

ABSTRACT: For sentimentalists like Hume, the most basic objects of our approval are actions or character traits that cause pleasure. But Adam Smith instead takes as the fundamental object of approval the *propriety* of sentiments: a sentiment's being 'suited' and 'proportionate' to its cause. Yet he is not particularly clear about what it is for a sentiment to match an object in this way. Moreover, extant interpretations are unsatisfying, because they generally fail to make sense of Smith's claim that, in judging of your sentiment's propriety, I use my own sentiment as a "rule or canon" for yours (TMS I.i.iii.9). This article provides a novel account of Smithian propriety, based on the idea that Smith sees our sentiments as representations of value. Sentimental propriety, on this account, is a kind of *representational correctness*; I judge your sentiment to be proper just insofar as I share your sentimental perspective on the relevant object.

Passion and Propriety: Adam Smith's Theory of Approval

Sentimentalism, very roughly, is the eighteenth-century tradition of attempting to account for the nature of value in terms of our emotional responses. Like the earlier sentimentalists,

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Adam Smith sees the central task of the theory of value as giving an account of approval—that is, the principles and psychological faculties in virtue of which we see certain actions and characters in a favorable light and others in a negative one. But unlike earlier sentimentalists, Smith thinks the most fundamental form of approval is approval of the ‘suitableness or unsuitableness’ of a sentiment to its cause, or what he calls the ‘propriety or impropriety’ of a sentiment. In such evaluation, I disapprove of your anger not on account of its effects, because it, say, leads you to harm me or others, but on account of its not being suited to the situation, as when one is angry at someone without having being wronged by them.

But Smith never explicitly explains what it *is* for a sentiment to suit something, or relatedly, what kind of thing a sentiment is such that it could suit or match certain objects in the world. My goal is to answer this question on behalf of Smith. The key, I suggest, is to look at Smith’s account of how we *approve* of propriety. I will argue that making sense of our practices of approval, as Smith conceives of them, requires seeing sentiments as having a *representational* dimension; fear, for example, represents its object as dangerous and to-be-avoided. The idea that Smith sees sentiments as representational or cognitive states has been suggested before, including in Nussbaum (1990), Griswold (1998), Fleischacker (2019), and McHugh (2021). But it has not been developed in detail, nor have its full ramifications for Smith’s account of approval and propriety been appreciated.¹ On my interpretation, we take a sentiment, like fear, to suit its object because we, too, take the

¹ A partial exception is McHugh (2021). I discuss his view in more depth in section 4.3.

object to be the way the fear represents it. Approval, then, emerges as importantly distinct from other evaluative sentiments; to approve of a sentiment is less like sensing that it has some valuable feature, and more like *agreeing* with that sentiment.

Smith's introduction of the notion of propriety, on my reading, constitutes an important and in ways dramatic departure from earlier sentimentalists like Hume. Whereas Hume mocks the idea of "eternal immutable fitnesses," I suggest that Smith attempts to incorporate them within a broadly sentimentalist picture (*T* 3.1.1.4–26).² But this account is not just of historical interest. Much recent work in philosophy of emotion emphasizes the ways in which we evaluate emotions as fitting or unfitting (e.g. D'Arms and Jacobson 2000, Tappolet 2016, and Maguire 2018). This notion plays an especially central role in contemporary attempts to revive sentimentalism as a theory of value (e.g. McDowell 1985, D'Arms and Jacobson 2023). If I am right, Smith not only anticipates these ideas, but also provides a distinctive and plausible theory of a notion like that of fittingness, one that explains this notion by tying it to our ability to agree or disagree with sentiments in sympathy.

I proceed as follows. Section 1 both introduces the notion of propriety and sets it against the background of the early modern debate about whether sentiments are characterized primarily as feelings or as representations of value. In section 2, I lay out Smith's account of approval of propriety and argue that there is something unsatisfying

² Hume's works are cited as follows. References to '*T*' are to Hume (2007 [1739/40]) and are in the standard book, part, section, and paragraph format. References to '*E*' are to Hume (1998 [1751]) and are by page number.

about the natural interpretation of how such approval works, which I call the *pleasure-based reading*. I then, in section 3, argue for an alternate interpretation of Smithian approval, which I call the *agreement-based reading*. Central to this interpretation is Smith's claim that I judge your sentiments by means of my own, and I further argue that the best way to make sense of how this is possible is to see the sentiments as representations. Finally, section 4 is dedicated to spelling out this view of sentiment as representations and to contrasting it with other, more Humean interpretations of Smithian propriety. In particular, I argue that it is crucial to Smith's account of approval that sentiments are a distinctive and autonomous way of representing the world.

1. Propriety

1.1 Propriety and Merit

For Smith, the primary objects of evaluation are sentiments; what makes your act of charity praiseworthy is the benevolence that inspires it, and what makes your bullying of someone else blame-worthy is the undue malice from which it flows. Smith does not directly give an account of the sentiments, nor does he, like many early modern philosophers, distinguish them from other affective states like affects or passions; instead, Smith uses "sentiment" interchangeably with "passion," "affection" and "emotion." In each case, he seems to be referring broadly to any kind of affective state, including such things as hate, desire, pain, and feelings of aesthetic admiration.

Throughout the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith distinguishes between two ways of evaluating our sentiments:

The sentiment or affection of the heart from which any action proceeds, and upon which its whole virtue or vice must ultimately depend, may be considered under two different aspects, or in two relations; first, in relation to the cause which excites it, or the motive which gives occasion to it; and secondly, in relation to the end which it proposes, or the effect which it tends to propose. (*TMS* I.i.iii.5)³

To consider a passion in “relation to the end which it proposes, or the effect which it tends to propose” is to consider the effects which such a passion tends to produce or “aims at,” and whether those effects benefit or hurt both oneself and others. Smith uses “merit and demerit” as his evaluative terms for both passions and actions that are good or bad in terms of these standards (I.i.iii.7). Such evaluation is primarily done by means of our feelings of resentment and gratitude; in being injured by another, my suffering leads me to resent the injury, and in seeing another being injured, their suffering leads me to feel sympathetic resentment on their behalf.

By contrast, to consider a passion “in relation to the cause which excites it,” Smith says, is to consider both (i) whether the passion is suited to its cause and (ii) whether the passion is proportionate to that cause: “In the suitableness or unsuitableness, in the

³ Smith’s works are cited as follows. All references to ‘*TMS*’ are to Smith (2002 [1759]) and specifically to the sixth edition. Citations are in the standard part, section, chapter, paragraph format. References to “HA” are to Smith (1980a [n.d.]) and are by section and paragraph. References to “ES” are to Smith (1980b [n.d.]) and are by paragraph. References to ‘*Corr.*’ are to Smith (1987) and are to the letter number.

proportion or disproportion to which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it, consists the propriety or impropriety, the decency or ungracefulness of the consequent action” (I.i.iii.6). Suitability, roughly, concerns whether one feels the right *kind* of passion, whereas proportionality concerns whether one feels this passion to the right degree. For example, it would not be “suitable” to feel anger at someone who gave us a nice present, whereas it would not be proportionate to feel intense gratitude.⁴ Importantly, given the way Smith draws the contrast with merit, it is clear that he thinks suitability and proportion are not a matter of the good or bad effects of the sentiment; even if it were useful to feel intense anger at the smallest slight, since it might discourage future such slights, it would still not be proportionate.

Smith uses “propriety and impropriety” as his evaluative terms for passions that are good or bad in terms of these standards; a passion that is both suitable and proportionate is proper, whereas one that fails on either of these standards is improper. Importantly, Smith does not have in mind a notion of social etiquette of the kind that is associated with the word ‘propriety’ today; not only did ‘propriety’ not generally have such connotations in eighteenth-century English (Johnson 1773), but Smith is emphatic that reactions can be proper even when they are at odds with general social norms (*TMS* III.i.5; *Corr.* 40).

Two additional notes about propriety. First, Smith does not see propriety-approval as *moral* approval, at least in a narrow sense of ‘moral.’ For Smith discusses approval in contexts that seem clearly non-moral; he talks both of approving of another’s aesthetic

⁴ I say “roughly” here because some emotions may be individuated primarily in terms of strength, e.g. hate and loathing.

appreciation of an artwork and approving of someone's finding a joke funny (I.i.iii.1).

Likewise, he discusses propriety-approval in the domains of science and mathematics, suggesting that he also sees such approval as extending to what one might call 'epistemic' sentiments like surprise and wonder (I.i.iv.2–3). I take it, then, that Smith sees propriety as a more general kind of value that applies within *any* evaluative domain.

Second, Smith thinks there is a sense in which propriety is more fundamental than merit or any other kind of value; he frequently claims that we “originally” approve of sentiments on the basis of their propriety (I.i.iv.5). On my reading, Smith thinks approving of effects turn out to be a *species* of propriety-approval, and in particular, to amount to approving of relevant effect-regarding sentiments such as love or resentment. So, for example, judgments of demerit will amount to the compound judgment that the agent's motive was not proper and that resentment towards the agent is proper (II.i.v.2). When taken together with the previous point, this suggests that propriety is really at the core of Smith's theory of value; it is both the most fundamental and the most general evaluative notion in his system.

