
Sentiment and Sensibility

It is commonplace nowadays to acknowledge that the eighteenth century was as much an age of sentiment as of reason. Certainly there was a good deal of fashionable snivelling, swooning, twitching, tingling, snuffling, gushing, glowing and melting.¹ Sensibility, that key term of the age, represents a kind of rhetoric of the body, a social semiotics of blushing, palpitating, weeping, fainting and the like. It is also the age's riposte to philosophical dualism, since for the ideology of sentiment body and soul are on as cosy terms with each other as a jerkin and its lining. As a kind of primitive materialism, eighteenth-century sensibility is a discourse of fibres and nerve endings, vapours and fluids, pulses and vibrations, excitations and irritations. 'Feelings', remarks Vicesimus Knox, 'is a fashionable word substituted for mental processes, and savouring (*sic*) much of materialism.'² Indeed, the very word 'feeling', which can mean both physical sensation and emotional impulse, the act of touching and the event of experiencing, provides the age with a link between the excitation of the nervous fibres and the subtle motions of the spirit.

The Irish novelist Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) bemoans in her memoirs her 'unhappy physical organisation, this nervous susceptibility to every impression which circulated through my frame and rendered the whole system acute',³ but she is really just boasting of how compassionate she is. Her husband Sir Charles Morgan wrote a treatise on physiology, perhaps influenced by observing his exquisitely impressionable wife. Isaac Newton's *Principia*, not unlike Bishop Berkeley's eccentric work *Siris*,

¹ I have written more fully on this subject in *The Rape of Clarissa* (Oxford, 1982), and in 'The Good-Natured Gael', Ch. 3 of my *Crazy John and the Bishop* (Cork, 1998). I have reused some of the latter material in somewhat altered form for the present chapter.

² Quoted by G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility* (Chicago and London, 1992), p. 2.

³ Lady Morgan, *Memoirs* (London, 1862), vol. 1, p. 431.

regards the whole of creation as permeated by the subtle spirit of ether, which creates sensations by vibrating the nerves. Sensibility is the spot where body and mind mingle. It is now the nervous system rather than the soul which mediates between material and immaterial realms. Morality is in danger of being superseded by neurology. Laurence Sterne sends up sensibility as a kind of social pathology in *A Sentimental Journey*, despite purveying the stuff himself in plenty. For its abundant critics, the cult of sentiment is a mark of the neurasthenically overcivilised.⁴ The Man of Feeling is a moral pelican who feeds off his own fine emotions.

In contrast to the frigid *hauteur* of the patrician, a middle-class cult of pity, benevolence and fellow-feeling was sedulously fostered. Richard Steele writes:

By a secret charm we lament with the unfortunate, and rejoice with the glad; for it is not possible for a human heart to be averse to any thing that is human: but by the very mien and gesture of the joyful and distress'd we rise and fall into their condition; and since joy is communicative, 'tis reasonable that grief should be contagious, both of which are seen and felt at a look, for one man's eyes are spectacles to another to read his heart.⁵

We have here some of the primary elements of the imaginary: a projection or imaginative transposition into the interior of another's body; the physical mimesis of 'by the very mien and gesture (of the other) we rise and fall into their condition'; the 'contagiousness' by which two human subjects share the same inner condition; the visual immediacy with which the other's inner state is communicated, so that the inside seems inscribed on the outside; and the exchange of positions or identities ('one man's eyes are spectacles to another').

Or consider this statement from Joseph Butler's *Sermons*:

Mankind are by nature so closely united, there is such a correspondence between the inward sensations of one man and those of another, that disgrace is as much avoided as bodily pain, and to be the object of esteem and love as much desired as any external goods . . . There is such a natural principle of attraction in man towards man, that having trod the same tract of land, having breathed in the same climate, barely having been born in the

⁴ See John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988), Ch. 5.

⁵ Richard Steele, *The Christian Hero* (Oxford, 1932), p. 77. Steele is said to have written this tract while on guard duty at the Tower of London.

same artificial district or division, becomes the occasion of contracting acquaintances and familiarities many years after . . . Men are so much one body, that in a peculiar manner they feel for each other, shame, sudden danger, resentment, honour, prosperity, distress . . .⁶

Once more, we are offered some of the chief components of the imaginary: correspondence, the exchange of inward sensations, the merging of two bodies and a quasi-magical principle of magnetism, along with a rather clubbish disregard for difference which assumes that others are of much the same inner stuff as oneself. Indeed, for Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, such affectionate sentiments are due as much to oneself as to others. Only those who are amicably disposed towards themselves, Aristotle argues, are truly capable of love for others, while those who feel no affection for themselves 'have no sympathetic consciousness of their own joys and sorrows'.⁷ The necessary corollary of treating others as oneself is to treat oneself as another. For Aristotle, the condition in which each takes place in terms of the other is known as friendship.

