

In Defense of

Sentimentality

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Preface: Emotions and Sentimentality

Feeling is everything.—Johan Wolfgang von Goethe

Philosophy has as much to do with feelings as it does with thoughts and thinking. It requires sensitivity and devotion as well as curiosity about the world and a critical spirit. It is a fascination not only with abstract ideas and logically possible worlds but also with concrete and very real human concerns and engagements, “the human condition.” To be a philosopher is to be steadfastly attentive to what it means to be human, to the passions as well as to much-celebrated “rationality.” It is to be concerned with what it means to “exist,” with the satisfactions and worries and real-life joys and confusions that affect us all. That is why one of the canonical exhortations in philosophy, inherited from the Delphic Oracle via Socrates, has always been “know thyself,” for it is through unusually rigorous self-examination that we come to know not only ourselves but our Selves: our deepest feelings, fears, and hopes. Philosophy, accordingly, in its concern for feelings, requires not only emotional sensitivity but also an understanding of the emotions, not as curious but marginal psychological phenomena but as the very substance of life.

And yet, philosophy and philosophers have much more often than not shunned the emotions and defined their profession and themselves strictly in terms of reason and rationality. I do not think that there is anything wrong with reason and rationality as such: let me be clear about that. But when being “reasonable” means repressing, ignoring, or denigrating feeling, then philosophy has gone too far and, so far as most people are concerned, rendered itself irrelevant. In the history of philosophy and—especially—in the academic machismo of the contemporary university, sensitivity is too often considered a vice rather than a virtue and dismissed as mere “sentimentality.” “Sensitivity to the issue” tends to refer only to scholarly focus and technical facility, not the emotional nature of the subject at hand. Take, for instance, many of the cold, logical, thrust-and-parry philosophical discussions of such emotionally charged issues as abortion and human rights. But “appeal to the emotions” is condemned in such debates, and in almost every introductory logic text and ethics book, as a fallacy (albeit “informal”).

Sentiment and sentimentality are to be avoided, not at all costs, perhaps, but at least in philosophical discussions and (advisedly) in student term papers and refereed journals.

Philosophy, accordingly, gets defined as the hardheaded formulation and criticism of arguments, the exclusive domain of reason. Philosophy might still be dutifully described as the “love” of wisdom, but this love is hardly the *erotic* enthusiasm with which Socrates, if not Plato, approached the subject. The great eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant famously dismissed the sentiment of love as “pathological.” He may also have insisted that “nothing great is ever accomplished without enthusiasm” (a comment usually attributed to Hegel), but it is clear that enthusiasm as such has very little place in his celebration of rational “critique” and the rigors of “the Categorical Imperative.” In most of the subsequent history of philosophy, enthusiasm, emotion, and the “sentiments” failed to hold their own against the onslaught of dispassionate reason, and thus are dismissed as mere sentimentality.

In this book, in general, I will be concerned to defend sentimentality and the emotions—at least, some emotions—as essential to life. They are or can be virtues, features of the human condition without which civilized life would be unimaginable. And they are essential to philosophy, both as a topic of central concern and as motivation for our ideas. Foremost among those essential emotions (but by no means the lot of them) are those typically referred to as the *sentiments* of love and compassion. About the same time as Kant and just before, there were many philosophers in Germany and the rest of Europe (including Britain) who celebrated the “moral sentiments” in addition to (and sometimes instead of) reason in human life. The Swiss-born philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in particular, glorified the natural sentiments and opposed them to the artifices and “corruption” of society. More than anyone else, he came to be identified with the “sentimental” side of moral philosophy, despite his sometimes harsh political judgments and his enormous influence on the quite anti-sentimental Kant. In Scotland, such “moral sentiment theorists” as David Hume and Adam Smith were trying to restore “sympathy” and its kin to their rightful place in ethics and philosophy. But it is with Rousseau that the philosophical movement of Romanticism got its start, and even before the waning of the Enlightenment, Romanticism was already sweeping across Europe. Foremost in the vocabulary of the Romantics were such terms as “passion” and “sentiment,” and reason was suddenly on the defensive. The German Romantics elevated feeling to something like divine status (the usual status of reason), and celebrated it in their poetry. To be sentimental was to be a truly excellent human being, perhaps even just a bit godly.

