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Draft 2

Counterfactual Causal Reasoning in Smithian Sympathy¹

1. Thesis and introduction

In this paper I argue that the workings of (anything but extremely simple) sympathetic judgment(s) in Smith presuppose and crucially depend on counterfactual causal reasoning in the sympathetic process.² I assume this will surprise many readers and scholars of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS),³ who tend to understand Smithian sympathy primarily in terms of (a-causal) feeling and fellow-feeling. For example, early in TMS Smith writes, “Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others. Sympathy, though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever.” (TMS 1.1.1.6, 10) This seems to imply that sympathy is primarily something felt. In what follows I do not deny that the outcome of sympathetic process is in the first instance a feeling. But this is compatible with my claim that the process itself crucially relies on counter-factual causal reasoning within the imagination.

My interest is not merely to call attention to the nature of the sympathetic process. For once we notice the sympathetic process involves extremely rapid (perhaps almost sub-conscious) counterfactual reasoning about causes, that is, it is an instance of (habitual) causal reasoning – and in particular that Smith insists that we understand moral agents as causes and moral situations as effects, the situation is ripe for a reevaluation of Smith’s moral philosophy more generally. So, a sub-text of this paper that I will not argue for, but hope to make plausible, is that the brilliant recent Kantian inspired readings of Smith – Fleischacker, Carrasco, Montes, Darwall⁴ – systematically overlook an important aspect of Smith’s moral philosophy; that as moral creatures we understand ourselves as causes and belonging to causal chains.

In particular I commit to four, related claims: (i) that according to Smith that the sympathetic process depends on a type of causal reasoning that goes well beyond the kind of simulationist theory standardly attributed to him;⁵ (ii) that the Smithian imagination in the sympathetic process works by way of counterfactual reasoning and that even the feelings we ought to feel

¹ I thank audiences at Antwerpen University and University of Illinois, Chicago, especially Steve Darwall, Bence Nanay, Wim Lemmens, Kate Abramsom, Sam Fleischacker, and, most of all Warren Herold for very helpful critical comments on earlier versions of this paper. Finally, I am grateful to Ryan Hanley for half a life-time (and counting) of intellectual friendship.

² I rely on a distinction between the sympathetic process which takes place in the imagination of moral agents and spectators and the outcomes of sympathy (e.g., a feeling of pleasure, a motive to action, a judgment, etc); Smith tends to use “sympathy” for both, but context tends to help disambiguate the two. See L. Montes (2004) *Adam Smith in Context: A Critical Reassessment of Some Central Components of His Thought* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

³ In deference to recent custom, I refer to the paragraph and page-numbers of the Glasgow edition, but I much prefer Hanley’s annotations in the Penguin edition.

⁴ Samuel Fleischacker, (1999) *A Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment and Freedom in Kant and Adam Smith* Princeton: Princeton University Press; Maria Carrasco (2004) “Adam Smith’s Reconstruction of Practical Reason,” *Review of Metaphysics* 58: 81–116; Stephen Darwall (2006) *The Second-person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, And Accountability*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, especially chapters 3 and 7.

⁵ Darwall (2006), p. 45 n. 12.

as a consequence of the sympathetic process need not be actual, but counterfactual; (iii) that Smithian agents are non-trivially understood as belonging to the causal order of nature;⁶ (iv) that Smithian judgments of propriety are intrinsically judgments about the proportionality of causal relations.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I present evidence for what I take to be the standard feeling-focused reading of Smithian sympathetic process and outcome—one that emphasizes the mutual modulation of feelings between spectator and moral agents. In section three, I provide evidence for the claim that the sympathetic process crucially involves counterfactual causal reasoning. One important feature of my argument is that this is so in what I take to be the paradigmatic or exemplary form of sympathy—what based on some of Smith’s terminology we may call “perfect sympathy.” In final section I discuss the role of counterfactual reasoning within the sympathetic process.

