

# Adam Smith's sentimentalist conception of self-command

Lauren Kopajtic

## Introduction

'Self-command' is a central capacity in Adam Smith's moral philosophy, especially as presented in the final edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS).<sup>1</sup> Smithian self-command is a specific conception of the more familiar capacity for self-control, and in Smith's view, it enables an individual to regulate her affective states, from turbulent passions to calm sentiments, and to act in a way that is proper and worthy of praise. But in spite of its centrality, self-command has long been overshadowed by the interest in Smith's conceptions of sympathy and the impartial spectator. And when self-command is discussed, it has been regularly cited as an example of Smith's interest in classical Stoicism, following the influential editorial comments of D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (1976/82, 5–6). But the interpretive trend is now shifting. Several scholars have noted that there are serious problems with the traditional reading of Smithian self-command as a piece of his Stoicism, especially given Smith's explicit arguments in TMS against the Stoic conception of self-control, understood by him as leading to 'insensibility'.<sup>2</sup> Interpreting Smithian self-command as 'Stoic'—as requiring not merely the *restraint* of passion and sentiment, but their *extirpation*—seems to be in serious tension with Smith's commitment to the sentimental foundation of morality.

Challenging this traditional reading of Smithian self-command, two authors have recently offered alternative interpretations: Leonidas Montes (2016; 2008; 2004) argues for a Socratic reading of self-command, and Maria Carrasco (2012; 2004) argues that self-command is 'an expression of practical reason' (2012, 399). Each of these readings maintains a strong connection between self-command and rationalism—Montes looks to an alternative classical conception of rational self-control, and Carrasco to a conception of practical reason inspired by Aristotle and Kant. But Smith makes his sentimentalist allegiance clear, and each of these new interpretations requires us to saddle Smith with a position that is in apparent tension with his sentimentalist commitments.

In this paper, I argue that we should adopt an interpretation of self-command suggested by Smith himself when he writes that 'our sensibility to the feelings of others, so far from being inconsistent with the manhood of self-command,

is the very principle upon which that manhood is founded' (TMS III.3.34; Smith 1976). Why read Smithian self-command as 'Stoic', or 'Socratic', or as a version of practical rationality, when we can read it as a sentimental capacity, one that coheres with Smith's philosophical framework? I argue that attending to the details of Smith's conception of self-command will help us to see that self-command is a home-grown, sentimentalist conception and not an awkward rationalistic transplant.

I begin with a discussion of the sentimentalist framework in general, and of the roles for reason and reasoning within that framework. I then offer my interpretation of Smithian self-command, arguing that Smith develops his conception of this capacity from within the sentimentalist framework. Finally, I offer a brief critical discussion of the interpretations of Montes and Carrasco, arguing that while each captures important features of Smithian self-command, each also relies on an implicitly and problematically *rational* conception of self-command. Reconstructing the moral psychology of Smithian self-command, and seeing how Smith has 'sentimentalized' this notion, will provide us with an important historical precedent for conceptions of self-control that ascribe no special governing power to reason.

### **The sentimentalist framework**

We can understand moral sentimentalism as developing in opposition to a variety of extant moral views, including the moral rationalism of philosophers like Ralph Cudworth and Samuel Clarke.<sup>3</sup> Since this is a large and complicated topic, I will focus on two major points of disagreement—one epistemological and one psychological—between the rationalists and the sentimentalists.<sup>4</sup> For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will take Clarke as a representative rationalist, and I will take Hume and Smith as representative sentimentalists.<sup>5</sup> In the next section, I will use these points of disagreement to set out three dimensions along which Smith 'sentimentalizes' self-command, conceiving of this capacity in a way that coheres with his *expanded* conception of the role of sentiment in moral judgment and action, and with his *restricted* conception of the role of reason.

The deepest and most basic difference between the moral rationalists and the moral sentimentalists of the eighteenth century is the dispute over the foundation of morality—whether morality is ultimately founded on reason or on sentiment. Questions about this foundation often turn into questions about how we judge or know what is right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, proper or improper; that is, they turn into epistemic questions about how human beings make 'moral distinctions'. Where a rationalist like Clarke holds that necessary and eternal relations determine moral distinctions, and that these relations can be discovered through reason, a sentimentalist like Smith holds that all moral distinctions are ultimately determined by 'immediate sense and feeling', and thus we judge that something is right or wrong by first feeling a moral sentiment in response to it (TMS VII.iii.2.7).<sup>6</sup> As Smith claims, 'nothing can be

agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling' (TMS VII.iii.2.7).<sup>7</sup>

In addition to quarrelling about how we discover moral distinctions, rationalists and sentimentalists also quarrel over the question of moral motivation, of how we are moved to do what we take to be good, proper, right, or obligatory. Rationalists like Clarke argue that reason and our 'understanding or knowledge of the natural and necessary relations, fitnesses, and proportions of things' directs and 'determine[s]' the wills of all rational creatures (Clarke 1991, 189–190). Through reason we discover what is right or fitting for us to do, and reason thereby motivates us to do that thing. But sentimentalists like Hume argue that the nature of reason is such that it cannot motivate action or suppress passion: 'reason is perfectly inert, and can never either prevent or produce any action or affection' (Hume 2007, 3.1.1.8, 294).<sup>8</sup> For Hume, reason alone cannot influence action, and all our actions are motivated by feelings—by desires, passions, sentiments, or psychological propensities.

