Hume and Smith on Utility, Agreeableness, Propriety, and Moral Approval

by

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Pages 13-16 and 38 - 50 may be skimmed/skipped.

Abstract: We offer a fresh examination of Smith’s moral theory in relation to Hume’s. In Part IV of The Theory of Moral Sentiments, Smith presents a foil against which he develops his own theory, a foil attributed to Hume. According to the foil, moral approval derives from “utility.” But, as a characterization of Hume’s theory, that foil is misleading. One twist is that Smith used the words utility and useful differently than Hume did – Smith quietly stretched them to include agreeableness, thereby obscuring the importance of agreeableness in Hume’s theory. The other, more significant problem concerns Smith’s advance on Hume. Smith’s great advance is to elaborate that between moral approval and “utility” (or beneficialness) there is propriety. But Smith gives a somewhat misleading impression about the extent to which that advance is at variance with Hume’s account of moral approval. Whereas Smith allows the impression that in Hume moral approval derives quite determinately from “utility,” in fact Hume conveys the interpretive and sentimental spaciousness of the operations that generate moral approval; here, Hume even speaks repeatedly of “proper sentiments,” thus almost using the term propriety himself. We suggest that Smith’s development on Hume is that he emphasizes a locus of sympathy not emphasized in Hume – namely, the relation between the moral judge and her own man within the breast –, but that locus enters the theory in addition to the sympathies emphasized in Hume, not in lieu of them. We distinguish lateral sympathy, which is important in Hume’s thought, and vertical sympathy, which is especially characteristic of Smith’s more inner-directed and allegorical thought. Smith embraces Hume’s lateral sympathy and enhances moral theory by adding formulations (“the man within the breast,” “the impartial spectator”) that elaborate vertical sympathy. Smith comes off as somewhat critical of Hume, as a departure from Hume, but we argue that he is, rather, a development on Hume. Indeed, we interpret propriety as a species of agreeableness, and Smith’s propriety phase represents another dimension within which such agreeableness lives. We speculate that Smith was more or less aware of all this, and we address the question: Why, in that case, would Smith have proceeded as he did?

Keywords: Adam Smith, David Hume, Theory of Moral Sentiments, utility, propriety

JEL Codes: B12, B30
Robertson’s Book has great Merit; but it was visible that he profited here by the Animosity against me. I suppose the Case was same with you.

…it mortifies me that I sometimes hurt my Friends.

– David Hume, letter to Adam Smith, 28 July 1759 (Smith 1987, 44)

In 1759, shortly after the publication of Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), David Hume wrote an anonymous abstract of it, appearing in Smollett’s *Critical Review* in May of 1759. David Raynor (1984, 52) aptly describes it as “highly complimentary,” though it consists mostly of quotations from TMS.

Commenting briefly on TMS’s Part IV, Hume writes:

Our author subjoins many irrefragable arguments, by which he refutes the sentiments of Mr. Hume, who founded a great part of his moral system on the consideration of public utility. The compass to which we are confined, will not allow us to explain them at full length; but the reader, who will consult the author himself, will find, that philosophy scarcely affords any thing more undeniable and conclusive. (Hume 1759, 45)

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2 References to Hume’s Abstract are to Reeder (1997, 33-50); note that on page 50 there is a typo: “digest himself” should read “divest himself.”
The quotation begins with “Our author,” which clearly signifies Adam Smith. Afterward we read that the present occasion “will not allow us to explain them at full length” (italics added) and, then, a suggestion that the reader consult “the author himself.” The exoteric signification of “them” is Smith’s irrefragable arguments and of “the author himself,” again Smith, thus:

*Philosophy scarcely affords anything more undeniable and conclusive than the moral writings of Smith.*

But “Hume was capable of using ambiguity or irony for ulterior purposes” (Raynor 1984, 61). We believe that Hume has a sly signification of “them,” namely “the sentiments of Mr. Hume,” and of “the author himself,” namely David Hume, thus: *Philosophy scarcely affords anything more undeniable and conclusive than the moral writings of Hume.*

Hume’s Abstract highlights the mystery of the relation between Smith’s moral theory and Hume’s, and how Smith and Hume themselves conceived of that relation. Several authors have treated the matter (Campbell 1971; Haakonssen 1981, especially 39-44; 1996; Raynor 1984; Martin 1990; Pack and Schliesser 2006). In this paper we offer a fresh examination of Smith’s moral theory in relation to Hume’s. In Part IV of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* Smith presents a foil against which he develops his own theory, a foil attributed to Hume. According to the foil, moral approval derives from “utility.” But, as a characterization of Hume’s theory, that foil is misleading.

The foil is misleading in several ways. One conspicuous way, which is not really germane to the larger issues that we deal with in this piece, comes with Smith’s “chest of drawers,” where Smith gives the impression that Hume’s moral theory draws no distinction

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3 Such is the reading of James Fieser (2005, I: 117).
between human beings and inanimate objects. But Hume says just the opposite in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, published eight years prior to TMS. Such a misrepresentation is curious, and it might be a tip-off that something is up.

Another important matter is that Smith used the words *utility* and *useful* differently than Hume did – Smith quietly stretched them to include agreeableness, thereby obscuring the importance of agreeableness in Hume’s theory. Smith’s obscuring of agreeableness is curious, for, in Smith, we find repeated remarks in which he associates propriety with agreeableness. In treating the matter we introduce a distinction between propriety-agreeableness and otherwise-agreeableness.

But the most significant problem with Smith’s representation of Hume concerns Smith’s advance on Hume. Smith’s great advance is to elaborate that between moral approval and “utility” (or beneficialness) there is propriety. But Smith gives a somewhat misleading impression about the extent to which that advance is at variance with Hume’s account of moral approval. Whereas Smith allows the impression that in Hume moral approval derives quite determinately from “utility,” in fact Hume conveys the interpretive spaciousness of the operations that generate moral approval; here, Hume even speaks repeatedly of “proper sentiments.”

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4 Smith writes: “[I]t seems impossible that the approbation of virtue should be a sentiment of the same kind by which we approve of a convenient and well-contrived building; or that we should have no other reason for praising a man than that for which we commend a chest of drawers” (TMS IV.2.4, and similarly VII.iii.3.17).

5 Hume writes: “We ought not to imagine, because an inanimate object may be useful as well as a man, that therefore it ought also, according to this system, to merit the appellation of virtuous. The sentiments, excited by utility are, in the two cases, very different; and the one is mixed with affection, approbation, &c. and not the other” (EPM 5.1 n17; italics his).

6 On conspicuous errors as a device of esoteric writing, see Melzer 2014, 55, 314-315.
We suggest that Smith’s development on Hume is that he fashions and elaborates a locus of sympathy not emphasized in Hume – namely, the relation between the moral judge and her own man within the breast –, but that locus enters the theory in addition to the sympathies emphasized in Hume, not in lieu of them. We fashion Smith’s development in terms of an added dimension. We distinguish lateral sympathy, which is important in Hume’s thought, and vertical sympathy, which is especially characteristic of Smith’s more inner-directed and allegorical thought. Smith embraces Hume’s lateral sympathy and enhances moral theory by adding formulations (“the man within the breast,” “the impartial spectator”) that elaborate vertical sympathy. Smith’s propriety phase is a vertical enhancement to Hume’s account.

Smith comes off as somewhat critical of Hume, as a departure from Hume, but we argue that he is, rather, a development on Hume. We think that Hume and Smith’s thinking on “utility” has much in common. We speculate that Smith was more or less aware of all this, and we address the question: Why, in that case, would Smith have proceeded as he did?

Before treating Smith’s representation of Hume, we present Hume’s thinking on utility, agreeableness, and moral approval, particularly in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (EPM).\(^7\) We offer a broad interpretation of Hume’s thinking on moral approval that nests moral approval within Hume’s conception of “understanding” and “taste.” Such an interpretation portrays Hume’s thinking on moral approval more sparsely than it is often understood (and than represented by Smith).

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We treat EPM, not the *Treatise*, as the Hume work that Smith has chiefly in view. Smith, for example, employs the phrase “why utility pleases” in both of Part IV’s complimentary allusions to Hume (IV.1.2; IV.2.3), the phrase repeating a section title of EPM (and absent from the *Treatise*). The editors of the Glasgow edition of TMS, D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie, note the connection to EPM, but remark “Smith seems to be thinking more of the *Treatise*, II.i.5” (TMS 179 n1). We disagree. The present piece, we suggest, amply shows that, despite the terminological twist, Smith made the schematic portion of EPM, what we call the four-factor account, a touchstone in his building on Hume.\(^8\) Surely Smith was well aware of Hume’s sentiments about his own works: Hume thought EPM his finest piece of writing, whereas he repeatedly regretted the *Treatise*, even explicitly disavowing “that juvenile Work.”\(^9\)

**Hume’s moral theory**

*Hume’s four-factor account in EPM*

Hume develops his thought concerning the relation between utility, agreeableness, and moral approval quite schematically in EPM. He relates judgment of an action or character trait to its usefulness and agreeableness. Hume develops what we term a ‘four-factor account’ of moral approval. Hume’s four-factor account can be expressed as follows: Mary deems Jim’s conduct or action praiseworthy based on Mary’s understanding of whether it is (1) useful to Janet or other non-Jim persons (i.e., serves public utility), (2) useful to Jim, (3) agreeable to Jim, or (4)

\(^8\) It is true that the four-factor account finds articulation in the *Treatise* (3.3.1.30, p. 377), but it is only in EPM that it is made strongly schematic.

\(^9\) Hume refers to the *Treatise* as “that juvenile Work” in the “Advertisement” disavowing it, penned in 1775, published in 1777, and reproduced in Hume 2007, 586-587. Hume’s repeated regrets are presented by Norton (2007, 582-588). We agree with Tom Beauchamp (2000, xvi) that “it is probable that his ‘repenting’ of his early work was unfeigned.”
agreeable to Janet. (In this paper we often say “Janet” as synecdoche for all non-Jim persons.) Each of the four factors of moral approval in Hume’s account is treated in a separate section of EPM. These criteria of praiseworthiness are, of course, not unrelated to one another. Some of Jim’s actions could be useful to Jim and agreeable to Janet, and so forth. Hume says that honesty, fidelity, and truth are praised initially as social virtues contributing to public utility, but are also approved of for their private benefit to individuals who possess them (EPM 6.1.13).

