

# The Sympathetic Formation of Reason and the Limits of Science

by

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*Abstract:* I develop an interpretation of reason using the thought of David Hume and Adam Smith. I contend that reason in Hume and Smith can plausibly be interpreted as a kind of sensation. Reason is a sensation in that it is a sentimental conception of the relationship between two objects that impels certain interpretations. Reason is developed sympathetically in experiential contexts that not only guide but constitute reason's operation. I comment on Hume's talk of reason in his *Treatise of Human Nature* to build my interpretation. I use Smith's work in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to develop an understanding of the sympathetic formation of reason. I briefly integrate my interpretation with talk of confirmatory bias in psychology and behavioral economics. I conclude by considering implications for scientific conversation.

Keywords: David Hume, Adam Smith, reason, knowledge, confirmatory bias

*Society*, forthcoming

## 1. Introduction

In this paper I develop an interpretation of reason by way of the thought of David Hume and Adam Smith. I suggest that reason in Hume and Smith can plausibly be interpreted as a particular kind of sensation. Reason is a sensation in that it is a sentimental conception of the relationship between two objects that impels certain interpretations. It is developed in social and experiential contexts that not only guide but constitute reason's operation. Its development can be understood to occur by way of sympathy. Understanding reason thusly sheds light on the fragmentary and often disjointed nature of political opinion, scientific conclusions, and cultural sensibilities. Moreover, interpreting reason as a special sort of sensation highlights its limitations in social discourse.

In what follows I elaborate on the interpretation of reason as a sensation and then move to consider its development in community. I do not seek to claim that Hume and Smith themselves necessarily conceived of reason as a sensation, although there is some textual evidence for such a claim. I merely suggest that such an interpretation is a plausible and fruitful implication of their thought. I am inclined to think that Hume would be sympathetic to the interpretation of reason as a sentiment, as I believe such an interpretation is consonant with his thinking and his overall project of subsuming the cognitive aspects of human nature into passion. Likewise, I am inclined to think that Smith would be sympathetic to this interpretation in that it is a natural extension of his spectator theory and broadly Humean sensibilities.

In the paper I first lay out my Humean conception of reason. I suggest that Hume can be interpreted as conceiving of reason as a sensation that arises from conceiving of the relationship between two objects. Second, I develop a formulation to help understand the sympathetic formation of reason. I draw on ideas from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. If reason

is a sort of sensation, it can be treated in a manner similar to other sentiments. I suggest a simple nested relationship by which reason can be understood to be enshrouded in sympathy: reason is nested within judgment, which is nested within sympathy. Such an interpretation of reason provides us with a useful way to think about Hume and Smith's thought, and moreover, presents a way to understand the recursive nature of different social conversations. I conclude with implications for the role of reason in our scientific conversations. I suggest that appeals to reason in conversation, at least in some important conversations within social science, are more like clashes of worldviews than interpersonal dialogues. I relate my conception of reason to modern discussion of confirmatory bias in psychology and behavioral economics and give examples from opinions in modern economics. Finally, I offer some suggestions as to how the frailties of reason should be treated and how we should proceed in conversation.

## 2. *Hume on the looseness of reason*

Much of my inclination to think of reason as a sensation comes from Hume's thought.<sup>1</sup> Hume uses the word 'reason' in basically three senses in his work. First, he sometimes uses the word to refer to the traditional psychological faculty of reason. Reason as a faculty is a capacity, a potentiality of the mind in line with the other traditional psychological faculties (e.g., those of judgment, understanding, imagination). In the introduction to his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume uses reason in such a way when says: "When we see we have arrived at the utmost extent of *human reason*, we sit down contented..." (T Intro, SBN xviii; italics added).<sup>2</sup> It is not clear

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<sup>1</sup> For interpretations of Hume on reason in the Hume literature see, e.g., Winters (1979); Baier (1991); Garrett (1997); Owen (1999); Ridge (2003).