The comeuppance of the Romantics, accordingly, naturally turned on their often uncritical emphasis on sentiment. By the mid-nineteenth century, to be

called a “sentimentalist” had become an insult. Oscar Wilde enjoyed and employed the offensive term often. Sentimentality, mawkishness, “soft-mindedness,” “bleeding heart”—these were, and still are, intended to be damning. One recent critic (Amitava Kumar, in *The Nation*, November 26, 2001) chastised Salman Rushdie’s book *Fury* for its “embarrassing sentimentality.” In many circles sentimentality is one of those offenses against which there is no defense. For hardheaded activists as for intellectuals in general, “sentimentality” is a dirty word, indicating bad taste, a paucity of arguments, sniveling morals, and an absence of backbone. To be sure, some expressions and provocations of the tender emotions are grander and more poignant than others, while some are just plain tacky. But what is being criticized or ridiculed as sentimentality is all too often neither an excess of emotion nor a lack of hardheaded rationality, but the very evidence of emotion as such (except, perhaps, tightly controlled rage and contempt, which are acceptable and even admired).

But other than controlled anger and the disdainful emotions, emotion tends to imply weakness and becoming emotional means not being reasonable. Following one’s feelings is often—though not so often as a mere twenty or thirty years ago—identified with “femininity,” which, like “sentimentality,” is typically intended as a diminutive (like “cute”) if not as an outright put-down (when applied to a man, as “effeminate”). But beneath the attack on sentimentality, I believe, often lurks an attack on sentiment and most emotion, and this I find unacceptable. Whether or not life is reasonable, it is most certainly and essentially emotional. That is what this book is about: defending the sentiments and the emotions, and thus defending much-abused “sentimentality” as well.

Not all of the sentiments are “sweet,” of course. Continuing the gustatory metaphor, some are bitter, others are sour, others are quite spicy and even “hot.” Some are sickening, poisonous, or even lethal, but together they make up the range of experiences that define and dominate human life. Accordingly, in the chapters that follow, I want to discuss not only such “moral sentiments” as sympathy and compassion but also grief, gratitude, love, horror, and even vengeance. All of these have suffered from considerable abuse, though from different quarters, but all of them play a central if not essential role in our experience and our lives. Grief, for example, is typically (if not officially) treated as an illness, a predictable malaise from which one hopes to recover. But grief is a far nobler emotion than this, and however painful it may be, it honors and lays bare the most important attachments of our lives.

Gratitude, likewise, is often seen as a weakness, a slavish emotion that makes all too clear our inability to stand on our own and our need to depend on others. But gratitude, too, is thereby deeply misunderstood. We *are* mutually dependent creatures, however strong our individualism, and an

inability to feel or express gratitude is not a sign of strength but a sure symptom of weakness, if not viciousness. Horror is an emotion of a very different kind, but again, the ability to be horrified is neither a weakness nor a liability; it is an essential aspect of the human condition. It does not much help that horror is often confused or conflated with fear, a very different emotion, or that the mention of horror first of all brings to mind some of the most ridiculous films ever made. And I have not yet said anything here about vengeance, one of the most allegedly despised emotions. The passion for revenge is, to be sure, one of the most dangerous passions, but that does not mean we do not need to appreciate its power and even its virtues. As Susan Jacobi argued some years ago, a society that represses its need for vengeance is as prone to neurosis as one that represses its sexual urges.

Trying to obey Socrates' Delphic Oracle, accordingly, I have made some attempts to understand and appreciate these various abused and neglected emotions, sentiments, and feelings. For in that direction lie not only self-knowledge but also perhaps even Socrates' ultimate goal, wisdom.

