

Moral Sentimentalism

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1. Introduction

Scholars across a variety of disciplines have come to believe that eighteenth-century luminaries such as David Hume and Adam Smith were correct to see our normative judgments as *sentiments*—that is, as integrating both affective and cognitive elements, both emotions and beliefs.

There are several ways to defend this thesis (Frazer 2013: 21-24). Psychologists, neuroscientists and other social scientists have gathered considerable evidence that normative judgments depend on emotions (e.g. Damasio 1994; Marcus et al. 2000; Haidt 2001; Westen 2007). Philosophers have explored the deeper implications of these empirical discoveries (e.g. Nichols 2004; Prinz 2007). Ethicists and political theorists argue that emotional engagement ought to be appreciated as positive features of our ethical and political lives (e.g. Walzer 2004; Hall 2005; Krause 2008; Frazer 2010; Slote 2010). During the first half of the twentieth century, analytic metaethicists even argued that the very concept of affectless evaluation is incoherent (Ayer 1936: 102-119; Stevenson 1944). Under a particularly strong version of this metaethical view—often defended under such names as emotivism, non-cognitivism, or expressivism—moral judgments consist only of emotion, and contain no cognitive content, whatsoever. Among metaethicists today, moderate, qualified, hybrid, or ‘neosentimentalist’ views are more popular (e.g. Gibbard 1990; D’Arms and Jacobson 2000).

Given the long-standing centrality of emotion in analytic metaethics, it is surprising that sentimentalism is only now gaining a foothold in Anglo-American political theory. Some might see this as evidence of the irrelevance of metaethics to politics. Even though the view that metaethics is normatively neutral has not been popular for nearly half a century (Gewirth 1968; Gewirth 1970; Solomon 1970), the view that political theory ought to be metaethically neutral is still widespread. Following Rawls (1996: 12-15), metaethics is often classified alongside religion, metaphysics and even comprehensive theories of normative ethics as an inappropriate starting-point for political theorizing in a democratic society characterized by a broad diversity of competing worldviews.

Yet although there may be good reasons to try to build our political theories on as non-controversial a philosophical foundation as possible, our views about the necessary or proper form of normative judgements will inevitably shape the techniques we use to try to form better ones. The main implications of metaethics for political theory are thus likely to be methodological rather than substantive. Most important for our present purposes, the standard tools of analytic political theory discussed elsewhere in this volume, which are designed to help

us formulate sound and valid arguments rather than to hone our emotional sensitivity, typically fail to speak to our sentiments.

The tension between the aspiration to make the standard methods of analytic political theory metaethically neutral and the likelihood that their appeal depends on some form of moral cognitivism can be felt throughout the present volume. In the chapter on thought experiments, for example, Brownlee and Stemplowska argue that ‘what matters in thought experiments are not (or not exclusively) raw affective states.’ Despite appearances to the contrary, they claim that this view is compatible with a ‘sophisticated version of non-cognitivism’, one which ‘accepts that, even if moral judgment is ultimately a matter of affective states, there is nonetheless a plausible distinction to be drawn between raw affective states and “gardened” or reflective ones’ (p. xx). Indeed, sentimentalists have rarely thought that one ought to follow one’s immediate moral feelings, but instead must undertake a process of reflective correction in which all one’s moral sentiments are progressively put under the test of their own evaluative scrutiny (Frazer 2010).

Later in their chapter, however, Brownlee and Stemplowska defend the permissibility of what they call ‘imaginatively opaque’ thought experiments—scenarios in which it is impossible to engage empathetically with the impossible situations in which the protagonists find themselves—on the grounds that ‘experiments are not “run” (simply) to establish how we (the experimenters) would *feel*, but to establish what we may plausibly *think*’ (p. XX). Purely cognitive consideration of characters with whom empathy is impossible may allow for the formation of proper normative judgments if evaluation is a matter of pure reason, but this imaginative opacity will prevent proper judgement under most sentimentalist theories.

If the standard methods of analytic normative theory are indeed less attractive under a sentimentalist theory than they are under a cognitivist one, then the committed sentimentalist is left with at least three options. Most emotivists in the first half of the twentieth century believed that only analytic methods qualified as philosophical. Since analytic techniques could never vindicate normative claims, normative evaluation could not be a legitimate part of philosophy. Of course, considerations of professional survival make this option rather unattractive to normative theorists. Fortunately for us, in the second half of the twentieth century normative moral and political philosophy came to establish themselves as important subfields in even the most analytic philosophy departments.

