

## **Impartiality through ‘Moral Optics’: Why Adam Smith revised David Hume’s Moral Sentimentalism**

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David Hume and Adam Smith claim that moral judgments are sentimental in kind, based on sentiments of the moral judge. Sentiments tend to be partial; they are not only shaped by what triggered them but also by various factors relating to the people whose sentiments they are. Sentimental dispositions vary across individuals and times. The question is how a sentimental moral judgment can be impartial nevertheless. For answering it, both Hume and Smith rely on what J.J. Ferrier has labeled ‘moral optics’, namely the analogy between the procedure for making impartial moral judgments and the procedure for making justified perceptual judgments:<sup>1</sup>

[Sympathy and mere feeling] operate in different directions, and produce different results. I shall illustrate this subject by the analogy of physical optics, because there seems to be an analogy between the process by which correct moral judgments are obtained, and the process by which visual judgments are obtained. I think Smith’s view might very properly be called a species of *Moral Optics* – a science in which an attempt is made to show how our primary judgments in regard to morality are corrected by means to sympathy. (Ferrier, 2015: p. 105, our italics)

The label ‘moral optics’ fits Hume’s moral theory as well as Smith’s. But, as we shall argue, they reconstruct this analogy in different ways. We shall first provide an account of Hume’s ‘moral optics’. We shall then uncover three increasingly specific reasons for Smith’s departure from Hume: (1) while perceptual and moral judgments request partly similar procedures of justification, there are also dissimilarities; (2) moral sentimentalism cannot

focus on a mere selection of similar sentiments; and (3) Hume does not provide an adequate account of the source of partiality of moral sentiments that threatens to undermine the impartiality of moral judgments. Finally, we shall give an account of Smith's 'moral optics' and of the limitations he saw in this analogy.

### **1. Hume's moral optics**

According to Hume, moral judgments are judgments about agents and the constant traits of their characters.<sup>2</sup> These character traits are virtuous or vicious, depending on whether or not they motivate the agent to perform actions that are useful and produce pleasure for the agent herself or for the people within her narrow social circle (see EPM 9.1.12). The members of the 'narrow circle' (T 3.3.3.2) of an agent are those who have 'commerce' with her (T 3.3.1.18): they are either directly affected by the agent's actions or witness them from close by. They are in the best position to judge what an agent's character traits are and what moral esteem they deserve. Moral assessments of an agent's character traits are based on passions of love and hatred. People love and esteem those whose actions induce pleasure and they hate and do not esteem those who do not.

Love and hatred have both an evaluative and a cognitive function (Cohon 2008). These passions inform moral judgments, but they also allow the moral judge to track an agent's character traits. In order to successfully track these traits and judge them morally, people need more evidence than merely a particular response of pleasure or uneasiness to one of the agent's actions and the love or hatred these sentiments induce:

If any *action* be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a *sign of some quality or character*. It must depend upon durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character. Actions themselves, not

proceeding from any constant principle, have no influence on love or hatred, pride or humility; and consequently are never consider'd in morality. (T 3.3.1.4, our italics)

Particular actions and people's spontaneous sentimental responses to them cannot be trusted to reveal an agent's character traits and the 'durable principle[s]' determining them. Agents do not have total control; actions can go wrong accidentally and produce unintended consequences. For taking such exceptional circumstances into account, one has to observe the agent over an extended period of time and focus on those kinds of actions which she most commonly performs. Exceptional kinds of actions can be dismissed as not revealing the agent's character traits.<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of their first attempts at tracking an agent's character traits people pass proto-moral judgments on them.<sup>4</sup> The evidential basis for a proto-moral judgment is limited to a judge's personal evaluations of an agent's character traits, that is, to her positive or negative sentimental responses to the agent's common actions.

Proto-moral judgments are based on more evidence than the judge's sentimental response to a single action can provide. Nevertheless, their evidential basis is not sufficient for making a claim to general agreement. This is because, for tracking an agent's character traits and passing a general moral judgment on them, the judge cannot rely on her own responses to the agent's actions exclusively. She also needs an idea of the sentimental responses these actions commonly induce in other people. This represents a major challenge because sentimental responses to actions are subject to a great deal of variation. How a person sentimentally responds to an action depends on whether she is directly affected by it or merely witnesses it from a distance, that is, on her 'nearness or remoteness' to the action. It also depends on the previously existing relation between this person and the agent, which disposes her to take a more or less critical attitude to her actions (Hume speaks of 'limited generosity' as a characteristic feature of human behavior; see T 3.2.2.16 and T 3.3.1.23). Finally, a person's

sentiments are also shaped by the ‘present disposition’ of her mind. Hume recognizes that ‘all sentiments of blame or praise are variable’ (T 3.3.1.16).<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, proto-moral judgments about agents’ character traits, made by judges on the basis of their personal sentimental responses to these agents’ actions, tend to be variable and inconsistent (T 3.3.1.18).