<sup>2</sup> References to the *Treatise* are to Hume (2000b), hereafter cited as "T" followed by part, section, chapter, and paragraph number, and to Hume (1978), hereafter cited as "SB" followed by page number.

the extent to which Hume's philosophy is compatible with the concept of faculties in that he moves to holistically subsume the cognitive into the sentimental throughout his project. But it is clear that he uses the language of faculty psychology throughout his work.

Second, Hume sometimes uses 'reason' to refer to acts of demonstrative reasoning. Demonstrative reasoning operates on relations of ideas and is roughly akin to modern deductive reasoning.<sup>3</sup> Thus demonstrative reasoning is true by the law of non-contradiction. It is the only sort of reasoning that can arrive at certainty or knowledge in an epistemologically rigorous sense in that its conclusions are determined by the content of the ideas being compared. Demonstrative reasoning in Hume comes to bear on four philosophical relationships: resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity or number (T 1.3.1.1, SB 69).

Finally, Hume uses 'reason' in reference to acts of probable reasoning. Probable reasoning is his broadest, most encompassing conception of reason. Probable reasoning is a habitual conception that characterizes inductive, abductive, and causal reasoning. Such reasoning is uncertain in that it is based on experience. As experience has no recommendation other than past experience, any reasoning based upon it tends to be propositional and conjectural in nature.<sup>4</sup> Probable reasoning thus consists of propositional interpretations that seem to tie together the particular experience set of the mind. There are some conclusions from probable reason that function pragmatically as 'truths', which Hume calls proofs. But such proofs are not

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<sup>3</sup> David Owen (1999) points out some crucial differences between Humean demonstrative reasoning and deductive reasoning, namely that demonstrative reasoning is non-formal in nature. Humean demonstration hinges on intuitive chains of connection between ideas, not logical or syllogistic forms.

<sup>4</sup> Hume famously illustrates the logic of probable reasoning with the following example: "*That the sun will not rise to-morrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, *that it will rise*" (Hume, 2000a; italics his).

categorically different from the rest of the body of probable reasoning.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to demonstrative reasoning, probable reason give rise to belief, not knowledge. Belief is merely an impression that leads to a lively conception of the relationship which two objects bear to one another, a conception that is developed through experience (cf. T 1.3.1, SB 94-99).

My general sensibility is that all Hume's talk of reason can be folded into probable reasoning. That is, both reason as a faculty and as the act of demonstrative reason can be readily folded into probable reasoning. Reason *qua* faculty collapses into the act of reasoning in that it is revealed and takes on meaning only through particular acts of reasoning. The capacity to reason, therefore, is discovered through various acts of reasoning and seems to be a largely artificial distinction. Given Hume's empirical sensibilities, it seems that he would probably embrace such a dissolution of the categories of faculty psychology. Indeed, he seems to go to lengths in his own works to dissolve the usefulness of such distinctions between, e.g. reason, understanding, and judgment.<sup>6</sup>

I suggest that reasoning in the demonstrative sense can likewise be folded into probable reasoning. Demonstrative reason on its face is categorically different than probable reason in that it can operate with precision and certainty. But its precision is limited within particular intellectual universes, the bounds of which are constructed by experience. Within a constructed system, e.g., of a particular scientific model, demonstrative reason is precise and certain. But the relation that that systems bears to reality and the mind's ability to leverage such relations to

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<sup>5</sup> Hume distinguishes three epistemic categories: demonstrations, probabilities, and proofs. But he notes at T 1.3.13.3 (SB 144) that proofs really slide into probabilities: "...that tho' our reasonings from proofs and probabilities be considerably different from each other, yet the former species of reasoning often degenerates insensibly into the latter by nothing by the multitude of connecting arguments."

