

MORAL TUNING

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Abstract: Can a set of musical metaphors in a treatise on ethics reveal something about the nature and source of moral autonomy? This article argues that it can. It shows how metaphorical usage of words like *tone*, *pitch*, and *concord* in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* can be understood as elements of an analogical model for morality. What this model tells us about morality depends on how we conceptualise music. In contrast to earlier interpretations of Smith's metaphors that have seen music as an aesthetic object, this article sees music as a practice. Understood in this way, the analogy allows us to see morality too as a practice—as *moral tuning*. This in turn reveals a novel answer to the intractable problem of conventionalism: moral autonomy consists in the freedom inherent in the constant need to interpret and reinterpret the strictly formal ideal of perfect propriety.

Keywords: music, metaphor, model, ethics, Adam Smith, tuning, practice, musicking, sentimentalism, conventionalism, autonomy.

1. Introduction

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Smith admonishes Plato and Aristotle for failing to condemn the then common practice of killing unwanted babies by abandoning them outside (2002, V.2.15, 246–47). Rightly so, we would venture to say, but if even Plato and Aristotle were blind to such a morally corrupt practice among their contemporaries, how can we lesser mortals ever hope to discover morally corrupt practices among ourselves? In this article, we find an answer by studying Smith's use of metaphor.

Smith's aptitude for metaphor is well established. To many, Smith is known primarily for the metaphor of “an invisible hand,” which, although associated with his economic theory, first appears in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2002, III.6.10, 215). We focus on a different cluster of metaphors in the book, which have music as their source domain and morality as their target. We propose to treat these metaphors as elements of an analogical model for morality, rather than

purely rhetorical devices, and suggest that this analogy can tell us something significant about the nature of moral interaction.

What the analogy tells us depends on our understanding of what music is. In contrast to earlier interpretations of Smith's musical metaphors that have seen music primarily as an aesthetic object, we propose to consider music as a practice, as something we *do*. After refocusing the musical metaphor in this way, we reconsider morality as described by Smith, and find reason to think of this too as a kind of practice, as a kind of *moral tuning*. This in turn opens new possibilities for understanding moral judgement and action. We single out and pursue one of these possibilities, showing what the musical analogy offers in terms of resources to understand how individuals can rebel against the conventional norms of society.

2. Modelling Morality

Smith makes extensive use of musical metaphors in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.¹ Are the metaphors there for purely rhetorical purposes, or do they also have a more systematic function? Maria Semi's *Music as a Science of Mankind in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2012) tends towards the latter conclusion by showing how Smith and his contemporaries used music as a model for thinking about philosophical subjects. In keeping with her aesthetic theme, Semi discusses Smith's essay "Of the Imitative Arts" and does not mention *Moral Sentiments* (Semi 2012, 93–102; Smith 1982, 176–215). There is, however, an affinity between the way Smith uses musical terms in *Moral Sentiments* to describe morality and the wider tendency of his day to use musical concepts to elucidate philosophical subjects. Building upon Semi's observation that music in eighteenth-century Britain provided a rich source of metaphorical transfer between art and philosophy, we interpret Smith's musical metaphors in *Moral Sentiments* as elements of a model for morality.

In so doing, we must tread carefully. Much misrepresentation of Smith's work has its source in an overemphasis on the metaphor of "an invisible hand" (Kennedy 2009), and Smith himself, in an essay on scientific explanation, writes disparagingly of those who fall for the temptation of letting a nice analogy become the "great hinge" upon which everything in a "system" turns (1982, 42).

Proceeding with these cautions in mind, our exploration of Smith's musical metaphors is primarily aimed neither at the question of how Smith himself intended these metaphors to be understood nor at the

¹ For an overview of just how extensive Smith's use of musical metaphor is, see Klein and Clark 2011.

question of how his contemporaries might have interpreted them. Instead, we use the opportunity afforded by his use of musical metaphors to explore an aspect of moral psychology and ethics that he himself did not adequately address: namely, how we are to free ourselves from the grip of convention. The test for our proposal thus lies in what insights we gain by pursuing it.

2.1 *Metaphor and Model*

To see the musical metaphors in *Moral Sentiments* as elements in an analogical model is to see them as cognitive tools for interpreting phenomena in one domain (the target) in terms of phenomena in another (the source). More precisely, by *model* we mean a cognitive device that extends our capacity to understand and manipulate complex phenomena by reducing their complexity, often to a very limited set of features. An *analogical model* is a cognitive device that is used to understand phenomena in domains other than its domain of origin. The transfer of a model from one domain to another resembles how metaphor transfers a word from one domain to a new one. Just as the success of a metaphor depends on how well it captures salient features of that for which it is a metaphor, the adequacy of an analogical model depends on how well the salient features of the model fit the salient features of the target domain (Nersessian 1999, 16).

As for what distinguishes the use of metaphors in modelling from their poetic use, Mary Hesse proposed that the “truth criteria” for the modelling type of metaphor, while not “rigorously formalizable,” are generally much clearer than for the poetic (1966, 169). A similar distinction can be made in the case of philosophy by stipulating that whatever metaphors are central to a philosophical endeavour “are best viewed as theoretical rather than poetic or rhetorical” (Thagard and Beam 2004, 504). Given how central the musical metaphors are in *Moral Sentiments*, it is reasonable to see them as theoretical. Moreover, because Smith’s use of these metaphors is sustained and systematic, they suggest an “analogical transfer of vocabulary” (Black 1962, 238) from the domain of music to the domain of morality. On this basis, we interpret Smith’s musical metaphors as elements of an analogical model for morality.

2.2 *Modelling Morality with Music*

We can observe the transfer of vocabulary in the systematic mapping by Smith of musical terms such as *pitch*, *beat*, *tone*, *unison*, *harmony*, and *concord* onto some of the most central terms in his sentimentalism, such as *sympathy*, *affects*, *emotion*, *passion*, *society*, and *sentiments*.

