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What is Wrong With Sentimentality?

MARK JEFFERSON

It is generally agreed that there is something unwholesome about sentimentality: it would certainly be a mistake to think it a virtue. But just what sentimentality is and why it is objectionable is something of a mystery. Of course we know that it is an emotional quality or range of qualities, and that it is expressive of (or in itself) an ethical or aesthetic defect; but we don't know quite what it is that makes certain emotions sentimental or why it is that certain emotion types are more likely hosts for it than others. Nor is it clear what sort of objection we are making when we call something sentimental. Sometimes the charge seems to impart nothing more than mild ridicule; on other occasions it has more sinister implications. And between these range usages expressing more or less serious rebuke.

What we ordinarily say is, in this case, a peculiarly poor source of illumination. Our intuitions about what counts as sentimentality and why we find it, in varying degrees, objectionable seem very frail. There are some very general reasons why this should be true within the context of the Anglo-American ethical tradition. The influence of Kant towards the theoretical denigration and neglect of the role of emotion in moral life is part of the story. The empiricist tradition of Mill and Moore has been equally neglectful and equally influential. But there are special reasons in addition to these why sentimentality should be obscure to us. For a start, it is a relative newcomer to the vocabulary of critical abuse. 'Sentimentality' has undergone a rapid evolution since it first appeared, in the eighteenth century, as a term of commendation. It was then a fine thing to be sentimental—it set one apart from the coarser types. One had refined feelings, not brute passions. It could be said without a sneer that 'your squires are an agreeable race of people, refined, sentimental, formed for the belle passion'. By the first quarter of the nineteenth century there were signs of disaffection. In 1823 the poet Southey wrote of Rousseau that he 'addressed himself to the sentimental classes, persons of ardent and morbid sensibility, who believe themselves to be composed of finer elements than the gross multitude'. Despite the mocking tone, 'sentimental' still fits best here as a compliment. But from this time its descent into ridicule and odium proceeded apace. By the mid-century it seemed to signify a brand of culpable naivity. A contributor to the 1839 *Quarterly Review* wrote accusingly of someone that his 'implied negation of the inevitable results of evil training has a tendency to countenance their studied sentimentalization of the genus scamp'. By the turn of the century 'sentimentality' standardly functioned as an insult. Witness Oscar Wilde tirading against Lord Alfred Douglas as a 'sentimentalist' and against sentimentality as a 'contemptible affair'. It was denounced in the Futurist Manifestos as a demeaning relic of romanticism. D. H. Lawrence derided it as emotional failure and dissemblance. Sentimentality had truly fallen from favour.[1]

In the light of such a rapid transformation it is perhaps small wonder that there is some confusion about sentimentality. But there is another, connected reason for the elusiveness of the notion. That is the markedly apparent divergence between demotic and literary usage. At street level there is an insistence that sentimentality is the near exclusive preserve of those who buy Christmas presents for their dogs. With this goes the view that sentimentality is just a sort of silliness, not particularly damning and not worth much serious attention. This would be fine were it not for a persistent and highly literate minority who tell us that sentimentality is a dangerous corruption and who tend, as a mark of their seriousness, to cite cases involving Nazis.[2] A favourite but mystifying example is that of Hoess, weeping over music played for him by a Jewish orchestra that he was about to have murdered. I myself hesitate to call *this* a case of sentimentality. It seems instead to be a rather good example of the baffling discordance some people exhibit between the sensitivity of their emotional responses to music and the emotional crassness of their interpersonal affairs. But I won't dwell on the point, for I agree with the fundamental insight that sentimentality can be more than just a brand of silliness and can have sinister implications. In the remainder of this piece I shall try to show how this might be so.

