

Adam Smith's Cosmopolitan Liberalism: Taste, Political Economy, and Objectification

Brianne Wolf, James Madison College at Michigan State University

The cosmopolitan character of liberalism has been debated since its beginnings. The status of mercantilism, colonialism, and market relations is central to this debate. While most scholars agree that among eighteenth-century thinkers in the liberal tradition, Adam Smith is remarkably anti-colonial on both moral and economic grounds, they do not engage his theory of taste as part of his normative critique of the mercantilist and colonial projects and argument for free trade. Smith's theory of taste, largely developed in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *History of Astronomy*, highlights the importance he placed on connecting with distant others despite the limitations of sympathy. I argue that for Smith, aesthetic judgment acts as an impetus to moral judgment because taste can overcome barriers to sympathy. However, taste has a dual-nature in Smith's political economy. Bad taste widens the sympathetic gap. I show that the framework of taste in Smith's moral theory applied to mercantilism and colonization demonstrates that substituting poor aesthetic judgment—love of order instead of true beauty—for sympathy objectifies distant others and prevents them from developing moral judgment through freely engaging in the market and sympathetic interaction.

Keywords: Adam Smith, liberalism, mercantilism, colonialism, aesthetic judgment, moral judgment

The question of whether it is possible to connect with distant others has plagued liberalism from its beginnings. As Uday Mehta states, "liberalism has come to represent, even in its original motivation, political thought that was cosmopolitan in

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Polity* for their comments which greatly improved the piece. I also want to thank Rick Avramenko, Thomas Bunting, Ryan Hanley, Maria Pia Paganelli, Michael Promisel, Dennis Rasmussen, Michelle Schwarze, Seth Marvyn-Vanderryn, Caroline Burdick, and Patricia Freitag as well as the participants in the Adam Smith Fellowship paper workshop at Liberty Fund for their helpful feedback on different stages of the paper. All remaining errors are of course my own.

Published online August 18, 2022.

Polity, volume 54, number 4, October 2022.

© 2022 Northeastern Political Science Association. All rights reserved. Published by The University of Chicago Press for the Northeastern Political Science Association. <https://doi.org/10.1086/721233>

its imagination and potential reach.”¹ The cosmopolitan character of liberalism is particularly at issue when we consider the potential of the market to build social bonds. Scholars advocate the morality of markets because markets can interest us in distant others² and cause us to behave better because we are interacting with strangers.³ Yet many argue that liberalism fails to meet its universalist, pluralist claims given its ties to mercantilism and colonialism. There is a growing body of scholarship on the status of empire in the liberal tradition. Some argue that “liberalism contains contradictory impulses” but is inextricably bound up with colonialism.⁴ Others assert that liberal theory should be evaluated on its own merits whether it can accommodate diversity and difference.⁵ Scholars agree that “Locke’s hands were dirty” with colonialism because of his investments in the Royal Africa Company, but debate whether his writings justify slavery.⁶ Similarly, Edmund Burke’s status as a liberal or conservative is questioned regarding his support for imperialism.⁷ The advocate of the potential of both markets and sympathy to connect us, Adam Smith, has also been subject to this examination with many scholars arguing that his discussion of both colonialism and the laboring poor point to his status as a social liberal who cares about the dignity and equality of humankind.⁸ Some scholars argue

1. Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 36.

2. Virgil Henry Storr and Ginny Seung Choi, *Do Markets Corrupt Our Morals?* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).; and James R. Otteson, *Adam Smith’s Marketplace of Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

3. Maria Pia Paganelli, “The Moralizing Role of Distance in Adam Smith: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as Possible Praise of Commerce,” *History of Political Economy* 42 (2010): 425–41.

4. Bhiku Parekh, “Liberalism and Colonialism: A Critique of Locke and Mill,” in *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge, and Power*, ed. Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhiku Parekh (London: Zed Books, 1995), 82.

5. Inder S. Marwah, *Liberalism, Diversity and Domination: Kant, Mill and the Government of Difference* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

6. James Farr, “Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery,” *Political Theory* 36 (2008): 495–522. For more on Locke as anti-slavery see Holly Brewer, “Slavery, Sovereignty, and “Inheritable Blood”: Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery,” *The American Historical Review* 122 (2017): 1038–78. For an argument that Locke supported slavery in the Constitution of Carolina and his financial ties to the Royal Africa Company see Brad Hinselwood, “The Carolinian Context of John Locke’s Theory of Slavery,” *Political Theory* 41 (2013): 562–90.

7. For the conservative argument see: Daniel I. O’Neill, “Rethinking Burke and India,” *History of Political Thought* 30 (2009): 492–523. For the liberal argument see: Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*.

8. See Samuel Fleischacker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).; Stephen Darwall, “Sympathetic Liberalism: Recent Work on

that Smith denounces colonial rule on economic and sympathetic grounds,⁹ and intends to disrupt his readers' complacency toward the actions of the British empire with irony,¹⁰ while others contest that this cosmopolitanism is inauthentic and comes from his aristocratic status in society,¹¹ or that he did not extend sympathy to European emigrants and cannot be considered a liberal.¹²

What is at stake in this conversation about cosmopolitan liberalism is whether it is possible to connect with distant others in a liberal society without objectifying them. In the eighteenth century, sympathy was the predominant solution to overcoming differences caused by a shifting social order.¹³ Yet it has shortcomings, namely requiring other-directedness. Though sympathy is the essential capacity necessary for fostering moral sentiments in his theory, Smith recognized it was limited. Despite this problem referred to as the sympathetic gap, Smith still thinks it possible and desirable to connect with individuals who are geographically, culturally, and socially distant. This paper turns to taste to show how aesthetic judgment can open avenues for sympathizing with others and in doing so, improve moral judgment and work to prevent a political economy that objectifies others. In Smith's theory, taste has been recognized as a driving force for the development of society,¹⁴ motivator for human beings to understand the order of the world around them, including the moral order,¹⁵ parallel to moral judgment,¹⁶ and as a possibly dangerous

Adam Smith," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 28 (1999): 139–64.; and Remy Debes, "Adam Smith on Dignity and Equality," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20 (2012): 109–40.

9. Emma Rothschild, "Adam Smith in the British Empire," in *Empire and Modern Political Thought*, ed. Sankar Muthu (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

10. Jennifer Pitts, "Irony in Adam Smith's Critical Global History," *Political Theory* 45 (2017): 141–63.

11. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*.

12. Donald Winch, "Adam Smith's Colonial Politics," originally published as *Libéralisme a l'épreuve*; Adam Smith et l'économie coloniale, ed. F. Démier and D. Diatkine, *Cahiers d'économie politique* 27–28, (L'Harmattan, 1996): 39–55, available at: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/intellectual-history/islandora/object/intellectual-history%3A46/datastream/OBJ/view>.