Inconsistencies between proto-moral judgments can arise both intra-personally and inter-personally. However, since moral judgments are supposed to track an agent’s character traits and evaluate them morally, people are committed to expecting these judgments to coincide. They take inconsistencies among proto-moral judgments to be indications of their being poorly justified and perhaps mistaken. While the difficulty of making stable judgments about an agent’s character traits on the intra-personal level is merely frustrating for the individual judge, the lack of agreement between proto-moral judgments on the inter-personal level hinders the prospect of shared moral judgments and thereby threatens the very ‘peace of society’ (T 3.1.1.1).

Tracking an agent’s character traits is a cognitive task. For fulfilling it, the moral judge needs to recognize regular patterns that allow her to align actions that an agent commonly performs with equally common sentiments that the members of the agent’s narrow circle feel in response to them. According to Hume, these patterns emerge from our awareness of ‘constant conjunctions’ (T 1.3.6.3) of actions of certain kinds and kinds of sentimental responses to them. Hence, the agent’s character traits are manifest in causal relations between the actions she commonly performs and the emotional responses these actions commonly induce.

But how can different people, whose proto-moral judgments about an agent’s character traits are incompatible, reach an agreement about which character traits the agent has and how these are to be morally evaluated? Hume suggests that they identify the regular patterns that align the kinds of actions an agent commonly performs with equally common kinds of sentimental responses. This procedure is analogous to the way in which we identify

continuously existing external objects of perception on the basis of a manifold of their various perceptual appearances. It is in virtue of this analogy that the label ‘moral optics’ applies to Hume’s moral theory. Hume sees the *sentimental responses* caused by actions which reveal the character traits of the respective agent as analogous to the *perceptual states* caused by external perceptual objects (and the character traits as analogous to these objects). While agents’ character traits appear in reoccurring *particular sentimental responses*, perceptual objects such as the ‘fields and buildings’ an observer sees from a window appear in reoccurring *particular perceptions* (T 1.4.2.9). In both cases, a manifold of various perceptual and sentimental appearances is subjected to a search for stability or patterns of ‘coherence and constancy of certain impressions’ (T 1.4.2.20).<sup>6</sup>

In his ‘moral optics’, Hume relies on the idea that people have no more direct access to external objects and their perceptual properties than they have to the ‘constant principle[s]’ determining an agent’s character traits and their virtuous or vicious nature. In both cases, people have to rely on ‘appearances’ that must be ‘corrected’ (T 3.3.1.16) In matters both of visual perception and morality people face similar challenges, namely deriving properly justified judgments about external objects from a manifold of varying appearances. For meeting these challenges, they rely on procedures of selection, dismissing deviating appearances and focusing instead on the common patterns they reveal.

A perceiver of an external object can only take one point of view at a time. What appears in her visual field depends not only on the visual properties of the object, but also on her point of view, on the available light, and on the quality of her perceptual sensitivity. Instead of thinking that the perceived object changes in size, shape, and color every time she looks at it, nature has programmed her mind in such a way that she interprets every particular visual appearance of an object as part of a manifold of its previous, current, and imagined future perceptual appearances. The mind looks for stability in appearances over time and uses that

information to construct constantly existing perceptual objects with their equally constant visual properties.

While this process of dealing with a manifold of perceptual appearances already takes place in the intra-personal realm, it can easily be extended to the inter-personal realm. Whenever two perceivers disagree about the visual properties of a particular object, they first try to find a point of view from which the object can be clearly perceived by both of them. From there, with the same visual access to the object and with equally well-functioning perceptual systems, what appears in their visual fields will be the same and they will come to a shared judgment of the perceived object's visual properties.

