

ADAM SMITH AND THE CHINESE EARTHQUAKE

To the extent that sentimentalism emerged across Europe in the eighteenth century, with parallel formulations in different languages, we may ask how self-aware such writers were about the international reach of their discourse. To what degree did sentimental writers reflect upon the cosmopolitan character of their own feelings? When did they start looking for emotional correspondences between themselves and distant foreigners? Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) provides a striking passage challenging readers to consider just how capable Europeans were in feeling with peoples they knew only through textual mediation. The resonance of his inquiry among Germans became a measure of how far his ideas on sympathy could extend. By incorporating the moral claims from Smith, as well as elements from Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, and David Hume, German Enlightenment writers were already implicitly demonstrating their own inclination to identify with foreign sentiments.

The reception of English fiction and philosophy was decisive in fostering the German Enlightenment. Moral weeklies such as the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, and *Guardian*, along with Fielding's and Richardson's novels, established an affinity between sentimental writing on both sides of the channel. Gotthold Lessing translated the work of Smith's teacher, Francis Hutcheson's *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1756) into German, an activity that helped him adapt the moral philosophy of sympathy into *Mitleid* (pity).¹ The shared German and English investigations into the psychology of spectatorship went into minute detail. In section four of *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (*Laocoon, or the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, 1767), Lessing draws on Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, quoting a long passage on the semiotics of extreme suffering and the viewer's ability to sympathize.² In recounting the German reception of Adam Smith's philosophy, economic historians have long focused solely on *Wealth of Nations*. Since the 1980s, however, literary scholars have called more attention to Smith's less competitive side by highlighting the affinities between *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Lessing's *Laokoon* essay. Ellwood Wiggins claims that Lessing and Smith complement each other, because Smith's moral psychology has a theatrical structure. Lessing, on the other hand, insists that the most moral person is the one with the most sympathy, yet he does so without formulating clear ethical principles in the manner of Smith.³ Katherine Harloe insists that Lessing incorporated Smith's psychology into his own arguments about tragedy, even if he claimed to be debating the Englishman.⁴

1. Thomas Martinec, "Übersetzung und Adaption, Lessings Verhältnis zu Francis Hutcheson," in *'ihrem Originale nachzudenken': Zu Lessings Übersetzungen*, ed. Helmut Berthold (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2008), 95–114.

2. For a clear account, see Arnold Heidsieck, "Adam Smith's Influence on Lessing's View of Man and Society," *Lessing Yearbook* 15, ed. Edward Harris (1983): 125–44.

3. Ellwood Wiggins, "Pity Play: Sympathy and Spectatorship in Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*," in *Performing Knowledge: 1750–1850*, ed. Mary Helen Dupree and Sean B. Franzel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 85–111.

4. Katherine Harloe, "Sympathy, Tragedy, and the Morality of Sentiment in Lessing's *Laocoon*," in *Rethinking Lessing's Laocoon: Antiquity, Enlightenment*,

Kant also appreciated Smith's moral philosophy without offering footnotes, by praising him in the 1770s for offering insights into human moral understanding beyond those offered by German writers on the subject. The Königsberg philosopher was particularly drawn to Smith's visual model of an impartial spectator who stands over the subject, holding him accountable for his moral feelings.⁵ In 1777, when Johann Heinrich Georg Feder reviewed the first translation of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, he noted that German readers were already familiar with his work: "Through his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* the name of author has long been known already as an excellent philosopher, leading us to expect nothing mediocre from him."⁶

How emotional identification with foreigners serves to establish a cosmopolitan sense of similarity can be seen in Smith's reflection in the fourth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, wherein he asks the reader to contemplate how a civilized European might react to news that all of China had been destroyed by an earthquake: "Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connection with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity."⁷ From the vantage point of media history, Smith offers probably the first moral conjecture predicated specifically upon the flow of news reporting across continents. Smith sets the absence of a personal relationship with China as a condition to his query, while focusing instead on how the mere conveyance of mediated news could produce sympathy. Writing less than a decade after the devastating Lisbon

and the 'Limits' of Painting a Poem, ed. Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 158–78.

5. Samuel Fleischacker, "Philosophy in Moral Practice: Kant and Adam Smith," *Kant-Studien* 82.3 (1991): 249–68.

6. Johann Heinrich Georg Feder, [Review of *Wealth of Nations*], *Göttingischen Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* (March 10, 1777): 234.

7. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1976), 233–34.

earthquake, Smith takes it for granted that the delivery of such long-distance information has, by the mid-eighteenth century, become commonplace. The shock lies in the content of the news—namely, the massive earthquake—and not in the fact of its delivery from the other side of the world. His assumption that Europeans regularly receive news about both China and distant earthquakes was quite reasonable. Newspapers and their forerunners, on the continent and in Great Britain, had been transmitting updates about shocking natural catastrophes long before the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.⁸ His scenario is really concerned with analyzing the recipient's emotional response to the media. The first German translation refers to the subject of the thought experiment as an emotional European.⁹ Are these emotions intense enough to establish a cosmopolitan sense of unity? Does distance mitigate our feelings for the suffering of others? In his provocative question, Smith suggests that once our sympathy has found expression, once we have given voice to our shock and dismay, we would be quickly distracted by the smallest of personal complaints. The sympathetic spectator would, in other words, move from the sublime to the domestic. This sequence of diminishing sympathy reverses the hierarchy of baroque tragic drama in which the audience's emotions are directed toward the monarch as representative of the people. Ever since George Lillo's *London Merchant* (1731), English drama had allowed that tragedies occur not only to the great

8. Carlos H. Caracciolo, "Natural Disasters and the European Printed News Network," in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 756–78.

9. Adam Smith, *Adam Smiths Theorie der sittlichen Gefühle*, trans. Ludwig Theobul Kosegarten (Leipzig: Graff, 1791), 218: "Laßt uns annehmen, daß das ganze große Kaiserthum China, mit allen seinen Millionen Einwohnern, jähling von einem Erdbeben verschlungen würde, und laßt uns erwägen, wie ein gefühlvoller Europäer, der mit diesem Welttheil in gar keiner Verbindung stünde, durch die Zeitung dieses fürchterlichen Unglücks affizirt werden würde." For a quick and easy overview of Smith's and the Scots' reception in the German Enlightenment, see Norbert Waszek, "The Scottish Enlightenment in Germany," in *Scotland in Europe*, ed. Tom Hubbard and R. D. S. Jack (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 55–72. For a thorough examination of sources, translations, reviews, and philosophical adaptations of Scottish thinkers in Germany, see Norbert Waszek, *The Scottish Enlightenment and Hegel's Account of 'Civil Society'* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988).

and powerful. Smith's reasoning follows this turn toward the ordinary person as the bearer of tragic fate. From baroque to Enlightenment, Vondel to Smith, sympathy for China shifts from the emperor to the populace at large.

Smith is also addressing David Hume's earlier argument that the strength of our sympathy depends on how distant we are from its object. "Sympathy . . . is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous."¹⁰ Our own concerns trouble us much more than those of 100 million distant foreigners. Hume's notion of sympathy concentrates on the similarities between humans in terms of our recognition of resemblances; he seems less concerned with the expression of strong emotion than with epistemology. Hume takes an affectively neutral position, preferring to define sympathy in terms of the subject's ability to identify with another on the basis of shared traits. In this sense he preserves the ancient Stoic detachment while not giving his hypothesis over to a more intense understanding of compassion. Käte Hamburger argues in this regard that to the extent that it implies a "suffering with another," the German *Mitleid* fails as an adequate translation of Hume's meaning. Hamburger admires Hume's concept of sympathy precisely because it preserves the awareness of the other as distanced from oneself: it constructs a bond through shared humanity rather than an affective kinship.¹¹ Hume grounded the recognition of similarities, or sympathies, in human nature: "There is a remarkable inclination in human nature, to bestow on external objects the same emotions, which it observes in itself; and to find everywhere those ideas, which are most present to it."¹² In Smith's more complex formulation, the relationship between the sufferer and the spectator does not involve emulation or projection; instead, he posits a parallel between the two, thereby importing the language of cosmo-

10. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principals of Morals*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), sect. 186, 229.

11. Käte Hamburger, *Das Mitleid* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986), 110–16.

12. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005), 173.

logical harmony into psychology: “When the original passions of the person principally concerned are *in perfect concord* with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects.”¹³

Adam Smith’s choice of China for his thought experiment was not random. Much more than serving as a placeholder for “some distant place,” China embodied a great civilization parallel to Europe. As Phil Dodds has shown, “China played a vital role in Scottish Enlightenment thought.”¹⁴ For both Hume and Smith, China represented the great “other” civilization that challenged the universal validity of any European hypothesis. If Smith argued that wealth was established through international commerce, China’s closed market and vast wealth offered a potential counter argument. Smith’s information came in part through his acquaintance with Edinburgh merchants who traded in Canton.¹⁵ While he also turned to French Jesuit treatises, most prominently Du Halde’s *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la chine et de la tartarie chinoise* (*General History of China, Containing a Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political and Physical Description of the Empire of China*, 1735), he was skeptical about their reports, famously stating “The accounts of [Chinese public] works, . . . which have been transmitted to Europe, have generally been drawn up by weak and wondering travelers; frequently by stupid and lying missionaries.”¹⁶ Smith’s attitude was clearly much more influenced by the views of merchants than of the philosophically inclined Jesuits. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith states: “The Chinese have little respect for foreign trade. Your beggarly commerce! was the language in which the Mandarins of Peking

13. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 58 (emphasis added).

14. Phil Dodds, “‘One Vast Empire’: China, Progress, and the Scottish Enlightenment,” *Global Intellectual History* 3.1 (2018): 49.

