

7 Applying Adam Smith

A step towards Smithian environmental virtue ethics

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A wealthy eccentric bought a house in a neighborhood I know. The house was surrounded by a beautiful display of grass, plants, and flowers, and it was shaded by a huge old avocado tree. But the grass required cutting, the flowers needed tending, and the man wanted more sun. So he cut the whole lot down and covered the yard with asphalt. After all, it was his property and he was not fond of plants.

(Hill 1983: 98)

I

Largely through the work of J. Baird Callicott, David Hume and Adam Smith are familiar to those seeking to provide a philosophical framework for environmental ethics.¹ In his *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, Callicott traces the philosophical pedigree of the land ethic from Hume and Smith through Darwin to Aldo Leopold. He sees the key philosophical move made by both Hume and Smith as an extension of intrinsic value from narrower to wider circles, so that Hume, for example, ‘insisted that things other than oneself (or one’s own experiences) may be valued for their own sakes’ (Callicott 1989: 85). Leopold and Callicott then extend this trajectory further to include the welfare of nature, or the ‘land’ (Leopold 1949; Callicott 1989, 1999, 2001). Unfortunately, Callicott’s inclusion of Smith in his lineage of the land ethic is misleading because Smith’s most fruitful contributions to environmental ethics come not from using his theory to extend ‘intrinsic value’ to nature, but from an appropriation of Smith to show how an environmental ethic can be philosophically rigorous *without* needing to invoke notions of intrinsic value.² This can be done by drawing from Smith’s rich and insightful virtue ethic to support specifically environmental virtues.

This chapter began with a story from Thomas Hill’s article, ‘Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving the Natural Environment’ (Hill 1983), an article which first drew widespread attention to a virtue ethical approach to environmental ethics. Hill remarks that the story, in which a

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man destroys a garden because he is annoyed at taking care of it and wants more sun,³ leaves 'even apolitical observers with some degree of moral discomfort' (Hill 1983: 98). Hill asks how to account for this discomfort and rejects approaches that depend on the 'untenable' claim that 'plants have rights or morally relevant interests' (Hill 1983: 100). Instead, he suggests virtue ethics as a better approach to environmental problems. Even if Hill overstates the case against rooting environmental ethics in the intrinsic value of nature,⁴ an environmental ethic that defends environmental virtues without entering the murky waters of intrinsic value is valuable, given the unsettled nature of the present debates about what entities have intrinsic value.⁵

Like Hill, Adam Smith can explain what is wrong with environmental degradation without first needing to solve contentious issues about intrinsic value. But Smith goes further than Hill in laying out a philosophical account of the nature of moral evaluation, so Smith avoids some key ambiguities in Hill's account.⁶ Like Hill (and any other virtue ethic), a Smithian defense of environmental virtue will depend on psychological claims about which there may be disagreement.⁷ Smith provides sufficient detail about the nature of moral evaluation that although Smith himself did not focus on applying his theory to environmental ethics, one can use Smith's account of moral sentiments to defend environmental virtues.

I show how Smith's moral theory can improve on Hill when it is used to defend environmental virtues. In focusing on 'virtues' and in calling Smith's ethic a 'virtue ethic', I am not concerned primarily with specific virtues that Smith discusses, nor even with his account of 'virtue' *per se*.⁸ Rather, in discussing Smith's 'virtue ethics', I have in mind Smith's concern with what Hill identifies as a new approach in environmental ethics, a focus on 'what kind of person' one should be (Hill 1983: 101) and what sorts of attitudes towards nature one should have.⁹ Adam Smith, like Hill, focuses on the kinds of attitudes that it is proper for human beings to have, and in that sense a Smithian environmental ethic will be a virtue ethic that does not depend upon any particular outcome of discussions about intrinsic value. In part II of this chapter, I lay out the overall contours of that ethic.

After offering a general account of how a Smithian approach to attitudes towards the environment would look, I take up the question of whether a Smithian environmental ethic is fundamentally question-begging. In responding to this challenge, I point out (in section III) the role of 'laws of sympathy' in Smith's account. These regularities of sentiment ensure relative uniformity of ethical evaluation and decision, at least among impartial spectators.

My discussion of these regularities of sentiment in section III might seem to conflict with a true virtue ethic, within which 'we may be able to formulate rules ... but no set of rules will exactly ... anticipate every decision in a new situation' (Schneewind 1990: 43). Thus in section IV, I

highlight how Smith's ethics, like many contemporary virtue ethical approaches, encourages sensitivity to particulars of human psychology and ethical situations in a way that differs from many deontological and consequentialist approaches in ethics. Although Smith discusses both general rules and regularities of sentiment, the general rules are ultimately secondary to the considered responses of an impartial spectator to the nuances of moral situations,¹⁰ and the regularities of sentiment are always responsive to particular details. In that sense, Smith's ethics includes a sensitivity to particulars that characterizes a virtue ethic.

Finally, because Smith's ethics depends on the capacity to evaluate and even deliberate as an impartial spectator, one might question whether it is ever possible to be free from sources of partiality. In section V, I take up one example of a particularly pernicious form of partiality – custom – and I show how Smith addresses the 'warping' influence of custom. This provides an opportunity to highlight the distinctive way in which Smith envisions moral progress, and it shows one example of the ethical fruit of Smith's attention to possible problems with his theory. Overall, this chapter provides a taste of the richness of Smith's theory and a beginning to the process of applying that theory to environmental ethics.

II

Smith was a contemporary and friend of David Hume, and Smith's own ethical theory extends some of the insights of Hume's theory. But whereas Smith and Hume are often seen as having nearly identical moral theories, in part because both develop sentimentalist accounts based on sympathy, Smith takes Hume's insights in a very new direction. Thus although sympathy lies at the foundation of Smith's moral theory, it functions in moral evaluation quite differently for Smith than for Hume. For Hume, one sympathizes with the pleasures and pains of others. When a character trait causes pleasure, one feels a sympathetic pleasure and approves of that trait. Thus for Hume, the scope of moral considerability is the scope of sympathy. That is, because one evaluates character traits based on their tendencies to promote pleasure or pain to the person with the trait or to others affected by it,¹¹ only those with whom one can sympathize are morally considered in deciding the virtue or vice of a character trait. To avoid anthropocentrism, a Humean environmental ethic must show that one can extend sympathy beyond human beings, that one can 'feel the pain' of nature.¹²

Within Smith's moral theory, sympathy functions differently, and this allows Smith to provide an environmental virtue ethic that does *not* depend on the extension of sympathy beyond human beings (cf. Darwall 1998; Otteson 2002; Levy and Peart forthcoming).¹³ For Smith, when we feel sympathy for another 'we place ourselves in his situation ... become in some measure the same person with him' (TMS I.i.1.2, 9). By imagining

oneself in the place of another, one 'feel[s] something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike' the feelings of the 'person principally concerned' (TMS I.i.1.2, 9).¹⁴ But for Smith, unlike for Hume, moral evaluation is not a matter of simply approving of pleasant feelings and disapproving of unpleasant ones. Instead, it comes from a distinctive pleasure associated with successfully sympathizing with another fully.¹⁵

To understand the importance of this distinctive pleasure, it is important to realize that for Smith, the sympathetic union between the spectator's feelings and those of the person principally concerned is seldom complete. There is often a gap between the idea one forms of the sentiments of another and the feelings one acquires sympathetically. Our *idea* of what another feels is usually based on *effects* of the other's feelings, which we know by observing what the other says and does. Smith explains, 'It is, indeed, scarce possible to describe ... internal sentiment or emotion' in any way other than 'by describing the effects which they produce without, the alterations which they occasion in the countenance, in the air and external behavior, the resolutions they suggest, the actions they prompt to' (VII.iv.5, 328–9).¹⁶ In contrast to the *idea* that one forms of the feelings of another, sympathetic feeling is a genuine *feeling*. This feeling is not acquired, as it is for Hume, simply from the idea that one has of the feelings of another.¹⁷ A spectator can know that another is sad without the spectator herself feeling sad. Nor is the feeling acquired by considering what one would feel in the place of another. This consideration can give a conditional judgment about one's feelings, but it does not provide an actual feeling. In the case of bodily passions, for example, one can know that one would feel hungry if one were actually in the situation of another – such hunger might be, as Smith says, 'natural' and 'unavoidable' – but one will still not feel sympathetic hunger because one does not feel that hunger when one *imagines* being the other. One comes to feel something sympathetically by vividly imagining oneself in the place of the other and then *actually responding* to that imagined situation. Normally this response will be a feeling, and this feeling is typically similar to that felt by the object of one's sympathy, but it need not be identical. Usually, in fact, the expressed emotion of the object of sympathy is stronger than what the sympathetic spectator feels. Although it can cause some sympathetic feeling, imagining oneself in the place of another generally does not have the same emotional effect as actually being in that place.