Analogously, for 'correcting our sentiments' and the proto-moral judgments about agents' character traits based on them, we have to find a 'common point of view'. This point of view must be generally accessible to all people so that they can collect the relevant information for morally judging an agent's character traits. Hume explains:

tis impossible we could ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent those continual contradictions, and arrive at a more stable judgment of things, we fix on some steady and general points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation (T 3.3.1.15)

By taking this general point of view, the moral judge leaves behind her own interests, her personal attachments to the agent, and her varying sentimental dispositions. She takes the role of a 'spectator' with a stable sentimental disposition (T 3.1.2.4, T 3.3.1.30). What the spectator perceives from this point of view is the way a particular agent interacts with the more or less numerous members of her narrow circle over time. Perception, here, is

sentimental in kind. The spectator relies on ‘sympathy’ for her access to the sentiments of agents and the sentimental responses of people affected by their actions. Sympathy, as Hume understands it, is ‘contagious’ in kind (T 3.3.3.5; Fleischacker 2012: p. 276); it allows a spectator to share the feelings of those she sympathizes with.<sup>7</sup> The sympathizing spectator does not merely reproduce others’ situated or partial sentimental responses. She focuses on the sentiments the members of the agent’s narrow circle commonly feel in response to actions the agent commonly performs. The spectator thereby neutralizes some of the factors causing sentiments to be unstable, namely the impact of diverging interests, personal attachments and changes in people’s sentimental dispositions.<sup>8</sup>

By restricting her attention to the members of the agent’s narrow circle, the spectator dismisses sentimental responses from the side of people who are too remote to have access to the relevant information. The results of their attempts at tracking an agent’s character traits are too unreliable and can therefore be ignored.<sup>9</sup> By focusing on common sentimental responses she encounters within an agent’s narrow circle, the moral judge avoids all other sources of incompatible sentimental responses to an agent’s actions. She follows the example of an observer who collects a manifold of visual information about an object’s visual properties from a good and commonly accessible point of view and then identifies the most commonly appearing properties within this manifold.

The sentimental responses an agent commonly causes provide the information for the moral judge for passing her judgment. The judge relies on passions of love and hatred – as do those who make their proto-moral judgments from within the agent’s narrow circle. If an agent’s character traits induce this agent to perform actions which typically cause pleasure within herself and those nearby, the spectator will sympathetically share this pleasure. This shared pleasure will make her love the agent by virtue of her character traits and judge them to be virtuous. If, however, an agent commonly causes uneasiness in herself or others, the spectator

will sympathetically share this uneasiness, hate the agent's character traits and judge them to be vicious (T 3.3.3.2).

Hume explains the concordance of moral judgments in terms of the general accessibility of the general point of view, the sameness of the evidence spectators collect from there, their shared capacity to recognize constant connections between actions of certain kinds and kinds of sentimental responses to these actions, their equally shared capacity to sympathize with these responses, and their shared disposition to respond to pleasure-inducing character traits with love and to uneasiness-inducing traits with hatred. People who lack the capacity of contagious sympathy can no more be moral judges than the blind can be judges of the visual properties of objects. Hume assumes that most people are similar to each other, not only within cultures, but also across cultures. Normal people are not blind; neither do they lack the capacity for sympathy (T 3.3.1.7 and 16; T 2.1.11.5).

Christine Korsgaard (1999) and Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (1994) have raised the question why people would be motivated to leave their own concerns behind and take the general point of view. Would it not be much more natural for people to stay where they are and pass their partial proto-moral judgments on agents' character traits? Both deny this question, but they do so for different reasons. Korsgaard explains a person's motivation to take the general point of view in terms of a rational agent's love of humanity that is incompatible with a refusal to care about a common moral judgment. Sayre-McCord suggests a functional explanation of this motivation: agreement in matters of moral judgment is a necessary condition for a harmonious and flourishing society, the building and preservation of which is in everybody's interest. While we do not deny the plausibility of these explanations, we want to point to a cognitive source for this motivation which emerges from the 'moral optics' analogy. Collecting reliable information that provides proper and generally accessible reasons for a common judgment about a stable object is the main concern both for a perceiver and for a



moral judge. It is as much an intra-personal as it is an inter-personal concern. The latter is continuous with the former. Underlying these concerns is the cognitive motivation to achieve a stable belief about an object, be it an object of perception or the constant principles determining an agent's character traits.