2. Sympathetic process (feelings)

The standard feeling-focused reading of the Smithian sympathetic process has plenty of evidence in Smith’s text.⁷ Take for example, this passage:

“In order to produce this concord, as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continually placing themselves in his situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs, and thence conceiving some degree of that coolness about his own fortune, with which he is sensible that they will view it...As their sympathy makes them look at it, in some measure, with his eyes, so his sympathy makes him look at it, in some measure, with theirs, especially when in their presence and acting under their observation: and as the reflected passion, which he thus conceives, is much weaker than the original one, it necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before he came into their presence, before he began to recollect in what manner they would be affected by it, and to view his situation in this candid and impartial light.” (TMS 1.1.4.8, 22)

Here is a way to capture the sequential nature of this process: following (T0) (i) an intensely/passionately felt moral situation which is experienced or observed empirically by (ii) spectators and moral agents, who place themselves in each other situations, by way of the imagination and this involves (iii) a sympathetic mutual modulation (informed, perhaps, by observations about how the other is reacting), which, in turn, produces (iv) a conceived reflected passion within each participant in the sympathetic process and this (v) alters the intensity of the feelings of the participants in the process; after several rounds of this, perhaps, this produces (vi) fellow feeling (sympathy) among spectator and persons principally concerned.

⁶ A companion piece, Eric Schliesser (forthcoming) “On Seeing Oneself as a Moral Cause: Smith, Moral Luck, and the Piacular” *Nature and Normativity*, eds. Martin Lenz & Anik Waldow, Springer, argues more at length for commitment (iii). See, for example, the very lucid account by James Otteson (2002) *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press), chapter 1.

⁷ Given that Otteson understands Smithian sympathy in terms of human sociability it is understandable that he tends to focus on sentiments in his treatment of (what he takes to be three kinds of usages of ‘sympathy’ within Smith). See also Darwall op. cit.

I distinguish among the following three different ways in which causation matters here. [A] The sequence from i-vi is not merely temporal, but, of course, causal (i.e., Smith “to produce,” “makes,” “necessarily abates” etc.). But while it is non-trivial background fact, this causal sequence is not what I focus on. Rather, I focus primarily on [B] the (counterfactual) reasoning about causes within different steps in this sequence. That is, in the absence of such reasoning about causes, the sequence i-vi will only produce what Smith calls merely “extremely imperfect” sympathy (TMS 1.1.1.9, 11). I also suggest that [C] this reasoning is itself a form of mental causation (akin to natural relations in Humean association in the imagination; see *Treatise* 1.1.4 & 1.3.14.31.)⁸

Now, one nice feature of the standard feeling-focused analysis of Smithian sympathy is that the process and outcome of sympathy form a seamless whole, which is really about the transformation of feelings by way of the passions. This is nicely illustrated by this passage in Smith: “our propensity to sympathize with joy is much stronger than our propensity to sympathize with sorrow; and that our fellow-feeling for the agreeable emotion approaches much more nearly to the vivacity of what is naturally felt by the persons principally concerned, than that which we conceive for the painful one,” (TMS 1.3.5, 44)

The standard reading resonates with what we may call a ‘Humean reading’ of Smithian sympathy. By this I do not mean just the focus on feelings, but also the significance of what has come to be known as the “contagion” model of the transmission of sympathy in Hume’s *Treatise* (e.g., 3.3.2.2). In Hume and Smith, the sympathetic process by way of the imagination transforms one conceived feeling in a related kind of feeling (cf. in Hume the sympathetic process is “the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination” (*Treatise* 2.3.6.8). Of course, while in Hume relative dull ideas are turned, as it were, back into vivacious impressions (that is, the sympathetic process is always vivifying), in Smith emotions are turned into reflected passions (and in Smith this is only sometimes vivifying). This is not the place to develop a richer analysis of Hume’s account of the varieties of sympathy, but my paper supplement Sam Fleischacker’s important arguments on the differences between Hume and Smith.⁹ For, despite such differences Smith just *feels* Humean.

3. Sympathy and Knowledge of Causal Relations

Consider the following passage in TMS:

There are some 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.... The general idea of good or bad fortune, therefore, creates some concern for the person who has met with it, but the general idea of provocation excites no sympathy with the anger of the man who has received it. Nature, it seems, teaches us to be

⁸ Here I remain agnostic on how to understand the metaphysics of causation in Hume and Smith. Recently, in the wake of considerable revisionary literature on Hume and the status of natural beliefs, Ryan Hanley has advocated a so-called skeptical-realist reading of Smith in “Skepticism and naturalism in Adam Smith” *The Philosophy of Adam Smith: The Adam Smith Review, Volume 5; Essays Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of The Theory of Moral* edited by Vivienne Brown and Samuel Fleischacker, London Routledge. I had hoped to forestall such an interpretation of Smith in Eric Schliesser (2005) “Realism in the Face of Scientific Revolutions: Adam Smith on Newton’s “Proof” of Copernicanism,” *British Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13(4): 687-732.