Smith argues, however, that when the gap of sentiment is overcome, when people share the same feelings, there is a distinctive pleasure: 'Nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast' (TMS I.i.2.1, 13). The pleasure of mutual sympathy is, moreover, a mutual pleasure, sought after by both the person principally concerned – the agent or sufferer – and the spectator who sympathizes. Thus both the agent and the spectator seek to modify their own passions to fit those of the other:

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The spectator must . . . endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur in the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded. After all this, however, the emotions of the spectator will still be very apt to fall short of the violence of what is felt by the sufferer. . . . The person principally concerned is sensible of this, and at the same time passionately desires a more complete sympathy. . . . In order to produce this concord, as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators.

(TMS I.i.4.6–7, 21–2)

Because complete sympathy brings pleasure, both spectator and person principally concerned seek to bring their sentiments in line with those of the other. The spectator imaginatively enters as fully as possible into the situation of the agent in order to feel the agent's passions more intensely, and the agent moderates her passions to the level with which they can be sympathized.

Smith's moral theory arises out of this process, such that the right or 'proper' pitch of any passion is defined by the mutual compromise between person principally concerned and spectator. In so far as the spectator enters into one's passions, she approves of those passions.

When the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects. . . . To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them.

(TMS I.i.3.1, 16)

On this account of sympathy (unlike Hume's), one can morally approve of passions that are unpleasant, because the basis for moral approval is not the pleasure of the feelings with which one sympathizes but the pleasure of sympathy itself. This also implies, again contrary to Hume, that one can morally approve or disapprove of character traits as 'unsuitable to their objects' independent of any benefit or harm to those objects. A 'proper' sentiment is simply one that can be sympathized with.

For environmental ethics, this account of sympathy implies that a Smithian will not primarily focus on extending sympathy beyond human beings.¹⁸ The extension of sympathy to non-human entities would be important if the only entities that count morally are those with which one

can sympathize. But while this is arguably true in the case of Hume, it is not true for Smith. For Smith, the scope of sympathy tracks moral *accountability*, not moral *considerability*. That is, one can hold an entity morally accountable only if one is capable of sympathizing it, because the way in which one holds others accountable depends upon the degree of concord between their sentiments and one's own sympathetic emotions. Still, one can hold entities such as people morally accountable for actions, even if one cannot sympathize with the entities affected *by* those actions. Thus a Smithian virtue ethic need not engage in the task of showing that nature or non-sentient beings have 'interests' or other attitudes with which an observer would be able to sympathize. Smith can discuss proper attitudes towards nature *directly*, since any attitude towards nature is proper if one can sympathize with it (or improper if one cannot). In this sense, Smith gives a basis for making claims about the virtue or vice of certain attitudes, a basis lacking in Hill's virtue ethical approach.

Thus Smith can address the case of the wealthy eccentric, for example, by showing why the attitudes of that eccentric are improper. The problem with this eccentric is that we cannot sympathize with him. Based on his actions, we conclude that he has little or no affection for his garden. And when we imagine ourselves in his situation, looking out over his garden, we simply cannot enter into this indifference. With great imaginative effort we can sympathize to some degree with his annoyance at needing to take care of the plants in his garden and his desire to have more sun. But we cannot sympathize with these sentiments to the degree that would justify destroying the garden. Thus we rightly deem the eccentric's attitudes to nature to be morally wrong.

With respect to more complex cases, the evaluation is more complex, but its overall structure is the same. One can sympathize with the feelings of loggers seeking to preserve their way of life, and with strip miners seeking to make efficient use of natural resources. In some cases, one may be able to sympathize with these loggers and miners to a degree that will justify actions such as logging and mining, but one will never be able to sympathize with a total disregard for nature. Ultimately, for Smith, moral evaluation is based on the particular details of each situation, and so Smith's theory, as a virtue ethic, gives no fixed rule for settling every case. But his account of the nature of moral evaluation shows that the details that will matter morally are those that influence one's emotional response to imagining oneself in the situations of eccentrics, loggers, and miners. And this provides a non-arbitrary way to engage in ethical reflection.¹⁹

III

The appeal to sympathy provides Smith with a basis for environmental virtues that need not appeal, as Hill's does, to the role of those virtues in furthering anthropocentric virtues, and that does not directly depend on

any appeal to intrinsic values in nature. But one might worry that this appeal to sympathy only works when the sympathizer already shares a concern for the natural world. Although Smith provides an account for how one makes moral judgments, one might think that this amounts to little more than a rigorous intuitionism, and thus that it suffers from the same problems as intuitionism when facing moral disagreement. Thomas Hill's criticism of intuitionism seems to apply to Smith as well. Hill argues, 'those prone to destroy natural environments will doubtless give one answer, and nature lovers will likely give another' (Hill 1983: 101).²⁰ As applied to Smith, one might argue that there are variations in sentiments that undermine any Smithian defense of environmental virtues. Appeals to sympathy seem particularly problematic precisely 'when an issue is as controversial as the one at hand' (Hill 1983: 101). One might think that anti-environmentalists *will* sympathize with the wealthy eccentric, and thus that Smithian ethics will have little to add, unless it can somehow ground environmental virtues on shared sympathetic reactions about anthropocentric virtues. And in that case, Smith would be little better than Hill.

Smith's responses to the objection that sympathies vary elucidate the insightfulness of his overall approach to ethics. The first response, on which I focus in the rest of this section, is that ethical judgments *will* be more or less uniform, despite various differences between individuals, because of basic laws that govern sympathy. Human nature is simply not as variable as the criticism suggests. People are not generally 'prone to destroy natural environments' for no reason. And even those who destroy natural environments in a particular context – say, loggers who cut old growth forests – will generally be unsympathetic to the destruction of a garden by our wealthy eccentric. For Smith, 'if everyone were an impartial, knowledgeable, and attentive spectator, then each person would react with the same passion to the same situation' (Heath 1995: 452).

Smith does not simply make this general point, however. He lays out several natural 'laws of sympathy' (Campbell 1971: 98), *universal* tendencies that affect the degree of sympathy with various emotions. These are not laws in the strict sense – Smith never uses the term 'law' to describe them – but they do reflect *relatively* consistent generalities of human sympathy. In that sense, Smith's ethic reflects the attentiveness to particularity that should characterize a virtue ethic, but he still recognizes the importance of general, though not exceptionless, laws. To show how these work in a concrete case, I discuss three that are relevant to the way in which people are likely to respond to the wealthy eccentric (for more on laws of sympathy, cf. Campbell 1971; Griswold 1999). The way that these laws apply to the wealthy eccentric is based on the particular details of that case, and one will need to give different arguments for other cases. Many of these will draw on other laws of sympathy than those discussed here. The discussion of this case is given as a sample of the kind of ethical argument that

Smith can make, an example that justifies further study of Smith's laws of sympathy and further application of these to environmental virtues.

The first law that is relevant to the case of the eccentric is that 'our propensity to sympathize with joy is much stronger than our propensity to sympathize with sorrow' (TMS I.iii.1.5, 45, cf. VI.iii.15, 242–3). Moreover, 'we are generally most disposed to sympathize with small joys and great sorrows'; thus small pains are harder to enter into than small pleasures (TMS I.ii.5.1, 40). The pains involved in taking care of a garden are so small that one can hardly enter into them, and the pleasures associated with spending time in a garden are, even if small, particularly easy to enter into. In the WN, in fact, Smith emphasizes the pleasures of 'cultivating the ground', arguing that this activity has 'charms that more or less attract every body' (WN III.i.3, 378).²¹ Thus people will find it difficult to sympathize with the wealthy eccentric, and they will therefore deem his attitudes and behavior towards his garden morally improper.