In comparison with the rationalists, then, we can see the sentimentalists as holding an expanded conception of the role of sentiment in moral judgment and action, and a restricted conception of the role of reason. Moral distinctions are all ultimately founded on the affective responses of human beings, and human conduct and action springs from affective states like desires, passions, and propensities. Crucially, to restrict the role of reason is not to remove reason from the realm of morality entirely. The sentimentalists restrict reason to important but *ancillary* roles, where it assists by working on or with perceptions, desires, and sentiments. *Reason alone* may not have a role in evaluation and action, but *reason in conjunction with* sentiment, imagination, and perception is of great use. In the case of evaluative judgment, reason helps to discover facts of the matter and perform inferential and causal reasoning. In the case of action, reason helps to discover the best means toward one's ends. Other activities formerly associated with reason, including judgment and reflection, lose their purely rational connotations and take on wider connotations of feeling and imagination.<sup>9</sup>

Smith's 'theory of moral sentiments' is constructed within this larger sentimentalist framework. Although Smith briefly addresses the epistemological issue, arguing, as we saw, that moral distinctions are founded on 'immediate sense and feeling,' he does not offer extensive arguments against the moral rationalists. Two of Smith's sentimentalist predecessors, Francis Hutcheson and David Hume, had already offered such arguments, and Smith's TMS is written in the wake of these. I agree with Charles Griswold, James Otteson, and others who read Smith as taking Hume's and Hutcheson's anti-rationalist arguments as having settled the issues, just as he takes Hutcheson's arguments against Hobbes, Mandeville, and other 'selfish theorists' as having settled those issues.<sup>10</sup> But although Smith does not offer explicit anti-rationalist arguments, we can see the evidence of Smith's acceptance of these arguments in the few mentions of reason and reasoning in TMS. For example, in a largely unnoticed passage from TMS IV, Smith characterizes 'superior reason and understanding' as an *instrumental* capacity, 'by which we are capable of discerning the remote consequences of all our actions,

and of foreseeing the advantage or detriment which is likely to result from them' (TMS IV.2.6).<sup>11</sup> And in his later discussion of moral rationalism, Smith again clearly specifies the instrumental role of reason, noting that reason enables us, by 'induction from this experience [of moral sentiments on different occasions]' to establish general rules of conduct. He adds that 'reason may show that this object is the means of obtaining some other which is naturally either pleasing or displeasing' but that it 'cannot render any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake' (TMS VII.iii.2.7). Like Hume, Smith holds a restricted conception of the role of reason in moral judgment and action, assigning to it only instrumental functions.<sup>12</sup>

Smith is working within a well-defined sentimentalist framework, a framework that took shape in opposition to moral rationalism. But is *self-command* an organic part of Smith's sentimentalist framework? Or is it a rationalistic transplant—a piece of Stoicism or some other version of rational self-control, awkwardly grafted onto Smith's sentimentalist system? Smith's conception of self-control would make a likely candidate for being a holdover from more traditional, rationalist systems, given the long and rich tradition of conceiving of reason as having sovereignty over the passions. Although there are different conceptions of rational self-control, one core, familiar conception is colorfully captured by Plato's image of a charioteer (reason) directing the power provided by his horses (passion and desire).<sup>13</sup> Variations of this conception were rife during Smith's time, and can be seen in well-known works like Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* ('On life's vast ocean diversely we sail,/Reason the card, but passion is the gale'), and Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* ('a Man of sound Understanding [may] Govern himself by his Reason with as much ease and readiness as a good Rider manages a well taught Horse by the Bridle') (Pope 2008, 107–108; Mandeville 1988, 323).<sup>14</sup> According to such positions, passion and desire provide motivational power while reason provides guidance and direction. As we move to Smith's conception of self-command, we must ask: Has Smith found a way to revise the traditional conception of self-control as reason's control over the passions, thereby assimilating it into his sentimentalist framework? And if so, how has he managed this?

### **Sentimentalized self-command<sup>15</sup>**

I will argue that Smith breaks with the tradition of conceiving of self-control as reason's governing of the passions, and that Smithian self-command is 'sentimentalized'. According to this view, to *sentimentalize* some notion is to conceive of it in a way that conforms to the commitments and tenets of a sentimentalist framework.<sup>16</sup> Offering an interpretation of the moral psychology of Smithian self-command, I argue that there are three crucial dimensions along which Smith sentimentalizes this capacity. These are:

- 1 **Motivation:** Efforts at self-command are motivated by the disposition to sympathize with other people and by the desire for the pleasures of mutual

sympathy and approval (and by the aversion to the pain of antipathy and disapproval).

- 2 **Standard:** Efforts at self-command are guided by a standard of propriety, which is constituted by the sentiments a well-informed and impartial spectator would feel upon sympathizing with the agent.
- 3 **Operation:** Self-command works by imaginatively taking up the perspective of an impartial spectator on oneself and sympathetically imagining the feelings of such a spectator.

According to my interpretation, Smith succeeds in sentimentalizing self-command. That is, Smith succeeds in developing a conception of self-command and the government of the passions from within his sentimentalist framework, and in conformity with its commitments to an expanded role for sentiment and a restricted role for reason.

### *The motivational basis of and standard for self-command*

Smith opens TMS with a series of empirical claims about human beings. He claims that we are naturally social, sympathetic, and curious creatures, regularly striving to understand one another, to share our beliefs, opinions, and sentiments, and deriving a great deal of pleasure from successful sympathetic interactions, and pain from unsuccessful ones. Although self-command does not receive top billing in the first part of TMS, it is present throughout Smith's discussion of the sympathetic interaction between the spectator and the agent, a presence which is confirmed in a later passage:

Our sensibility to the feelings of others, so far from being inconsistent with the manhood of self-command, is the very principle upon which that manhood is founded. The very same principle or instinct which, in the misfortune of our neighbour, prompts us to compassionate his sorrow; in our misfortune, prompts us to restrain the abject and miserable lamentations of our own sorrow. The same principle or instinct which, in his prosperity and success, prompts us to congratulate his joy; in our own prosperity and success, prompts us to restrain the levity and intemperance of our own joy. In both cases, the propriety of our own sentiments and feelings seems to be exactly in proportion to the vivacity and force with which we enter into and conceive his sentiments and feelings.