15. For a microhistory of Scottish private traders working in Asia outside the parameters of the East India Company, see Jessica Hanser, *Mr. Smith Goes to China: Three Scots in the Making of Britain’s Global Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

16. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner, and W. B. Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 2:729.

used to talk to Mr. De Lange, the Russian envoy, concerning it. Except with Japan, the Chinese carry on, themselves, and in their own bottoms, little or no foreign trade.”¹⁷ As for so many Europeans, China was an object of fascination precisely because of its refusal to engage in trade. Smith was no different: “China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world.”¹⁸ *The Wealth of Nations* presents one of the first formulations of an argument that would be deployed sharply by British diplomats later. “[China] seems . . . to have been long stationary. Marco Polo, who visited it more than five hundred years ago, describes its cultivation, industry, and populousness, almost in the same terms in which they are described by travellers in the present times.”¹⁹ While the key economic question for Smith was whether China would open its ports to foreign traders, this did not deter his positing an affinity for Chinese people in his moral philosophy. The theatrical position of his typical moral agent has often been noted, and Smith clearly has recent plays in mind when contemplates sympathy for China: “In that beautiful tragedy of Voltaire, the Orphan of China, while we admire the magnanimity of Zamti, who is willing to sacrifice the life of his own child, in order to preserve that of the only feeble remnant of his ancient sovereigns and masters; we not only pardon, but love the maternal tenderness of Idame, who, at the risque of discovering the important secret of her husband, reclaims her infant from the cruel hands of the Tartars, into which it had been delivered.”²⁰ Smith’s reflections present a cosmopolitan triangle involving a Scottish admirer of a French play about a Chinese family. His summary of Voltaire’s adaptation based on a Jesuit translation of a Yuan-era drama concentrates on the intimacies of family life more than on the drama’s imperial politics in a way that calls attention to the sentimental potential for cross-cultural literary identification

17. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 2:680.

18. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 1:89.

19. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 1:89.

20. Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, 371.

The question of whether it was possible for people to feel sympathy over long distances had immediate relevance to the emerging British Empire. While grounded in the suffering of others, sympathy could motivate colonial policies. Such feelings could be translated into concrete policies, particularly if they were intended to alleviate the pain of oppressed subjects. In his speech on the India Bill of 1783, aimed against corruption among the British agents on the subcontinent, Edmund Burke stressed the need for the English voter to sympathize with the ordinary inhabitants of India in order to understand what it feels like to be ruled by the arbitrary power of the East India Company.²¹ Meant to inform members of Parliament, the speech includes a geographical survey of India along with a critical review of the East India Company's misalliances and broken treaties. Like Smith, Burke is well aware that distance coupled with ignorance could hamper sympathy. "But we are in general . . . so little acquainted with Indian details; the instruments of oppression under which the people suffer are so hard to be understood; and even the very names of the sufferers are so uncouth and strange to our ears, that it is very difficult for our sympathy to fix upon these objects."²² At the start of his speech, Burke asserts his authority as an expert on India by providing a geographical review of the subcontinent. India's sublimity has immediate political implications for the British. With vast territory come monumental responsibilities. In other words, Burke is preparing his suggestion that the company now rules like an Asian despot over vast territories and that it needs to be reformed lest the abuses of power undertaken abroad be brought back to England—an anticolonial argument that stretches back as far as Euripides and Thucydides.

To build India up as an object of concern, Burke lists off the variety of traditions and populations within. He admonishes members of Parliament for focusing the debate about the India bill primarily on coalition politics within England, rather than on the Indian people,

21. For a broader discussion of Burke's speech and orientalism, see Frederick Wheelan, *Enlightenment Political Thought and Non-Western Societies: Sultans and Savages* (London: Routledge, 2012), 103–29.

22. James Burke, *The Speeches of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* (Dublin: Duffy, 1854), 249.

instead it has focused. Much the same could have been said about the scandal surrounding Christian Wolff's speech on Chinese ethics at the University of Halle—the participants had nothing to say about China, but devoted vast reams of paper to church-state politics. Burke is eager to display his many years of study devoted to India. Like Wolff, Burke published his China speech with a long critical apparatus of footnotes that dwarfs the original text. Then as now, the Orient was a territory that attracted scholars eager to display their own learnedness. The overwhelming complexity of the place, which Burke alone seems to have comprehended, leads him to catalog Indian geography. So great is the space, that it threatens to confuse the audience, making it seem more fabulous than ever. As Sara Suleri notes: "In seeking to represent the physical tangibility of the subcontinent, he succeeds only in essentializing size into a numbing sequence of figures."²³ Burke's display of his knowledge about India inadvertently generates greater uncertainty.