The impropriety of the wealthy eccentric's behavior will be highlighted by a second law of sympathy, that spectators can more easily enter into 'passions which take their origin in the imagination' than those 'which take their origin from the body' (TMS II.ii.1.6, 29; II.ii.1.3, 27). The small joys associated with spending time in the garden are not specifically bodily. One does not sympathize as much with the physical pleasure of sitting under the avocado tree as much as the imaginative or aesthetic pleasure of spending time in the garden. And sympathy with the imaginative pleasures of the garden will generally be greater than sympathy with the bodily pains of taking care of it.

A third relevant law of sympathy is that 'passions ... which take their origin from a particular turn or habit ... are ... but little sympathized with' (TMS I.ii.2.1, 31). The wealthy eccentric is eccentric, and passions that are rooted in eccentricity are harder to sympathize with because the spectator cannot easily enter into them. Eccentricity can sometimes be entered into, when it is rooted in aspects of one's upbringing or situation with which a spectator can sympathize. When Aldo Leopold describes how he 'love[s] all trees, but [is] in love with pines' (Leopold 1949: 74), he gives a sufficiently vivid description of the circumstances of this love to induce the reader, at least when reading his book, to sympathize with him. (To feel this, of course, I refer the reader to Leopold's essay 'Ax in Hand' (Leopold 1949: 72–7). I would need to quote most of that essay to generate the proper sympathy with Leopold.) But the wealthy eccentric seems incapable of any equivalent account of his eccentricity, incapable, that is, of describing his situation such that a spectator can sympathetically share his eccentricity.

Of course, there may be factors that would make it easier to sympathize with the wealthy eccentric. He may lack the resources to care for his garden properly (and thus not really be wealthy), or he may have other responsibilities that preclude such care, or it may be particularly painful

for him to care for it. All of these factors will affect our sympathy with the eccentric (who may even cease to be eccentric), and thus our moral evaluation. But in all of these cases, our capacity to sympathize will be governed by the laws governing sympathy in general. Thus if the eccentric paves his garden because he lacks the resources to care for it properly and still provide for himself and his children (not the case of our ‘wealthy’ eccentric), then one will easily enter into the pains of seeing one’s children suffer, both because these pains are intense (and hence easier to enter into by the first law above) and because they are largely imaginative rather than bodily (and hence easier to enter into by the second law). This will help one to sympathize with his desire to destroy the garden, and thus make it more morally appropriate. One of the strengths of Smith’s theory is that it provides a framework for thinking about how various factors will affect our sympathies, one that requires attending to all the details that can affect one’s sympathies without getting so lost in these details that one cannot make any moral assessments at all.

It is important to note here that Smith’s criterion for moral evaluation is the sympathy of *spectators*, not the feelings of actors involved in the situation, and for moral judgments that are stable and reliable, these spectators must be ‘impartial’.²² Often moral disagreements arise when those who stand to benefit in various ways are the main interlocutors about the propriety of various policies. Smith is acutely aware of the fact that human interests differ, and that these different interests lead to different attitudes towards situations. Hunters, loggers, biologists, hikers, and environmentalists may have different views about who should get access to a particular natural environment, but these are differences between sentiments of ‘persons principally concerned’, not differences between *moral* evaluations of *spectators*. And Smith insists that moral judgment strictly speaking involves judging from the standpoint of a true – and hence impartial – *spectator*. From this standpoint psychological laws governing sympathy will override one’s contingent interests, and moral judgments will be more or less uniform.

Smith defends his turn to the impartial spectator on two grounds. First, the quest for complete concord between one’s own sentiments – as a person principally concerned – and the sentiments of partial spectators will be constantly frustrated. Smith explains this process in detail:

When we first come into the world, from the natural desire to please, we accustom ourselves to every person we converse with ... and for some time fondly pursue the impossible and absurd project of gaining the good-will and approbation of every body. We are soon taught by experience, that this universal approbation is altogether unattainable.... The fairest and most equitable conduct must frequently obstruct the interests or thwart the inclinations of particular persons, who will seldom have candor enough to ... see that this conduct ... is

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perfectly suitable to our situation. In order to defend ourselves from such partial judgments, we . . . conceive ourselves as acting in the presence of . . . an impartial spectator who considers our conduct with the same indifference with which we regard that of other people.

(III.2.36, 129)²³

The effort to secure actual praise meets with frustration when actions and attitudes fail to receive the praise that one knows they are due. Thus one learns to discount the judgments of those who decide on purely partial grounds and to evaluate one's own attitudes, and eventually those of others as well, on the basis of the judgments of an impartial – and hence more 'candid and equitable' – spectator. The tendency to turn to an impartial spectator is heightened, for Smith, by humans' natural tendency to seek not only praise – actual concord of sentiments – but *praiseworthiness*: 'Nature . . . has endowed [people] not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of, or of being what he himself approves of in other men' (III.2.7; for a discussion of these arguments in the context of Hobbes and Mandeville, cf. Muller 1993: 105ff.)

This shift from mere spectators who give praise to *impartial* spectators who affirm *praiseworthiness* has implications for moral evaluation of others as well. For Smith, truly ethical reflection involves a double movement of the imagination. One first seeks to put oneself imaginatively in the place of an impartial spectator, to look at the person principally concerned from a disinterested standpoint. Then, from the perspective of the impartial spectator, one imaginatively enters the position of the person principally concerned. Once this double act of imagination is complete, one responds naturally to the situation in which one imaginatively finds oneself. One judges sentiments to be proper if one feels those sentiments when imagining oneself in the place of an impartial spectator imagining herself in the place of the person principally concerned.

It is important to note here that 'impartial' does not mean purely rational or distant from the concrete particulars of life.²⁴ In this sense, Smith's impartial spectator is quite different from an 'ideal observer' who is 'dispassionate', even 'in the sense that he is incapable of experiencing emotions of the kind – such emotions as jealousy, self-love, . . . and others which are directed towards particular individuals as such' (Firth 1952: 55). The impartial spectator must be a *sympathetic* spectator, one who enters into the particulars of the situation and responds emotionally to them. As Martha Nussbaum explains, the perspective of impartial spectator

is a viewpoint rich in feeling. Not only compassion and sympathy, but also fear, grief, anger, hope, and certain types of love are felt by this spectator, as a result of his active, concrete imagining of the circumstances and aims and feelings of others.

(Nussbaum 1990: 338)

Rather than a lack of emotion, the impartiality of the spectator reflects the fact that one's emotional response must be entirely sympathetic, rather than tainted by various particular and purely personal interests. Such impartiality is necessary in order to achieve the 'concord' of sentiments with others that human beings naturally seek.

In addition to being impartial, spectators who hope to make good ethical judgments must be 'well-informed' (III.2.32, 130). Spectators must know all the information that is relevant to properly evaluating the passions of the person principally concerned. This will include detailed particular knowledge about the situation causing those passions, as well as information about the effects of expressing those passions. It will also include knowledge of what the person principally concerned knows. Thus a well informed spectator evaluating the eccentric will need to know that the eccentric's disregard for his garden is likely to disturb the nesting patterns of the bird that live in the garden's trees, but the spectator will also need to know that the eccentric does not realize this.²⁵ With respect to the capacity to sympathize with the eccentric when imagining oneself in his position, knowledge of the eccentric's state of mind will moderate, though not completely eliminate, the effects of the spectator's knowledge of the effects of the eccentric's attitudes.

Finally, Smithian spectators must be 'attentive' (TMS I.i.1.4, 10). Attentiveness refers to the degree to which the spectator makes use of her knowledge of the situation, the extent to which she actually uses her imagination to enter into the situation of the person principally concerned. Thus it is distinct from being well informed. The clearest case of being well informed but not attentive comes in Smith's discussion of what happens when 'a stranger passes by us in the street with all the marks of the deepest affliction; and we are immediately told that he has just received the news of the death of his father' (I.i.3.4, 17). In this case, Smith suggests, 'it may often happen . . . that, so far from entering the violence of his sorrow, we should scarce conceive the first movements of concern upon his account' (I.i.3.4, 17). One might think that the discord of sentiment would be a kind of disapproval, but Smith points out that it need not be. Instead, we can explain the failure to sympathize in terms of a lack of attentiveness. As Smith says, 'we [may] happen to be employed about other things, and do not take time to picture out in our imagination the different circumstances of distress which must occur to him' (I.i.3.4, 18). The problem here is not that we are too partial, nor that we do not *know* the relevant circumstances of distress, but simply that we do not imaginatively attend to those circumstances. We are imaginatively inattentive.²⁶ But we can still correct our moral judgments, and even our actions, based on what we know we would feel if we were more attentive.