A good place to begin the investigation is with a hint from one of the few philosophical contributions to the question, Mary Midgley's short piece, 'Brutality and Sentimentality'.[1] Her chief purpose in this was to undermine the wantonly perverse suggestion that it is sentimental to attribute feelings to animals. I cannot see that this is a particularly worthy target thesis for her but, that aside, in the course of her demolition job she does make some promising remarks about sentimentality. In particular, she claims that being sentimental is 'misrepresenting the world in order to indulge our feelings' (ibid. p. 385). Now I think that this is partially correct. It does at least identify the genus of which sentimentality is a species. My complaint, though, is that it is much too broad; it fails to bring out what, amongst the range of possible emotional indulgences, is peculiar to sentimentality. Correspondingly, it fails to explain why sentimentality is especially singled out as an objectionable indulgence. But in speaking of sentimentality as the product of misrepresentation of the world two useful conjectures can be seen close beneath the surface. Firstly there is the implication that sentimentality should be located in the context of a broadly cognitivistic theory of emotion. And this is importantly connected with a second hint which is that sentimental emotion is in some sense an expression of choice. The truth of this would, of course, greatly enlarge the potential moral significance of sentimentality. But I want to put these matters aside for a time and look firstly at an objection to the idea that sentimentality is a property of the intentional constituents and causal antecedents of emotion. For this objection provides the chief ground for another claim to the effect that sentimentality is 'the name of several kinds of disease of the feelings'[2] and not, as I contend, the name of a very specific emotional abuse. The objection occurs in the only other recent and sustained attempt to explain sentimentality, i.e. that of Michael Tanner.

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[1] See *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. R. Hart-Davis, p. 501; Va.entine de Saint-Point in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio, pp. 70–74; and D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix*.

[2] See Michael Tanner 'Sentimentality', *P.A.S.*, 1976–7, p. 144 and Anthony Burgess, *Earthly Powers* (Penguin), p. 451.

Rather discouragingly, Tanner claims that 'sentimentality is an intrinsic quality of some emotions, though it may be tempting when one thinks of situations where there are objects to claim that the sentimentality resides in the relationship between the feelings and what they are feelings about, or towards' (ibid. p. 137). If Tanner is right about this, then in pursuing the idea that sentimentality involves misrepresentation, I am bound to be telling, at best, only part of the story. For this idea seems to have no application to those emotions whose sentimentality is 'an intrinsic quality'. Now it would help here if we could have some clue as to what is meant by 'intrinsic quality'. I think the answer Tanner would approve is that an intrinsic quality of an emotion is one that inheres to the purely sensational aspect of emotion and not to any of its intentional causes or constituents. For his chief ground for saying that some emotion is intrinsically sentimental involves an appeal to the sentimentality of certain pieces of instrumental music. He notes that 'for most instrumental music it seems simply mistaken to say that it is concerned with a situation or has an object' (ibid. p. 129). The argument then seems to go like this. Instrumental music can be sentimental but is not, in any precise sense, ever about anything. So sentimentality need not be a feature of the 'aboutness' of emotion. Therefore it must sometimes be an intrinsic quality of emotion. Rather than directly confront the idea of the purely sensational qualities of emotions it would, I think, be more fruitful to examine the move from the sentimentality of some music to the sentimentality of some people. Music may be expressive of emotion in at least two ways. It can be the vehicle by which a player or writer expresses what he or she feels and, apart from this, it may somehow represent or embody certain emotions. The distinction here is sometimes put as the difference between the expression of emotion *through* music and its expression *in* music. The last of these is surprisingly underexplored and this in itself is good reason for hesitancy about the sort of move Tanner makes. While there are striking similarities there are also some very fundamental differences between the expression of emotion in music and its manifestations in people. Not least among these differences is the fact that music, unlike us, doesn't *feel* anything. Certainly such differences are enough to suggest that when terms like 'angry' and 'sentimental' are applied to music they are functioning in a parasitic relation to their usage in respect of people. In the present context, then, there is no obvious need to worry about the secondary use of 'sentimental' as an occasional description of the sensational aspect of emotion: we will keep our attention focused on the primary application of the term to people. In this last context Tanner gives us no good reason to suppose that 'sentimentality' loosely refers to many kinds of emotional corruption.

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[1] In *Philosophy*, 1979, pp. 385–389.

[2] Tanner, ibid. p. 140.