Second, the standard techniques of analytic normative theory could be reinterpreted in ways that make them a better fit with sentimentalism. Even if most analytic philosophers believe that they are only in the business of constructing sound and valid arguments, they may succeed in improving their readers’ normative judgments by encouraging psychologically holistic self-scrutiny, sparking empathy with other’s emotional experiences, and increasing sensitivity to the affectively salient features of collective life. I have argued elsewhere that Rawls (1999) succeeds in engaging our moral sentiments in exactly these ways, and that his theory of justice is far more sentimentalist than Rawls himself ever acknowledges (Frazer 2007). Many of the most successful pieces of moral and political philosophy operate similarly; just think of the emotional power of Singer (1972) equating a nearby child drowning in a mud puddle with one dying from famine in Bangladesh. Yet since most affective effects of analytic philosophy are unintended by-products of its usual methods, this alternative is unsuited for a chapter designed to provide a guide to the intentional practice of sentimentalist theory.

Only sentimentalists who are willing to violate the conventions of contemporary philosophy will deliberately seek to evoke moral sentiments in their readers. As such, my focus here will be on a third alternative available to sentimentalists, who can make common cause with all those seeking to bring a greater diversity of methods and approaches to the practice of Anglo-American political theory.

Once we accept that political theory can be more than a matter of applied logic, we can consciously develop techniques designed to spark psychologically holistic reflection in our readers. Section 2 of this chapter will discuss the implications that sentimentalism should and should not have for our approach to normative political theory. Section 3 defends the permissibility of this theoretical approach against possible objections. Section 4 concludes by drawing on the work of Hume and Smith to provide concrete advice about how to apply sentimentalist techniques successfully.

2. Sentimentalist Theory and Impassioned Practice

This is hardly the place to provide a full defense of sentimentalism on empirical, normative or conceptual grounds. Instead, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that sentimentalism in some form is true, or at least more plausible than the available alternatives. The obvious methodological response would seem to be an impassioned form of normative argumentation. Nussbaum, for one, suggests that conducting sentimentalist theory dispassionately gives the appearance of a ‘peculiar sort of self-contradiction between form and thesis.’ Consider, she suggests, an article that

argues that the emotions are essential and central in our efforts to gain understanding on any important ethical matter; and yet it is written in a style that expresses only intellectual activity and strongly suggests that only this activity matters for the reader in his or her attempts to understand. There might have been some interesting reason for writing this way; but usually, in cases of this kind, the whole issue had just not arisen. Such articles were written as they were because that was the way philosophy was being written, and sometimes because an emotive or literary style would have evoked criticism, or even ridicule (Nussbaum 1990: 21).

Nussbaum’s argument would seem to suggest that there is at least a *pro tanto* reason for those convinced of the truth of moral sentimentalism to adopt different approaches to philosophical argumentation than those adopted by their cognitivist colleagues, one stemming from the desire to avoid contradiction between form and content. In order to avoid such contradictions, it can be argued that diverse philosophical positions require different investigative methods and modes of expression (Stewart 2013: 1-12, 159-170).

In fact, however, there is neither any logical entailment nor a strong empirical correlation between a commitment to moral sentimentalism and the adoption of a distinctively impassioned approach. Sentimentalists often draw a distinction between the proper practice of philosophy and the proper practice of everyday reflection, maintaining that it is not appropriate for philosophers to express or evoke moral sentiments, but only to discover the truth about them. As a result, one

might argue that while first-order practical reflection is and ought to be impassioned, second-order philosophical investigation into the nature of this first-order reflection should not be.

There is considerable precedent for this sort of unemotional analysis of human emotion. While ancient philosophers may have disagreed about the proper place of passion in moral life, most agreed that the study of emotion was an important part of the philosophical enterprise, such as in the fields of rhetoric and poetics. Yet Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* are as dry as anything else in his corpus. Aristotle carefully examines the evocation of human emotion while failing to evoke any significant feelings in the reader (with the possible exception, depending on one's predilections, of intellectual excitement or boredom). The same dispassion can be found in the study of emotion by most experimental psychologists and sentimentalist metaethicists today. Hume is therefore guilty of no inconsistency when he insists in the *Treatise* that, when it comes to practical decision-making, 'reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions' (1740/2000: 2.3.3.4, 226), while also complaining that too often in philosophy 'it is not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence' (1740/2000: Intro.2, 3).

At the conclusion of the *Treatise*, however, Hume makes clear that 'were it proper in such a subject to bribe the reader's assent, or employ anything but solid argument', his seemingly dry anatomy of the moral sentiments is in fact 'abundantly supplied with topics to engage the affections' (1740/2000: 3.3.6.3, 394). In his later writings, Hume lost this reticence about engaging readers' affects, and used a wide variety of literary techniques in the attempt to do so (Frazer 2015).

