Sovereign Sentiments: Conceptions of Self-Control in David Hume, Adam Smith, and Jane Austen

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Sovereign Sentiments: Conceptions of Self-Control in David Hume, Adam Smith, and Jane Austen

A dissertation presented by:

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To:

The Philosophy Department

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the subject of Philosophy

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Abstract

The mention of “self-control” calls up certain stock images: Saint Augustine struggling to renounce carnal pleasures; dispassionate Mr. Spock of *Star Trek*; the dieter faced with tempting desserts. In these stock images *reason* is almost always assigned the power and authority to govern passions, desires, and appetites. But what if *the passions* were given the power to rule—what if, instead of sovereign reason, there were sovereign sentiments? My dissertation examines three sentimentalist conceptions of self-control: David Hume’s conception of “strength of mind”; Adam Smith’s conception of “self-command”; and Jane Austen’s examination of these conceptions.

Hume divests reason of motivational power, and with this new moral psychology comes a new conception of self-control. Humean strength of mind is indirect, artificial, and social—a regulatory system that humans cannot develop until societal systems of government and regulations have been instituted. Smith accepts Hume’s anti-rationalist arguments, but he emphasizes that only certain sentiments are *fit* to rule. And he argues that self-control develops without the sophisticated external conditions posited by Hume. Smithian self-command is the capacity to modify one’s feelings in accordance with a regulative ideal: the sentiments of an imagined impartial spectator. Austen responds to these conceptions, illustrating and complicating them. *Sense and Sensibility* explores the difficulties of discerning the feelings of others, and *Persuasion* dramatizes the difficulties of distinguishing strength of mind in another, offering sets of characters for the reader’s scrutiny, each with a competing claim to strength of mind. Taken together, Austen’s novels offer a fuller and more delicately shaded depiction of the sort of self-control that Hume and Smith imagine in their philosophical works.
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When Anne Elliot of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* meets the lovelorn and grieving Captain Benwick, she “venture[s] to recommend a larger allowance of prose in his daily study”, suggesting some unspecified “works of our best moralists” as a tonic for the copious quantities of poetry he has been ingesting. But she then reflects on her own lovelorn state and fears “that, like so many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination.”

Writing a dissertation on self-control has provided many such moments of reflection, and many such moments of fear. And it has impressed on me the fact that “self”-control is so very often a social endeavor, one where many other people are involved in helping you regulate your emotions and in getting you to do what you should do. I would like to thank some of the many people who have helped, guided, and supported me in this project.

First and foremost, thank you to Alison Simmons for encouraging me from the very beginning, for reading drafts in all states, for insightful and incisive comments, for long meetings and quick responses to frantic emails, for advice on every aspect of academic life, and for keeping me quite generally on the right path. She has been and will continue to be an inspiration to me as a philosopher, a writer, a teacher, and a mentor.

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INTRODUCTION

My good Simmias, I fear this is not the right exchange to attain virtue, to exchange pleasures for pleasures, pains for pains and fears for fears, the greater for the less like coins, but that the only valid currency for which all these things should be exchanged is wisdom. With this we have real courage and moderation and justice and, in a word, true virtue, with wisdom, whether pleasures and fears and all such things be present or absent. Exchanged for one another without wisdom such virtue is only an illusory appearance of virtue; it is in fact fit for slaves, without soundness or truth, whereas, in truth, moderation and courage and justice are a purging away of all such things, and wisdom itself is a kind of cleansing or purification.¹

All Human Creatures are sway’d and wholly govern’d by their Passions, whatever fine Notions we may flatter our Selves with; even those who act suitably to their Knowledge, and strictly follow the Dictates of their Reason, are not less compell’d so to do by some Passion or other, that sets them to Work, than others, who bid Defiance and act contrary to Both, and whom we call Slaves to their Passions.²

How do we regulate our emotions? How do we bring ourselves to do what we think is best? These questions are at the heart of practical philosophy and they have been treated throughout history by a variety of different advisers. Depending on your choice of counsel, you may be urged to eradicate the influence of the emotions on your conduct,³ or to pray for grace and the strength to restrain those passions which are signs of your fallen nature,⁴ or to educate and train your emotions through reason and habit.⁵ And while many of your potential advisers will disagree about the best particular methods,

¹ Plato (1997), 60 (Phaedo 69b-c).
² Mandeville (1732), 31.
³ E.g. Plato’s Phaedo (as represented by the first epigraph), and Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations, especially Book III.
⁴ The question of what we should do with the passions presupposes that humans are capable of any control at all, but there is also a long-running tradition of claiming that humans are not capable of controlling their passions on their own. According to some positions, we need the grace of God to achieve any control over our passions [e.g. Senault (1649), Part I, second treatise]. According to others, the passions are signs of our fallen nature, to act on the basis of passion is to do evil, and to believe oneself capable of self-improvement is sinful pride [e.g. Calvin (1960), especially II.1].
⁵ E.g. Descartes (1985), especially articles 48-50.
the overwhelming majority will claim that reason should govern and direct your emotions and action. The emphasis on rational self-control, and on reason as the governor of the passions, was so strong that in the mid-eighteenth century, David Hume could offer this summary:

Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and to assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates. Every rational creature, ’tis said, is obliged to regulate his actions by reason; and if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct, he ought to oppose it, ’till it be entirely subdued, or at least brought to a conformity with that superior principle. (T 2.3.3.1; SBN 413)

It was (and perhaps still is) thoroughly commonplace to conceive of the human being as made up of two prominent parts: mind and body, head and heart, reason and passion. And it was just as commonplace to discern an obvious hierarchical structure between those parts, with reason (or the mind, or the head) as the proper ruler. Rational hegemony is the predominant view throughout the history of western thought, from the severe doctrines of Plato’s Phaedo, to the friendlier, though still hierarchical recommendations of Descartes’ Passions of the Soul.

But how is reason supposed to accomplish this command and control, and what explains those many cases where it seems as though reason issues a command, but that command is not heeded? These questions are not easily answered, and, indeed, when one looks to the many historical accounts of rational self-control, one is struck by just how little is said about how self-control works. Are reason’s dictates supposed to be forceful commands? Must they be backed by desire7 or perhaps by divine influence8? Many authors writing at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century observed that reason seemed weak and incapable of actually executing its

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6 See the Abbreviations key at the end of this dissertation for a comprehensive overview of abbreviations and citation practices used extensively in this dissertation.

7 This seems to be Alexander Pope’s view in The Essay on Man when he writes, “On life’s vast ocean diversely we sail, / Reason the card, but passion is the gale” (2008, 107-8).

8 This seems to be Senault’s view, see (1649) Part I, second treatise.
commands.\footnote{McIntyre discusses various authors who noted the weakness and ineffectiveness of reason in the face of the passions (2006a). See also Kaye (1988), lxxx n. 2 for further sources.} Gone was the easy assumption about reason’s ruling power, colorfully imagined by Plato as the power of a charioteer over his team of horses, and in its place, a palpable worry about the impotence of reason and the prospects for encouraging and effecting virtuous self-improvement.

In the passage quoted above, Hume is describing a historical consensus, a consensus he goes on to undermine by flagrantly claiming that reason cannot play the role of governor so often assigned to it. Hume and several of his fellow sentimentalis ts argue that moral rationalism, associated at the time with the views of Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Clarke, William Wollaston, and others, is a flawed and perhaps even bankrupt position. There is a marked break and turn here, but what were the key points of opposition between the moral sentimentalists and rationalists, and what were the commitments of the new sentimentalist framework that Hume and others were developing?\footnote{The four oft-cited sentimentalists are Ashley Anthony Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith, although Shaftesbury and Hutcheson are more appropriately termed “moral sense” theorists. This dissertation focuses on Hume and Smith and leaves Shaftesbury and Hutcheson to the side. Additionally, given the scope of this dissertation, I focus only on the sentimentalists’ opposition to the rationalists. A full account of sentimentalism and its commitments would also have to consider the sentimentalists’ opposition to egoism and to natural law theory, as well as to the more overtly religious moralists.} Since this is a large and complicated topic, I will focus on two major points of disagreement between the rationalists and the sentimentalists, one epistemological and one psychological.\footnote{I am indebted to Korsgaard (1986) and Kauppinen (2014a; 2014b) here.} For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will take Clarke as a representative rationalist, and I will take Hume and Smith as representative sentimentalists.\footnote{I acknowledge that this oversimplifies many differences within these schools of thought, and can only plead considerations of space in my defense. I take these two points of disagreement to be central enough and basic enough that they helpfully differentiate the two kinds of positions, and in a way that is applicable to many of the figures that can be identified on either side.}

The deepest and most basic difference between the moral rationalists and the moral sentimentalists of the long eighteenth century is revealed in the dispute over the foundation of
morality—whether morality is ultimately founded on reason or on sentiment. Questions about this foundation often turn into questions about how we judge or know what is right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, proper or improper; that is, they turn into epistemic questions about how human beings make “moral distinctions”. Where a rationalist like Clarke holds that “necessary and eternal” relations determine moral distinctions, and that these relations can be discovered through reason, a sentimentalist like Smith holds that all moral distinctions are ultimately determined by “immediate sense and feeling”, and thus that we judge that something is right or wrong by first feeling a moral sentiment in response to it (TMS VII.iii.2.7). As Smith claims, “nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling” (TMS VII.iii.2.7).

In addition to quarreling about how we discover moral distinctions, rationalists and sentimentalists also quarrel over the question of moral motivation, of how we are moved to do what we believe is good, proper, right, or obligatory. Rationalists like Clarke argue that reason and our “understanding or knowledge of the natural and necessary relations, fitnesses, and proportions of things” directs and “determine[s]” the wills of all rational creatures. Through reason we discover what is right or fitting for us to do, and reason (somehow) thereby motivates us to do that thing. But sentimentalists like Hume argue that the nature of reason is such that it cannot motivate action or suppress passion: “reason is perfectly inert, and can never either prevent or produce any action or affection” (T 3.1.1.8; SBN 458). For Hume, reason alone cannot influence the will, and all our actions are motivated by feelings—by desires, passions, sentiments, or psychological propensities.

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14 See also TMS III.4.8, and see, e.g., Hume, T 3.1.2.1 (SBN 470).


16 Hume is here referring to his arguments at T 2.3.3 (SBN 413-18). These arguments have been contested by many commentators, and many have weighed in on the nature of the disagreement between Hume and his rationalist targets.
Compared to the rationalists, then, we can see the sentimentalists as holding an *expanded conception of the role of sentiment* in moral judgment and action, and a *restricted conception of the role of reason*. Moral distinctions are ultimately founded on the affective responses of human beings, and human conduct and action springs from affective states like desire and passion. Crucially, to restrict the role of reason is *not* to oust reason from the realm of morality entirely. The sentimentalists restrict reason to important but *ancillary* roles, where it assists by working on or with perceptions, desires, and sentiments. *Reason alone* may not have a role in evaluation and action, but *reason in conjunction with sentiment, imagination, and perception* is of great use. In the case of evaluative judgment, reason helps to discover facts of the matter and to perform inferential and causal reasoning. In the case of action, reason helps to discover the best means toward one's ends. Other activities formerly associated with reason, including judgment and reflection, lose their purely rational connotations and take on wider connotations of feeling and imagination.\(^{17}\)

These sentimentalist commitments to the restricted role of reason are well-known, but one consequence of them deserves further study. As we just saw, Hume argues that, “reason is perfectly inert, and can never either prevent or produce any action or affection” (T 3.1.1.8; SBN 458). He then famously concludes that “[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (T 2.3.3.4; SBN 415). But if reason is out of the picture, how exactly can Hume account for our ability to govern the passions? More generally, and for anyone holding the sentimentalist commitment to the restricted role of reason, can there be

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\(^{17}\) See Nazar (2012) and Frazer (2012) for further discussion of the contours of rationalism and sentimentalism in Enlightenment thought.
anything like the regulation and government of the passions? Or is all conduct and action at the whim of whichever passion happens to be strongest or most violent?18

In this dissertation, I examine three attempts to respond to these questions and to show how sentimentalist self-control could work. In Chapter One, I focus on Hume’s conception of “strength of mind”, arguing that human beings cannot pervasively cultivate this virtue until societal systems of government have been instituted. For Hume, I have little do with the direct regulation of my passions, for they are modified by the social structures within which I am embedded, and through the social interactions in which I am engaged.

In Chapters Two and Three, I focus on Adam Smith’s conception of self-command, looking first at the moral psychology of self-command, and then at the normativity of Smithian self-command. I argue that we should dismiss the traditional reading of Smithian self-command as Stoic, as well as newer interpretations that require us to saddle Smith with more rationalist conceptions of self-control. I show how Smith thoroughly “sentimentalizes” self-command, accounting for this capacity from within his sentimentalist system, and in a way that coheres with his anti-rationalist commitments. For Smith, self-command is the capacity to govern one’s feelings in accordance with a regulative ideal: the sentiments of an imagined impartial spectator. I then argue that the sentiments we feel when we take up the standpoint of this spectator are authoritative over our other sentiments because this standpoint is functionally and epistemically superior to other evaluative standpoints. I conclude these chapters on Smith by addressing several objections to my reading and to Smith’s view more generally.

In Chapter Four, I turn away from explicitly philosophical treatments of the questions about sentimentalist self-control and to Jane Austen’s literary treatment of these questions in her novels. I argue that Austen’s novels offer a sentimentalist conception of self-control, focusing on her treatment

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18 A view suggested by the second epigraph, from Mandeville.
of “self-command” in *Sense and Sensibility* and on her treatment of “strength of mind” in *Persuasion*. Using narrative techniques that would be less available to philosophers like Hume and Smith, Austen brings us to recognize our epistemic and sympathetic limitations, as well as the difficulties of discerning self-control in other people and of cultivating it in ourselves. In this way, she illustrates but also complicates a sentimentalist conception of self-control.
CHAPTER ONE

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PASSIONS AND HUMEAN STRENGTH OF MIND

A standard Early Modern treatise on the passions and their government begins by explaining that, given the nature of the passions, they must be governed.¹ According to Francis Bragge’s 1708 text, *A Practical Treatise of the Regulation of the Passions*, ungoverned passions make us miserable, agitating the mind, causing us to fly off after objects which only contribute to further misery, and turning us from our true good.² A standard treatise would go on, as Bragge’s does, to outline how to order and govern the passions properly, to describe how properly governed passions become virtues, and then to provide remedies and practical guidance for the reader. Properly governing one’s passions would be shown to result in a highly desirable state of mental tranquility. The way to such a calm and peaceful state of mind, for Bragge and for many others, is through reasoning about the true value of objects and the true good of the human being, reflecting on Scripture and the example of Christ, and training one’s desires and aversions so that they contribute to happiness on earth and salvation hereafter.

Hume’s well-known pronouncements about reason and the passions in the *Treatise*, which we looked at briefly in the Introduction, could suggest that he will completely overthrow the standard position on rational self-control and proclaim that the passions are ungovernable, virtue impossible,

¹ I describe a representative kind of treatise, one which assumes that human beings can control their passions to some degree, and that the passions should not be eradicated but trained and governed. See also Senault (1649); Reynolds (1640); Ayloffe (1700).

² See Bragge (1708), Chapter 1, Section 1.
and mental tranquility out of our reach. But this is not Hume’s view. On his account, the internal conflict that we so often experience is conflict between various passions, including those that are often misidentified as reason and its products, namely, the calm passions. The calm passions “produce little emotion in the mind”, by which Hume means that we can experience a calm passion without feeling agitated, disturbed, or swept up by it.3 These passions feel calm and tranquil (T 2.3.3.8; SBN 417).

Further, Hume defines the quality of “strength of mind” as “the prevalence of the calm passions over the violent”, and suggests that this is possible for some people, some of the time, according to their temper (T 2.3.3.10; SBN 418). So, where the traditional moralists entreat us to govern our passions by reason in order to achieve mental tranquility and happiness, Hume claims that this desirable state depends on our achieving strength of mind, or the “motivational prevalence” of the calm passions (T 2.3.4.10; SBN 419).

For Hume, then, removing reason from the picture does not leave us with unregulated and unregulatable passions. But how do we achieve this regulation? How can we cultivate strength of mind, bringing the calm passions to prevail over the violent? Several recent commentators have found Hume to be surprisingly silent on this topic. James Harris, for example, writes: “Book Two, when seen in the context provided by the literature on the government of the passions, is striking principally in so far as there is no mention made of techniques by means of which the passions can be ordered and subdued ….”5 I agree with Harris and others who have argued that while Hume has much to say about

3 “Emotion” is a semi-technical term for Hume, often referring to a motion of the “spirits” or of the imagination as it runs from one passion, impression, or idea, to another, along the rails of association and relation. Hume’s terms “passion” and “sentiment” correspond more readily to our term “emotion.” See Paxman (2015) and Radcliffe (2015) for two recent accounts of how best to understand this distinction between calm and violent passion.

4 I borrow this phrase from Radcliffe (2015), 547.

5 Harris (2009), 139. See also Paxman (2015); Radcliffe (2015); Tolonen (2013), especially 1-17; Harris (2015); Gill (2006); McIntyre (2006a); McIntyre (2006b); McIntyre (2000). Others have argued that Hume has much more to say about strength of mind and its cultivation than is often noticed; see, e.g. McCullough (2014); Abramson (2002).
the intricate interplay of passions and principles, he has much less to say about how we cultivate strength of mind and achieve command of our passions. Hume’s interest in the *Treatise* seems to lie in the meticulous study of the principles and phenomena of human nature, while the more practical topics of self-reform and self-improvement are left to other texts and other authors.⁶

But perhaps Hume had good reasons for his relative silence on these issues, reasons stemming from his conviction that strength of mind would not admit of cultivation in the way that many of his contemporaries and predecessors had suggested. In this chapter, I argue that attention to Hume’s discussion of artificial virtue, especially the virtue of allegiance to government, reveals a complex view of the limitations on human efforts at self-reform. On Hume’s view, while a few rare individuals may possess native strength of mind, this virtue cannot be pervasive in societies until externally-imposed regulative and governing structures have been instituted in those societies. That is, in most people and in all societies, strength of mind has sophisticated enabling conditions—external government must be established, governors must be selected, and a system of rules, regulations, and punishments must be in place.

In Part One, I piece together a picture of strength of mind, drawing from Book Two of the *Treatise*. I sketch Hume’s comments on how we could strengthen the calm passions and bring them to have motivational prevalence, thereby achieving strength of mind. In Part Two, I consider some significant limitations on our ability to cultivate strength of mind, drawing from Hume’s account of the “natural abilities” in *Treatise* 3.3.4, and his account of the artificial virtues in *Treatise* 3.2. Reading Hume’s discussion of artificial virtue, especially the virtue of allegiance to government, alongside his claims about strength of mind and the calm passions reveals that strength of mind shares certain features with the artificial virtues. I then consider how best to classify strength of mind, and I conclude

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⁶ This focus is perhaps a result of Hume’s self-conscious refusal to engage in “painting” in the *Treatise*. See T 3.3.6.3-6 (SBN 619-21).
that strength of mind is an atypical virtue, resisting classification. In Part Three, I briefly consider this view of strength of mind in a wider context, arguing that, compared with traditional models of self-control and the government of the passions, Humean strength of mind is strikingly indirect, artificial, and social.  

Part One: Humean Strength of Mind

Hume’s anatomy of the passions in Book Two of the Treatise is a piece of his “science of man”, and is no less intricate than his analysis of human understanding. Hume reveals us to be dizzyingly complex creatures, propelled by a variety of impulses and propensities, which are themselves structured and directed by an array of principles. A full account of Hume’s anatomy of the passions is beyond the scope of this project, but we can grasp the core of his view by focusing on his conception of passion, on his distinction between calm and violent passions, and on the mechanisms which contribute to the strengthening of calm passions. In the next part, I argue that while Hume may have the resources to explain how it is possible for the calm passions to prevail over the violent, he is also aware that there are certain propensities in human nature that cause the calm passions regularly to fail to motivate our actions. We can explain how it is that the calm passions can prevail over the violent, but we cannot, without recourse to artificial and external checks, be confident that they will so prevail.

For Hume, passions are perceptions of the mind—“impressions of reflection” in his terminology. They are sometimes produced by bodily pains and pleasures, sometimes by the

7 A word on terminology: “self-control” is our most familiar term for the capacity under consideration here, the capacity for controlling, regulating, and governing the emotions. “Self-command” is Adam Smith’s term for this capacity, and “strength of mind” is Hume’s term for it. As will become clear, Hume’s “strength of mind” is different from Smith’s “self-command”, but I treat them as picking out the same basic capacity for self-control.

8 For a recent and very thorough treatment of Hume’s Book Two account of our passions and their interplay, see McCullough (2014).

9 For helpful general discussions of Hume’s account of the passions, see Schmitter (2014); Buckle (2012); Alanen (2006).
perception of objects, and sometimes by a combination of impressions and ideas (T 2.1.1; SBN 275-6). The passions often have objects (for example, as in the case of my fear of the scorpion), but they are not properly said to represent their objects. That is, passions may be joined to ideas, which do represent objects, but they are not themselves “copies of” anything. Passions also have a phenomenal feel (violent or calm, pleasant or uneasy, etc.), and they can motivate action. Indeed, all motives are properly understood as passions for Hume, for the class of passions includes desires, or “direct passions.” The experience of perceiving and fearing a scorpion, for example, is a complex moment, involving impressions of sensation, ideas, impressions of reflection, and impulses to action.

Hume draws several distinctions within the class of passions, including the distinction between calm and violent passion. There is some debate over how best to understand this distinction, but most agree that the important difference between a calm and a violent passion is in the felt quality of each. The calm passions produce little to no agitation (or “emotion”) in the mind, which leads them to be mistaken for the operations of reason (T 2.3.3.8; SBN 417). The violent passions, on the other hand, feel disruptive, turbulent, and uneasy. Hume includes in the class of calm passions two kinds of calm desires and tendencies: “either certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence and resentment, the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil, consider’d merely as such” (T 2.3.3.8; SBN 417). Hume’s class of the violent

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10 This is a complicated issue that I cannot do justice to here. For further discussion, see, inter alia, Garrett, Don (2006a); Cohon and Owen (1997); Sayre-McCord (1997).

11 But not all passions are motives—pride and humility are explicitly discussed by Hume as not producing any impulse to action; see T 2.2.6.3 (SBN 367). Hume’s distinction between direct and indirect passions is an important part of his anatomy of the passions, but since it does not play an important role in his discussion of strength of mind, I do not discuss it here. See McIntyre (2000) for a discussion of the indirect and direct passions which briefly connects these to the question of strength of mind and its cultivation.

12 Several commentators have observed that Hume seems to be following Francis Hutcheson in this distinction. See, for example, McIntyre (2006a, 2000); Immerwahr (1992). There is a large body of literature on Hume’s taxonomy of the passions, and I do not engage with that literature here. See Fieser (1992) for an overview of this discussion.

13 See Paxman (2015); Buckle (2012); Harris (2009); Immerwahr (1992).
passions includes lust and a desire for revenge “independent of all considerations of pleasure and advantage to myself” (T 2.3.3.9; SBN 418). Hume’s examples here indicate that the calm passions are standardly more like dispositions than occurrent flashes of emotion.

How could a calm passion like “the general appetite to good” ever be capable of countering and prevailing over lust or revenge? Hume distinguishes calm and violent passions from weak and strong passions, and he claims that it is not the case that the calm passions are always weaker than the violent:

"Tis evident passions influence not the will in proportion to their violence, or the disorder they occasion in the temper; but on the contrary, that when a passion has once become a settled principle of action, and is the predominant inclination of the soul, it commonly produces no longer any sensible agitation. As repeated custom and its own force have made every thing yield to it, it directs the actions and conduct without that opposition and emotion, which so naturally attend every momentary gust of passion. We must, therefore, distinguish betwixt a calm and a weak passion; betwixt a violent and a strong one. (T 2.3.4.1; SBN 418-9)

The influence of a passion on action is thus a function of its strength or lack thereof, not of its felt qualities. If a calm passion becomes a “settled principle of action” or “the predominant inclination of the soul”, it will exert steady, strong, and calm influence over conduct and action. Hume suggests here that strengthening the calm passions, and thus cultivating strength of mind, involves cultivating such calm, steady influences through custom and habituation (developing “good habits” as we might now say). And a few sections following this remark about the role of custom, Hume adds that reflection and resolution will also play an important role. He writes, “Generally speaking, the violent passions have a more powerful influence on the will; tho’ tis often found, that the calm ones, when corroborated by reflection, and seconded by resolution, are able to controul them in their most furious movements” (T 2.3.8.13; SBN 438).

It seems that Hume’s replacement for reason in the government of the passions is calm passion. Hume avoids the language of philosophers like Bishop Butler, making no claims about the
“manifest authority” or “natural supremacy” of these passions.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, in a letter to Francis Hutcheson, Hume suggests that the distinction between a powerful principle and an authoritative principle is a hollow one. Hume writes, “[y]ou seem here to embrace Dr Butler’s Opinion in his Sermons on human Nature; that our moral Sense has an Authority distinct from its Force and Durableness, & that because we always think it ought to prevail. But this is nothing but an Instinct or Principle, which approves of itself upon reflection, and that is common to all of them.”\textsuperscript{15} Instead, Hume observes that the calm passions, when strengthened into settled principles of action, can counter and negate the force of violent passions, securing us mental tranquility and constancy in action. Insofar as we desire mental tranquility, it is in our interest to endeavor to strengthen the calm passions, but there is nothing special about their nature—they are not inherently authoritative or superior to the other passions.

Taken at face value, what Hume tells us about strengthening the calm passions seems quite platitudinous: develop good habits, reflect on your motives for action and check your means-end reasoning, and resolve to act as would best achieve your considered interest. Several authors have recently attempted to develop or supplement these remarks, filling in this picture of how custom and reflection work to strengthen the calm passions. Jane McIntyre suggests that the calm passions might gain strength by being shared with many other individuals, and by being communicated through sympathy. A calm passion like “love of life” (T 2.3.3.8; SBN 417) seems to be constant and universal, and so could be strengthened by being shared with a multitude of others.\textsuperscript{16} James Harris offers a similar view, focusing on the strengthening effects of sympathy and sociability, and arguing that “the intense sociability of human beings of human beings both enables and necessitates the regulation of

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\textsuperscript{14} See Butler (1991), 351.
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\textsuperscript{15} Hume (2011), 47 (Letter 19, January 10, 1743).
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\textsuperscript{16} McIntyre (2006b), referring to EPM 9.9 (SBN 275) and T 2.1.11.19 (SBN 324). See also McCullough (2014).
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I agree with these authors that these are promising lines to pursue in our search for an account of strengthening the calm passions, but I think that we should first consider some of Hume’s more cautious claims about cultivating strength of mind, and about attempts at self-improvement more generally. Indeed, pulling together Hume’s claims about the obstacles to cultivating strength of mind will help us to see why social mechanisms and indirect methods work in strengthening the calm passions, and why more individual and direct methods do not. But, as I will argue, gathering these claims will also complicate our understanding of strength of mind, for, as we will see, this virtue does not fit easily into Hume’s classificatory scheme.

Part Two: Limitations on Cultivating Strength of Mind

We have gleaned an account of strength of mind from Book Two of the Treatise. Hume claims that although reason cannot govern the passions, calm passions can counter violent passions, and if they regularly prevail over them, we can achieve strength of mind and the attendant mental tranquility. It may not be proper to say that the calm passions “govern” the violent, but the calm passions can be the dominant forces in us, reliably influencing our conduct and action. However, Hume is very aware of the limitations of attempts at strengthening the calm passions, cultivating strength of mind, and generally engaging in self-improvement. Not only does one’s degree of strength of mind seem dependent on one’s general temperament for Hume, strength of mind also seems to be severely constrained by an ineradicable principle of human nature. In this part, I first consider whether Humean strength of mind is best understood as a “natural ability” and thereby not admitting of any cultivation at all. I then turn to Hume’s account of artificial virtue, which offers insight into how Hume conceives of our ability to reform or alter our temperament and passions. Bringing Hume’s discussion

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17 Harris (2009), 137; I return to Harris’ view, which is close to my own, in Part Three below.
of the origin of government to bear on the question of cultivating strength of mind reveals that Hume thinks that our efforts will be regularly undermined and blocked by our natural tendency to pursue the proximate over the remote, even when the remote is known to be in our greater interest. Hume’s argument reveals that, by and large, human beings will not be able to strengthen the calm passions or achieve strength of mind without the institution of government and the imposition of a large-scale system of rules and regulations. External government enables the government of the passions, and with the establishment of magistrates and sanctions comes the possibility of stable regulation of the passions.

Section 2.1: Temperament and Natural Abilities

In one of the few discussions of strength of mind in the Treatise, Hume claims that the motivational prevalence of the calm passions will be determined according to the “general character or present disposition of the person” (T 2.3.3.10; SBN 418, emphasis original). And a few sections later, he claims that the motivational prevalence of the calm passions will “depend, in a great measure, on the peculiar temper and disposition of every individual” (T 2.3.8.13; SBN 437). This connection between temperament and strength of mind suggests that, for Hume, one’s ability to strengthen the calm passions, or to restrain the violent, will be determined by one’s temperament, and that strength of mind may be a quality more like wit or cheerfulness than justice or honesty.

Although Hume does not explicitly discuss strength of mind in the sections on wit, cheerfulness, and other “natural abilities” in Book Three of the Treatise, he does refer to a cluster of traits that are associated with strength of mind, arguing that these can be properly understood as virtues, even though they seem to be “invariable by any art or industry” (T 3.3.4.4; SBN 609). Hume lists “industry, perseverance, patience, activity, vigilance, application, constancy … temperance, frugality, economy, resolution …” as examples of such “invariable” and involuntary traits (T 3.3.4.7;
These are all qualities that we judge to be useful to their possessor, and of which we approve, even though they are “involuntary”:

“Constancy, fortitude, magnanimity”, “temperance” and “resolution”, and many other qualities are said to be “involuntary and necessary”—the kinds of qualities that are “natural” to a temper and “impossible” to change. It looks as though one either gets dealt a lucky hand, with strength of mind, or at least patience or prudence as one of the cards, or one does not. And bad luck for you if your hand includes “prodigality, luxury, irresolution, uncertainty” (T 3.3.4.7; SBN 611).

If one’s strength of mind is determined by one’s temperament, and temperament is inalterable, then Hume should have very little to say about how strength of mind is cultivated, for it would turn out that it is not cultivable. In this case, either one has native strength of mind or one does not, and no amount of advice, philosophical therapy, or sheer willpower could change that. But this may be too strong, for while it may be the case that I cannot directly and completely change my temperament, Hume certainly does not think that human beings are utterly incapable of growth and development.19 There must be some methods available to us, some ways to modify or correct the temperament we are each given by nature.20 Indeed, Hume’s discussion of the artificial virtues in Treatise 3.2 provides

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18 In the parallel discussion of “qualities useful to ourselves” in the second Enquiry, “strength of mind” is mentioned along with discretion, industry, frugality, and other similar qualities (EPM 6.8-15; SBN 236-9).

19 See Abramson (2015) for a more extended discussion of the question of the inalterability of the natural virtues and abilities.

20 Although I cannot discuss them here, Hume’s four essays on happiness (“The Epicurean”, “The Stoic”, “The Platonist”, and “The Skeptic”) treat this theme as well. I choose not to discuss these essays here as there are tricky interpretive questions to be decided about whether we see Hume’s own views anywhere in these essays. My own view is that Hume’s position can be found in “The Skeptic”, with the tempering provided by the important footnote at the end. Hume’s view would thus be that we cannot radically change our natures, but education, habituation, and persuasion can contribute to
three case studies of how a deep-seated and universal passion or principle can be reformed. Attending to Hume’s account of the artificial virtues will show us both how Hume is thinking of our ability to restrain and reform our natural passions, and it will also lead us to confront the second limitation on the cultivation of strength of mind.

Section 2.2: Regulatory Virtues – Justice and Fidelity to Promises

Each of Hume’s central artificial virtues—justice, fidelity to promises, and allegiance to government—is presented as a remedy to an infirmity in human nature. In each case, an artifice or convention develops through repeated experience of the effects of a certain passion or principle in human nature, and repeated recognition that one's own interest is not best served by allowing that passion or principle free and full movement. In each case, reformation and regulation of the passion is accomplished through artificial means. I will briefly discuss the first two artificial virtues, justice and fidelity to promises, in order to set up the structure that characterizes each of these sections. Then I will turn to the third artificial virtue, allegiance to government, as it will also help us to understand the nature of strength of mind.

Hume’s account of justice and the other artificial virtues has received a great deal of scholarly attention. I will not be able to engage with the many interesting problems, puzzles, and solutions that have been posed and concern myself here merely with Hume’s account of justice, understood as a regulation and reformation of certain qualities and propensities. What will not help is philosophical argumentation, which is, according to the Skeptic and the author of the footnote, of little use in the moment of action.

21 Cohon and Gill have each argued that Hume’s sketch of the development of the artificial virtues involves a description of a psychological transformation; see Cohon (2008), Chapter 6; Gill (2006), Chapter 18; Gill (2000); Cohon (1997).

22 There are far too many excellent discussions of Hume on justice and the artificial virtues to cite comprehensively. For a recent introduction to and overview of Hume on justice, see Magri (2015). For other important treatments of justice and artificial virtue see, inter alia, Tolonen (2013); Baier (2010); Cohon (2008); Garrett (2007); Mackie (2003); Gauthier (1992); Baron (1982); Haakonsen (1981).
regulatory artificial virtue. After arguing that justice must be an artificial, not a natural virtue, Hume describes the origin of justice. He claims that while human beings are initially brought into social relations through “the natural appetite betwixt the sexes” and the bonds of parental affection, these relations of partiality maintain small social groups only (T 3.2.2.4; SBN 486). With the growth of social groups and the constant problem of our “outward circumstances”—the scarcity of goods and the ease of their transfer—a particular passion grows and becomes a pervasive and predominant inclination in us. Justice is an artificial “remedy” for this passion, “for what is irregular and incommodious in the affections” (T 3.2.2.9; SBN 489). More specifically, justice offers a remedy for avidity, the self-interested desire for “acquiring goods and possessions”, which is, according to Hume, “insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society” (T 3.2.2.12; SBN 492).

How does justice remedy this violent passion? Hume argues that human beings naturally and gradually develop a convention, the convention of “bestow[ing] stability on the possession of those external goods, and leav[ing] every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry” (T 3.2.2.9; SBN 489). By this convention “the passions are restrain’d in their partial and contradictory motions” and human beings are “induce[d]” “to regulate their conduct by certain rules” (T 3.2.2.9-10; SBN 489-90). Hume also explains that the regulatory function of justice works by working with the problematic passion: “Nor is such a restraint contrary to these passions; for if so, it cou’d never be enter’d into, nor maintain’d; but it is only contrary to their heedless and impetuous movement” (T 3.2.2.9; SBN 489). The convention restrains the “heedless and impetuous movement” of avidity, it does not eradicate that passion itself, nor attempt to entirely stifle it. And this restraint is accomplished by reflecting on the end of the passion and the best means of satisfying that end: “upon the least reflection … ’tis evident that the passion is much better satisfied by its restraint, than by its liberty” (T 3.2.2.13; SBN 492). Once human beings recognize that they can best satisfy their “insatiable, perpetual, universal” desire to acquire goods and possessions by establishing
rules of justice in their society, the “natural movements” of avidity are reformed, changing from something like a scattershot desire attaching to all goods to a focused desire attaching to the goods one possesses and those one may possess through just means. Hume claims that avidity is “regulat[ed] and “restrain[ed]”, through “an alteration of its direction” (T 3.2.2.12-13; SBN 492). The “first and most natural movements” (T 3.2.2.12; SBN 492) of this passion are redirected so that the passion itself becomes more functional and effective.

The structure of Hume’s account of justice as a regulatory virtue is repeated in his description of the second artificial virtue, fidelity to promises. This artificial virtue develops alongside the development of justice, for when the system of property rules grows complex enough to require long-term planning and group cooperation, a new tendency of human nature rears its head. Hume portrays this development as follows:

Your corn is ripe to-day; mine will be so to-morrow. 'Tis profitable for us both, that I shou'd labour with you to-day, and that you shou'd aid me to-morrow. I have no kindness for you, and know you have as little for me. I will not, therefore, take any pains upon your account; and shou'd I labour with you upon my own account, in expectation of a return, I know I shou'd be disappointed, and that I shou'd in vain depend upon your gratitude. Here then I leave you to labour alone: You treat me in the same manner. The seasons change; and both of us lose our harvests for want of mutual confidence and security. (T 3.2.5.8; SBN 520-1)

These unfortunate neighbors are not joined by bonds of affection or partiality (“I have no kindness for you, and know you have as little for me”), and, when faced with the need to cooperate in order to achieve their mutual interest, they are checked by “want of mutual confidence and security.” They are driven by the suspicion and mistrust that attends relations with strangers and end up acting against their own interest. But repeated experience with this “want of mutual confidence and security”, especially as contrasted with “the more generous and noble intercourse of friendship and good offices”, gives rise to a symbolic phrase—“I hereby promise to…”—which marks the difference between promises between disinterested parties and those between interested parties (T 3.2.5.10; SBN 522). An artificial phrase now serves as a sign, as something that when used shows that the user “is
immediately bound by his interest to execute his engagements, and must never expect to be trusted any more, if he refuses to perform what he promis’d” (T 3.2.5.10; SBN 522). As Mark Collier puts it, these agents “stake their reputations on these exchanges”, and agree to make good on their word, on pain of forfeiting future opportunities to enter into agreements.\footnote{23}{Collier (2011), 135.}

How does this artificial sign serve to check the natural tendency—suspicion and mistrust towards strangers—that caused the problem in the first place? Hume again argues that the problematic natural tendency is redirected by means of the convention:

All this is the effect of the natural and inherent principles and passions of human nature; and as these passions and principles are inalterable, it may be thought, that our conduct, which depends on them, must be so too, and that it would be in vain, either for moralists or politicians, to tamper with us, or attempt to change the usual course of our actions, with a view to public interest. And indeed, did the success of their designs depend upon their success in correcting the selfishness and ingratitude of men, they would never make any progress, unless aided by omnipotence, which is alone able to new-mould the human mind, and change its character in such fundamental articles. All they can pretend to, is, to give a new direction to those natural passions, and teach us that we can better satisfy our appetites in an oblique and artificial manner, than by their headlong and impetuous motion. (T 3.2.5.9; SBN 521, emphases added)\footnote{24}{See also: “But ’tis certain we can naturally no more change our own sentiments, than the motions of the heavens” (T 3.2.5.4; SBN 517); and “Men are not able radically to cure, either in themselves or others, that narrowness of soul, which makes them prefer the present to the remote. They cannot change their natures. All they can do is to change their situation …” (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537).}

Again we see Hume arguing that a natural principle of human nature, “inalterable” in the sense that it cannot be wholly rooted out or suppressed, may nonetheless be given a “new direction.” In this case, human beings learn through experience that the “headlong and impetuous motion”\footnote{25}{Cf. Hume’s language about the “heedless and impetuous” movement of avidity (T 3.2.2.9; SBN 489).} of certain principles and passions may be checked and that we may better pursue our own interest by satisfying those passions “in an oblique and artificial manner”. These artificial virtues do not work by extirpating or replacing passions but by redirecting them, by harnessing the deeply rooted power of these
universal, constant, and original passions and directing that power along a more efficient path towards its end.

Hume describes justice and fidelity to promises as artificial virtues, which each regulate a natural propensity of human nature that would be troublesome if left in its natural state. Justice regulates our natural avidity through artificial property conventions, and fidelity regulates our natural suspicion and mistrust of strangers through an artificial sign of trust. I will now turn to the third artificial virtue, allegiance to government, and argue that Hume’s account of this virtue reveals a much more general infirmity in our nature, indeed, an infirmity which characterizes the previous two cases as well. I will then show that Hume’s solution, while similar in structure to the other two artificial virtues, complicates our understanding of Humean strength of mind.

Section 2.3: Regulatory Virtues – Allegiance to Government

Hume begins his discussion of the origin of government by claiming that “men are, in great measure, govern’d by interest” (T 3.2.7.1; SBN 534). At this point in the Treatise, Hume has argued that justice and fidelity to promises are clearly in everyone’s interest, so he must now deal with a difficult problem: how could disorder ever arise in a society if order is so clearly in our interest, and self-interest is such a strong motive? The explanation he finds hinges on the claim that we are “govern’d” by interest, for it turns out that this government is neither stable nor reliable, and this is due to a deep and worrisome propensity of human nature:

Now as every thing, that is contiguous to us, either in space or time, strikes upon us with such an idea, it has a proportional effect on the will and passions, and commonly operates with more force than any object that lies in a more distant and obscure light. Tho’ we may be fully convince’d, that the latter object excels the former, we are not able to regulate our actions by

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26 I have found Cohon (2001) and Collier (2011) very helpful in working out my view on these sections.
this judgment; but yield to the sollicitations of our passions, which always plead in favour of whatever is near and contiguous. (T 3.2.7.2; SBN 535)\textsuperscript{27}

I will refer to this principle of human nature as the \textit{proximity principle}.\textsuperscript{28} The proximity principle determines us to pursue the proximate over the remote, despite our resolutions, and even when we are aware that the remote is in our greater interest. This principle does not necessarily interfere with or corrupt our judgment about the value of the near object in comparison with the remote, rather, it interferes with our motivation to pursue the remote object by increasing the influence of the passion that “pleads in favour of” the near object.

If we compare the proximity principle with the two previous problematic passions, which are regulated by an artificial virtue, we can first notice that the proximity principle is much more general than avidity or “want of mutual confidence and security.” The proximity principle is a basic and general motivational tendency to pursue the proximate over the remote, unlike the specific desire for goods that justice remedies, or the specific aversion to trusting strangers, which fidelity remedies. Indeed, the proximity principle seems to operate by qualifying other desires and tendencies, increasing the influence of desires for proximate items, and decreasing the influence of desires for remote items. Further, the proximity principle seems to make trouble for the two previous remedies; in each of the previous cases, the members of the society come to recognize that they can better satisfy their desires and pursue their interest by regulating their conduct by a convention. Both previous remedies depend on the individuals’ recognition that their greater interest is best served through the institution of a

\textsuperscript{27} See also, “Talk to a man of his condition thirty years hence, and he will not regard you. Speak of what is to happen to-morrow, and he will lend you attention. The breaking of a mirror gives us more concern when at home, than the burning of a house, when abroad, and some hundred leagues distant” (T 2.3.7.3; SBN 428-9).

\textsuperscript{28} We might also call it the “contiguity principle” as Hume is clearly referencing his discussion in \textit{Treatise} Book Two, especially the sections “Of contiguity and distance in space and time” which treat the effects of contiguity and distance on the direct passions. I choose “proximity” instead of “contiguity” because it seems to better capture Hume’s way of describing the distance between the agent and her interest, and because the central cases in \textit{Treatise} 3.2 are temporal cases (long-term versus short-term interest). Collier refers to this principle as “a propensity toward temporal discounting”, and he explicitly notes its connection to self-control (2011, 136). Cohon refers to this principle as “temporal myopia” (2001, 397).
convention and the subsequent redirection of the passion. But what happens when the opportunity to filch from a neighbor or to break a contract presents itself as an attractive—and *proximate*—option? Hume’s discussion of the origin of government begins at the limits of the two previous solutions; justice and fidelity to promises, without the external backing of a government and its magistrates, will not long regulate everyone’s conduct reliably. Disorder enters society, and a new remedy must be sought.

Let us look more closely at how the proximity principle causes disorder. Hume has claimed that human beings are strongly and “sincerely” attached to their own interest, and that the observation of justice is clearly in their interest, and so he asks: “[how can any disorder] ever arise in society, and what principle is there in human nature so *powerful* as to overcome so strong a passion, or so *violent* as to obscure so clear a knowledge?” (T 3.2.7.1; SBN 534).\(^2^9\) We have already seen Hume’s answer: the proximity principle is *strong* enough to counter and overcome our strong motivation to pursue our interest, and it is *violent* enough to obscure our knowledge of what is in our interest. The proximity principle will thus consistently undermine prudential action, and once it gets a foothold in society, it will undermine justice as well. This is because each member of society recognizes that everyone around her is affected as she is by the proximity principle:

You have the same propension, that I have, in favour of what is contiguous above what is remote. You are, therefore, naturally carried to commit acts of injustice as well as me. Your example both pushes me forward in this way by imitation, and also affords me a new reason for any breach of equity, by shewing me, that I should be the culy of my integrity, if I alone shou’d impose on myself a severe restraint amidst the licentiousness of others. (T 3.2.7.3; SBN 535)

Once people start to be affected by this principle, their example has a cascading effect, loosening the bonds of the conventions of justice and promising, and encouraging further infractions.\(^3^0\)

\(^{29}\) See also “Of the Origin of Government” (EMPL 38).

\(^{30}\) See also EPM 6.15 (SBN 239).
What can we do in this situation? We cannot remove this troublesome principle from our nature—Hume is adamant about this: “Men are not able radically to cure, either in themselves or others, that narrowness of soul, which makes them prefer the present to the remote. They cannot change their natures” (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537). Further, the various methods for strengthening the calm passions and countering the violent passions, which we tried to glean from Hume’s Book Two account, are explicitly called out as ineffectual: “I may have recourse to study and reflexion within myself; to the advice of friends; to frequent meditation, and repeated resolution: And having experienced how ineffectual all these are, I may embrace with pleasure any other expedient, by which I may impose a restraint upon myself, and guard against this weakness” (T 3.2.7.5; SBN 536-7). Perhaps habit, reflection and resolution work sometimes, for some passions, and for some people, but in the case of the proximity principle, they are not reliably effective, and they do not solve the widespread problems created by this principle.

On Hume’s account, the very principle that hampers our attempts to act prudently and justly also explains the origin of government. After experiencing the workings of the proximity principle, I recognize that I have a “natural infirmity” and I “endeavor, by all possible means, to free my self from it” (T 3.2.7.5; SBN 536). But I cannot just resolve to uphold the rules of justice, for such a resolution is exactly what is doomed by the proximity principle to fail; I need to find some way of circumventing or exploiting the problematic principle. Hume argues that the only solution is to select a group of people to be governors, to make the observance of justice their constant, proximate interest, and to agree to be constrained by them:

… [A]s it is impossible to change or correct any thing material in our nature, the utmost we can do is to change our circumstances and situation, and render the observance of the laws of justice our nearest interest, and their violation our most remote. But this being impracticable with respect to all mankind, it can only take place with respect to a few, whom we thus immediately interest in the execution of justice. These are the persons, whom we call civil magistrates, kings and

31 See also T 3.2.5.4 (SBN 517); T 3.2.5.9 (SBN 521).
their ministers, our governors and rulers … These persons, then, are not only induced to observe those rules in their own conduct, but also to constrain others to a like regularity, and enforce the dictates of equity through the whole society. (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537, emphases added)

We cannot change our natures, so we change our situations. An artificial hierarchy is created—a few of us becoming governors, while most of us become subjects—and an enforceable system of rules and punishments is established. For the new magistrates, the enforcement of justice becomes their nearest and strongest interest, and for the subjects, an aversion to punishment and contempt.

If we compare this remedy to the other two proposed remedies, a few things become clear. First, as mentioned above, this remedy is offered for a much more general propensity of human nature, a propensity which presumably affects almost all of us most of the time. Second, in this case, Hume does not describe the regulation of the principle as a redirection or a restraint of its “headlong” (or “heedless”) and “impetuous” motion. Instead, this remedy works by effecting a large-scale rearrangement of persons in relation to other persons and in relation to their various interests. We all

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32 In his reprise of these sections in the essay “Of the Origin of Government”, Hume emphasizes that this remedy is palliative, not curative (EMPL 38). Human beings cannot rid themselves of this weakness, and so “they must institute some persons … whose particular office it is, to point out the degrees of equity, to punish transgressors, to correct fraud and violence, and to oblige men, however reluctant, to consult their own real and permanent interests. In a word, OBEDIENCE is a new duty which must be invented to support that of JUSTICE” (EMPL 38).

33 It is not entirely clear how setting up government is supposed to work. As I suggest here, while the would-be governors may “change their situation” and so set up a different “nearest interest”, the would-be subjects may be plausibly described as being motivated by fear of contempt and punishment while still affected by the proximity principle. This would cohere with Hume’s advice that “when we wou’d govern a man, and push him to any action, ‘twill commonly be a better policy to work upon the violent rather than the calm passions, and rather take him by his inclination, than what is vulgarly call’d his reason” (T 2.3.4.1; SBN 419). But see Cohon (2001) for an examination of some of the issues with Hume’s account and an attempt to resolve them. See also Collier for a circularity objection, namely that Hume’s account of the origin of government presupposes that the agents are capable of the kind of collective action that government is supposed to enable (2011, 141). I agree with Collier that the most mysterious part of Hume’s story is the moment when the group of pre-civil human beings simultaneously have a strong, proximate desire to set up government. But Hume’s explanation need not be circular, so long as he holds that it is the strong proximate desire to curb the proximity principle that motivates the change. It seems plausible to me that Hume is seeing the situation of these people as one of such desperation and such restricted resources that they look to the strongest member of their tribe or clan to lead them and force them to act in their own interest. They do this without considering the long-term consequences of their action (which is plausible given how the proximity principle works). Hume offers such a story in T 3.2.8.2 (SBN 540-1) about how a military leader comes to become a civil leader; and he discusses the choice of a leader in the essay “Of the Origin of Government”, there claiming that the initial leader is likely to be someone “endowed with superior mental qualities of valour, force, integrity, or prudence, which command respect and confidence” (EMPL 39).

34 See T 3.2.2.9 (SBN 489) and T 3.2.5.9 (SBN 521).
“change our circumstances and situation”: magistrates are put into a new relation of proximity to the interested motive to uphold justice, and they are put into a very new relation of authority over the newly-created subjects. Subjects are put into a new relation to fear of punishment and contempt, which passions were presumably present before, but now are made stronger because of the belief that there is someone with the authority and capacity to enforce the rules of justice. Like the two previous remedies, this is an “oblique and artificial” solution to a problem, an attempt to indirectly remedy what cannot be directly manipulated. But this remedy involves a more radical and complex structural change: the creation of hierarchical relations, a system of constraints and punishments, and a large-scale, external regulatory structure. It is only by such drastic means, Hume claims, that humans “acquire a security against each other’s weakness and passion, as well as against their own, and under the shelter of their governors, begin to taste at ease the sweets of society and mutual assistance” (T 3.2.7.8; SBN 538).

For Hume, the proximity principle is the most dangerous, most pressing infirmity of human nature: “there is no quality in human nature, which causes more fatal errors in our conduct” (T 3.2.7.8; SBN 539). This principle is basic enough to interfere with all of our well-laid plans, from the self-interested to the public-spirited, and it is deep enough to resist most attempts to remedy it. It undermines the efforts made to establish justice and fidelity, and it blocks our attempts to improve our situation. The proximity principle is so dangerous and so pervasive that humans agree to “lay themselves under the necessity of observing the laws of justice and equity” (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537). That is, we agree to be governed by others because we recognize that we cannot govern ourselves.

Section 2.4: Strength of Mind as a Quasi-Artificial Virtue

Hume’s artificial virtues play a crucial regulatory role—they each involve a convention that helps to redirect, reform, or rearrange human passions and principles. Our discussion of allegiance to
government and the attempt to find a remedy for the proximity principle brings us to new questions about the nature of strength of mind and the possibility of cultivating it. Is strength of mind an artificial or a natural virtue? Is it a temperament or a natural ability? In this section I argue that, on Hume's view, while some rare individuals will be able to develop their native capacity for strength of mind without much external intervention, this virtue cannot be pervasive in societies until regulative and governing structures have been instituted. Thus, strength of mind sits uneasily in Hume’s classificatory system, sharing features with the natural virtues and with the artificial virtues, and resisting categorization.

In recent papers, Jane McIntyre and Elizabeth Radcliffe each notice that strength of mind seems to share features with both the artificial and the natural virtues. Between them, McIntyre and Radcliffe focus on three features that Hume uses to distinguish the virtues: (1) whether or not what we approve of when we approve of the virtuous quality or trait is a natural motive, a motive that has “no dependence on the artifice and contrivance of men” (T 3.3.1.1; SBN 574); (2) whether good is produced on every individual exercise of the virtuous quality, or whether good is produced rather by its being part of a “whole plan or scheme” that is “highly conducive, or absolutely requisite” to the good of society and its members (T 3.2.2.22; SBN 497); and (3) whether or not the approvable motive depends on a specific convention. Artificial virtues are those that (1) have no natural motive; (2) produce good by being part of a larger scheme; and (3) are enabled by a specific convention. Natural virtues are the converse; they (1) have natural motives; (2) produce good on every instance; and (3) are not dependent on a specific convention. This scheme looks neat enough—the problem is that strength of mind is not easily sorted according to these features.

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35 McIntyre (2006b) and Radcliffe (2015). This is another fraught interpretive issue and I cannot do full justice to the many intricacies involved. For further work on Hume’s distinction between natural and artificial virtue, see, *inter alia*, Abramson (2015); Cohon (2006); Fieser (1997); O’Day (1994).
McIntyre focuses on the second and third features, arguing that, based on the second feature, strength of mind falls on the side of artificial virtue, for, “like the artificial virtues, its exercise is approved as part of a plan or scheme that satisfies a longer term interest.” But since strength of mind, on her view, is not supported by a “specific convention[]”, but rather by “a variety of social artifices”, it does not have full status as an artificial virtue. McIntyre concludes from this evidence that strength of mind is “best understood as a quasi-artificial virtue.” Radcliffe focuses on the first and second features. She disputes McIntyre’s claim that strength of mind shares the second feature with the artificial virtues, noting that even if strength of mind does require the “postponement of gratification”, it does so in service of a longer-term personal good, and not in service of a larger-scale or public good. Furthermore, Radcliffe argues that strength of mind shares the first feature with the natural virtues, arguing that there are “numerous” natural motives for strength of mind. Radcliffe concludes that “strength of mind is clearly a natural virtue for Hume.”

McIntyre and Radcliffe each focus on different features of strength of mind, and these different features point to different cases to be made for classifying this virtue. While I am sympathetic to the points that each author makes, I am less confident that we can settle the question of how to classify this virtue. In the rest of this section, I will describe yet another complicating feature of

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36 McIntyre (2006b), 398.
37 McIntyre (2006b), 398. *Pace* McIntyre, I argue that strength of mind does depend on a specific convention, but not in the way that justice or fidelity does. Strength of mind does not depend on a specific convention for its very existence, but rather for its development and for its pervasive presence in society.
38 McIntyre (2006b), 398, emphasis original.
40 Radcliffe complicates this affinity by showing that there is no single identifiable motive that we approve of when we approve of strength of mind. She suggests that “the way to understand strength of mind is … not as any particular motive, but as a constellation of traits comprising certain calm passions …” (2015, 564).
41 Radcliffe (2015), 565.
strength of mind, namely, that its enabling conditions are artificial and complex. The key to seeing this point is to reflect on the fact that Hume discusses the artificial virtues before the natural virtues. This detail about the order of presentation may seem minor, but it has been the subject of regular speculation. Ken O’Day writes that it is “perplexing” that “Hume begins with the artificial virtues and devotes over twice the space to discussing them.” And Annette Baier devotes several pages of her Progress of Sentiments to explaining why Hume has good reasons for this seemingly odd choice. I too think that Hume had good reasons for this choice, namely, that he thought that given certain features of human psychology and certain conditions of human society, and especially given the pervasive and dangerous effects of the proximity principle in large-scale societies, the institution of government is a necessary enabling condition for the development of strength of mind in societies.

In order to see the importance of the order of presentation more clearly, let us return to Hume’s account of artificial virtue. For Hume, humans in pre-civil society are driven by sympathy and motivated by benevolence and many other natural virtues. They are kind and affectionate to their family members, generous with their friends, and diligent in acting to improve their condition.

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43 Baier (1991), Chapter Eight.

44 Although I cannot argue for this claim in this paper, if I am right that the institution of government is required to enable the societal development of strength of mind, then the institution of government may also be required for the development of the various natural virtues into their full-blown forms. This is because the general point of view, which is the standpoint from which moral sentiments are properly felt, seems to require some artificial construction and agreement [see Baier: “some artifice, in the sense of thoughtful design and contrivance, seems involved in that point of view [from which the natural virtues are recognized] itself” (1991, 177)]. Furthermore, as Abramson suggests, “our innate affective dispositions require education in order to acquire the appropriate range of objects, strength, responsiveness, etc., before they are candidates for natural virtues” (2015, 339, emphasis original). If Baier and Abramson are correct, then some artifice would be necessary for the recognition of natural motives as virtuous motives, as well as for the development of our natural dispositions and motives into the forms we currently recognize as virtues. See also Tolonen (2013), Chapter 4.

45 As Tolonen observes, natural affection and other natural virtues are “latent features of human nature”, features that require “time and social development” in order to be effective (2013, 160). Strength of mind is also a latent feature of human nature, it just happens to be one that needs a much more radical and sophisticated set of conditions for its development.
with the development of the first two artificial virtues, which Hume believes will happen quickly,\(^46\) such a society can persist for some time. Hume writes, “tho’ government be an invention very advantageous, and even in some circumstances absolutely necessary to mankind; it is not necessary in all circumstances, nor is it impossible for men to preserve society for some time, without having recourse to such an invention” (T 3.2.8.1; SBN 539). But once such a society grows large enough, or once several small societies proliferate in the same area, the conflict and disorder described in Treatise 3.2.7 arises and individuals come to feel and recognize the dangerous influence of the proximity principle. Their attempts to be prudent or just regularly fail, they are governed by violent and strong desires for the proximate, and their examples have a cascading effect, encouraging others to imitate their behavior and thereby spreading the problem. And it is in this state of desperation that humans search for “any other expedient, by which [they] may impose a restraint upon [themselves], and guard against this weakness” (T 3.2.7.5; SBN 537-8). What they find is the artificial institution of government, which provides the “security” and “shelter” under which human societies can grow and develop (T 3.2.7.8; SBN 538).

Hume’s account of the origin of government is also an account of the enabling conditions for strength of mind. It is possible that a few members of the pre-civil society are of a naturally “strong and determined temper”, and resistant to the effects of the proximity principle that plague the rest of us (EPM 6.15; SBN 239). But the crisis that leads to the establishment of government is caused by the widespread and regular failure of individuals to be strong of mind—to be governed by their calm desire for their own greater interest. Instead, they are governed by violent desires for the proximate, and they are bereft of any resources to change their situation (T 3.2.7.5; SBN 536).\(^47\) External government

\(^{46}\) See T 3.2.2.14 (SBN 493).