Before we delve more deeply into Butler's idea of inward correspondences, however, we need to investigate its social context a little further. In the culture of sentiment, the virtues of civility, uxoriousness and blitheness of spirit seek to oust the more barbarous upper-class values of militarism and male arrogance.⁸ They are aimed equally at the unpolished earnestness of the petty-bourgeois puritan. 'The amiable virtue of humanity', Adam Smith observes, 'requires a sensibility much beyond what is possessed by the rude vulgar of mankind.'⁹ The delicacy of your nervous system is now a reasonably reliable index of social class. A new kind of anti-aristocratic heroism, one centred on the man of meekness, the chaste husband and the civilised entrepreneur, becomes the order of the day, to reach its consummation in that ineffably tedious prig Sir Charles Grandison, last and least of Samuel Richardson's protagonists and a kind of Jesus Christ in knee-breeches. There is a general embourgeoisement of virtue: Francis Hutcheson offers as types to be commended not only the prince, statesman and general but 'an honest trader, the kind friend, the faithful

⁶ Joseph Butler, *Sermons*, in L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), *British Moralists* (New York, 1965), vol. 1, pp. 203–4.

⁷ Aristotle, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 295.

⁸ See R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London, 1974).

⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in Selby-Bigge, *British Moralists*, vol. 1, p. 279.

prudent adviser, the charitable and hospitable neighbour, the tender husband and affectionate parent, the sedate yet cheerful companion'.¹⁰ It is, in Raymond Williams's phrase, 'the contrast of pity with pomp'.¹¹ Mildness, gallantry and joviality are weapons to wield against both the hatchet-faced Dissenters and the bellicose ruffians of the old-style squirearchy. Adam Smith sees economic self-interest as a kind of displacement or sublimation of the lust, power-hunger and military ambition of the ancien régime, while Francis Hutcheson distinguishes a 'calm' desire for wealth from the more turbulent passions. The Earl of Shaftesbury speaks with remarkable blandness of the possession of wealth as 'that passion which is esteemed particularly *interesting*';¹² while Montesquieu, whose *Esprit des Lois* is the source of much of this philosophy of *le doux commerce*, has a touching faith in the civilising power of bills of exchange.

One thinks, too, of Samuel Johnson's celebrated remark that a man is never as harmlessly employed as when he is making money – a comment which goes to show that a falsehood authoritatively enough proclaimed ceases instantly to sound like one. As far as economic life goes, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher John Millar even ropes the proletariat into the sentimentalist project, incorporating them into a single social sensorium or community of sentiment. When labourers are massed together by the same employment and the 'same intercourse', he asserts, they 'are enabled, with great rapidity, to communicate all their senses and passions', and the basis for plebeian solidarity is accordingly laid.¹³ For the English middle classes of a later historical era, such solidarity would prove more a source of anxiety than edification.

In this pervasive feminisation of English culture, pathos and the pacific were now the badges of a bourgeoisie whose commercial ends seemed best guaranteed by social decorum and political tranquillity. Sensibility was among other things a response to the bloody sectarianism of the previous century, which had helped to fashion the political status quo but which now, having accomplished its subversive work, was like many a revolutionary heritage to be erased from memory and thrust into the political unconscious. Within a still despotic patriarchy, there were calls for a deepening

¹⁰ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil*, in Selby-Bigge, *British Moralists*, vol. 1, p. 17.

¹¹ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London, 1966), p. 92.

¹² Quoted in Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton, NJ, 1977), p. 37.

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 90.

of emotional bonds between men and women, along with the emergence of 'childhood' and the celebration of spiritual companionship within marriage.¹⁴ A cheerful trust in Christian providence was to oust an old-style pagan fatalism. A style of mannered moderation was fashioned by social commentators such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, one which would seem to succeeding generations the very essence of Englishness. Properly indulged in, sentimentalism allowed you to be ardent or enraptured, lively or lachrymose, without for a moment violating decorum. It is this which Jane Austen's emotionally unkempt Marianne Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility* has yet to learn.