Hume came to see that, if his readers fail to feel affective approbation for the moral sentiments that he is analyzing, his normative defence of these sentiments becomes merely descriptive. Since all evaluation contains an affective component, sentimentalist theory cannot be consistently normative without being impassioned. While there is no necessary connection between sentimentalism as such and the practice of impassioned theorizing, the conjunction of sentimentalism with a commitment to practising normative evaluation does require emotion.

If sentimentalists abide by the standard methods of analytic philosophy, they will only evoke affective approbation and disapprobation unintentionally, if at all. Their work may end up merely descriptive. Even worse, it might weaken our moral sentiments. Hume is deeply concerned that any moral sentiment can 'with facility, be refined away ... in sifting and scrutinizing it, by every captious rule of logic, in every light or position, in which it may be placed' (Hume 1985: 482). To be sure, Hume holds that those who tamp down their moral sentiments in this way are indulging in a 'false philosophy', but even accurate philosophy may have similar results.

Although the minute moral distinctions that casuists draw are often unobjectionable when considered individually, the very process of coldly drawing distinction after distinction seems to desensitize both casuists and their audience to the properly affective features of moral life. Anyone who has ever sat through a dispassionate—or even downright cheerful—discussion by analytic ethicists of scenarios involving running over people with trolleys and resorting to cannibalism on lifeboats has to worry that standard analytic methods can have precisely this effect. Nor is this problem a new one: Seneca also objected to the logic-chopping playfulness of

the ethicists of his own day. ‘It makes one ashamed’, he writes, ‘that men of our advanced years should turn a thing as serious as this into a game’ (Seneca 2004: 97).

3. Objections to Impassioned Philosophy

Before we can discuss practical techniques for successfully evoking moral sentiments in our readers, we have to address the argument that this is not an appropriate goal to be pursuing in the first place. I will focus on two important objections to the practice of impassioned philosophy: the objection from disciplinary distinctions, and the objection against manipulation.

3.1. The Objection from Disciplinary Distinctions

There is a remarkable degree of methodological conservatism in most academic disciplines. The most common criticism of anyone violating local conventions is that their work is not ‘real’: not ‘real philosophy’, ‘real political theory’, and so on. If research resembles work done outside the academy rather than in an adjacent discipline, it may not even qualify as ‘real scholarship’.

While the professional norms of each discipline may seem self-justifying to most of their practitioners, Applebaum (2000) observes that what creates an ethical justification for abiding by the duties of a particular profession is the importance of that profession for one’s larger society. If a particular vocation serves no justifiable purpose, then the internal rules of that profession are not a legitimate branch of any larger ethical system. We’re all better off without professional gladiators and professional torturers. The question is therefore whether the reigning standards of a given profession—such as the methodological norms of an academic discipline—aid in the achievement of a genuinely valuable social purpose.

The methodological standards governing analytic philosophy are less than a century old. The idea of a philosophy as a distinct discipline is slightly older. In the eighteenth century and earlier, philosophy was simply the search for general, nomothetic truth. As such, it included much of what we now call ‘science’, but still excluded activities that have something other than general truth as their aim—such as persuasive oratory and idiographic narrative, whether factual or fictional.

The principle that the search for general truth precludes the evocation of emotion has long had its defenders. Recall the young Hume’s view that when discussing ‘such a subject’ it is inappropriate to ‘employ anything but solid argument’.

Later, Smith contrasts three types of writing: narrative, didactic and rhetorical. Didactic discourse, of which philosophical writing is the paradigm, ‘proposes to put before us the arguments on both sides of the question in their true light, giving each its proper degree of influence, and has it in view to persuade no farther than the arguments themselves appear convincing’. By contrast, rhetorical discourse ‘endeavors by all means to persuade us, and for this purpose it magnifies the arguments on the one side and diminishes or conceals that might be brought’ on the other. The goal of a didactic discourse is primarily instruction, and only secondarily persuasion; the goal of rhetoric is persuasion and ‘instruction is considered only so far as it is subservient to persuasion, and no farther’ (Smith 1985: 12, i.149-150, p. 62).

Although the line between rhetorical and didactic compositions is sharply drawn, the line between didactic and narrative writing is blurrier. This is most evident in the genre of history, a form of narrative writing that incorporates significant didactic elements. The didactic power of historical and other factual narratives, moreover, suggests a sort of hybrid genre in which an author establishes ‘certain principles’ that are ‘confirmed by examples’ (Smith 1985: 17 ii.17, pp. 90-1). This hybrid approach is particularly well-suited for what Smith calls ‘the practical sciences of politics and morality or ethics’, which he complains ‘have of late been treated too much in a speculative manner’ (Smith 1985: i.102, p. 41).

