

SENSE OUT OF SENSE: Notes on the Affect/Ethics Impasse

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One of the great contributions of the affect theory boom of the past fifteen years or so has been to address that which is at once intimate *and* impersonal (Berlant 2011; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Massumi 2002, 2015; Sedgwick and Frank 1995; Stewart 2007; Thrift 2008). The intimate and the impersonal have conventionally been imagined either as opposites or as prosthetic supplements to each other. According to such a scheme, the intimate sphere is that of the innermost personality, in contrast to the impersonal outer domain of social routines and pressures. As a consequence, communication that wishes to engage us intimately needs to move beyond anonymous, merely rational facts and figures toward the kind of sentimental resonance that, supposedly, only human-interest stories can activate. Against such clichés, affect theory alerts us to the uncanny fold in which inner and outer life are disjunctively blended: the zones of the intimately impersonal and the impersonally intimate.

In March 2013, the Republican senator Rob Portman came out, unexpectedly, in favor of gay marriage, revealing that the decisive factor in his conversion was his own son's homosexuality. A radio commentator followed up the an-

nouncement with the observation that, for most of us, the radius of empathy stretches no further than intimates and acquaintances. Two implications are embedded in this claim. The first is that our (spontaneous?) capacity to empathize remains inextricable from our (cultivated?) ethical capacity as citizens. The second is that there may also be an irreducible gap between these capacities. Or, to put it differently: being members of societies that constantly expect us to have an ethical relationship to people we will never meet makes demands on us to which we are not naturally adequate. At issue, then, is our public response-ability: the distance between our ability to respond and a potentially infinite horizon of responsibility. The media theorist [John Durham Peters \(1995, 665\)](#) observes, “Parochial containment for us . . . has been shattered today, in our dispersed yet interconnected condition. . . . Limitations of scale have been breached and we citizens of the world today inhabit social systems not apportioned to the limitations of our bodies.” That our attention is daily an/aesthetized by images of distant suffering—images at once visceral and remote—hardly helps ([Boltanski 1999](#)).

Here, we have a classic point of contention between liberal-progressive and conservative-populist positions on the relationship between citizenship and affect. Conservatives tend to ground the ethics of citizenship in some communitarian conception of moral values that are supposed to be locatable in the circumscribed affective field of family and local community life. The liberal tradition, conversely, has tended to stress the importance of self-suspension, of transcending the partiality of merely local and personal attachments to attain a higher or more impersonal ethics. As [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel \(1977, 43\)](#) once warned, “Since the man of common sense makes his appeal to feeling, to an oracle within his breast, he is finished and done with anyone who does not agree; he only has to explain that he has nothing more to say to anyone who does not find and feel the same in himself. In other words, he tramples underfoot the roots of humanity.”

Once we lay it out like this, the flaws in the standard opposition between conservative and liberal visions become clear. On the one hand, Senator Portman’s ostensibly personal announcement is already a calculated public act; its invocation of the intimate affective ground of family is intended to address—and, crucially, to resonate with—strangers. On the other hand, the impersonality of liberal ethics is shot through with its own affects, from the dense pathos and not-so-secret enjoyment that suffuses every insistence on acting on principle to the suddenly intimate reverberations, the wild affect, of even the most apparently abstract kinds of information—illness statistics, threat-level assessments, and so on ([Jain 2007](#); [Masco 2014](#); [Massumi 2005](#); [Woodward 2009](#)). Sometimes the

very abstraction or inscrutability of the information that confronts us is what makes it agitating.

The intersectionality of recent writings on affect—their engagements with queer, environmental, and posthumanist thought—has proven especially generative for theorizing cultural politics. Still, as I have had occasion to observe elsewhere (Mazzarella 2009, 2013, *forthcoming*), affect theory certainly did not invent the problem of the interfolding of the impersonal and the intimate. Emile Durkheim’s classic meditations on the ritual mediation of *mana*, for example, insist on the inextricability of the most palpably intimate currents of experience and the most impersonal social forms. And the philosophy of aesthetics has mined related terrain for more than two hundred years (Eagleton 1990; Hammermeister 2002; Haug 1987). If anything, recent iterations of affect theory have tended toward a bit of a blind spot when it comes to the resonance between many of its concerns and deeper genealogies of that subject too often pejoratively dismissed as “Enlightenment” or “liberal.” These deeper genealogies have bequeathed to us both the habits of thought enshrined in the figure of a radius of empathy and, I want to suggest, the necessity of thinking beyond it.