13. Ryan Patrick Hanley, "The Eighteenth-Century Context of Sympathy from Spinoza to Kant," in *Sympathy: A History*, ed. Eric Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

14. Knud Haakonssen argues that taste drives the invisible hand because it is not economic motives, but a desire to be looked at and appear beautiful that gives form to society; Knud Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 183–4.

15. Charles L. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

16. Samuel Fleischacker, *Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment & Freedom in Kant & Adam Smith* (Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 1999).; and Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

impetus to love of system.¹⁷ The potential of taste to bridge the sympathetic gap, however, has not been explored, and the connections between taste, mercantilism, colonialism, and markets has not received sustained analysis. Notwithstanding its advantages for countering self-interest that earned it popularity in the eighteenth century and a resurgence today, sympathy may not be the best avenue for a cosmopolitan liberalism because of its many limitations, at least in isolation. Indeed though some scholars champion emotion, and in particular sympathy, within liberalism, especially as an impetus to justice,¹⁸ there are concerns about the role of emotion in further dividing individuals in a liberal, democratic society.¹⁹

Adam Smith's engagement with aesthetics is often overlooked and yet has important implications for his political economy. This article reconstructs Smith's account of taste as distinct from sympathy to demonstrate its broader significance on four themes: taste offers a lower threshold for connection than, and can act as a helpmate to, sympathy; bad taste can exacerbate sympathetic distance; honing aesthetic judgment also hones moral, political, and economic judgment; and finally, the implications of taste are revealed in Smith's account of free trade as a counter to mercantilism and colonialism. This treatment is significant for three reasons: (1) it offers insight into a problem Smith himself acknowledges with his theory—the limited nature of sympathy; (2) it demonstrates that Smith was a committed cosmopolitan liberal and helps us think about what is possible from cosmopolitan liberalism; (3) it reveals the normative significance of free trade for Smith and the limitations of political economy.

The paper makes this intervention in three ways. First, my analysis of Smith's theory of taste demonstrates the potential for taste to draw individuals outside of themselves, overcome disagreement, surmount spacio-temporal limitations, be educated, and finally, stimulate sympathy. Second, I explore the limitations and severe political economic consequences of bad taste. I show how bad taste can worsen systemic practices that exert power over others and limit their freedom. Third, I turn to Smith's political economy as a case study for the significance of taste and

17. Michael Frazer, "Seduced by System: Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Embrace of Adam Smith's Philosophy," *Intellectual History Review* 25 (2015): 357–72.

18. Michelle Schwarze, *Recognizing Resentment: Sympathy, Injustice, and Liberal Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013); and Sharon R. Krause, *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

19. Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

cosmopolitan liberalism. While I do not argue that mercantilist political economy or colonial domination is driven by bad taste, I examine how taste supplements Smith's case for free trade and simultaneously illuminates and furthers his critique of the economic inefficiencies of mercantilism and the inhumanity of colonialism. His aesthetic theory offers one possible clarification of why the market is insufficient to connect distant others in these cases. Examining mercantilism and colonialism through Smith's account of aesthetic judgment reveals that bad taste presents opportunities to objectify others, worsening the sympathetic gap. The purported laissez-faire economist advises that understanding beauty—not simply monetary incentives—is necessary for a healthy political and moral economy.

The paper proceeds in four parts. In part one, I establish the differences between taste and sympathy in Smith's account. In part two, I turn to the limits of taste and the perils of corrupt aesthetic judgment. I demonstrate how taste can harm our ability to form moral judgments and extend sympathy beyond our circle of care. In part three, I apply Smith's account of taste to his argument against mercantilism and colonialism. Using Smith's political economy, I show how taste poorly understood creates a precarious precedent for treating others as objects in our individual pursuit of order and wealth. I also reconstruct the potential of taste in a free market system in Smith's theory. I conclude by analyzing how the relationship between love of beauty, taste, and art can support cosmopolitan liberalism. I show that despite the dangers and limits of taste, it offers productive modes of engaging with other cultures and prevents objectification of distant others. Smith thought taste, properly understood, could have a constructive role for extending sympathy and strengthening individual judgment—a quality he thought necessary for freedom.

Taste and Sympathy

In the eighteenth century, taste was a prominent subject of study. It was certainly important to Smith, though it does not receive extended or preferential treatment in his writing. He was a founding member of the Edinburgh Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture, with his friend, David Hume who also writes an essay on the subject of taste. The Society sponsored a prize for the "best essay on taste" in 1755 and awarded the prize to Alexander Gerard.²⁰ Smith's approach to aesthetics is notable for his focus on different mediums

20. Peter Jones, "The Aesthetics of Adam Smith," in *Adam Smith: International Perspectives*, ed. H. Mizuta and C. Sugiyama (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 44.

of aesthetic pleasure such as rhetoric, literature, sculpture, and dance.²¹ Whether or not he contributes to the aesthetic conversations of his time is debated, but I contend Smith's originality lays in his connecting taste to his moral, political, and economic concerns.²²

From the beginning of his explanation of sympathy in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith addresses taste. He makes clear that taste and sympathy are separate but related ways of thinking and connecting with others. Though some have argued he collapses sympathy and taste and therefore colonialism erodes the potentiality of taste,²³ Smith actually distinguishes them to preserve sympathy's capacities and highlight the possibilities and dangers of taste. He defines sympathy as a "fellow-feeling with any passion whatever."²⁴ Sympathy is not the same as pity or compassion. Instead it is our effort to imagine what another is feeling and then determine whether our emotions would correspond to what the other person is experiencing. Through sympathy, we imaginatively change place with others, put ourselves in their shoes, and can begin to understand their behavior. This faculty is natural. Smith tells us that even "the greatest ruffian" cannot help but feel with those around him.²⁵ Sympathy is also an orienting faculty that allows human beings to make sense of and live in society with others. Through this imaginative exchange we develop social order.

For Smith, sympathy is also essential for developing moral judgment. After internalizing the sentiments of others, we must judge whether their emotions are appropriate. This is the next step in the sympathetic process. We judge the propriety or impropriety of others' emotions by gauging the level of agreement between what we imagine our emotions would be in the same situation and their emotions. If our emotions correspond with another's we determine that they are appropriate, and if not, we decide they are inappropriate and do not "entirely sympathize" with the other person.²⁶ In Smith's account of moral sentiments, sympathy is the main

21. Neil De Marchi, "Smith on Ingenuity, Pleasure, and the Imitative Arts," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 137.

22. See also *ibid.* and Catherine Labio, "Adam Smith's Aesthetics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, ed. Christopher Berry, Maria Pia Paganelli, and Craig Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

23. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*, 38–9.

24. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982 [1759]), I.i.1.5.

25. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.1.1.

26. Smith. *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.2.6.

method by which we transcend our self-interest and engage with other human beings.