ALL BUT ONE OF THESE chapters have been published previously, but I have taken the liberty to rewrite them, in some cases just to bring them up to date, most of them much more extensively. Hegel once complained of his onetime friend Friedrich Schelling that "he educated himself in public." (Schelling, five years younger, had published five books and become world famous before Hegel cranked out his first published article.) I have to admit that such is my own case. Over the years I have educated myself in public (and, I would like to think, sometimes with the public), in the sense that I rethink and rewrite my essays frequently, often after they have been published. Accordingly, many of the essays that make up this book have been through not only multiple drafts but also multiple published and publicly presented versions, usually resulting in longer, I hope better, pieces. Several of the chapters in this book represent such further thinking, elaborations, and extensions.

The title essay, "In Defense of Sentimentality," along with the follow-up essay, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality" (the last chapter in this volume) grew out of many conversations with Kathleen Higgins on the subject of kitsch. Both essays were helped along by the generous support of the American Society for Aesthetics, one of the most friendly and inspiring organizations of which I am a marginal member. These two articles frame my concerns in the book, the contempt that intellectuals and political activists show for sentimentality (with or without such adjectives as "mawkish" or "embarrassing"). While I do not deny that I, too, feel a certain amount of disgust with the excessive emotionality surrounding a good deal of holiday cheer and more

melodramatic romances, I do think that the degree of that “excessiveness” is much of what is at issue. For too many people, *any* such emotion or overt sentiment is excessive. Such emotions are themselves embarrassing (and this embarrassment is in turn embarrassing, thus shifting the emotional stage from sentimentality to embarrassment to shame to rage). It is against such views and prejudices that my arguments here are intended.

“Sympathy and Vengeance: The Role of Feelings in Justice” has a long history and has appeared in several quite different versions over the years. It began as a brief presentation to the International Society for Research on Emotions and at Oxford University in 1988. I then revised and expanded it considerably, first as a Memorial Lecture at the University of Massachusetts in Boston for my dear friend and I.S.R.E. colleague Shula Sommers after her tragic death in April 1989, then again, on a much happier note, on the occasion of Nico Frijda’s formal retirement at the University of Amsterdam. Among the many delights of that celebration was Nico’s own contribution on the same topic and his ample and always insightful advice on my presentation.

“Care and Compassion” grew out of my interest in the emotional basis of ethics and political justice as well as out of my long engagement in the very practical field of business ethics. I have taken a very particular approach to that field, which is so often straitjacketed by strictly legal (“compliance”) considerations, general policy matters, and other large issues that are far beyond the powers of the people who actually work in the corporate world below the executive suites. I am interested, by contrast, in the virtues and vices of the ordinary employee and manager, and their motivation. This led me back to Adam Smith, one of the founders of modern business ethics as well as the father of free enterprise theory, and his *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (1759). The engine of business and the question posed to business ethics by Smith (as opposed to his more crass interpreters) is not the maximization of profit but the satisfaction of vital human interests, especially those expressed in the moral sentiments.

“On Grief and Gratitude” grew first out of a technical worry about the nature of emotions in general, namely, the analysis of an emotion (grief) that apparently contained no coherent desires and served no apparent personal or evolutionary purpose, but rather seemed more like an emotional breakdown (and a breakdown in a person’s life) rather than an emotion as such. But it quickly developed into a much more general concern about the relationship between grief and love, the social role of grief, and the common observation that American society (as well as philosophers) seems to have a good deal of trouble with it. (In working life, “two ‘personal days’ off for the funeral, and then back to work.” In philosophy, for the most part, not a word.) That concern dovetailed with a seemingly very different concern, prompted by the

research of Shula Sommers, which suggested that American men, in particular, have a great deal of trouble with gratitude. Thus I started to think both about the importance of gratitude and about the neglect of both grief and gratitude in contemporary ethics.