(TMS III.3.34)<sup>17</sup>

This passage is the key passage for my interpretation of self-command, and it summarizes two important points about the connection between sensibility and self-command, as established in the earlier parts of TMS. First, Smith claims that there is one 'principle or instinct' that 'prompts' *both* the effort to sympathize with someone else *and* the effort to command one's own feelings. That is, Smith seems to be saying that there is one motivational basis for both sympathy and

self-command. Second, Smith claims that ‘the propriety of our own sentiments and feelings’ is determined ‘exactly’ by the ‘vivacity and force’ with which we sympathize with another’s feelings. This seems to be a claim about the standard with which we evaluate our passions and desires, a standard which is set by a spectator’s sympathetic sentiments. Let’s unpack each of these claims by examining Smith’s account of sympathy and the sympathetic interaction.

According to Smith, *sympathy* is the experience of a ‘fellow-feeling with any passion whatever’, caused by the spectator’s effort<sup>18</sup> to imaginatively enter into the situation<sup>19</sup> of the agent (TMS I.i.1.5).<sup>20</sup> Sympathy is not merely a ‘contagion’ or ‘transfusion’ of feeling; it is the result of a spectator’s attempt to move from her own situation into that of the agent—to step into the shoes of the agent, so to speak—and to feel what they feel, given their situation. And Smith claims that this tendency to sympathize with those around us springs from a ‘natural principle’ that drives us to imagine the experiences and feelings of others (TMS I.i.1.1). Smith adds that we are driven not only to imagine the experiences of others, but also to try to reach agreement of sentiment, for ‘nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast’ (TMS I.i.2.1). That is, we desire *mutual sympathy*, the harmonious state wherein the spectator’s and the agent’s feelings agree. As we will see in the section that follows, achieving this desirable state requires an effort by both the spectator and the agent.

On Smith’s view, then, our curiosity about the sentiments of others combines with our strong desire for sympathy and approval and produces a potent motive to regularly engage in the sympathetic interaction. The desire for mutual sympathy (and the converse aversion to antipathy and disapproval<sup>21</sup>) is the ‘principle or instinct’ which Smith refers to in TMS III.3.34; this desire ‘prompts us’ to sympathize with others. How might this principle also prompt the effort of self-command? To answer this question, we must look more closely at the sympathetic interaction. In brief, when the spectator and the agent engage in the sympathetic interaction, the spectator will strive to enter fully into the situation of an agent, gathering information about that situation and striving to understand it without bias or partiality. Her effort will first produce in her a sympathetic emotion, and then a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation. If her sympathetic emotion is ‘in perfect concord’ with the agent’s original passion, then she wholly approves of his passion and judges it proper, but insofar as her sympathetic emotion does not match the original passion of the agent, she feels a degree of disapprobation and judges it improper. The agent, aware that others will be so judging him, and moved by his desire to be sympathized with, strives to bring his emotions to a level into which the spectator can enter.

Let’s illustrate this interaction, beginning with the task of the spectator, which Smith describes as follows:

[T]he 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.4.6)

If I walk into the office and see you, a colleague of mine, brushing away tears, my first thought, according to Smith, is ‘What has befallen you?’ (TMS I.i.1.6). But I may push this thought aside and jump to a quick disapproval of crying in the office. ‘Unprofessional’, I think, and I go to my desk. In this case, we see someone who is not properly being a spectator, because they are not bothering to imagine what has befallen the agent. Smith thinks this may often happen, ‘without any defect of humanity on our part’ (TMS I.i.3.4). Perhaps I know little about you, or perhaps I am ‘employed about other things, and do not take time to picture out in [my] imagination the different circumstances of distress which must occur to [you]’ (TMS I.i.3.4). In such a case, I have not endeavored to put myself in your situation, and so if I feel a sentiment of disapproval and form a judgment from it, they are not warranted.

What about a spectator who does make the effort? Perhaps I know that you have been struggling to cope with the illness of your mother and the way it is affecting your family. I ask what has happened, and I try to work out the details of your situation. This is the *first step* in the spectator’s role in the sympathetic interaction, and it is the effortful step: what I am doing here is trying to understand you, your situation, and why you feel as you seem to feel. By trying to imaginatively simulate your experience and situation, I am putting myself in a situation to feel what I would feel, if I were in your place.<sup>22</sup> The *second step* is the experience of a sympathetic emotion. If you tell me that your mother passed away over the weekend, and now your siblings are squabbling over her estate, I will quickly enter into your grief and frustration, for, Smith claims, ‘our sympathy ... with deep distress, is very strong and very sincere’ (TMS I.ii.5.4). I feel a sympathetic emotion of grief, one that is not as strong as yours, but in harmony with it. The two sentiments, your original passion of grief, and my sympathetic emotion of grief, ‘will never be unisons’, for I can never fully become you through the work of the imagination, but ‘they may be concords, and this is all that is wanted or required’ (TMS I.i.4.7). I feel the concord of sentiments and then feel a sentiment of approbation, for we are in mutual sympathy. This is the *third step*: the comparison of my sympathetic emotion with the emotion I believe you are feeling will produce a further sentiment, a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation.<sup>23</sup>

While the spectator is attempting to sensitively and imaginatively engage with the agent, the agent is trying to anticipate the spectator’s evaluation of his situation and to command his passions accordingly. The agent (‘the person principally concerned’ in the situation) is aware that the spectator will not be able to enter fully into his situation, and so his effort is to regulate his passions, bringing them to a level with which a spectator could sympathize:

The person principally concerned is sensible of this [inability to achieve perfect unison], and at the same time passionately desires a more complete

sympathy. He longs for that relief which nothing can afford him but the entire concord of the affections of the spectators with his own. To see the emotions of their hearts, in every respect, beat time to his own, in the violent and disagreeable passions, constitutes his sole consolation. But he can only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which spectators are capable of going along with him. He must flatten, if I may be allowed to say so, the sharpness of its natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him.

(TMS I.i.4.7)<sup>24</sup>

The agent is driven by his desire for the sympathy of a spectator to regulate his passions in accordance with what he thinks that spectator would find proper. In order to anticipate the response of the spectator, the agent *also* runs through the steps of the spectatorial process, imagining himself and his own situation through the eyes of the spectator, feeling the propriety or impropriety of his reaction, and adjusting his conduct and emotions accordingly. Thus, just as the spectator is driven to sympathize with the agent by *her* desire for mutual sympathy, the agent is driven to regulate his emotions by *his* desire for mutual sympathy.

