

Adam Smith and the Possibility of Sympathy with Nature

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Abstract: As J. Baird Callicott has argued, Adam Smith's moral theory is a philosophical ancestor of recent work in environmental ethics. However, Smith's "all important emotion of sympathy" (Callicott 2001: 209) seems incapable of extension to entities that lack emotions with which one can sympathize. Drawing on the distinctive account of sympathy developed in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as well as his account of anthropomorphizing nature in "History of Astronomy and Physics," I show that sympathy with non-sentient nature is possible within a Smithian ethics. This provides the possibility of extending sympathy, and thereby benevolence and justice, to nature.

In *Beyond the Land Ethic*, J. Baird Callicott argues that "the philosophical foundations and pedigree of [Aldo Leopold's] land ethic are traceable through Darwin to the sentiment-based ethical theories of Hume and Smith" (Callicott 1999:66-7). Callicott's overall approach, like that of Leopold, is to show that one can extend these sentimentalist theories to include concern for ecological wholes. Callicott's appropriation of Hume has been increasingly contested (cf. Varner 1998, Lo 2001), but so far, no one has looked carefully at Adam Smith as a philosophical resource for environmental ethics.¹ This is unfortunate given the rising attention to Smith in mainstream philosophical ethics, where scholars are engaged both in close analysis of Smith himself² and in appropriating Smith for the development of contemporary ethical theories.³ This paper draws on those recent discussions to focus on Smith as a resource for environmental ethics.⁴ I argue that although there seem to be problems with extending Smithian sympathy beyond sentient creatures, Smith has resources for addressing those problems. He is able to provide an explanation of why people do in fact sympathize with non-sentient entities such as natural wholes, and he is able to show the importance of this sympathy for ethical life.

1. The difficulty of sympathizing with nature

Recently, both eco-centrists and critics of eco-centrism have argued that the ethical theory presented by Smith (and Hume) cannot accommodate sympathy with non-sentient entities. The argument against such sympathy is quite straightforward. As Gary Varner puts it, “For both Hume and Smith, we are capable of sympathy only with individuals. The reason is that, for both authors, what we identify with is the other individuals’ passions” (Varner 1998: 14). Even Callicott, who seeks to defend the land ethic in broadly Humean-Smithian terms, concedes defeat when it comes to the extension of sympathy in a strict sense:

I should expressly acknowledge that in the moral philosophy of Adam Smith one finds little ethical holism. Sympathy means “with-feeling.” And that “all important⁵ emotion of sympathy,” as Darwin (1871, p. 81) styles it, can hardly extend to a transorganismic entity, such as society per se, which has no feelings per se. (Callicott 2001: 209).

Both Varner and Callicott claim that for Smith, sympathy with transorganismic entities – including species, ecosystems, and nature as a whole – is impossible. And both take this to imply that Smith cannot embrace an “ethical holism” that would ascribe moral worth to such natural wholes. In this paper, I show that Adam Smith, at least, can allow for the moral worth of non-sentient and transorganismic entities. In section two, I briefly point out how Smith can accommodate this without any extension of sympathy to nature, but the paper focuses on the ways in which Smith’s moral theory can provide for the extension of sympathy beyond sentient creatures.

Because Callicott, Varner, and others are typically interested in the expansion of ethical regard to non-sentient natural wholes in general, I typically use the term “nature” throughout this paper to include a wide range of transorganismic or even merely non-human entities. Unless specifically noted otherwise, “nature” could refer to nature as whole, particular ecosystems, or species. It could even more broadly include individual trees, animals, and other non-human entities. My point is that there are a set of entities that environmentalists are often concerned about, and that traditional sentientist approaches to ethics fail to address adequately. The account offered in this paper is meant to show that sympathy with “nature” in

all these senses is possible on a Smithian account. Thus one can sympathize with nature as a whole, but also with local ecosystems, animal species, and so on. The specific degree of this sympathy – the extent to which one can sympathize with a particular marshland, for example, or with a particular species of beetle – depend on details that I do not enter into in this paper. My purpose here is simply to make a space for sympathy with nature in general. Filling in this space with arguments for sympathy in particular cases is a task that goes beyond the scope of this project, although I occasionally use specific examples to make my more general point.

As an exegetical issue of the extent to which Smith himself extends notions of sympathy, benevolence, and justice to nature, Callicott and Varner might be correct. In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter TMS), Smith never unambiguously extends sympathy or benevolence to non-sentient creatures. In his early work, Callicott sought to find textual and historical antecedents of the land ethic's regard for non-individual and non-sentient entities in Hume's account of patriotism (see Callicott 1986). Recently, Gary Varner has challenged those claims, on the grounds that “for Hume and Smith, as for any sentientist, talk of the ‘welfare of the community’ is a shorthand way of referring to the aggregate or average happiness of the individuals who make up society” (Varner 1998:14). Varner does not back up this claim textually, however, and it is not actually clear whether Smith (or Hume) limit benevolence in this way, but the balance of textual support in the case of Smith seems to support Varner's interpretation.

In the discussion where he most extends the range of benevolence, Smith at first seems to argue for a radically expansive benevolence, but then quickly constrains his discussion to sentient creatures. Smith argues that “though our effectual good offices can very seldom be extended to any wider society than that of our own country; our goodwill is circumscribed by no boundary, but may embrace the immensity of the universe” (TMS VI.ii.3.1, p. 235).⁶ Here Smith not only suggests that we can care for communities such as our “society” and our “country,” he also makes the Callicott-Leopoldian move beyond patriotism to a benevolence that would attend to nature as a whole. Smith even seems to go further than Callicott and Leopold in extending benevolence not merely to nature in the sense of our

earth-bound environment but to a literally *universal* benevolence. But immediately following this bold statement, Smith repeats his claim in language that suggests an individualist-sentientist (but importantly *not* anthropocentric) interpretation of “the universe”: “We cannot form the idea of any innocent and *sensible* being, whose happiness we should not desire” (TMS VI.ii.3.1, p. 235, my emphasis). The universe seems, for Smith, to be reducible to the sum of its innocent and sensible beings. And that makes Smith’s “universal benevolence” (TMS VI.ii.3, p. 235) a very wide sentientism, but not sufficient to justify benevolence towards nature itself.⁷

In other places, however, Smith seems to extend notions of benevolence and arguably even sympathy beyond the goods of individuals, and even to nature as a whole. In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for example, Smith claims that “the two great purposes of nature” are “the support of the individual, and the propagation of the species,” the latter of which cannot be reduced to merely individual goods (II.ii.3.5, p. 87). Smith’s language is even stronger in his “History of Ancient Physics,” a text to which we will return in section five. There Smith claims that one can view “the Universe . . . as a coherent system . . . directed towards general ends, viz. its own preservation and prosperity, and that of all the species that are in it” (§9, *EPS* p. 113). The structure of this sentence implies that the preservation and prosperity of the Universe itself is a distinct end from that of the species in it, and even that the Universe has among its ends the prosperity of *species* rather than mere individuals. Later in the same essay, Smith describes how “the whole of Nature” was “apprehended to be animated by a Universal Deity, to be itself a Divinity, an Animal” (§11, *EPS* p. 116), which again suggests that Nature itself can be taken to have interests distinct from those of the individual organisms that live in it. And even when Smith alludes to a theism that distinguishes God from Nature, he claims that this God “governs the whole by general laws, directed to the conservation and prosperity *of the whole*” (§9, *EPS* p. 113). Unfortunately, it is difficult to know how far to take this text. Smith’s account of Nature here is a provisional one, an account of one stage of thought about human nature. And though this is where his discussion of views of Nature ends, Smith did not have a chance to finish his “History,” and one cannot know to what extent Smith’s final view on the status of Nature would involve holism. Still, these passages will provide an important basis

for a Smithian account of anthropomorphizing Nature, and in that context, I will return to them in section five.

The textual evidence about Smith's holism with respect to sympathy and benevolence is mixed at best, and Smith certainly did not devote much energy to applying his ethics to natural wholes. But this exegetical point is not decisive for the possibilities of a properly Smithian ethic. The biographical issue of whether Smith personally extended his ethics in the eco-centric way that Callicott and Leopold propose to extend it is less important than the philosophical issue of whether a Smithian ethic *could* allow for sympathy with nature as a whole, or with wholes within nature. And this is a *philosophical* point about the nature of Smith's overall treatment of sympathy, not a narrow point about what Smith chose to do with that treatment.

In that context, it is particularly important that both Varner and Callicott seem to agree that as a *philosophical* matter Smith *cannot* allow for sympathy with non-sentient creatures. Callicott explicitly goes further, arguing that independent of anything related to Smith, "Sympathy . . . can extend only to individual human beings and sentient animals, hardly to plants, and certainly not at all to species, ecosystems, and other wholes" (Callicott 1999: 182). Moreover, both authors give an apparently good argument to show *why*, for Smith, sympathy cannot extend beyond sentient entities:

1. One can sympathize only with the feelings of the object of one's sympathy.
2. Non-sentient entities (including any transorganismic entity) have no feelings.

Therefore, 3. There is nothing with which one can sympathize in the case of non-sentient entities.

Therefore, 4. Sympathy with non-sentient entities is impossible.

This apparently Smithian argument precludes both eco- and bio-centrism, since many living things have no feelings, and one ends up with a sentientist approach to benevolence and justice, much like the view that Smith appears, as a matter of fact, to have held in TMS. And even if one modifies the argument by replacing "feelings" with "interests" to develop a biocentric approach to ethics, the argument seems to rule out any sympathy with nature as a whole.

2. *The importance of sympathizing with nature*

Before turning to an analysis of the argument against sympathy with nature, it is worth briefly pointing out that given the role of sympathy in Smith's moral theory, Smith does not *need* to extend sympathy to non-sentient creatures in order to extend moral regard to them. For Smith, the primary role of sympathy is to make possible moral *evaluation* of the object of one's sympathy; an action, attitude, or passion is judged morally proper insofar as one can sympathize with it. Thus one can ascribe moral *regard* to nature without extending sympathy to it. One extends moral regard to nature when one claims that certain attitudes and passions, such as respect or humility or cherishing, are called for with respect to nature, and one does this because one is unable to sympathize with *people* who fail to have those passions. Thus one can defend environmental values without appealing to sympathy with nature *per se*.⁸

Nonetheless, Callicott and Varner are right to place at least some emphasis on the scope of sympathy because two very important sorts of ethical attitude depend upon sympathy.⁹ First, certain "social passions" such as benevolence and kindness, seem to require sympathy with their objects.¹⁰ If one cannot sympathize with nature in some sense, then benevolence and kindness towards nature will, it seems, always be improper. Second, Smith builds his account of justice on an "indirect sympathy" that depends on being able to sympathize with the victim of injustice. Unless it is possible to sympathize with nature, Smithian virtue ethics will not be able to make sense of the notion of injustice to nature.¹¹

Benevolence towards nature is an important virtue in part because it is a virtue that is specifically focused on the well-being of its object. Other passions that one might take towards nature, such as humility, awe, delight, aesthetic appreciation, and even respect, need not focus on promoting anything like the good of nature. But benevolence does. According to Smith's moral theory, benevolence is also particularly important because it is a passion that is proper to a much higher degree than other passions. Smith distinguishes between unsocial passions such as hatred and resentment, selfish passions such as joy and sorrow in one's good fortune, and social passions such as benevolence. Unsocial passions are usually improper to any degree, and even when proper, they must be moderated. Selfish passions are often proper, but only when brought below their normal pitch. But social passions "are peculiarly agreeable

and becoming” (I.ii.4.1, p. 38). They “please the indifferent spectator upon almost every occasion” and “we have always . . . the strongest disposition to sympathize with the benevolent affections” (I.ii.4.1, p. 39). Given that propriety is simply a matter of the extent to which impartial spectators sympathize with the passions of the person principally concerned, benevolence is a particularly proper passion, and Smith even makes it one of his three most important virtues (cf. VI.ii). If benevolence towards nature is a virtuous passion for Smith, it will be proper to feel this benevolence to a very high degree. And this means that proper benevolence towards nature is likely to trump other, more selfish, human concerns.