## **2. Smith's reasons for departing from Hume's 'moral optics'**

In TMS I.i.4, Smith distinguishes between two different kinds of judgments. The first include judgments 'of the general subjects of science and taste'. They assess external objects that are 'matters of indifference' to us (TMS I.i.4.2). For making such judgments, we contemplate their objects 'from the same point of view'. Hume understands moral judgments as judgments of this kind – as his version of 'moral optics' reveals. We contend that Smith's *first reason to depart* from Hume's moral theory concerns Hume's understanding of moral judgments as of the same kind as judgments of natural science, perception, and taste. While Smith follows Hume in his understanding of moral theory as part of the 'science of human nature' (TMS VII.iii.2.5), he denies that moral judgments are about such 'matters of indifference'. It is quite the contrary; they are about 'things of vital importance' to us, about things which affect us personally (TMS I.i.4.2). But personal affections tend to be partial. The main challenge for a sentimentalist moral judge arises from the partiality of these sentiments. While Smith agrees with Hume on the psychological fact that people have a natural propensity to focus on regular patterns within the manifold of their visual perceptions,<sup>10</sup> he denies that they use a similar strategy to limit the impact of partiality on their sentiment based moral judgments.<sup>11</sup> For Smith, moral judgments are not about regular patterns which reveal agents' character traits and the sentimental responses they cause; moral judgments are about individual actions as either morally proper or not. The moral judge, in order to meet the challenge of partiality, cannot distance herself from the objects of her judgment and take a 'general point of view' instead

(see Lindgren 1973: pp. 21-25). This leads to the *second reason for Smith's departure* from Hume.

Smith shares Hume's recognition of the importance of agreement on moral judgments for facilitating harmonious social life (TMS I.1.4.7). But he departs from Hume in his account of how to achieve this agreement. As we have argued, Hume requires moral judges to dismiss the impact that personal interests and attachments have on how people respond to an agent's actions and underlying character. Otherwise, they would estimate the virtue of a 'diligent and faithful' servant higher than that of Marcus Brutus (T 3.3.1.16). Moral judges should focus on sentimental responses common among the sentimental responses of the members of the narrow circle to which the agent belongs. While Smith does not deny that people are similar by virtue of being human, he requires the moral judge to recognize that they are also different from each other in their needs, interests, and corresponding vulnerabilities. Once a moral judge dismisses all people's particularities from the factors that shape the way they sentimentally respond to an action, he cannot explain any more why they have any sentimental responses at all. We read the following passage as containing an implicit rejection of Hume's view:

[The] beauty and deformity which characters appear to derive from their usefulness or inconveniency, are apt to strike, in a peculiar manner, those who consider, in an abstract and philosophical light, the actions and conduct of mankind. [...] But it is in particular instances only that the propriety or impropriety, the merit or demerit of actions is very obvious and discernible. It is only when particular examples are given that we may perceive distinctly either the concord or disagreement between our own affections and those of the agent. (TMS IV.2.2)

Underlying is the thought that dismissing particular needs and interests from the factors that shape people's sentimental responses to agents by adopting a 'general point of view' is dismissing the 'raw material of ethics' (Carrasco 2015: p. 679), that is, the phenomena on which we rely for constructing our justified sentimental moral judgments. This material is not 'discernible' from a general point of view; we encounter it in 'particular instances' and 'particular examples'. Moreover, only these 'particular instances' manifest that the sphere of human interaction is not only shaped by cooperation for the sake of the common good, but also by people's pursuing conflicting interests – hence the need of moral agreement and the challenge of reaching it.

The *third* reason for Smith's *departure* from Hume is that, according to Smith, Hume does not provide an adequate account of the main challenge facing a sentimentalist moral theory. The challenge as Smith sees it arises from the objectionable partiality of spontaneous responsive sentiments. While different people may vary in their sentimental responses to one and the same action, this variation alone does not explain their morally objectionable partiality. In matters of responsive sentiments, there has to be room for some variation, namely for due partialities, partialities which are not morally objectionable and do not stand in the way of achieving properly justified sentimental moral judgments (TMS III.3.13, and Carrasco 2015: p. 688).

These three reasons for Smith's departure from Hume's moral theory did not lead him to give up on the project of 'moral optics'. On the contrary, Smith seems to have been inspired by Hume's use of this analogy, but he developed his own version of it. However, Smith was also aware of its limitations. In one respect the challenge of making a properly justified perceptual judgment and that of making a properly justified and impartial sentimental moral judgment are not analogous – and here Smith's commonsensical view of the world becomes important. In matters of visual perception, the challenge is not only to achieve a shared description of a