Now, as the spectator and agent engage in the sympathetic interaction, motivated by their respective desires for mutual sympathy, each is also evaluating the ‘original passion’ of the agent. This is a key feature of Smith’s account of the moral sentiments. On Smith’s view, a moral sentiment (a sentiment of approval or disapproval) is a sympathetic response to the *propriety* of the agent’s original passion. That is, the spectator, upon attempting to sympathetically imagine the agent’s situation, will also feel a sense of ‘the suitableness or unsuitableness ... the proportion or disproportion which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it’ (TMS I.i.3.6). If the spectator, ‘upon bringing the case home to himself’, feels a ‘dissonance’ between his sympathetic emotion and the passion the agent appears to feel, he will disapprove of the agent’s passion and judge it *improper* (TMS I.i.3.1). If he feels a ‘concord’ between the two feelings, he will approve of the agent’s passion, and judge it *proper*. ‘Upon all occasions’ says Smith, the sentiments of the spectator ‘are the standards and measures by which he judges of [the agent’s]’ (TMS I.i.3.1).

But can the sentiments of *any* spectator serve as the standard of propriety? Or, to ask this question in another way, can any instance of moral approbation or disapprobation justify a consequent judgment that an action is proper or improper? We have already seen that one of the core commitments of Smith’s sentimentalism is the claim that moral distinctions and moral judgments have their source in ‘immediate sense and feeling’ (TMS VII.iii.2.7). We have also just seen Smith’s view that the *propriety* of any affective state, including motives for action,<sup>25</sup> is determined by the sentiments of the spectator. But Smith clarifies that the standard-setting sentiments are ‘the sympathetic feelings of the *impartial and well-informed spectator*’ (TMS VII.ii.1.49, emphasis added).<sup>26</sup> That is, the level of propriety for any particular feeling will be determined by the



sentiment (approbation or disapprobation) that an informed and impartial spectator would feel upon sympathizing with the agent.

We shall return to Smith's conception of this spectator later, but for now, we should note that Smith takes this part of his theory to be one left unexplained by previous theorists, rationalists, and sentimentalists alike:

None of those systems [which make virtue consist in propriety]<sup>27</sup> either give, or even pretend to give, any precise or distinct measure by which this fitness or propriety of affection can be ascertained or judged of. That precise and distinct measure can be found nowhere but in the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator.

(TMS VII.ii.1.49)

One of Smith's self-proclaimed contributions to this tradition of moral philosophy is his account of the standard of propriety, and this standard is itself explicitly sentimental. In this respect, Smith maintains the sentimentalist commitment to the restricted role of reason, assigning to sentiment, not reason, the role of setting the standard for judgment and action.

To return to the passage with which we began, TMS III.3.34, we can now see that, on Smith's view, our sensibility to the feelings of others both drives *and* guides our attempts at self-command. The effort of sympathizing and the effort of commanding one's passions have the same motivational basis, each springing from the natural and basic desire for mutual sympathy and approval. And the standard that guides the effort of self-command is set by the sentiments of the well-informed and impartial spectator. Put differently, I would not be motivated to regulate my passions if I cared nothing for what you felt (and so, nothing for whether you felt my feelings were improper), and I would have no sense for the propriety of my feelings if I were not able to imagine how you would feel if you were a well-informed and impartial spectator of me. But because I *do* care about achieving mutual sympathy with you, and because I *can* imagine your sympathetic feelings, I learn which emotions are proper in which situations, and I am motivated to achieve that level of propriety—I am motivated to exercise self-command. These are the first two facets of Smith's sentimentalization of self-command: Smithian self-command springs from and is driven by the *desire* for mutual sympathy, and it is guided by the *sentiments* of a well-informed and impartial spectator.<sup>28</sup> In so conceiving of self-command, Smith thus far remains true to his sentimentalist commitments.

### ***The operation of self-command***

We saw that in the effort of self-command, the agent is guided by the sentiments of a spectator and he strives to command his passions and bring them to a level into which a spectator can enter. We also saw that Smith conceives of the standard of propriety as being set by the sentiments of the well-informed and impartial spectator. And we saw that in the sympathetic interaction, the

spectator is imagining the situation of the agent, and the agent is imagining what a spectator would feel upon her attempt to sympathize. In a long paragraph following his discussion of the sympathetic interaction, Smith describes these intersecting efforts and their result:

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

(TMS I.i.4.8)

Smith is describing the process of *learning to be an impartial spectator of oneself*, and he is describing how the effort of taking up that perspective can actually alter an agent's emotions. But how does this guidance work? What happens in the effort of self-command, such that a passion is restrained or otherwise modified?

To begin, we can take a hint from the musical metaphors Smith uses throughout TMS. In a passage discussed earlier, he writes that in a sympathetic interaction, the agent 'must flatten ... the sharpness of [the passion's] natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him' (TMS I.i.4.7). And elsewhere he compares mutual sympathy to the harmony produced when 'so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another' (TMS VII.iv.28). Extending Smith's musical metaphors, we can understand self-command as an agent's attempt to 'tune' her feelings so that they harmonize with the feelings of a spectator. In order to tune an instrument, a musician must be aware of the note she is producing and she must be aware of the note she is aiming for. She must also desire to bring her own instrument into harmony either with the instruments around her, or with a more ideal standard. Likewise, the effort of self-command involves three elements: the original affection, the standard by which the agent tries to regulate it, and the desire to regulate the original affection so that it accords with the standard. But how does the standard in the case of self-command get a grip on

us? How can I be moved by the sentiments of an impartial spectator—by the sentiments of someone else—to regulate *my own* passions? In order to answer these questions, let's turn to Smith's account of how an agent learns to be an impartial spectator of herself. We shall see that taking up the perspective of a 'supposed' impartial spectator allows an agent to feel a new set of spectatorial sentiments. These are the sentiments that serve as the standard that guides her attempts at self-command, and they are sentiments she herself feels.