In the domain of ideas, a militant empiricism sought to discredit rationalist systems with too little blood in their veins, embracing instead the raw stuff of subjective sensation. Concepts were to be rooted in the rough ground of lived experience, where the honest burgher felt rather more at home than on the pure ice of metaphysical speculation. It was a style of philosophising appropriate to an age which witnessed the rise of the novel. Perception and sensation – the human body itself – lay at the source of all our more elaborate speculations. Meanwhile, buoyed by the nation's economic prosperity and political triumphs, many of the intelligentsia felt free to cultivate a sanguine trust in the beneficence of human nature. An oozy, self-satisfied air of benevolence and humanitarianism suffused the clubs, journals and coffee houses. Despite the prevalence of malice, envy and competition in society, the Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson was still able to believe that 'love and compassion [were] the most powerful principles in the human breast'.¹⁵

Sensibility and sentimentalism were, so to speak, the eighteenth century's phenomenological turn – the equivalent in the realm of the emotions of that turn to the subject which was Protestant inwardness and possessive individualism. In such extraordinarily influential journals as the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, sensibility took on programmatic form, as the uncouth reader submitted himself to a crash course in civility. This brand of journalism,

¹⁴ See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (Harmondsworth, 1979), Ch. 5; but also the challenge to Stone's main thesis in Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations* (Cambridge, 2004); Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (London, 1962), especially Part 3; Jean H. Hagstrum, *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart* (Chicago and London, 1980); David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy* (Chicago and London, 1988) and Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility* (Cambridge, 1996). See also Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London, 1984) and *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1990), Chs 1 & 2.

¹⁵ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Dublin, 1767), p. 53.

with its adroit blending of grace and gravitas, represented a new form of cultural politics, consciously educating the reading public in the virtues of meekness, simplicity, decency, non-violence, chivalry and connubial affection. 'I have long entertained an ambition to make the word Wife the most agreeable and delightful name in nature', Steele writes in the fortieth number of the *Spectator*. He was hardly a cynosure of virtue himself: he drank too much, killed a man in a duel, was familiar with the inside of a debtor's prison, married a widow for her money and was arraigned for sedition before the House of Commons. Yet the writ of his and Addison's cultural authority ran all the way from the reform of dress to homilies against duelling, from modes of polite address to eulogies of commerce.¹⁶ Among their journalism's gallery of exemplary social figures were Cits, Snuff-Takers, Rakes, Freethinkers, Pretty Fellows and Very Pretty Fellows.

Moral codes were to be aestheticised, lived out as style, grace, wit, lightness, polish, frankness, discretion, geniality, good humour, a love of company, freedom and ease of manner, and courteous self-effacement. Francis Hutcheson recommends as quasi-moral virtues in his *An Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil* 'a neat dress, a humane deportment, a delight in raising mirth in others', along with sweetness, mildness, vivacity, tenderness, certain airs, proportions and '*je ne sais quoy*s [*sic*]'.¹⁷ It is a far cry from the moral philosophy of Plato or Kant. As in the fiction of Richardson or Austen, stray empirical details can prove morally momentous: it is in the crook of a finger or the cut of a waistcoat that virtuous or vicious dispositions may be disclosed, a notion which would have seemed absurd to Leibniz. Bodies, and countenances in particular, are for Hutcheson directly expressive of the moral condition of their possessors, so that in the manner of the imaginary, interiors and exteriors are easily reversible and seamlessly continuous. In this unity of manners and morals, states of consciousness are well-nigh material affairs, visibly inscribed on the surfaces of human conduct, incarnate in too servile a gait or too haughty a tilt of the head. Dickens will inherit this brand of anti-dualism. The most admirable of Jane Austen's characters reveal an inward sense of outward propriety, dismantling the opposition between love and law, spontaneity and social convention.¹⁸ *Politesse* goes all the way down: civility means not just

¹⁶ See Eagleton, *Function of Criticism*, Ch. 1.

¹⁷ Selby-Bigge, *British Moralists*, p. 148.

¹⁸ See Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2005), Ch. 5.

not spitting in the sherry decanter, but not being boorish, conceited or emotionally tactless as well.

The cult of sentiment was the feel-good factor of a successful mercantile nation, but it was a social force as well as a state of mind. Feeling could oil the wheels of commerce, allowing the Irish-born poet and novelist Henry Brooke to write rhapsodically of how the merchant 'brings the remotest regions to converse . . . and thus knits into one family, and weaves into one web, the affinity and brotherhood of all mankind'.¹⁹ (As a rapaciously mercenary character who wrote pro-Catholic pamphlets for profit despite his robustly anti-Catholic views, Brooke knew a thing or two about the market.) Here, in a nutshell, is the ideology of so-called commercial humanism, for which the proliferation of trade and the spawning of human sympathies are mutually enriching.²⁰ Laurence Sterne uses the phrase 'sentimental commerce' with the economic meaning well in mind. Economic relations between men deepen their mutual sympathies, polish their parochial edges, and render the conduits of commerce more frictionless and efficient. Trade, as a kind of material version of civilised conversation, renders you more docile and gregarious, a doctrine that the associates of Defoe's Moll Flanders or Dickens's Mr Bounderby might have had trouble in believing. Commercial wealth, being diffusive and mercurial, has an affinity with the ebb and recoil of human sympathies; and the same quicksilver quality provides a mighty counterweight to the insolence of autocratic power.