<sup>6</sup> In, e.g., Hume (2007, 3) he equivocates between the the understanding and the imagination.

ascertain knowledge about reality is much vaguer. To move from the intellectual universe of the model to the external world necessarily entails probable reasoning. Moreover, the ideas from which a particular system is constructed are necessarily constrained by experience. The experiential framework in which the Humean mind develops cannot transcend itself. Its ideas come from reflection upon sensory impression and are thus inextricably linked to matters of fact (T 1.1.1.1, SB 1). Reason, however construed, is thus conditioned by experience and in turn operates upon the objects of experience.

Hume maintains the distinction between demonstrative and probable reasoning throughout his work. But he shows himself sensible to the sort of dissolution just canvassed at T 1.4.1 (SB 180-187) in an infamous section called ‘Of scepticism with regard to reason.’ In this section, Hume effectively puts demonstrative reasoning on par with probable reason. He notes that within the intellectual universe of demonstrative sciences rules are infallible. “[But] when we apply them, our fallible and uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them and fall into error. We must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgment as a check or controul on our first judgment or belief” (T 1.4.1.1, SB 181). Moreover, the mind does not have any absolute assurance of its own abilities. So even *within* a particular intellectual universe we cannot be sure that we are grasping the right chains of connection and arriving at the correct intuition. “There is no algebraist nor mathematician so expert in his science, as to place entire confidence in any truth upon his discovery of it, or regard it as any thing, but a mere probability” (T 1.4.1.2, SB 180). Thus all knowledge devolves into probability in that our ability to accurately perceive the

truth, even of demonstrative certainties, is uncertain. Kevin Meeker (2000) calls this Hume's 'iterative probability argument'.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. *Reason as sensation*

From the preceding discussion, it seems that since Humean demonstrative reason is (1) only infallible within certain intellectual universes and (2) is informed by reflections upon experiential matters of fact, it is not categorically distinct from probable reason.<sup>8</sup> Hume did not make this move explicitly or consistently in his work, though there are moments, e.g., at T 1.4.1, where he leans in such a direction. I think it is useful to interpret Hume as not maintaining a hardy distinction between these two modes of reasoning. I thus build my interpretation of reason from Hume's conception of probable reason.

I think that reason in the broadest and most encompassing sense can be framed essentially as an act of comparison in the mind, an act necessarily involving sentiment. Hume himself says that reason is essentially an act of comparison: "All kinds of reasoning consist in nothing but a *comparison*, and a discovery of those relations, either constant or inconstant, which two or more objects bear to each other" (T 1.3.2.1, SB 73; italics his). He reiterates the same point at T 3.1.1.24 (SB 467). The objects of comparison can be simple or complex, in line with Hume's distinction between simple and complex ideas (T 1.1.1.4, SB 3). A simple comparison could be

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<sup>7</sup> Hume also suggests at T 1.3.2.1 (SB 74) that the philosophical relationships of demonstrative reason can be engulfed by the relationships of probable reason, loosening the precision of demonstrations: "This is all I think necessary to observe concerning those four relations, which are the foundation of science; but as to the other three, which depend not upon the idea, and may be absent or present even while *that* remains the same..." (italics his). Such an idea foreshadows his iterative probability argument at T 1.4.1.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Kemp Smith (1941, 99-102) broadly corroborates this interpretation of the relationship between demonstrative and moral reason in Hume.

between two physical objects, a marble and a cube. The mind, beholding the marble formulates a set of conceptions in comparison to how it remembers the cube. The perceived relationship between the marble and the cube then becomes its own complex object, and object that can be compared to other objects, simple and complex.

The comparison understanding of reason gives experience an exalted place in the determination of reason. Experience both gives the mind its frame of reference and conditions its impressions (cf. T 1.3.8, SBN 98-106). In making any particular comparison of objects, the mind is conditioned by a set of past impressions. The influence of past impressions on current reasoning is predominantly subconscious. The mind merges various associated ideas and conceptions together to form subsequent impressions. Hume gives the example of a man who comes upon a river. His conception of the river is formed by a host of subconscious experience: “The idea of sinking is so closely connected with that of water, the idea of suffocating with that of sinking, that the mind makes the transition without the assistance of memory. The custom operates before we have time for reflection” (T 1.3.8.13, SB 104). Thus when the mind reasons, or compares two objects, the impression of each object is tacitly comprised of past associations and impressions.