Our initial sympathetic interactions are with actual other people, but an agent can also learn to 'suppose' or imagine a spectator of her conduct. Smith writes that once I 'become anxious' to know how I am perceived by others, and whether I 'deserve their censure or applause', I begin examining myself by considering how I would appear if I were in the spectator's position: 'we suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct' (TMS III.1.5). This process of 'supposition' involves a change of perspective, for, according to Smith, 'we can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us' (TMS III.1.3).

Thus, if I want to assess the propriety of my own emotions and actions, I must take up a new perspective on them, the perspective of someone who is at an appropriate distance from them, namely, an impartial spectator. How do I do this? Smith claims that I must split or divide myself:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined and judged of.

(TMS III.1.6)

In order to assess myself, I must divide myself, *as it were*, into two characters. Smith claims that *I* am both these characters, I am both the judge and the one judged, both the spectator and the agent. But more precisely, we might say that *I*, the agent, develop the ability to take up different perspectives, including the perspective of someone impartial to me and my interests. For example, I can view the behavior of my good-natured but raucous friend from my own partial perspective, loving her for her humor and impulsiveness, and for how she always ensures that a party is fun, or I can view her behavior from the perspective of the other restaurant patrons who find her to be noisy, intrusive, and dramatic. Likewise, I can view my own furious resentment at a personal slight from the partial perspective of the resentment, which urges my revenge on the offender, or I can view that resentment from the perspective of a third, impartial party, who sees the insult in a different light and as meriting a more moderate

response. We have already seen how the roles of agent and spectator intersect, and we have seen that the agential effort in the sympathetic interaction involves moving between one's situation as an agent and the perspective of the spectator one is interacting with. Smith is claiming that we internalize this switching or toggling between perspectives, and that when we attempt to scrutinize ourselves, we similarly take up and move between perspectives.

Repeated experience with the sympathetic interaction and repeated attempts to take an impartial perspective on one's own feelings results in the development of the capacity to imaginatively suppose the presence of an impartial spectator. The mature agent in Smith's system is someone who has had this repeated experience and is able to be her own spectator 'so easily and readily, that [she] is scarce sensible that [she does] it' (TMS III.3.3). This process of habituation begins at a very young age, and Smith describes the development of the supposed impartial spectator as 'studying' in 'the great school of self-command' (TMS III.3.22). As a child, Smith claims, I am initially surrounded by partial caregivers and I feel no pressure to moderate my passions or control my actions. But when I first encounter people who are not partial to me, I am moved for the first time to care about what they think of me—I begin to exercise self-command. I want these impartial spectators to approve of me, and so I endeavor to bring my sentiments to a level into which they can enter. As I continue in this 'great school', and I encounter more and more actual impartial spectators, I gradually develop the ability to suppose the presence of an impartial spectator, to occupy the perspective of that supposed spectator, and to feel moral sentiments from that perspective.

When the mature Smithian agent scrutinizes her own passions from the perspective of the impartial spectator, when she divides herself 'as it were' into agent and spectator, she will feel both her own original passion *and* a sympathetic emotion, produced by taking up the spectatorial perspective. The sympathetic emotion will interact with the original passion, in some cases 'abat[ing] the violence' of it, and in others, presumably, increasing the force (TMS I.i.4.8).<sup>29</sup> Further, the mature moral agent will feel the relation between her original passion and the sympathetic emotion she feels by taking up the perspective of the impartial spectator. If she feels the concord of these two feelings, she will feel a sentiment of self-approbation and no impulse to command her original passion. If she feels a dissonance between them, she will feel a sentiment of self-disapprobation and the impulse to 'tune' her original passion to the standard set by the sympathetic emotion of the impartial spectator.<sup>30</sup> In the case of a failure of perfect coincidence, the powerful desire to achieve the sympathy of the impartial spectator (and so to avoid the pain of self-disapprobation) will motivate the agent to strive to regulate her passion and bring it to the level of propriety.<sup>31</sup>

To extend Smith's musical metaphor, we might say that the agent who is a thoughtful and attentive pupil in the great school of self-command is developing her 'ear' for the sentiments of the impartial spectator. The more sensitive and acute this sense is, the better she will be able to tune her emotions to the proper

level. Indeed, Smith claims that the cultivation of self-command requires just this sort of refinement:

There exists in the mind of every man, an idea of [exact propriety and perfection], gradually formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other people. It is the slow, gradual, and progressive work of the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct. This idea is in every man more or less accurately drawn, its colouring is more or less just, its outlines are more or less exactly designed, according to the *delicacy and acuteness of that sensibility*, with which those observations were made, and according to the care and attention employed in making them.

(TMSVI.iii.25, emphasis added)

It is through the ‘delicacy and acuteness’ and the ‘care and attention’ of our sensitive observations that we are able to discern the level of propriety for a variety of sentiments and actions, a standard we then use to command our own sentiments and guide our conduct. Self-command is developed by continually participating in the social world, by refining the delicacy of one’s sensibility, by honing one’s discriminatory powers, and by cultivating the virtues of sensibility and self-command.

Thus, when Smith claims that self-command is founded on our sensibility to the feelings of others, he means that it springs from and is driven by the desire for mutual sympathy; that it is guided by the sentiments of the well-informed and impartial spectator; that it works through the agent’s ability to become her own impartial spectator and to feel sympathetic emotions from that perspective; and that it is developed through the cultivation of delicacy in imagination and sentiment. If we examine Smith’s moral psychology carefully, we can find a detailed account of Smithian self-command—an account of what it is, how it is developed, and how it works in an agent. Furthermore, as I have argued here, this account turns out to be thoroughly sentimentalized. That is, Smith’s conception of self-command turns out to be an organic piece of his sentimentalist framework, cohering with its commitments to the expanded role of sentiment and the restricted role of reason in moral judgment and action.