Yet these rituals of the heart had their utopian aspect as well as their ideological one. Sensibility, of all things, was perhaps the most resourceful critique of Enlightenment rationality which pre-Romantic British culture was able to muster. Feeling may have oiled the wheels of commerce, but it also threatened to derail the whole project in the name of some less crassly egocentric vision of human society. The man of sentiment, Janet Todd comments, 'does not enter the economic order he condemns; he refuses to work to better himself or society'.²¹ There is a smack of the Benjaminian *flâneur* about the Man of Feeling, whose lavishness of sensibility, and smug or generous-hearted refusal to calculate, cut against the grain of a crassly utilitarian order. His cavalier carelessness of proportion, as well as his habit

¹⁹ Henry Brooke, *The Fool of Quality* (London, 1765–70), vol. 1, p. 41.

²⁰ The classic account is J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1995).

²¹ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London and New York, 1986), p. 97. Todd's claim is perhaps a little unnuanced.

of giving for the sheer sake of it, represent an implicit assault on the doctrine of exchange value, rather like the later extravagances of an Oscar Wilde. At the same time, carelessness of proportion was just what the critics of sentimentalism find hard to stomach: an excess of sensibility means a failure to sort the central from the marginal, since 'feeling' itself will yield you no clue to such vital distinctions. Sentimentalism, and the literature produced by it, tends to be whimsical, digressive and idiosyncratic, preferring the pale sheen of a snowdrop to prison reform. It is in every sense a luxurious ethics.

There is, however, a need for such affective *rapprochement* in a social order no longer held together by an absolutist state. An individualist society requires a framework of solidarity to contain its anarchic appetites. Otherwise, those appetites are in danger of subverting the very institutions which permit them to flourish. It is, however, a concord increasingly hard to come by, given that social relations are in danger of being reduced to the purely contractual, political power to the instrumental, and individuals themselves to isolated monads. Adam Ferguson, in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, gloomily contrasts the solidarity of a tribal culture with the 'detached and solitary' individuals of modern life, for whom 'the bands of affection are broken'. In these conditions, it is not surprising that men and women should fall back on the natural affections to secure themselves a degree of fellowship, given its shrinking availability in the social world. What cannot be found in human culture must now be located in human nature.

In a self-interested social order, the springs of public virtue are likely to appear obscure. As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, it is no longer possible in such conditions to provide an account of social roles and relations in ways which make implicit reference to moral obligations and responsibilities.²² Such obligations are accordingly left hanging in the air – rather as, for the more immoderate of the sentimentalists, feelings have come loose from the objects with which they are supposed to be bound up, to become strange, quasi-objective entities in their own right. Since there seems nothing in the constitution of society which might prompt its members to mutual aid and affection, the sympathetic faculty must be relocated instead in the interior of each man and woman, naturalised as an instinct akin to hunger or self-preservation. We are as much delighted by benevolence as we are gratified by the scent of perfume or nauseated by a foul stench. It is in this sense that an age of reason, for which utility, technology and

²² See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London, 1981).

rational calculation are increasingly paramount, is also a culture of the heart, of tearfulness and *tendresse*. In the kingdom of possessive individualism, love and benevolence are forced to migrate from the private sphere of the domestic hearth to become metaphors of broader public significance. On the most dismal of estimates, sentiment – the quick, whimsical, wordless exchange of gestures or intuitions – is now perhaps the sole form of sociality left in a world of bleakly isolated individuals. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* might be taken to intimate as much.

The turn to the subject is a canny move, but also a perilous one. For to anchor political community in the natural affections is in one sense to furnish it with the strongest foundation imaginable, and in another sense to leave it alarmingly vulnerable. For David Hume, human society is held together in the end by habits of feeling; and if nothing could be more spiritually coercive, nothing could be less rationally demonstrable. Feelings matter because they provide motives for behaviour in a way that mere rational precepts may not. The same is true for modern-day rationalism: as J. M. Bernstein points out, Jürgen Habermas's communicative ethics are strongly decontextualising; but if their universal norms are to be fleshed out as persuasive motives, they must be re-anchored in everyday practice.²³ The drawback is that there can now be no rational justification for compassion or generosity, as there could be for Spinoza. There is no pragmatic rationale for it either: as the fiction of Henry Fielding suggests, such soft-heartedness is more likely to land you up at the end of a rope than to secure you a country estate or a government ministry. This is why Fielding commends his heroes' virtue while at the same time satirically sending it up, since in such a predatory society it can only appear naïve.