1.2 The Nature of Propriety

Yet despite this central role in Smith's thought, the notion of propriety is hard to get clear on. In particular, the difficulty is understanding the murky and quasi-metaphorical notions of a sentiment *suiting* or *being proportionate* to an object. Take 'suiting.' One way of hearing the idea of 'suiting' is as an aesthetic notion, akin to 'becoming', as when a color suits a

person or a rug suits a room. Yet Smith is skeptical about attempts to explain propriety in terms of beauty or similar aesthetic notions. In Book IV, he considers the claim that approval is founded on the beauty of utility, and he there argues that while our approval of an object of propriety is “no doubt enhanced by the perception of beauty or deformity which results from [the object’s] utility or hurtfulness,” it is simultaneously “originally and essentially different from this perception” (IV.ii.3). Here, describing approval as “originally and essentially” different from the perception of beauty in utility strongly suggests Smith is not only rejecting this specific account of propriety, but any attempt to cast propriety as an aesthetic notion.⁵

Alternatively, one can hear ‘suiting’ simply as a synonym for ‘fitting,’ a term which Smith also uses when discussing propriety (see, e.g., II.i.v.6, II.ii.iii.7, III.iv.12, and III.v.5).⁶ ‘Fitting’ is a kind of spatial-geometric metaphor, based on the idea of one shape slotting into another. Yet there is no straightforward way to apply such an idea of fit to sentiments like fear or love; there is no clear way to compare the ‘shape’ of sentiments and their objects. The same is true of the mathematical metaphor of proportionality; there is no obvious measure shared by objects and sentiments such that they could correspond in size.⁷

The question of how to make sense of propriety is even more pressing because the claim that sentiments are evaluable in terms of their suitability is not a standard view

⁵ Aesthetic interpretations of Smithian propriety include Griswold (1998) and Fudge (2009).

⁶ ‘Become’ and ‘fit’ are the two relevant options for ‘suit’ given by Samuel Johnson’s dictionary (Johnson 1773).

⁷ Schliesser (2017) suggests a mathematical reading of propriety, though he does not give an account of *what it is* in the sentiment that is proportionate to the object (117).

within the tradition of sentimentalism. Propriety is not a central notion for Hume, Hutcheson, or Shaftesbury, who instead think that what we approve or disapprove of are affective states, or the durable mental traits expressed in such states, which have good or bad effects.^{8,9}

Instead, the most immediate source for Smith's notion of propriety is the notion of fitness in the tradition of *moral rationalism*; "fitting" is among the many apparent synonyms Smith uses for propriety. For moral rationalists like Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Clarke, and Catharine Trotter-Cockburn, certain actions are fitting in virtue of the relations between two things. For example, given the infinity of God and the finitude of humans, it is fitting for us to worship God. Morality, on this view, is a matter of these fundamental and eternal relations of fitnesses. Such fitness, moreover, is to be understood by analogy to mathematical relationships; just as it follows immediately, from comparing two quantities A and B, that A and B are unequal, so it might follow immediately, from comparing the nature of two creatures S and P, that it is fitting for S to benefit P. And just as such mathematical relationships are discovered by reason, so reason also discovers these fitness relations.

Moral rationalism and sentimentalism are often contrasted as antagonistic traditions, and indeed many of Hume's famous arguments for sentimentalism take moral

⁸ Neither is it a central notion for a later sentimentalist like Sophie de Grouchy. Hume does sometimes talk of a passion's propriety, but he seems to use it in a non-normative sense; the "proper objects" of a sentiment, for Hume, are those objects which, given our nature, naturally excite that sentiment (*E* 5.1n17).

⁹ While Smith often talks as if Hume also sees the fundamental object of evaluation as sentiments, this is not quite right; for Hume, they are "durable" mental traits (*T* 3.3.1.4-5; *T* 2.3.2.6).

rationalists as their targets. Smith's discussion of moral rationalism in Book VII, by contrast, is notably positive. His main criticism there is not the doctrine of fitness relations, but rather the view that reason is the source of our evaluative judgments; for Smith, it is "immediate feeling" and not reason that "renders any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake" (VII.iii.ii.7). Indeed, in discussing Clark and Wollaston, Smith explicitly claims that his own notion of propriety is a clarified version of the moral rationalist notion of fitness (VII.i.i.48–49).

Yet even if Smith inherits, from the moral rationalists, the basic notion of fitness, it is hard to see him as accepting their account of what it *is* for something to be fitting. For the moral rationalists, fitness is a matter of certain natures having been created so as to belong together in specific ways, much as a key might have been made to slot into a specific lock in a specific way.¹⁰ More precisely, on the moral rationalist picture, God has created us with a kind of telic essence, such that by virtue of our very nature there are certain things we ought to do. This account of value is older than moral rationalism. For natural law theorists like Culverwell too, our essence gives us a certain intrinsic end, and this means there are certain actions that are naturally in harmony (*conventia*) or disharmony with our nature. The innovation in the moral rationalist picture is to see fitness as relational; the fact that, say, worship of God is fitting for us is not just a matter of our own nature, but of the *relationship* between our nature and God's nature. But it still relies on the thought that there is an intrinsic normative content to our essence; we are created with a nature such

¹⁰ Though of course the relation of 'fit' between the key and the lock is contingent on their shapes still matching in the right way, whereas genuine relations of fitness for the moral rationalists are eternal and necessary, given the existing essences.

that, given other natures, there are certain actions we ought to take, or certain relations in which we ought to stand to those other natures.¹¹ This is the key aspect of the metaphysics that explains the idea of fit; our essences are created such that there is a way for them to naturally match or harmonize with certain other essences.

Smith, however, dismisses this account of fitness as obscure, and more generally, he never engages in anything that remotely resembles such telic metaphysics (VII.i.i.48).¹² So, we are still left with the central question of this essay. Smith adopts, in contrast to the sentimentalists that went before him, the idea that there are certain basic relations of fitness. Yet he rejects the kind of metaphysics that the moral rationalists used to account for such relations. How, then, does he conceive of such fitness or suitability?

1.3 Two Views of the Sentiments

The answer to this question, I propose, lies in the fact that Smith sees propriety foremost as a feature of *sentiments*. It is, in other words, something specific about sentiments that makes them capable of suiting or fitting certain objects.

¹¹ One might hold that the immutable relationships of fitness are independent of our essences. If so, then God would have been able to create the same creatures, but with different relationships of fitness. But Trotter-Cockburn explicitly denies this; she argues that, given the creatures God in fact chose to create, the fitness relationships immediately follow ([1743] 2006: 107–108). This strongly suggests that relationships of fitness are fully grounded in and explained by the natures of the related creatures.

¹² Some interpretations of Smith see teleology as central to Smith's overall project. But even on these views, Smith does not see teleology as explaining the nature of propriety, but rather as explaining why human nature has the features it does (see Otteson 2002).

Here, it is helpful to place Smith's account against the background of two different early modern ways of thinking about the sentiments or passions.¹³ The first one is associated with Hume, who famously denies that passions have any intrinsic representational content¹⁴:

A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification. When I am angry, I am actually possest with the passion, and in that emotion have no more a reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five foot high. (*T* 2.3.3.5)

This denial leads Hume to a view of passions on which they are primarily characterized as certain kinds of *feelings*. In defining pride and humility, for example, Hume takes them to be characterized by their distinctive phenomenology; they are certain “simple and uniform

¹³ It is standard in the early modern tradition to distinguish between a number of different kinds of affective states, and it is often unclear how to map such distinctions between different thinkers. My assumption in this essay is that there is a more-or-less unified phenomenon that all the thinkers canvassed here are theorizing about. I will use “sentiments” to stand for this phenomenon when discussing Smith, and “passions” when talking about Descartes and Malebranche, as this is the word they use for their most central and general notion of affective states. Hume, however, is a tricky case, since he is careful to distinguish between passions and sentiments, and only explicitly addresses the arguments discussed in this section to the passions. For Hume, *passions* are reflective impressions—impressions caused by other impressions or ideas rather than arising immediately from the external world—of a kind that tend to be violent, though token passions can be calm. By contrast, *sentiments* are reflective impressions of a kind that tend to be calmer and that are the product of the faculty of taste; these include the sentiment of approbation and blame and the sentiment of beauty. There are, in addition, other kinds of calm reflective impressions. For this taxonomy, see Garrett (2026). Nonetheless, I think we can still see Hume, Smith, Descartes, and Malebranche as engaged in a debate over the nature of the states we would using ordinary emotion-language identify as fear, love, hate, pride, and so on.

¹⁴ There is substantial controversy about how to interpret this passage; see e.g. Alanen (2005), Cohon and Owen (1997), and Garrett (2006). My claim, in the main text, is only that for Hume passions are not intrinsically representational, which is compatible with the claim that they are intrinsically *intentional*. For this distinction, see Qu (2012).

impressions,” the specific feeling of which we know from our own case (*T* 2.1.2.1; see also *T* 2.1.5.4).

