



Dissing *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: Twenty-Six Critics, from 1765 to 1949

Daniel B. Klein¹

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

The first reviews of Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) were warm and favorable. After Smith’s death in 1790, TMS was consistently criticized, its standing declined quite sharply, and it fell into “oblivion” (Morrow 1927, 336). In 1899 H. C. Macpherson pronounced it “dead” (p. 40).

But TMS is now very much alive. In recent decades, TMS has soared in favorability. The figure below charts the percentage of all four-word strings, in millions of books, that are “Theory of Moral Sentiments” (case-sensitive).



The figure covers up to 2008 and indicates a post-1976 comeback, but I suspect that it does not adequately represent the comeback of TMS in the social sciences

1. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030. I thank David M. Levy and Erik Matson for useful feedback, Stephen Delli Priscoli for checking quotation accuracy, and William Carey for help on Latin.

and humanities (at the [Google Ngram Viewer](#) there is no way to narrow the corpus thusly).

The pattern prompts several questions:

- Why at first the warm reception?
- Why then the fall?
- Why the long years of oblivion?
- Why the comeback, and its timing?
- Why today's wide and warm favor?

The comeback surely depended on the 1976 Glasgow Edition of TMS (eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie). But necessary is not sufficient. The present compendium of quotations aims to contribute to a broader story, by cataloging the disrespect, dislike, disparagement, and dismissal—in a word, the dissing—of TMS up to 1949, by 26 figures, listed here by their native origin:

- *Scotland*: Thomas Reid, George Ridpath, Henry Home Lord Kames, Adam Ferguson, Dugald Stewart, Thomas Brown, James Mackintosh, Henry Brougham, Alexander Bain, H. C. Macpherson, James Bonar, and William R. Scott (born in Northern Ireland)
- *England*: Henry Thomas Buckle, Leslie Stephen, Walter Bagehot, Henry Sidgwick, J. A. Farrer, Harold Laski
- *France*: Sophie de Grouchy Marquise de Condorcet, Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis, Victor Cousin, Théodore Jouffroy, Henri Baudrillard
- *United States*: Simon Patten, Richard T. Ely
- *New Zealand*: Arthur N. Prior

By reading their dissing of TMS we better understand what they disliked. Several points of criticism are commonly made by them: TMS was said to err by relying on allegory, metaphor, and figurative language at the most crucial points in the theory; at those points it was said to invoke principles themselves vague or, even worse, circular; it was said to lack foundations; it was said to violate fundamental demarcations.²

2. On demarcationism, see McCloskey (1985, 42f). In the dissing of TMS, pertinent demarcations are those between reason and sentiment, *is* and *ought*, and others. One critique of demarcationism is not merely that the separation is one of gradations but, more significantly, that the relationship is spiraling, such that an *ought* may be seen as an *is*, or that an instance of reason may be seen as a sentiment (recall that Hume said that reason is a "calm passion;" see Klein and Matson 2015). A distinction certainly may be useful in a loop of the spiral, but each loop also relates to the next loop and the previous loop, with no upper-most loop and no lower-most loop. The spiraling nature of certain formulations relates to non-foundationalism, for, though we may distinguish A and B, it makes little sense to hold that one is foundation for the other,

A TMS devotee, I regard most of the disparagement compiled here to be wrongheaded. Before turning to that compilation, I share some thoughts about the story, including possible answers to some of the questions raised above:

- Smith lectured in Edinburgh, 1748–1751, and became a Glasgow professor in 1751, having published nothing. Smith won support, standing, goodwill, and advancement from lecturing, collegiality, university service, and a dignity of mind and personality. I suspect that from the start of these early years Smith furtively felt himself to be deeply aligned with David Hume, and that he was throughout these years discreet or even dissembling about his non-foundationalist, non-demarcationist Humean tendencies, which, only later, after becoming more apparent, would come to be criticized by his colleagues.
- TMS appeared in 1759. There quickly followed three warm and highly favorable, albeit unsigned, notices by Hume (1759), Edmund Burke (1759), and William Rose (1759). Yet from the first TMS contained intimations to the effect that moral approval always involves, or even *depends on*, a sympathy. That organon, particularly in its stronger form (*viz.*, *depends on*), would in time become a major point of dissatisfaction.
- Smith’s moral philosophy course at Glasgow was taken over in 1764 by Thomas Reid (Norton and Stewart-Robertson 1980, 382).
- *The Wealth of Nations* (WN) in 1776 elevated Smith to still much greater eminence.
- Later in 1776 Smith published his letter to William Strahan eulogizing Hume. In 1780 Smith would say it “brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain” (*Corr.*, 251; see Rasmussen 2017, 215–228).
- TMS had been a quite lesser book than what it became in 1790 with Ed. 6. Dugald Stewart observed (quoted below) that Smith now “laid much greater stress upon” the man within the breast. Smith now referred, repeatedly, to the man within the breast as a “*supposed* impartial spectator” (*italics added*), and he described him as a “representative of the impartial spectator.”³ From Ed. 5 to Ed. 6, there was a threefold increase in the number of occurrences of the expression *impartial spec-*

for rather the relationship is ... $A_i \rightarrow B_i \rightarrow A_{i+1} \rightarrow B_{i+1}$ The TMS-dissing writers quoted in the present compilation are often weak in their appreciation of the spiraling nature of some of Smith’s formulations.

3. The expression “supposed impartial spectator” occurs at 131.32, 134.1, 226.22, 262.1, 262.2, 287.34—all new to Ed. 6. The man within the breast as “representative of the impartial spectator” is at 215.11—also new to Ed. 6.

tator.⁴ Also, Ed. 6 was significantly less religious, confirming signs in WN and the eulogy of Hume. Although now less tethered to established religion, TMS became much more allegorical, and its non-foundationalism more elaborate.

- A few months after publication of TMS Ed. 6 in 1790, Smith died. In the years that followed, figures such as Stewart absorbed the final edition, and, seeing more to object to, and also being no longer stayed by Smith's personage, began to express criticism openly. Within a few decades a pattern of criticisms became quite common. TMS fell sharply in standing, and then into oblivion. In Smith's oeuvre TMS was utterly eclipsed by WN—even though, according to the testimony of Smith's friend Samuel Romilly in a letter of 1790, Smith “always considered his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as a much superior work to his *Wealth of Nations*” (Romilly 1840, 404).
- In the late 1970s TMS began a rapid resurgence that continues to today. Many scholars (e.g., Griswold 1999, 165; Fleischacker 2004, 23–26; Rothschild 2004, 152) note that Smith's moral philosophy was not foundationalist. That feature was not much *celebrated* in the resurgence, but now readers stopped holding Smith's not being foundationalist against him,⁵ and it seemed readers also no longer found serious fault in the other features for which TMS had been forsaken by roughly seven generations.

A guided compilation of dissing TMS

The compilation that follows bears some likeness, and a great debt, to John Reeder's *On Moral Sentiments: Contemporary Responses to Adam Smith* (1997).⁶ I use only works written in English or translated into English (and consequently bypass altogether several German critics, for example). I concatenate quotations jauntily,

4. For the threefold increase (that is, from 22 to 67), see column G of the “Impartial spectator” spreadsheet of the Excel file [here](#); that file accompanies Klein, Matson, and Doran (2018), which discusses such changes made in Ed. 6.

5. Samuel Fleischacker concurs that TMS's return to great favor in recent decades was because people stopped holding its non-foundationalism against it (Fleischacker 2016, listen around 9:00). For my own explication of Smith's non-foundationalism see Klein 2016.

6. Reeder (1997) differs from the present compilation in that it includes both positive and negative commentary, and for the pieces it includes it more thoroughly reproduces the piece. Of the 26 authors that I quote, only eight are in Reeder, namely Kames, Reid, Ferguson, Stewart, Brown, Mackintosh, Jouffroy, and Farrer.

providing such contextualization as necessary or noteworthy. The goals here do not include providing or even pointing to background sources about the individuals featured, nor to treatments of their criticisms of TMS. This compilation is a set of quotations to work from, not finish with. I seize upon criticisms, not praise: Many of the quoted authors (notably Stewart, Brown, Mackintosh, Brougham, Farrer, Macpherson, Bonar, and Scott) also express more than token praise for TMS.⁷ The ordering of the authors generally follows the order of the onset of their dissing of TMS (*not* birthyear), although the French authors are grouped together as a segment in the series. Footnotes are omitted except when indicated otherwise. I put certain bits in **boldface**, notably criticism of TMS's metaphorical or allegorical language, the vagueness and supposed circularity of its principles, its lack of foundations, and its violation of supposedly fundamental demarcations. All boldface has been added.

Thomas Reid (1710–1796)

We begin with a figure of special importance, Thomas Reid. The opening paragraphs of a chapter on the “First Principles of Morals” provide a taste of his thinking:

Morals, like all other sciences, must have first principles, on which all moral reasoning is grounded.

In every branch of knowledge where disputes have been raised, it is useful to distinguish the first principles from the superstructure. They are the foundation on which the whole fabric of the science leans; and whatever is not supported by this foundation can have no stability.

In all rational belief, the thing believed is either itself a first principle, or it is by just reasoning deduced from first principles. When men differ about deductions of reasoning, the appeal must be to the rules of reasoning, which have been very unanimously fixed from the days of Aristotle. But when they differ about a first principle, the appeal is made to another tribunal; to that of common sense. (Reid 1788, 369)

In the same work, Reid writes: “A very ingenious author has resolved our moral sentiments respecting the virtues of self-government, into a regard to the opinion of men. This I think is giving a great deal too much to the love of esteem,

7. Of English-available commentary on TMS to 1949, I am aware of only a few that contain no significant dissing (Höffding 1900, I, 443+446; Windelband 1901, 517–518; Hirst 1904; Small 1907; Morrow 1923; 1927). By far the best is Morrow 1923. Biographical works that do not significantly comment on the ideas of TMS include Rae 1895; Scott 1937. Going just a bit beyond our 1949 cut-off, noteworthy for its extended TMS enthusiasm is Taylor 1960.

and putting the shadow of virtue in place of the substance” (1788, 139, see also 163).

When in 1764 Glasgow was selecting a replacement for Smith, Smith received a letter from John Millar, the truest next-generation heir to Hume and Smith (Haakonssen 1996, 7, 159, 163, 180–181, 269). Millar reported that Reid had received support from influential people outside the University (Lord Kames and leading aristocrats), declared his and Joseph Black’s support for another candidate (Thomas Young), and seemed confident that Smith would concur: “We earnestly beg that if you can do any thing in counterworking these extraneous operations you will exert yourself. . . . No body knows of my writing this but Black” (*Corr.*, 100). Thus Millar urged Smith to help stop the appointment of Reid. The appointment went forward, and it arguably was quite fateful, as it gave Reid a secure prominence from which to propound and publish so-called common sense. There is no paper trail of Smith having weighed in, nor correspondence between Reid and Smith.

Reid scarcely alludes to Smith in his published works, but as moral philosophy professor at Glasgow Reid criticized TMS. His lecture notes, presumed reflective of 1765 to his retirement in 1780, treat Smith amply. The following is my own selection of the text first⁸ published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* (Reid 1984).⁹

The Author in this System endeavours to reduce Morals to very few original Principles, for as all Our moral Sentiments are resolved into Sympathy so even this Sympathy seems to be resolved into self love. (Reid 1984, 311)

This Sympathy being a part of our frame implies no virtue at all. . . . But The Sympathy which can with any propriety be called virtuous is a fixed determination of the will. . . . Now this kind of Sympathy supposes a moral faculty. . . . Sympathy when we take it in the first of these senses is a natural affection, resulting immediately from our frame. And requires no imaginary change of persons. When we take Sympathy in the second Sense no change of persons will account for it without supposing a faculty by which perceive right and wrong. (*ibid.*, 312)

As this Author resolves all Sympathy into self love variously modified by certain operations of the Imagination. So he resolves all moral Approbation

8. I say “first” in 1984 for Reid’s own lecture notes, but note that student transcriptions were published in Duncan and Baird (1977).