We go back then to Mrs. Midgley's claim that to be sentimental is to misrepresent the world in order to indulge our feelings. To this claim she adds another. She says that the notion of sentimentality is ill-formed. By this I think she means that its limited application to the indulgence of 'softer' feelings embodies an objection that applies equally to indulgence of *any* feeling, so long as that indulgence is secured by misrepresenting reality. Since the alleged offence in sentimentality is the dishonest distortion of reality, for Mrs. Midgley it makes no difference what sort of emotion is being secured as a result. I think she is mistaken about this. It is true that we misrepresent the world in order to indulge in many types of emotion—'soft' and 'hard'—but it is not true that every sort of emotional indulgence is equally objectionable. There are significant differences in the sorts of misrepresentation required for different kinds of indulgence. What gives sentimentality its claim to be properly formed is the peculiar nature of the misrepresentation it involves; and this is also what makes it more objectionable than many other sorts of emotional indulgence.

To aid the descent from general to particular I want to introduce a group of Theophrastic-style characters. The group is not supposed to be comprehensive or entirely serious; its members serve only to gesture towards some commonly recognized phenomena. Each of the characters relates to a disposition across a range of emotion types and each such disposition is found by some to be attractive, sometimes addictively so. In each case the pleasure may be secured by dishonest or self-deceptive appraisals of the world or bits thereof.

The first character is a thrill seeker. He takes pleasure in certain emotions though typically, in fear. The nature of his pleasure is a sort of exhilaration. His type climbs mountains or become mercenaries or, generally, find fearful situations to put themselves in. Since dangerous situations abound in the world, they rarely have need to selectively misrepresent things in order to, as it were, indulge their passion; though no doubt someone, somewhere, is doing just this. Of course one can be less discriminating about the source of one's emotional thrills. One might, for example, thrill to jealousy, anger or any emotion so long as it is strong and followed quickly by another. This brings us to our second type, the melodramatic man. He seeks out intense emotional involvement; he exercises his entire emotional repertoire frequently and at as high a volume as possible. He likes, in short, to emulate the sort of emotional chaos that American television drama would have us accept as the norm. Such a man could stage manage his life to accommodate his tastes (i.e. he could choose his friends, location and vocation accordingly) but if his emotions were to match the world he would need to seek out an enclave of it that was populated with affectionate, adulterous psychopaths. More likely though, he will misrepresent things. He will need to overstate and over-attend to the dramatic quality of experience and to neglect his and its mundanity. The third character, the disdainful man takes pleasure in an emotional attitude towards things, particularly people and by extension their works, which is characterized by derision or contempt. Pouring scorn is his forte. To sustain this he must see people as motivationally transparent and shabby. He must systematically neglect acknowledgement of anything resembling or akin to nobility of motive in his fellows. In short, he must play the cynic. Another well-known and much abused type is the self-righteous man. He takes pleasure in a range of emotion from indignation to outrage, always other directed and always made pleasurable by the backhanded contribution to his moral self-esteem. Self-righteousness involves concentration upon the failures of others and thrives at the expense of acknowledgement of one's own capacity for moral failure. The wondrous man has a rather more specialized indulgence. He delights in the mysterious. He seeks out remarkable correlations and the like but, in order to preserve their sparkle, he may take to declining any sort of account of them that isn't equally provocative of wonder. Finally there is the man who takes his pleasure in untrammelled, unequivocal feelings of the sympathetic variety. He can arrange his world to suit by concentrating on the likeable, the endearing qualities of people, animals and things and by neglecting aspects of them that would adversely qualify these features. He may embellish his picture of the object of his sentimentality by attributing wholly fictional qualities to that object. He is a sentimentalist and his trick is to misrepresent the world in order to feel unconditionally warm-hearted about bits of it.