This Humean view of the passions as mere feelings contrasts with another early modern tradition, on which the passions are a kind of representation of value. This view is perhaps best exemplified by Nicholas Malebranche, who claims not only that passions involve a “perception” of good or evil, but also that they have a kind of judgmental structure; passions involve a “judgment ... of the relation an object has to us,” where this relation is one of being good or evil for us (1992 [1674/5]: 5:4.1; 5:3.2). In feeling a passion, in other words, I am not just gripped by a kind of feeling, but I also take the object of the passion to have a certain kind of evaluative significance for me. Indeed, for Malebranche, it is this representational aspect of the passions, rather than their distinctive feel, which gives them their motivational force and leads us to act (5:3.3). I call this broad tradition of thinking about passions the *Neo-Stoic view* of passions, insofar as it self-consciously derives from the Stoic view of passions as (mistaken) judgments.¹⁵

This view of the passions as representations, in turn, also leads to a distinctive kind of ethico-epistemic criticism of the passions as accurate or misleading. Indeed, Malebranche argues that the passions are always false; as he puts it, “the judgments of the passions are never in agreement with judgments of the truth” (5:6.1). For Malebranche, this is because passions are responses to what is good in relation to us, rather than the subject-independent perfections which constitute genuine goodness. But what is

¹⁵ Other representatives of this tradition plausibly include Descartes and Spinoza.

significant here is that it is precisely because sentiments are representations—because they constitute a view on the world—that it makes sense in this way to evaluate them not just as useful or pleasant but as distorting or false.

On the view of passions as feelings, by contrast, there is no clear sense in which sentiments might match or fail to match the world. Indeed, Hume takes the claim that passions are not representational to have important consequences for the way in which passions are evaluable; on his view, passions cannot be “oppos'd by, or be contradictory to truth and reason; since this contradiction consists in the disagreement of ideas, consider'd as copies, with those objects, which they represent” (*T* 2.3.3.5). Instead, the main way in which passions can be good or bad is in terms of their good or bad effects.¹⁶

Despite his close philosophical affinities with Hume, I read Smith's notion of propriety as representing a turn towards the Neo-Stoic, representational view of sentiments or passions. As we will see, Smith regularly engages with Malebranche, but he also discusses the Stoics at length in Part VII, indicating that he must have been familiar with this tradition. In particular, I argue that for Smith sentiments represent a kind of proto-value; fear, for instance, presents an object as dangerous and to-be-avoided. Importantly, such proto-values are not response- or subject-independent. For like other sentimentalists, Smith thinks that part of what makes something dangerous or good or beautiful is our sentimental responses; as Smith puts it, “nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling”

¹⁶ There is, for Hume, a derivative sense in which passions might be irrational, though not “properly speaking” (*T* 2.3.3.6). I discuss this more in section 4.2.

(TMS VII.iii.ii.7). But these values *are* distinct from the particular response itself, such that I might get it right or wrong; what makes the object dangerous is not that I *right now* fear it, but that it is properly feared or, what for Smith is equivalent, that it is feared by the impartial spectator (see e.g. Sayre-McCord 2013).

It is in virtue of this representational quality that a sentiment can match or fit the world; we judge a sentiment to be proper, on my interpretation, when we see the object as having the kind of evaluative property that the sentiment represents it to have. It is in this representational sense that resentments ‘calls out’ to be paired with a certain state of the world. The notion of sentiments as representations, for Smith, replaces the idea of telic essences in British moral rationalism and allows for a thoroughly *sentimentalized* conception of a sentiment fitting its object.

2. Approval and Emotional Concord

The main reason for thinking that propriety amounts to representational fit lies in Smith’s highly novel account of approval or “approbation,” that is, our judgment that a sentiment is proper. I lay out this account and some of the interpretive difficulties with it in this section. In the next section, I argue that the best way to resolve these difficulties is by taking sentiments as representations.

Famously, Smith sees approval as closely tied to sympathy. Smith introduces his account of approval by saying that to “approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with

them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them” (I.i.iii.1). For Smith, evaluating the propriety of your sentiment involves, at least in standard cases, imaginatively placing myself in your situation. If, from that standpoint, I see that I feel the same thing as you do, I then approve of your sentiment.¹⁷

At some points, Smith talks as if approval simply consists in sharing another’s sentiments. Elsewhere, however, he makes it clear that approval in fact arises from *the perception of emotional concord*:

In the sentiment of approbation, there are two things to be taken notice of; first, the sympathetic passion of the spectator; and secondly, the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned. This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful.

(I.iii.i.9.fna)

Approval, then, is the pleasurable feeling that comes from observing correspondence between my feelings and yours.¹⁸ The question, here, is *why* observing such emotional harmony amounts to or gives rise to approval. Recall that, for Smith, judging that a

¹⁷ The process of sympathetic projection, however, is not necessary; in cases where which sentiment is appropriate does not depend on anything specific to you, I can simply judge your sentiment by means of my own. So, for example, Smith thinks we can generally judge the aesthetic responses of others without projection (I.i.iv.1).

¹⁸ For the difference between “concord” and “correspondence” or “unison,” see I.i.iv.7.

sentiment is proper is judging that it is suitably related to its object. It is, in other words, judging that it is a fitting response to the object at hand; in introducing the notion of propriety, Smith talks about approving sentiments as “just and right and accurate, and not merely as useful or advantageous” (IV.ii.7) and as “just, as delicate and as precisely suited to its object” (I.i.iv.4). Yet it is not obvious, at least at first, why finding that there is a harmony between our sentiments should amount to approving your emotion as “just” or “accurate.”

The correct answer to this question, I claim, relies on seeing our sentiments as representations. But to see why this is the case, it is helpful to first consider an alternate and, in many ways, more natural answer that avoids attributing such a representationalist view to Smith. This answer relates Smith’s discussion of approval in Part I Chapter III to his immediately preceding account of the pleasure of mutual sympathy in Part I Chapter II. Here, Smith claims that when I sympathize with others and notice that my sympathetic passions correspond to what they actually feel, this gives me pleasure: “Whatever may be the cause of sympathy, or however it may be excited, nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary” (I.i.ii.1). Smith takes it as self-evident that we do feel such a pleasure in sympathy; the bulk of his argument in Part I Chapter II is concerned, not with establishing the existence of this pleasure, but with arguing against explanations of this pleasure as derivative of self-interested desires: for example, the desire that others share our emotions because this might make them more

likely to help us. By contrast, Smith thinks, the pleasure in mutual sympathy is non-derivative and natural.

Given this background, it is natural to read Smith's account of approval in Part I Chapter III as just an extension of this observation; emotional concord gives rise to or constitutes approval simply because we have a natural tendency to be pleased by emotional concord. That is, the reason emotional concord between our sentiments leads me to view your sentiment in a favorable light just is that such concord gives me a (certain kind of) pleasure. Call this interpretation the *pleasure-based reading of approval*.¹⁹

The question of why the perception of emotional concord gives rise to approval is rarely explicitly raised in the literature on Smith, and if it is done, scholars often take it as a brute fact (e.g. Raphael 2007).²⁰ Hence, there are few explicit statements of the pleasure-based reading approval, with the notable exceptions including Haakenson (1981, see esp. 51–52) and Otteson (2002). More commonly, the pleasure-based reading is in the background of interpretations of Smithian approval. Consider, for example, Charles Griswold's claim that the pleasure of mutual sympathy is a kind of aesthetic delight in sentimental harmony, or as Griswold puts it, that "the pleasure we take in mutual sympathy is understood by Smith aesthetically, as a disinterested attraction to harmony,

¹⁹ There is a variation on this view, on which observation of emotional concord gives rise to or constitutes approval *just because* we have a basic desire for mutual sympathy (and it is the satisfaction of this desire that gives rise to our pleasure). For discussion of the relationship between our pleasure in mutual sympathy and our desire for mutual sympathy, see Otteson (2002) and McHugh (2016). I follow McHugh in seeing the desire as fundamental, but nothing in the argument depends on this detail.

²⁰ A recent exception is Cohon (2022).

concordance, system, and balance” (1998: 121).²¹ Griswold concludes from this that approval “exhibits our love of beauty,” and that, for Smith, ethics is thoroughly “aestheticized” (127; 112). Presumably, then, the reason emotional concord gives rise to or constitutes pleasure, on his account, is because it is pleasurable, where the pleasure here is aesthetic delight in the beautiful.²²

Other interpreters view the pleasure of mutual sympathy differently. Samuel Fleischacker understands the pleasure of mutual sympathy specifically as a sense of solidarity, of not being emotionally isolated but rather participating in a community of feeling. As he puts it, “finding that others feel as I do signals my membership in the general human community” and that “is always a pleasure” (2019: 28). Elsewhere, he links this pleasure to approval:

It is, moreover, precisely the pleasure that constitutes our “approving” of the feelings of others: when I feel it, I think that the other person has commendable feelings about her situation, feelings that I approve of. This point is pretty much definitional. To feel pleased about the feelings a person has is to approve of them; to feel displeased is to disapprove. (2021: 104)

Here, again, the most natural way to read this passage is in terms of the pleasure-based interpretation. Why, precisely, is it that in observing the emotional concord between me and someone else, I “think that the other person has commendable feelings about her

²¹ In later work, Griswold offers an account that is a kind of hybrid of this ‘aesthetic’ view and Fleischacker’s ‘social’ view, discussed below. See Griswold (2017: 172-3), especially fns. 50 and 51.