9. The original text is rough, and I omit some of the editorial paraphernalia and alternate words (from Reid’s own revisions), but without altering any of the words preserved (even when misspelled) nor inserting any new words. Brackets and bracketed material (other than the page citations) are those of Stewart-Robertson and Norton.

and Disapprobation into Sympathy. (313)

I observe that the word Sympathy seems not to have always the same **fixed and determinate** meaning in this System, nor to be so **accurately** defined as is necessary to make it **the foundation** of a distinct Theory of Morals. (313)

Let us suppose that our feeling that Emotion for another which he ought to feel but does not feel, is to be called Sympathy. It is evident that this Sympathy supposes a moral Judgment and consequently a moral faculty. ... Therefore it appears to me that this definition of Sympathy makes a moral faculty to be necessarily antecedent to our Sympathy and consequently our moral Sentiments cannot be the Effect of Sympathy[;] they must go before it, and set bounds to it. (314)

When the Author observes that our Approbation of the Passions of others as just and proper arises from our perceiving them to [be] in accord with what we should feel in like Circumstances; the word *should* here is ambiguous; either it means what we ought to feel in like Circumstances or what we actually would feel in like circumstances. If the first is the meaning it supposes that we have a moral faculty by which we judge of the justness and propriety of our feelings as was already observed[,] but if we take the word *should* here to mean what we actually would feel in like Circumstances, I conceive this account of approbation is very far from the truth. (314)

We may observe that this Author speaks all along of the passions and the feelings of ourselves and others as being not onely the proper but the onely object of moral Approbation & Disapprobation[.] ... Now as the whole of this System by which our moral Sentiments are resolved into Sympathy is built upon this **foundation**. That what we call Virtue and what we account the object of Moral Approbation is a certain tone or temperament of our feelings and passions. If that is not true the **foundation** of it must fail. (314–315)

To approve of an opinion is to judge it to be a true opinion. To approve of an action is to judge that the Agent acted virtuously and properly in doing that Action. The approbation of an action implys not onely a judgment of its being right, but it implys some sentiment of inward worth in the Agent, on account of which he merits our benevolent regard and Esteem. The approbation of his opinion implys nothing of this kind. The word approbation therefore when applied to opinions and to Actions is **equivocal** and we can not reason from the one sense of it to the other. (316)

I conceive this System can never Account for our Approbation and Disapprobation of our own Actions. It is evident that we approve or disapprove of our own Actions as well as those of others, & by the same

principle. Will it be said then that when a Man does a good Action which his heart approves. That this approbation is nothing else but sympathising with himself[?] It would be still more strange if when a Man does an Action which his heart condemns him for, that this disapprobation of his own Mind is an Antipathy to himself. Yet I see no other way Agreeable to this System of accounting for our Approbation or disapprobation of our Own Actions. To Judge of the Propriety of my own Passions and feelings, I must change persons with the impartial Spectator and view them with his Eyes. But how shall I know what judgment he would pass upon them[?] Onely by knowing how I myself judge in such cases. This is the onely way in which I can Jud[g]e of them. There must therefore be some faculty of the Mind by which we approve or disapprove of actions without respect to the Judgment of others otherwise we never could Judge whether they will appear in an agreeable or in a disagreeable light to others. (317)

To conclude these Observations, it is obvious that according to this System there is **no fixed Standard of Virtue at all**[;] it depends not upon our Actions but upon the Tone of our Passions, which in different men is different from Constitution. Nor does it solely depend upon our own Passions but also upon the Sympathetick passions of others. [W]hich may be different in different Persons or in the same Person at different Times. Nor is there any Standard according to which either the Emotions of the Actor or the Sympathy of the Spectator is to be measured[;] all that is required is that they be in Harmony or Concord[.] It is evident that the **ultimate** Measure & Standard of Right and Wrong in human Conduct according to this System of Sympathy, is not any fixed Judgment **grounded upon Truth** or upon the dictates of a well informed Conscience but the variable opinions and passions of Men. (317–318)

In 1778 Reid received a letter and enclosure from Lord Kames. Kames revised one of his works, and shared a draft of a new insertion critical of TMS (the final version appears below). Reid approved, and wrote back: “I have always thought Dr Smith’s System of Sympathy wrong. It is indeed only a Refinement of the selfish System” (quoted in Reeder 1997, 66).

George Ridpath (1716–1772)

George Ridpath was a parish minister, scholar, historian, and Edinburgh graduate. In his diary he wrote in 1759:

Saturday, September 29th.—Got Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* from Matthew, of which I read a little in the evening, but was more inclined to doze. (Ridpath 1922, 273)

Thursday, October 11th.—Read over a good deal more of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and looked over the rest. The work shows him to be a man of knowledge and of genius too, but yet I can by no means join in the applauses I have heard bestowed on it. What is new in it is perhaps of no great moment in itself, and is **neither distinctly nor clearly established**. An extravagant turn to declaim and embellish leads him quite astray from that study of **accuracy, precision, and clearness** that is so essentially necessary to the delivering of any theory, especially a new one; and his indulgence of this humour for playing everywhere the orator, tho' his oratorical talents are far from being extraordinary, has made him spin out to the tedious length of 400 pages what in my opinion might be delivered as fully and with far more energy and perspicuity in 20. What can this arise from but the man's being used all his life to declaim to boys and not attending to the distinction necessary to be made betwixt a circle of *them* as auditors and a world of cool and reasonable men as readers? The most valuable part of the work, tho' not altogether free from the fault taken notice of, is the account given in the end of the different systems of Moral Philosophy, Ancient and Modern. (*ibid.*, 275)

Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696–1782)

Of the TMS critics collected here, Lord Kames was both the first to come into the world and the earliest to put criticism into print—trailing TMS's first appearance by 20 years! A very prominent judge and author, he had been Smith's early patron, and later warmed to Reid; thus his new insertions into the third and final edition of *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1779) mark a significant early moment in the train of disparagement:

A system that resolves every moral sensation of sentiment into sympathy, shall next be introduced. Listen to the author himself.

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of it but by imagining what we ourselves would feel in the like situation. Our senses will never inform us of what a man suffers on the rack. They cannot carry us beyond our own persons; and it is by the imagination only that we can form any perception of what he suffers. Neither can that faculty help us to this, any other way than by representing to us what would be our own sufferings if we were in his place. His agonies when thus brought home to ourselves, begin at last to affect us; and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels.^[10]

10. Kames here is condensing the second paragraph of TMS (see p. 9 in the standard edition).

The **foundation** here assigned for the various sentiments of morality, ought to have been very strictly examined before venturing to **erect so weighty a superstructure upon it**. Is it certain that this play of imagination will necessarily raise the passion of sympathy? The celebrated Rousseau affirms the contrary. "Pity is sweet, says he, because in putting ourselves in place of the person who suffers, we feel the pleasure of not suffering as he does." And considering that the rack is a punishment reserved for atrocious criminals, I should be inclined to think with Rousseau, that the sight of an odious wretch on the rack, instead of sympathizing in his pain, would make one feel pleasure in not suffering as he does; precisely as a ship in a storm makes the spectators at land rejoice in their own security.

But however that may be, my respect to the author of this system as a man of genius and learning, cannot make me blind to a difficulty that appears unsurmountable. If the torments of a man on the rack be not obvious to my sight from his violent perturbation, nor to my hearing from dismal screams and groans, what can I learn from imagining myself to be in his place? He may be happy for ought I know. To give that act of imagination any effect, I ought before hand to know that the person on the rack is suffering violently. Then indeed, the bringing his case home to myself, would naturally inflame my sympathy. I have another argument against this system, which, being more simple and popular, will probably be more relished. That a man should conceive himself to be another, is no slight effort of imagination; and to make sympathy depend on that effort, confines it to persons who have given much exercise to a ductile imagination. Dull people and illiterate rustics are intirely excluded; and yet, among such there appears no defect of sympathy to associates and blood-relations. Nay, we find sympathy eminent even in children; and yet, it would be a hard task to make a child imagine itself to be what it is not. This shows clearly, that sympathy must proceed from some natural principle inherent in all human beings, the young as well as the old.

This principle will appear from the following facts, which every thinking person knows to be true. First, every passion stamps on the countenance certain signs appropriated to it by nature. Next, being taught by nature to connect every external sign with the passion that caused it; we can read in every man's countenance his internal emotions. Third, certain emotions, thus made known, raise in beholders the passion of sympathy. With respect to the last, nothing is more natural than that a social being should be affected with the passions of its fellows. Joy is infectious: so is grief. Fear communicates itself to the beholders; and in an army, the fright of a few spreads the infection till it becomes an universal panic. These facts are clear and certain; and applying them to the subject before us, is it not evident, that the distress we read in a person's countenance, directly moves our sympathy, without needing any aid from imagination? I appeal to any man who has seen a person on the rack, whether his sympathy was not raised by sight merely, without any effort of imagination. Thus, in the sympathetic system under examination, an intricate

circuit is made in order to account for a passion that is raised by a single glance. The system indeed is innocent; but did it hold in fact, its consequences would not be so. Sympathy is but one of many principles that constitute us moral beings; and yet is held furth as the **foundation** of every moral sentiment. **Had not morality a more solid foundation in our nature**, it would give very little obstruction to vicious desires or unjust actions. It is observed above, that, according to this system, sympathy would be rare among the lower ranks. And I now add, that if moral sentiments had no **foundation** but the imagining myself to be another, the far greater part of mankind would be destitute of any moral sentiment.

So much for the sake of truth: in every other view controversy is my aversion. One observation more, and I conclude. This system is far from comprehending all our moral sentiments. It may pretend to account for my sentiments regarding others; but my sentiments regarding myself are entirely left out. My distress upon losing an only son, or my gratitude for a kindly office, are sentiments that neither need to be explained by imagining myself to be another person, nor do they admit of such explanation.

The selfish system shall be more strictly examined. The sympathetic system is a harmless conceit; but a system that resolves all morality into self-love, cannot but be dangerous among luxurious nations whose bent to selfish pleasures is already too strong. (Kames 2005/1779, 70–73)

Beforehand, Kames, in late 1778, graciously ran a draft of the insertion by Smith. I remark on Smith’s letter back to Kames at the end of the present piece.

Adam Ferguson (1723–1816)

Adam Ferguson was born four days after Adam Smith but outlived him by 26 years. Their relationship “had its ups and downs” (Ross 2010, 203).

Our first item from Ferguson is from his *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792). It does not mention TMS specifically, but implicates it. After remarking on Nicolas Malebranche, John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes and their “allegorical substitutions” and “metaphorical language” (1792, 75), he writes (his notes inserted in brackets):

The author of an Enquiry into the Mind,* [*Dr Reid] and of subsequent Essays on the intellectual and active powers of man, has great merit in the effect to which he has pursued this history: But, considering the point at which the science stood, when he began his inquiries, he has perhaps no less merit in having removed **the mist of hypothesis and metaphor**, with which the subject was enveloped; and, in having taught us **to state the facts, of which we are conscious, not in figurative language**, but in the terms which are proper to the subject. In this it will be our advantage to follow him; the more,

that in former theories so much attention had been paid to the introduction of ideas or images, as the elements of knowledge, that the belief of any external existence or prototype has been left to be inferred from the mere idea or image; and this inference indeed is **so little founded**, that many who have come to examine its evidence have thought themselves warranted to deny it altogether* [*See the Writings of Dr [George] Berk[e]ley and Mr Hume]. And hence the scepticism of ingenious men, who not seeing a proper access to knowledge, through medium of ideas, without considering whether the road they had been directed to take was the true, or a false one, denied the possibility of **arriving at an end**. (Ferguson 1792, 75–76)

The next item comes from a short discourse Ferguson composed apparently sometime after 1800 (Ross 2010, 200). The discourse involves Hume, the not so tactful General Robert Clerk, and Smith, but I excerpt only portions involving Clerk and Smith.

After Clerk and Hume have conversed about morality and utility, Smith enters the room “with a smile on his Countenance and muttering somewhat to himself” (Ferguson 1960, 228). Smith is told they have been discussing a subject treated by TMS and Smith asks for Clerk’s opinion of the work:

CLERK. I don’t much like to trouble authors with my opinion of their works.

SMITH. Ah, Do, you will oblige me!

CLERK. If you insist upon it. I must be plain & leave no doubts.

SMITH. Surely. Surely.

CLERK. Your Book is to me a Heap of absolute Nonsense.

Smith seemed to be stunn'd and Clerk went on, You endeavour to explain away the distinction of Right and Wrong by telling us that all the difference is the Sympathy or want of Sympathy, that is, the Assent or Dissent of some two or more persons of whom some one acts & some other observes the action and agrees or does not agree in the same feeling with the actor. If the Observer agree, sympathise, go along with him, or feel that he would have done the same himself, he cannot but approve of the Action. If, on the Contrary, he does not Sympathise or agree with the Actor, he dissents & cannot but disapprove of him; and you seem to mean that where there is neither assent nor dissent there is neither Right nor wrong, and no one would ever suppose any such thing. Or if you don’t deny the reality of the Distinction, you at least furnish but a very inadequate means of discovering it. How can I believe that a Person is in the right because I sympathise with him? May not I myself be in the wrong? Does the presence of any sympathy ascertain a good action, or the want, of a bad one?

SMITH. No! I have cleared up that point. Parties concerned in any transaction may be willing each to flatter himself or both Mutually to flatter one another, But to the monitor may not fail to present himself. The well

informed and impartial observer will bring to view what the Ignorant or prejudiced would overlook.

CLERK. That is convenient, to be able to bring Virtue itself to your aid when actual Sympathy fails. You began with calling Sympathy to explain Moral Sentiment. You now call up moral sentiment to explain itself: what is a well informed & impartial observer, but a Virtuous Person whose Sympathy may be relied on as a Test of Virtue? If he be well informed, of what is he informed? Not of Astronomy or Geography, for these would be of little use to him in distinguishing the Chara[c]ters of men. For this purpose he must be informed of the distinction of Right, how constituted and applied in particular Instances. And to be impartial must aim at a fair application without By [bias?] to any Side. Such a Person is not likely to mislead those who confide in him and such a Person every one is concerned to become in himself & instead of acquiescing in Sympathy as the Test of Virtue, appeals to Virtue as the test of Just Sympathy.

Here then ends your System. After beating round a **Circle of Objections & Answers**, you **return to the point from which you set** the Phaenomena of moral distinctions, moral sentiments, to be explained. (Ferguson 1960, 228–229)¹¹

A couple of paragraphs later, Smith resumes:

SMITH. ... a man who participates in the Passion of another cannot but approve of it. Every Passion or strong motive urging a Person to act justifies itself and, if others go along with it or Sympathise, they too approve: if they do not go along with it, they disapprove or condemn his Conduct and so he does himself if, when the occasion is past, he cannot go along with the passion which actuated him.

CLERK. The whole amount then is that what others term Conscience, you Term Sympathy or the want of Sympathy. Every body knows, that under the operation of any strong Passion men are incapable of cool reflection. This you call justifying their Passion; but when it [is] over & they come to reflect, a Crime if committed stares them in the face & they become a prey to remorse or self condemnation. I do not see that your account of the matter is any way more Intelligible than this, or that we are any way nearer **the ultimate** in the one account than in the other. Most men repose on the Fact that men are by nature endued with a Principle of Conscience. But you say the Fact commonly called Conscience is Sympathy or the want of Sympathy, and the supposed Theory is a mere change of Words or at best an attempt to confound two distinct principles of Nature....

I confess I was affraid that your Sympathy might have some such Effects as this or that the difference of right & wrong might vanish into an

11. The bracketed insertions are those of Mossner.

assent or dissent of two or more Persons who may agree in the wrong as well [as] in the Right: but you relieve us at last by telling us you do not mean any assent or dissent at random but that of a well informed & impartial observer, who we would say in common language is a virtuous man or Competent Judge. And the preference due to such a Person is what no one doubts, tho it is the Phaenomenon which you sett out with a Purpose to explain in your Theory, and so have it at last as others do as a self evident Truth which needs no Explanation. (ibid., 229–230)

Ferguson left another unpublished, incomplete discourse. In its published form, its editor Ernest Mossner (1963) quotes the discourse as he, as it were, narrates the conversation to us. Ferguson himself is a participant in the discourse. The topic comes to the principle of approbation. I quote thusly directly from Mossner, where quotation marks indicate the Ferguson character speaking in the dialogue, and other text is Mossner narrating for us:

“Others in treating of this Subject confound two questions together as different as Wisdom is from folly and Candour from Partiality.”