One useful way to begin grappling with these genealogies is to revisit that moment in the mid-eighteenth century when moral philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith were trying to make sense of the place of affect in a then nascent mass-mediated society.¹ The human capacity to be empathetically affected—Hume and Smith called it “sympathy”—appeared to them as a kind of *pharmakon* of modern citizenship: at once an obstacle to and a condition of possibility for ethics in a society of strangers.

Around that same time, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1997, 74) argued that a large-scale society of strangers was affectively unworkable: “The people has less affection for its chiefs whom it never sees, for a fatherland which in its eyes is as [big as] the world, and for its fellow-citizens most of whom are strangers to it.” A couple of centuries later, Benedict Anderson (1983) would counter Rousseau’s prejudice by accounting for the mediatic forms—novels, newspapers, maps, and so on—that made intimate affective investments possible between strangers at national and transnational scales. But the question was never just whether the anonymous intimacies of public affect were *possible*; the question was also whether they could be *ethical*.

The underlying question informing Hume’s and Smith’s musings on sympathy was: what happens to the relation between our affective and ethical capacities when the local radius of our face-to-face interactions is no longer isomorphic

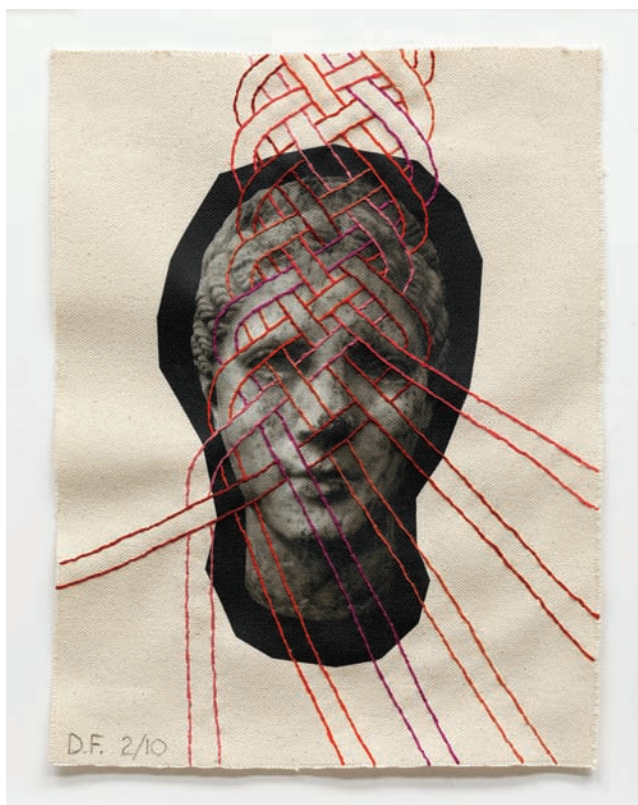


Figure 1. *Apuntes (Edition)*, by Dianna Frid, 2015–2016. Heat transfer on canvas, with embroidery floss; edition of ten variables. Photo courtesy of Dianna Frid.

with the imagined communities of citizenship and nationality through which we are expected to understand ourselves? In short, Hume and Smith were engaged in early attempts to come to terms with the affect/ethics impasse under conditions of mass publicity.

Hume's and Smith's explorations of sympathy are certainly not reducible to an organicist equanimity regarding the affective grounds of social life.² For them, sympathy is, from the very beginning, an ambiguous matter. At one level, [Hume \(2000, 206\)](#) says, sympathy is our most extraordinary resonant susceptibility, "that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own." [Smith \(1982, 11\)](#), in turn, describes such sensuously mimetic transmission as follows: "The passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be

transfused from one man to another, instantaneously, and antecedent to any knowledge of what excited them in the person principally concerned.”³