Yet there is no rational justification for tasting a peach or smelling a rose either, experiences which (like a sudden upsurge of pity or moral revulsion) seem to carry their justifications on their faces, writ large in their very immediacy and incontrovertibility. If we cannot furnish the virtues with a rational foundation, as eighteenth-century moralists like Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston still sought to do, perhaps this is because they are themselves foundational, as built into the body as the liver or pancreas. Maybe in this sense they resemble aesthetic taste, a *je ne sais quoi* which – who knows? – we may need to know no more of after all, since there may be nothing more to know. Perhaps taste and moral judgement, like God and the work of art, provide their own *raison d'être*. Francis Hutcheson

²³ J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 83.

certainly seems to have believed so: if he is asked, he writes, why we approve of public good, 'I fancy we can find (no reasons) in these cases, more than we could give for our liking any pleasant fruit'.²⁴ Explanations, as Wittgenstein comments, have to come to an end somewhere; and Hutcheson's spade hits rock bottom, in a Wittgensteinian phrase, when it arrives at the idea of a moral sense which is as much part of our material nature as sneezing or smiling.

In any case, 'good' and 'bad' seem to be terms which go all the way down, in the sense that even if we could back such judgements up with non-moral reasons, as the rationalists claim we ought, it might always be possible to push the question back a stage and ask why these reasons should in turn be regarded as good ones, or why it should be thought good to be guided by them. The question is partly one of motivation, as the etymology of the term 'benevolence' would suggest. Hutcheson, Hume and their colleagues are addressing a civilisation in which what is thought to be real is by and large what is felt on the pulses or the eyeballs, and which thus feels a natural scepticism of acting on abstract principle. 'Virtue placed at such a distance', Hume remarks of images of ancient virtue, 'is like a fixed star, which, though to the eye of reason it may appear luminous as the sun in his meridian, is so infinitely removed, as to affect the senses, neither with light or heat'.²⁵ Such bloodlessly admirable ideals lack psychological force. As far as a concern with motive goes, the philosophy of Hutcheson and the fiction of Defoe belong to the same cultural milieu. If one wished to pursue an inquiry into human motivations in all their pragmatic intricacy, one which delves into the most elusive recesses of the psyche, one would probably end up writing a novel.

Besides, in a society where virtue appears in scant supply, and where what little of it exists is scarcely beguiling (thrift, prudence, chastity, self-discipline, obedience, abstinence, punctuality, industriousness and so on), men and women are likely to demand some rather more robust motivation for acting well than a rational appreciation of cosmic harmony. Once morality grows dreadfully bourgeois, in short, one needs extra incentives for adhering to it. In any case, what would it mean to claim that the reasons for virtue advanced by the rationalists have a specifically *moral* force? What is so splendid, for example, about conforming to the nature of the cosmos? Plenty of moralists have imagined that the good life consists precisely in not doing so.

²⁴ Francis Hutcheson, *Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), p. 129.

²⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry into the Principles of Morals* (Oxford, 1998), p. 45.

Hutcheson himself deploys just this line of reasoning in his *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, arguing that rationalism presupposes the very moral sense it seeks to explain. It is a dilemma familiar enough to modern ethical theory: either we hold, like Hutcheson and G. E. Moore, to an intuitive or non-naturalistic notion of the good, in which case we buy a foundation of sorts at the cost of its utter mysteriousness; or we translate the idea of the good into some set of natural properties, which demystifies the notion only at the expense of laying the explanation itself open to further explanation, thus depriving it of the very foundational function it was required to fulfil.

The so-called moral sense of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, which as we shall see a little later is a kind of spontaneous divination of good and evil, is in one sense a confession of philosophical defeat. This spectral moral sense, which Hutcheson himself calls ‘an occult quality’, and which Immanuel Kant bluntly deemed ‘unphilosophical’, is simply a kind of locum tenens for some more solid kind of ethical grounding, a mysterious *X* marking an empty place in the argument. To posit this sense, a kind of spectral shadowing of our grosser organs of perception, as the source of moral judgement is in one sense tantamount to claiming that such judgements cannot be justified at all. It is as question-begging as Molière’s ‘dormitive power’. It seems that we can deny the reality of this sense no more than we can deny the taste of potatoes; but it is just as perplexing to say what the former consists in as it is to analyse the latter. Moral sense is a kind of *je ne sais quoi*, akin to the aesthetic faculty, as irrefutable as it is undemonstrable. Reason for Hume and Hutcheson must inform our moral sense, but it cannot found it. And this is scarcely surprising, given that reason loses much of its credence when it is defined by an Age of Reason in instrumental terms. If the moral sense is prior to reason, it is partly because reason is now largely in the hands of those for whom it can have no truck with moral ends. All this, then, amounts to admitting that though love, generosity and mutual cooperation are indeed the most resplendent of human virtues, it is impossible any longer to say why.²⁶ Yet why should we need to do so in the first place? Is this not simply a sign that our spade has hit rock bottom and need sink no further?