If ethics and politics are treated too speculatively—that is, only in terms of nomothetic principles rather than in terms of concrete events in the lives of particular human beings—our moral sentiments may be blocked. ‘When a philosopher contemplates characters and manners in his closet’, Hume complains, ‘the general abstract view of the objects leaves the mind so cold and unmoved, that the sentiments of nature have no room to play, and he scarce feels the difference between vice and virtue’. A historian, by contrast, ‘places the objects in their true point of view’, and hence develops ‘a lively sentiment of blame and praise’ (Hume 1985: 568). In all of his post-*Treatise* writings, Hume is therefore careful to illustrate every moral and political point with concrete examples. Hume usually takes his examples from history and the classics; Smith tends to prefer everyday experiences that his readers will recognize from their own lives.

Interdisciplinarity has thus been a hallmark of moral sentimentalism from its beginning (Frazer 2016). Moral sentiments are unlikely to be evoked effectively when one strictly follows the norms of didactic, speculative eighteenth-century philosophy, let alone the norms of analytic philosophy in the twenty-first century. As such, sentimentalists can make common cause with those practising what is now called realist or non-ideal theory, overcoming the barriers between political philosophy and social science (see Jubb’s chapter in this volume).

Much of the empirical work cited by realists today is the sort of nomothetic social science that still qualifies as philosophy in the eighteenth-century sense, the kind of ‘general facts about human society’ that Rawls allows to the otherwise ignorant agents in the original position (Rawls 1999: 116). In order to integrate narrative and didactic elements in the manner advocated by Hume and Smith, sentimentalists are more likely to draw on idiographic work in history and ethnography. They are particularly likely to be drawn to the work of social scientists who favour interpretive rather than causal explanations of human behavior. In the interpretive tradition, tracing others’ narratives allow us to identify their motivations, values and worldviews, hence achieving empathetic understanding, what Weber (1978, 7-8) calls *Verstehen*. Although Weber believed that *Verstehen* is compatible with a commitment to value-neutrality, sentimentalists seek such empathetic understanding insofar as it allows for accurate, affectively-laden normative judgments.

There is a growing awareness in the social sciences that accurate accounts of particular incidents can serve as what Thacher (2006) calls ‘normative case studies’. A ‘phronetic’ social science of the sort advocated by Flyvbjerg (2001) considers such cases in order to help us develop the skills of ethical judgment required to guide public decision-making for the better. It is a friendly amendment to this agenda to understand the ethical skills being developed to consist largely in emotional, empathetic sensitivity.

In addition to joining forces with those seeking to challenge the division between normative theory and social science, sentimentalists may also ally themselves with those opposed to the division between philosophy and the rest of the humanities—especially the movement that Danto (1985: 63) calls ‘philosophy as/and/of literature.’ To be sure, turning from factual to fictional narratives poses the danger that fictions will be designed manipulatively, artificially evoking inappropriate moral sentiments. While the particular challenges that a sentimentalist faces when drawing on imaginative literature will be discussed later in this chapter, this worry suggests a second objection to the sentimentalist approach. Even if it is acceptable to challenge reigning disciplinary distinctions, one might still worry that it is unacceptable to evoke moral sentiments in one’s readers because doing so is manipulative.

3.2. The Objection Against Manipulation

Recall Hume’s contention that evoking moral sentiments is an attempt to ‘bribe the reader’s assent’ (section 2, above). On this view, evoking a reader’s sentiments might itself be ethically objectionable—a deformation of the appropriate relationship between an author and a reader, just as bribery is a deformation of the proper relationship between a citizen and an official. This moral objection holds regardless of an author’s disciplinary identity, or lack thereof.

Bentham was later to sharpen the point still further, arguing that what Hume said was merely bribery is in fact ‘a cloak, and pretense, and alignment, to despotism’. Emotionally evocative literary effects are but ‘so many contrivances for avoiding the obligation of appealing to any external standard, and for prevailing upon the reader to accept of the author’s sentiment or opinion as a reason for itself’ (Bentham 1789/1962: 2:14, 8-9).

Bentham foreshadows the hostility to evoking emotion which we find in the more recent liberal theories. Darwall (1995: 74) interprets Bentham as regarding an obligation to provide public justification ‘as a necessary condition of *liberal* public moral debate. When people make a moral claim on others, he suggests, but are unwilling to offer a reason for doing so that others could be expected to accept without already sharing those moral views, this is implicitly coercive.’ The contrast here is between the power of an authoritarian demagogue—for whom emotionally manipulative propaganda is just another means of control, no different in this respect from the secret police—and the non-coercive exchange of reasons among equals in democratic discourse.