With such an understanding of reason, it is easy to transition to thinking about reason as a sort of sensation. Hume makes this quite explicit:

Thus all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. ‘Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. When I am convinc’d of any principle, ‘tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me. When I give preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide

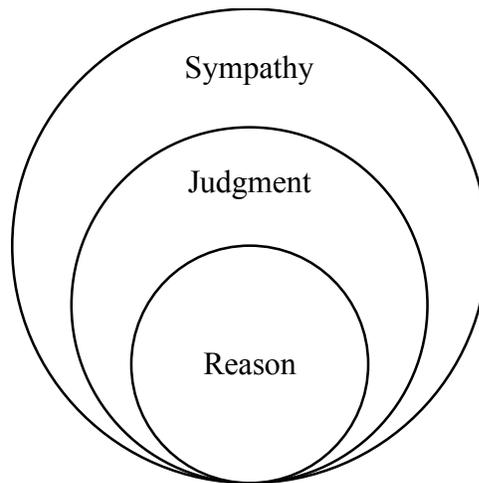
from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence. Objects have no discoverable connexion together, nor is it from any other principle but custom operating upon the imagination that we can draw any inference from the appearance of one to the existence of another. (T 1.3.8.12, SB 103)

Reason is a sentiment, or a sensation, in that it is a sort of conditioned reaction that impels different interpretations. When the mind compares two objects, it is impelled by past experience to conceive them in certain ways. It *senses* a certain relationship between objects that stems from its predilections. The sensation of reason is developed experientially and can be consciously worked on. But it often operates at subterranean levels, below what the mind consciously considers to be ‘reason’. When the mind consciously deliberates, or ‘reasons’, its operation is subconsciously driven by its looming conception of objects and how they stand in comparison to one another. Personal reasoning about, say, whether to adopt a certain political position, entails conscious deliberation on the surface, but is deeply conditioned by experience and how the mind conceives of particular ideas.

It is worth mentioning, and keeping in mind as I proceed in my interpretation, that there are some instances of reason, e.g., the operations of logic, that are not strictly sensation. But those instances are engulfed and defined within the broader sense of reason as a sensation, as I have discussed it. That is, they function only within the intellectual universe that the broader sensation of reason constructs for them. Thus the operations of logic and deduction vastly underdetermine reason’s sphere.

#### 4. *Smith on the sympathetic nesting of reason*

Hume’s formulations help develop the interpretation of reason as a sensation. Adam Smith’s formulations in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* gives us tools to think about how the sensation of reason is developed sympathetically and in community.<sup>9</sup> I suggest that thinking about reason as a sensation arising from comparison implies a simple nested relationship by which reason constitutes a sympathetic mechanism: Reason is a comparison of two objects; comparison constitutes judgment; judgment, at least of complex objects, is always enveloped in sympathy. I illustrate this nested conception of reason in **Figure 1**. Understanding this relationship can help us think about the development of reason. Moreover, it provides us with a vocabulary with which we can talk about the mind’s process of arriving at particular sensations that constitute reason.



**Figure 1: The sympathetic nesting of reason**

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<sup>9</sup> References to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* are to Smith (1982b), hereafter cited in the text as “TMS”, followed by part, section, chapter, and paragraph.

The basic logic of the sympathetic nesting of reason is as follows: The mind's sensibilities develop over time in community. Community gives the mind different exemplars from whom it is molded consciously and unconsciously. Community trickles down from a general desire for sympathy, to more specific characterizations of acts of judgment that subconsciously affect the sensation of reason. It is useful to start from the top of this nesting and work downwards. I begin with sympathy.