Because it forces individuals to account for the sentiments of others, sympathy is necessary to allow distant others to connect. However, Smith acknowledges that sympathy is limited by physical and cultural space,²⁷ familiarity,²⁸ emotional connection,²⁹ circles of intimacy,³⁰ and even social status.³¹ It is hard to be interested in people with whom we do not interact, share any of our world, or understand. Sympathy is also limited by self-love, as our own experience is that with which we are most familiar and interested. Because individuals filter the emotions of others through their own experience, “That imaginary change of situation, upon which their sympathy is founded, is but momentary. The thought of their own safety . . . continually intrudes itself upon them.”³² We can never completely understand the situation of others. Self-love can lead to self-deceit when we do not view ourselves as an impartial spectator would.³³ We have trouble getting distance from our own experience and therefore deceive ourselves about the propriety of our actions, obscuring both our view of ourselves and the notion of morally upright behavior we apply to our judgment of others. For Smith, self-deceit is a “fatal weakness of mankind” and “the source of half the disorders of human life.”³⁴ Self-deceit allows us to act without regard for others and their perspective about our behavior.

The limited extent of sympathy is concerning and difficult to accept in an age where we have to—much more than in Smith’s time—interact with others who are geographically, culturally, materially, or politically distant from us. The point of Smith’s story about the man who cares more for his hurt little finger than all the people who die from an earthquake in China seems to be that we ought to care more about our brethren than our little finger and yet we often do not.³⁵ In this way, Smith’s system is not as natural as he purports. Sympathy needs help. To have a

27. Fonna Forman-Barzilai, “Sympathy in Space(s): Adam Smith on Proximity,” *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 189–217.

28. Otteson, *Adam Smith’s Marketplace of Life*.

29. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*.

30. Russell Nieli, “Spheres of Intimacy and the Adam Smith Problem,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986): 611–24.

31. Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*, 48.

32. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.4.7.

33. *Ibid.*, III.i.2.

34. *Ibid.*, III.4.6.

35. *Ibid.*, III.3.4.

harmonious and free society we need to be able to interact with those whom we most disagree with or those who are most different from us. Smith does not try to make sympathy accomplish what it cannot, but he still wants to interest us in the situation of distant others because sympathy is the source of how we connect with one another and the basis for moral judgment and self-spectatorship.

Smith recognizes the role of self-interest and presents some solutions to the problem of distance and the resulting sympathetic gap. He demonstrates how the market can incentivize us to take interest in distant others to satisfy our goals in an exchange. He also argues that, “experience . . . in particular instances” with others and “habitual reflection” help us to develop general rules of morality and self-command.³⁶ These general rules can help us overcome self-deceit.³⁷ Human beings develop general rules of morality as “standards of judgment” for our behavior when sympathy would not otherwise check our propensity toward self-interest.³⁸ Like general rules, justice can also act as a negative virtue that helps us overcome cultural bias.³⁹

Taste presents another solution to the problem of sympathetic distance. Smith defines taste as recognition of something “perfectly suited to its object.”⁴⁰ Examples of things that might bring aesthetic pleasure include a picture, a discourse, or an object in nature, like a plain or mountain range.⁴¹ Taste is the judgment made when we recognize beauty, which is a subcategory of love of order. The imagination is very powerful in Smith’s account of human nature. It drives human beings to seek order to ameliorate the emotions of wonder and surprise. In *History of Astronomy*, Smith describes at length the desire to order the world to relieve anxiety and promote mental tranquility. The sentiments which inspire this desire, surprise at the new, wonder at the unexpected, and admiration of the beautiful, are “sentiments whose influence is of far wider extent than we . . . imagine.”⁴² It is also this form of love of beauty that inspires human beings “to invent and improve all the sciences

36. Ibid., III.4.8; III.4.12.

37. Samuel Fleischacker, “True to Ourselves? Adam Smith on Self-Deceit,” *Adam Smith Review* 6 (2011).

38. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, III.4.11.

39. Fonna Forman-Barzilai, “Smith on ‘Connexion’, Culture and Judgment,” in *New Voices on Adam Smith*, ed. Leonidas Montes and Eric Schliesser (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006): 157–96.

40. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.4.4.

41. Ibid., I.i.4.2.

42. Adam Smith, “The History of Astronomy” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. L. D. Wightman (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, (1980 [1795]), Intro.7.

and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life.”⁴³ The desire for order can be productive or destructive. Its dual nature in Smith’s moral psychology and political economy is exemplified in his example of the poor man’s son. The poor man’s son shows how a corrupted love of beauty, where we judge beauty in terms of all the order and convenience our lives would have if we possessed “more means of happiness,” can cause the individual to become more obsessed with trinkets and baubles than genuine relationships.⁴⁴ The poor man’s son misses out on the real opportunity for harmony and order—sympathizing with others—because he is obsessed with pursuing wealth and purchasing objects of convenience. He “*admires* the condition of the rich” and thinks that their condition represents true beauty.⁴⁵ The imagined order of objects that he can control is more attractive than the internal order he could achieve by sympathizing with others because sympathy can never bring perfect order, only a concord of sentiments. Yet, his imagination of order from objects drives the poor man’s son and others in their commercial pursuits.⁴⁶

Taste and sympathy are both outgrowths of the psychological and emotional desire for order. Though he separates taste and sympathy, they operate on parallel tracks in his theory. He uses aesthetic language to explain sympathy—comparing the exercise of sympathy to the harmony of music that is in tune and rhythm.⁴⁷ He also describes self-command and taste as similar forms of judgment that require experience and special skill: “As taste and good judgment . . . are supposed to imply a delicacy of sentiment and an acuteness of understanding not commonly to be met with; so the virtues of sensibility and self-command are not apprehended to consist in the ordinary, but in the uncommon degrees of those qualities.”⁴⁸ Just as sympathy brings psychological relief by allowing us to order the social world by entering into the feelings of another and having a mirror to understand how others view us, similarly, we admire beauty not for utility, but to satisfy our emotional desire for order.⁴⁹ Aesthetic pleasure arises out of observing a watch working precisely, chairs being arranged well, and even imaging a system of politics or trade. Though it became common in the latter half of the eighteenth-century, Smith does not

43. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, IV.1.9

44. *Ibid.*, IV.1.8.

45. *Ibid.* emphasis added.

46. *Ibid.*, IV.1.9.

47. *Ibid.*, I.i.4.2.

48. *Ibid.*, I.i.5.6.

49. *Ibid.*, IV.1.3. Smith distinguishes his idea of beauty from David Hume’s based on utility in Part IV.i of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. He also does not adopt Francis Hutcheson’s view of taste as an embodied sense.

distinguish between aesthetic pleasure and the sublime.⁵⁰ Still, he worries about something like sublime, which for him, entails systems that appear so perfect they emotionally consume us.⁵¹

Smith distinguishes between sympathy and taste early in his explanation of sympathy to demonstrate that aesthetic judgments offer an alternative possibility for connection with others and stimulus for both sympathy and moral judgment. Taste can accomplish several things in Smith's account of social and moral relations that sympathy alone cannot. Taste draws individuals outside of themselves; overcomes issues of disagreement; is not subject to spacio-temporal limitations; can be more easily changed; and stimulates sympathy.

