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# An Investigation into the Smithian System of Sympathy: from Cognition to Emotion,

Laurie Bréban \*

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## 0. Introduction

In the first part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, 1790) – "Of the Propriety of Action" – Smith seeks to explain the origin of moral approbation. It is well-known that the solution to this problem lies in his famous concept of sympathy.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the question of the precise nature of Smithian sympathy gave rise to an abundant literature from as early as the nineteenth century with the emergence of the *Adam Smith Problem*.<sup>2</sup> This famous *Problem*, which suggests that there is an inconsistency between Smith's two major works – *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) – led Smith scholars to question whether or not sympathy, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, was a *specific sentiment* ("the sentiment of sympathy") or a specific virtue (like altruism or benevolence) as it was interpreted to be by the advocates of the *Adam Smith Problem* (with authors from the *Older German Historical School* such as Carl Knies and Wiltold von Skarzynskiat the top of the list).<sup>3</sup> But this was challenged, albeit much later, by contributions following the scientific publication of the complete works of Adam Smith in the late 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Since the publication of the Glasgow edition, it has generally been agreed that Smithian sympathy does not refer to a specific sentiment or a

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<sup>1</sup>For a presentation and discussion of Smith's concept of sympathy, Morrow (1923) and Campbell (1971) remain relevant introductions.

<sup>2</sup>For a critical review of the *Adam Smith Problem*, see Macfie and Raphael (1976, p. 20); Montes (2003) and Dellemotte (2011).

<sup>3</sup>As explained by Dellemotte (2011), the *Adam Smith Problem* relies on a "twofold conflation" between sympathy and altruism, on the one hand, and self-love and selfishness, on the other hand.

<sup>4</sup>To be more precise, between 1976 and 1983.

specific virtue.<sup>5</sup>This does not mean, however, that there is a consensus among commentators about what Smith meant by sympathy, so that the question of its precise nature remains open.

For some commentators, Smith used the term sympathy to refer to a concordance of sentiments between two persons (a spectator and an actor) rather than a specific sentiment felt by the spectator.<sup>6</sup>They claimed that such a concordance was brought about by the spectator undergoing an imaginary change of situation in order to conceive of what he would feel in the actor's situation. At the end of the process, if he feels something which concords with the actor's feeling, then there is sympathy. On this interpretation, Smith's concept denotes something in the emotional realm (a specific configuration of both persons' emotions). For other commentators, Smith's sympathy refers to the imaginary change of situation itself. Thus, sympathy is held to be rather a cognitive process, prior to the emotional realm, which would enable us to conceive of the sentiments of others. It purportedly gives rise to an emotion related to the other but not necessarily concordant with the other's actual emotion (see Cropsey, 1963; Macfie, 1968; Biziou, Gautier and Pradeau, 1999; Peil, 1999; Nanay, 2010; Urquhart, 2010and Dellemotte, 2011).

Between these two interpretations, there are contributions which indistinctly use the word sympathy to refer to both the concordance of sentiments and to the imaginary change of situation in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (see, for instance, Fleischacker, 2012<sup>7</sup>and Frazer, 2012). Even commentators who claim to adhere to one of the two interpretations above maintain some confusion about the precise content of Smithian sympathy. This is typically the case of Campbell (1971) who, after having stated that "'sympathy' is Smith's word for agreement, coincidence or harmony of sentiments" (1971, p. 94), suggests "that Smith has a general meaning for 'sympathy', namely the perception of the coincidence of sentiments, and a specific meaning, the capacity to achieve such a coincidence through the imaginary change of one's point of view" (1971, p. 94). The same kind of confusion is at work in Sugden (2002) and Dellemotte (2011). For instance, Sugden (2002), who insists on the emotional dimension of sympathy, states that part of what Smith says could correspond to the modern concept of empathy, in the sense that the spectator,

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<sup>5</sup> However, Dellemotte (2011), prompts us to give a more nuanced picture of this consensus.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Campbell (1971), Sugden (2002) and Raphael (2007).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Fleischacker (2012), right from the beginning of his article, makes it clear that "for Hume and Smith, sympathy is not compassion. Rather they use the word for any case, in which one person participates in another's feelings". But at the same time, Fleischacker claims that "we might identify Humean and Smithian sympathy with what today we call 'empathy', except that that word is generally employed for a thinking of oneself into other people's shoes that fits Smith's but not Hume's account of shared feelings"(2012, p. 273).

identifying with the person he observes, could imagine the emotional experience of this person (R. Sugden, 2002, p. 71).<sup>8</sup> As for Dellemotte (2011), he maintains that sympathy, as the faculty which enables one to perceive and then feel another's sentiments, is prior to any sentiments. But at the same time, he cannot help underscoring what he considers to be the polysemous character of Smith's concept. Dellemotte claims that Smith uses the word sympathy to refer to an explanatory principle (the system of sympathy), to a cognitive process and to an emotional result.<sup>9</sup> Finally, other scholars go so far as to attribute this confusion to Smith himself (Binmore, 1998<sup>10</sup> and Frazer, 2012<sup>11</sup>).