In order to help his Parliamentary listeners come to terms with the vastness of India, he builds a comparison with Germany—imperial humor for the home audience:

If I were to take the whole aggregate of our possessions there, I should compare it, as the nearest parallel I can find, with the empire of Germany. Our immediate possessions I should compare with the Austrians, and they would not suffer in the comparison. The nabob of Oude might stand for the king of Prussia; the nabob of Arcot I would compare, as superior in territory, and equal in revenue, to the elector of Saxony. Cheyt Sing, the rajah of Benares, might well rank with the prince of Hesse, at least; and the rajah of Tanjore (though hardly equal in extent of dominion, superior in revenue) to the elector of Bavaria.²⁴

Burke's plea for sympathy sets the Holy Roman Empire as the mediating domain in order to awaken familiarity for an even more remote and cloudy object. If one can feel for the Germans with their diversified empire of different religions, classes, and principalities—the ruling British dynasty descended from Hannover—then why

23. Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 29.

24. Burke, *Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 238.

not for India as well? Europe can itself already be half oriental, at least from the perspective of a nationalist Englishman. As Russell Berman has argued, alterity was attributed not only to far-off lands, but was also found within the Enlightenment's conceptual boundaries of Europe.²⁵ The chaotic constitution of Central Europe served as a familiar middle term, standing somewhere between the Orient's overwhelming diversity and England's insular coherence.²⁶ India's patchwork of principalities might have remind the audience of Pufendorf's famous description of the Holy Roman Empire as a monstrosity: "If we want to name Germany according to the rules of political classification, then nothing remains for us but to call it a monstrosity of related political bodies, that, because of the Emperor's sluggish yielding, the princes' ambition, and the clerics' restlessness, has over time been transformed into such a clumsy political form."²⁷

The India bill before Parliament, Burke stated, was intended to become the "*magna charta* of Hindostan" and if that analogy seemed far-fetched, Burke inserted a comparison with the equally arcane Treaty of Westphalia.²⁸ When Burke's speech appeared a year later in German translation, this passage skipped over all direct references to Brandenburg, Saxony, or Hessen. The text includes Burke's explanation as to why he drew an analogy between Germany and India, but without giving specifics.²⁹ German critics of the Holy Roman Empire's constitution would recognize a not-so-quiet thrust at the composite character of the Holy Roman Empire, its disparate small and larger principalities, yet the ostensible reason for Burke's comparison is his desire to instill sympathy for India. He presumes that his British audience is familiar with Germany,

25. Russell Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1998), 22.

26. A little more than a century later, Adolf Loos would again apply this geographical valuation to the Habsburg Empire to show how it lagged so far behind London's modernity that it was almost Asian.

27. Samuel von Pufendorf, *Ueber die Verfassung des deutschen Reiches*, trans. Harry Breßlau (Berlin: Heimann, 1870) 107.

28. Burke, *Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 235.

29. "Edmund Burkes Schilderung der gegenwärtigen Lage der Englisch-Ostindischen Gesellschaft," *Historisches Portefeuille* 3.7 (July 1784): 82.

so if they can imagine an emotional bond that far over the channel, then they should take the next leap to identify with Indians living under arbitrary British rule. The German text does include Burke's explanation: "[India] I have compared to Germany . . . not for an exact resemblance, but as a sort of middle term, . . . in order to awaken some thing of sympathy for the unfortunate natives, of which I am afraid we are not perfectly susceptible; whilst we look at this very remote object through a false and cloudy medium."³⁰ Burke's call reinforces the contention that Europeans in general were familiar with the emotional configuration.

Whereas Smith imagined a Chinese earthquake, Burke describes the very real Indian suffering caused by British administrators. Given the ease with which Asian countries were interchangeably organized under the rubric "The Orient," it would not take much to draw the further analogy between India and China. While Smith asks the reader to sympathetically consider suffering Chinese, Burke wants them to do so for Indians. Smith sidesteps the colonial debate by using China in his speculation to focus solely on the problem of sympathy. Likewise, by having a European as the agent of his thought experiment, rather than an Englishman or a member of Parliament, Smith was abstracting away from the particulars of British rule in Asia. Burke's call would have been a much more political and commonly discussed challenge in late eighteenth century London. To sympathize with China allows for the possibility that one could do same for India—a point Smith would well have understood.

If sympathy serves as a cornerstone to ethics, it does so in part because the ability to share emotions depends upon communication connecting moral agents. Human beings resemble each other in the "fabric of the mind, as with that of the body," and this resemblance allows them to embrace opinions of others.³¹ The emotions Smith ponders reveal a lived connection between eighteenth-century Europeans and China. First, sympathy for Chinese victims shows that the emotionally sensitive European is enmeshed in a media system

30. Burke, *Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 238.

31. Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History—Lost and Found* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2011), chap. 3, paras. 8, 9.