In addition to showing the importance of benevolence, Smith’s moral theory draws specific attention to the close connection between sympathy and benevolence. The reason that impartial spectators have the “strongest disposition to sympathize with the benevolent affections” (I.ii.4.1, p. 39) is because of what Smith calls a “redoubled sympathy,” whereby the spectator’s sympathy with the person who feels the social passions is “enlivened” by the spectator’s interest in the beneficiary of these passions.¹² When one’s sympathy is “redoubled,” the added strength comes from an interest in the happiness of the beneficiary of social passions. And Smith suggests that the reason that one takes an interest in the happiness of the beneficiary is that one “enter[s] into the satisfaction . . . of the person who is the object of” these passions (I.ii.4.1, p. 39). Thus this “redoubled sympathy” seems to be a true union of two sympathies, with the benevolent agent and with the object of that beneficence. And that implies that in order for one’s attitude to nature to be proper *benevolence*, it must be possible for an impartial spectator to sympathize not only with the agent, but with nature itself.¹³

Similarly, sympathy with nature is required for a Smithian account of *justice* towards nature. Justice towards nature is particularly *important*, for Smith, because injustice is the only kind of wrongdoing “which may be extorted by force, and the violation of which exposes to punishment” (VII.ii.1.10, p. 270, cf. II.i-ii, pp. 67ff.). In the environmental context in particular, Christopher Stone has discussed in detail the importance of legal rights for nature,¹⁴ and groups ranging from the Sierra Club to Earth First have sought to argue for extension of norms of justice to nature.

If one seeks only a Smithian account of injustices *with respect to* the environment, one can still claim that only human beings are the direct objects of injustice. In that case, one need sympathize only with other human beings. This approach to environmental justice is dominant in the “environmental justice” movement. As Robert Figueroa and Claudia Mills explain this movement,

Environmental practices and policies affect different groups *of people* differently, and environmental benefits and burdens are often distributed in ways that seem unjust. Environmental justice refers to the conceptual connections . . . between environmental issues and social justice. (Figueroa and Mills 2001: 426-7, emphasis added)¹⁵

This account of injustice *with respect to* nature is important, and Smith’s description of sympathy between human beings helps provide a background for thinking about social justice in general and environmental justice in particular.

But many environmental philosophers have pointed out the limits of this approach. Callicott, for example, argues that “one wants to offer the right reasons for doing the right thing” and he compares purely human-centered approaches to environmental justice to purely economic approaches to arguing against slavery: “Lincoln might have persuaded Southern plantation owners to voluntarily, even gladly, free their slaves, because to do so would be in the planter’s enlightened self-interest . . . (Think for a moment about the repugnance of that argument.)” (Callicott 1999: 244). The point here is that it is not merely wrong to abuse slaves or nature, it is a wrong done *to* those slaves, or *to* nature. And Stone points out that such accounts of environmental justice fail to capture the full scope of environmental problems, both because of “standing” issues¹⁶ and because of the way harm gets described on an anthropocentric approach. Without an account of injustice *to* nature, one must always show harm to *humans* to seek redress, and the measure of such harm will ignore or underestimate relevant harms to nature itself. As Stone puts it, “The stream itself is lost sight of in ‘a quantitative compromise between two conflicting interests’” (Stone 1972: 47).¹⁷

A Smithian account of justice and injustice *to* nature, including any account of relevant “rights,” will depend on the capacity to sympathize with nature. The reason that sympathy is essential here is that

Smith's account of justice is not based on abstract rights or principles of justice, but on sentiments. For Smith, an action is unjust¹⁸ – in Smith's terms, has "demerit" – insofar as one can sympathize with the resentment of the one harmed by that action. As Smith explains, "He . . . appears to deserve punishment, who is . . . to some person or persons the natural object of a resentment which the breast of every reasonable man is ready to adopt and sympathize with" (II.i.2.3, pp. 69-70), such that "our sense of demerit arises from what I shall here . . . call an indirect sympathy with the resentment of the sufferer" (II.i.5.4, p. 75). On this account, it is impossible for an action to have demerit unless it has a *sufferer*, and unless one can sympathize with the *resentment* of that victim. And this implies that injustice *to* nature is possible only if one can sympathize with nature.

Finally, both benevolence and justice are deeply connected with the history of extending moral regard within the history of Western ethical thought. Val Plumwood has pointed out the importance of attending to this tradition in environmental ethics. As she argues,

A look at other liberation struggles can help us here. Critiques of "centrism" are at the heart of modern liberation politics and theory. Feminism has focused on male-centeredness, also called androcentrism. Anti-racist theory has focused on ethnocentrism or eurocentrism . . . The green movement's flagship in this critical armada has been the critique of human-centeredness. Surely the critique of this form of centrism could learn from some of these relatively successful (at least, relatively well-formulated) others. (Plumwood 1999: 70, cf. too Plumwood 1996)

The relative successes of other critiques of centrism have focused on extending moral consideration to former slaves or women or (increasingly) animals in terms of the extension of benevolence – a concern for the well-being of others – or justice – a concern for their rights. Feminists, for example, do not simply want men to take more "proper" attitudes towards women, perhaps by properly appreciating their beauty or by humbling themselves before them. They want men to recognize their equality of interests, ambitions, and rights. And that involves not merely virtuous attitudes, but the *specific* virtues of benevolence and justice. With respect to Smith in particular, Charles Griswold has pointed out the role of

sympathy in Smith's critique of slavery, an example of eurocentrism to which Smith was particularly attuned. Griswold argues, rightly, that

literary and rhetorical evocations of the slave's situation and emotions – such as Smith's moving description of the “negro from the coast of Africa” – can help the spectator to grasp the slave's humanity. Through the cultivation of sympathy, partiality may be countered, and we learn to share in a common human world. (Griswold 1999: 214).

Here sympathy is an important part of overcoming brutal eurocentrism. Similarly, moving descriptions of harm to nature, such as those of Leopold, Muir, Dillard, and Barry, can help us to share in a common *natural* world. But insofar as Smith's descriptions of slaves function by getting us to *sympathize* with them, moving descriptions of nature will work most effectively if we can come to sympathize with nature.

3. *The possibility of sympathy with nature*

Given the importance of sympathy in Smith's moral theory, it is important to respond to the apparently plausible argument, offered in section one, that purports to show that sympathy **with nature** is impossible. Despite the apparent plausibility of this argument, and despite its apparently good fit with Smith's account of the scope of benevolence, the argument is one that Smith never gives and, more importantly, could not have given. For Hume, whose theory of sympathy Smith is often viewed as sharing, the argument might work.¹⁹ Hume explains his notion of sympathy in a way that emphasizes that one sympathizes with the *actual passions* of the object of one's sympathy: “as in strings equally wound up, the motion of the one communicates itself to the rest; so too affections readily pass from one person to another” (*Treatise*, 576).²⁰ And Hume never suggests that one ascribe feelings to ecological wholes. Thus the arguments presented by Varner and Callicott against sympathy with nature might show that *Hume* could not allow for such sympathy.²¹ But Smith *rejects* the model of sympathy according to which the feelings of one person simply pass to the other. For Smith, sympathy is dependent upon how one feels when one imagines oneself in the position of the other, and that feeling will often be *quite different* from what that other feels (I.i.1.2, p. 9).²² Thus Smith would not accept the first premise of the argument

that Varner and Callicott use to show that sympathy with non-sentient entities is impossible, **the premise that states that one can sympathize only with the feelings of the object of one's sympathy.** And Smith has several good reasons for rejecting this premise.

The first reason to reject the premise has to do with the systematic place of sympathy in Smith's moral theory. For Hume, moral approval is based on the feeling with which one sympathizes, so that one approves of character traits that are pleasurable to the one who has them or to others, and one disapproves of traits that are painful. Thus for Hume, sympathy with the actual feelings of others is essential for the proper functioning of his moral theory. For Smith, however, moral evaluation depends on a gap between what an impartial spectator feels when sympathizing and what the person principally concerned feels. Passions of another are "proper," or morally correct, when one is able to sympathize with them fully, and passions are morally wrong when one cannot fully sympathize with them (TMS I.i.3, pp. 16-19). If sympathy *always* involved a perfect coincidence of one's feelings with those of another, one could never judge the actions of another to be morally improper. This would make Smith's moral theory vacuous. Thus although sympathy for Smith is a kind of "with-feeling," and in the case of proper passions is an exact "with-feeling," the feelings of the impartial spectator are not in fact limited by the feelings of the object of sympathy. A denial of premise (1) is essential for Smith's overall moral theory, and that denial at least opens the possibility that one can sympathize with an entity that has no feelings of its own.

The second reason that Smith denies that sympathy always involves sharing the actual feelings of another is empirical. Smith observes cases within which this is simply not true, cases wherein one's sympathetic feelings do not match the feelings of the object of sympathy. The most common cases of this sort are cases within which the spectator's feelings are less intense – "weaker in degree" (TMS I.i.1.2, p. 9) – than the feelings of the person principally concerned.²³ But in exceptional circumstances, the spectator can feel more strongly than the person principally concerned. For example, Smith points out that "a person becomes contemptible who tamely sits still and submits to insults" (TMS I.ii.3.3, pp. 34-5) because the spectators feel resentment towards his insulter that he does not feel, or does not feel intensely

enough. Likewise sympathetic passions such as gratitude and benevolence are often felt more strongly by spectators than by the person principally concerned (cf. TMS II.ii.1.3, pp. 78-9).

Even in cases where one may eventually come to sympathize with another, Smith points out that, in general, one does not sympathize merely because one believes that another feels something, but because one puts oneself in the place of the other. The clearest examples of this are those passions “of which the expressions excite no sort of sympathy, but before we are acquainted with what gave occasion to them, serve rather to disgust and provoke us against them” (TMS I.i.1.7, p. 11). Smith offers “the furious behavior of an angry man” as a paradigm case of this. For Hume, the expression of this anger should give the spectator an idea of anger and eventually anger itself. But Smith rightly argues that “as we are unacquainted with his provocation, we cannot bring his case home to ourselves,” and it is only when we “see what is the situation of those with whom he is angry” that we are able to “sympathize” (TMS I.i.1.7, p. 11). Even in cases, such as grief and joy, where “sympathy may seem to arise merely from the view of a certain emotion in another person,” Smith argues that “the appearances of grief and joy inspire us with some degree of the like emotions . . . because they suggest to us the general idea of some good or bad fortune . . . and in these passions this is sufficient to have some little influence upon us” (TMS I.i.1.6, 8, p. 11). Thus even in these cases, sympathy really comes from imagining ourselves, albeit vaguely, in the situation of the person principally concerned, and in cases such as anger, there will be no sympathy without further details to support one’s imagination. Smith’s account of sympathy includes sufficient examples to show that sympathetic feelings are based not on the actual feelings of another, but on the feelings that one gets **by** imagining oneself in the place of another. And this provides for a gap between sympathetic feeling and feelings of the object of sympathy, a gap upon which the rest of Smith’s ethics depends.

