

Hume and Smith on Utility, Agreeableness, Propriety, and Moral Approval

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NYU Economics Colloquium, September 2017

Smith criticizes a foil in TMS.

He develops his moral theory against this foil.

He implicitly associates this foil with Hume.

The foil is a misrepresentation of Hume.

Smith allows for a two-fold misinterpretation of Hume.

Rightly understood, Smith builds on Hume.

Smith augments Hume's account with a propriety phase.

Why did Smith proceed as he did?

Hume has a four-factor account of moral approval.

Mary approves of some agent's (Jim's) action if it is:

- (1) Useful to Jim
- (2) Agreeable to Jim
- (3) Useful to Janet (all non-Jims)
- (4) Agreeable to Janet (all non-Jims)

Moral approval in Hume occurs by way of sympathy.

Mary imagines herself in Jim/Janet's situation.

Considers the usefulness of Jim's action to Jim/Janet.

Considers the agreeableness of Jim's action to Jim/Janet.

Our semantics: usefulness + agreeableness of Jim's action = *beneficialness* of Jim's action.

“Moral approval derives from Mary's *interpretation* of the beneficialness Jim's action.”

Emphasis on lateral sympathy in Hume.

Note the word “interpretation” here.

Smith uses the word “utility” differently than Hume.

Hume: utility = usefulness

Smith: utility = usefulness + agreeableness = beneficialness

Smith is indirect about his semantic deviation.

In TMS IV, Smith mentions “agreeableness” once.

His use of agreeableness seems to merge it with utility.

Smith: utility = usefulness + agreeableness = beneficialness

Textual evidence:

[Hume resolves]...our whole approbation of virtue from the appearance of utility...No qualities of mind...are approved of as virtuous, but such as are useful or agreeable..(TMS IV 2.3)

According to [that system which places virtue in utility], all those qualities of mind which are agreeable or advantageous, either to the person himself or to others, are approved of as virtuous...(TMS VII.ii.3.21)

Smith allows for a speculative/determinate impression of Hume.

Smith says moral approval is in-the-moment.

Smith says determination of virtue is “loose, vague, and indeterminate.”

Allows for a faulty impression about Hume.

Hume *does not* think we consciously deliberate about the beneficialness of an action before judging.
(see T 3.2.1.11)

Hume thinks beneficialness is loose, speaks of “uncertainty of merit” (EMP 3.2.23)

Smith still advances on Hume.

He adds a propriety phase to process of moral approval that emphasizes Mary's *interpretation* of Jim.

The idea of the utility of all qualities of this kind [delicate taste, accurate reasoning, etc.], is plainly an after-thought, and not what first recommends them to our approbation. (TMS I.i.4.4)

The usefulness of any disposition of mind is seldom the first ground of our approbation; ...the sentiment of approbation always involves in it a sense of propriety quite distinct from the perception of utility. (TMS IV.2.3)

Smith's account of moral approval:

(1) We automatically consider the propriety of Jim's action. This is in-the-moment.

(2) We then think on the beneficialness of Jim's action.

(1) looms larger than (2) in Smith's account.

Where does our sense of propriety come from?

(1) Experience

(2) Exemplars who help us interpret (1)

(1) and (2) come to constitute our conscience, our man within the breast.

Moral approval requires vertical sympathy with our conscience.

Hume: lateral sympathy regarding beneficialness of Jim's action.

Smith: vertical sympathy with our conscience.

Vertical and lateral sympathy are related.

Sense of propriety comes from man within the breast (conscience).

Man within the breast is comprised of judgments of exemplars who better understand the beneficialness of Jim's action.