Most of this mapping, and thus the modelling of morality in analogy to music, happens in a single paragraph in the first part of *Moral Sentiments*, where Smith describes the interaction between agent and spectators:

The person principally concerned . . . 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 . . . constitutes his sole consolation. But he can only hope to obtain this by *lowering his passion to that pitch*, in which the 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. . . . These two *sentiments*, however, may, it is evident, have such a correspondence with one another, as is sufficient for the *harmony of society*. Though they will never be *unisons*, they may be *concord*s, and this is all that is wanted or required. (2002, I.i.4.7, 27, emphases added; see also I.i.3.1, 20; I.i.5.2, 20; and I.i.3.1, 20)

The musical terms Smith uses relate to sound qualities (pitch, tone, unison, concord, and dissonance), rhythmic qualities (“to beat time”), and the wider organisational systems of sound (harmony and pitch).

Pitch, by way of an example, is a term used by Smith in connection with the action of adjustment, as in the phrase “lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him.” His concept of pitch adjustment appears to refer to the way musicians alter the pitch of their instruments, to be in tune with each other, where being in tune is the result of an agreement on, and adherence to, a *shared* notion of pitch. But how are we to understand pitch as a musical concept? What meanings are evoked in Smith’s statement? On one level a pitch is a musical note, a particular quality of sound defined by the rate of vibrations producing it. In this light, a pitch can be seen as holding a particular quality, such as high or low. This simple definition implies a stable, universal standard dictated by the laws of acoustics. If pitch is a stable, universal standard, then being in tune should simply be a matter of adjusting to this standard. Agreement on pitch is not, however, simply set via universal acoustical norms. It is negotiated between musicians in particular contexts.

A short practical example might best illustrate the point. A bass guitarist and a pianist are about to perform together. Before they can play, they must tune their instruments. The pianist plays on the piano provided by the performance venue, which was tuned by a professional instrument tuner earlier in the day. The bass player tunes her instrument with an electronic guitar tuner. When both players are satisfied that their instrument is in tune, they play together, at which point the clashing, dissonant sounds make it immediately apparent that their instruments are not in tune with each other. The bassist points out that

her instrument is in tune because she has tuned it with the aid of an electronic tuner that measures precisely the number of vibrations per second occurring when each string is played. But the pianist believes the piano is also in tune because it has been professionally tuned and sounds in tune when she plays alone. Who is in tune? Who should adjust her pitch and how? In this case, the reason the two instruments sound in tune when played alone but out of tune when played together is because the piano had been tuned to a pitch where the note a' (A above middle C) occurred at 432 vibrations per second (Hertz or Hz) in order to be in tune with an old pipe organ located in the same venue. The bassist, on the other hand, had tuned to a pitch where a' occurred at 440 Hz, the modern-day standard programmed into the electronic tuner. Both instruments are in tune, but not with each other. The only way to resolve the pitch problem is for the two players to reach a consensus about which pitch they should use in this context and then make adjustments according to the agreed principle. The players then agree that the bass player will retune to the piano's $a' = 432$ Hz, since retuning a piano is much harder than retuning a bass.

Even after retuning to $a' = 432$ Hz, however, the two instruments remain slightly out of tune when played together. This final tuning discrepancy occurs because the bass player tuned her instrument according to the natural harmonic series found on the instrument, whereas the piano, as pianos always are, was tuned according to the system of equal temperament. The tuning system of equal temperament had to be developed because if pianos are tuned to the natural harmonic series, the instrument ends up being out of tune with itself across its wide range. When tuning the bass guitar using natural harmonics and starting from $a' = 432$ Hz, the G string (96 Hz) will be about 0.22 Hz out of tune with the corresponding G on the piano tuned to equal temperament (96.22 Hz). This would not be audible to all people listening, but to some it would be sufficient to spoil their enjoyment of an otherwise successful musical performance.

This situation describes some of the challenges faced by musicians today, in relation to the concept of pitch, pitch adjustment, and their relationship to tuning. Pitch is a quality of sound, but it is set through an agreement among musicians working in a particular context. In Smith's era, consistent and precise measurement of pitch was difficult, and therefore practices were both extremely varied and always a matter of negotiation. Indeed, in European history pitch has fluctuated widely according to time and place, to the point where "it is rarely possible to generalize about pitch standards. Even when the exact period and location are known, different kinds of music often had their own standards [of pitch]" (Haynes and Cooke 2015). In the modern era, pitch has become easily standardized via technologies that can reliably produce and measure pitch. Nevertheless, the modern consensus on pitch

expressed as $a' = 440$ Hz was established only in 1939 and can be considered “no less artificial and unrealistic” than the differing pitch standards that preceded it or continue to coexist with it (Haynes and Cooke 2015). Consequently, pitch should not be thought of as a stable, universal, or unchanging essence, around which adjustments can be made. Even with the broad adoption of $a' = 440$ Hz and the advent of electronic tuning meters, pitch remains socially and culturally negotiated. Rather than a universal and unchanging essence, pitch is a relational process that must necessarily take place whenever people want to sound together.

When Smith talks of the agent “lowering his passions to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him,” we can see that this pitch is not itself independent of the process described: what pitch the spectators will be able to go along with depends on who they are, who the agent is, what passions are involved, and what features of the situation are most salient. Furthermore, even if the interaction in question takes place in a society that has adopted a single standard of “pitch,” a single standard of propriety, the people directly involved will, like the two musicians in the example above, have to agree, explicitly or implicitly, on a pitch that is suitable for the specific situation. There is, of course, nothing mysterious about this: what counts as appropriate behaviour or sentiment differs according to the situation. Understanding pitch in a way that enables the analogical model to account for this is, in all fairness, a very marginal gain.