Figure 1 shows the four factors, numbered counterclockwise (1) - (4) to match the order presented in EPM. In our presentation of Figure 1, notice that we provide an explanatory sentence, and notice an important feature of that sentence: Mary’s approval depends on Mary’s understanding of Jim’s action as viewed through the four lenses. Smith’s development on Hume chiefly lives in the realm of Mary’s understanding, a realm we dub the “vertical” dimension.

**Figure 1: Hume’s four-factor account**

Mary’s assessment of the praiseworthiness of Jim’s action is based on Mary’s understanding of four factors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jim’s action is <strong>Useful</strong> to</th>
<th>Jim’s action is <strong>Agreeable</strong> to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Janet** | (1) EPM 5  
E.g.: justice, fairness, kindness | (4) EPM 8  
E.g.: wit, politeness, chivalry |
| **Jim**  | (2) EPM 6  
E.g.: industry, discretion, prudence | (3) EPM 7  
E.g.: cheerfulness, courage |

*Public utility and social virtue*
Virtues that are approved of largely for their public utility (factor (1) of Hume’s account) are called the social virtues, and include justice, kindness, gratitude, and public spirit (EPM 2.5, 3.1). Utility to Hume is synonymous with usefulness to the purposes that people have, purposes that are presumptively morally legitimate, ordinary peaceable purposes. When Hume says that Jim’s virtue or action is approved of for its public utility he means that it is understood to be useful to purposes of non-Jim persons. We might say that the approval-points of useful action are imputed from the value – or agreeableness – of achieving the purposes that the action conduces to. The useful action assists purposes, even if such “assistance” is not mutually known and recognized by the actual agents. Thus the approval-points of usefulness do not flow directly from the action; they are dependent on the value of the assisted purposes. Rather like how the value of a capital good, such as a wheelbarrow, is imputed from the final goods it helps produce, the merit of utility is imputed from the agreeableness it conduces to.

Hume writes of the social virtues: “the end, which they have a tendency to promote, must be some way agreeable to us, and take hold of some natural affection” (EPM 5.1.4). He holds that the natural affection that bonds the moral approval of the social virtues to public utility is fellow-feeling and a desire for the prosperity of humankind. Hume, like Grotius, Hutcheson, and Smith, has a roundly social conception of the self and holds that we are genuinely good-willed toward others, saying (EPM 5.2.17): “Here is a principle, which accounts, in great part, for the origin of morality: And what need we seek for abstruse and remote systems, when there occurs one so obvious and natural?”
Sympathy underlies a general fellow-feeling with human happiness or misery (EPM 7.29). Public utility in Hume is understood by imagining the sentiments of a person who is affected by a particular virtue or action of another. Thus when Mary is judging a particular action of Jim’s and considering its contribution to public utility, she imagines, for instance, how Janet is affected by Jim’s action. If she imagines Jim’s action as being useful in a process that brings about pleasure, benefit, or comfort for Janet, Mary understands it to contribute to public utility. The same process occurs in the assessment of inanimate objects, which fall outside the realm of morals, but are subject to similar aesthetic judgment:

Thus, suppose a man, who takes a survey of the fortifications of any city; considers their strength and advantages, natural or acquir’d; observes the disposition and contrivance of the bastions, ramparts, mines, and other military works; ‘tis plain, that in proportion as all these are fitted to attain their ends, he will receive a suitable pleasure and satisfaction. This pleasure, as it arises from the utility, not the form of the objects, can be no other than a sympathy with the inhabitants, for whose security all this art is employ’d… (T 2.3.10.5)

Thus, understanding in Hume, at least as pertains to moral approval, involves the sympathetic imagination. In Hume we have an emphasis on lateral sympathy, sympathy with actual rather than figurative or allegorical beings. Think of Mary on a field of social affairs. In judging Jim’s action, she enters multilaterally into Jim’s situation, into Janet’s situation, and into any other non-Jim’s situations. She relies upon her understanding. It is noteworthy that Friedrich

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10 Hume’s account of sympathy in EPM is different than his account in the Treatise. In the Treatise, Hume attempts to give a much more elaborate and mechanistic account of sympathy. He abandons such efforts in EPM and simplifies his conception of sympathy to fellow-feeling, a conception that is more compatible with Smith’s treatment in TMS. Norman Kemp Smith (1941, 151-152) makes a similar point. But, as discussed below, Smith goes much further than Hume in talking of one’s sympathy with increasingly “illusive” or figurative beings.
Hayek (1967, 58) noted that the moral-sense school’s idea of sympathy corresponds to the later notion of *verstehen* – which is German for understanding.

*Private utility and selfish virtue*

Hume calls the category of Jim’s virtues that are approved of for their usefulness for Jim’s purposes “selfish” virtues. Since Hume’s time the word *selfish* has developed more definite connotations that make it self-contradictory to speak of “selfish virtues.” Hume simply means character traits useful for achieving one’s own purposes, which are, again, presumptively perfectly legitimate. As with social virtue, Hume relates moral approval to sympathy and sociability. When we observe Jim to act in a manner that we understand to be useful for bringing about his own joy and happiness, e.g., acting industriously, diligently, prudently, reflectively, we sympathize with him and approve his action and character (cf. EPM 6.1.3). Hume maintains that such approval of selfish virtue cannot stem from self-love in that “[no] force of imagination can convert us into another person, and make us fancy, that we, being that person, reap benefit from those valuable qualities, which belong to him” (EPM 6.1.2).

*Agreeableness*

Agreeableness is that which is immediately agreeable. When Hume employs the adverb “immediately” in front of “agreeable,” he does not modify “agreeable” but simply accents a key feature of agreeableness. “Immediately agreeable” and “agreeable” are one and the same to Hume (as well as to Smith). Hume writes: “Whatever is valuable in any kind, so naturally classes itself under the division of useful or agreeable, the *utile* or the *dulce*” (EPM 9.1.1; italics his). Latin for *sweet*, *dulce* highlights the immediateness of agreeableness, as with chocolate ice
cream. In addition to agreeableness of the taste buds, we should point out that agreeableness is fruitfully associated in Hume with pleasing sensation more generally, with something feeling good or right, as opposed to “rubbing us the wrong way,” as the idiom has it.

Hume treats the agreeableness of Jim’s action under two heads: agreeableness to Janet (i.e., non-Jim’s) and the agreeableness to Jim himself. Qualities that are immediately agreeable to Janet include manners, wit, and politeness. Qualities that are immediately agreeable to Jim include cheerfulness, courage, and tranquility. Things that we judge to be immediately agreeable to their possessors are approved of from basically the same source as with the so-called selfish virtues. It pleases us to see other people happy. “These [characteristics and actions] are immediately agreeable to others, abstracted from any consideration of utility or beneficial tendencies: They conciliate affection, promote esteem, and extremely enhance the merit of the person, who regulates his behaviour by them” (EPM 8.1; italics his). Moreover, virtues and actions that please their possessors spread and become naturally agreeable to onlookers: “WHOEVER has passed an evening with serious melancholy people, and has observed how suddenly the conversation was animated, and what sprightliness diffused itself over the countenance, discourse, and behavior of every one…” (EPM 7.1). Agreeableness in morals immediately engages our approbation and spreads “by a contagion or natural sympathy” (EPM 7.2).

The Role of the Understanding

Hume’s four-factor account is not a simple formula for moral judgment, but an explanatory process embedded in contexts of understanding, imagination, and judgment that vary with Mary. Mary’s understanding – as we use the term – can be broadly interpreted as the
complex interaction of her portfolio of interpretations and her faculties of reflection and judgment. Reflection involves reason and imagination. As pertains to reason, Mary’s understanding instructs her “in the tendency of qualities and actions, and point out their beneficial consequences for society and to their possessor” (EPM Append. 1.2). Mary’s reason can progress over time, giving her a more or less sound sense of the consequences of a characteristic or action. Hume says: “But though reason, when fully assisted and improved” (EPM Append. 1.2; italics added), implying that it is coherent to talk about better or worse reason, as accords with our own sensibilities and higher-level judgments.11

Hume holds that reason alone cannot lead Mary to judge a quality or act to be praiseworthy or blameworthy (EPM App. 1.2). Sentiment plays a necessary role. A sentiment is generated by the sympathy that arises from an imaginative component of Mary’s understanding. Her ability to imagine herself in the situation of others is a function of her experience and of the degree to which she has cultivated her imagination and moral sensibilities. Hume illustrates the sympathetic imagination:

Nay, when we run over a book with our eye, we are sensible of such unharmonious composition; because we still imagine, that a person recites it to us, and suffers from the pronunciation of these jarring sounds. So delicate is our sympathy! … In every judgment of beauty, the feelings of the person affected enter into consideration, and communicate to the spectator similar touches of pain or pleasure. (EPM 5.37)

Our treatment of reason here is slightly oversimplified. Hume does not maintain a strong distinction between reason, judgment, and imagination. Rather, he folds them all together into a complex faculty of deliberation. He thus uses the word ‘reason’ in a number of senses. He has one sense of reason that is flat and logical. Reason in this first sense pertains to relations of ideas and matters of fact when the instances that constitute facts are agreed upon. In contrast, reason in the second sense is more spacious, and is closer to something like a calm passion (see Winters 1979; Baier 1991; Ridge 2003; Matson 2017).
The sympathetic imagination and the operations of reason are codependent in Hume’s account. Reason informs of the consequences of actions; sympathetic imagination enables moral approval of actions that do not engage us directly. The combined operations of reason and imagination give rise to moral judgment. Together reason, imagination, and judgment comprise Mary’s understanding, or assessment, of Jim’s action. The understanding is a spacious faculty that encompasses Mary’s various interpretive frameworks. When the social essence of Hume’s conception of the understanding is grasped, we see its adaptability not only to diverse contexts that Mary might take into view, but to diverse Marys.