²² For these reasons, any ‘aesthetic’ interpretation of propriety is *prima facie* committed to the pleasure-based interpretation.

situation”? Fleischacker seems to answer this question by appeal to the pleasure of mutual sympathy; that is the point of claiming that it is “pretty much definitional” that to be pleased by the feelings of others is to approve of them. To see the person as having “commendable feelings,” on this interpretation, is to see the person as having feelings that give me a certain kind of pleasure, namely the pleasure of solidarity. Or at least, if this is not the intended view, then we still lack an explanation of why the pleasure of emotional concord “constitutes our ‘approving’ of the feelings of others.”²³

Now, as I will suggest later, it is not clear that this is Fleischacker’s considered view. For many recent discussions of approval, including ones by Fleischacker, in fact point in a different direction than the pleasure-based reading, even if this has not been fully appreciated. For now, however, I want to focus on the pleasure-based reading as suggested in the above passages, since I think understanding why it fails is crucial both for seeing the distinctiveness of the alternate answer and for understanding how to make sense of Smithian approval.

The pleasure-based reading, then, is both natural and in some sense the main extant explanation of the relation between emotional concord and approval, even if it is often unarticulated. But I think it is ultimately unsatisfying.

To see this, consider how the pleasure-based reading explains why emotional concord gives rise to *propriety*-based approval. For a sentiment to be proper, recall, is for it

²³ Other expositions of Smith’s account of approval that seem to implicitly assume the pleasure-based reading include Sagar (2017: 687).

to be suitably related to its object. But on the pleasure-based interpretation, approval arises from perceiving that a certain relationship exists between *our sentiments*, namely that they are in harmony. Approval, on this interpretation, seems to be a response to the arrangement of our sentiments, rather than to the relationship between sentiment and object. The pleasure-based reading, therefore, needs to give a further explanation of why approval has anything to do with the object of our sentiments.

Here, presumably, the answer has to do with the role of sympathy.²⁴ Approval standardly involves imagining myself in your position, through the faculty of sympathy, and seeing whether in those circumstances I would share your emotions. But, as Fleischacker emphasizes, Smith sees sympathy as arising from attention to the causes of your emotions; sympathy “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it” (*TMS* I.i.i.10; for discussion see Fleischacker 2012, Debes 2016, and Ben-Moshe 2020). In imagining what I would feel if I were in your position, I imagine my response to, say, being slighted in the way that you are.²⁵ In this way, then, the relationship of your emotion to the object enters into emotional concord on the pleasure-based interpretation, since whether I can share your emotion and so achieve emotional concord depends on the object of your emotion; it is because your anger is out-of-proportion to the slight that I cannot feel the same thing in sympathy.

²⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

²⁵ This is often summarized by saying that Smith has a ‘projection or ‘simulation’ theory of sympathy, though see Fleischacker (2012) for some complications concerning these terms.

But I think this still fails to explain why finding that our emotions correspond also means finding that your emotion is proper. For even though my relation to the object does play a role here, it plays the wrong *kind* of role; it is merely a necessary prerequisite for emotional concord, rather than the thing I approve of itself. Nor do I, in any obvious sense, approve of every necessary prerequisite for something that pleases me. It is necessary, for us to be in emotional concord, that your anger is in proportion to the slight you suffer, but it is also necessary that you are slighted, and I do not therefore approve of *that*. So it still seems that what I fundamentally approve of, on the pleasure-based interpretation, is a relationship between our emotions rather than the propriety of your emotion.

Here are two ways to see this. The first is to note that approval is tied to *endorsement* of certain emotions. Recall that, for Smith, approving of a sentiment as proper is tied to seeing that emotion as, in some sense, the right emotion to have (at least in those circumstances, for that person, and so on); it amounts to the sense that this emotion is “just and right and accurate.” So, for example, I take your resentment to be proper insofar as I take it that you were really injured, and I think it really makes sense to desire a kind of punishment of the person who injured you. But it seems like I could take pleasure in emotional concord even when I do not endorse the emotions of others, or even of myself, in this way. Suppose, for example, that I am completely overreacting to some slight on behalf of one of my friends, and that I suspect I might in fact be overreacting. Upon telling a third person about this, that person sympathizes with me completely. There might be a genuine pleasure in such solidarity, a sense of being understood and of feeling that, even if I overreacted, such overreaction is natural and intelligible. But this pleasure is

not tied to any kind of endorsement; I still take my reaction to be inappropriate, and I also take my friend's reaction to be inappropriate—at least on the merits of the slight, if not in terms of comforting a friend.²⁶ Insofar as Fleischacker is right that feeling pleasure in something amounts to approving of it, there might be a kind of approval here, but it is not approval of the sentiment as *proper*.

Second, it is hard to see why, on the pleasure-based theory, mutual sympathy should lead me to approve specifically of *another* person's sentiments as proper. For on this theory, what I am really taking as good is the match between our emotions. But both of us presumably play an equal role in achieving this match; both of us have to have our emotions in the right way for us to have our emotions in the same way. Hence, it is unclear why I should take a particular shine to your role in this rather than mine.

This is clearest when it comes to the case of disapprobation. Suppose you feel anger at a slight, and I, in imagining myself in your position, do not, perhaps because I feel that the person who you think slighted you really had no malice in mind. On Smith's theory, I here disapprove of your emotion as improper. But why think that it is your emotion that is at fault here? If what I am after is emotional concord, why not equally think that I am the one who ought to adjust my sentiments to fit yours?²⁷ If the basis of disapproval is the

²⁶ A similar but importantly different worry arises for my own account; I address this at the end of section 3.1.

²⁷ Such questions are not impossible to answer on behalf of the pleasure-based reading; John McHugh, in particular, has developed a sophisticated theory on which mature agents resort to the impartial spectator as a common standard to which they should both adjust their emotions – and so, insofar as I disapprove of your emotion, it is because I think you are not hitting that standard (but I am) (2016). Note that McHugh himself does not endorse the pleasure-based reading, but rather a view closer to my own; I discuss this more in section 4.2 (2021: 50-51).

pleasure of emotional discord, there is no clear reason why I should disapprove of your emotion rather than mine.

Now, it might be thought that these objections misunderstand the *sense* in which knowledge of the causes of a sentiment matter for sympathy. For surely, in sympathizing, it is not just that the object is a kind of prerequisite that determines whether I can match the other person's emotion; rather, I am in sympathy focused on the object because I am in some sense figuring out what the right way to feel about the object is. When Smith says that we blush with embarrassment for the rude person, this is surely because we, in imaginatively projecting ourselves into his situation, come to see rudeness as an inappropriate response to this situation (I.i.i.10). Several scholars, including Fleischacker, have suggested that there is some kind of connection between our ability to sympathize with an emotion and our sense that this emotion is correct (2012: 293–4 and 2019: 27). But if there is such a connection, then there *is* a natural way in which being in emotional concord involves approving of your emotion, since in sharing your emotion I also see your emotion as correct.

I think this is the right way to think about emotional concord, though I think its importance has not been recognized. One goal of this paper is therefore to spell out, more explicitly than has previously been done, this connection between feeling an emotion and seeing that emotion as correct, as well as its centrality to Smith's theory of approval. More importantly, however, I think this feature of sentiments, what one might call their normative dimension, is *precisely what needs to be explained*. What I have argued, so far, is that one cannot explain this simply by appeal to the pleasure of mutual sympathy. For this reason,

though I have used passages from Fleischacker and Griswold to illustrate the pleasure-based reading, they can also be read as pointing towards an alternative to this reading.²⁸ But to make such an alternative work, one needs a further explanation of *why* there is such a normative dimension to sentiments. Without this explanation, we are in effect no better off in terms of making sense of why emotional concord gives rise to approval than on the pleasure-based reading. This further explanation is, I think, missing in the literature, and I attempt to provide it in the next section.²⁹

3. Agreement in Sentiment

3.1 *Sentiments as Self-Endorsing*

To see how an alternative to the pleasure-based reading is possible, it is helpful to focus on what happens in Part I Chapter III *after* the claim that approval is the pleasurable feeling of emotional concord. For Smith does go on to explain why emotional concord amounts to approval; in fact, on my reading this is the central task of the chapter. On his explanation, the perception of emotional concord constitutes approval because, in judging whether your emotion is appropriate, I consider how the object of your emotion appears to me. The observation of emotional concord then registers a kind of *emotional agreement*, where such agreement does not simply amount to our emotions being similar in kind, but to us

²⁸ Indeed, Fleischacker in later work claims, in line with my account, that sentiments are representations, though he does not connect this point to his account of how Smithian approval works. This may be in part because he has some reservations about this view and so does not want to make it load-bearing; see (2019: 32–33).