Even so, as the eighteenth-century rationalists recognised, there is cause to be alarmed. It is true that to ground moral imperatives in felt experience

²⁶ Some excellent historical reasons why it is impossible to say why are provided by MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

is in one sense to lend them the most unimpeachable of foundations. Only those claims which engage our pieties and affections have a hope of being persuasive, as Edmund Burke, the eighteenth century's most eminent philosopher of hegemony, understood in the political sphere. The most loyal subject of power is a sentimental one, in the eighteenth-century sense of the term. Yet to anchor such claims in the subject is also to risk surrendering them to the vagaries of chance, caprice, habit, fancy and prejudice. How does our aversion to torture differ from our aversion to sprouts? What is specifically moral about such disgust? If we do not dignify a distaste for sprouts with the status of a universal law, why should we do so in the case of torture? So it is that Sir John Hawkins, in a flight of sardonic admiration, can accuse the sentimentalists of subjectivising morality away: 'Their generous notions supersede all obligation; they are a law to themselves, and having *good hearts* and abounding in the *milk of human kindness* are above those considerations that bind men to that rule of conduct which is founded in a sense of duty [original emphasis].'²⁷ Hawkins is rattled by the moral sense merchants in much the same way that modern deontologists find something rather too laid-back about virtue ethics. Søren Kierkegaard was later to register the same opinion: 'let us not speak aesthetically [about morality]', he writes in his *Journals*, 'as if the ethical were a happy geniality'.²⁸

Coleridge was equally disconcerted, complaining in his *Aids to Reflection* that Sterne and the sentimentalists had perpetrated far more mischief than Hobbes and the materialists. Oliver Goldsmith, himself a connoisseur of pity and *tendresse*, accused his compatriot Edmund Burke of 'found(ing) his philosophy on his own particular feelings'.²⁹ The move to entrench moral values in the human subject is just what risks undermining them. Besides, in democratising morality (since anyone can feel spontaneous sympathy), you also court the Pelagian danger of making virtue look far too easy and instinctive, more like a sigh than a struggle. Such easy goodness is a patrician response to the unlovely ethics of the lower-middle-class puritans, with their high-minded insistence on self-discipline and endeavour. A gentleman does not wrestle with his conscience any more than he

²⁷ Quoted by Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 6.

²⁸ Alexander Dru (ed.), *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard: A Selection* (London, 1938), p. 385.

²⁹ See Arthur Friedman (ed.), *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith* (Oxford, 1966), vol. 1, p. 28.

wrestles with his valet. But the Protestant middle class is not pleased by such moral facility. As the eighteenth-century writer Elizabeth Carter tartly observes: 'Merely to be struck by a sudden impulse of compassion at the view of an object in distress is no more benevolence than is a fit of gout.'³⁰

Carter and Kierkegaard undoubtedly have a point – one which (as we shall see later) Shakespeare's Shylock might well have taken. Morality is too vital a question to be left to the capricious big-heartedness of those who can afford to be affable. The vulnerable need a material bond or code of obligations to cover their backs, a precise piece of wording they can brandish when their superiors turn sour. A rule-bound ethics may sound less agreeable than a genial impulse, but its point is that you should behave humanely to others whatever you happen to be feeling. Its point is also that morality is a matter of what you do, not what you feel. Compassion unaccompanied by a warm glow does not cease to be compassion. Only moral dualists claim that they had love in their heart when they skewered the baby on a spit.

The imaginary ethics of the eighteenth-century 'moral sense' school are dogged by the hoary old suspicion that altruism might simply be a devious form of egoism. Rather as it is hard to tell in the imaginary order which sensations are mine and which are yours, so it is difficult, perhaps finally impossible, to know whether my pleasure in your pleasure is other- or self-regarding. A creaturely ethics for which sympathy with others is a well-nigh sensual kind of gratification must ask itself whether its true goal is the selfless sympathy or the selfish gratification. What if I am as delighted by my own benevolence, as a kind of idealised version of myself, as the small child is charmed by his deceptively coherent mirror image? One thinks of those ghastly Dickensian do-gooders from Brownlow to Boffin whose gruff exteriors conceal a weeping heart, and whose soppy-sternness occasions in them a well-nigh erotic *frisson*. Richard Steele compares the compassionate soul who dissolves in pity for another to the amorous man who is 'melted' by beauty. In Laurence Sterne's sentimentalist praise of 'the glorious lust of doing good', does the emphasis fall on 'lust' or 'good'?