Ethical evaluation, then, comes when an impartial, well informed, and attentive spectator imagines herself in the place of another. When imagining herself in that situation, the spectator will feel various sentiments and

begin to adopt certain attitudes. These sentiments and attitudes define what is morally right or ‘proper’, and in so far as they correspond to those of the person with whom she sympathizes, that person is virtuous.²⁷ *Environmental* virtues, then, will be those attitudes towards nature with which impartial and attentive spectators can fully sympathize. And while these attitudes will depend largely on the particulars of each situation, they are likely to include such virtues as humility, respect, cherishing, gratitude (or something like it) and aesthetic appreciation (cf. Hill 1983, Cafaro 2001, and Frasz 1993). Environmental vices will be any attitudes towards nature with which a spectator cannot sympathize, and are likely to include indifference, abusive exploitation, domineering attitudes, violence, and ingratitude. Smith provides a framework that offers hope that people with widely different interests can, when they assume the position of impartial spectators, come to agreement about the nature of environmental virtues and vices.

IV

Unfortunately, however, impartiality may be difficult to discern, and people often have hidden interests that affect their sympathies. Moreover, even those who are impartial may be ignorant of information that is relevant to assessing the propriety or justice of various attitudes towards nature. And these people may not only be uninformed but may not even realize that they are uninformed. Finally, even among those who ingenuously seek to be impartial may not be sufficiently attentive, or not attentive to the most important details of situations. Thus differences will persist, even among those who ingenuously seek moral agreement.²⁸ It is hard to imagine approving of the wealthy eccentric, but it is easy to imagine ingenuous anti-environmentalists defending even more drastic forms of environmental degradation, such as clear-cutting old growth redwoods or allowing greenhouse gases to get out of control. What resources does Smith have for discussions between environmentalists and ingenuous anti-environmentalists?

Unlike deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethical problems, virtue ethicists such as Smith do not provide litmus tests for determining which party to a disagreement should be declared victor. Smith cannot simply call both sides to tally overall pleasure and pain, nor will he be able to show rational inconsistency in those who are ethically wrong. With Hume, Smith would agree that ‘tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger’ (*Treatise* 2.3.3.7).²⁹ Charles Griswold points out that because of his absence of exceptionless rational principles of morality, ‘Smith always resists easy descriptions of what [moral improvement] might entail’ (Griswold 1999: 214).³⁰ But the absence of overriding principles for settling disputes does not mean that Smith has nothing to say about to those engaged in ethical

debates. For one thing, Smith does outline various *virtues* – prudence, generosity, self-command, and justice (TMS VI) – that are relevant to these debates.³¹ For another, Smith’s resistance to quick solutions to complex disputes comes from his appreciation for the fact that what makes for a successful ethical conversation depends not only on universal facts about human nature – the so-called ‘laws of sympathy’ – but also on details of the situation being discussed and the histories of the interlocutors. For the case of the wealth eccentric, relevant details of the situation discussed might include the background and other obligations of the eccentric himself, specifics about the history and health of the plants and animals in the garden, attitudes of neighbors towards the garden, and relevant ecological impacts that the destruction of the garden will have. Relevant details of the interlocutors might include a variety of hidden sources of partiality or blindness, their past experiences with gardens and trees, their scientific backgrounds, and any connections with the eccentric himself.

Despite the limitations imposed by its sensitivity to particulars, Smith’s account of moral judgment helps show the kinds of moral conversations that will be required. Part of the discussion between proponents and opponents of environmental virtues would involve helping one’s interlocutor be more well informed about and attentive to relevant features of the situation. An environmentalist may need to bring the anti-environmentalist – physically or through words and pictures – to an old growth forest and a recent clear-cut. The anti-environmentalist may introduce the environmentalist to the loggers whose livelihood depends on logging and show towns decimated by restrictions on logging. Part of the point here is to teach one’s interlocutor new facts, to help her be more ‘well-informed’. But even if one already knows all the relevant facts, new experiences may be needed to give the capacity to enter more attentively *in imagination* into the full context of assessing the proper attitude towards the forest.³² This attentiveness depends on being able to see nature from a variety of different perspectives and to be aware of features that are ethically relevant but that one might too quickly pass over as one seeks to quantify the value of nature.

The important role of imagination and attentiveness in Smith’s ethical theory helps explain the importance of environmental literature and poetry as an essential component of a philosophically rigorous environmental ethic (cf. Griswold 1999: 59, 214–15). As philosophers become more attuned to the importance of the emotions and of sensitivity to particulars in ethical life, they emphasize the role of literature. Martha Nussbaum, for example, points out,

There may be some views of the world and how one should live in it – views, especially, that emphasize the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty – that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional

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philosophical prose . . . but only in language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.

(Nussbaum 1990: 3)

Although Nussbaum primarily has in mind in this passage the variety, mystery, and beauty of the human social world, her description perfectly fits the nature writing of such authors as Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Gilbert White, Rachel Carson, Loren Eiseley, Mary Hunter Austin, Annie Dillard, and Wendell Berry. Environmental ethics that focuses on philosophical theorizing about intrinsic value or various 'rights' risks failing to see the important role that environmental literature can play in explaining humans' responsibility to nature. A Smithian environmental virtue ethic, by contrast, will depend on sensitively written literature to explain and expand its claims about the nature of environmental virtues.

Smith is widely recognized as an important precursor to contemporary interest in the intersection between philosophy and literature. Nussbaum herself takes Smith as an example of one who 'attaches considerable importance to literature' (Nussbaum 1990: 339).³³ Charles Griswold has gone further, pointing out that 'plays, novels, and poems, but particularly tragedies . . . completely overshadow [Smith's] relatively rare references to properly philosophical texts' (Griswold 1999: 59). Perhaps more important, 'so permeated with examples, stories, literary references and allusions, and images is the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that at times it presents the character of a novel; narrative and analysis are interwoven throughout' (Griswold 59–60). Even if Griswold may overstate his case here,³⁴ it is clear that Smith not only recognizes the value of literature as a resource for moral philosophy, but also incorporates literary elements into his own philosophical analysis.

Literature, examples, and stories play three important roles in Smith's ethic, three roles that are particularly well served by environmental literature. First, as Nussbaum frequently emphasizes, literature is uniquely well suited to capture the particulars of situations in a way that addresses one's emotions. Philosophical analysis tends to be abstract, but Smith's ethics depends on attentiveness to particular details. In environmental writing in particular, literature is needed to communicate the intricate beauty of nature, its complexity and mystery. Second, literature is needed to learn to imagine oneself in the place of another. For Smith, ethics is fundamentally an effort of imagination, a response to fully seeing oneself in the place of another. And literature places one in a position to sympathize with characters in that literature. When one feels grief at the end of a tragedy or gets excited at the prospects for a character in a novel, one is more easily able to feel the grief or hopefulness of others in one's life. In this respect, non-fiction environmental literature is particularly powerful, because one learns to sympathize with the real-life authors of such literature, entering into their love of nature in a way that carries directly into

one's own life. Finally, reading literature teaches one to assume the stance of spectator in a way that is emotionally engaged but still 'impartial' in Smith's sense. This makes it easier to assume this 'impartial' stance when evaluating one's one actions and attitudes.

However, even as literature, conversation, and new experience make one more attentive to relevant features of a situation, hidden partiality may continue to cloud one's judgment. The logger may feel or at least claim to feel some sympathy with the wealthy eccentric's antipathy to the plants in his garden. This might arise from a vague sense that caring too much about the eccentric's garden could force her to care more about the forests she logs every day. Or it may even come from a defense mechanism needed for her daily life; she needs to disregard the welfare of plants and trees in order to live with herself, and she takes that disregard into her attempt to sympathize with the eccentric. In either case, she evaluates the eccentric from a standpoint that is closer to that of a person principally concerned than that of an impartial spectator. Impartiality can have profound indirect effects. Those engaged in environmentally destructive activities, even if only implicitly, will be less likely to be moved by environmental literature and will thus remain ill informed about and inattentive to ethically important features of nature.