Such confusion prompts us to pay more attention to the exact terminology used by Smith, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As shall be seen, when Smith uses the term "sympathy" in isolation (or synonymously "*fellow-feeling*" (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 10)), he is not designating a cognitive process but rather a particular result of it that would seem to be in the realm of emotion. Smith never uses the word "sympathy" to refer to this cognitive process. He uses instead the expression "imaginary change of situation" (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 19, p. 21; VII, iii, 1, p. 317). Of course, this imaginary change of situation plays an important part in his system of sympathy. But Smith does not leave any ambiguity about this part: a few times in the text, sympathy is said "to be founded" or "to arise from" an imaginary change of situation.<sup>12</sup> Thus, as Raphael (2007) remarked, it constitutes a

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<sup>8</sup> For an opposing interpretation, see Nanay (2010).

<sup>9</sup> "[S]ympathy designates [...] in Smith's work both an *explanatory principle* (as in the expression "system of sympathy"), an *operator*, or the main cog of a "*mechanism*" by which an individual, identifying with another and conceiving what he would feel in his situation, is likely to share his feelings, and lastly the *result* of this operation when it succeeds (the actual concordance of sentiments between the actor and the spectator)" (Dellemotte, 2011, p. 2248).

<sup>10</sup> Some recent contributions on Smithian sympathy still refer to the *Adam Smith Problem*. This is the case of Binmore's second volume of *Game Theory and the Social Contract* (1998). According to Binmore, the *Adam Smith Problem* stems from Smith's ambiguous understanding of sympathy. On the one hand, Smith allegedly defines sympathy as empathy in its modern sense, but on the other hand, he often uses it in the sense of today's sympathetic preferences (1998, pp. 368-9). In order to reconcile Smith's two major works, Binmore proposes to free Smithian sympathy from its supposed initial confusion by reinterpreting it in terms of modern empathy (1998, p. 12, pp. 368-9).

<sup>11</sup> "Smith confusingly speaks of sympathy and compassion (as do we all) in many different senses. Smith sometimes uses the term sympathy to refer to stage one alone [the imaginary change of situation; L.B.] or to stage two alone [the spectator feels some reaction herself in response to this imagined situation]; when it is used in these senses sympathy need not imply any approval at all. Yet Smith also calls moral approval itself 'sympathy' [...] and the same name is given to the whole process to the extent that approval is the result" (Frazer, 2012, p. 101).

<sup>12</sup> My italics in all the quotations hereafter: "and we have no occasion for sympathy, or for that *imaginary change of situations from which it arises*" (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 19); "He must [...] strive to render as perfect as possible, that *imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded*" (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 21); "That *imaginary change of situation, upon which their sympathy is founded*, is but momentary" (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 21); "When I sympathize with your sorrow or your indignation, it may be pretended, indeed, that my emotion is founded in self-love, because *it arises from bringing your case home to myself, from putting myself in your situation*, and thence conceiving what I should feel in the like circumstances. But though *sympathy is very properly said to arise from an imaginary change of situations* with the

prerequisite for sympathy, not sympathy itself. Finally, to designate the entire system (both the “imaginary change of situation” and “sympathy”), Smith broadly speaks of “the system of sympathy” (TMS, VII, iii, 1, p. 317). In the rest of the paper, I will strive to remain faithful to Smith’s terminology.

Beyond the clarification that it brings, this terminological detour allows us to emphasize that Smith’s system of sympathy, as a whole, contains both a cognitive and an emotional dimension. Now, there remains a point barely addressed by commentators, that is, how does Smith connect both dimensions or, in other words, how can this cognitive process give rise to something in the emotional realm?

The literature often claims that Smith’s conception of sympathy is superior to Hume’s because Smith’s supposedly includes a further cognitive dimension that is missing from Hume’s (see, for instance, Macfie, 1968; Campbell, 1971 and Frazer, 2012). Fleischacker (2012) goes so far as to write that Smith, in his opening chapter on sympathy, “uses technical terms borrowed from Hume to make an anti-Humean point” (2012, p. 279). In this paper, I take the opposite view. Of course, there are differences between Smith’s and Hume’s system of sympathy.<sup>13</sup> However, the fact remains that the Smithian system uses elements from the Humean philosophy of knowledge. This is especially the case for the way Smith views the connection between the cognitive and the emotional dimensions within his system. As shall be seen, such a connection relies on a neglected concept of the *Theory of Moral Sentiment*, inherited from Hume’s theory of beliefs and that Smith calls “the force of conception”.