³⁰ Quoted by Arthur Hill Cash, *Sterne's Comedy of Moral Sentiments* (Pittsburgh, 1966), p. 55.

For the philosopher C. S. Peirce, this is really a pseudo-problem. To say that we act for the sake of pleasure is in his view to say no more than we desire to do what we do.³¹ With characteristic cynicism, Thomas Hobbes sees pity for others in purely egoistic style, as 'the imagination or fiction of future calamity to ourselves, proceeding from the sense of another man's calamity'.³² It is a reminder to the Romantically inclined that the imagination is by no means an entirely beneficent faculty. A far less cynical commentator, Amartya Sen, writes that 'it can be argued that behaviour based on sympathy is in an important sense egoistic, for one is oneself pleased at others' pleasures and pained at others' pain, and the pursuit of one's own utility may thus be helped by sympathetic action'.³³ An imaginary eighteenth-century ethics, as we shall see, is about altruism; but for Lacan the category of the imaginary lies at the very source of the ego.

Perhaps a distinction between benevolence and sentimentalism may prove useful here, hazy though the difference is. Roughly speaking, benevolence in the eighteenth century is a case of selflessness, while sentimentalism is a more self-regarding affair. Benevolence is centrifugal, whereas sentimentalism is centripetal. Benevolentists like Goldsmith, Hutcheson, Smith and Burke are oriented to the other, while sentimentalists like Steele and Sterne are self-conscious consumers of tender feelings, chewing the cud of their own congenial emotions.³⁴ The benevolentist does benevolent things, but not for the sake of doing so, whereas the sentimentalist's motive is self-satisfaction. What one feels in the latter case is less the other's felicity or misfortune than one's own 'melting' affinity with it. Steele's letters to his wife are full of impeccably polite bleatings and swoonings: she is his 'Dear Creature', 'Dear Ruler', 'Dearest Being on Earth'; he swears that 'I dye for thee I languish' even when he has not the slightest intention of abandoning a dinner with some bigwig.³⁵ It is now mannerly to be unmanned. Sentimentalism is feeling in excess of its occasion, passing through its object like Freudian desire so as to curve back upon itself and rejoin the subject; benevolence, by contrast, is feeling in proportion to its object. Hutcheson makes this point when he argues in his *Inquiry Concerning the Original of Our Ideas of Virtue and Moral Good* that we do not love

³¹ C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, MA, 1931–58), vol. 7, p. 329.

³² Thomas Hobbes, *English Works* (London, 1890), vol. 4, p. 44.

³³ Amartya Sen, 'Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6, 1977.

³⁴ Sterne, however, is an ambiguous case, as a satirist of sentimentalism as well as a probable champion of it.

³⁵ See Raze Blanchard (ed.), *The Correspondence of Richard Steele* (Oxford, 1941).

because it is pleasant or advantageous for us to do so; rather, our feeling arises from its 'proper object'.

Joshua Reynolds congratulated Oliver Goldsmith on 'feeling with exactness', and it is true that Goldsmith himself – a benevolentist rather than a sentimentalist – found something offensively theoreticist about the cult of feeling by which he was surrounded. Only a man who has drawn his ideas from books, he thought, 'comes into the world with a heart melting at every fictitious distress'.³⁶ As an Irish émigré himself, Goldsmith habitually sees sentimentalism as a kind of 'colonial' oppressiveness: there is something covertly domineering about whimsical largesse, which is a crafty way of putting others in one's debt. As he perceives, it is really a devious form of egoism, in which what you appear to bestow on another is secretly conferred on yourself. Prodigality, pressed to an extreme, treats others simply as convenient objects, as *Timon of Athens* illustrates. It plunders others of their emotional booty to feed its own voracious appetite. As a stout Tory, Goldsmith regarded superfluity as a question of foreign imports which debilitated the native economy. Similarly, England should not ruin its emotional economy by importing sentimental goods from the likes of the French. Tory though he was, however, his theory of the historical origins of surplus has remarkable affinities to historical materialism.³⁷

In an essay entitled 'Justice and Generosity', Goldsmith insists that true generosity is not a matter of capricious good feeling, but a duty which carries with it all the severity of a law. It is a rule imposed upon us by reason, 'which should be the sovereign law of a rational being'.³⁸ The Kantian language is revealing. Goldsmith wants to dismantle the opposition between love and law by converting the former into an obligation; and in this he is true to the New Testament, for which love is a command rather than an option. Love for the Judaeo-Christian tradition has precious little to do with fellow-feeling. If you rely on your affections you are likely to

³⁶ Friedman, *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, vol. 1, p. 408.