First, the emotions taste inspires can be a unique source of connection between individuals. While sympathy relies on an imaginative exchange between the person principally concerned and the spectator, taste requires looking at an object from outside of ourselves. Smith mentions that discussing taste or science with another individual "interests" neither person, by which he means self-interest or self-love.⁵² I have to appeal to the self-love of the butcher, brewer, and baker to engage them in an exchange, but I can discuss an aesthetic object without engaging the self-love of my interlocutor.⁵³ The object stands apart from what directly affects me—it does not require changing place with another as sympathy does. Instead, taste requires a dispassionate discussion.

In this way, taste can also help build bonds between individuals even when there is disagreement. Smith puts it: "Though your judgments in matters of speculation, though your sentiments in matters of taste, are quite opposite to mine, I can easily overlook this opposition; and if I have any degree of temper, I may still find some entertainment in your conversation, even upon those very subjects."⁵⁴ However, if an interlocutor refuses to sympathetically engage with "the injuries I have suffered," "we become intolerable to one another."⁵⁵ Whereas we can withstand disagreements with others about objects, we cannot continue to interact with those who refuse to put themselves in our shoes to reach some correspondence of

50. Catherine Labio, "Art and Aesthetic Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 271–88.

51. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford University Press, UK, 2007 [1790]), §28, 90–94.

52. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.4.5

53. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner, W.B. Todd (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1981 [1776]), I.ii.2.

54. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.4.5.

55. *Ibid.*

sentiments. If, for example, you do not agree with my taste in clothing, I can forgive you, but I will not continue to engage with you socially if you do not listen and respond to my misfortunes. Individuals can harmonize sentiments with others when they disagree on matters of taste, but a barrier is erected between them when one or the other party refuses to sympathize. Thus, the threshold of engagement for taste is lower than that for sympathy. This is the most politically significant possibility for taste.

Aesthetic pleasure relies on distinction from reality. Because of this, taste can overcome spacio-temporal limits when sympathy cannot. We enjoy figuring out how a piece of art differs from reality. In his essay “Of the Imitative Arts,” Smith tells us that art inspires emotions when we recognize “the disparity between the imitating and imitated object.”⁵⁶ We experience wonder, surprise, or admiration in noticing the gap between reality and what is depicted.⁵⁷ Art relies on the gap between imitation and reality. If art perfectly approximated reality, the aesthetic experience would be diminished. Further, appreciating beauty does not rely on context in the same way as sympathy. It is why the beauty of nature can be appreciated across cultures. Sympathetic exchange, on the other hand, is never a perfect match between the person principally concerned and the spectator.⁵⁸ Sympathy brings the most psychological relief, happiness, and social concord, when another feels with us as closely as possible—what Smith refers to as mutual sympathy.⁵⁹ We also experience pleasure when we are worthy of moral approbation. In these instances, there is a concord of emotions, even if only briefly. Though distance is still important with sympathy because others can never reflect back to us exactly what we are, and like with art, we try to figure out the dissonance between what we think of ourselves and what others think, distance is even more apparent in matters of beauty. With sympathy, we expect a measure of congruence, but with taste we judge as though congruence is not achievable.

Smith is optimistic about the potential for taste to be educated to move individuals outside of themselves to connect with distant others. Taste can be altered much more easily than sympathy because of its reliance on custom and fashion. Smith explains: “The principles of the imagination, upon which our sense of beauty depends . . . may easily be altered by habit and education: but the sentiments of moral

56. Adam Smith, “Of the Nature of that Imitation which Takes Place in What are Called the Imitative Arts” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. L. D. Wightman (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund Inc., 1982), I.9.

57. Smith, “History of Astronomy,” HA II.1.

58. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.2–4.

59. *Ibid.*, I.i.2.

approbation and disapprobation, are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted.”⁶⁰ Sympathy and the moral judgment that results from sympathetic interactions cannot and should not be so easily altered because then the basis for justice would be constantly shifting. Whether or not moral judgment is as immune from custom and fashion as Smith wants it to be is certainly questionable, but at the very least, he is right that tastes change more quickly. He gives the example of “that fashion appearing ridiculous to-day which was admired five years ago,” and we can compare myriad examples of changing tastes, such as fashion, to changing moral judgments and social norms such as those around interracial or gay marriage, and at least agree that standards of moral judgment and justice take longer to shift.⁶¹

Limits of Taste: The Two Sides of Beauty

Though Smith thinks taste can be one solution to self-deceit and individualism, it is imperfect. He describes good taste, in part, to caution against corrupt taste and to demonstrate its potential consequences for human freedom. Sharing aesthetic judgments is not a sufficient basis for social harmony or the formation of moral standards. Sympathy does this best: “Society and conversation, therefore, are the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquility.”⁶² It both helps individuals achieve self-command, a sort of freedom for Smith, as well as tranquility. This tranquility improves life for the individual because they are happier and feel understood by their fellows, but also improves social order. Because sympathy requires us to moderate our behavior, we can better engage with others. Further, as we develop self-command, we behave with more propriety. In other words, we become more moral. For Smith, we also become freer in the sense that we become “masters of ourselves” and are not subject to being carried away by our passions or reactions to others’ behavior.⁶³ Sympathy also helps us form moral judgment. Though we think science, philosophy, and art can produce happiness in persons and society, they only can produce “vague and indeterminate” ideas about “why

60. Ibid., V.2.1.

61. Ibid., V.1.4.

62. Ibid., I.i.4.10.

63. Ibid., I.i.4.9. Fleischacker argues self-command is a more demanding form of freedom than the reflective judgment Kant extols for judging aesthetic objects because it requires us “to take responsibility for our action. To accept our actions as ours, and condemn them, change them, or repent for them when necessary,” Fleischacker, *Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment & Freedom in Kant & Adam Smith*, 83.

humanity is approved of, or cruelty condemned.”⁶⁴ Instead, Smith suggests that it “is in particular instances only that the propriety or impropriety, the merit or demerit of action is very obvious and discernible.”⁶⁵ Out of this argument comes his claim that judgments of beauty, or taste, and morality are distinct. We can theorize about beauty, philosophy, or forms of government, but those generalizations are not likely to produce a lasting tranquility for the individual or society. Proper judgment of beauty can accomplish much in Smith’s theory, but will not achieve the same things as sympathy. Though sympathy is limited, the basis for both individual happiness and social concord is particular, sympathetic interactions.