We can thus distinguish between at least three different sorts of “sympathy” in Smith, all of which are relevant here. When one sympathizes with another, one first attempts to imagine oneself in the place of another, and then one responds to this imagined situation. The feeling that one gets in this situation could be considered sympathy in the most *basic* sense. But one’s imaginative change of place

will often be incomplete, and one's sentimental response will often be partial or due to peculiarities of one's present disposition. Thus one might distinguish this basic sense of sense from *proper* sympathy, which requires an impartial and attentive change of place that puts oneself as fully as possible into another's place, abstracting from all of one's own peculiarities. But finally, and most importantly, even this proper sympathy must be distinguished from *complete* sympathy, where one actually feels what the other person feels. Complete sympathy is equivalent, for Smith, to approbation, and if it is a complete and proper sympathy, it constitutes genuine moral approbation.

What is crucial from the the standpoint of environmental ethics in this process is that Smith's moral theory leaves open the possibility for a gap between the proper sympathetic feelings of a spectator and the actual feelings of the object of sympathy. For Smith, this gap is important to make room for moral disapproval. For environmental ethics, however, the gap is important because it makes room for cases of disconnect between the feelings of spectator and object of sympathy where the object of sympathy feels *nothing at all* and even when it is *impossible* for the object of sympathy to have any feelings.²⁴ Smith's most dramatic example of such a case is sympathy with the dead.²⁵ As Smith explains in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

We sympathize even with the dead . . . It is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations. Surely, we imagine, we can never feel too much for those who have suffered so dreadful a calamity. The tribute of our fellow feeling seems doubly due to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by every body; and, by the vain honours which we pay to their memory, we endeavour, for our own misery, artificially to keep alive our melancholy remembrance of their misfortune. That our sympathy can afford them no consolation seems to be an addition to their calamity; and to think that all we can do is unavailing, and that, what alleviates all other distress, the regret, the love, and the lamentations of their friends, can yield no comfort to them, serves only to exasperate our sense of

their misery. The happiness of the dead, however, most assuredly, is affected by none of these circumstances; nor is it the thought of these things which can ever disturb the profound security of their repose. (TMS I.i.I.13, pp. 12-13)

Smith clearly did not consider this example unique. It is the last of three examples all designed to show that “we sometimes feel for another a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable” (TMS I.i.1.10, p. 12). And Smith points out elsewhere that “we feel upon this, *as upon many other occasions*, an emotion which the person principally concerned is incapable of feeling” (TMS II.i.2.5, p. 71, emphasis added). Moreover, the discussion of sympathy with the dead concludes the first chapter of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a chapter devoted to laying out the basic nature of sympathy.

The capacity of human beings to sympathize with the dead is particularly important in the context of environmental ethics. Sympathy with the dead is important because it is a feeling that dramatically expands the scope of sympathy. On the one hand, the feeling of sympathy with the dead is a common one. Smith even argues that this sympathy with the dead is what makes us fear our own deaths:

It is from this very illusion of the imagination, that the foresight of our own dissolution is so terrible to us, and that the idea of those circumstances, which undoubtedly can give us no pain when we are dead, makes us miserable while we are alive. And from thence arises . . . the dread of death.

(I.i.I.13, p. 13)

Even without specific reference to *sympathy*, the idea that one can be harmed even after one is dead seems to be quite common. The shock at disrespect of dead bodies is a clear indication of people’s sense that violating the bodies of the dead is morally wrong. On the other hand, though, the sense that one can have duties to the dead, and especially that one can sympathize with them, is remarkable. The dead are not human, not sentient, and not even living. It seems quite strange that one could sympathize with an entity that has no feelings. But Smith can make sense of this sympathy. Because sympathy is a matter of imagining oneself in the place of another and simply responding to that imaginative change of place, one can have “sympathy” even when the object of one’s sympathy feels nothing at all. Sympathy with and duties towards the dead are an underutilized resource for developing the intuitions that underlie eco-

centric approaches to environmental ethics. By providing an ethics within which the example of duties to the dead features prominently, Smith's view of sympathy provides a way to go beyond anthropocentric, sentientist, and even biocentric accounts of moral regard.

Moreover, Smith explicitly draws on this capacity to sympathize with the dead to make sense of the notion of demerit – and thus justice – with respect to the dead. As we saw in section one, Smith's notion of injustice is tied to the justified resentment of the victim of injustice. And we saw that this poses a special challenge for attempts to discuss injustice eco-centrally, since ecosystems, populations, species, etc. cannot literally “resent” violence done to them. For Smith, an analogous problem arises in the context of victims of murder because murder victims cannot literally resent their murderers.

However, Smith insists,

If the injured should perish in the quarrel, we not only sympathize with the real resentment of his friends and relations, but with the imaginary resentment which in fancy we lend to the dead, who is no longer capable of feeling that or any other human sentiment. But as we put ourselves in his situation, as we enter, as it were, into his body, and in our imaginations, in some measure, animate anew the deformed and mangled carcass of the slain, when we bring home in this manner his case to our own bosoms, we feel upon this, as upon many other occasions, an emotion which the person principally concerned is incapable of feeling. (II.i.2.5)

Not only is sympathy with the dead possible, it is possible to sympathetically feel precisely those sentiments that are most important for grounding theories of justice with respect to the dead. And that opens up the possibility for sympathy with nature that can ground an account of justice *to* nature, and even of nature's rights.

Smith does not simply point out that sympathy with the dead is possible, however. He also explains the psychological mechanism that makes such sympathy possible. In describing sympathy with the dead, Smith says,

The idea of that dreary and endless melancholy, which the fancy naturally ascribes to their condition, arises altogether from our joining to the change which has been produced upon them, our own consciousness of that change, from our putting ourselves in their situation, and from our lodging, if I may be allowed to say so, our own living souls in their inanimated bodies, and thence conceiving what would be our emotions in this case. (I.i.I.13, p. 13)

Sympathy with the dead is possible because one can never *fully* abstract one's own nature away when one sympathizes with another. Sympathy is an act of the imagination, and the imagination has limits. Thus a person is capable of imagining herself "deprived of the light of the sun" and even a "prey to corruption," but one cannot imagine oneself devoid of all life. One's very imagining depends upon *not* abstracting away one's sentience from one's imaginings. Sympathy with the dead is always sympathy *of the living*.

Similarly, one can sympathize with nature because one's sympathy is always the sympathy *of a human being*. One might think that sympathy with the dead depends upon the fact that the dead person was once a human being.²⁶ But for Smith, the humanness that is relevant to being able to sympathize with the corpse is primarily a humanness that is *imported* by the sympathetic spectator. Similarly, one's sympathy with nature will be due to the fact that one imports one's own humanity into attempts to *imagine oneself in the place of non-sentient nature*. In that sense, one introduces an inextricably human component into sympathy with nature. For Smith, even the *impartial* sympathizing spectator is a member of the human species and sympathizes as a member of the human species.²⁷ This limitation need not mean that the impartial spectator is speciesist in the traditional sense, nor even that the impartial spectator sympathizes only with other human beings. In fact, it is precisely *because* the impartial spectator remains a human spectator with human responses and interests, that she is able to sympathize with nature. Nature does not itself have passions, and the spectator can have sympathy with nature only by importing her humanity into the process of imagination that gives rise to sympathy. Fortunately, this kind of anthropomorphization is a common psychological phenomenon, and one the legitimacy of which is reinforced by its role in Smith's overall use of sympathy in his moral theory. By appealing to this

phenomenon to explain both compassion and justice to the dead, Smith provides a model for how to account for similar attitudes towards nature.²⁸

4. The laws of sympathy and the place of nature

Given Smith's account of sympathy with the dead, and more generally with entities that are "altogether incapable" of having feelings, there is room within the basic framework of Smith's account of sympathy for sympathy with non-sentient entities. To discern whether this account can be extended to include the holism of an eco-centric ethic, we need to look in more detail at the mechanisms of the imagination that underlie sympathy to see what limits Smith's theory imposes on sympathy. Fortunately, Smith lays out several "laws of sympathy" (Campbell 1971: 98) that give details about how sympathy works.²⁹ Smith introduces these laws in the context of laying out his moral theory, so his focus is on the degree to which one's sympathy differs from the sympathy of the person principally concerned, the object of one's sympathy in those discussions. In the case of sympathy with nature, if one is able to sympathize at all, one's sympathetic feelings will diverge considerably from the feelings of the objects of sympathy, since nature has no feelings at all. Still, one can use Smith's rules for the general operation of sympathy to discern the extent to which one is likely to be able to have a proper sympathy with nature.

Throughout this paper, I am more interested in the overall contours of Smith's account of sympathy than his particular applications of it. Smith was not particularly interested in environmental ethics, and he does not apply these rules his laws of sympathy to discuss sympathy with nature. In the next section, I address Smith's limited discussion of nature, and in particular the extent to which one can properly anthropomorphize nature. But in the rest of this section, I focus on two laws of sympathy in order to give a sense for how these laws can be applied to environmental ethics in a way that allows for genuinely eco-centric sympathy. This application provides a model for the development of further Smithian environmental ethics that uses psychological laws of sympathy, whether Smith's own or more recent ones, to discern the extent to which sympathy with nature is possible for impartial and attentive spectators.

One law that is important for thinking through an eco-centric Smithian ethic is that we sympathize more with passions “which take their origin from the imagination” than with those “which take their origin from the body” (I.ii.1.6, p. 29; I.ii.i.1, p. 27). Smith points out that one cannot sympathize with “violent hunger, for example,” and even when one recognizes that such hunger is natural, one does not sympathize to any considerable degree with one who feels it (I.ii.i.1, p. 27). (Smith grounds the virtue of temperance on the basis of this lack of sympathy (I.ii.i.4, p. 28).) By contrast, “a disappointment in love, or ambition, will . . . call forth more sympathy than the greatest bodily evil,” even though the pains of disappointed love or ambition are mostly imaginary, pains that come from how one thinks of oneself and one’s future (I.ii.1.6, p. 29). This is understandable, of course. Because the imagination is the means by which one sympathizes, it cannot easily generate those pleasures and pains that are due to bodily conditions. But when one imaginatively enters into the place of another, one can feel in full (or almost full) force all those pains and pleasures that are due to imagination in the person principally concerned.

Smith emphasizes that even when we do sympathize with those in bodily pain, it is usually not the pain itself that we sympathize with, but ancillary (and imaginary) effects of that pain: “we can sympathize with the distress which excessive hunger occasions when we read the description of it in the journal of a siege or of a sea voyage . . . but . . . we cannot properly, even in this case, be said to sympathize with the hunger itself” (I.ii.i.1, p. 28). The point here is reiterated with respect to the fear that is associated with certain kinds of pain (but not others):

Pain never calls forth any very lively sympathy unless it is accompanied with danger. We sympathize with the fear, though not with the agony of the sufferer. Fear, however, is a passion derived altogether from the imagination, which represents, with an uncertainty and fluctuation that increases our anxiety, not what we really feel, but what we may hereafter possibly suffer. The gout or the tooth-ach, though exquisitely painful, excite very little sympathy; more dangerous diseases, though accompanied with very little pain, excite the highest. (I.ii.i.9, p. 30)

On their own, these passages might seem particularly troubling for any attempt to extend Smithian sympathy beyond human beings. If nature does not feel bodily pain in any literal sense, it surely does not feel the pains that come from anticipating and imagining danger.