### **Recent interpretations of Smithian self-command**

I have argued that Smithian self-command is sentimentalized, showing how Smith conceives of self-control and the government of the passions without relying on reason to play the role of governor. But my interpretation seems to stand opposed to the two most recent and thorough interpretations of self-command. In this final section, I shall briefly consider the views of Leonidas Montes and Maria Carrasco, mentioned in the introduction.<sup>32</sup> I argue that while each of these views captures important features of Smithian self-command,

each also attributes to Smith a conception of reason that, were he to have that conception, would violate his sentimentalist commitments.

While several authors have registered their dissatisfaction with the reading of Smithian self-command as Stoic, Montes is one of the first to offer an alternative reading, one which looks to an alternative ancient source. Montes' main contention is that the 'influence of the Stoics in self-command—Smith's chief virtue—has been overestimated' and that self-command 'reflects an important Socratic source quite different from that of the Stoics' (2008, 30).<sup>33</sup> Montes finds in Smithian self-command two important features which he claims it shares with the Socratic notion of *enkrateia* (literally, 'inner power'). The first feature is that Smithian self-command is more than a 'mere control of passions', for self-command has a 'sense of direction' (2016, 149), or 'a positive (in terms of command "for") and enabling characteristic' (2008, 49). The second feature is that Smithian self-command 'is a fundamental and enabling virtue', a virtue that enables its possessor to be virtuous in other ways as well (2008, 49).<sup>34</sup> Montes finds both of these features in Socratic *enkrateia*, and he claims that 'it is very likely that Smith was thinking in terms of a Socratic self-command as *enkrateia* when he developed his corrections of TMS last edition [*sic*]' (2008, 49).

I agree with much of Montes' reading of Smithian self-command, and although his suggestion that we look to other possible influences for Smithian self-command is a helpful one, there are several issues with his reading of self-command as Socratic. First, it is not clear why the two features Montes indicates make self-command more like Socratic *enkrateia* than Aristotelian *enkrateia*, for example. And given Smith's emphasis on propriety as a kind of 'mediocrity' (TMS I.ii.intro.1), we might find a greater similarity with the Aristotelian notion than the Socratic, especially considering the severe, *apatheia*-approaching portrayal of Socratic *enkrateia* in Plato's *Phaedo*.<sup>35</sup> But the issue that is most pertinent here is that Montes does not consider the fact that Socratic *enkrateia*, like Stoic self-control, is a rational capacity. The 'inner power' of control is a power ascribed to reason over the passions and desire.<sup>36</sup> Now, this may not be a deep issue if Montes means to draw only a loose connection to Socratic self-control, emphasizing the place of Smithian self-command in the tradition of the cardinal virtues. But as his interpretation stands, it runs afoul of Smith's overt allegiance to the sentimentalist framework, and his commitment to the restricted role of reason in action and evaluative judgment.

Carrasco has also offered an alternative reading of Smithian self-command, agreeing with Montes and others that Smithian self-command should not be understood as 'Stoic', and arguing for an interpretation that connects self-command 'to the traditional ethics of practical reasoning' (2012, 409). Carrasco draws a distinction between the 'pre-moral habit' of self-command and the 'moral virtue' of self-command, and focuses on the first as a condition that must be met for the agent to be practically rational, and the second as having to do with the ends that the agent chooses to pursue. Carrasco argues that the 'pre-moral habit' of self-command 'involves the first rational mediation of our desires' (2012, 398), and that it is 'a practical habit, an expression of practical

reason, which may be improved through its exertion ... and enables us to discipline our passions in order to guide our lives according to our deliberate intentions' (2012, 399–400).

I am sympathetic to many of the details of Carrasco's interpretation, and I agree that Smithian self-command involves the 'rational mediation of our desires'. On my own reading, reasoning plays an important role in the effort of self-command, especially in the attempt to achieve the conditions of information and impartiality from which we can evaluate the propriety of our sentiments. But it is not immediately apparent how we should understand Carrasco's stronger claim that Smithian self-command is an 'expression of practical reason'. On a straightforward reading of this claim, Carrasco is attributing to Smith a conception of reason as *practical*—as motivationally efficacious—and claiming that when we command our passions, we are doing so by means of the faculty of practical reason. Indeed, this reading is borne out by evidence from an earlier article (2004) where Carrasco explicitly attributes a conception of practical reason to Smith. She argues there that Smith's ties to sentimentalism are weaker than they have been considered, and that 'Smith's system can also be plausibly seen as a theory of practical reasoning' (2004, 81). She notes that this is an anachronistic argument, as 'in Smith's time the concept of practical reason was in complete disuse until Kant rehabilitated it, in a totally different form, at the end of the century' (2004, 82–83). And, somewhat oddly, she does not engage with the sentimentalists' explicit arguments against reason as a practical capacity; instead she assumes that Smith was just unaware of the right conception of practical reason.<sup>37</sup> Carrasco's argument for reading Smith as a theorist of practical rationality is already on difficult interpretive ground, given Smith's overt disavowal of rationalism and avowal of sentimentalism, and it is further undermined by her omission of engagement with the sentimentalist arguments for a motivationally inert conception of reason.

Montes and Carrasco each makes an important contribution to the understanding of Smithian self-command, but they each offer a reading of self-command that, as it stands, runs afoul of Smith's commitment to the sentimentalist framework. Each connects Smithian self-command with a framework according to which reason has governing power over the passions. But Smith follows Hume and other sentimentalists in denying this power to reason. If we are to understand Smithian self-command, we must face up to this commitment and try to see what the government of the passions might look like when sentiment, not reason, is sovereign.