Not only does taste best function to coordinate human activity when it serves as a stimulus to sympathy, Smith also is concerned about the dangers of bad taste. Corrupt judgments of beauty can cause the well-meaning statesmen to objectify his constituents and pursue order at their expense.⁶⁶ For example, he notes that moral judgment should learn from good taste in the example of art criticism. He says, “when a critic examines the work of any of the great masters in poetry or painting, he may sometimes examine it by an idea of perfection . . . which neither that nor any other human work will ever come up to; and as long as he compares it with this standard, he can see nothing in it but faults and imperfections.”⁶⁷ What a critic and a spectator of moral behavior should do is rank art and behavior according to better and worse to determine its merit. If we examine a painting by standards of perfection, we will always judge it flawed, as human beings can never produce exactly what we see in nature. Similarly, human beings are never perfect and we have to assign propriety to their behavior and character by comparison and determining better and worse, rather than perfect or flawed. If we judge according to perfect order, we are exercising flawed aesthetic judgment. The man of system contemplates with wonder the beauty of the system he is trying to create more than he tries to sympathize with those he is supposed to help. He treats human beings as “pieces upon the chess-board.”⁶⁸ In this part of TMS which Smith adds in 1790 partly in response to the French Revolution, his target is the Physiocrats and their flawed system of liberty and economy.⁶⁹ He will also target this group at the end of his treatment of colonization in Book IV of *Wealth of Nations* for the errors in their

64. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, IV.2.2.

65. *Ibid.*, IV.2.2.

66. *Ibid.*, IV.i.11.

67. *Ibid.*, I.i.5.10.

68. *Ibid.*, VI.ii.2.17.

69. Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 55, 124.

system of liberty, despite their opposition to mercantilism. However, Smith is also treating “the utility of system love” as in earlier parts of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *History of Astronomy*.⁷⁰ He refers to the idea of the invisible hand for a second time in the former, but this time, the hand is the visible hand of the man of system trying to control everyone and everything to produce his “ideal plan of government” because, he “is often so enamored with [its] supposed beauty.”⁷¹ The man of system treats people as objects he can move about as he likes, rather than as humans deserving of fellow-feeling who have their own wants and needs.

Alternatively, love of beauty can inspire a powerful patriotism that drives the individual to sacrifice their own interest for the greater good. The man of public spirit sympathizes with those he is administering by “moderating” his behavior so as to “accommodate, as well as he can, his public arrangements to the confirmed habits and prejudices of the people.”⁷² The man of public spirit does not put a misdirected judgment of beauty as perfection above sympathy. Yet even he is not motivated by “pure sympathy” but instead is inspired by “the great system of government, and the wheels of the political machine.”⁷³ In the man of public spirit, we see the political significance of taste—it offers a lower threshold to engagement than sympathy and can be more captivating.

Taste works best in Smith's theory as an impetus for sympathy, but cannot replace it. Smith believes the psychological faculties responsible for our aesthetic judgments can both support and undermine the faculties responsible for our moral judgments. Love of beauty becomes corrupt when we pursue order for its own sake, and thereby seek perfection that is not possible in political economy. The invisible hand appeals to Smith's readers because it suggests that perfection or design is possible in human affairs. And while some order will result both in nature and human society, this order will not resemble the arrangement of chairs or pieces upon a chessboard.⁷⁴

70. Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*, 167.

71. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, VI.ii.2.17.

72. *Ibid.*, VI.ii.2.16.

73. *Ibid.*, IV.1.11.

74. There are many theories of spontaneous order resulting from individuals pursuing self-interest, see for example F.A. Hayek, “The Market Order or Catallaxy,” in *Law, Legislation and Liberty vol. 2* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978 [1976]: 107–32). For a critique of order in Smith's theory, see Michelle Schwarze and John T. Scott, “Spontaneous Disorder in Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments: Resentment, Injustice, and the Appeal to Providence,” *The Journal of Politics* 77 (2015): 463–76.

Taste and Smithean Political Economy

Smith's treatment of mercantilism and colonization tracks onto his account of how bad taste—judging beauty as perfect order—can substitute for sympathy. Central to his analysis of free trade and its benefits is his critique of commerce as practiced in his time. There are several components to Smith's critique, among them first, that because the state controls trading partners, products, and prices, it does not garner as much revenue as it could with a system of free trade and the economic well-being of its citizens is reduced; second, mercantilism harms the system of natural liberty whereby foreign and domestic individuals are not free to pursue their own ends—this second point is important for overall wealth but also for individuals' ability to develop moral sentiments. In this section, I focus on how Smith's analysis of taste shows that while free trade could work with taste to extend sympathy, poor taste widens the sympathetic gap in the case of mercantilism and colonialism. For Smith, the aesthetic lens demonstrates not that mercantilists and colonizers could have better maximized their wealth if they had exercised proper aesthetic judgment, but the moral consequences of their flawed judgment. Poor aesthetic judgment allows mercantilists and colonizers to justify their “dazzling” system of perfect order that objectifies those they interact with. Taste helps us understand Smith's normative critique of political economy as well as why he thinks trade can and ought to facilitate cosmopolitanism instead of further dividing individuals and fostering violence.

Smith is optimistic about taste supplementing sympathy. In a brief treatment, Smith shows how the free market can encourage shared taste and build connections between distant individuals. Smith does not often refer to taste in his discussion of the colonies, but does so in one instance. He explains how Madeira wine was able to slip past the British monopoly on wine exports because its trade was not restricted. The free trade of this good made it so popular in the Americas and West Indies that “these circumstances had probably introduced that general taste for Madeira wine.”⁷⁵ The officers from the colonies brought this wine “back with them to the mother country, where that wine had not been much in fashion before.”⁷⁶ Smith shows two things in this brief example. First, an economic lesson—free trade moves goods better than trade limited by monopoly. However, he also demonstrates the power of a foreign good to change the fashion through exchange and

75. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, IV.iv.10.

76. *Ibid.*

generate connections between distant peoples.⁷⁷ Historians confirm Smith's account, articulating how Madeira wine was so loved throughout Europe, but especially in Britain, that it was exempted from mercantilist tariffs.⁷⁸ Madeira wine opened the door for sympathetic relationships between foreign nations because now they shared a common interest—a taste for wine.

Mercantilism, on the other hand, demonstrates the problem of bad taste—pursuing order and control rather than free interaction in the market. Mercantilists believed that they could generate economic prosperity through force by connecting power and plenty.⁷⁹ While economic exchange should “be, among nations, as among individuals, a bond of union and friendship” instead because of mercantilist theory “nations have been taught that their interest consisted in beggaring all their neighbours.”⁸⁰ The theory is based on two flawed political economic theories: “that wealth consist[s] in gold and silver” “and that those metals could be brought into a country which had no mines only by the balance of trade, or by exporting to a greater value than it imported.”⁸¹ Thomas Mun, director of the East India Company in the seventeenth century, calls overbalance of trade a “rule . . . to increase our wealth and treasure.”⁸² Smith describes flawed judgment as guiding “the great object of political economy.”⁸³ The mercantilists pursue order and system rather than judging particular instances and engaging with particular people. Smith explains how the mercantilist system enables “statesmen . . . to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals” and instead he advocates that “every individual, it is evident, can, in his local situation, judge much better than any statesman or lawgiver can do for him.”⁸⁴ Smith describes this pursuit of order

77. David Hancock, “Commerce and Conversation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic: The Invention of Madeira Wine,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1998): 197–219. Hancock articulates the historical evidence for how Madeira wine trade fostered goodwill between individuals.