“Real Horror” emerged while I was thinking about rewriting an essay on horror movies and was interrupted by the very real horror of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001. On that tragic Tuesday morning, my interest in “make believe” horror seemed nothing but frivolous and irrelevant, despite the fact that my interest in horror movies goes back to my childhood. My scholarly interest developed when I was asked to review Noël Carroll’s delightful book, *The Philosophy of Horror*, for the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. The essay I was starting to write was for Daniel Shaw’s book on horror movies, but after September 11 I focused on the difference between real horror and “art-horror,” and this in turn returned me to my more general interest in the misunderstood emotions.

“Comic Relief: In Appreciation of the Seven Deadly Sins,” by contrast, was an attempt to make light of the human condition. It kicked off a delightfully creative collection of essays, not by me but by roughly half a dozen or so (seven, to be exact) of my friends and colleagues, each of whom embraced his or her favorite sin for the occasion. Title credit (“Comic Relief”) goes to Kathleen Higgins (from her *Comic Relief: Nietzsche’s Gay Science* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]) and, of course, to the Williams–Crystal–Goldberg telethon for the homeless.

“Spirituality as Sentimentality” is adapted from a book I wrote confessing my blithering ignorance of and contempt for that whole side of human experience often designated as “spiritual.” As I confessed in the introduction, I found that I had thrown out the baby with the bath toys, confusing sectarian rage and New Age pap with the real thing. I don’t yet have a grasp on the real thing, but I’m creeping up on it.

“The Virtue of (Erotic) Love” grew out of two books on love and my growing interest in “virtue ethics.” Part of my concern was scholarly. Aristotle had argued vigorously for the virtues, but he also insisted that virtues were not passions but states of character. Kant, attempting a very different approach to ethics, had suggested that the passions played no essential role in ethics and had no “moral worth.” I was concerned to show that at least one passion—love—was itself a virtue and an important part of ethics. Aristotle, who had a keen appreciation of the importance of emotions in the good life, certainly appreciated this. But his definition of “virtue” and his conception of the emotions seemed to undermine it. Kant, a devout Christian, certainly appreciated the importance of love, at least in what he called the “practical” sense. But with this in mind, I wanted to argue both that love was a virtue and that *erotic* love was a virtue. The fact that this thesis

seemed so outrageous has not only to do with our famous puritanical discomfort with sex but also with our discomfort with powerful emotions and the philosophical insistence (so evident in Kant) that ethics and philosophy must be strictly rational. So, once again, I found myself defending sentimentality, but in this case, as erotic sensibility construed as a virtue.

“Reasons for Love” is a more recent piece. It was spurred by two Syracuse University philosophers, Michael Stocker and Laurence Thomas, quite separately. Stocker, in a now classic essay titled “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” directed a powerful accusation against not only modern ethical theories but also “cognitive” theories of emotion (such as mine) as well. Thomas wrote a nice piece for an anthology I put together with Kathleen Higgins (*The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*), titled “The Reasons for Love.” That started me thinking about an essay which would both build on Thomas’s insights and respond to Stocker’s challenge. The idea is that we *love for reasons*, but as I got into the subject, it took me through all sorts of fascinating twists and turns. What it means to “love for reasons,” and what sorts of reasons those are, turned out to be a lot different from what I originally suspected.

“A Lover’s Reply (to Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse*)” was written at the invitation of Hugh Silverman. I had admired Barthes’s work for many years, and I happily accepted the challenge of trying to (more or less) meet him on his own ground. Though the piece looks like a parody, it is intended as a true “reply,” taking very seriously the rather sad experiences of love Barthes reflects on and trying to counter with a much more upbeat conception (although, to be sure, based on a great many similarly disheartening experiences). For of all the passions and sentiments, surely love is the most profound, the most moving, the most inspiring, and the most difficult. And any adequate defense of sentimentality must therefore make the defense of love, even at its most pathetic and sentimental, its top priority.