## **Conclusion**

As Smith revised TMS over the course of more than 30 years, self-command became more and more prominent in his theory, taking, in the 1790 edition, a place with sympathy and the impartial spectator as one of the most central features of his moral theory. But we cannot properly understand self-command or the role it plays in his sentimentalist theory if we persist in seeing it as a

Stoic or rationalistic holdover. My task in this paper has been to show that despite a persistent scholarly tendency to find Stoicism and rationalism in Smith's conception of self-command, Smithian self-command is thoroughly *sentimentalized*. Smith cultivates a conception of self-control and the government of the passions from within his sentimentalist framework. The result is a complex and rich view of our capacity for controlling and regulating our affective states.<sup>38</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Self-command comes into the foreground of Smith's moral philosophy in the sixth edition of TMS (1790). This is largely due to the added section on self-command and magnanimity in the completely new Part VI, as well as the significant revisions made to Part III of TMS.
- 2 *Inter alia* Bee and Paganelli (2019); Carrasco (2012, 2004); Forman-Barzilai (2010); Ross (2010); Hanley (2009); Montes (2016, 2008, 2004); Schliesser (2008); Vivenza (2001); Fleischacker (1999); Griswold (1999). For Smith's critique of Stoic 'apathy', which he understands as 'insensibility', see TMS III.3.14, VI.iii.18, and VII.ii.1.43. (I cite TMS in the manner recommended by the *Adam Smith Review*, relying on the Glasgow edition of Smith's works.) Smith's claim that Stoic self-control leads to 'apathy' or insensibility is, of course, easily contested. For considerations of space, I do not evaluate Smith's claims about various Stoic doctrines in this paper.
- 3 Given the scope of this paper, I focus only on the sentimentalists' opposition to the rationalists. A full account of sentimentalism and its commitments would also have to consider the sentimentalists' opposition to egoism and natural law theory, as well as the more overtly religious moralists. A full account would also have to address the nuances of the different sentimentalist positions, especially the differences between the moral sense theorists and the sympathy-based sentimentalists. Unless otherwise noted, whenever I refer to 'moral rationalists' and 'moral sentimentalists', I mean to refer to those positions as defined and understood in the eighteenth century. There are many much newer ways of being a rationalist or a sentimentalist, and I cannot engage with these here.
- 4 I am indebted to Christine Korsgaard's (1986) discussion of 'content skepticism' and 'motivation skepticism' about reason in this section. See also Kauppinen (2014).
- 5 I acknowledge that this oversimplifies many differences within these schools of thought, and can only plead considerations of space in my defense. I take these two points of disagreement to be central enough and basic enough that they helpfully differentiate the two kinds of positions, and in a way that is applicable to many of the figures that can be identified on either side.
- 6 For Clarke's view, see the selections from his *Discourse*, in Raphael (ed.) (1991).
- 7 See also TMS III.4.8.
- 8 Hume is here referring to his arguments in *Treatise* 2.3.3 (SBN 413–418). These arguments have been contested by many commentators, and many have weighed in on the nature of the disagreement between Hume and his rationalist targets. For further discussion of Hume's conception of reason, see *inter alia*, Cohon (2008); Sayre-McCord (2008); Garrett (2006); Owen (1999); Radcliffe (1999); Baier (1991); Korsgaard (1986).
- 9 See Nazar (2012) and Frazer (2012) for further discussion of the contours of rationalism and sentimentalism in Enlightenment thought.



- 10 See Griswold (1999, 157–159); Otteson (2002, 51).
- 11 Smith also discusses the utility of self-command here, explicitly contrasting self-command with this “superior reason and understanding” (TMS IV.2.6–8).
- 12 There is one well-known place in TMS where Smith claims that ‘reason, principle, conscience’ call to us ‘in a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions’ (TMS III.3.4). What will my reading make of this passage? I think it is quite clear that ‘reason’ is meant loosely here, and used as an equivalent in a capacious list of terms, which includes: ‘reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct’ (TMS III.3.4). Smith is clearly referring to the ‘supposed’ impartial spectator here, and, as we will see, he claims that it is the *sentiments* of that spectator which affect our conduct. This is all well within Smith’s sentimentalist framework, as will become clear in the discussion that follows.
- 13 This image is from the *Phaedrus*. Other common conceptions deny that human beings have the capacity for self-control, claiming, for example, that we need the grace of God to achieve any control over our passions (e.g., Jean-François Senault’s *De l’Usage des Passions*), or that the passions are signs of our fallen nature and to believe oneself capable of self-improvement is sinful pride (e.g., John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*). And some conceive of virtuous self-control as self-mastery, and as the eradication of the influence of passion and desire on action (e.g., Plato’s *Phaedo* or Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*).
- 14 Mandeville is referring to Shaftesbury’s conception of self-control here, not his own, but he nonetheless captures a common way of understanding this capacity.
- 15 In this paper, I consider only central instances of self-command, leaving aside Smith’s occasional discussion of what looks like non-moral or even vicious self-command (like the command of fear of death exhibited by Buccanneers; see VI.iii). As Carrasco has argued (2012), Smith uses ‘self-command’ in different ways, and not always to refer to a virtuous capacity. I also leave aside Smith’s discussion of the relation between self-command and the other virtues.
- 16 I am not claiming that Smith is the only philosopher to do this, nor that there is only one way to sentimentalize self-control. The nature of one’s sentimentalization of something will depend on the particular brand of sentimentalism one holds.
- 17 Sensibility and self-command are also mentioned together in the beginning of TMS; see I.i.5.6–7.
- 18 This is not necessarily a conscious or deliberate effort, and that Smith thinks that much of the imaginative work involved in the sympathetic process becomes automated. He notes in TMS I.i.1.6 that ‘upon some occasions sympathy may seem to arise merely from the view of a certain emotion in another person’, but he goes on to claim that this ‘does not hold universally, or with regard to every passion’ (TMS I.i.1.7).
- 19 The ‘situation’ of the agent includes relevant details about the agent’s personality and history, details about the people they are close with, their environment, and their tendencies to act in different situations.
- 20 Smith uses the term ‘sympathy’ in several ways, sometimes to describe the spectator’s initial imaginative attempt to enter into the situation of another, sometimes to describe the spectator’s fellow-feeling, and sometimes to describe the pleasure of approbation felt when the feelings of the spectator and the agent are in harmony or concord. See Haakonssen (1981, 51).
- 21 See TMS I.i.2 for the first sustained discussion of this desire, and see TMS I.i.4.5 for his discussion of the ‘intolerable’ pain of disagreement on moral matters.