The Sense of Taste

In treating agreeableness, Hume speaks of taste and sentiment. Mary senses in the moment whether she likes a particular object, whether it accords with her sense of taste. But Hume says that Mary can also foster what she thinks constitutes a better sense of taste, and that bettering her sense of taste is itself an agreeable quality: “The very sensibility to these beauties, or a DELICACY of taste, is itself a beauty in any character; as conveying the purest, the most durable, and most innocent of all enjoyments” (EPM 7.29). Mary’s taste in one particular moment might reflectively become an object of her future estimation. So Mary might think to herself, “how agreeable is my sense of what is agreeable?” On our interpretation, there is a naturally occurring recursivity in Hume’s conception of agreeableness. His account of agreeableness can allow for conscious development of moral approval. As Mary can strive to develop good taste in music and art, she can strive to develop good taste in character and morals by working off her exemplars and experience. She can cultivate agreeable sensibilities regarding objects that she thinks should be agreeable, independent of whether she finds them to be
particularly agreeable herself at a given time. We can think of Mary reflectively thinking about what sort of conduct she should find agreeable in Jim, and how Jim’s conduct accords with her developing sense of taste.

Our interpretation of Hume’s conception of taste does not draw particularly on EPM. His two essays on taste (Hume 1987b, 1987c), however, show the importance he ascribed to taste in literature and morals, and his general interest in the ongoing eighteenth-century discussion regarding whether a standard of taste could be established. When Smith alludes to Hume, he does not specify particular works by Hume, so it is perhaps fair on our part to draw from Hume’s essays, with which Smith was surely familiar. It might be objected that Hume’s essays on taste speak solely to the issue of connoisseurship and cannot be generalized to morals and understanding. But Hume seems comfortable with such generalization, saying that the function of taste is to “give the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue” (EMP App 1.21).

Moreover, early in his career Hume generalized taste to the enterprise of philosophy itself: “’Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy” (T 1.3.8.12). Moral sensibility is the matter of beauty of human conduct, for both Hume and Smith.

In “Of the Delicacy of Taste,” Hume speaks directly of cultivating taste as a way to of forming sound judgment:

12 Think, for example, about learning to appreciate fine wine. At a young age, wine might taste bitter, sour, and unpleasant. But our first impression of wine comes to be overmatched by our sense that our parents and others find wine to be agreeable, and we cultivate an appreciation for it. In terms of morals, perhaps we could think about acts of obedience and probity in children. Such virtues are, perhaps, initially repellant. But we observe our parents practicing them and, we hope, learn to view such virtues in a more agreeable light.

13 In a 1757 letter, Hume told Smith he would send him a copy of his Four Dissertations (Corr., 22), and says Smith would already be familiar with the material from having read the manuscripts. Such evidence reinforces pervasive textual evidence that Smith was very familiar with Hume’s work.
In order to judge aright of a composition of genius, there are so many views to be taken in, so many circumstances to be compared, and such a knowledge of human nature requisite, that no man, who is not possessed of the soundest judgment, will ever make a tolerable critic of such performances. And this is a new reason for cultivating relish in the liberal arts. Our judgment will strengthen by exercise: We shall form juster notions of life… (Hume 1987b, 6)

Hume’s idea that we can form more or less just notions of life parallels the idea of the recursive nature of propriety in Smith. The sense of taste in Hume allows us, as does the sense of propriety in Smith, to think about how just or proper Mary’s moral sensibilities regarding Jim’s action are. We can hold Mary’s judgment up against the judgment of others. So Hume basically holds that taste allows us to swap our sense of beneficialness (the overarching composite of usefulness and agreeableness), which is inevitably linked to our exemplars’ sense of beneficialness, for Mary’s. Hume tacitly endorses and encourages this move in “Of the Standard of Taste”: “One accustomed to see, and examine, and weigh the several performances, admired in different ages and nations, can alone rate the merits of a work exhibited to his view, and assign its proper rank among the production of genius” (Hume 1987c, 238; italics added).

Thus, Hume relates agreeableness to a sense of taste, to a conception of what is justly, or properly, considered agreeable. Hume says, “But when these obstructions are removed, the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately display their

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14 On recursivity in Smith, see Klein 2016. Hume’s idea here of the difference between information and knowledge is reminiscent of a comment from Smith in Wealth of Nations: “[The laborer’s] condition leaves him no time to receive the necessary information, and his education and habits are commonly such as to render him unfit to judge even though he was fully informed” (WN I.xi.p.9; italics added). On knowledge as entailing information, interpretation, and judgment, see Klein 2012, 79-156.
energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men” (Hume 1987c, 233, italics added). Hume writes of a sense of agreeableness that is blameworthy: “Particular incidents and situations occur, which either throw a false light on the objects, or hinder the true from conveying to the imagination the proper sentiment and perception” (Hume 1987c, 234; italics added). He continues: “One obvious cause, why many feel not the proper sentiment of beauty, is the want of that delicacy of imagination, which is requisite to convey a sensibility of those finer emotions” (Hume 1987c, 234; first italics added).

Hume’s use of the word proper prefigures Smith’s propriety phase. Indeed, Smith himself uses taste in a way that parallels his propriety phase: in developing our sense of taste we look to the exemplary taste of others (cf. TMS I.i.4.4). Smith particularly links taste to the formation of intellectual virtues. So in terms of our distinction between the lateral dimensions (a two-dimension plane) and the vertical dimension, Hume’s thought was by no means devoid of the vertical dimension. Smith, we shall see, allows the impression that Hume mechanically flattened matters down to the lateral dimensions of the plane, but that is not really fair to Hume. However, what Hume did not (much15) do in the vertical dimension that Smith does do is treat it in terms of sympathy.

Adam Smith: TMS Part IV and Beyond

“Utility” and “Useful”: Smith’s Curious Semantic Deviation from Hume

Smith develops his thinking on “utility” and moral approval against a foil that he attributes to Hume. His major development from Hume’s account is a sense of propriety in the

15 Later in the present piece we point out hints of vertical sympathy in Hume.
process of moral approval. By emphasizing Mary’s sense of propriety, Smith better opens up conversation about whether Mary’s sense of propriety is proper: What would our authorities and exemplars think of Mary’s sense of propriety? Where is it that Mary goes wrong? Or is Mary’s sense of propriety in fact superior, at least in some respects, to our own hitherto sense of propriety? Is it we who need to improve our sensibilities? Have we put too much store by our exemplars? Propriety in Smith, moreover, elaborates on Hume’s conceptions of taste and understanding in morals.

But first we need to treat something curious about Smith’s treatment of Hume’s four-factor account, something that has perhaps clouded the relation between Hume and Smith on moral approval.

In several signal passages, Smith represents Hume’s account as holding that Mary’s moral approval of Jim’s conduct flows from Mary’s understanding of the “utility” of Jim’s conduct. That is, Smith specifies “utility” but not “agreeableness.” The “utility”-without-“agreeableness” representation is very pronounced: The very title of Part IV begins it and then immediately the very title of the first chapter continues it (in relation to the beauty of non-moral objects), and then immediately the first sentence of the first chapter affirms it again, as does the very title of the second chapter (on moral objects). Indeed, in Part IV it is but once (at IV.2.3) that “agreeableness” is mentioned as a factor in beauty judgments, coming more than halfway through the Part, and quite in passing.

If one were to assume that Smith uses the word utility (and useful) as Hume does, then one would have to conclude that Smith simply misrepresents Hume. In all of Smith’s
Figure 2: The agreeableness arms and usefulness legs, on Hume’s semantics

representations (except for the IV.2.3 occasion), it would seem that Smith has simply overlooked, or lopped off, the agreeableness parts of Hume’s four-factor account, like cutting off the agreeableness arms and leaving only the usefulness legs (see Figure 2). Such a view of the matter seems to be held by Raynor (1984), who says “Smith evidently misrepresents Hume’s moral philosophy, which…identifies four independent sources of value, only two of which involve utility” (59).

But we read Smith as using the terms differently than Hume does: If only implicitly, Smith does preserve the agreeableness arms, but he denominates all four limbs “utility,” whereas Hume denominates only the useful legs “utility.” The agreeableness arms are intact, but Smith denominates them, too, “utility.” In fact, Smith sometimes denominates the agreeable arms as “useful,” as though he views “agreeable” as a species of “useful.” Thus, the arms, for Smith are agreeable, useful, and have utility, whereas for Hume the arms are agreeable but not useful nor have utility. For Smith, this extending of the semantic deviation down to “useful” is really the

16 cf. Campbell (1971, 118) who notes that Smith “does include the immediate effects of action” (italics original).
only way to see Smith as preserving Hume’s four-factor thesis while handling the passages saying that according to Hume’s system “qualities which are approved of as virtuous… are originally valued as useful to ourselves as well as those which are esteemed on account of their usefulness to others” (TMS, IV.2.5).

Suppose Smith knows that Hume likes chocolate ice cream. Smith might say: “Hume finds usefulness, or utility, in chocolate ice cream.” To this, Hume might object: “Well, I find utility in chocolate ice cream only in that, as against other sustenance, it is useful to me, should I have a purpose to satisfy an impulse to it; in that sense agreeableness can always be said to entail such a usefulness, and hence a utility; but I prefer to strip away such a trivial usefulness and preserve ‘useful’ and ‘utility’ for purpose aside from such immediate agreeableness.”

The one instance within Part IV in which Smith speaks of “agreeableness” as a factor involves an ambiguous “or” but seems to support our interpretation:

The same ingenious and agreeable author [i.e., Hume] who first explained why utility pleases, has been so struck with this view of things, as to resolve our whole approbation of virtue into a perception of this species of beauty which results from the appearance of utility. No qualities of the mind, he observes, are approved of as virtuous, but such as are useful or agreeable either to the person or to others… (TMS IV.2.3; italics added)

Elsewhere, in Part VII, Smith more clearly subsumes agreeable under “utility”: “According to [that system which places virtue in utility], all those qualities of the mind which are agreeable or advantageous, either to the person himself or to others, are approved of as virtuous, and the contrary disapproved of as vicious” (VII.ii.3.21). Likewise, in reviewing “that principle which
gives beauty to utility,” Smith speaks of society as “an immense machine, whose regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand agreeable effects” (VII.iii.1.2).  