The point I have been overworking is this. Sentimentality looks like one of a family of emotional habits some of which I have caricatured above. Each of these habits may be sustained by the misrepresentation of things. But the nature of the misrepresentation differs according to the sort of indulgence desired. Each indulgence type requires the projection upon the world of a different kind of unreality. My contention is that sentimentality is objectionable because of the nature of its sustaining fantasy and not simply because it must employ one. Indeed I am not convinced that there is a good moral case to be made against any sort of emotional indulgence that involves misrepresenting the world. That there is such a case is the ground to Mrs. Midgley's objection to sentimentality. The sentimentalist is objectionable for her because in being sentimental he is partaking of 'the central offence . . . self deception, in distorting reality to get a pretext for indulging in any emotion'. The reasons given for supposing that this practice is morally objectionable appeal to two of its likely consequences. Firstly it is said that sentimentality 'distorts expectations; it can make people unable to deal with the real world'. And the second complaint is that sentimental pity 'can so absorb [people] that they cannot react to what is genuinely pitiful in the world around them' (ibid. p. 385). These are, apparently, perils attaching to any emotional indulgence and not just to the indulgence of 'softer' feelings. In fact the first point has an even broader scope that this. When it was said that emotional indulgence 'distorts expectations' the particular reference was to one of Dickens' syrupy creations, Little Nell. To be overly moved by Little Nell is to risk inability to deal 'with the real world, and particularly with real girls' (ibid). Now this might be true. Being overly impressed by Dan Dare may make us unable to cope with real spacemen but this is a very general, quasi-Platonic point about the perils of fiction. It is also an argument that seems likely to lead to some very illiberal prescriptions. For there are a great many activities that in some sense tempt us to involvement in a fiction. Without any of them life would be unendurably drab. We cannot spurn sentimentality merely because it involves us in an expectation warping fiction. At least we cannot do so without explaining why it remains acceptable to indulge in other pursuits like daydreaming, filmgoing and the like. The second point may take us further. If we do allow ourselves to wallow in our sympathies for Little Nell we may cease to be alive to the genuinely pitiable. If this is true then most probably it is so in virtue of there being, for most of us, something that might be called an emotional economy. I suspect that most of us have limits to our emotional expenditure. We cannot afford to be emotionally spendthrift—to squander too much emotional energy on the likes of Little Nell. There is, as it were, barely enough of the sympathetic in us to allow for such wastage. There are those who have such an emotional abundance that they may effuse in all directions without deadening themselves to the genuinely pitiable, admirable or contemptible but they are rare creatures. The rest of us must be a little sparing. None of this, of course, singles out sentimentality. It would provide grounds for a very general injunction, in Aristotelian vein, about feeling the right thing towards the right people, for the right reasons and to the right degree. More specifically it constitutes an objection to any sort of emotional overplaying whether it be self-indulgent or simply wrong-headed. But it does not seem to explain our particular suspicions about sentimentality.

Let me try then to connect, as I earlier claimed was possible, some thoughts about the influence of choice on emotion with a cognitive theory of emotion. The combination of these can then be applied to sentimentality. The cognitivism will provide a background legitimizing talk of 'misrepresentations' and the attendant implication of a certain passional voluntariness will sanction the suggestion of moral significance attaching to sentimentality.

Emotional episodes are typically expressive of a concatenation of beliefs and desires. Some of these are actually type-differentiating constituents of emotions. They are grounded in a further causal-rational infrastructure of beliefs and desires which give the constituent ones their rationale and, together with these, provide a rationale for the emotion itself. This is, I think, a widely accepted picture of the nature of emotion. It suggests that one's emotional responses to the world are typically determined by how one sees the world. And how we see the world—our beliefs and the desires they inform—is not something that the world entirely imposes upon us. There is a degree of choice in the vision one adopts of things. The nature of the choice we can exercise over our beliefs need be no more than that we may or may not employ certain truth-orienting procedures. But that is enough to secure responsibility for at least some, a good many, of our beliefs. And to the extent that emotion is a product of belief, through our responsibility for our beliefs, we may also be responsible for our emotions. Now I think that this line of thought has very general implications for our thinking about the role of emotion in moral life; but this is not the time or place to develop these. I want only to point out its relevance to sentimentality. I have earlier accepted that sentimentality involves attachment to a distorted series of beliefs and I have now suggested that this attachment is not something that simply befalls people. I am therefore suggesting that sentimentality is not something that simply befalls us either.

What distinguishes the fictions that sustain sentimentality from those that occur in other forms of emotional indulgence? Well, chiefly it is their emphasis upon such things as the sweetness, dearness, littleness, blamelessness, and vulnerability of the emotions' objects. The qualities that sentimentality imposes on its objects are the qualities of innocence. But this almost inevitably involves a gross simplification of the nature of the object. And it is a simplification of an overtly moral significance. The simplistic appraisal necessary to sentimentality is also a direct impairment to the moral vision taken of its objects. This may in itself be harmless. Often enough it is. Though the sentimentalists in the poodle parlours may have a morally warped view of their little darlings no-one need be too alarmed by it. But sentimentality does have its moral dangers and these are rather more apparent when its objects are people or countries. For the moral distortions of sentimentality are very difficult to contain just to its objects. Frequently these objects interrelate with other things and sentimentality may impair one's moral vision of these things too. The parody of moral appraisal that begins in sentimental response to something, naturally extends itself elsewhere. The unlikely creature and moral caricature that is someone unambiguously worthy of sympathetic response has its natural counterpart in a moral caricature of something unambiguously worthy of hatred.