\(^{47}\) Actual widespread failure to regulate one’s conduct is not necessary, for it is enough to recognize one’s own weakness, and to believe that weakness to be shared throughout society; see T 3.2.7.3 (SBN 535).
originates from the recognition that strength of mind is beyond the reach of most of us most of the
time. With the institution of government, we agree to have a regulatory structure imposed on us, and
this structure checks the proximity principle in one key area of its possible harm, that pertaining to
justice. Members of the newly-created government grow accustomed to restraining the passions and
motives that call them to break their promises and to infringe upon the rules of justice.\textsuperscript{48} They also
begin to sympathize with the public interest, thereby leading to the “progress of sentiments”, by which
a moral sentiment comes to be attached to justice and the other artificial virtues (T 3.2.2.24-5; SBN
499-500). Politicians encourage this progress, employing evaluative terms and offering public praise
for the just and the obedient, and blame for the unjust and the disobedient (T 3.2.2.25; SBN 500).
Private education also steps in, further reinforcing the association of justice with moral praise and
honor, and teaching children “to regard the observance of those rules, by which society is maintain’d,
as worthy and honourable, and their violation as base and infamous” (T 3.2.2.26; SBN 501). Finally,
the opinion that merit and demerit attend justice and injustice proliferates, and our interest in our own
good reputation reinforces the motive to be just (T 3.2.2.27; SBN 501).

This little story about the “progress of sentiments”, which comes as a preview of Hume’s
account of moral sentiment in \textit{Treatise} 3.3, also offers an account of how external, artificial regulations
may come to be habitual and regular influences on action.\textsuperscript{49} Recall Hume’s description in Book Two
of how a calm passion comes to be strong: “as repeated custom and its own force have made every
thing yield to it, it directs the actions and conduct without that opposition and emotion, which so

\textsuperscript{48} Cf. Hume’s account in the essay “Of the Origin of Government” of how obedience and allegiance come to become
strong motives in us: “Habit soon consolidates what other principles of human nature had imperfectly founded; and men,
once accustomed to obedience, never think of departing from that path, in which they and their ancestors have constantly
trod, and to which they are confined by so many urgent and visible motives” (EMPL 39).

\textsuperscript{49} This story is repeated in T 3.2.5.12 (SBN 523), regarding the way in which a moral sentiment comes to be attached to
the artificial virtue of fidelity to promises, and at T 3.2.8.7 (SBN 546), regarding the way a moral sentiment comes to be
attached to allegiance and loyalty to government.
naturally attend every momentary gust of passion” (T 2.3.4.1; SBN 419). Prior to the establishment of government, even the strong, calm desire for one’s own greater interest was not sufficiently strong to outweigh the proximity principle (T 3.2.7.1-3; SBN 534-5). But following the establishment of government, individuals become accustomed to restraining their desires for proximate objects that would lead them to commit unjust acts. At first, this is likely because they fear the consequences of injustice, but as sentiments progress, sympathy with the public interest, love of honour and the desire to be thought well of by others also contribute to the strengthening of the desires to be just, faithful, honest, and loyal—all of which are artificial virtues on Hume’s account. And in this way, strength of mind is developed and people begin to regulate their behavior in a variety of important but mundane ways. Members of such early governments learn a pattern of restraint and regulation, a pattern that can be applied by the diligent and the insightful to other, more private, areas of their lives. Indeed, learning this pattern is crucial to the development of strength of mind, for the institution of government only exploits the proximity principle in cases of justice and public interest. Governors do not (for better or worse) constrain us to get regular exercise, to control our anger and frustration with a lackadaisical colleague, or to treat our loved ones with patience and kindness. Strength of mind in these more private realms must still be developed, and this will proceed as humans learn to apply the pattern of self-restraint to other passions and principles.

Strength of mind is the quality of mind characterizing someone in whom the calm passions regularly influence action. Like the natural abilities, “industry, perseverance, patience, activity,

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50 This process also occurs within the family in the earlier, pre-government stage, when “custom and habit, operating on the tender minds of the children, makes them sensible of the advantages, which they reap from society, as well as fashions them by degrees for it, by rubbing off those rough corners and untoward affections, which prevent their coalition” (T 3.2.2.4; SBN 486). Custom and habit are the great engines driving the slow progress of sentiments and the gradual regulation of passions.

51 For different versions of what this post-government development might look like, see McIntyre (2006b), 399-400; Abramson (1999); and Magri (1996).
vigilance, application, constancy”, strength of mind seems at least partly dependent on one’s given temperament (T 3.3.4.7; SBN 610). Like the natural virtues, the motive for strength of mind is natural, and the exercise of strength of mind is useful and often immediately approvable. And like the artificial virtues, strength of mind requires the establishment of specific conventions for its development. Humean strength of mind is not non-existent without the institution of government, but without government, a very large proportion of human beings will be incapable of regulating the proximity principle and developing strength of mind. With the institution of government and the imposition of a regulatory structure, humans grow accustomed to regulating their conduct, thereby strengthening their calm passions and developing strength of mind. Thus, strength of mind is an atypical virtue, falling between, or perhaps straddling, Hume’s distinction between the natural and artificial virtues.

In summary, Hume’s account of the government of the passions relies on an intricate anatomy of the passions and their interactions. He shows that if we can strengthen the calm passions so that they prevail over the violent ones, we will achieve mental tranquility and consistency in action. But Hume has little to say about how we strengthen the calm passions and he seems to think that for many of us, most of the time, we will fail to be motivated by them. To help correct this “infirmity”, we agree to be governed by others, who will then compel us to do as we should. Over time, this artificial obligation becomes a “moral obligation” through the “progress of sentiments” and the work of politics, education, and the general human concern for reputation.

In the Introduction, I raised a question facing sentimentalist moral theories, particularly those that adopt a restricted conception of the role of reason in moral judgment and action. If reason is not capable of controlling, correcting, or otherwise directly interacting with the passions, is the government of the passions even possible? And if it is possible, how might human beings achieve such government? How might we be self-controlled? Hume’s position refuses to deny the capacity for self-rule to human beings, but also recognizes that for most of us, most of the time, strength of mind
is something out of our reach. Indeed, reading Hume’s Book Two account of the passions alongside his Book Three account of the origin of government reveals that Hume thinks that all societies require the institution of government to enable the cultivation of strength of mind. If I am not one of the rare strong-minded individuals (and it is likely that I am not), I must agree to be governed by others in order to be capable of regularly governing myself.

**Part Three: Self-Reform and Self-Control in a Humean Society**

I claimed above that interwoven with Hume’s sparse and platitudinous comments about strengthening the calm passions is a striking view about the limitations on our attempts to reform our passions and conduct. Hume has not offered a canonical account of self-control—Humean strength of mind is not an account of the autonomous individual flexing her willpower muscle,\(^52\) or retreating to a darkened room in order to eliminate errors in her judgment and desires.\(^53\) It is not the account of a weak human praying for the grace of God to help her defeat her passions,\(^54\) and it is not an account of the reflective person employing philosophical argumentation as a sort of therapy for desire.\(^55\) Considered alongside other standard accounts of the government of the passions and self-control, Hume’s account of strength of mind is strikingly *indirect*, *artificial* and *social*.\(^56\)

In each of the three cases of artificial virtue, we saw that the regulation of a specific passion involves an “oblique and artificial” remedy. These indirect remedies are a function of Hume’s general

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52 A frequently-used image in popular psychology books and articles; e.g. Baumeister and Tierney (2011).

53 The model familiar from Descartes and Malebranche [see especially the opening scene of Dialogue 1 in Malebranche (1991)].

54 Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* provides perhaps the best-known version of this model.

55 Indeed, Hume’s essay “The Skeptic” offers a biting mockery of this tradition (see EMPL 173-7).

56 It is also strikingly *secular* in comparison to the standard treatises, but this is a vast issue that I do not touch on here.
conception of human psychology. Hume describes individuals as bundles of forces, themselves embedded in a network of forces. I am the site of myriad interactions between more or less forceful passions, each with a direction or object, a degree of strength, and a qualitative feel. The interactions between my passions are determined by a long list of “steady principles”, like the proximity principle. And these principles operate, for the most part, sub-agnostically—without my awareness and often beyond the reach of any intentional control. Hume writes,

What makes [the influence of passions on the will] more uncertain, is, that a calm passion may easily be changed into a violent one, either by a change of temper, or of the circumstances and situation of the object, as by the borrowing of force from any attendant passion, by custom, or by exciting the imagination. Upon the whole, this struggle of passion and of reason, as it is call’d, diversifies human life, and makes men so different not only from each other, but also from themselves in different times. Philosophy can only account for a few of the greater and more sensible events of this war; but must leave all the smaller and more delicate revolutions, as dependent on principles too fine and minute for her comprehension. (T 2.3.8.13; SBN 438)

The passions and principles of human nature are complicated, intricate, and difficult to observe, even for the diligent scientist of human nature. Many of the movements of our thoughts and feelings depend on “principles too fine and minute for [philosophy’s] comprehension.” These minute principles are also the cause of the great diversity and apparent inconstancy we see in human action.

Hume’s picture grows even more complicated if we zoom out to the level of groups and societies. Not only are individuals buzzing bundles of passions, sympathy works to connect individuals and to allow passions to reach across persons, and artificial institutions like government insert checks and constraints into the system. As we saw above, the “progress of sentiments” is moved along by the influence of politicians, educators, and the basic human concern for reputation, and our passions are affected by each of these influences. At this level of complexity, we could interpret Hume’s account of the government of the passions as an account of the homeostasis of the passions of groups of people.

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57 See Hume’s descriptions in T 2.3.4-9; SBN 418-48.
Or, to use an analogy suggested by Hume himself, as a meteorological model of human passion. On such a view, I do not govern my passions, my passions are regulated and modified through interactions with other passions in the system, and in accordance with general principles that are largely beyond my awareness and control.

In this way, we can speak of the “self-regulation” of the passions, as James Harris has recently argued: “Hume presented the realm of passions as structured in such a way as to make permissible talk of the self-regulation of the passions—though with the proviso that it be understood that the self-regulation in question operates in the context of the social realm taken as a whole, rather than within the breasts of individual men and women.” But Harris also claims, just after this description of Hume’s view, that Hume sees the passions as capable of self-regulation “without superintendence by political authority.” Harris makes this claim in the context of a comparison of Hume to Thomas Hobbes, and Hume may indeed have a less severe view than Hobbes of how political authority is requisite for the government of the passions. But, as I have argued above, political authority is an important part of Hume’s story, and the “self-regulation” of the passions requires the institution of government before sympathy can do any work to aid that regulation. Without the establishment of

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58 “The philosopher, if he be consistent, must apply the same reasoning to the actions and volitions of intelligent agents. The most irregular and unexpected resolutions of men may frequently be accounted for by those who know every particular circumstance of their character and situation. A person of an obliging disposition gives a peevish answer: But he has the toothache, or has not dined. A stupid fellow discovers an uncommon alacrity in his carriage: But he has met with a sudden piece of good fortune. Or even when an action, as sometimes happens, cannot be particularly accounted for, either by the person himself or by others; we know, in general, that the characters of men are, to a certain degree, inconstant and irregular. This is, in a manner, the constant character of human nature; though it be applicable, in a more particular manner, to some persons who have no fixed rule for their conduct, but proceed in a continued course of caprice and inconstancy. The internal principles and motives may operate in a uniform manner, notwithstanding these seeming irregularities; in the same manner as the winds, rain, cloud, and other variations of the weather are supposed to be governed by steady principles; though not easily discoverable by human sagacity and enquiry” (EHU 8.15; SBN 88, emphasis added). See also T 2.3.1.9-10 (SBN 402).

59 See Tolonen (2013), 245.

60 Harris (2009), 132.

61 Harris (2009), 133.
government, strength of mind and the government of the passions cannot gain a stable foothold in society.

If my interpretation is correct, we can see why Hume may have avoided giving advice on strengthening the calm passions and cultivating strength of mind. We can also see why Hume’s pre-civil human beings, when faced with the problems caused by the proximity principle, must “change [their] circumstances and situation”, and not seek futilely to “change or correct any thing material in [their] nature” (T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537). If we and our passions are embedded in a massive system of interacting passions and principles, and if we can only gain insight into a few of the major forces at play, and if many of those forces will prove to be ineradicable propensities of human nature, why should we think we can directly tinker with the system? Better for us to try indirect methods—to use Hume’s example, if I find myself gripped with “philosophical melancholy”, I would be well-advised to leave the confines of my room and “[to] dine, [to] play a game of backgammon, [to] converse, and [to be] merry with my friends” (T 1.4.7.9; SBN 269).62

This is a strikingly different account of the government of the passions and strength of mind.63 Instead of an emphasis on the willful and solitary efforts of the individual, marked by the presence of “self” in the terms preferred by other authors (“self-control”, “self-command”, “self-rule”, etc.), we find an emphasis on the complexity and opacity of human psychology.64 Instead of finding a connection between self-control and autonomy, we find that the development of strength of mind for

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62 See also Baier (2010) 133.

63 One that seems close to the cognitive behavioral therapy of our day, which seeks to change patterns of thought and behavior by changing the “circumstances and situation” of individuals.

64 See Korsgaard (1997), 233-4 for a similar observation, framed as a criticism. Hume may have consciously avoided compounds like “self-control” and “self-command”, preferring “strength of mind” instead. There is one use of “self-command” in EPM, and it occurs during Hume’s discussion of chastity. Hume asks: “But by what action can a woman, whose behavior has once been dissolute, be able to assure us, that she has formed better resolutions, and has self-command enough to carry them into execution?” (6.14; SBN 239). Interestingly, self-command is considered here from the spectator’s position—how could a “dissolute” woman convince a spectator that she is, in fact, self-commanded? In EHU, Hume uses “self-command” only to refer to its weakness in us (7.18-19; SBN 68).
the vast majority of human beings requires the artificial establishment of institutions of government. And instead of conceiving of strength of mind and self-control as individual affairs only, we find that strength of mind requires society; human beings learn to regulate their desires and passions by first internalizing the regulations imposed by external government, and then through the influence of politics, education, and other social interactions.

In the next two chapters, I will turn to Adam Smith’s sentimentalist account of the government of the passions and self-control, which is similarly a complex sentimentalist view, but which is quite different from Hume’s. Hume’s account reveals us to be “hard-wired”, so to speak, to regularly fail to act in our own interest, and the solution he finds is an artificial one, the institution of government. But, as I will show, Smith avoids the distinction between “natural” and “artificial”, and constructs a conception of “self-command” that incorporates some of Hume’s insights, but rejects the hard line Hume takes on the necessity of external government for internal government.
In the Introduction I claimed that David Hume and Adam Smith, as sentimentalist moral philosophers committed to a restricted role for reason in moral judgment and action, must find a way of accounting for self-control and the government of the passions that does not rely on the faculty of reason to control the passions. Despite their shared commitments, Hume and Smith come up with significantly different ways of solving this problem. As we saw in Chapter One, Humean strength of mind involves the motivational prevalence of the calm passions over the violent, but there is nothing special about the calm passions on Hume’s account—they are not inherently authoritative or fit to rule the other passions. Further, the cultivation of strength of mind requires the institution of external government as its enabling condition; after the institution of government and the large-scale systems of regulation and restraint that come along with it, individuals may internalize patterns of regulation, learning to extend them to other passions, and thereby strengthening their calm passions and developing strength of mind.

In comparison, Smith claims that certain sentiments—the sentiments of the “supposed” impartial spectator—are the “supreme arbiters of all our actions”, and carry with them “the most evident badges of this authority” (TMS III.5.5). And he claims that we could not develop the capacity for self-command and for mature moral judgment without repeated social and sympathetic
interactions. So, where Hume claims that the calm passions possess no authority over the other passions—nothing that makes them fit to rule—Smith claims that the sentiments of the impartial spectator do possess such authority. And where Hume claims that the institution of external government and the creation of governors and rules is required to enable the development of strength of mind, Smith claims that we need only basic social interactions (admittedly, many years’ worth of experience with these basic interactions) in order to cultivate self-command. I develop these suggestions about Smith’s view in this chapter and the next. In this chapter, I focus on the second of the two claims, about the development of the ordinary moral agent through basic social interactions; in the next chapter, I focus on the claim about the authority of the sentiments of the impartial spectator.

This chapter has two broad goals. The first goal is to offer what we might call a moral psychology of Smithian self-command. As such, this chapter will take a basically explanatory stance, remaining at the level of explanation, illustration, and interpretation. The second goal is to engage with the literature on Smithian self-command. While self-command is often mentioned as a core feature of Smith’s moral philosophy, it has received only scattered philosophical attention, rarely meriting even an article-length treatment.² And when it is discussed, it is regularly cited as an example of Smith’s interest in classical Stoicism, following the influential editorial comments of D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie.³ Call this the Stoic Self-Command reading.⁴ As we will see, Smithian self-command often requires

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² Carrasco (2012, 2004) and Montes (2008, 2004) are the only two authors I am aware of who have published work that focuses on Smithian self-command.


⁴ Anyone familiar with the literature on Smith will have noticed that “Stoic” is used as an adjective to describe self-command, often without comment, and often unnecessarily. It is not clear to me why this is, although I suspect that conceptions of self-control come along with a whiff of Stoicism to many, perhaps because of the association of the Stoics with one of the strongest conceptions of self-control. But we do not need to look to the Stoics for the concept of self-control—practically every philosopher from Socrates on has thought that we need to control our emotions, so unless we want to lump all philosophers together into an indistinguishable mass, we need to attend to how they differ within this
the restraint of the passions, and in some cases, like those involving bodily pains and pleasures, it requires an extreme degree of control. So there does seem to be some apparent similarity between Smithian self-command and Stoic self-control. But, as several scholars have noted, there are serious problems with the *Stoic Self-Command* reading, especially given Smith’s explicit arguments against the Stoic conception of self-control, understood by him as leading to *apatheia*, or “insensibility.”[^5]

Interpreting Smithian self-command as “Stoic”—as requiring not just the *restraint* of passion and sentiment, but their *eradication*—seems to be in serious tension with Smith’s commitment to the sentimental foundation of morality.

Challenging this traditional reading of Smithian self-command, two authors have recently offered alternative interpretations: Leonidas Montes argues for a Socratic reading of self-command, and Maria Carrasco argues that self-command is “an expression of practical reason.”[^6] Each of these readings maintains a strong connection between self-command and rationalism—Montes looks to a Socratic conception of rational self-control, and Carrasco to a conception of practical reason inspired by Aristotle and Kant. But, again, Smith makes his sentimentalist allegiance clear, and each of these new interpretations requires us to saddle him with a position that is in apparent tension with his sentimentalist commitment to the restricted role of reason.[^7] That is, given Smith’s commitment to the general framework. (I am paraphrasing Samuel Fleischacker here, who has made a similar point, but about a different labeling issue, see 2004, 101).

[^5]: *Inter alia*, Montes (2016, 2008, 2004); Broadie (2012); Carrasco (2012, 2004); Forman-Barzilai (2010); Ross (2010); Hanley (2009); Schlesser (2008); Vivenza (2001); Fleischacker (1999); Griswold (1999). For Smith’s critique of Stoic *apatheia*, see III.3.14, VI.iii.18, and VII.ii.1.43.


[^7]: While Fleischacker argues against the *Stoic Self-Command* reading, he too commits Smith to a strongly rationalist conception of moral motivation and moral judgment, but without addressing Smith’s sentimentalist commitments (see 1999, Chapter 3, especially). In a later piece, Fleischacker makes the tension more explicit, writing, “Smith does suggest at one point that taking up the impartial spectator position is equivalent to acting on reason. ‘It is reason, principle, conscience’ he says, that informs us of ‘the real littleness of ourselves’, and he goes to equate ‘reason, principle, [and] conscience’, with ‘the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct’ (TMS, 137). This reason, moreover, much like Kant’s, rises above and can strike down all our emotions: it is capable of ‘astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions’. This reason is also impartial, and it reveals, as noted, human equality. So it is very like Kant’s reason, so
sentimentalist framework, there is a deep tension between that commitment and any reading that casts Smithian self-command, explicitly or implicitly, as rational control of the passions. I return to the Stoic Self-Command reading throughout this chapter, arguing that it is a misreading of Smith’s view, one that obscures the innovative aspects of Smithian self-command, and I engage with the interpretations offered by Montes and Carrasco at the end of this chapter.

Pursuing the first goal of this chapter, that of offering a moral psychology of Smithian self-command, will allow us to achieve the second, that of responding to the standard reading of Smithian self-command as “Stoic” or otherwise rationalist. I contend that once we have a full account of the moral psychology of Smithian self-command in view, we will be able to see that Smith has thoroughly “sentimentalized” self-command—that he has accounted for this capacity and how it works using the terms of his sentimentalist system, and in a way that coheres with its commitments to the restricted role of reason and the expanded role of sentiment.

I take as given in this chapter that Smith is working, in general, within a sentimentalist framework, one that took shape in opposition to moral rationalism.\(^8\) Our question is whether self-
command is an organic part of this sentimentalist framework, or whether it is instead a rationalistic transplant—a piece of Stoicism, or some other version of rational self-control, awkwardly grafted onto Smith’s sentimentalist system. Has Smith found a way to revise the traditional conception of self-control as reason’s control over the passions, thereby assimilating it into his sentimentalist framework? And if so, how has he managed this?

This chapter is structured as follows. I offer a moral psychology of Smithian self-command in Parts One and Two. In Part One, I focus on what we might call virtuous or proper self-command, self-command that is guided by the sentiments of an impartial spectator and motivated by a desire to achieve the sympathy of that spectator. I offer a reading of several core features of Smith’s view, including the sympathetic interaction, the conception of passions and sentiments, the distinction between praise and praiseworthiness, the development of the capacity to “suppose” or imagine the presence of an impartial spectator, and the influence of the sentiments of the supposed impartial spectator. In Part Two, I focus on other forms of command of the passions, discussing a variety of cases that do not fit the model explored in Part One, including the case of self-command by a general rule of morality. Finally, in Part Three I consider a further piece of Smith’s account of self-command, focusing on the cultivation and tendency of self-command. I also return to the *Stoic Self-Command Reading* and examine Smith’s explicit critique of the Stoic view of self-control, which he claims leads to improper and disagreeable insensibility. I argue that instead of requiring a decrease in sensibility, Smithian self-command requires the cultivation of sensitivity and delicacy of sentiment. I conclude

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the advantage or detriment which is likely to result from them” (IV.2.6). And in his later discussion of moral rationalism, Smith again clearly specifies the instrumental role of reason, noting that reason enables us, by “induction from this experience [of moral sentiments on different occasions]” to establish general rules of conduct. And further, that “reason may show that this object is the means of obtaining some other which is naturally either pleasing or displeasing” but that it “cannot render any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake” (VII.iii.2.7).
the chapter with a consideration of the two recent alternative readings of Smithian self-command, which emphasize its rationality, although without associating it with Stoic self-control.

**Part One: Sentimentalized Self-Command**

In this part, I will offer an interpretation of the moral psychology of Smithian self-command, arguing that Smith has “sentimentalized” self-command. I argue that there are three crucial dimensions along which Smith sentimentalizes this capacity. These are:

1) **Motivation**: Efforts at self-command are motivated by the disposition to sympathize with other people, and by the desire for the pleasures of mutual sympathy and approval (and by the aversion to the pain of antipathy and disapproval).
2) **Standard**: Efforts at self-command are guided by a standard of propriety, which is constituted by the sentiments a well-informed and impartial spectator would feel upon sympathizing with the agent.
3) **Operation**: Self-command works by taking up the perspective of an impartial spectator on oneself and sympathetically imagining the feelings of such a spectator.

In Section 1.1, I introduce the basic principles of Smith’s moral psychology: the drive to sympathize, the sympathetic interaction between the spectator and the agent, and the pleasures of mutual sympathy and approbation. In Section 1.2, I turn to Smith’s conception of passions and sentiments. In Section 1.3, I examine Smith’s discussion of merit and praiseworthiness, and in Section 1.4, his discussion of the impartial spectator and the development of “conscience” or the “supposed” impartial spectator. Finally, in Section 1.5, I discuss the principles that govern and explain the influence of the impartial spectator on our conduct. Putting these pieces together will provide us with a moral psychology of Smithian self-command, and it will allow us to evaluate Smith’s attempt to sentimentalize self-command. I will argue that Smith succeeds in this attempt—that he succeeds in developing a conception of self-command and the government of the passions from within his sentimentalist framework, and in conformity with its commitments to an expanded role for sentiment and a restricted role for reason.
Two remarks about my focus in this part: first, I will focus on Smith’s central case of self-command, which we might call virtuous self-command, self-command that is guided by the sentiments of an impartial spectator and motivated by a desire to achieve the sympathy of that spectator. Smith occasionally refers to other forms of command of the passions, and we will consider these in Part Two below. Second, throughout this part, I assume Smith’s commitment to the restricted role of reason within the sentimentalist framework, as described in the Introduction. As we will see, the effort of self-command involves reasoning of various sorts (comparison of passions, information-gathering, etc.), but this is all well within the commitments of Smith’s position, or so I hope to show.

Section 1.1: The Motivational Basis of and Standard for Self-Command

Smith opens TMS with a series of empirical claims about human beings. He claims that we are naturally social, sympathetic, and curious creatures, regularly striving to understand one another, to share our beliefs, opinions and sentiments, and deriving a great deal of pleasure from successful sympathetic interactions, and pain from unsuccessful ones. Although self-command does not receive top billing in the first part of TMS, it is present throughout Smith’s discussion of the sympathetic interaction between the spectator and the agent, a presence which is confirmed in a later passage:

Our sensibility to the feelings of others, so far from being inconsistent with the manhood of self-command, is the very principle upon which that manhood is founded. The very same principle or instinct which, in the misfortune of our neighbor, prompts us to compassionately his sorrow; in our misfortune, prompts us to restrain the abject and miserable lamentations of our own sorrow. The same principle or instinct which, in his prosperity and success, prompts us to congratulate his joy; in our own prosperity and success, prompts us to restrain the levity and intemperance of our own joy. In both cases, the propriety of our own sentiments and feelings seems to be exactly in proportion to the vivacity and force with which we enter into and conceive his sentiments and feelings. (III.3.34)

9 This has been noticed by Carrasco (2012), and I return to her treatment in Section 3.2 below.

10 Note that “principle” is used here as roughly equivalent to “instinct.” This is the sense in which Smith often uses this term, namely, to refer to “an original or native tendency; a natural or innate disposition” (“principle, n.”. OED Online).
This passage is the key passage for my interpretation of self-command, and it summarizes two important points about the connection between sensibility and self-command, as established in the earlier parts of TMS. First, Smith claims that there is one “principle or instinct” that “prompts both the effort to sympathize with someone else and the effort to command one’s own feelings. That is, Smith seems to be saying that there is one motivational basis for both sympathy and self-command. Second, Smith claims that “the propriety of our own sentiments and feelings” is determined “exactly” by the “vivacity and force” with which we sympathize with another’s feelings. This seems to be a claim about the standard by which we evaluate our passions and desires, a standard that is set by a spectator’s sympathetic sentiments. Let us unpack each of these claims by examining Smith’s account of sympathy,11 the sympathetic interaction, and propriety.

Like Hume, Smith takes the tendency to sympathize to be a deep and pervasive feature of human nature, and one that lies at the bottom of our explanations of a range of other psychological phenomena. According to Smith, sympathy is the experience of a “fellow-feeling with any passion whatever”, caused by the spectator’s effort to imaginatively enter into the situation of the agent (I.i.1.5).14 Sympathy is not merely a “contagion” or “transfusion” of feeling; it is the result of a

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11 There is a significant body of literature on the conceptions of sympathy (or “empathy” as we would now call this capacity) in Smith and Hume, and on the differences between those conceptions, and I do not treat those issues here. For a classic treatment of these issues, see Darwall (1998). For further discussion of Hume and Smith on sympathy, see, inter alia Fleischacker (2012); Rick (2007); Raynor (1984); Haakonssen (1981, Chapter 3).

12 This is not necessarily a conscious or deliberate effort, and that Smith thinks that much of the imaginative work involved in the sympathetic process becomes automated through “habit and experience” in the same way that correction of visual perspective is or becomes automated (III.3.2-3). He notes at I.i.1.6 that “upon some occasions sympathy may seem to arise merely from the view of a certain emotion in another person”, but he goes on to claim that this “does not hold universally, or with regard to every passion” (I.i.1.7).

13 The “situation” of the agent includes relevant details about the agent’s personality and history, details about the people they are close with, their environment, and their tendencies to act in different situations. For simplicity’s sake, we can think of the situation of the agent as the set of factors which cause them to feel as they feel, and which would explain why they feel as they feel. I follow Haakonssen here (1981, 46-8).

14 Smith uses the term “sympathy” in several ways, sometimes to describe the spectator’s initial imaginative attempt to enter into the situation of another, sometimes to describe the spectator’s fellow-feeling, and sometimes to describe the pleasure of approbation felt when the feelings of the spectator and the agent are in harmony or concord.
spectator’s attempt to move from her own situation into that of the agent—to step into the shoes of the agent, so to speak—and to feel what they feel, given their situation. And Smith claims that this tendency to sympathize with those around us springs from a “natural principle” that drives us to imagine the experiences and feelings of others (I.i.1.1). Smith adds that not only are we driven to imagine the experiences of others, we are also driven to try to reach agreement of sentiment, for “nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast” (I.i.2.1). That is, we desire mutual sympathy, the harmonious state wherein the spectator’s and the agent’s feelings agree. As we will see below, achieving this desirable state requires an effort by both spectator and agent.

On Smith’s view, then, our basic curiosity about the sentiments of others combines with our strong and natural desire for sympathy and approval and produces a potent motive to regularly engage in the sympathetic interaction. The desire for mutual sympathy (and the converse aversion to antipathy and disapproval) is the “principle or instinct” which Smith refers to in III.3.34; this desire “prompts

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15 Smith admits the existence of “contagion” type instances of sympathy, but these are not his focal cases. See I.i.3 for examples of these sympathetic responses.

16 This is a claim about human nature for Smith, and it is supposed to be universally true: Smith writes that even the “greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without [the principle of sympathy]” (I.i.1.1).

17 See also, “The great pleasure of conversation and society, besides, arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another. But this most delightful harmony cannot be obtained unless there is a free communication of sentiments and opinions. We all desire, upon this account, to feel how each other is affected, to penetrate into each other’s bosoms, and to observe the sentiments and affections which really subsist there” (VII.iv.28). This is not to say that we must always engage in the sympathetic interaction to reach sentimental agreement. Smith recognizes that we can reach agreement on “objects which are considered without any peculiar relation either to ourselves or to the person whose sentiments we judge of” without any sympathetic effort (I.i.3.2). It is only when the object of sympathy does bear a “peculiar relation” to one of us (for instance, your gratitude towards another person), that I must sympathize with you in order to understand and evaluate your response.

18 See I.i.2 for the first sustained discussion of this desire, and see I.i.4.5 for his discussion of the “intolerable” pain of disagreement on moral matters.
us” to sympathize with others. How might this principle also prompt the effort of self-command? To answer this question, we must look more closely at the sympathetic interaction.

In brief, when the spectator and the agent engage in the sympathetic interaction, the spectator will strive to enter fully into the situation of an agent, gathering information about that situation, and striving to understand it without bias or partiality. Her effort will first produce in her a sympathetic emotion, and then a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation. If her sympathetic emotion is “in perfect concord” with the agent’s original passion, then she wholly approves of his passion and judges it proper, but insofar as her sympathetic emotion does not match the original passion of the agent, she feels a degree of disapprobation and judges it improper. The agent, aware that others will be so judging him, and moved by his desire to be sympathized with, strives to bring his emotions to a level into which the spectator can enter.

Let us illustrate this interaction, beginning with the task of the spectator, which Smith describes as follows:

[T]he spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded. (I.i.4.6)

If I walk into the office and see you, a colleague of mine, brushing away tears, my first thought, according to Smith, is “What has befallen you?” (I.i.1.6). But I may push this thought aside and jump to a quick disapproval of crying in the office. “Unprofessional”, I think, and I go to my desk. In this case, we see someone who is not properly being a spectator, because they are not bothering to imagine what has befallen the agent. Smith thinks this may often happen, “without any defect of humanity on

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19 Throughout this chapter, I use different pairs of pronouns for the spectator and agent for ease in parsing the interaction. Smith uses only masculine pronouns in his writing, as was the standard practice, and I retain the original language in all quotations from the text.
our part” (I.i.3.4). Perhaps I know little about you, or perhaps I am “employed about other things, and do not take time to picture out in [my] imagination the different circumstances of distress which must occur to [you]” (I.i.3.4). In such a case, I have not endeavored to put myself in your situation, and so my sentiment of disapproval and any judgment of impropriety I form from it are not warranted.

What about a spectator who does make the effort? Perhaps I know that you have been struggling to cope with the illness of your mother and the way it is affecting your family. I ask what has happened, and I try to work out the details of your situation. This is the first step in the spectator’s role in the sympathetic interaction, and it is the effortful step: what I am doing here is trying to understand you, your situation, and why you feel as you seem to feel. By trying to imaginatively simulate your experience and situation, I am putting myself in a situation to feel what I would feel, if I were in your place. The second step is the experience of a sympathetic emotion. If you tell me that your mother passed away over the weekend, and now your siblings are squabbling over her estate, I will quickly enter into your grief and frustration, for, Smith claims, “our sympathy … with deep distress, is very strong and very sincere” (I.ii.5.4).

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my sympathetic emotion of grief, “will never be unisons”, for I can never fully become you through the work of the imagination, but “they may be concords, and this is all that is wanted or required” (I.i.4.7). I feel the concord of sentiments and then feel a sentiment of approbation, for we are in mutual sympathy. This is the third step: the comparison of my sympathetic emotion with the emotion I believe you are feeling will produce a further sentiment, a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation.\(^{22}\)

While the spectator is attempting to sensitively and imaginatively engage with the agent, the agent is trying to anticipate the spectator’s evaluation of his situation, and to command his passions accordingly. The agent (“the person principally concerned” in the situation) is aware that the spectator will not be able to enter fully into his situation, and so his effort is to regulate his passions, bringing them to a level with which a spectator could sympathize:

The person principally concerned is sensible of this [inability to achieve perfect unison], and at the same time passionately desires a more complete sympathy. He longs for that relief which nothing can afford him but the entire concord of the affections of the spectators with his own. To see the emotions of their hearts, in every respect, beat time to his own, in the violent and disagreeable passions, constitutes his sole consolation. But he can only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which spectators are capable of going along with him. He must flatten, if I may be allowed to say so, the sharpness of its natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him. (I.i.4.7)\(^{23}\)

The agent is driven by his desire for the sympathy of a spectator to regulate his passions in accordance with what he thinks that spectator would find proper. In order to anticipate the response of the spectator, the agent also runs through the steps of the spectatorial process, imagining himself and his

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\(^{22}\) Smith is careful to note that the sympathetic emotion is not the same as the sentiment of approbation. In a footnote added to the second edition of TMS (to I.iii.1.9), Smith responds to an objection Hume made to the view as presented in the first edition. In his response, Smith is careful to distinguish two feelings attendant upon the process of sympathizing: the feeling that the spectator shares with the agent, which may be a painful or a pleasant feeling, and “the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned” (I.iii.1.9), which is always pleasant.

\(^{23}\) In this description, the agent is driven to “lower” his passion, but Smithian self-command will require “up-regulation” as well as “down-regulation” of passions, depending on the passion and the situation.
own situation through the eyes of the spectator,\(^{24}\) feeling the propriety or impropriety of his reaction, and adjusting his conduct and emotions accordingly.\(^{25}\) Thus, just as the spectator is driven to sympathize with the agent by her desire for mutual sympathy, the agent is driven to regulate his emotions by his desire for mutual sympathy.

Now, as the spectator and agent engage in the sympathetic interaction, motivated by their respective desires for mutual sympathy, they are each also evaluating the “original passion”, of the agent. This is a key feature of Smith’s account of the moral sentiments. On Smith’s view, a moral sentiment (a sentiment of approval or disapproval) is a sympathetic response to the propriety of the agent’s original passion. That is, the spectator, upon attempting to sympathetically imagine the agent’s situation, will also feel a sense of “the suitableness or unsuitableness … the proportion or disproportion which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it” (I.i.3.6). If the spectator, “upon bringing the case home to himself”, feels a “dissonance” between his sympathetic emotion and the passion the agent appears to feel, he will disapprove of the agent’s passion and judge it improper (I.i.3.1). If he feels a “concord” between the two feelings, he will approve of the agent’s passion, and judge it proper. “Upon all occasions” says Smith, the sentiments of the spectator “are the standards and measures by which he judges of [the agent’s]” (I.i.3.1).\(^ {26}\)

\(^{24}\) In this case, the agent is imagining himself in the eyes of the actual spectator in front of him, but we can also see the direction in which this account is heading, for the actual spectator in this case may be known to the agent to be someone who is unimaginative and quick to judge. The agent may imagine himself under the gaze not of this actual person, but of someone who is more impartial and better-informed about his situation. That is, he may “suppose” the presence of an impartial spectator. We will examine this capacity in further detail in Section 1.4 below.

\(^{25}\) It may be the case that for many actual sympathetic interactions, the agent must make more of an effort to reach mutual sympathy than the spectator. Smith repeatedly notes that pain “is a more pungent sensation than pleasure”, which suggests that the agent has a stronger motive to avoid the pain of the spectator’s failure of sympathy and attendant disapproval than does the spectator to achieve the pleasure of mutual sympathy and approbation (see, e.g., I.iii.1.3; I.iii.1.8; III.2.15). But in the model case of the sympathetic interaction, the spectator’s effort is also onerous, requiring her to be insightful, observant, and involved. I thank Aino Lahdenranta for encouraging me to address this issue.

\(^{26}\) See also I.i.3.10.
But can the sentiments of any spectator serve as the standard of propriety? Or, to ask this question in another way, can any instance of moral approbation or disapprobation justify a consequent judgment that an action is proper or improper? We have already seen that one of the core commitments of Smith’s sentimentalism is the claim that moral distinctions and moral judgments have their source in “immediate sense and feeling” (VII.iii.2.7). We have also just seen Smith’s view that the propriety of any affective state, including motives for action, is determined by the sentiments of the spectator. But Smith clarifies in several places throughout TMS that the standard-setting sentiments are “the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator” (VII.ii.1.49, emphasis added). That is, the level of propriety for any particular feeling will be determined by the sentiment (approbation or disapprobation) that an informed and impartial spectator would feel upon sympathizing with the agent. We will return to Smith’s conception of this spectator below, but for now, we should note that Smith takes this part of his theory to be one left unexplained by previous theorists, rationalists and sentimentalists alike:

None of those systems [which make virtue consist in propriety] either give, or even pretend to give, any precise or distinct measure by which this fitness or propriety of affection can be ascertained or judged of. That precise and distinct measure can be found nowhere but in the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator. (VII.ii.1.49)

One of Smith’s self-proclaimed contributions to this tradition of moral philosophy is his account of the standard of propriety, and this standard is itself explicitly sentimental. In this respect, Smith

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27 Smith argues in Part II of TMS that the propriety of an action is determined by the propriety of the motive, “the intention of affection of the heart, from which it proceeds” (II.iii.intro.1).

28 See also III.2.32. Smith’s conception of impartiality is complicated, and I return to it below. He does not mean that spectators are dispassionate, omniperceptient, omniscient, or in any way possessing super-human capacities. He means, rather, that good spectators have striven to enlarge their understanding of human character and behavior, and to free themselves of bias and partiality when they make moral judgments. See a very nice examination of these issues in Garrett and Hanley (2015).

29 This claim comes at the end of a long section where Smith canvasses the views of Plato, Aristotle, Zeno (“the founder of the Stoical doctrine”, VII.ii.1.15), Samuel Clarke, William Wollaston and Lord Shaftesbury, which all hold, according to Smith, that virtue consists in propriety (VII.ii).
maintains the sentimentalist commitment to the restricted role of reason, assigning to sentiment, not reason, the role of setting the standard for judgment and action.

Smith’s account of the sympathetic interaction shows that the roles of the spectator and the agent intersect, and that both are engaged in an ongoing process of imagination, feeling, and adjustment and regulation of feeling. The Smithian spectator is a keen observer of human nature, and a caring, insightful, and imaginative member of society. She feels pressure to be a well-informed and impartial judge because she has experienced what it feels like to be judged by someone who has not bothered to put himself in her situation, or because she remembers times when she has failed to fulfill her role as a spectator, and has passed an unmerited and ill-founded judgment on someone. This awareness, combined with her curiosity about the feelings of those around her, and with her desire for the pleasure of mutual sympathy, creates a strong motive to be a good spectator—to be a good listener, a discerning observer, and a cautious judge. Smith writes that upon the efforts of the spectator are founded the virtues of sensibility, “the soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues, the virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity” (I.i.5.1). The Smithian agent is a spectator of his own conduct and feeling, and he is acutely aware of his place in a world of spectators and judges. Smith writes that upon the efforts of the agent are founded the virtues of self-command, “the great, the awful and respectable, the virtues of self-denial, self-government, of that command of the passions which subjects all the movements of our nature to what our own dignity and honour, and the propriety of our own conduct require” (I.i.5.1).

To return to the passage with which we began (III.3.34), we can now see that, on Smith’s view, our sensibility to the feelings of others drives and guides our attempts at self-command. The effort of sympathizing and the effort of commanding one’s passions have the same motivational basis, each

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30 In many cases, the spectator may also need to be self-commanded, to put aside her pressing concerns and passions in order to clear particular biases she may have, or just to make space to be able to imaginatively engage with the agent.
springing from the natural and basic desire for mutual sympathy and approval. And the standard that guides the effort of self-command is set by the sentiments of the well-informed and impartial spectator. Put differently, I would not be motivated to regulate my passions if I cared nothing for what you felt (and so, nothing for whether you felt my feelings were improper), and I would have no sense for the propriety of my feelings if I were not able to imagine how you would feel if you were a well-informed and impartial spectator of me. But because I do care about achieving mutual sympathy with you, and because I can imagine your sympathetic feelings, I learn which emotions are proper in which situations, and I am motivated to achieve that level of propriety—I am motivated to exercise self-command. These are the first two facets of Smith’s sentimentalization of self-command: Smithian self-command springs from and is driven by the desire for mutual sympathy, and it is guided by the sentiments of a well-informed and impartial spectator.

Section 1.2: Passions and Sentiments

Thus far on our reading, Smithian self-command is the effort of regulating one’s passions in accordance with the standard set by the moral sentiments (sentiments of approval or disapproval) of a well-informed and impartial spectator. But how is Smith understanding the passions (and other feeling-type states) such that they can admit of regulation? Are they ‘blind’ impulses or forces that can only be regulated up or down by other, stronger forces? Are they states with representational content, admitting of something more like doxastic correction—the correction of the belief annexed to or part of the passion? And how can Smith account for this correction and regulation of passions without undermining his sentimentalist commitment to the restricted role of reason? In this section, we will consider Smith’s brief discussion of the passions, offering an answer to the first question, about the

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31 For two recent treatments of this question as put to Hume’s sentimentalist theory, see Barkhausen (2016) and Wallace (2002).
nature of the passions for Smith. We will only begin to answer the second question, about the process of correction or regulation, and we will pick up this question again in Section 1.4.

Despite offering a sentimentalist theory rife with the terms “sentiment”, “passion”, “emotion”, “feeling”, and so on, Smith does not provide a thorough discussion of the nature of these states, nor does he systematically distinguish them from one another.\(^\text{32}\) That said, TMS I.ii offers Smith’s account “of the degrees of the different Passions which are consistent with Propriety”, and can help us to better grasp Smith’s conception of passion.\(^\text{33}\) In this section, Smith offers a general discussion of the level of propriety for five different classes of passions. The main division of these five classes of passions is between those “which take their origin from the body” and those which take their origin from the imagination. The class of passions which originate in the imagination is then divided into four subsequent classes: the passions which “take their origin from a particular turn or habit of the Imagination” (emphasis added), the “unsocial passions”, the “social passions”, and the “selfish passions”.

The level of propriety for bodily passions, from hunger to severe physical pain, tends to be quite low, according to Smith. This is because spectators cannot imaginatively recreate the bodily state upon which the passion is based, and so they can only go so far when they attempt to enter into the situation of the agent. “Strong expressions” of hunger, sexual desire, and other bodily appetites are “loathsome and disagreeable”, but not because they are aspects of our ‘lower nature’ or because we ‘share them with the brutes’. Rather, Smith says, “the true cause of the peculiar disgust which we conceive for the appetites of the body when we see them in other men, is that we cannot enter into them” (I.ii.1.3). According to Smith, we can sympathize with a hungry person who also feels grief and

\(^{32}\) Smith is less precise even than Hume with his use of these terms, and often seems to use them interchangeably. Many commentators have made this point, but see Schliesser (2016) for a recent discussion.

\(^{33}\) TMS VI.iii, “Of Self-command” also contains a long discussion of the degree of propriety in different passions.
hopelessness, as in the case of someone suffering through a siege or a long sea voyage (I.ii.1.1), or with a person in great physical pain who also feels fear (I.ii.1.9), but this is because our imagination can enter into the passions that accompany the bodily passions—the grief or the fear. Similarly, the level of propriety of the class of passions originating in a “particular turn or habit of the imagination” is also set quite low. Smith’s main example is that of romantic love; if our friend is in love, he says, “though we may think his passion just as reasonable as any of the kind, yet we never think ourselves bound to conceive a passion of the same kind, and for the same person for whom he has conceived it” (I.ii.2.1). Romantic love is too particular for a spectator to be able to enter into it, although a spectator may enter into the hope, joy, gratitude, and so on, which accompany the romantic love.

The remaining three classes of passions—the unsocial, the social, and the selfish—all take their origin from the imagination. The unsocial passions, “hatred and resentment, with all their different modifications”, tend to have a lower level of propriety, according to Smith (I.ii.3.1). There are two general reasons for this. First, “our sympathy is divided between the person who feels [the passion], and the person who is the object of [the passion]” (I.ii.3.1). And second, the “immediate effects” of these passions are “disagreeable” and “do not dispose and prepare us to sympathize with them, before we are informed of the cause which excites them” (I.ii.3.6). The “voice of anger” is “hoarse, boisterous, and discordant”, and it inspires “fear or aversion” in those who hear it.34 That is, when a spectator observes someone who resents someone else, their effort of sympathizing is hindered by the difficulty of having to sympathize with two “persons principally concerned”, and by the general disagreeableness of resentment and its initial effects on the expression and voice of the

34 See also Smith’s essay, “Of the Imitative Arts”, where he discusses the musical ‘voice’ of various passions (EPS II.10-13). Of the unsocial passions, he writes: “The passions, on the contrary, which drive men from one another, the unsocial, the hateful, the indecent, the vicious passions, cannot be easily imitated by Music. The voice of furious anger, for example, is harsh and discordant; its periods are all irregular, sometimes very long and sometimes very short, and distinguished by no regular pauses. The obscure and almost inarticulate grumblings of black malice and envy, the screaming outcries of dastardly fear, the hideous growlings of brutal and implacable revenge, are all equally discordant (EPS II.13).
person experiencing it. The social passions, instead of “dividing” our sympathy with the persons involved, “redouble” it and render them “almost always peculiarly agreeable and becoming” (I.ii.4.1). Smith’s examples of social passions are: “generosity, humanity, kindness, compassion, mutual friendship and esteem, all the social and benevolent affections” (I.ii.4.1). And where the unsocial passions are immediately disagreeable, the social passions are immediately agreeable, and “we have always, therefore, the strongest disposition to sympathize with the benevolent affections” (I.ii.4.1).

The fifth class of passions is the “selfish passions”, which Smith claims “holds a sort of middle place” between the unsocial and social passions (I.ii.5.1). These passions include “grief and joy, when conceived upon account of our own private good or bad fortune” (I.ii.5.1). Smith introduces several complicating factors into his discussion of our tendency to sympathize with the grief and joy of others, including whether envy is a factor, and here his discussion recalls Hume’s discussion of the inter-workings of the principles of sympathy and comparison in Book Two of the Treatise.

What can we take from this discussion of the classes of passions and of the regularities governing the spectator’s sympathy with different passions? For one, I think it is clear that for Smith, passions and sentiments can have complex intentional objects as well as fine-grained phenomenological characteristics. When the spectator considers an agent’s passion of resentment, she considers the passion as being ‘about’ at least two people, and as having a negative or unpleasant valence, and she associates that passion with a complex set of standard effects (effects on the person feeling the passion as well as on the person that is its object). In modern parlance, we might be inclined to say that Smith is thus a “cognitivist” about the emotions.35 As Charles Griswold puts it, “for Smith the emotions are in some way cognitive; beliefs are part and parcel of emotions, and beliefs may be

35 Several of Smith’s commentators have ascribed a cognitivist view to him; see Garrett and Hanley (2015); Fricke (2013); Carrasco (2012, 2004); Fleischacker (1999); Griswold (1999); Nussbaum (1990), 339.
true or false, adequate or inadequate.” According to Maria Carrasco, proper sympathizing “includes some deliberation, comprehension, and understanding; it is a cognitive feeling, for besides sentiment, it also implies some sense of cognition, imagination, and responsiveness to reality and permanent adjustment to new circumstances.”

This way of speaking, of cognitive and non-cognitive states, can imply a sharp distinction between these states, which would be misleading to ascribe to Smith. As should be clear from Smith’s discussion of the classes of passions and from our Section 1.1 discussion of sympathy and propriety, Smith does not draw a clean or sharp line between thinking and feeling. He may draw a sharp boundary around reason in one respect—explicitly claiming that reason alone cannot produce impulses or motives and that reason alone cannot originally discover moral distinctions—but once that sharp boundary is drawn, the activities of thinking and feeling become intertwined in a way that makes it difficult to separate them cleanly from each other.

But it is right to emphasize the information-laden and information-sensitive aspects of the passions and sentiments on Smith’s account, and the term “cognitivism” does this. So, while Smith may not be very precise or systematic about his treatment of the passions and sentiments, we can gather a rough view from his various comments. In brief, we can say that, for Smith, the variety of “original passions” can be ranged along a scale of complex intentionality, where passions like hunger, lust, and rage tend to be simpler and more immediate reactions to the world, and sentiments like

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36 Griswold (1999), 115.

37 Carrasco (2004), 100. See also Garrett and Hanley: “Because of Smith’s focus on sympathy as perspectival his sentimentalism had a ‘cognitivist’ slant. To have a viewpoint meant to have beliefs and for Smith acts of sympathy were often extremely complex and involved multiply iterated what-would-I/they-do-under-such-circumstances judgments, circumstantial information, and diverse sentiments. Consequently, a great deal went into apparently simple acts of sympathy that was not simple transfer of sentiment, and what seemed like a simple transfer of sentiment on the surface was often revealed to be a rich cognitive achievement upon dissection” (2015, 247).

38 I follow other commentators in making this point; see, for example: Fricke (2013); Carrasco (2004); Griswold (1999, 130); Fleischacker (1999, 145). See also Nazar (2012) and Frazer (2010, 2007).
resentment and gratitude tend to be more complex reactions, mediated by a greater degree of information and by more extensive processes of imagination and discernment.39 The moral sentiments, spectatorial approval and disapproval, are the most complex and mediated types of feeling. As we saw in the previous section, these sentiments are formed through an extensive process of information-gathering and perspective-shifting; the spectator tries to imagine the situation of the agent in as much detail as possible, and she tries to adopt the best perspective on the situation, one that is not too close to the agent’s concerns as to be partial to them, and one that is not too far from those concerns as to lose sight of their granularity and specificity.40 The spectator’s sentiments are formed through her imaginative and sympathetic engagement with the entire situation of the agent, not just the agent’s affect, and that engagement involves cognition, causal reasoning, perspectival toggling, information, and, crucially, feeling.

This sketch of Smith’s account of the passions and sentiments reveals that cognitive elements and processes of reasoning are part of the sympathetic interaction and the resulting spectatorial sentiments. Passions and sentiments are thus not mere ‘raw feels’ or ‘brute forces’, and they can admit of correction and regulation by being information-laden and information-sensitive. But we have not yet addressed the question of how the correction and regulation works. Is it just by seeing that one’s fear is based on a mistaken apprehension of the snake as venomous that one’s fear is corrected and removed? If so—if Smith has a view whereby passions are corrected and regulated by bringing reason to bear on them—then his view would be much closer to certain traditional accounts of rational self-

39 Sympathetic versions of these emotions, that is the sympathetic analog that a spectator feels upon sympathizing, will tend to be “weaker” than the original passion (see I.i.4.8).

40 Hume’s version of the famous shipwreck example from Lucretius is helpful here (T 3.3.2.5; SBN 594-5). To apply this to the Smithian paradigm, we might say that when we are too far away (too critically detached from and cool toward) the agent, we cannot actually see the salient features of their situation and so cannot base our spectatorial sentiment on a well-informed assessment of that situation. But when we are too close to the agent (perhaps too partial toward them), we also lose sight of certain features of their situation, being caught up in the beloved countenance of our child or in the miserable pangs of our friend’s grief.
control than I have been claiming. Indeed, Smith’s view would end up quite close in this respect to the Stoics’. Perhaps Smith would still disagree with the Stoics about the result of the process of correction, but he would have a very similar account of the process itself. In Section 1.4, we will look more closely at Smith’s account of the way the effort of self-command works, trying to see whether Smith remains true to his sentimentalist commitments here.

Section 1.3: Merit and Praiseworthiness

Our discussion of Smithian self-command has thus far assumed that an agent always cares about achieving the sympathy and approval of the impartial spectator. But what about an agent who surrounds himself with only partial spectators, with flatterers or indulgent friends who are so interested in him that they quickly enter into and share his every emotion and motive? Or what about an agent who is a deft dissimulator, able to mask the expressions of his emotions, and effectively fooling a spectator into approval and praise when none is deserved? Would such agents count as self-commanded for Smith? We can begin to answer this question by looking at Smith’s discussion of judgments of merit and demerit, along with his discussion of praise and praiseworthiness. We will see that Smith’s view is that agents learn to assess the merit and demerit of affections and actions, and subsequently to assess the merit and demerit of moral praise and approval and blame and disapproval. Agents learn from experience that one may be praised without being worthy of that praise, and they learn to distinguish between merited praise and blame and unmerited praise and blame. Thus they develop a love of praiseworthiness and a desire to be that which they approve of in others. These pieces of Smith’s account are an important part of his account of moral motivation and of virtuous

41 I say that we can begin to answer this question as we will have to continue to keep it in mind in the next section as well. The question arises in part because that Smith uses “self-command” sometimes to refer to any instance of a commanded passion, and sometimes to refer to a special set of instances of command of passion, namely those aimed at achieving the sympathy of an impartial spectator. I discuss non-virtuous forms of self-command in Part Two.
self-command, for they build in a further dimension of evaluation and correction of sentiment. We will continue to consider these cases in the next section as well.

In his discussion of sympathy and propriety, Smith notes that we can evaluate emotions, intentions, and the actions which proceed from them “under two different aspects, or in two different relations; first, in relation to the cause which excites it, or the motive which gives occasion to it; and secondly, in relation to the end which it proposes, or the effect which it tends to produce” (I.i.3.5). The first relation pertains to propriety, which we examined in Section 1.1, and the second pertains to the merit or demerit of the action, or “the qualities of deserving reward, and of deserving punishment” (II.i.intro.1). For Smith, judgments of merit and demerit have specific objects: a judgment of merit attaches to actions that are received by a third party with proper *gratitude*, and a judgment of demerit attaches to actions that are received by a third party with proper *resentment*. Gratitude and resentment are the two primary objects of merit and demerit, and they each point to a subsequent action: gratitude towards *reward*, and resentment towards *punishment* (II.i). Smith also notes that judgments of merit and demerit are dependent upon judgments of propriety and impropriety. That is, an action that meets with gratitude but proceeded from an improper motive will not produce a judgment of merit in a spectator.\(^{42}\)

Let us examine an instance of this more complicated interaction. Suppose you are attending a dinner party, which is being hosted by an acquaintance of yours. You do not know the host very well, but you are good friends with a few of the other guests. During the course of the evening, one of your friends is the target of a very rude comment from the host. As far as you can tell, this rudeness was completely unprovoked and seems to spring from the host’s desire to “stir things up” and have a lively

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\(^{42}\) There is much more to say about Smith’s account of merit and demerit, but to do so would take us outside the scope of this project. In his account of merit and demerit, Smith also addresses the virtue of justice and the problem of what we now call “moral luck”. For further discussion of these issues in Smith, see, *inter alia*, Blackburn (2015); Schliesser (2013); Flanders (2006); Garrett (2005); Russell (1999).
party. As a spectator of this, you will feel a “compounded sentiment”, according to Smith. You will feel a sense of impropriety and a subsequent sentiment of disapproval towards the host, produced by your “direct sympathy [or, as in this case, antipathy] with the affections and motives of the person who acts” (II.i.5.1). You will also feel a sense of demerit, produced by your “indirect sympathy” with the resentment that your friend feels (II.i.5.1). Your sympathy with your resentful friend, and your sense of the demerit of the situation will also lead you to sympathize with your friend’s desire to punish the host for his rudeness, perhaps with a cutting reply, or by “taking the high road” and refusing to engage, or by telling your circle of friends to snub the host at future occasions.

Smith’s account of judgments of merit and demerit introduces a further evaluative dimension to our moral sentiments. Our sense of merit allows us to evaluate affections and actions that affect other people. But the sense of merit can also be applied to moral approbation and disapprobation itself—we can learn to assess the moral sentiments that we ourselves feel, as spectators, and then to assess the moral sentiments directed toward us as agents.43 This is because each experience with the sympathetic interaction leaves its marks; I may feel the pangs of shame after I realize I misjudged someone’s situation and subjected them to undeserved criticism, or I may feel the awful and alienating pain of being misunderstood by someone who is not trying to see where I am coming from, or I may feel the joy and ease of meeting a sympathetic mind, someone who understands who I am and why I feel as I do. As we grow up in the world of continuous sympathetic commerce, taking up the intersecting roles of spectator and agent, we learn to assess the sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, of praise and blame, and to evaluate them for their merit and demerit.