³⁷ Goldsmith argues in *The Citizen of the World* that for science to flourish, a country must first become populous, developing its productive forces by what Marx will later term the division of labour. 'The inhabitant', he writes, 'must go through the different stages of hunter, shepherd, and husbandman, then when property becomes valuable, and consequently gives cause for injustice; then when laws are appointed to repress injury, and secure possession, when men by the sanction of these laws, become possessed of superfluity, when luxury is thus introduced and demands its continual supply, then it is that the sciences becomes necessary and useful; the state then cannot subsist without them . . .' (Friedman, *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, vol. 2, p. 338).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

end up acting compassionately only in the case of those you happen to care for anyway, or only when you feel like it. It is in this sense, as we shall see, that Judaeo-Christian ethics, for which the exemplary love-object is a stranger or an enemy, are not of an imaginary kind. The New Testament's deep-seated antagonism to the family belongs with its anti-imaginary bias. This is no doubt one reason for the extraordinary success of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, an execrably written potboiler in which Jesus marries Mary Magdalene and fathers a child. The New Testament's intensely relaxed view of sexuality, in contrast to the views of most of its pious adherents down the ages, is evidently scandalous to a postmodern age obsessed by the erotic. A steamy sexual narrative must accordingly be read into the text, if it is to retain the mildest degree of contemporary interest.

The benevolentist hopes to stop having to feel the discomfort of pity by coming to the aid of the victim who occasions it; the sentimentalist is rather less eager to see off his agreeably sadomasochistic sensations by binding the other's wounds. Shaftesbury notes that excessive pity may actually prevent us from helping another.³⁹ It is possible, he thinks, to be overfond, too zealously affectionate, a notion that Richard Steele would no doubt have found churlish. The Scottish philosopher David Fordyce writes of the sentimentalist as finding 'a sort of pleasing anguish' in human misery, one which culminates in 'self-approving joy'.⁴⁰ Rather as desire for psychoanalytic theory wishes simply to carry on desiring, so what the sentimentalist feels most keenly is the need to feel. Some philanthropists of the day considered that poverty, wretchedness, class distinction and the like were heaven-sent opportunities for the exercise of charity. Pity and commiseration are always *post hoc* responses, indicative of the fact that the catastrophe has already happened. This, no doubt, is the political force of William Blake's savagely *faux*-sentimentalist line 'Weeping tear on infant's tear' in his *Songs of Experience*. The world is given, and our freedom lies solely in a passive response to its immutable forms. In the case of the moral-sense philosophers, for whom sympathy is involuntary, even our response to human misery is not free.

By and large, benevolence is a matter of laughter, while sentimentalism is a question of weeping. Sentimentalism is really a sympathy with one's own act of sympathising, a self-devouring affair in which the world is

³⁹ Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit*, in Selby-Bigge, *British Moralists*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ See Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*, p. 6.

reduced to so much raw material for one's lust for sensation, or to so many occasions for exhibiting one's moral munificence. You can thus exchange the objects of your affections from moment to moment, with scant regard for their use-value. It is the mode of feeling appropriate to those who are not much practised in emotion in everyday life, and who can thus manage only a theatrical, over-the-top version of it on the rare occasions when they are called upon to display it. This is no doubt one reason why US politicians sob so helplessly in public. The sentimentalist flaunts his dainty feelings like so many commodities, since like his annuity or landed estate they are part of what secures his *entrée* to polite society. 'The intensity of a special experience of feeling', John Mullan remarks astutely, 'was a substitute (in the eighteenth century) for common and prevailing sympathies.'⁴¹

Rather as the child in the mirror phase is cajoled by an idealised reflection of itself, so the sentimentalist misrecognises an exalted image of himself in the act of coming to another's help. The other is simply a mirror for his own self-delight. The Yorick of Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, to adopt Byron's phrase about Keats, is forever frigging his imagination, dreaming up scenes of distress in order to relish the orgasmic pleasures of pity. Whereas benevolentists see only the object of their compassion, sentimentalists act with one coy eye on the admiring response of others. They are men of substantial emotional property, investing their fine feelings with a stockbroker's hope of a lucrative return.⁴² In this sense, they resemble those modern-day narcissists, mostly to be found in the United States, who treat their own bodies with all the wary vigilance of one who carries around with her some indescribably precious, sickening, fragile antique. One is reminded of Dickens's hypocritical Mr Pecksniff, who warms his hands at the fire as benevolently as if they were someone else's. Narcissism, like the imaginary, involves treating myself as an other, as well as treating another as myself.

⁴¹ Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, p. 146.

⁴² Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* consciously uses balance-of-payments imagery about emotions.