that includes China as its extreme limit. Eighteenth-century information networks gathered information from around the world, so much so that Immanuel Kant asserted the existence of world human rights because whenever European empires committed violations anywhere in the world, the public learned of these crimes and *felt* with the sufferers. It is not quite enough for Kant that international crimes became known to the public; he also insisted that their misery was shared as a feeling. Kant's insistence on a moral feeling is quite striking in his late essay on "Perpetual Peace," because his categorical moral imperative is famously grounded in rational judgment, and specifically not in emotions. "The peoples of the earth have thus entered in varying degrees into a universal community, and it has developed to the point where a violation of rights in *one* part of the world is felt *everywhere*."³² Kant, like Smith, takes for granted that media convey suffering from around the world. In moral psychological terms, these networks have taken on a function previously attributed to an omniscient deity. The role Nietzsche ascribes to the mythic gods to witness even the most remote spectacle of suffering has already in the eighteenth century been assumed by news media. "So as to abolish hidden, undetected, unwitting suffering from the world and honestly to deny it, one was in the past virtually compelled to invent gods and genii of all the heights and depths, in short something that roams even in secret, hidden places, sees even in the dark, and will not easily let an interesting painful spectacle pass unnoticed."³³ In addition to acknowledging the spread of information, Adam Smith's speculation also questions how far emotions can range and how long their intensity can be sustained over great distances. Indirectly, he is asking how securely the media circuits bearing news of the world are lodged in the psyche of the ordinary subject. Does information from such a distance have an impact on the domestic reader? That Smith answers in the affirmative reveals that such emotions are embedded

32. Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," in *Kant's Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nesbit, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 107–8 (emphasis in original).

33. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 68.

in the flow of information from Asia to Europe. That Smith could sensibly offer his speculation also confirms how common such a feeling could be among his readers. His insistence that the sympathizing person not turn away from China to concentrate on personal worries shows that information from abroad had enough presence to compete with immediate events.

Bernard Mandeville argued in more radical terms against the presumption that Europeans would feel real compassion for the suffering of distant foreigners. In his 1723 essay on (or rather, against) charity and charity schools, Mandeville contemplates a smaller-scale analogy to Smith's thought experiment: "When we hear that three or four thousand Men, all Strangers to us, are kill'd with the Sword, or forc'd into some River where they are drown'd, we say and perhaps believe that we pity them." Humanity and reason compel us to commiserate over an event completely removed from us, yet Mandeville argues that such thoughts are mere politeness to be forgotten in less than two minutes.³⁴ In dismissing any expression of compassion for distant suffering, he is forced to discount the effect that performance and reading have. Mandeville does acknowledge that "those who have a strong and lively Imagination, and can make Representations of things in their Minds" might feel "something that resembles Compassion." However, this emotion is "done by Art": it is not heartfelt, but is as faint as "what we suffer at the acting of a Tragedy."³⁵ With his disregard for theater, Mandeville shows that his argument does not consider the heightening effects of rhetoric or performance, indeed, mediation of any kind—a curious stance given that tragedy and Aristotle's comments on it were the locus of most eighteenth-century reflections on pity and sympathy. It was precisely the intensity of the audience's identification with the protagonist that made it a favored scenario for analyzing sympathies as the basis for moral responses.

Smith was not satisfied with skeptical assertions such as Mandeville's, for he argues that feeling sympathy for the Chinese victims is

34. Bernard Mandeville, "An Essay on Charity and Charity Schools," in *The Fable of the Bees* (London: Penguin 1970), 266.

35. Mandeville, "Charity," 266–67.

a moral obligation. Our conscience shames us into feeling. Smith concluded his thought experiment by stating: "And hence it is, that to feel much for others, and little for ourselves, that to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent, affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature."³⁶ This obligation to restrain greed and feel compassion was the basis for Smith's cosmopolitan conscience. The two-step maneuver—having the sociable emotions and then analyzing their moral implications—goes back to Shaftesbury's sense that the two stages can exist in sequence. Shaftesbury's concept of moral judgment attempts to synthesis two elements: first, a rational, reflective process utilizing such standards as consistency and the general welfare; and second, an intuitive process in which one responds directly to moral objects, being either attracted or repelled by them.³⁷ Shaftesbury takes a rhetorical approach to this moral self-examination in that he refers to the practice as "soliloquy"—a conversation, or even disputation, that one carries out with oneself rather than in a public forum. Ian Watt underscored the theatrical quality of these inner debates, seeing them as a continuity connecting Shaftesbury, Smith, and the new novels. "It would be left to Adam Smith . . . to take the notion of spectatorship implicit in the writings of Shaftesbury, Steele, and Richardson, and to develop all of this into a full-blown moral system in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)."³⁸ James Chandler adds that for Smith the human capacity for functioning as a sympathetic spectator of others as well as oneself was "cultivated in the daily life of commercial civil society."³⁹ Smith "elaborated the innovative idea of an impartial spectator as an internal principle of general perception that is able to counteract our egoism."⁴⁰

Smith's sequence begins with the emotional response, followed by moral reflection. In twenty-first-century terms, the gap between

36. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 71.

37. Stanley Graen, Introduction, in Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), xxxii.

38. James Chandler, *An Archeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 171.

39. Chandler, *Archeology of Sympathy*, 172.

40. Chandler, *Archeology of Sympathy*, 172.

sympathy that wears off quickly and a moral recommitment to care for the suffering foreigner constitutes the difference between a privileged ignorance about the suffering of others and a self-conscience obligation to sacrifice one's own selfish interests for others. What makes Smith's account of sympathy interesting is his explanation of how to overcome its limitations. By recognizing the failure of sympathy to sustain an emotional engagement with distant suffering, the subject becomes more self-aware and feels compelled to correct the first fading of sympathy. Sustained engagement requires more than a burst of emotion; it takes a second-order observation to hold the subject's focus on the object of pity.⁴¹ Over time, the effect of sympathy for foreign suffering leads to greater self-observation and regulation.