An extraordinary example of how sentimentality corrupts one's moral vision of its objects and of how this corruption naturally extends itself occurs in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Miss Quested, the fiancée of a colonial official, returns in disarray from an outing and claims to have narrowly escaped indecent assault by a young Indian doctor. The effect of this claim upon the British community is revealing. On the one hand Miss Quested is transformed into a semi-mythical figure. She comes to symbolize the purity, bravery and vulnerability of English womanhood. Her alleged attacker, Dr. Aziz, comes to symbolize a lust-ridden and perfidious people. In fact Miss Quested was hardly known to the British community before the incident. And what was known of her was not particularly liked. But as innocence assailed, 'an English girl fresh from England', she becomes the focus of a lavish compassion. Amongst her compatriots is felt 'a not unpleasing glow, in which the chilly and half-known features of Miss Quested vanished, and were replaced by all that is sweetest and warmest in the private life.'[1] And they want revenge. Even the leading official, who recognizes his duty to fairness and 'the old weary business of compromise and moderation' wishes that he could 'flog every native that he saw' and longs, too, for the moral simplicity of 'the good old days when an Englishman could satisfy his own honour and no questions asked afterwards'.

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[1] *A Passage to India* (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 180.

The community's sentimentalized portrayal of Miss Quested is strengthened and sustained by its corollary, a vilification of her supposed attacker. The distorted picture of Miss Quested as an ingénue is matched by an equal and opposite distortion of Aziz. He becomes a treacherous monster—a man whose attack upon Miss Quested, though foul enough itself, is made trebly so by its having been carefully planned. It is said that servants were bribed and circumstances arranged well in advance. The moral fantasy, with sentimentality at its source, develops a life of its own which ends, finally, in the humiliation of those who partook of it. But such fervours may have other sorts of result. Sentimentality has often been associated with brutality though the nature of that association has remained obscure. Perhaps we are now in a better position to understand it. For the simple-minded sympathies bestowed upon Miss Quested generate an equally simple-minded antipathy to Dr. Aziz. Crude hatreds tend to have crude expression. This connection has not been lost upon propagandists. Early cartoons of the First World War regularly portrayed Belgium as a simpering maiden, beset by leering, sub-human molesters. And later, British audiences were treated to ludicrous film 're-enactments' of spike-hatted Huns, ugly to a man, bayoneting Belgian babies. The purpose of these untruths was simply to set a moral scene in which the death of Germans was something to be applauded, something worth doing. Sentimentality is rightly connected with brutality because it is a principal component of the sort of moral climate that will sanction crude antipathy and its active expression.

So, we began by registering some slight precariousness in our understanding of sentimentality. We had no precise grip either upon what sentimentality is, or why it is objectionable. At the very broadest level I have set my attempt to clarify the notion against a background which has emotions as importantly cognitive phenomena. This enables us to see emotion generally and sentimentality in particular as something integral to the moral self. That is, a cognitive theory of emotion introduces the possibility that there is a degree of choice involved in the sort of emotional repertoire a man may have. I went on to suggest that sentimentality is a rather more precise notion than has been supposed. Particular attention was paid to two suggestions that would have it otherwise. The first of these sought to establish that sentimentality is sometimes a property of the purely sensational aspect of emotion; and more broadly, that it picks out several sorts of emotional malaise. The second suggestion was that sentimentality is distinguished and objectionable simply because it is a form of emotional indulgence that depends upon a distortion of the way things are. I have suggested that there is no general moral objection to emotional indulgence but that there is a moral objection peculiar to sentimentality. And this objection arises from the special character of the fiction that sentimentality employs. We located this fiction as, roughly speaking, a fiction of innocence. It then became clear why sentimentality had come to be associated with brutality. For to maintain the innocence one has projected upon a favoured object it is often necessary to construct other, dangerous fictions about the things that object interacts with.[1]

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