The first question is, “From what Principle *may we Safely & truly* decide of Action and Character?”

The second question is, “On what Principle *do men actually* decide or entertain Sentiments of Praise or Blame?”

Ferguson’s answers are speedily forthcoming.

“To the first Question we have now endeavoured to Answer that Wisdom & Goodness, the Excellence of Intelligent Being, is the Test of moral Rectitude & Felicity and that well Informed Intelligence is competent to judge of such Merits.

“To the second Question we may admit that men frequently consult their own Interest in judging of merit in others.

“To others we may admit that what they are pleased to call sympathy or even coincidence of Sentiment or [the] reverse is the ordinary or frequent **ground** of Estimation of praise or Censure. But we cannot admit that either is a safe **ground** of Estimation, much less the only **Ground** which Nature has laid for the distinction of Right & Wrong. And every attempt to Instruct us on the Subject without distinguishing the Questions [that is, the first and second stated previously] is not only Nugatory and Perplexing to the unwary but actually tending to **explain away** distinctions of the utmost importance to Mankind, turning Zeal for Morals into a mere selfish Interest or into a mere coincidence of sentiment which may take place among Knaves and Fools as well as among honest Men.” (Ferguson, presented by Mossner 1963, 307–308; italics and the second brackets added by me)

Dugald Stewart (1753–1828)

Dugald Stewart “decisively influenced a large number of men who must all, in varying degrees, be characterized as intellectual epigoni” (Haakonssen 1996, 261). From Stewart’s long years of eminence at Edinburgh, his influence was felt in their careers in opinion, publishing, reform, and politics, including leaders at the *Edinburgh Review*. Stewart played a leading role in TMS’s fall and send-off to oblivion.

In his account of Smith’s life and writings, delivered orally in 1793, Stewart politely summarized TMS, criticizing only gently: “For my own part I must confess, that it does not coincide with my notions concerning the **foundation** of Morals” (1982/1795, 290). He suggested engagement with its “author’s peculiar theories” as follows: “it is easy for an attentive reader, by stripping them of **hypothetical** terms, to state them to himself with that logical **precision**, which, in such very difficult disquisitions, can alone conduct us with certainty to the truth” (ibid., 291).

But in Stewart’s lectures his dissatisfaction is elaborated, as in *The Philosophy of the Active and Moral Powers of Man* (1829):

The phenomena generally referred to *sympathy* have appeared to Mr. Smith so important, and so curiously connected, that he has been led to attempt an explanation from this single principle of all the phenomena of moral perception. In this attempt, however, (abstracting entirely from the **vague** use which he occasionally makes of the word,) he has plainly been misled, like many eminent philosophers before him, by an excessive love of simplicity; and has mistaken a very subordinate principle in our moral constitution (or rather a principle *superadded* to our moral constitution as an auxiliary to the sense of duty) for that faculty which distinguishes right from wrong, and which (by what name soever we may choose to call it) recurs on us constantly in all our ethical disquisitions, as **an ultimate fact in the nature of man**. (Stewart 1829, 209–210)

It may be objected to Mr. Smith’s theory, that it confounds the *means* or *expedients* by which nature enables us to correct our moral judgments, with the principles in our constitution to which our moral judgments owe their origin. These means or expedients he has indeed described with singular penetration and sagacity, and by doing so, has thrown new and most important lights on *practical* morality ; but, after all his reasonings on the subject, the metaphysical problem concerning **the primary sources** of our moral ideas and emotions will be found involved in the same **obscurity** as before. The intention of such expedients, it is perfectly obvious, is merely to obtain a just and fair view of circumstances; and after this view has been obtained, the question still remains, what constitutes the obligation upon me to act in a particular manner?

In answer to this question it is said, that, from recollecting my own judgments in similar cases in which I was concerned, I infer in what light my conduct will appear to society; that there is an exquisite satisfaction annexed to mutual sympathy; and that, in order to obtain this satisfaction, I accommodate my conduct, not to my own feelings, but to those of my fellow creatures. Now, I acknowledge, that this may account for a man's assuming the appearance of virtue, and I believe that something of this sort is **the real foundation** of the rules of good breeding in polished society; but in the important concerns of life, I apprehend there is something more, —for when I have once satisfied myself with respect to the conduct which an impartial judge would approve of, I feel that this conduct is *right* for me, and that I am under a moral obligation to put it in practice. (*ibid.*, 211–212)

From these observations I conclude, that the words *right* and *wrong*, *ought* and *ought not*, express simple ideas or notions, of which no explanation can be given. They are to be found in all languages, and it is impossible to carry on any ethical speculation without them. Of this Mr. Smith himself furnishes a remarkable proof in the statement of his theory, not only by the occasional use which he makes of these and other synonymous expressions, but by his explicit and repeated acknowledgments, that the propriety of action cannot be always determined by the *actual* judgments of society, and that, in such cases, we must act according to the judgments which other men *ought* to have formed of our conduct. Is not this to admit, that we have a standard of right and wrong in our own minds, of superior authority to any instinctive propensity we may feel to obtain the sympathy of our fellow-creatures?

It was in order to reconcile this acknowledgment with the general language of his system that Mr. Smith was forced to have recourse to the supposition of “*an abstract man* within the breast, the representative of mankind and substitute of the Deity, whom nature has constituted the supreme judge of all our actions.”¹² Of this very ingenious fiction he has availed himself in various passages of the *first* edition of his book; but he has laid much greater stress upon it in the *last* edition, published a short time before his death. An idea somewhat similar occurs in Lord Shaftesbury's *Advice to an Author*, where he observes, with that quaintness of phraseology which so often deforms his otherwise beautiful style, that “when the wise ancients spoke of a demon, genius, or angel, to whom we are committed from the moment of our birth, they meant no more than enigmatically to declare, “That we have each of us a patient in ourselves: that we are properly our own subjects of practice: and that we then become due practitioners, when, by virtue of an intimate recess, we can discover a certain duplicity of soul, and divide ourselves into two parties.” He afterwards tells us, that, “according as this recess was deep and intimate, and the dual number practically formed in us, we were supposed

12. This passage is from Ed. 5 of TMS, and appears in the standard edition at p. 130 note r.

by the ancients to advance in morals and true wisdom.”

By means of this fiction Mr. Smith has rendered his theory (contrary to what might have been expected from its first aspect) perfectly coincident in its practical tendency with that cardinal principle of the stoical philosophy which exhorts us to search for the rules of life, not *without* ourselves, but *within*: “Nec te quæsiveris extra.” Indeed [Joseph] Butler himself has not asserted the authority and supremacy of conscience in stronger terms than Mr. Smith, who represents this as a manifest and unquestionable principle, whatever particular theory we may adopt concerning the origin of our moral ideas. It is only to be regretted, that, instead of **the metaphorical expression** of “*the man within the breast*, to whose opinions and feelings we find it of more consequence to conform our conduct than to those of the whole world,”^[13] he had not made use of the simpler and more familiar words *reason* and *conscience*. This mode of speaking was indeed suggested to him, or rather obtruded on him by the theory of sympathy, and nothing can exceed the skill and the taste with which he has availed himself of its assistance in perfecting his system; but it has the effect, with many readers, of keeping out of view the real state of the question, and (like Plato’s Commonwealth of the Soul, and Council of State) to encourage among inferior writers **a figurative or allegorical style** in treating of subjects which, more than any other, **require all the simplicity, precision, and logical consistency** of which language is susceptible. (212–214)

Thomas Brown (1778–1820)

As a teenager studying at Edinburgh under Dugald Stewart, Thomas Brown pondered moral and mental experience as psychological or physiological phenomena. At age 20 he published a challenge to Erasmus Darwin’s materialism. Brown studied medicine, participated in the early years of the *Edinburgh Review*, published poetry, and wrote on Hume’s views of causality. Beginning in 1808 Brown assisted Stewart and then co-occupied the moral philosophy chair at Edinburgh, where he developed lectures that captivated students—and that criticized TMS—until 1820, when Brown suffered an early death at age 42. The year of his death he published several works, including his four-volume *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, which in its last volume criticizes TMS at length (Brown 1820, 112–145). The criticism has lately been reproduced in the present journal (Brown 2017/1820), so here I provide just a few excerpts:

[T]here is still one system which deserves to be considered by us... as appearing to fix morality on **a basis**, that is not sufficiently firm; with the discovery of

13. This does not seem to be a direct quotation of Smith, but perhaps is a paraphrase of a passage prior to Ed. 6 found in the standard edition of TMS at p. 129 note r.

the instability of which, therefore, the virtues that are represented as supported on it, might be considered as themselves unstable; as the statue, though it be the image of a God, or the column, though it be a part of a sacred temple, may fall, not because it is not sufficiently cohesive and firm in itself, but because it is too massy, for the feeble **pedestal** on which it has been placed.

The system, to which I allude, is that which is delivered by Dr Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*... (Brown 1820, 113; 2017, 5)

The sympathy, therefore, on which the feeling of propriety is said to depend, assumes the previous belief of that very propriety;—or if there be no previous belief of the moral suitableness of our own emotions, there can be no reason, from the mere dissonance of other emotions with ours, to regard these dissonant emotions as morally unsuitable to the circumstances in which they have arisen. (Brown 1820, 124; 2017, 10)

If those to whom an action has directly related, are incapable of discovering, by the longest and minutest examination of it—however much they may have been benefited by it, or injured, and intentionally benefited or injured—any *traces* of *right* or *wrong*, merit or demerit, in the performer of the action; those whose sympathy consists merely in an illusory participation of the same interest, cannot surely derive, from the fainter reflex feelings, that moral knowledge which even the more vivid primary emotions were incapable of affording,—anymore than we can be supposed to acquire from the most faithful echo, important truths that were never uttered by the voices which it reflects. (Brown 1820, 133; 2017, 15)

If, indeed, we had *previously* any moral notions of actions as right or wrong, we might very easily judge of the propriety or impropriety of the sentiments of others, according as our own do or do not sympathize with them; and it is this *previous* feeling of propriety or impropriety which Dr Smith tacitly assumes, even in contending for the exclusive influence of the *sympathy*, as itself the **original** source of every moral sentiment. (Brown 1820, 134; 2017, 15)

It was absolutely necessary, therefore, for Dr Smith to maintain, that we have no power of judging of our own actions directly,—that, knowing the choice which we have made, and all the circumstances which led to our choice, and all the consequences of benefit or injury to individuals, and to the world, which our choice may have produced,—it is yet absolutely impossible for us to distinguish, without the aid of the real or supposed sentiments of others, any difference of propriety or impropriety, right or wrong, merit or demerit, or whatever other names we may use to express the differences of vice and virtue... (Brown 1820, 137; 2017, 17)

That his own penetrating mind should not have discovered the inconsistencies

that are involved in his theory, and that these should not have readily occurred to the many philosophic readers and admirers of his work, may, in part, have arisen,—as many other seeming wonders of the kind have arisen,—from the ambiguities of language. The meaning of the important word *sympathy*, is **not sufficiently definite**, so as to present always one clear notion to the mind. (Brown 1820, 142–143; 2017, 20)

James Mackintosh (1765–1832)

A pupil of Stewart, James Mackintosh was a philosopher, historian, politician, and commentator (e.g., on Burke and James Mill). In 1820 Stewart wanted Mackintosh as his successor at Edinburgh, but Mackintosh, “something of a social and intellectual gadfly, declined to present himself, preferring to pursue his career in politics” (Reeder 1997, xviii). In 1836, Mackintosh published the *Dissertation on the Progress of Ethical Philosophy*, in an introductory volume of the new edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, republished in volume I of his *Miscellaneous Works* (1846). It contains this critical section regarding TMS:

The main defects of this theory seem to be the following.

1. Though it is not to be condemned for declining inquiry into the origin of our fellow-feeling, which, being one of the most certain of all facts, might well be assumed as **ultimate** in speculations of this nature, it is evident that the circumstances to which some speculators ascribe the formation of sympathy at least contribute to strengthen or impair, to contract or expand it. It will appear, more conveniently, in the next article, that the theory of “sympathy” has suffered from the omission of these circumstances. For the present, it is enough to observe how much our compassion for various sorts of animals, and our fellow-feeling with various races of men, are proportioned to the resemblance which they bear to ourselves, to the frequency of our intercourse with them, and to other causes which, in the opinion of some, afford evidence that sympathy itself is dependent on a more general law.

2. Had Smith extended his view beyond the mere play of sympathy itself, and taken into account all its preliminaries, and accompaniments, and consequences, it seems improbable that he would have fallen into the great error of representing the sympathies in their primitive state, without undergoing any transformation, as continuing exclusively to constitute the moral sentiments. He is not content with teaching that they are the roots out of which these sentiments grow, the stocks on which they are grafted, the elements of which they are compounded;—doctrines to which nothing could be objected but their unlimited extent. He tacitly assumes that if a sympathy **in the beginning** caused or formed a moral approbation, so it must ever continue to do. He proceeds like a geologist who should tell us that the body of this planet had always been in the same state, shutting his eyes to transition states,

and secondary formations; or like a chemist who should inform us that no compound substance can possess new qualities entirely different from those which belong to its materials. His acquiescence in this old and still general error is the more remarkable, because Mr. Hume's beautiful Dissertation on the Passions had just before opened a striking view of some of the compositions and decompositions which render the mind of a formed man as different from its original state, as the organization of a complete animal is from the condition of the first dim speck of vitality. It is from this oversight (ill supplied by moral rules,—a loose stone in his building) that he has exposed himself to objections **founded** on experience, to which it is impossible to attempt any answer. For it is certain that in many, nay in most cases of moral approbation, the adult man approves the action or disposition merely *as right*, and with a distinct consciousness that no process of sympathy intervenes between the approval and its object. It is certain that an unbiassed person would call it *moral approbation*, only as far as it excluded the interposition of any reflection between the conscience and the mental state approved. Upon the supposition of an unchanged state of our active principles, it would follow that sympathy never had any share in the greater part of them. Had he admitted the sympathies to be only elements entering into the formation of Conscience, their disappearance, or their appearance only as auxiliaries, after the mind is mature, would have been no more an objection to his system, than the conversion of a substance from a transitional to a permanent state is a perplexity to the geologist. It would perfectly resemble the destruction of qualities, which is the ordinary effect of chemical composition.