Far from being a concept of secondary importance, the force of conception provides a key to answering a question raised by some commentators and which concerns the possibility of moral evaluation based on Smith’s system of sympathy (see, for instance, Macfie, 1968; Campbell, 1971; Gordon, 1995; Sugden, 2002; Nanay, 2010 and Frazer, 2012). The issue generally arises as to whether the imaginary change of situation allows for the spectator’s emotion to be distinct from the emotion of the person with whom he identifies (the original emotion). Commentators agree

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person principally concerned [...]” (TMS, VII, iii, 1, p. 317). Smith even writes “that *this is the source of our fellow-feeling for the misery of others, that it is by changing places in fancy* with the sufferer, that we come either to conceive or to be affected by what he feels” (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 10; On the synonymy between sympathy and fellow-feeling, see *above*, §1.1).

<sup>13</sup> But it is not the purpose of the present paper to confront the two authors’ systems of sympathy. On this point see, for instance, Morrow (1923), Fleischacker (2012) and Frazer (2012).

that it cannot be otherwise – if only because, as Sugden (2002) rightly observed, there would be no room for moral evaluation in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

For some, the mere existence of an imaginary change of situation ensures the possibility of moral evaluation, because they understand the word “situation” in the strict sense of the term (see, for instance, Macfie, 1968 and Campbell, 1971). They claim that, by imaginary change of situation, Smith meant the process by which a spectator imagines what *he* would feel in another’s situation. It would then be possible that Smith’s imaginary change of situation would lead him to feel an emotion distinct from the one felt by the person with whom he identifies.

Now, Smith does not understand the word “situation” in the strict sense of the term. For Smith, the imaginary change of situation implies that the spectator imagines being *the other* in his situation (see *TMS*, VII, iii, 1, p. 317). This has made some scholars quite skeptical about the possibility of moral evaluation in the *Theory of Moral sentiments* (see, for instance, Gordon, 1995 and Sugden, 2002). Their skepticism stems from their interpretation of Smith’s imaginary change of situation which they consider to involve the spectator’s loss of identity. Contrary to them, I will show that this is not the case.<sup>14</sup>

After having made it explicit that Smithian sympathy, strictly speaking, possesses an emotional content, I show, in the first section of the paper, that it relies on a complex cognitive process (the “imaginary change of situation”) which enables one to conceive of others’ sentiments. Of course, Smith’s aim, with his system of sympathy, was not to explain how we manage to conceive of others’ feelings but rather how we come to be affected by them. This cognitive process constitutes, therefore, just one step, the next step being to highlight how we move from the cognitive to the emotional realm. I argue that such a movement relies on the concept of “force of conception” which allows for our conception of others’ feelings to give rise to an emotion being experienced that is related to others’ situations (§1).

In the second section, we offer a characterization of the emotional result that arises from Smith’s imaginary change of situation. We do so by highlighting the influence of the cognitive realm on the emotional realm, through the role of the force of conception. After having highlighted two

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<sup>14</sup>Nanay (2010) and Frazer (2012) also share the position according to which Smith’s imaginary change of situation does not entail the spectator’s loss of identity. However, Nanay (2010) does not set out Smith’s reasons for such an eventuality. As for Frazer (2012), he identifies one of the reasons put forward by Smith (the fact that the imaginary change is momentary). But Frazer fails to explain how, for Smith, this reason ensures that the spectator will retain his own identity during the imaginary change.

properties of Smith's imaginary change of situation [(i) the conception bias and (ii) the weakness of conception], we show that it is not only possible but that it is also taken for granted that this imaginary change of situation leads the spectator to feel an emotion distinct from the one felt by the person with whom he identifies (§2).

To conclude, I highlight the conditions under which the emotional result of Smith's imaginary change of situation can properly be called "sympathy". Unlike Nanay (2010), I come to the conclusion that Smithian sympathy does consist in a correspondence of sentiments between the sympathizer and the person he is sympathizing with. It shall be argued that the question of the content of sympathy does not lie so much in knowing whether it is a correspondence of sentiments but rather in knowing what Smith means by correspondence?

## 1. Moving from the cognitive to the emotional realm

### 1.1. *The emotional content of sympathy*

According to some commentators, in order to restore the consistency between *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith's sympathy has to be interpreted as a cognitive process, prior to the emotional realm. Thus, while recognizing the necessity to link the concept of sympathy with the emotional realm (see, for instance, Bizou, Gautier and Pradeau, 1999, p. 6), these commentators neglect one of its fundamental aspects: its emotional content. Yet, asserting that sympathy possesses an emotional content is not to say that it refers to a specific sentiment, such as supported by the advocates of the *Adam Smith Problem*. This is why we would like to emphasize the emotional content of Smithian sympathy, without, for the time being, going into the details of this content.

