition.

And the other side of the picture, the griefs and miseries of the poor? Just as we can slide to an unjustified assimilation of riches and virtue, so we may despise the poor, as if their poverty is a result of their *lack* of virtue or wisdom. Hence, while we parade our riches, we conceal our poverty.⁹⁷ This relative invisibility can reinforce the sense that poverty is shameful, along with decreasing our awareness of its extent. But another scenario is possible here. Suppose we see the poor not as victims of their own inadequacies, but as victims of the system; not just as poor, but as *oppressed*, wronged, suffering injustice. In this case, our sympathy with them – feeling and the impartial spectator working together – will mean that we sympathize with the *resentment* they feel, their justified sense of grievance. Resentment at harm done produces or reinforces a sense of injustice. Indeed, the poor could justifiably expect us to *share* their resentment.⁹⁸ We do not rush to do this, since in general 'resentment' is not a pleasant feeling; but this very fact can contribute to the strength of the feeling, under the reinforcement provided by the impartial spectator. And from this stems a major strand in the subsequent politics of modernity, whereby the Enlightenment tradition spawns grand projects of social reform and political movements of the oppressed, through to socialist movements and beyond.⁹⁹

The extension of sympathy

This leads us to a final problem. Both Hume and Smith imply that we are more likely to be able to sympathize with those who resemble us and who are closest to us; the shared experience of small-scale groups such as families seems to be the model here, as it seems to be for sentimentalism generally. Smith suggests that getting agitated about distant suffering of which we know nothing is artificial and unreasonable, and does nobody any good;¹⁰⁰ and Hume goes so far

as to argue that ‘In general, it may be affirm’d, that there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to oneself.’¹⁰¹ The possible implication of all this, given the significance of spectacle, is spelled out by Griswold: “Sympathy” may foster, rather than counter, selfishness and self-love; the pleasure of mutual sympathy seems transformed into the pleasure of mutually reinforcing vanity.¹⁰² I can sympathize most with those who most resemble and reinforce my own – frequently self-deluding – self-image, and society becomes a series of fragmented networks of nervous narcissists.¹⁰³

Yet this is, of course, precisely the situation the ‘impartial spectator’¹⁰⁴ is there to try to prevent; and we have referred to Smith’s example of an earthquake in China to suggest that this figure can have some success. Indeed, Smith claims that ‘The plaintive voice of misery, when heard at a distance, will not allow us to be indifferent’. More radically still, he asserts that ‘our good-will is circumscribed by no boundary, but may embrace the immensity of the universe. We cannot form the idea of any innocent and sensible being, whose happiness we should not desire.’¹⁰⁵ And Hume adopts a strikingly similar position. Having just dismissed the possibility of a ‘love of mankind’ in the abstract, he proceeds to assert the power of sympathy to range even beyond the confines of the human: ‘... there is no human, and indeed no sensible, creature, whose happiness or misery does not, in some measure, affect us, when brought near to us, and represented in lively colours.’¹⁰⁶

This is a highly significant twist in the argument. For a start, it reinforces the idea that it is feeling, ‘sentience’, that provides the grounding of moral response, hence the extension of the range of sympathetic engagement beyond the human. But it also suggests that the ‘closeness’ needed for this engagement is, again, a matter of ‘situation’ and, crucially, how that situation is *represented* (in ‘lively colours’). Far from being necessarily in tension with sympathetic engagement, the spectacle is a presupposition of its operation. Vivid representation amounts to a kind of proximity, while in no way abolishing the distance of difference. One needs the vividness of proximity, to engage us in the first place, but also distance, as the space within which the imagination can work. Effective witnessing has an element of indirectness about it. And this also reminds us that sympathy reacts not to universals and abstractions, but to particulars, *within* this broad, overall presumption of sentience. Except, in this sense, such particulars are not instances of universals, although they may be exemplars of analogous situations. As Jamie Ferreira puts it, in a discussion of Hume: ‘What is morally relevant is what is brought home to us imaginatively – namely, the particular we engage

with when we abstract from *our* particularity only.' He argues that this calls for 'concretizing engagement' in which 'imagination is clearly used to generate a distance'; but this is a distancing that seeks to 'engage fully with the relevant other,' rather than to universalize or reconstruct the other as a 'representative' or 'typical' human.¹⁰⁷ Again following Hume, Davide Panagia concludes that 'there is an ethical priority in learning to relate to difference rather than sameness,' born from 'an aesthetic experience that generates a capacity for sympathy – an attunement, that is, to difference as such.'¹⁰⁸

If it is *difference* that drives all this, then this can, of course, include difference of class, race and gender; and it is essential not to reduce such 'difference' to the discriminatory, stigmatizing 'otherness' that has been such a central feature of so many modern constructions of self-and-other, serving to legitimize inequality, oppression and exploitation.¹⁰⁹ And difference is not *primarily* a matter of identity, but of situation, ranging from culturally and socially restricted 'positions,' that do have serious implications for self-identity, through to current contexts, predicaments and problems, which may well be transitory and only contingently linked to identity, whether individual or cultural. As we saw earlier, for Smith sympathy could be said to involve a relationship between differences: the conversion of difference into relationship, or difference *as* relationship; as an idea, it enables us to think 'relationship-in-distance'. And, from this point of view, if we do sympathize with those 'close' to us ('closeness' defined in Hume's terms, as proximity plus resemblance), then this is not because of, but despite, the closeness: it is the *difference* that is relevant. I am not you, however much I may resemble you; the difference in our situations can be converted into a sympathetic response on my part if the relationship between my response and your situation can be mapped on to your response to your situation. Fundamentally, this analysis is not about identity politics and identification with the same in the other, however much it can be appropriated *ideologically* for the elaboration of stereotypes of identity and community, and frequently has been, from the eighteenth century onwards (with nation being added to gender, family and class as bases for this process of group identification). Such stereotypes are indeed the 'other' side of the coin to discrimination against the 'other'. They are mutually reinforcing.¹¹⁰

In an arresting formulation, Hume claims that 'the happiness of strangers affects us by sympathy alone.'¹¹¹ It might appear that, as sentient beings, we recognize a kinship with them only through the shared sentience that makes sympathy possible as a relation of similarity between differences. But this initial recognition poses a problem: we might have extended the range of sympathy,

but we still seem to encounter similarity or identity again, at this point of furthest extension. Perhaps we should return to the fact that they are *strangers*, after all – how do they become candidates for sympathetic response in the first place? We may indeed be bumping up against the limits of the discursive possibilities available within this framework, but we can perhaps just remember the key role of the sympathetic imagination here. McCarthy claims that ‘Sympathy is only truly itself when there is a challenge to the imagination.’¹¹² This challenge occurs, as Ferreira suggests, via ‘interestedness – sentiment catching us, captivating us, engaging us’.¹¹³ And this ‘interest’ is not the telos, the ‘purposiveness’ of the self-interested subject, with its ‘vested’ interests to defend, but rather refers to the curiosity of the outgoing self in its responsiveness, its openness to ‘other’ experiences, an orientation towards the other *as* other, in its difference. This is the ‘extension’ of sympathy – not just its range, but its capacity to extend outwards, towards the experience of difference.¹¹⁴ And this imaginative engagement with the other is *felt*; it captivates us, our senses and feelings. It is indeed sympathy itself, at its most basic.