Smith’s semantic deviation from Hume is curious. One might suspect that Smith had simply misunderstood Hume, that he had somehow overlooked the agreeableness factors in Hume’s account. But the IV.2.3 passage and others shows that Smith recognized agreeableness in Hume’s account. Indeed, Smith there calls Hume “agreeable”! In fact, in Part IV’s second paragraph Smith introduced Hume as “an ingenious and agreeable philosopher,” so it is twice that Smith calls Hume “agreeable.” We believe the semantic deviation was knowing and deliberate. Indeed, we fancy that there is an inside-joke quality to Smith’s calling Hume “agreeable” (as well as to the passage of Hume’s abstract quoted at the outset of the present paper).  

We can see why Smith would like to have a term that covers all four factors, so that he can then augment that term with propriety. But he could have avoided using utility, instead using, for example, beneficialness, including both agreeableness and usefulness (in Hume’s narrower sense). Swapping “beneficialness” in for “utility” in Smith’s Part IV would work nicely, and throughout. Smith is then saying that our understanding of the relation between moral approval and beneficialness needs to be augmented with the idea of propriety.

17 As for other passages outside of Part IV, there are yet more passages in which “utility” can be interpreted to encompass both usefulness and agreeableness (TMS II.i.3.1; I.iii.2.3; II.iii.3.3; V.1.11; VI.3.4; VII.iii.3.17), and indeed in LJ (338, 401ff). At TMS VII.ii.3.12, Smith separates useful and agreeable but immediately brings them together under “utility.” Smith often seems to signify beneficialness when he says “utility,” but there are passages in TMS in which “utility” seems to signify only (or, at least, especially) Hume’s usefulness (TMS I.i.4.5; I.ii.3.4; II.ii.3.2).  

18 On the inside-joke hypothesis, let us also note that the letter that is perhaps the most beloved of Hume’s to Smith (12 April 1759 on the reception of TMS) begins: “I give you thanks for the agreeable Present of your Theory” (Corr., 33).
Another curious aspect of Smith’s semantic deviation is that he does not alert the reader that he shoehorns agreeableness into “usefulness” and “utility.” If Hume’s stronger definition (hence, narrower signification) of “utility” were at all the norm, then Smith does a very poor job of conveying to the reader that he uses “utility” in a sense that is weaker than they are accustomed to. Perhaps most curious of all, is that Smith never calls attention to the fact that Hume himself does not talk “useful”/“utility” as Smith does. Because “useful” and “utility” play such a central role in Hume’s discourse, not calling attention to the semantic deviation from Hume, not flagging it, makes for a representation of Hume that is downright misleading. The reader of TMS IV would have to be very familiar with Hume’s thought not to be led into thinking that Hume uses “utility” as Smith does, – or, even worse, that Hume’s account does not include the agreeableness factors.

By stretching “utility” to mean beneficialness, Smith now has a concise term to represent his foil, and to add propriety to. But the stretching of “utility” is the shoehorning of agreeableness. Agreeableness is de-emphasized. People might get the false impression that Smith has a drab moral vision, giving no weight to chocolate ice cream, wit, charm, manners, and other merely immediately agreeable human experiences. This problem, indeed, was pointed out to Jeremy Bentham, years after he had adopted the stretched “utility,” and beginning about 1823 he publicly expressed regret about the choice he had made (Burns 2005, 49). The confidante and editor of Bentham, John Bowring, said the following in “History of the Greatest-Happiness Principle”:

19 On Bentham’s regret appearing as of 1823, see Burns (2005, 49). Also, in an 1822 writing Bentham speaks of “reasons derived from the principle known by the name of the principle of utility; more expressly say the greatest-happiness principle” (Bentham 1954, vol. III, 439, 458).
An observation made to Mr Bentham by Lady Holland produced a great impression upon him. She said that his doctrine of utility put a veto upon pleasure; while he had been fancying that pleasure never found so valuable and influential an ally as the principle of utility. It was clear, therefore, that the word ‘utility’ not only failed in communicating to other minds the ideas which Bentham attached to it, but that to some minds it communicated ideas wholly different and opposed to them. And true it is, that unless the Greatest-Happiness Principle be recognized as the end, the doctrine of utility might be represented as useful to some other end. … Dissatisfaction, therefore, with utilitarian phraseology, gradually increased in Bentham’s mind. (Bowring 1834, 318-319)

In his later years, Bentham said that he had adopted the term “principle of utility” “in compliance with custom…from David Hume and Helvetius” (Bentham [1830]). It is entirely possible that Smith had set Bentham (and others) onto the “utility” semantic path. Suppose that Smith had not deviated from Hume’s semantic practice on “utility” (using, say,

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20 Bentham used “principle of utility” and the like in Fragment on Government (first edition 1776) and An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789).
21 Also, Bentham writes: “for that was the name adopted from David Hume,” explaining why he used “utility;” see: “Historical Preface, Intended for the Second Edition” of Fragment of Government (Bentham 1843).
22 Searching online resources, we have found no direct evidence that Bentham had read TMS; still, it seems plausible to us that, even if he hadn’t, Smith’s moves there would have filtered down to Bentham. As for Hume: Nowhere in his earlier works does Bentham show awareness that Hume had separated usefulness (utility) and agreeableness; he does show such an awareness in Deontology (1834, vol. I, 223, 250-251), published two years after his death in 1832.
23 It is perhaps not unreasonable to think that Smith may have influenced Cesare Beccaria (1764, using utilità) and William Paley (1785), both of whom talk “utility” in the vein of greatest happiness. As for Helvetius, De L’Esprit was published in 1758, one year prior to TMS; our French is not adequate to judge the utilité talk found there; but that word is what Google gives as the French translation of usefulness, whereas Google gives utilitaire as the French translation of utility, and utilitaire does not appear in De L’Esprit.
“beneficialness” instead\(^{24}\)); suppose that Smith had not led the reader into think that Hume too used “utility” in the stretched sense: In that case, maybe the term “utilitarian” never would have come into existence. We do not mean to suggest that Bentham would not have developed his greatest-happiness thinking as he did, only that it might have gone by some other name.\(^{25}\)

*Our Own Word Choices*

Going forward, we shall use *agreeable* and *useful* as Hume does, and beneficialness for the composite of agreeableness and usefulness (a term with some resemblance to “universal benevolence” in Smith), and avoid *utility* altogether.

*Smith Allows an Impression of Hume both Speculative and Determinate*

A number of scholars say that Smith criticizes Hume for having an overly philosophical or speculative theory of morals.\(^{26}\) Charles Griswold (1999, 54) says that “Smith thinks that

\(^{24}\) Trained as we are in economics, where “benefit” has taken on willingness-to-pay meaning, it struck us as odd that Hume, Smith, and Bentham did not make “benefit,” “beneficial,” and “beneficialness” central to their formulations. But we have come to realize that “benefit” derived etymologically from “well done,” and was thus originally a good deed, a benefaction, the product of beneficence. Thus Samuel Pufendorf (as originally rendered in English): “[I]t is a higher Degree of Humanity, out of a singular Favour *to do a good Turn freely*...[a]nd these... are called *Benefits*, and are the fittest Matter for rendring Men Illustrious” (2003, 106). On such original understanding, consumer/producer surplus from mere market exchange would not constitute benefit. Though the OED indicates that the wider modern meaning does go back to at least to 1606, perhaps the original meaning was still too dominant for Hume et al to follow the word choice that seems so natural to us.

\(^{25}\) Indeed, Bowring (1834, 311-323) treats at length Bentham’s agonizing over terminology, saying, “there is no topic on which his mind was more habitually occupied than in the search of fit terms to convey his ideas” (321). Bowring indicartes that Bentham pondered alternatives including *Eudaimonologian, Feliotarian*, and *ipse-dixitism* (320-321).

\(^{26}\) For an elaboration on the meaning of speculative and philosophical in this context, and Hume’s view on speculation, see T.1.4.7; Livingston (1985, 1-33); Baier (1991, 1-27). Criticizing Hume for being overly speculative is, of course, ironic in that it is a charge Hume levels at metaphysicians throughout his work. For an exposition of the *Humean* (i.e., proto-
Hume looks [of moral judgment] *too philosophically* or ‘abstractly’” (italics his). Knud Haakonsen (1985, 69) likewise notes that Smith views Hume’s idea of beneficialness as a “speculative philosophical construction and not a true reflection of how men in fact judge.” Marie Martin (1990, 107) says that Smith and Hume’s views on such matters are in “practically diametrical opposition,” and D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (1982, 13) similarly speak of a “sharper difference” between Smith and Hume. Spencer Pack and Eric Schliesser (2006, 53) tell us that “Smith devotes the whole of Part IV of TMS to a respectful criticism of Hume’s views, which he thinks more suitable to ‘men of reflection and speculation’” and James Otteson (2002, 8) likewise argues that Smith prides himself on his “superior” understanding of the role of utility in moral approval. In terms of modern psychology and behavioral economics, we might say that Smith represents and criticizes Hume for framing moral approval as a conscious, calculative, System 2 process, rather than an immediate, effortless, System 1 type process (cf. Kahneman 2013, 21).

We agree that Smith represents Hume as having an overly philosophical, speculative, System 2-type account of moral judgment. Smith prefigures such representation in Part I: “The idea of utility…is plainly an afterthought, and not what first recommends [intellectual virtues] to our approbation” (TMS I.i.4.4). And he does so again in a section called “Of the utility of this constitution of Nature”: “When led by natural principles we are led to advance those ends, which a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us, we are very apt to impute that reason, as to their efficient cause, the sentiments and actions by which we advance those ends, and to imagine that to be the wisdom of man, which in reality is the wisdom of God” (TMS II.ii.3.5, italics added). By Part IV, it seems that Smith’s theory is indeed, as Griswold (1999, 140 n23) evolutionary, psychological, experiential) nature of Smith’s criticism of Hume, particularly regarding Hume’s account of justice, see Pack and Schliesser (2006, 52-63).
tells us, “a running critique of Hume’s view of the role of utility in moral evaluation.” Smith, as against his representation of Hume, says that although there is an important link between beneficialness and moral approbation, moral judgments by no means spring directly from understanding beneficialness: “This utility, when we come to view it, bestows upon them, undoubtedly, a new beauty, and upon that account still further recommends them to our approbation. This beauty, however, is chiefly perceived by *men of reflection and speculation*” (TMS IV.2.11; italics added). Smith says that our moral judgment springs, rather, first from immediate feelings, which then loom over the completion of our judging.