In *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), Descartes had already noted that the theater was the most important institution for conveying sympathy, or "fellow-feeling" of the elevated, noble variety in which the observer feels for the victim without considering that he, too, might share the same fate.⁴² Outside the theater, however, other sources of information could induce sympathy without indulging in dramatic excess. To the extent that tragic dramas were based on missionary reports and travelogues, the spectator uninterested in theater could turn to these newer forms of communication. Descartes, like many other early modern thinkers up to Kant, adopts a neo-Stoical attitude that holds compassion to be dangerous when it leads to excessively sentimental behavior. Feelings of pity elicited by dramatic suffering seemed a threat that had to be contained by reason.

For critics who see Smith as an advocate for self-interest and the free market, this thought experiment is another example of the limits of a morality based on sympathy. However, Smith's critical reflections do not come to rest here; he pursues the question beyond pointing out how selfishness counteracts empathy when he postu-

41. Albrecht Koschorke, "Selbststeuerung: David Hartley's Assoziationstheorie, Adam Smith's Sympathielehre und die Dampfmaschine von James Watt," in *Das Laokoon-Paradigma, Zeichenregime im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Inge Baxmann, Michael Franz, and Wolfgang Schäffner (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 179–90.

42. Katherine Ibbett, "Fellow-Feeling," in *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction*, ed. Susan Broomhall (London: Routledge, 2017), 62.

lates the existence of a conscience that shames selfishness into acting in the interest of others. "And hence it is, that to feel much for others, and little for ourselves, that to restrain our selfish, and to indulge our benevolent, affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature."⁴³ The Chinese thought experiment occurs two hundred pages into a treatise in which Smith argues that sympathy for the suffering of others is the very basis of ethics. He insists that the imaginary spectator of another person's suffering fully invest himself in the effort to think like the victim.

The Chinese earthquake example is but one of many hypothetical situations that Smith posits, the most famous being his example of watching our brother on the torture rack. Like Foucault, who begins *Discipline and Punish* with the famous 1757 execution of Damians, Smith opens his argument with a graphic and extreme case, to draw our attention as readers: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them."⁴⁴ While scholars debate over Adam Smith's religious views, the fact that the image that elicits a moral feeling based on sympathy is that of a man tortured on the rack does invite comparisons with martyr dramas or the pious contemplation of altar paintings depicting Christ's crucifixion. The brother tortured on the rack is but a secular, political variation on the much older Christian coupling of compassion, vision, and morality. Torture appears in baroque tragedies, both German and English, as the exemplary moment in which the protagonist his or her Stoic virtue in the face of excruciating pain and dismemberment.⁴⁵ Smith rigorously eschews any such religious connotation in his lectures, concentrating instead on the psychological challenges in establishing an emotional economy with the other. For compassion

43. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 71.

44. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 48.

45. Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, *Wollust und Grausamkeit: Affektenlehre und Affektdarstellung in Lohensteins Dramatik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 245.

to become moral philosophy, it must negate its theological origins. Smith offers a psychological process to guide the moral movement of sympathy that previously would have been undertaken with the supervision of a priest. The sequence with which his moral logic unfolds, including a sense of necessity that drives it, follows those laid out by earlier spiritual exercises: "In all such cases, that there may be some correspondence of sentiments between the spectator and the person principally concerned, the spectator must, first of all, endeavor as much as he can put to himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possible occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion, with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible the imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded."⁴⁶ Smith's psychological rhetoric stripped of religious tones translates readily into aesthetic spectatorship. The dramaturgical purpose of the victims' torture lays not so much in their Stoicism than in the onlookers' sympathy. In both cases torture sets the extreme limit that reveals the moral order: in the baroque tragedy, the torture victim struggles against the complete loss of self-control, while in Smith's moral philosophy the sight of the torture victim establishes the paradigm requiring moral sympathy for the suffering of others. Smith's secular discussion of how best to represent the tortured body is but one of many that permeated eighteenth century criticism, most notably in Gotthold Lessing's *Laokoon* essay.⁴⁷

The question of why the victim is suffering, to what end and under whose hand, does not define the victims' moral courage but it does influence the audience's ability to feel sympathy. While Chris-

46. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 66.