But Smith points out that the imaginative pains and pleasures that are the primary foci of sympathy need not actually be felt by the object of one's sympathy. Smith's account of the sympathetic pain of a mother for her sick infant is particularly illuminating in this regard:

What are the pangs of a mother, when she hears the moaning of her infant that during the agony of disease cannot express what it feels? In her idea of what it suffers, she joins, to its real helplessness, her own consciousness of that helplessness, and her own terrors for the unknown consequences of its disorder; and out of all these, forms, for her own sorrow, the most complete image of misery and distress. The infant, however, feels only the uneasiness of the present instant, which can never be great. With regard to the future, it is perfectly secure, and in its thoughtlessness and want of foresight, possesses an antidote against fear and anxiety, the great tormentors of the human breast. (I.i.I.12, p. 12)

In this case, the infant does feel some pain, but only a relatively mild "uneasiness," and the mother hardly even sympathizes with the uneasiness that the infant actually feels. This is perfectly consistent with Smith's claim that bodily pains are hard to sympathize with. But the mother *does* sympathize with a pain of the imagination that the infant itself does not feel, and this a pain associated with the "unknown consequences of its disorder."³⁰

This imaginative sympathy is just the kind of sympathy that one can imagine having for non-sentient nature. Ecosystems, species, and nature as a whole might not be able to feel pain, but they can be in conditions of disorder, and this disorder can be disturbing because of consequences both known and unknown. Moreover, an *attentive* spectator, who is sensitive to nature itself, can sympathize with the terrors that an ecosystem itself *would* feel for its own future, were it capable of recognizing its danger. Aldo Leopold engages in something like this kind of sympathy when he engages in "thinking like a mountain." Leopold's sympathy with the mountain itself challenges his "thought that because fewer

wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean a hunter's paradise." As Leopold explains, "I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view" and goes even further to sympathize with the *fear* of the mountain: "just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades" (Leopold 1949: 138-40). Leopold might be accused of anthropomorphizing here, and this is a legitimate claim about the projection of fear onto the mountain. But Smith's point is that this anthropomorphic projection is precisely what is ethically relevant, as long as it is a natural human response **to imagining oneself in the place of the mountain**. The mountain is endangered by the deer, and the potential damage could be devastating. **In such a context, one who imagines herself in the place of the mountain will anticipate (in a way that the mountain cannot) the danger that the deer pose, and this anticipation will generate fear in the imagining and attentive spectator. Moreover, because this fear can be shared by an *impartial* spectator, the sympathetic fear with the mountain will be proper.**³¹

Another relevant rule of sympathy, one with quite different effects for environmental ethics, comes from Smith's account of sympathy with social, unsocial, and selfish passions. Smith explains that the impartial spectator sympathizes most with passions that are "social" in the sense that the passion of the person principally concerned is directed towards its object in a way that is precisely the way in which the impartial spectator "as a [hu]man, is obliged to take" towards that object. Smith's paradigm cases of these social passions are those such as kindness and compassion, in which the person principally concerned seeks to promote the happiness of another person, whose happiness any impartial spectator will also have an interest in. "Unsocial passions," by contrast, are characterized by a "divided" sympathy, and include passions such as hatred and anger. Selfish passions are those passions that give rise to neither a divided nor a redoubled sympathy, and include a wide variety of types of "grief and joy" that reflect the frustration of purely individual interests.

The general principle here depends on the fact that impartial spectators are “obliged,” by their human nature, to have certain interests independent of sympathy with the object of one’s sympathy. Insofar as the object of one’s sympathy has passions that fit with these interests, one sympathizes more strongly with her; insofar as her interests are contrary to one’s own, one sympathizes less.³² This general principle has very important implications for eco-centric sympathy. Ecosystems have no passions per se, but insofar as one imagines oneself in the place of an ecosystem, one can feel an “illusory sympathy” like that felt with the dead, and this “illusion” is a genuine case of sympathy. But given the nature of sympathy, one is unlikely to feel any sympathies *strongly* that do not coincide with one’s natural interests as a human being.

This rule of sympathy is dependent upon the same inextricably human component of sympathy that makes sympathy with nature possible. Because nature does not have passions, the spectator sympathizes only by importing humanity into the process of imagination that gives rise to sympathy. But the humanness of sympathy also limits sympathy in a particularly human way. Human beings have natural interests that are independent of any partiality. One is, simply “as a [hu]man,” “obliged” to have certain interests (I.ii.4.2, p. 39). And these specifically human interests limit the degree to which one can sympathize with passions, including the imagined passions of nature, that conflict with these interests.

Smith’s paradigm case of an obligatory but impartial interest is the interest that every human being must take in the happiness of other people. Thus when imagining oneself in the place, say, of a wetland, it will be difficult to feel hatred or anger or resentment towards people to any considerable degree. These are unsocial passions that one feels only when “brought down” to a very low “pitch” (I.iii.3.1, p. 34). It will be less difficult, but still difficult, to imagine feeling a desire to persist undisturbed or to fluctuate naturally with the seasons. These passions, imaginary as they are, are imagined “selfish” feelings, and they occupy a “middle place” in terms of our capacity for sympathy (I.ii.5.1, p. 40). It will be easiest to sympathize with the benevolence of the wetland, with a certain imagined willingness on its part to give of itself freely for the well-being of people who may depend on it.

Such benevolence is a social passion that is “peculiarly agreeable and becoming” (I.ii.4.1, p. 38) because it fits well with other interests that one is obliged to have, interests in the welfare of people.

The implications of this law of sympathy might seem disastrous for the environment. If impartial spectators consistently sympathize with nature only in ways that fit well with purely human interests, especially if those interests tend to focus on the happiness of persons, then sympathy with nature may still be fundamentally anthropocentric. However, Smith’s theory need not have this implication. For one thing, the natural interests of human beings need not be limited to the well-being of other persons. As we have seen, sympathy is possible with other animals, and even with non-living entities. Thus the “social” passions that one will sympathize with in the wetland will include not only its imagined benevolence to human beings but also its imagined concern for “the preservation and prosperity . . . of all the species that are in it” (EPS: “Physics” ¶9, p. 113). That is, one sympathizes with the wetland’s imagined “benevolence” to the plants, animals, other organisms, and even other ecological wholes such as species or ecosystems that depend on it. And this kind of concern for nature or for ecosystems within it seems appropriate, even for an eco-centric environmental ethic. One can have at least some concern for the imagined “selfish” passions of a wetland, but one will tend to have much more sympathy with ecosystems as entities that provide for and are enriched by the individuals and other ecosystems that are in relations of interdependence with them.

Moreover, the rule governing the relative strengths of sympathy for different types of passion does *not* say that one *never* sympathizes with selfish or unsocial passions, but only that one sympathizes with them to a reduced degree. One *might* take this to mean that one’s sympathy with selfish and unsocial passions will *always* be less than the passions of the object of one’s sympathy. Smith suggests this when he claims that unsocial passions “must always be brought down to a pitch much lower than that to which undisciplined nature would raise them” before one will sympathize with such passions (34). Since the pitch to which nature itself feels passions is already zero, this might imply that one cannot feel any sympathy for them. But again, Smith draws on the example of the dead to show that *even in the case of*

unsocial passions, one can feel, and feel to a *very strong degree*, passions that the object of one's sympathy does not feel:

If [an injured person] should perish . . . , we . . . sympathize with . . . the imaginary resentment which in fancy we lend to the dead, who is no longer capable of feeling that or any other human sentiment.

(II.i.2.5, p.71, cf. too VI.iii.16, p. 243)

Resentment is an “unsocial” passion, and thus one *generally* feels it less that the object of one's sympathy. But in some cases, such as those of murder victims, one can feel a very intense sympathetic resentment even when the object of one's sympathy – the victim – feels nothing at all. Just as this resentment is felt not only for the “real resentment of friends and relations” but also for the “illusive” resentment of the victim herself, so we can feel resentment not only for *people* who are affected by environmental degradation, but we can even feel an illusive *but nonetheless proper* sympathy with the imagined resentment of nature itself.

Although sympathy *generally* is stronger for social than for unsocial passions, the specific strength of proper sympathy depends on the details of the situation. Thus people will generally not sympathize with *unjustified* unsocial passions, but most environmental problems *justify* resentment. When one imagines oneself in the place of a wet-land being drained **or polluted**, or in the place of a formerly great but now extinct or endangered species, and when one realizes that the being drained or driven extinct is the result of thoughtless greed or of unreflective ambition, one feels a sense of resentment. And this resentment is not merely felt on behalf of the people and other sentient creatures who will suffer from the loss. One feels that if one were the wet-land itself, one would want to strike back at those doing violence. One feels, that is, **sympathetic** resentment.

In this context, the restriction on the extent to which one can feel sympathy with certain passions need not be as bad as one might have feared. But there is still a real restriction here, one informed by human nature. The degree of sympathy felt for ecosystems will depend on the real needs of human beings and other sentient creatures. If the destruction of a wetland is necessary for the survival or even merely for the happiness of a group of people, one's interest in the happiness of that group will inhibit

one's ability to sympathize with the wetland's resentment, or even with the wetland's imagined interest in existing relatively undisturbed.

Thus a Smithian eco-centrism will not be egalitarian in its eco-centrism. *Laws of sympathy constrain both the range of entities with which human beings can sympathize and the degree of that sympathy. It will probably be possible to sympathize with other humans more than with animals, with animals more than plants, and with individuals more than natural entities like marshes and species. Even for entities with which one can imaginatively identify, some sympathetic sentiments will be more common (and common to a higher degree) than others.* Impartial spectators are human beings, and they bring to their sympathetic capacities the limitations of human nature, which include a certain level of speciesism. But this speciesism is merely a matter of priorities and emphasis. Smithian ecocentrism need not be any more limited than that of prominent ecocentric approaches in environment ethics today. Even Callicott, for example, claims that “obligations generated by membership in more . . . intimate communities take precedence over those generated in more recently emerged and impersonal communities” (Callicott 2001: 212). Callicott uses this principle to justify the claim that “the duties attendant upon citizenship in the biotic community . . . do not cancel or replace the duties attendant on membership in the human global village (to respect human rights)” (Callicott 2001: 211), and Callicott even suggests that purely human duties should in many cases override purely biotic ones. Like the land ethic, Smithian sympathy can justify eco-centric concern, but this concern will be limited by anthropocentric concern at least to some degree. And Smith provides a systematic basis for the priority of certain human interests, a basis that shows why human interests will sometimes but not always override the imagined selfish interests of nature.

5. Natural theology and anthropomorphizing nature

The account of sympathy with nature in this paper so far has been based on extending Smith's treatment of sympathy to cover cases that he did not consider. In the previous section in particular, I focused on two specific laws of sympathy and showed how they could be relevant to describing our

sympathy with nature. Sympathy with nature, however, always involves a certain amount of anthropomorphization. One imagines oneself in the place of nature and imports one's human reactions into nature. In this context, the extent to which human beings have a natural tendency to anthropomorphize nature or aspects of nature is directly relevant to the issue of whether one can sympathize with nature. And fortunately, Smith offers a rich and interesting discussion of humans' tendency to anthropomorphize nature.³³

In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith primarily discusses anthropomorphization in the context of his account of merit and demerit. There he explains how “we conceive . . . a sort of gratitude for those inanimate objects, which have been the causes of a great, or frequent pleasure to us,” such as “the tree, whose verdure and shade we have long enjoyed,” and which therefore is “looked upon with a sort of respect that seems due to such benefactors” (II.iii.1.2, p. 94). Smith even suggests that “the Dryads . . . of the ancients, a sort of genii of trees . . ., were probably first suggested by this sort of affection, . . . which seemed unreasonable if there was nothing animated about them” (II.iii.1.2, p. 94). In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith does not say much more about the human tendency to anthropomorphize, but in his histories of astronomy and physics, Smith gives considerably more detail.