⁹ See Fleischacker’s brilliant treatment (2012) “Sympathy in Hume and Smith: A Contrast, Critique, and Reconstruction,” *Intersubjectivity and Objectivity in Adam Smith and Edmund Husserl*, edited by Christel Fricke and Dagfin Føllesdal, Frankfurt: Onto Verlag.

more averse to enter into this passion, and, till informed of its cause, to be disposed rather to take part against it. Even our sympathy with the grief or joy of another, before we are informed of the cause of either, is always extremely imperfect (TMS 1.1.1.7-9, 11)

In context Smith's claim that what we might label 'instinctual sympathy' only goes so far. In some contexts without knowledge of the causal circumstances that produce the passions in the agent concerned the sympathetic process will always lead to what Smith calls "imperfect sympathy." It seems to follow from Smith's account adopted terminology that there exists some (non-instinctual) sequence that leads to perfect, or at least much less imperfect sympathy. It can be described as follows: following (T0) (i) an intensely/passionately felt moral situation which is experienced or observed empirically by (ii) spectators and moral agents, who place themselves in each other situations, by way of the imagination including (ii*) knowledge of (moral) causes that gave rise to the moral situation, and this involves (iii) a sympathetic mutual modulation (informed, perhaps, by observations about how the other is reacting), which, in turn, produces (iv) a conceived reflected passion within each participant in the sympathetic process and this (v) alters the intensity of the feelings of the participants in the process; after several rounds of this, perhaps, this produces (vi) fellow feeling (sympathy) among spectator and persons principally concerned.

The addition of (ii*) is not ad hoc. It reflects significant currents in Smith's thinking about moral evaluation and moral agency. Consider a standard summary that Smith provides about the natures of propriety and impropriety, on the one hand, and merit or demerit, on the other hand:

It has already been observed [TMS 1.1.3.5, 18--ES], that the sentiment or affection of the heart, from which any action proceeds, and upon which its whole virtue or vice depends, may be considered under two different aspects, or in two different relations: first, in relation to the cause or object which excites it; and, secondly, in relation to the end which it proposes, or to the effect which it tends to produce: that upon the suitability or unsuitableness, upon the proportion or disproportion, which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it, depends the propriety or impropriety, the decency or ungracefulness of the consequent action; and that upon the beneficial or hurtful effects which the affection proposes or tends to produce, depends the merit or demerit, the good or ill desert of the action to which it gives occasion. (TMS 2.1.Intro.2, 67)

There is a lot going on here and I am not going to provide even the semblance of a full treatment of Smithian concept of propriety (or merit). All I claim is that causal relations are constitutive of the nature of both Smithian propriety and merit. That is, the two central Smithian moral judgments can be characterized schematically in the following temporal sequence: (u) an exciting cause, which produces (v) a sentiment of heart, which leads to (w) an action and (x) its foreseeable effects, and, of course, (y) the actual effects produced by (w). Now, first, in judgments of propriety and impropriety, which are principally concerned with judgments of situations, are judgments of the proportion among (u)-(v)-(w)-(x). Meanwhile, second, merit and demerit, which are fundamentally judgments of character focus on the proportion among (v)-(w)-(y). These two sequences are fundamentally causal in nature (i.e., "excites," the effect it produces, etc).