3. The same error has involved him in another difficulty perhaps still more fatal. The sympathies have nothing more of an *imperative* character than any other emotions. They attract or repel like other feelings, according to their intensity. If, then, the sympathies continue in mature minds to constitute the whole of Conscience, it becomes utterly impossible to explain the character of command and supremacy, which is attested by the unanimous voice of mankind to belong to that faculty, and to form its essential distinction. Had he adopted the other representation, it would be possible to conceive, perhaps easy to explain, that Conscience should possess a quality which belonged to none of its elements.

4. It is to this representation that Smith's theory owes that unhappy appearance of rendering the rule of our conduct dependent on the notions and passions of those who surround us, of which the utmost efforts of the most refined ingenuity have not been able to divest it. This objection, or topic, is often ignorantly urged; the answers are frequently solid; but to most men they must always appear to be an **ingenious and intricate contrivance of cycles and epicycles**, which perplex the mind too much to satisfy it, and seem devised to evade difficulties which cannot be solved. All theories which treat Conscience as built up by circumstances inevitably acting on all human minds, are, indeed, liable to somewhat of the same misconception; unless they place in

the strongest light (what Smith's theory excludes) the total destruction of the scaffolding, which was necessary only to the erection of the building, after the mind is adult and mature, and warn the hastiest reader, that it then rests **on its own foundation alone**.

5. The constant reference of our own dispositions and actions to the point of view from which they are estimated by others, seems to be rather an excellent expedient for preserving our impartiality, than a fundamental principle of Ethics. But impartiality, which is no more than a removal of some hinderance to right judgment, supplies no materials for its exercise, and no rule, or even principle, for its guidance. It nearly coincides with the Christian precept of "doing unto others as we would they should do unto us;"—an admirable practical maxim, but, as Leibnitz has said truly, intended only as a correction of self-partiality.

6. Lastly, this ingenious system **renders all morality relative**, by referring it to the pleasure of an agreement of our feelings with those of others,—by confining itself entirely to the question of moral approbation, and by providing no place for the consideration of that quality which distinguishes all good from all bad actions;—a defect which will appear in the sequel to be more immediately fatal to a theorist of the *sentimental*, than to one of the *intellectual* school. Smith shrinks from considering utility in that light, as soon as it presents itself, or very strangely ascribes its power over our moral feelings to admiration of the mere adaptation of means to ends, (which might surely be as well felt for the production of wide-spread misery, by a consistent system of wicked conduct,)—instead of ascribing it to benevolence, with Hutcheson and Hume, or to an extension of that very sympathy which is his own **first principle**. (Mackintosh 1846, 151–154)

Henry Brougham (1778–1868)

Henry Brougham, a student of Dugald Stewart, was one of the founders and heavy contributors to the *Edinburgh Review*, and a prodigious public intellectual. He became an eminent public figure, MP, and in 1830 lord chancellor. His *Lives of Philosophers of the Time of George III* contains lengthy treatment of Adam Smith, principally WN. The following is from Ed. 3 of 1855:

The 'Theory of Moral Sentiments,' although it be not the work by which Dr. Smith is best known, and for which he is most renowned, is yet a performance of the highest merit. The system has not, indeed, been approved by the philosophical world, and it seems liable to insuperable objections when considered even with an ordinary degree of attention, objections which never could have escaped the acuteness of its author but for the veil so easily drawn over an inquirer's eyes when directed to the weak points of his own supposed discovery. The principle or property in our nature which leads us to sympa-

these or feel with the feelings of others, to be pleased when our feelings are in accordance with theirs, to be displeased when they are in discord, must be on all hands admitted to exist; and thence may fairly be deduced the inference, that our approval of another's conduct is affected by the consciousness of this accord of our feelings, and our self-approval by the expectation of his feelings according with our own. But when we resolve our whole approval of his conduct and of our own into this sympathy, we evidently assume two things : first, that the accord is **a sufficient ground** of approbation; and, secondly, that this approbation is **not independent but relative, or reflected**, and rests upon either the feelings of others and upon our own speculations respecting those feelings, or upon our sympathy with those feelings, or upon both the one and the other. Now, the first of these things involves a *petitio principii*, and the second involves both a *petitio principii* and a dangerous doctrine. It cannot surely be doubted that a sense of right may exist in the mind, a disposition to pronounce a thing fit and proper, innocent or praiseworthy, unfit or unbecoming, guilty or blameworthy, without the least regard either to the feelings or the judgments of other men. It is quite certain, that, in point of fact, we feel this sentiment of approbation or disapprobation without being in the least degree sensible of making any reference to other men's feelings, and no sympathy with them is interposed between our own sentence of approval or disapproval and its object. But it is enough to say, and it seems to answer the theory at once, that even if our sympathy were admitted to be the **foundation** of our approval, our inability to sympathise the **ground** of our disapproval, this in no way explains why we should approve because of the accord and disapprove because of the discord.

The theory, with the utmost concession that can be made to it as to **the ground-work**, leaves the super-structure still defective, and defective in the same degree in which the 'Theory of Utility' is defective; we are still left to seek for a reason why approval follows the perception of corresponding feelings in the one case, of general utility in the other. Dr. [William] Paley is so sensible of this, that after resolving all questions of morals into questions of utility, he is obliged to call in the Divine Will as the **ground** of our doing or approving that which is found to be generally useful. Other reasoners on the same side of the question pass over the defect of their system altogether, while some try the question by assuming that we must desire or approve that which is useful; while a third class, much more consistently, consider that the approving of what is generally useful, and disapproving of what is generally hurtful, arises from the exercise of an inherent faculty or moral sense, an innate principle or property in our nature, irresistible and universal. The like defect is imputable to Dr. Smith's theory, and is only to be supplied either by Dr. Paley's method of reasoning, or by the last supposition to which I have referred. But all this concedes a great deal more than is due to the 'Theory of Sympathy,' and **assumes it to stand on as good a foundation** as that of 'Utility.' Now one consideration, which has in part been anticipated, shows that **such is not**

the case. We may sympathise with another, that is, we may feel that in his position our own inclinations would be exactly the same with those under which he appears to be acting, and yet we may equally feel that we should deserve blame, and not approval. Why? “Because,” says Dr. Smith, “we take into the account also that others, that is to say, men in general, not under the influence of excitement to disturb their feelings or their judgments, will disapprove.” But why should they? If they are to place themselves, as we are desired to do, in the situation of the propositus, of him whose conduct is the subject of consideration, they must each of them feel, as we do ourselves, that in his situation they would do as he is doing, or, at least, would be inclined so to do. Therefore, this appeal to others in general, this calling in the general sense to correct the individual, can have no effect upon the hypothesis; it can only exert any influence, or apply any correction, **upon some other hypothesis.** It appears, therefore, that in every view the theory is unsound. (Brougham 1855, 197–199)

Sophie de Grouchy Marquise de Condorcet (1764–1822), Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis (1757–1808), and Henri Baudrillart (1821–1892)

Michaël Bizou is one of the composers of the 1999 French translation of TMS (Smith 1999). Here I crib from his splendid essay about the French translations (Bizou 2015).

Prior to Smith’s Ed. 6, two separate translations had appeared. In 1798 came the translation of Ed. 6 by Sophie de Grouchy, Marquise de Condorcet. Bizou notes that all three translations tended to interpret “Scottish moral sentimentalism through the framework of French moral rationalism” (2015, 59). Bizou explains that Grouchy regrets that TMS “does not go philosophically far enough in the explanation it gives of the foundation of morals” (Bizou 2015, 59). Grouchy published, along with her translation, a set of letters on morals and sympathy. She writes: “Smith did not go further than establishing the existence of [sympathy] and showing its principal effects. I was sorry that he had not done more, had not penetrated **its first cause**” (Grouchy, quoted and translated in Bizou 2015, 58). For Grouchy virtue comes to be defined as “actions giving to others a pleasure that is approved by reason” (ibid., 59).

Grouchy’s commentary, known as *Letters on Sympathy*,¹⁴ are addressed to “C,” presumed to be her brother-in-law Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis, physician, philosopher, and *idéologue*. In work from 1802, Cabanis writes: “Smith had made a very learned study, which was nevertheless incomplete for want of his having **linked**

14. See Grouchy (2017), [here](#), for an online English translation by Jonathan Bennett.

it to physical laws, and which Mme Condorcet, by means of simple rational considerations, knew how to remove from the **vagueness** in which it was left by the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*” (Cabanis, quoted and translated in Forget 2001, 321; see Cabanis 1867, 283–284).

Biziou writes that during the first half of the nineteenth century, readers of TMS in French “shared the same moral rationalism as that of its translator.” He mentions Théodore Jouffroy and Victor Cousin, both glossed below, as philosophers who commented at length on TMS: “But if they are appreciative of Smith as an eminent member of what they term the ‘Scottish school of philosophy’, their favourite author in this so-called school is much rather Thomas Reid” (Biziou 2015, 62).

“Then,” writes Biziou, from about 1850 “to the late twentieth century, in France people almost stopped reading Smith as a moral philosopher” (2015, 62). This despite the fact that in 1860 Grouchy’s translation was reissued, with a new introduction by the economist Henri Baudrillart. In the following quotation Biziou relates and quotes Baudrillart on TMS:

So sympathy, in the *Theory*, is [according to Baudrillart] just another name for harmony. In this interpretation, the ‘impartial spectator’ becomes quite an abstruse and tortuous concept, which Smith had had better replaced by the concept of reason: “This ideal spectator that we carry inside us...Smith should have given him right away his real name, which is reason, instead of trying to explain it as an artificial production of sympathy alone’. Baudrillart thus adopts the moral rationalism of the French tradition, just as Cousin and Jouffroy a few years before...Baudrillart is satisfied with the Marquise’s translation, through which, he says, Smith’s thought ‘is always conveyed with the utmost precision’. (Biziou 2015, 63, including his translations of passages from Baudrillart 1860)

Glenn Morrow (1923, 36) indicates that Albert Delatour (1866), whose work is not in English, was another significant French critic of TMS.

Victor Cousin (1792–1867)

The Scottish philosophy of common sense was introduced into the French university philosophy curriculum after 1814 by Pierre Paul Royer-Collard, whose disciples Victor Cousin and Théodore Jouffroy commented at great length on TMS (Reeder 1997, xx). A popular and prestigious professor, and later minister of public instruction, Cousin commented at great length on TMS in his history of modern philosophy (Cousin 1846, 192–246), but the material is not available in English. His *Lectures on the True, the Beautiful, and the Good* contain pertinent remarks:

[T]here are philosophers, for example, Hutcheson, Smith, and others, who, mistrusting the senses and reason, give **the supremacy** to sentiment. (Cousin 1855, 347)

The philosophy which deduces all our ideas from the senses falls to the ground, then, before the idea of the beautiful. It remains to see whether this idea can be better explained by means of sentiment, which is different from sensation, which so nearly resembles reason that good judges have often taken it for reason, and have made it the principle of the idea of the beautiful as well as that of the good. It is already a progress, without doubt, to go from sensation to sentiment, and Hutcheson and Smith are in our eyes very different philosophers from Condillac and Helvetius; but we believe that we have sufficiently established that, in confounding sentiment with reason, we deprive it of its **foundation and rule**, that sentiment, particular and variable in its nature, different to different men, and in each man continually changing, cannot be sufficient for itself. Nevertheless, if sentiment is not a principle, it is a true and important fact, and, after having distinguished it well from reason, we ourselves proceed to elevate it far above sensation, and elucidate the important part it plays in the perception of beauty. (ibid., 129–130)

Théodore Jouffroy (1796–1842)

Théodore Jouffroy translated Stewart and Reid, lectured, and published philosophical works, particularly expositing the ideas of others. In 1840 an English translation appeared, *Introduction to Ethics; Including a Critical Survey of Moral Systems*, discussing TMS very extensively (Jouffroy 1840, 98–176), and more contumaciously than any of the other critics.