There is, however, a regrettable slippage in this argument between the idea that public justification requires the provision of public reasons (in the sense of grounds for justification which you expect the entire community to share) and that it requires reasoning (in the sense of collective reliance on the rational faculty alone). As recent sentimentalist political theorists have pointed out, an important implication of moral sentimentalism is that our reasons—whether individual and private or public and shared—cannot come from reason alone (Krause 2008; Frazer 2010; Kingston 2011). Shared reasons imply the existence of shared feelings; this is why sympathy or empathy, the faculties by which emotions are communicated from one person to another, are so important in most versions of sentimentalism (but see Prinz 2011). It is no more despotic, coercive or manipulative for members of a political community to share emotions with one another than it is for them to provide rational arguments to one another.

Recent philosophers have struggled to provide a precise account of what constitutes manipulation, but there is a general consensus that evoking emotion is neither necessary nor sufficient for manipulation to occur. Most see manipulation as influence that is at best indifferent to whether its target adheres to the relevant standards of good judgment (Coons and Weber 2014: 11-14). This raises the question of whether these relevant standards are objectively binding or are grounded in the subjective commitments of the manipulator, the target, or both. Regardless, if all the parties involved are committed sentimentalists—and if they are objectively correct to in being so—then the ideals in question will call for the feeling of proper emotions. This is not to say that morally unacceptable forms of interpersonal manipulation are impossible among sentimentalists, but that they are just as likely to involve sophistic argumentation as they are to involve the artificial evocation of affect.

4. Techniques for Impassioned Philosophy

Simply establishing that it is permissible to evoke moral sentiments in our readers would be of little value were it impossible for us ever do so successfully. Fortunately, this sentimentalist goal is eminently achievable. Admittedly, evoking emotion is an art rather than a science, and using the techniques described below is neither necessary nor sufficient for impassioned philosophy. It is not necessary because, as has already been mentioned, analytic philosophers often end up evoking moral sentiments without even intending to do so. It is not sufficient because, if not practised with the right degree of philosophical and literary artistry, these techniques cannot be guaranteed to succeed.

4.1. Write Interesting Stories

As is now already evident, the best format for impassioned, sentimentalist normative theory is a genre combining both idiographic and nomothetic elements, both particular narratives and general philosophy. The most important thing sentimentalists should keep in mind when writing a story is that it should be interesting, both in the sense that we use the term ‘interesting’ today and in its original meaning, still dominant in the eighteenth century, of involving or engaging our interests.

The antiquated and the current uses of ‘interesting’ are closely connected. As Vermeule (2010: 41) observes, engaging our empathy with another human mind is a sure-fire way to hold our attention. **Sentimentalist theory should be filled with interesting stories, ones in which we sympathetically engage with the characters, allowing their needs and interests to become our own.** Without this engagement with another’s interests, we are likely to find ourselves left both cold and bored.

Livy, for example, interests us because ‘we enter into all the concerns of the parties and are almost as much affected with them as if we ourselves had been concerned in them’ (Smith 1985: 17, ii.27, 95-96). Via sympathy, their interests become our own. Livy and Tacitus lead us ‘so far into the sentiments and mind of the actors that they are some of the most striking and interesting passages to be met with in any history’ (Smith 1985: 20, ii.67, 113).

Well-written history is always interesting in this way, as are philosophical, didactic writings that make frequent use of well-written narratives. This is probably one of the reasons why historians and ethnographers still regularly find an audience among the educated reading public, while philosophers who are not also storytellers rarely do so.

4.2 Show, Don't Tell

Manipulative rhetoricians often succeed in arousing moral sentiments in their audiences, but they do so in ways very different from those writing in the mode that Hume and Smith advocate. The author of a well-written historical narrative, Smith points out, 'may excite grief or compassion but only by narrating facts which excite those feelings; whereas the orator heightens every incident and pretends at least to be deeply affected by them himself' (Smith 1985: 18, ii.38, 101). A good historian 'acts as if he were an impartial narrator of the facts' (Smith 1985: 7, i.82-83, 35), and 'exclamations in his own person would not suit with the impartiality he is to maintain and the design he is to have in view of narrating facts as they are without magnifying or diminishing them' (Ibid., 18, ii.40, 101).

The best writers in other genres, including the hybrid genre which is most appropriate for sentimentalist political theory, typically share the historian's characteristic 'modesty' in this regard. **When detailing their narratives, sentimentalists should refrain from telling their readers how to feel, letting their stories speak for themselves.**

Smith and Hume were both, like many of their time, admirers of the essayist Joseph Addison. While previous print moralists would harangue their readers with moral exhortation, following the model of the church sermon, Addison prefers to 'deliver his sentiments in the least assuming manner; and this would incline him rather to narrate what he had seen and heard than to deliver his opinions in his own person' (Smith 1985: 10, i.128, 53). Addison's authorial persona, like Smith's ideal moral judge, is an impartial spectator—'Mr. Spectator', as Addison calls him—who simply tells it like he sees it. The immense popularity and influence of Addison's *Spectator* is evidence of the popular power of such non-rhetorical writing.