constantly existing perceptual object, but also to make a judgment that is true to external matters of fact, to the perceived object which exists independently of its being perceived and described by anyone. While this object may not be directly accessible, the assumption of its independent existence justifies the dismissal of those perceptions of it that have been generally recognized as misleading; we may focus on perceptions collected from the best points of view, under the best perceptual conditions, and from the best perceivers. In matters of moral judgments and the sentiments informing it, however, there is no analogue to such standards of excellence. The moral quality of a particular action is constituted by the responsive sentiments of the particular people affected by it. Acquiring true beliefs about a particular action as a factual event in the world is necessary, but not sufficient, for achieving an agreement on how to morally judge it. For morally judging an action, people must rely on their responsive sentiments to it. And while these sentiments are partial, there is nothing that allows people to dismiss any of them as less informative than others. For Smith, the process of making a properly justified moral judgment is a process of constructing not the object but the standard of morality. And the construction material is provided by the raw material of ethics, the particular sentimental responses of those involved and personally affected by a particular situation (TMS I.i.4).

### **3. Smith's moral optics**

Smith revises several elements of Hume's moral theory. One of them is his account of the object of moral judgment. While he does not deny the importance for every rational agent to acquire a virtuous character (TMS III.1.7; III.3.22; III.3.25; III.3.35), the main object of a moral judgment for him is a particular action performed by a particular agent under particular circumstances that affects particular people. Agents do things to people, and people spontaneously respond to particular actions with sentiments of either gratitude or resentment,

depending on whether they found themselves to be beneficiaries or victims of the action. Affected people make proto-moral judgments about the agent's action as either good (when feeling gratitude) or bad (when feeling resentment), and they expect other people to sympathetically share these feelings. Unaware of the likelihood of their own sentiments' being distorted by partiality, they turn to spectators, expecting them to share and approve of these sentiments.

The spectator of a person affected by an action does not have any 'immediate experience' of what this person feels (TMS 1.1.1.2). For filling this gap, she relies on what Samuel Fleischacker has called 'projective sympathy' (Fleischacker 2012: p. 276). She puts herself imaginatively into the circumstances of the person affected in order to form an idea of how she herself would have felt if she had been affected just as this person was.<sup>12</sup> But this is not all. The spectator then asks whether the sentiment the person affected actually felt, and the sentiment the spectator imagines she would have felt in this person's position, are 'in perfect concord' or not.<sup>13</sup> She makes her approval of the affected person's sentiment – her second order or evaluative sympathy – dependent on finding such concord:

When the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects; and, on the contrary, when, upon bringing the case home to himself, he finds that they do not coincide with what he feels, they necessarily appear to him unjust and improper ... . (TMS 1.1.3.1)

As Smith says in this passage, a responsive sentiment on which one can base a normatively authoritative moral judgment should be 'just and proper', and its propriety is a matter of its being 'suitable' to its object. The suitability of the responsive sentiment of a person affected by an action is not only a matter of properly adapting it to the agent's action and the

underlying intention, but also to the particular way this person was affected (more or less directly and seriously) and to her particular vulnerability – which a spectator might first overlook. Accordingly, sentiments that are proper responses to one and the same action, but felt by people with different vulnerabilities and affected in different ways, may be different. The death of a young child affects its mother and father much more than it affects someone who accidentally learns of it without being acquainted with either the parents or anybody of their social environment. Spectators may have reasons to approve of more than one way of responding sentimentally to the death of a child. If a socially and even geographically remote person who accidentally learns about the death of a child responded with sentiments similar to those felt by the affected parents, every spectator would consider this response improper.

Given that people differ in their vulnerabilities, spectators do not find themselves in a position of inevitably approving – sympathizing with – the responsive sentiment of a person affected. Whenever the spectator and the person affected find themselves in a state of disagreement, they have to enter into a process of communication – the ‘sympathetic process’ as it is commonly called – that aims at revising their respective sentiments with the aim of aligning them and thereby settle their disagreement.

The challenge for a person affected by an action is to feel a responsive sentiment that is proper, namely properly adapted to the agent, the action, its impact on this person and to her particular vulnerability. Accordingly, when engaging in a sympathetic process, the spectator of a person affected is as much required to imagine and share this proper sentimental response as the affected person himself is required to. However, the spectator is not more likely than the person affected to imagine and sympathetically feel a proper responsive sentiment. There is no reason to assume that the spectator’s imagined sentimental response is any more proper than the sentiment the person affected felt spontaneously. What guides the spectator’s acts of imaginative egocentric sympathy includes, apart from her beliefs about the relevant facts, her

previous experiences in the role of a person affected by similar actions. Neither the spectator nor the person affected has an independent standard for judging the propriety of responsive sentiments at their disposal. This standard has to be constructed; it cannot be found in a shared understanding of the common good as it underlies the social norms which both the person affected and her spectator equally recognize.