47. Lessing and Smith overlapped to such a great extent in their psychology of sympathy that Lessing mentions "the Englishman" only once in a quibble over whether the expressions of suffering diminish the spectator's empathy for the victim. Lessing cites Smith so little because they agree on so much. For a masterfully lucid account of their mutual sympathies, see Helmut J. Schneider, "Empathy, Imagination, and Dramaturgy—A Means of Society in Eighteenth-Century Theory," in *Empathy*, ed. Vanessa Lux and Sigrid Weigel (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017): 203–21.

tian martyrs suffering at the hands of pagan rulers formed the earliest version of these moral spectacles, the terms where soon reversed in the eighteenth century, so that the martyr dramas presented the Church's missionaries as the oppressors. Images of torture on the stage, particularly as they depict encounters between Europeans and indigenous people, allegorized the violent failure of intercultural relations. The martyr figure thus became an avenue for Europeans to identify with the victims of colonialism. Already in the seventeenth century, the tortured native served as a vivid image of colonial greed, so often depicted in Protestant countries as a particularly Spanish vice. Smith is quite careful to separate out the theological implications of sympathy. Unlike missionary accounts that sought to inspire Europeans to dedicate themselves to China, Smith's sympathy for the earthquake victims ignores their possible Christian salvation. The death of Chinese does not raise the question that seemed to torment so many missionaries: What will become of their heathen souls in the afterworld?

Contra his reputation as *the* spokesperson for self-interest, Smith insists that compassion for others is the very basis for masculine virtue: "Our sensibility to the feelings of others, so far from being inconsistent with the manhood of self-command, is the very principle upon which manhood is founded."⁴⁸ Smith is one of the first modern thinkers to make explicit that he is providing a gender theory along with his ethics. Thus each aspect of his moral subject defines a different masculine quality: the conscience is an imposing father figure who forces the selfish subject to act nobly, not to slink away from responsibility but stand up for virtue before the eyes of the impartial spectator. In this scheme, sympathy for others and the ability to imagine their emotional state were not confined to the foppish figures we commonly associate with eighteenth-century sentimental literature. Smith insists that his ideal man of virtue has nothing in common with fashionable clowns who flatter their way into courtly favor.⁴⁹ Rather than making an open display of his feelings for everyone else to share, Smith insists that the sympathizing

48. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 254.

49. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 129.

moral subject is composed, particularly under the most difficult conditions. In drawing a distinction between public demeanor and private sensations, Smith still admires Stoical self-command even as he rejects the ancient call for apathy toward oneself and others.⁵⁰ That the modern male feels the suffering of others, yet maintains his composure, suggests that Smith has the training of public servants in mind.⁵¹

Alongside a morality of sympathy, Smith provides a “philosophy of vision” to serve as a second-order correction. His observing spectator shares some but not all characteristics with Stoicism, another explicitly masculine moral system, whose paradigmatic example is that of a man who must grapple with the news that his wife and son have just been heartlessly killed. For Smith, the moral spectator is an allegorical figure functioning as a conscience. In many ways, he places the reader of his book in the position of the impartial spectator, who evaluates the hypothetical European’s sympathy for China. His thought experiment functions as an adapted spiritual exercise. Whereas pious Catholics were asked to share the suffering of Chinese martyrs, Smith provides a secularized model for extending sympathy based on one of the oldest disaster scenarios in Western philosophy. Since antiquity, earthquakes have been a paradigmatic test of Stoical forbearance. Seneca, for example, recounted the shock Romans felt upon news of Pompeii’s destruction by earthquake. An earthquake underscores the ancient and baroque lesson that nothing in this world is stable. As Seneca writes,

Comfort needs to be found for the fearful, and their great terror needs to be eradicated. For what can anyone regard as sufficiently secure, if the world itself is shaken, and its firmest parts crumble; if the one thing in it that is immovable and fixed, so that it supports everything that converges on it, starts to waver; if the earth has lost its characteristic property of standing still? Wherever will our fears find rest? What shelter will our bodies find, where will they escape to in their anxiety, if the fear arises from the foundations and is drawn from the depths? There is general

50. Fonna Forman-Barzilai, “Adam Smith as Globalization Theorist,” *Critical Review* 14.4 (2000): 391–419.

51. A. L. Macfie, “Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*,” in *The Individual in Society: Papers on Adam Smith* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), 44.

panic when buildings rumble and their collapse is signaled. Then everyone rushes straight outside, abandons his home, and entrusts himself to the open air. What hiding place can we see, what help, if the earth itself cracks, and the very thing that protects and supports us, that cities are built on, that some have called the foundation of the world, gapes open and trembles?⁵²

When Smith mentions the inevitable philosophizing that follows an earthquake, he surely has these lines from Seneca in mind. How to take the news, how not to crumple in despair, how not to moan before other people, but to preserve one's own dignity and composure—these are virtues that distinguish a Stoic from a man of unrestrained feelings.