²⁹ The notable exceptions here are Griswold (1998) and McHugh (2021), whose views I discuss in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

concurring in how to relate to the object. Call this the *agreement-based interpretation*.³⁰

section 3.1, I lay out the agreement-based interpretation; in 3.2, I argue that this reading of Smith's notion of approval suggests that he sees sentiments as representations.

The agreement-based account is already implicit in Smith's initial illustrations of approbation:

The man who resents the injuries that have been done to me, and observes that I resent them precisely as he does, necessarily approves of my resentment. The man whose sympathy keeps time to my grief, cannot but admit the reasonableness of my sorrow. He who admires the same poem, or the same picture, and admires them exactly as I do, must surely allow the justness of my admiration. ... Upon all occasions his own sentiments are the standards and measures by which he judges of mine. (I.i.iii.1)

Here, the suggestion is not that approbation or disapprobation results directly from emotional concord. Rather, the suggestion is that I judge whether laughter is proper in response to the object simply by seeing, in sympathy, whether I would laugh at the object. My own responses, then, serve as the "standards and measures" of another person's response. I judge your response—your laughter or your resentment—by checking to see what I, from my own perspective, think of the object and seeing how I would react.

This leads to a different interpretation of the significance of emotional concord. Emotional concord gives rise to approval not because I desire emotional concord or

³⁰ Similar interpretations include Sayre-McCord (2010 and 2013) and McHugh (2021).

because it is pleasurable, but because I in some sense see my own emotional response as the right response, and insofar as we are in emotional concord, this means that you too have the right response. Emotional concord amounts not just to a pleasurable arrangement of sentiments, but to *agreement in sentiment*.

Why does my response, in this way, serve as a standard for yours? I take it that Smith's thought is something like this. In evaluating whether anger is the appropriate thing to feel in response to some purported slight, I do not step back from my own feelings and consider the matter in a detached way. My anger is not, in this way, a feeling that just happens to appear in my mind, and which I might review as right or wrong without any prior commitment to it. Rather, insofar as I feel angry in this case, I also take that to be the right way to feel, at least insofar as I reflect on my sentiment; I identify, so to speak, with the perspective of my emotional responses and, absent some further reason to doubt them, see the world through them.

More specifically, I think Smith is making the following assumption:

Self-Endorsement: Insofar as I feel a sentiment S in circumstances C, I am disposed upon reflection to take feeling S in C to be *pro tanto* proper.³¹

³¹ The “upon reflection” qualifier is important here; it is not the case that in feeling S, I thereby immediately also take S to be proper to feel in C. The first-order emotion and the second-order evaluation are distinct, even if the first-order emotion disposes one to also have the second-order evaluation. As is frequently noted in the literature, the distinction between these two states plays a central role in Smith's much-discussed response to Hume in I.iii.i.9na. But Smith also thinks that the second-order evaluation requires socialization in a way that the first-order emotion does not; see III.i.i, as well as discussion in Griswold (1998) and Fleischacker (2019).

That is, the reason my sentiments can serve as a standard for yours is that, when I feel resentment at the object, I am simultaneously disposed to endorse this emotion as proper in the circumstances—and hence, I can also deliver a verdict on whether your feeling or not feeling that emotion is proper.³² Indeed, Smith explicitly makes this kind of claim later on in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* when he says, “The passions, upon this account, as father Malebranche says, all justify themselves, and seem reasonable and proportioned to their objects, as long as we continue to feel them” (III.iv.3).

Moreover, I think the *implicit* connection between feeling a sentiment and seeing that sentiment as correct or appropriate is widespread through *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. This is most notable, perhaps, in Smith’s account of sympathy. For here, Smith frequently moves between descriptive talk of sympathy as imagining what we *would* feel in A’s place and normative talk of sympathy as imagining we *ought* to feel in A’s place. So, for example, shortly after characterizing sympathy as representing “what would be our own [sentiment]” if we were in someone else’s case (I.i.i.2), Smith says that “in every passion of which the mind of man is susceptible, the emotions of the by-stander always correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines *should* be the sentiments of the sufferer” (I.i.i.4, emphasis mine). This might look like an unfortunate conflation. But if we see Smith as relying on **Self-Endorsement**, it makes more sense. Insofar as we are imagining what we would feel in someone’s circumstances, we are not neutral about the

³² What, on this view, is the relationship between Chapter II, on the pleasure of mutual sympathy, and Chapter III, on approval? My view is that, in Chapter II, Smith is pre-emptively clearing the ground for his account of approval by noting that there is a pleasure in mutual sympathy, and that it cannot be accounted for by the self-interested system. This then leaves it open for him, in Chapter III, to identify this pleasure with approval and to explain the basis of such approval by reference to agreement, in the way I have outlined here.

right way to feel; rather, we are disposed to take our feeling as the proper one in such a circumstance. Smith, in other words, is not conflating the descriptive and the normative forms of imagination but noting that there is a way in which they go together.

One might here object that **Self-Endorsement** faces the same problem that I raised for the pleasure-based theory, namely that it seems that our sentiments can correspond even though I see both our sentiments as inappropriate. But there is in fact an important difference here. **Self-Endorsement** does raise the problem of how, if I take my sentiment to be *pro tanto* proper, that I ever come to see them as improper. This is a problem that Smith answers in Part III with the introduction of our ability to take up different perspectives; I see my anger as improper because I can take up the perspective of a spectator, including the impartial spectator, who disapproves of that feeling. By contrast, the problem for the pleasure-based theory is not how to explain why I can come to disapprove of a sentiment even though I have it, but rather why there should be *any* connection between the pleasure of mutual sympathy and the endorsement of a sentiment in the first place.

3.2 Self-Endorsement and Representation

This still leaves the question, however, of *why* sentiments are self-endorsing in this way. Smith, I think, gives a partial answer in comparing this method of judging sentiments to how I might judge of another's *beliefs*:

To approve of another man's opinions is to adopt those opinions, and to adopt them is to approve of them. If the same arguments which convince you

convince me likewise, I necessarily approve of your conviction; and if they do not, I necessarily disapprove of it: neither can I possibly conceive that I should do the one without the other. To approve or disapprove, therefore, of the opinions of others is acknowledged, by every body, to mean no more than to observe their agreement or disagreement with our own. But this is equally the case with regard to our approbation or disapprobation of the sentiments or passions of others. (I.i.iii.2)

Here, I take it, Smith is thinking of approving of someone's opinions as judging those opinions to be *true*. But to judge that your belief that P is true involves judging that P, and so, in other words, adopting your belief that P. If I want to judge whether your belief that it is raining is true or not, I will look outside the window and see *whether it is raining or not*; that is, I will form my own belief on the matter. In the case of belief, then, my mental state serves as the "standard or measure" for the states of others. Of course, there is a sense in which the ultimate standard here is not a belief, but just whether it is raining or not. But since *my* access to that fact always comes by means of a belief, *my* standard for your belief will always take the form of a belief on the matter.

Why do we evaluate beliefs in this way? I take it that the most plausible explanation is that they are representations. Believing that it is raining involves taking the world to be a certain way—namely, currently rain-filled. But in the case of belief, those are also the precise conditions that make the belief true and so would lead me to endorse a belief that it is raining as accurate. In other words, my belief is a standard for yours because my belief

constitutes a stance on precisely those features of the world which make your belief appropriate or inappropriate.

The analogy with belief, then, suggests that Smith similarly sees sentiments as representations, and approval of their propriety as akin to approving of the truth of opinions. In fact, though Smith does not explicitly talk about sentiments as representations, there is substantial indirect textual support for this view. For example, Smith several times talks of sentiments “judging” of their objects, and he compares the sense in which they do so with the way in which *physical* senses judge that their objects have certain response-dependent qualities: for example, taste judging that the object is sweet (III.v.5). He several times compares moral sentiments directly to senses: resentment is a kind of “sense of injuries,” and gratitude a “sense of benefits” (VII.iii.iii.11). Moreover, Smith explicitly compares propriety to the correctness of opinions, and in motivating the notion of propriety, he says that we approve of sentiments as “right and accurate,” both of which are most naturally understood as values that accrue to representations (IV.ii.7; I.i.iv.4).

Given the view of sentiments as representations, we can understand **Self-Endorsement**—the claim that insofar as I feel a sentiment S in circumstances C, I am disposed upon reflection to take feeling S in C to be *pro tanto* proper—as following from the following two claims:

Commitment: In feeling a sentiment S, I am *pro tanto* committed to the content of S.³³

Propriety as Correctness: I take a sentiment S to be appropriate in C just in case I take the object of S in C to be as S represents it to be.