However, the analogy between standards of pitch and standards of propriety holds intriguing possibilities for understanding the relationship between morality as a natural and as a conventional phenomenon. On the one hand, pitch can be measured in terms of vibrations per second, and it is defined by the physical constraints of an instrument and the auditory capacities of a listener. Accordingly, pitch is thoroughly natural. On the other hand, pitch, as we have seen, is a matter of social negotiation. Even if $a' = 440$ Hz has been widely adopted as a standard pitch for tuning, musicians will deviate from the standard when the situation demands it. Likewise, what we consider right and wrong seems tightly connected to the kind of creature we are: what things are likely to hurt us, what pleases us, what our basic needs are, and how they may be met. At the same time, the particular standards of propriety that are operative in society or that we negotiate in particular interactions are mostly conventional.

Where few if any seem bothered by the role conventional standards play in music, the idea that morality is somehow conventional is often considered highly problematic. Perhaps a better understanding of how the conventional aspects of pitch relate to the natural ones—as well as to the enjoyment or even value of music—could help us navigate the perceived problems of conventionality in ethics? We could formulate

similar questions from the other musical concepts that Smith uses to describe the interactions underlying morality, such as harmony, concord, and beat. Seeing Smith's musical metaphors as an analogical model for morality, however, also raises a more fundamental question about the model itself: How do we understand music, the source domain of the musical metaphors?

2.3 *Music as Aesthetic Object Versus Music as Practice*

In *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Charles Griswold analyses Smith's work in the light of its key metaphors. According to Griswold, Smith's juxtaposition of art and life through metaphors such as *theatrum mundi* may lead us to wonder "whether our lives are in some peculiar sense like works of art, so that evaluating them, like evaluating a play, blurs the line between aesthetic and moral categories" (1998, 67). Smith's concept of "sympathy," like the allied desire for mutual sympathy with others, "responds to the disinterested pleasure that arises from the apprehension of concord.... The pull of sympathy in our lives testifies, in short, to our love of beauty" (1998, 111–12). The pleasure we get from seeing someone who is in concord with his fellow human beings springs from the same source as the pleasure we get from seeing works of art. Griswold regards Smith's "striking fondness for musical metaphors" as an expression of this general tendency to *aestheticize morality* (1998, 183). These metaphors "pervade [*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*] and express Smith's conviction that life is suffused with a spontaneous love of beauty" (1998, 300).

Griswold's interpretation is both plausible and informative. It rests, however, on the implicit assumption that the relevant aspect of music, in this case, is the one we study in aesthetics: the work of art as an intentionally produced artefact. For music to aestheticize morality, the music itself must first be defined as an aesthetic artefact. There is, to be clear, nothing illicit about this. Nevertheless, in the particular context of Smith's use of these metaphors, framing music in terms of aesthetics presents some problems for our understanding of morality.

To see this, consider a distinction drawn by Knud Haakonssen between practical and theoretical imagination in Smith's *Moral Sentiments* (Haakonssen 2002, xiii). Although the two are expressions of the same "desire for order," they are also "fundamentally different" (2002, xiii). Practical imagination—"sympathy" is Smith's word—is responsible for "creating the moral world," writes Haakonssen, by allowing us to ascribe actions to persons, including ourselves, and to evaluate these actions as appropriate or not, based on our ability or inability to sympathize with them (2002, xiii). The theoretical imagination, on the

other hand, is concerned with bringing “order and system into things and events” and is thus “the foundation for all the arts and sciences” (2002, xiii). If we apply this distinction to Smith’s use of musical metaphor while at the same time defining music as an object of aesthetics, we seem forced to conclude that when Smith characterizes moral sentiments as harmonious, in concord, discordant, in tune, and so on, he is bringing the theoretical imagination to bear, urging us to view the personal interaction from without: an *event* to be contemplated and judged, much as we would a work of art.

It is trivially true that any single interpretation makes sense of a phenomenon in part by excluding alternate interpretations. In the case of Smith’s musical metaphors, however, understanding them in aesthetic terms excludes what we take to be a particularly important alternative interpretation: namely, that they can help us explore the intricacies of the *practical* imagination. To learn something from these metaphors about the practical imagination, about what it means to be *in* a moral world, we have to construe their source domain not as a realm of artefacts and events but as a realm of personal interaction between agents that act in concord. We must, in short, consider music as *practice*.²

2.4 *Music as Practice*

In the Western philosophical tradition, the term “music” has often been taken to refer to a defined and bounded collection of acoustic materials conceptualized and reified into the form of a musical work. Music is seen as an aesthetic object, a thing to be contemplated. Traditionally, the largely unquestioned thingness of a musical work has formed both the basis of music’s self-contained autonomy and its ability to create meaning (Small 1998, 4). Musicology has a long-standing preoccupation with music as an object, something that can be measured, described, analysed outside and beyond the people who make it and experience it. Yet such understanding of music fails to account adequately for the enormous variety of sounds, structures, practices, and experiences commonly included within the term “music,” globally and historically. The traditional understanding of music has been challenged in several ways, and we shall restrict our discussion to briefly mentioning two important redefinitions of music as practice.