As much as this sympathetic capacity makes human solidarity possible, it also clouds autonomous judgment. Hume (2000, 209) cautions, “Nothing tends more to disturb our understanding, and precipitate us into any opinions, however unreasonable, than their connexion with passion; which diffuses itself over the imagination, and gives an additional force to every related idea.” The radius of empathy comes into focus here. Both Hume and Smith suggest that we will care less about and resonate less with those who are more distant from us. By the same token, we are more likely to be blinded by a spontaneous resonance with those who are close by (whether this resonance is solidary, competitive, or antagonistic is another matter). “There is no quality in human nature which causes more fatal errors in our conduct,” remarks Hume (2000, 345), “than that which leads us to prefer whatever is present to the distant and remote, and makes us desire objects more according to their situation than their intrinsic value.”

Hume’s solution is to make sure that impartial magistrates will, in all decisive matters, guide human affairs. But Smith, writing a couple of decades later, proposes something more striking: the famous formula of the impartial spectator. Smith (1982, 113) imagines a kind of internal self-division whereby each of us might view and review our passionate engagements as if from a neutral, external standpoint: “I divide myself, as it were, into two persons . . . I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of.”

By setting up this inner division, Smith prescribes something more than the usual austerities of stoical and, later, liberal self-abstraction. Rather, Smith’s impartial spectator enacts the intimate anonymity of modern publicness: the inner stranger qua ethical compass—at once private and exposed before the gaze of the world.⁴ This amounts to an important difference between Hume and Smith. In Hume, the sympathetic relationship is more or less dyadic and face to face: one subject resonating with another. For Smith (1982, 50), by contrast, something like a generalized public opens up as an imagined audience for the self-abstraction of the impartial spectator: “the view of the public . . . open to the eyes of all mankind.”⁵

It is easy enough to see that Smith’s impartial spectator models the kind of Protestant white-man “birch-rod pedagogy” (Adorno 1973, 336) that we all love to satirize, with its febrile attachment to moderation, prudence, and the strictest monitoring of corporeal desire.⁶ Yet, crucially, the impartial spectator is not

simply dispassionate and distant. Rather, he or she is at once affectively absorbed *and* reflexively autonomous. How? Smith's impartial spectator establishes not so much self-reflexivity as such, but a theatricalized (some might say hystericized) self-relation.⁷ By *theatricalized* I do not mean only that the impartial spectator is, in some sense, as much on display to him- or herself as to an imagined public (indeed, the two become, in Smith's scheme, hard to disentangle). In fact, Smith explicitly idealizes the quietly industrious bourgeois against the showy public man, the flamboyant courtier of the ancien régime. Nor do I mean only that Smith invokes the impartial spectator as a model of imaginative identification—much as audience members at a play might put themselves in the shoes of the characters on stage.

What makes Smith so modern is the deep ambivalence that runs right down the middle of the self-relation opened up by the impartial spectator. On the one hand, and against Hume, Smith insists that there can be no direct transmission of sentiments between individuals; the best we can do is *imagine* what it would be like to be someone else.⁸ At the same time, Smith (1982, 10) also acknowledges a profoundly and spontaneously mimetic-corporeal faculty: "When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer. The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation."

It is the juxtaposition and the disjuncture between (ethical) identification and (mimetic) resonance that makes the peculiar self-relation established by the impartial spectator theatrical: a dynamic tension between distanced communicative *representation* and immersed sensuous *participation*.⁹ Inadvertently, inconsistently, and with a great deal of ambivalence, Smith offers us one of the earliest diagnoses of mass-mediated subjectivity.

We are now in a position to return to the conservative-versus-liberal opposition with which I began. Both terms in this opposition name attempts to resolve the anxious tension, the affect/ethics impasse necessarily triggered by the existential predicament of mass-mediated subjectivity. Both attempt, in opposite ways, to enforce a spatial separation between the personal and the impersonal. Whether they celebrate it or castigate it, both imagine a radius of empathy as the spontaneous situation of affective life. The conservative model draws a defensive line around a community—whether of kin, locality, or nation—and treats it as

if it were a family in constant need of protection from external threats. Within the radius, according to this approach, we find a perfect—not to say a claustrophobic—coincidence of affect and ethics. The liberal self-abstraction model, conversely, insists on a radical split between spontaneous affective resonances (which are imagined as inherently parochial) and the cosmopolitan potential of an impersonal (which is thus imagined as properly ethical) field of judgment.