It is a striking fact of human psychology that this more modest approach can arouse even greater emotional reactions than those aroused by direct rhetorical appeals. Smith argues that it is a 'general rule that when we mean to affect the reader deeply we must have recourse to the indirect method of description, relating the effects the transaction produced both on the actors and the spectators' (Smith 1985: 16, ii.7, 86-87). Creative writers are taught the rule 'show, don't tell', not to establish impartiality or avoid manipulation, but simply to maximize emotional impact. The fact that the same technique is the best way to achieve these two very different objectives is a happy coincidence of human psychology.

4.3. Focus on Particulars, Then Generalize

While analytic theorists often try to deduce particular conclusions from general moral principles, Smith insists that the general rules of morality should only be derived inductively. Specifically, they are to be 'formed, by finding from experience, that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstanced in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of' (Smith, 1759/1790/1984:

III.4.8, 159). **Sentimentalists should begin with empathetic consideration of particulars, only then attempting to extrapolate from these cases to more general principles, rather than vice versa.** When a general principle is stated in the abstract, we are unlikely to have any emotional reaction. When, however, it is inductively derived from a series of cases, each one of which evoked our moral sentiments, it can carry with it the force of the cases that serve as its foundation.

Even within a particular normative case study, the reader's attention is best focused on the subjective experiences of particular individuals. Smith says Tacitus is a particularly good example of an author who focuses on 'internal' micro-level phenomena rather than 'external', macro-level ones. When Tacitus fixes our attention on the psyche of a single individual, our sympathies are 'as it were concentrated, and become greatly stronger than when separated and distracted by the affecting circumstances that befell the several persons involved in a common calamity' (Smith 1985: 20, ii.66, 113).

Once we understand the individual experience of a certain event, we can then generalize to the effects of that event on relevantly similar others. It is then the empathetic understanding of particular experiences that allows us to inductively derive general principles about similar cases from the full range of human life.

It is also the empathetic understanding that each person in a statistic represents an entire subjective world of experience that can prevent large numbers from having their usual morally distorting effects. Bertrand Russell is alleged to have said that 'the mark of a civilized man is the capacity to read a column of numbers and weep', but as Vermeule (2010: 33) observes, 'on this view, none of us is really civilized.' After we have empathetically experienced the suffering of a single individual, however, learning that a troublingly large number of others have experienced something similar can have a profound emotional effect. When we are discussing global poverty, for example, we must never forget that we are discussing the lives of millions of real human beings, each of which could be recounted with the novelistic detail of the stories in Boo's (2012) account of a single Mumbai slum.

Guenther's (2013) phenomenological study of solitary confinement is a good model for how to combine Boo's focus on individual experiences with the pursuit of general philosophical conclusions. Guenther helps us understand that the experience of years of forced isolation is the phenomenological equivalent of death. Cut-off from all others, a prisoner ceases to have the inescapably social experiences that are the markers of living humanity. When we empathetically feel the horror of such living death, we understand the cruelty of subjecting even a single individual to it. We can then extrapolate to the full moral significance of subjecting thousands upon thousands of prisoners to such an experience throughout a nation's penal system. We are then also able to begin establishing normative principles about the importance of social interaction to human life more generally.

4.4. Consider Multiple Perspectives

Whenever we seek to generalize from the subjective experience of a single individual, there is a danger that our generalization will fail to capture the experiences of others. If our chosen

individual is not typical, then our generalization may prove misleading. Although we lack the imaginative and emotional resources to engage empathetically with a statistically representative sample of any large population, we can make a concerted effort to find counter-examples to any general theses, and then give the individuals involved in these counter-cases our full empathetic consideration. If the most likely potential counter-examples turn out to have experiences relevantly similar to those we have already considered, this provides important evidence in favour of our general hypothesis. Those wishing to question our generalization are always free to suggest other potential counter-examples.

In many politically important cases, however, generalizations that hold true about the subjective experiences of all individuals involved are neither possible nor desirable. Politics typically involves conflict between competing interests and worldviews. **When groups with radically different experiences of a given situation are in conflict with each other, it is appropriate to consider the perspectives of representative members of each of the conflicting groups.** The ideal moral judge, Smith famously argues, is an impartial spectator; in cases where we are naturally biased in favor of one party in a conflict, our moral sentiments will be improved if we try to overcome our initial partiality.

Smith argues that, when observing a conflict, an impartial spectator must attempt to achieve what he calls ‘divided sympathy’ (Smith 1759/1790/1984: I.ii.3.1, 34). We have to consider the experiences of those on both sides of the conflict empathetically, and try to form sensitive evaluations of each of them in turn. Doing so cannot involve a single narrative with a single protagonist, but multiple, *Rashomon*-style narratives of a given case in which the perspective of each party is given due consideration.