In the “History of Astronomy,” Smith's discussion of anthropomorphizing nature follows the account in *TMS* closely. Smith writes,

The ancient Athenians . . . erected altars, and offered sacrifices to the rainbow . . . With him . . . every object of nature, which by its beauty or greatness, its utility or hurtfulness, is considerable enough to attract his attention, and whose operations are not perfectly regular, is supposed to act by the direction of some invisible and designing power. The sea is spread out in a calm, or heaved into a storm, according to the good pleasure of Neptune. Does the earth pour forth an exuberant harvest? It is owing to the indulgence of Ceres. . . . The tree, which now flourishes, and now decays, is inhabited by a Dryad, upon whose health or sickness its various appearances depend.
(EPS.Astr.III.2, p. 49).

As in the case of the *TMS*, Smith's initial focus here is on anthropomorphizing that is related to the passions of gratitude and resentment. As he explains in both places, "whatever is the cause of pleasure naturally excites our gratitude" (EPS.Astr.III.2, p. 48; cf. *TMS* II.iii.1.1, p. 94). Because resentment and gratitude are connected to punishment and reward, one has a natural tendency to personify their objects, and so people naturally tend to personify nature. In the "History of Astronomy," however, Smith goes further and points out that one has a natural tendency to explain the operations of nature through anthropomorphizing it, and this tendency goes beyond those aspects of nature that cause pleasure or pain. One anthropomorphizes anything "considerable enough to attract his attention . . . whose operations are not perfectly regular."³⁴

In his "History of Ancient Physics," Smith goes even further, explaining how one can come to personify the perfectly regular and ordered aspects of nature, and even nature as a whole. There Smith describes the transition from "the seeming incoherence of the appearances of nature" that "so confounded mankind" in "the first ages of the world" to a time when people, "upon a more attentive survey, . . . discovered . . . more distinctly the chain which bound all [nature's] parts to one another" (EPS.Phys.9, p. 112-3). Once people come to see order and interdependence in nature, they anthropomorphize nature as a whole, as well as nature's several different parts. Smith explains,

[T]he Universe was regarded as . . . a coherent system, governed by general laws, and directed to general ends, viz. its own preservation and prosperity, and that of all the species that are in it The unity of the system, which, according to this ancient philosophy, is most perfect, suggested the idea of the unity of that principle, by whose art it was formed; and thus . . . science gave birth to the first theism According to Timaeus, who was followed by Plato, that intelligent Being, who formed the world, endowed it with a principle of life and understanding, which extends from its center to its remotest circumference, which is conscious of all its changes, and which governs and directs all its motions to the great end of its formation The Stoics, the most religious of all the ancient sects of philosophers, seem in this, as in most other things, to have altered and refined the doctrine of Plato. The order, harmony, and coherence which this philosophy bestowed upon the

Universal System, struck them with awe and veneration. As, in the rude ages of the world, whatever particular part of Nature excited the admiration of mankind, was apprehended to be animated by some particular divinity; so the whole of Nature having, by their reasonings, become equally the object of admiration, was equally apprehended to be animated by a Universal Deity, to be itself a Divinity, an Animal. (EPS.Phys.9, 11, pp. 113-4, 116)

Three aspects of this development are striking. First, anthropomorphism does not disappear once the universe is better understood; it simply transfers from isolated parts to a more comprehensive whole. Second, the nature of the anthropomorphism here is dramatic. Nature is conceived of as being an intelligent “Animal,” and the ends of nature include not only the prosperity of living beings but even the “preservation and prosperity” or “formation” of itself as a whole. Finally, Smith’s particular progression from Plato to the Stoics is significant, since it reflects a transition from a more Judeo-Christian theism, within which a God creates a world, to a more pantheistic theism, within which God is the life of the universe itself. This Stoic account of the universe as an animal, animated by a principle of life that can be considered a “God,” is the last stage in Smith’s history of theology, and suggests some Smithian sympathy for Philo’s suggestion, in Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, that “if we survey the universe, so far as it falls under our knowledge, it bears a great resemblance to an animal or organized body, and seems actuated with a like principle of life or motion,” so we can “infer” that “the world . . . is an animal.”³⁵

It is not immediately clear to what extent Smith would want to apply this ancient Greek and Roman anthropomorphization to his own day,³⁶ much less to ours. In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith seems to take a more traditional Christian stance. He describes how

[i]n every part of the universe we observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce; and in the mechanism of a plant, or animal body, admire how every thing is contrived for advancing the two great purposes of nature, the support of the individual, and the propagation of the species. (II.ii.3.5)

But Smith ascribes these “purposes” to “the wisdom of God” rather than any soul of the world. Even in that passage, however, Smith’s description of the mechanism of the universe is like that of animals and even like “the operations of . . . the mind,” emphasizing that divine direction is something that human beings share in *common* with plants, animals, and the universe as a whole. Thus even when Smith’s theology has a more traditional hue, it still anthropomorphizes nature in a way that leaves open room for sympathy with nature.

At the very least, Smith’s discussions of nature show that there is a natural tendency to anthropomorphize nature, and this tendency is reinforced by any sense of the “order, harmony, and coherence” of nature. And that provides at least some basis for thinking that the tendency to anthropomorphize nature will increase rather than decrease as human beings develop a greater ecological understanding of nature. Ecology teaches not only the orderliness of nature but the interdependence of its parts, reinforcing the sense of purposiveness that nature shares in common with organisms.³⁷ Moreover, biology has increasingly interpreted organisms in ways that can be applied to ecosystems. To give just one example, recent work in the philosophy of biology has shown how concepts such as fitness and natural selection can be applied not only to individual organisms, but to species as wholes and ecosystems of varying scales.³⁸ Thus it becomes increasingly “reasonable” to anthropomorphize nature. Even if the analogies between nature and animals do not justify the ascription of interests strictly speaking, they can provide a context within which it will be natural to ascribe interests to nature in the imagination. And for Smith, this metaphorical application of interests is sufficient to justify sympathy with nature, and thereby both benevolence and justice to it.

6. Correcting irrational sympathy

In this paper, I have shown that one can sympathize with nature through what Smith refers to as an “illusion of the imagination” (I.i.1.13, p. 13) whereby one comes to feel something that the object of one’s sympathy does not and cannot feel. One might challenge this account, both on textual grounds as a misreading or misapplication of Smith, and on philosophical or ethical grounds, that such illusory

sympathy is no proper basis for an environmental ethic. In this section I take up both challenges.

Throughout, it is important to remember (as noted in section 2) that sympathy with nature is only one small part of an overall Smithian account of environmental *ethics*. Even without sympathy for nature, Smith provides a rich environmental *ethic*.³⁹ But given the prominence of sympathy in this paper, it is appropriate to ask whether it strengthens or weakens the overall Smithian approach to nature. In this section, I start by raising some basic problems with grounding environmental virtues on imaginative sympathy. I then turn to the interpretive issue about the role of illusive sympathy in Smith. This interpretative discussion provides resources to addressing the more basic problems with illusive sympathy in a Smithian environmental *ethics*.

Grounding ethical obligations on illusive sympathy seems like a bad idea for at least three reasons. First, it seems to reflect a rather cruel and irrational preference of tricks of fancy over real pain and suffering. Put bluntly, why should we care more about the imaginary pains of trees than the real pains of loggers? Why let a sympathy that is merely illusory influence decisions that affect *real* pleasures and pains? Second, illusive sympathy seems a rather fragile basis for duties to nature. The illusion cannot last forever, and it looks like careful reflection will quickly erode any environmental ethic based on irrational tricks of fancy, since we will quickly see how absurd such an ethic is. This is especially problematic in the context of the anthropomorphism of nature discussed in section 5, since this anthropomorphism seems to involve actually believing that nature is inhabited by spirits (or by a god), beliefs that many people today⁴⁰ find absurd. Finally, anthropomorphism itself might seem a bad way to do environmental ethics. To say that one should feel benevolence towards the environment only because one imagines, and imagines falsely, that the environment is like a person or an animal, may seem to devalue the intrinsic uniqueness of nature itself. This approach could be compared to saying that men should value women, or that majorities should value minorities, only insofar as they can imagine women (or minorities) being similar to them.⁴¹ Moreover, some things that environmentalists care about are *not* very much like us, and linking moral regard to the degree of similarity may preclude sufficient attention to these radically “other” natural entities.⁴²

In addition to these general objections, one might object that this account of sympathy with nature is simply not compatible with Smith's philosophy. Smith himself points out, especially in the context of discussing anthropomorphizing nature, that "the least reflection . . . corrects this sentiment" (TMS II.iii.1.1, p. 94) or that the sentiment is "checked by reflection" (EPS.Astr.ii.2, p. 49). And Smith's use of phrases like "illusive sympathy" (II.i.2.5, p. 71) and "illusion of the imagination" (I.i.1.13, p. 13) seem to suggest that Smith did not consider these forms of sympathy wholly legitimate.

Charles Griswold has recently pointed out similar problems with Smith's example of sympathy with the dead in the context of a broader discussion of "selfishness" in Smith's theory. In introducing the example, Griswold argues that "in the extreme case of sympathizing with the dead, sympathy seems 'selfish,' in the sense that we are grieving in light of what we imagine we would feel were we in that situation" (Griswold 1999:89).⁴³ Griswold elaborates on this account of the selfishness of sympathy with the dead by distinguishing between two senses of selfishness.

[Sense (1) relates to the] question of whether or not we naturally take an interest in the fortunes of others . . . regardless of the immediate advantage to us of doing so. . . . In sense (2), "selfishness" would prevent us from entering into another's situation and person and would deny us transcendence of ourselves. (Griswold 1999: 93)

Griswold argues that it is important for Smith that we be unselfish in sense (2), citing Smith's extended discussion of the unselfishness of sympathy. There Smith emphasizes,

When I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession should suffer . . . but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters. (VII.iii.1.4, p. 317, cf. Griswold 1999: 92)

Griswold argues that sympathy with the dead is an "extreme" case, and one that "from an ethical perspective," is not "the ideal attainable point," because sympathy with the dead is "'selfish' in our second sense of the term" and "might also be selfish in the first sense" (Griswold 1999: 89, 102, 101).

The extension of sympathy with the dead to sympathy with nature might seem to be an example of taking a defective, illusory, and ethically non-ideal sort of sympathy as a model for environmental ethics.