78. Nuala Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies: London and the Atlantic Economy, 1660–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 37, 255–56.

79. Jacob Viner, “Power Versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *World Politics* 1 (1948): 1–29.; and Peter McNamara, *Political Economy and Statesmanship* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), 88–9.

80. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, IV.iii.c.9.

81. *Ibid.*, IV.i.35.

82. Thomas Mun, *England's Treasure by Foreign Trade* (1664) in *A Select Collection of Early English Tracts on Commerce from the Originals of Mun, Roberts, North, and Others* (London, UK: Printed for the Political Economy Club, 1856) <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/mc-culloch-a-select-collection-of-early-english-tracts-on-commerce-1856> (accessed July 26, 2020).

83. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, IV.i.35.

84. *Ibid.*, IV.ii.10.

as “fruitless,” “embarrassing”;⁸⁵ and as promoting “hurtful regulation” against the common people.⁸⁶ These policies produce wealth for the few at the expense of the average citizen, indigenous, and colonial emigrants.

The mercantilists are captivated by the supposed value of possessing gold and silver and fail to understand true wealth. There are consequences for misjudging value and being captivated by the dazzling and luxurious for sympathizing with distant others and for the cosmopolitan ends of commerce to be realized. Indeed, in his analysis of the problem of thinking “that wealth consists in money” and therefore misunderstanding how trade creates wealth, Smith reveals how Europeans’ flawed judgment prevents them from extending their sympathy to distant others.⁸⁷ He comments that the Tartars—considered a barbarian people in the “rude” age of society in his stadial theory—used to search for sheep and oxen in their exploits just as the Spanish search for gold. Smith finishes the paragraph commenting on the superior economic knowledge of the supposed barbarians: “Of the two, the Tartar notion, perhaps, was nearest to the truth” about where wealth subsists.⁸⁸

The mercantilist system also causes disaffection between merchants and the nation that provides them with monopoly gains from trade. The merchant “wishes to get out of the country, and consequently to have done with the government, as soon as he can, and to whose interest, the day after he has left it and carried his whole fortune with him, it is perfectly indifferent though the whole country was swallowed up by an earthquake.”⁸⁹ Smith continues, “It is the system of government . . . that I mean to censure.”⁹⁰ The reference to an earthquake and the problem of sympathy transcending distance that we also see in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is striking. The merchant cares as little for the mother country as the man who hurt his little finger did for China. There is no incentive for the merchant to invest in the fate of his countrymen because the connection is only insofar as he makes money from the monopoly his company enjoys. There is no occasion for sympathy in this commercial transaction because the “system” is not based on free exchange.

Smith’s discussion of colonialism as a subset of mercantile policy also demonstrates the negative implications of bad taste. The system that captivates the politicians is not as ordered and beautiful as they imagine. Smith explains that the

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid., IV.ii.11.

87. Ibid., IV.i.1.

88. Ibid., IV.i.2.

89. Ibid., IV.vii.c.106

90. Ibid., IV.vii.c.107.

development of colonies should foster economic and sympathetic growth: “By uniting, in some measure, the most distant parts of the world, by enabling them to relieve one another’s industry, their general tendency would seem to be beneficial.”⁹¹ Smith extols the potential of the market for overcoming distance. Yet the effect of colonization “has been to raise the mercantile system to a degree of splendor and glory which it could never otherwise have attained.”⁹² Smith’s language about the glory of the system throughout this section of *Wealth of Nations* is sarcastic at best. He says, for example, “what benefits, or what misfortunes to mankind may hereafter result from those great events [discovery of America and passage to the East Indies] no human wisdom can foresee.”⁹³ Smith points out that the colonial enterprise is an imagined system of order and beauty that in reality results in “dreadful misfortunes” for the natives⁹⁴ and a “show and splendor of this great commerce” that actually excludes many trading partners from “a greater share of the real benefit of it” by “invidious restraints.”⁹⁵ No one mind can envision the entire system of trade and in their effort to control it, colonizers actually evade its benefits, rendering the system fundamentally inglorious. Because the colonizers treat colonization not as an opportunity to sympathize through exchange with fellow-human beings, but an opportunity for “the plundering of the defenceless natives” and denying representation to colonists, they are preventing themselves from experiencing the freedom gained from open trade, but more importantly for Smith, they are denying subjectivity and autonomy to those they are using.⁹⁶ The colonies represent a failure of economic, aesthetic, and moral judgment.

Another focus of Smith’s account of the horrors of colonialism and the consequences for sympathy is the way Columbus and his crew treated the inhabitants of

91. Ibid., IV.vii.c.80.

92. Ibid., IV.vii.c.81.

93. Ibid., IV.vii.c.80.

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid., IV.vii.c.82.

96. Ibid., IV.vii.a.16. Smith’s discussion of slavery within his analysis of colonialism presents another example of objectification and exploitation in an altogether different model of trade than his ideal of free trade. When discussing custom in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith argues that Africans slaves are “heroes” and possess more magnanimity than the colonizers ever will. (V.ii.9–10). Similarly in *Wealth of Nations*, Smith advocates for arbitrary government in the colonies so it is easier for the magistrate “to protect the slave” (*Wealth of Nations*, IV.vii.b.54). Though he notes the utility of slavery, in part, because he falsely attributes the constitution of slaves to be better suited to such labor, Smith calls slavery an “unfortunate law” and argues that “common humanity” should “naturally dispose” the magistrate to lend protection to the slave, and that this would actually be more economically efficient (Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, IV.vii.b.54). He argues against treating enslaved people as objects.

the new world as objects to be appropriated rather than equal partners in exchange. Just as he critiques the mercantile focus on system, Smith focuses on Columbus's wonder at the imagined beauty he could extract from the colonies. When Columbus returns to Europe, he is viewed as a hero by the Spanish. He had found only "little fillets" of gold and some cotton, but "the rest were mere objects of vulgar wonder and curiosity; some reeds of an extraordinary size, some birds of a very beautiful plumage, and some stuffed skins of the huge alligator and manatee; all of which were preceded by six or seven of the wretched natives, whose singular colour and appearance added greatly to the novelty of the show."⁹⁷ Smith's language recalls his account of why human beings pursue and are fascinated by order in *History of Astronomy*: "Wonder, therefore, and not any expectation of advantage from its discoveries, is the first principle which prompts mankind to the study of Philosophy."⁹⁸ Smith makes this argument shortly after using his invisible hand reference for the first time, as the hand of Jupiter that mankind believed in to make sense of "the irregular events of nature."⁹⁹ His use of aesthetic language helps Smith prove not only the economic inefficiency of the colonial project, but more importantly, its moral depravity. Smith points to the way in which the indigenous peoples were treated in the same manner as minerals and plants—as beautiful objects that could be used to put on a "show" for the Spanish crown, demonstrating the purported brilliance of their colonial endeavors. Columbus and his crew did not view the natives as people to sympathize with, but as objects like plant and animal life that they had never seen before. He does not recognize the beauty of indigenous culture on its own terms, but how it can be used to Columbus' ends. In the eighteenth century, aesthetic categories were often employed to scientifically justify racism and dehumanization. In the paradigmatic example, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach created a typology of skulls arranging them from least to most beautiful.¹⁰⁰ The colonizers admire the natives as beautiful objects to use and abuse, rather than as trading partners.