Thus an important part of ethical conversation will involve drawing the attention of one's interlocutor to her partiality, so that she can begin to work through it. In some cases, becoming more aware of partiality will help people actually overcome that partiality and assume a more truly impartial, and thus more properly ethical, perspective. But Smith also emphasizes the importance of being aware of partiality even if one cannot actually change the way one feels, because one can at least change one's moral judgments (see TMS I.i.3.3–4, 17). One will not always have the time or ability to reform one's sentiments themselves, and some forms of partiality may simply be impossible to overcome. But one can change one's judgments and even modify the expression of one's sentiments to correspond to what one knows one *would* feel were one truly impartial. And whether they lead to changes in sentiments or simply in moral judgments, conversations that draw attention to hidden sources of partiality can bring about greater agreement about environmental virtues.

In this context, one of the greatest strengths of Smith's moral theory is his sensitivity to the sources of hidden partiality, such as self-deception, vanity, and custom. In the rest of this chapter, I focus on one particularly pernicious source of partiality: custom.³⁵ Smith's response to the problem of custom helps address concerns about relativism in Smith and will provide the opportunity to show how Smith's account of moral progress differs from at least some other approaches (especially those of Callicott and Leopold) in contemporary environmental ethics.

V

Smith claims that the way people are raised, the company one keeps, and the overall attitudes of one's culture, all have effects on one's moral sentiments. Smith describes 'custom' as a 'principle ... which ha[s] a considerable influence upon the moral sentiments of mankind, and [is] the chief cause ... of the many irregular and discordant opinions which prevail in different ages and nations concerning what is blamable or praise-worthy' (V.1.1, 194, cf. V.2.2, 200–1). Within societies, custom can have dramatic effects on one's attitudes towards virtue and vice. And across different societies, 'the different situations of different ages and countries are apt ... to give different characters to the generality of those who live in them, and their sentiments concerning the particular degree of each quality ... vary according to that degree which is usual in their country' (V.2.7, 204). All of these influences of custom reflect a potentially hidden partiality that should be uncovered and overcome.³⁶

Fortunately, the effects of custom are limited: 'the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted' (TMS V.2.1, 200). In particular, the differences introduced by custom affect *degrees* of approval more than which traits will be approved (V.2.13, 209). In the context of environmental ethics, this diagnosis seems particularly apt. There are few whose moral sentiments are so perverted that they do not recognize *something* wrong with a wealthy eccentric who paves his garden. But those accustomed to environmental destruction may prefer the virtues of frugality and industry in the eccentric efficiently saving the time and resources of maintaining a garden. The case of the wealthy eccentric is extreme, of course, in part because it can seem like a stretch to say that the 'duties' of frugality and industry here really encroach on the important virtues of cherishing natural beauty. But the conflicts between virtues can play particularly large roles in precisely the debates that most occupy environmentalists, debates where what is at stake are trade-offs of goods or even trade-offs of relevant virtues – compassion towards human beings and respect for nature, for example.

Moreover, Smith suggests that when it comes to particular kinds of *action*, custom can have a more profound influence on moral evaluation than it can in the case of moral evaluation of character traits (V.2.14, 209). Smith's main example of such 'wide departure' from good morals is infanticide, approved of by 'almost all the states of Greece, even among the polite and civilized Athenians' (V.2.15, 210),³⁷ and several aspects of Smith's discussion of infanticide are instructive for environmental ethics.

First, the *scope* of example is extreme. Smith's comments about the limited capacity of custom to 'warp' moral sentiments imply only that 'custom should never pervert our sentiments with regard to *the general*

style and character of conduct' (V.2.16, 211). In particular cases, custom can *dramatically* warp moral sentiments. In the environmental arena, this suggests that it will be helpful to discuss environmental virtues, on which there will be more agreement, before getting to specific practices. Difficult conversations about practices will be more fruitful when preceded by easier discussions about virtues.

Second, the *proximate cause* of this perversion of moral sentiment is important for identifying such perversions in one's own moral evaluations. As Smith explains, 'the uniform continuance of the custom had hindered [people] from perceiving [infanticide's] enormity' (V.2.15, 210). When people engage in a practice for a long time, they are more likely to be morally blinded. Importantly, the barbarity of the practice is one that societies themselves could and should have censured, *if* they had adopted a truly impartial standpoint. Smith emphasizes that the 'helplessness' and natural 'amiableness' of infants '*call forth* the compassion, even of an enemy', and the efforts of philosophers to defend infanticide forced them into increasingly 'far-fetched considerations' (V.2.15, 210, emphasis added). An environmentally relevant example of such a custom may be 'familiarity' with eating animals (cf. Singer 1990). Our culture packages those animals – both literally in supermarkets and linguistically as 'beef' rather than 'cow' – to distract imaginative and emotive attention from uncomfortable facts about what one is doing. Such a long-standing custom of eating other animals is likely to make us approve of the practice even when it is a 'barbarous prerogative' (V.2.15, 210). Of course, the fact that eating meat is an established custom does not settle the debate about whether eating meat is naturally barbarous or not. It may be that humans have a custom of eating meat precisely *because* there is nothing morally repulsive about that practice. In fact, Smith insists that custom can 'never pervert our sentiments with regard to the general style and character of conduct' because 'no society could subsist' in which this were the case (V.2.16, 211). But this does not take away from the fact that custom *can* conceal the injustice of virtually any single practice (V.2.15, 210). The fact that one is part of a culture with a long history of meat eating suggests a source of partiality to which we should be particularly attentive, though it does not in itself decide regarding the propriety of the practice.

Third, the *initial cause* of the ancients' approval of infanticide can be explained naturally. Smith explains that 'the extreme indigence of a savage is often such that he ... he often dies of pure want, and it is frequently impossible for him to support both himself and his child' (V.2.15, 210). This explanation is important for showing that the custom of infanticide is a cause of its moral approval, not vice versa. There are many practices that are customary, such as parents caring for their children or victims seeking some sort of retaliation for harm done to them. These practices are customary in part *because* they are proper, so custom alone cannot constitute a reason (not even a *prima facie* reason) to reject a prac-

tice. But by explaining the origin of infanticide, Smith shows how a practice that may initially have been engaged in with ambivalence – because necessary but repugnant – could eventually pervert one’s moral sense.³⁸ Without such an explanation, there would be no way to make sense of the ancients’ *initial* approval of infanticide other than to say that they have a fundamentally different moral sense. Similarly in the case of eating meat, a plausible story about why people would initially have eaten meat despite the repugnance of killing animals – say, because there were no vegetarian ways to get sufficient calories and nutrition – can help one defend the claim that a natural condemnation of meat eating is obscured by custom. And Smith even suggests that there is a natural basis for not wanting to kill animals, claiming that ‘Nature has . . . implanted in man’ a ‘fellow-feeling’ and even ‘some degree of respect’ for ‘all . . . animals’ (‘Of the External Senses’, ¶7).³⁹

The previous points all suggest that when confronting someone – including oneself – whose sentiments are perverted by custom, one should point out proximate causes of such perversion as a way of highlighting the possible influence of custom, as well as the initial cause, to show that the original basis of the custom no longer applies and should no longer affect our judgments. But all of these attentions to the perverting influence of custom are merely means of promoting a more impartial stance. The final judgment must be based on a person’s natural sympathies, ‘what *naturally* ought to be the sentiments of’ an impartial spectator (II.2.25, emphasis added). These natural sentiments are not, of course, the raw and partial sentiments of a person principally concerned, but the reflective and educated sentiments of an impartial spectator. But even impartial spectators imagine themselves in the place of another and respond naturally, though not partially, to being in that position.⁴⁰ This suggests that the way in which moral progress will take place will not be through an evolution of moral sentiments in the traditional sense. For Smith, the problem raised by custom is that moral sentiments are perverted or impeded from functioning as they naturally would. Thus the primary task for those seeking to cultivate environmental virtues is not to generate *new* moral sentiments but to clear away the corrupting influences of custom to reveal natural moral sentiments that have been impeded.⁴¹

VI

Indifference towards environmental problems is among the most important ethical crises facing the world today. Ecologists, nature writers, and environmentalists have all made valuable contributions to reflecting on the proper relationship between human beings and the nature on which we depend. Philosophers have also played an important role, especially in explaining and defending core claims and concepts underlying better attitudes towards nature. But environmental ethics has remained too

narrowly focused, and the resources of the history of ethics have not been sufficiently brought to bear on reflections about nature. Meanwhile, studies in ethics and the history of ethics have generally ignored ethical issues related to the environment in particular. Early modern ethics in particular has often suffered from its association with metaphysical views about the differences between humans and nature and from the fact that early modern moral philosophers themselves generally did not apply ethics to environmental issues. But the history of ethics in general, and Adam Smith in particular, can help open new approaches within environmental ethics. Although many of these thinkers did not focus on human relationships with nature, their careful ethical reflection can be fruitfully extend to deal with the greatest ethical issues – including environmental issues – faced today.