The emotional content of sympathy can be emphasized through Smith's use of two words:

- 1) It concerns, of course, the word "sympathy" itself, which the author describes as something that we feel or express (my italics in the following quotations, L.B.):

"The *sympathy*, which my friends *express* with my joy, might, indeed, give me pleasure by enlivening that joy: but that which they *express* with my grief could give me none, if it served only to enliven that grief." (TMS, I, i, 2, p. 14)

"But though we *feel* no proper *sympathy* with an attachment of this kind" (TMS, I, ii, 2, p. 32)

"The *sympathy* which we *feel* with them, renders the passion which they accompany less disagreeable" (TMS, I, ii, 2, p. 33)

- 2) But, it also concerns the word "fellow-feeling":

Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our *fellow-feeling* with the sorrow of others. *Sympathy*, though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our *fellow-feeling* with any passion whatever. (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 10)

This last excerpt from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which Smith acknowledges a synonymy between “sympathy” and “fellow-feeling”, is very explicit about the fact that sympathy refers to something located in the emotional realm: it is obviously what is signified by the words “fellow-feeling”.<sup>15</sup>

However, despite textual evidence, the synonymy between “sympathy” and “fellow-feeling” is not supported by all commentators. For instance, Montes (2004) asserts that “sympathy” should not be confused with “fellow-feeling”. He claims that the difference between them turns on the fact that sympathy arises from our knowledge of the cause of the other’s passion whereas fellow-feeling refers only to a real (and not fictitious) sharing of sentiments. Though appealing, this interpretation is debatable. On the one hand, textual evidence shows that information on the cause of the other’s passion is necessary for the emergence of “fellow-feeling”:

Even our sympathy with the grief [...] before we are informed of the cause of either, is always extremely imperfect [...] The first question which we ask is, What has befallen you? Till this be answered, though we are uneasy both from the vague idea of his misfortune, and still more from torturing ourselves with conjectures about what it may be, yet our fellow-feeling is not very considerable. (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 12)

On the other hand, just like sympathy, “fellow-feeling” does not always refer to a real sharing of sentiments. The case that best illustrates this point is the one of our sympathy with the dead with whom no sharing of sentiment is possible at all:

We sympathize even with the dead, and overlooking what is of real importance in their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them, we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike our senses, but can have no influence upon their happiness [...] Surely, we imagine, we can never feel too much for those who have suffered so dreadful a calamity. The tribute of our *fellow-feeling* seems doubly due to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by every body. (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 13)

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<sup>15</sup>Sugden also insists on this synonymy between “sympathy” and “fellow-feeling” in order to show the emotional content of Smithian sympathy (2002, p. 71). This leads him to reject both the modern concepts of sympathy and empathy as used in what he calls “rational choice theory” as possible candidates for expressing Smithian sympathy, since they would be deprived of any emotional content which, he argues, characterizes Smith’s conception (on the more general question of the emotional content of rational choice theory, see the debate between Diaye and Lapidus (2005a; 2005b) and Sugden (2005)).



The result is that fictitious “fellow-feelings” are possible. They correspond to cases that Smith calls “illusive sympathy” (TMS, II, i, 2, p. 71).<sup>16</sup> In this context, it remains difficult to deny the synonymy that Smith establishes between “sympathy” and “fellow-feeling”. And this synonymy together with the foregoing textual evidence strongly suggests that Smithian sympathy belongs to the emotional realm.

Now that the reasons which prompt us to think that Smithian sympathy belongs to the emotional realm have been stated, let us turn to what could be considered its foundation.

### *1.2. Smith’s imaginary change of situation: a complex cognitive process*

The secondary literature has widely acknowledged the cognitive dimension within Smith’s system of sympathy. But, as we saw in the introduction, part of this literature assigns it to sympathy strictly speaking. However, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* leaves no doubt about the fact that the cognitive process that Smith describes –the “imaginary change of situation”–and “sympathy” are separate concepts, serving different purposes.

Let us now focus on the specific purpose served by the imaginary change of situation. Actually, Smith dedicates a whole paragraph to it, in the opening chapter of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* entitled “Of sympathy” (TMS, I, i, 1, §2). In this paragraph, he tries to deal with a fundamental philosophical issue which is well known today as the attribution problem. As he observes, we cannot have an “immediate experience” of others’ feelings. But all the same, we are able to perceive “the manner in which [they] are affected” (TSM, I, i, 1, §2).<sup>17</sup> This leads him to conclude that

It is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are [others’; L.B] sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in [their] case. (TSM, I, i, 1, §2, p. 9)

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<sup>16</sup> Smith defines illusive sympathy as follows: “But as we put ourselves in [the deceased’s situation] we feel upon this, as upon many other occasions, an emotion which the person principally concerned is incapable of feeling, and which yet we feel by an illusive sympathy with him” (TMS, II, i, 2, p. 71). It may be noticed that illusive sympathy refers not only to our sympathy with the dead. Smith also gives other typical illustrations such as the case of our sympathy with a man who has lost his reason or a mother nursing a sick child (see TMS, I, i, 1, pp. 12-13).