43 Indeed, although the sixth edition of TMS does not explicitly signal this, there is an indication of this in the first five editions of TMS. The title of Chapter One in Part III of TMS was, in the first five editions, “Of the consciousness of merited praise or blame” [see the editor’s notes to TMS III.1.1 (1982), 109]. Smith changed the title of this chapter to “Of the Principle of Self-approbation and of Self-disapprobation” in the sixth edition, perhaps because he added an entire chapter, Chapter Two of Part III, which discussed the notion of merited praise and blame, although under the new denominations of “Praise-worthiness” and “Blame-worthiness”.
Smith claims that the impetus to evaluate our own evaluative responses stems from a basic desire in human beings:

Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love. He naturally dreads, not only to be hated, but to be hateful; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of hatred. He desires, not only praise, but praise-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise. He dreads, not only blame, but blame-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be blamed by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of blame. (III.2.1)

These lines open the section in TMS on praiseworthiness, and they extend Smith’s discussion of propriety and merit in the first part of TMS. Smith is claiming that there is a deep desire in human beings to be the proper object of praise and approbation, and a deep aversion to being the proper object of blame and disapproval. He admits that we may be pleased momentarily by “groundless praise”, but such praise “can give no solid joy, no satisfaction that will bear any serious examination” (III.2.5). Indeed, he thinks that “if we are conscious that we do not deserve to be so favourably thought of, and that if the truth were known, we should be regarded with very different sentiments, our satisfaction is far from being complete” (III.2.4). Such praise can even be mortifying, if it causes me to reflect on my real motive for acting, or the real sentiment I feel. If I visit my ailing grandmother in the hospital because my parents have told me I must, and she responds with joy and gratitude for my apparent affection and concern, I will likely feel awful. Conversely, says Smith, it often pleases us to reflect that even though we have received no praise for some action, our conduct “has been such as to deserve it” (III.2.5). According to Smith, we are “endowed” by nature “not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of; or of being what [we ourselves] approve[] of in other men” (III.2.7).

This claim about human nature has been criticized for being outside the spirit of Smith’s otherwise respectably empiricist framework. Fonna Forman writes,

Smith asserted the distinction between praise and praise-worthiness without saying a word – not a single word – about how ordinary people within his empirical description come to know
the difference, and where this new knowledge about the world may come from. Certainly he argued that the distinction exists, but it seems to be an epiphenomenal assertion, divorced from Smith’s anthropological description of the process by which our standards of judgment are formed.44

James Otteson is less critical, but he claims that Smith’s distinction between praise and praiseworthiness certainly seems more like a “stipulation of a certain characteristic of human nature” than an argument.45 While Smith may be guilty of some Enlightenment optimism here, he is certainly not guilty of failing to provide an explanation of how “ordinary people” come to know the difference between praise and praiseworthiness. Although Smith does not make this account explicit, we can find it in what he says about the two main ways of evaluating affections: for their propriety or impropriety, and for their merit or demerit.

As noted above, we can learn to evaluate our moral sentiments for merit and demerit, and to judge whether praise or blame is warranted. Let us return to the case I mentioned above, of my visit to my ailing grandmother. In this case, I visit my grandmother because my parents have told me I must. But my grandmother receives my visit with joy and praise for my being a thoughtful and caring granddaughter. My grandmother imputes a certain intention to me, that of concern and affection for her, sympathizes with that intention, and approves of me because of it. Indeed, she is grateful to me for my visit. Let us also suppose that my mother, who knows that I was unwilling to visit my grandmother (because I protested so much that she had to compel me to do so), accompanies me on the visit. Standing next to my mother while my grandmother praises me for being such a kind and caring granddaughter would be a mortifying experience. My mother knows that this praise is ill-deserved, and I know that she knows this, and I can feel that I am not worthy of such praise. Indeed, my mother may even blame me for my lack of affection for my grandmother. I can view myself

44 (2010), 155; see also Forman-Barzilai (2006), 99.
45 (2002), 88; Otteson goes on to offer a Smithian argument for this claim, and I examine that argument in the next chapter.
through my mother’s eyes, and see that my motive was improper, and that the gratitude I receive from my grandmother is unmerited. Now, assuming that I have made judgments of other people who have acted out of a hollow sense of duty, finding them to be wanting a proper motivation for their action, and assuming that I have made judgments of other people who have received gratitude for actions that did not deserve it, I should be able to implicitly compare my case with those cases. Doing so should allow me to see that I am currently acting in a way that I in fact disapprove of in other people.

Smith offers an explanation of how ordinary agents can come to recognize the difference between praise and praiseworthiness. This explanation may not be explicitly set out, but it can be reconstructed from what Smith says about our ability to evaluate sentiments of approbation and disapprobation for their merit or demerit. As we will see in further detail in the next section, turning that apparatus of judgment onto oneself allows one to evaluate the praise and blame that one receives from others. Thus we can learn to distinguish between merited praise (actions and sentiments that are praiseworthy), and unmerited, or “mere” praise. Now, perhaps Forman and Otteson mean to focus on a different aspect of Smith’s distinction between praise and praiseworthiness. Perhaps they mean to ask why an agent who can tell that they have received unmerited praise should care. Why should agents care more about praiseworthiness than praise? Why could I not be as happy with unmerited praise as Gyges is said to be because of his ring? These questions bring us to deep issues involving the normativity and authority of the sentiments of the impartial spectator, and I must put them off until the next chapter.

Thus far we have examined Smith’s conception of sympathy and the sympathetic interaction, his conception of passions and sentiments, his account of our judgments of propriety and merit, and his claim about our desire to be worthy of praise and not merely praised. But we have not yet addressed the two problematic cases with which we began this section. If propriety is set by the sentiments of the spectator, could an agent not surround himself with partial spectators who will easily enter into
his sentiments, and achieve self-command through no real effort? Or could an agent not dissemble with a spectator, masking the expression of his true sentiment and securing sympathy through deception? We also have not yet addressed the question remaining from Section 1.2, about how self-command works, and how an agent actually alters her emotions. Depending on how Smith answers this question, his account may be closer to standard views of rational self-control than it appears, despite its other sentimentalized features. In order to complete our picture of Smith’s conception of self-command, and to answer these remaining questions, we must turn to his account of the impartial spectator and the development of the capacity for self-evaluation.

Section 1.4: The Impartial Spectator and the Operation of Self-Command

As we saw above, Smith’s self-commanded agent is the person who commands her original passions so that they are brought to a level into which a spectator can enter. In the cases we considered in Section 1.1, the agent was concerned with the sentiments of the actual spectators by whom she was faced. And in Smith’s initial discussion of sympathy and propriety, in Part I of TMS, he speaks largely of actual spectators, people who have their own concerns and interests, are animated by their own sentiments, biased in certain ways, and limited in the information they have about us. But as we move from Part I to Part II of TMS, “the impartial spectator” becomes a more frequent character. In Part II, the impartial spectator is the actual third person that observes a situation involving two other people. That is, a person who has no particular tie to the two people involved, and who can feel and judge of the situation without any particular bias.

We also saw above that in the sympathetic interaction, the spectator is imagining the situation of the agent, and the agent is imagining what a spectator would feel upon her attempt to sympathize. Following his discussion of the sympathetic interaction, Smith describes these intersecting efforts and their result:
In order to produce this concord [of sentiments], as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned [i.e., the agent], so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continually 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. As they are constantly considering what they themselves would feel, if they actually were the sufferers, so he is as constantly led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he was only one of the spectators of his own situation. As their sympathy makes them look at it, in some measure, with his eyes, so his sympathy makes him look at it, in some measure, with theirs, especially when in their presence and acting under their observation: and as the reflected passion, which he thus conceives, is much weaker than the original one, it necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before he came into their presence, before he began to recollect in what manner they would be affected by it, and to view his situation in this candid and impartial light. (I.i.4.8)

Smith is describing the process of learning to be an impartial spectator of oneself, and he is describing how the effort of taking up that perspective can actually alter an agent’s emotions. Let us take up these two components in reverse order.

Smith claims that imagining myself through the eyes of an impartial spectator can actually modify my original passion. How might this work? We can take a hint from the musical metaphors Smith uses throughout TMS. In a passage discussed above, he writes that in a sympathetic interaction, the agent “must flatten … the sharpness of [the passion’s] natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him” (I.i.4.7). And elsewhere he compares mutual sympathy to the harmony produced when “so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another” (VII.iv.28). He even characterizes certain passions according to their musical qualities, claiming, for example, that the “natural tones [of joy, grief, love, admiration, devotion] are all soft, clear, melodious”, whereas “the voice of anger … and of all the passions which are akin to it, is harsh and discordant” (I.ii.3.6). Extending Smith’s musical metaphors, we can understand self-command as an agent’s attempt to “tune” her feelings so that they harmonize with

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46 See also Smith’s essay “Of the Imitative Arts”, especially Part II, in EPS, for a discussion of representing different passions in operatic music and in instrumental music.
the feelings of a spectator. In order to tune an instrument, a musician must be aware of the note she is producing and she must be aware of the note she is aiming for. She must also desire to bring her own instrument into harmony either with the instruments around her, or with a more ideal or imaginary standard.\(^47\) Likewise, the effort of self-command involves three elements: the original affection, the standard by which the agent tries to regulate it, and the desire to regulate the original affection so that it accords with the standard. But how does the standard in the case of self-command get a grip on us?\(^48\) How can I be moved by the sentiments of an impartial spectator—by the sentiments of someone else—to regulate my own passions? In order to answer these questions, let us turn to Smith’s account of how an agent learns to be an impartial spectator of herself. We will see that taking up the perspective of a “supposed” impartial spectator allows an agent to feel a new set of spectatorial sentiments. These are the sentiments that serve as the standard that guides her attempts at self-command, and they are sentiments she herself feels.

Part III of TMS marks Smith’s turn from examining the “origin and foundation of our judgments concerning the sentiments and conduct of others” to “the origin and foundation of our judgments concerning our own sentiments and conduct: (III.1.1). Smith claims that we judge ourselves according to the same principle we use to judge others. As we saw above, I approve or disapprove of another person insofar as I feel that, when I enter into his situation, I can sympathize with the sentiments he feels and the motives he was acting on. Similarly, “we either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station, we either can or cannot entirely enter into

\(^47\) Recall that “harmony” need not be an exact matching or unison of tones, something Smith points out in the case of the sympathetic interaction: “Though [these two sentiments, of spectator and agent] will never be unisons, they may be concords, and this is all that is wanted or required” (I.i.4.7).

\(^48\) We should also ask how Smith explains our impulse to accord to the standard set by the sentiments of the impartial spectator. Why is this the appropriate standard? These questions will be addressed in the next chapter.
and sympathize with the sentiments and motives which influenced it” (III.1.2). According to Smith, then, in order to evaluate and judge of ourselves, we must be able to be our own spectators.

Indeed, this brings us back to Smith’s point, which we saw briefly above, that human beings must be in society in order to develop the capacity to scrutinize and evaluate themselves, the capacity which is required for any degree of self-command. Smith claims,

Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. … Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind. (III.1.3)

Bring a human being into society and she will see her own affections and intentions reflected in the faces and conduct of her fellow human beings. They may laugh with her when she is witty, or frown at her when she is arrogant, or weep with her when she suffers, or punish her when she is cruel. Other human beings are the mirrors in which we see the reflection, for the first time, of our own emotions and intentions. And seeing the reflection of our passions allows us to form intentions and affections about those passions: “Bring [a man] into society, and all his own passions will immediately become the causes of new passions” (III.1.3). I will discover that some of my qualities are approved of by some people, and that other qualities are distasteful and disapproved. I will be spurred by my desire for the sympathy and approval of others to scrutinize myself, to modify my passions, to change my conduct, and to secure the praise and approval of others.

Society is required for these initial self-assessments, and Smith encourages us to imagine real agents confronted with real spectators as the initial stage of this learning process. But an agent can also “suppose” or imagine a spectator of her conduct. Smith writes that once I “become anxious” to know how I am perceived by others, and whether I “deserve their censure or applause”, I begin
examining myself by considering how I would appear if I were in the spectator’s position: “we suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct” (III.1.5). This process of “supposition” involves a change of perspective, for, according to Smith: “we can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us” (III.1.3).

In a suggestive analogy, Smith compares this process of perspective-taking to the case of visual perspective (III.3.2). When I look out my window, I see a particular landscape—in my case, of snow-covered sidewalks, parked cars, and colorfully-painted houses—and it seems to stretch from one frame of the window to the other. If I were to trace the picture presented through my window, it would cover a rectangle of approximately 30 inches by 60 inches, a space much smaller than the room in which I sit and write. To judge that the objects outside my window (cars, houses, and piles of snow), are therefore smaller than the objects on my desk (books, pens, and piles of paper) would be incorrect. As Smith says, “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 distances and thereby form some judgment of their real proportions” (III.3.2, emphasis added). In order to correctly assess the relative size of objects, I take up a new perspective, from which the objects currently at arm’s length from me are at a similar distance to those currently outside of my window.

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49 As the editors of TMS note, Smith has a similar discussion of visual perspective in his essay “Of the External Senses”, where he cites and praises Berkeley’s *New Theory of Vision*. 71
Similarly, if I want to assess the propriety of my own emotions and actions, I must take up a new perspective on them, the perspective of someone who is at an appropriate distance from them. How do I do this? Smith claims that I must split or divide myself:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of a spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion. The first is the judge; the second the person judged of. But that the judge should, in every respect, be the same with the person judged of, is as impossible, as that the cause should, in every respect, be the same with the effect. (III.1.6)

In order to assess myself, I must divide myself, as it were, into two characters. Smith claims that I am both of these characters, I am both the judge and the one judged, both the spectator and the agent. But more precisely, we might say that I, the agent, develop the ability to take up different perspectives, including the perspective of someone impartial to me and my interests. For example, I can view the behavior of a good-natured but raucous friend from my own partial perspective, loving her for her humor and impulsiveness, and for how she always ensures that a party is fun, or I can view her behavior from the perspective of the other restaurant patrons who find her to be noisy, intrusive, and dramatic. Likewise, I can view my own furious resentment at a personal slight from the partial perspective of the resentment, which urges my revenge on the offender, or I can view that resentment from the perspective of a third, impartial party, who sees the insult in a different light and as meriting a more moderate response. We have already seen how the roles of agent and spectator intersect, and we have seen that the agential effort in the sympathetic interaction involves moving between one’s situation as an agent, and the perspective of the spectator one is interacting with. Smith is claiming

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50 Smith also says that I “properly call myself” the agent. I hope to consider this claim and related issues about the authenticity of the person who strives to accord with the sentiments of the impartial spectator in future work.
that we internalize this toggling between perspectives, and that when we attempt to scrutinize ourselves, we similarly take up and move between perspectives.\footnote{The idea of toggling between characters or perspectives may seem strange at first, but think of the sorts of things adults say to children to try to get them to see that they’ve done something wrong, or insensitive, or improper (etc): “How would you feel if he did that to you?”; “What would your father say if he saw you doing that?”; “Think of how she feels now.” These and similar such phrases ask someone to try and imagine their actions or feelings from the perspective of someone else. See also Valihora (2016), 413; Otteson (2013), 430.}

Repeated experience with the sympathetic interaction and repeated attempts to take an impartial perspective on one’s own feelings results in the development of the capacity to imaginatively “suppose” the presence of an impartial spectator. The mature agent in Smith’s system is someone who has had this repeated experience” and is able to be her own spectator “so easily and readily, that [she] is scarce sensible that [she does] it” (III.3.3). This process of habituation begins at a very young age, and Smith describes the development of the supposed impartial spectator as “studying” in “the great school of self-command” (III.3.22). Smith offers a colorful picture of the early stage of this development:

A very young child has no self-command; but, whatever are its emotions, whether fear, or grief, or anger, it endeavours always, by the violence of its outcries, to alarm, as much as it can, the attention of its nurse, or of its parents. While it remains under the custody of such partial protectors, its anger is the first and, perhaps, the only passion which it is taught to moderate. By noise and threatening they are, for their own ease, often obliged to frighten it into good temper; and the passion which incites it to attack, is restrained by that which teaches it to attend to its own safety. When it is old enough to go to school, or to mix with its equals, it soon finds that they have no such indulgent partiality. It naturally wishes to gain their favor, and to avoid their hatred or contempt. Regard even to its own safety teaches it to do so; and it soon finds that it can do so in no other way than by moderating, not only its anger, but all its other passions, to the degree which its play-fellows and companions are likely to be pleased with. It thus enters into the great school of self-command, it studies to be more and more master of itself, and begins to exercise over its own feelings a discipline which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection. (III.3.22)

As a child, Smith claims, I am initially surrounded by partial caregivers and I feel no pressure to moderate my passions or control my actions. But when I first encounter people who are not partial to me, I am moved for the first time to care about what they think of me and I begin to strive to
command my passions and conduct—I begin to exercise self-command. I want these impartial spectators to approve of me, and so I endeavor to bring my sentiments to a level into which they can enter. As I continue in this “great school” and I encounter more and more actual impartial spectators, I gradually develop the ability to “suppose” the presence of an impartial spectator, to occupy the perspective of that “supposed” spectator, and to experience moral sentiments from that perspective.

As a mature agent, supposing the presence of an impartial spectator, I may also compare the sentiments of actual spectators with those of the spectator I suppose. Perhaps the actual spectators surrounding me are ill-informed about my situation, or ill-disposed toward me, and I recognize that this is influencing their understanding of my situation. Their sentiments of disapprobation are not merited as they have not properly understood my situation. Smith occasionally refers to two different standards that we can use when evaluating the propriety of our own sentiments. The first is described as the standard set by the actual people we live with, those people whose sentiments are limited and conditioned in a variety of ordinary but pervasive ways. The second standard is an idea of “exact propriety and perfection”, a standard that “exists in the mind of every man … gradually formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other people” (VI.iii.25). I can suppose a more ideal spectator, both to help me gain perspective on myself when actual spectators have not fully understood my case, and to help me gain perspective when I am being swayed by the partiality of self-interested affections. The “ideal” nature of this supposed impartial spectator should not suggest a retreat to some dispassionate, omniscient point of view. The ideal impartial spectator is simply someone who is well-informed and impartial, someone who knows the relevant facts of the situation and who is disinterested toward the persons involved.

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52 See also I.ii.5.9.

53 We will return to this notion of two standards in Part Three below, and in the next chapter when we discuss the authority of the sentiments of the impartial spectator.
When the mature Smithian agent scrutinizes her own passions from the perspective of the impartial spectator—when she divides herself “as it were” into agent and spectator—she will feel both her own original passion and a sympathetic emotion, produced by taking up the spectatorial perspective. The sympathetic emotion will interact with the original passion, in some cases “abat[ing] the violence” of it, and in others, presumably, increasing the force (I.i.4.8). Further, the mature moral agent will feel the relation between her original passion and the sympathetic emotion she feels by taking up the perspective of the impartial spectator. If she feels the concord of these two feelings, she will feel a sentiment of self-approbation and no impulse to command her original passion (a rare case). If she feels a dissonance between them, she will feel a sentiment of self-disapprobation and the impulse to “tune” her original passion to the standard set by the sympathetic emotion of the impartial spectator. In the case of a failure of perfect coincidence, the exceedingly strong desire to achieve the sympathy of the impartial spectator (and so to avoid the pain of self-disapprobation) will motivate the agent to strive to regulate her passion and bring it to the level of propriety.

In summary, self-command is the regulation of the agent’s original passion in accordance with the sympathetic emotions of the impartial spectator, and on the strength of the agent’s desire to achieve the approval of the impartial spectator. As she grows up in her community, regularly engaging in sympathetic interactions and self-scrutiny, the agent will grow accustomed to taking up an impartial perspective on her own sentiments and subjecting them to spectatorial scrutiny. Once she has

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54 Smith offers very little discussion of how the passions interact with one another on a psychological or “anatomical” level, to use a favorite term of Hume’s. He seems to conceive of the sympathetic emotion as “cooler” and less violent than the original passion, but he does not elaborate on how we are to understand this. This is one of the clearest differences between Smith’s account of self-command and Hume’s account of strength of mind. Hume focuses on the intricate and often obscure interactions between passions, with some repelling each other as oil and vinegar, some swallowing up others and absorbing their force, etc., and has much less to say about the cultivation of strength of mind and how it operates on an agential level. But see Smith’s essay “The History of Astronomy”, for more overtly Humean language about the movements of the passions and the imagination. It seems that Smith is hinting at something like Hume’s picture of passions as having a degree of force or violence, which interacts with other passions in a variety of force-on-force ways.

55 As we saw above, Smith describes this desire as one of the strongest and most basic features of human motivational psychology; see I.i.1.1 and I.1.4.7.
developed the perspective of the supposed impartial spectator, the agent becomes capable of actually feeling the sentiments an impartial spectator would feel upon sympathizing with her. This is because the agent has constructed a perspective she can occupy and use in making moral judgments about herself and others. To return to Smith’s musical metaphor, we might say that the agent who is a thoughtful and attentive pupil in the great school of self-command is developing her “ear” for the sentiments of the ideal impartial spectator. The more sensitive and acute this sense is, the better able she will be to tune her emotions to the proper level. This is Smith’s account of self-command—self-command is the effort of the agent to command her passions in accordance with a regulative ideal, the sympathetic feelings of the well-informed and impartial spectator.

Section 1.5: The “Influence” of the Sentiments of the Impartial Spectator

We have seen how the standpoint of the supposed impartial spectator is developed, and how an agent learns to command her feelings and motives by taking up that standpoint. But, of course, there are many ways for dysfunction, self-deception, and weakness to enter this picture, and Smith is far from sanguine about our ability to regularly and successfully imagine our way into the standpoint of an impartial spectator and then exercise self-command accordingly. In this final section, we will consider some further sources of the potency of the sentiments of the impartial spectator, focusing on how the sentiments of the impartial spectator recruit and mobilize powerful passions like fear of shame and remorse, and love of the noble, grand, dignified, and respectable.

56 This raises an important question: could there be someone who is “tone-deaf”, so to speak, and just not capable of feeling emotions in the requisite range or with the requisite “delicacy”? Given that current empirical research suggests that human beings have diverse and varied capacities for emotional experience, we might worry that Smith’s view is premised on a false empirical assumption, or that it has the undesirable consequence of admitting only the emotionally fluent into the moral community. I cannot engage with these issues here, but I plan to take up this problem as it arises for the sentimentalist philosophies of Smith and Hume in future work.
In a striking passage in TMS III.3, in the chapter titled “Of the Influence and Authority of Conscience”, Smith considers the case of someone who sacrifices his own interests in order to help his fellow human beings. “What is it”, Smith asks, “which prompts the generous, upon all occasions, and the mean upon many, to sacrifice their own interests to the greater interests of others?” (III.3.4). Smith’s answer is this:

It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. It is a stronger power, a more forcible motive, which exerts itself upon such occasions. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration. It is from him only that we learn the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves, and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator. It is he who shows us the propriety of generosity and the deformity of injustice; the propriety of resigning the greatest interests of our own, for the yet greater interests of others, and the deformity of doing the smallest injury to another, in order to obtain the greatest benefit to ourselves. It is not the love of our neighbour, it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of those divine virtues. It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place upon such occasions; the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters. (III.3.4, emphases added)

There is much to say about this passage, and we will return to it again in the next chapter. Here, I want to focus on the two claims I have indicated with italics. Smith claims that the “power” of the supposed impartial spectator is tied, in part, to its connection to the aversion to being resented, abhorred, and execrated, and to the love of the honorable, noble, and dignified character. Let us consider each in turn.

Shame, remorse, guilt and related passions play an important and recurring role in Smith’s moral theory. Throughout TMS, Smith describes mortified and embarrassed agents, cut to the quick by the keen and disapproving judgments of their spectators. And he describes remorseful, guilty, and ashamed agents, pursued by the “furies” of those disagreeable passions. Smith writes eloquently of
the man who has committed a deeply unjust act, the “violator” of “the most sacred laws of justice”,
and in the process offers a description of remorse:

[He] can never reflect on the sentiments which mankind must entertain with regard to him, without feeling all the agonies of shame, and horror, and consternation. … By sympathizing with the hatred and abhorrence which other men must entertain for him, he becomes in some measure the object of his own hatred and abhorrence. The situation of the person, who suffered by his injustice, now calls upon his pity. He is grieved at the thought of it; regrets the unhappy effects of his own conduct, and feels at the same time that they have rendered him the proper object of the resentment and indignation of mankind, and of what is the natural consequence of resentment, vengeance and punishment. … Every thing seems hostile, and he would be glad to fly to some inhospitable desert, where he might never more behold the face of a human creature, nor read in the countenance of mankind the condemnation of his crimes. But solitude is still more dreadful than society. His own thoughts can present him with nothing but what is black, unfortunate, and disastrous, the melancholy forebodings of incomprehensible misery and ruin. The horror of solitude drives him back into society, and he comes again into the presence of mankind, astonished to appear before them, loaded with shame and distracted with fear, in order to supplicate some little protection from the countenance of those very judges, who he knows have already all unanimously condemned him. Such is the nature of that sentiment, which is properly called remorse; of all the sentiments which can enter the human breast the most dreadful. It is made up of shame from the sense of the impropriety of past conduct; of grief for the effects of it; of pity for those who suffer by it; and of the dread and terror of punishment from the consciousness of the justly provoked resentment of all rational creatures. (II.ii.2.3)

This passage refers to a variety of themes we have already covered in our discussion of the standpoint of the impartial spectator and the desire to be praiseworthy. Notice that Smith claims that the guilty man can “read in the countenance” of those around him his guilt and blameworthiness. He sees in their faces that he is “the proper object of the resentment and indignation of mankind” and therefore the proper object of “of resentment, vengeance and punishment.” Solitude and society are each unbearable for the guilty person, for he cannot escape his remorse and his awareness of being blameworthy.

On Smith’s description, remorse is a complicated and compounded passion. Remorse involves “shame from the sense of the impropriety of past conduct”, “grief for the effects of [past conduct]”, “pity for those who suffer by [past conduct]”, and “dread and terror of punishment from the consciousness of the justly provoked resentment of all rational creatures” (II.ii.2.3). We are all averse
to being afflicted by this “most dreadful” sentiment. In a later treatment of the guilty man, Smith extends and clarifies his account, claiming that the guilty man need not be discovered to be guilty to feel such remorse. His crime may be hidden from the eyes of actual spectators, but it cannot be hidden from the imagined impartial spectator—“the man in the breast”. In a passage that closely parallels the description of the remorseful man, Smith claims that this guilty man too would feel that he is the “natural object” of “contempt and derision” and even “detestation and resentment” (depending on the severity of his undiscovered crime). The man guilty of an “enormous crime[]” would feel “all the agony of horror and remorse”, and, “if his heart was not grown callous by the habit of crimes”, he would be tormented by this agony, perhaps even to admitting his own guilt. In a powerful metaphor, Smith claims that “these natural pangs of an affrighted conscience are the demons, the avenging furies, which, in this life, haunt the guilty, which allow them neither quiet nor repose” (III.2.9). The supposed impartial spectator, in its internalized form of “conscience”, sees where actual spectators cannot, knows the truth about one’s motives and passions, and judges accordingly. Those judgments have power and bite, such that the reference to the dog-like and tenacious Furies is apt.

The impartial spectator also recruits and mobilizes a set of powerful, positive passions, described in III.3.4 as, “the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters.” In the description that complements that of the remorseful man, Smith portrays the man who has acted generously and nobly and who is conscious of his own merit:

The man who, not from frivolous fancy, but from proper motives, has performed a generous action, when he looks forward to those whom he has served, feels himself to be the natural object of their love and gratitude, and, by sympathy with them, of the esteem and approbation of all mankind. And when he looks backward to the motive from which he acted, and surveys it in the light in which the indifferent spectator will survey it, he still continues to enter into it, and applauds himself by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed impartial judge. In both these points of view his own conduct appears to him every way agreeable. His mind, at the thought of it, is filled with cheerfulness, serenity, and composure. He is in friendship and harmony with all mankind, and looks upon his fellow-creatures with confidence and

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57 See the full passage at III.2.9.
benevolent satisfaction, secure that he has rendered himself worthy of their most favourable regards. In the combination of all these sentiments consists the consciousness of merit, or of deserved reward. (II.ii.2.4)

Again we can see how this passage prepares the way for Smith’s discussion of the desire to be praiseworthy in Part III of TMS, as well as his discussion of the capacity to suppose an “impartial judge” of our own conduct. The virtuous man is the “natural object” of love and gratitude, as well as esteem and approbation. He is filled with “cheerfulness, serenity, and composure” when he thinks of the propriety and agreeableness of his conduct, and he is secure in the awareness that he is “worthy of” the “favourable regards” of his fellow human beings.

Just as Smith extends his account of guilt and remorse to cover the man whose crimes remain undiscovered, he also extends his account of the consciousness of merit to the man whose virtue passes unnoticed by actual spectators. And in a passage that closely parallels II.ii.2.4, quoted above, Smith describes the man who is conscious of the propriety and agreeableness of his motives and conduct: “though mankind should never be acquainted with what he has done, he regards himself, not so much according to the light in which they actually regard him, as according to that in which they would regard him if they were better informed” (III.2.5). This man regards himself as a well-informed and impartial spectator would, and doing so, he sympathizes with himself: “he thoroughly enters into all the motives which influenced [his behavior]” (III.2.5). Smith often connects the approval of the supposed impartial spectator with “tranquillity” and “security”, or “self-satisfaction”, all of which are highly desirable states on his account. Indeed, Smith even claims that “the consciousness that [virtue] is the object of such favourable regards, is the source of that inward tranquillity and self-satisfaction with which it is naturally attended” (III.1.7). We desire to be virtuous and we love virtue because to be virtuous is to be worthy of love and admiration, and to feel tranquil and self-satisfied in the knowledge that we are or would be so loved. As Smith asks, “What so great happiness as to be beloved, and to know that we deserve to be beloved?” (III.1.7).
To conclude Part One, let us return briefly to the *Stoic Self-Command* reading, and to the various unanswered questions we considered at the end of Section 1.3. As we move deeper into the details of Smithian self-command, it continues to reveal itself as a sentimentalized capacity. Now we can see that not only does self-command spring from the desire for mutual sympathy, it works *through* a construct of the imagination, the perspective of the supposed impartial spectator, *by* a standard constituted by the sentiments of that spectator, and *through* the force of those sentiments as buttressed by the ever-present desire to achieve mutual sympathy and by a variety of other passions. When we correct our sentiments, we do so *by feeling* spectatorial emotions and moral sentiments about them. Reason may indeed assist in the process of taking up the perspective of the supposed impartial spectator, and in forming the spectatorial emotions, but it is by feeling the spectatorial sentiment of disapproval that I am provided with the standard to use in regulating my passion and the drive to make the effort of regulating it. We will have one more major dimension of this reading to consider in Part Three of this chapter, but thus far, Smithian self-command appears to be thoroughly a part of Smith’s own sentimentalist framework.

What about the questions we considered at the end of Section 1.3? Recall that we worried about two apparently problematic cases of apparent self-command, the agent surrounded by flatterers, and the deceptive agent. We can also now see what Smith would say about these two problematic cases. The agent who surrounds himself with partial friends and indulgent flatterers is refusing to consider what an *impartial* spectator of his situation would feel. Similarly, the agent who achieves the sympathy of an actual spectator through deception is failing to consider his situation through the eyes of the *well-informed* and impartial spectator. He need only consider what an impartial spectator would feel *if* the impartial spectator were acquainted with his true motive, and he can feel the impropriety of it. We will consider some further cases of apparent self-command in the next part, after which we will
consider one final dimension of Smith’s conception of self-command, namely, what is involved in the cultivation of self-command.

**Part Two: Other Forms of Command of the Passions**

The bulk of Smith’s discussion of self-command in TMS is concerned with the kind of self-command we have been focusing on thus far, the effort to command one’s passions so as to achieve the sympathy of an impartial spectator. But Smith recognizes alternative ways to command one’s passions, one that is a kind of ersatz command, useful in a pinch but not the real thing, and another that is a derivative of virtuous self-command. Since Smith suggests that these two forms of self-command are fairly common, and since they each have different explanatory stories, they deserve our attention.

How does Smith understand the apparently ordinary cases in which an agent controls his emotions or behavior out of pure self-interest, or out of any desire other than the desire for mutual sympathy with the impartial spectator? To help grasp these instances of emotion regulation, we can suppose an agent, Adam, and a series of cases. In the first case, Adam receives an insult from his boss at work, one which makes him furiously angry. But out of fear of the consequences of reacting (he might have an important client taken away, or be ostracized at work functions, or be passed over for a promotion, etc.), he commands his anger. Call this the *Angry Adam* case. Smith actually addresses this kind of emotion regulation in the conclusion to Part VI of TMS:

> Upon some occasions, indeed, those [mutinous and turbulent] passions are restrained, not so much by a sense of their impropriety, as by prudential considerations of the bad consequences which might follow from their indulgence. In such cases, the passions, though restrained, are not always subdued, but often remain lurking in the breast with all their original fury. The man whose anger is restrained by fear, does not always lay aside his anger, but only reserves its gratification for a more safe opportunity. (VI.concl.3)

In this case, according to Smith, one achieves only a kind of temporary control. Passions which are restrained only by prudential considerations are, “frequently inflamed by the restraint, and sometimes
(long after the provocation is given, and when nobody is thinking about it) burst out absurdly and unexpectedly, and with tenfold fury and violence” (VI.concl.3). We are now familiar with the notion of “displaced” impulses, and the dangers of “repressed” emotions, and Smith is hinting at these kinds of consequences in the case of Angry Adam. Passions restrained by prudential considerations are not necessarily modified, and so this form of control, while occasionally useful (VI.concl.5), is not a reliable form of self-command.

Smith repeats his view here that passions that are regulated out of a sense of propriety, that is, out of a regard for the sentiments of an impartial spectator, are actually moderated and changed. If, instead of pushing his anger aside, Adam had discussed the situation with a friend, for example, he may have felt his emotions change from furious anger to considered frustration:

But the man who, in relating to some other person the injury which has been done to him, feels at once the fury of his passion cooled and becalmed by sympathy with the more moderate sentiments of his companion, who at once adopts those more moderate sentiments, and comes to view that injury, not in the black and atrocious colours in which he had originally beheld it, but in the much milder and fairer light in which his companion naturally views it; not only restrains, but is some measure subdues, his anger. The passion becomes really less than it was before, and less capable of exciting him to the violent and bloody revenge which at first, perhaps, he might have thought of inflicting. (VI.concl.3)

Situations like Adam’s, receiving an insult or a personal slight, are hard to “get perspective on”, as we might say. It is difficult to adopt the perspective of an impartial spectator in such a case, and we find that it helps to speak with a real spectator.\footnote{See III.3.38, where Smith claims that, “the man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be awakened and put in mind of his duty, by the presence of the real spectator.” See also I.i.4.8, where Smith claims that because we “expect less sympathy” from strangers, the presence of a stranger will often “really compose us.”} We often need the help of a friend, a sibling, a colleague, or a therapist to help us to see our own situation and to feel the calming effects of a more impartial perspective.\footnote{This is not to say that no one ever feels righteous anger, or that no one should ever react to personal insults. Smith offers an extended discussion of the importance of natural resentment, and of the various ways in which feeling resentment on behalf of another will spur us to take action—to enforce the rules of justice, to lobby for equity in the workplace, and}
Let us turn to a second case, which introduces a much more complex set of issues for Smith’s account. Suppose that Adam’s father has just died. They were close and had an excellent relationship, but both were raised in a community where men were expected to be very “stoic” and unemotional. Adam suppresses his grief at his father’s death because “men should not cry.” Call this case Grieving Adam. In this case, Adam commands his grief because he feels the pressure of a general rule or norm that dictates that men should not express certain kinds of emotions, and perhaps even that they should not feel them. Smith is very aware of the power of general rules over our behavior, and he offers an extended discussion of how they operate.

Smith introduces the notion of “general rules” after the conclusion of his discussion of the development of “conscience” and the supposed impartial spectator. A problem arises for his account because it seems obvious that, in many instances, our passions are strong, compelling, and even distorting. How can we take up the perspective of an impartial spectator or “listen” for the tone of her sentiments when “the fury of our own passions constantly calls us back to our own place, where everything appears magnified and misrepresented by self-love” (III.4.3)? Smith returns to his theory of the passions here and claims, following “father Malebranche”, that “the passions … all justify themselves, and seem reasonable and proportioned to their objects, as long as we continue to feel them” (III.4.3). That is, passions are “eager” and they can be “violent”, “discolour[ing] our views of things, even when we are endeavouring to place ourselves in the situation of another” (III.4.3). When I resent someone who has injured me, it is hard to see past my violent desire for retaliation; when I

so on. In the case here, I am assuming that the insult Adam received was of the garden-variety sort, and not the product of pernicious prejudice or injustice.

60 In Chapter Four, Part Four, I discuss an illustration of this principle from Austen’s Persuasion.

61 Smith is referring to Search V.11 here; Smith refers to this same passage in “History of Astronomy”; “But our passions, as Father Malbranche [sic] observes, all justify themselves; that is, suggest to us opinions which justify them” (III.1, in EPS). As the editors of TMS note, Hutcheson also cites this exact passage.
am gripped by fear, it is hard to see through the fear to the facts about the apparently fearful situation. My own “peculiar situation”—my resentment, my fear, etc.—is too present and too swamping. I may try to get myself out of my myopia, and to take up an impartial perspective, but I “obtain … but instantaneous glimpses, which vanish in a moment, and which, even while they last, are not altogether just” (III.4.3). Selfish passions and violent passions are especially prone to these swamping and discoloring effects, and it is not until the moment has passed and we can look back on the situation that we can judge properly.

In these moments of retrospection, Smith describes us as having a choice: face up to one’s feelings and actions from the impartial perspective, which is now easier to occupy, or turn one’s gaze from the shameful actions and put on the “veil of self-delusion” (III.4.5). Smith suggests that facing up to one’s actions from an impartial perspective, while easier than trying to do so in the heat of action, will still be difficult:

> It is so disagreeable to think ill of ourselves, that we often purposely turn away our view from those circumstances which might render that judgment unfavourable. He is a bold surgeon, they say, whose hand does not tremble when he performs an operation upon his own person; and he is often equally bold who does not hesitate to pull off the mysterious veil of self-delusion, which covers from his view the deformities of his own conduct. (III.4.4)

We may be able to view our own mistaken, passionate feelings and actions as impartial spectators, but when doing so will only mean seeing oneself as disagreeable or blameworthy, the effort is difficult and unpleasant.62

Fortunately, Smith tells us, nature provides a remedy: “our continual observations upon the conduct of others, insensibly lead us to form to ourselves certain general rules concerning what is fit and proper either to be done or to be avoided” (III.4.7).63 Every time I have observed someone being

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62 For further discussion of Smith on self-deceit, see Fleischacker (2011a).

63 Cf. Smith’s discussion of the development of the idea of “exact propriety and perfection”, which we saw in Section 1.4 above: “there exists in the mind of every man an idea of this kind, gradually formed from his observations upon the
rude or ungrateful to someone who has been kind to them, I have also observed the uniform disapproval directed at the rude person. Every time I have observed someone fulfilling a promise, I have also observed the uniform approval of that action. Through inductive reasoning, I gradually form certain general principles: “ingratitude towards those who have been kind is wrong”; “keeping promises is right.” Smith is careful to note that general rules are founded on experience, and that they derive their force from their conformity to experience:

[General rules] are ultimately founded upon experience of what, in particular instances, our moral faculties, our natural sense of merit and propriety, approve, or disapprove of. We do not originally approve or condemn particular actions; because, upon examination, they appear to be agreeable or inconsistent with a certain general rule. The general rule, on the contrary, is formed, by finding from experience, that all actions of a certain kind, or circumscribed in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of. (III.4.8)

Smith is also careful to note that general rules are rules drawn from sentimental experience: intentional murder is forbidden because it causes every spectator to feel “detestation … at the thought of this, and every other particular action of the same kind” (III.4.8).

Smithian general rules have a sentimental and an empirical foundation, and they have a very important function. Smith claims that “once they have been fixed in our mind by habitual reflection, [they] are of great use in correcting the misrepresentations of self-love concerning what is fit and proper to be done in our particular situation” (III.4.12). But how exactly do these general rules help the situation caused by the self-justifying nature of the passions? If it is difficult to run through the

character and conduct both of himself and of other people” (VI.iii.25). Our continual observations allow us to develop a sense of propriety, and to derive general rules about propriety.

64 See also VII.iii.2.6, where Smith returns to the nature of the “general maxims” of morality, here considering their relation to reason. He raises the objection that since the general maxims of morality are formed through induction, and thus by reason, and since reason is a much more stable basis for our moral judgments, virtue must be said to consist in reason. He repeats his view that the general rules of morality must be ultimately founded on sentiment: “But though reason is undoubtedly the source of the general rules of morality, and of all the moral judgments which we form by means of them; it is altogether absurd and unintelligible to suppose that the first perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason, even in those particular cases upon the experience of which the general rules are formed. These first perceptions, as well as all other experiments upon which any general rules are founded, cannot be the object of reason, but of immediate sense and feeling. It is by finding in a vast variety of instances that one tenor of conduct constantly pleases in a certain manner, and that another as constantly displeases the mind, that we form the general rules of morality” (VII.iii.2.7).
spectatorial process when gripped by resentment or fear, it must be equally difficult to cast about for the appropriate rule and then apply it to oneself. Further, if Smith’s view is that knowing that something is forbidden by a rule has power over one’s passions, and that it is often too difficult to get oneself into a position to feel as an impartial spectator would, then it seems he has violated his sentimentalist commitment to reason being motivationally inert.

In order to see how general rules function, we can look at an extended and vivid vignette at III.4.12, where Smith portrays someone in the grip of “furious resentment” (we might imagine Angry Adam as the man in Smith’s illustration, and we will return to Grieving Adam below). Smith is describing someone gripped by one of the strongest and most violent passions, “furious resentment”, and he characterizes this passion as urging that the death of one’s enemy is “but a small compensation for the wrong.” This man is said to have had a standard education, and to have seen in all cases that “sanguinary revenges” for resented wrongs are “horrible” to spectators, and the object of “the highest disapprobation.” He has laid down for himself an “inviolable rule”, (presumably, not to take revenge for a resented wrong by attempting to kill the perceived wrongdoer), and he feels “reverence”, “awe” and “respect” for this rule. Crucially, Smith claims that, “that reverence for the rule which past experience has impressed upon him, checks the impetuosity of his passion, and helps him to correct the too partial views which self-love might otherwise suggest, of what was proper to be done in his situation” (III.4.12, emphasis added). It is the sentiment of respect or reverence for general rules and not the content of the rules that is influential here.

65 I do not have space here to discuss the role of education as a factor contributing to the influence and efficacy of general rules. Smith, like Hume, places great importance on the power of habit and custom to entrench and automate various mental processes, and, as we saw in the previous chapter, habituation and discipline play an important role in the development of self-command and in the refinement of one’s sense of propriety. I will address some issues pertaining to the influence of education in Chapter Three, when I consider the question of relativism in Smith’s philosophy and the effect that education and cultural context have on the development of one’s supposed impartial spectator. For further discussion of Smith on education, see especially Griswold (1999), who makes an extended argument about the protreptic purpose of Smith’s works. See also, Weinstein (2013); Heydt (2012); Hanley (2006); Fleischacker (2004), 76-7 (for a discussion of education in WN); Alvey (2001).
But even this reverence and respect may not be strong enough. As Smith continues his description, he ascribes to the power of general rules many of the same buttressing elements he ascribed to the impartial spectator, which we discussed in Section 1.5. The man of furious resentment feels a strong aversion (a “foreboding”) and terror at the thought of violating the rule, fearing “the horrors of shame and repentance”, and he feels “a momentary calm” when he considers “the prospect of that security and tranquility” that would follow conformity with the rule. This unfortunate man vacillates between the furious urgings of his resentment and the powerful influence of the general rules, as backed by a sentiment of respect along with a variety of other sentiments. And in this case, he at last “throws himself over a precipice”, commits the forbidden action, and is pursued by “the stings of remorse and repentance” which “begin to agitate and torment him” (III.4.12).

This is a sad tale, but an instructive one. Smith introduces a further buttressing element, the sense of reverence and respect that attaches to general rules of morality, which he also refers to regularly as “the sense of duty”. Smith suggests that the power of the sense of duty derives from repeated and uniform experience, from seeing that, on every occasion, such an action or motive meets with severe disapproval and blame. The rules gain the gravity of tradition and custom, and with sufficient “discipline, education, and example”, they can be impressed upon all of us, ensuring that we “act upon almost every occasion with tolerable decency” (III.5.1). If we revisit Angry Adam, we can now see an alternative path for his command. Instead of merely stifling his anger (and potentially causing a subsequent outburst), and instead of discussing the situation with a friend (and experiencing an actual alteration in his feelings), it could have happened that Adam felt that he was about to act in a way that he has always disapproved of in others, and he could have subdued his anger out of respect for the authority of a general rule he accepts.

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66 There are explicit religious tones to Smith’s discussion of our respect and awe for general rules, and I discuss the implication of these tones in Chapter Three.
Self-command by general rules is a kind of shortcut, one that gets an agent to the desired outcome, conformity with the standard of propriety, but without the effort of engaging in self-scrutiny, taking up different perspectives, and trying to feel as an impartial spectator would feel. Smith thinks that this shortcut method of self-command is the one we find most commonly in the world: “many men behave very decently, and through the whole of their lives avoid any considerable degree of blame, who yet, perhaps, never felt the sentiment upon the propriety of which we found our approbation of their conduct, but acted merely from a regard to what they saw were the established rules of behavior” (III.5.1). Decent education and habituation can produce proper members of society, who need no sophisticated degree of reflection and sensibility in order to act appropriately.  

What would this account of general rules have to say about Grieving Adam, who suppresses his grief because “men should not cry”? This question takes us to the edge of complicated questions about how Smith’s moral philosophy deals with the possibility of genuine moral disagreement and the possibility of relativism. I will return to these questions in the next chapter, but for now, I think we can sketch what Smith’s response to Adam’s case would be. Adam has indeed formed a general rule, and it is one based on the sentiments of approval and disapproval that he experienced as he grew up in his particular community. Adam has formed the rule “men should not cry” because he has regularly experienced sentiments of disapproval directed at men who do cry. Let us even assume that at the time of his father’s death Adam has never seen an instance of approved crying in a man.  

Smith would say that such a rule does not yet deserve the status of “general rule of morality”, for it has not been enlarged beyond the confines of Adam’s particular community. Smith claims that

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67 Smith’s “two standards”, that of mere propriety and that of virtuous action are in play here. See I.i.5.7-9; VI.iii.23-25. We saw this notion briefly in Section 1.4 above.

68 This is a strong and probably implausible assumption. Many modern societies are not as homogeneous or isolated as to provide no observable instances of deviation from a norm. Smith himself grew up in stern and buttoned-up Scottish Calvinist society, but this hardly means that he saw only one type of sentiment expressed on every instance of a kind of feeling or action.
general rules of morality are warranted standards of judgment “when they are universally acknowledged and established by the concurring sentiments of mankind” (III.4.11). This is a specific and stringent requirement: general rules of morality are proper standards when they are universally acknowledged, and established by the concurring sentiments of mankind. Smith’s formulation suggests a test for general rules like Adam’s “men should not cry”, and it suggests a program for combatting parochialism in standards. All it takes is for Adam to observe an instance of approved crying in a man and he may begin to feel that the apparent authority of the general rule he has formed is undermined. Perhaps he reads Homer’s Odyssey and sees Odysseus, the great hero of Greek epic and paragon of masculine virtue, weeping on various beaches. Or perhaps he meets a new student at school, befriends him, and for the first time interacts with a person who is affectionate and expressive. Although he need not express what he learns in this way, what Adam is learning is that the sentiments of mankind do not concur in the disapproval of crying in men.

The case of Grieving Adam reveals that general rules are only a shortcut to virtuous self-command when they are well-founded general rules—when they are derived from the sentiments of an impartial spectator, and when the sentiments of such spectators would concur in their approval or disapproval. This third case also reveals how difficult it will be to arrive at any such precise and covering rules. Indeed, Smith is suspicious of casuistry in any realm of moral virtue except justice: “the general rules of almost all the virtues, the general rules which determine what are the offices of prudence, of charity, of generosity, of gratitude, of friendship, are in many respects loose and inaccurate, admit of many exceptions, and require so many modifications, that it is scarce possible to regulate our conduct entirely by a regard to them” (III.6.9). Reliance on general rules is a shortcut,
something to help us in certain fraught situations, such as when we are not able to fulfill our role as a spectator and moral judge because we lack information about the case, or time and energy to fully sympathize, or when we are in a moment of overwhelming passion and cannot get the right perspective on our own case. But the general rules we rely on are themselves always subject to a test for well-foundedness, and they are only a second-best standard for guiding self-command. Smith claims that if we want to cultivate the various virtues, including the virtue of self-command, “our conduct should rather be directed by a certain idea of propriety, by a certain taste for a particular tenor of conduct” (III.6.10).

A sense of propriety, a “regard to the sentiments of the supposed impartial spectator”, is the foundation for our moral judgments. We may indeed fight one passion with another passion, or with prudential interests, and we may employ general rules, and these various methods may result in the temporary or occasional command of our passions. But Smith is insistent that,

Respect for what are, or for what ought to be, or for what upon a certain condition would be, the sentiments of other people, is the sole principle which, upon most occasions, overawes all those mutinous and turbulent passions into that tone and temper which the impartial spectator can enter into and sympathize with. (VI.concl.2)

Respect for what are the actual sentiments of other people may allow me to effectively command my passions. This version of self-command is represented by Angry Adam, when a conversation with a friend who is impartial to the situation actually helps Adam to subdue and modify his passions. Respect for what ought to be the sentiments of other people may also allow me to effectively command my passions. This is Smith’s model case, the case where an agent commands her passions by taking up the perspective of an idealized impartial spectator, feeling the sentiments of that spectator, and commanding her passions accordingly. And respect for what upon a certain condition would be, the sentiments of other people may allow other virtues. Whereas justice admits of precise and exact rules, the other virtues do not, and are far more context-dependent.
me to command my passions. This last case is arguably represented by *Grieving Adam*, where an enlargement of experience with other communities and other norms could reveal to Adam that the sentiments of impartial spectators do not concur in disapproving of men who cry. 71 “Upon a certain condition”, namely, the enlargement of experience with what other impartial spectators approve of, the sentiments of the impartial spectator that Adam supposes *would* approve of expressions of grief upon the death of a much-loved father. 72

**Part Three: The Cultivation of Self-Command and Smith’s Critique of Stoicism**

A problem arises from the conception of virtuous self-command thus far described. It seems plausible to think that our strongest feelings—anger at a personal insult, love of one’s child, grief over the loss of a close friend—are also our most partial feelings. But insofar as self-command involves adopting an impartial perspective on our sentiments and regulating them accordingly, will it not be the case that in order to achieve the sympathy of an impartial spectator I should strive to decrease my sensitivity to everything that peculiarly affects me? This is an important question, for if self-command tends in the direction of a decrease in sensibility, then, in spite of the various ways in which Smith sentimentalizes self-command, his view may end up closer to the Stoic position than it would otherwise seem. In this part, we will explore this final dimension of Smithian self-command—how it is cultivated and the direction in which it tends—and we will engage with Smith’s explicit critique of

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71 I follow Haakonssen in my reading of this curious phrasing, which shows up regularly in TMS. Haakonssen refers to II.iii.3.6 as offering an illustration of the phrase “Respect for what are, or for what ought to be, or for what upon a certain condition would be, the sentiments of other people”, and he explains: “The first [“what are”] gives the standpoint of the actual spectator; the second [“what ought to be”] that of the impartial spectator; and the third [“what upon a certain condition would be”] indicates the way the former can approach the latter – through the sympathetic understanding of the situation and of human nature” (1981, 66).

72 Of course, it could still be the case that a culture approves of expressions of grief that take the form of silence and lack of any outward show of grief. I consider the question of relativism for Smith’s impartial spectator theory of propriety in Chapter Three.
Stoic self-control and *apatheia*. In Section 3.2, I will briefly consider two recent, alternative readings of Smithian self-command, and I will return to the question of the place of reason and rationalism in Smithian self-command.

Section 3.1: Smith and the Stoics on Impartiality and Sensibility

Smith addresses the issue of the tendency of self-command in TMS III.3, which is concerned with how we are capable of commanding the “selfish and original passions of human nature”, those passions which magnify and even misrepresent their objects (III.3.2-3). Smith’s own answer to this problem relies on his view of the supposed impartial spectator, which we have already encountered, but he develops his position against two positions he rejects. The second of the rejected positions is of special interest, for Smith includes in this group “all the ancient sects of philosophers, but particularly the ancient Stoics” (III.3.11). He claims that these philosophers “endeavour to correct the natural inequality of our passive feelings by diminishing our sensibility to what peculiarly concerns us” (III.3.11). According to them, in order to accomplish this diminishment of sensibility, we should strive to view ourselves not in the light of our own partial passions, “but in the light in which any other citizen of the world would view us” (III.3.11). Smith seems to be saying that according to the various systems of ancient philosophy, we learn to command our passions—even the most imperious—by taking up an impartial perspective on them. How is this position different from his own?

Smith’s argument against this position begins by elucidating the Stoic view, as found in Epictetus. According to Epictetus, says Smith, if my neighbor’s child dies, I treat this event as natural and in accordance with the order of things, but if my child dies, I treat it as the most dreadful

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73 His general objection to these two positions is this: “one set have labored to increase our sensibility to the interests of others; another, to diminish that to our own. The first would have us feel for others as we naturally feel for ourselves. The second would have us feel for ourselves as we naturally feel for others. Both, perhaps, have carried their doctrines a good deal beyond the just standard of nature and propriety” (III.3.8).
misfortune. According to Epictetus, this is an improper reaction to my own situation (III.3.11). Indeed, there are two kinds of misfortune to which I am likely to respond inappropriately: those which affect me directly, by affecting my body, my fortune, or my reputation; and those which affect me indirectly, by affecting someone who is dear to me (III.3.12). It is in order to correct for my improper reaction in each of these cases that the Stoics advise that I decrease my sensibility to what peculiarly concerns me.

For Smith, something has gone wrong here, and he thinks we can spot the problem by looking at what the Stoics say about misfortunes that affect one’s “nearest connections”. The Stoic standard would dictate that I feel for the death of my child just as I feel for the death of a stranger’s child, for death is outside of the realm of choice, and so cannot be the locus of value. From the standpoint of impartiality, for them, all deaths are in accordance with nature, and all familial bonds are outside the realm of choice. But according to Smith’s standard of impartiality—the sentiments of a well-informed and sentimental spectator—the parent who says, upon the death of their child, “Such is the human lot”, would be found wanting in affection and improperly unaffected by the death of their child. Smith writes, “the sense of propriety, so far from requiring us to eradicate altogether that extraordinary

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74 Smith is translating and quoting from Epictetus’ Discourses, 1.9.29. Smith seems to treat Epictetus as representative of the Stoic position in these sections, and I follow him in this. There were, of course, disputes within Stoicism about several doctrines, but I do not deal with these here.

75 Smith agrees with the Stoics’ judgment about the level of propriety with regard to the second kind of misfortune, though he has a different explanation for this level of propriety. He thinks that an impartial spectator will have trouble entering into our passions when they are based on private fortune or misfortune, and so the level of the passion into which the spectator can enter is quite low. We often have to restrain those passions. This is in line with Smith’s discussion of the passions in I, which we explored in Section 1.2 above. See Nussbaum (2008) for a critical discussion of Smith’s view here. Nussbaum focuses on Smith’s “fascination” with the “manly” Native Americans and the Stoics, both of whom exhibited the “norm of manliness” whereby they had rigid control over their personal passions (2008, 155). Nussbaum’s assessment of Smith’s view is that it “is not very successful” and “indeed, it seems quite incoherent” (2008, 156). But her assessment does not engage at all with the moral psychology that supports it (which may be open to criticism, of course). Nussbaum indicates in this paper that a forthcoming piece (a chapter in her forthcoming book The Cosmopolitan Tradition) will further address these passages in TMS III.3, hopefully with a further engagement with the moral psychology that supports Smith’s claims about the asymmetry in our ability to enter into different kinds of passions.

76 Epictetus (1995), 26 (1.9.29).
sensibility, which we naturally feel for the misfortunes of our nearest connections, is always much more offended by the defect, than it ever is by the excess of that sensibility. The stoical apathy is, in such cases, never agreeable …” (III.3.14). Epictetus advises us to “throw aside” the grief of the parent who has lost his child, but Smith tells us that if we were impartial spectators of such a person, we would share their grief and approve of it. Where Epictetus clearly says that all grief is the result of an erroneous value judgment, Smith says that the propriety of any instance of grief depends on what an impartial spectator would feel upon sympathizing with the agent.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we have hit on a deep disagreement between Smith and the Stoics over the appropriate standard to use in making moral judgments. Smith and the Stoics agree that virtue consists in propriety, and they agree that a standpoint of impartiality is needed to discern the level of propriety, but they divide sharply over the nature and source of such a standpoint. The Stoic standpoint of impartiality is the standpoint of the rationally-ordered universe; Smith claims that “the Stoical wise man endeavoured to enter into the views of the great Superintendent of the universe, and to see things in the same light in which that divine Being beheld them” (VII.ii.1.39). From this standpoint, that of cosmic logos and providence, all events are “perfectly equal … equally parts of that great chain which he had predestined from all eternity” (VII.ii.1.39). From such a standpoint, clear and precise results are possible: all grief is erroneous; virtue is the only true good. But Smith’s standpoint of impartiality is the perspective of the well-informed (not omniscient), sensitive and


78 Forman comments on these passages and comes to a similar conclusion, although she focuses on the difference between the standard of propriety, and I locate the difference more deeply in the conception of the standpoint from which propriety is determined or constituted (2010, Chapter 3).

79 Smith personifies the Stoic standpoint of cosmic reason, which may or may not be apt.
imaginative (not dispassionate), unbiased member of human society. And it is the fine-grained and particular sentiments of this figure that constitute the standard of propriety.\textsuperscript{80}

This disagreement between Smith and the Stoics goes further. Not only do they disagree over the nature of the standpoint of impartiality, they disagree over the tendency of self-command:

By the perfect apathy which it prescribes to us, by endeavouring, not merely to moderate, but to eradicate all our private, partial, and selfish affections, by suffering us to feel for whatever can befall ourselves, our friends, our country, not even the sympathetic and reduced passions of the impartial spectator, it endeavours to render us altogether indifferent and unconcerned in the success or miscarriage of every thing which Nature has prescribed to us as the proper business and occupation of our lives. (VII.ii.1.46)

The Stoic standard of propriety calls for the complete eradication of all our “private, partial, and selfish affections”. But such an extreme program of cultivating “insensibility to the events of human life” would, according to Smith, “necessarily extinguish[] all that keen and earnest attention to the propriety of our own conduct, which constitutes the real essence of virtue” (VI.iii.18). On Smith’s view, if I go about trying to become less sensible to my own partial concerns and to the concerns of others, I will fetter the very principle that allows me to be self-commanded in the first place—sympathy.