There is yet another critical aspect of Smith’s impression of Hume that we think has gone largely unnoticed: Smith allows for a *determinate* impression of Hume’s moral theory. That is, Smith allows the reader to see Hume as thinking that moral judgment is a matter of a determinate mapping from inputs to outputs, as opposed to mapping rules that are “loose, vague and *indeterminate*” (TMS III.6.11; italics added). On the determinate impression, given that they have the same inputs, all Marys will come to the same judgment of Jim. Smith’s determinate impression appertains to how the foil regards knowledge. For the foil, knowledge is interpretively fixed, common-to-all. Hence, knowledge is flattened down to information. A critic of the foil might then say that the foil neglects the interpretation and judgment facets of knowledge; it neglects that interpretations are not symmetric but asymmetric, not common but disjointed. It is important to consider that different Marys have differently formulated sets of information and different interpretive frameworks through which they are processed.

27 The idea of asymmetric interpretation goes beyond asymmetric information, and for interpretations the term *disjointed* is a more fitting term than “divided,” “dispersed,” “diffused,” or “decentralized.” For a discussion on the relationship between knowledge and information, see Klein (2012, xi-xiii, 144-56).
As evidence of this determinate impression, Smith represents Hume as suggesting that: “The spectator enters by sympathy into the sentiments of the master, and necessarily views the object under the same agreeable aspect” (TMS IV.1.2, italics added). Mary enters into Jim’s situation and necessarily views things in the same determinate way as he does; she automatically and mechanically shares his interpretation—which implies that all Marys would agree. Smith provides an implicit example in treating the virtue of public spirit: “It is not commonly from a fellow-feeling with carriers and waggoners that a public-spirited man encourages the mending of the high roads” (TMS IV.1.11). The implication here is that the foil might see the public-spirited man entering into and necessarily agreeing with the interpretation of the waggoners. The impression that Smith gives of his foil has, then, a flat, determinate conception of the sympathetic imagination, taste, and understanding.

At TMS IV.2.3, one of the passages where Smith most directly engages his foil, he says: “No qualities of mind [the foil observes] are approved of as virtuous, but such as are useful or agreeable…” (italics added). He could have said “but such as are considered to be useful or agreeable,” which would be closer to Hume’s actual position. But he did not. By saying “are useful or agreeable” instead of “are considered useful or agreeable,” Smith suggests that Hume sees the things that are useful or agreeable in the universe as fixed. He portrays Hume as a sort of moral and imaginative objectivist. Subsequently in the same passage, Smith tells us that his foil resolves “our whole approbation of virtue into a perception” of the beauty deriving from beneficialness (IV.2.3; italics added). The word “perception” here suggests, again, a kind of fixedness of knowledge and a flatness of interpretation. The sentence seems to read as if the beneficialness of Jim’s action is fixed and would be correctly understood by Mary if she but had sufficient access to information. Whereas the moments reviewed here allow a determinate
impression of Hume, Smith never portrays the foil contrariwise, that is, as acknowledging
disjointedness of interpretation in understanding beneficialness. Indeed, in a subsequent section
we shall suggest that one of the reasons Smith sets up the foil as he does is to accentuate an
advantage of his own enhancement to the foil’s theory: That enhancement highlights the problem
of indeterminateness, and it proposes means to deal with it.

*The Knowledge/Processing Matrix*

With Smith’s twofold representation of the foil in mind, we can conceive of a set of terms
to describe Mary’s act of judgment. The terms might be said to sit under the rubrics knowledge
and processing. Figure 3 shows both rubrics and their corresponding terms combined in what we
call “The knowledge/processing matrix.” Under the knowledge rubric, we place two broad
conceptions of knowledge: determinate and indeterminate. The hallmark of “determinate,” again,
is commonness (and fixedness) of interpretation—thought is then a matter of logical processing
within the interpretation, automatic or computational —so the first row of Figure 3 corresponds
to “determinate.” The hallmark of “indeterminate” is asymmetry in interpretation and loose,
vague rules, corresponding to the second row of Figure 3.

The processing rubric corresponds to dual process theory in modern psychology and
behavioral economics, which has been elaborated by Daniel Kahneman (2013) and applied to
Adam Smith by Nava Ashraf, Colin F. Camerer and George Loewenstein (2005). The dual
process theory differentiates between conscious, reflective, and speculative acts of judgment
(System 2) and instinctive, reactionary, and immediate judgment (System 1). Thus, under the
processing rubric, we have speculative and immediate, the columns in Figure 3.
Smith gives the impression that Hume sits largely in cell (1), where interpretation is common and the process is speculative. We think that Smith himself teaches that moral reflection and judgment range over all four cells, and he develops that extensive sense of moral judgment partly against a foil ascribed to Hume and put in cell (1). Ashraf et al. (2003) suggest that Smith has a well-developed sense of dual process-like thinking that runs through his work, placing himself, at times, in different columns. We believe that each of the four cells makes sense as a distinct depiction of morally judging – that is, that there is a meaningful distinction between the two rubrics.

Figure 3: The knowledge/processing matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Processing</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Mary’s approval is Speculative</th>
<th>Mary’s approval is Immediate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determinate: Mary’s interpretation is common to other’s</td>
<td>(1) The foil “Hume”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indeterminate: Mary’s interpretation is disjointed with other’s</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is Hume Speculative and Determinate?

We agree with T.D. Campbell (1971, 118) that “Smith is somewhat misleading in the way in which he draws a sharp contrast between his own views and those of Hume.” We think that Hume is, by and large, neither speculative nor determinate in the way that Smith makes him out to be. We would recast Griswold’s (1999, 54) statement to say that TMS appears as “a running critique” of the foil’s “view of the role of utility in moral evaluation.” Hume is not
confined to cell (1). His conception of moral judgment, like Smith’s, extends to the other three cells.

A careful reading of Hume – which Smith undoubtedly had – makes it clear that Hume does not hang moral approval on speculative processing. Hume has, rather, an evolutionary conception of moral approval, such that beneficialness is enveloped into general moral rules over time.

_Thirdly_, experience sufficiently proves, that men, in the ordinary conduct of life, look not so far as the public interest, when they pay their creditors, perform their promises, and abstain from theft, and robbery, and injustice of every kind. That is a motive [i.e., of understanding beneficialness] too remote and too sublime to affect the generality of mankind, and operate with any force in actions so contrary to private interest as are frequently those of justice and common honesty. (T 3.2.1.11)

The basis of moral judgment in Hume is an instinctive sensing of the beneficialness of an action through the sympathetic imagination and lens of general rules, not conscious speculation. Moreover, at times, moral judgment in Hume even explicitly occurs apart from considerations of beneficialness: “These [qualities agreeable to ourselves] are some instances of the several species of merit, that are valued for the immediate pleasure, which they communicate to the person possessed of them. No views of utility or of future beneficial consequences enter into this sentiment of approbation” (EPM 7.29; italics added). And Hume goes to lengths to makes it quite clear throughout his corpus that moral distinctions are not derived from reason, speculation, or calculation, but from feeling (T 3.1.1; EPM App. 1; Kemp Smith 1941, 148). “Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment” (EHU 12.3.9).
The matter is messier when it comes to the determinate impression. There are moments, especially in EPM, where Hume seems like his moral theory entails a determinate conception of knowledge. For example, he calls his moral theory “so simple and obvious” (EPM 9.1); he elevates the power of “natural unprejudiced reason” in moral deliberation (9.2); he suggests, in something of a rationalistic fashion, that civil laws “extend, restrain, modify, and alter the rules of natural justice, according to the particular convenience of each community” (3.34). But we think that the determinate impression is an unjust impression of Hume.

The determinate impression cuts against the grain of Hume’s understanding of knowledge. Hume speaks of the indeterminateness of knowledge when he says: “We must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or controul on our first judgment or belief; and must enlarge our view to comprehend a kind of history of all the instances, wherein our understanding has deceiv’d us, wherein its testimony was just and true” (T 1.4.1.1). He is a skeptic who is leery of finality in interpretation: “The most perfect philosophy of the natural kind only staves off our ignorance a little longer…Thus the observation of human blindness and weakness is the result of all philosophy, and meets us, at every turn, in spite of our endeavours to elude or avoid it” (EHU 4.1.12). His indeterminate conception of knowledge famously culminates in the moving conclusion to Book 1 of the Treatise, where he confesses his despair: “all my opinions loosen and fall of themselves… Every step I take is with hesitation, and every new reflection makes me dread an error and absurdity in my reasoning” (T 1.4.7.2). Such skepticism implies an indeterminateness of knowledge, where reasoning proceeds experientially, instinctively, and passionately. In philosophy, then, Hume calls for modesty and limited pretense (EHU 4.2.14).
In his *Essays*, Hume hints at indeterminateness when it comes to moral judgment. In “Of the Delicacy of Taste,” he says good judgment is rare and requires cultivations: “[the delicacy of taste] enlarges the sphere both of our happiness and misery, and makes us sensible to pains as well as pleasures, which escape the rest of mankind” (Hume 1987b, 5). And in “The Platonist,” he speaks to the indeterminateness of judgment and self-assessment:

To some philosophers it appears matter of surprize, that all mankind, possessing the same nature, and being endowed with the same faculties, should yet differ so widely in their pursuits and inclinations…To some it appears matter of still more surprize, that a man should differ so widely from himself at different times; and, after possession, reject with disdain what, before, was the object of all his vows and wishes. (Hume 1987d, 155)

There are, as we have mentioned, parts of EPM that seem to be quite determinate. But when EPM is viewed in the context of the *Treatise*, EHU, EPM, and the *Essays*, we think that the determinate impression fades and the indeterminate looms. In his melancholy conclusion to Book 1 of the *Treatise*, Hume determines to press on in his pursuit of, among other things, morals (T. 1.4.7.12). But his pursuit occurs within a universe of indeterminateness. Hume decides – he feels – that there is meaning in moral thinking despite the non-foundational implications of his epistemology. The nature of his pursuit of morals – and his pursuit of philosophy, more generally – within the frame of indeterminateness is dialectical and has been called by Donald Livingston (1984) the “philosophy of common life.” His moral theory in EPM should be understood against such a backdrop. Hume’s tone in EPM can, perhaps, be interpreted as abstracting from the indeterminateness problem, strewn throughout Hume’s work and immortalized by T 1.4.7. Indeed, he hints at the indeterminateness problem in morals at the end of EPM:
[R]eason...can instruct us in the tendency of qualities and actions, and point out their beneficial consequences to society and to their possessor. In many cases, this is an affair liable to great controversy: Doubts may arise; opposite interests may occur; and a preference must be given to one side, from very nice views, and a small overbalance of utility. (EPM App. 1.2)

It bears repeating that in offering his foil “Hume” Smith does not single out EPM; it would seem that he is referring to the to the whole of Hume’s moral theorizing, and in that whole indeterminateness looms large.  