Columbus and his explorers' false idea of beauty as order allows them to ignore the humanity of those whom they propagate atrocities onto in their pursuit of domination and gold. Smith implies that there ought to have been an occasion for sympathetic and economic exchange; if the explorers had sympathized with

97. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, IV.iv.a.14.

98. Smith, "History of Astronomy," III.5.

99. *Ibid.*, III.2. For more on Smith's original use of the invisible hand metaphor see Alec Macfie, "The Invisible Hand of Jupiter," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 (1971): 595–599.

100. See Raj Bhopal, "The Beautiful Skull and Blumenbach's Errors: The Birth of the Scientific Concept of Race," *BMJ* 335 (2007): 1308–09.

the indigenous, they might have been prevented from seeking gold in vain and might have pursued free trade instead of plunder. He ridicules Columbus's bad judgment: "Columbus . . . flattered himself . . . the little bits of gold with which the inhabitants ornamented their dress, and which, he was informed, they frequently found in the rivulets and torrents that fell from the mountains, were sufficient to satisfy him that those mountains abounded with the richest gold mines."¹⁰¹ The problem of proximity is aggravated by corrupt love of beauty. The indigenous peoples know that there is not much gold to be found, but because Columbus and his crew treat them as sub-human, they do not converse with them to garner this information. While it is already difficult to sympathize with foreign peoples, misjudging beauty as perfect order rather than noticing context exacerbates this problem to the point of objectification.

Turning from the natives to the European emigrants he argues, "upon all these different occasions it was, not the wisdom and policy, but the disorder and injustice of the European governments, which peopled and cultivated America."¹⁰² The example of the colonists presents a related problem of bad taste to the objectification of the indigenous peoples. Here, the problem is that Britain is enamored with organizing an imagined system of the colonies according to a political plan and treating the colonists as objects upon which they can impose perfect order. Though Britain does not perpetrate the same objectification and violence upon its colonists as the indigenous peoples, Smith points out that the colonists are not treated as equal trading partners and do not have political representation. While he notes that British policies are less illiberal than those of France, Portugal, or Spain, because "in every thing, except their foreign trade, the liberty of the English colonists to manage their own affairs their own way is complete" the colonies are still not as economically advantageous as they would be if a policy of free trade was implemented.¹⁰³ Smith also points out that defending the colonies is expensive and they do not participate in their own defense. Finally, he suggests that animosity between the mother country and America will harm Britain in the long-run.¹⁰⁴ In "Thoughts on America," he argues Britain should choose one of four reformed approaches to the

101. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, IV.iv.a.14.

102. *Ibid.*, IV.vii.b.61.

103. *Ibid.*, IV.vii.b.50–51.

104. According to a letter from Hume, Smith delayed publication of *Wealth of Nations*, awaiting resolution of the War of Independence: "By all accounts, your Book has been printed long ago; yet it has never been so much as advertised. What is the Reason? If you wait till the Fate of America be decided, you may wait too long." February 8, 1776. David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume Volume II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011 [1766–1776]), 308

American colonies: complete submission of America where the colonies are independent, but pay taxes to the empire; complete emancipation; reverting to the old system where the Crown appoints all colonial officials and they are not taxed; or finally, the submission of part of America, and the emancipation of the rest, which he thinks will only come at the end of “a long, expensive, and ruinous war.”¹⁰⁵ Though the colonial project is built on an economic system, Smith shows that it is not producing the order the statesmen imagine.

Smith attributes part of Britain’s unwillingness to give up the colonies, despite the economic facts, to its politicians’ poor judgment of beauty:

At first sight, no doubt, the monopoly of the great commerce of America, naturally seems to be an acquisition of the highest value. To the undiscerning eye of giddy ambition, it naturally presents itself amidst the confused scramble of politicks and war, as a very *dazzling* object to fight for. The *dazzling splendor* of the object, however, the immense greatness of the commerce, is the very quality which renders the monopoly of it hurtful.¹⁰⁶

Smith uses the same language of “the seduction of the dazzling” repeatedly in Part VI of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.¹⁰⁷ Proper aesthetic judgment would demonstrate the disorder that comes from economic manipulation and lack of representation. He advises that Britain should give up the colonies because it would only lose its power over them and none of its wealth.¹⁰⁸ Developed moral and aesthetic judgment would similarly require Britain to recognize that the human beings who live in the colonies are not objects to be arranged at will. Smith argues that they deserve representation in addition to free trade, and it will be more problematic for Britain to deny it than incorporate them into the union because they would be forced to turn against the mother country.¹⁰⁹ The colonists will defend their own situation and way of life as Britain is “on the other side of the water” and they fear their

105. Adam Smith, (1987 [1778]). *Thoughts on the State of the Contest with America. Correspondence of Adam Smith*. ed. D. Stevens. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987 [1778]), 380.

106. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, IV.vii.c, emphasis added.

107. Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*, 168.

108. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, IV.iv.c.65. Sankar Muthu argues that colonization was morally problematic because it prevented natural liberty through transnational commerce, especially joint stock companies. Sankar Muthu, “Adam Smith’s Critique of International Trading Companies: Theorizing “Globalization” in the Age of Enlightenment,” *Political Theory* 36 (2008): 185–212.

109. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, IV.vii.c.76.

interests will not be taken into account.¹¹⁰ In this example, Smith demonstrates the political problems that arise from bad taste worsening the sympathetic gap.