<sup>17</sup> On the fundamental separateness between individuals in Smith’s analysis of sympathy, see Griswold (1999, pp. 83-91).

Now, the cognitive process that Smith describes is more complex than it appears. Such complexity arises from the twofold operation of the imagination.<sup>18</sup>

On the one hand, as already observed, imagination allows for a change – an imaginary change – of situation. This operation constitutes, for Smith, the only way by which we can bypass a fundamental limitation of our senses. Our senses, he says, “never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person”. But it is not the same for the imagination. Thanks to the imagination, we are able to go “beyond our own person” and to “place ourselves” in the other’s situation (TMS, I, i, 1, §2, p. 9).<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, though the limitation of our senses has been overcome, they remain decisive in the process which leads us to conceive of others’ sentiments. In that we can say that Smith endorses the Humean opposition to innatism.<sup>20</sup> According to Smith, when putting ourselves in the situation of others, we do not give up what we have learnt from our senses. On the contrary, it is only on the basis of what we felt in the past that we manage to conceive of what others feel. Now, such a transition from the past experiences of our senses to our conception of others’ feelings also rests on the operation of imagination. Indeed, using the same vocabulary as his mentor and friend David Hume, Smith asserts that once we are in the situation of others, “[i]t is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of [theirs], which our imaginations copy” (TMS, I, i, 1, §2, p. 9), so that our conception of others’ feelings is none other than our representation of what our own would be if we were in the same situation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Indeed, for Smith, imagination is a cognitive faculty. This specific role that Smith grants to imagination is even more salient in his *History of Astronomy* (1795). For a discussion of the role of imagination in Smith’s work, see, among others, Harrison (1995), Campbell (1971), Skinner (1974; 1979, pp. 14-41) and Raphael (2007). For a more specific discussion of the central role of imagination in Smith’s moral philosophy and, especially, in sympathy, see Evensky (2005, I, 1, pp. 3-9).

<sup>19</sup> Consequently, identification requires information about the situation which gives rise to the other’s emotion (see TMS, I, i, 1, p. 11). This latter, per se, does not constitute sufficient information for the spectator to identify with the other. This is why Smith asserts that “Sympathy [...] does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it” (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 12). According to some commentators, the importance Smith accords to information for the emergence of sympathy introduces an objective element on which a spectator can rely in order to accompany, or not, the other’s emotions (Biziou, Gautier, Pradeau, 1999, p. 8; Griswold, 1999, pp. 83-96; Rick, 2007, pp. 138-9).

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of Hume’s influence on Smith regarding the opposition to innatism, see for instance, Young (1997, pp. 32-3).

<sup>21</sup> For all these reasons, I do not share Fleischacker’s position that “almost immediately, in the second paragraph of the [opening] chapter [of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*], Smith uses technical terms borrowed from Hume to make an anti-Humean point” (2012, p. 279). On the contrary, I believe that Smith embraces Hume’s philosophy of knowledge in order to enrich his own system of sympathy.

Thus, according to Smith, imagination – and not sympathy, as it is sometimes argued (see DelleMotte, 2011) – is the faculty that enables us to conceive of others' feelings.<sup>22</sup> This faculty is the foundation of a complex cognitive process which, as has been shown, allows us both to put ourselves in others' situations and, from there, call on the past experiences of our own senses in order to conceive of what they feel, namely, what we would feel in their situation.

### *1.3. The force of conception: a bridge between the cognitive and the emotional realms*

Now, the aim of the first chapter of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is not to explain how we manage to conceive of others' feelings. In the opening lines of the chapter, Smith observes:

That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. (TMS, I, i, 1, §1, p. 9)

The issue then becomes for him to explain how we come to be affected by others' feelings. In this perspective, the cognitive process described above is just one step in the author's reasoning; the following step is to show how we move from the cognitive to the emotional realm.

Such a movement relies on a neglected concept of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* which is somewhat reminiscent of the Humean theory of "belief" and that Smith sometimes calls "the force of conception" (see, for instance, TMS, I, i, 1, p. 10). It is well known that, for Hume, the difference between an idea and the original impression from which it derives depends on their respective emotional contents. For Hume, unlike an impression, an idea does not per se have any emotional content. But it may give rise to an impression thanks to belief, the specificity of which is to endow an idea with "the force and the vivacity" of the original impression (Hume, 1739-40, I, iii, 7).<sup>23</sup>

Now, this is the same kind of influence that Smith ascribes to the force of conception while explaining how our conception of others' feelings comes to give rise to an emotion related to others. In terms similar to Hume's, Smith argues:

For as to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to Conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, *in proportion to the vivacity or dullness of the conception*. (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 9; my italics, L. B.)

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<sup>22</sup> As DelleMotte (2011) himself concedes, Smith never uses the word "faculty" to refer to sympathy.

<sup>23</sup> On the technical meaning of Humean belief, see also Lapidus (2000 and 2010).