The Propriety Phase: Between Moral Approval and Beneficialness

Smith addresses the relationship between moral approval and beneficialness, and his big move, his big enhancement, is to insert, between those two phases, propriety. “[I]t will be found, upon examination, that the usefulness of any disposition of mind is seldom the first ground of our approbation” (TMS IV.2.5). We interpret “the first ground” as referring to the immediacy of a predominant moral sentiment that wells up in us upon our spectating or considering Jim’s quality or action. Our sense of propriety is “first” in the sense that it looms over our subsequent speculations; it profoundly influences which interpretations we entertain and how we judge. Smith gives the example of the propriety we sense in cases of admirable heroism, and says that, also, “when we come to view” the usefulness of the heroism, we yet find “a new beauty” and such new beauty “still further recommends them to our approbation.” But this additional beauty, he says, “is by no means the quality which first recommends such actions to

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28 Indeed, editors Raphael and Macfie note (1982, 179 n1) that in TMS IV.i Smith seems to be referring more to T 2.2.5 than to EPM.
29 Smith reiterates a sort of propriety phasing at TMS VI.iii.4, VII.iii.1.2
the natural sentiments of the bulk of mankind” (TMS IV.2.11). Two other passages convey the same in-the-moment priority of propriety:

[I]t is not the view of this utility or hurtfulness which is either the first or principal source of our approbation and disapprobation. These sentiments are no doubt enhanced and enlivened by the perception of the beauty or deformity which results from this utility or hurtfulness. But still, I say, they are originally and essentially different from this perception. (TMS IV.2.3)

The idea of the utility of all qualities of this kind [delicate taste, accurate reasoning, etc.], is plainly an after-thought, and not what first recommends them to our approbation. (TMS I.i.4.4)

Between Hume’s two phases of moral approval and beneficialness, then, Smith inserts a third phase: propriety (see Figure 4). He says: “the sentiment of approbation always involves in it a sense of propriety quite distinct from the perception of utility” (TMS IV.2.5).

**Figure 4: The three phases in Smith’s moral theory (TMS IV)**

Hume’s account holds that Mary’s moral approval of Jim’s action is linked to Mary’s understanding of its beneficialness. Smith’s foil leaves out the understanding, making a wide-
open empty space for him to insert his development: the propriety phase. In exploring Smith’s propriety phase, one might treat what propriety means in TMS, but such an undertaking is beyond our scope.

*The Propriety Phase as Vertical Sympathy*

In Figure 4, the first link, between moral approval and propriety, is, for Smith, preordained by his formulations. He posits that moral approval relates to a sympathy – an organon that is sustained by resorting as necessary to the man within the breast as the being with whom one finds sympathy$^{30}$ – and the sympathy in question regards the judging of Jim’s action. $^{31}$ As for the second link – between propriety and beneficialness – both of those phases are often sources of dissatisfaction to Smith: Mary’s sense of propriety might be quite different from Smith’s sense of propriety, and Mary’s understanding of the beneficialness of Jim’s action might be quite different from Smith’s understanding of its beneficialness.

The chief development of Smith’s propriety phase is the location of sympathy between Mary and her man within the breast, or her conscience (see Figure 5). So whereas Hume’s account locates sympathy laterally, Smith’s propriety phase implies lateral *and vertical* sympathy. Smith writes:

> It is not commonly from a fellow-feeling with the waggoners that a public-spirited man encourages the mending of high roads. When the legislature establishes premiums and other encouragements to advance the linen or woollen manufactures, its conduct seldom

$^{30}$ Smith affirms the organon at TMS I.i.3.2, n* at I.iii.1.9; III.1.2 (“some secret reference”), III.5.4-5, IV.2.12 (final sentence), VII.i.3.21 (final sentence), VII.iii.3.14 (last three sentences). He also does so in a letter to Gilbert Elliot (Smith 1987, 40).

$^{31}$ Indeed, Smith explicitly says that, within his own system, sympathy is “the natural and original measure” of propriety (TMS VII.ii.3.21).
proceeds from pure [i.e. lateral] sympathy with the wearer of cheap or fine cloth, and much less from that with the manufacturer or merchant. The perfection of police, the extension of trade and manufacturers, are noble and magnificent objects. The contemplation of them pleases us, and we are interested in whatever can tend to advance them. (TMS IV.1.11)

**Figure 5: Lateral and vertical sympathy**

The beneficialness of the high roads does not lead directly to Mary’s approval of Jim for mending them. It is the sympathy with her man within the breast that leads her to consider the meritoriousness, the justness, the beauty of the project. Again, such a sympathy is preordained by Smith’s formulations; Mary will not approve Jim’s action unless her man within the breast sympathizes with, or can enter into, her judgment—a judgment that we might think of as provisional or potentially up for reconsideration. When judging Jim, Mary tacitly considers whether or not her man within the breast smiles upon her judgment of Jim’s action. The man
within the breast embodies the practice and judgments of Mary’s exemplars, the deepest-to-date best practice, so to speak.

The jurisdiction of the man within [the man within the breast], is founded altogether in the desire of praise-worthiness, and in the aversion to blame-worthiness; in the desire of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions [e.g., judging], which we love and admire in other people; and in the dread of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we hate and despise in other people. (TMS III.2.33)

Lateral and vertical sympathy are by no means unrelated. In fact, they are quite closely connected. Perhaps the best way to think about their relationship is with the following formulation: Mary considers how her man within the breast, an exemplar, call him David, considers the properness of her judgment of Jim’s action. Such a consideration entails tacitly thinking about David’s judgment of the beneficialness of Jim’s action. David’s judgment of Jim’s action entails his lateral consideration of the usefulness and agreeableness of Jim’s action to Jim and Janet. Mary’s vertical sympathy with David, then, can be framed in part as a vertical sympathy with David’s lateral sympathy. When Mary moves to judge Jim’s action, she doesn’t explicitly consider how David views each of the four factors in Hume’s account. All is blended into an overall sense of propriety. Mary asks: “How would David view my judgment of Jim’s action?” But David’s view of Mary’s action is, in part, a function of his lateral sympathy with Jim and Janet. It should be noted that Mary’s judgment of Hume’s four-factors still win points for moral approval. But her sense of the propriety of her judgment, the vertical sympathy with David, looms large.
What is to stop us, one might ask, from extending the recursion? We might ask after the propriety phase between beneficialness and David’s moral approval of Jim’s action. David consults his man within the breast, call him Adam, and tacitly asks: “How would Adam view my judgment of Jim’s action?” And so on. In principle, we can ask after the exemplars of exemplars, and try to excavate traditions of moral philosophy, as well as the diachronic evolution of the sage, such as Adam Smith. But obviously the higher-order figurative beings grow vague. Actual human beings leave records and give signs that are much more focal than figurative beings. But self-judging is a key feature of actual human beings, and that feature points to figurative beings.

Smith’s propriety phase provides a serviceable interpretation of the substance of Hume’s conception of taste and understanding. Smith develops on Hume by fashioning a moment or phase—the propriety phase—within which we may consider taste and understanding. Though the propriety phase is marked out in relation to the other two phases, what goes on within the propriety phase remains loose, vague, and indeterminate (though there may be many firm and hardy maxims within the soup of the propriety phase). The usefulness of the propriety phase is that it gives us a language and a set of formulations with which we can consider Mary’s moral sensibilities. Moreover, it readily allows for consideration of the beneficialness of Mary’s judgments. We swap our own sense of propriety for hers and formulate an opinion on the soundest and goodness of her judgment and the quality of her exemplars.\(^{32}\) Thus the propriety phase in Smith lends itself to deeper cultural judgments and viewpoints. It opens up the situation to broader social considerations, to estimating the properness of different senses of propriety. It spirals us up towards considerations of how the impartial spectator would view Jim’s action and Mary’s judgment of Jim’s action as we consider the justice of action and judgment (see TMS 32).

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32 See Matson (2016, 9-15) for a discussion on Smith on a sense of propriety and selection in interpretation and reasoning.
VII.i.1.10). It enables us to integrate our judgments about Mary’s approval and Jim’s behavior with higher and deeper considerations of “that general taste for beauty and order which is excited by inanimated as well as by animated objects” (TMS VII.iii.3.17).

TMS IV puts the propriety phase at the center of the work. Throughout TMS, Smith elaborates on the importance of propriety and the power of the formulation of propriety for thinking about judgment and moral philosophy. The first part of TMS is called ‘Of Propriety.’ But by Part IV it is not Jim but Mary who has become the first-person actor, the person principally concerned: Her action is the judging of Jim’s action. Inserting propriety between the beneficialness and approval phases of Mary’s judgment improves our ability to talk about Mary’s judgment and sensibilities as a whole. It puts the core of Smith’s framework at the center of the conversation.

**Propriety as a Species of Agreeableness**

We are now in a position to explain that the agreeableness arms in Hume had, all along, included considerations of propriety within his formulation of lateral sympathy.

Smith often talks about the *agreeableness* that necessarily accompanies propriety. In fact, once one goes hunting for it, one sees such talk in TMS is found to be abundant, even overwhelming, and from the outset. In Smith, propriety is agreeable by construction, for propriety entails a sympathy, which is always pleasant and agreeable (cf. TMS I.i.2, I.iii.1.9.n*). When Mary senses Jim’s motive or intention to have been proper, she sympathizes with Jim. But that is just one of several touchstones in judging the propriety of Jim’s action, and at each touchstone Mary finds a sympathy – or agreement – if only with her man within the breast. In a passage that appears to engage Hume and prefigures Part IV, Smith says: “Originally, however,
we approve of another man’s judgment, not as something useful, but as right, as accurate, as agreeable to truth and reality: and it is evident we attribute those qualities to it for no other reason but because we find that it *agrees with our own*” (TMS I.i.4.4; italics added).