John Blacking led the challenge to the standard definition of music detailed above (Blacking 1973). A pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology,

² Smith himself seems to have had little interest in technical or strictly aesthetic aspects of music. When, as in Smith 1982, he writes about music directly, it is the emotional and social effects of music, in other words, music as a social practice, that is the focus of his interest.

he observed that music was neither an elite skill nor a “sonic object,” suggesting instead that music was better defined as a kind of social action that had consequences for other kinds of social action (1995, 223). Blacking’s work points to the fundamental connection between musicality, musical thinking, and the dynamics and organisation of human social life, what Blacking termed the “musicosocial” (1995, 231). Music is here foregrounded as a vital capacity rather than ancillary or abstract, “a basic human mode of thought by which any human action may be constituted” (1995, 224). Blacking’s extensive work with the Venda people of South Africa led him to believe that music should be considered “a primary modelling system” for human thinking, “generative” as a cultural system and as a human capability (1995, 223). In this understanding, music is a way of being in the world and, importantly, a way of being with others in the world. Our innate musicality forms the roots of our sociability and the dynamic structure of our relational capacity.

Evolving Blacking’s work, Christopher Small begins his study of the meaning of musical performing and listening with the statement, “There is no such thing as music” (1998, 2). Small’s rejection of “music” as a term is based on the fact that in the English language “music” is a noun commonly used to refer to “the thing music,” which, for Small, is inadequate because it is a “figment, an abstraction of action” (2). Instead, he proposes that we can only attain a greater understanding of music if the noun is recast as a verb, “to music” or simply “musicking.” Employing music as a verb removes it from the autonomous and abstract, locating it emphatically as an active process, contextual and relational, located in people and practices rather than existing beyond and outside them. The term “musicking” directs our attention to the way music resides “in actions, in what people do,” and in what they do together (8).

Small’s work critiques the abstract “music as object” position as growing from an ethnocentric conventionalisation of music bound to the European notated musical tradition of the period stretching from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Challenges to this definition of music and the value system it generates have often been developed through the validation of music from outside this canon, as in Blacking’s work. Small, on the other hand, develops his concept of musicking through the example of “the total experience of a symphony concert” (1998, 184), a genre usually held as the very epitome of the European notated musical tradition. He stresses that even in this context music is neither an object nor a rare skill residing only in the highly trained performers on stage but a distributed human capability, a form of action or behaviour, related to the uniquely human capacities for communication and relationship building. Accordingly, taking part in a musical event in any capacity is an instrument of relational “exploration” (183). “By bringing into existence relationships that are thought of as desirable, a

musical performance not only reflects those relationships but also shapes them. It teaches and inculcates the concept of those ideal relationships,” with relationships created not only among the sounds as they are created and performed but also “among the people who are taking part” (184).³

In what follows, we argue that Small’s analysis of the late twentieth-century symphony concert—with all its norms, ideals, and codes of conduct—provides insight into the source and nature of what we call “musical autonomy.” This insight can, in turn, give us a new perspective on the place of moral autonomy in Smith’s theory of moral judgement—a problem that has engendered a significant amount of debate in the secondary literature on *Moral Sentiments*.

3. Music, Morality, and the Freedom of Interpretation

Briefly, the issue of moral autonomy in connection with *Moral Sentiments* is the question of whether Smith’s theory of the “impartial spectator” (Smith 2002, *passim*; e.g., III.1.2, 129) admits moral agents sufficient autonomy to criticize not only the application of moral norms in particular situations but also the validity of the norms themselves. In order to understand why this question arises, it is helpful to have a basic grasp of Smith’s account of moral autonomy.

3.1 *The Moral Blindness of the Impartial Spectator*

Smith starts out with some simple observations, one of them being that we tend to be anxious that others should like us. Because of this, we try to imagine what others would think of us if we acted in such and such a manner. By analogy to how we use mirrors to check our own appearance, we set up a metaphorical mirror to our own behaviour in the form of an imaginary spectator (2002, III.1.5, 131). Taking the perspective of this spectator, we can predict what others will think of us based on our experience of what their judgements are usually like. Through the habit of viewing ourselves from the perspective of an imagined spectator, however, our predictive judgements gain a certain independence from the actual judgements of real spectators. Based on

³ Most recently Small and Blacking’s claims for music have found increasing resonance in the umbrella concept of *communicative musicality*, a theory that positions human musicality as the pre-linguistic basis for human thought and action rather than just the basis for all forms of musicking (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009). Malloch and Trevarthen refer specifically to the work of Adam Smith as consistent with their own insights into the fundamental nature of human musicality: “It is our common musicality that makes it possible for us to share time meaningfully together, in its emotional richness and its structural holding, and for us to participate with anticipation and recollection of pleasure in the ‘imitative arts’ as explained by Adam Smith” (2009, 5).

our experience of being unfairly treated by real spectators who are often either ill informed, partial, or both, we gradually form an idea of what “ought to be the judgement of others” (III.1.2, 128), namely, what an “impartial and well-informed spectator” would judge, if such a one were present (III.2.32, 150).

Even though the perspective of the impartial spectator gives us a degree of autonomy from actual spectators, it seems that the standard of propriety we apply will still only be an idealized version of the standard of propriety followed by actual spectators. As Samuel Fleischacker puts it, “The impartial spectator is disinterested, well-informed and ‘candid’ . . . but is otherwise just like actual, partial spectators. It is built out of . . . the basic modes of moral judgment that our actual friends and neighbors have” (Fleischacker 2011, 28). If the impartial spectator is no more than an idealized version of “our friends and neighbors,” it likely also conserves or even distills whatever biases and prejudices might be endemic to the moral culture in question. If that is the case, taking the perspective of the imagined impartial spectator will allow us to see ourselves from without, but it will not allow us to step outside the standard of propriety of our society. If there is anything wrong with the standard of propriety in the society to which we belong, we shall not be able to discover it. Our autonomy as individual moral agents would then be limited to our specific society, and we end up with a kind of cultural relativism that, among other things, seems difficult to combine with any vision of moral progress.