Beyond the terminological similarities, it is obvious that Smith uses here the general conception of belief built by his elder. The very basis of his argument constitutes the outcome of the prior cognitive process: our conception of others' feelings. As has been observed, this actually corresponds to our conception of what our emotion would be if we were in the others' situation. But this conception does not have any emotional content so long as we do not really believe that we are experiencing this situation. It is because, during our imaginary change of situation, we believe ourselves in some measure to be in the other's situation that it is endowed with an emotional content – the emotional content of the emotion that we imagine we would feel in the other's situation.

This is how, for Smith, we come to be affected by others' feelings. Our *belief* about being in the others' situation, or in Smith's words, *the force of our conception* allows for our conception of others' feelings, which arises from our imaginary change of situation, to give rise to an emotion being experienced that is related to the other's situation.

We began this first section by emphasizing that Smithian sympathy, strictly speaking, belongs to the emotional realm. Now, with regard to what has just been shown, it becomes legitimate to ask whether the emotional result which arises from Smith's imaginary change of situation, thanks to the force of conception, corresponds to what the author properly calls sympathy. It will be shown that, under certain circumstances, this is indeed the case.

## **2. The influence of the cognitive realm on the emotional realm**

### *2.1. Smith's imaginary change and the spectator's identity*

Some commentators complain that Smith's account of his imaginary change of situation is equivocal since it is unclear how it could allow for the spectator's emotion to be distinct from the original emotion (see, for instance, Gordon, 1995 and Sugden, 2002). Their doubts arise from a passage of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in which Smith reviews "those Systems which deduce the Principle of Approbation from Self-love" (TMS, VII, iii, 1, p. 315). On this occasion, Smith argues that the other's situation to which he refers while speaking of an imaginary change of situation is a matter of both "circumstances" and "person":

though sympathy is very properly said to arise from an imaginary change of situations with the person principally concerned, yet this imaginary change is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize. (TMS, VII, iii, 1, p. 317)

Consequently, through identification, Smith says, “I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters” (TMS, VII, iii, 1, p. 317).

This passage gave rise to various and sometimes conflicting interpretations of Smith’s imaginary change, the question then being whether such an imaginary change of position, which involves becoming the other person, could leave room for the emergence of an emotion distinct from the original one.

For instance, Fontaine (1997) considers that Smith’s identification process corresponds to what he calls “empathetic identification”, as opposed to “partial empathetic identification” which would only imply a change of circumstances. But Fontaine does not make explicit the consequences of such an identification process for the resulting emotion, as if it were obvious that it would allow for the spectator’s emotion to be distinct from the original one. This is, however, a point raised by Sugden (2002) who remains skeptical about such a possibility. Endorsing Fontaine’s categories, Sugden argues that “given the central role that Smith’s account of approval plays in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, [...] we must assume that Smith intended identification to be only partial” (Sugden, 2002, p. 75). Thus, despite textual evidence, Sugden considers “empathetic identification” as inconsistent with Smith’s moral philosophy.

In substance, Sugden’s skepticism stems from the fact that he associates empathetic identification with the spectator’s loss of identity. Of course, for the sake of the consistency of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I agree with Sugden that Smith’s identification process should not involve such a phenomenon. However, I do not share his interpretation of Smith’s intentions. Unlike Sugden, I take Smith at his word arguing that he intended identification to involve an imaginary change both of circumstances and persons. Moreover, I maintain that Smith is clear about the fact that this does not suppose the spectator’s loss of identity. As a result, it is not only possible but it is assumed that, for him, identification leads the spectator to feel an emotion distinct from the one felt by the person with whom he identifies.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Several commentators have remarked that Smith’s imaginary change systematically leads the spectator to feel a distinct emotion from the original one (see, for instance, Campbell, 1971; Griswold, 1999, pp. 86-7; Dellemotte, 2002, 147-9; Broadie, 2006, pp. 168-9; Nurock, 2009, pp. 66-7). Nonetheless, the question will be addressed differently hereafter.

Actually, the issue of the spectator's loss of identity lies not so much in the elements that he changes with others while identifying with them (circumstances or both circumstances and persons) as in the specificities of Smith's imaginary change evoked in the previous section, namely:

- 1) in the way the spectator comes to conceive of the others' circumstances and persons;
- 2) in the degree to which he believes himself to be the other person, in his circumstances.

It is from this perspective that we are now going to show that identification, for Smith, does not involve the spectator's loss of identity. So as not to be too ponderous, in what follows, we remain faithful to Smith's terminology and refer to the other's circumstances and person as "the other's situation".

## *2.2. The properties of Smith's imaginary change: conception bias and weakness of conception*

From what has been shown in the first section, it can be argued that Smith's imaginary change involves the spectator's loss of identity if:

- 1) He has no conception bias: his conception of the other's situation is strictly identical to the latter's conception of his own situation;
- 2) The force of his conception is maximal: his belief about being in the other's situation is such that he is no longer able to differentiate himself from the other.