On the view I am offering, then, my sentiment involves a certain emotional perspective on the world, e.g., my fear of the bear involves taking the bear to be *scary*, and my resentment at your harming me involves taking your action to be an unjust injury. I am disposed to see such sentiments as proper, upon reflection, because its being proper just amounts to the object being the way the sentiment represents it as being; my fear is made right precisely by its object being scary. Likewise, my sentiment serves as a standard for *your* sentiments, because judging the propriety of your sentiments just amounts to judging whether your sentimental perspective on some object is really correct, e.g. whether the object of your fear *really is scary*. But I do so simply by evaluating whether the object appears the same way to me, or would appear so if I were properly positioned—i.e. I form my *own* sentimental perspective on the object. So, the reading of Smithian sentiment as representational explains both self-endorsement and the sense in which my sentiments can serve as a standard for yours.

This representational reading also helps explain another initially puzzling feature of Smith’s account of approval. Recall, again, that Smith thinks that, in noting the emotional

³³ By saying that I am “committed” to the content of S, I mean that my relation to the content of my sentiments is not merely that of entertaining it or idly imagining it; in feeling a sentiment, I really take the object to be as the sentiment represents it.

concord between us, I approve of your sentiment “necessarily” see your sentiments as “suitable to their objects” (I.i.iii.1). On the pleasure-based interpretation, it was hard to see why this was the case. For your sentiment’s being suitable to its object amounts to a certain relationship between *your sentiment and its object*, whereas concord just amounts to a relationship between our sentiments. Such a match between our sentiments could only bear on the propriety of your sentiments, it seems, *if the sentiment itself somehow reflects on or gets at its object*. That is, it is only if my sentiment also tells me something about the object—for example, if my fear shows me the scariness of the bear—that agreement between our sentiments could be grounds for me to think that your sentiment matches its object. But that is precisely what the representational interpretation I am offering suggests.

Let me recap my argument. Central to understanding Smith’s theory of approval is understanding why the observation of mutual sympathy constitutes approval—why noting that we both feel anger amounts to me taking your anger to be proper. First, I have argued that this is not because such mutual sympathy is pleasurable, but rather because such mutual sympathy amounts to a kind of agreement; my sentiment serves, as Smith puts it, as a standard for yours. Second, I have argued that the *reason* it can serve as such a standard is that it is a kind of representation of its object. The upshot is this: that the distinctive and novel theory of approval that Smith develops out of his account of sympathy reveals that he also adopts a distinctive theory of the things of which we approve, namely, the sentiments.

4. The Content of Sentiments

4.1 *The Representation of Value*

I have argued that Smith sees sentiments as representations. But if they are representations, it would be helpful to say something about *what* they represent.

Consider, as an example, the case of resentment. For Smith, resentment is a kind of “sense of injuries”; to resent O involves characterizing O in an *evaluative* way, namely as having injured one (VII.iii.ii.11). Likewise, he talks of gratitude as a “sense of benefits,” of the “amiable” as the object of love, the “respectable” as the object of respect, and the “horrid” as the object of horror (VII.iii.ii.11; III.iv.10). What is common here is that these are all value-laden properties; to see an object as horrid or respectable is not merely to ascribe some neutral feature to it, but to see it as in some way good or bad, in some way agreeable or disagreeable. I will use “evaluative characters” as a general term for such properties. Generalizing from these examples, then, I suggest that for Smith feeling a sentiment towards O involves representing O as having a certain evaluative character.

In addition, some sentiments also involve an additional, *action-recommending* component; Smith talks of at least some sentiments as “aim[ing] at” actions and as “propos[ing]” (I.i.iii.7; I.i.iii.5). In the case of resentment, for example, this end is both the punishment of O and the achievement, through that punishment, of recognition on O’s behalf of the wrong they did. Resentment, then, not only represents the object as injurious

but also as *to-be-punished*. Whether all sentiments ‘propose’ actions in this way is not clear, but certainly some do.³⁴

The evaluative characters represented by sentiments are also not yet *full-fledged* value-properties, in the vein of goodness or justice. This is because, for Smith, judging something to have a value property in the full sense also involves judging that a certain sentiment is proper with regards to it, e.g. judging that an action is meritorious involves judging that gratitude towards the agent is proper (II.i.3). Such judgments therefore involve not just first-order sentiments, but also second-order reflection on the propriety or impropriety of our first-order sentiments. The full account of how such full-fledged value-notions are built up from our first-order sentiment by the means of sympathy and reflection would require significant additional discussion; my point here is just to note this additional, reflective content cannot already be part of the content of our first-order sentiments. Representing an object as having an evaluative character, in other words, involves representing it as mattering to me, but not yet as *justifying* acting a certain way or *meriting* a certain reaction.³⁵

Moreover, these evaluative characters are not response-independent value-properties, but rather response-dependent ones. Smith, following the earlier sentimentalists, holds that it is only the relationship of an object to our affective states that

³⁴ Specifically, Smith restricts his claim about sentiments “propos[ing]” ends to those sentiments from which “action proceeds,” and it seems possible there may be some sentiments from which no actions proceed (I.i.iii.5).

³⁵ The full story of how second-order reflection is added to my first-order sentiments does not come until Book III and involves the process of seeing oneself from the perspective of others.

could make the object agreeable or disagreeable to us (VII.iii.ii.7). Hence, there is a sense in which these evaluative properties are not metaphysically prior to the sentiments which represent them.³⁶ Nonetheless, I take it that our immediate sentiments do not include any explicit reference to such response-dependence; in being afraid of the bear, I am simply taking the bear as scary and not thereby thinking of its relationship to any sentiments of mine or others, even if the bear's being scary amounts to it, say, causing fear responses in appropriately-positioned observers.³⁷ Compare this to a secondary quality like sweetness, to which Smith analogizes values (III.v.5). Our perception of sweetness not only picks out a quality in the object, but a response-dependent quality—something like the disposition to give rise to such sensations. Nonetheless, our perception of sweetness does not, in itself, represent that quality as response-dependent. Even if sweetness *is* the disposition to give rise to feelings of sweetness, the perception of sweetness does not represent such a disposition, but simply the quality of sweetness.

4.2 The Autonomy of Sentiments

³⁶ This combination of representationalism about the sentiments and response-dependence about the represented properties gives rise to interesting questions about Smith's metaphysics of value, if not an outright tension. For example, Christine Tappolet has argued that representationalism about emotions should lead one to be a realist about the properties these emotions represent (2016). A full resolution of this tension would make my reading more plausible but is outside the scope of this paper.

³⁷ Put in an anachronistic way: while sentiments represent evaluative properties, and evaluative properties are identical to certain relational properties of giving rise to or being the proper objects of our sentiments, representation is an opaque context, and so it does not follow that our sentiments directly represent evaluative properties as a relational property. That values are response-dependent is a conclusion of philosophical argument, specifically the one in VII.iii.ii.7, and not simply a matter of reading off the contents of our value-representations.

On my reading, then, sentiments are feelings of a kind of proto-value in the object, one that will eventually get refined by the process of sympathy and reflection into a full-fledged value judgment. This approach contrasts with another, more traditional way of understanding the sense in which Smithian sentiments might have a cognitive dimension, where the focus is on the ideas that give rise to those sentiments.

Smith adopts Hume's view that affective states—in Hume's terminology, “passions or sentiments”—are, at least in standard cases, caused by prior ideas or impressions. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith distinguishes between sentiments which “take their origin from the body” and sentiments “derived from the imagination” (I.ii.i.1; I.ii.ii.1). The first kind of passions are responses to a state of my body, as for example hunger is a response to a lack of nutrition. The second kind of sentiments, however, are a response to a *representation* of their object as having certain qualities. So, for example, Smith says of a person who has lost all his fortune that he “suffers from the imagination only, which represents to him the loss of his dignity, neglect from his friends, contempt from his enemies, dependence, want, and misery, coming fast upon him” (I.ii.i.6). Likewise, Smith holds that fear, in general, is a response to the imagination representing an object as a source of future pain (I.ii.i.9). In general, I will call the idea that causes a given sentiment under standard conditions the *source-idea* for that sentiment.

There is a sense in which the sentiment is *based* on its source-idea. If I am afraid of the snake because I think its venom can inflict serious pain, but I later discover that it is not venomous, then I am also likely to stop being afraid it, and if my fear persists, I am likely to see this fear as either groundless or based on some other, perhaps unconscious, attitudes

towards snakes. Source-ideas, then, play a kind of justificatory role with regards to the sentiments.³⁸

One *kind* of rational criticism that can be brought to bear on sentiments is criticism of the source-idea(s) on which they are based. If I fear the bear because I see it as larger than me and apt to crush me, then I am likely to change my feelings if I discover that it is in fact a small cub. Indeed, several commentators have suggested that insofar as Smith sees sentiments as rationally criticizable, it is exactly along this dimension. So, for example, Charles Griswold claims that the “whole notion of rational criticism of an actor’s emotions from the standpoint of a spectator is supported by this interpretation of the emotions” as “guided by an ‘idea’ of the imagination” (2006: 42).

Yet I think that Smith must think of the sentiment’s as having a representational content that is *distinct* from the content of the source-idea. This is for two reasons. First, it fails to account for Smith’s commitment to what I call the *autonomy of the sentiments*. Second, it fails to differentiate Smith’s view from Hume’s.