Impartiality is possible only where there is judgment; and when we say that judgment is impartial, our idea is precisely this — that it is influenced by no passion. Why can I not be impartial in regard to a friend? Because sympathy biases my judgment in his favor. And I cannot be impartial in regard to an enemy, for an opposite reason. It becomes all the more difficult to comprehend what is meant by the impartiality of sympathy, because, in the common acceptance of words, it is the absence of sympathy that constitutes impartiality. And let no one suppose that this objection consists in a mere play upon words; this error in expression actually betrays the error of the principle... It is because this system does violence to the nature of things, that it cannot be described without doing violence to language. (Jouffroy 1840, 131–132)

Let me suppose myself in the presence of a great number of persons of different ages, sexes, and professions... Which of these kinds of sympathy

shall be my rule, which shall I select as a test of the propriety or impropriety of my feeling? Shall I adopt the sympathy of this or that particular person? or shall I take the mean of all the sympathies? But why should I adopt this mean? or how shall I determine what it is, among so many which are unknown and not to be appreciated? And how, then, can I determine, according to the doctrine of Smith, whether my emotion is proper or improper? (*ibid.*, 132–133)

Smith has the candor to acknowledge that such cases may arise, and the fairness to confess that a man is then bound to follow the right and despise public opinion. But how can he do this without denying his system, and abjuring his rule of moral appreciation? Much as we may admire the ingenuity with which he has attempted to escape from this dilemma, it is impossible not to see that his efforts are fruitless, and that his theory is wrecked upon this difficulty. (135)

Now, who is this impartial spectator? Is it John or Peter? No! but an abstract spectator, who has neither the prejudices of the one nor the weaknesses of the other, and who sees correctly and soundly, precisely because he is abstract. It is in the presence of this abstract spectator, who is another *me*, separate from the impassioned *me*, and its judge, that, in my deepest consciousness, I deliberate, decide, and act. Not only is this spectator no particular man, but he does not even represent any portion of society — no age nor sex, no village nor city, no nation nor era; he represents humanity — he represents God. (135–136)

[T]his... is introducing an entirely new view, into which Smith has unconsciously entered, without perceiving that he was not led into it by setting out from his own principle, and that he cannot return from it to his principle again. (136)

Now, what is it that I do, when, for the sentiments of actual spectators, I substitute those of an abstract spectator? Most evidently, gentlemen, I not only abandon the rule of sympathy, and adopt another in its place, but I even deny this rule, and pronounce it false, and condemn it; for this abstract spectator **does not exist, and never existed**; and his sentiments, therefore, have no **reality**, and are wholly **fictitious**. It is no longer by the sentiments of others that I judge, but by my own. The sentiments of others I reject wholly, and prefer my own; this abstract spectator is one of my own creation; he has no existence in the world without; he is neither a real individual, nor a combination of real individuals; he is an emanation from my own sentiments. (136–137)

In truth, gentlemen, it is quite plain that this abstract spectator, imagined by Smith, is nothing else than reason, judging, in the name of order, and of the immutable nature of things, the mutable and blind decisions of men. It is a

consciousness of the reality of this **supreme** faculty, that embarrasses Smith in the exposition of his system... Instead of the words *conscience*, or *reason*, therefore, he makes use of the expression *abstract spectator*... (137–138)

[T]he rules of moral appreciation... consist not in emotions of sympathy, but in conceptions of reason. It is true that Smith may say, in answer, that he recognizes these inward laws, and gives a perfectly clear explanation of their **origin**. But consciousness cannot confound the rules which he acknowledges with those of morality, nor the decisions of sympathy, of which they are the generalization, with the true moral judgments given by reason. (142)

A judgment is a judgment; an emotion is an emotion; but an emotion is no more a judgment than a sensation is an idea. There is no more reason for identifying these two things than there is for declaring them equal. Is the emotion, then, of such a nature, that, when presented to the view of reason, the judgment is an immediate consequence? In other words, do I approve every emotion which I feel to be equal to yours? Whence comes the necessity of any such consequence? I can see none, and facts contradict it. I share a thousand emotions, without morally approving or disapproving them; I condemn many emotions which I share; and, on the other hand, I approve many things which are neither emotions nor the result of emotions; and I even approve emotions which I not only do not participate in, but which are absolutely displeasing to me. There is no reason whatever, therefore, for pronouncing the sensible fact of sympathy to be equal to the rational fact of approbation. Any equality which there is between them, is only in appearance, and the appearance consists wholly in words. So much for the first sophism.

Our author proceeds to say, that, when I approve an emotion, I feel it to be good; to which I answer, This is not the way in which the human mind reasons; from the goodness of the act we are led to approve it, but not from our approbation to pronounce it good. For what is it that merits approbation? It is that which is good; but that is not necessarily good which is approved. Before we can infer the goodness of an act, as a conclusion, from the fact of its being approved, it must be proved that the approbation is merited, which is saying, in other words, that it is good; this shows that the approbation is a consequence of an antecedent perception of goodness. Smith reverses this order of nature, for he makes the approbation the sign and proof of the goodness. Instead of the true equation between that which is good and that which merits approbation, he substitutes a false equation between that which is approved and that which is good. This is the second sophism.

Once possessed of the word *good*, Smith dashes on with full sails, and without difficulty arrives at the idea of obligation; for what is more evident to reason than that that which is good ought to be done, and that which is evil avoided? But what mean such words as these, in a system which preserves nothing of moral good but its name, while it destroys the reality? Obligation

is attached, not to words, however, but to things; and the word, which is but an appearance, can produce only an apparent obligation. Such is the third sophism. (145–147)

Smith himself is conscious, that, after all his efforts, his principle of moral qualification is still wanting in the character of obligation; and he has been compelled, therefore, to employ one further mode of evasion, which it is well you should be acquainted with, if only to convince you of the power of truth, and to show you what embarrassment systematic minds must feel, and to what sophistries the loftiest genius must descend, in its attempt to endue error with a character which it cannot justly claim. (148)

And, in my view, the remarks suggested by Smith's system extend to all others which seek in instinct for the laws of morality... (151)

In absolute truth, the reason why we ought to do good is so included in the very idea of good, that there is no difference between the moral law and the motive which makes obedience to it our duty. But when we substitute a false law of morality for the true one, the authority is no longer recognized in the law itself, and we are obliged to seek it in the motive to which we yield in obeying it. This is precisely what becomes necessary in the system of sympathy. Good, in this system, is that which is conformable to the emotions of an impartial spectator. Such a rule has, as we have already seen, no authority; it remains, then, to be seen whether the authority, which does not reside in the rule, may be found in the motive which influences us when we act in accordance with it. (159)

Its superiority must come, then, from a judgment of reason, declaring its title to be better than that of any other instinct. But, if reason thus decides, it is by means of some rule foreign from, and higher than, instinct; and, therefore, if, governed by this judgment, we prefer the inspirations of instinctive sympathy **to all other** impulses, our motive is no longer derived from instinct, but from this higher rule; that is to say, from reason; but this the system of sympathy cannot admit. According to this system, then, the instinct of sympathy, both by right and in fact, is neither more nor less than equal to every other instinct, and can have no real title to superiority. (160–161)

The instinct of sympathy, therefore, far from appearing to be superior to self-love, is acknowledged by us to be inferior; and this superiority of the motive of interest is owing to its character of being rational: on this ground, and on this ground alone, does it legitimately rule over the instinctive impulse; and if at any time the sympathetic tendencies of our nature appear to have the nobler character, it is communicated to them by a motive, also rational though yet higher — the moral motive. (161–162)

This Smith seems to have thought himself, and his efforts to establish the authority of the instinct of sympathy are manifest. Unfortunately, they led only to **evident paralogisms**. Instead of proving that the instinct of sympathy is the true moral motive, he describes the characteristics of this moral motive, and then gratuitously attributes them to the instinct of sympathy; thus proving, to be sure, that, if the instinct had these characteristics, it would be the moral motive, but forgetting altogether the evidence that it possesses them. (163)

The point to be proved is not that the instinct of sympathy acts *like* the moral motive, but that it *is* the moral motive. (166)

Smith has the art of connecting his errors with a truth, and of thus rendering them specious. (168)

The failure of [Smith's and other philosophers'] attempts to explain our moral ideas, by means of a supposed law that is really not a law, should have undeceived them; but once lost on a false track, the mind no more returns. It follows out its principle, reconciling its errors with common sense by unconscious sophistry. Such is the spectacle which Smith, notwithstanding his clear intellect, presents; and this is one consideration that has led me to give so detailed an exposition of his views.

When reason...rises to the idea that this personal good...is but one element of a universal order, that every rational and free being is summoned to advance, then, and then only, is an end which ought to be pursued, a law which ought to be respected, a motive which ought to be obeyed, revealed. And here is the source of those various moral ideas, which neither instinct nor interest can account for, because interest and instinct do not give them **birth**. Traced back to their true principle, these ideas may be explained easily, without sophistry, and in a natural and common sense; but referred to self-love or to instinct, they remain inexplicable; and the combined resources of the most ingenious mind can account for them only by mutilating and deforming their real nature. (175–176)

Interlude

Up to this point, most of the commentators may be associated with Reid-Stewart common-sense philosophy. Peaking in influence during the first half the nineteenth century in Scotland, France, and America, its inculcation to college students continued in some schools in Scotland and America right to the end of the century. But by mid-century, other philosophical trends increasingly left it behind (Davie 1964, 257, 261, 272). The new trends did not, however, work towards TMS's recovery. Still consigned to oblivion, TMS is scarcely mentioned

by the later philosophers, and when it is mentioned, it is again often disparaged for its allegorical formulations, supposed circularity, lack of foundations, and transgressing of supposedly fundamental demarcations.

Alexander Bain (1818–1903)

A Scot and religious skeptic, Alexander Bain studied and taught mathematics and philosophy in Scotland before moving to London in 1848 and falling in with J. S. Mill and his circle. Heavily influenced by and touted by Mill, he developed associationist theory in works on psychology and philosophy. With Mill he edited James Mill's *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, in which James Mill says that the love of praiseworthiness is “eloquently described, but not explained, by Adam Smith” (J. Mill 1869, 298; see also J. S. Mill's remarks on p. 309). Bain also wrote a biography of James Mill (Bain 1882).

In *Mental and Moral Science* (1868), Bain reviews ethical thinkers. Having provided a guide to TMS, Bain sums up Smith's ethical theory, including:

The Ethical Standard is the judgment of an impartial spectator or critic; and our own judgments are derived by reference to what this spectator would approve or disapprove.

Probably to no one has this ever appeared a sufficient account of Right and Wrong. It provides against one defect, the self-partiality of the agent; but gives no account whatever of **the grounds** of the critic's own judgment, and makes no provision against his infallibility. It may be very well on points where men's moral sentiments are tolerably unanimous, but it is valueless in all questions where there are fundamental differences of view. (Bain 1868, 631)

He affords little or no grounds for remarking on the connexion of Morality with Politics. Our duties as citizens are a part of Morality, and that is all.

He gives his views on the alliance of Ethics with Religion. He does not admit that we should refer to the Religious sanction on all occasions. He assumes a benevolent and all-wise Governor of the world, who will ultimately redress all inequalities, and remedy all outstanding injustice. What this Being approves, however, is to be inferred solely from the principles of benevolence. Our regard for him is to be shown, not by frivolous observances, sacrifices, ceremonies, and vain supplications, but by just and beneficent actions. The author studiously ignores a revelation, and constructs for himself a Natural Religion, grounded on a benevolent and just administration of the universe.

In Smith's Essay [that is, TMS], the purely scientific enquiry is overlaid by practical and hortatory dissertations, and by eloquent delineations of character and beau-ideals of virtuous conduct. His style being thus pitched to the popular key, he never pushes **home** a metaphysical analysis; so that even

his favourite theme, Sympathy, is not **philosophically sifted to the bottom**. (ibid., 632–633)

In treating Dugald Stewart, Bain writes:

[H]e introduces a criticism of the Ethical theory of Adam Smith; and, adverting to the inadequacy of the theory to distinguish the *right* from the *actual* judgments of mankind, he remarks on Smith's ingenious fiction 'of *an abstract man* within the breast;' and states that Smith laid much greater stress on this fiction in the last edition of the *Moral Sentiments* published before his death. It is not without reason that Stewart warns **against grounding theories on metaphorical expressions**, such as this of Smith, or the Platonic Commonwealth of the Soul. (Bain 1868, 642)

In treating Thomas Brown, Bain writes:

Brown next criticises the system of Adam Smith. Admitting that we have the sympathetic feeling that Smith proceeds upon, he questions its adequacy to constitute the moral sentiment, on the ground that it is not a perpetual accompaniment of our actions. There must be a certain *vividness* of feeling or of the display of feeling, or at least a sufficient cause of vivid feeling, to call the sympathy into action. In the numerous petty actions of life, there is an absence of any marked sympathy.

But the essential error of Smith's system is, that it assumes the very moral feelings that it is meant to explain. If there were no antecedent moral feelings, sympathy could not afford them; it is only a mirror to reflect what is already in existence. The feelings that we sympathize with, are themselves moral feelings already; if it were not so, the reflexion of them from a thousand breasts would not give them a moral nature.

Brown thinks that Adam Smith was to some extent misled by an ambiguity in the word sympathy; a word applied not merely to the participation of other men's feelings, but to the further and distinct fact of the *approbation* of those feelings. (Bain 1868, 650)

In treating James Mackintosh, Bain writes:

[Mackintosh] objects to the theory of Adam Smith, that no allowance is made in it for the transfer of our feelings, and the disappearing of the original reference from the view. Granting that our approbation began in sympathy, as Smith says, certain it is, that the adult man approves action and dispositions as right, while he [the adult man] is distinctly aware that no process of sympathy intervenes between the approval and its object... He [Mackintosh] further remarks that the reference, in our actions, to the point of view of the spectator, is rather an expedient for preserving our impartiality than a fundamental

principle of Ethics... Lastly, he objects to Smith, that his system renders all morality relative to the pleasure of our coinciding in feeling with others, which is merely to decide on the Faculty, without considering the Standard. Smith shrinks from Utility as a standard, or ascribes its power over our feelings to our sense of the adaptation of means to ends.