As we saw in Part One above, it is through regular engagement in the sympathetic, sentimental, and social world that we develop as spectators and as self-commanded agents. Smith’s criticism against the positions he is discussing in these passages from TMS III.3 is that each claims to show that it is through rational reflection on the true value of things that we develop the capacity for self-command. Smith claims that we can see from experience that “this control of our passive feelings must be

\textsuperscript{80} The problem is not specifically with the Stoic conception of the standpoint from which we make proper judgments, but with any conception of the proper standpoint of reflection, judgment, and evaluation as a pure or unconditioned one—as one external to our human perspectives. As Darwall notes, “impartiality disciplines the way we enter into the agent’s or patient’s point of view; it does not provide its own, external perspective” (2004, 131). I think Smith would be equally against conceiving of the standpoint of impartiality on the model of that of the Kantian noumenal self, or of the Platonic rational soul. Such conceptions of “proper” human evaluation and judgment are prey to what Blackburn has characterized as the fiction of the “Kantian Captain”, the wish to stand above our human, conditioned, contingent affairs, and to judge them from a pure standpoint of “ultimate authority and ultimate power” (1998, 246). In Blackburn’s words, “This is the Kantian Captain. He is a peculiar figure, a dream—or nightmare—of pure, authentic self-control” (1998, 247).
acquired, not from the abstruse syllogisms of a quibbling dialectic, but from that great discipline which
Nature has established for the acquisition of this and of every other virtue; a regard to the sentiments
of the real or supposed spectator of our conduct” (III.3.21). We gradually develop our sense of
propriety by taking up the impartial perspective and making judgments about others and about
ourselves. In the process, we develop our idea of “exact propriety and perfection”, and the capacity
to imagine an ideal impartial spectator. And as we progress through the “great school of self-
command” we continuously refine and correct that sense of propriety. As Smith writes in a passage
we have already partially seen,

There exists in the mind of every man, an idea of [exact propriety and perfection], gradually
formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other
people. It is the slow, gradual, and progressive work of the great demigod within the breast,
the great judge and arbiter of conduct. This idea is in every man more or less accurately drawn,
its coloring is more or less just, its outlines are more or less exactly designed, according to the
delicacy and acuteness of that sensibility, with which those observations were made, and according
to the care and attention employed in making them. (VI.iii.25, emphasis added)

It is through the “delicacy and acuteness” and the “care and attention” of our sensitive observations
that we are able to discern the level of propriety for sentiments and actions, a standard we then use to
command our own sentiments and guide our conduct. Smith’s wise and virtuous person is “he who
joins, to the most perfect command of his own original and selfish feelings, the most exquisite
sensibility both to the original and sympathetic feelings of others” (III.3.35). Self-command is not
developed by retreating from life and striving to render oneself less affected, but by continually
participating in the social world, by refining the delicacy of one’s sensibility, by honing one’s
discriminatory powers, and by cultivating the virtues of sensibility and self-command.

Thus, when Smith claims that self-command is founded on our sensibility to the feelings of
others, he means that it springs from and is driven by the desire for mutual sympathy; that it is guided
by the sentiments of the well-informed and impartial spectator; that it works through the agent’s ability
to become her own impartial spectator and to feel sympathetic emotions from that perspective; and
that it is developed through the cultivation of delicacy in imagination and sentiment. If we examine Smith’s moral psychology carefully, we can find a detailed account of self-command—an account of what it is, how it is developed, and how it works in an agent. Furthermore, as I have argued, this account turns out to be thoroughly sentimentalized. That is, Smith’s conception of self-command turns out to be an organic piece of his sentimentalist framework, cohering with its commitments to the expanded role of sentiment and the restricted role of reason.

Section 3.2: Recent Interpretations of Smithian Self-Command

I have argued that Smithian self-command is sentimentalized, emphasizing how Smith conceived of self-control and the government of the passions without relying on reason to play the role of governor. But my interpretation seems to stand opposed to the two most recent and most thorough interpretations of self-command. In this final part, I will briefly consider the views of Leonidas Montes and Maria Carrasco, mentioned at the start of this chapter. I argue that each of these views seems to attribute to Smith a conception of reason that, were he to have that conception, would violate his sentimentalist commitments.

While several authors have registered their dissatisfaction with the reading of Smithian self-command as Stoic,81 Montes is one of the first to also offer an alternative reading, one which looks to a different Classical conception of self-control. Montes’ main contention is that the “influence of the Stoics in self-command – Smith’s chief virtue – has been overestimated” and that self-command “reflects an important Socratic source quite different from that of the Stoics.”82 Montes finds in Smithian self-command two important features which he claims it shares with the Socratic notion of

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81 See the references cited in footnote 5 above.

enkrateia (literally, “inner power”). The first feature is that Smithian self-command is more than “mere control of passions”, for self-command has a “sense of direction”, or “a positive (in terms of command ‘for’) and enabling characteristic.” The second feature is that Smithian self-command “is a fundamental and enabling virtue”, a virtue that enables its possessor to be virtuous in other ways as well. Montes finds both of these features in Socratic enkrateia, and he claims that “it is very likely that Smith was thinking in terms of a Socratic self-command as enkrateia when he developed his corrections of TMS last edition [sic].”

While Montes’ suggestion that we look to other possible influences for Smithian self-command is a helpful one, there are several issues with his reading of self-command as Socratic. For one, it is not clear why the two features Montes indicates make self-command more like Socratic enkrateia than Aristotelian enkrateia, for example. And given Smith’s emphasis on propriety as a kind of “mediocrity” (I.ii.intro.1), we might expect a greater similarity with the Aristotelian notion than the Socratic, especially considering the severe, apatheia-approaching portrayal of Socratic enkrateia in Plato’s Phaedo. But the issue that is most pertinent here is that Montes does not consider the fact that Socratic enkrateia, like Stoic self-control, is a rational capacity. The “inner power” of control is a power

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83 (2016), 149.

84 (2008), 49.

85 (2008), 49. Montes is referring to Smith’s discussion of self-command in VI.iii, where Smith claims that self-command supports the other virtues and gives them their impressive quality.

86 (2008), 49.

87 Another pressing issue with Montes’ reading is that given the likely influence of Socratic enkrateia on Stoic enkrateia and sophrosyne, Montes needs to say much more about why we should find an important distinction between these conceptions (he briefly mentions this influence in an endnote to 2008, n. 33). This is a pressing issue because without clarifying this, it is not clear why we should think that Socratic enkrateia does not also lead to apatheia, especially given the portrayal of Socratic enkrateia in dialogues like the Phaedo. If Socratic enkrateia is effectively the same as Stoic enkrateia, then Montes’ interpretation would not stand opposed to the standard interpretation, it would just extend that interpretation.
ascribed to reason over the passions and desire.88 Now, this may not be a deep issue if Montes means to draw only a loose connection to Socratic self-control, emphasizing the place of Smithian self-command in the tradition of the cardinal virtues. But as his interpretation stands, it runs afoul of Smith’s overt allegiance to the sentimentalist framework, and his commitment to the restricted role of reason in action and evaluative judgment.

Carrasco has also offered an alternative reading of Smithian self-command, agreeing with Montes and others that Smithian self-command should not be understood as “Stoic”, and arguing for an interpretation that connects self-command “to the traditional ethics of practical reasoning.”89 Carrasco draws a distinction between the “pre-moral habit” of self-command, and the “moral virtue” of self-command, and focuses on the first as a condition that must be met for the agent to be practically rational, and the second as having to do with the ends that the agent chooses to pursue. Carrasco argues that the “pre-moral habit” of self-command “involves the first rational mediation of our desires”,90 and that it is “a practical habit, an expression of practical reason, which may be improved through its exertion … and enables us to discipline our passions in order to guide our lives according to our deliberate intentions.”91

I am sympathetic to many of the details of Carrasco’s interpretation, and I agree that Smithian self-command involves the “rational mediation of our desires.” On my own reading, reasoning plays an important role in the effort of self-command, especially in the attempt to achieve the conditions of information and impartiality from which we can evaluate the propriety of our sentiments. But it is not

88 This ascription is clearest in the Platonic dialogues where Socrates’ self-control is discussed, especially, Phaedo, Republic, and Phaedrus. Montes also relies on Xenophon’s characterization of Socrates in the Memorabilia, and there is much less of metaphysics of the soul or even a moral psychology worked out in that text.

89 (2012), 409.

90 (2012), 398.

91 (2012), 399-400.
immediately apparent how we should understand Carrasco’s apparently stronger claim that Smithian self-command is an “expression of practical reason.” On a straightforward reading of this claim, Carrasco is attributing to Smith a conception of reason as practical—as motivationally efficacious—and claiming that when we command our passions, we are doing so by means of the faculty of practical reason. Indeed, this reading is borne out by evidence from an earlier article where Carrasco explicitly attributes a conception of practical reason to Smith.92 There, she argues that Smith’s ties to sentimentalism are weaker than they have been considered, and that “Smith’s system can also be plausibly seen as a theory of practical reasoning.”93 She notes that this is an anachronistic argument, as “in Smith’s time the concept of practical reason was in complete disuse until Kant rehabilitated it, in a totally different form, at the end of the century.”94 And, somewhat oddly, she does not engage with the sentimentalists’ explicit arguments against reason as a practical capacity, instead assuming that Smith was just unaware of the right conception of practical reason.95 Carrasco’s argument for reading Smith as a theorist of practical rationality is already on difficult interpretive ground, given Smith’s overt disavowal of rationalism and avowal of sentimentalism, and it is further undermined by her omission of engagement with the sentimentalists’ arguments for the restricted role of reason in practical matters.

92 Carrasco (2004).
93 (2004), 81.
94 (2004), 82-3.
95 Carrasco also argues in this article that Smith’s notion of corrected or informed sentiments suggests that he “may not be a genuine sentimentalist” (2004, 86-7). This assumes that “genuine sentimentalists” would not allow reason to correct or inform sentiments, and this is a problematic assumption. As we saw in the Introduction, the sentimentalists are happy to find ancillary roles for reason in practical matters, including the role of helping to inform the sentiments. Indeed, it seems that on Carrasco’s notion of “genuine” sentimentalism, only strict non-cognitivists would count as sentimentalists, but this seems too stringent a criterion.
Montes and Carrasco each make an important contribution to the understanding of Smithian self-command, but neither fully engages with the commitments of Smith’s sentimentalist framework, and, as a result, they each offer a reading of self-command that, as it stands, runs afoul of those commitments. My contribution to the growing body of literature on Smithian self-command is to offer another opposition to the *Stoic Self-Command* reading, but one that does justice to Smith’s sentimentalist commitments. We can see from the moral psychology of Smithian self-command, offered in Part One of this chapter, that this capacity is thoroughly sentimentalized. In the next chapter we will pick up various issues and questions that have arisen throughout this chapter, looking more closely at the authority and normativity of the sentiments of the impartial spectator. We will also return to questions surrounding the case of *Grieving Adam* and the extent to which agents can correct their sentiments and achieve some independence from the moral sentiments of their community.
At the beginning of Chapter Two, I claimed that where Hume holds that the calm passions can be made to counter and prevail over the violent passions, Adam Smith makes the stronger claim that the sentiments of the impartial spectator are *fit* to govern the other passions and principles of human nature. That is, where Hume holds that the calm passions possess no special authority over the other passions—nothing that makes them fit to rule—Smith holds that the sentiments of the impartial spectator *do* possess such authority. I then temporarily sidelined this issue, focusing first on the moral psychology of self-command. But along the way, questions pertaining to the authority of the sentiments of the impartial spectator arose. Why should the sentiments of the impartial spectator set the standard for propriety? (Why not think, for example, that the standard-setting sentiments are those of a partial spectator or of the agent herself?). Why, in the case of conflict between an “original passion” and a “sympathetic emotion”, should the “sympathetic emotion” be authoritative over the original passion? (Why not think, for example, that the conflict should be decided by the strongest sentiment?). And why should agents care more about praiseworthiness than praise? (Why not think, for example, that we should be satisfied with praise and applause, perhaps when we receive enough of it?).

These questions are now pressing because, on the reading of self-command\(^1\) established in Chapter Two, the sentiments of the impartial spectator have the crucial normative function of *guiding*

\(^1\) Specifically, virtuous or proper self-command. I discuss other types of emotion regulation in Chapter Two, Part Two.
self-command, of commanding and directing the other passions. Smith claims that when I evaluate my
own feelings and conduct, and when I strive to be an impartial judge of others, I take the sentiments
of an impartial spectator as authoritative, as providing the standard by which I evaluate and judge all
other feelings. But how does Smith account for the authority of the sentiments of the impartial
spectator? Is this just the mere feeling of authority, or is the authority of the impartial spectator
legitimate? Are we just psychologically hard-wired to take the impartial spectator as our standard, or
is there more to be said about why we should follow such a standard?

In this chapter, I will engage with the various questions about the authority of the impartial
spectator that have arisen thus far in our examination of Smithian self-command. But first, why think
that Smith is interested in such questions at all? Indeed, Smith, with Hume, is often seen as offering a
descriptive account of morality, a kind of social-scientific explanation of morality as it is found in actual
human societies.² Where Hume is the “anatomist” of morality, perhaps Smith is the
“phenomenologist”, describing and depicting moral experience and the psychological principles that
explain it. Such a view can be found throughout the literature; for example, Fonna Forman writes,

People often mistake the Moral Sentiments as a normative treatise about morality, but Smith
rarely spoke in what we would refer to today as a “normative” voice. … In the tradition of
Hutcheson and Hume, Smith was engaged in a far more descriptive activity … [he] wanted
primarily to convey as earnestly as possible the phenomena he observed in the social world

² Inter alia, Forman-Barzilai (2010); Raphael (2007); Otteson (2002); Campbell (1971). The classic text for this reading is a
comment Smith makes in a footnote present in all editions of TMS, where he clarifies his discussion of resentment, which
places great importance and value on this sentiment. In the course of defending his view, he writes, “Let it be considered
too, that the present inquiry is not concerning a matter of right, if I may say so, but concerning a matter of fact. We are
not at present examining upon what principles a perfect being would approve of the punishment of bad actions; but upon
what principles so weak and imperfect a creature as man actually and in fact approves of it” (TMS II.i.5.10). Many authors
take this as Smith stating his purpose: that of engaging in a description of ‘the facts’ of human morality, and not justification
of that morality. But the context of this passage suggests that he means the emphasis to be on his “present inquiry” being
one into human morals, not the morals (whatever they might be) of a “perfect being.” Rothschild argues from a different
direction that Smith was “somewhat less than interested in what would now be called metaethics, or the theory which is
concerned with the status of normative or substantive claims about ethical life” and that Smith “denies any intention of
putting forward a (normative) system of virtue” (2004, 152-3). Because of this, she claims that “he is by that token unconcerned to put forward his own (speculative) system as a support to or foundation of a normative theory” (2004,
153). And Tolonen (2013) and Gill (2006; 1996), among others, have argued that Hume is not engaged in the project of
justifying morality as a whole, and that attempts to read him as engaged in this project, like those of Baier (1991) and
Korsgaard (1996), depart from the text and Hume’s purposes.
around him. As such, he approached the subject of morality with the empirical eye of a moral psychologist.\(^3\) James Otteson suggests a similar assessment, writing that Smith’s view “seems to be an entirely descriptive account and leaves no room for normative moral standards.”\(^4\) But other commentators find a great deal of normativity in Smith’s moral philosophy. For example, Charles Griswold writes that “Smith’s books, which embody his philosophical efforts, are not simply ‘descriptive,’ even when they seem to be. They are necessarily protreptic.”\(^5\) And Knud Haakonssen argues that while Smith’s account of “how a social morality is formed and how an ideal morality develops out of it are given in purely descriptive terms”, this account “is of clear normative import as well.”\(^6\)

I suspect that one source of this scholarly disagreement is that these authors are asking different questions about normativity in Smith’s moral philosophy, and sometimes running these questions together. Three of the most central of such questions are these:

1. How does Smith account for the normativity that he posits or requires within his own system? More specifically, what is the nature of the authority that Smith explicitly ascribes to the standpoint of the impartial spectator (III.5.5), and what resources does he use to explain and account for that authority? Call this the **Details Question**.

2. Does Smith offer an answer to the “Why be moral?” question, the question asked by the moral skeptic, or simply by the run-of-the-mill agent in a situation of moral conflict?\(^7\) How

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\(^3\) (2010), 60.

\(^4\) (2002), 202. Otteson is here only describing a natural way of reading Smith and he goes on to offer an extended discussion of this issue (2002, 202-57), focusing on Smith’s providentialist language and arguing that “appeals to final causes or teleology are not superfluous window dressing of his argument. They are rather the final—in the sense of ultimate—explanation for human moral sentiments” (2002, 247).

\(^5\) (1999), 329.

\(^6\) (1981), 61. See also Fleischacker (2013); Hanley (2009), Chapter 2. Cf. Haakonssen: “Morality was, in Smith’s eyes, to be approached as a matter of fact about the human species’ history, but this does not mean that there is no normative significance to his theory. It is just a very indirect normativity. For one thing, as a naturalist Smith sees it as his task to detail how facts guide our actions by setting limits to what we can do, and among the facts about humanity which it would be futile to ignore are such things as the constant presence of both egoistic and altruistic attitudes or the claim to some degree of individual integrity. For another thing, as a humanist Smith obviously believed that his students and readers would gain insight into their moral potential through his portraits of the complexity, even contradictions, of moral lives and moral judgments” (2002, viii).

\(^7\) This version of “the normative question” seems to be one that contemporary moral philosophers take to be central, and it forms the core of Korsgaard’s influential treatment in *Sources of Normativity*. Korsgaard writes, “the normative question
would Smith handle the situation where an agent’s self-interest conflicts with the requirements of morality? Call this the *Why Be Moral Question*.

3. Does Smith take his theory to offer a vindication or endorsement of morality? If so, how so? Call this the *Vindication Question*.

In this chapter, I will engage with these three questions, posing them to Smith’s moral philosophy.

The *Details Question* and the *Why Be Moral Question* will be the focus of Part One. In the first section, I examine Smith’s account of the authority of the standpoint of the impartial spectator, focusing on what grounds this authority. Second, I consider a possible alternative account of normativity in Smith’s philosophy, looking closely at the text of TMS III.5 and examining the role of religious belief in Smith’s account. And third, I examine Smith’s treatment of the *Why Be Moral Question*, focusing on the case of an agent on whom morality is making a difficult claim. The *Vindication Question* will be the focus of Part Two. I identify two features of Smith’s account of the impartial spectator that pose problems to reading his account as offering a vindication of morality. These issues have both received attention in the literature, and after a brief discussion of that literature, I offer a

is a first-person question that arises for the moral agent who must actually do what morality says. When you want to know what a philosopher’s theory of normativity is, you must place yourself in the position of an agent on whom morality is making difficult claim. You then ask the philosopher: must I really do this? Why must I do it? And his answer is his answer to the normative question” (1996, 16).

8 While Hume raises concerns like this explicitly (EPM 9.14; SBN 279), Smith does not seem worried that his account of moral philosophy could have the pernicious effect of undermining our confidence in morality. Smith claims that speculation into the “contrivance or mechanism” from which our sentiments arise is “a mere matter of philosophical curiosity” and can have no effect on our “notions of right and wrong” (TMS VII.iii.intro.3). But we may still want to ask whether he’s correct about this, or whether Smith’s account of morality undermines our confidence in our moral “notions”.

9 These are just three possible questions about normativity, and they are the ones I find to be most salient when directed at Smith’s moral philosophy. I do not mean to suggest that this is a complete list. I also do not mean to suggest that these questions must be separated whenever they are asked, but only to suggest that we are well served by separating them when we ask them of Smith’s moral philosophy. Another question pertains to Smith’s mode of discourse and its generally descriptive character. See Valihora (2016); Fleischacker (2013); Heydt (2012); Griswold (1999); and Brown (1994) on the nature of Smith’s discursive modes. I leave general questions about Smith’s mode of discourse to the side, focusing instead on the import of that discourse.

10 See the Abbreviations key at the end of this dissertation for a comprehensive overview of abbreviations and citation practices used extensively in this dissertation. For the rest of this chapter, I drop the “TMS” when citing from Smith. References to Smith’s other works will be indicated by their abbreviated title.
Smithian response to each, arguing that the features do not give us reason to lose faith in our moral faculties. I conclude that Smith’s account offers a cautiously hopeful and therefore cautiously vindicatory stance on our moral faculties. Reflection on morality, understood in Smithian terms, should not erode or destroy our confidence in it.\textsuperscript{11}

**Part One: The Authority of the Impartial Spectator**

As we saw in Chapter Two, according to Smith, human beings are naturally social, sympathetic, and evaluative creatures, regularly striving to understand and sympathize with each other, continually exchanging beliefs, opinions, and sentiments, and repeatedly passing judgment on themselves and the people around them. We begin reflecting on and evaluating the conduct and character of others at a very young age, and we soon learn to reflect on and evaluate our own conduct as well. But in this world of early and frequent evaluative judgment, we quickly run into disagreement and conflict. Perhaps you judge my behavior to be eccentric and inappropriate, and I judge your judgment of me to be prim and unmerited. Perhaps I judge your behavior towards an acquaintance to be fawning and demeaning, but that acquaintance judges it to be respectful and appropriate. Smith’s account of evaluative judgment is an account of how we converge on a shared standpoint from which to make evaluative judgments that are less susceptible to error and bias, and therefore less likely to produce disagreement and conflict. This standpoint is the standpoint of the well-informed and impartial

\textsuperscript{11} One might worry that these concerns about “normativity” are concerns of our time, and that to bring such questions to bear on Smith’s philosophy is anachronistic if not also misguided. I agree that Smith, Hume, and other moral philosophers of the eighteenth century do not seem to have been centrally concerned with such questions. Hume’s discussion of the “sensible knave”, which has produced so much recent literature, occupies a scant four paragraphs in his second Enquiry (EPM 9.22-25; SBN 282-4), and Smith raises the *Vindication Question* only to apparently dismiss it (VII.iii.intro.3). Nonetheless, these are questions that are prompted by their philosophies, and not foreign imports. Furthermore, it can be profitable to us to try to situate Smith and other historical philosophers within our contemporary narratives and debates. Not only does this give us a reason to dig deeper into their systems and the commitments of those systems, it also helps us to gain perspective on our own concerns and questions, and to see whether they are as well-formed or as important as we take them to be.
spectator, and the sentiments of approval and disapproval felt from this standpoint are, according to Smith, authoritative. They are fit to guide action and judgment. Or so Smith claims.

In Section 1.1, I will offer an account of the authority of the impartial spectator, also engaging with the Details Question. I argue that the standpoint of the impartial spectator is authoritative because it is functionally superior to other evaluative standpoints, given a set of ubiquitous and natural desires: the desire to be in sympathy and harmony with others, the desire to avoid conflict and disagreement and to live in a coordinated and harmonious society, and the desire to be that of which we approve. Feeling and judging from the standpoint of the impartial spectator allows us to best satisfy these desires. I then show how the functional superiority of this standpoint is connected to its epistemic superiority over other evaluative standpoints. In Section 1.2, I consider an alternative account of the authority of the impartial spectator, one that argues that a well-hidden, or at least unnoticed, theological view is doing the important work of grounding that authority. In Section 1.3, I engage with the Why Be Moral Question, examining the most challenging case for Smith’s account of normativity, the case where morality makes difficult claims on an agent. I argue that Smith’s answer to this question reveals that the impartial spectator is authoritative in all cases of moral judgment, but that the deontic nature of the judgments and commands of the impartial spectator varies depending on the domain within which the judgment is issued.

Section 1.1: The Details Question

In this section, we will engage with the Details Question, asking about the nature of the authority that Smith explicitly ascribes to the standpoint of the impartial spectator, and about the resources he uses to explain and account for that authority. We will first retrace our steps a bit and review some of
the elements of Smith’s account of approval and evaluative judgment as presented in Chapter Two.\textsuperscript{12}

The key passage is the passage that we have already seen in part, which I reproduce in full here:

Upon whatever we suppose that our moral faculties are founded, whether upon a certain modification of reason, upon an original instinct, called a moral sense, or upon some other principle of our nature, it cannot be doubted, that they were given us for the direction of our conduct in this life. They carry along with them the most evident badges of this authority, which denote that they were set up within us to be the supreme arbiters of all our actions, to superintend all our senses, passions, and appetites, and to judge how far each of them was either to be indulged or restrained. Our moral faculties are by no means, as some have pretended, upon a level in this respect with the other faculties and appetites of our nature, endowed with no more right to restrain these last, than these last are to restrain them. No other faculty or principle of action judges of any other. Love does not judge of resentment, nor resentment of love. Those two passions may be opposite to one another, but cannot, with any propriety, be said to approve or disapprove of one another. But it is the peculiar office of those faculties now under our consideration to judge, to bestow censure or applause upon all the other principles of our nature. They may be considered as a sort of senses of which those principles are the objects. Every sense is supreme over its own objects. There is no appeal from the eye with regard to the beauty of colours, nor from the ear with regard to the harmony of sounds, nor from the taste with regard to the agreeableness of flavours. Each of those senses judges in the last resort of its own objects. Whatever gratifies the taste is sweet, whatever pleases the eye is beautiful, whatever soothes the ear is harmonious. The very essence of each of those qualities consists in its being fitted to please the sense to which it is addressed. It belongs to our moral faculties, in the same manner to determine when the ear ought to be soothed, when the eye ought to be indulged, when the taste ought to be gratified, when and how far every other principle of our nature ought either to be indulged or restrained. What is agreeable to our moral faculties, is fit, and right, and proper to be done; the contrary wrong, unfit, and improper. The sentiments which they approve of, are graceful and becoming: the contrary, ungraceful and unbecoming. The very words, right, wrong, fit, improper, graceful, unbecoming, mean only what pleases or displeases those faculties. (III.5.5)

There is much to say about this passage, and we will return to it throughout this section and the next. But let us begin with a worry that in spite of all of this strong language about the authority of the impartial spectator, Smith cannot mean anything more than that the impartial spectator \textit{seems} to be authoritative. That is, we might reasonably worry that the apparent authority of the impartial

\textsuperscript{12} I have already argued for Smith’s adherence to a sentimentalist framework, and I take that argument as established here. When I refer to “judgment” throughout this chapter, I mean to refer to more or less propositional judgments that we may form on the basis of felt sentiments. I say “may form” because sometimes we will not form an overtly propositional judgment after feeling a sentiment of approval or disapproval, and indeed, it is more likely that we often have judgment-ish feelings about the character and conduct of others, but fail to consciously codify or make precise the content of those feelings. I do not mean to suggest that Smith takes emotions or sentiments to be judgments, nor that he takes judgments to be prior to sentiments.
spectator is merely an effect of our psychology, of our being “set up” in such a way as to be incapable of doubting that the impartial spectator standpoint was “given us for the direction of our conduct in this life.” In this section, I will argue that while Smith’s view may suggest that we merely feel that the standpoint of the impartial spectator is authoritative, and while Smith does not explicitly offer a justification of the authority of the impartial spectator, we can draw from the Smithian moral psychology to show that the authority of the impartial spectator is grounded in its functional and epistemic superiority over other available evaluative standpoints. That is, I will argue that the standpoint of the impartial spectator allows us to best satisfy a set of natural desires—the desire for mutual sympathy and approval, the desire for harmony and concord, and the desire to be that of which one approves—and that it allows this in part by affording us access to the privileged conditions of information and impartiality, under which we make evaluations and judgments that are maximally harmonious and minimally conflicting. This is a standpoint that we are justified in taking as authoritative.

1.1.1: The Function of the Supposed Impartial Spectator

As we saw in Chapter Two, Smith’s account of evaluative judgment begins with the phenomenon of basic spectatorial judgment, the evaluation of a given situation (in terms of propriety/impropriety, merit/demerit) by spectators who do not necessarily make any effort to fully engage with the situation they are evaluating. At this basic level, spectators form evaluative judgments simply when they feel that they either do or do not share the opinion of another. Smith writes,

To approve of another man’s opinions is to adopt those opinions, and to adopt them is to approve of them. If the same arguments which convince you convince me likewise, I necessarily approve of your conviction; and if they do not, I necessarily disapprove of it: neither can I possibly conceive that I should do the one without the other. To approve or disapprove, therefore, of the opinions of others is acknowledged, by every body, to mean no more than to observe their agreement or disagreement with our own. (I.i.3.2)
Smith thinks that our approval and disapproval of the *sentiments* of others follows the same general principal, for “this is equally the case with regard to our approbation or disapprobation of the sentiments or passions of others” (I.i.3.2). We approve of those sentiments, passions, and opinions that we share, and we come to share these through sympathizing with others. Indeed, Smith states explicitly that “[t]o approve of the passions of another … as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them” (I.i.3.1).

The spectator’s sentiments of approval and disapproval constitute the standard for his judgments of propriety and impropriety. If the spectator shares and approves of a passion or motive, then he judges that the passion or motive is proper; if a spectator fails to share and does not approve of a passion or motive, then he judges that the passion or motive is improper. As Smith writes, “upon all occasions [the spectator’s] own sentiments are the standards and measures by which he judges of mine” (I.i.3.1). And in a similar vein, he writes, “Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them” (I.i.3.10). On this account, we are all regularly engaged in making evaluative and normative judgments, and we use our own sentiments as the standard for those judgments. To use one of Smith’s more innocuous examples, if I “laugh loud and heartily” at a joke, where you “only smile”, you will fail to share my passion, feel disapproval, and judge that I should temper my reaction to the joke (I.i.3.1). And to take a more obviously moral case, if you fail to resent the injuries done to me, or to “resent them as precisely” as I do, I will feel disapproval, and judge that you should try to better understand my situation (I.i.3.1).

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13 I offer an extended discussion of the sympathy and the sympathetic interaction in Chapter Two.
As we saw in Chapter Two, Smith claims that agents feel the normative force of these spectatorial sentiments and judgments, and that their efforts at self-command are efforts to regulate their feelings in accordance with those sentiments and judgments, so as to achieve the sympathy and approval of the spectator. That is, the normative force of the spectatorial sentiments is grounded in part in the desire for the pleasure of sympathy and approval and the aversion to the pain of antipathy and disapproval, which Smith thinks are basic features of human nature.\textsuperscript{14} We desire to be in agreement, concord, and harmony with those around us, and we are strongly averse to being in disagreement, discord, and disharmony with those around us. Further, according to Smith, our aversion to disagreement and discord on moral matters is quite strong, especially in comparison with our desire for concord and conformity in non-moral matters:

Though your judgments in matters of speculation, though your sentiments in matters of taste, are quite opposite to mine, I can easily overlook this opposition; and if I have any degree of temper, I may still find some entertainment in your conversation, even upon those very subjects. But if you have either no fellow-feeling for the misfortunes I have met with, or none that bears any proportion to the grief which directs me; or if you have either no indignation at the injuries I have suffered, or none that bears any proportion to the resentment which transports me, we can no longer converse upon these subjects. We become intolerable to one another. I can neither support your company, nor you mine. You are confounded at my violence and passion, and I am enraged at your cold insensibility and want of feeling. (I.i.4.5)

Our desire for sympathy and our aversion to conflict, especially in matters concerning human character and conduct, move us to strive for harmony and understanding and to avoid such conflict and disagreement.

But while such disagreement may be intolerable, it also seems inevitable given Smith’s initial discussion of evaluative judgment. Indeed, it seems that we would all be faced with a welter of conflicting sentiments directed at us, with no way of adjudicating between them. How could an agent

\textsuperscript{14} Smith’s first discussion of this desire is in I.i.2, at the very beginning of TMS, and it remains a theme throughout the text. I agree with Debes, that “it would be facile to say that, for Smith, we strive for mutual sympathy only because it is pleasurable” (2016, 201). Smith’s view is far from a simple or reductive hedonism, even if pleasure and pain play an important role in his moral psychology.
ever settle on a spectatorial sentiment to use in guiding her attempts at self-command? Given the array of sentiments of approval and disapproval with which we meet, and given our desire to reach agreement and concord and to avoid the “intolerable” pain of disagreement, we must find some way of assessing those sentiments, and of correcting or regulating our passions and sentiments as needed. The development of the standpoint of the “supposed” impartial spectator affords a solution to this problem.

As we saw in Chapter Two, the development of this standpoint depends crucially on the natural tendency to evaluate and judge of oneself just as one evaluates and judges of others, and on the desire to be worthy of praise.15 Once I see that I am evaluated and judged by other human beings, I begin to evaluate and judge my own passions and sentiments and to feel desires and aversions about those passions. That is, upon entrance into the social world, we “become anxious to know how far we deserve their censure or applause, and whether to them we must necessarily appear those agreeable or disagreeable creatures which they represent us” (III.1.5). We become anxious to know whether we are worthy of the praise and blame we receive. Smith claims that the impetus to evaluate our own passions and evaluative responses stems from a natural desire in human beings:

Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love. He naturally dreads, not only to be hated, but to be hateful; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of hatred. He desires, not only praise, but praise-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise. He dreads, not only blame, but blame-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be blamed by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of blame. (III.2.1)

But how should we understand this allegedly “natural” desire? Is it akin to the desire for sympathy, which Smith introduces on the very first page of TMS, and which seems basic to his view of human nature? Is it, as we worried in Chapter Two, Section 1.3, a problematic or implausible stipulation of our

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15 I discuss the development of the standpoint of the supposed impartial spectator in detail in Chapter Two, Section 1.4.
inherently moral nature? Given that Smith introduces the desire to be praiseworthy in his discussion of the development of the supposed impartial spectator, it is important to clarify the nature of this desire and its relation to the authority Smith claims for the standpoint of the impartial spectator.

I take the desire to be praiseworthy to be a natural desire, but not a basic desire. That is, the desire to be praiseworthy is natural, on Smith’s view, because it is something that any human being will develop in society. But the desire to be praiseworthy is not basic because it can be explained by two more basic and less obviously moral desires: the desire to emulate that of which one approves, and the desire for mutual sympathy. At the beginning of Smith’s discussion of the difference between the love of praise and the love of praise-worthiness, he writes, “[t]he love and admiration which we naturally conceive for those whose character and conduct we approve of, necessarily dispose us to desire to become ourselves the objects of the like agreeable sentiments, and to be as amiable and as admirable as those whom we love and admire the most” (III.2.3). Approval comes along with a desire to emulate, according to Smith, to be like that which we approve of (and to avoid being like that of which we disapprove). He writes, “Emulation, the anxious desire that we ourselves should excel, is originally founded in our admiration of the excellence of others” (III.2.2). And he notes later that “this desire of the approbation, and this aversion to the disapprobation of his brethren, would not alone have rendered [man] fit for that society for which he was made. Nature, accordingly, has endowed him, not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of; or of being what he himself approves of in other men” (III.2.7, emphasis added). Smith is adding to his

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16 The desire to emulate is initially described as a desire to be the “object[] of the like agreeable sentiments”, which is fairly unspecific and undemanding. I can wish to be like that which I approve of, where the likeness I focus on is merely the being approved of. And this could be achieved by surrounding myself with flatterers. So it is not clear how this desire, so described, would get us to the desire to be that which one approves of in any robust way, where one wants to emulate the approvable character traits and conduct of someone else. This comes in with the next step, for in trying to discern whether I am the object of approval, I take up the perspective of an impartial spectator, and this makes me examine and evaluate my own character and conduct.

17 I agree with Otteson that the italicized phrase in this passage holds a key to Smith’s argument for the desire of being praiseworthiness being natural to human beings (2002, 88). Otteson argues that “the desire for praiseworthiness reduces
initial discussion of approval, and claiming that approving of something comes along with a desire to be or to emulate that which is approved of.

Immediately after introducing the desire to emulate and be that which one approves of, Smith notes that in order to discern whether we are that which we admire in others, and to “attain this satisfaction, we must become impartial spectators of our own character and conduct. We must endeavor to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them” (III.2.3). Smith thus connects his discussion of this desire and its satisfaction to his earlier discussion of the principle of self-approbation and the capacity for reflecting on and evaluating one’s own sentiments and passions, in TMS III.1. According to Smith, as soon as I begin approving and disapproving of others, I also begin reflecting on myself to see whether I would pass muster according to the standard I apply to others. And given “our uncertainty concerning our own merit, and our anxiety to think favourably of it”, we attempt to discern how we are viewed by other people by taking up the perspective of an impartial spectator (III.2.24). If, in doing this, I sense that I would fall short of the standard to which I hold others, I “anticipate[] the contempt and derision” of the spectator who could know my real motives and passions, and I feel a sentiment of self-disapprobation. It seems, then, that the desire to be praiseworthy is grounded in the ubiquitous desire for the pleasure of mutual sympathy, together with the “anxious” desire to emulate that of which one approves, and that the desire to be praiseworthy develops in step with the development of the spectatorial stance we occupy in order to see ourselves through the eyes of others. We can satisfy these desires by attempting to view

to the desire for mutual sympathy of sentiments”, and he adds, “to be precise, in this case it is the desire for an imagined sympathy of sentiments that drives us” (89). I agree that the desire for sympathy plays an important role here, explaining how we would be motivated to command and regulate passions and motives that may be hidden from the view of actual spectators. But I am not convinced by Otteson’s claim that the desire for praiseworthiness “reduces to” the desire for sympathy, especially given the importance of the desire to emulate, which Otteson does not discuss.
ourselves as an impartial spectator would, thereby determining whether we are worthy of the praise or blame, approval or disapproval, that we receive.

Thus, and crucially, the reflective awareness that Smith describes in TMS III.1 allows us to scrutinize and evaluate sentiments of approval and disapproval—those which we feel towards others, and those which we feel from others—as we seek to determine whether they are proper and merited. We are driven to scrutinize and evaluate ourselves by our experience with various intra-personal and inter-personal conflict situations. I may feel the pain of inner conflict when I realize that a spectator views my conduct as improper and blameworthy, while I had been viewing it as proper and praiseworthy. Or I may feel “intolerable” distress when I realize that you take our boss’s conduct toward a colleague to be permissible when I find it to be inappropriate and repugnant. In the case of intra-personal conflict, I feel the need to regulate my emotions and achieve self-command so that I may avoid the discomfort of being torn between conflicting emotions. In the case of inter-personal conflict, I feel the need to find common ground, and to settle on a shared response so that I can avoid social conflict and the pain of being out of harmony with others.

According to Smith, as we reflect on the evaluative judgments we make and receive, we learn that there is an evaluative standpoint from which we can significantly reduce internal and social conflict. That standpoint is that of a somewhat idealized spectator, a spectator who is well-informed.

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18 See also Garrett and Hanley (2015, 249-50) and Broadie (2012, 135-137) on the role of conflict in Smith’s view. See Kauppinen (2014a; 2014b) on these issues as they pertain to contemporary sentimentalist theories. And see Gibbard’s discussion of the desire for sympathy in Smith’s view: “the desire [for fellow feeling] plays a social role … It serves to mesh feelings. Meshed feelings coordinate actions, and coordinated actions make for cooperation and keep conflict from being ruinous” (1990, 281).

19 “Somewhat idealized”, not “ideal”. Smith’s account of moral judgment is importantly different from an Ideal Observer theory according to which only judgments made by an “omniscient”, “omnipercipient”, “disinterested”, “dispassionate”, “consistent”, but in other respects “normal” judge count as standard-setting (these are the characteristics Firth attributes to his Ideal Observer in his 1952 paper). The standpoint of Smith’s impartial spectator is one of emotional sensitivity, engagement with and interest in others, and desire for the pleasure of mutual sympathy. It is worth noting that in the case of the Ideal Observer view, on which agents seek to guide their conduct in accordance with a standard set by a highly idealized judge, we can plausibly worry that the standpoint we are supposed to use to guide our action is one that we cannot actually access. What would an omniscient, omnipercipient, dispassionate, disinterested judge think I should do? How am I supposed to perform the translations between my experience and the experience of such a being so as to arrive
about the situation, and impartial, or unbiased toward any of the people involved in the situation. As Aaron Garrett and Ryan Hanley write, “the impartial spectator is generated by a need to take into account a variety of different, conflicting, (locally) irreconcilable viewpoints. The clashes between directives, interests, and sources of approval result in dissonances that cannot be reconciled except by the establishment of some external means of adjudication.” We find that when we are well-informed and impartial spectators, we feel sentiments of approval and disapproval and make judgments of propriety and impropriety that are minimally conflicting and discordant, and maximally convergent and harmonious. So, when we need to correct or regulate our moral sentiments, we learn to “suppose” the presence of a spectator who is well-informed about a situation and impartial to the persons principally concerned in it, to occupy that perspective, and to assess, correct, and regulate our sentiments as needed.

In re-examining Smith’s account of evaluative judgment, we have seen that the natural desire for the pleasures of sympathy and harmony and the natural aversion to the pains of discord and disagreement play a crucial role in grounding the normative force of the sentiments of the impartial spectator. The desire to be praiseworthy and the aversion to being blameworthy also plays an important grounding role. It is because we care so deeply about achieving harmony, avoiding conflict, and being worthy of praise and approval that we search for an evaluative standpoint that will satisfy those desires. And the standpoint that we settle on—the standpoint Smith claims is best suited for satisfying these desires—is that of the well-informed and impartial spectator. That is, on Smith’s view, the standpoint of the well-informed and impartial spectator is functionally superior to other, more partial

at a sense of what I should do? The judgments of the Observer fail to get a grip on me—they fail to be normative for me—because I do not have access to those judgments. Smith’s view does not fall prey to this problem for, as I argued in Chapter Two, the standpoint of the impartial spectator is a standpoint available to agents, and it is a sentimental standpoint, a standpoint from which we actually feel sentiments as well-informed and impartial spectators.

(2015), 249.
standpoints, better enabling us to satisfy our desire for mutual sympathy (and to avoid inner and social conflict) and to satisfy our desire to be praiseworthy. If we wanted to describe Smith's view using contemporary terms, we could say that it combines elements of a desire-satisfaction model with elements of a sophisticated hedonism\(^\text{21}\) in order to account for the normativity of the impartial spectator. The sentiments of an impartial spectator are normative because they stem from a standpoint that best satisfies a set of universal desires, including the desire for the unique pleasure of mutual sympathy and harmony of sentiments.

1.1.2: The Epistemic Superiority of the Standpoint of the Impartial Spectator

Smith's account of the authority of the standpoint of the impartial spectator places special emphasis on the epistemic virtues of that spectator: the virtue of being well-informed about the situation being judged, and the virtue of being impartial to the persons involved in that situation. Smith also offers an analogy between veridical perceptual judgment and merited moral judgment, and this analogy helps to further account for the authority of the standpoint of the impartial spectator.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Section 1.4, when Smith introduces his account of the principle of self-approbation and the capacity for reflecting on and judging of oneself, he draws an analogy between moral judgment and perceptual judgment. Smith writes,

> 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 pretty much in the same manner. In my present situation an immense landscape of lawns, and woods, and distant mountains, seems to do no 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

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\(^{21}\) Discussing the normativity of Hume's moral philosophy, Cohon suggests a new category: “one way to read this reliance on sentiment as the foundation of norms is to understand Hume as a normative hedonist to coin a term … the ultimate justification for a moral judgment will be its 'immediate accord or agreement' with the moral sentiments in particular, those pleasures and pains we feel on unbiased consideration of a quality of mind” (2008, 243).
both at nearly equal distances, 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 scarcely sensible that I do it; and a man must be, in some measure, acquainted with the philosophy of vision, before he can be thoroughly convinced, how little those distant objects would appear to the eye, if the imagination, from a knowledge of their real magnitudes, did not swell and dilate them. (III.3.2, emphases added)

Smith then claims that “in the same manner”, in order to correct our partial and selfish passions and to consider fairly the interests of another, “we must change our position.” We must view our own interests and his interests “from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has no particular connexion with either, and who judges with impartiality between us” (III.3.3). Here also, habit and experience make it so that we are hardly aware of “how little interest we should take in the greatest concerns of our neighbour, how little we should be affected by whatever relates to him, if the sense of propriety and justice did not correct the otherwise natural inequality of our sentiments” (III.3.3). In order to properly assess the relative size of objects, we must imaginatively take up a perspective from which we can survey them from equal distances, just as, in order to properly assess competing claims of interest, we must imaginatively take up a perspective from which all claims can be surveyed impartially.

In a recent paper, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord notes that both Hume and Smith appeal to perceptual analogies to describe the standpoint from which one makes moral judgments.22 Sayre-McCord helpfully spells out the way this analogy works:

The model for this approach is familiar from accounts of what it is for something to be, say, blue, that appeal to it looking a certain way, under normal light, to a person with a normal visual system, under normal circumstances. These accounts start with the fact that we have certain reactions to the world (color perceptions, in this case) and then mark the difference between something merely seeming or looking blue and it actually being blue by appeal to how it would look under privileged circumstances. The idea, it is worth emphasizing, is not that the privileged (“normal”) conditions are those in which we happen to be able to see a thing’s true color, where we have some independent way of identifying its true color, and so a way of confirming the conduciveness of the circumstances to seeing it. Rather, the idea is that being blue just is being such as to look a certain way under the specified conditions. There is no

22 See also Barkhausen (2016); Griswold (2001).
On Smith’s view, the standpoint of the impartial spectator is the standpoint from which we can see the situation of an agent in the best light, so to speak. The conditions of information and impartiality are the “privileged conditions” under which a sympathetic spectator can sense the propriety of a motive or passion. Further, on this model the standpoint of the impartial spectator is the standpoint from which the standard of propriety and impropriety is defined or constituted. That is, on this model, we do not take up the standpoint of the impartial spectator in order to access, for example, the Platonic Form of Propriety, and then to use that as a standard for our judgments. The standpoint of the impartial spectator is not a mechanism for detecting or apprehending some special realm of moral facts or properties, it is constitutive of those facts or properties. As Smith explicitly claims, “what is agreeable to our moral faculties, is fit, and right, and proper to be done; the contrary wrong, unfit, and improper” (III.5.5). We take up the standpoint of the impartial spectator in order to discern whether someone’s character or conduct is fit or unfit, proper or improper. And we discern this by feeling as an impartial and well-informed spectator would feel.

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23 (2013), 226. See also Sayre-McCord (2010). Sayre-McCord uses the case of color perception here, whereas Smith uses the case of spatial perception. There are important differences between these cases (for example, it seems that color perception will be more response-dependent than spatial perception), but I cannot enter into the details of the issues of choosing between these cases here.


25 Cf. Griswold’s discussion of the impartial spectator standard: “[t]he impartial spectator has normative force in part because it define the moral point of view already latent in ordinary life … The verb ‘define’ must be given its full weight here. The ‘precise and distinct measure’ of virtue is to be found in the ‘sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator.’ ‘The very words right, wrong, fit, improper, graceful, unbecoming, mean only what pleases or displeases those [moral] faculties,’ and by definition the impartial spectator exercises the moral faculties in the proper manner. Whatever this impartial spectator takes to be morally good or not is such (III.5.5) … The impartial spectator is not a heuristic procedure, one way among others of checking the accuracy of our view of things … The impartial spectator does not look off to principles of impartiality, as though to a Platonic Form … the impartial spectator is constitutive of the moral outlook. The responses of the impartial spectator are defining: they determine that certain passions and actions are moral, these being ‘rendered’ (VII.iii.2.7) worthy of approbation or contrary by his or her reflective sentiments” (1999, 144-5).
Importantly, while the functional superiority of the standpoint of the impartial spectator is connected to its epistemic superiority, this is not in violation of Smith’s sentimentalist commitments. As we saw in Chapter Two, Section 1.2, Smith conceives of passions and sentiments, especially the moral sentiments of approval and disapproval, as information-laden and information-sensitive. A spectator imaginatively recreates the situation of the agent with whom she is attempting to sympathize, she does not merely “catch” the passion of the agent. If she attempts this imaginative effort from a position of bias or partiality, some of the salient information will be occluded for her; if she attempts this effort in a hasty or patchwork fashion she may overlook some of the salient information. According to Smith, poorly-informed and partial or biased spectators will be those whose moral sentiments regularly lead to conflict of various types—the epistemic inferiority of their evaluative perspectives helps to explain the functional inferiority of those perspectives. But none of this involves a retreat to a rationalistic framework. Sentiments and desires remain the guiding and driving forces here, and reason remains in its restricted role.

In conclusion, in this section we have attempted to answer the Details Question, the question about how Smith accounts for the normativity that he posits within his own system. While Smith may not have faced this question head on, I have argued that there are resources readily available within his system to account for the authority he ascribes to the standpoint of the impartial spectator. The authority of the sentiments of the impartial spectator is something that Smith thinks we feel as “evident”—“it cannot be doubted”, he thinks, that the impartial spectator is fit for its “peculiar office.” But while this could initially appear to be a merely psychological account of authority, we have

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26 It may seem that the impartial spectator functions like an average of sentimental responses, and that this would lead to a flattening of affect or homogenization of response—that the good moral agent on Smith’s view is someone who would always act in a kind of calm, constant way, no matter who she is engaging with. But the impartial spectator issues highly particular judgments (the object of the impartial spectator’s evaluation is a fine-grained and specific situation), and so could (depending on the situation), recommend a variety of responses. This is a flexible standard, not a rigid one, and it is a highly specifiable standard, not an abstract one.
seen that there are principles explaining and justifying this psychological tendency to accept and endorse the authority of the impartial spectator. The normativity of the standpoint of the impartial spectator is grounded in a set of natural desires: the desire for mutual sympathy, which gives rise to the desire for intra-personal and inter-personal harmony and convergence, and the desire to be praiseworthy, to be that of which one approves. The authority of the standpoint of the impartial spectator stems from its functional superiority over other available standpoints—it allows us to best satisfy these natural desires. And that functional superiority is itself connected to the epistemic superiority of the standpoint—it allows us to feel and judge under the privileged conditions of information and impartiality. Finally, on this account, the sentiments of the well-informed and impartial spectator constitute the standard for moral judgment; as we saw in III.5.5, whatever the impartial spectator approves of is fit, right, proper, graceful, or becoming, and whatever the impartial spectator disapproves of is unfit, wrong, improper, ungraceful, unbecoming.

Section 1.2: A Hidden Theological Grounding of the Impartial Spectator?

I have argued that while Smith does not explicitly address the question of how the authority of the impartial spectator is grounded, we can use Smith’s moral psychology to show that the impartial spectator’s authority is grounded in its functional and epistemic superiority as an evaluative standpoint. But several of the passages I rely on contain strong providentialist language, language that can be found throughout TMS, and our key passage from III.5.5 appears in the midst of an extended discussion of religious belief. This language suggests that there is another strategy available for accounting for the authority of the impartial spectator, a strategy that would align Smith with more traditional teleological accounts of human nature and theological accounts of morality: God has

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27 In III.5.5, for example, Smith claims that our moral faculties “were given us for the direction of our conduct in this life”, and that “they were set up within us to be the supreme arbiters of all our actions” (emphases added).
implanted moral faculties in us that attune us to his commands (perhaps by way of sensibility and sentiment), and allow us to realize our true nature or purpose, and those commands are normative because they are the commands of an almighty lawgiver who will dole out punishments and rewards as is fitting. The authority of the impartial spectator would, on such an account, be derivative—it would be derived from the supreme authority of God.

To my knowledge, no one has yet pursued this exact strategy in the literature,\(^\text{28}\) although there have been several fairly recent attempts to reveal the “hidden” or “secret” theology in Smith’s writings.\(^\text{29}\) And depending on how the details of such a view would be worked out, it could make serious trouble for the account I have defended in Section 1.1. If, for example, it turns out that some action or affection is fit, good, or proper simply because God has commanded it—that is, if Smith

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\(^{28}\) Otteson comes the closest, offering an account of normativity in Smith that relies heavily on the more religious passages (2002, Chapter 6). He argues that if we do not take Smith’s references to God seriously, “then it seems that the moral rules captured by the system of morality, including the judgments of the impartial spectator, would have no ultimate authority beyond the hypothetical imperative that one should obey them if one wants to be happy. They would be right or good only to the extent that they conduce to human happiness, not because they are right or good intrinsically” (2002, 240). Otteson is worried, it seems, that without an “ultimate” or perhaps absolute backing for the rules of morality, they will be open to criticism and scrutiny. As I will argue, I think we need to be careful here and note that there is a very small set of rules that approach a kind of absolute status, namely, the “sacred laws of justice”, but even these are open to some scrutiny as we refine our notions of “injury”, “property”, and “rights”. But the rest of our general rules of morality and our norms are very much open to scrutiny, and are authoritative only if they pass such scrutiny and are shown to be universally approved of by impartial spectators. We should also be careful of looking for a moral standard in Smith that carries such grave, absolute weight, for to propose that such a standard exists in Smith’s account is either to accuse him of being disingenuous when he claims that the sentiments of the impartial spectator set the standard (for these are not absolute or objective, but very much depend on human nature and human needs), or to saddle him with a deep tension, one that threatens to fracture the very foundation of his view. Gill also comes close to describing such a view, but not defending it (2014). In his discussion of Smith’s leanings toward “prioritarianism” and “pluralism” [using definitions of those terms from Gaut (1993)], Gill notes that there are passages, many of which we will examine below, where Smith seems to endorse something like the “theological prioritarianism” of Bishop Butler (2014, 293). But Gill also notes the many passages where Smith leans more toward an “anti-prioritarian pluralism” (2014, 296). And he offers a “tentative reason” for thinking that, all things considered, Smith leans more strongly toward pluralism and away from the apparent theological prioritarianism (2014, 302). In what follows, I offer my own argument for discounting the apparent theological view, whether emphasized as an account of moral principles, or as an account of the normativity of moral sentiments and judgments.

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\(^{29}\) See Hill (2004; 2001) and Alvey (2004), both of whom focus on the import of the “invisible hand” metaphor and on the providentialist or “theodicy”-style comments about certain features of human nature and human societies tending overall to our good. The essays collected in Oslington (ed.) (2011) offer an a variety of treatments on Smith as a theologian, and Viner (1972) offers perhaps the first extended case for the importance of the role of natural theology in Smith’s philosophy. Although I cannot discuss these various issues here, Graham (2016) offers an excellent overview of the issues at stake in these debates, and a very sensible response to the attempts to find a theology in Smith’s moral philosophy. See also Bissonette (2012); Hanley (2010); Raphael (2007); and Haakonssen (1981), Chapter 3, for more skeptical treatments of the role of this language in Smith’s moral philosophy.
turns out to have a strongly voluntarist divine command theory backing his apparently sentimentalist moral philosophy—then it would be incorrect to say that the sentiments of an impartial spectator constitute fitness, goodness, or propriety, and we would need to revise our understanding of the way the impartial spectator functions as a standard. The evidence for a theological account of the authority of the impartial spectator thus demands examination.

Immediately following the passage from III.5.5 on the “authority” of our “moral faculties”, Smith writes,

Since these [faculties], therefore, were plainly intended to be the governing principles of human nature, the rules which they prescribe are to be regarded as the commands and laws of the Deity, promulgated by those vicegerents which he has thus set up within us. All general rules are commonly denominated laws: thus the general rules which bodies observe in the communication of motion, are called the laws of motion. But those general rules which our moral faculties observe in approving or condemning whatever sentiment or action is subjected to their examination, may much more justly be denominated such. They have a much greater resemblance to what are properly called laws, those general rules which the sovereign lays down to direct the conduct of his subjects. Like them they are rules to direct the free actions of men: they are prescribed most surely by a lawful superior, and are attended too with the sanction of rewards and punishments. Those vicegerents of God within us, never fail to punish the violation of them, by the torments of inward shame, and self-condemnation; and on the contrary, always reward obedience with tranquillity of mind, with contentment, and self-satisfaction. (III.5.6)

This looks like good evidence for a not-very-hidden theological account of the authority of the impartial spectator. Smith explicitly states that we should “regard” the general rules set by “our moral faculties” (i.e., the sentiments and judgments of the impartial spectator) as “the commands and laws of the Deity.” These commands are “prescribed” by a “lawful superior” and attended by rewards and punishments. The supposed impartial spectator has become a “viceregent[] of God”, given the responsibility of “promulgat[ing]” or enforcing divine commands by meting out inner pain upon transgression and inner pleasure upon obedience.

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30 I discuss Smith’s understanding of the general rules of morality in Chapter Two, Part Two, and I discuss them further below.
What should we make of this development? How does this story about the general rules of morality being divine commands fit with the moral psychology of sympathy and self-command, and thesentimentalist theory of propriety? We should proceed carefully in answering these questions, and take our initial cue from the context of the chapter in which these claims appear. As we saw in Chapter Two, Part Two, in TMS III.4 Smith sets a serious problem for the “influence and authority of conscience”, \(^{31}\) namely, the self-justifying nature of the passions, especially the selfish passions, and our tendency toward self-deceit. Smith then introduces the corrective power of the “general rules of morality”, which is based on the “awe” and “reverence” we feel toward such inviolable rules. And in TMS III.5, Smith explains the “influence and authority” of these rules by showing “that they are justly regarded as the Laws of the Deity.”\(^{32}\) His discussion in III.5 begins with a claim about the pervasive influence of the general rules of morality: “The *regard* to those general rules of conduct, is what is properly called a sense of duty, a principle of the greatest consequence in human life, and the only principle by which the bulk of mankind are capable of directing their actions” (III.5.1, emphasis added). And in what follows, Smith offers a series of explanations for the incredibly stable and strong influence of the general rules of morality. That is, in III.5 Smith begins in the discursive mode of a scientist of human nature, now taking as his topic the human propensity to obey the general rules of morality, and offering something like an anthropology of religion in order to explain that propensity.\(^{33}\)

What Smith finds is that the “reverence” human beings feel toward general rules, “is still further enhanced by an opinion which is first impressed by nature, and afterwards confirmed by reasoning and philosophy, that those important rules of morality are the commands and laws of the

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\(^{31}\) From the title of III.3.

\(^{32}\) From the title of III.5.

\(^{33}\) See Graham (2016) for the idea of Smith’s discussion as an anthropology of religion.
Deity, who will finally reward the obedient, and punish the transgressors of their duty” (III.5.3). There are two important things to notice about this claim of Smith's, which, again, precedes the more powerful language about divine commands. First, our reverence toward general rules is only “further enhanced” by the belief in a divine lawgiver, implying that it pre-exists that belief. Second, the belief in a divine lawgiver who will mete out punishments and rewards is “first impressed by nature”, and only later “confirmed by reasoning and philosophy”, suggesting that such a belief is a piece of human nature. That is, Smith is indicating that concrete religious beliefs are a consequence of more fundamental principles of human nature, including those sentiments that are the foundation for morality.  