One the first point, recall that Smith thinks not only that my sentiments can serve as a standard for your sentiments, but that my sentiments are the *only* such standard; I have no other way of judging your sentiment than by comparison with my own. So, Smith says, “When we judge in this manner of any affection, as proportioned or disproportioned to the

³⁸ The sense in which an idea justifies a sentiment is, on my reading, downstream of the notion of propriety. Roughly, I suggest that a state of affairs P fully justifies feeling a sentiment S just in case and because S is proper in P, and so likewise a *representation* of P justifies S *from my perspective*. In turn, a state of affairs Q *partially* justifies S just in case it is part of some P that fully justifies S.

cause which excites it, it is scarce possible that we should make use of any other rule or canon but the correspondent affection in ourselves” (*TMS* I.i.iii.9).

In this sense, then, the sentiments form a kind of *autonomous* domain; they only admit of criticism from each other, and not from any standard drawn from a source external to that domain. In other words:

Autonomy of the Sentiments: I can only judge whether a sentiment is appropriate (in a circumstance, at a time, etc.) by means of another sentiment.

This does not mean that, in order to judge whether some sentiment is appropriate, I always need to *right now* feel another sentiment that I can use as a standard. Smith’s point, rather, is that sentiments alone are authoritative about whether another sentiment is appropriate. For Smith is clear that I can use past sentiments to form general rules about what it is appropriate to, say, fear or love, and that I can use such general rules to judge whether some given sentiment is appropriate (see I.i.iii.4 and III.iv.1–7). But Smith is also clear that these general rules are entirely based on my past sentiments and do not have any independent authority (III.iv.8). Hence, I am still in such cases employing a sentiment to judge whether this sentiment is appropriate, just a *past* one. If I had no past sentiments to appeal to, I would have no basis for correcting a current sentiment.

Some commentators, e.g. Raphael (2007), have seen the autonomy of sentiments as mere rhetoric, but Smith repeats this view at a number of points (see, e.g., III.v.5). Moreover, Smith sees the autonomy of the sentiments as flowing from a more general

claim about our cognitive faculties, namely that they all constitute autonomous domains: “Every faculty in a man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them” (I.i.iii.10). This is not just a claim that shows up in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but one that Smith argues for at some length in his unpublished essay “Of the External Senses” (see “ES” 47–50 and 81). Hence, it is hard to imagine that he did not mean these claims literally.³⁹

But note that the autonomy of sentiments means that, insofar as sentiments have a cognitive dimension, this must amount to something more than just them being caused by a certain source-idea. For if judging whether my sentiments are suitable simply amounted to discerning features the object had, as represented by the source-idea, then it would not be the case that I could only judge of your fear by my fear. For, clearly, I do not need to have a fear-involving response to a snake—or even to be capable of feeling fear—to determine whether it is venomous, or in other ways a possible source of future pain. So, judging the propriety of your sentiments must amount to something more than judging the source-ideas of your sentiments. Likewise, then, it cannot be that the content of sentiments simply amounts to the content of their source-ideas; they must have a *distinctive* kind of content.

³⁹ D.D. Raphael’s skepticism about this claim comes from the evident possibility of cross-modal correction, as for example when my hand tells me that an object is concave even though it looks convex to me. But the possibility of cross-modal correction can also be explained by appeal to general rules; through experience, I learn that the objects of vision are correlated, in certain ways, with the objects of touch, and so I am in effect correcting my present vision by means of this past vision. Smith develops precisely this kind of account in some detail in “Of The External Senses”; see especially the references to Berkeley in paragraphs 50–60.

The key here is to see that there are *two* ways in which my sentiment can be liable to rational criticism. First, I can be mistaken about the features which my fear is a response to; so, for example, I might be afraid of some snake because I think it is venomous, when in fact it is not. But second, I might be mistaken, not about whether the object of my fear genuinely has these features, but about whether these features *really are such as to merit my response*. So, for example, it might be that the snake is venomous, but that this is not grounds for fear—for example, because the truly wise person realizes that the only true kind of harm is harm to the soul and so would not fear bodily pain, as the Stoics held.⁴⁰ Since the first kind of evaluative question—whether the *basis* for my sentiments is correct - can be answered without appeal to any sentiments, the autonomy of the sentiments and propriety-approval must strictly speaking concern the second question—whether the basis for my sentiment is such as to render my sentiment appropriate. Of course, there is a looser sense in which propriety-evaluation also concerns the first kind of mistake, since these mistakes naturally *lead* to mistakes of the second kind; if I mistakenly think that the snake is venomous, then I am also likely to improperly see the snake as dangerous. Hence, Smith in talking about propriety is also frequently concerned with these kinds of mistakes

⁴⁰ Smith discusses the second kind of mistake at a number of points. In discussing self-command under distress, for example, Smith compares the person who reacts to losing their leg to a cannon shot with “coolness and tranquility” to the one who is entirely consumed with “pain and their own fear” (TMS III.iii.26). Here, the mistake of the second person lies, Smith suggests, in being unable to escape their “own natural feeling of [their] own distress” and so being unable to take up the perspective of the impartial spectator, from which the injury can be seen simply as “an inconveniency under which he can enjoy all the ordinary pleasures of solitude and of society” (TMS III.iii.26–27). As I read him, Smith is not here suggesting that the fearful person is mistaken about *what happened to them*. Rather, they are mistaken about the *significance* of this physical injury; they take it to merit far greater distress than it in fact does. Similar points can be made of the person who places their own interest over that of others; their mistake is not in being confused about the facts of the situation, so to speak, but rather in seeing their own interest as meriting more concern than that of others. See Smith’s discussion in III.iii.4–11.

(see, e.g., *TMS* III.ii.4–5). But these mistakes are not strictly speaking mistakes of propriety; they are important because they tend to *cause* impropriety rather than because they *constitute* impropriety.

The second reason for seeing the sentiments as having a representational content distinct from the content of ideas is that, if Smith did not hold this view, his position would not be substantially distinct from Hume's. Recall that, for Hume, the passions are not representations and so cannot be evaluated as true or false. Nonetheless, Hume claims that one can "in a figurative and improper way of speaking" evaluate passions as "unreasonable," namely insofar as they are caused by false ideas (*T* 3.1.1.12). So, if you feel affection for the bear in part because you think it is harmless, then the basis for your affection, and by extension your affection too, can be rationally criticized. But if you continue to feel affection even once properly aware of the bear's capabilities, then your feeling cannot be criticized; it is just there.⁴¹

If Smith took the propriety of sentiments to amount simply to the truth or falsity of their source-ideas, his notion of propriety would be the same as Hume's notion of being unreasonable in a figurative sense. Yet Smith emphasizes that the notion of propriety is supposed to be an innovation on Hume's account. When he first introduces the notion of propriety, Smith claims that philosophers "of late years," presumably including Hume, have

⁴¹ Note that this is true even if you hold, as many interpreters of Hume do, that passions or sentiments are extrinsically representational. On one kind of reading of Hume, for example, an affective state like pride is not itself representational, but it always co-exists with a representational state as a matter of psychological law. But even on such an account, the affective state *itself* can only be criticized on grounds of its effects; if we hold fixed the representational states, whether or not feeling pride is correct is just a matter of whether or not it is useful or immediately agreeable to ourselves and others.

given “little attention to it” (*TMS* I.i.ii.8). More directly, in Book IV, Smith argues against Hume’s account of approval, on the grounds that his focus on utility does not capture “the first ground of our approbation,” which instead is “a sense of propriety” (IV.ii.5; see also I.i.iii.4).⁴² But if this sense of propriety turns out to amount to an evaluation of sentiments in terms of the truth or falsity of their source-ideas, then it is already part of Hume’s account, and so it is neither the case that philosophers “of late” have ignored propriety nor that Hume’s account of approval leaves no room for “the first ground of our approbation.” So, for Smith, propriety must be a distinct evaluation of sentiments above and beyond evaluation of their source-ideas as true and false.

Instead, I suggest, the best way to make sense of the autonomy of sentiments is to see Smithian sentiments as constituting a self-contained way of knowing and representing. Many of the senses, for Smith, have their own distinctive domains; all my awareness of color ultimately comes from my sight, just as all my awareness of sound ultimately comes from hearing. So, too, for the sentiments, where their proprietary domain is that of value-qualities. In feeling anger or hate or love, I am taking the object to have a certain kind of evaluative character, and only another sentiment can correct me here, because only other sentiments can represent the object as having that evaluative character or not.⁴³ It is through the sentiments, and the sentiments alone, that we see things as laden with value. In other words, the autonomy of the sentiments follows from the representationalist account of propriety, on which the only way to evaluate whether a sentiment is proper is to

⁴² Smith does not name Hume as the target of Part IV, talking instead of an “ingenious and agreeable philosopher,” but scholars generally understand this to be Hume.

⁴³ But cf. my discussion of general rules on page 40 and fn. 39.

consider whether one endorses its content, together with the additional claim that sentiments, and only sentiments, represent a distinctive kind of property, namely value-laden qualities.