Smith did not think that this was all there was to the impartial spectator. This is most evident in his admonition of Plato and Aristotle for their support of the practice of infant exposure, or the indirect killing of unwanted newborns by abandoning them out of doors. Smith accepts that the practice might have been justified by the extreme hunger and constant threat of death of an earlier age “of the most savage barbarity” (2002, V.2.15, 246). By the time, however, of “the latter ages of Greece . . . the same thing was permitted from views of remote interest or convenience, which could by no means excuse it” (V.2.15, 246). The reason even great thinkers like Plato and Aristotle failed to see this was that “the uniform continuance of the custom had hindered them . . . from perceiving its enormity” (V.2.15, 246). In other words, two of history’s greatest thinkers were blinded to the moral wrongness of killing infants by the mere fact that it was an established practice.

In Smith’s own day, the transatlantic slave trade was similarly permitted for reasons that could by no means excuse it, and Smith does his part in *Moral Sentiments* to argue against it on this ground (V.2.9, 240–42). With the benefit of hindsight like Smith’s vis-à-vis the Greeks, we in the early twenty-first century can see that Smith himself had his own moral blind spots—for example, on the question of the equality of the sexes. No doubt we ourselves are similarly blind to or only dimly

aware of aspects of our conduct which are equally unjust and unreasonable, and for which our descendants will harshly condemn us. In all these cases, Smith's conclusion is clear: being blinded by tradition is no excuse for failing to correct the moral perversions of our particular practices. We ought to recognize this perversion even if it is difficult to do so when we are accustomed to them. Because of this, we need to answer the question of how we can come to realize that a particular practice is perverted. We need, that is, an understanding of the source and nature of moral autonomy.

This is where the analogy with musical practice comes into play. The reasoning is as follows: If we take *musical autonomy* to be the ability to critically reflect on musical practice in such a way as to render musicians capable of changing this practice through practising music, we can look for the source of this autonomy in an analysis of musical practice. Having located this source, we have discovered, by virtue of the analogical model, a candidate source of moral autonomy. What we need, therefore, is an analysis of a musical practice in which we can locate the desired kind of musical autonomy. We find this in Small.

3.2 *Musical Autonomy in the Symphony Concert*

On the face of it, Small's analysis of the peculiar ritual that is the late twentieth-century symphony concert presents us with a portrait of musical practice strictly bounded by convention. Every aspect of the performance is tightly choreographed and regulated by explicit and implicit norms.

Small describes the grandiose concert hall, "designed down to the last detail to house not just musical performances but performances of a very specific kind" (1998, 20); the audience, which, physically separated from the musicians but forcefully directed towards them by the orientation of their seats, "knows it is to keep still and quiet" (26); the uniformed musicians, whose evening wear locates them "in a social between-stairs, on the one hand proclaiming their social equality with the members of the audience and on the other suggesting their continuing status as providers of services for the upper classes" (66), each in possession of only a small part of the complete score (110); and, finally, the conductor (usually a he) on his dais, "the centre of attention . . . of this whole vast space" (25), who presides over the ritual and directs the individual efforts of the musicians into a coherent whole, but whose apparently absolute authority extends only as far as the score—that enduring testament to the sonic intentions of the composer—permits: the conductor "can make no gesture that is not inspired by those instructions, make no demands on the players that is not sanctioned by them" (115). The score itself is something of a sacred text. Certain

musicologists, in the fashion of religious scholars, seek out the most “authentic” versions they can find (90), thus subscribing to the idea that the meaning of art resides in the art object. In the case of music, however, that idea has some unfortunate corollaries.

One of them is that the performance of the work, the actual playing, is secondary, even incidental, to the work “itself.” The performance only exists as “the medium through which the isolated, self-contained work has to pass in order to reach its goal, the listener” (Small 1998, 5), and so “the quality of the work sets an upper limit to the possible quality of the performance” (6). Any given performance can only be as good as the score that is performed.

Moreover, given the technical limitations and brute contingencies of a physical performance, a performance will only ever imperfectly approach the perfection that the score may embody. Thus, if one does not side with Johannes Brahms in preferring to stay at home reading a great work of music, one might agree with Igor Stravinsky, according to whom the “execution” of a musical work should be nothing but “the strict putting into effect of an explicit will that contains nothing beyond what it specifically commands” (Stravinsky 1947, qtd. in Small 1998, 6).

Therefore, the performers, the living musicians, “can clarify or obscure a work, present it adequately or not, but . . . have nothing to contribute to it; its meaning has been completely determined before a performer ever lays eyes on the score” (Small 1998, 5) If there is any musical autonomy in the symphony concert, it is certainly well hidden.

3.3 *The Moral Score of Society*

Interpreting Smith’s use of musical metaphor in the light of the symphony concert would lead us to think that moral action is a matter of finding and following the behavioural script laid out by the “score” of society’s standard of propriety. The more exactly this can be followed, the more perfect the propriety of the behaviour.

One need not think that a divine composer has written this score; the idea of a “moral score” is equally amenable to thinking in terms of a collective endeavour, the result of which is the moral norms of a given society—a behavioural script for proper action and sentiments in that society. In either case, moral education and individual moral development would amount to a rigorous training in the execution of extant moral norms—be these what they may.

Of course, as Smith notes, no moral society can subsist on thoroughly perverted moral norms (2002, V.2.16, 247). Human societies have basic needs that a system of morality must fulfil, and if “custom” and “fashion” are allowed to pervert the usages of otherwise suitable

moral norms to the point where the norms themselves become perverted, that society is already far along on its way to self-destruction.

Even with these checks in place, however, moral development, moral education, and moral action would all be measured by the degree to which they approach a pre-set ideal of perfect propriety. Moral autonomy would be wholly restricted by the moral conventions into which one is socialized. Fleischacker's criticism that the impartial spectator is no more than an idealized version of "our friends and neighbors" would be supported also by Smith's musical metaphors. There would be no answer here to the question of how we are to go about discovering our moral blind spots.