The subsequent discussion in III.5 reinforces this claim about the moral sentiments being prior to religious beliefs. Smith argues that concrete religious beliefs, whether those of “pagan superstition” or those of his Christian contemporaries, stem from the natural sentiments of fear of merited punishment and hope for merited reward. These sentiments of fear and hope are connected with the sentiments of justice (merited resentment and gratitude with the idea of merited punishment and reward), and to the necessity of justice for human societies. He writes,

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34 I thus agree with Haakonssen, who writes that “religious belief is a consequence of, a function of morality. Men believe in God and an after-life because they are led to it by their moral convictions. The former is a continuation and completion of the latter, and religion thus becomes a strong support of morality …” (1981, 75). See also Graham (2016), 314; and see Garrett and Hanley (2015), 250, n. 25 for an emphasis on the consolatory effects of these basic religious beliefs (and see III.2.34 for Smith’s strong statement of the consolatory effects of these beliefs).

35 Hanley has recently argued that Smith takes religious beliefs to be basic and natural beliefs, beliefs without which ordered and stable human societies could not exist, on the model of Humean “natural beliefs” (2010). But I think this misses Smith's more crucial point. On Smith’s account, as I read it, religious sentiments of fear and hope attach to any beliefs about merited punishment and reward, boosting them so that they have a stronger influence over us. But it is the sentiments of resentment and gratitude and the beliefs about merited punishment and reward which are necessary, natural, and basic; that is, it is sentiments and beliefs about justice that are necessary and natural. Consider Smith’s discussion in TMS II.ii, where he explains that justice is necessary for the stable existence of any human society. He claims that human beings can only exist in societies, for they “stand in need of each others [sic] assistance” (II.ii.3.1). And society “cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another” (II.ii.3.3). Justice is necessary to the existence of society: “justice, on the contrary, is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society, that fabric which to raise and support seems in this world, if I may say so, to have been the peculiar and darling care of Nature, must in a moment crumble into atoms” (II.ii.3.4). In a very similar passage in III.5.2, referring to our regard for general rules, Smith writes, “but upon the tolerable observance of these duties, depends the very existence of human society, which would crumble into nothing if mankind were not generally impressed with a reverence for those important rules of conduct” (III.5.2).
These natural hopes and fears, and suspicions, were propagated by sympathy, and confirmed by education; and the gods were universally represented and believed to be the rewarders of humanity and mercy, and the avengers of perfidy and injustice. And thus religion, even in its rudest form, gave a sanction to the rules of morality, long before the age of artificial reasoning and philosophy. That the terrors of religion should thus enforce the natural sense of duty, was of too much importance to the happiness of mankind, for nature to leave it dependent upon the slowness and uncertainty of philosophical researches. (III.5.4)

That is, our religious sentiments are natural, attaching to our sentiments of resentment and gratitude, fear and hope, and “enforcing” and “sanctioning” them. Furthermore, Smith makes it clear that they perform this function in a pagan just as they perform it in a Christian. Even assuming that there is some theological truth of the matter, these sentiments do not need to track that truth in order to perform their function. Thus, it seems that these sentiments contribute to the influence of the general rules, they do not legitimate their authority. Religious beliefs “enhance[]” the reverence we feel for the rules of justice and the “awe” and “terror” we feel when we consider the punishment we would receive if we were to transgress those rules, and they “enforce[] the natural sense of duty” (III.5.3; III.5.13).

But Smith goes on to say that our “philosophical researches” have actually “confirmed those original anticipations of nature”, and that “[u]pon whatever we suppose that our moral faculties are founded, whether upon a certain modification of reason, upon an original instinct, called a moral sense, or upon some other principle of our nature, it cannot be doubted, that they were given us for the direction of our conduct in this life” (III.5.5). That is, “philosophy” has confirmed the original assumption that the general rules of morality are the commands of a deity, and that that deity will

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36 Cf. Graham: “The function of religion is to give powerful backing to moral rules. It does so by threatening evildoers with hell and promising heaven to the righteous, regardless of earthly appearances to the contrary. The motivating force of this sanction, though, rests entirely on the strength of an individual’s conviction. It is enough to believe in heaven or hell; the belief does not need to be true … Furthermore, any religious belief, however ill founded, is as good as any other, provided that it adequately serves the purpose of powerfully inclining those who believe it to act in accordance with the moral rules that social life requires” (2016, 316-7).

37 Smith also claims that our religious beliefs are connected to more noble sentiments as well, “And thus we are led to the belief of a future state, not only by the weaknesses, by the hopes and fears of human nature, but by the noblest and best principles which belong to it, by the love of virtue, and by the abhorrence of vice and injustice” (III.5.10).
reward those who conform to them and punish those who transgress them. What follows this claim is a somewhat breathless discussion of how fortunate it is that we have been set up in this way by “the Author of nature”, intermixed with a series of additional explanations of the usefulness of our basic religious beliefs. And in the penultimate paragraph of III.5, we can see a complex interweaving of voices as Smith concludes his discussion:

When the general rules which determine the merit and demerit of actions, come thus to be regarded as the laws of an All-powerful Being, who watches over our conduct, and who, in a life to come, will reward the observance, and punish the breach of them; they necessarily acquire a new sacredness from this consideration. That our regard to the will of the Deity ought to be the supreme rule of our conduct, can be doubted of by nobody who believes his existence. The very thought of disobedience appears to involve in it the most shocking impropriety. How vain, how absurd would it be for man, either to oppose or to neglect the commands that were laid upon him by Infinite Wisdom, and Infinite Power! How unnatural, how impiously ungrateful not to reverence the precepts that were prescribed to him by the infinite goodness of his Creator, even though no punishment was to follow their violation. The sense of propriety too is here well supported by the strongest motives of self-interest. The idea that, however we may escape the observation of man, or be placed above the reach of human punishment, yet we are always acting under the eye, and exposed to the punishment of God, the great avenger of injustice, is a motive capable of restraining the most headstrong passions, with those at least who, by constant reflection, have rendered it familiar to them. (III.5.12, emphasis added)

There are at least two different rhetorical voices in this passage, one (indicated by the un-italicized text) that speaks in the mode of the cool scientist of human nature, explaining how the believer comes to believe that morality is founded on the commands of an All-powerful Being, and how that belief greatly influences his conduct; and one (indicated by the italicized text) that gets a bit carried away by the belief that the general rules of morality are the binding commands of an infinitely wise and powerful Creator.

How should we interpret this polyphonic passage? 38 I contend that this passage illustrates what it is like to be in the grip of the religious beliefs that are natural and so influential on our conduct. Indeed, the passages following III.5.4 can be interpreted as an illustration of the influence of “our” (meaning,

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38 See Valihora (2016); Heydt (2012); Griswold (1999); and Brown (1994) for different treatments of Smith’s rhetoric in TMS.
Smith’s and his audience’s) natural sentiments, as attached to the Christian version of the basic religious beliefs in a “divine author” and an afterlife. If Smith, *qua* scientist of human nature, is correct that such beliefs are pervasive and stable, and that there is no human society without them, then he too must have a strongly and deeply held belief in a divine author and in an afterlife. And when he considers someone who would doubt the existence of the Deity and the afterlife, Smith *qua* believer takes over, and we can see the force of his beliefs enacted in the text. But Smith *qua* scientist returns at the end of III.5.12, and reminds us that this entire discussion about religion has been in the service of explaining how it is that we are capable of restraining “headstrong” and self-justifying passions. Thus, I read III.5.5-13 as enacting the explanation that Smith has given of our “reverence” for the general rules of morality, an explanation which turns on their influence over us in order to perform the function of maintaining ordered and just societies. Smith is showing, in at least two discursive modes, how religion can serve to strengthen the moral sentiments, but not by being the foundation for those sentiments.

In further support of this reading of Smith, we can look at the curious closing paragraph of Smith’s essay “The History of Astronomy”, where something similar seems to take place. In this essay, Smith is arguing that science “endeavours to introduce order into this chaos of jarring and

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39 Does my reading of this language mean that, on Smith’s view, no society could subsist without religious belief? And if so, what might Smith make of the secularization of many modern societies? These are vast issues, and I can hardly treat them satisfactorily here. On my reading, Smith is committed to all societies holding certain laws as “sacred” and all members of society feeling deep respect and reverence for those laws. Smith’s own account suggests that he thinks that these laws and the sentiments felt toward them will always be backed by religious fear of punishment and religious hope for reward in some afterlife (see II.ii.3.12, where Smith claims that “In every religion, and in every superstition that the world has ever beheld, accordingly, there has been a Tartarus as well as an Elysium; a place provided for the punishment of the wicked, as well as one for the reward of the just”). But one could argue that while religious beliefs no longer seem attached to our (meaning: those of us who live in largely secular societies) most sacred laws of justice, other deeply-held and strongly-reverenced ideals do—ideals like the belief in the equal freedom and dignity of all human beings—and that we who are in such societies reverence these ideals in the same way that someone in Smith’s society reverenced the belief in a Creator and an afterlife.

40 “The History of Astronomy” (HA) is further connected to these passages in TMS by also containing a brief anthropology or natural history of religion, at III.1-3, in EPS.
discordant appearances, to allay this tumult of imagination, and to restore it, when it surveys the great revolutions of the universe, to that tone of tranquillity and composure, which is both most agreeable in itself, and most suitable to its nature” (HA II.12). Natural philosophy, here in the domain of cosmology, devises theories that attempt to “sooth the imagination” (HA II.12), and the “history of astronomy” is a history of ever-improving attempts to do this. At the end of this essay, Smith considers the views of Isaac Newton, and claims that Newton’s system is one “whose parts are all more strictly connected together, than those of any other philosophical hypothesis” (HA IV.76). And that “his principles, it must be acknowledged, have a degree of firmness and solidity that we should in vain look for in any other system” (HA IV.76). And just as the author is at his most effusive, writing that “the most sceptical cannot avoid feeling” the superiority of Newton’s view, he also seems to recognize that he is in the grip of the very tendency he has been describing:

And even we, while we have been endeavouring to represent all philosophical systems as mere inventions of the imagination, to connect together the otherwise disjointed and discordant principles of this one, as if they were the real chains which Nature makes use of to bind together her several operations. Can we wonder then, that it should have gained the general and complete approbation of mankind, and that it should now be considered, not as an attempt to connect in the imagination the phenomena of the Heavens, but the greatest discovery that ever was made by man, the discovery of an immense chain of the most important and sublime truths, all closely connected together, by one capital fact, of the reality of which we have daily experience” (HA IV.76, emphasis added).

I take Smith to be illustrating the effects and influence of the tendency of human nature to believe that which soothes the imagination, just as he is illustrating the effects and influence of our natural, religious sentiments in TMS III.5.

On my view, then, the religious language in TMS III.5 should not be written off as mere rhetoric or ornamentation, because Smith is doing complex work with this language. In these passages, Smith is offering an explanation of the authority and influence of the rules of morality, and he claims that our basic religious beliefs play an important role in enhancing the influence of those rules. But can we read these passages as amounting to a rival, theological account of the normativity of the impartial spectator? I think not. Not only does such an account play no role in the rest of Smith’s discussion of
the sentimental foundation of morality, we have good reason to discount Smith’s language in these passages as \textit{performative or enactive} of the influence of these beliefs, and not as \textit{justificatory} of their truth. Smith does not offer a discussion of the “philosophical researches” that have confirmed our religious beliefs, and he is far less interested in their truth than in their pervasiveness and usefulness.\footnote{Indeed, Smith does not offer \textit{any} explicit account of the authority of the impartial spectator—when we initially examined III.5.5, we noticed that it could be easily read as claiming that we are “set up” in such a way as to believe that the impartial spectator was authoritative, and as offering a merely psychological account of that authority. Our work in Section 1.1 above was to reconstruct an account of the authority of the impartial spectator from Smith’s moral psychology in order to answer a question about normativity that he does not himself raise.}

In general, Smith treads delicately on the topic of the relation between religion and morality, perhaps, as Nicholas Phillipson suggests, out of “a determination not to allow his treatment of a theologically sensitive subject to descend into the cynicism and iconoclasm that was characteristic of earlier, non-Christian, and, in contemporary eyes, skeptical or Epicurean systems.”\footnote{(2016), 108.} Theologically-minded Christian contemporaries of Smith’s could and did read TMS and find much to agree with in it,\footnote{After the publication of the first edition of TMS in 1759, Hume wrote a highly entertaining letter to Smith, in a tone of mock commiseration over the success of his book. Hume writes, “I proceed to tell you the melancholy News, that your Book has been very unfortunate: For the Public seem disposed to applaud it extremly. It was looked for by the foolish people with some impatience; and the Mob of Literati are beginning already to be very loud in its Praises. Three Bishops calld yesterday at Millar’s Shop in order to buy Copies, and to ask Questions about the Author: The Bishop of Peterborough said he had passed the Evening in a Company, where he had heard it extolld above all Books in the World” (Letter 31, from David Hume 12 April, 1759, in \textit{Correspondence} 35). And one of Smith’s former students, the Rev. James Wodrow, wrote to a friend that “The Author seems to have a strong detestation of vice and Love of Virtue & perhaps a regard for Religion at least it does not appear to me that the book has any licentious tendency like the most part of David Hume’s writing on those subjects tho perhaps the Principles are at the bottom the same” [James Wodrow to Samuel Kenick, 10 July 1759, quoted in Phillipson (2010), 161]. These comments are all on the first edition of TMS, but the passages we have been focusing on remained largely unchanged throughout all editions of TMS.} and Smith may have intentionally tried to provide a “science of human nature” that Christians could agree with and see as explaining the morality they believed to be commanded by God. But his own view remains staunchly sentimentalist, and the brief but concentrated comments he makes about religion function more as anthropology and further moral psychology than as theology.\footnote{I have only addressed the small question about whether the passages in III.5.5 present a rival account of the authority of the impartial spectator that would supplant or undermine the account I presented in Section 1.1. But could these two views be compatible? I do not have the space here to fully consider this question, but I think not. Briefly, if Smith were to hold \textit{both} that virtue and propriety have a divine \textit{origin} and that we discover what is virtuous or vicious, proper or improper...}
Section 1.3: The Why Be Moral Question

In this section, we will turn to a version of the *Why Be Moral Question*, and pull together several themes discussed in the previous sections. Smith does not raise this question in a way that is likely to be recognizable to readers more familiar with current moral philosophy. Instead of presuming a moral skeptic or an amoralist and asking whether such a person has any reason to be moral, he focuses on the situation where there is a conflict between a demand of morality and a demand of self-interest, and he asks what explains our ability to act morally in such a situation. Thus, it might be more accurate to say that Smith himself asks a ‘how are we moral?’ question, and not a ‘why be moral?’ question. But, as I will show, we can nonetheless extract an answer to a more recognizable version of the ‘why be moral?’ question from Smith’s answer to the ‘how are we moral?’ question. We will first look at Smith’s own discussion, focusing on his explanation of moral motivation in TMS III.3. We will then apply Smith’s answer to a concrete example, using this example to determine what his answer to a version of the ‘why be moral?’ question might be. We will see that, for Smith, the scope and strength of the moral authority of the impartial spectator depends on the kind of moral demand being made on the agent. That is, on Smith’s view, we are under a “stricter obligation” to obey the demands of justice than to obey those of “friendship, charity, or generosity” (II.i.1.5).

through sentiment and experience, the resulting view would be unstable. He would have to hold the apparently irreconcilable claims that virtue and propriety are determined by God but also constituted by our moral faculties. Now, one could also posit that the will of God agrees with the results of human experience, but even this would not help the instability of these two claims. The claim that virtue and propriety are determined by God’s will pushes in the direction of universalism and absolutism, while the claim that virtue and propriety are constituted by human sentiment and experience pushes in the direction of relativism and pluralism. These two claims would continue to be in tension with one another, and reflection on them would likely have a destructive and undermining effect, causing one to lose confidence in one’s own moral faculties. I consider this general issue, about the tendencies toward universalism and relativism we can find in Smith in Section 2.1 below. As will be clear, my Smithian solution rejects universalism writ large, and so would likely make trouble for a reading that wanted to show that a theological grounding of the authority of the impartial spectator was compatible with my account of the functional and epistemic superiority of the spectator.
Smith’s explanation of moral motivation begins with the observation that our natural sentiments and passions are highly partial: “to the selfish and original passions of human nature, the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance, excites a much more passionate joy or sorrow, a much more ardent desire or aversion, than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connexion” (III.3.3). He illustrates this inequality of sentiments with the vivid example of “a man of humanity in Europe” reacting to an earthquake which “suddenly swallow[s]” all of China (III.3.4). As Smith describes the situation, this man would express his sorrow for these unfortunate people, he would make “many melancholy reflections” on the precariousness of human life, and he may even speculate about the effects of this event on trade and commerce. But, “when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened” (III.3.4). Our natural sentiments are so strongly partial that “the most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance” (III.3.4). The expected loss of a “little finger” would cause a sleepless night while the known loss of an entire nation of people would not.

Smith’s example is striking, and it has an important point. Our initial sentiments may indeed be partial and unequal, but our actions very often are not. Given the partiality of our original sentiments, Smith asks, “to prevent, therefore, this paltry misfortune to himself, would a man of humanity be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them?” (III.3.4). Smith thinks the answer is clear: “human nature startles with horror at the

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45 Smith sometimes refers to these as “original” sentiments, and calls them “undisciplined”. The process of discipline that this implies is, of course, the effort of self-command.

46 As Raphael and Macfie note, Smith’s example of the “little finger” may call to mind Hume’s infamous claim about preferring the destruction of the entire world to the scratching of one’s little finger (T 2.3.3.6; SBN 416).
thought, and the world, in its greatest depravity and corruption, never produced such a villain as could be capable of entertaining it” (III.3.4). Smith is claiming that we would all powerfully disapprove of an agent who acts in such a way as to cause the death of millions of people in order to prevent a minor misfortune to himself. He then uses this example to raise an important question about moral motivation:

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

This is Smith’s version of the normative question we are now exploring. Smith is seeking an explanation of the fact that many people do act morally, even sacrificing their own interests to those of others. He is seeking an explanation of how we learn what we calls “this hardest of all lessons of morality” (III.3.8).

Immediately after raising this question, Smith offers his own explanation of moral motivation. We have already examined this passage in Chapter Two, but I reproduce it here, with special emphasis:

It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. It is a stronger power, a more forcible motive, which exerts itself upon such occasions. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration. It is from him only that we learn the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves, and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator. It is he who shows us the propriety of generosity and the deformity of injustice; the propriety of resigning the greatest interests of our own, for the yet greater interests of others, and the deformity of doing the smallest injury to another, in order to obtain the greatest benefit to ourselves. It is not the love of our neighbour, it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of those divine virtues. It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place upon such occasions; the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters. (III.3.4, emphases added)
As we might expect, Smith’s explanation of moral motivation relies on his impartial spectator theory. In a moment of conflict, when we are about to act in such a way as to prefer ourselves to others, and in such a way as to harm others in that preferment (a stipulation of the case he is considering), the internalized impartial spectator calls to us “with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions” and reminds us that “that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it.”\textsuperscript{47} That is, the impartial spectator reminds us that human beings are all of \textit{equal} worth, and that to act as if your own interests were more important than those of others is to treat others as being less than you.\textsuperscript{48} As we saw in Section 1.1 above, and in Chapter Two, in such a case the impartial spectator also draws on the force of our desire for mutual sympathy and our desire to be praiseworthy, and it recruits and mobilizes our fear of punishment and our aversion to shame and remorse. Put more prosaically (but still metaphorically), when we are about to act to further our own interests in such a way that another will be injured by that self-interested action, a complex and powerful motivational structure is activated and stands opposed to the motivation to act selfishly. If the agent ends up acting in accordance with the voice of the impartial spectator, she will avoid shame, remorse, blame, and even punishment, but if she does not, she will incur all those painful consequences of her action.

In what follows this crucial passage, Smith is interested in explaining how this moral motivational structure is developed, and he does not address a question that readers may feel is far more pressing. Namely, \textit{why} should we follow the motivational structure associated with the impartial spectator over that associated with the partial, self-interested passions—why should an agent be moral? In order to reconstruct a Smithian answer to \textit{this} question, let us illustrate the situation we are

\textsuperscript{47} The phrase “but one of the multitude” appears three times in TMS (II.ii.2.2; III.3.4; VI.ii.2.2), and in each case pertains to duties of justice as opposed (implicitly or explicitly) to those of the other virtues.

\textsuperscript{48} See also Debes (2012); Fleischacker (2011b); Darwall (2004, 1999).
discussing more concretely. Suppose that I have been assigned a project at work, and I have asked you, a colleague of mine, to assist me with the project (suppose you have some special skill that I do not have, and your assistance will significantly hasten the completion of the project). When the project is completed successfully, I am awarded a sizable stipend for my efforts. The person who gives the award knows only that I have been assigned the project, and does not know that you have assisted me in a significant capacity. I know that you have not been told about the award, but I also know it is unlikely to remain a secret that the award was given. I also know that you could use the extra money as much as I could. I have two conflicting options: I could keep the entire amount of the award to myself, or I could share it with you, compensating you for the effort you put in to the project.

Smith would consider this case to be a question of justice, and he would consider my decision to keep all of the money to be an “injury” to you (II.ii.1.5). He writes, “the violation of justice is injury: it does real and positive hurt to some particular persons, from motives which are naturally disapproved of” (II.ii.1.5). The naturally disapprovable motive in this case is the motive on display in the passage from III.3.4, the motive of preferring one’s own interest in a situation where the happiness or misery of another depends on one’s action. Smith states explicitly, and repeatedly, that in such cases, actual and supposed impartial spectators strongly concur in their disapproval. He writes,

In the race for wealth, and honours, and preferments, he may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrip all his competitors. But if he should justle, or throw down any of them, the indulgence of the spectators is entirely at an end. It is a violation of fair play, which they cannot admit of. This man is to them, in every respect, as good as he: they do not enter into that self-love by which he prefers himself so much to this other, and cannot go along with the motive from which he hurt him. They readily, therefore, sympathize with the natural resentment of the injured, and the offender becomes the object of their hatred and indignation. He is sensible that he becomes so, and feels that those sentiments are ready to burst out from all sides against him. (II.ii.2.1) 49

49 See also Smith’s discussion of the true object of revenge and retaliation: “what chiefly enrages us against the man who injures or insults us, is the little account which he seems to make of us, the unreasonable preference which he gives to himself above us, and that absurd self-love, by which he seems to imagine, that other people may be sacrificed at any time, to his convenience or his humour” (II.iii.1.5).
To prefer oneself when doing so will injure another is resoundingly disapproved of by spectators. It is a violation of “fair play”, and it incurs the resentment and hatred of others, not their sympathy and approval. Crucially, the agent considering this course of action is aware that, if the roles were reversed, she would condemn the person who cheated her out of her fair share of compensation. She is also aware that if she is to act selfishly, she will likely feel the stings of shame and a guilty conscience. She may be able to put on the “mysterious veil of self-delusion” that Smith discusses in III.4, but this will be much harder with actual spectators around her who disapprove of and blame her for her action.

So, why should an agent facing such a conflict be moral? Smith would answer that being moral in such a case is the only way to satisfy some of our deepest and strongest desires: our desire for the sympathy of the actual or supposed impartial spectator, our desire to be that of which we approve, and our desire to be free of inner and social conflict. In the case we are considering, if I do the self-interested thing, I will incur the disapproval of all (actual or supposed) impartial spectators, since acts of injustice are so thoroughly condemned. I will also fail to be that which I approve of—treating oneself as if one were to be preferred over another is something I resoundingly disapprove of when I see it in other agents. And I will feel the inner conflict of shame and remorse, as well as the social conflict of knowing that I am the object of hatred and resentment. Even if we suppose that I could get away with my self-interested action without any actual spectators aware of what I have done, Smith holds that the inner voice, the voice of “the man within”, reminds us that we have acted in a way that we disapprove of in others. This is the supposed impartial spectator reminding us, in the moment of such a conflict, “that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it” and that to treat oneself as if one were better than the rest is to become the proper object of “resentment, abhorrence, and execration”. This reminder is enough to call up the moral motivational structure, and to mobilize the powerful passions of fear of shame and remorse. This reminder also puts the agent, whose attention may be swamped by a powerful selfish passion (like the “man of furious resentment”
we considered in Chapter Two, Section 1.5), in a reflective attitude, forcing them to consider, at least briefly, that they are acting in a way they would not approve of if the roles were switched. 50

Thus, the simple answer to the Why Be Moral Question, for Smith, is that being moral in such cases is the only way to achieve what is in one’s own interest, and it is the surest way of achieving the pleasure of mutual sympathy and avoiding the pain of antipathy and disapproval (including that of the supposed impartial spectator). Sure, I could cheat you out of your share of compensation, but if doing so brings the pain of shame, antipathy, resentment and inner conflict, then the financial gain seems hardly worth it. 51 And the more severe the intended transgression, the stronger the expected disapproval and resentment, and so the stronger the motivation to be moral (II.ii.2.2). The Smithian answer to this question thus falls in the tradition of answering the ‘why be moral?’ question by first showing that the question implies that being moral is not in one’s own interest, and then showing how being moral is in one’s own interest (with a caveat to be explored below). This is not a retreat to egoism, for, as we have seen, one of the most significant and powerful desires motivating us to be moral is an other-directed desire. 52 Smith holds that human beings are deeply and ubiquitously driven by their desire to be in sympathy with their fellow human beings—to share in their opinions and sentiments, to be approved of and loved, and to be worthy of the praise and reward that they receive.

50 Some readers may wonder whether Smith thus has what has been called a “reflective endorsement” model of normativity. Korsgaard refers to the moral philosophies of Butler and Hume as “reflective endorsement” models (1996), and Baier offers a similar reading of Hume (1991). Several commentators have applied this model to Smith; see Sayre-McCord (2013; 2010); Fleischacker (2015); Frazer (2010); Schliesser (2006). On Korsgaard’s way of understanding the reflective endorsement way of answering the normative question, it is what I have called the Vindication Question: “when an explanation of our moral nature is in hand, we can then raise the normative question: all things considered, do we have reason to accept the claims of our moral nature, or should we reject them” (1996, 19). I do not think we are yet in a position to answer this version of the question for Smith, and I will raise and respond to it in Part Two, below.

51 There is still the question of the agent who receives a “very singular education” and develops a corrupted, skewed, or incomplete inner voice (III.4.12). We will examine this issue briefly in Part Two.

52 See Debes (2016) and Fleischacker (2015), who each make a similar point.
We are sympathetic and sentimental creatures who naturally and necessarily live in social groups, and as such creatures, morality is in our interest.

But does Smith really think that whenever I am about to prefer my interest over someone else’s, this powerful motivational structure is activated and I do the strictly moral thing? This would be a fairly implausible view for someone who is so keenly interested in human action as it is found in the world, and, upon closer examination of the account, we can see that Smith’s discussion of the moral authority of the impartial spectator in TMS III is quite narrow in scope. Smith’s central case is precisely drawn: it is a case where the self-interested motive of an agent would lead them to act in such a way as to affect the “happiness or misery of others” (III.3.5). Indeed, Smith is clear in the three paragraphs that follow the oft-quoted passage from III.3.4 that he is discussing motives of justice and injustice, and the language of III.3.4 through III.3.7 bears a strong resemblance to Smith’s discussion of justice in II.ii.1. The case where the impartial spectator calls to us “immediately” and with a “voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of passions” is a case like the one that launches this entire investigation—the consideration of “a man of humanity” who, to prevent a “paltry misfortune to himself”, “would … be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them” (III.3.4). And throughout this discussion, Smith repeatedly mentions the necessity of justice to the maintenance of ordered society—the necessity of “those sacred rules, upon the tolerable observation of which depend the whole security and peace of human society” (III.3.6).

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53 As well as being in apparent conflict with Smith’s argument about the overall salutary effects of self-interested action in the domain of economic activity. As Smith famously says, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages” (WN I.ii.2).

54 For an excellent and thorough discussion of Smith on justice and the rules of jurisprudence, see Haakonsen (1981). Other important treatments of Smith on justice are, Fricke (2011); Pack and Schliesser (2006); Darwall (2004; 1999); Fleischacker (1999); Griswold (1999), Chapter 6.
In these specific cases of justice, Smith holds that “we feel ourselves under a stricter obligation to act according to justice, than agreeably to friendship, charity, or generosity” (II.ii.1.5). It is when we consider violating “the most sacred laws of justice”—“the laws which guard the life and person of our neighbour”, those which guard his “property and possession”, and those which guard “what are called his personal rights”—that the impartial spectator calls to us so forcefully, and delivers a judgment that is clear and precise (II.ii.2.2). This is because “the rules of justice are accurate in the highest degree, and admit of no exceptions or modification but such as may be ascertained as accurately as the rules themselves, and which generally, indeed, flow from the very same principles with them” (III.6.10).

But in the rest of the domain of morality, the commands of the impartial spectator are less specific and less stringent. This is because “the general rules which determine what are the offices of prudence, of charity, of generosity, of gratitude, of friendship, are in many respects loose and inaccurate, admit of many exceptions, and require so many modifications, that it is scarce possible to regulate our conduct entirely by a regard to them” (III.6.9). Thus, Smith writes, “[w]hen the happiness or misery of others, indeed, in no respect depends upon our conduct, when our interests are altogether separated and detached from theirs, so that there is neither connexion nor competition between them, we do not always think it so necessary to restrain, either our natural and, perhaps, improper anxiety about our own affairs, or our natural and, perhaps, equally improper indifference about those of other men” (III.3.7). The practice of the virtues of prudence, friendship, charity, and even beneficence “seems to be left in some measure to our own choice”, whereas “we feel ourselves to be in a peculiar manner tied, bound, and obliged to the observation of justice” (II.ii.1.5).

55 In the practice of these virtues, Smith writes, “our conduct should rather be directed by a certain idea of propriety, by a certain taste for a particular tenor of conduct, than by any regard to a precise maxim or rule; and we should consider the end and foundation of the rule, more than the rule itself” (III.6.10).

56 The difference between the duties of justice (at least in the case of the “sacred laws of justice”) and those of the other virtues thus seems to bear a resemblance to Kant’s distinction between perfect and imperfect duties.
Thus, it seems that the impartial spectator issues two general kinds of commands: in the case of justice, the commands of the impartial spectator are requirements or obligations, obligations to the strict observance of the rules of justice (which are themselves clear and precise); and in the case of all the other virtues the commands of the impartial spectator are recommendations of permissible actions.\(^57\) That is, we might say that while the impartial spectator is authoritative in all cases of moral judgment, the deontic nature of the judgments and commands of the impartial spectator varies depending on the domain within which the judgment is issued.\(^58\) So, Smith’s answer to the agent who asks ‘Why should I be moral?’ depends on the kind of moral demand in question. It seems Smith would hold that only a deeply self-deceived or corrupted agent could even ask such a question about a strict demand of justice. On his view, all agents at all times have a strict obligation to uphold the “sacred laws of justice” and refrain from injuring other people,\(^59\) and this obligation springs from their powerful interest in and need for stable, ordered society.\(^60\) If an agent were to ask ‘Why should I be moral?’ about a demand of prudence, generosity, friendship, or some other virtue, Smith’s answer will again refer to the agent’s own interest, but it is unlikely that an obligation to do some specific thing will be generated. Put differently, in the case of these virtues, there may be many ways of achieving the sympathy and approval of the impartial spectator—there may be many proper motives and approvable actions, and

\(^57\) Cf. Carrasco (2014), who offers a similar account of the two aspects of Smith’s moral theory.

\(^58\) As we will see in Part Two, this feature of Smith’s account of normativity yields interesting results when we pose questions about the objectivity or universality of Smith’s moral philosophy.

\(^59\) Of course, Smith also famously notes that this strict obligation may be achieved by doing nothing: “Mere justice is, upon most occasions, but a negative virtue, and only hinders us from hurting our neighbour. … We may often fulfil all the rules of justice by sitting still and doing nothing” (II.i.1.9).

\(^60\) Matters will be more complicated for rules of justice that are not one of the “sacred laws of justice”, especially if one of these minor rules were to conflict with a duty of another virtue. In such moral dilemma cases, Smith’s view shows us that, we should reflect carefully and seriously about the situation, trying to determine what an impartial spectator would find proper. Depending on the particularities of the dilemma, an impartial spectator may themselves feel torn between two proper but conflicting motives, and so there would be no strict requirement of morality in such a case. See Gill (2014) for further discussion.
no single motive or action is commanded by the impartial spectator. In determining what to do, an
agent should carefully and thoroughly reflect on the situation, attempting to gather information and
achieve impartiality.

Smith’s world of agents and spectators is a complicated one. In this world, people repeatedly
engage in the sympathetic interaction, developing their sense of propriety, cultivating the practice of
self-command, and developing the rules of morality and propriety. In some cases, what must be done
is clear and specific—one must not injure or harm other people; one must not steal from other people;
one must not break the rules of “fair play” in the world of ambition and interest—and in these cases,
the powerful interest each of us has in living in an ordered and stable society generates strict
obligations to not do specific things. But in the vast remainder of human life, what must be done is
far from clear, and far from specific. Smith clearly holds that a proper human life is one that exhibits
some of the positive virtues, virtues like prudence, beneficence, and magnanimity. But in our efforts
to cultivate these virtues, we are guided not by specific and exact rules, but by a “certain taste for a
particular tenor of conduct” (III.6.10). Cultivating virtue is thus a matter of cultivating our sense of
propriety, of enlarging our experience with the world and with the variety of proper human lives, and
then consulting the supposed impartial spectator in order to determine what is best for someone in
our situation to do. As Smith writes, “no man during, either the whole course of his life, or that of
any considerable part of it, ever trod steadily and uniformly in the paths of prudence, of justice, or of
proper beneficence, whose conduct was not principally directed by a regard to the sentiments of the
supposed impartial spectator, of the great inmate of the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct”
(VI.concl.1).
Part Two: The Vindication Question

I will now turn to the third of the questions outlined above, the *Vindication Question*, and ask whether Smith’s account of the authority of the impartial spectator has an effect on our moral sentiments and our moral practices, perhaps undermining them, or perhaps vindicating them. In the one place where Smith discusses the possible effects of philosophizing about morals, he claims that investigations into the “contrivance or mechanism” from which “those different notions [of right and wrong] or sentiments arise, is a mere matter of philosophical curiosity” (VII.iii.intro.3). That is, Smith seems to suggest that an explanation of our moral sentiments could have neither a vindicatory effect on those sentiments, nor an undermining one. But Smith may be too quick here, and we may reasonably ask whether his account of morality can indeed have no influence on our moral sentiments and judgments.

This question is especially pressing as there are two features of Smith’s account of the impartial spectator that seem like they would have an effect on our moral notions. First, the localized and developed nature of the supposed impartial spectator suggests that the members of significantly different cultures will have substantively different impartial spectators, and this suggests that while our moral sentiments and judgments seem to be making universal or objective claims about propriety and virtue, they are in fact making relativized claims. Second, Smith suggests that the impartial spectator is subject to certain “irregularities of sentiment”, and this suggests that reflecting on the impartial spectator as constituting the standard of propriety could lead us to *disapprove* of such an irregular and possibly defective standard (whether or not we seem to be stuck with it). Depending on how Smith would answer these concerns, we can see his account as ultimately vindicatory of our moral faculties, or as ultimately eroding our confidence in those faculties. This part is divided into two sections, each treating one of the problematic features of Smith’s account of the impartial spectator. I offer a
Smithian response to each, arguing that Smith’s account offers a cautiously hopeful and therefore cautiously vindicatory stance on our moral faculties.

Section 2.1: The Problem of Relativism

One of the most attractive features of Smith’s moral philosophy is its extended engagement with moral practices as they are found in the world. Smith offers his readers a series of well-drawn vignettes and vivid examples, and he regularly insists on the sufficiency of quotidian interactions for the development of our “moral faculties” (the capacity to suppose an impartial spectator, to feel and judge as such a spectator, and to command ourselves in accordance with the sentiments of that spectator). There is no need for “severe[]” or “profound[]” philosophy, nor for an “artificial and refined education”, in order to become a mature moral agent (III.3.7), and “abstruse syllogisms of a quibbling dialectic” are likelier to cause harm and impede the natural development of our moral faculties than they are to help them along (III.3.21). But with all this emphasis on our moral faculties developing in the ordinary and everyday world of evaluation and judgment, and out of interactions with actual spectators, Smith’s view runs the risk of being “beset by relativism”.61 That is, Smith’s view could look like it holds that people who develop and are educated in significantly different cultures62 will have significantly different supposed impartial spectators and senses of propriety. Someone raised in a fundamentalist religious community, for example, surrounded by people who believe that homosexual relationships are “unnatural” or even “evil”, and who concur in their strong disapproval of such relationships, would very likely share in that disapproval. Someone like Grieving Adam, the character in the case we examined in Chapter Two, Part Two, who is raised in a community that

61 Fleischacker (2011b) 25.

62 As Fleischacker notes, the term “culture” was not one available to Smith; Smith speaks of the customs of societies and nations. See Fleischacker (2011b), 26, n. 9; (1994).
strictly disapproves of emotional expressions by men, will very likely feel he must not express his grief upon the death of his father. And given Smith’s account of the development of the supposed impartial spectator and the sense of propriety, it could seem that neither of these characters could get a foothold from which to criticize the sentiments of the community around them, if they are pervasively and uniformly held.

Cultural and moral relativism would not, in itself, be a problem for Smith’s view, but only an outcome of that view, perhaps unattractive to some readers but plausible to others. But Smith also seems committed to there being at least some universal moral principles, as in the case of the “sacred rules of justice”, which we examined briefly in Section 1.3 above. And his impartial spectator theory seems to be (or at least to involve) a critical process for testing our sentiments and judgments. If this is correct, then the apparent relativism of Smith’s view would be in deep tension with the commitment to the judgments of the impartial spectator being critically refined and being, at least in some cases, universal moral principles. It would also be an explanatory weak spot of the view, for, if Smith’s account of the impartial spectator is committed to our absorbing or mirroring the judgments of those around us, it is unclear how he could explain the fact that individuals can and do dissent from prevailing opinion and convention.

In this section, I will first delineate the problem as presented by two of Smith’s strongest critics on this topic. I will then try to ease the tension from two different directions. First, we will re-examine Smith’s account of the impartial spectator, focusing on whether this evaluative standpoint affords us the resources with which to critically engage our possible cultural biases. I will argue that Smith’s account indeed has the resources to account for how and why we are led to test our sentiments and judgments. Second, we will examine how much universality or objectivity we can find in Smith. Following Christel Fricke, I will argue that on Smith’s view, there is a core of universal moral principles that can be found across all human cultures, and a periphery of norms and manners that vary across
different human cultures. As we move from the “sacred laws of justice” at the core, the intersubjective warrant decreases in strength, and the need for critical engagement with and testing of our sentiments and judgments increases. But given this shared, stable core, we have reason to hope for convergence on moral matters. Thus, I argue that Smith should deny that the local and developed nature of the impartial spectator leads to cultural relativism, although it may lead to pluralism at the periphery of our general rules and norms.\(^63\)

2.1.1: The Impartial Spectator as a Critical Tool

Many scholars have noted that Smith seems to have revised his impartial spectator theory of judgment in response to a charge made against the first edition of TMS, by Gilbert Elliot, that the view amounted to a kind of conventionalism, or morality by public opinion.\(^64\) Smith made important revisions to the second edition, emphasizing the critical and reflective space that an agent can occupy when evaluating sentiments and judgments, and he made even more extensive revisions for the sixth edition, fine-tuning and elaborating on his account of the “supposed” impartial spectator. It seems that Smith was keenly aware that his view of the developed and empirical nature of our “moral faculties” invited criticism that, on his view, agents merely absorb and replicate the sentiments and judgments of the communities in which they are educated. But Smith explicitly claimed that while education and custom have a strong influence on our sentiments and opinions in general, their influence on our moral sentiments is “much less”:

But the characters and conduct of a Nero, or a Claudius, are what no custom will ever reconcile us to, what no fashion will ever render agreeable; but the one will always be the object of dread.

\(^63\) Fleischacker and Forman each also make a similar claim, but about Smith’s stated view. They go on to argue that Smith’s stated view is in tension with his account of judgment. See Fleischacker 2011b (27); Forman-Barzilai (2010a), 164, n. 107. See Gill (2014) for an excellent, related discussion of pluralism in Smith.

\(^64\) While the letter containing Elliot’s original objection has not been preserved, see Smith’s response in his letter to Elliot, of October 10, 1759, which includes the proposed revisions for the second edition of TMS (Correspondence, Letter 40). See also Raphael (2007), Chapter 5 for a discussion of the development of Smith’s impartial spectator theory.
and hatred; the other of scorn and derision. The principles of the imagination, upon which our sense of beauty depends, are of a very nice and delicate nature, and may easily be altered by habit and education: but the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation, are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warpt, cannot be entirely perverted. (V.2.1)

Smith’s own stated view is that cultural variation in moral sentiments will be moderate, and that there “cannot be” radical or extensive differences between the moral sentiments of different societies.

But despite Smith’s strong language here, and despite his efforts to craft the impartial spectator theory of judgment so as to respond to charges of conventionalism, several scholars have argued that Smith’s view is not actually able to surmount the threat of relativism. Fonna Forman and Samuel Fleischacker have each argued that the problem lies not with Smith’s explicit treatment of variations in cultural custom, but with the more fundamental principles of his moral psychology and his theory of judgment. In particular, they have each denied, in different ways, that Smith’s account of the impartial spectator allows for the kind of critical distance needed to evaluate the possibly prejudicial or biased views of one’s own culture. In this section, I will briefly present each author’s criticism, responding to that criticism using resources established in Part One above and in the previous chapter.

Forman has engaged extensively with Smith’s impartial spectator theory, focusing on the tension between the cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan leanings of his view. She has argued that

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65 Given different customs, norms, and general rules, all of which have a strong influence on moral sentiments, actual spectators may thus judge the same situation differently. A spectator from one culture may feel that it is proper to wail and tear one’s clothing upon the death of a loved one, while a spectator from a different culture may feel that it is improper to “carry on like that” at someone’s death. Each arrives at their judgment in the same way, according to Smith: by sympathetically imagining the situation of the persons principally concerned, and by feeling a sympathetic emotion upon that imagination. We can even assume that in this specific case, each does so with the appropriate degree of information and with impartiality. The difference in judgment is to be explained, on Smith’s view, by the difference in custom, which may itself be further explained by environmental conditions. Cf. Hume’s famous remark from the Dialogue appended to his second Enquiry: “the Rhine flows north, the Rhone south; yet both spring from the same mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the same principle of gravity. The different inclinations of the ground, on which they run, cause all the difference of their courses” (1998, 116). As we will see in the next section, this suggests that well-informed and impartial spectators would not judge that one specific way of grieving the dead is obligatory for all human beings. Many ways of grieving may be proper. This is a pluralistic account, not a relativistic one.

66 Many commentators on Smith have weighed in on these issues. Authors who have argued that the problem of relativism cannot be surmounted given Smith’s views are, inter alia, Fleischacker (2013; 2011b; 2004; 1999) and Forman-Barzilai (2010a; 2010b; 2001). Authors who have argued that it can be surmounted are, inter alia, Herzog (2016); Garrett and Hanley
“Smith’s accounts of sympathy and the impartial spectator, on their own, do not explain sufficiently how people might surmount cultural bias.”

She holds that the impartial spectator succeeds as a tool for “mediating our self-regarding and other-regarding tendencies, disciplining propriety, and ensuring relatively stable and sociable communities”, but that it does not afford the standpoint needed “to question and sometimes to subvert the *very measure* by which [one] has become accustomed to judging [oneself] and the world.”

She asks,

> How do [Smithian spectators] detach themselves from their own experiences as agents disciplined in a world of values and overcome cultural bias? How, within the terms of Smith’s thick description of the disciplinary process through which spectators in historical space come to be proper members and gatekeepers of social morality, do they now become critical of and able to transcend historical space when they imaginatively enter into the conditions and motivations of others with potentially very different histories?

And she notes, in response to these questions, that “critics of course will point to Smith’s thoughts on praise-worthiness” in responding to her objections. Indeed, the crux of Forman’s criticism of Smith is her criticism of the role that praise-worthiness plays in his theory.

As we saw in Section 1.1.1 above, and in Chapter Two, Section 1.3, the desire to be praiseworthy plays an important role in Smith’s account of our ability to evaluate ourselves, and to

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(2015); Carrasco (2014); Debes (2012); Fricke (2011); Otteson (2002); Griswold (2001; 1999); Darwall (1999); and Haakonssen (1981). Authors who have offered a Kantian reading of Smith also tend to emphasize the universalism of Smith’s view over the empiricism of it; see Tugendhat (2004) and Fleischacker (1991) for two strong Kantian readings of Smith.

(2006), 89.

(2006), 97. I find it hard to understand how the impartial spectator could succeed as a critical tool in the one case, but not in the other. Are cultural “beliefs” supposed to be so strong or so pervasively held that a given member of the culture cannot even notice them? Forman seems to be assuming a strongly monolithic or homogeneous sort of culture, and there is good reason to think that such cultures do not exist. See e.g. Moody-Adams (1997).

(2010a), 167. I agree with Griswold that in several places Forman also seems to run together Smith’s notion of the spectator and his notion of the supposed impartial spectator—the spectator who is *supposed* as feeling sympathetic sentiments upon impartially sympathizing with an agent’s situation, and on the grounds of good information (2001, 164-5). Forman’s critical engagement of Griswold (1999) in Forman-Barzilai (2001) remains largely the same as her engagement with his views in Forman-Barzilai (2010).

(2010a), 182.
achieve critical distance on our own sentiments and judgments. Forman holds that Smith is utterly mysterious about the genesis of this desire: “Smith asserted the distinction between praise and praiseworthiness without saying a word about how ordinary people within his empirical description come to know the difference, how they differentiate these standards.”71 As I have already argued,72 this is a serious overstatement of the issue, and Smith has a great deal to say about how ordinary agents come to distinguish between praise and praiseworthiness, and about how they learn to critically evaluate and correct their own sentiments and judgments. As with so much in Smith, critical engagement is fueled by the experience of being wrong, of making judgments that we learn were misinformed or self-serving, and of being wronged, of experiencing what it is like to be the subject of unmerited blame and disapproval. As we saw in Section 1.1 above, these painful experiences are the powerful spurs that drive us to seek out a standpoint from which we can minimize conflict and maximize concord. What we find is the standpoint of the sympathetic, well-informed, and impartial spectator.

Forman’s criticism of Smith turns on her criticism of the role of praiseworthiness in Smith’s view, and, as we have seen, that criticism is ill-founded. But Forman also cites and relies on Fleischacker’s criticism of Smith, which turns on a different issue, Smith’s account of the standard of judgment. Fleischacker raises a series of problems for Smith’s view of moral judgment, the most trenchant being that, “the impartial spectator is constructed out of modes of judgment that seem essentially relative to a particular culture. … this impartial judge within us cannot defend us against the outsiders’ judgments unless it uses the same standards of judgment that they do; it cannot otherwise

71 (2010a), 185-6. Forman has repeatedly made this criticism, often in exactly the same very strong form, and without discussing possible responses; see (2013), 189; (2010b) 155; (2006), 99.

72 See Chapter Two, Section 1.3 for my response to Forman, and see Section 1.1.1 above for my analysis of the desire to be praiseworthy.
engage with their judgments.”\footnote{2011b, 28. Cf. Forman’s claim, quoted above, that the impartial spectator does not allow us “to question and sometimes to subvert the very measure by which [one] has become accustomed to judging [oneself] and the world” (2006, 97, emphasis original).} And he goes on to claim that, “There is little in Smith’s construction of the idealized spectator to correct for the surrounding society’s standards of judgment; the idealized figure takes over those standards and corrects merely for their partial or ill-informed use.”\footnote{2011b, 28, emphasis original.} Fleischacker is arguing that Smith’s account of the development of the supposed impartial spectator will not include the critical apparatus needed to test the sentiments and judgments one encounters in one’s social world.

There are several things to respond to in Fleischacker’s criticism. First, somewhat oddly, Fleischacker does not consider the role of the desire to be praiseworthy, which, on Smith’s view drives much of our critical and reformative work. Second, and more substantively, Fleischacker claims that the impartial spectator is “constructed out of modes of judgment that seem essentially relative to a particular culture.” But this is not Smith’s view. On Smith’s account of the development of the impartial spectator, the mode of judgment is stable, but the particular token judgments may differ depending on how well the spectators in question approximate the perspective of the sympathetic, well-informed, and impartial spectator.\footnote{These are three important characterizations of the standard of propriety, and these characterizations each set a dimension along which any given moral sentiment may be tested. Whenever I wish to determine whether a moral sentiment is merited or not (whether a sentiment I feel toward someone else, or one I feel from someone else), I should first determine whether these sentiments are the result of genuine sympathetic engagement; second, whether they are based on a well-informed understanding of the agent’s situation; and third, whether they are felt from a stance that is impartial toward the agent and the situation. These apparently simple tests do a lot of important work in Smith’s theory, and they plausibly cover many of the cases we are most concerned with when it comes to repugnant but culturally pervasive views. Many prejudicial and biased judgments will stem from a failure to actually sympathize with the member of the oppressed minority, and to see them as someone who is equally “one of the multitude.” (Think here of the propaganda used to dehumanize a specific population and portray them as “vermin” or “beasts”—creatures with which one would not sympathize). Many will also stem from inaccurate information about a group of people or about a situation. (Think here of the vitriolic attacks on same-sex marriage, understood as having some sort of pernicious effect on opposite-sex marriage; or of the justification for women requiring a different kind of education “because” their intellectual capacities are different from those of men). And many will be self-serving or indulgent judgments. (Think here of the approval a plantation-owner feels toward slavery, which...} Fleischacker seems to undervalue this crucial piece of Smith’s
account of the standard of propriety. As we saw above, the sentiments of a spectator do not count as standard-setting unless they are “the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator” (VII.ii.1.49). When an agent in a society develops her own supposed impartial spectator, picking up the sentiments and judgments of the actual spectators around her, she almost immediately also begins testing them for their merit. At first this is because she is anxious to know whether she deserves their antipathy, disapproval, or blame, as in the case of the child who enters “the great school of self-command” (III.3.22). But while her initial evaluations may be self-interested, she is nonetheless learning a critical procedure, one which she will be able to apply to all sentiments and judgments, even those that are most deeply held.

Responding to an objection by Stephen Darwall, Fleischacker considers the possibility of this sort of correction and asks whether, “the impartial spectator, as it corrects for misinformation and partiality in the application of its society’s standards, can also accuse those standards themselves of being based on faulty information or of having arisen to serve the interests of some group or other within the society.” And he notes that “Smith may well have believed that tools of this sort would enable us to correct for moral corruption in the shared sentiments around us.” Fleischacker’s response is that it is “unlikely” that such efforts “will in fact suffice to reform many corrupt attitudes.” And he suggests that this means that “the claims of misinformation and partiality come

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76 Fleischacker gives credit to Darwall for this objection (2011b, 29, n. 13).

77 (2011b), 29. Note that this still relies on misunderstanding Smith’s conception of the standard of judgment. We can interpret Fleischacker here as making a point about the norms of a particular culture, and how these might rise to the level of apparent “general rules of morality”. As we will see in the next section, Smith also suggests tests for these rules to determine whether they are well-founded rules.

78 (2011b), 29.

79 (2011b), 30. Fleischacker seems to me to focus on a different problem in his response to this objection, the problem of actually convincing a specific, prejudiced individual that his beliefs are wrong (2011b, 29-31). Smith would hardly deny that it is difficult to change the sentiments and beliefs of someone whose moral sentiments have been “warpt” by cultural
too late to correct appropriately for the relativity of the impartial spectator.” But this seems to miss the point of the objection. The point is not to specify an additional corrective tool, but to emphasize that corrective processes are built in to the very development of the standpoint of the supposed impartial spectator and the sense of propriety. When agents in a given culture or society are developing their supposed impartial spectator, they are learning a procedure, one that comes along with its own norms and criteria. As we saw in Chapter Two, Section 1.1, on Smith’s view, spectators feel pressure to sympathize fully with the “persons principally concerned”, to gather good information about the situation of those persons, and to judge without bias or partiality.\[81\]

At the conclusion of his critical paper, Fleischacker suggests an avenue for further study:

I suspect that the most promising direction for a solution to the problem I have stressed in this paper is to develop an account of how the development of the impartial spectator within us, in actual practice, implicitly brings with it richer opportunities for correcting the moral standards of our society than Smith himself allows. Moral education in every society, it may turn out, normally or even inevitably leads us to develop a judge within ourselves that is not just ‘candid’, well-informed and disinterested, but that has at least an implicit understanding of and commitment to a truly dialectical interrogation of anything held up to us as a moral standard, and to a notion of the good, however thin and abstract, against the background of which such standards can be examined.\[82\]

I think such critical and corrective possibilities are a core part of Smith’s view, as I have presented it above, and I think that such possibilities come into clear focus when we look closely at Smith’s conception of self-command. Self-command, after all, is a capacity for self-regulation, and it is one


\[81\] Perhaps we could imagine a culture that stifles all of these tendencies that Smith claims are features of the basic sympathetic interaction, and encourages absolute conformity and obedience. Of course members of such a culture would not have the critical apparatus with which to test their sentiments and judgments, but they would also not have developed a supposed impartial spectator. I suspect Smith would have to be committed to claiming that no such culture could actually survive.

\[82\] (2011b), 38-9, n. 27.
that depends on individuals scrutinizing, evaluating, and then modifying their own sentiments and motives. Entering into “the great school of self-command” is entering into a life-long career of self-examination and self-reform, where we learn to listen for the clear tones of the “great judge and arbiter” within us even when the voices of those without are boisterous and harsh.

Further investigation of the critical resources available within Smith’s view should also take into account his scattered discussion of two standards of propriety.\(^83\) Smith writes,

> In estimating our own merit, in judging of our own character and conduct, there are two different standards to which we naturally compare them. The one is the idea of exact propriety and perfection, so far as we are each of us capable of comprehending that idea. The other is that degree of approximation to this idea which is commonly attained in the world, and which the greater part of our friends and companions, of our rivals and competitors, may have actually arrived at. We very seldom (I am disposed to think, we never) attempt to judge of ourselves without giving more or less attention to both these different standards. But the attention of different men, and even of the same man at different times, is often very unequally divided between them; and is sometimes principally directed towards the one, and sometimes towards the other. (VI.iii.23)\(^84\)

As we saw in Chapter Two, Section 3.1, Smith holds that the higher standard “exists in the mind of every man”, and that it is the product of the “slow, gradual, and progressive work” of the supposed impartial spectator (VI.iii.25). As we learn from experience, we learn what our sentiments and judgments are or were, and we learn what they could have been, if, say, we had been better-informed, or we learn what they should have been, if, say, we had not been in the grip of passion or swayed by partiality. Although Smith does not say this, we might see the supposed impartial spectator serving as a regulative ideal—not as a mouthpiece for or mirror of the actual spectators around us, but as a cautionary voice within us, reminding us that no sentiment or judgment, no matter how deeply-held or widely-shared, should be immune from testing.

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\(^{83}\) See Schliesser (2016), 41.

\(^{84}\) See also I.i.5.9.
On the reading of Smith’s impartial spectator theory that I have defended, all agents develop, through the least sophisticated and most common social and sympathetic experiences, the capacity to reflect on and evaluate their sentiments and judgments. Some agents have more refined capacities of judgment, some have more “delicate” sensibilities, and some are more disciplined in and “anxious” about their self-examination, but all have this capacity for reflection and evaluation, and all feel the basic desire for sympathy and the natural desire to be that which one approves of. Smith wears his Enlightenment sensibilities on his sleeve here, positing a universal and largely optimistic account of human nature. And while criticizing those Enlightenment sensibilities is not a part of my project, we should ask: what kind of universalism is this, and how far does it go?

2.1.2: Universality and Objectivity

In the previous section, I attempted to relieve some of the tension that commentators have found between the relativism-leaning account of the developed nature of our moral faculties and the universalism-leaning account of the content or deliverances of those faculties. We will turn to the second side of the tension in this section, examining how much universality or objectivity we actually find in Smith’s theory. I will adopt a suggestion made by Christel Fricke, that Smith’s “most sacred laws of justice” (II.ii.2.2) play an important role in helping his view to surmount the charge of relativism. This is because they have a claim to universality that other rules and norms do not, being necessary for the subsistence of societies.

Fortunately, we have already laid the foundation for this discussion in two previous sections. As we saw in Section 1.3 above, Smith argues that the deontic nature of the commands and judgments

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See Fricke (2011). Like Fleischacker and Forman, Fricke argues that Smith’s account of the impartial spectator (or conscience) cannot do the work of surmounting cultural relativism, but, unlike them, she also claims that it is not intended to (2011, 49). I think that these two elements of Smith’s view work together in eliminating the threat of relativism, as I will show in this section.
of the impartial spectator varies by domain. In many cases of justice, the impartial spectator strictly requires or forbids some specific action, whereas in questions of prudence, generosity and benevolence, and so on, the impartial spectator recommends a general course of action, but not specific actions. And as we saw in our Chapter Two treatment of the Grieving Adam case, Smith suggests that societal or cultural norms are subject to a test to determine whether they count as “general rules of morality.” Smith claims that it is appropriate to rely on general rules as standards of judgment “when they are universally acknowledged and established, by the concurring sentiments of mankind” (III.4.11). In Grieving Adam’s case, the societal norm that prohibited expressions of emotion in men was shown to fail this test, simply by finding that the sentiments of mankind do not universally concur in strictly forbidding emotional expression in men. Smith’s account of well-founded general rules of morality, combined with his claims about the difference between justice and the other virtues suggests that the Smithian picture of morality is one where there is a core of universal moral principles that will be found across all human cultures, and a graded periphery of rules, norms, and manners that admit of more variation across different human cultures. As we move from the “sacred laws of justice” at the core, we move from universality to slightly weaker intersubjectivity, and the need for critical engagement with and testing of our sentiments and judgments increases.