Now, it will be shown that Smith's imaginary change, does not possess either of these two properties and so there is no ground for claiming that it is consistent with the spectator's loss of identity.

First of all, the spectator's conception of the other's situation cannot be identical to the latter's conception of his own situation. As seen before, by means of the imagination, the Smithian spectator is able to go beyond his own person and to put himself in the other's situation. However, the fact remains that this spectator cannot have any direct experience of the other's situation. Consequently, it is only on the basis of his own experiences that the spectator can form a conception of this situation (see above, §1.2). Now, experiences of the one are irreducible to experiences of the other. This gives rise to a *conception bias* that Smith illustrates through several extreme cases of illusive sympathy.<sup>25</sup> Here, we focus on the case of the man who has lost his reason:

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<sup>25</sup> On illusive sympathy, see §1.1 above.

Of all the calamities to which the condition of mortality exposes mankind the loss of reason appears, to those who have the least spark of humanity, by far the most dreadful, and they behold that last stage of human wretchedness with deeper commiseration than any other. But the poor wretch, who is in it, laughs and sings perhaps, and is altogether insensible of his own misery. The anguish which humanity feels, therefore, at the sight of such an object, cannot be the reflection of any sentiment of the sufferer. The compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation, and, what perhaps is impossible, was at the same time able to regard it with his present reason and judgment. (TMS, I, i, 1, pp. 12)

In this case, it is clear that the spectator's conception of the other's situation is not identical to the other's conception of his own situation. This difference arises from the respective states of their reasons and judgments. The man who has lost his reason does not seem to be aware of his situation. However, the spectator is fully aware of it, because to his observations about the other's situation, he adds elements of his own experience: elements coming from "his present reason and judgment". This leads him to conceive of the loss of reason in a very distinct way from the man who has really lost his reason. Whereas the spectator considers it to be an "unhappy situation" or the "last stage of human wretchedness", the latter "is altogether insensible of his own misery".<sup>26</sup>

Of course, an immediate consequence of such a bias regarding *our conception of the other's situation* is that *our conception of the other's emotion* cannot be identical to the original emotion either. Typically, in the foregoing case, Smith claims that the imaginary change of situation leads the spectator to conceive an emotion that "cannot be the reflection of any sentiment of the sufferer". Recall that the spectator's conception of the latter's emotion can be nothing but his own representation of what his own emotion would be in the other's situation (see §1.2 above). Then, since the spectator considers this situation to be a sad state of affairs, this leads him to conceive a sad emotion, whereas the man who has lost his reason, for his part, "laughs and sings".<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>In a previous footnote, we emphasized that Smith's imaginary change requires information about the other's situation (see §1.2 above, footnote 19). We can assume then that the more informed the spectator, the lower the conception bias. As has been suggested to me by Jerry M. Evensky, at *The 2014 Meetings of the History of Economics Society*, this conception bias may, therefore, disappear for "the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator" or the one that Smith also calls "the man within the breast" (TMS, III, 2, p. 130).

<sup>27</sup>The conception bias and its consequences are also particularly salient in the case of our sympathy with the dead: "The idea of that dreary and endless melancholy, which the fancy naturally ascribes to [the] condition [of the dead], arises altogether from our joining to the change which has been produced upon them, our own consciousness of that change, from our putting ourselves in their situation, and from our lodging, if I may be allowed to say so, our own living souls in their inanimated bodies, and thence conceiving what would be our emotions in this case" (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 13).

Let us now show that Smith's imaginary change does not possess the second property according to which the spectator's belief about being in the other's situation would be maximal. Smith makes it explicit through another illustration in which he depicts a spectator who tries to minimize the foregoing conception bias while identifying with a sufferer:

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, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur 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, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded. (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 21)

But notwithstanding the efforts made by the spectator, as observed by Frazer (2012), the fact remains that the "imaginary change of situation, upon which his sympathy is founded, is but momentary" (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 21). Consequently, Smith says, "[t]he thought of [his] own safety, the thought that [he himself] is not really the sufferer, continually intrudes itself upon [him]" (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 21). In other words, the spectator's awareness that the imaginary change of situation is just momentary diminishes his belief about being in the other's situation. It weakens the force of his conception, so that it cannot be maximal. So, while identifying with the other, he is continually aware that he is a separate person from the other.

To sum up, such a reading of Smith's imaginary change of situations can overcome Gordon (1995) and Sugden's (2002) concerns about it implying the loss of the spectator's identity. Though identification with others involves not only a change of circumstances but also of person and character, the spectator cannot but retain his own identity. As a result, Smith's identification process does not satisfy the two foregoing properties. Even in the case where the spectator strives to render his imaginary change of situation as perfect as possible:

- 1) there remains an irreducible conception bias arising from the fact that *he is not the other*;
- 2) the force of his conception is not maximal because of *his consciousness that he is a separate person from others*.