Academics tend to come from the political left (Gross 2013), and typically have an inclination to side with those whom they see as oppressed. But Smith warns us against this instinct, and urges us to consider the perspective of both the alleged victim and the alleged oppressor in any potential case of injustice. What our initial reaction tells us is cruel or unjust may, with greater empathetic consideration of all the parties involved, turn out to have been motivated by laudable moral sentiments, such as a commitment to the common good (Smith 1759/1790/1984: II.ii.3.8, 88-9). Neither the perspective of the powerful nor that of the powerless should be privileged. We may ultimately conclude that some current practice—modern policing, for example—is indeed oppressive, but doing so impartially requires that we consider the point of view of the police (as in Fassin 2013) as well as the policed (as in Goffman 2014).

4.5. Use Psychologically Realistic Fiction

Sentimentalist normative argumentation requires piling narrative upon narrative, but narratives are an expensive resource. All consideration of narratives is emotionally and imaginatively draining—especially when contrasted with the ease with which a clever undergraduate can construct sound and valid arguments. Any adequate narrative will demand more space than is typically possible in a journal article. And some kinds of narrative are also expensive to source, requiring years of ethnographic fieldwork or archival exploration. This raises the question of whether the narratives that sentimentalists use must be drawn from the careful, fact-checked work of historians, ethnographers and journalists, or can they just be made up—whether by theorists themselves or by professional writers of fiction?

Hume himself took a clear stand against creative writing. While poets ‘can paint virtue in the most charming colours’, their undisciplined imaginations often lead them to ‘become advocates for vice.’ By contrast, ‘historians have been, almost without exception, the true friends of virtue, and have always represented it in its proper colours’ (Hume 1985: 567). While it would be wrong to conclude that historians, ethnographers and journalists have never been guilty of emotionally manipulating their readers through the use of one-sided, unrealistic or even wholly fabricated narratives, when they have done so they have been violating the norms of their respective professions. Creative writers are not held accountable to reality in this way.

Those defending fiction under the rubric of ‘philosophy as/and/of literature’ find their inspiration in Aristotle, who maintains that ‘poetry is more philosophical and more elevated [that is, of greater ethical import] than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars’. While history recounts ‘actual events’, poetry recounts ‘the kinds of things that might occur ... the kinds of things which it suits a certain kind of person to say or do, in terms of probability or necessity’ (Aristotle 1995: 1451b, 59-61). Sentimentalists are likely to value fiction most highly in terms of its ability to trace what Nussbaum (1995: 5) calls ‘the effect of circumstances on the emotions and the inner world’ and its unparalleled efficacy in promoting ‘identification and sympathy in the reader’.

Just as fiction can describe ‘the kinds of things that might occur’, however, it can also describe the kinds of things that could never occur. **Fiction need not be realistic in all its details to be useful to sentimentalists, but if it is to show us anything real about the moral sentiments then characters’ inner worlds must be realistic, even if the outer worlds that surround them are not.** It is fine to fill a fictional case with dragons, spaceships, experience machines, and baroque trolley systems, as long as we can empathize with the three-dimensional characters trying to navigate these bizarre circumstances. In order not to distort our moral sentiments, however, writers must avoid flat characters like demonic villains and angelic heroes. The presence of such impossible people is a warning sign that readers are being manipulated.

The problem here is that, while it is always possible to check the accuracy of a factual narrative, there is no objective test for the psychological realism of a fictional narrative. All we can rely on is our own power to recognize and empathize with what we appreciate to be plausibly human states of mind. For example, it seems psychologically realistic to most readers that the protagonist of Thomson’s (1971) famous thought experiment about abortion would deeply resent being attached to an ailing violinist for nine months. Since no one has actually experienced this particular procedure, however, there is no way to check how it actually makes someone feel.

With their preference for high culture over low, academics tend to assume that great literature is more likely to be psychologically realistic than popular fiction or their own amateur storytelling. Philosophers have a particular liking for recent, philosophically-informed high fiction, such as the works of Milan Kundera, J. M. Coetzee, and David Foster Wallace. Nineteenth-century novels are also popular, from those by Jane Austen at the beginning of the century to those by Henry James at the end (the latter no doubt a favourite, at least in part, thanks to the reflected philosophical prestige from brother William).

All of these are wonderful sources for narratives, to be sure, but literary genius is by no means necessary for the purpose of sentimentalist normative argumentation. Smith’s own homely stories throughout *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—think, for example, of the unfortunate tale

of the poor man's son (Smith, 1759/1790/1984: IV.i.8, 181)—are all highly realistic examples of the kinds of effects that circumstances can have on our inner life, but none rise to the level of great literature. Thomson's is a more recent example of a successful philosopher-written narrative, as is Williams's (1981: 18) more realistic story of the spouse-rescuer with 'one thought too many.' While it is important not to underestimate the literary gifts of Smith, Williams, or Thomson, theorists without the creative genius of Kundera or James might nonetheless hope to craft serviceable fictions of this caliber.