What is at the “core” of Smith’s account of morality? What are the “most sacred laws of justice”? Smith has little to say about these, but he is clear that while we are under a “stricter obligation” to justice than we are to the other virtues, within the domain of justice, some rules are still stricter

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86 A core of universal moral principles, but not absolute or mind-independent principles. The stable moral principles are contingent upon human nature and human needs. Cf. Carrasco, who writes, “[Smith’s] notion of universality (or of the universal authority of rules of justice) has no pretension of becoming something analogous to the Categorical Imperative, a principle ‘out of space and time’. Smith found universality (understood as norms that are valid for everybody independent of any circumstance) on [sic] the ‘kind of beings’ we are, in our natural innate psychological drives and our capacity to channel our impulses and model our dispositions” (2014, 243).
than others. This variation in strictness tracks the degree of injury and the degree of resentment felt upon the injury. Smith writes,

As the greater and more irreparable the evil that is done, the resentment of the sufferer runs naturally the higher; so does likewise the sympathetic indignation of the spectator, as well as the sense of guilt in the agent. Death is the greatest evil which one man can inflict upon another, and excites the highest degree of resentment in those who are immediately connected with the slain. Murder, therefore, is the most atrocious of all crimes which affect individuals only, in the sight both of mankind, and of the person who has committed it. To be deprived of that which we are possessed of, is a greater evil than to be disappointed of what we have only the expectation. Breach of property, therefore, theft and robbery, which take from us what we are possessed of, are greater crimes than breach of contract, which only disappoints us of what we expected. The most sacred laws of justice, therefore, those whose violation seems to call loudest for vengeance and punishment, are the laws which guard the life and person of our neighbour; the next are those which guard his property and possessions; and last of all come those which guard what are called his personal rights, or what is due to him from the promises of others. (II.ii.2.2)

The most sacred rules of justice prohibit acts of serious injustice and injury toward others, and they may be often fulfilled, as Smith says, “by sitting still and doing nothing” (II.ii.1.9).

Smith argues that the rules of justice are so “sacred” and so strict because they are necessary to the subsistence of society, which is itself necessary to the subsistence of human beings. He claims that human beings “can subsist only in society”, for “all the members of human society stand in need of each others assistance” (II.ii.3.1). And while society may subsist without any degree of love or affection between its members, it “cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another. The moment that injury begins, the moment that mutual resentment and animosity take place, all the bands of it are broke asunder, and the different members of which it consisted are, as it were, dissipated and scattered abroad by the violence and opposition of their discordant affections” (II.ii.3.3). That is, justice is necessary to the subsistence of society: “justice, on the contrary, is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society, that fabric which to raise and support seems in this world, if I may say so, to have
been the peculiar and darling care of Nature, must in a moment crumble into atoms” (II.ii.3.4). Given Smith’s universalist account of human nature, he is arguing that no culture and no society can subsist without the “most sacred laws of justice.”

So much for the core of universal moral principles—what more can we say about the periphery? We move into speculative territory here, but I think it is plausible that just outside of the core laws of justice, we would find other laws of justice and the general rules of other virtues, such as they are. Further out from here, we would find more culturally-specific rules, norms, and manners. And at each step away from the core, we move away from the precision and accuracy of the rules of justice and into the looseness and inaccuracy of the general rules of the other virtues (III.6.9-10). At the further reaches, the sentiments of mankind will concur in their approval of the proper, or praiseworthy, or graceful action, but there will be many ways of acting so as to achieve the sympathy of an impartial spectator, and the appropriateness of any specific action will depend heavily on the agent and the agent’s situation. As we saw in Section 1.3 above, there are very few, if any general rules of the other virtues, and because of this, we are better guided by our sense of propriety and our “taste for a particular tenor of conduct” than by rules (III.6.10).

As we move away from the core, the need for critical engagement with our sentiments and judgments increases. This is not to say that the core of universal moral principles is immune from testing, after all, those rules, as precise and exact as they are, still depend on disputable notions of “injury”, “property”, and “rights”. But as we move from laws like “do not murder”, and “do not steal”, to rules like “women must cover their bodies”, and norms like “men should not express emotions”, we should be careful to test such rules before treating them as authoritative. Indeed, what

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87 See also III.5.2, where Smith is discussing our regard for general rules: “but upon the tolerable observance of these duties, depends the very existence of human society, which would crumble into nothing if mankind were not generally impressed with a reverence for those important rules of conduct” (III.5.2).
we see in the case of *Grieving Adam* is a member of a culture questioning the deontic status of an apparent general rule of morality, by testing whether the sentiments of mankind universally concur in strictly forbidding emotional expression in men. If they do not, then this should be a norm that recommends a certain action, at most, and not a rule that strictly forbids a certain course of action. We can describe what *Adam* is doing in this case as moving a rule that does not belong at the core of his moral sphere out into the periphery. Of course, it will be difficult to achieve critical distance on a rule, norm, or motive that many actual spectators approve of, but it will not be impossible.

On Smith’s account, individual human beings are thrown into the world of evaluation and judgment, and it is up to us to scrutinize our practices, to reform our rules and policies, and to improve our judgments. As Haakonsen writes, “Smith’s theory is not a set of basic moral doctrines, nor a prescription for how to construct such a set. On the contrary, it presupposes the existence of such a moral life; but it specifies the principles for discussion within that life.” The crucial critical work is to test our moral sentiments and judgments to determine whether a well-informed and impartial spectator would feel the same upon sympathizing with the given situation. We can test our rules and norms in the same way, by asking whether a well-informed impartial spectator would approve of an agent who followed such a rule or norm in a given situation. Smith’s impartial spectator account of judgment is, as Haakonsen puts it, “a description of the criteria which mankind must use in deciding with an action or character is morally valuable or not … For although the impartial spectator does not supply us with positive moral rules, the spectator principles do show us how moral judgments can be critically discussed and tested.” One way to encourage scrutiny and testing of one’s own accepted rules and norms is by enlarging one’s awareness of human behavior, both through encounters


with people from different societies and cultures, and through the study of historical cultures and manners.\footnote{See Garrett and Hanley (2015) for further discussion of the importance of historical investigation.} Another way is through careful empirical investigation, which Smith, along with many of his fellow enlightened Scots, believed would aid the general progress of human societies, improving the lives of the people within those societies.\footnote{Fleischacker has argued that we can read WN as attempting, among other things, “to change attitudes toward the poor, by providing better information about them, and by describing their circumstances in such a way as to encourage readers to project themselves, imaginatively, into the poor’s shoes” (2011b, 29); referring to Fleischacker (2004)]. See Berry (2015); Dwyer (1987) for more general discussion of this tendency amongst the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment.} Along the way, as we discover rules that do not pass the test, they can be discarded or modified, and we can attempt to check their authority over others by reforming our educational systems and our policies.\footnote{Smith offers an extended discussion of educational reform in WN V.i.f, but has relatively little to say about education in TMS, especially given his account of the development of the impartial spectator.}

In conclusion, I think we can see that the threat posed to Smith’s moral theory by the “specter of relativism” can be dismissed.\footnote{Fleischacker (2011b), 26.} We worried, initially, that there was a tension between the empirical and relativism-leaning tendencies of Smith’s view and the normative and universalism-leaning tendencies of that same view. If it could be shown that our moral judgments are actually relative while they appear to be universal or objective, then we could plausibly worry that Smith’s account of morality would undermine our confidence in our own moral faculties. What we have found is that Smith offers a universalist account of our capacity for judgment, meaning that all human beings will naturally develop “moral faculties” that operate by the principles described in his impartial spectator theory of judgment, and that universal and strictly obligatory laws may be derived from a small set of the judgments of the impartial spectator. But beyond the small core of such universal moral principles, much of our moral lives will be characterized by a shifting, inexact, and unspecific periphery of rules, norms, and manners. We are thrown into a specific moral culture, with a specific periphery of norms.
and accepted manners, but as we develop and as we enlarge our experience with the world, we learn that other cultures have different peripheries, and we learn that there is disagreement and difference within our own culture. Thus, we do not simply absorb and replicate the norms we encounter, we also test and evaluate them, using the standpoint of the impartial spectator to subject our cultural mores to the same scrutiny we give to our more private and personal motives and passions. This is a complex picture of a messy human world, but it is not a relativistic picture of morals.

Section 2.2: The Problem of Sentimental Irregularities

Smith’s moral philosophy has been called a “reflective sentimentalism”, and our discussion of his account of moral judgment has shown just how densely interwoven reflection and sentiment are. Since we have also been concerned throughout this chapter with the normativity of Smith’s account, readers may have wondered whether Smith has a “reflective endorsement” account of normativity, similar to the account of normativity in Hume’s moral philosophy that has been offered by Christine Korsgaard and Annette Baier. The slogan for this variety of accounts of normativity can be taken from Baier: “Successful reflectivity is normativity.” That is, a faculty that survives reflective scrutiny is, ipso facto justified. This is because, as Korsgaard argues, sentimentalists replace questions about whether moral dictates are true with questions about “whether we have reason to be glad that we have such sentiments, and to allow ourselves to be governed by them.” If we can reflect on our

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94 Nazar (2012); Frazer (2010).

95 See Korsgaard (1996) and Baier (1991). The central text for this reading comes from the final pages of the Treatise, where Hume writes, “this sense [of morals] must certainly acquire new force, when reflecting on itself, it approves of those principles, from whence it is derived, and finds nothing but what is great and good in its rise and origin” (T 3.3.6.3; SBN 619). See also Cohon (2008). As noted above, Tolonen (2013) and Gill (2006, 1996) have argued against this reading of Hume.

96 (1991), 100, emphasis original.

97 (1996), 50.
apparatus of moral judgment and approve of it, finding it noble, admirable, useful, or worthy of respect, then we endorse or vindicate morality as we have understood it.

Does Smith have a reflective endorsement account of normativity? \(^{98}\) I have put this specific question off until now because asking it means having in view a full picture of Smith’s account of moral judgment. Thus far, what we have seen of Smith’s account suggests that the impartial spectator operates in a worthy and useful way, and that we have good reason to approve of and endorse our moral faculties. After all, the standpoint of the impartial spectator successfully resolves conflicts, it allows us to best satisfy some of our deepest and most basic desires, and it is epistemically superior to other available standpoints. But there is a potentially problematic aspect of Smith’s account of the impartial spectator that we have not yet examined. Smith’s impartial spectator may be an idealized version of the spectators we actually encounter in the world, possessed of information about the situation at hand, and sympathetically engaged with but impartial toward those involved, but it is still a very human spectator. Indeed, Smith suggests that the impartial spectator is subject to certain tendencies, including an “irregular” interest in the influence of fortune or luck on the consequences of actions, and, occasionally, a tendency to be overwhelmed by “violent” and “unanimous” actual spectators. \(^{99}\) We should ask whether reflecting on the impartial spectator as constituting the standard of propriety could lead us to disapprove of such an irregular and possibly defective standard. “If”, as Sayre-McCord notes, “the irregularities do render a putative standard for our moral judgments, we will have reason, whatever Smith thinks, for holding that he has gotten the standard

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\(^{98}\) Several authors have argued that he does; see Fleischacker (2013); Sayre-McCord (2013; 2010); Frazer (2010); Schliesser (2006).

\(^{99}\) Commentators tend to refer to Smith’s discussion of “irregularities” of the sentiments of the impartial spectator, but, as far as I can tell, Smith posits only one irregularity of sentiment to which the impartial spectator is subject (the interest in the influence of fortune). Other discussions of corrupt, “warpt”, or perverted sentiments are about actual spectators, and not “the impartial spectator”.

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for our moral judgments wrong.”

Sayre-McCord has written extensively on this topic, and in this section, I will only add to his already excellent discussion. Like Sayre-McCord, I think that Smith shows that we approve of even these more irregular aspects of the impartial spectator, and seeing how Smith argues for this will help us to complete our account of normativity in Smith’s moral philosophy.

Let us begin by examining two potentially problematic tendencies of the impartial spectator. In TMS II.iii, Smith introduces a problematic “irregularity of sentiment” to which all spectators, including the impartial spectator, are subject. Smith is referring here to the influence of what is frequently called “moral luck”, that is, to the tendency of spectators to factor the “accidental”, “unintended”, and “unforeseen” consequences of an action into their judgments. Smith claims that we all agree that an agent is only “answerable” for consequences “which were someway or other intended, or those which, at least, show some agreeable or disagreeable quality in the intention of the heart, from which he acted” (II.iii.intro.3). But that “scarce[ly], in any one instance, perhaps, will our sentiments be found, after examination, to be entirely regulated by this rule, which we all acknowledge ought entirely to regulate them” (II.iii.intro.5). We all recognize that we ought to judge based only on those consequences which flow from the intention or motive, or those which were reasonably foreseeable by the agent, but, in fact, we are often influenced by luck and happenstance, and we judge an attempted theft more lightly than a successful theft, and we accord less praise to an attempted act.

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100 (2010), 134.

101 I would also like to thank Olivia Bailey for many helpful conversations about these issues in Smith.

102 Sayre-McCord discusses a slightly different set of irregularities, including the spectator’s varying sympathy with different passions and his susceptibility to custom and fashion (2010, 131-3). I take Smith to be offering a general description of tendencies of spectators in these sections, and since he does not refer to these tendencies as “irregularities” of an impartial spectator’s sentiments, I leave them to the side. I add an element Sayre-McCord does not include, since it seems to highlight both a limit on the impartial spectator, and a further role for the religious beliefs we discussed in Section 1.2 above.

103 For further discussion of “moral luck” in Smith, see, inter alia, Blackburn (2015); Schliesser (2013); Flanders (2006); Garrett (2005); Russell (1999).
of generosity than to a successful one. And “this irregularity of sentiment ... is felt, in some measure, even by the impartial spectator” (II.iii.2.2).

Second, Smith suggests that in some cases, the supposed impartial spectator can be overwhelmed by a vociferous and unanimous group of actual spectators. In a finely-drawn vignette, Smith describes a man who has been unjustly accused of a violent and serious crime. The unjustly accused man knows that he is innocent, as does the “man within”, but the “man without” is convinced of his guilt:

But in this and in some other cases, the man within seems sometimes, as it were, astonished and confounded by the vehemence and clamour of the man without. The violence and loudness, with which blame is sometimes poured out upon us, seems to stupify and benumb our natural sense of praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness; and the judgments of the man within, though not, perhaps, absolutely altered or perverted, are, however, so much shaken in the steadiness and firmness of their decision, that their natural effect, in securing the tranquillity of the mind, is frequently in a great measure destroyed. We scarce dare to absolve ourselves, when all our brethren appear loudly to condemn us. The supposed impartial spectator of our conduct seems to give his opinion in our favour with fear and hesitation; when that of all the real spectators, when that of all those with whose eyes and from whose station he endeavours to consider it, is unanimously and violently against us. In such cases, this demigod within the breast appears, like the demigods of the poets, though partly of immortal, yet partly too of mortal extraction. When his judgments are steadily and firmly directed by the sense of praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness, he seems to act suitably to his divine extraction: But when he suffers himself to be astonished and confounded by the judgments of ignorant and weak man, he discovers his connexion with mortality, and appears to act suitably, rather to the human, than to the divine, part of his origin. (III.2.32)

Smith’s description of this case reveals the intermixed nature of his impartial spectator, and of the standard of propriety set by the sentiments of that spectator. This is a standpoint that stands “above the fray” and with critical detachment, but it is hardly a “view from nowhere” or from outside an ethical community. As such, it seems it can be overpowered, confounded, and even unseated in its authority and influence over us.

What are we to make of these tendencies of the impartial spectator? Should they disqualify the impartial spectator from serving as the standard for propriety? Should we, upon reflection, lose confidence in our moral faculties, seeing them as problematic or perhaps even defective? Sayre-
McCord notes that Smith does not seem to think of the impartial spectator “as suffering defects at all, despite the irregularities of sentiment [he] highlights.” Indeed, Smith claims that the first tendency is a “salutary and useful irregularity in human sentiments”, offering a necessary corrective on our sentiments of merit and demerit (II.iii.3.2). He argues that if we judged solely and completely on the basis of intentions, “there would be no safety for the most innocent and circumspect conduct. Bad wishes, bad views, bad designs, might still be suspected; and while these excited the same indignation with bad conduct, while bad intentions were as much resented as bad actions, they would equally expose the person to punishment and resentment” (II.iii.3.2). Smith does not say this, but he might add that given how imperfectly we can actually know the sentiments and intentions of others, such a system could and likely would regularly punish the innocent.

In the case of the second tendency, or rather weakness, of the impartial spectator, Smith has less to say, and we must construct a response for him. As we saw in Chapter Two, Section 3.1, one of Smith’s main criticisms of Stoic philosophy is that its standpoint of impartiality is purportedly a pure, detached, and divine one—the standpoint of the “great Superintendent of the universe” (VII.ii.1.39). But such a divine standpoint is inappropriate as a standpoint for evaluating human actions and judging human character. Smith writes that, “the administration of the great system of the universe … the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension; the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country” (VI.ii.3.6). We need a standpoint and a standard that is “partly of immortal, yet partly too of mortal extraction” (III.2.32). Smith would argue that it is necessary and

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104 (2010), 134.

105 See also VII.ii.1.43-46.
fitting that the impartial spectator be somewhat limited—that the impartial spectator be well-informed, not omniscient. And to bridge the gap between the limits of the impartial spectator and our happiness and tranquility in all situations, Smith recruits our natural sentiments of religion. An additional role for our religious sentiments and beliefs, which we did not discuss in Section 1.2 above, is to provide a necessary consolation in times when all worldly judges, the “man in the breast” included, cannot see our situation clearly or justly. Smith explicitly claims that the unjustly accused man has one recourse only: “in such cases, the only effectual consolation of humbled and afflicted man lies in an appeal to a still higher tribunal, to that of the all-seeing Judge of the world, whose eye can never be deceived, and whose judgments can never be perverted” (III.2.33). The belief in an all-seeing and all-knowing “Judge” is a very useful belief, capable of consoling us when nothing else can.\(^{106}\)

In his explanation of each of these tendencies, Smith makes an appeal to the usefulness or overall salutary effects of the tendency, but should he be permitted to make such appeals?\(^{107}\) After all, Smith offers an extended critique of systems of moral philosophy that rely on utility as the fundamental principle of approbation,\(^{108}\) and furthermore, Smith’s impartial spectator is supposed to constitute the standard of propriety, not to look off to some independent standard of utility to determine what is proper. But Smith is clear that while utility cannot be the sole source of our moral sentiments, considerations of utility frequently factor into those sentiments:

When we approve of any character or action, the sentiments which we feel, are, according to the foregoing system, derived from four sources, which are in some respects different from one another. First, we sympathize with the motives of the agent; secondly, we enter into the gratitude of those who receive the benefit of his actions; thirdly, we observe that his conduct has been agreeable to the general rules by which those two sympathies generally act; and, last of all, when we consider such actions as making a part of a system of behaviour which tends to promote the happiness either of the individual or of the society, they appear to derive a

\(^{106}\) As we saw in Section 1.2, Smith remains silent on the question of whether such religious beliefs are true, but he enacts the necessity of so believing in the course of his discussion of the utility of these beliefs.

\(^{107}\) As Sayre-McCord suggests (2010, 136), and goes on to dismiss (2010, 137).

\(^{108}\) TMS IV; VII.ii.3.21; VII.iii.3.17.
beauty from this utility, not unlike that which we ascribe to any well-contrived machine.
(VII.iii.3.16)

Considerations of utility, understood in Smithian terms as functionality, or “the fitness of any system or machine to produce the end for which it was intended”, are thus one among several sources of our moral sentiments (IV.1.1).

According to Smith, then, we need not lose confidence in our moral faculties upon reflection on certain surprising and even “irregular” tendencies of those faculties. And we can add, drawing on our discussion in Section 1.1 and Section 2.1.1 above, given that the impartial spectator is a critical tool, we can regularly subject our own judgments and rules to scrutiny and evaluation, refining and enlarging our standard of propriety. We can and do test the sentiments and judgments of others, trying to determine whether they are merited or unmerited moral sentiments. And we do this by occupying the reflective and critical standpoint of the impartial spectator. We can say that Smith has a reflective endorsement model of normativity, but it is a somewhat idiosyncratic one. We cannot, on Smith’s view, step outside of our evaluative and judgmental sphere, and reflect on that sphere in a pure and detached way. We are always embedded in the sphere of evaluation and judgment, and the best we can do is regularly reflect on and test portions of that sphere to see if we would endorse them. We might think of this as testing the impartial spectator indirectly and partially, by testing (some of) its products or results. As Sayre-McCord writes,

There is a real possibility that once we uncover and examine our standards, we’ll discover that, by our own lights, they don’t stand up to scrutiny. In those cases, we will then have found reason to change them. Alternatively, though, we might discover that our standards, once examined and understood, actually withstand the test well and emerge as not subject, after all, to the worries we might otherwise have had. How things turn out can’t be settled ahead of time, nor can they be settled for all time, given that new grounds for worry, and new discoveries about the standards themselves, might come in to view. But when our standards do survive reflective scrutiny they are appropriately seen as having been shown to be, at least in the respects explored, defect-free, so far as we can tell.  

109 (2010), 137.
It is incumbent upon us, recognizing how complex and multifarious our moral world is, to instill habits of critical reflection and evaluation of our moral sentiments, and to encourage caution when judging.

In conclusion, we have been exploring whether Smith is right to claim that investigating the source of the moral sentiments and the principle of approbation is “a mere matter of philosophical curiosity” and one which could have no “influence upon our notions of right and wrong” (VII.iii.intro.3). That is, we have been exploring whether Smith’s account of our moral faculties could, despite what he says, have the effect of undermining our confidence in those faculties. If it could, then our claims in Part One about the authority of the impartial spectator would be undercut. We have looked at two possibly problematic features of Smith’s account of the impartial spectator: an apparent tension between the local and developed nature of the supposed impartial spectator and the universality of the judgments of that spectator; and certain apparently irregular tendencies of the sentiments of the impartial spectator.

In responding to each of these problems, I have focused on the critical potential of the impartial spectator. We do not find in Smith’s view a “once and for all” vindication of morality, just as it is. What we find is a hopeful but cautious endorsement of our moral faculties as providing us the means by which to test our moral sentiments and judgments, to refine our individual senses of propriety, and to improve our discernment in matters of judgment. There may be much difficult work for us as we call into question certain deeply-held or highly convenient views, like, in Smith’s time, the view about the overall utility of slavery, or, in our own time, the view about the overall utility of basic religious beliefs (in which Smith seems strongly to believe), and we may never reach a point where we can say that we have closed the book on moral criticism and inquiry. But, at least according to Smith’s account of our moral faculties, we can feel confident that we have within us the capacity to examine, reform, and progress.
In a striking passage at the center of Adam Smith’s discussion of self-command and propriety, Smith advises that we turn to “poets and romance writers” and not to Stoic philosophers in order to understand our emotions: “The poets and romance writers, who best paint the refinements and delicacies of love and friendship, and of all other private and domestic affections, Racine and Voltaire; Richardson, Maurivaux, and Riccoboni; are, in such cases, much better instructors than Zeno, Chrysippus, or Epictetus” (TMS III.3.14). Smith’s description of the activity of these writers, that they “paint the refinements and delicacies of love and friendship”, may recall David Hume’s distinction between two species of moral philosophy: that which anatomizes virtue and that which paints it.¹ In the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Hume elaborates on this distinction, claiming that the latter species of philosophers,

[P]aint [virtue] in the most amiable colours; borrowing all helps from poetry and eloquence, and treating their subject in an easy and obvious manner, and such as is best fitted to please the imagination, and engage the affections. They select the most striking observations and instances from common life; place opposite characters in a proper contrast … They make us feel the difference between vice and virtue; they excite and regulate our sentiments ….

Smith and Hume each identify an important function of imaginative literature, the ability to illustrate or “paint” affects, character traits, virtues, and human situations more generally, and to thereby contribute to moral education. Smith only claims that imaginative literature can serve an instructive

¹ Hume introduces this distinction in the Treatise (see T 3.3.6.6; SBN 620-1), and then further comments on it in EHU. For more on Hume’s distinction between anatomy and painting, see, e.g. Abramson (2007); Abramson (2006); Immerwahr (1991). For a full list of abbreviations used in this chapter, see the key at the end.

² EHU 1.1 (SBN 5-6), emphasis original.
purpose, but Hume hints at the way it serves that purpose: by making us “feel the difference between vice and virtue; they excite and regulate our sentiments.” Imaginative literature has the power to “engage” and “excite” our feelings, and also to “regulate” those feelings.

We have examined two sentimentalist conceptions of self-control in the previous chapters, Humean strength of mind and Smithian self-command. In this chapter, I turn from these more anatomical treatments of self-control to a more painterly one, and I argue that we can continue to build and refine our understanding of this sentimentalist virtue by looking to a near contemporary of Hume and Smith, Jane Austen. Neither Hume nor Smith had the chance to read Austen’s novels; Hume died less than a year after Austen’s birth in 1775, and Smith died in 1790, when Austen was sharing her writing only within her family. And it has not been decisively shown to what extent Austen directly knew of the philosophical writings of Hume or Smith, although she mentions Hume’s *History of England* in *Northanger Abbey*, and several scholars have argued for her familiarity with Hume and Smith as well other moralists. These issues of direct engagement notwithstanding, I will argue in this chapter that Austen’s novels offer a “painting” of sentimentalist self-control, one that illustrates but, more importantly, *complicates* such a conception of self-control.

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3 I do not mean to suggest that neither Hume nor Smith ‘paint’ self-control, nor that they are solely engaged in anatomizing this virtue. Indeed, as we have seen, Smith often engages in lengthy illustrations of different traits and virtues. I mean only to suggest a difference of emphasis.

4 Several scholars have claimed that there is “insufficient evidence” of Austen’s direct or specific knowledge of any single philosopher or philosophical system [Dadle (2009), vii; see also, e.g., Michie (2000), 5, n.1; Ruderman (1995), 17, n. 29]. But Christel Fricke claims that “the young Jane Austen was acquainted with Smith’s TMS” (2014, 344). Fricke’s evidence for this claim is pretty slim, however, and she relies on Moler (1967), which establishes acquaintance with Smith by means of textual and conceptual affinities between Smith’s and Austen’s conceptions of pride, vanity, and self-esteem, focusing on *Pride and Prejudice*. This seems less like a “discovery” to me, and more like a case being made [Fricke (2014), 345, n. 4]. Given the popularity and respectability of Smith’s TMS, and given its origin as a series of lectures with an audience of young students, it is not unlikely that this text could have been known by Austen, perhaps through the influence of her brothers. As Knox-Shaw notes, if Maria Edgeworth’s young Belinda could have a copy of Smith’s TMS by her bedside, it is not far-fetched to assume that a young Jane Austen could as well (Knox-Shaw 2005b).

5 As a reminder, “self-control” is the term I use to refer to the concept of self-control in general; the terms “self-command” and “strength of mind” are used to refer to a specific author’s specific conception of self-control.
It may seem surprising to claim that Austen is engaging with a tradition that we have thus far located in explicitly philosophical works, but Austen's novels have long been recognized as exploring moral views and themes. This is not to say that Austen is offering a moral theory herself, and, indeed, while her novels arguably have moral lessons to impart, they are rarely didactic or obtrusive about those lessons. But they are full of discussions of propriety, virtues and vices, good and bad characters, moral judgment, moral education, and the often unpleasant moments of self-awareness. And, as Peter Knox-Shaw has compellingly argued, Austen's moral discourse is of her own time. Her frequent use of terms like “propriety”, “approbation”, “sympathy”, “sensibility”, “sentiment”, “self-command”, and “strength of mind” can be readily traced to the complex moral theories of the British moralists, especially to those of Hume and Smith.

6 Indeed, an impressive and somewhat perplexing variety of connections between Austen and various moral philosophers have been argued for. In his 1870 review of Austen, Richard Simpson suggests a Platonic connection, focusing on Austen’s understanding of love [Southam (1968), 244]; several authors have argued for an Aristotelian connection, focusing on Austen’s discussion of the virtues and her general endorsement of moderation [see, e.g., Emsley (2005); Gallop (1999); Ruderman (1995); MacIntyre (1981)]; Sarah Emsley, largely following Alasdair MacIntyre, suggests that Austen is exploring the “cardinal virtues” tradition, as inherited from Aristotle and Aquinas (2005); Avron Fleishman suggests Hobbesian overtones in Austen’s depiction of society (1967); Gilbert Ryle claims that Austen likely absorbed a broadly Aristotelian sense of morality from Shaftesbury (2009); D. D. Devlin contests Ryle’s claim and suggests that Austen was influenced by the educational writings of Locke and by the moral writings of Samuel Johnson and Bishop Butler (1975); David Kaufmann argues for connections between Austen and Kant and Austen and Schiller (1992); Eva Dadlez offers a book-length study arguing against ties between Austen and Aristotle and Austen and Kant, and for ties between Austen and Hume (2009); Peter Knox-Shaw argues for connections between Austen and various Scottish Enlightenment moralists (2004; 2005a); and several authors have argued for connections between Austen and Smith (Fricke 2014; Valihora 2010; Michie 2000; Moler 1968). Most of these authors are focusing on one or two features of Austen’s novels, and finding affinities between those features and a notion or concept in a work of moral philosophy. But the sheer variety of affinities that have been found should give us pause. It is very hard to see how Austen’s views could share affinities with Aquinas, Hume, and Kant, just to choose three, and not be therefore seriously inconsistent or muddled. Since, as most readers of Austen recognize, her views are consistent and clear, it is incumbent upon her readers to be more cautious about applying labels, tracing affinities, and claiming connections. We do not need to assume a Kantian connection just because Austen speaks of “duty” and “principle”, for example.

7 See Knox-Shaw (2004; 2006). As Knox-Shaw notes, pace Emsley and others who have tried to link Austen’s virtues to “a moral tradition that was full-blown many centuries before her birth”, Austen’s terms are very much of her own moment [Knox-Shaw (2006) 245-6]. Instead of the cardinal Classical and Christian virtues that Emsley focuses on—prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, hope, charity—Austen’s virtues are capacities like self-command, sense of propriety, discernment, benevolence, independence, and agreeableness. See also Dadlez (2009), especially Chapter Three for an extensive consideration of the evidence for Kantian and Aristotelian readings of Austen. Dadlez’s focus is on arguing that the preponderance of evidence suggests a Humean reading more than any other, but she also recognizes that Hume and Smith are close enough on various issues that it would be hard to argue that Austen is more Humean than Smithian (see 2009, 79-81 especially).
so complex, and perhaps because the scholarly literature on British moral philosophy and that on Austen rarely overlaps, much work still needs to be done to situate Austen’s moral discourse in that context.8

My goal in this chapter is to contribute to this work in three ways. Focusing on Sense and Sensibility and Persuasion,9 I will first show how Austen is illustrating a sentimentalist conception of self-control in her novels, a conception on which the sentiments of other people guide and enable our attempts at regulating our emotions.10 Second, I will show how Austen’s illustration of sentimentalist self-control complicates our understanding of it by “mak[ing] us feel” our epistemic and sympathetic limitations; that is, I will show how Austen’s illustration complicates our understanding of self-control by making us feel how difficult it is to cultivate this virtue in ourselves, and to accurately discern it in others. Third, I will argue that Austen also shares with Hume and Smith a sentimentalist take on moral education, and that her novels contribute to the moral education of their readers while they depict that of their characters. For Austen, moral education is a kind of training, not teaching, and it involves regularly striving to take up an impartial perspective on the particular situations with which one is faced.11 Through Austen’s use of free indirect discourse and other narrative techniques, readers are taken through the movements of sympathy and impartial spectatorship, and they are brought to make mistakes in perception and judgment, to confront those mistakes, and to become (with luck) better-informed and less partial judges. Reading Austen alongside Hume and Smith can thus not only

8 As should be clear from the previous chapters, possible affinities between Austen’s conception of self-control and Smith’s would also be obscured by the entrenched misunderstanding of Smithian self-command as Stoic or rationalist.

9 One could include Mansfield Park as well, which explores “constancy” and a strong sense of principle and duty. I discuss Mansfield Park only very briefly in Part Two for reasons of space and scope.

10 Seeing the ties between Austen’s conception of self-control and those of Hume and Smith will allow us to see beyond the often-used but undeveloped characterization of self-control in Austen as “Christian” or “Stoic”. See, e.g., Tanner (2007), 98; Emsley (2005); Wiltshire (1992); Poovey (1984); Duckworth (1971).

11 I am grateful to Lanier Anderson for conversation on this aspect of Austen’s novels.
illuminate Austen’s own portrayal of self-control, it can bring us to grapple with problems and complexities inherent in the sentimentalist conception of self-control.

This chapter will proceed as follows. In Part One, I will address two important interpretive issues: potential problems with finding “sentimentalism” in Austen, especially given the influential line of reading that finds Austen to be a conservative author opposed to the new philosophies of sensibility, and potential problems with claiming that Austen’s conception of self-control is akin to those found in Hume and Smith, and that it differs from more traditional conceptions of self-control. In Parts Two, Three, and Four, I will defend my thesis that Austen illustrates and examines a sentimentalist conception of self-control in her novels, treating Austen’s novels broadly in Part Two, and then turning to focus on *Sense and Sensibility* in Part Three and *Persuasion* in Part Four.

**Part One: Interpretive Issues**

My claim that Austen’s novels are engaged in the project of developing a sentimentalist conception of self-control may seem contentious to some readers and tenuous to others, and so, before providing evidence for that claim, I want to address these apparent problems. My thesis may seem contentious because there is an influential line of reading that finds Austen to be a moral and political conservative, strictly opposed to the new philosophies of sensibility and their associations with radical and revolutionary individualism. And my thesis may seem tenuous because it requires Austen to have broken with a long and pervasive tradition of conceiving of self-control as a rational capacity that, when exercised, tends toward a reduction of feeling. So: Why should we think that Austen has anything to do with sentimentalism? And why should we think that Austen breaks with tradition and employs a sentimentalist conception of self-control? I will address each of these questions in turn.
There is an influential line of interpretation that finds in Austen an adherence to conservative ideals and a “preconceived and inflexible” morality, and a deep aversion to the revolutionary individualists and their preaching on sentiment and sensibility.12 Marilyn Butler, in her pioneering study, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas, describes Austen’s writings as “anti-sentimental”,13 and claims, of Austen, that “she chooses to omit the sensuous, the irrational, the involuntary types of mental experience” from her portrayals of the inner life of her characters, “because, although she cannot deny their existence, she disapproves of them.”14 In further support of this line, we can note that Austen herself lampoons the cult of sensibility in her early work “Love and Freindship”, and she undermines the claims to value made on behalf of “exquisite sensibility” in her portrayal of Marianne Dashwood.

However, as Peter Knox-Shaw has shown, Butler, like many others, is working with an impoverished or skewed understanding of sentimentalism.15 “Sentiment” and “sentimental” were indeed often associated with the immediate effusions of feeling of such characters as Henry Mackenzie’s Harley, the “man of feeling”, or with the romantic-leaning sensibilities of Austen’s own Marianne Dashwood. Sentimentalism in this guise manifests in grandiose displays of strong passion, and in moral subjectivism, the bedrock belief in the sanctity of one’s own sensibility and in the

12 Butler (1987), 298. Duckworth also finds Austen to be defending a broadly conservative morality, as do more recent authors like Emsley (2005), and Ruderman (1995). Several scholars have argued, rightly in my opinion, that we should not be forced between seeing Austen as either a hidebound conservative primly opposed to new ideas, or as a subversive radical seeding her apparently polite prose with dangerous ideas. Although I cannot engage here with the tangled issues of Austen interpretation, I am most sympathetic to the line recently articulated by Lee (2010) and suggested by Harding’s ground-breaking paper (1998a, originally published in 1938), which holds that Austen is engaging in a subtle critique of her own society and its norms and manners. I think we can see a corroboration of this line in an early (1818) unsigned review of Austen, which sees and commends her ability to reflect back to her readers their foibles and also their more serious flaws: “Her merit consists altogether in her remarkable talent for observation; no ridiculous phrase, no affected sentiment, no foolish pretension appears to have escaped her notice. It is scarcely possible to read her novels, without meeting with some of one’s own absurdities reflected back upon one’s conscience; and this, just in the light in which they ought to appear” (Southam, 1968, 81).


15 See Knox-Shaw (2004), 3-8 especially. See also Dadlez (2009); Knox-Shaw (2005).
rectitude of one’s own moral sense. And it is sentimentalism in this guise that Austen criticizes in her works. But “sentiment” and “sentimental” are also importantly associated with the moral philosophies of Hume and Smith, who argue that only certain sentiments are fit to guide action and judgment, namely those that are approvable from the common point of view or from the perspective of the impartial spectator. The sentiments fit for sovereignty are not necessarily the first outpourings of an ardent soul, or the unchecked convictions of the resolute individual. Thus, while Austen may be aptly described as an “anti-sentimental” writer if we have in mind the individualistic and expressive brand of sentimentalism represented by characters like Mackenzie’s Harley, she is (arguably) aptly described as a “sentimental” writer if we have in mind the social and reflective brand of sentimentalism that we find in Smith and Hume.16

I will argue in the following parts of this chapter that Austen is engaging with the capacity for self-control as it has been radically reimagined by sentimentalists like Hume and Smith, who do not simply posit the fact of an innate and unerring moral sense, who do not find value in any feeling merely because it is a feeling, and who do not place a premium on sentiments approaching “enthusiasm”. Hopefully this clarifies my thesis enough to dismiss its apparent contentiousness. Still it may also seem tenuous, for why should we think that Austen is engaged in the quite specific project of developing a sentimentalist conception of self-control? This claim will be harder to defend, and doing so will be the task of the subsequent parts. To lay some groundwork for that defense, however, I want to offer

16 Others have, of course, noticed the affinities between Austen and the sentimentalist school of philosophy. Claudia Johnson includes excerpts from Smith’s TMS in the Norton Critical edition of Sense and Sensibility (2002), noting that “exertion and self-control also play large roles in the sentimental theory he develops” and suggesting that his views are more relevant to the position espoused by Elinor than that of Marianne (273, note). Hina Nazar characterizes the difference between the Dashwood sisters as “a family quarrel within sentimentalism. Both Dashwood sisters value independent judgment, but Marianne, the novel’s chief representative of sensibility, simplifies the independence judgment entails when she conflates judgment and subjective preference—and relatedly, taste and instinct. By contrast, Elinor is committed to a reflective and deliberative understanding of judgment” (2012, 9). I agree with Nazar, and think that the line of interpretation that finds Austen to be an “anti-sentimental” writer also fails to see that Elinor’s brand of reflective sentimentalism is in fact a sentimentalism with a foundation in moral philosophical writings. Philosophical sentimentalism is too often reduced to a simplistic emotivism, as it is, for example, in Alasdair MacIntyre’s influential After Virtue (1981).
three depictions of self-control found in texts closely contemporary with Smith and Austen, which offer a more traditional characterization of this capacity. Second, I will outline several features of self-control I will find in Austen’s novels, features that it shares with the Smithian brand of sentimental self-control.\footnote{Because the bulk of the work in the previous chapters has focused on Smithian self-command, and for the sake of simplicity, I rely on Smith’s conception as our touchstone in examining Austen’s portrayals of self-command and strength of mind. See Dadlez (2009) for a detailed comparison of Austen and Hume.}

Mary Wollstonecraft makes for a helpful first comparison with Austen and Smith, and she forms something of a bridge between them. Wollstonecraft directly engages with Smith’s views in \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman} (1798), often citing them approvingly and using Smith’s claims as evidence for her own arguments.\footnote{Wollstonecraft’s focus in \textit{Vindication} is on Smith’s TMS.} And scholars largely concur that Austen knew of Wollstonecraft’s writings and views, and that she subtly echoes themes from Wollstonecraft in her novels.\footnote{See Kirkham (1997). See also Knox-Shaw (2004), 102.} Wollstonecraft also makes for a helpful comparison because the need for “strength of mind” in women forms a major theme in \textit{Vindication}. In her characterization of strength of mind Wollstonecraft relies on a traditional division between reason and intellect on one side and passion and sensibility on the other. For example, criticizing the way women are encouraged to overdevelop their sensibility through “novels, music, poetry, and gallantry”, Wollstonecraft claims, “this overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others, and content with its own station: for the exercise of the understanding, as life advances, is the only method pointed out by nature to
calm the passions.” And later, she makes her acceptance of reason as the governor of the passions more explicit:

[T]he whole tenour of female education (the education of society) tends to render the best disposed romantic and inconstant; and the remainder vain and mean. In the present state of society this evil can scarcely be remedied, I am afraid, in the slightest degree . . . I will venture to assert that their reason will never acquire sufficient strength to enable it to regulate their conduct, whilst the making an appearance in the world is the first wish of the majority of mankind.

This looks like a clear, if under-developed, statement of the traditional view of rational self-control, which holds that reason should have sovereignty over the passions.

About a decade following the publication of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, Hannah More published *Cœlebs in Search of a Wife* (1809), a very popular novel that depicts male and female virtue. Austen knew of and read this work, commenting on it in her letters and finding More’s evangelical and didactic style off-putting. The novel is the narrative of a young unmarried man’s deliberations about and choice of a proper wife. One of the most important traits in his ideal wife is self-control, which is sometimes referred to as “firmness” or “strength” of mind, and More’s conception of self-control is in line with an overtly religious brand of self-denial. The narrator describes an early conversation with his mother, who tells him:

For my own part I call education, not that which smothers a woman with accomplishments, but that which tends to consolidate a firm and regular system of character; that which tends to form a friend, a companion, and a wife. I call education not that which is made up of the shreds and patches of useless arts, but that which inculcates principles, polishes taste, regulates

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20 *Vindication* 131. All references will be to the Oxford World Classics version (1994), which is based on the second (1792) edition.

21 *Vindication* 146-7.

22 Letter to Cassandra Austen, 24 January 1809 (L 177), and 30 January 1809 (L 179) [all references to letters are to La Faye (2011)]; Ian Ross suggests that Smith may have known of Hannah More and may have discussed her and other female writers with Henry Mackenzie and other members of the Oyster Club (2010, 429). More’s novel, of course, was not published before Smith’s death, but she had written several tragedies as well as works of moral and religious commentary and was fairly well known in the 1780s.

23 The narrator’s name is Charles; “cœlebs” describes his state of being a bachelor.
temper, cultivates reason, subdues the passions, directs the feelings, habituates to reflection, trains to self-denial, and, more especially, that which refers all actions, feelings, sentiments, tastes, and passions, to the love and fear of God.\textsuperscript{24}

Some of this language of “polish[ing] taste”, “regulat[ing] temper”, and “habitua[ting] to reflection” is germane to the sentimentalist discourse familiar from Smith and Hume. But More emphasizes that self-control and self-regulation is a species of “self-denial” and that the whole edifice of virtue is directed “to the love and fear of God.” While there are interesting sentimental features of this religious brand of self-control, this is a far cry from the social, sympathetic, and largely secular versions we find in Smith and Hume.

Finally, in the same year that Austen’s \textit{Sense and Sensibility} was published, 1811, Mary Brunton’s \textit{Self-Control} also appeared. Like More’s \textit{Cœlebs}, Brunton’s novel was a great success, and it was known and read by Austen.\textsuperscript{25} As the title suggests, this novel is about the exemplary virtue of its heroine, Laura Montreville, a young woman possessed of great self-control who must resist the rakish attentions of an unworthy lover, battle a series of misfortunes, and eventually learn to see the virtue of a steady suitor. Early in the novel, the narrator offers an illuminating explanation of Laura’s great self-control:

> It is the fashion of the age to account for every striking feature of a character from education or external circumstance. Those who are fond of such speculations may trace, if they can, the self-denying habits of Laura, to the eagerness with which her enthusiastic mind imbibed the stories of self-devoting patriots and martyrs, and may find, in one lesson of her preceptress, the tint which coloured her future days. The child had been reading a narrative of the triumphant death of one of the first reformers, and, full of the emulation which the tale of heroic virtue inspires, exclaimed, her eyes flashing through their tears, her little form erect with noble daring,—‘Let them persecute me and I will be a martyr.’ ‘You may be so now, to-day, every day,’ returned Mrs Douglas. ‘It was not at the stake that these holy men began their self-

\textsuperscript{24} More (2007), 48.

\textsuperscript{25} Austen finds the novel to be vastly wanting in realism. After a second reading and in a letter to Cassandra she records her impressions: “I am looking over Self Control again, & my opinion is confirmed of its’ being an excellently-meant, elegantly-written Work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it. I declare I do not know whether Laura’s passage [by herself, and in a canoe] down the American River, is not the most natural, possible, every-day thing she ever does” (10-11 October 1813; L 244).
As with More’s description of self-control, we again see an overtly religious air to this virtue, as well as a characterization of self-control as ascetic self-denial out of a sense of duty. Laura’s self-control is modelled on that of a martyr.

These three examples should provide a sense of competing accounts of self-control in popular writings at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. In Wollstonecraft, we see an emphasis on the importance of strength of mind, but an understanding of strength of mind in line with the traditional conception of rational self-control. In More and Brunton we again see an emphasis on the importance of self-control, but an understanding of this virtue in religious and ascetic terms. As we saw in the previous chapters, Hume and Smith break with conceptions of self-control that assign to reason the role of governor of the passions. And we also saw how keen Smith is to sever the connections between his conception of self-command and the ascetic conception of self-control as tending toward insensibility. We can add that the associations between self-control and religiously-motivated self-denial are also ones that Hume and Smith were concerned to root out. Hume famously refers to “celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude” as members of “the whole train of monkish virtues” serving “to no manner of purpose” and more properly placed in the catalogue of vices (EPM 9.3; SBN 270). And Smith criticizes those who seek to compare the “futile mortifications of a monastery” with “the ennobling hardships and hazards of war” (TMS III.2.35). Humean strength of mind is neither a matter of the intellect controlling the sentiments nor of self-denial; and Smithian self-command is neither the regulation of feeling by reason, nor is it the mortification of a martyr.

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26 Brunton (1811), 11.
In what follows, I will argue that we can find Jane Austen standing with Hume and Smith and against many of her contemporaries on the question of self-control. To help structure our discussion in the rest of the chapter, let us briefly recall some significant features of sentimentalist self-control, focusing on Smith’s account for the sake of simplicity:

1) **Motivation**: Efforts at self-control are motivated by a concern for the sentiments of other people, and by a desire for their approval and an aversion to their disapproval.

2) **Operation**: Self-control works by taking up the perspective of an impartial spectator on oneself and sympathetically imagining the feelings of such a spectator. It requires lifelong practice and effort.

3) **Standard**: Efforts at self-control are guided by a standard of propriety, which is constituted by the sentiments a well-informed and impartial spectator would feel upon sympathizing with the agent.

4) **Tendency/Outcome**: Exercising self-command results not in insensibility, nor even necessarily in the decrease of feeling, and one is not aided in being self-commanded by being less sensible to the feelings of others.

Sentimentalist self-control is affective, social, and moderate—it works through attention to, imagination of, and care for the feelings of others, especially their sentiments of approval and disapproval; it is guided by a socially-derived and sentimental standard of propriety; and it results in a regulated but rich affective life.

Austen is not offering a theory of self-command, nor is she offering a detailed analysis of this virtue, and so we should not expect to find a similarly philosophical approach to understanding this capacity. But we can find, I will argue, versions of these features in her novels.\(^\text{27}\) We can take our starting point from a scene in *Mansfield Park*. Referring to the inadequate self-control of Julia Bertram, the narrator offers an illuminating description of self-command, one that draws a distinction between mere control of expression and conduct out of a sense of politeness, and virtuous command of oneself out of a sense of propriety:

\(^{27}\) We can also find, as Dadlez (2009) has argued, a general adherence to a sentimentalist framework. Dadlez notes how often Austen discusses various feelings in evaluative language, and she notes that two of the most severe moral failings of an Austen character are insensibility to the feelings of others and failure to feel moral sentiments at the appropriate moments (see 64-70).
The politeness which [Julia] had been brought up to practise as a duty made it impossible for her to escape; while the want of that higher species of self-command, that just consideration of others, that knowledge of her own heart, that principle of right, which had not formed any essential part of her education, made her miserable under it. (MP 76)

Julia Bertram is miserable while going through the motions of polite conversation with Mrs. Rushworth and Mrs. Norris, and her misery is ascribed to her lack of the “higher species of self-command.” It is not difficult to reinterpret this passage in Smithian language, and to see that what Julia Bertram lacks is a proper care for and consideration of the sentiments of others, a careful and scrutinizing attention to her own feelings, and a sense of propriety constituted not by the mere forms of politeness but by the moral sentiments of an impartial and well-informed spectator. As we will see below, Austen’s characterization of Elinor Dashwood and of Anne Elliot reveals that they each possess the “higher species of self-command” that Julia Bertram lacks, and her narrative of Marianne Dashwood’s development shows how Marianne comes to such self-command.

Put more schematically, I claim we can find the main features of sentimentalist self-command in Austen’s novels (with a slight Austenian spin indicated by *):

1) **Motivation**: Efforts at self-control are motivated by a concern for the sentiments of other people, and by a desire for their approval and an aversion to their disapproval.
2) **Operation***: Self-control requires the sympathetic imagination of the feelings of other people, as well as regular effort and habituation.
3) **Standard***: Efforts at self-control are guided by a standard of propriety.
4) **Tendency/Outcome**: Exercising self-command results not in insensibility, nor even necessarily in the decrease of feeling and one is not aided in being self-commanded by being less sensible to the feelings of others.

There are two major differences between this list of features and the previous, and they each stem from the fact that Austen’s novels do not provide an exact analogue of Smith’s well-informed and

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28 Quotations from Austen’s novels will refer to the abbreviated titles followed by page number; see the key to abbreviations at end for further details. References to *Mansfield Park* will be to the Penguin Classics edition, but page references to all of Austen’s other novels are to the Oxford World Classics editions.
impartial spectator.29 First, the operation of self-control in Austen’s novels often involves imagining the feelings of other people, but it does not always involve imagining their feelings as if they were spectators of one’s own conduct. Sometimes, as is often the case with Elinor Dashwood, a character imagines the consequences for the feelings of others of revealing or not commanding her own feelings, and this provides a new motivation to command those feelings. And sometimes, in the cases that align with Smith’s own view, a character prospectively imagines the approval or disapproval of others and this guides their efforts at self-command.

Second, while propriety and impropriety are clearly important notions for Austen, and while she is clear that propriety does not collapse to whatever is dictated by religion or by reason, her conception is nonetheless difficult to make as precise as Smith’s. Sometimes the rules of propriety seem to be closer to mere rules of etiquette, as when Lady Catharine de Bourgh disapproves of “two young women travelling post by themselves” as being “improper” (PP 162). But in many other cases, the standard of propriety is closer to Smith’s own conception, being constituted by the approval and disapproval of an impartial judge of a situation, as in the case of Mr. Knightley’s censure of Emma’s behavior toward Miss Bates at Box Hill. Further, as we will see below, a recurring theme in Austen’s novels is the observation that it is very difficult to tell if one is looking to the right spectator or judge and being guided by the right sense of propriety. One’s education can make one less discerning, and the circumstances of a situation, including the reserve and secrecy of others, can conspire to make a situation opaque and difficult to evaluate. Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that Austen’s novels frequently contain a major or minor educational plot, a narrative of a character’s sentimental and moral education and their journey toward accurate and sensitive discernment of their own

29 Although, as I will suggest below, in Sections 3.3 and 4.2, Austen’s narrator often represents the standpoint of impartial spectatorship, even as it also represents the standpoint of sympathetic spectator. So, while Austen’s characters only occasionally approximate the standpoint of the impartial spectator, her narrator much more consistently stands in for that perspective. See Lynch (1998), 233 for a similar claim.
sentiments and those of others, which echoes Smith’s own story about how we learn which sentiments and which spectators counts as standard-setting.

In the following parts of this chapter, I will focus on how Austen illustrates and complicates sentimentalist self-control, and in the process, we will see how Austen’s conception of self-control shares key features with sentimentalist conceptions. Austen offers us a chance to see what sentimentalist self-control looks like when it is removed from the limiting genre of the philosophical treatise. But, as we will also see, Austen’s illustration of sentimentalist self-control brings to light and explores several problems inherent in the sentimentalist conception of self-control. Sense and Sensibility explores the difficulties of discerning and sympathizing with the sentiments of others, and of distinguishing between propriety and mere politeness. And Persuasion dramatizes the difficulties of discerning strength of mind in someone else—of distinguishing the virtuous quality from urbane poise or headstrong willfulness. By bringing us to feel these difficulties, and by engaging and exciting our sympathy and imagination, Austen also helps us, as readers, to understand the importance of and difficulties involved in cultivating and understanding self-control.

Part Two: Extending Conceptions – Self-Control on the Battlefield and in the Parlor

In this part, I will take a broad view of Austen’s novels, looking briefly at the ways in which Austen extends the sentimentalist conception of self-control by illustrating it in a variety of common and domestic settings. Whereas Hume and Smith tend to focus on stock examples of martial and

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30 Although, again, I do not mean to suggest that Hume or Smith employ only the driest and most ‘anatomical’ prose. Each author peppers their treatise with brief, evocative narratives, which arguably have the function of engaging the sentiments of the reader and guiding their understanding.
masculine self-control, Austen shows her readers a range of strong-minded characters and a variety of situations that call for exertions of self-command.\footnote{Austen is, of course, not the only novelist to depict female characters possessing strength of mind or self-control, nor is she the only one to dramatize the development of this important virtue. As the above excerpts from Wollstonecraft, More, and Brunton reveal, self-control and the question of the proper management of the passions and sensibility were pervasive topics in the literature of Austen’s time. But Austen is an important representative of this trend, not only because her conception of self-control differs in significant respects from those employed by other popular authors, but also because she is a master of realistic characterization.}

The portrayal of self-command that we find in Smith sticks closely to the classic examples of martial and philosophical poise under pressure. For example, Smith writes that “the man who has lost his leg by a cannon shot, and who, the moment after, speaks and acts with his usual coolness and tranquillity, as he exerts a much higher degree of self-command, so he naturally feels a much higher degree of self-approbation” (TMS III.3.26). And he describes the conditions fitted for the development of self-command as “the violence of faction”, and “the hardships and hazards of war” (TMS III.3.36). Alongside these martial associations, Smith also connects “heroic magnanimity” with the image of Socrates facing execution:

Whenever we meet, in common life, with any examples of such heroic magnanimity, we are always extremely affected. We are more apt to weep and shed tears for such as, in this manner, seem to feel nothing for themselves, than for those who give way to all the weakness of sorrow: and in this particular case, the sympathetic grief of the spectator appears to go beyond the original passion in the person principally concerned. The friends of Socrates all wept when he drank the last potion, while he himself expressed the gayest and most cheerful tranquility. (TMS I.iii.1.14)

\textit{Pace} scholars who have claimed that Smith’s examples of self-command reveal a deep commitment to a gendered conception of the virtues, I do not take Smith to be arguing that only men can possess this virtue.\footnote{\textit{Inter alia}, Cole (1991); Dawson (1991); Dwyer (1987); Kay (1986); Marshall (1986). I cannot engage with this literature here, but it is important to note that the textual evidence cited for these claims is often very slim. For example, most authors rely on the passage where Smith claims that “Humanity is the virtue of a woman, generosity of a man” (TMS IV.2.10), and then combine this with Smith’s division of the virtues into the “amiable” and the “respectable” (TMS I.5.1). They then argue that Smith associates amiability, humanity, and sensibility with women, and respectability, generosity, and self-command with men—hence, a deep gendering of the virtues. But there are several problems with this argument, the} Nevertheless, Smith does rely on stock examples of heroic self-command, and these examples skew masculine and martial.
In Austen’s novels, we rarely encounter the world of “cannon-shots”, death by execution, and military valor. We are instead faced with the many everyday instances where one is called to regulate one’s feelings, to command one’s conduct, or to control one’s conversation. In this world, keeping silent when one could speak a biting comment counts as heroic forbearance, and maintaining the forms of polite and civil conversation while one is distressed counts as fortitude. In her depiction of domestic and social instances of self-control, Austen draws out what is implicit in Smith’s view of self-command as a “great school” one enters as a child and remains enrolled in all of one’s life. On Smith’s view, self-command is as basic to our ethical lives as sympathy and spectatorship are, and Austen helps us to see past the distorting noise of Smith’s dramatic depictions of the self-commanded soldier and to what everyday self-command looks like.

Emma Woodhouse of Austen’s *Emma* provides a helpful example of Austen’s domestication of self-command. Emma is not a character known for her sense of principle, nor for self-denial, but she recognizes the importance of acting with propriety, even when faced with someone as insufferable as Mrs. Elton or as occasionally unbearable as her own brother-in-law, John Knightley. In a scene with the latter, after she has finished listening to his diatribe about having to leave the comfort of one’s own home in order to visit someone else’s, Austen takes us inside Emma’s thoughts:

Emma did not find herself equal to give the pleased assent, which no doubt he [John Knightley] was in the habit of receiving, to emulate the “Very true, my love,” which must have been usually administered by his travelling companion; but she had *resolution* enough to refrain from making any answer at all. She could not be complying, she dreaded being quarrelsome; her *heroism* reached only to silence. She allowed him to talk, and arranged the glasses, and wrapped herself up, without opening her lips. (E 90-1, emphases added)

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First being that this ignores the fact that the amiable virtues of feeling and sensibility are also the *spectatorial* virtues, those associated with propriety and judgment, as is clear in the passage from TMS I.i.5.1. Second, there are over 70 instances of the word “humanity” in TMS, almost all of which are used in a gender-neutral or even explicitly masculine way. Third, and most importantly, Smith clearly thinks that all moral agents need a balance between the sets of virtues; no man can be fully virtuous without being humane, and no woman can be fully virtuous without being self-commanded. As Henry Clark sharply puts this point, “Both humanity and self-command are generic attributes before they take shape in any specific way for one sex or the other. Men also need humanity; women also need self-command; and they need these skills pervasively, throughout the whole quiet, unheralded course of daily life” (1993, 343-4).
Emma cannot do as her sister does and assent to John’s opinions simply because they are his, and she
does not wish to quarrel with her brother-in-law—her heroism is that of controlling her conduct. This
is a familiar scene in Austen’s novels, and when one of her heroines must observe social niceties,
Austen often takes us inside her thoughts and gives us a glimpse of the self-command required for
such fortitude.