Possibilities of Taste and Cosmopolitan Liberalism

Smith's desire to achieve a system of natural liberty fits with what I have called his cosmopolitan liberalism. But what is at stake for Smith if bad aesthetic judgment is exercised? Smith is concerned about individuals engaging in the self-deceit that supplants moral rules and behavior. While commerce certainly encourages the sympathy that brings about good behavior such that "colleagues in an office, partners in trade, call one another brothers; and frequently feel towards one another as if they were really so," Smith is concerned about instances in which poor taste overwhelms the benefits that can come from commerce.¹¹¹ The poor man's son, the man of system, and the mercantilist and colonial projects all present such examples. "If the chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved," then substituting corrupt taste for sympathy denies subjects of sympathy both autonomy and potentially their happiness.¹¹²

Though he has distinguished taste and sympathy, Smith's emphasis on taste also demonstrates its potential for encouraging sympathy. Educating our tastes can open new avenues for sympathy and the development of the impartial spectator. Smith sometimes relays different cultural practices to his readers to show how education can influence our understanding of what is beautiful, and might also induce us to try and engage with and understand distant others whose cultural practices at first seem unintelligible. Taste is not subject to the same barriers as sympathy because it requires a lower threshold to engage. We see this in Smith's discussion of custom and fashion "which extend their dominion over our judgments concerning beauty of every kind."¹¹³ Though the mutability of taste can have negative effects, such as following the fashion of the rich who have done little to earn moral approbation, Smith also paints this in a positive light because tastes can be changed through education and experience. He demonstrates the potential of educating tastes by comparing the European practice of wearing corsets to other cultures' aesthetic practices:

110. *Ibid.*, IV.vii.c.79.

111. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, VI.ii.1.16.

112. *Ibid.*, I.ii.5.2.

113. *Ibid.*, V.I.1.

What different ideas are formed in different nations concerning the beauty of the human shape and countenance? A fair complexion is a shocking deformity upon the coast of Guinea. Thick lips and a flat nose are the objects of universal admiration. In China if a lady's foot is so large as to be fit to walk upon, she is regarded as a monster of ugliness. Some of the savage nations in North-America tie four boards round the heads of their children, and thus squeeze them, while the bones are tender and gristly, into a form that is almost perfectly square. Europeans are astonished at the absurd barbarity of this practice, to which some missionaries have imputed the singular stupidity of those nations among whom it prevails. But when they condemn those savages, they do not reflect that the ladies in Europe had, till within these very few years, been endeavouring, for near a century past, to squeeze the beautiful roundness of their natural shape into a square form of the same kind. And that, notwithstanding the many distortions and diseases which this practice was known to occasion, custom had rendered it agreeable among some of the most civilized nations which, perhaps, the world ever beheld.¹¹⁴

The implication of Smith's example is that aesthetic education can widen our sphere of appreciation beyond our immediate context and customs. Smith wants to shock his readers out of complacency in their habituated notions of beauty to examine beauty on its own terms.¹¹⁵ He reinforces that because taste is influenced by custom, changing the perspective of the spectator can alter his sensibility. Similarly, in the "Of the Imitative Arts," he compares cultural practices to explain why each of the different art forms—poetry, statuary, music, and painting—give us pleasure. He notes that poetry and dancing both convey human emotions well, but that dance is a more natural way of imitating "the adventures of common life, than to express them in Verse or Poetry."¹¹⁶ To explain this finding he uses the example of the colonies in Africa and America. He puts it "we hear little, accordingly, of the Poetry of the savage nations of Africa and America, but a great deal of their pantomime dances."¹¹⁷ Smith encourages readers to judge the customs and art of "savage nations" on their own terms, and to recognize that African dance conveys the pleasure of human emotion *better* than European poetry. Smith himself studied taste across cultures to better understand "the general principles of the human

114. *Ibid.*, V.1.8.

115. Pitts makes a similar argument about Smith's rhetorical strategy in *Wealth of Nations*. Pitts, "Irony in Adam Smith's Critical Global History."

116. Smith, "Of the Imitative Arts," II.6.

117. *Ibid.*

mind."¹¹⁸ He deploys these examples to demonstrate how to engage in the transcendence of self that aesthetics can provide.

Smith's inquiry into the dangers of bad taste also helps explain why certain utilizations of the market circumvent sympathetic possibilities. His inquiry into colonialism and mercantilism lends itself to arguments against marketization and commodification that impose market structures rather than engaging with local practices and meanings.¹¹⁹ Smith's aesthetic critique of markets joined to power in mercantilism and colonialism supports Marx's later critique of the alienation caused by capitalism. Similarly, his analysis of taste demonstrates that cultural engagement is necessary and morally constructive while cultural appropriation is exploitative. When we deny others sympathy by objectifying them, we limit their freedom by harming their ability to develop self-command and autonomy and our own freedom by reducing our sympathetic interaction.¹²⁰ Without sympathy we lose the opportunity to develop self-command and preclude the opportunity for social coordination. Both outcomes lead to a loss of freedom and prevent cosmopolitan liberalism.

Taste works to bridge the sympathetic gap, but love of beauty absent good aesthetic judgment can work against its potential. As in the case of the Madeira wine, or Smith's examples of Chinese foot-binding and African dance, taste can act as an impetus to sympathy. Taste allows individuals to build an initial connection when putting themselves in one another's shoes proves too demanding because of geographic, material, or cultural distance. Taste can even encourage sympathy, showing individuals the humanity in their interlocutors when they might not otherwise have seen it. However, when love of beauty overwhelms sympathetic capacity, it can exacerbate sympathetic distance. Smith explains, "taste" or shared interest "can by no means deserve the sacred and venerable name of friendship" because it is temporary.¹²¹ Taste is only a starting point for deeper moral bonds.

Taste is a double-edged sword. It can help us avoid being too individualistic, but also cannot supplant the more particular and challenging way of engaging with

118. Dugald Stewart, "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, L.L.D.," in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W.L.D. Wightman (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982 [1793]), 305.

119. See for example: Erica S. Simmons, *Meaningful Resistance: Market Reforms and the Roots of Social Protest in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).; E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136.; James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1976).; and F.A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review* 35 (1945): 519–30.

120. Fleischacker, *Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment & Freedom in Kant & Adam Smith*.

121. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, VI.ii.1.19.

others, through the imaginative change of place that sympathy requires. Taste can help us, however, relate to others in a way more detached from personal emotions than sympathy. Taste can also offer a limit to self-interest and prevent objectification by demonstrating the humanity of distant others. Smith is not suggesting that taste can overcome all challenges inherent in sympathy in the lust for domination or political economic laws that make the system of natural liberty that commerce affords ineffective. Still, he sees in the exercise of aesthetic judgment the possibility for cosmopolitan liberalism because individuals are forced to think outside of their particular world-view.

Brianne Wolf is Assistant Professor of Political Theory and Constitutional Democracy at James Madison College at Michigan State University. She specializes in the history of political thought with a focus on the Scottish and French Enlightenments, liberalism, moral judgment, aesthetics, and the interaction between economics and politics. She is currently at work on a book-length study of the role of taste in solving problems of individualism in the liberal tradition in the thought of Hume, Rousseau, Smith, and Tocqueville. Her work has also appeared in *History of Political Thought*, *Review of Politics*, and edited volumes. She can be reached at briewolf@msu.edu.

Copyright of Polity is the property of University of Chicago Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.