Smith's understanding of sympathy can be usefully applied to the nested relationship of reason. His understanding of sympathy is somewhat unconventional. He says: "Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others. Sympathy, though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" (TMS 1.1.1.6). Smith takes it that people desire mutual sympathy. They long for approval and, moreover, to be the proper objects of approval (TMS 3.2.1). The mind determines whether or not a particular act is what ought to be approved of by observing or imagining the reaction of various spectators. The spectators can be real and at hand, or imaginary. But the imaginary spectators are necessarily adapted from interaction with physical spectators. Adam's imaginary spectator (what Smith calls his man within the breast) is developed by interacting with some real spectator David. Adam observes how David reacts to certain situations and to certain interpretations, and subsequently induces the properness of various actions. David's reactions are folded into Adam's man within the breast. Adam has many 'David's' in his life. He selectively takes their reactions, based on his estimation of their character, to construct his own imaginary spectators.

The mind's desire for mutual sympathy with spectators – imaginary or actual – steers its judgment. Smith's conception of sympathy suggests what Daniel Klein (2014, 120) calls Smith's

organon: all moral approval is enshrouded in sympathy.<sup>10</sup> Every act of judgment, and consequent approbation or disapprobation, involves a sympathy. Before we approve or disapprove of an act, we imagine how other spectators might approve or disapprove of the act. We imagine them in our situation and judge according to how we think they might judge. We look at the situation at hand through the eyes of others. Again, these “others” can be real or at hand. The mind both consciously self-selects into communities of “others” it admires and subconsciously belongs to communities of “others” who silently guide its development. We are members of various communities that have varying influence on our moral and interpretive outlook.

The desire for mutual sympathy steers judgment; judgment steers reasoning. To turn to the last level of the nested relationship of reason, I suggest that Klein’s conception of Smith’s organon can be extended to judgment concerning acts of reason. Thus, all acts of reasoning, which are tacitly acts of judgment, involve a sympathy. On such an extension, it is clear that the desire for mutual sympathy not only guides reason but forms its operation. Our communities deeply inform the way that we reason and the way that we interpret the world. For any two objects that I am comparing I can be seen as subconsciously asking the question: How would my exemplar relate or conceive of such objects? I pause at each turn and tacitly ask the question: What would my exemplar David Hume think of such an interpretation of reason? What would my exemplar Adam Smith think of such a proposition? Imagining how my various exemplars and communities would react to certain lines of reasoning inevitably affect my way of reasoning. For example, if I imagine David Hume or Adam Smith approving of a particular position, I am apt to approve of it and justify it on such authority. Our search for, and reliance on, moral

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<sup>10</sup> Klein (2016) puts forth a non-foundational interpretation on Smith’s moral philosophy in which he elaborates on Smith’s organon.

authority is indicative of the defining role of sympathy in our reason. W.V.O. Quine expresses this idea nicely: “We often accept jarring beliefs when someone we greatly trust presents them; and such acceptance need not be seen as flying in the face of evidence, since part of the evidence available to us is whatever attests to the reliability of our informant” (1970, 40).

Our moral and psychological constitutions are developed within communities. Without community, we have no basis from which to compare, self-assess, or judge. As Smith said,

Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, *of the beauty or deformity of his own mind*, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face...Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before...it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, *the beauty and deformity of his own mind*. (TMS 3.1.3.3; italics added)

Man’s judgment of the beauty of his own mind is developed sympathetically. Why should it not be similar with regard to the properness of his reason? Societal feedback is crucial to development and formation of reason. This point is not to suggest that man is totally bound by the status quo, but rather that the mind is always contextualized within the communities – broadly defined – it identifies itself with.<sup>11</sup> The mind is fundamentally social, in step with the

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<sup>11</sup> The community that a person identifies with could be philosophers, making critical enquiry a status-quo proposition. Thus the sympathetic understanding of reason allows one to make way for a sort of internalized critical theory. Within certain spheres of exemplars, critical assessment is a core commitment to be sympathized with by those wishing to be validate in such an outlook.

character of human nature. F.A. Hayek puts this well: “Mind is as much the product of the social environment in which it has grown up and which it has not made as something that has in turn acted upon and altered these institutions” (1982, 17). Any reasoning that the mind undertakes is within sympathetic context. The purposes to which objects are related, the color of the lens through which they are viewed, and the effect that interpretations have on subsequent belief all render the sensation of reason to be a complex sympathetic nesting.