However, sympathy with the dead is neither more selfish (in either of Griswold's senses) nor more illusory than any other case of sympathy. Griswold is certainly right that proper sympathy must not be selfish in the sense that I should not import into my imagination the particulars of my "character and profession," but should "consider what I should suffer if I was really you" (VII.iii.1.4, p. 317). Thus sympathy with the dead *would* be selfish if my sympathetic grief were based on imagining what *I* would suffer were I dead, *or if it were somehow due to an incomplete attempt to imagine oneself in the place of the other*. But this is not how Smith describes sympathy with the dead. When one sympathizes with the dead, one enters into the position of the dead and responds emotively to imagining being the dead person him or herself. When we imagine the pain that comes when the dead person is "obliterated, in a little time, from the affections of *their* dearest friends and relations" (I.i.I.13, p. 12, emphasis added), we are not grieving over the pain that *we* would suffer from being forgotten by *our* friends. The pain with which one sympathizes is the pain that comes from imaginatively entering into the situation of the dead themselves.⁴⁴

But Smith's claims that one should fully enter into the circumstances of another imply only that one should not allow one's idiosyncrasies to affect one's response to imagining oneself in the place of the other. He never suggests that one should abstract away even the basic laws governing sympathy itself, laws which preclude fully sympathizing with certain passions (such as hunger) and which allow sympathizing with imaginary ones (such as the resentment of the dead). *All* sympathy, for Smith, is selfish in the sense that sympathy is limited by various aspects of one's human character. Smith makes this clear, not only in his *several* examples of cases where one's sympathetic feelings diverge from those of the object of one's sympathy, but from the systematic place of sympathy in his ethical theory. Again, it is important to remember that for Smith sympathy is not primarily a means for forming *ideas of or beliefs about* what another is actually feeling.⁴⁵ One often forms such beliefs on the basis of the *expressions* of passions that one observes in others. Sympathy is a means for actually *feeling* with another, but this

feeling with is limited by various psychological principles. There is nothing “deceptive” about the limits on our capacity to feel what another feels when we imagine ourselves in the situation of that other. For Smith, these limiting laws are simply psychological facts about us.

In fact, it is fortunate that the laws of sympathy do not allow human beings to feel exactly what others feel.⁴⁶ The most important advantage of this gap in sympathy is that moral evaluation is possible. If one were always “selfless” in the sense of feeling exactly what one would feel if one had exactly the traits of the object of sympathy and were in fact in exactly the same situation as that object, then one’s sympathetic feelings would always match the feelings of the person principally concerned and every passion would always be proper.⁴⁷ Smith’s moral theory would be utterly vacuous.

Moreover, with respect to the illusive sympathy with the dead in particular, it is again fortunate that the laws of sympathy allow for divergence between the actual feelings of the object of sympathy (in this case nothing at all) and the sympathetic feelings of spectators. Without this divergence, sympathy with the dead, and especially with the *resentment* of the dead, would be impossible, and the special injustice (or demerit) associated with murder would vanish.⁴⁸ Assault would have to be considered worse than murder, since in the case of murder, the victim *in fact* has no justified resentment. Even in more mundane cases, Smith points out that our *illusive* sympathy, and not our accurate estimation of the actual response of the person principally concerned, is what is relevant for determining the merit or demerit of actions (cf. II.1.5.11, p. 78). Similarly, those with a strong and eco-centric sense of environmental justice will see illusive sympathy with nature as fortunate because without it, one cannot make sense of injustice to nature.

What this discussion of Smith’s treatment of illusive sympathy shows is how fundamental such sympathy is for Smith’s overall moral theory. All sympathy, and hence all moral evaluation, is based on feelings that arise when one imagines oneself in the place of another. In that sense, all sympathy is based on “illusions of the imagination.” And the specific moral judgments that human beings make, such as the importance of benevolence, prudence, and self-mastery, are based on the laws that govern and limit human sympathy. Again, “illusive sympathy” is precisely the sympathy that is involved in every case of

moral evaluation, since one compares one's illusive sympathy with the actual feelings of another, and one takes one's *illusive* sympathy, rather than any actual feelings of an actor, as the *proper* sort of sympathy.

This also implies that one need not ascribe one's sympathetic feelings to the object of one's sympathy. Smith makes clear in the case of the dead that our sympathy with the dead is not based upon any *belief* that the dead actually feel the sentiments with which we "sympathize." Smith emphasizes that we "overlook... what is of real importance in their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them" (I.i.1.13, p. 12).⁴⁹ Even without considering the afterlife, people naturally feel sympathy with the dead. Similarly in the cases of other human beings, we generally are able to "describe the internal sentiment[s] or emotion[s]" of another by "describing the effects which they produce without" (VII.iv.5). Thus one can feel sympathetic gratitude, for example, without *believing* that the person principally concerned feels or even can feel gratitude (II.i.5.11, p. 78).⁵⁰ In general, then, although illusive sympathy can sometimes deceive one into false beliefs, it need not. One can feel emotions through an imaginative change of place without necessarily believing that the object of one's sympathy feels the same sentiments.

The importance of a gap between one's sympathetic feelings and one's beliefs about the feeling of the person principally concerned suggests at least a partial response to the objections with which this section began. The first objection, that one should care more about the real feelings of sentient beings than about the imagined feelings of nature, is an apparently sensible maxim, but one that is ultimately misguided. Actual feelings of sentient creatures are never what one takes into account in moral evaluation. Instead, one takes into account only those feelings with which one can sympathize. The mother seeks to alleviate the suffering of her child, focusing not on the actual discomforts of the child but on the anxieties that she feels when she enters into her child's frame. The prosecutor avenges the death of the murder victim, not based on the actual wishes of that victim (since she has none), but on the resentment that the prosecutor feels when entering the victim's frame through imagination. And the prosecutor, in this case, chooses the imagined wishes of a dead person over the actual pleasures that would accrue to the murderer were he released. Similarly, in morally evaluating loggers, one will take

into account the feelings of the loggers *only insofar as one can sympathize with them*, and one will take into account the feelings of the trees in the same way.

This approach to ethics reflects the deep sentimentalism of Smith's theory. For Smith, one discerns what is right not by rational principles or some sort of pleasure-calculus, but by sympathetic sentiments. *As Smith insists, "our sense of merit is often founded upon one of those illusive sympathies by which, when we bring home to ourselves the case of another, we are often affected in a manner in which the person principally concerned is incapable of being affected" (II.i.5.11, p. 78).* Smith recognizes that these moral judgments will occasionally depart from what seems "rational." Smith's most important example of this is his discussion of the "general maxim, that [if an] event does not depend on the agent, it ought to have no influence upon our sentiments, with regard to the merit or propriety of his conduct" (II.iii.3.1, p. 105). Smith addresses this maxim in two ways, both of which are relevant to dealing with the equally general maxim, that real feelings should matter more than imagined feelings. Smith's first point about his general maxim is that "when we come to particulars, we find that our sentiments are scarce in any one instance exactly conformable to what this equitable maxim would direct" (II.iii.3.1, p. 105). We can say the same about the maxim of real and imagined pleasure. As a matter of fact, people do not make moral judgments on the basis of real pleasures and pains, but on the basis of those pleasures and pains with which they can sympathize. This fact may seem odd from the standpoint of abstract reasoning, but for Smith ethics is not abstract. It is a matter of sentimental responses to particular situations, and thus ethical judgments are ultimately based on laws that govern sympathy, not on principles that guide abstract reasoning. Whether it fits our maxims or not, ethical reasoning that takes the "feelings" of nature into account will be morally proper.

Smith does not simply point out that moral *sentiments* override maxims of reason, however. He also shows that the nature of our moral sentiments is ultimately beneficial. As Smith explains, "Nature, . . . when she implanted the seeds of this irregularity [of sentiment] in the human breast, seems, as upon all other occasions, to have intended the happiness and perfection of the species" (II.iii.3.1, p. 105). With respect to the maxim that luck should not affect our moral evaluations, Smith explains the wisdom of

nature by pointing out that the principle of considering only what depends on the agent would make “sentiments, thoughts, [and] intentions . . . the objects of punishment” (II.iii.3.2, p. 105), which would have devastating consequences for society. Moreover, downplaying the actual effects of actions would make people too easily “satisfied with indolent benevolence” rather than action (II.iii.3.3, p. 106). The actual moral sentiments, in this case, are wiser than the principles of abstract moral reasoning.

Similarly, in the case of the environment, without some capacity to sympathize with nature, human beings would be likely to destroy the environment on which they depend. The considerations of long-term utility are simply too weak to affect human actions without some immediate regard for the welfare of nature. In the abstract, one might be able to argue, as many have, that only sentient creatures are proper objects of benevolence and justice. On these grounds, one might even be able to show that proper regard to such creatures should lead people to promote the same goods that a more eco-centric ethic supports.⁵¹ But human beings are not guided by such refined reasoning. We largely act on the basis of sentiment, and we are constituted such that our sentiments can extend to include a regard for nature, a regard that leads directly to actions that reason can later justify indirectly. For Smith, of course, the recognition that such irregularities of sentiments are ultimately good for us is not the reason that those irregularities are proper. They are proper because they are the sentiments with which an impartial spectator would sympathize. But recognizing their indirect benefit does give these illusive sympathies “a beauty” that comes “when we consider [them] as making a part of system . . . which tends to promote the happiness . . . of . . . society,” and this sense of beauty can be part of what is involved “when we approve of a character or action” (VII.iii.3.16, p. 326). The objection that real feelings should matter more than illusive ones seems sensible, for Smith, only on the basis of abstract reasoning, and it is both a psychological fact and a good thing that such reasoning does not dominate moral judgments in particular cases.

This Smithian response to the first objection also deals with the second objection, that sympathy with nature is likely to fade as human beings learn that nature does not really have any feelings. For Smith, sympathy is not a matter of inferring the actual feelings of another, but is the feeling one gets

when imagining oneself in the place of the other. And while knowing that another is not *in fact* feeling anything might *affect* one's sympathy, it does not preclude it. The second objection, like the first, is based on the notion that one's feelings are wholly guided by one's reason, a feeling that Smith adamantly rejects.⁵² Moreover, in the case of nature, ecology increasingly gives pictures of nature that make it easier, not harder, to see nature as itself "alive." It is thus increasingly easy to anthropomorphize nature in refined ways, and this makes it possible to feel *proper* sympathy with nature. While none of this increased knowledge leads us to *believe that* ecosystems or species literally "feel" anything, the similarity in organizational structure makes it easier to imagine "what it would be like" to be an ecosystem or a species. And when we imagine "what it would be like," we import our human susceptibility to pain and loss into the imaginative context. We anthropomorphize nature, but precisely because "we" – impartial and well-informed spectators – anthropomorphize nature, this anthropomorphization is morally proper, and may even be morally required. It is an "illusive sympathy," to be sure, but no more illusive than the sympathies that ground our sense of injustice when one person kills another.⁵³

The third objection to Smithian sympathy, that there is something limiting and inappropriate about grounding duties to nature on seeing it as somehow "like us," is the most challenging. It may help, at least to some degree, that for Smith we do not *literally* think that nature is like us. But still, it looks like Smithian sympathy operates at least partly on the basis of similarity, and this is likely to introduce difficulties when dealing with radically dissimilar aspects of nature. Here it is important to remember, however, that sympathy with nature is *not* required for *all* forms of moral regard. One can be in awe of nature, aesthetically appreciate it, be humbled before it, and even respect it, all without sympathy. Sympathy is required only for notions of *benevolence* or *justice* to apply. And in that context, perhaps the limitation to beings that can be seen as somewhat like us is appropriate. Without some anthropomorphization, even if only an extension of notions like interests, it is hard to know what it would *mean* to be benevolent or just to an entity. For entities that are really *wholly* other, sentiments like humility and awe, which do not depend on sympathy, are more proper than benevolence and justice.