Thus we say that propriety can be considered as a species of agreeableness. Figure 6 presents some textual evidence from TMS of our interpretation.

**Figure 6: Propriety as a species of agreeableness in TMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Snippet Quote</th>
<th>Citation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“has exactly observed those measures…which are generally agreeable, reflects with satisfaction on the propriety”</td>
<td>TMS III.2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“bestows a certain propriety…and renders…it agreeable”</td>
<td>TMS IV.1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“why the appearance of inconveniency should render any object disagreeable”</td>
<td>TMS IV.1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What is agreeable to our moral faculties, is fit, and right, and proper”</td>
<td>TMS III.5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the power or faculty of the mind which renders certain characters agreeable or disagreeable to us”</td>
<td>TMS VII.iii.intro.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Conscience…properly signifies our consciousness of having acted agreeably”</td>
<td>TMS VII.iii.3.15</td>
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Understanding Smith as formulating propriety as a species of agreeable implies that he effectively subdivides agreeableness in two. He delineates two kinds of agreeableness: the agreeableness of something from its striking us as proper—hereafter, “propriety-agreeable” — and the agreeableness of something from it otherwise being agreeable—hereafter, “otherwise-agreeable.” The combination of propriety-agreeable and otherwise-agreeable make for an overall sense of the agreeableness of an action or character. Each kind of agreeableness interacts over time with the other: If Janet considers Jim’s action to be propriety-agreeable, she will have a heightened sense of its otherwise-agreeableness, and vice versa. Over time, propriety-
agreeableness and otherwise-agreeableness inform each other. We might find particular foreign customs, like “excessive” ceremony in greeting or parting company, to trigger a sense of otherwise-disagreeableness simply because our sense of their impropriety has been cemented into our habits over time. But the distinction is useful in that it helps us highlight the multidirectional nature of lateral sympathies in Smith’s account – sympathies between Mary, Janet, and Jim – as opposed to the more unidirectional lateral sympathy in Hume’s account. Understanding the multidirectional sympathy that is implicit in a conception of propriety-agreeableness gives us a generally more sophisticated account of the mechanisms of agreeableness.

Suppose that Jim steals chocolate ice and gives it to Janet. Janet knows that the ice cream was stolen. Under Hume’s scheme, Mary judges Jim’s act of stealing the ice cream by considering whether the theft and subsequent gifting is useful and agreeable to Jim and/or useful and agreeable to Janet. For simplicity, let’s confine our thinking to the agreeableness-to-Janet arm of moral approval. In one sense, Janet might find Jim’s theft and gifting to be otherwise-agreeable in that she enjoys eating the stolen dessert. So by Hume’s original scheme, Mary might award Jim’s conduct some otherwise-agreeable points. But when Mary thinks about Janet’s sense of the agreeableness of Jim’s action, she thinks both about the otherwise-agreeableness and the propriety-agreeableness of Jim’s theft as she imagines it appears to Janet. Janet’s sense of the otherwise-agreeableness of Jim’s theft is, perhaps, initially confined to the yumminess of the ice cream. But Janet’s sense of propriety-agreeableness, by construction, simulates, as it were, a

33 Our chocolate ice cream example calls to mind Hume’s treatment of exceptions to the rules of justice (EPM App. 3.7). Although it might, according to Hume, be agreeable to take money from a miser and give to the poor, Hume holds that we should disapprove of such redistribution on usefulness grounds: the rules of justice are useful in that they are all but universally and rigidly enforced. Smith might add to Hume’s assessment that departures from the rules of justice are propriety-disagreeable.
Mary’s sense of the propriety: “Whatever judgment we can form concerning [our own sentiments]… must always bear some secret reference, either to what are, or to what, upon a certain condition, would be, or to what, we imagine, ought to be the judgment of others.” (TMS III.I.3.2). Whether Janet finds Jim’s actions to be propriety-agreeable hinges in part on her assessment of whether she imagines that someone in Mary’s position finds Jim’s actions to be proper. So when Mary considers Janet’s sense of the agreeableness of Jim’s actions, she puts herself into Janet’s situation. But Janet’s situation, as pertains to discerning the overall agreeableness of Jim’s actions, entails entering into a Mary’s sense of the propriety of Jim’s actions. In other words: Mary enters into Janet’s entering into a Mary’s situation.

The propriety-agreeable and otherwise-agreeable distinction is thus important, despite its blurriness, in that it highlights an important multidirectional sympathy between Mary and Janet in Mary’s judging of Jim’s action. Elaborating propriety as it lives in lateral sympathies effectively subdivides Hume’s conception of agreeableness into propriety-agreeableness and otherwise-agreeableness. But more significantly, Smith’s account, in a sense, implies a breakdown of the Mary-Janet distinction. In Hume’s account, Mary and Janet are not necessarily mutually exclusive in that Janet is a synecdoche for non-Jims, and Mary is a non-Jim. But in Smith’s account, Mary and Janet are more concretely linked in that Mary’s sense of the propriety of Jim’s action informs Janet’s sense of the propriety-agreeableness of Jim’s action. Whereas in Hume, Mary sympathizes with Janet, in Smith, Mary sympathizes with Janet and Janet simultaneously sympathizes with a Mary.34

34 Incidentally, the way “Mary” can be expanded into a class of Marys might bring to mind what Smith writes about the pronoun I: “It may be said…to join in its signification the seemingly opposite qualities of the most precise individuality, and the most extensive generalization” (Smith 1761, 219).
Naturally the same goes for the relationship between Mary and Jim. Suppose that Jim steals and eats chocolate ice cream. His action might be, in some respects, otherwise-agreeable to himself in that he, too, partakes and he loves chocolate ice cream. But it might be propriety-disagreeable to him in that he imagines a discord between his action and a Mary’s sense of propriety. So Mary, in judging Jim’s action on agreeableness-to-Jim grounds, enters into Jim’s entering into a Mary’s situation, once again. In this case, the Mary-Jim distinction blurs, as they enter into one another’s situations. Smith elaborates this kind of process of Jim’s self-assessment: “When I endeavour to examine my own conduct…it is evident that I, the examiner and judge [Jim imagining himself as Mary], represent a different character from that other I [Jim], the person whose conduct is examined and judged of” (TMS III.i.6).

At this point one wonder whether Smith’s propriety phase is, after all, latent within Hume’s four-factor account, for propriety was nestled within agreeableness all along; in treating of agreeable qualities, just in the space of three paragraphs Hume uses “decency,” “proper,” “unsuitable,” “decorum,” “a MANNER, a grace, an ease, a genteelness, an I-know-not-what, which some men possess above others, which is very different from external beauty or comeliness” (EPM 8.12-14). If, in the Abstract passage provided at the outset of this paper, Hume meant to say that “philosophy scarcely affords any thing more undeniable and conclusive” than Hume’s own moral writings, should we agree? Does Smith merely belabor what is conclusively furnished by Hume?

_The Propriety Phase Is Mary’s Own_

The propriety phase, as exposited in Part IV, can be interpreted in terms of propriety-agreeableness, but only by making it a matter of Mary agreeing with her man within the breast.
The propriety *phase* of moral approval is Mary’s own in a way that lateral agreeableness is not. In lateral agreeableness, Mary tests Janet’s or Jim’s sentiments against our own. Mary sees whether they measure up. Such lateral agreeableness does not necessarily entail much or even any self-assessment on Mary’s part. But the propriety *phase* queries Mary as to the agreement of her immediate sentiments, her System 1 sentiments, as it were, with those of her conscience.

Smith is aware that propriety is a species of agreeableness; his point is to open up the vertical dimension of moral judgment to conscious deliberation and comparison. In that vertical dimension Mary has special ownership of the sentiments on *both* sides of the sympathy in play: she uniquely resides in her immediate self and her conscience (cf. TMS III.i.6). The sympathy involved in moral approval within Mary is a complex procedure (Haakonssen 1981, 51-53). But it is a procedure of which she has unique knowledge and intimate control, a control that is socially focal. She owns it. It is her natural property. The responsibility for your moral judgment resides with you. With power comes responsibility.

Smith’s emphasis on natural ownership in the process of moral approval, the conversation between Mary and her man within the breast, highlights indeterminateness in a way that Hume does not. In framing moral approval as involving a vertical sympathy, Smith moves to suggest that we actively seek to develop our conscience and scrupulously select exemplary interpretations and judgments to work from. The process of selecting exemplars and worthy interpretations necessarily has an element of indeterminateness, or bottomlessness. How are we to determine who to select as exemplars? Who is judging our judgment of exemplary interpretation? There is no sure link between the propriety phase and the beneficialness phase.

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35 In developing the idea of natural property, David Friedman (1994) highlights how a locus of knowledge and control resides with the owner, and that that is socially focal.
What we judge to be improper and blameworthy might, when viewed from a higher level, a different perspective, be proper, meritorious, and beautiful.

Indeed, Smith’s main example of his propriety phase in TMS IV, the parable of the poor man’s son (TMS IV.i.8-10), beautifully delivers disjointed interpretations and indeterminateness. The reader enters into the protagonist’s youthful ambitions, which seem proper enough so long as he stays within the bounds of justice (cf. TMS II.i.2.1). But at the end of his life, the poor man’s son looks back and realizes that the true means to happiness were within him all along. “[H]e curses ambition, and vainly regrets the ease and indolence of his youth… Power and riches appear then to be, what they are, enormous and operose machines…ready…to crush in their ruins their unfortunate possessor” (TMS IV.i.8). But Smith brings us along further: “it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner,” rousing us to turn “the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains” (TMS IV.i.10). Smith concludes the parable on the view we take “in better health and in better humour” (TMS IV.i.10). He himself inclines towards that view, and furnishes youthful sons and daughters a parable of dual interpretations to ponder.

Smith’s propriety phase, then, turns the propriety-agreeableness that is in Hume onto another species of acting—exercising moral judgment—and constructs beings so as to make applicable the concept of “agreement” or “sympathy” within the judger. The parable, furnished by Smith’s hand, entreats us to cultivate our faculty of judgment. In so doing, he highlights the indeterminateness of judgment that vertical sympathy implies, and yet fortifies us to face that indeterminateness bravely, and to carry on toward perspectives higher and deeper.