Smith's account of the construction of the moral standard is implicit in his version of 'moral optics'. In the course of the sympathetic process, a spectator and a person affected try to come to an agreement about what would have been the proper sentiment for the person affected to feel in response to the agent whose action affected her. Smith rejects Hume's account of the procedure that leads to a shared moral judgment, the core element of which consists in having spectators take the 'general point of view'. For Smith, this procedure has to aim at more than a stable and shared view of the object of the moral judgment, namely an agent's character traits and their moral quality. What needs to be constructed is the moral standard. The construction material is provided by people's spontaneous sentimental responses to an action. The problem is that these responses tend to be partial. According to Smith, the main source of this partiality is an underlying misconception of the relative importance of an individual person's interests in comparison to that of other people:

My companion does not naturally look upon the misfortune that has befallen me, or the injury that has been done me, from the same point of view in which I consider them. They affect me much more nearly. (TMS 1.1.4.5)

People's spontaneous responses to an agent's action are merely 'passive feelings' (TMS III.3.4), which are partial and potentially mistaken (improper or not fitting). For revising and correcting them, people engage in a sympathetic process with another, a spectator (either another person or an imagined spectator) and switch points of view with this other:

In order to produce this concord [of sentiments], as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continuously placing themselves in his situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs, and thence conceiving some degree of that coolness about his own fortune, with which he is sensible that they will view it. (TMS 1.1.4.6-8)

In the course of this process, people learn to become increasingly impartial spectators both of other people and of themselves. If a person affected and her spectator reach a state of mutual sympathy, they will agree on what would have been the proper sentimental response to the agent for this person; it is the sentimental response that any properly impartial spectator would have.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the sympathetic process is not restricted to only two participants. Ideally, all people affected by an action as well as the respective agent herself engage with as many spectators as they can reach in a sympathetic process and achieve a state of mutual sympathy.

There are different kinds of mistakes that people make when spontaneously responding to an agent and his action: false beliefs about matters of fact, evaluative prejudices, and mistakes due to excessive self-love (Fricke 2013). Here, we focus exclusively on excessive self-love, because it is in Smith's account of how people can try to avoid this mistake that he develops his version of 'moral optics'. Due to their self-love, people are much more concerned with their own interests than with the interests of others. Accordingly, their spontaneous, non-reflective, or passive sentimental responses to an agent tend to be out of proportion. They feel as if their own interests were more important than those of anyone else, and this distortion informs their proto-moral judgments. Self-love is the main source of their partiality:



As to the eye of the body, objects appear great or small, not so much according to their real dimensions, as according to the nearness or distance of their situation; so do they likewise to what may be called the natural eye of the mind: and we remedy the defects of both these organs in pretty much the same manner. In my present situation, an immense landscape of lawns, and woods, and distant mountains, seems to do not more than cover the little window which I write by, and to be out of all proportion less than the chamber in which I am sitting. I can form a just comparison between those great objects and the little objects around me, in no other way, than by transporting myself, at least in fancy, to a different station, from whence I can survey both at nearly equal distance, and thereby form some judgment of their real proportions. Habit and experience have taught me to do this so easily and so readily, that I am scarce sensible that I do it. (TMS III.3.2)

In his version of the ‘moral optics’ analogy, Smith is mainly interested in the phenomenon of proportionality of perceived objects’ size. The size of objects as they appear in our visual field varies with the standpoint from which we perceive them and, in particular, with the distance between this standpoint and the object. Consequently, for judging the comparative size (not the actual size which can be measured!) of two objects, we have to look at them from an equal distance.

Analogously, the importance of our own interests varies with the standpoint from which they are perceived. From the standpoint of every individual person, her interests appear to be much more important than the interests of others. Thus, for properly judging the relative importance of everybody’s interests, people have to look at every person from an equal distance, or rather, from the point of view of an impartial spectator who attributes equal importance to all people affected by an action.<sup>15</sup>