7. Conclusion

Callicott is correct when he indicates that sympathy is central to Adam Smith's moral theory. Sympathy plays a large role in determining the scope of moral accountability, and it lies at the heart of both benevolence and justice. But Callicott is wrong to think that the centrality of sympathy in Smith's ethics precludes Smith from **ethical regard for nature**. For Smith, sympathy always involves a certain amount of projection and hence anthropomorphization. And that means that Smith can make sense of why people often see nature as reacting the way human beings would, why we **can feel as though the** Grand Canyon is annoyed by and even angry at dams on the Colorado **or as though** a mountain fears the deer who threaten to destroy it. Moreover, because sympathy always has the last word in Smith's ethical theory, the fact that one "knows" that the Grand Canyon and the mountain have no actual feelings **should not** trump one's imagined sympathy with them when it comes to moral judgments. Smith thus provides a clear account of why environmentalists feel the way they do about nature, and a philosophical defense of the importance of those feelings in ethical evaluation and deliberation.⁵⁴

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¹ Varner has a brief discussion of Smith in Varner 1998, but it hardly amounts to a detailed study of Smith as a resource for environmental ethics. Still, Varner's discussion is the most detailed so far, and it provides a valuable critique of Smith that sets a context for the arguments I present in this paper. It is worth noting, too, that even Callicott himself seems to include Smith only as an afterthought in many of his key discussions. Callicott's appropriation of Smith shifts between *In Defense of the Land Ethic* and *Beyond the Land Ethic*, but not significantly. In the first, Smith is *only* referred to in conjunction with Hume (cf. pp. 53, 79), and in the second, this is the primary way in which Smith is referred (cf. pp. 7, 13, 62, 64, 67, 87-8, 100, 105-6, 166, 169).

² See e.g. Brown 1994, Griswold 1999, Fleischacker 2004, and Schleisser/Montes forthcoming.

³ See e.g. Nussbaum 1990, Blackburn 1998, and Gibbard 1990.

⁴ Elsewhere, I have argued that Smith is an important resource for an environmental *virtue* ethic (see <<reference deleted for blind review>>), and in that context I emphasized that Smith can support a robust environmental ethic even *without* extending sympathy to non-sentient creatures. Nevertheless, as I argue in section 2 of this paper, there are important advantages to a Smithian account that includes sympathy with non-sentient creatures.

⁵ I have deleted the second "important" from Callicott's essay. This typo does not appear in Darwin.

⁶ Throughout, references to Smith are to the section and page number in the Liberty Fund edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund), a reprint of the Glasgow Edition of the Works of Adam Smith.) The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was initially published in 1759.

⁷ Even in this account of benevolence, Smith may have in mind benevolence directed towards societies, countries, or the universe as a whole *as well as* benevolence towards individuals. In section 5, I point out passages from Smith's unpublished writings that suggest the possibility of sympathy with nature as a whole.

⁸ In {author's paper}, I discuss in detail how Smith can ground an environmental virtue ethic even without extending sympathy to nature. Here I am interested in expanding that account by showing that benevolence and justice, which *do* depend on sympathy, can also be applied to relations with nature.

⁹ There is a third, more extreme, way in which sympathy with nature could strengthen a Smithian virtue ethic. Sympathy with nature would open the door to a radical sort of community with nature. Insofar as one can sympathize with nature, one considers oneself in a moral community with nature, such that one can morally evaluate and be morally evaluated by nature. **In fact, Smith remarks on the moral evaluation of "even animate and inanimate things" (LJ (A) ii.118-20, p. 116, cf. TMS II.iii.1.1 and LJ (B) 188, p. 478), suggesting that this practice requires correction by "reflection" but also that there is room for it in certain cases.** This deeper moral community reflects a possible approach to environmental ethics that is worth further development, but I do not focus on this option in the present paper.

¹⁰ **"Benevolence," in this context, specifically involves a concern for the happiness of the object of one's benevolence (I.ii.4.1). Thus it is a somewhat narrower term than the benevolence to which some writers in environmental ethics (e.g. Frasz 2005) have referred. In other respects, however, Smith's notion of benevolence is quite similar to these environmental versions (cf. e.g. Frasz 2005: 125 for an account of benevolence as an environmental virtue that fits well with Smith).**

¹¹ As I note below, even with sympathy with nature Smith can make sense of injustice *with respect to nature*, the kind of injustice that is popular amongst those who speak of "environmental justice." This justice is, strictly speaking, human justice applied to environmental issues. But many environmentalists, especially those sympathetic to the land ethic developed by Leopold and Callicott, seek an ethic that can make sense of injustice *to nature*, and *this* sort of environmental justice depends, for Smith, on sympathy with nature.

¹² Smith explains the cause of redoubled sympathy as follows:

His [the spectator's] sympathy with the person who feels these passions, exactly coincides with his concern for the person who is the object of them. The interest, which, as a man, he is obliged to take in the happiness of this last, enlivens his fellow-feeling with the sentiments of the other, whose emotions are employed about the same object. We have always, therefore, the strongest disposition to sympathize with the benevolent affections. They appear in every respect agreeable to us. We enter into the satisfaction both of the person who feels them, and of the person who is the object of them. (39)

¹³ The emphasis on sympathy with the subjective feelings of the object of social passions is emphasized later, when Smith points out that the primary source of happiness in the beneficiary is not the particular benefits of "all the little services which could be expected to flow from" social passions, but simply the "satisfaction in the consciousness of being beloved" (39).

¹⁴ See Stone 1972.

¹⁵ For further sources within the environmental justice movement, see the texts listed in the bibliography of Figueroa and Mills 2001, as well as Schrader-Frechette 2002.

¹⁶ **In U.S. courts of law, litigants must establish standing by showing actual or possible harm to themselves. Thus damage to nature itself is not a legitimate basis for filing a lawsuit unless nature as such has "standing."**

¹⁷ The quote within the quote is from *Smith v. Staso Milling Co.*, 18f.2d 738 (2d Circuit 1927). The page numbers to Stone's essay are taken from the reprint of it in Schmidt and Wilcott 2002.

¹⁸ Smith actually distinguishes between "several different meanings" of "justice" (VII.ii.1.10, p. 270).

The strict sense of justice, which Smith associates with Aristotle's "commutative justice" and which is the only kind "which may be extorted by force, and the violation of which exposes to punishment" (VII.ii.1.10, p. 270), is the one on which I focus here. The second sense – justice as benevolence – is covered in my account of benevolence, and the third – justice as propriety – is covered in my account of propriety. These senses of justice are important for an overall account of Smithian "environmental justice." A treatment of justice *with respect to* the environment of the kind popular within the environmental justice movement would also be appropriate for that context. But these discussions do not specifically involve sympathy with nature, so I leave them out here.

¹⁹ In this context, it is ironic that Callicott (See Callicott 2001: 209) seems to think that Hume is actually *better* than Smith for eco-centric ethics.

²⁰ For Hume, sympathy is felt for another person when one receives an impression of certain external signs of a passion in the countenance or conversation of another. These signs give rise to an idea of the passion itself, by means of the principle of cause and effect: "the relation of cause and effect [is that] by which we are convinced of the reality of the passion" (Hume 1740: II.i.9, p. 320). The idea of the passion then becomes "enlivened" (Hume 1740: II.i.9, p. 319) because "nature has preserved a great resemblance among all human creatures" and "this resemblance must very much contribute to make us enter into the sentiments of others" (Hume 1740: II.i.9, p. 318). Finally, since "the different degrees in their force and vivacity are the only particulars that distinguish" impressions from ideas, as an idea of a passion becomes more vivid, it becomes more and more like an impression. Eventually, "'tis no wonder an idea of a sentiment or passion may by this means be so enlivened as to become the very sentiment or passion" (Hume 1740: II.i.9, p. 319). As Hume explains,

When any affection is infused by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it. This idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself. (Hume 1740: II.i.9, p. 317)

The result of this overall Humean account is that one sympathizes with the *actual passions* of the object of one's sympathy.

There are some contexts, however, wherein Hume seems to suggest that one can sympathize without sympathizing with actual feelings of another. He describes, for example, that

Were I present at any of the more terrible operations of surgery, 'tis certain, that even before it begun, the preparation of the instruments, the laying of the bandages in order, the heating of the irons, with all the signs of anxiety and concern in the patient and assistants, would have a great effect upon my mind, and excite the strongest sentiments of pity and terror. (III.iii.1, p. 576).

This case is not how Hume generally explains sympathy, and even here the effects of anticipation (the "signs of anxiety and concern in the patient") play a role in sympathy. More importantly, even in this case Hume does not allow a real gap between what one believes another feels or will feel and what one feels oneself through sympathy. (In part, this is due to the fact that sympathy and belief both operate through increasing the vivacity of ideas.) In that sense, Smith's account is different from Hume's.

²¹ For the debate about whether Hume's views on patriotism allow for some degree of holism, see Callicott 1989 and Varner 1998. For examples of some more general treatments of Hume's moral theory, see Baier 1991, Stroud 1977, and Garrett 2002.

²² For a more detailed account of Smith's overall views on sympathy, see Griswold 1999, Campbell 1971, Heath 1995, and others.

²³ Griswold claims that they are *always* less in degree (Griswold 1999: 86). While Smith's language sometimes suggests this (see I.i.1.2 and I.i.4.7), his overall account of sympathy clearly allows for sympathetic feelings that are equal to or even stronger than those of the person principally concerned. These include not only sympathy with the dead, but the sympathetic gratitude or benevolence that leads one to condemn another for insufficient degrees of these feelings.

²⁴ Often in these cases (but not always), moral disapproval is inappropriate, as should become clear in the succeeding discussion.

²⁵ Lest one argue on religious grounds – such as the immortality of the soul – that the dead do have feelings, Smith points out that our sympathy is not based on any feelings of an immortal soul but on imagined feelings of the embodied dead person. He explains that we “overlook . . . what is of real importance in their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them, [and] we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike our senses, but can have no influence upon their happiness” (I.i.1.13, p. 12).

²⁶ Some of Smith’s language even lends itself to this reading. He says that the dead “is *no longer* capable of feeling” and that we “animate *anew*” his body (II.i.2.5). But while some pains, such as the fear of being lost from the memory of friends (I.i.1.13), are specific to entering into the situation of a former human being, others, such as the pain of being a prey to corruption, are not. The question of whether one can sympathize with non-sentient creatures that were never and never will be sentient is not one that Smith explicitly discusses. His account of *why* we can sympathize with the dead, however, does not appeal to the former humanity of the dead, and the account leaves open room for an ecocentric application.

²⁷ In Smith’s examples, this is clear from his use of the term “we” when discussing sympathy, even with the dead, as well as his use of the term “spectator,” when he explains that “the compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation and . . . was at the same time able to regard it with his present reason and judgment” (I.i.1.11, p. 12).

²⁸ Smith’s approach to taking the interests of nature seriously is similar in some respects to that of Paul Taylor, who argues,

We can also take on the standpoint of a plant and judge what happens to it as being good or bad from its standpoint. To do this would involve our using as the standard of evaluation the preservation or promotion of the plant’s own good. Anyone who has ever taken care of flowers, shrubs, or trees will know what these things mean. (68)

Like Taylor, Smithian sympathy involves taking on the standpoint of the object of sympathy. But unlike Taylor, Smith is not committed to thinking that the plant itself actually has anything like a standpoint. Plants are non-sentient, and thus to talk of the standpoint of the plant can really only mean the standpoint that a human takes when that human tries to look at the world the way she, the human, would see it. This Smithian approach lowers the meta-ethical burden of proof. Taylor needs to show that the “plant’s own good” is an objective good, something that the gardener recognizes. Otherwise, it can play no significant role in his ethics. But Smith need only show that the gardener does ascribe something like a good to the plant, and that any reasonable gardener would do this. And that is much easier to show.

²⁹ For further accounts of the rules governing sympathy, see Campbell 1971: 98-101 and Griswold 1999: 122-4. It is worth pointing out that Smith refers to these laws as “regularities” or what “generally” occurs. For Smith, these should not be understood as *exceptionless* laws. For the sake of convenience, it is helpful to think of these regularities as laws, but one must not think that they apply necessarily.