Small moments of fortitude abound in Austen’s novels, but the moments for great heroism
often take place at or because of a ball. In *Emma*, Mr. Knightley’s offer to dance with Harriet Smith
after she has been rudely snubbed by Mr. Elton is the moment of heroism that stands above Frank
Churchill’s rescue of her from “gypsies.” And in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland is called to
exercise great fortitude when she must remain seated, even though she has a dance partner, simply
because he has not yet arrived:

> She could not help being vexed at the non-appearance of Mr. Thorpe, for she not only longed
to be dancing, but was likewise aware that, as the real dignity of her situation could not be
known, she was sharing with the scores of other young ladies still sitting down all the discredit
of wanting a partner. To be disgraced in the eye of the world, to wear the appearance of infamy
while her heart is all purity, her actions all innocence, and the misconduct of another the true
source of her debasement, is one of those circumstances which peculiarly belong to the
heroine’s life, and her fortitude under it what particularly dignifies her character. Catherine
had fortitude too; she suffered, but no murmur passed her lips. (NA 36)

Austen is clearly having fun with Catherine’s thoughts in this scene, and the overt reference to how a
“heroine” must feel in such a situation nicely reminds us that Catherine is apt to think of herself as a
heroine in one of Ann Radcliffe’s novels, about to be faced with dark mysteries and thrilling
adventures. But Catherine is, in fact, no such heroine, and *Northanger Abbey* is no *Mysteries of Udolpho*.
Austen is subtly introducing a comparison between a standard novelistic portrayal of fortitude and
heroism and the instances that we actually encounter in life. Very rarely is someone called to exert
fortitude when faced with a sadistic General; much more often are we called to regulate our emotions
when we are waiting for someone who is inconsiderate and late for an appointment.
Along with these domestic scenes of fortitude and heroism, Austen also centers three of her novels on a young woman who possesses the virtue of self-command, thus asserting that this virtue is not reserved for soldiers and statesmen. Elinor Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*, which will be the focus of Part Three, is introduced as a young woman of “sense” and of self-command: “She had an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them” (SS 6). We see Elinor engaged in this effort of governance throughout the novel, often having to take a moment to compose her emotions in order to act with poise and civility. Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, which will be the focus of Part Four, is introduced as a prudent and composed person, and revealed over the course of the novel to be someone of exemplary fortitude and strength of mind. In the key dramatic moment of the novel, the scene at Lyme when Louisa Musgrove falls “lifeless” from the high stone wall, Anne is capable, calm, and efficient. With “strength and zeal” she sends someone to fetch a surgeon, comforts those who need comforting, and directs the entire enterprise while the other, apparently stronger members of the group (including ranked members of the Navy) fall to pieces (P 92-3). Finally, Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* is also characterized as someone with self-command, constancy, and the ability to do as her conscience dictates.\(^\text{33}\)

Austen extends the characterization of sentimentalist self-control that we find in Hume and Smith, providing us with realistic characters in a variety of quotidian situations instead of ideal or typical characters in stock situations. We see fortitude in a ballroom and heroism in a conversation. We see one young woman with great self-command, another with excellent principles and the ability to follow them, and yet another with impressive strength of mind. In the next two parts we will look

\(^{33}\) I do not have the space to thoroughly examine the treatment of self-control in *Mansfield Park*. Briefly, this novel focuses in part on the question of what principles count as good principles by which to guide oneself. More subtly, the novel explores how knowing which principles are proper and right is not enough to ensure virtue, for one must be able to govern oneself in accordance with them and out of a “higher species of self-command” (MP 76). *Mansfield Park* also reflects on the development of self-command, seeing that it is in hardship and turmoil that one can best practice self-command (see Sir Thomas’ musings at MP 389, and Henry Crawford’s at MP 197). This is a further point of contact between Austen and Smith (cf. TMS III.3.35-7).
in much greater detail at Austen’s characterization of sentimentalist self-control, focusing on *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*. In Part Three, we will focus on Austen's narrative of Marianne’s belated entrance into the “great school of self-command”, and we will examine Austen's depiction of Elinor's self-command. In Part Four, we will follow with Wentworth as he learns to distinguish between the strength of mind of Anne Elliot and the willfulness of Louisa Musgrove, and we will grapple with the complicated characters of Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Smith. Along the way, we will continue to examine the various sentimentalist features of Austen’s conception of self-control.

**Part Three: Sense and Sensibility**

There are several Smithian themes in *Sense and Sensibility*, and even more scattered scenes and comments that recall Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Robert Ferrars’ ridiculously involved purchase of a toothpick-case and his great pride in his own delicate taste and “inventive fancy” (SS 165) recall Smith’s example of the “tweezer-case”, a “trinket[] of frivolous utility” that gratifies the vanity of its possessor (TMS IV.1.8). And there are Smithian resonances in the language used to describe various acts of sympathy, as in the description of Mrs. Dashwood’s sympathy with Marianne and Willoughby, “enter[ing] into all their feelings with a warmth which left her no inclination for checking this excessive display of them” (SS 41). Or as in the case of Mrs. Jennings’ compassion for Marianne, which increases when she engages in sympathetic projection: “and as for their mother, when Mrs. Jennings considered that Marianne might probably be to *her* what Charlotte was to herself, her sympathy in *her* sufferings was very sincere” (SS 237, emphases original).

In this part, I will argue that an extended Smithian theme is to be found in the treatments of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. As is often noted, Elinor and Marianne do not illustrate a simple opposition between “sense” and “sensibility”. They do, however, illustrate opposing “systems”
pertaining to feelings and their management.34 Marianne’s system values “potent sensibility” and the expression of exactly what one feels (SS 63), and, as Elinor alleges, it “sets propriety at nought” (SS 43). Elinor’s system, referred to by Edward as her “plan for general civility”, values self-command and propriety. In Elinor and Marianne we see two pupils in Smith’s “great school of self-command.” Elinor has been long enrolled in this school, and is regularly engaged in scrutinizing and judging herself and others, and in striving to act and feel with propriety. Elinor’s efforts and exertions, along with her continual evaluations and judgments, help us to feel the weight of Smith’s claim that “the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring [the practice of self-command] to complete perfection” (TMS III.3.22). When we meet Marianne, she does not see the need for or value of controlling one’s emotions, and she dismisses those who act with propriety as cold or deceptive. What Marianne learns over the course of the novel is that her extreme partiality for her own feelings and for any who appear to share them exactly causes her to underrate qualities she does not have, to overlook people who differ from her, and to generally ignore the feelings of others. Marianne enters the great school of self-command when she realizes the importance of caring for the feelings of other people, even when those other people are flawed, imperfect, and sometimes exasperating.

In this part, I will begin by tracing Marianne’s journey and her entrance into the school of self-command. We will see that the self-command Marianne learns is characterized by all four features of sentimentalist self-control, as outlined in Part One. I will then turn to the example Elinor sets for her sister and examine some of the complications in Austen’s characterization of Elinor. Elinor is frequently described as assigning the emotional labor of civility and politeness to herself, and this “post” is often described in ambivalent terms (SS 119). While Marianne comes to see the importance

34 Cf. Butler: “The entire action is organized to represent Elinor and Marianne in terms of rival value-systems. Which are seen directing their behaviour in the most crucial choices of their lives. It is an arrangement which necessarily directs the reader’s attention not towards what they experience, but towards how they cope with experience, away from the experiential to the ethical” (1987, 184).
of self-command and of “those offices of general complaisance and particular gratitude” (SS 263), we might still wonder how to interpret Elinor’s regular willingness to “tell[] lies when politeness required it” (SS 92). I will argue that Austen’s treatment of propriety as “civility” in this novel complicates Smith’s picture of self-command and reveals the difficulties inherent in striving to act and feel with propriety when proper understanding of a situation is so hard to achieve, and society so flawed.

Section 3.1: Marianne and the Great School of Self-Command

Marianne’s journey to understanding self-command and recognizing the need for it is plotted across the entire novel. In the first volume, we see various sides of Marianne’s character and we learn why she is so opposed to Elinor’s way of managing her passions. In the second volume we see Marianne in hardship, brought on by Willoughby’s cruel and selfish treatment, and we see her utterly unable to support herself during this trial. And in the third volume, we see the crisis which is the outcome of Marianne’s hardship and her inability to learn the lesson of self-command. It is only with the time and quiet afforded by her convalescence that she comes to understand and value self-command.

When we are introduced to the Dashwood women, they are reacting to the admittedly awful situation of Mr. Dashwood’s death, John Dashwood’s inheritance and quick takeover of their home at Norland, and Mrs. John Dashwood’s insensitive treatment of them all. In the narrator’s commentary on the reactions of the Dashwood women, an important contrast is laid out:

Elinor saw, with concern, the excess of [Marianne’s] sensibility; but by Mrs. Dashwood it was valued and cherished. They encouraged each other now in the violence of their affliction. The agony of grief which overpowered them at first, was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again. They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, seeking increase of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in future. Elinor, too, was deeply afflicted; but still she could struggle, she could exert herself. She could consult with her brother, could receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with proper attention; and could strive to rouse her mother to similar exertion, and encourage her to similar forbearance. (SS 6)
Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood have strong feelings that tend to excess, and this tendency to excess is encouraged and indulged by each of them. Their sympathy with each other and their valuing of their own strong feelings causes them to stoke those feelings, to wallow in them, and to allow them to swamp every other concern or care they might have. Elinor, on the other hand, is “deeply afflicted” but “struggle[s]” and “exert[s] herself.” She is able to act with prudence and propriety in the midst of her own grief and frustration.

Marianne not only feels strongly, she sees no merit in controlling, regulating, or masking her feelings. To Marianne, self-command is understood readily—it comes easily to those who feel little and tend to be cold, as she is ashamed to believe of her sister, and it is “impossible” with strong affections (SS 79). Marianne believes that her sister does not possess strong feelings, and that this explains how calm and cheerful Elinor is after her separation from Edward in the first volume. According to Marianne, Elinor’s self-command springs from a general calmness of passion, and a less ardent heart, and while Marianne “blush[e] to acknowledge” this weakness of feeling, she gives “a very striking proof” of her own potent sensibility “by still loving and respecting that sister, in spite of this mortifying conviction” (SS 79). To Marianne, self-command is not for the warm-hearted; for such as herself, the proper way of dealing with one’s passions is to “feed[] and encourage[e]” them “as a duty” (SS 59).

Moreover, self-command is associated by Marianne with reserve, deception, and a petty adherence to a popular standard of propriety. When Elinor “venture[s] to suggest the propriety of some self-command” to Marianne in her swiftly growing intimacy with Willoughby, Marianne ignores her cautions: “Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve; and to aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to common-place and mistaken notions. Willoughby thought the same; and their behaviour, at all times, was an illustration of their
opinions” (SS 41). The connection made between Marianne and Willoughby in the last line casts a
darker light on Marianne’s valorization of unchecked sensibility, for, as Elinor notices, in Willoughby,
as in Marianne, there is “a propensity … of saying too much what he thought on every occasion,
without attention to persons or circumstances. In hastily forming and giving his opinion of other
people, in sacrificing general politeness to the enjoyment of undivided attention where his heart was
engaged, and in slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety, he displayed a want of caution
which Elinor could not approve” (SS 37-8). Marianne and Willoughby are alike in their scorn for
anyone who does not immediately and completely agree with them, in their lack of consideration for
“persons and circumstances”, and in their sense of self-importance.

Marianne is also assured of her own sentiments and opinions and scorns the approval and
disapproval of other people. She confidently asserts: “At my time of life opinions are tolerably fixed.
It is not likely that I should now see or hear anything to change them” (SS 70). At the wise age of
seventeen she has decided, for example, that a person can only love once and that second attachments
are impossible (in spite of the example offered by her own father, who married twice, as Elinor
reminds us) (SS 43). More generally, she flatly refuses to be guided by the approval and disapproval
of others, with the occasional exception of her mother and sister, because she believes in the
superiority of her own judgment. This propensity can be seen in two early episodes in the novel.

The first episode reveals Marianne’s understanding of what it means to value the sentiments
and opinions of other people. After Mrs. Jennings discovers Marianne’s highly inappropriate visit to
Allenham with Willoughby, she teases Marianne about this in her good-natured but vulgar way.
Marianne “turn[s] away in great confusion”, and Elinor is incredulous that Marianne would open
herself to the censure of others by acting as though she and Willoughby were married, in possession
of Allenham, and had the right to visit the house as if it were their own (SS 52). Marianne defends
herself, claiming that “if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible
of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure” (SS 52). But Elinor counters with the claim that exposing oneself to “impertinent remarks” is evidence that one’s conduct has been improper. Marianne’s retort reveals her lack of concern for the opinions of other people: “If the impertinent remarks of Mrs. Jennings are to be the proof of impropriety in conduct, we are all offending every moment of our lives. I value not her censure any more than I should do her commendation” (SS 52). Marianne is partly right to think that Mrs. Jennings’ opinions, given so freely and with so little sensitivity to how they might be received, should not set the standard for her conduct, but she is wrong to dismiss them without consideration.

Dismissing the sentiments of others without any consideration is what Elinor is criticizing in Marianne, not failing to be ruled by those sentiments on each and every occasion. Elinor makes this clear in the second episode wherein we can see Marianne’s self-involved standard of judgment. Here, Elinor, Marianne, and Edward Ferrars are in conversation together while Edward is visiting the Dashwoods at Barton Cottage. They are discussing the difficulties of judging someone else’s character, and Elinor notes that she has “frequently detected” in herself “a total misapprehension of character in some point or other: fancying people so much more gay or grave, or ingenious or stupid than they really are, and I can hardly tell why or in what the deception originated. Sometimes one is guided by what they say of themselves, and very frequently by what other people say of them, without giving oneself time to deliberate and judge” (SS 71). Elinor’s comments here set out a clear standard for proper judgment and they also indicate how difficult it can be to achieve such judgment. One must

Commenting on Marianne’s assertion, Margaret Doody claims that “this example of Marianne’s behavior offers a salient instance of the untruth of her loose and Shaftesburian supposition that feelings are sufficient moral guide, that ‘we always know when we are acting wrong’” (Doody, 1990, xxvii). I think that the situation here is much more complex, and that we see Marianne making a more subtle mistake. Some sentimentalists would agree that “if there had been any real impropriety in what [she] did, [she] should have been sensible of it at the time”, but the more subtle moral psychologists like Hume and Smith would have noted how easy it is for some sensations to swamp other ones, rendering the feeling of impropriety unnoticeable amongst a welter of selfish feelings. It takes serious work to render the perspective of the impartial spectator (or of the common point of view) accessible in moments of action, and this is the work that Marianne has not yet begun in earnest. See Smith TMS III.4-5.
give oneself “time to deliberate and judge”, and not jump to a hasty assessment of someone else based on a small sample of evidence or on the unchecked testimony of others.\textsuperscript{36} One must also be willing to revise one’s opinions, and to recognize that they may be based on poor information or on a partial understanding of someone. But this willingness to doubt, to examine, and to revise is exactly what Marianne disavows, claiming a fixity of opinions (SS 70).

Not only is Marianne unwilling to treat her sentiments and opinions as revisable, she misunderstands Elinor’s point about being guided by the testimony of other people in forming those sentiments and opinions. She asks, “But I thought it was right, Elinor … to be guided wholly by the opinion of other people. I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of neighbours. This has always been your doctrine, I am sure.” (SS 71). And Elinor corrects her misunderstanding:

‘No, Marianne, never. My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behaviour. You must not confound my meaning. I am guilty, I confess, of having often wished you to treat our acquaintance in general with greater attention; but when have I advised you to adopt their sentiments or to conform to their judgment in serious matters?’ (SS 71)

Elinor’s “plan for general civility”, as Edward calls it (SS 71), is a plan for treating one’s acquaintance with attention and consideration. It is not a plan for adopting their sentiments or conforming to their judgment wholesale. But Marianne cannot yet see how to consider someone else’s opinions without thereby endangering the authenticity and purity of her own sentiments. She cannot yet see that her own sense of conviction is a comforting fiction, one that keeps her from the complicated work of

\textsuperscript{36} Elinor’s patient assessment of Mrs. Jennings’ character bears witness to the need for time to deliberate and judge. When we first meet Mrs. Jennings she is vulgar and intrusive, but also friendly and genuinely interested in the comfort of others. When Mrs. Jennings invites Elinor and Marianne to stay with her in London, Elinor worries that “she is not a woman whose society can afford us pleasure, or whose protection will give us consequence” (SS 116). But by the end of the novel, and after much time spent together, Elinor has learned (and we have come to see with her), that Mrs. Jennings has some truly sterling qualities. Not only is she of significant help during Marianne’s illness, she has “a kindness of heart which made Elinor really love her” (SS 232).
scrutinizing, examining, and regulating, all while also keeping up the small, respectful gestures of common civility and politeness.

In the first volume of the novel, Marianne’s character and sentiments are revealed to us. She is a sympathetic character, but one that we are encouraged to see as flawed. She is too enamored of her own “potent sensibility” (SS 63), too fixed in her own convictions, and too proud of her own superiority. She loves her family deeply and is capable of ardent efforts on their behalf, but she does not realize that her attempts to defend her sister or to speak the truth often cause more pain than aid (e.g., SS 177). In the second volume we see and sympathize with the trials she faces as she learns first of Willoughby’s betrayal and then of his past villainous treatment of Eliza Williams. But Marianne’s trials are not met with self-command (as Elinor’s are at the same time, and unbeknownst to Marianne), rather, they are met with her continued program of indulging her feelings, and behaving with a complete lack of civility to all but her sister.

Marianne is violently struck by the apparently abrupt change in Willoughby’s conduct toward her, in the disappointment of her hopes, and in the painful words of his letter, which seem to disavow all feeling for her. This is all, of course, understandable and we sympathize deeply with her distress. But Marianne is unable to think of anyone but herself. Elinor entreats her to try and calm herself, if only for the sake of those who love her and would not want to see her make herself ill through such anguish, and Marianne cries “‘I cannot, I cannot,’” and tells Elinor, “‘leave me, leave me, if I distress you; leave me, hate me, forget me! but do not torture me so. Oh! how easy for those, who have no sorrow of their own to talk of exertion!’” (SS 138). The painful irony of this assertion is that Elinor has a sorrow of her own, one she cannot disclose, and that she is still and has always been able to talk to others of their exertion.

Marianne does not change her policy of indulging her feelings, whether they are painful or pleasant. She grieves over the loss of Willoughby, and she later grieves to learn of his past actions, and
she wallows in these feelings, refusing even the compassion of others. The novel shows us that she is especially unkind to Mrs. Jennings: “[Marianne’s] heart was hardened against the belief of Mrs. Jennings’s entering into her sorrows with any compassion. ‘No, no, no, it cannot be,’ she cried; ‘she cannot feel. Her kindness is not sympathy; her good-nature is not tenderness. All that she wants is gossip, and she only likes me now because I supply it’” (SS 150). Mrs. Jennings may be comical, and she may be intrusively curious about the lives of the people in her circle, but she is not a hard-hearted gossip. The novel allows us to feel the injustice of Marianne’s remarks, and it follows this with Elinor’s confirmation of this injustice:

Elinor had not needed this to be assured of the injustice to which her sister was often led in her opinion of others, by the irritable refinement of her own mind, and the too great importance placed by her on the delicacies of a strong sensibility, and the graces of a polished manner. Like half the rest of the world, if more than half there be that are clever and good, Marianne, with excellent abilities and an excellent disposition, was neither reasonable nor candid. She expected from other people the same opinions and feelings as her own, and she judged of their motives by the immediate effect of their actions on herself. (SS 150)

Elinor finds Marianne guilty of self-involved partiality, expecting others to have “the same opinions and feelings as her own”, dismissing those who fall short, and judging of others only in respect to herself.

In the final volume, we witness Marianne’s entrance into the great school of self-command, one precipitated not by her well-meaning efforts, but by Elinor’s confession of her own sufferings, and by Marianne’s subsequent illness and convalescence. Volume Three opens with the public disclosure of the secret engagement of Lucy Steele and Edward Ferrars, and with Elinor’s consequent release from having to keep Lucy’s confidence. She immediately tells Marianne the entire story, dwelling little on her own feelings but nonetheless hoping that “the self-command she had practised since her first knowledge of Edward’s engagement, might suggest a hint of what was practicable to

37 Perhaps even more unjustly, Marianne is constantly dismissive and condescending of Colonel Brandon, and only changes her conduct toward him (from rude and dismissive to quietly tolerant) when he reveals Willoughby’s past crimes.
Marianne” (SS 196). Marianne feels “violent agitation” at this recitation, listens with “horror”, and “cries excessively” (SS 196). But when she learns that Elinor has known all of this for four months, and that she has been keeping a secret pressed on her in unwanted confidence by the odious Lucy Steele, Marianne cannot understand:

‘Four months!’ cried Marianne again. ‘So calm! so cheerful! how have you been supported?’
‘By feeling that I was doing my duty. My promise to Lucy, obliged me to be secret. I owed it to her, therefore, to avoid giving any hint of the truth; and I owed it to my family and friends, not to create in them a solicitude about me, which it could not be in my power to satisfy.’
Marianne seemed much struck. … ‘Four months! and yet you loved him!’
‘Yes. But I did not love only him;—and while the comfort of others was dear to me, I was glad to spare them from knowing how much I felt. Now, I can think and speak of it with little emotion. I would not have you suffer on my account; for I assure you I no longer suffer materially myself. I have many things to support me. …’
‘If such is your way of thinking,’ said Marianne, ‘if the loss of what is most valued is so easily to be made up by something else, your resolution, your self-command, are, perhaps, a little less to be wondered at. They are brought more within my comprehension.’ (SS 197-8, emphasis added)

Marianne cannot believe that Elinor could be so calm and so cheerful if she had really loved Edward and therefore been really hurt by the knowledge forced on her by Lucy Steele. She misses Elinor’s quiet, powerful remark—that she loved Edward, but she did not love only him. Elinor’s self-command through this trial springs from her sense of duty in keeping the promise she made, but, more significantly, from her care for her family and friends. She could not appear to suffer while she could not reveal the secret, for this would “create in them a solicitude about [her], which it could not be in [her] power to satisfy.”

Marianne’s cutting remark about Elinor’s self-command does not go unnoticed, and in one of Elinor’s most passionate speeches, she brings Marianne to feel the full extent of how she has suffered under the knowledge that she must be separated from Edward (SS 198-9). This speech has an immediate effect, as Marianne is “quite subdued”, recognizing that “because your merit cries out upon

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38 We will examine Elinor’s efforts at self-command in the next section.
myself, I have been trying to do it away” (SS 199). She promises Elinor to try to seem unaffected by the revelation, especially when with Lucy, and to be discreet in her new knowledge. But this painful conversation does not have the effect Elinor wishes, in suggesting “a hint of what was practicable” through Elinor’s exemplary conduct. Instead, Marianne sinks even lower:

She felt all the force of that comparison [between her conduct and Elinor’s]; but not as her sister had hoped, to urge her to exertion now; she felt it with all the pain of continual self-reproach, regretted most bitterly that she had never exerted herself before; but it brought only the torture of penitence, without the hope of amendment. Her mind was so much weakened that she still fancied present exertion impossible, and therefore it only dispirited her more. (SS 203-4)

Marianne has added the powerful emotions of self-reproach and regret to the emotions of grief and disappointment in love, which she has stoked for months. Her lack of practice in exertion is a new source of reproach, and it is not surprising that she cannot break out of this cycle of self-involved feeling.\(^{39}\)

It takes a serious crisis to change Marianne’s ways, and it is a crisis brought on by the continued execution of her system of indulging her own feelings. When the sisters leave London and stay briefly at the Palmers’ home at Cleveland, Marianne spends as much of her time as possible alone: “in such moments of precious, invaluable misery, she rejoiced in tears of agony to be at Cleveland; and as she returned by a different circuit to the house, feeling all the happy privilege of country liberty, of wandering from place to place in free and luxurious solitude, she resolved to spend almost every hour of every day while she remained with the Palmers, in the indulgence of such solitary rambles” (SS 229). Marianne indulges in these “solitary rambles” and after “two delightful twilight walks” that take her “where the trees were the oldest, and the grass was the longest and wettest”, she comes down with a violent fever that almost kills her (SS 231). But in the period of convalescence following her illness,

\(^{39}\) This echoes Smith’s picture of the “man of sensibility” who has never formed the habit of self-command, and who, in an unexpected hardship, is too violently “impressed” by it to respond as he knows he should (TMS III.3.36).
she is afforded “leisure and calmness for serious recollection” (SS 262). And in her reflective hours, she comes to realize the errors of her own conduct, the power of Elinor’s exemplary conduct, and the value of governing one’s feelings out of a concern for the feelings of others.

Marianne’s new outlook is immediately noticed by Elinor, who has been watching her so closely over the course of the entire novel. But it is not until the two sisters renew their conversation during a walk that takes them to the very spot where Marianne first met Willoughby that we learn how much Marianne has grown. In a long speech, Marianne tells Elinor that she compares her own conduct not with Willoughby’s, but with “what it ought to have been”, with Elinor’s conduct:

Do not, my dearest Elinor, let your kindness defend what I know your judgment must censure. My illness has made me think. It has given me leisure and calmness for serious recollection. Long before I was enough recovered to talk, I was perfectly able to reflect. I considered the past: I saw in my own behaviour, since the beginning of our acquaintance with [Willoughby] last autumn, nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others. I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the grave. … Whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected, or some failing indulged. Every body seemed injured by me. The kindness, the unceasing kindness of Mrs. Jennings, I had repaid with ungrateful contempt. To the Middletons, to the Palmers, the Steeles, to every common acquaintance even, I had been insolent and unjust; with a heart hardened against their merits, and a temper irritated by their very attention. To John, to Fanny, yes, even to the [little as they deserve, I had given less than their due. But you, you above all, above my mother, had been wronged by me. I, and only I, knew your heart and its sorrows; yet to what did it influence me?—not to any compassion that could benefit you or myself. Your example was before me; but to what avail? Was I more considerate of you and your comfort? Did I imitate your forbearance, or lessen your restraints, by taking any part in those offices of general complaisance or particular gratitude which you had hitherto been left to discharge alone? No; not less when I knew you to be unhappy, than when I had believed you at ease, did I turn away from every exertion of duty or friendship; scarcely allowing sorrow to exist but with me, regretting only that heart which had deserted and wronged me, and leaving you, for whom I professed an unbounded affection, to be miserable for my sake. (SS 262-3, emphasis original)

I reproduce Marianne’s speech almost in full because it so richly reveals what she has learned from Elinor’s example and from reflection on her own conduct. Looking at her past actions, she sees that her program of indulging her feelings led her almost to her death, that her actions caused pain to those she loved most, and that she regularly treated others with contempt: “with a heart hardened against their merits, and a temper irritated by their very attention.” But she also sees that even when Elinor’s
sufferings and example were in front of her, she failed to respond, “scarcely allowing sorrow to exist but with me, regretting only that heart which had deserted and wronged me.” Marianne recognizes that in spite of her professions to love her sister and mother, she cared only for one heart, and acted in consideration of one person only—Willoughby.

What Marianne learns is that to indulge one’s feelings is to court suffering; that to retreat into one’s own feelings is to ignore those of others, treating them with unkindness and unjust contempt; and that self-command is worth the effort and exertion. Indeed, to put things more schematically, I think we can find all four components of sentimentalist self-control in what Marianne learns. Regarding the motivation for self-command, Marianne moves from caring about the sympathy of only those rare persons who agree with her about everything (as Willoughby so skillfully pretends to be), to caring more widely about all of those people in her “common acquaintance.” In this way, she moves toward desiring the sympathy of an impartial spectator and away from caring only for the highly partial spectator. Regarding the operation of self-command, Marianne realizes that she has spent all of her time luxuriating in her own feelings and scorning to evaluate or judge them from another’s perspective. She realizes that she even failed to imagine the effects of her conduct on her beloved mother and sister, acting as though her professions of love could be enough. She learns that she must imagine the feelings of others, and that doing so affords one a new perspective on one’s own feelings. Regarding the standard for self-command, Marianne realizes the importance of propriety and of what is owed to other people (of “those offices of general complaisance or particular gratitude”), and ceases to think of this as submission to a shabby sort of public opinion. Finally, regarding the tendency of self-command,

40 It is significant that Willoughby reveals to Elinor that in his initial acquaintance with Marianne, he was “careless of her happiness, thinking only of my own amusement, giving way to feelings which I had always been too much in the habit of indulging, I endeavoured, by every means in my power, to make myself pleasing to her, without any design of returning her affection” (SS 242). The narrator hints in their initial conversation that Willoughby need only affect enthusiastic love for the same books, poets, music, etc. to convince Marianne of his being in complete sympathy with her (SS 36).
Marianne learns that Elinor’s self-command is neither the result of cooler feelings, nor does it mean that she has ceased to feel strongly. One can feel strongly and still govern one’s feelings.

Marianne’s entrance into the great school of self-command occurs later than Smith suggests is normal for she has been held back by her strong conviction that “the business of self-command” is not for those with an ardent heart like hers (SS 79). But she learns through illness, reflection, and the good example of her sister, that self-command is for those such as herself, and she sets herself a plan: “my feelings shall be governed and my temper improved. They shall no longer worry others, nor torture myself” (SS 263). But what sort of example does Elinor’s conduct really provide Marianne? Elinor Dashwood is a character that divides readers, and her critics have routinely found something repugnant in her conduct. Elinor’s constant efforts at self-command have been read by some critics as “masochistic”, and by others as “priggish and self-righteous”. Much of this negative reception stems from, I believe, a misunderstanding of Elinor’s self-command, which is hardly a program of eradicating the passions. But a good portion also stems from the novel’s frequent references to Elinor’s ability to tell polite lies, to act with tact, and to perform the general offices of civility. In the next section we shall examine the connections between Elinor’s self-command and her concern for propriety and civility. Austen introduces a darker tone into the picture of sentimentalist self-command through her depiction of propriety, and through her placement of Elinor, who constantly seeks to act with propriety, in the midst of a flawed and generally vicious social set.

Section 3.2: Elinor and the Complexities of Civility

When we meet Elinor, she has been enrolled for some time in the great school of self-command and she is in regular command of her sentiments and conduct. She is sensitive, reflective,
intelligent, and cautious, preferring to examine her own feelings and to observe others before fixing her judgment. She is, in many ways, a model Smithian agent, one who sympathetically imagines the feelings of others, who is guided by the standard of propriety, and who strives to command her feelings and to judge impartially. But the standard of propriety by which Elinor is guided leads her to act in apparently ambivalent ways. She is civil to those who are rude, she pretends to be indifferent when she cares, and she tells the lies demanded by politeness. After first illustrating Elinor’s efforts at self-command, I will argue that Austen’s treatment of propriety as civility complicates Smith’s picture of self-command and reveals the difficulties inherent in striving to act and feel with propriety when the standard of propriety is difficult to discern, and society flawed and opaque.

At the end of the first volume of *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne are thrown into regular meetings with the Steele sisters, and Lucy Steele capitalizes on an early chance to improve her acquaintance with Elinor “by an easy and frank communication of her sentiments” (SS 96). With little warning, Elinor is pressed into Lucy’s confidence, only to learn that Lucy has been engaged for several years to Elinor’s own supposed beloved, Edward Ferrars. This initial conversation between Elinor and Lucy is a painful piece to read, and we repeatedly see Elinor struggling with “astonishment” and disbelief as Lucy presents an impressive amount of evidence for her claim. Elinor maintains “composure of voice throughout this interview”, a composure “under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond any thing she had ever felt before” (SS 102). And she concludes this initial interview with Lucy “mortified, shocked, confounded”, and left alone “to think and be wretched” (SS 102).

Volume Two opens with Elinor’s reflections on Lucy’s undesired information. Austen takes us inside Elinor’s thoughts and feelings as she first considers “such a body of evidence, as overcame every fear of condemning him unfairly, and established as a fact, which no partiality could set aside, his ill-treatment of herself” (SS 103). Given the evidence of his engagement to Lucy, Elinor judges
that Edward should not have behaved toward her as if he were unattached and interested in her. But
Elinor’s thoughts do not remain here, and we watch as she enlarges her understanding of the situation,
speculates about Edward’s motivations, and considers the evidence further:

Her resentment of such behaviour, her indignation at having been its dupe, for a short time
made her feel only for herself; but other ideas, other considerations, soon arose. Had Edward
been intentionally deceiving her? Had he feigned a regard for her which he did not feel? Was
his engagement to Lucy an engagement of the heart? No; whatever it might once have been,
she could not believe it such at present. His affection was all her own. She could not be
deceived in that. Her mother, sisters, Fanny, all had been conscious of his regard for her at
Norland; it was not an illusion of her own vanity. He certainly loved her. What a softener of
the heart was this persuasion! How much could it not tempt her to forgive! He had been
blameable, highly blameable, in remaining at Norland after he first felt her influence over him
to be more than it ought to be. In that, he could not be defended; but if he had injured her,
how much more had he injured himself; if her case were pitiable, his was hopeless. His
imprudence had made her miserable for a while; but it seemed to have deprived himself of all
chance of ever being otherwise. She might in time regain tranquillity; but he, what had he to
look forward to? (SS 103-4, emphasis original)

Elinor cannot believe that Edward was deliberately toying with her affections, and the novel bears this
judgment out. She also believes that she is not wrong to think Edward loves her, and her conviction
is strengthened by recognizing that other people were conscious of his regard—“it was not an illusion
of her vanity.” Elinor begins by dwelling on her own feelings, and then turns to consider the motives
and judgments of others. She considers the sentiments and reactions of other people in testing her
own initial beliefs, and when she feels the persuasiveness of the realization that Edward “certainly
loved her”, her own pain pales in comparison to his suffering.

As Elinor runs over the suffering Edward must feel, being trapped in an engagement to Lucy,
she “[weeps] for him, more than for herself” (SS 104). And her sympathy with his suffering enables
her to command her own feelings. Elinor compares her situation with his, and “supported by the
conviction of having done nothing to merit her present unhappiness, and consoled by the belief that
Edward had done nothing to forfeit her esteem, she thought she could even now, under the first smart
of the heavy blow, command herself enough to guard every suspicion of the truth from her mother
and sisters” (SS 104). Elinor does not expect to feel nothing, but she does expect to be able to conduct
herself with composure, which she must if she is not to excite the solicitude of her family, a solicitude that she cannot satisfy because of the promise she has made to Lucy. Elinor's situation is more complicated than the examples of self-command Smith describes, for Elinor cannot openly express her feelings of disappointment—feelings that would likely garner the sympathy of an impartial spectator—because she is bound by a promise to keep the reason for her disappointment a secret. All she can do is focus on the feelings and situations of others: on Edward's own suffering, with which she sympathizes, and on the suffering her mother and sisters would feel were they to see Elinor distressed. She imagines their possible suffering, realizing that “their tenderness and sorrow must add to her distress, while her self-command would neither receive encouragement from their example nor from their praise” (SS 105). Elinor knows her family well enough to know that if she expressed the distress she feels, she would be assailed by their “excess of partial affection” for her, and that she would be unable to command herself as she must, given her promise (SS 105).

This scene illustrates self-command in action, and throughout the novel we are treated to regular glimpses of Elinor's efforts. Elinor's self-command is not a complete stifling or eradication of feeling, and we do occasionally see her express exactly what she is feeling. But Elinor's self-command is at its strongest and most consistent when she is in more public situations—situations governed by the forms of civility—whether in a conversation with a new acquaintance or in performing the offices of a grateful neighbor. And it is in these situations that the novel introduces a complicating thread to Elinor's exemplary self-command, for the standard of propriety by which Elinor is guided is

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42 We see her “burst” of tears when Marianne is in the depths of her own affliction (SS 135), and we see another “burst” of tears, this time of joy, when Edward reveals that Lucy has become Mrs. Robert Ferrars (SS 273).
ambivalently described. Propriety and civility require one to feign indifference, to lie, and to screen one’s feelings from others.43

Throughout *Sense and Sensibility*, “propriety” and “civility” (and their cognates) are often interchanged with one another, and each set of terms is used in an apparently ambivalent way. In the opening chapters, for example, we learn that John Dashwood “conduct[s] himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties” (SS 4-5); and that his wife, Fanny Dashwood, treats the Dashwood women with “quiet civility” (SS 6). Later we learn that silly Mrs. Palmer has “a turn for being uniformly civil and happy” (SS 81) and that the “manners” of the vulgar Steele sisters “were particularly civil” (SS 89). But Elinor, the most virtuous of the characters in this novel, is also regularly characterized as proper and civil. We see Elinor take “immediate possession of the post of civility which she had assigned herself”, acting with kindness and attention toward Mrs. Jennings on their journey to London and during the entire time of their stay with her (SS 119). And in various domestic scenes with Lady Middleton and the Steele sisters, we see Elinor lie and pretend. These scenes often set up a contrast between Elinor’s conduct and Marianne’s, and where Marianne ignores or fails to even notice that something is demanded by politeness and civility, Elinor is keenly aware and completely responsible for satisfying such demands. When the Dashwood sisters first meet the Steele sisters, for example, we see an awkward conversation about the charms of Lady Middleton:

‘What a sweet woman Lady Middleton is!’ said Lucy Steele.
Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell. She did her best when thus called on, by speaking of Lady Middleton with more warmth than she felt, though with far less than Miss Lucy. (SS 92)

And in a second gathering of the Steele, Dashwood, and Middleton women, we see Elinor employ “the forms of general civility” and “address” to smooth away Marianne’s blunt remarks, to get out of

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43 See Tanner (2007), Chapter Three for a perceptive treatment of Elinor’s tendency to ‘screen’. I am also indebted to Susan Morgan’s excellent treatment of *Sense and Sensibility* in the rest of this section (1980).
a card game with Lady Middleton, and to resume conversation with Lucy Steele. The narrator comments on Elinor’s deft skill with the forms of civility: “and thus by a little of that address which Marianne could never condescend to practise, [she] gained her own end, and pleased Lady Middleton at the same time” (SS 108).

In her discussion of Sense and Sensibility, Jenny Davidson offers a sharp assessment of Elinor’s behavior throughout the novel:

Elinor is acutely aware that in matters of prudence and dissimulation, she may have more in common with the odious Lucy Steele than her own beloved sister Marianne. … Elinor also shares with Lucy a talent for hypocrisy. Sense and Sensibility repeatedly emphasizes Elinor’s accomplishments as a social hypocrite. All her interactions with the Middleton and Palmer families (for whom she feels a mixture of gratitude and contempt) are hypocritical, although this behavior is usually given the name of civility or politeness.44

Elinor’s behavior indeed seems hypocritical and it is indeed given the name of civility. We might ask, with Marianne, if the standard of propriety gets to be set by people like Lady Middleton, the Steele sisters, or, worse still, Mrs. Ferrars, then why not set propriety at nought? To put this question in a more Smithian form, we might ask: why should someone care about partial, poorly-informed spectators and why should someone allow them to have influence even over one’s conversation and conduct? Austen’s depiction of Elinor’s self-command in the context of her particular social circle might make us pause and wonder whether Elinor is ultimately in the wrong, telling lies and feigning sentiments for the sake of such people, and Marianne in the right, scorning their opinions and rejecting their judgments.

In trying to understand Austen’s characterization of propriety and civility, I think we can take a helpful cue from a scene we looked at in Section 3.1. In conversation with Marianne and Edward about proper judgment and the standard for propriety, Elinor makes several important points:

‘I have frequently detected myself in such kind of mistakes,’ said Elinor, ‘in a total misapprehension of character in some point or other: fancying people so much more gay or

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44 Davidson (2004), 151.
grave, or ingenious or stupid than they really are, and I can hardly tell why or in what the deception originated. Sometimes one is guided by what they say of themselves, and very frequently by what other people say of them, without giving oneself time to deliberate and judge.’

‘But I thought it was right, Elinor,’ said Marianne, ‘to be guided wholly by the opinion of other people. I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of neighbours. This has always been your doctrine, I am sure.’

‘No, Marianne, never. My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behaviour. You must not confound my meaning. I am guilty, I confess, of having often wished you to treat our acquaintance in general with greater attention; but when have I advised you to adopt their sentiments or to conform to their judgment in serious matters?’ (SS 71)

This is a rich commentary on judgment and propriety, and I want to pull two threads from it. First, Elinor’s opening musings highlight an important fact about the situations one tries to evaluate and judge—appearances are often deceiving. As we saw in our discussion of Smith, it takes serious work to be a well-informed and impartial spectator, and as we see in Austen, this work often involves combatting deception, seeing past the screens others put up to hide their feelings and motives, and discovering and eliminating prejudices when they creep in. Many of Austen’s minor characters have no intention of doing such work and are content with their initial judgments, often formed on the basis of incomplete or false information. But most of Austen’s heroines are depicted as going through exactly this sort of moral education, learning that they have been prejudiced, or that they have accepted the testimony of an incredible source, or that they have formed a hasty opinion of someone. Like Smith, Austen emphasizes the difficulties of accurately and sensitively understanding a particular

45 The difficulty of accurate discernment in a world where civility requires one to screen one’s emotions suggests that if more people were to adopt something like Marianne’s style of behavior—at least her openness and immediacy—discernment would be easier and mistakes less frequent. As I will suggest in Part Four, I see Austen as moving toward such a realization in Persuasion, with her emphasis on the value of the open and candid manners of the Crofts and other members of the naval set.

46 This is seen throughout Austen’s novels, notably in the description of characters who place a premium on facts like whether someone is rich, ranked, or handsome. For an example from Sense and Sensibility, we might think of Lady Middleton’s eventual assessment of Elinor and Marianne: “Though nothing could be more polite than Lady Middleton’s behaviour to Elinor and Marianne, she did not really like them at all. Because they neither flattered herself nor her children, she could not believe them good-natured; and because they were fond of reading, she fancied them satirical; perhaps without exactly knowing what it was to be satirical; but that did not signify. It was censure in common use, and easily given” (SS 184).
situation, and she stresses, perhaps more than Smith, that these difficulties can often be attributed to
the human tendency to be reserved, secretive, or deceptive.

The second point to be drawn from the long passage quoted above is the one made earlier,
namely that there is a difference between being considerate of the opinions of others and being guided
by those opinions. Elinor argues that one should treat one’s general acquaintance with attention, and
she suggests that one’s behavior should be influenced by the sentiments and opinions of that
acquaintance. But she denies that one should subject one’s judgment and understanding to those
opinions “in serious matters.” One must give oneself “time to deliberate and judge” before accepting
or rejecting the opinions of others. Again, we can think of Smith’s account of how one refines one’s
sense of propriety through repeated experience with actual spectatorial responses. Like a good
Smithian agent, Elinor is unwilling to finalize a judgment or a general rule of morality until she has
examined and tested it. And when she has formed a judgment or settled on a principle, she still
recognizes that she could be misinformed or swayed by partiality. For Smith and for Austen, a good
judge is sympathetic and cautious, and she is aware of her own fallibility.

As Susan Morgan suggests, politeness and decorum function as a kind of safety net given the
difficulties of correct perception and judgment. For someone like Elinor, aware of these difficulties
and conscientious in her role as an observer and judge, playing by the rules of civility gives one time
and space to deliberate and judge:

Judgement requires, in Elinor’s words, being able to give oneself time. But human relations
do not wait for judgment to be conclusive. They happen in the meantime. That is why people
keep arriving at houses and walking into rooms when other characters are not prepared to see
them. For it is that meantime, that in-between time, with which Austen is concerned. Her
solution, of course, is decorum, the classic social principle for keeping our judgments from
becoming irretrievable in our acts.

47 See also Lynch (1998), Chapter Five.

48 Morgan (1980), 119. Morgan adds later that “politeness must be a general principle of behavior if it is to reflect truly the
assumption that perception can be wrong” and that “decorum, then, is a public avowal of continued feelings and thoughts,
Following the forms of civility give one the space and time for judgment without committing oneself prematurely to strong approval or disapproval. While this seems correct, there is more to Elinor’s adherence to propriety than this, for behaving with propriety also signals one’s basic respect for other people—one’s willingness to treat them as worthy of consideration, even if that consideration goes no further than simple politeness. The novel repeatedly indicates the importance of such care for other people, and it evaluates various characters based on whether or not they exhibit such care. One of the first things we learn about Fanny Dashwood is that she can act with “little attention to the comfort of other people” (SS 5); and of Lady Middleton, we learn that she cares only for other people insofar as they flatter her children and the elegance of her table. In contrast, we are told at various occasions that Colonel Brandon is “on every occasion mindful of the feelings of others”, and that even the sillier Sir John Middleton and Mrs. Jennings are laudable for their genuine sociable affections.

The emphasis in *Sense and Sensibility* on the importance of at least considering the feelings of all others helps us to understand the motivation for Elinor’s politeness, and it helps us to distinguish her sense of propriety from that of the other characters. Elinor is motivated to be civil—even when

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49 See also Spacks, who argues that Elinor’s tact is a way of preserving personal liberty and privacy, and that this is a form of self-preservation, but also consideration for others (2003, 113).

50 Cf. Davidson: “Austen seems to accept as legitimate the idea that tact results from a desire not to hurt someone or to protect the other from one’s own sense of superiority. For Edgeworth, tact is moral weakness, while for Austen it is a moral obligation of some complexity” (2004, 154).

51 See also Harding: “The control that Jane Austen respected was not to be exercised in favor of some abstract standard of ‘reason’, but in consideration for one’s immediate companions. It fulfilled a social obligation, as Marianne shows in her self-reproaches after she has recovered from her serious illness, and as Mr. Knightley implies when, sympathizing with what he supposes Emma to feel at the loss of Mr Frank Churchill, he says: ‘Time, my dearest Emma, time will heal the wound. – Your own excellent sense – your exertions for your father’s sake’” (1998b, 75). Cf. some recent work on Smith and the role of basic respect for other persons: Debes (2012); Darwall (2004, 1999).

52 See also, e.g., SS 257, and the various reactions of characters to learning that Colonel Brandon has offered the Delaford living to Edward Ferrars even though they are unrelated.
it involves lying, pretending, or screening—out of her care for and consideration of the feelings of other people. In comparison, Lady Middleton is motivated to be civil out of a desire to be perceived as having an elegant table and domestic arrangements (SS 25); John Dashwood is motivated to be civil out of a desire to ingratiate himself with anyone who is rich (SS 167); Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny Dashwood are motivated to be civil to one person out of a desire to show their scorn for another (SS 172-9); and Mrs. Palmer is motivated to be civil by apparently nothing at all, having been “endowed by nature with a turn for being uniformly civil and happy” (SS 81). So compared, Elinor’s civility seems to be of a “higher species”, similar to that of Colonel Brandon in this novel, and to that of virtuous characters in Austen’s other novels.

We can better understand Elinor’s civility by understanding her motive for it, but we might still regret the difficulties of having to be civil to such people as those that make up Elinor’s social set. Indeed, as Morgan notes, civility toward such characters as the Middletons, Steeles, and John Dashwoods brings no reward in this novel. Austen illustrates how claustrophobic society can be, especially for young women like Elinor and Marianne, trapped by relative poverty, lack of opportunity, and social institutions that prevent them from many courses of action. Elinor somehow manages to become a good moral agent in spite of her restricted circumstances, and when we are introduced to

53 I borrow the phrase ‘higher species’ from the earlier cited passage from *Mansfield Park* on the “higher species of self-command” (MP 76).

54 Cf. Smith’s two standards of propriety (TMS VI.iii.23-25). Smith claims that the “wise and virtuous” consider themselves in the light of the higher species, thereby finding “no ground for arrogance and presumption, but a great deal for humility, regret and repentance” (TMS VI.iii.24). And when such a person looks instead to the lower standard, and finds themselves to be superior to the common run of human achievement, the response is continued modesty: “Far from insulting over their inferiority, he views it with the most indulgent commiseration, and, by his advice as well as example, is at all times willing to promote their further advancement. If, in any particular qualification, they happen to be superior to him (for who is so perfect as not to have many superiors in many different qualifications?), far from envying their superiority, he, who knows how difficult it is to excel, esteems and honours their excellence, and never fails to bestow upon it the full measure of applause which it deserves. His whole mind, in short, is deeply impressed, his whole behaviour and deportment are distinctly stamped with the character of real modesty; with that of a very moderate estimation of his own merit, and, at the same time, of a full sense of the merit of other people” (TMS VI.iii.25).

55 Morgan (1980), 129.
her, we watch as she is trapped in even further ways—by the viciousness and selfishness of others, by their secrecy and misinformation, and by her own sense of what is proper. Austen thus reveals how challenging and unrewarding the efforts of self-command can be when one must consider the opinions and sentiments of such people as those that surround Elinor.

Austen’s depiction of Elinor’s self-command is complex and this complexity allows for very different readings of her character. She clearly assigns value to Elinor’s efforts and she clearly sees Elinor as an exemplar of self-command, worthy of serving as the guide to Marianne’s own growth. If we read with these aspects in mind, we could see Elinor as a virtuous young woman temporarily trapped in an unfortunate situation, but possessed of the inner resources that allow her to maintain equanimity and sense throughout her trials. But Austen places Elinor in a miserably narrow and selfish set of people and she shows Elinor contending with the secrets and deception of those people as she strives to form good judgments and act with propriety. If we read with these aspects in mind, we could see Elinor as going through the “futile mortifications” of self-command, and we could read Austen as either an apologist for such masochistic behavior, or as a cynic about the unrewarded social, sentimental, and moral labor assigned to those who manage to cultivate self-command. It is difficult to see how to resolve these inconsistent readings and I believe that Austen returns to her characterization of Elinor in later novels, continuing to explore the character of the self-commanded individual who is placed in a limited or flawed society. We will see how these themes are explored and further complicated in Part Four, which focuses on the character of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*.

But for now, in the next section I want to suggest that Elinor’s complex characterization functions in a different, more educational way, one that adheres to and enacts a sentimentalist understanding of moral education. Just as Elinor’s conduct is an example for Marianne, one that creates an actual change in Marianne’s way of life, it is also an example for the reader. By giving us access to Elinor’s consciousness as she strives to be self-commanded, to act with propriety, and to
form good judgments about herself and others, Austen offers us a rare view of self-command in action from the inside. In this way, Austen’s “painting” of self-command in Sense and Sensibility can have a powerful effect on the reader, one that may even assist the development of the reader’s own capacities for self-command and impartial spectatorship.

Section 3.3: Moral Education in Sense and Sensibility

Unlike Pride and Prejudice or Emma, Sense and Sensibility seems only secondarily concerned with the education of a heroine. Marianne is one of two heroines in this novel, but we are rarely given an inside glimpse of her thoughts. Instead, we reside mostly in the perspective of Elinor, watching with her as she bears witness to Marianne’s struggles and her eventual entrance into the great school of self-command. But even though Elinor does not undergo an educational journey like Marianne, she is regularly engaged in improving her understanding of the people around her, in clarifying her perception of the situations she encounters, and in correcting her judgments. As Susan Morgan notes, “[Elinor] does not mature in this novel, but she is in a constant process of developing her vision. Again and again Elinor is confronted with facts that challenge her own point of view. And we watch the quiet heroine struggling with her own heart to evaluate her experiences justly.”

I will argue that Austen’s depiction of Elinor’s efforts to understand, sympathize, and judge provides the reader with a sentimentalist “painting” of self-command and impartial spectatorship, one that is meant to engage, excite, and regulate the sentiments of the reader while also training her sympathy and judgment.

For Hume, Smith, and any moralist conceiving of moral education as the development of virtuous character traits, moral education will not be achieved through indoctrination or the internalization of a set of rules and maxims. Rather, moral education will involve enlarging one’s

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56 Morgan (1980), 130.
experience with various human situations, learning to discern sentiments and character traits in others, practicing the various virtues in the effort to develop them into habits and dispositions, and critically reflecting on one’s judgments and accepted rules. For sentimentalists like Hume and Smith, moral education will involve, especially, developing one’s sympathetic imagination and practicing taking up the proper perspective from which to feel moral sentiments and make moral judgments (the perspective of an impartial spectator for Smith, and the “common” or “general” point of view for Hume). These are activities that require lifelong engagement and practice, and, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, both Hume and Smith see imaginative literature as providing an important resource in this endeavor. Neither Hume nor Smith dwell on how imaginative literature works in this regard, but it is clear that they see it as at least offering compelling depictions of different traits and affections, depictions that can have the effect of encouraging or discouraging the development of a given trait or the indulgence of a given passion. While this is not all that Austen is doing with her depiction of self-command in the character of Elinor Dashwood (and I discuss other functions below), it is an important part of the educational aspects of *Sense and Sensibility*.

One of the ironic details of the reception of *Sense and Sensibility* is that Elinor’s more critical readers seem to see Elinor through the eyes of Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne, failing to sympathize with and approve of Elinor’s efforts at self-command. This could be ascribed, in part, to Austen’s continual development of her own stylistic techniques and to some flaws in characterization in this early novel. But the irony here is not that some readers fail to sympathize with a character who is written to be sympathetic, but that they fail to sympathize with a character because she is so self-commanded. As Jan Fergus makes this point,

Elinor’s continual exertions to control her feelings … lead Mrs Dashwood and Marianne to assume – along with some of the critics – that in fact she has no feelings. This situation, as it

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57 For further discussion of Austen on education, see, *inter alia*, Astell (1987); Fergus (1983); Morgan (1980); Devlin (1975); McMaster (1975).
is presented and developed by the action, embodies two central ironic perceptions. First, consideration for others’ feelings permits others to be inconsiderate of one’s own. Secondly, excess of sensibility (in Marianne and Mrs Dashwood) becomes insensitivity – insensitivity to and misjudgment of others’ feelings. As a result, Elinor is given credit neither for having feelings not for commanding them. Austen insists, however, that the consideration and self-command Elinor shows are not any the less required of her for being absolutely misunderstood and rewarded. They remain, absolutely and imperatively, an obligation.\textsuperscript{58}

Fergus is indicating an apparently paradoxical feature of trying to represent someone who is self-commanded, namely, they will appear to many as Elinor appears to Marianne: as having only reduced feelings to begin with, and so as not meriting approval. And this difficulty of representing self-command should make us wonder about the difficulty of discerning it in another person. Austen agrees with Hume and Smith that this is a very important capacity, but she also sees that it is difficult to distinguish from cold insipidity, from shrewd prudence, and from unattractive reserve.\textsuperscript{59} Her insight is to take us inside the consciousness of someone possessing self-command, and to delineate with care and approval the effort involved in exercising self-command.

Austen’s use of the technique of free indirect discourse is crucial to her characterization of Elinor’s self-command. As helpfully explained by Jane Spencer, “in free indirect discourse, a text’s dominant narrative style (typically third-person and past tense) incorporates, for brief snatches or longer passages, words emanating from a particular character, without such tags as ‘he said’ or ‘she thought’ to make their attribution explicit. Character and narrator momentarily merge and move apart again.”\textsuperscript{60} An early example of free indirect discourse in \textit{Sense and Sensibility} occurs during the infamous

\textsuperscript{58} Fergus (1983), 41.

\textsuperscript{59} We will return, with Austen, to issues of distinguishing self-control in another person when we turn to \textit{Persuasion} in the next part. Austen herself returns to these issues in \textit{Emma}, in the character of Jane Fairfax. Jane, like Elinor, is keeping a secret throughout most of the novel, and Jane, like Elinor, is a master at controlling her emotions. But we are often looking at Jane from the perspective of Emma and other characters who find her to be cold and reserved (e.g., E 130, 160, 225-6). Indeed, we might think, as Emma thinks of Jane, that Elinor Dashwood is, “… so cold, so cautious! There was no getting at her real opinion. Wrapt up in a cloak of politeness, she seemed determined to hazard nothing. She was disgustedly, was suspiciously reserved” (E 132).

\textsuperscript{60} Spencer (2009), 186.
discussion between John and Fanny Dashwood about how Mr. Dashwood’s deathbed request should be honored. Austen introduces a standard scene of dialogue with a passage that takes us into Fanny Dashwood’s subjectivity using free indirect discourse: “Mrs. John Dashwood did not at all approve of what her husband intended to do for his sisters. To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree” (SS 7). This example of free indirect discourse is not hard to miss even by a casual reader, and we are easily clued in by the phrase in the second sentence “their dear little boy”—a phrase from Fanny Dashwood’s mouth even if direct quotation does not indicate it.

Austen often uses free indirect discourse to exhibit the partialities or prejudices of a character, or to lead us to make a mistake in perception or judgment with them. But when she uses this technique to bring us inside Elinor’s mind, we are more often afforded an impartial and sympathetic perspective than a partial and prejudiced one. As we saw above, in Section 3.2, Elinor’s thoughts following Lucy Steele’s revelation move quickly from a partial concern for her own feelings to a consideration of the wider situation, and as we follow with her we engage in impartial (but not dispassionate) reflections on the situation (SS 103). We can see another instance of this in Elinor’s awkward meeting with Colonel Brandon shortly after the sisters arrive in London. Instead of reproducing the full dialogue, Austen uses free indirect discourse to convey how Elinor responds to Brandon’s question about whether Marianne and Willoughby are engaged:

These words, which conveyed to Elinor a direct avowal of his love for her sister, affected her very much. She was not immediately able to say anything, and even when her spirits were recovered, she debated for a short time, on the answer it would be most proper to give. The real state of things between Willoughby and her sister was so little known to herself, that in endeavouring to explain it, she might be as liable to say too much as too little. Yet as she was convinced that Marianne’s affection for Willoughby, could leave no hope of Colonel Brandon’s success, whatever the event of that affection might be, and at the same time wished to shield her conduct from censure, she thought it most prudent and kind, after some consideration, to say more than she really knew or believed. She acknowledged, therefore, that though she had never been informed by themselves of the terms on which they stood with each other, of their mutual affection she had no doubt, and of their correspondence she was not astonished to hear. (SS 129)
Instead of showing us Elinor in conversation with Colonel Brandon, Austen shows us Elinor deliberating about what to say and why to say it. We see her weigh the propriety, prudence, and kindness of various answers, and we see her consider the feelings of the various people involved. Elinor is striving for an impartial perspective, one that does justice to the various people involved, and her efforts to achieve this take a moment because she feels so strongly for her sister, for Colonel Brandon, and even for the inscrutable Willoughby.

Not only are we provided with an inside view of Elinor’s mind and efforts throughout the novel, we also witness her outward appearance when she engages in conversation or is observed on rare occasions by other characters. And if we compare what Elinor is like from the inside with how she appears to others, we can see further why she is so often misunderstood. Early in the novel we witness a conversation between Elinor and Marianne about Edward’s character. Elinor speaks like a buttoned-up moralist when she pronounces,

I have seen a great deal of him, have studied his sentiments and heard his opinion on subjects of literature and taste; and, upon the whole, I venture to pronounce that his mind is well-informed, enjoyment of books exceedingly great, his imagination lively, his observation just and correct, and his taste delicate and pure. His abilities in every respect improve as much upon acquaintance as his manners and person. (SS 16)\(^{61}\)

Barbara Benedict is right to say that Elinor speaks in phrases that appear to be lifted from the moral essays of writers like Samuel Johnson.\(^ {62}\) Benedict goes on, summarizing and criticizing this early conversation: “Her mannered parallelisms, abstract diction, and passive phrasing suggest an impartiality at comic variance with her motive in this speech: she is defending her love to her sister. With a self-consciousness reminiscent of the bookish Mary Bennet, Elinor reiterates clichés to validate

\(^{61}\) Cf. Emma’s reaction to Jane Fairfax’s account of Frank Churchill, which, to Emma contains “not a syllable of real information … Emma could not forgive her” (E 133).