Hume shows himself sensible to this sort of sympathetic nesting of reason in his emphasis on the role of custom in the development of reason. There is room for a sympathetic understanding of reason in Hume’s comments concerning the influence of custom on reason and belief. Hume articulates that custom is the foundation of all our judgments (T 1.3.13.9; SBN 147-148). Custom affects our conception and relation of objects: “According to my system, all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom; and custom has no influence, but by enlivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any object” (T 1.3.13.11; SBN 149). So it often is custom, not deliberation that affects our reason. Custom can be understood as entailing habit, which inevitably includes the ways in which we have observed others reason and judge. Thus sympathy can be construed as falling under the general heading of custom.

Moreover, Hume accords a considerable weight to education in the development of reason: “But tho’ education be disclaim’d by philosophy, as a fallacious ground of assent to any opinion, it prevails nevertheless in the world, and is the cause why all systems, upon whatever convincing arguments they may be founded, are apt to be rejected at first as new and unusual” (T 1.3.10.1; SBN 118). Hume recognizes that reasoning exists within particular frameworks and that education reinforces such frameworks. The role of education in developing reason can be construed as a conditioning of reason to respond to certain propositions in particular ways. But if

one broadens the understanding of education to encompass sympathetic education by exemplars and community, Hume's position is as follows: the framework in which we reason is strongly effected by those with whom we engage and identify. Such a position is quite compatible with the framework elaborated above.

##### *5. Implications for discourse in science*

Understanding reason as a sensation in the manner that I have described can help us understand the difficulty of appeals to reason in our conversations, particularly scientific conversation, on a number of margins. If reason is a subterranean sensation that is developed by experience and custom through the desire for sympathy, divergences in scientific conversation should be understood as being closer to a clash of worldviews than an interpersonal dialogue concerning the validity of evidence or fact. Perhaps the constitution of evidence is so strongly determined by the sensation of reason that no amount of data, or flatly presented information, will lead to consensus on significant issues. The nature of reason as a conditioned sensation suggests that there could be an ineluctable lock-in problem in our interpretations. If the mind is steeped in a certain framework, if its mode of reasoning is in fact a sensation that is developed sympathetically, then it will tend to interpret new experiences in light of its predilections. Moreover, if the operation of reason is constituted by social norms, then the very way in which evidence is interpreted, e.g., the particular weighting and synthesis of evidence, is highly circumstantial.

Psychologists and behavioral economists talk about this sort of problem at a basic level as 'confirmatory bias'. Bruner and Potter (1964) present a classic experimental study in psychology along such lines that essentially suggests that people are poor Bayesians. They find in their study

that people tend to run with their first impressions instead of updating their priors as new evidence comes along. People even with shaky first interpretations are likely to maintain such interpretations and use subsequent evidence to confirm their priors in one way or another. Rabin and Schrag (1999) formalize Bruner and Potter in an attempt to crystalize the conception of confirmatory bias. On Rabin and Schrag's account: "A person suffers from confirmatory bias if he tends to misinterpret ambiguous evidence as confirming his current hypothesis about the world" (38). But by my understanding of reason, confirmatory bias should be understood to be much larger in scope than studies in psychology or behavioral economics make it out to be. The theorist selecting a particular theory based on its mathematical cogency or simplicity suffers from a sort of technical or aesthetic confirmatory bias. People – including scientists – can't easily shake their interpretive predilections. The scope of the lock-in problem of confirmatory bias suggests an inherent difficulty in attempting to search for consensus by way of reason in social, political, and scientific conversations. If reason is a sensation, then differing parties will find great difficulty in reconciling their positions by appeal to such reason. Such an appeal, again, represents more of a clash of worldviews than a conversation.