This, however, is not the whole of what Small's analysis shows us. If Western classical music were the only thing we recognized as music and the symphony concert the only kind of musicking, it would indeed be difficult to escape its confines. Luckily, that is not the case. We use the term "music" for an incredibly diverse set of sonic relationships, and, if Small is right, what unites them is that they "explore, affirm, and celebrate" sets of human relationships that those taking part in the performance "feel to be ideal" (1998, 49). Therefore, even if we are thoroughly socialized into a specific tradition, we can recognize radically different ways of musicking as the celebration of alternative, and possibly valuable, sets of human relationships.

Small's analysis of the late twentieth-century symphony concert allows us to step outside whatever presuppositions we might have about the nature or quality of classical music in the Western tradition, and critically reflect on the practice and the sets of relationships it celebrates. If we free ourselves from Western classical music as the paradigmatic example of what music is, we can come to see that the strong authoritarian bent of this tradition is a contingent feature of one way of musicking, rather than a general feature of musicking as such.

That is not to say that other forms of musicking are fundamentally free in a way the symphony concert is not, or that they afford a musical autonomy essentially different from the one available to those partaking in an instance of musicking in the European annotated music tradition. Small warns against the kind of "neat antithesis" (1998, 44) one might be tempted to postulate between a bourgeois symphony concert, celebrating the values and relationships of the industrialized society, and a phenomenon like "the great rock festivals of the 1960s and 1970s" (45). While the latter became famous for creating, temporarily, something like a parallel society founded on tolerance and love, Small continues (45), they did so not by escaping constraints but by establishing new ones: "At rock festivals, as at any other kind of musical event, there were, and are, right and wrong ways to behave, right and wrong ways to dress, to speak and to respond, both to one another and of course to the musical performances. To dress or behave there in ways

that come naturally in Symphony Hall would be to invite ridicule, if not downright hostility. That these codes were felt by those present not as constraints but as liberation only goes to show how lightly norms fall on those for whom they represent ideal social relationships” (46). The point, therefore, is not that there is a kind of musicking that, if used as a model for morality, would reveal the source of moral autonomy. Rather, any kind of musical performance, however constrained it might appear, provides affordances of musical autonomy. To see this, we shall consider the role *interpretation* plays in musicking.

3.4 Imperfection and Interpretation

The starting point for finding the source of musical autonomy lies in the realization that no two musical performances, no two instances of musicking, will ever be the same—even if the two are instances of the same symphonic orchestra playing the same work by the same composer. The reason for this is trivial. Playing a symphony requires a concerted effort of perhaps a hundred musicians, with none of the thousands or millions of bodily motions performed by them ever an exact replica of any other, nor the sounds produced ever the same. Moreover, each instance of musicking is constituted also by the relations between the musicians, between them and the conductor, between all of them and the audience, between all of them and the building in which they play, and so on; and by second-, third-, and even higher-order relations between these relations—patterns that defy description but can be experienced and explored in the musicking itself (Small 1998, 200). While the general form of these relationships may be recognizably similar, perhaps even indistinguishable, depending on the granularity of our analysis and the aims of those engaged in the two instances in musicking—a symphonic concert is, after all, as Small argues, an enactment of stability (1998, 90)—their constitution, for the reason noted above, is not.

This unavoidable variability is the flip side of the fact that no instance of musicking, not even the professional performance of a work of Western classical music, is ever the mere following of a score but always an interpretation of it. How the score is interpreted—that is, how it is performed—might, in the case of a symphonic orchestra, in large measure be up to the conductor. Still, however small we make the space between direction and execution, there will always be a gap, a need for translation of one thing into another: the notation into musicking. Where there is translation, there is always, no matter how accurate it aspires to be, space for interpretation. Where there is interpretation, there is always also freedom.

Granted, the freedom of interpretation is bounded by the possibilities offered or realized in the domain from which you translate and the domain into which you translate, and so the score, the musical genre, the direction of the conductor, and the skill of the individual musician all put bounds on the freedom of interpretation.

But there is a deeper, more general point in this: performance is always interpretation. However constrained, a performance of a score will only ever be one of endless possible variations. The variations may sound alike, at least to the untrained ear, but none of them will ever be the same. Trying to weed out all errors of interpretation or trying to arrive at an authentic performance of a score is, therefore, in a sense, senseless. At “best,” one will arrive at an interpretation shared by the entire orchestra for the duration of the performance. The deeper point is thus that the style of musicking represented by the symphony concert is itself just one of many that are possible. The desires for note-perfect, authentic, or otherwise perfected ways of performing an orchestral piece is itself an interpretation of what musicking should be.

By realizing that there is such a need for interpretation, we can come to see even the most forcefully protected musical convention as just that—one convention among many possible. Being one of many possible does not mean that the convention is without value or some claim to allegiance. It does mean, however, that it has no absolute value or unquestionable authority. Musicking is about exploring, affirming, and celebrating a set of human relationships: how we relate to each other and to the world. The relationships celebrated in the symphony concert—sonic, social, commercial, and cultural—constitute one very particular set of relations among those possible. This set has some things to recommend it, and others that count against it. Realizing your interpretational freedom is, therefore, a way to realize the interpretational nature of the practice itself. When combined with the realization that fundamentally the same is true for everyone, this leads to the conclusion that you are not relegated to merely following the rules set by others. On the contrary, you are in on the making of them.