He commends Smith for **grounding** Benevolence on Sympathy, whereas Butler, Hutcheson, and Hume had **grounded** Sympathy on Benevolence. (Bain 1868, 672)

Henry Thomas Buckle (1821–1862)

Henry Thomas Buckle published a once-famous work, *Introduction to the History of Civilization in England*, in two volumes, 1857 and 1861. He died aged 41, in Damascus. He extolled Smith, but chiefly for WN. He said that TMS “has had no influence except on a very small class of metaphysicians,” and that compared to WN “it is certainly easier to understand” (Buckle 1904, 895). He claimed that WN “assumes that selfishness is the main regulator of human affairs, just as his previous work had assumed sympathy to be so” (ibid., 811). Each work proceeds deductively: “And in each work he reasons from only part of his premisses; supplying the other part in the other work. None of us are exclusively selfish, and none of us are exclusively sympathetic. But Adam Smith separates in speculation qualities which are inseparable in reality. In his *Moral Sentiments*, he ascribes our actions to sympathy; in his *Wealth of Nations*, he ascribes them to selfishness” (808). About TMS he wrote:

Sympathy, then, is the main-spring of human conduct... By this bold hypothesis Adam Smith, at one stroke, so narrowed the field of inquiry as to exclude from it all considerations of selfishness as a primary principle, and only to admit its great antagonist, sympathy. The existence of the antagonism he distinctly recognizes. For he will not allow that sympathy is in any way to be deemed a selfish principle. Although he knew that it is pleasurable, and that all pleasure contains an element of selfishness, it did not suit the method of his philosophy to subject the principle of sympathy to such an inductive analysis as would reveal its elements. His business was to reason from it, and not to it. Concentrating his energy upon the deductive process, and displaying that dialectic skill which is natural to his countrymen, and of which he himself was one of the most consummate masters the world has ever seen, he constructed a system of philosophy, imperfect indeed, because the premisses were imperfect, but approaching truth as closely as it was possible for any one to do who abstained from giving due consideration to the selfish part of human nature. Into the workings of its sympathetic part he looked with a minuteness, and he reasoned from it with a subtlety, which make his work the most important that has ever been written on this interesting subject. But, inasmuch

as his plan involved a **deliberate suppression of preliminary and essential facts**, the results which he obtained do not strictly correspond to those which are actually observed in the world. (Buckle 1904, 810)

Walter Bagehot (1826–1877)

Walter Bagehot was an influential political commentator, economist, author, and journalist, affiliated with *The Economist*, as well as a banker. He published “Adam Smith as a Person” in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1876, reproduced in Bagehot (1915, 1–32), including:

[H]is lectures on Moral Philosophy...formed the once celebrated *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which, though we should now think them rather pompous, were then much praised and much read. For a great part, indeed, of Adam Smith’s life they constituted his main title to reputation. *The Wealth of Nations* was not published till seventeen years later; he wrote nothing else of any importance in the interval, and it is now curious to find that when *The Wealth of Nations* was published, many good judges thought it not so good as *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and that the author himself was by no means certain they were not right.

The Theory of Moral Sentiments was, indeed, for many years, exceedingly praised. One sect of philosophers praised it, as it seems to me, because they were glad of a celebrated ally, and another because they were glad of a celebrated opponent: the first said, “See that so great an authority as Adam Smith concurs with us”; and the second replied, “But see how very weak his arguments are; if so able an arguer as Adam Smith can say so little for your doctrines, how destitute of argumentative grounds those doctrines must be”. Several works in the history of philosophy have had a similar fate. But a mere student of philosophy who cares for no sect, and wants only to know the truth, will nowadays, I think, find little to interest him in this celebrated book. In Adam Smith’s mind, as I have said before, it was part of a whole; he wanted to begin with the origin of the faculties of each man, and then build up that man—just as he wished to arrive at the origin of human society, and then build up society. His *Theory of Moral Sentiments* builds them all out of one source, sympathy, and in this way he has obtained praise from friends and enemies. His friends are the school of “moral sense” thinkers, because he is on their side, and believes in a special moral faculty, which he laboriously constructs from sympathy; his enemies are the Utilitarian school, who believe in no such special faculty, and who set themselves to show that his labour has been in vain, and that no such faculty has been so built up. One party says the book is good to gain authority for the conclusion, and the other that you may gain credit by refuting its arguments. For unquestionably its arguments are very weak, and attractive to refutation. If the intuitive school had had no better **grounds** than these, the Utilitarians would have vanquished them ages

since. There is a fundamental difficulty in **founding** morals on sympathy; an obvious confusion of two familiar sentiments. We often sympathise where we cannot approve, and approve where we cannot sympathise. The special vice of party spirit is that it effaces the distinction between the two; we sympathise with our party, till we approve its actions. There is a story of a Radical wit in the last century who was standing for Parliament, and his opponent, of course a Tory, objected that he was always against the king whether right or wrong, upon which the wit retorted that on his own showing the Tory was exposed to equal objection, since he was always for the king whether right or wrong. And so it will always be. Even the wisest party men more or less sympathise with the errors of their own side; they would be powerless if they did not do so; they would gain no influence if they were not of like passions with those near them. Adam Smith could not help being aware of this obvious objection; he was far too able a reasoner to elaborate a theory without foreseeing what would be said against it. But the way in which he tries to meet the objection only shows that the objection is invincible. He sets up a supplementary theory—a **little epicycle**—that the sympathy which is to test good morals must be the sympathy of an “impartial spectator”. But, then, who is to watch the watchman? Who is to say when the spectator is impartial, and when he is not? If he sympathises with one side, the other will always say that he is partial. As a moralist, the supposed spectator must warmly approve good actions and warmly disapprove bad actions; as an impartial person, he must never do either the one or the other. He is a fiction of inconsistent halves; if he sympathises he is not impartial, and if he is impartial he does not sympathise. The radical vice of the theory is shown by its requiring this accessory invention of a being both hot and cold, because the essence of the theory is to identify the passion which loves with the sentiment which approves. (Bagehot 1915, 11–13)

If it had not been for this odd consequence of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [viz., the Buccleuch engagement], he might have passed all his life in Scotland, delivering similar lectures and clothing very questionable theories in rather pompous words. . . . [T]he mere removal from his professorship was to him a gain of the first magnitude. It was of cardinal importance to him to be delivered from the production of incessant words and to be brought into contact with facts and the world. (ibid., 15–16)

At last, in 1776, *The Wealth of Nations* was published, and was, on the whole, well received. Dr. [Alexander] Carlyle, indeed, preserves an impression that, in point of style, it was inferior to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. But all competent readers were agreed as to the great value of the substance. And almost everybody will probably now think, in spite of Dr. Carlyle, that the style is very much better than that of the *Moral Sentiments*. There is about the latter a certain showiness and an ‘air of the professor trying to be fascinating,’ which are not

very agreeable; and, after all, there is a ponderous weight in the words which seems to bear down the rather flimsy matter. But the style of *The Wealth of Nations* is entirely plain and manly. (ibid., 23–24)

Leslie Stephen (1832–1904)

Leslie Stephen was an author, literary critic, and first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. His *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) had a large and lasting influence, and in it he addresses TMS:

Adam Smith's 'Theory of Moral Sentiments' appeared in 1759, and won a rapid popularity, though producing little conviction. The qualities of thought and style which afterwards caused the success of the 'Enquiry into the Wealth of Nations' are equally visible in its predecessor. Smith's ingenious and discursive intellect pours itself out in streams of diffuse eloquence, often brilliant with felicitous illustrations, and quick flashes of historical insight, and yet wide rather than deep, rather dexterous in new combinations than penetrating the essence of the subject, and, therefore, apt to disappoint us by a certain superficiality and flimsiness. Smith's ingenuity in tracing the working of the mechanism of human nature is so marked and so delightful to himself that he almost forgets to enquire into **the primary forces** which set it in action. He describes the mutual action and reaction of the passions with more fidelity than the passions themselves. Smith, in fact, is a thorough representative of that optimistic Deism which we have seen illustrated by Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Hutcheson, Smith's predecessor in the chair of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow, was in this respect nearer to Smith than was Smith's friend and teacher, Hume. The characteristic difference appears in this, that Smith follows Hutcheson and departs from Hume in making the doctrine of final causes an essential part of his system. Although we have no longer that extraordinary complex machinery of primitive instincts which, according to Butler and Hutcheson, had been mysteriously implanted in our bosom as divinely appointed monitors, yet Smith constantly regards human nature as a mechanism skilfully contrived to carry out the divine purposes. He simplifies the construction with a view to a rational explanation; but the action of the artificer is still discernible. Superfluous wheels and pulleys have been removed, but the general conception remains.

His theology rests essentially upon the 'whatever is, is right' dogma. He believes in a 'great, benevolent, and all-wise Being,' who is determined by his own perfections to maintain in the universe at all times 'the greatest possible quantity of happiness.' (Stephen 1876, 70–71)

He [Smith] holds that the moral sentiments contribute blindly to promote the happiness of mankind. Our anger against evildoers falls in by an undesigned coincidence—undesigned, that is, so far as we are concerned—with the

general disposition of Providence to promote the greatest possible amount of happiness. But if not designed by us, it must have been designed by the Creator. The theory is, therefore, directed against a palpable weakness of the doctrine as generally expounded. It is easy to perceive that a dim perception of the utility of certain actions may have gradually generated moral sentiments which have no longer a conscious reference to the necessity which produced them. But until this distinction had been plainly drawn, it was a natural objection to the utilitarian theory that moral approval frequently did not involve any distinct recognition of the utility of actions. The instincts which had grown up by a complex process seemed, to observers still unable to place themselves at the historical point of view, to have something mysterious about them. Philosophers who talked not of concrete men, but of abstract human nature, assumed, or rather loudly asserted, to be the same in all times and places. They did not think of our instincts as slowly developed under the influence of a thousand modifying causes through long generations, but as suddenly springing into existence ready made. And to such observers it was natural that the conformity between our wants and our sentiments should appear to be the result of special contrivance, rather than of slow evolution. Smith, however, regards the moral sense described by Hutcheson as a superfluity, and as not properly explaining the phenomena. Our judgments of different vices and virtues vary too widely to be explained as the dictates of one sense; and it would be strange if an instinct so important and so peculiar should have been discovered for the first time within a few years, and not even have received a name. For this and other reasons, he rejects the theory of a specific moral faculty, and substitutes a theory of his own, which, however, seems to have gained few adherents.

In the place of Butler's conscience and Hutcheson's moral sense, Smith erects an internal monitor, who is the object of much eloquence, and who is generally described as the 'man,' or 'the demigod within the breast—the great judge and arbiter of conduct.' What, then, is this demigod? Whence his authority, and what his origin? The general reply is that he is formed by sympathy. God has given us the gift, though not in such perfection as might be desired, to see ourselves as others see us. We invent, as it were, an impartial spectator, and approve or disapprove of our conduct as we feel that another man would or would not sympathise with our actions. Or, to use an appropriate metaphor, we form a mirror from the opinions of other men, by supposing ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour. 'This is the only looking-glass by which we can in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinise the propriety of our own conduct.' The theory becomes complex as it is worked out. We have to take into account not merely the primary but the secondary reflections; and, indeed, we must imagine two opposite mirrors, reflecting images in indefinite succession. We must consider A's sympathy for B, and then B's sympathy with A's sympathy, and then A's own sympathy with B's sympathy with A's sympathy for B, and we are finally rather puzzled to

discover **the ultimate basis** of the sympathy. From some points the doctrine seems to resolve itself into a regard for public opinion as embodied in the hypothetical ‘impartial spectators.’ But which sympathies are right and which wrong? Where is **the ultimate** criterion? Impartiality is, doubtless, an essential condition for a sound moral judgment, but can it be the only condition? The standard of morality seems to be too fluctuating to serve any intelligible purpose. We can understand the process by which, according to Smith, the ‘amiable virtues’ are generated by the spectator’s sympathy with the sufferer, and the ‘respectable virtues’ by the sufferer’s sympathy with the spectator’s sympathy, and consequent desire to restrain his emotions within moderate bounds. But how are these inconsistent demands to be regulated? How far should the spectator sympathise, and within what bounds should the sufferer restrain his demands for sympathy? The ‘man within the breast’ is not an incorruptible judge. He may be persuaded to make reports very different from what circumstances would authorise. Who, then, is to correct his judgments? Man, says Smith, has been constituted a judge of his brethren, and is thus the ‘vicegerent upon earth’ of his Creator. But he is only judge in the first instance. An appeal lies from him to the higher tribunal of conscience, or, what is identical, to that of the supposed well-informed and impartial spectator, to that of the ‘man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of their’ (that is, mankind’s) ‘conduct.’ The jurisdiction of the ‘man without’ is founded in the desire of simple praise; that of the ‘man within’ in the desire of praiseworthiness. Does, then, the impartial spectator give a final judgment? No; for it seems that this demigod is partly of mortal, though partly of immortal extraction. His judgment is perverted by the clamour of the ‘man without.’ There lies, therefore, another appeal to a still higher tribunal—that of the ‘all-seeing Judge of the world,’ from whom perfect justice may be anticipated in another life, if not in this.

But how is the appeal to be made? Smith avoids all reference to supernatural revelation, and we must assume that the decisions of this final and absolute tribunal are to be sought in nature. But **on what principle they are to be discovered is nowhere apparent.** Smith asserts that, beyond the standard of conduct which is formed from the ordinary opinions of the world, there is a higher standard, slowly framed by the ‘demigod,’ and approximating indefinitely to the ‘archetype of perfection’ framed by the Divine artist—but we seek in vain for any **definite** account of its nature. The appeal is ultimately made to an inaccessible tribunal, or, in other words, **the standard of absolute morality seems to be hopelessly uncertain.** It is in heaven, not on earth, and heaven is shrouded in impenetrable mystery. Here, as elsewhere, Smith’s copious and rather unctuous eloquence enables him to glide over the real difficulty, quite unconscious of its existence. His ultimate analysis of the sources of approbation is given in his concluding account of ‘Systems of Moral Philosophy.’ First, he says, we sympathise with the motives of the agent; secondly, with the gratitude of those he has benefited; ‘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 beauty from this utility, not unlike that which we ascribe to any well-contrived machine.’ And this he asserts to be a complete analysis of the sentiment.

The general laws of morality, then, are merely formulae expressive of the mode in which sympathy habitually acts, and are convenient standards of reference, but not **the ultimate foundation of morality**. Utility, again, occupies a strictly subordinate position. Smith rejects Hume’s explanation of our sentiments as **founded** upon it, because we praise a man for other reasons than those which lead us to praise ‘a chest of drawers ;’ and because the usefulness of any disposition is not the ‘first ground of our approbation.’ Utility acts chiefly as facilitating sympathy. We readily fall in with the sentiments which dictate an action plainly useful to mankind, and in this indirect fashion, the utility stimulates, though it does not cause, approbation. ‘Many an honest Englishman,’ he says, would have been more grieved by the loss of a guinea than by the loss of Minorca; and yet, had it been in his power, would have sacrificed his life a thousand times to defend the fortress. It is because he naturally sympathises with the nation to whom Minorca was of importance, though the utility to him personally may be infinitesimal. Smith, as before, is arguing against the hypothesis that each man acts from calculations of private interest, and does not consider that loyalty and patriotism may have been generated by their obvious utility, though, when developed, their origin passes out of sight.