So, contrary to what has been often claimed (L. Wispé, 1986, p. 314 and p. 318; K. Binmore, 1994, pp. 55-6; L. Montes, 2004, pp. 50-51; J. Rick, 2007, pp. 148-9), the Smithian spectator is invariably able to differentiate himself from others.



### *2.3. A characterization of the emotional result of imaginary change*

Let us turn now to the features of the emotion resulting from the spectator's imaginary change of situation. As already suggested, the result of the non-fulfillment of both properties (1) and (2) is that the Smithian spectator necessarily feels an emotion distinct from that felt by the person with whom he identifies. However, the influence of (1) the conception bias and (2) the weakness of the force of conception on the emotional result shall be distinguished.

Since there is a conception bias inherent in Smith's imaginary change, "[w]e sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality" (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 12). What has been shown in the previous subsection already put us on this track since an immediate consequence of the conception bias is that our conception of the other's emotion cannot be identical to the original emotion (see §2.2 above).<sup>28</sup> Yet, it is precisely this conception that gives rise to an emotion related to the other, thanks to the force of our conception (see §1.3 above). This is our conception of what our emotion would be in the other's situation – which is by its very nature, distinct from the other's real emotion – that is endowed with an emotional content. The result is that the emotion arising from our imaginary change of situation is necessarily distinct from the original one.

Let us now focus on the emotional content of our conception. Following Smith, this emotional content varies "in proportion to the vivacity of [our] conception" (TMS, I, i, 1, p. 9). However, as we have already argued, this vivacity cannot be maximal. This has another influence on the emotional result of identification, namely, that we can "never conceive [...] that degree of passion which naturally animates the person principally concerned" (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 21).<sup>29</sup> But that is not all! The weakness of our conception "not only lowers [our emotion] in degree, but, in some measure, varies it in kind, and gives it a quite different modification" (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 22). To illustrate this point, Smith returns to the case of the spectator identifying with a sufferer. While comparing the spectator's emotion with the sufferer's emotion, he argues that

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<sup>28</sup> Whereas some contributions have noticed that the emotion resulting from Smith's imaginary change is never as intense as the original one (see Campbell, 1971; DelleMotte, 2002 and Frazer, 2012), none mentions the fact that it is also never completely the same. In any event, such a characterization of the emotional result of Smith's imaginary change distance us from an intuitive understanding that it would be a more or less accurate copy of the other's emotion (Levy and Peart, 2004; Montes, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Smith also writes that "the emotions of the spectator will still be very apt to fall short of the violence of what is felt by the [other]" (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 21).

what [the former] feel[s] will always be, in some respect, different from what [the latter] feels, and compassion can never be exactly the same with original sorrow. (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 22)

Though both the spectator's and the sufferer's emotions reflect some sort of sorrow, this sorrow is not of the same kind. This difference arises from the fact that the spectator is aware that he is a separate person from the sufferer. Consequently, the sorrow that arises from the spectator's imaginary change of situation with the sufferer is not related to him but to the sufferer: it corresponds to compassion.

### **3. Conclusion: sympathy as a specific emotional result**

Such a characterization of the emotional result of Smith's imaginary change of situation prompts us to consider Smithian sympathy as something other than the case in which the spectator's emotion is similar to the other's. Far from being trivial, such an interpretation of sympathy, as a feeling similar to the original one, led some commentators to view Smith's cases of "*illusive sympathy*" (TMS, II, i, 2, p. 71; italics added) as anything other than sympathy (see, for instance, Raphael, 2007). Now, as we have shown, Smith's imaginary change of situation systematically leads the spectator to feel an emotion distinct from the other. The question then becomes: under which conditions can we consider that the emotional result of the imaginary change of situation corresponds to what Smith calls "sympathy"? Smith makes his answer explicit while concluding his example of the spectator identifying with a sufferer. Though the sympathetic emotion – the spectator's compassion – is not similar to the original emotion – the sufferer's sorrow – these two sentiments, Smith says

may [...] have such a correspondence with one another, as is sufficient for the harmony of society. Though they will never be unisons, they may be concords, and this is all that is wanted or required. (TMS, I, i, 4, p. 22)

Consequently, contrary to what Nanay (2010) asserts, there is sympathy when the spectator's and the actor's emotions correspond with one another. However, such a correspondence does not entail, for Smith, that they feel a similar emotion. There is sympathy when the spectator's emotional reaction to the others' situation "*concords*" (in kind and intensity) with the other's emotion. In such a case, it is well known that the spectator is said *to approve of* the other's emotional reaction to his own situation (see TMS, I, i, 3); otherwise, he is said *to disapprove of* it. As a result, there is no longer any reason to question the consistency between Smith's account of his imaginary change of situation and his analysis of moral evaluation.

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