Carrying a stoical topos into the space of mass publicity, the liberal tradition has fixated on the interestedness of affective resonances, as opposed to the disinterested, objective judgment that is supposed to become possible once we have sufficiently interrogated our own biases, investments, desires, and unconscious proclivities. A paranoid hermeneutic of suspicion is meant to serve here as a prophylactic against internal and external seductions. If the conservative romance of the communitarian circle launders affect, as it were, by insisting on its organic grounds, then the liberal tradition tries to make it safe by idealizing a disinterested aesthetic as the most reliable sensuous foundation for ethical life. We see this in Immanuel Kant's absolute prohibition on desire in the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful. And we see it in Smith's invocation of civic virtue sustained less by ethical commitments to our fellow citizens than by our sheer enjoyment of a smoothly functioning social machine.

Again, it is easy enough to satirize this kind of strenuous piety in the Enlightenment subject—to pour scorn, as Friedrich Nietzsche so mercilessly did, on both the pathos of purity and its inevitable other side: the only barely suppressed fascination that constantly obtrudes, obscenely, from under the philosopher's cassock. But maybe this kind of satire, entertaining as it is, rather misses the point. Behind the manifest obsession with interest and its seductions lurks a knottier, perhaps more uncanny problem: the affect/ethics impasse, which is not so much a problem of interest as a kind of parallax gap—"a constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible" (Žižek 2006, 5). As such, the affect/ethics impasse is, from the standpoint of a prescriptively normative philosophy, an intolerable deadlock.

And yet life goes on. What we call everyday life consists, as a quotidian ethics of habitation, of the myriad ways in which this deadlock is pragmatically negotiated. Therein lies an ethnographic opportunity for the anthropology of affect: to account for the ways in which people, amid common currents, intimate and anonymous, make sense out of the impasse of sense.

NOTES

1. My take on Smith differs in this regard from that of [John Durham Peters \(1995, 665\)](#), who argues that Smith's ethics in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* are still fundamentally those of the face-to-face community: "Sympathy is adjusted to human finitude in Smith in a way that it cannot be for us two centuries later." Although [Paddy Scannell \(2000\)](#) does not discuss Hume or Smith, he does provide an efficient outline of the relation between mediatic shift and subjective experience that I am presuming here.
2. Here I depart from the line of argument taken by, for example, [Uday Mehta \(1999, 38–41\)](#).
3. [John Durham Peters \(1995, 660–61\)](#) stresses the distance between Smith and the more Romantic eighteenth-century tradition of interpersonal influence and sympathetic vibration. I read Smith as more ambivalently situated in this regard, that is, as participating at once in a stoic-liberal tradition that emphasizes self-abstraction *and* in a discourse of interpersonal influences.
4. The evocation of [Georg Simmel's \(1971, 143\)](#) essay on the stranger is entirely appropriate here: "In the case of the stranger, the union of closeness and remoteness involved in every human relationship is patterned in a way that may be succinctly formulated as follows: the distance within this relation indicates that one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near."
5. Smith's *Moral Sentiments* is a transitional text in the theorization of modern publics. On the one hand, it imagines the kind of generalized public view that I am discussing here. On the other hand, Smith opposes the essentially feudal public man of the court with the emergent private man—the bourgeois entrepreneur.
6. Adorno uses the phrase to ironize the Kantian commandment that we renounce all merely personal attachments in our pursuit of *Bildung*.
7. See [Egginton 2003, 2006](#) and [Roach 1993](#) for detailed discussions of the elective affinity between modern theatricality and modern structures of publicity. See [Peters 1995](#) and [Marshall 1984](#) for analyses of the theatrical dimensions of Smith's impartial spectator.
8. For instance, [Smith \(1982, 9\)](#) writes: "As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations."
9. As [David Marshall \(1984, 600\)](#) notes, "It is as if Smith were endorsing the two theories of acting that Diderot opposes in his *Paradoxe sur le comédien*: both the position that an actor should merge himself with his role and the position that the actor must be a cool observer who can stand at a distance from his own performance."

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