Specifically, Adam Smith develops an ethic that can helpfully be applied to discussing environmental virtues. Like Thomas Hill’s environmental virtue ethics, Smith does not depend on controversial notions such as intrinsic value or the interests of nature. But unlike Hill, Smith is able to explain the propriety and moral importance of specifically environmental attitudes, without appealing to the role that these attitudes play in cultivating other more human-centered virtues. He can do this by showing how sympathy provides a rigorous but flexible standard for determining the moral appropriateness of an attitude.

The full strength of a Smithian approach to environmental ethics, however, comes in the details. Like other virtue-based ethical theories, Smith’s ethics is sensitive to details in a way that precludes sweeping claims about environmental problems, but his specific suggestions for dealing with challenges that his virtue ethics faces are particularly well suited for responding to the kinds of problems that arise in contemporary environmental debates. Conversations about the proper attitudes towards nature can benefit from Smith’s attention to the role of literature, the danger of custom, and the importance of rules grounded in particular cases.

There is, of course, considerably more to be done to develop a full Smithian environmental ethic. The account offered here is at best incomplete. I have left numerous details to be filled in, and several contentious issues unresolved. Moreover, Smithian ethics depends essentially on conversations in which partiality is uncovered and remediated and in which details play a large role. There is a certain amount of risk to doing environmental ethics from a Smithian perspective; it may turn out that love of nature will be difficult to sympathize with and wanton destruction of it will turn out to be proper in the end. Or it may turn out that Smith is wrong about his optimistic hope that human beings are capable of reaching unity of sympathy when we strip away partiality. Both of these cases seem to me unlikely, but they are potential dangers of a Smithian approach.

This chapter offered an initial taste of how the overall framework of Smith’s moral theory can be applied to environmental ethics. With its sen-

sitivity to details, its awareness of problems that generate ethical disagreement, and its hopeful accounts of the laws of human psychology that make agreement possible, Smith's theory is one that is particularly well suited to the complex environmental problems we face today. My treatment of his theory here points the way to areas for further research and provides a basis for hope that a fuller exploration of Smith's philosophy in the light of recent environmental ethics will provide a richer understanding of both Smith's ethics and the environmental problems to which it is applied.

Notes

- 1 Callicott's use of Hume has not been uncontested. For some critiques of Callicott's use of Hume, see Lo (2001) and Varner (1998). For other attempts to use Hume to develop an environmental ethic, see Carter (2000) and Boomer (unpublished manuscript).
- 2 The reason for this is not, as Callicott has suggested (Callicott 1999: 209), because Smith is a poorer resource for environmental philosophy than Hume and Darwin; he is better one.
- 3 Here, I take Hill's brief account of this case at face value. Given the arguments presented in this chapter, of course, this brief account is not wholly sufficient for moral evaluation. Smith's arguments depend on details of the case, and Hill's unsympathetic approach to the eccentric is probably unfair in various respects. Still, for the purposes of this chapter, his account will serve as a useful, even if overly simple, example.
- 4 The debate between defenders and opponents of extending rights to ecological wholes is among the most developed in contemporary environmental ethics literature. For some examples of defenders, see Leopold (1949), Stone (1974), Goodpaster (1979), Callicott (1989, 1999), and Naess (1973). For some opponents, see Singer (1975), Taylor (1989), and Varner (1998).
- 5 Katie McShane has put the advantage of this approach well: 'The environmental ethics literature is filled with attempts to run all of these lines of [meta-ethical] argument. But ... [a] book [that] has nothing at all to say about [such] conflicts ... surely ... is an asset. The debates about biocentrism and ecocentrism are well-worn at this point' (McShane 2003). I do think that Smith's approach offers a way to think about intrinsic value that will move that discussion forward in productive ways (see my 'Adam Smith and Intrinsic Value', unpublished manuscript), and discussions of intrinsic value in nature have yielded philosophical and practical fruit in environmental ethics. The approach outlined here, however, is an alternative to those discussions.
- 6 Hill provides no overarching theory of virtue. Rather than working from a clear account of what makes something a virtue and showing that certain attitudes towards nature are virtues on that account, Hill defends the importance of various environmental attitudes on the basis of their connection with virtues that an 'anti-environmentalist' – Hill's term – will endorse. As Hill explains, 'though indifference to nature does not *necessarily* reflect the absence of virtues, it often signals the absence of certain traits which we want to encourage because they are, in most cases, a natural basis for the development of certain virtues' (Hill 1983: 102). For example, 'it may be that, given the sort of beings we are, we would never learn humility before persons without developing the general capacity to cherish ... many things [including nature] for their own

- sakes' (Hill 1983: 105–6). Unfortunately, this argument ties the value of environmental virtues to their contingent connection with specifically human-centered character traits. Hill does not sufficiently defend the value of environmental virtues in their own right.
- 7 Elizabeth Anscombe, whose 'Modern Moral Philosophy' is often regarded as the origin of contemporary interest in virtue ethics, famously insisted that 'it is not profitable. . . to do moral philosophy . . . until we have an adequate . . . psychology' (Anscombe 1956: 26). Although Anscombe and Smith would disagree about the precise psychology that underlies good moral philosophy, Smith's ethics reflects his deep appreciation of the need to get one's psychology right before doing moral philosophy. In that sense, Smith shares with virtue ethics a concern with psychology as an important component of moral philosophy. And of course, that leaves Smith open to the criticism on psychological grounds (see e.g. Darwall 1998), and these psychological issues may turn out to be just as much of a morass as the meta-ethical issues related to intrinsic value.
- 8 Thus there is considerably more work to be done to fully lay out a Smithian virtue ethic and apply that ethic to environmental issues. Smith develops a detailed account of specific human virtues, focusing his account on prudence, benevolence, self-command, and justice. Moreover, Smith carefully distinguishes between virtue in the strict sense and what he calls 'propriety', the moral category that will be the primary focus of this chapter (I.i.5.7, 25). (Briefly, the distinction is that propriety is conformity of one's attitudes to what they should be, whereas virtue includes a consideration of how far from the norm one's actions or attitudes are. Smith points out, for example, that 'to eat when we are hungry is certainly, upon ordinary occasions, perfectly right and proper, . . . [but] nothing can be more absurd than to say it was virtuous', whereas by contrast 'there may frequently be . . . virtue in . . . actions which fall short of the most perfect propriety because they may still approach nearer to perfection than could well be expected' (I.i.5–6, 25).) Both of these specifically virtue-oriented aspects of Smith's theory are relevant to environmental ethics, and both are important for Smith's overall theory. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I have chosen to focus on two other distinctive features of Smith's account – his emphasis on evaluating *attitudes* rather than deciding on intrinsic value or looking at actions or states of affairs, and the focus on rich description and concrete particulars that goes with his account of moral life..
- 9 For Hill, the relevant contrast here is between environmental virtue ethics and environmental ethics that depends on claims about intrinsic value. A similar point can be made about the contrast between virtue ethics and deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics more generally. Unlike those approaches, virtue ethics focuses on issues of character, attitudes, and emotions rather than the rightness or wrongness of actions (deontology) or the goodness of states of affairs (consequentialism). Cf. Darwall (2003: 3), Crisp and Slote (1997), Slote (1992), and Hursthouse (1999).
- 10 Although I have a detailed discussion of 'laws of sympathy' in Smith in section III, I have cut my discussion of Smith's account of general rules for the sake of length. Smith introduces general rules as a way of dealing with the problem of self-deception. Although these rules play an important part in his ethics and reflect a quasi-deontological stance in ethics, they are ultimate derivative on particular responses to particular situations (cf. III.iv.8–10, 159–60).
- 11 Hume says to be 'useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others' (*Treatise* IX.i.1). Hume's account is a bit more complicated in the *Treatise*, primarily because of his emphasis there on artificial virtues, which do not fit this account of sympathy as neatly. For more, see Boomer.
- 12 Hume does extend sympathy beyond human beings, claiming that we 'observe