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36 For an interpretation of Smith’s parable in relation to Hume’s conclusion to Book I of the Treatise, see Matson and Doran (2016).
Hume Hints at Vertical Sympathy

Smith develops Hume’s account by inserting his propriety phase and emphasizing vertical sympathy. But Hume’s account is not entirely devoid of a vertical dimension. Seeing hints of vertical sympathy in Hume reinforces our interpretation that Smith develops on Hume; he doesn’t depart or deviate from him.

Hume shows vertical sympathy sensibilities – although they are not nearly as well formulated as in Smith – throughout his works. In EPM, he says that “inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct; these are circumstances very requisite to happiness” (EPM 9.23). Moreover, Hume’s general conception of the soul gives room for internal, vertical conversations and sympathies, and an evolving conception of the self:

In this respect, I cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons, who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts. And as the same individual republic may not only change its members, but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity. (T 1.4.6.19; see also Hume 1987d, 155)

Hume’s thinking about inward conversation and self-reflection is related to Smith’s talk of the man within the breast. Hume, in fact, writes: “You can never find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you towards this action” (T 3.1.1.26; italics added). He speaks of a “sympathetic motion in my breast” (T 2.2.9.14). Hume didn’t elaborate on the vertical dimension of sympathy in his work. But he hints
at it nonetheless and suggests, at the very least, that moral judgment of ourselves is a matter of a kind of vertical sympathy.

*Why Did Smith Proceed as He Did?*

We consider two possible reasons: (1) to distance himself from Hume in the public eye, and (2) to provide conceptual clarity for his propriety phase. Upon examination, these two reasons are found to interrelate.

It is quite possible that Smith would want to appear to be critical of Hume, to allay suspicions. Hume was a quite controversial figure. He was irreligious, irreverent, and irrepressibly inventive. Such traits made him unpopular with many Scots elites, particularly among the religious elite, and cost him university appointments. Associating with Hume, or even reading him, was frowned upon in many circles. Legend has it that while at Oxford Smith himself was chided as a teen for secretly reading Hume’s *Treatise* (Ross 2010, 71). Hume candidly recognized his poor reputation and the potential advantages of disassociation in an April 1759 letter to Smith: “Scotland…is the Seat of my principal Friendships; but it is too narrow a Place for me, and it mortifies me that I sometimes hurt my Friends” (italics added). In the same letter, as quoted earlier, Hume tells Smith he “profited” with TMS “by the Animosity against me” (*Corr.*, 36), and just two months earlier told William Robertson the same in parallel fashion (1932, 298). In 1776, Smith reports that his published praise of his departed friend “brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain” (*Corr.*, 208).

Perhaps Smith’s misrepresentation of Hume’s system as determinate and lacking sympathy, and, Smith’s obscuring of agreeableness, were moves of disassociation. He presented
a somewhat suppressed and misleading version of Hume’s moral philosophy so that he could present himself as a critic of Hume. People could then embrace and applaud TMS, despite its praises of Hume, as criticism of Hume.

The second possible reason is the sake of clarity. Even if Smith could have swapped the term *beneficialness* for *utility* in his thought, he still may have had reason to make the semantic decisions that he did. If he had used *beneficialness*, and openly acknowledged that beneficialness encompasses both usefulness and agreeableness, he would have had to address the relationship between the agreeable aspects of beneficialness and propriety. He would have had to deal head-on with the intimate and complex relationship between propriety and agreeableness; he would have had to candidly admit that propriety is intimately connected to an understanding of the agreeableness of an action or character. Such matters would have been complicated. Maintaining a seemingly stark contrast between utility and propriety, then, may have simplified Smith’s task of introducing the propriety phase.

Suppose that Smith had developed matters along the lines presented in this paper. He would have shown himself to be intricately linked and indebted to Hume. This link would exacerbate the first problem: the likeness to Hume, indeed, the building upon Hume, becoming obvious.

In the part new to the sixth and final edition of TMS, added shortly before his death in 1790, Smith plainly lays out Hume’s four-factor account and the propriety phase, and wraps his arms around both together writes that: In our approbation of virtues “*our sense* of their agreeableness, of their utility, either to the person who exercises them, or to some other person, *joins with our sense* of their propriety, and constitutes always a considerable, frequently the greater part of that approbation” (TMS VI.concl.6, italics added). Here his semantics line up with...
Hume’s, yet he clearly maintains the importance of marking out Mary’s sense of propriety. Also, he notes that Mary’s judgment of Jim’s action depends on her sense of things—and in that way undoes the connotation of determinateness he had originally ascribed to Hume. That late change shows greater closeness to Hume. That closeness became more overt in later years—for example, by 1776, in WN, the now more established Smith simply refers to Hume as “by far the most illustrious philosopher and historian of the present age” (WN, V.i.g.3; italics added).

**Recapitulation**

We reason that Hume whole-heartedly smiled on TMS. Yes, Smith had misrepresented Hume, and in several respects:

- Smith submerged agreeable into useful and into utility, thus altering, without any alert to the reader, the meaning of useful and utility.
- Smith creates a foil “Hume” for which the process of moral approving comes across as speculative (“thinking slow”), and not immediate (“thinking fast”).
- Also, and perhaps more importantly, Smith presents the foil “Hume” such that it makes moral conclusions rather determinate, as opposed to indeterminate.

In these respects, the foil is really quite misleading as a representation of Hume. But we like to think that Smith misrepresented Hume quite knowingly and deliberately, and that Hume understood his reasons for it, and didn’t mind.

Smith proceeds to fashion the propriety phase, situated between moral approval and beneficialness, as a space to explore both the immediate and speculative sides of moral approval, and the indeterminateness of moral justification. He does so by proposing to elaborate the
operations of moral approval in terms of the sympathy of the man within the breast, which is a product of the exemplars within one’s personal history. The excavation of one’s moral approving, then, flows naturally into the world of social influence, including those focal figures meaningful to all parties of the conversation. This inner sympathy we have fashioned as vertical sympathy, in contrast to the lateral sympathy highlighted by Hume. But Hume too had hinted at vertical sympathy, so there, too, Smith somewhat shortchanged Hume. But we suspect that Hume was happy to let Smith keep the change, for it was reasonable to trust Smith’s judgment that, among the practical alternatives, doing so best advanced universal benevolence.

A Disingenuous Passage?

In correspondence (Corr., 36), Hume, noting that a hospital is a scene of abundant sadness and abundant sympathy, had asked Smith to clarify the agreeableness of sympathy, and in the second edition Smith did so (TMS I.iii.I.9.*) by pointing to next-order sentiment: The disagreeableness of the first-order sentiment characteristic of sadness is found to be shared. In such sharing there is a next sentiment, one that in the hospital example is characteristic of consolation or commiseration, which is agreeable, and it too may be shared. There is an agreeableness in the agreement on the properness of the first-order sentiment. Smith’s turn to the next-order sentiment regarding a sentiment’s properness generates a recursivity.

Is our sense of properness proper? Every time the question is iterated, our account of ourselves becomes more difficult and perplexing. But to slough off the next iteration, to shut oneself off from such challenge, is foolish, for each iteration asks of something that is higher and deeper, something more important than the preceding one. Such spirals of questioning and self-
examination naturally frighten us. Smith’s interpretation of our moral faculties embarrasses all who aspire to determinate, definitive answers in ethics; it especially challenges authorities who advance answers purportedly of such nature. Smith encouraged us to press on nonetheless. He taught that we must try to handle each iteration by characterizing the being that would express the feelings of properness we incline toward defending. Such figures inevitably become figurative composites of exemplars, “the man within the breast.”

We think that Smith chose not to be upfront about the spiraling, non-foundationalist, anti-doctrinaire character of TMS’s central ideas. That is how we explain a curious passage in TMS. In Part VII of TMS, Smith treats different systems of moral philosophy. He considers how different thinkers have treated of two questions. The first asks about the nature of virtue; the virtue-ness of conduct or character. The second asks about “the principle of approbation,” or the operations or faculties within the judge by which virtue is apprehended and assessed. At the outset of the section about the second question, “Of the different Systems which have been formed concerning the Principle of Approbation,” Smith writes:

Before I proceed to give an account of those different systems, I must observe, that the determination of this second question, though of the greatest importance in speculation, is of none in practice. The question concerning the nature of virtue necessarily has some influence upon our notions of right and wrong in many particular cases. That concerning the principle of approbation can have no such effect. To examine from what contrivance or mechanism within, those different notions or sentiments arise, is a mere matter of philosophical curiosity. (TMS VII.iii.intro.3)

We reject the idea that our understanding of the faculties of approbation have no practical implications, and we reject the implication that “speculation” and “practice” are such highly separable realms of human experience. Moreover, we are perplexed at Smith’s saying what he
says here. For starters, would it not be remarkable that “speculation” and “practice” are so highly separable that a principle whose importance for practice is “none” holds in speculation “the greatest importance”? That a matter of greatest importance in speculation holds no importance for practice goes directly against the whole pragmatist tendency of Hume and Smith, as well as their whole tendency to keep philosophy grounded in the experience and sentiment of the talking and trading animal. Does not Smith, right in the first chapter of WN (21), present the “philosophers or men of speculation” as practicing a “business of a particular trade”? Indeed, something that we regard as a signal aspect of Smith’s thought is the bringing of all human practice, from manufacturing pins to manufacturing self-judgment, under a general moral plexus. In our view, Hume and Smith tend to dissolve any dichotomy between theory and practice!

We confess that, on the supposition of a wise Smith, the passage would leave us little choice but to invoke esotericism. Specifically, we suggest that Smith doesn’t really mean what he says here, that he here deliberately puts out a red herring, one to obscure the nature and the importance of his own theory regarding the faculties of moral approval. His own theory—a signal feature of which is the organon that moral approval always involves a sympathy—is, again, spiraling, non-foundationalist, and anti-doctrinaire. That, it seems to us, is exactly why the early critics of it, neatly collected in On Moral Sentiments (Reeder 1997, 61-216), sent TMS into oblivion, where it largely stayed until such time that readers no longer held Smith’s not being foundationalist against him.

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