But, and here Smith reaches the limits of the ‘moral optics’ analogy, the spectator’s function is not exclusively cognitive. She does not only collect information about how an agent’s action affects various other people and their prospects to satisfy their interests. Her function is also normative. She requests that people adjust their spontaneous assessments of the importance of their own interests to the proper level. They have to revise their spontaneously felt sentimental responses, not in response to properly justified moral judgments but rather as a condition for making such judgments. Those who, in the light of the impartial spectator’s lack of approval, find that they either overestimated or underestimated the importance of their interests will have to make sentimental revisions. Agents will have to recognize that the harm they imposed on other people resulted from the assumption that they could satisfy their own interests at the expense of other people, an assumption that the impartial spectator teaches them to recognize as false. People affected by an agent’s action will have to either decrease or increase their spontaneously felt resentment or gratitude. They will meet this requirement in response to the following insight:

we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better [or more important] than any other in it; ... when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper object of resentment, abhorrence, and execration... (TMS III.3.4)

How can persons assess the proper level of the importance of their own interests? Smith thinks that, for meeting this challenge, people have to make interpersonal comparisons. A person affected will have to revise her spontaneous responsive sentiments according to her recognition that her own interests are neither more nor less important than those of other people. An agent who has harmed others will have to admit having done so because she falsely assumed that her interests were more important than those of others. As a consequence of such sentimental revisions, moral judgments of an agent’s actions will tend to coincide.

## **To sum up**

For Hume, moral judgments are judgments about an agent's constant character traits and their qualities as either virtuous or vicious. He compares these traits to constantly existing perceptual objects. Moral judges attribute character traits to agents and judge them morally. They track the respective traits by relying on actions the agents commonly perform; then, they align these traits with the common sentimental responses to these actions by the members of the agent's narrow circles. This tracking and aligning are cognitive processes, analogous to the process in which we track external objects with constant perceptual properties on the basis of a manifold of varying perceptions. Moral judges sentimentally judge an agent's character traits as more or less virtuous or vicious. For Hume, the main challenge for the moral judge is to find stability in a manifold of seemingly inconsistent appearances, and this challenge resembles the one judges face when making claims about objects' perceptual properties. For meeting this challenge, the moral judge relies on a twofold procedure of selection: The judge focuses on actions an agent commonly performs and on sentimental responses these actions commonly induce among the members of the agent's narrow circle. Uncommon actions, uncommon sentimental responses to actions as well as sentimental responses from people outside an agent's narrow circle are dismissed. That a moral judge succeeds in identifying the regular patterns on which she relies for making a generally justified moral judgment reveals, according to Hume, people's generally shared interest in promoting the 'happiness of mankind' (T3.3.1.27). People revise their proto-moral judgments in the light of properly justified moral judgments made by spectators from the general point of view.

Smith is skeptical as to the motivational attraction of the happiness of mankind, especially when its promotion requires an agent to make sacrifices of her own happiness. While he shares Hume's understanding of the challenge a sentimental moral judge faces, he denies that

the procedure of justification of a particular moral judgment can be mainly selective: The moral judge should not dismiss seemingly uncommon sentimental responses to an agent's action and focus on the most common responses instead. Nor can he focus on a selected group of people responding to an action with approving or disapproving sentiments. According to Smith, the moral judge, for justifying a particular moral judgment about an agent and her action has to engage in a sympathetic process with the agent herself, as well as with those directly or indirectly affected by the action, whether they belong of the agent's narrow circle or not. The aim of this process is revisionary in kind: the participants have to critically assess their spontaneous sentimental responses to the action; in particular, they have to recognize their natural tendency to be selfish and to take their own interests to be more important than that of other people and to revise their sentimental responses so that they meet the requirement of impartiality. Moral judgments about an agent and her action are properly justified if and only if they are based on impartial sentimental responses to this action. For explaining the impact of people's natural selfishness on their spontaneous sentimental responses, Smith relies on the analogy between these responses and states of visual perception: Just as objects near the perceiver appear to be comparatively larger than those at a larger distance, people's own interests appear to be more important than those of other people. In both cases they have to revise spontaneous assumptions, assumptions about the relative size of perceptual objects and assumptions about relative importance of personal interests. But there is a difference: While people have a natural propensity to revise the mistakes their perceptions of the relative size of objects induce, they do not have a similarly natural propensity to revise the mistakes their spontaneous partial sentiments induce. For this revision, they need to rely on sympathy. Only by engaging in sympathetic processes can they hope to learn to be impartial moral judges. The revision of sentiments is a condition for making properly impartial moral judgments.