- the force of sympathy thro' the whole animal creation and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being [which in the context clearly includes animals] to another' (*Treatise*, II.ii.5.15) and that 'sympathy ... takes place among animals no less than among men' (II.ii.12.6). Hume does not go beyond sentient beings, however. (For a discussion of whether Hume's account of patriotism commits him to concern for wholes, see Callicott 1989: 75–100 and Varner 1998: 12–16.)
- 13 Thus Callicott is wrong to claim that because 'the sentiment of sympathy [is] so central to it' Smith cannot provide for 'ethical holism' (Callicott 1999: 209). The argument against holism in Smith might work given the role of sympathy in *Hume's* theory, but the role of sympathy in Smith's account does not preclude ethical holism, as the rest of this section will show.
- 14 TMS I.i.1.2, 9. 'Person principally concerned' is Smith's term for the person with whom one sympathizes (see e.g. I.i.3.1, 13). This way of describing the object of sympathy is neutral between agent and those who passively respond to situations. For Smith, both action-guiding passions and mere responses to situations are susceptible to moral evaluation. This has important implications for environmental ethics in that the scope of environmental virtues will extend beyond those that guide actions. Feeling the right way about nature is a virtue, even if such feelings are volitionally inert.
- 15 Smith and Hume are explicit about this difference between their accounts. (See TMS I.iii.1.9, footnote, and related notes in the Glasgow/Liberty Fund Edition, 46.) Cf. too Raynor (1984) for an examination of this difference. Raynor sees Hume's criticisms of Smith as having more merit than I do, but a full discussion of the differences between Smith and Hume on this point is beyond the scope of this chapter.
- 16 Cf. too II.i.5.11, 78; I.i.3.1, 16–17; III.1.3, 110; Heath (1995: 452–3), and Campbell (1971: 97). The fact that one gets an idea of what another feels largely from the expression of that feeling is important for Smith's overall moral theory, and it helps explain why Smith's discussion of moderating one's passions often focuses on the *expressions* of those passions. However, this fact can be obscured by the way that Smith introduces his discussion of sympathy, where Smith claims that 'as we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation' (TMS I.i.1.2, 9). As a means of introducing sympathy, this approach is quite effective, but it proves confusing when Smith discusses the comparison of one's sympathetic feeling with the actual feelings of another. Fortunately, in the passages referenced above, Smith clears up the confusion by admitting that the expression of emotion provides some basis for inferring the actual feelings of another.
- 17 Admittedly, this account of Hume is somewhat simplified for the purposes of comparison with Smith. Although this account fits some of Hume's descriptions of sympathy in the *Treatise* well (see e.g. 2.i.9, 318–20), there are other passages in the *Treatise* (e.g. 3.3.1, 576) that seem to allow for different mechanisms of sympathy, and the EPM account can be read as quite different from the one I have presented here.
- 18 In 'Adam Smith and the Possibility of Sympathy with Nature' (unpublished manuscript), I show that Smith *can* extend sympathy beyond human (and even sentient) beings, but my focus here is on the contribution that Smith can make to environmental ethics even *without* this extension.
- 19 Incidentally, this also provides a helpful way to think about Sylvan's 'last man' argument (see Routley 1973 and Routley and Routley 1980). In that argument, Richard Routley (now Sylvan) imagines the case of the last human being alive, whose last act is to destroy a forest. The thought experiment is generally used

- to show that without some account of the non-instrumental value of the forest we cannot explain what is wrong with this action. On a Smithian account, however, we would explain the wrongness of this action by our inability to sympathize with such a last man. Of course, this depends on giving a richer account of the circumstances of that last man than Routley offers. If his desire to destroy the forest was due to the fact that the forest had (somehow) been responsible for destroying the human race, then it would be easier to sympathize with his resentment, though it is arguable whether this would justify destroying the forest. But a random and callous act of destruction would be difficult if not impossible for an impartial spectator to sympathize with, given the nature of human sympathy. And thus, for Smith, the last man's destruction of the forest would be morally improper. (I thank an anonymous commentator for recommending that I include some discussion of this case in this chapter. I regret that space prevents me from offering a fuller Smithian account of various 'last man' scenarios.)
- 20 This objection is similar to a more general objection to Smith's moral theory, that it depends on importing into the sympathetic spectator the very moral norms that Smith seeks to get out of him. See Campbell (1971: 119ff.) for a detailed explanation of and response to this more general problem in Smith.
- 21 I thank Eric Schliesser for drawing my attention to this important passage.
- 22 There are degrees of impartiality here, and similar degrees of stability and reliability. Judgments based on custom can be *relatively* impartial in that they depend upon communal rather than purely individual forms of partiality, and they can thus be *relatively* stable. The case of infanticide discussed later is a clear example of just how stable these ultimately partial moral judgments can be.
- 23 This passage is not in the first or last editions of TMS. For details about its inclusion, see the footnote in TMS, 128–9.
- 24 Impartiality may be the most widely discussed issue in Smith's ethics, so the relevant secondary literature is vast. For two insightful accounts, see Griswold (1999) and Campbell (1971). My contrast of Smith's impartial spectator with Firth's 'ideal observer' largely follows Griswold's account, though I take Smith's impartial spectator to be closer to the ideal observer than Griswold does. In particular, on my reading the impartial spectator is primarily an imaginative construct, though many actual spectators will respond impartially.
- 25 Some might think that for Smith one would need to know about a situation only what the person principally concerned knows. After all, if one is trying to imagine oneself in that person's situation, any knowledge beyond knowledge that is known by the person principally concerned might be thought to interfere with one's sympathetic imagination. In a sense, this is correct. Knowing details that the person principally concerned does not know *is* likely to inhibit one's sympathy with that person, since the spectator cannot fully ignore what she knows, even if she knows that the agent does not know it. But Smith thinks that this limitation on sympathy is appropriate. Smith's clearest admission that the spectator takes into account information of which the agent is unaware or to which the agent is inattentive comes in his discussion of unsocial passions, where the welfare of others affected by the agent affect the spectator's judgment. In his account of the influence of fortune (II.iii), it is clear that this effect on the spectator applies even when the agent is unaware of or not focused on the effects of his actions on others.
- 26 Incidentally, Smith points out in this context that this inattentiveness can be present 'without any defect of humanity on our part' (TMS I.i.3.4, 17). This suggests that one need not always assume the role of attentive (nor for that matter of impartial and well informed) spectator. Such careful sympathetic

imagining takes effort and often will simply not be worth the time. Part of living a virtuous life is knowing which issues call for detailed moral consideration and which can simply be passed by in the business of life. And that will apply to environmental cases as well. One need not always carefully think through every attitude towards nature. It is enough to reflect periodically on one's relationship with nature and to think particularly carefully about attitudes that are particularly significant. Given the current environmental crises that the world faces, however, attitudes towards nature demand more attention than people often give them.

- 27 This account is simplified in that it ignores the distinction between virtue and propriety.
- 28 Here it is important that Smith is not trying to come up with an ethical theory that can coerce the most resistant opponent to change her mind. Often environmental philosophers assume that those who disagree are stubbornly fixed to speciesist positions that environmental philosophy must somehow break through. Hill's description of the 'anti-environmentalist' (Hill 1983: 103) is typical in this respect. Smith has very little to say, however, to a truly stubborn antagonist. (He might adopt Hume's strategy from the introduction to the *Enquiry*: 'The only way ... of converting an antagonist of this kind, is to leave him to himself. For, finding that nobody keeps up the controversy with him, it is probable he will, at last, of himself, from mere weariness, come over to the side of common sense and reason.') For Smith 'nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast' (TMS I.i.2.1, 13). Thus there is a natural impulse to seek congruence of sentiment with others, and when this impulse is overcome, there is no reason to believe that ethical arguments of any kind will have any effect. (Simon Blackburn has pointed out in his development of a Humean-Smithian ethic, the futility of these kinds of attempts to 'prove to the annoying character that he is thinking contrary to reason', Blackburn 1998: 215. See his discussion for more on the dangers of making such attempts.)
- 29 Smith would agree with this, of course, only if he were to use the term 'reason' in Hume's sense. In fact, Smith sometimes conflates the term 'reason' with 'principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast' (III.3.4, 137). In *this* sense of reason, neither Hume nor Smith would take preferring the destruction of the world to be 'reasonable'. I thank Eric Schliesser for encouraging me to be clearer about this point. For a much more detailed examination of Smith as developing an account of practical 'reason', see Carrasco (2004). I disagree with Carrasco's emphasis on reason in that essay, but even in her discussion she admits that in the 'account of practical reason which I [Carrasco] am taking as a reference, perception is constitutive of practical reason and it may occur via emotions' (Carrasco 2004: 88). In so far as Carrasco is admitting the possibility of a practical 'reason' that is just a refined and impartial kind of sentiment, she and I agree.
- 30 Griswold includes detailed descriptions of the kinds of ethical conversation that Smith will encourage and specific illustrations of these, such as Smith's account of slavery.
- 31 As noted earlier in note 8, the present chapter does not focus on these virtues, though they are an important element of Smith's overall theory, and one with implications for environmental ethics. (I discuss the virtues of benevolence and justice in relation to the environment in 'Adam Smith and the Possibility of Sympathy with Nature', unpublished manuscript.)
- 32 It is worth pointing out here that, like Hill, Smith does not limit his focus to the morality of *actions* specifically. Smith's focus is on the *attitudes* that it is proper to take towards nature, and actions become relevant as expressions of these attitudes.