That said, the freedom thus realized does not put you suddenly outside all convention, free to create, from nothing, a new set of ideal relationships. Small’s image of a “herdsman playing on his flute . . . in the African night” (1998, 201) both reinforces and nuances this point. The solitary flute player stands in sharp contrast to the collective conventionality of the orchestra musician, but his freedom, though real, is not as radically unbounded as it might first appear. His simple flute “is as much a product of technology and of technological attitudes and choices as is the Western orchestral instrument that goes by the same name, and it is as finely adapted as the Western instrument to the musical and social purposes for which it is intended” (202). As for the music he plays, it will almost certainly sound strange to Western ears

adapted to Western notions of beats and harmony. Failing to find familiar rhythms, the sounds may appear to such ears as free in the sense of unpredictable or chaotic. Nevertheless, “we may be sure that they are always being measured against a rhythm that is going on in his head,” and “whatever it is he is playing, it will not be invented from nothing. No human being ever invents anything from nothing but is guided always in his invention by the assumptions, the practices and the customs of the society in which he or she lives—in other words, by its *style*. A person may rebel against the assumptions of the society, but the style of the rebellion will inevitably continue to reflect those assumptions. It is inescapable” (203, emphasis in original). Style is inescapable. Nevertheless, the recognition of other sets of relationships as explored in other kinds of musicking provides us with stylistic tools other than those most readily available in the society in which we live. These tools can be used to embellish or criticize the style we are familiar with, whether as individuals or as members of a collective. We cannot escape style in musicking, but we are not confined to just one. Nor does any style ever stop evolving. Not even Western classical music, “with the repertory held steady and with the authenticity movement thriving” (Small 1998, 90), has achieved stasis. “Of course such a thing is impossible. Each generation of musicians and listeners remakes the culture in ways that will support and sustain their values” (90–91). The source of musical autonomy thus lies in the need for interpretation, both in the following and in the shaping of different styles of musicking.

3.5 *Moral Autonomy and the Ideal of Perfect Propriety*

Is moral autonomy similarly founded on the freedom of interpretation? Before we can consider this question, we must step back and consider a more general one: namely, whether conceiving of the source domain of Smith’s musical metaphors as music-as-practice really is compatible with the target domain as described by Smith.

We think it is. The principal role played by sympathy in Smith’s theory suggests that what we usually reify as “morality” is originally and primarily a practice: the complex ways in which individuals “feel in” to each other in a “self-regulating process of sympathetic exchange” (Forman-Barzilai 2010, 193). Morality understood as a practice is a sort of *moral tuning*.

Evidence in favour of this interpretation can be found throughout *Moral Sentiments*, but is most clearly expressed in what Smith says about the “general rules of morality”: far from being the foundation of our moral judgements, they are “founded on experience of what, in particular instances, our moral faculties, our natural sense of merit and

propriety, approve, or disapprove of" (2002, III.4.7–8, 184–85). Take murder as an example. The first person who saw "an inhuman murder" needed no divine command to grasp its wrongness; on the contrary, the general rule against killing arose from the "detestation" that this person "felt necessarily arise . . . at the thought of this, and every other particular action of the same kind" (III.4.8, 185). Such general rules may in time become "universally acknowledged and established," and they are thus frequently cited as the foundation of our moral judgements (III.4.11, 186). The general rules, however, are really just shorthand summaries of human experience, rules of thumb that we can use to guide ourselves when we are too pressed or hot-headed to truly take the perspective of an impartial spectator and properly survey the situation (III.4.12, 186–87). Sympathy and the moral judgements issuing from it are thus primary to the general rules of morality. Moral tuning is primary to the moral score.

This primacy of practice is true also in the case of the impartial spectator. Even though Smith often personifies it as "the great demigod within the breast" (2002, IV.iii.25, 291), the idea of the impartial spectator arises out of a particular act of the imagination, namely, the taking of an outside perspective on ourselves (III.1.2–7, 128–32). As we have already argued, moral autonomy, to the extent that we have any, comes from this ability to see ourselves from without, and through the perspective of the hypothetical impartial spectator to second-guess the judgements of the actual spectators surrounding us. Therefore, if interpretation plays any role in moral autonomy, this is where we would expect to find it.

When looking for such interpretation, we find a good starting point in Smith's observation that we always have a kind of double vision when judging our own merit: "In estimating our own merit, in judging of our own character and conduct, there are two different standards to which we naturally compare them. The one is the idea of exact propriety and perfection, so far as we are each of us capable of comprehending that idea. The other is that degree of approximation to this idea which is commonly attained in the world, and which the greater part of our friends and companions, of our rivals and competitors, may have actually arrived at" (2002, IV.iii.23, 291). We hardly ever, contends Smith, consider our own merit only by comparing ourselves to what we ideally ought to do; we almost always also compare ourselves to our friends and companions. The main effect of this comparison may be the comforting thought that, while no saint, I am at least better than my friends are. But the "idea of exact propriety and perfection" can also function as something towards which to strive, and with which to criticise our own and other people's shortcomings. This includes shortcomings in moral reasoning. When Smith criticises Plato and Aristotle for failing to condemn the practice of child exposure, he is in effect

appealing to his own idea of exact propriety and perfection to criticise that of those venerable philosophers. If we in turn criticise Smith for his failure to grapple adequately with the issue of gender inequality, we apply our own idea of such perfection to Smith.

The trouble is that this idea is itself a product of our moral surroundings: the idea of exact propriety and perfection is, Smith admits, “gradually formed from [our] observations upon the character and conduct both of [ourselves] and of other people” (2002, VI.iii.25, 291). If we have no other standard by which to judge the propriety of our actions, we risk ending up with just the kind of social or cultural relativism that Fleischacker was worried about. Of course, there are other people and cultures with other standards, and we could draw on these in criticising our own. If, however, we have no third, overarching standard with which to adjudicate, it is hard to see how we could even get this process started.

But reconsider for a moment the very thought that there is something you *ideally* ought to do. As Carola Freiin von Villiez points out, this thought is strictly formal, a *Grenziideal*, or limiting ideal, transcending any particular interpretation of it (2006a, 206; 2006b, 130–34). The thought that there is something you ideally ought to do contains no reference to what this something is. Accordingly, the idea of exact propriety and perfection could play the role of the third, overarching standard that we can use to adjudicate different conceptions of propriety.