Of course, the previous paragraph is a gross simplification and ignores considerable complexity in Smith's treatment of propriety (etc.). But it is crucial for my argument that in describing the content of our moral judgments, Smith introduces the language of causal

relations. In particular, when we make a moral judgment we do so after mentally inspecting, as it were, the proportionality of the relata that enter a cause-effect relation.¹⁰

As an aside, one might think that Smith's terminology provides further evidence for his Humean debts. And indeed, Smith's terminology echoes the manner in which Hume treats the natural relation of cause and effect at *Treatise* 1.1.4. (See also Smith's treatment at *The History of Astronomy* 2.2-7.) There is no doubt that at first sight Smith is deploying a Humean framework about the nature of causation here—in which causes are regular successions of a certain sort.¹¹ But, upon reflection, Smith also subtly diverges from Hume.¹² For, Hume accepts the following position, “An effect always holds proportion with its cause” (“Of Interest,” *EMPL*, 297). Elsewhere, I have dubbed this “Hume's ninth rule” (because it follows from the conjunction of Hume's fourth and seventh (out of eight) “rules by which to judge of causes and effects” (*Treatise* 1.3.15)).¹³ So, Smith's position is that when Hume's ninth rule *obtains*, we are inclined to make judgments of propriety and merit. But he is absolutely clear that in our moral life the ninth rule regularly does not hold—it is not as if judgments of impropriety need to be rare. Or to put the point of this aside somewhat differently: Smith thinks that moral causes and effects can be monstrously out of proportion and this is something that is much harder to incorporate into Hume's framework.¹⁴

I return to the main thrust of my argument that the addition of (ii*) is not ad hoc and that it reflects significant currents in Smith's thinking about moral evaluation and moral agency. There is a striking passage where Smith suggests we ought, in fact, to see ourselves, at least in part, as moral causes:

“A man of humanity, who accidentally, and without the smallest degree of blamable negligence, has been the cause of the death of another man, feels himself piacular, though not guilty. During his whole life he considers this accident as one of the greatest misfortunes that could have befallen him. If the family of the slain is poor, and he himself in tolerable circumstances, he immediately takes them under his protection, and, without any other merit, thinks them entitled to every degree of favour and kindness. If they are in better circumstances, he endeavours by every submission, by every expression of sorrow, by rendering them every good office which he can devise or they accept of, to atone for what has happened, and to propitiate, as much as possible, their, perhaps natural, though no doubt most unjust resentment, for the great, though involuntary, offence which he has given them,” (TMS 2.3.3.4; cf.2.3.3.5.)

If we are part of a voluntary cause-effect sequence then the categories of propriety/guilt and merit/demerit are appropriate. If, however, we are part of an involuntary cause-effect sequence then the category of the piacular is appropriate. Now, the further details of Smith's fascinating treatment of the piacular need not concern us here; what matter is that it is not an aberration in TMS. He repeats his analysis (with interesting complications) at 7.4.30.¹⁵

¹⁰ In this paper I leave unanalyzed what “proportionality” is according to Smith.

¹¹ As noted above this claim is made while remaining agnostic about the so-called New Hume debate.

¹² In older scholarship on Smith, Smith tends to be systematically read as a Humean. My position echoes more recent claims by Hanley, *op cit*, and Fleischacker (2012) in focusing on how Smith employs and subverts Hume's categories.

¹³ For more discussion, see Eric Schliesser <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-newton/#RulRea>>

¹⁴ Not impossible, of course, Hume does occasionally resort to the language of barbarism after all.

¹⁵ I develop this argument in Schliesser (forthcoming).

It is not the main purpose of this paper to explore to what extent Smith encourages moral agents to think of their own activity in causal terms when we are sympathizing and making judgments of others and ourselves. At TMS 1.1.3.5, 18 and 2.1.Intro.2, 67, Smith privileges the language of causal relations to explain and summarize his position; motives are identified as causes and ends as consequences. Yet, Smith does not provide evidence that our moral phenomenology views our moral situations in terms of causal relations, and he seems to be cautious in actively promoting the view. I speculate that this is so because Smith is aware that even though “in accounting for the operations of bodies, we never fail to distinguish...the efficient from the final cause, in accounting for those of the mind we are very apt to confound these two different things with one another.” (TMS II.ii.3.5, 87)¹⁶ Given our ordinary tendency to confound final and efficient causation, Smith may have been reluctant to promote his theoretical perspective on his readers. If that is right, then I have identified a rare instance where Smith’s theoretical stance has very clearly infiltrated his first-order treatment.¹⁷

4. Counterfactual reasoning in the Sympathetic Process.

Earlier I offered a partial quote from TMS 1.1.4.8, 22. I now reproduce the full passage:

In order to produce this concord, as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continually placing themselves in his situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs, and thence conceiving some degree of that coolness about his own fortune, with which he is sensible that they will view it. *As they are constantly considering what they themselves would feel, if they actually were the sufferers, so he is as constantly led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he was only one of the spectators of his own situation.* As their sympathy makes them look at it, in some measure, with his eyes, so his sympathy makes him look at it, in some measure, with theirs, especially when in their presence and acting under their observation: and as the reflected passion, which he thus conceives, is much weaker than the original one, it necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before he came into their presence, before he began to recollect in what manner they would be affected by it, and to view his situation in this candid and impartial light. (TMS 1.1.4.8, 22; emphases added to highlight the text originally omitted.)

I offer two claims on the emphasized part of the passage. First, Smith explains that when we imaginatively place ourselves in each other’s situations, we do so by counterfactual analysis. This is crucial for my overall analysis in this paper. Second, in addition, my speculative gloss on Smith’s “constantly” is that Smith means to convey that we do so very rapidly and almost unconsciously. If that is right, I am inclined to interpret the sympathetic process as relying on some kind of unconscious habit (similar, but not identical to, the associative habits that rely Humean natural relations).

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of this passage in TMS (which is directed at Hume’s position), see Spencer J. Pack & E. Schliesser (2006) “Adam Smith’s ‘Humean’ Criticism of Hume’s Account of Origin of Justice,” *Journal for the History of Philosophy* 44(1): 47-63.

¹⁷ For more on this issue see E. Schliesser (2006a) “Adam Smith’s Benevolent and Self-Interested Conception of Philosophy.” In: *New Voices on Adam Smith*. L. Montes and E. Schliesser, eds., London: Routledge.

We need, therefore, to rewrite the sequence of steps in the sympathetic process: following (T0) (i) an intensely/passionately felt moral situation which is experienced or observed empirically (ii+) by way of (potentially very rapid) counterfactual reasoning within the imagination about causal processes involving persons and situations, spectators and moral agents place themselves in each other situations, including (ii*) knowledge of (moral) causes that gave rise to the moral situation, and this involves (iii) a sympathetic mutual modulation (informed, perhaps, by observations about how the other is reacting), which, in turn, produces (iv) a conceived reflected passion within each participant in the sympathetic process and this (v) alters the intensity of the feelings of the participants in the process; after several rounds of this, perhaps, this produces (vi) fellow feeling (sympathy) among spectator and persons principally concerned.

Once one pays attention to it, Smith's moral philosophy is suffused by the significance of counterfactual reasoning. I quote two prominent passages: "As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation." (TMS 1.1.1.2, 9) "the brother is upon the rack". "We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality..." (TMS 1.1.1.10-11, 12; "the calamity of the poor wretch")

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In fact, Smith explicitly allows that the sympathetic process can be counterfactual all the way down: "No actual correspondence of sentiments, therefore, is here required. It is sufficient that if he was grateful, they would correspond; and 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." (TMS 2.1.5.9)

I have relied on many of the same passages from TMS familiar in the existing secondary literature on the significance of the (sympathetic) imagination in Smith. My treatment has gone beyond this scholarship by offering an analysis of the counter-factual, causal process that makes Smithian sympathy work. As Warren Herold pointed out to me, I have, in fact, understated the role of counterfactuals in the sympathetic process; it "also makes use of what might be called counterfactual identities or personal profiles." Moreover, he rightly claims that according to Smith "we identify the relevant counterfactuals not before engaging in the process, but during it by exploring the extent and limitations of our capacity for imaginative

engagement with feelings that are not our own.”¹⁸ Here I have not attempted to offer an account that can do justice to these complexities.

Even so, I have called attention to the significance of the fact that when we make a moral judgment we do so after mentally inspecting, as it were, the proportionality of the relata that enter a cause-effect relation. It seems, then, that we are also capable of including or supplying non-factual relata to this judgment.

14 October 2012
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¹⁸ Warren Herold (ms) “Love, Counterfactual Reasoning, and Adam Smith’s Account of Sympathy: Comments on Schliesser and Hanley,” Adam Smith: Philosophical Perspectives, University of Illinois at Chicago May 17, 2012.