The name of Adam Smith should be mentioned with high respect; but I think that the respect is due chiefly to his economical labours. It may be fully admitted that he shows great ingenuity, and great fertility of illustration, and that he calls attention to a fact which must be taken into account by the moralist. But it is impossible to resist the impression, whilst we read his fluent rhetoric, and observe his easy acceptance of theological principles already exposed by his master Hume, that we are not listening to a thinker really grappling with a difficult problem, so much as to an ambitious professor who has found an excellent opportunity for displaying his command of language, and making brilliant lectures. The whole tone savours of that complacent optimism of the time which retained theological phrases to round a paragraph, and to save the trouble of genuine thought. Smith’s main proposition was hardly original, though he has worked it out in detail, and it is rather **calculated to lead us dexterously round difficult questions than to supply us with a genuine answer.** (ibid., 73–77)

Stephen turns to political economy later, and says the following:

Here, too, we come upon the main speculative defect of the ‘Wealth of

Nations.' We are sensible, after reading his always lucid and ingenious, and often most acute, though rather too discursive enquiries, that there is something wanting. **The arguments are not properly clenched. The complexity of Smith's enquiries has prevented him from drawing them to a focus.** Price, he tells us, is fixed by supply and demand; supply and demand act through the 'higgling of the market;' the buyer wants things cheap, and the seller wishes them to be dear; and so at last an agreement is struck out. But, if we go a little further, if we ask what general causes determine the precise rate of exchange, how it happens that a certain weight of yellow metal exchanges for a certain bulk of the seeds of a vegetable, we can get no **definite** answer, though here and there are glimpses of an answer. There is a whole side of the question which is left in **obscurity**. Roughly speaking we may say that Smith's conclusions are satisfactory if we assume that a certain social equilibrium has been somehow established, and seek to trace the process by which slight disturbances are propagated from one part to another. But to the further questions, what are the forces which are thus balanced? what is the true nature of the blind struggle which rages around us? and what are the **ultimate barriers** by which its issues are confined? we get a rather cursory and perfunctory answer. The difficulty is analogous to that which meets us in the 'Moral Sentiments.' We there follow the play of sympathy till we are perplexed by the intricacy of the results, but **we do not perceive what is the ultimate ground which determines the limits and the efficacy of sympathy.** And here, after tracing hither and thither the complex actions and reactions of supply and demand, we somehow feel that we have gone over all the ropes and pulleys by which force is transmitted, but have not fairly come in sight of the weights **by which the force is originated.** (Stephen 1876, 325–326)

Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900)

Henry Sidgwick was a utilitarian ethical philosopher and economist, who studied at Cambridge University, became professor there, and wrote several major books on ethics, political philosophy, political economy, and philosophy of science. The following selections come from *Outlines of the History of Ethics for English Readers* (4th ed., 1896):

Adam Smith, like Hume, regards sympathy as the **ultimate** element into which moral sentiments may be analysed... (Sidgwick 1896, 213)

Again, the report of the 'man within the breast' is liable to be perverted from truth by the internal influence of passion and self-regard, as well as by the opinions of the 'man without.' But against such self-deceit a valuable remedy has been provided by Nature in the 'general rules of morality'; which are not to be regarded as original intuitions, but as 'ultimately **founded** upon experience

of what, in particular instances, our moral faculties, our natural sense of merit and propriety, approve or disapprove of.' Regard for these general rules is what is properly called a sense of duty; and without this regard 'there is no man whose conduct can be much depended upon,' owing to 'the inequalities of humour to which all men are subject.' Adam Smith, indeed, goes so far as to say that this regard for general rules 'is the only principle by which the bulk of mankind are capable of directing their actions'; but it is somewhat difficult to reconcile this with his general theory; —especially as, in the case of most virtues, the general rules are said to be 'in many respects so loose and inaccurate,' that our conduct should rather be directed 'by a certain taste' than by precise maxims. The rules of Justice, however, he holds to be 'accurate in the highest degree,' so that they 'determine with the greatest exactness any external action which it requires.' He further takes care to assure us that the general rules of morality are 'justly to be regarded as the laws of the Deity,' and that the voice of 'the man within the breast, the supposed impartial spectator,' if we listen to it with 'diligent and reverential attention,' will 'never deceive us': but it can hardly be said that his theory affords **any cogent arguments** for these conclusions.

The theories of Hume and Adam Smith taken together anticipate, to an important extent, the explanations of the origin of moral sentiments which have been more recently current in the utilitarian school. But both of them err in underrating the complexity of the moral sentiments, and in not recognising that, however these sentiments may have originated, they are now, as introspectively examined, different from mere sympathy with the feelings and impulses of others; they are compounds that cannot be directly analysed into the simple element of sympathy, however complicated and combined. In these respects both Hume's and Adam Smith's methods of explanation compare unfavourably with that of [David] Hartley, whose *Observations on Man* (1749) come in time before Hume's *Inquiry*. (ibid., 217–218)

On the whole we must say that, though Hartley is obviously in earnest in his attempt to determine the rule of life, the systematic vigour which still gives an interest to his psychology, in spite of its defects of style and treatment, is not applied by him to the question of the criterion or standard of right conduct; on this point his exposition is blurred by a vague and shallow optimism that prevents him from facing the difficulties of the problem. A somewhat similar inferiority has been noted in Adam Smith's work, when he passes from psychological analysis to ethical **construction**. It would seem that the intellectual energy of this period of English ethical thought had a general tendency to take a psychological rather than a **strictly** ethical turn. In Hume's case, indeed, the absorption of ethics into psychology is sometimes so complete as to lead him to a confusing use of language; thus in one or two passages he insists with apparent emphasis on the 'reality of moral distinctions'; but a closer examination shows that he means no more by this

than the real existence of the likes and dislikes that human beings feel for each other's qualities. (ibid., 222–223)

James Anson Farrer (1849–1925)

Barrister and writer James Anson Farrer published a too-forgotten book on TMS (Farrer 1881), for a series on English philosophers. He presents background and many of the main ideas in TMS, quoting amply. The final chapter “Review of the Principal Criticisms of Adam Smith’s Theory” runs to 30 pages in length. He draws from Stewart, Mackintosh and especially Jouffroy and Brown, interlacing the criticisms with suggestions on how Smith might have responded. At the end, he signals a turn to his own voice and judgment, from which I quote:

It is difficult to read Adam Smith’s account of the identification of sympathy and approbation, without feeling that throughout his argument there is an unconscious play upon words, and that an equivocal use of the word “sympathy” lends all its speciousness to the theory he expounds... In the one case a mere state of feeling is intended, in the other a judgment of reason... To say that we approve of another person’s sentiments when we sympathize with them is, therefore, nothing more than saying that we approve of them when we approve of them—a **purely tautological proposition**.

It cannot therefore be said that Adam Smith’s attempt to trace the feeling of moral approbation to emotions of sympathy is altogether successful, incontestable as is the truth of his application of it to many of the phenomena of life and conduct. Yet although sympathy is not the only factor in moral approbation, it is one that enters very widely into the growth of our moral perceptions. It plays, for instance, an important part in evolving in us that sense of right and wrong which is generally known as Conscience or the Moral Faculty. It is one of the elements, just as self-love is another, in that ever-forming chain of association which goes to distinguish one set of actions as good from another set of actions as bad. (Farrer 1881, 196–197)

Although any action that hurts another person may so affect our natural sympathy as to give rise to the feeling of disapprobation involved in sympathetic resentment, and although an action that is injurious to ourselves may also be regarded with similar feelings of dislike, the constant pressure of authority, exercised as it is by domestic education, by government, by law, and by punishment, must first be brought to bear on such actions before the feeling of *moral* disapprobation can arise with regard to them. The association of the pain of punishment with certain actions, and the association of the absence of such pain (a negative pleasure) with certain others, enforces the natural dictates of our sympathetic or selfish emotions, and impresses on them the character of morality, of obligation, and of duty. The association is so

close and constant, that in course of time the feeling of the approbation or disapprobation of certain actions becomes perfectly independent of the various means, necessary at first to enforce or to prevent them; just as in many other cases our likes and dislikes become free of the associations which first permanently fixed them.

In this way the feeling of moral approbation is seen to be the product of time and slow growth of circumstance, a phenomenon to which both reason and sentiment contribute in equal shares in accordance with the laws that condition their development. Moral approbation is no more given instantaneously by sympathy than it is given instantaneously by a moral sense. Sympathy is merely one of the conditions under which it is evolved, one of the feelings which assist in its formation. It is indeed the feeling on which, more than on any other, the moral agencies existing in the world build up and confirm the notions of right and wrong; but it does of itself nothing more than translate feelings from one mind to another, and unless there is a pre-existent moral element in the feeling so translated, the actual passage will not give rise to it. Sympathy enables one man's fear, resentment, or gratitude to become another man's fear, resentment, or gratitude; but the feeling of moral approbation which attends emotions so diffused, arises from reference to ideas otherwise derived than from a purely involuntary sympathy — from reference, that is, to a standard set up by custom and opinion. A child told for the first time of a murder might so far enter by sympathy into the resentment of the victim as to feel indignation prompting him to vengeance; but his idea of the murder itself as a wrong and wicked act — his idea of it as a deed morally worse than the slaughter of a sheep by a butcher, would only arise as the result of the various forces of education, availing themselves of the original law of sympathy, by which an act disagreeable to ourselves seems disagreeable in its application to others. And what is true in this case, the extreme form of moral disapprobation, is no less true in all the minor cases, in which approbation or the contrary is felt.

The feeling of moral approbation is therefore much more complex than it is in Adam Smith's theory. Above all things it is **one and indivisible**, and it is impossible to distinguish our moral judgments of ourselves from our judgments of others. There is an obvious inconsistency in saying that we can only judge of other people's sentiments and actions by reference to our own power to sympathize with them, and yet that we can only judge of our own by reference to the same power in them. The moral standard cannot primarily exist in ourselves, and yet, at the same time, be only derivable from without. If by the hypothesis moral feelings relating to ourselves only exist by prior reference to the feelings of others, how can we at the same time form any moral judgment of the feelings of others by reference to any feelings of our own?

But although the two sides of moral feeling are thus really indistinguishable, the feeling of self-approbation or the contrary may indeed be so

much stronger than our feeling of approval or disapproval of others as to justify the application to it of such terms as Conscience, Shame, Remorse. The difference of feeling, however, is only one of degree, and in either case, whether our own conduct or that of others is under review, the moral feeling that arises is due to the force of education and opinion acting upon the various emotions of our nature. For instance, a Mohammedan woman seen without a veil would have the same feeling of remorse or of moral disapprobation with regard to herself that she would have with regard to any other woman whom she might see in the same condition, though of course in a less strong degree. In either case her feeling would be a result of all the complex surroundings of her life, which is meant by education in its broadest sense. Sympathy itself would be insufficient to explain the feeling, though it might help to explain how it was developed. All that sympathy could do would be to extend the dread of punishment associated by the woman herself with a breach of the law, to all women who might offend in a similar way; the original feeling of the immorality of exposure being accountable for in no other way than by its association with punishment, ordained by civil or religious law, or by social custom, and enforced by the discipline of early home life. It is obvious that the same explanation applies to all cases in which moral disapprobation is felt, and conversely to all cases in which the sentiment of moral approbation arises. (ibid., 198–201)

Hector C. Macpherson (1851–1924)

A Scot, H. C. Macpherson was a Spencerian and a prolific writer and journalist. His little book on Smith is instructive and affectionate, apart from some remarks about TMS:

Smith set himself to show the complex phenomena of the moral life is reducible to Sympathy. Sympathy, with him, is the **ultimate** root of ethical judgments.

Detailed criticism of the Theory of Moral Sentiments would carry us too far afield. As a literary production it holds a high place, but its philosophic value is slight. Little reflection is needed to see that Sympathy, **upon which Smith rests his whole ethical system**, has not the oneness and simplicity he imagined... Smith's mistake in imagining Sympathy was a simple instead of a complex feeling, and had universality enough and coercive power enough **to be the basis** of morality, rose out of a conception of human nature peculiar to all the eighteenth-century thinkers. It was assumed that man was everywhere the same, that at all times and in all countries he possessed nearly the same general ideas, and was regulated by much the same class of motives... The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is dead, because it was the representative of a metaphysical method, which in result was almost as sterile as the scholasticism which it displaced. (Macpherson 1899, 38–40)

Simon Patten (1852–1922)

Simon Patten was a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania from 1888 until 1917, when his anti-war views precipitated his retirement. A strong protectionist and founder of the American Economic Association and the American Academy of Political and Social Science, he was associated with the social gospel movement, eugenics, progressivism, and the German historical school of economics (Leonard 2016, 118–119; Coats 2008). The following passage comes from *The Development of English Thought: A Study in the Economic Interpretation of History* (1899).

To-day we see more clearly than Smith did that unguided sympathy is often immoral. Modern charity furnishes a good example of how sympathy may promote more evils than it checks. A feeling that needs the intellect to guide it aright cannot of itself be the force which gives an intellectual process its sanction. We must, therefore, seek the sanction of morality in an older and more fundamental feeling. Pain gives rise to two kinds of feeling. Either a desire to approach and destroy the cause of pain which is called wrath, or else a shrinking from it which is called fear. The first of these feelings is the source of morality. (Patten 1899, 268–269)

James Bonar (1852–1941)

James Bonar, a Scot, though employed as examiner in the Scottish civil service, was a philosophical economist, historian of thought (especially on Malthus), prodigious contributor to Palgrave's *Dictionary of Political Economy* and reviewer for *Economic Journal*, important player in what became the Royal Economic Society, and cataloguer of Adam Smith's library (Shirras 1941). He inclined toward Immanuel Kant and Thomas Hill Green. His book *Moral Sense* (1930) treats TMS at length.