For this normative limiting ideal to be of any use in guiding our judgements and actions, we have to give it a substantive interpretation, filling in the blank “something” with concrete particulars. In giving such an interpretation, we are inevitably drawing on our own, limited experience (Freiin von Villiez 2006a, 203; 2011, 41), and this experience will be shaped by the style (in Small’s sense) of the society in which we have matured. Therefore, that style will put bounds on the freedom of our interpretation of what that something is.

Nevertheless, consider what we established about musical autonomy above. Although style itself is inescapable, a musician is never limited to a single style. Nor does any style ever remain constant; it is constantly reinterpreted by those engaged in applying it in practice. Small’s solitary flute player is bounded by convention but free to interpret and reinterpret this in response to different situations and the conventions of others. When interpreting the normative limiting ideal of perfect propriety, moral agents appear to be in an analogous position. Interpretation is necessary, and so a certain freedom of interpretation—the freedom to draw on the standards of propriety of different people and different moral cultures, adapting these to the particular situation at hand—is built into the foundations of morality-as-practice.

There is, however, a problem with this analogy: the “idea of exact propriety and perfection” has no obvious analogue in musicking. A disanalogy for such a central concept could undermine the comparison between music-as-practice and morality-as-practice. If we have ideas of perfect propriety against which we test imperfect manifestations of it, then critically reflecting on moral norms appears to be essentially different to the process of interpretation in musicking, in which individuals can simply draw on different styles to embellish or criticize the style they are most familiar with.

Notice, however, that if we reverse the analogy, we can see different ideals of musicking as representing imperfect interpretations of a formal limiting ideal of musical perfection. The ideal of performing an orchestral piece the way the Great Composer intended would then be one such substantial interpretation, the rock festivals of the 1960s and 1970s another, and so on for any substantive ideal of musicking.

Here the reader may object that we have merely traded one problem for another. For what is a “formal limiting ideal of musical perfection” supposed to be? Can we even imagine such a thing? The answer is yes. If we accept Small’s broad characterisation of musicking as a way of “exploring, affirming, and celebrating ways of relating to one another and to the world” (1998, 87), then musical perfection is not an unknown after all. It is simply the thought that there is a perfect way of relating to one another and to the world. What this perfection consists in is available to us only in imperfect interpretations—namely, in specific ideals of musicking. Wondrously, it then turns out that specific ideals of musicking and specific ideals of propriety are different kinds of answers to very same question: How are we to live as humans among humans? Considered as practices, that is, music and morality are two sides of the same many-faced die.

We can criticize, revise, and (temporarily) justify particular moral norms from the imagined point of view of what we imperfectly conceive of as an impartial spectator. At the same time, the ideal of perfect propriety that guides us in so doing is itself open to revision in the light of new information and the different perspectives on propriety that you may meet with in others (Frein von Villiez 2006b, 132). This mutual exchange can potentially take the form of a reflective equilibrium (130–34) between the formal ideal and various imperfect substantive interpretations of it. Such an equilibrium would provide a standard that is stable enough for judging the propriety of our actions, without ever ossifying, and thus never pretending to be the one and only truth about what is right and wrong.

The mirror in which we see ourselves distorts our vision with the assumptions of our society. Even norms justified through reflective equilibrium will reflect this distortion. Nevertheless, in the constant need for interpretation, there is room for revision, rebellion, and even

reconstruction of our set of moral norms. The freedom of interpretation—bounded as it is, but freedom nonetheless—appears built into the very fabric of morality, just as it is in musicking. The question, therefore, is not how the individual musician or moral agent can come to have this freedom but how we can come to realize that we already do. If we do, the realization that interpretation is essential to both musicking and morality also allows us to see that *not* questioning established norms and ideals, not using our moral and musical autonomy, is nothing more than to propagate, borrowing a phrase from Herbert Spencer, “the rule of the dead over the living” (1899, 515). There is certainly nothing inherently noble in that.

4. Conclusion

By treating Smith’s musical metaphors in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as elements of an analogical model in which the source domain is musical *practice* rather than musical works, we open new possibilities for interpreting Smith’s model of moral judgement, as well as new paths to discovering and exploring affinities between music and morality more generally.

That there are affinities between Smith’s model of moral judgement and the domain of music becomes particularly clear when we look to recent developments in musicology. From Blacking (1973; 1995) through Small (1998) to the current interest in communicative musicality (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009), the turn from object to process in music studies shifts perception of music-as-source-domain from aesthetics to practice. This in turn warrants a closer look at Small’s analysis of Western classical music and the particular ritual that is a symphony concert.

By showing us the set of relationships celebrated in the symphony concert, Small allows us to step outside whatever presuppositions we might have about the nature or quality of Western classical music, thus giving us the distance we need to reflect critically on these relationships. Small achieves this not just by pointing out to “us”—Westerners steeped in Western traditions—the alternative represented by the ways of the “other” but also by engaging in the same way with the very tradition in which we are steeped. To cultivate moral autonomy, moral philosophy should similarly encourage such “fieldwork in familiar places” (Moody-Adams 2002, 224).

In order to do so, we must tread the line between what Fleischacker has called the anthropological and philosophical approaches to morality: recognising the norms of different societies as actual moral norms while also providing the philosophical tools necessary to critique them (2011, 25). Fleischacker laments what he sees as Smith’s failure to

combine these two approaches (40), but seeing morality as a practice in analogy to musicking allows a reconsideration of Smith's purported failure. The analogy established by Smith's musical metaphors then reveals the freedom inherent in the constant need to interpret and reinterpret the strictly formal ideal of perfect propriety.

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