- 22 There are important questions to be asked about how much of the spectator's own character is transported during this imaginary change of situation. Is it that I take on your personality and feel what you would feel? Do I do this while retaining my own personality? In one place, Smith claims that we split ourselves, in a sense, and that a 'secret consciousness' remains with the spectator, 'that the change of situations ... is but imaginary' (TMS I.i.4.7). But at the end of TMS, he claims that when I sympathize with you, I 'consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters' (TMS VII.iii.1.4). These are important questions, but I think it is futile to try and seek a general answer to them. Smith certainly needs to maintain that the spectator should be trying to take on the salient features of the agent's personality, and not merely projecting herself into the situation of someone else, because the personality of the agent is an important factor in understanding the response of the agent to her situation. But Smith also needs to maintain the basic separation of persons in sympathy, for sympathy and the ability to feel the moral sentiments depends on the comparison or relation of the spectator's feeling to the agent's. The selves of the agent and the spectator cannot collapse in the moment of sympathy, for if they did, we would not be able to make evaluations of other people. And since we do clearly make evaluations, Smith's account must preserve the separation, perhaps only through a 'secret consciousness' of it. For further discussion, see Fleischacker (2019), Griswold (2006, 1999, 83–109); Darwall (2004); Haakonssen (1981, 48).
- 23 Smith is careful to note that the sympathetic emotion is not the same as the sentiment of approbation. In a footnote added to the second edition of TMS (to I.iii.1.9), Smith responds to an objection Hume made to the view presented in the first edition. In his response, Smith is careful to distinguish two feelings attendant upon the process of sympathizing: the feeling that the spectator shares with the agent, which may be a painful or a pleasant feeling, and 'the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned' (TMS I.iii.1.9), which is always pleasant.
- 24 In this description, the agent is driven to 'lower' his passion, but Smithian self-command will require 'up-regulation' as well as 'down-regulation' of passions, depending on the passion and the situation.
- 25 Smith argues in Part II of TMS that the propriety of an action is determined by the propriety of the motive, 'the intention of affection of the heart, from which it proceeds' (TMS II.iii.intro.1).
- 26 See also TMS III.2.32.
- 27 This claim comes at the end of a long section where Smith canvasses the views of Plato, Aristotle, Zeno ('the founder of the Stoical doctrine', TMS VII.ii.1.15), Samuel Clarke, William Wollaston, and Lord Shaftesbury, all of whom, according to Smith, hold that virtue consists in propriety (TMS VII.ii).
- 28 As I mentioned in note 15, in this paper I focus on the central instances of self-command in TMS, leaving aside cases of apparently vicious command of passions. My reading of Smithian self-command suggests a way of understanding where those cases of self-command go wrong, so to speak. In such cases, we could argue that the agent's self-command fails to meet one or both of these criteria for what we might call virtuous self-command. Perhaps the 'Buccaneer' commands his fear of death out of a desire to plunder more prodigiously, or perhaps because he measures his fear

of death against the standard set by his partial and ill-informed fellow Buccaneers (TMS VI.iii.8).

- 29 Smith offers very little discussion of how the passions interact with one another on a psychological level. He seems to conceive of the sympathetic emotion as ‘cooler’ and less violent than the original passion, but he does not elaborate on how we are to understand this. It seems that Smith is hinting at something like Hume’s picture of the passions as having a degree of force or violence, which interacts with other passions in a variety of force-on-force ways.
- 30 See TMS III.5.5 for Smith’s explicit statement about the ‘authority’ of the sentiments of the impartial spectator (referred to by the general term ‘moral faculties’). There are important questions to be asked about the source of this authority, and these questions are especially pressing for Smith given his sentimentalist framework. I address this topic in Kopajtic (2019), but see also Sayre-McCord (2013, 2010).
- 31 I am describing an ideal version of this process and am aware (as was Smith) that there will be many factors which impede this process. See Smith’s discussion of the need for ‘general rules’ in III.4 and III.5, where he discusses the prevalence of self-deception and the corrective influence of general rules.
- 32 I set aside the consideration of my view in relation to the reading of Smithian self-command as ‘Stoic’. Enough work has already been done to show that Smith is explicitly opposed to the conception of self-control as found in the canonical Stoic texts. See the references mentioned in note 2.
- 33 See also Montes (2016), 148–149.
- 34 Montes is referring to Smith’s discussion of self-command in TMS VI.iii, where Smith claims that self-command supports the other virtues and gives them their impressive quality. As mentioned in note 15, I set this aspect of self-command aside in this paper.
- 35 Another pressing issue with Montes’ reading is that given the likely influence of Socratic *enkrateia* on Stoic *enkrateia* and *sophrosyne*, Montes needs to say much more about why we should find an important distinction between these conceptions (he briefly mentions this influence in an endnote to 2008, n. 33). This is a pressing issue because without clarifying this, it is not clear why we should think that Socratic *enkrateia* does not also lead to *apatheia*, especially given the portrayal of Socratic *enkrateia* in dialogues like the *Phaedo*. If Socratic *enkrateia* is effectively the same as Stoic *enkrateia*, then Montes’ interpretation would not stand opposed to the standard interpretation; it would just extend that interpretation.
- 36 This ascription is clearest in the Platonic dialogues where Socrates’ own self-control is discussed, especially, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*. Montes also relies on Xenophon’s characterization of Socrates in the *Memorabilia*, and there is much less of metaphysics of the soul or even a moral psychology worked out in that text.
- 37 Carrasco also argues in this article (2004) that Smith’s notion of corrected or informed sentiments suggests that he ‘may not be a genuine sentimentalist’ (86–87). This assumes that ‘genuine sentimentalists’ would not allow reason to correct or inform sentiments, and this is a problematic assumption. As we saw the sentimentalists are happy to find *restricted* roles for reason in practical matters, including the role of helping to inform the sentiments. Indeed, it seems that on Carrasco’s notion of ‘genuine’ sentimentalism, only strict non-cognitivists would count as sentimentalists, but this seems too stringent a criterion.

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