³⁰ As in the case of the dead, this is another example of sympathy with a human being, and this is a disanalogy with the case of nature. If it lives to adulthood, the child will be capable of feeling the sentiments the mother feels in sympathy with it. But as in the case of the dead, Smith does not appeal to the humanity of the infant in explaining the mother’s sympathy for it. Because he does not give principled reasons for limiting his examples to human beings, Smith does not preclude and might even invite an application of his ethics beyond the human examples he in fact gives.

³¹ The fact that *anthropomorphic* sympathy is ethically relevant suggests that hierarchies of goods are not necessarily based on what people, animals, and non-sentient beings can *actually* feel, but based on what sympathetic *spectators* feel when imagining themselves in the situation of those entities. Thus, for example, pigs awaiting slaughter and being forced to watch their fellows be brutally killed may or may not be capable of anticipating their own death in the way that human beings would, but a human sympathizer imagining herself in the place of those pigs would *certainly* experience the pains of that anticipation. This helps explain, in part, why certain ways of killing animals are so horrible.

³² This account of social passions is slightly different than that presented in section one. There I focused

on the way in which sympathy for the object of a passion – say, for the object of benevolence – can give rise to a redoubled sympathy with the person who has that passion. Smith generally treats the redoubled sympathy of social passions in this way, as a strict combination of two sympathies. But he sometimes suggests that the redoubling need not specifically involve two sympathies. Any “interest” that an impartial spectator is “obliged” to take, whether this interest derives from sympathy or not, will redouble sympathy with an agent who shares that interest. Here I use this more general sense of social passions.

³³ A full discussion of the psychological bases of this tendency depends on a detailed treatment of Smith’s philosophy of science and philosophy of religion. Here I give only enough detail to show how a Smithian account of anthropomorphizing nature could fit into a Smithian environmental ethic.

³⁴ The underlying psychological account of why one has these tendencies is rooted in Smith’s philosophy of science, according to which one develops habits of thought based on regularities in nature, such that one is disturbed by any irregularities.

Smith acknowledges in both TMS and the “History of Astronomy” that “the least reflection . . . corrects this sentiment” (TMS II.iii.1.1, p. 94) or that the sentiment is “checked by reflection” (EPS.Astr.ii.2, p. 49). And the role of *irregularity* is important for Smith (“it is the irregular events of nature only that are ascribed to the agency and power of their gods” (EPS.Astr.ii.2, p. 49)), but this implies that scientific progress, which explains irregularities in terms of underlying regularities, erodes the anthropomorphizing of nature. I take up these points in the next section.

³⁵ Smith did know Hume, and there are deep connections between the philosophies of religion of the two thinkers. For more, see Pack 1995.

³⁶ The “History of Ancient Physics” was an unfinished essay, and Smith may well have written more to show the natural development of this Stoic theology into properly Christian theology. But the fact that he ends with the Stoics, and especially the fact that the progression of theology goes *from* a separate Creator *to* God as an animate principle of Nature itself, is provocative to say the least. For further discussion of Smith’s relationship with orthodox Christianity, see Pack 1995, Fitzgibbons 1995:25-44, and Campbell 225-33.

³⁷ In a post-Darwinian context, one cannot apply purposes in the strict (Aristotelian) sense to Nature. But purposes in that sense do not even apply to individual organisms. The point is that the functional coordination of parts of an ecosystem bears enough similarity to the functional organization of organisms to justify some degree of anthropomorphism of Nature.

³⁸ See Brandom 1998 and Sober/Wilson 1994.

³⁹ See footnotes 4 and 9, and my {author’s article}.

⁴⁰ It is important to note here that not all people today find these ideas absurd, and it may be no accident that animism, paganism, and polytheism are often closely linked with environmentalism.

⁴¹ See e.g. Callicott 1999:244 for why this would be offensive. See too Plumwood 1993 and 1996, Gruen 1993, and Griffin 1978.

⁴² Katie McShane has put this last point well, pointing out that “metaphysical misfits” and “oddballs stand a good chance of being left out” of an account of environmental ethics based on nature’s similarity to us. (See McShane (unpublished manuscript).)

⁴³ Whereas Smith uses the term “illusive,” which suggests only that things are not represented exactly as they are in reality, Griswold goes further and calls this sympathy “*deceptive*” (90), a term which implies moral disapprobation. Later (Griswold 1999: 222, 262) Griswold uses this term in a different context to refer to the illusion of imagination that leads people to think of the wealthy as being happy, and thereby leads them to seek riches. In *that* context, Smith does seem to think that there is something deceptive about the illusion of imagination. Smith refers to this tendency to overvalue riches as a “*deception* which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind” (IV.I.10, p. 183, emphasis added). To the best of my knowledge, however, Smith never uses the term “deceptive” when discussing sympathy for the dead.

⁴⁴ There is a sense in which this must be qualified, and which may allow for some significant difference between sympathy with the dead and other kinds of sympathy. Griswold distinguishes between two sorts

of sympathy. The “narrow sense” of sympathy is “an emotion” that comes from imagining oneself in the place of another. A “broader . . . sense,” which Griswold misleadingly calls a “Smithian sense,” of sympathy “is . . . the means through which emotions are conveyed and understood,” which Griswold associates with entering into the position of the other. (This is misleading because, as Griswold realizes elsewhere, the narrow sense is just as Smithian as the broad one.) Given this distinction, we might say that all forms of sympathy involve a certain amount of selfishness in narrow sympathy, since one’s reactions to imagining oneself in the place of another are always affected by one’s human nature and the laws that govern that nature. But in the case of the dead, these laws of human nature also affect one’s ability to sympathize in the broader sense, since one does not *fully* enter imaginatively into the place of the other. A full discussion of this distinction and its implications for the case of the dead is beyond the scope of this discussion. Here I will note only that the distinction between broad and narrow sympathy is not one that Smith himself draws, and Smith does not seem to think that there is a hard distinction between limits on the capacity to imagine oneself in the place of another and limits on one’s reactions to imagining oneself in that place. Neither sort of limit is treated as introducing any ethically suspect sort of selfishness into one’s sympathy, as long as the limits are based on general laws governing human nature rather than idiosyncratic or partial aspects of oneself.

⁴⁵ Cf. VII.iv.5, II.i.5.11, I.i.3.1, III.1.3; 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” (I.i.1.2). As a means of introducing sympathy, this approach is quite effective, but it causes confusion when Smith discusses the comparison one 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.

⁴⁶ Recall the discussion of sympathy in the basic sense, proper sympathy, and complete sympathy in section three.

⁴⁷ Griswold seems to address this point. He explains,

Because one can sympathize with almost any passion, it must be possible to sympathize with someone and *not* approve of them, not even be “sympathetic” in the narrow sense of the term. Sympathy does not preclude a spectator’s fellow feeling with an actor’s selfish passions. Indeed, Smith’s theory of sympathy allows that one could “sympathize” with an agent’s selfish passions, recognize that one’s own passions would under similar circumstances resemble those of the agent (a recognition that would require one to “sympathize” with oneself), and then condemn both the agent and (hypothetically, as it were) oneself for having inappropriately self-centered passions. In sum, sympathy is not to be equated with approval; that would destroy the possibility of ethical evaluation and entail that disapproval amounts to no more than the inability of a spectator to empathize with an actor.

But the cases in which one can sympathize (or fail to sympathize) and not approve (or approve) are extraordinary; they are cases in which one recognizes that one’s sympathies *would* be different but for some contingent circumstances (Smith’s example is one who does not laugh at a funny joke because they are too depressed). In general, for Smith, sympathy and moral approval are the same thing, but neither is necessarily connected with views about one would feel in a situation, and sympathetic need not be identical with (in fact is usually different from, at least in degree) what the person principally concerned feels.

⁴⁸ Of course, there might be other strategies for defending the special demerit associated with murder. One could defend punishing murders severely on the grounds of the utility of such harsh punishments for the good of society. Smith explicitly allows for such consideration in his discussion of military

discipline, for example (see II.ii.3.11, p. 90). Or one could appeal to the suffering of friends and relatives of the victim, as Smith suggests in his discussion of the demerit of murder (II.i.2.5, p. 71). These are both indirect approaches to arguing for punishment, however, and they lose both the elegance of Smith's account and the intuitive sense that murder is worse than assault for the victim him- or herself.

⁴⁹ Even insofar as "superstition" imagines "ghosts which . . . rise from their graves to demand vengeance upon those [murderers] who brought them to an untimely end," this superstition is the *result*, not the cause, of "the natural sympathy with the imaginary resentment of the slain" (II.i.3.1, p. 71). Smith refers to that sympathetic resentment as the "origin," not the effect, of these superstitious beliefs. Similarly, Smith suggests that the animism that postulates "the Dryads . . . of the ancients, a sort of genii of trees" is "first suggested by" one's natural gratitude towards trees, a sentiment "which seemed unreasonable if there was nothing animated about them" (II.iii.1.2, p. 94). In both cases, the superstitious beliefs *follow from* natural sentiments, rather than providing a basis for them. Because Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* provides other bases for the legitimacy of these sentiments, his readers need no longer adhere to the superstitions of the ancients. In that sense, although Smith sometimes associates superstition with "ignorance and darkness" (III.5.4, p. 164), he does not claim that the sentiments that *prompt* such superstition are to be rejected, and in several contexts (e.g. II.i.2.2, II.ii.3.12, II.iii.1.2) even specifically supports the sentiments that "superstition" seeks to explain. In {author's unpublished manuscript}, I discuss in more detail Smith's complex treatment of superstition as a set of false beliefs supporting what is usually a legitimate and proper sentiment or disposition.

⁵⁰ One might imagine two quite different cases of this. For one case, a benefactor might be so generous that she advances the interests of her beneficiary – say, by arranging for gainful employment – without the beneficiary even being aware of this. Here a spectator would feel a sympathetic gratitude that the beneficiary is incapable of feeling (because of ignorance), although one would probably not, in this case, judge the beneficiary's lack of gratitude as improper, because one would not feel such gratitude if one were similarly ignorant. For another case, a person might be the knowing beneficiary of a genuine benefit but have such a self-centered or misanthropic heart that he cannot feel any gratitude for it. Here one would not only feel gratitude that the person principally concerned cannot feel, but one would judge the person's lack of gratitude to be improper, precisely because it does not match one's own.

⁵¹ For examples of this, see Varner 1998 (especially p. 10) and Norton 1988, 1991 (Norton argues that Leopold himself has this kind of view). These thinkers distinguish between "ethical holists," who ascribe intrinsic value to nature itself, and "practical holists," who treat ecosystems *as if* they are wholes.

⁵² Smith does acknowledge that "reflection" can *affect* one's sentiments. He says, for example, that although "we are angry, for a moment, even at the stone that hurts us, . . . the least reflection corrects this sentiment" (II.ii.1.1, p. 94). Even in these sorts of cases, however, reflection can only go so far in correcting our sentiments. "The sailor who, as soon as he got ashore, should mend his fire with the plank upon which he had just escaped from a shipwreck, would seem to be guilty of a most unnatural action" (II.ii.1.2, p. 94). In any case, one's sentiments are neither determined nor directed by reflection, even if reflection can have some effect on them. In that sense, Smith adamantly rejects the view that one's feelings are wholly guided by reason.

⁵³ Of course, the question of what *beliefs* about nature are appropriate is not settled by the recognition that some sort of sympathy with nature is morally proper. Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* even provides a way to see the legitimacy of those feelings *without* superstitiously postulating actual feelings in natural wholes. See too fn 49.

⁵⁴ {Acknowledgments footnote deleted for anonymity}