\(^{62}\) Benedict (1990), 457.
her own judgment: she adopts the language of authoritative detachment.”\(^{63}\) In this conversation, Elinor’s self-command and propriety come off oddly—she seems to be dispassionate, prim, and stilted in her expression.

The contrast between how Elinor is depicted from the inside and how she is depicted from the outside gets to the heart of the trouble with characterizing self-command. The self-commanded person is regulating their emotions, controlling their expressions, and commanding their conduct. How they feel and how they appear to feel come apart because of these very efforts. As readers, then, we can easily understand how Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood, who live so closely with Elinor and sympathize with her so strongly, can yet completely misunderstand her motives and feelings. At the end of the novel, after Thomas has revealed that he met “Mrs. Ferrars”, but before we learn that Lucy Steele has become Mrs. Robert Ferrars, Mrs. Dashwood learns that she has erred in understanding Elinor’s state of mind:

She now found that she had erred in relying on Elinor’s representation of herself; and justly concluded that every thing had been expressly softened at the time, to spare her from an increase of unhappiness, suffering as she then had suffered for Marianne. She found that she had been misled by the careful, the considerate attention of her daughter, to think the attachment, which once she had so well understood, much slighter in reality, than she had been wont to believe, or than it was now proved to be. She feared that under this persuasion she had been unjust, inattentive, nay, almost unkind, to her Elinor; that Marianne’s affliction, because more acknowledged, more immediately before her, had too much engrossed her tenderness, and led her away to forget that in Elinor she might have a daughter suffering almost as much, certainly with less self-provocation, and greater fortitude. (SS 270)

This is a tender moment, and it again emphasizes the unrewarded emotional and social labor Elinor performs so consistently. She does so much for the sake of other people, only to be thereby

\(^{63}\) Benedict (1990), 458; I agree with Benedict on her reading of Elinor in conversation, and with her point about Elinor’s “im partiality” (466). But Benedict too quickly assimilates impartiality with “detachment” and “objectivity” without noticing that these need not be features of the same person. I read Elinor as an impartial spectator and judge like that described by Smith, not as an ideal or detached observer of the people around her. Furthermore, Austen herself criticizes the overly detached person in the character of Mr. Palmer in this novel, and more trenchantly in the character of Mr. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice. Impartiality is to be aimed for, but the impartial judge in Sense and Sensibility is sympathetically connected to the people she judges, and cares for their feelings and concerns.
misunderstood and undervalued by them precisely because of her efforts. And it also puts a sharp point on the problem with representing self-command: the self-commanded person often represents themselves as feeling less than they do.

But notice that as readers we see all of these perspectives on Elinor. We see Elinor’s self-command and sympathize with her efforts, we see when she is undervalued and dismissed, and we see why she is misunderstood. Most importantly, we learn that even exemplary self-command can be difficult to spot, and, hopefully, we learn to be cautious when judging someone else for their apparent coldness or reserve.\(^{64}\) At the same time that she “paints” self-command in vivid colors, engaging our sympathy with Elinor and our admiration for her continued fortitude, Austen also encourages us to learn Elinor’s lesson of caution and care in forming judgments about other people.

Austen’s characterization of Elinor Dashwood as a careful and steady judge means that, for the most part, when we are in Elinor’s mind we share in her principled deliberation and judgment. But Austen also occasionally uses free indirect discourse to bring us inside Elinor’s mind while she is making a mistake in perception or judgment. A striking instance of this is the scene where Edward’s new ring is remarked on by Marianne:

>Marianne was sitting by Edward, and in taking his tea from Mrs. Dashwood, his hand passed so directly before her, as to make a ring, with a plait of hair in the centre, very conspicuous on one of his fingers. ‘I never saw you wear a ring before, Edward,’ she cried. ‘Is that Fanny’s hair? I remember her promising to give you some. But I should have thought her hair had been darker.’ Marianne spoke inconsiderately what she really felt; but when she saw how much she had pained Edward, her own vexation at her want of thought could not be surpassed by his. He coloured very deeply, and giving a momentary glance at Elinor, replied, ‘Yes; it is my sister’s hair. The setting always casts a different shade on it, you know.’ Elinor had met his eye, and looked conscious likewise. That the hair was her own, she instantaneously felt as well satisfied as Marianne; the only difference in their conclusions was, that what Marianne considered as a free gift from her sister, Elinor was conscious must have been procured by some theft or contrivance unknown to herself. She was not in a humour, however, to regard it as an affront, and affecting to take no notice of what passed, by instantly

\(^{64}\) A lesson we may recognize when confronted with the character of Jane Fairfax and Emma’s frequently hasty criticism of her.
talking of something else, she internally resolved henceforward to catch every opportunity of
eying the hair and of satisfying herself, beyond all doubt, that it was exactly the shade of her
own. (SS 74)

When we read this we are, of course, as much in the dark about the former possessor of the lock of
hair as Marianne and Elinor. And, as we will soon find out with Elinor, the hair does not belong to
her, but to Lucy Steele. But upon re-reading this passage with the full set of facts in mind, it is striking
how quickly Elinor jumps to the conclusion that it is her hair, despite the very compelling fact that she
does not know how Edward could have gotten it. If it were Willoughby with the mysterious ring, and
Marianne believing it her hair, we can easily imagine Elinor’s doubts and her caution at believing
against the facts. Here Elinor is misled by wishful thinking, by wanting to believe that Edward loves
her enough to steal a lock of her hair and have it set in a ring without her knowledge. This provides
the reader with evidence of Elinor’s passion for Edward, a passion that we would be hard-pressed to
accept if all we had to go on was what she says to others about Edward, and it also brings the reader
into a mistaken belief. We believe, at least temporarily, that this is Elinor’s hair, and so we are
astonished and mortified with Elinor when Lucy Steele reveals that it is her own hair.

We also see Elinor’s good judgment swayed during her final interview with Willoughby.
Willoughby bursts in upon Elinor while she is awaiting her mother and Colonel Brandon, soon to
arrive to tend to Marianne, who is grievously ill. Willoughby is unexpected, and he is commanding,
vehement, and even violent (SS 240). As he reveals his side of the events in London that led Marianne
to her illness, we share in Elinor’s agitation, confusion, and eventual pity. Willoughby is magnetic and
he tells a compelling story about how he actually loved Marianne, how the cruel letter was not his idea,
and how he regrets his actions. And for a moment we, with Elinor, are impressed by him, softened by
his words, and perhaps a bit dazzled by his presence. That is to say, we are influenced as Elinor is by
Willoughby’s powerful presence and brought to sympathize with him and perhaps to change our
judgment of him. After Willoughby leaves, we follow Austen inside Elinor’s mind to reflect on the confusing interview:

Willoughby, he, whom only half an hour ago she had abhorred as the most worthless of men, Willoughby, in spite of all his faults, excited a degree of commiseration for the sufferings produced by them, which made her think of him as now separated for ever from her family, with a tenderness, a regret, rather in proportion, as she soon acknowledged within herself—to his wishes than to his merits. She felt that his influence over her mind was heightened by circumstances which ought not in reason to have weight; by that person of uncommon attraction, that open, affectionate, and lively manner which it was no merit to possess; and by that still ardent love for Marianne, which it was not even innocent to indulge. But she felt that it was so, long, long before she could feel his influence less. (SS 252-3)

Elinor is reflecting with some impartiality on the power of circumstances that should not influence her sympathy and judgment: personal attraction, charm, wit, vivacity. She recognizes (and we are encouraged to recognize with her), that she is nonetheless influenced, and that she has been persuaded to consider Willoughby with a tenderness in proportion to “his wishes”, not “his merits”. This is a powerful depiction of the factors that can heighten or dampen sympathy, factors that do not always track merit. By bringing us inside Elinor’s consciousness as she reflects on how she is affected by Willoughby, Austen encourages us to recognize the influence of such qualities and to be more aware of them when we are being so influenced.\(^65\)

Austen largely uses free indirect discourse in *Sense and Sensibility* to reveal the character of the self-commanded person, someone who is otherwise difficult to understand. But she also uses this technique to point out that even an excellent judge like Elinor is fallible, and to make us feel, as apparently detached and superior readers, that we are fallible too. Perhaps we believe that the lock of hair is Elinor’s after all, or perhaps we are swayed by the charms of Willoughby as he dashes into the room. One effect of Austen’s highly controlled prose is to induce such moments of recognition in her readers, and to thereby bring us to see with her characters that situations are difficult to assess; that

\(^65\) See also Fergus (1983), 56-7 for a discussion of the effects of sympathy on judgment.
“seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure” (E 339); that sympathy may be heightened or dampened by superficial circumstances; and that the work of self-command, impartial spectatorship, and judgment are all lifelong efforts.

Austen’s characterization of Elinor’s self-command reveals several problems with this important capacity. Not only is it difficult to cultivate (as evidenced by Marianne’s struggles and journey); not only does it often require one to do the thankless work of behaving considerately to those who are selfish, stubborn, or rude (as evidenced by Elinor’s efforts at civility); it is also very difficult to discern in another person. How do we distinguish Lady Middleton’s cold-hearted civility from Elinor’s well-disposed politeness? Or Lucy Steele’s cunning prudence from Elinor’s steady judgment? And how could even someone as well-disposed and sensitive as Mrs. Dashwood have been able to see past Elinor’s composure to understand how she was really feeling? Sense and Sensibility makes the question of distinguishing self-command from reserve less pressing by painting the villains in such clear colors, and by allowing us access to Elinor’s consciousness. But these problems will be picked up again in Persuasion, and to subtly different effects. Persuasion is concerned with firmness and strength of mind, with elasticity and malleability, and with openness and candor, and in the character of Anne Elliot we find a compelling depiction of self-command, prudence, and judgment.

Part Four: Persuasion

As we saw in our discussion of Sense and Sensibility, a reader on the lookout for affinities between Persuasion and the moral philosophies of Hume and Smith can find much of interest. One of the major themes of Persuasion, announced by its title, is the inter-personal relation of persuasion,

66 Or, how could we expect Emma, Mr. Knightley, or any of the other characters of Emma to perceive that Jane Fairfax was keeping a secret with great self-command, and not that she was, by disposition, cold and reserved? In Emma Austen flips the scheme she used in Sense and Sensibility, never putting us in the perspective of Jane Fairfax, and only revealing at the end, and from the outside, that Jane’s reserve is the effort of self-command and secrecy.
sometimes construed as interference and sometimes as advice or counsel. Characters repeatedly discuss how to persuade someone to do something—whether that something is breaking off an engagement or moving one’s household to Bath—and they choose or ignore various characters as apt counsellors (Lady Russell is regularly cited as an advisor of great influence, and Anne Elliot is variously appealed to or snubbed as a counsellor, depending on the social circle). A good advisor stands in a relation to the advisee that closely resembles the relation between the Smithian impartial spectator and the agent. Indeed, Anne has grown so used to appealing to Lady Russell for advice and counsel that she imagines Lady Russell’s sentiments, reactions, and prospective approval or disapproval throughout the novel. Sounding a more Humean note, characters and their qualities are regularly described as being useful or agreeable, recalling Hume’s distinction between four kinds of approvable qualities, with the most vicious or flawed characters being those who excel at merely being agreeable (Mrs. Clay) or at somehow being agreeable to everyone they meet (Mr. Elliot), and the most virtuous characters being those who combine usefulness and agreeableness (the Crofts; Anne).

More centrally, one of the most extended sentimentalist themes in *Persuasion* is the characterization of self-control, or “strength of mind”, a theme that appears both in the portrayal of the heroine of this novel, Anne Elliot, and in the education plot centered on Captain Wentworth. In this part, I will continue to make my case for the claim that Austen is presenting a sentimentalist conception of self-control in her novels, although here we will be concerned more with various complications for the picture we gleaned from *Sense and Sensibility* than with the specific features of sentimentalist self-control. In the first section, I will focus on the characterization of Anne Elliot, examining Anne’s attempts at regulating her emotions and comparing those attempts to Elinor Dashwood’s in *Sense and Sensibility*. I will argue that Austen’s portrayal of Anne Elliot emphasizes the

67 See especially the discussion in EPM, where the qualities are delineated as: qualities useful to others, qualities useful to ourselves, qualities immediately agreeable to ourselves, and qualities immediately agreeable to others.
physiological aspects of self-control and emotion regulation, as well as the limitations on our efforts at control and command, and that Austen returns to some of the more ambivalent aspects of her characterization of Elinor Dashwood, offering a reprisal of the relation between the self-commanded individual and her society. In the second section, I will turn to the pedagogical work of this novel, arguing that where *Sense and Sensibility* offered an inside-view of self-command in the effort to help us better understand how the appearance of self-command can come apart from its reality, *Persuasion* offers more of an outside-view, explicitly dramatizing the difficulty of discerning this character trait in others. Captain Wentworth’s search for a wife who will combine “a strong mind, with sweetness of manner” provides the occasion for the reader to also search for this character (P 54)—with Wentworth we compare Anne Elliot to Louisa Musgrove, and then with Anne we reflect on the characters of Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Smith.

Section 4.1: Anne Elliot and the Character of Self-Control

*Sense and Sensibility* was Austen’s first published novel, appearing in 1811, and *Persuasion* is Austen’s final published novel, published posthumously with *Northanger Abbey* by Austen’s brother Henry in 1818. These two novels bookend Austen’s career and they each take as a central theme the study of a character possessing exemplary self-control. Like Elinor Dashwood, Anne Elliot has been long enrolled in the Smithian “great school of self-command”, but unlike Elinor, Anne is not known to us from the beginning of the novel as someone who possesses strength of mind or self-command. Instead, we learn that while she is undervalued by her immediate family, especially her vain father and proud elder sister, who treat her as a “nobody”, she would be recognized by “people of real understanding” as a person with “elegance of mind and sweetness of character” (P 11). In the two

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68 The more commonly used term for this capacity in *Persuasion* is “strength of mind” in its various forms; I will use “self-command” and “strength of mind” interchangeably and as seems to suit the context.
opening chapters of the novel, we hear that Anne is sweet, elegant, delicate, just, and self-denying—a model of feminine virtue.\(^{69}\)

It is not until Chapter III that we see Anne in conversation, and that we are given a glimpse of her mind and feelings in action. What we learn, and what we continue to see throughout the novel is that Anne is acutely sensitive to the world around her, thrumming with emotion that threatens to burst from her in blushes, trembles, and tears. All it takes is the mention of a “Mr. Wentworth” and of the Navy for Anne to seek out “the comfort of cool air for her flushed cheeks” and to imagine “with a gentle sigh” that some “he” may be soon in her neighborhood (P 26). From this point on, we are privy to the inner life of this apparent model of feminine virtue, and we learn, over the course of the novel, that Anne combines sensitive feeling with strength of mind, activity, and usefulness. As we will see in the next section, we do not fully see Anne’s strength and usefulness until Wentworth does, and the first half of the novel is concerned, instead, with revealing Anne’s many failed attempts to master her feelings for Wentworth. In her portrayal of these various attempts to achieve self-command, Austen is returning to her treatment of self-control and examining the limitations on our efforts to command strong feelings.

The romantic plot of *Persuasion* is a testament to the power of “retentive feelings”—Anne’s continued love and admiration for Frederick Wentworth and her tangle of emotions about their broken engagement (P 53). The romance plot of this novel also provides the occasion for us to watch as Anne struggles to command her feelings for Wentworth in a variety of social situations. Before Wentworth has even arrived, Anne suffers through a conversation at the Musgroves’, where the various members of the large and voluble family wonder about Wentworth, try to discern whether he...

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\(^{69}\) For “sweetness”, “elegance”, and “delicate”, see P 11; for “justice” see P 16; and for “self-denial” see P 17. Mr. Elliot’s opinion of Anne, offered to Lady Russell and then communicated to Anne herself, is that she is “a most extraordinary young woman; in her temper, manners, mind, a model of female excellence” (P 129). Austen herself wrote that this character was “almost too good for me” (Letter to Fanny Knight, 23-5 March 1817; L 350).
would have known the now-deceased Dick Musgrove, and generally speculate about Wentworth’s eventual arrival. This conversation, we are told, “was a new sort of trial to Anne’s nerves” and she forms a “resolution” to “teach herself to be insensible on such points” as pertain to Wentworth and his history (P 46-7). Anne’s nerves and her attempts to stick to her resolution form recurrent themes in the subsequent chapters of the first volume.

One of the central but subtle differences between Austen’s portrayal of Anne’s attempts at regulating her emotions and her portrayal of Elinor’s is an increased emphasis on the physiology and phenomenology of self-control. Whereas, with Elinor, we are often told how Elinor achieves self-command—she “busily employ[s] herself” throughout the day so as to distract herself from feeling (SS 79), or she thinks through the many facets of a situation so as to see everything clearly (SS 103-4)—with Anne, we feel what it is like to feel acutely and powerfully, and to try to grapple for perspective. In the first meeting between Anne and Wentworth, Austen’s emphasis on the sensory aspects of Anne’s consciousness is striking:

Mary, very much gratified by this attention, was delighted to receive him, while a thousand feelings rushed on Anne, of which this was the most consoling, that it would soon be over. And it was soon over. In two minutes after Charles’s preparation, the others appeared; they were in the drawing-room. Her eye half met Captain Wentworth’s, a bow, a curtsey passed; she heard his voice; he talked to Mary, said all that was right, said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing; the room seemed full, full of persons and voices, but a few minutes ended it. Charles shewed himself at the window, all was ready, their visitor had bowed and was gone, the Miss Musgroves were gone too, suddenly resolving to walk to the end of the village with the sportsmen: the room was cleared, and Anne might finish her breakfast as she could.

“It is over! it is over!” she repeated to herself again and again, in nervous gratitude. “The worst is over!” (P 52-3)

As Wentworth enters the room, the compass of this scene shrinks down to bare sensory information: eyes half meet, one body bows while another curteys, some things are said, the room feels full, “full

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70 Several commentators have noted the general increase in physiological language and interest in *Persuasion*. See, e.g., Wiltshire (2006); Knox-Shaw (2004); Pinch (1996). See also Morgan (1980) for an insightful reading of Anne Elliot’s emotionality.
of persons and voices”, and then it is over. Austen is bringing us to feel, with Anne, what it is like to be overwhelmed by feeling.

As Anne recovers from this first meeting, we witness her first attempts at sticking to her resolution to be more insensible to Wentworth and his presence. She remains in the room with her sister, but cannot listen to what Mary is saying, and instead begins to reflect:

Soon, however, she began to reason with herself, and try to be feeling less. Eight years, almost eight years had passed, since all had been given up. How absurd to be resuming the agitation which such an interval had banished into distance and indistinctness! What might not eight years do? Events of every description, changes, alienations, removals—all, all must be comprised in it, and oblivion of the past—how natural, how certain too! It included nearly a third part of her own life.

Alas! with all her reasoning, she found, that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing. (P 53)

Anne’s first attempts “to be feeling less” are described as “reasoning[s]”. She reasons with herself that it is absurd to feel so strongly after such a long span of time. But she then recognizes the futility of this plan, finding that “retentive feelings” do not recognize time or such reasonings about time. Just after this she hears that Wentworth had made unkind comments on her appearance (not believing that they would be repeated to Anne), finding her very much altered. Anne “rejoice[s]” in them, even though they hurt, for “they were of a sobering tendency; they allayed agitation; they composed, and consequently must make her happy” (P 54).

In Anne’s initial encounter with Wentworth, we see new facets of Austen’s portrayal of the effort of self-control. First, we see an increased emphasis on the way self-control and emotion feel, along with an interest in the physiological aspects of these feelings. *Persuasion* is notably more interested in Anne’s “nerves” than *Sense and Sensibility* was interested in Elinor’s, and we frequently see Anne “nervously” react to some situation, or try to “harden” her nerves against some event. 71 We also see

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71 In *Sense and Sensibility*, nerves and nervousness are associated largely with Marianne, with only two references to Elinor’s nerves. In *Persuasion*, Anne’s nerves are referred to more regularly; see P 30, 46, 53, 69, 146, 186.
Anne tremble, tear up, blush, and feel so overwhelmed that she cannot perceive her surroundings clearly. Second, we see a new sense of the futility of the efforts of self-control, but specifically when those efforts are understood as an attempt to make oneself feel less by means of reasoning. Anne forms a resolution to be more insensible to Wentworth, and she brings some fine pieces of reasoning in support of that resolution, but Austen portrays this method of achieving self-command as ineffectual.

Indeed, a reader who read only so far as the chapters prior to the group visit to Lyme could be excused for thinking that Anne Elliot was sweet and helpful, but also excitable, nervous, and delicate, and not possessed of strength of mind or self-command at all. Her attempts to gain control of her feelings repeatedly fail, and she is repeatedly overpowered by the situations she is in.

If we compare Anne’s efforts at self-control to Elinor’s efforts, we can notice that in her attempts to control her feelings for Wentworth, Anne is not really guided by the feelings of other people. In some sense she is, wishing to keep her feelings hidden from others, and wishing to appear as though she is not affected by Wentworth’s presence or his flirting with the Musgrove girls. But she is not guided by a sense of what others would approve of, nor is she guided by a care for the effects of her feelings on the feelings of others. Anne is in an ascetic, self-denying mode, nostalgic for the past when she and Wentworth were so close, and mournful for the present where she must watch him admired by all others while she pretends indifference.

Three instances are worth noting. First, in the scene where Anne is playing the piano for the Musgrove group and where “her eyes would sometimes fill with tears as she sat at the instrument”, she also thinks that he might have looked at her, and once spoken of her, but she is too engrossed in her thoughts and her “mechanical” playing (P 62). Second, in the scene where Wentworth silently lifts young Walter off of her back and she is left so overwhelmed that she is “speechless”, and “overcome” (P 69). And third, when, after overhearing the conversation between Wentworth and Louisa in the hedgerow, Wentworth lifts Anne silently into the Croft’s carriage (P 77). Each of these scenes is notable for its emphasis on Anne’s finding herself in a situation without knowing the details of how she got there. The moment is so acute and so overwhelming that her attention lapses or is swamped, and she finds herself, for example “in the state of being released” from the child (P 68), or “in the carriage” (P 77).

That said, she also manages to keep all of her feelings and sensitivity a complete secret from everyone around her (with the possible exception of Wentworth), in part because no one suspects that Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth are anything other than acquaintances. Her control of expression and conduct is successful, even if she fails to regulate her feelings.
But why is Austen portraying Anne as engaged in a futile program of emotion regulation? One reason might be that Austen is emphasizing, just as Hume and Smith did, the general ineffectiveness of trying to reason oneself out of feeling a certain way. In the case of “retentive”, strong feelings especially, reasoning will not help—better to employ oneself in assisting others, or to imagine the feelings of other people. Another reason is suggested by Anne herself in a second overwhelming encounter with Wentworth, when he silently removes her young nephew from hanging on her back. Anne is confused and disordered after his assistance, while also indirectly aware of the presence of Wentworth and of Charles Hayter, who is also in the room. She thinks, “But neither Charles Hayter’s feelings, nor anybody’s feelings, could interest her, till she had a little better arranged her own” (P 69). This remark of Anne’s suggests an interesting development in Austen’s characterization of the self-commanded individual. In Sense and Sensibility we are told of Elinor’s efforts at command, but we do not often feel the difficulty of these efforts. Elinor’s self-command is almost too exemplary, a touch or two beyond realism. With Anne, however, we see the keen sensitivity that characterizes the Dashwood sisters combined with a realistic awareness of how powerful emotion can be in the moment. And we consequently see more clearly why resolutions and reasonings fail, and why it is often difficult to even think of someone else when one’s own feelings are violent and agitated. Anne is in such a tumultuous emotional state because of Wentworth’s presence that she cannot step outside of her own very partial and much heightened standpoint so as to gain an additional perspective on her feelings. It takes “a long application of solitude and reflection” and habituation to his presence for her to begin to act with equanimity around him (P 69; 142). Austen has not discarded her conception of self-control as involving the imagination of the feelings of other people, and the reliance on those feelings in one’s attempts to regulate one’s emotions, rather, she has turned to examine the conditions
allowing for such imagination and reflection. Anne is often unable to attend to the feelings of others because she is so overwhelmed by her own feelings.\(^{74}\)

There is a further important difference between the portrayals of Anne Elliot and Elinor Dashwood. Whereas in *Sense and Sensibility*, the sign of self-command was an impressive ability to regulate one’s emotions and conduct in accordance with a standard of propriety, in *Persuasion*, the sign of self-command is the ability to be active and useful when circumstances dictate. Anne’s interest in being useful is a note sounded throughout the novel. She is glad to be welcomed into the Uppercross set after being passed over by her sister Elizabeth, who chooses Mrs. Clay as her companion in Bath. We learn, “To be claimed as a good, though in an improper style, is at least better than being rejected as no good at all; and Anne, glad to be thought of some use, glad to have anything marked out as a duty, and certainly not sorry to have the scene of it in the country, and her own dear country, readily agreed to stay” (P 32). When she joins the Uppercross community, Anne muses on the local norms of “every little social commonwealth” and hopes “to become a not unworthy member” of her new social circle (P 39).\(^{75}\) We also see Anne glad to be of assistance to her old school friend Mrs. Smith, happy to play for the spontaneous dances got up by the Musgroves, and content to aid her nephews in various ways.

More striking than these instances of Anne’s desire to help are her actual, impressive efforts to act in crisis situations. We will examine the scene at Lyme in the next section, where Anne springs into effort, assisting the “lifeless” Louisa as well as everyone else who is falling to pieces in the

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\(^{74}\) Cf. Smith’s claims about the overpowering and “self-justifying” nature of the passions in TMS III.3-5, which we examined in Chapter Two, Section 1.5.

\(^{75}\) Austen’s phrase “little social commonwealth” recalls Hume’s notion of the “narrow circle” (T 3.3.3.2; SBN 602), Smith’s language of one’s duty toward one’s “little department” (TMS VII.ii.44), and Burke’s language of the “little platoon” (1999, 136). These social microcosms form the foundation for our other-directed affections and for our offices and duties. They also provide the particular situation of an individual, a situation we rely on, in Hume’s and Smith’s accounts, when we evaluate the actions and dispositions of an individual.
moment. But foreshadowing this scene is the incident involving Anne’s nephew, little Charles, who has a bad fall and is brought back to a house containing only Anne and her sister Mary:

His collar-bone was found to be dislocated, and such injury received in the back, as roused the most alarming ideas. It was an afternoon of distress, and Anne had every thing to do at once; the apothecary to send for, the father to have pursued and informed, the mother to support and keep from hysterics, the servants to control, the youngest child to banish, and the poor suffering one to attend and soothe; besides sending, as soon as she recollected it, proper notice to the other house, which brought her an accession rather of frightened, enquiring companions, than of very useful assistants. (P 47-8)

Just as in the later scene at Lyme, Anne is surrounded by people who cannot rise to the occasion and act as the situation dictates. It falls to Anne, someone who is herself so susceptible to overwhelming feeling, to act swiftly, sensibly, and effectively. Austen shows us in this early scene Anne’s capacity for strength of mind and focused effort. What we know of Anne at this point is that she is sensitive and brimming over with emotion. What we learn (especially upon re-reading this scene) is that she is also capable of regulating her emotions—her fear for the safety of her nephew, her likely frustration with her sister and the other ineffectual people she is surrounded by—and of acting as is necessary. This scene stands unremarked upon, unlike the later scene at Lyme, but it adds an important touch to Anne’s character, revealing that while her feelings for Wentworth may be unmanageable, she is, nonetheless, a self-commanded person, considerate of the feelings of others and diligent in her efforts to understand and assist as needed.

A final important difference between the portrayals of Anne and Elinor Dashwood is in their relation to their local society. As we saw above, Austen places Elinor in a narrow and selfish social set, and she shows Elinor contending with the secrets of the people around her as she strives to form good judgments and act with propriety. Because of this, it is easy to see how one could read Elinor’s efforts at self-command and the achievement of propriety as something like what Smith calls the “futile mortifications of a monastery” (TMS III.2.35). Elinor can seem as though she is trapped in a sclerotic system of formalities masquerading as propriety and rectitude, and that she is striving to trap
her sister and mother with her in the same system. In *Persuasion*, we see a subtly different examination of the relation between the self-controlled individual and her social set. When we are introduced to Anne, she is a member of the Kellynch set, which includes her father, her sister Elizabeth, and Lady Russell. She spends most of her time in the novel as a part of the Uppercross set, which includes her sister Mary and her family, and the Musgrove family, who are united to them through marriage. And Anne and the other characters regularly reflect on the virtues of yet another set, the naval officers and their wives, a set that intersects with the Kellynch and Uppercross sets at different points in the novel.

What we see in Austen’s portrayal of Anne that is new (as compared to her portrayal of Elinor) is a sense of at least slight social mobility—of having some choice in one’s social set. Anne reflects at various points on what it is like to transition from one narrow circle to another. As we saw briefly above, she is happy to move from the Kellynch set to the Uppercross set, and she muses on the small matters of difference between these two otherwise closely connected sets (P 39). Later in the novel, when Anne has reluctantly rejoined the Kellynch set, now transplanted to Bath, she reflects on the fawning vanity of her father and eldest sister as they try to ingratiate themselves to their noble “cousins in Laura-place” (P 121). And she discusses the pleasures of good company with Mr. Elliot, a new (and temporary) member of the Kellynch set (P 122). Anne consciously chooses her companions, preferring the company of Mrs. Smith to that of Lady Dalrymple, and happily walking with Admiral Croft and visiting the Musgroves in their Bath hotel instead of remaining at her father’s house. But most significantly, the novel repeatedly compares (often implicitly) the manners of the naval set to those of the aristocratic set. We hear that members of the Navy are “neat and careful”, that they have an “open, trusting liberality”, “easy, and decided” manners, and no formality in their relations (P 21;

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76 Although, as I argued above, this is just one way to read Elinor’s character, and the overall picture is more ambivalent than decidedly pessimistic.
31; 44; 82). After meeting the Harvilles and Captain Benwick, Anne thinks to herself, in a melancholy mood, that if she had married Wentworth those eight years ago, “these would have been all my friends” (P 82). Instead of “the usual style of give-and-take invitations, and dinners of formality and display”—a style of hospitality Anne will soon be returning to—she could have had more modest surroundings but also more sense, and more genuine affection and hospitality (P 82).

Where Elinor seemed trapped by her society and little rewarded for her efforts at consideration and care, Anne seems relatively detached and independent. She can smile at the foibles of Mary and the various members of the Uppercross set, she can disapprove of her father and Elizabeth without having to lie to them, and she can choose to associate herself with people she genuinely admires by reconciling with Wentworth and joining, through her marriage to him, the society of the Navy. There is a real sense, in *Persuasion*, of the ability to step back from one’s narrow circle in order to evaluate them, and perhaps to choose a new “little social commonwealth” for oneself.

There are several subtle differences between Austen’s portrayal of the self-commanded heroine in *Sense and Sensibility* and in *Persuasion*. In her portrayal of Anne Elliot, Austen emphasizes the physiological aspects of feeling and self-control; she comments on the futility of rationalistic methods of self-control, and on the difficulties of trying to control one’s feelings when one is in the grip of powerful, “retentive” emotions; she emphasizes the agency and usefulness of the self-commanded individual; and she reprises her treatment of the relation between the self-commanded individual and her society. But there is also a strong line of continuity between *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*; both novels are concerned with discerning self-command or strength of mind and with contributing to the

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77 There’s also Louisa’s lovely, ardent outburst: “Anne thought she left great happiness behind her when they quitted the house; and Louisa, by whom she found herself walking, burst forth into raptures of admiration and delight on the character of the navy; their friendliness, their brotherliness, their openness, their uprightness; protesting that she was convinced of sailors having more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England; that they only knew how to live, and they only deserved to be respected and loved” (P 83).
education of their readers. In the next section, we will look at how Austen dramatizes the difficulties of discerning strength of mind through Captain Wentworth’s search for a wife, and through Anne’s attempts to understand Mr. Elliot.

Section 4.2: Moral Education in *Persuasion*

The first volume of *Persuasion* is concerned with Anne’s largely futile efforts to master her “retentive feelings”, and with Captain Wentworth’s search for a wife. He arrives at Uppercross “ready to fall in love with all the speed which a clear head and quick taste could allow”, and he confides to his sister, Mrs. Croft, that “a strong mind, with sweetness of manner” describes the woman he wishes to marry (P 54). The narrator hints that when Wentworth announces this, “Anne Elliot was not out of his thoughts”, but before he can realize this for himself, he must learn to distinguish Louisa Musgrove’s headstrong willfulness from Anne Elliot’s more tempered strength of mind (P 54). Like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion* paints a character trait, and in so doing, the novel engages the reader’s sentiments and judgment, encouraging her to compare and assess different characters as they are compared and assessed by the characters in the novel. What the reader can gain from this activity of sympathetic and sentimental engagement is a more refined awareness of the various shades of the controlled, poised, and commanding character. In this way, I will argue, *Persuasion* complements and extends the depiction of self-command offered in *Sense and Sensibility*; not only does Austen return to and subtly develop her characterization of the self-commanded heroine (the inside-view of self-command, so to speak), she also offers a more thorough depiction of self-command and related traits as they appear to an outside observer.

The primary education plot of *Persuasion* begins with Wentworth’s announcement to his sister that he is looking to fall in love. The reader then watches as Wentworth becomes entangled with the Musgrove girls, Louisa and Henrietta. Various characters debate at first whether he is more attracted
to Louisa or to Henrietta, but when Henrietta renews her attachment to Charles Hayter, the field is cleared for Louisa to provide the “little beauty”, “few smiles”, and “few compliments to the navy” that Wentworth jokes are all he requires (P 54). More seriously, in the scene that takes a small group of the Uppercross set on a walk to Winthrop, we eavesdrop with Anne on the conversation between Wentworth and Louisa in the hedgerow, and we see that he has reason to believe that in Louisa he has found a woman with strength of mind.

When Anne finds herself near enough to overhear their conversation, she hears Louisa in the middle of “some eager speech” to Wentworth about how she convinced her sister to visit Charles Hayter. Louisa proudly states, “What!—would I be turned back from doing a thing that I had determined to do, and that I knew to be right, by the airs and interference of such a person, or of any person I may say? No, I have no idea of being so easily persuaded. When I have made up my mind, I have made it” (P 74). Wentworth applauds Louisa’s unpersuadability, proof of which is offered, ironically, in her ability to persuade her sister, and then muses about the value of traits like fortitude, resilience, and strength of mind:

‘… [W]oe betide him [Charles Hayter], and her [Henrietta] too, when it comes to things of consequence, when they are placed in circumstances requiring fortitude and strength of mind, if she have not resolution enough to resist idle interference in such a trifle as this. Your sister is an amiable creature; but yours is the character of decision and firmness, I see. If you value her conduct or happiness, infuse as much of your own spirit into her as you can. But this, no doubt, you have been always doing. It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on.—You are never sure of a good impression being durable; everybody may sway it. Let those who would be happy be firm.—Here is a nut,’ said he, catching one down from an upper bough. ‘To exemplify,—a beautiful glossy nut, which, blessed with original strength, has outlived all the storms of autumn. Not a puncture, not a weak spot anywhere.—This nut,’ he continued, with playful solemnity,—‘while

78 Claudia Johnson’s reading of this scene is acute: “[Louisa’s] speech, and Wentworth’s enthusiastic response to it, are not the simple assertions of principled self-determination they appear to be. Louisa, after all, did not disinterestedly supplement her sister’s faltering powers of mind with the strength of her own. Instead, she took advantage of her sister’s persuadability in order to clear the field for Wentworth and herself. Further, Louisa recommends independence even as she congratulates herself for her own interference: ‘I made her go’ [P 74]. Finally, Wentworth disdains the feeble malleability of ‘too yielding and indecisive a character’ [P 74] when it defies him as Anne’s did, but he does not seem to mind or even to notice the same qualities when they malleably conform to his own influence.” [Johnson (1988), 156; I have altered her in-text references so that they refer to the edition of Persuasion I am using].
so many of his brethren have fallen and been trodden under foot, is still in possession of all the happiness that a hazel-nut can be supposed capable of.' Then returning to his former earnest tone: ‘My first wish for all whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm. If Louisa Musgrove would be beautiful and happy in her November of life, she will cherish all her present powers of mind.’ (P 74-5, emphasis original)

Anne hears this entire speech, and she hears it go unanswered by Louisa. As she sits, reacting to Wentworth’s words of “such interest, spoken with such serious warmth”, she cannot but interpret this speech as a condemnation of the traits he associates with Anne—persuadability, lack of firmness, lack of strength—and a commendation of those he finds in Louisa (P 75). But, as Claudia Johnson has noted, Wentworth’s hazelnut is not just firm, it is impermeable, hard, and resistant to any impression.\(^79\) Wentworth has learned to so hate the traits of persuadability, flexibility, and impressionability that he has come to value their opposites: fixity, rigidity, and obstinacy.

We learn from Wentworth’s speech that he associates the valuable character trait of strength of mind with hardness and resolute firmness—the ability to withstand impressions—and that he believes that such firmness is essential to maintaining one’s happiness through the storms of life. And we, as first-time readers, may agree with him, aligning strength of mind with traits like autonomy, authenticity, and integrity, and finding them in Wentworth and perhaps Louisa too, but not in Anne. But Austen quickly casts doubt on Wentworth’s stance. First we see a subtle dart directed at Louisa. When an excursion to Lyme is proposed, Louisa is the most adamant in favor of it: “Louisa, who was the most eager of the eager, having formed the resolution to go, and besides the pleasure of doing as she liked, being now armed with the idea of merit in maintaining her own way, bore down all the wishes of her father and mother for putting it off till summer” (P 79). Louisa is resolute, eager, and now believes that there is “merit in maintaining her own way”, and she bears down on those around her in pursuance of this way.

\(^79\) Johnson (1988), 154-6.
In this somewhat barbed description, the reader may start to notice that there is something wrong with the Wentworth-Louisa understanding of strength of mind. On their understanding, the person with strength of mind will frequently impose their will on others. This sort of strength is dangerously divisive, creating a group of those who have such resolution and a group of those who must be dominated by them. It is thus a character trait that cannot be pervasively shared, for not everyone can have such firmness and resolution, on pain of there being no one for the resolute to dominate. And yet Wentworth advises Louisa to cultivate firmness in herself and in her sister and he claims more generally that anyone who wishes to be happy should be firm. Not only is there something self-undermining in Wentworth’s advising another to be less susceptible to advice, there is something impossible in his general claim that all who wish to be happy should cultivate a trait that necessarily not all can have.80 The Wentworth-Louisa understanding of strength of mind is mistaken, and the trait they value reveals itself to be more like a vice in the next important episode, the incident at Lyme.

Through obstinacy and resolution, Louisa gets her way and persuades her parents to arrange for the entire Uppercross group to travel to Lyme. On their final day there, Louisa is “determined” that everyone should walk once more along the Cobb, and persuades everyone to do this (P 91). But her firmness, girded as it is by her belief in Wentworth’s approval, leads not to her happiness, but to grave injury on her part and painful self-awareness on Wentworth’s:

There was too much wind to make the high part of the new Cobb pleasant for the ladies, and they agreed to get down the steps to the lower, and all were contented to pass quietly and carefully down the steep flight, excepting Louisa; she must be jumped down them by Captain Wentworth. In all their walks, he had had to jump her from the stiles; the sensation was delightful to her. The hardness of the pavement for her feet, made him less willing upon the present occasion; he did it, however; she was safely down, and instantly, to shew her enjoyment, ran up the steps to be jumped down again. He advised her against it, thought the jar too great; but no, he reasoned and talked in vain, she smiled and said, ‘I am determined I

80 The impossibility does not truly arise unless Wentworth is willing to claim that all people wish to be happy, that firmness (on his understanding of it) is necessary for happiness, and that firmness (on his understanding of it) necessarily involves exerting one’s will over other people. But the whiff of impossibility or paradoxicality remains even in what he explicitly says.
will;’ he put out his hands; she was too precipitate by half a second, she fell on the pavement on the Lower Cobb, and was taken up lifeless! (P 91)

This is the crisis point for the Wentworth-Louisa understanding of strength of mind. Louisa has well-learned the lesson from Wentworth’s speech, and she exerts her will in spite of his advice. Louisa acts in the way she believes is best, but in doing so, she misses Wentworth’s hands and falls to the ground. The mismatch between Louisa’s will, “too precipitate by half a second”, and Wentworth’s hands is telling. The problem with their understanding of strength of mind is that it impedes such moments where one would-be resolute individual must depend on another. Louisa is resolutely determined to be jumped down the stairs by Wentworth, and she therefore requires him to act in a certain way in order to satisfy her resolution. But their wills clash, to disastrous result. We can read this scene as revealing that the Wentworth-Louisa understanding of strength of mind depends on a mistaken understanding of social and moral necessities—even the most resolute individuals depend on other people in various ways, and to try to act as though one can remain untouched, unencumbered, and unreceptive to those around one is impossible and can lead to disaster. Human beings are not hazel-nuts.

Just as Austen reveals that Wentworth and Louisa are mistaken about strength of mind, she also reveals that Anne—sweet, sensitive, impressionable Anne—is the one who actually possesses this trait. As Louisa lies “lifeless” in Wentworth’s arms, the various members of the group fall apart: Mary screams in horror; Charles is rendered “immoveable” by Mary; Henrietta faints; and Captain Benwick

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81 This connection of Wentworth’s hands and Louisa’s will recalls an earlier scene where, following the walk to Winthrop where Anne overheard the conversation about persuadability and determination, Anne is lifted into the carriage by Wentworth without a word: “Anne was still in the lane; and though instinctively beginning to decline, she was not allowed to proceed. The Admiral’s kind urgency came in support of his wife’s; they would not be refused; they compressed themselves into the smallest possible space to leave her a corner, and Captain Wentworth, without saying a word, turned to her, and quietly obliged her to be assisted into the carriage. Yes,—he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it, that she owed it to his perception of her fatigue, and his resolution to give her rest” (P 77, emphasis added). Here we have several of the same points: Anne is being persuaded to act in a certain way, and Wentworth’s hands are needed for this action to occur, as is his resolution. But Anne is persuadable by the Crofts, and she is physically moveable by Wentworth (indeed, she is lifted up by his hands, not jumped down as Louisa is). And this is all happening in the context of Wentworth and the Crofts kindly and acutely seeing that Anne is weary and could genuinely benefit from being driven home. Anne owes her being in the carriage to Wentworth’s “perception” and “resolution”—but also to the match between her will (her desire to be driven home) and his hands.
and Anne must initially support Henrietta (P 92). But Anne soon springs into action, directing the
movements of everyone else, trying to revive Henrietta, sending someone for a surgeon for Louisa,
and then trying to “suggest comfort to the others”, “to quiet Mary, to animate Charles, to assuage the
feelings of Captain Wentworth” (P 92-3). Charles and Wentworth, the only two members of the group
who retain some command over themselves, look to Anne for direction and advice, and they adopt
her sensible and quickly-given suggestions. As we saw in the previous section, Anne’s strength of mind
is revealed through her actions and her ability to be useful and commanding in moments of pressure.
Just as she acted with facility when little Charles fell and injured his collarbone, so too she acts with
efficiency and sense when Louisa falls and no one else can take charge (including Captains Wentworth
and Benwick, who would likely have had some experience with similarly fraught situations).

In case we have not learned the lesson with Wentworth that willfulness and obstinacy are not
the marks of strength of mind, and that happiness is not secured by rigid firmness, Austen has Anne
reflect on the episode and compare what happened to what Wentworth had advised in his speech to
Louisa. As Anne rides back to Uppercross, she thinks about the incident:

    Anne wondered whether it ever occurred to him now, to question the justness of his own
    previous opinion as to the universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character; and
    whether it might not strike him that, like all other qualities of the mind, it should have its
    proportions and limits. She thought it could scarcely escape him to feel that a persuadable
    temper might sometimes be as much in favour of happiness as a very resolute character. (P
    97)

Anne construes the lesson as one about balance and proportion, of the value of persuadability
balanced with firmness. But we could also understand Wentworth’s lesson as one about true strength
of mind, which manifests not in obstinate willfulness, but in capability and command, in sense and
efficiency, and in the awareness of when one should be persuaded and when one should persuade.
What we learn over the course of the first volume is that Anne has this latter sort of awareness. She
is far from being always persuaded, or always persuading. She often acts as a counsellor to the
members of her little social commonwealth, but she is also receptive to them, open to their influence
and interested in their opinions and needs. As we saw with Elinor’s self-command, Anne’s strength of mind is founded on her sensitivity toward and care for the sentiments of other people, and because it is so founded, it is elastic, sometimes manifesting as the capacity to be directed and sometimes as the capacity to direct.

To put an even more final point on Wentworth’s education in discerning strength of mind, at the end of the novel, after Anne and Wentworth have reconciled, Wentworth describes to Anne the lessons he learned at Lyme:

Her [Anne’s] character was now fixed on his mind as perfection itself, maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness; but he was obliged to acknowledge that only at Uppercross had he learnt to do her justice, and only at Lyme had he begun to understand himself. At Lyme, he had received lessons of more than one sort. … till that day, till the leisure for reflection which followed it, he had not understood the perfect excellence of the mind with which Louisa’s could so ill bear a comparison; or the perfect unrivalled hold it possessed over his own. There, he had learnt to distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind. (P 194-5, emphasis added)

At Lyme, and in the comparison of Anne with Louisa, Wentworth finally learns to distinguish, and this clears the way for him to learn (or rediscover) the value of principle, self-command, and the balance of fortitude with gentleness. As readers, we learn to distinguish along with Wentworth, and we come to love Anne for her well-balanced character, just as Wentworth does. But Wentworth’s education plot is not the only of its kind in this novel, and there are several more peripheral moments of learning to distinguish in the second volume of the novel. After we learn one lesson with Wentworth, Austen tests us with two other characters, Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Smith, and her depiction of these characters contributes to filling out and refining her depiction of self-command more generally.

Duckworth makes a similar point about what Wentworth learns in comparing Anne and Louisa: “What the accident stresses is that the fortitude of Louisa, selfish, headstrong, and rash as it is shown to be, is morally inferior to the fortitude of Anne, which manifests itself in selfless and ‘useful’ actions and which is characterized by self-control rather than by self-assertion” (1971; 198). See also Butler (1987; 276).
Mr. Elliot is introduced just as Wentworth is learning his own lesson, and he presents Anne with a character that she needs time to decipher. When they first pass each other on the streets of Lyme, we learn that he is a “gentleman”, an observation then underscored by the parenthetical remark “(completely a gentleman in manner)” (P 87). Anne finds him to have “exceedingly good manners”, an “agreeable person”, and “an air of good sense” (P 88-9). When we next meet Mr. Elliot he has reconciled with Sir Walter and Elizabeth and been re-admitted into their inner circle. Upon being properly introduced to him, Anne muses that “his manners were so exactly what they ought to be, so polished, so easy, so particularly agreeable” (P 116). She continues to observe him, finding that “[t]here could be no doubt of his being a sensible man. Ten minutes were enough to certify that. His tone, his expressions, his choice of subject, his knowing where to stop; it was all the operation of a sensible, discerning mind” (P 116). Anne remains suspicious of his motives, but cannot help but admire his manners, his conversation, and his sense.

Anne’s suspicions prevent her from being taken in completely by Mr. Elliot, despite his ability to win over everyone else, including the discerning and cool-headed Lady Russell, and they allow us, as readers, to share in the critical distance she maintains. With Anne, we try to puzzle out this person who was once so dismissive of the Elliot family, and now seems so proper, so poised, and so much like a gentleman of sense and sensibility. After they have been acquainted for about a month, we learn that Anne remains cautious, for she still “[cannot] be satisfied that she really knew his character”, and “she would have been afraid to answer for his conduct” (P 130). But more importantly, Anne finds Mr. Elliot to be too poised, too controlled, too in command of himself in every situation:

Mr. Elliot was rational, discreet, polished,—but he was not open. There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others. This, to Anne, was a decided imperfection. Her early impressions were incurable. She prized the frank, the open-hearted, the eager character beyond all others. Warmth and enthusiasm did captivate her still. She felt that she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes

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83 She is, of course, also protected by her feelings for Wentworth.
looked or said a careless or a hasty thing, than of those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped. Mr. Elliot was too generally agreeable. Various as were the tempers in her father’s house, he pleased them all. He endured too well,—stood too well with every body. (P 130-1)

With this assessment of Mr. Elliot’s character, Austen continues to refine her depiction of the character of self-command. We learn that Mr. Elliot’s almost perfect command of himself—his uncanny ability to adapt to any situation and to please any person—can be perceived as an unnatural or suspicious uniformity and constancy. Austen is giving us another version of the character who is supremely self-commanded, especially in social settings, but instead of painting this character as an overall virtuous one—as she does with Elinor Dashwood and with Jane Fairfax—she associates Mr. Elliot’s urbane poise with his past reprehensible actions and his present mercenary motives.

Anne has accurately discerned that there is something awry with Mr. Elliot’s extreme poise and agreeability, and she soon learns from her friend Mrs. Smith that Mr. Elliot’s motives and conduct are far from approvable. Like Elinor Dashwood, like Jane Fairfax, and like several of Austen’s other characters, Mr. Elliot is using the codes of civility and his own exemplary self-command to protect a secret. His secret just happens to be something he is protecting solely for mercenary and self-interested motives.84 Pace scholars like Alastair Duckworth and Tony Tanner, we need not see Austen’s treatment of Mr. Elliot’s character as a sign of her having “lost faith in manners” as an indication of moral substance.85 After all, Anne does rely on Mr. Elliot’s manners to evaluate his character and find something worthy of disapproval. His universal agreeability is a sign to Anne that something about his inner qualities is off and worthy of suspicion. Rather, we can read Austen’s depiction of Mr. Elliot

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84 At least until he meets Anne and gains a romantic reason to protect his secret past as well.

85 Duckworth (1971), 181. Tanner writes: “Yet his manners are so perfect that even Anne can scarcely differentiate them from her true, beloved, Wentworth’s. … With the vivid example of the absolute non-correlation between ‘manners’ and character presented by Mr Elliot we have to accept that ‘good manners’ in the socially accepted and prescribed sense are simply no longer of any use in estimating or inferring the inner qualities of anyone” (2007, 227). This does not seem right to me. What Mr. Elliot demonstrates is the difficulty of discerning one’s morals from one’s manners when one is vicious but also self-commanded.
as revealing that there are non-virtuous and even vicious forms of self-command, and that the vicious but self-commanded person is especially dangerous and especially difficult to discern. Just as we saw in Chapter Two in our discussion of Adam Smith’s treatment of non-standard forms of self-command (e.g., the ability of the pirate to command his fear), self-command is a capacity for regulating one’s emotions that can be directed just as easily toward vicious or self-serving ends as it can be toward virtuous or benevolent ones. The crucial difference between an Elinor Dashwood or a Jane Fairfax and a Mr. Elliot is that their exemplary poise and manners is motivated by and the result of their sensitivity to and care for the feelings of other people, while his is not. As Mrs. Smith reveals to Anne, Mr. Elliot “has no feeling for others”, he is someone “who thinks only of himself” (P 160).

If we were to meet with a Mr. Elliot in real life, as it were, many of us would have difficulty discerning that his self-command is a sophisticated and manipulative sort of poise and not anything like the sentimental self-command of Elinor Dashwood or the flexible strength of mind of Anne Elliot. But Austen gives us the chance to observe Mr. Elliot’s character through the eyes of an acutely perceptive and cautious judge: Anne. This affords the reader, who may be hardly so perceptive or cautious, the chance to feel what it is like to practice this difficult kind of discernment. Anne evaluates and judges in a way that accords with the system described by Elinor Dashwood, which we examined above. Anne gives herself “time to deliberate and judge”—a month spent in regular meetings with Mr. Elliot—and she compares his impressions on her to those he makes on the other members of their shared society. We benefit from what she discovers and our assessment is given further proof by Mrs. Smith’s clear and damning evidence. Wentworth’s lesson in distinguishing obstinacy from strength of mind is introductory-level compared to this master class in discernment and evaluation. And Austen gives us an able tutor as our guide.

There is a final character to bring into this discussion of the effects of Austen’s “paintings” of self-command and strength of mind in Persuasion. Mrs. Smith is an old school-friend of Anne’s who
has fallen on seriously hard times. When Anne is reunited with her, she is living in severe poverty, alone, and with a debilitating illness. What Anne discovers about her friend’s character as they renew their acquaintance over several meetings serves as a foil to Wentworth’s claim that firmness is the character trait most important for happiness. After hearing her friend’s sad story of disappointment and loss, Anne realizes Mrs. Smith “had moments only of languor and depression, to hours of occupation and enjoyment”, and she wonders how this could be possible:

She watched, observed, reflected, and finally determined that this was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only. A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more; here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from nature alone. It was the choicest gift of Heaven .... (P 125)

Anne “watche[s], observe[s], reflect[s]” and decides that it is Mrs. Smith’s “elasticity of mind” that enables her to be cheerful, comforted, and occupied in spite of her situation. Not firmness or rigidity, but elasticity and flexibility contribute to her general cheerfulness in a cheerless situation (P 157). This description of elasticity recalls Hume’s description of the quality that most contributes to happiness: “Some men are possessed of great strength of mind; and even when they pursue external objects; are not much affected by disappointment, but renew their application and industry with the greatest cheerfulness. Nothing contributes more to happiness than such a turn of mind.”

Hume’s “strength of mind” looks a lot like the “elasticity of mind” that Anne attributes to Mrs. Smith, and it looks a lot like the species of strength of mind that we found in Anne but not in Louisa.

Anne’s sketch of Mrs. Smith’s character rounds out the broader depiction of strength of mind in *Persuasion*. With Wentworth, we learn the first, more basic lesson of distinguishing obstinacy from strength of mind, and we learn that strength of mind is often revealed in action. With Anne, we learn that someone can be self-commanded for all the wrong reasons, and that it can be very difficult to see

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86 Hume, “The Skeptic” (EMPL 168).
past the mask of civility to someone’s true moral core. Also with Anne, we further confirm Wentworth’s lesson that flexibility is more valuable than rigidity and that true strength of mind involves knowing when to persuade and when to be persuaded.87 Austen’s method of presenting this character trait over time and from a variety of more or less difficult angles allows us to learn how to distinguish strength of mind in a kind of “teaching environment”, where we are first guided by Wentworth as he makes mistakes and corrects them, and then by Anne, who is a much more capable instructor.

Conclusion

In the final paragraph of his Treatise, Hume writes,

The anatomist ought never to emulate the painter; nor in his accurate dissections and portraiture of the smaller parts of the human body, pretend to give his figures any graceful and engaging attitude or expression. There is something hideous, or at least minute in the views of things, which he presents; and it is necessary the objects should be set more at a distance, and be more cover’d up from sight, to make them engaging to the eye and imagination. An anatomist, however, is admirably fitted to give advice to a painter; and it is even impracticable to excel in the latter art, without the assistance of the former. We must have an exact knowledge of the parts, their situation and connexion, before we can design with any elegance or correctness. And thus the most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to practical morality; and may render this latter science more correct in its precepts, and more persuasive in its exhortations.88

If we see Austen as engaged in the sort of moral “painting” that Hume describes, I think we can also see her as having obtained the kind of “exact knowledge” of human nature that Hume thinks is required for a “painting” of elegant and correct design. Perhaps she gathered this knowledge directly from such anatomists as Hume and Smith, conceiving her own version of sentimentalist self-command against the backdrop of their “accurate dissections and portraiture.” Or perhaps the line

87 We even learn with Lady Russell that we sometimes have to “admit that [we have] been pretty completely wrong” about someone’s character (P 200).

88 T 3.3.6.6 (SBN 620-1); emphasis original.
of communication is more diffuse. Issues of direct connection notwithstanding, I have argued that, like Hume and Smith, Austen is engaged in the project of conceptualizing a sentimentalist version of self-control, a version of this important character trait that holds that our care for and imagination of the feelings of others is essential to our ability to regulate our own emotions. I have also argued that Austen’s narrative techniques allow her to engage in a more robust way than either Smith or Hume could in the project of sentimental and moral education. With Austen’s heroines and with her narrator, we, as readers, move between fine-grained, peculiar, and highly-situated perspectives, and more general, more impartial, and more enlarged perspectives. We learn to feel what it is like to be a sympathetic and impartial spectator of the world around us just as we learn more specific lessons about certain character traits.

I have focused on the lessons of discerning self-command and strength of mind that we find in Sense and Sensibility and Persuasion, but these are just some of the many possible examples. Like Hume and Smith and other moral philosophers, Austen is engaged in the project of understanding and delineating human character and action, but as a novelist, she has at her disposal more techniques and tools to engage, excite and regulate the sentiments of her readers. Hers are works in which, to borrow the words of the vehement narrator of Northanger Abbey, “the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language” (NA 24).
Abbreviations

Hume
T  A Treatise of Human Nature
EHU Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding
EPM Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals
EMPL Essays: Moral, Political, Literary

Smith
TMS The Theory of Moral Sentiments
EPS Essays on Philosophical Subjects
WN Wealth of Nations

Austen
NA Northanger Abbey
SS Sense and Sensibility
PP Pride and Prejudice
MP Mansfield Park
E Emma
P Persuasion
L Letters

A Note on Citations

References to Hume’s works follow the practice of the Hume Society, using the numbering system of the Clarendon editions, along with the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch pages. For example, when citing Hume’s A Treatise of Human Nature, book II, part iii, section 3, paragraph 1, at page 413 in the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition, the notation would be: T 2.3.3.1; SBN 413. I follow a similar practice when citing Hume’s Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (using section number, paragraph number, Selby-Bigge/Nidditch page number). When citing Hume’s essays, I use the Liberty Fund edition Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary, referring to essay title and page number.

References to Smith’s The Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS) will be to the Oxford/Liberty Fund edition (1976/82), using the convention of Book.Section.Chapter.Paragraph. For example, to cite from Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments, book VII, section ii, chapter 1, paragraph 21, the notation would be: TMS VII.ii.1.21.
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