The looseness of reason and the issues of confirmatory bias that such looseness implies can be seen by looking at the diversity of interpretations within different sciences, particularly social sciences. As a brief example, consider economics. If we adopt a common distinction between positive economics and normative economics, where positive economics is, "in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgment", we should expect consensus on positive matters and divergence on normative (Friedman, 1953, 146). But, in fact, there is a remarkable lack of consensus among economists on a number of seemingly

straightforward positive issues.<sup>12</sup> Economists differ on a great many issues and propositions based on their technical predilection and ideological priors.<sup>13</sup> Randazzo and Haidt (2015) provide compelling evidence from survey data suggesting that contrary to the assertion of economists, their moral perspectives significantly affect their positive findings. Such a finding squares well with my interpretation of reason. Economists, and many scientists more generally, cannot get away from preferential selection of theory, technique, and interpretations that is based on strictly non-factual matters (e.g., aesthetics, morals, political priors, etc.). Differences in conclusion cannot be readily resolved by appeals to reason in that the particular operation of reason, as I understand it, has largely contributed to those differences to begin with.

Understanding the sweep of confirmatory bias and the bounds of the sensation of reason recommends a shift in the way we approach scientific conversations. I suggest two related considerations that would seem useful to such an approach: (1) candidly recognizing the loose nature of reason and (2) dropping the pretenses of certainty in our positions. These go hand in hand but are worth emphasizing as distinct points. For instance, I might say: “Alfred Hitchcock made only good movies.” Such a statement entails both looseness and certainty. The conception of “good movies” is loose. The conception of “only” is certain. Recognizing this combination of certainty within looseness should frame our conversations. To recognize the loose nature of reason is to recognize that our understandings and sensibilities are generated in certain contexts. Such a recognition entails an understanding of the faith-encompassed nature of reason, an

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<sup>12</sup> For a simple example, consider the controversy of the minimum wage. There is a surprising amount of divergence amongst economists as to whether or not the minimum wage *does* in fact cause unemployment. See Card and Krueger (1994); compare to Neumark and Wascher (2000).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Klein et. al (2013) for survey evidence on the lack of consensus on policy views amongst economists and the bifurcated distribution of opinion on positive economics judgments.

understanding that implies an appropriate amount of skepticism and self-reflection. Recognizing the looseness of reason and the limits of our knowledge should encourage humble posturing.

For examples of conversations that embody these considerations, we can again look to Hume and Smith. They both recognize the looseness of reason and adopt a posture of humility throughout much of their work. Smith (1982a) characterizes such humility in his treatment of the history of astronomy. In that essay, Smith traces the development of systems of cosmology from Aristotle to Newton and mirthfully notes the mind's tendency to sink into whatever system of thinking is currently in fashion. He carries on in his own intellectual enterprises, but limits his pretenses of certainty, e.g., in the discernment of different moral rules (cf. TMS 7.3.4). Hume illustrates the limits of reason more dramatically in his own work, an illustration that culminates in the famous conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise* (T 1.4.7). Here Hume discovers that reason is quite frail and prone to deception. He momentarily despairs, but determines to press on towards other worthy endeavors. Both Hume and Smith recognize the limitations of their reason and formulate their conversations accordingly. Hume recognizes that "probable reasoning is... a species of sensation" but then proceeds to recommend how we should develop that sensation (T 1.3.8.12, SB 103). Smith recognizes that moral approval is enshrouded in sympathy but educates us along the way, particularly in his book *The Wealth of Nations*, as to with whom we should sympathize. Their approaches embody candid and responsible conversation.

I have briefly suggested in this piece by way of interpreting the thought of Hume and Smith that reason can be thought of as a sensation that is determined by way of sympathy. Understanding reason as a sensation should not hinder us from reasoning. But it should curb our enthusiasm regarding the caliber and potential of reason to solve our lingering debates. A candid

recognition of the character of our reason and the uncertain nature of our convictions is a step towards better conversations.

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