4.6. Write in Simple, Ordinary Language

Good writers, in any genre, share sentiments with their readers. Indeed, the central thesis of Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* is that 'when the sentiment of the speaker is expressed in a neat, clear, plain and clever manner, and the passion or affection he is possessed of and intends, by sympathy, to communicate to his hearer is plainly and cleverly hit off, then and then only the expression has all the force and beauty that language can give it' (Smith 1985: 6, i.v.56, 25). The *Lectures* is by and large a how-to guide designed to help Smith's students achieve this goal. Sentimentalists today would still be well-advised to follow his stylistic suggestions.

A recurring theme in Smith's lectures is the contrast between the straightforward lucidity of Jonathan Swift and the opaque floridity of the third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury, Smith explains, fell prey to a mistake to which we are all vulnerable. 'The idea we form of a good style is almost contrary to that which we commonly hear', Smith explains. 'Hence it is that we conceive the further one's style is removed from the common manner . . . it is so much the nearer to the purity and perfection we have in view' (Smith 1985: 8, i.103, 42). This belief is, of course, mistaken. **In order to evoke sentiments in their readers effectively, writers should use a style of prose continuous with the ordinary language that is the normal vehicle of emotional communication in everyday life.**

Academics today would never be attracted to the aristocratic excesses of Shaftesbury's antiquated mode of writing. Instead of aping the baroque floridity of aristocratic oratory, most philosophers now seek to gain prestige by aping the dry, technical style that predominates in high-status STEM fields. Yet there are a number of ways in which these seemingly opposed modes of artificial communication are surprisingly similar. For example, the tempo of normal speech varies considerably with the matter being discussed, but both artificial modes maintain a constant rhythm even when 'this uniform and regular cadence is not at all proper' (Smith 1985: 5, i.50, 22). Both artificial modes make everyone sound the same, whereas in natural communication 'when all other circumstances are alike the character of the author must make the style different' (Smith 1985: 8, i.97, 40). The list could be continued; in each case, artificial styles prevent emotional reactions in readers while everyday language encourages them.

Perhaps the most common way of distinguishing artificial modes of communication from ordinary speech is through the use of foreign terms. Greek or Latin words and phrases—and, even worse, Latin grammatical structures—lend an unearned air of authority to English prose, but at the price of turning it into something that is not quite English. Bad writing, both in Smith's

day and our own, often has ‘a great deal of the air of translations from another language’ (Smith 1985: 2, i.10, 7).

Smith argues that the words we use ‘should be natives ... of the language we speak in’. As always, this rule is justified in terms of the best means of evoking sentiments in our readers. ‘Foreigners’, Smith explains, ‘though they may signify the same thing, never convey the idea with such strength as those [words that] we are acquainted with’ (Smith 1985: 2, i.1, 3). Just think of the effects of choosing a word like ‘*ressentiment*’ over ‘resentment’. The gain in prestige is hardly worth the loss of evocative force. To be sure, Smith admits that foreign words ‘may be naturalized by time and be as familiar to us as those which are originally our own, and may then be used with great freedom’ (Smith 1985: 2, i.1, 3). Only then can these words connect with everyday life and the speech found within it, and hence carry the emotional force of these associations with lived experience.

If a neologism is needed, it should be constructed from one or more terms found in everyday English. Smith praises Greek philosophers for using only words found in their own language even when coining new terms of art (Smith 1985: 2, i.4, 4). In later centuries, German authors made use of a similar practice. Contrast Freud’s *das Es*, *das Ich*, and *das Über-Ich* to his English translator’s id, ego and superego.

The effect of all of these recommendations will be to narrow the gulf between political theory and all other forms of discourse, both elite and popular. This loss of disciplinary distinctiveness, however, is to be celebrated rather than mourned. For one thing, it is likely to increase the ‘impact’ of political theory outside the academy. Lay readers are happy to learn from academics, but only if these academics are willing to speak in the interesting, unavoidably impassioned language of normal human life. To be sure, public intellectuals are often excoriated for failing to produce ‘real scholarship’, but we have already seen that this accusation should carry no ethical weight.

‘Be a philosopher’, Hume famously urges us, ‘but amidst all your philosophy be still a man’ (Hume 1748/1776/2000: 1.6, 7). Since academics must, unavoidably, remain human beings, we should not be ashamed that the same sort of impassioned argumentation that is persuasive among the general population is also the best form of argumentation available to us.

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