The different components of Smith's view of the sentiments are represented below in Figure 1:

<FIGURE 1 HERE>

4.3 McHugh on Self-Endorsement and Approval

The most sophisticated version of the kind of view I reject in section 4.2 is in McHugh (2021), and it is worth discussing it in depth. McHugh motivates his view by drawing attention to Smith's early essay "History of Astronomy," where Smith discusses the same Malebranche passage I quoted earlier; here, he says, "But our passions, as Father Malbranche [*sic*] observes, all justify themselves; that is, suggest to us opinions which justify them" ("HA" III.1).

Note that Smith here adds an additional gloss to Malebranche's point; not only does he claim that sentiments justify themselves, but he suggests that the way they justify themselves is by leading us to have "opinions which justify them." From the discussion that follows, it is clear that the "opinions" here are source-ideas. Smith presumably has something like the following in mind: initially seeing the bear's sharp claws leads me to fear it rending my flesh, for example, but then this fear further causes me to think of the bear as

huge and able to crush me under its weight, or to dread its massive jaws, or so on. An initial idea of O as a future source of pain here causes me to fear O, which in turn leads to new, distinct ideas which also represent O as a future source of pain, though in different ways, thereby reinforcing my passion.⁴⁴

McHugh sees this mechanism as explaining **Self-Endorsement**. Sentiments, for Smith, “dispose us to call to mind considerations that act for us as reasons for feeling them,” where I take these “considerations” to be what I have called source-ideas (2021: 50).⁴⁵ It is this “cognitive component” of sentiments that explains our disposition to approve of our own sentiments. Moreover, it is also at the basis of our approval of the sentiments of others; for McHugh, “the pleasure we take in noticing mutual sympathy constitutes approval of others and the displeasure we take in noticing its absence constitutes disapproval of others because of this disposition toward approval of our own sentiments” (51).

The way this works is as follows. In evaluating other people’s sentiments, I imagine myself in their position. If, then, I share their sentiments, this will also make me aware of considerations that support such a sentiment and so will lead me to approve of their sentiment. McHugh here is open about the nature of the connection between sentiment

⁴⁴ This idea has precedence in Hume, who notes that “any harm or uneasiness has a natural tendency to excite our hatred, and that *afterwards we seek for reasons upon which we may justify and establish the passion*. Here the idea of injury produces not the passion, but arises from it.” (T 2.2.3.9, emphasis in original)

⁴⁵ One could read McHugh, instead, as holding that these considerations just are the distinctive contents of the sentiments themselves; for example, the consideration that supports my fear just is the fact that the bear is scary, and not the size of its claws. Indeed, McHugh gives as an example of a consideration that rationalizes fear the thought that the thing is dangerous, which on my account is a quality represented by the fear instead. On this reading, our accounts align.

and source-idea; though he generally talks of it as causal, such that our passion causes us to token certain source-ideas, he notes that certain remarks of Smith's suggest it might be conceptual, such that it might be part of what it *is* to feel fear that one also thinks of such rationalizing considerations (50). But either way, what makes sentiments subject to rational criticism on this interpretation is their connection to certain distinct cognitive states, and what is subject to rational criticism is just the content of those states; the sentiments do not have their own *distinct* content.

The passage from "The History of Astronomy" does make this account look tempting. Yet there are both textual and systematic reasons for doubting it.

First, the textual reasons. Smith clearly sees the psychological mechanism described in the "Essay" as an important feature of human psychology. But Smith, like both Hume and Malebranche, sees the tendency of passions to generate their own justification in this way as a kind of self-deception, on which we rationalize the emotions we happen to find ourselves with. So, for example, he notes that, in early societies, people fear immense natural phenomena like thunderstorms or comets, and this in turn leads them to see such phenomena as the will of the gods:

As those appearances terrify him therefore, he is disposed to believe every thing about them which can render them still more the objects of his terror.

That they proceed from some intelligent, though invisible causes, of whose vengeance and displeasure they are either the signs or the effects, is the

notion of all others most capable of enhancing this passion, and is that,
therefore, which he is most apt to entertain. (“HA” III.1)

Smith does not approve of this inference; he ascribes it to the “inexperience and uncertainty” of early humans and claims that “in the breasts of the most civilized” such sentiments would be “presently checked by the reflection, that the things are not their proper objects” (III.1; III.2) This mechanism, in other words, is a source of error, to be corrected by proper reflection. But it would be strange if Smith founded approval upon such a self-deceptive mechanism; there is no reason to think that Smith sees approval, in general, as illicit in this way.

More importantly, however, this account also runs afoul of the autonomy of the sentiments. For on this account, my approval of the sentiment as proper is based on endorsing its source-ideas. But we have already seen that this cannot be the basis of propriety-approval. For if my approval of sentiments as proper simply amounted to having ideas that supported or rationalized this sentiment, then it would not be the case that my sentiments were the only standard whereby I could judge the sentiments of others. There would be no necessary role for the sentiment to play in such evaluation; I could evaluate your fear, not by means of my own fear, but simply by directly considering whether the object is, perhaps from your perspective, a potential source of pain. To satisfy the autonomy of the sentiments, it must be the sentiments that, as Smith says, “justify themselves,” rather than the associated source-ideas.

Hence, rather than reading Smith's use of the Malebranche quote in the "History of Astronomy" as elaborating on his use of it in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I think it is better to read him as identifying two different mechanisms that could both be described as "self-justification." In the "History," he is describing an epistemically flawed psychological mechanism that leads sentiments to generate further, unwarranted support for themselves. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, by contrast, he does not invoke a second mental state but rather suggests that it is the passions *themselves* that make them "seem reasonable and proportioned to their objects" (*TMS* III.iv.3). Hence, I here take him to describe only the self-recommending feature that all representations share. This feature can lead to self-deception – in being convinced of our opinions, we sometimes ignore important counter-vailing evidence – but it *need* not do so, anymore than the fact that beliefs recommend themselves necessarily leads to self-deception.

5. Smith's Sentimentalized Representationalism

I have argued for three theses: (a) an account of Smithian approval, on which approval amounts to agreement in sentiment and involves me using my own sentimental perspective as a standard for yours, (b) a new interpretation of Smith's view of sentiments, on which they are representations of a kind of proto-value, and (c) a new account of Smithian propriety, on which it amounts to the match between a representation and the represented. These theses are related; the view of sentiments as representations and propriety as representational correctness, I have argued, is the best way of explaining *why*

approval functions in the way described in (a), and in particular, why *my* sentiment bears on whether *your* sentiment is proper.

One can see Smith's picture of evaluation as involving, in a way, two levels. At the first level, I have a variety of sentimental responses, each of which acquaints me with various values – grief with misfortune, resentment with unjust injury, fear with danger, and so on. Each of these sentiments corresponds to a substantive value-property, and each of them appraises objects in terms of that value. These sentiments, moreover, are autonomous within their domain; just as I have no acquaintance with sound that is not ultimately traced back to hearing, so I have no acquaintance with misfortune that is not ultimately based on grief.

But I can, in turn, also evaluate these responses themselves. Here, my evaluation is not in turn based on a further set of substantive standards; I am not now evaluating whether these responses are beautiful or fair or dangerous or disgusting, though of course I can also do this. Rather, evaluation on the level of *propriety* is based on a purely formal standard; namely, whether I agree with those responses, whether they match my own sense of the objects as unjust or dangerous or so on. This is marked by the fact that I do not evaluate the propriety of responses simply by means of some new sentiment which feels some responses to be proper and others improper; rather, evaluating them in this way requires mobilizing already present first-order responses to check the correctness or incorrectness of other responses. Propriety is not some *additional* thing we admire in responses, alongside other virtues like utility or justice. It is, rather, for sentiments what truth is for beliefs.

This notion of propriety, and the associated view of sentiments as representations, constitutes an important innovation within the sentimental tradition, one that in certain respects aligns Smith more with the moral rationalists than the sentimentalists. Yet even though Smith appropriates ideas from the neo-Stoic and moral rationalist tradition, he still incorporates them into a broadly sentimental picture. So, though Smith rejects Hume's view that passions are not representations and so cannot be evaluated in terms of their correctness, he accepts Hume's view that sentiments cannot be "oppos'd by (...) reason." For Smith, it is sentiment alone that judges the correctness or incorrectness of other sentiments. Likewise, while Smith accepts the moral rationalist view that there are basic relations of fitness between objects and reactions, he denies that reason is what discovers and judges about such fitnesses; again, such judging is for Smith done by the sentiments.⁴⁶ In both cases, Smith recovers elements of the rationalist view by assigning to the sentiments the role traditionally played by reason. So, while Smith is a representationalist, he proposes a distinctly *sentimentalized* representationalism.

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⁴⁶ Though it can be aided by reason; see (VII.iii.ii.5-7). For discussion of Smith on the role of reason in judgment, see also the debate between Carrasco (2004) and Kopatjic (2020), as well as Fleischacker (1999).

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