He [Smith] **did not show warrant for all he put in**. This may help to explain why, with its striking merits, his *Moral Sentiments* made no new beginning in moral philosophy. In Economics we have been sometimes told to go 'back to Adam Smith'; the cry has not been raised in Ethics... [Jeremy] Bentham's system was as destitute as Adam Smith's of a **metaphysical basis** such as Kant's. (Bonar 1930, 228)¹⁵

A theory drawn up in all seriousness by Adam Smith and found adequate by Edmund Burke cannot be treated lightly as obviously futile. Times, men, and

15. For more from Bonar on Kant, and in relation to Smith, see Bonar 1930, 246–257.

philosophies, however, have changed much; they were changing then; and there are features in the theory of which the weakness is more evident to plain folk now than to the acutest critics in those days. (ibid., 231–232)

In another work, *The Tables Turned* (Bonar 1931), Bonar offers a dialogue between a “Victorian,” resembling himself, and Adam Smith. I reproduce the concluding lines, laid out as there (Bonar 1931, 50–51):

Victorian

You mean, Sir, that a fine style is of no account in the eye of pure reason, *sub specie aeternitatis*. For all that, it is a great comfort to us here in the Wilderness, and we are glad to have it in your *Moral Sentiments*.

Adam Smith

Observe that there is less of it in the *Wealth of Nations*, to the latter’s advantage, if a man can judge his own books.

Victorian

That same test of Reason, Sir, would hold not only for your compositions, which stand the test well, but for all your library, parts of which would stand it indifferently. The books in your library, say the minor French classics or no classics, would not all appeal to our reason now. When some soul of reason lay in them, you were the man discerningly to distil it out.

Adam Smith

What I have read I have read, including much that both worlds will quite willingly let die. I add again: what I have written I have written, with same saving clause.

Here Bonar seems to suggest that Smith himself regarded WN as a superior work to TMS. Such suggestion directly contradicts the testimony of Romilly in his letter of 1790, quoted earlier.

Richard T. Ely (1854–1943)

Richard T. Ely was a progressive economist and founder and first secretary of the American Economic Association, and also founder and first secretary of the

Christian Social Union. He was professor at the University of Wisconsin from 1892 to 1925, and then at Northwestern until 1933. He was prolific as an economist and popularizer of his policy views. For an anthology that reproduced some text from Smith, Ely contributed a short essay on Smith, from which I draw the following:

The ‘Theory of Moral Sentiments,’ it has been maintained, would have achieved renown for its author, and a place for him in literature, had it been presented to the world simply as a collection of essays on the topics with which it deals; viz., the ‘Propriety and Impropriety of Actions,’ their ‘Merit and Demerit,’ ‘Virtue,’ ‘Justice,’ ‘Duty,’ etc. The essays are finely written, full of subtle analysis and truthful illustration. The book is least significant, however, as philosophy, because it **lacks any profound examination of the foundation** upon which the author’s views rest. (Ely 1902, 13521)

William R. Scott (1868–1940)

William R. Scott taught at St. Andrews from 1896 to 1915, published a study of Francis Hutcheson (Scott 1900), and moved to Glasgow to become the Adam Smith Professor of Political Economy, 1915–1940, publishing an important work on Smith’s life (Scott 1937). The following is from a 1923 address on Smith to the British Academy:

Certainly when he [Smith] came to write his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* he displayed no deep philosophical acumen. That book has its own place in the development of British Ethics, and it shows the kindly heart of the man, but its greatest importance consists in aiding us to understand some obscure parts of Smith’s growth as an Economist. (Scott 1923, 438–439)

It was the weakness of Smith’s Ethics that he attributed to others the high degree of imaginative power which he himself possessed. (ibid., 444)

Harold Laski (1893–1950)

Harold Laski, a Fabian socialist, was a prolific economist, political theorist, author, and lecturer, and professor at the London School of Economics from 1926 to 1950. He served as chairman of the British Labour Party. In *Political Thought in England: From Locke to Bentham*, he wrote that TMS was “written with sufficient power of style to obscure its inner poverty of thought” (Laski 1920, 291).

Arthur N. Prior (1914–1969)

Arthur Prior grew up in New Zealand and there studied under John N.

Findley. He went on to be professor in New Zealand and England and write works on logic, ethics, time, and language. The following comes from his first book *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (1949), in which at the outset he expresses his especially high regard for G. E. Moore, a chapter of Reid (1788), and the reason-slave-to-the-passions section and the *is/ought* section of Hume's *Treatise* (Prior 1949, x).

Smith...distinguishes not only between 'what are' and 'what, upon a certain condition, would be' the judgement of others (the 'condition' being perfect knowledge of our motives and circumstances), but also between the latter and 'what, we imagine, ought to be the judgment of others'. 'What, we imagine, ought to be the judgment of others' is, of course, simply what ours would be if we were in their place. Every man is endowed 'not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved; *or of being what he himself approves of in other men*' (italics mine [Prior's]).

Smith's final word, even here, thus directs us to his undisguisedly subjective notion of 'propriety'... (Prior 1949, 91)

In a footnote I explain why I am dissatisfied with Prior's treatment of Smith's words.¹⁶

16. Prior has here used words from TMS at 110.2 and 117.7. Regarding his handling of the words from 110.2, I have only a minor dissatisfaction: I think where Prior clarifies the "condition" as being one of "perfect knowledge" he would have done better to say *better* knowledge, as "perfect knowledge" opens up the possibility of allowing us to interpret the condition as being the one that would be tantamount to the unfathomable condition presupposed by *ought*, which Smith probably does not mean since, as Prior assumes, he seems to mean to distinguish the cases (I say "probably" and "seems" because, actually, whether Smith means to distinguish *those two* cases is somewhat tricky, as the passage reads "either... or... or..." (TMS, 110.2)). But my chief dissatisfaction is with Prior's handling of the words from TMS 117.7, which come immediately before Prior's "(italics mine)" in the quotation. Prior is here claiming that Smith maintains a sameness of the following two things: (1) a desire on Jim's part of "being what he himself approves of in other men," and (2) a desire on Jim's part of "being what ought to be approved of." Against Prior's claim of Smith holding the sameness of those two things, I make three points. First, there is much in TMS, ignored by Prior, that clearly shows or implies that Smith rejects a necessary sameness of, or even coincidence between, (1) and (2). Second, had Smith simply inserted "he imagines" (to use the verb "imagine" as at 110.2) or "he feels" or "he thinks," making it, instead, "desire of being what he imagines ought to be approved of," the added prolixity would explicitly block Prior's inference from the text; must we go around saying "I imagine" or "I think" every time we say "ought"?; after all, Smith is there speaking of Jim's *desire*, so it seems especially natural to see the tacit presence of "he imagines" or "he thinks." Third, Prior treats the "or" preceding "of being what he himself approves of in other men" as clearly meaning "or in other words," when, as is often the case with the word *or*, there is an ambiguity between interpreting *or* as "or in other words" and "or rather" (as in 'his eyes were green or blue'). If you read the "or" as meaning the latter, then that too, by itself, would be sufficient to block Prior's inference from the text.

Circa 1800

Arthur Prior noted one aspect of major changes circa 1800 when he wrote that Paley's "*Moral and Political Philosophy* first appeared a few years after Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation*; but Paley crystallized the theological Utilitarianism of the preceding period, while Bentham's secular Utilitarianism caught the ear of the age which followed it" (Prior 1949, 103–104).

Some readers of the present article would allow the notion that Smith was one of the greatest thinkers of his age, perhaps the greatest. The notion gives us cause to reflect on the fact that Smith thought TMS a much superior work to WN (Romilly 1840, 404), and yet that TMS found no exponents after 1790 and was so long neglected. Thus we have the worthy explanandum: The greatest thinker's greatest work quickly falling out of favor and being so long forsaken. What explanation could we give?

To generate an explanation, we would need to interpret at least 250 years of human experience, but particularly changes circa 1800. What relevant changes or shifts could have occurred near that date? Here I provide some material from two works, more quotations, which might be pertinent: With what follows I mean to be submitting further material to figure into a historical theory, more perhaps as additional explananda, rather than as explanation. That is, perhaps we should seek a historical theory that explains not only our TMS-specific explanandum, but also the following material, which comes from J. G. A. Pocock and Arthur Melzer.

The first work is Pocock's *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (1985). He writes:

But the defense of commercial society, no less than the vindication of classical virtue, was carried out with the weapons of humanism. The eighteenth century presents us with a legal humanism, or humanist jurisprudence, whose roots were in [Donald R.] Kelley's 'civil science of the Renaissance,' being employed against the civic humanism of the classical republicans in a way hard to parallel in the sixteenth century. The effect was to construct a liberalism which made the state's authority guarantee the liberty of the individual's social behavior, but had no intention whatever of impoverishing that behavior by confining it to the rigorous assertion of ego-centered individual rights. On the contrary, down at least to the end of the 1780s, it was the world of ancient politics which could be made to seem rigid and austere, impoverished because underspecialized; and the new world of the social and sentimental, the commercial and cultural, was made to proliferate with alternatives to ancient *virtus* and *libertas*, largely in consequence of the jurists' fascination with the universe of *res*. Now, at last, a right to things became a way to the practice of virtue, so long as virtue could be defined as the practice and refinement of

manners. A commercial humanism had been not unsuccessfully constructed.

About 1789, a wedge was driven through this burgeoning universe, and rather suddenly we begin to hear denunciations of commerce as found upon soullessly rational calculation and the cold, mechanical philosophy of [Francis] Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and [Isaac] Newton. How this reversal of strategies came about is not at present well understood. It may have to do with the rise of an administrative ideology, in which [Nicolas de] Condorcet, Hartley, and Bentham tried to erect a science of legislation on a foundation of highly reductionist assumptions. But that is another chapter in the history of both jurisprudence and humanism... (Pocock 1985, 50)

In the same work, Pocock writes:

I suggest that we cannot understand the vindication of commercial society unless we understand the grounds on which it was assailed and acknowledge the attack's continuous validity. This obliges us to take a route which leads through [Bernard] Mandeville and Hume to Ferguson and Smith, and to encounter classical economics at the end of it, after long debate between virtue and commerce, virtue and corruption, virtue and passion... But if classical economics emerged in this way, if the last of the civic humanists was the first of the Scottish economists, if the quarrel of the ancients and moderns furnished the context in which the developing understanding of market relations took on problematic meaning, then the classical economics seem rapidly to have hardened into a paradigm which operated to deny the ambivalent historicism of late Whig culture. Bentham and the elder Mill, as well as [John Ramsay] McCulloch and [David] Ricardo, would seem to have much to do with this, and we are left trying to see how their thought emerged in history. The space from Smith to Ricardo is replete with problems and possibilities. (Pocock 1985, 123)

Secondly I point to Melzer's *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (2014). Melzer maintains, soundly I think, the following three historical claims: (1) up to sometime in the 18th century it was common knowledge that most great writers wrote esoterically, (2) in the 18th century there was much lively discourse *about* esotericism, and (3) from about 1800 esotericism declined sharply as practice, and, moreover, people would soon neglect or forget how much it had been practiced. To illustrate, Melzer says that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote in an 1811 letter "of an act of forgetting taking place before his eyes" (Melzer 2014, xii). Goethe writes: "I have always considered it an evil, indeed a disaster which, in the second half of the previous century, gained more and more ground that one no longer drew a distinction between exoteric and esoteric."¹⁷ Melzer

17. Melzer (2014, vii) cites Goethe's correspondence (1988, 3, 168) and credits Werner J. Dannhauser for

elaborates on changes circa 1800:

[Esotericism] *became* unknown in the course of the nineteenth century (as Goethe was reporting). But how does a whole culture suddenly lose awareness of a practice that was, until relatively recently, so widespread, so openly discussed, so long enduring, so crucially important, and so thoroughly documented in the historical record? It is not easy to think of a comparable episode of philosophical forgetting, of intellectual expungement. Mustn't powerful cultural forces of some kind be at work here? (Melzer 2014, 96)

Final remarks

As noted earlier, before putting out a new edition of *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* inserting criticism of TMS, Lord Kames first shared the drafted insertion with Smith. In reply, Smith assured Kames that “Nothing can be more perfectly friendly and polite.” Smith added: “I am no doubt extremely sorry to find myself of a different opinion both from so able a judge of the subject and from so old and so good a friend. But differences of this kind are unavoidable; and besides, *partium contentionebus respublica crescit*” (*Corr.*, 234). I asked an instructor in Latin to translate *partium contentionebus respublica crescit*, and he suggested: “The republic grows by the struggles of factions.” Perhaps Smith is candidly acknowledging to Kames, his former patron, who by then had taken considerably to Reid, that afoot was the forming of intellectual parties divided over the issues treated and jostling over university curricula, appointments, and favorable opinion (see for example the Millar letter quoted above).

It is likely that Smith saw that his way in moral theorizing was losing ground. But nonetheless, with Ed. 6, he only took it to new depths. It would take some 200 years after the private exchange with Kames for his way to once again have more than sparse appeal. From about 1980 a growing number of readers stopped holding TMS's not being foundationalist and not being demarcationist against it.

Poor Richard often repeated the proverb: “An empty bag cannot stand upright” ([link](#)).¹⁸ It seems to me that some of the critics of TMS insist on a box-like circumscription that stands upright by itself. Maybe TMS is telling us that moral theorizing entails circumscriptions that only gain intelligibility and practicability in conjunction with things circumscribed, that moral theory is ineluctably more like a bag, and it gains intelligibility in relation to the things in the bag, things which include bags of things. Principal among the things are what Smith calls “particular

the translation of the quoted passage.

18. Benjamin Franklin, by the way, was a friend of David Hume.

instances” of interpretation, judgment, and conduct (TMS 159.8, 187.2); the pages of Smith’s works, letters, and lecture notes are loaded with such instances; they make the bag stand upright.

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About the Author



Daniel Klein is the editor of *Econ Journal Watch*, a professor of economics at George Mason University (where he leads a program in Adam Smith), the JIN Chair at the Mercatus Center at GMU, a fellow of the Ratio Institute in Stockholm, the author of *Knowledge and Coordination: A Liberal Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2012), and an exponent of **liberalism 1.0**. His email address is dklein@gmu.edu.

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