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- 33 She ultimately takes issue with a particular claim of his – that we do not sympathize with romantic love – on the basis of her reading of *David Copperfield*. I refer the reader to Nussbaum (1990) as an example of how philosophically rigorous debate can be furthered by reference to literature, and to chapter 14 in particular as a use of such debate to challenge Smith in several important respects.
- 34 Smith does, after all, devote a whole section of the TMS to discussing the relationship between his views and those of his *philosophical* predecessors (TMS VII), and the TMS includes more implicit allusions to philosophical texts than Smith’s explicit references might suggest.
- 35 Smith’s treatments of self-deception and vanity also have implications for environmental ethics, but I have cut discussions of those for the sake of brevity.
- 36 Some have argued that the role of custom in ethical evaluation is a fact of ethical life, one that Smith was willing to accept. Alan Gibbard, for example, claims that ‘If Smith’s . . . story supports his detached observer theory, it supports the theory in a relativized form. The proper feelings for a person, Smith must say, are those of a detached observer who belongs to that person’s own culture. The feelings people have, after all, depend greatly on their acculturation’ (Gibbard 1990: 280). There seems to be some merit to this claim. If the impartial spectator is developed in response to the failure to elicit praise from the partial spectators one faces in daily life (as explained in section III, above), it might seem reasonable to think that the impartial spectator will share the general cultural traits of those whose praise one initially sought. And as a psychological fact, this is no doubt true, at least to a point. Custom will influence the moral judgments that people make, even when those people *think* that they are assuming the role of impartial spectators. As Charles Griswold points out, ‘for most people, most of the time, the conception of the virtues and their relative is shaped by convention (V.2.7)’ (Griswold 1999: 351). But Smith does not claim that this psychological fact about moral evaluators applies to the impartial spectator itself. Griswold rightly insists, ‘[Smith] never suggests that we are so fully governed by convention or history that we cannot accurately or impartially understand [or evaluate] . . . temporally distant philosophies. . . . The possibility of critical moral reflection is reiterated even in the section of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* on custom (V.2.5); the reactions of the impartial spectator continue to serve as the standard (cf. V.2.13)’ (Griswold 1999: 350–1). Smith’s treatment of both other cultures and his own shows Smith’s willingness to apply moral categories to criticize opinions that are accepted on the basis of cultural norms. And Smith explains how custom can be ‘destructive of good morals’ (V.2.14, 209), which makes sense only if the standard for good morals is not itself based on custom. Moreover, Smith’s twofold argument for the impartial spectator – based on the innate desire for *praiseworthiness* and on the contingency of praise from partial spectators – provides good reasons to move beyond merely culture-bound moral norms towards an inter-culturally impartial spectator. Once one seeks praise not from actual peers in one’s society but from a spectator who captures ‘what *naturally* ought to be the sentiments of other people with regard to our character and behaviour’ (III.2.25), there is no reason to limit this imaginative construction by one’s own culture. Thus Maria Carrasco has rightly emphasized that ‘the impartial spectator . . . might err . . . when the standard he internalized, though approved by most of the people in that society, is actually mistaken’ (Carrasco 2004: 106). While I disagree with Carrasco about the process of correcting these mistakes, she is certainly correct that internalizing customary norms of one’s society is a form of partiality from which the impartial spectator must free herself.
- 37 TMS V.2.15, 210. Importantly, Smith adds that it was approved ‘even by ‘the

doctrine of [ancient] philosophers, which ought to have been more just and accurate'. Smith was acutely aware of the fact that philosophers are often behind the times when it comes to moral progress.

- 38 Smith's language in describing the case suggests that the parent has ambivalence here. He describes that case in which 'it is frequently impossible for him to support both himself and his child' and he asks movingly, 'what then should we imagine must be the heart of a parent who could injure that weakness which even a furious enemy is afraid to violate?' (V.2.15, 210). But Smith does not explicitly say that there is any ambivalence here, and in the case of eating meat, the evidence for ambivalence is even weaker. Still, it is reasonable that, in at least some cases, people engage in activities with ambivalence, and become so accustomed to the activity that the ambivalence gradually fades. Reading Smith's account of infanticide in this light is particularly plausible and helps one see the way in which Smith attributes the earliest cases of infanticide not to a morally depraved 'savage barbarity' but to an 'excusable' necessity (V.2.15, 210).
- 39 I thank Eric Schliesser for drawing this passage to my attention. It is important to note in this context that neither Smith nor this reconstruction of Smith depends on claiming that there was a point in the past at which human beings were vegetarians. In his lectures on Jurisprudence, Smith outlines 'four distinct states which man passes through', of which the first is 'the Age of Hunters' (LJ (A) i.27, 14, cf. too WN V.i, 689–90). Because the hunting and killing of animals is the primary 'means of sustenance' (LJ i.27, 14) for human beings at this (and the next) stage of human history, the respect for animals that is implanted in humans by 'Nature' (External Senses, ¶7, 136) is overridden by necessity. It is only late in human development that our respect for animals could lead human beings to refrain from killing them, but by those late stages the custom of eating meat has the potential to counteract this natural respect.
- 40 My account here differs in language, though only partially in principle, from that of Carrasco (2004). Carrasco claims that 'it is clear that Smith does not believe that our notions of moral good and evil arise from our brute or natural sentiments' (Carrasco 2004: 87). But, as the context of this quotation makes clear, what Carrasco means by natural sentiments are sentiments that are not 'informed by the impartial spectator' (Carrasco 2004: 87). In that sense, I agree. Moral sentiments are not the partial sentiments that we might be said to have 'naturally' in response to a situation in which we are a person principally concerned. But 'natural sentiments', as I use the term, are natural in the sense that they are not shaped by custom or even education, except in so far as the latter makes one impartial. Smith may use the term 'natural sentiments' occasionally to refer to sentiments that are unsuitable for moral evaluation (see II.ii.3.10, 90), although this case is debatable. But Smith's predominant use of the term is to refer to natural *but impartial* sentiments (for a few examples, see II.ii.3.13, 91 (ed. 1–5); II.iii.2.8–9, 103; III.2.9, 119; III.4.7, 159; III.5.9–10, 167–8; III.6.12, 176). Even in these cases, however, Carrasco is correct to distinguish these impartial natural sentiments from those sentiments that proceed from our partiality – which is 'natural' in a different sense – or from custom.
- 41 This account of the progress of morals is notably different from those of Leopold, Callicott, and their philosophical predecessors Darwin and Hume. For Darwin, human moral sentiments literally evolve to become more holistic because this is evolutionarily advantageous. For Hume, Leopold, and Callicott, the sentiments evolve as well, though these thinkers more clearly explain that the evolution is social and cultural rather than biological (cf. Callicott 2001: 211). But for Smith, moral sentiments do not need to evolve to meet changing situations, and it is unlikely that they even *could* evolve in this way. What is

required is that as situations change one *removes* cultural *impediments* to one's natural sentiments. This attitude towards progress suggests a humility towards nature lacking in Hume, Leopold, and Callicott, all three of whom seek to use human reason and culture to *improve on* the sentiments that are natural to us. Smith, by emphasizing that our natural sentiments are good but corrupted, favors a return to community with nature.

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