Pierre Hadot summarizes the ancient position: “The exercise of meditation allows us to be ready at the moment when an unexpected—and perhaps dramatic—circumstance occurs.”⁵³ The perfect Stoic attitude consisted in *apatheia*—the complete absence of passions.⁵⁴ Included in the list of Stoic virtues is the cosmopolitan claim that he is a man of the world. The Chinese earthquake thought experiment is Smith's means of linking ancient and modern cosmopolitanism through a chiasmic opposition. If the death of one's nearest kin is a shock that requires the survivor to restrain his emotions, the distant disaster calls upon him to stretch out his feelings. If Stoicism requires us to maintain the composure of powerless Roman slave, the modern man of feeling is supposed to assume the position of the generous master who extends his compassion outward. Smith sets the two philosophical outlooks in juxtaposition so often in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that the difference between Stoical and sentimental morality almost constitutes a master-slave dialectic in the manner of Hegel. Stoic cosmopolitanism insisted that the individual detach himself from his family and community in order to treat everyone in the world

52. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Natural Questions*, trans. Harry M. Hine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 87–88.

53. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 85.

54. Hadot, *Philosophy*, 136.

equally. Within ancient Stoicism, being a citizen of the world meant you were *not* a citizen of your family and city. The universal affirmation required a renunciation of the more proximate bonds of affection. Much as he admired self-command, Smith considered the call for apathy toward ones nearest kin detestable.⁵⁵ Likewise, and somewhat more controversially, he considered the call to love all people in the world as equally absurd and unattainable.⁵⁶

The alternative means for extending sympathy beyond our immediate circle are commerce and literature. In considering the modes of writing that foster the circulation in feeling Smith sets contemporary eighteenth-century literature above ancient maxims. "The poets and romance writers, who best paint the refinements and delicacies of love and friendship, and of all other private and domestic affections, Racine and Voltaire, Richardson, Marivaux, and Riccoboni, are, in such cases, much better instructors than Zeno, Chrysippus, or Epictetus."⁵⁷ Through his praise of poets, Smith shows that his thought experiment presumes the ability of representations to evoke emotions, and in his case without immediately presenting the audience any images, though Smith's moral philosophy depends on the ability of the philosophical subject to imagine the sight of the suffering person worthy of sympathy.⁵⁸ Smith presumes that the news of another person's suffering suffices to conjure up a corresponding image. While news of a Chinese earthquake today would most likely include still and moving images (unless the earthquake site were too remote), Smith presumes that the eighteenth-century recipient of news had enough visual memories

55. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 240.

56. Fonna Forman-Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy: Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 120–31.

57. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 241–42.

58. Ingo Berensmeyer sees Adam Smith as the central figure in Scottish and English sentimentality whose model of subjectivity fits neatly into recent German media histories. Only through his reading of later, satirical works by Lawrence Sterne and Thomas Rowlandson does Berensmeyer counter Koschorke's claim that sentimentalism represented a convergence of media, affect, and bodily sensation. See his "Empfindsamkeit als Medienkonflikt: Zur Gefühlskultur des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Poetica* 39.3/4 (2007): 397–422.

to construct a plausible image in their own minds. The importance of such images when stirring sympathy runs counter to the Protestant prohibitions on images, whether of Christ or martyrs, at the site of pious reflection.

Lynn Festa connects the inward turn of the sentimental mode with the outward expansion of empire in order to explain the eighteenth-century emergence of humanitarian feelings (a term central to cosmopolitanism and world literature). She argues that sentimental literature created the tropes that enabled readers to imaginatively grasp foreign culture, without wholly assimilating foreign figures. A key question is how this detachment is maintained and what end it serves: in breaking off sympathy is the sentimental reader acknowledging the strangeness of foreign literature or is the reader avoiding an excess of identification that might overwhelm? Rather than arguing that sentimental literature sugarcoats the nasty operations of European expansion, Festa argues that “sentimentality fashions the tropes that render relations with distant others thinkable.”⁵⁹

In his autobiography, Goethe describes a similar sympathetic response to reading newspaper reports of distant events. Not only does his characterization hearken back to Smith’s moral sentiments, it also anticipates his famous description of world literature, in which new journals circulate across borders after warring nations have ended their hostilities. “During a period of peace, there is no more cheerful kind of reading than indulging in the public press, which speedily delivers the most recent world events.”⁶⁰ Ordinary readers feel as if they were participating with those far removed from themselves. In a few strokes Goethe combines Smith’s ethics with Lessing’s dramaturgy, when he compares newspaper readers’ sense of “participating” or “being there” (*Teilnahme*) with theater audiences imaginatively sharing the fortunes of a character on stage,

59. Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century England and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2006), 8.

60. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Werke*, ed. Erich Trunz (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982), 10:112; hereafter cited as “HA.”

and while these affections often may seem arbitrary, they have a moral foundation.⁶¹

Smith's account of sympathy is important because he explains how moral thinkers can and should overcome mental and spatial limitations on fellow-feeling. By recognizing the failure of sympathy to sustain an emotional engagement with distant suffering, the subject becomes more self-aware and feels compelled to correct the decline. Sustained engagement requires more than a burst of emotion; it takes a second-order observation to hold the subject's focus on the object of pity.⁶² Over time, the experience of sympathy for foreign suffering leads to greater self-observation and regulation, the hallmarks of modern subjectivity.

61. HA, 10:112–13.

62. Koschorke, "Selbststeuerung," 186.