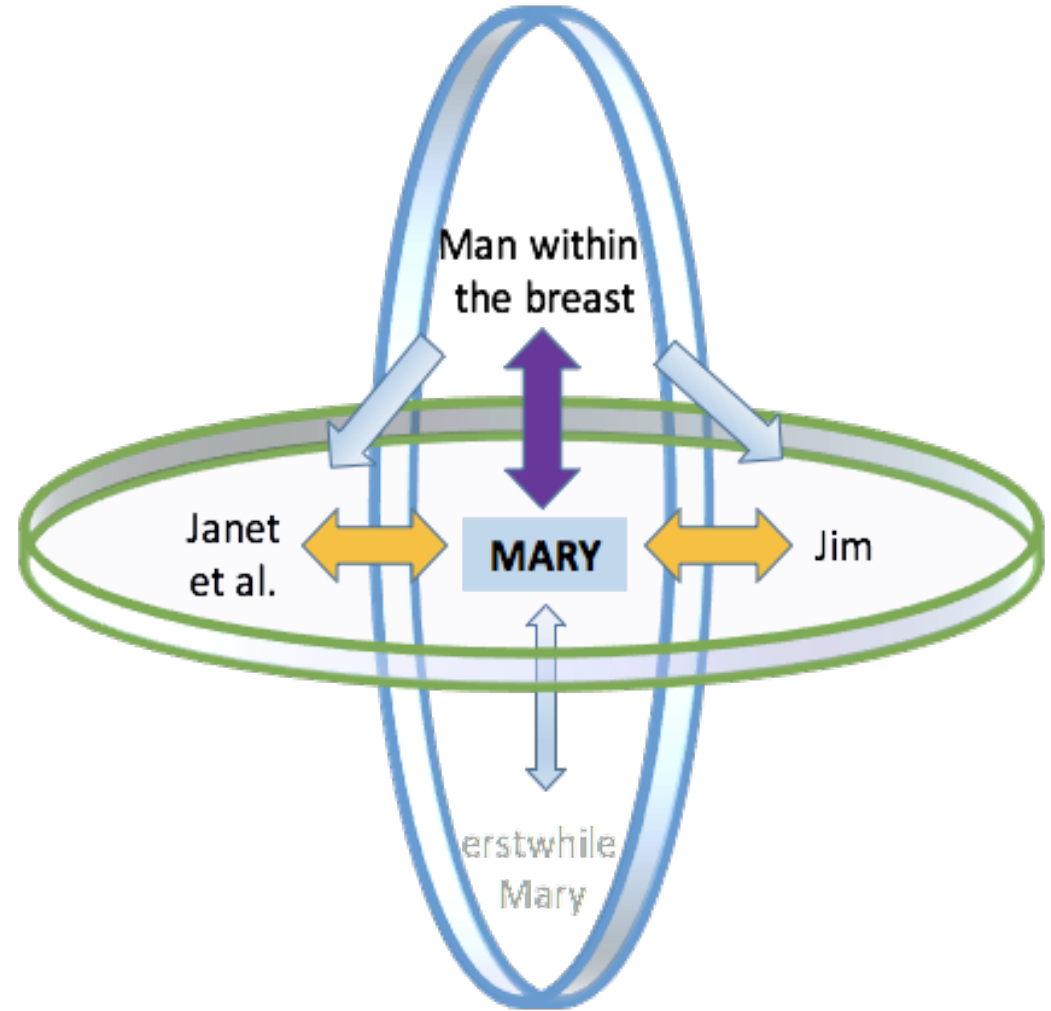


Figure 6: Propriety as a species of agreeableness in TMS

Snippet Quote	Citation
“has exactly observed those measures...which are generally agreeable, reflects with satisfaction on the propriety”	TMS III.2.5
“bestows a certain propriety...and renders...it agreeable”	TMS IV.1.1
“why the appearance of inconveniency should render any object disagreeable”	TMS IV.1.2
“What is agreeable to our moral faculties, is fit, and right, and proper”	TMS III.5.5
“the power or faculty of the mind which renders certain characters agreeable or disagreeable to us”	TMS VII.iii.intro.1
“Conscience...properly signifies our consciousness of having acted agreeably”	TMS VII.iii.3.15

Propriety-agreeable: agreeableness arising from mutual sympathy.

Otherwise-agreeable: agreeableness for any other reason.

Agreeableness = propriety-agreeableness +
otherwise-agreeableness

Why did Smith proceed as he did?

(1) To distance himself from Hume.

(2) For the sake of expositional clarity (which redounds back to (1))