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<sup>1</sup> Hume's account of this analogy has been a source of inspiration for discussions in meta-ethics about response-dependent moral predicates and the prospects of moral sentimentalism. Nevertheless, neither Hume's particular understanding of this analogy nor Smith's critical response to it have so far attracted detailed scholarly attention. Influential studies of Hume's and Smith's moral theories in general and of their respective accounts of sympathy in particular neglect it. See for example Griswold 1999, Pack and Schliesser 2006, Rick 2007, Cohon 2008, McHugh 2011, Fleischacker 2012, Fricke 2012, Taylor 2015, Hanley 2016, Muller 2016, Ilyes 2017, Rasmussen 2017, Sagar 2017, Schliesser 2017, McHugh 2018. We would like to thank Richard Gunn for drawing our attention to Ferrier's description of Smith's moral theory. Furthermore, we would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* for very helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> For presenting Hume's moral theory, we shall mainly rely on the *Treatise* and refer to the *Enquiry* only occasionally. We follow Cohon and others (for example Debes, 2007) in rejecting the view according to which the *Enquiry* widely departs from the *Treatise*. There are differences in emphasis, but most of the underlying moral theory remains the same.

<sup>3</sup> Here we are in agreement with Ilyes 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Hume speaks of 'common judgments concerning actions' or 'natural uncultivated ideas of morality' (T 3.2.2.8). Cohon uses the term 'situated sentiments' for the sentiments underlying proto-moral judgments and defines them as the general origin or source of what later becomes our praise or blame (Cohon 2008: p. 135).

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, in her account of Hume's moral theory, distinguishes between three kinds of 'errors' people commit when sentimentally responding to an action: the 'error of remoteness', the 'error of countervailing interests', and the 'consequentialist error' (Taylor 2017: pp. 106-110). The three factors that we mention here correspond to the first two of these 'errors'.

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<sup>6</sup> On this analogy see Loeb 2002, esp. chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> For a more complex account of Hume's 'sympathy' in comparison to that of Smith see McHugh 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Hume explains the sympathetic mechanism in T 2.1.11. By focusing on common sentimental responses the spectator filters out whatever makes them situated and partial (Stewart 1976: p. 178). In addition to sympathy, imagination, reflection, and deliberation will be required. For how the spectator sympathizes with the sentimental responses of the members of an agent's narrow circle see Taylor, 2015: pp. 45-49 and McHugh 2018.

<sup>9</sup> This point is relevant for Taylor's claim that Hume's views in the *Treatise* and in the *Enquiry* are not exactly the same. According to the *Treatise*, she argues, the moral judge dismisses the responses of people outside an agent's narrow circle. Therefore, while the moral judge can make claims to consistency of her moral judgments, she cannot make claims to their general authority. But in the *Enquiry*, as Taylor reads it, Hume has the moral judge referring to 'humanity' and thereby avoiding this problem. No action that might lead to damage 'humanity' (the whole of the human kind) could be considered as virtuous (Taylor 2015: p. 122). However, a spectator who does not narrow the social circle of her interest needs to find another way of neutralizing the impact of 'nearness and remoteness' on responsive sentiments and the resulting varieties of sentiments and proto-moral judgments. It is unclear what this alternative way would be.

<sup>10</sup> On this issue, see McHugh 2011.

<sup>11</sup> As Brian Glenny has pointed out, Smith agrees with Hume on the claim that we have a natural propensity to focus on regular perceptual patterns and attribute what we see in these patterns to external objects. See Glenny 2011. But Glenny overlooks that, in the TMS, Smith reserves the role of sympathy to the moral realm where we cannot rely on an analogous natural propensity.

<sup>12</sup> Whether and to what extent Smith's view of sympathy departs from Hume's has been much debated. For a recent account, see McHugh 2018. But the phenomena which Hume and Smith label as 'sympathy' are not the main focus of this paper.

<sup>13</sup> In order to make the comparison, one has to distinguish between two different kinds of projective sympathy: one *altrocentric*, where the spectator focuses on the otherness of the person affected, and one *egocentric*, where the spectator imagines how she would have felt if affected in the same way. For the altrocentric sympathy, the spectator relies on speech, the facial expression and the body language of the person affected (Fleischacker 2012: pp. 295-297; see also Fricke 2012: pp. 221-230).

<sup>14</sup> 'The precise and distinct measure [for the propriety of affection] can be found nowhere but in the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator' (TMS VII.ii.1.49).

<sup>15</sup> This request of proportionality in moral judgments is different from the one Schliesser highlights (2017: 114-6). While he points to the suitability of causes and effects that constitute propriety or merit, we focus on the proportionate importance of the interests of different people involved in the situation. This, so to say, 'interpersonal proportionality' is an aspect that plays a crucial part in Smith's 'moral optics'.