“On Kitsch and Sentimentality,” as I said, was written after many discussions and exchanges with Kathleen Higgins and extensive museum and gift-shop research.

My thoughts on these matters have developed considerably in the past twenty years, and I am indebted to many sensitive people for their encouragement, suggestions, and their own writings on these subjects. In particular, let me mention, first of all, Kathleen Higgins, my beloved and wonderful life companion. (I can talk like that in a book defending sentimentality.) Her exceptional sense of compassion, her unfathomable deep feelings, and her own thoughts and writings on sentimentality and kindred topics have been an extremely important contribution not only to my own ideas but to my life as well. I have learned much, directly or indirectly, from Nico Frijda, Paul Woodruff, Frithjof Bergmann, Shula Sommers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland

Barthes, Noël Carroll, Friedrich Nietzsche, Janet McCracken, Betty Sue Flowers, Cheshire Calhoun, Clancy Martin, and many others. I have dedicated several of the chapters to a few of the people who have most influenced, helped, or taught me. I also want to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for a delightful stint at their Bellagio site, during which I worked on several of these chapters, and the University Research Institute at the University of Texas, which supported others. My thanks, too, to the Philosophy Dept. at the University of Auckland for their wonderful hospitality and collegiality over these many years. My special thanks to my editors Peter Ohlin and Lisa Stallings, and to Farrah Ghazi Zughni for her help with the index. The book as a whole is dedicated to two of the most wonderful sentimentalists I have known, Kathleen and Kathryn Higgins (1925–2003).

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One

In Defense of Sentimentality

A sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it.—Oscar Wilde (*De Profundis*)

“What’s Wrong with Sentimentality?” The title of Mark Jefferson’s article¹ already indicates a great deal not only about the gist of his essay but also about a century-old prejudice that has been devastating to ethics and literature alike. According to that prejudice, it goes without saying that there is something wrong with sentimentality, even if it is difficult to put one’s finger on it. To be called “sentimental” is to be ridiculed or dismissed. Sentimentality is a weakness; it suggests hypocrisy. Or perhaps it is the fact that sentimental people are so . . . embarrassing. (How awkward it is to talk to or sit next to someone weeping or gushing, when one is dry-eyed or somber.) Or perhaps it is the well-confirmed fact that sentimentalists have such poor taste, and sentimental literature is, above all, literature that is tasteless, cheap, superficial, and manipulative—in other words, verbal kitsch. Such mawkish literature jerks tears from otherwise sensible readers, and sentimentalists are those who actually enjoy that humiliating experience. Perhaps that is why Oscar Wilde thought that sentimentalists were really cynics. (“Sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism.”)²

Or perhaps what bothers us is what once bothered Michael Tanner: that sentimental people indulge themselves in their feelings instead of doing what should be done.³ It is often said that the problem is that sentimentality and sentimental literature alike give us a false view of the world, distort our thinking, and substitute a “saccharine” portrait of the world for what we all know to be the horrible realities. Moreover, as Mark Jefferson and Milan Kundera more than suggest, the “simpleminded sympathies” of sentimentality might actually promote fascism and racism, if only by blunting any critical response. Mary Midgley similarly suggests that sentimentality leads to brutality.⁴ But even where sentimentality is a harmless diversion—a Daphne du Maurier novel on a sad Saturday afternoon—it seems to be all but agreed that sentimentality is no virtue even if it is not, like cruelty and hypocrisy, intrinsically vicious. Something is wrong with sentimentality; the only question is, What is it?

In this chapter, I want to argue that there is *nothing* wrong with sentimentality. Of course, like any quasi-ethical category, it admits of unwarranted excesses and hypocritical abuses, and is prone to various pathological distortions. But the prejudice against sentimentality, I want to argue, is ill-founded and is an extension of that all-too-familiar contempt for the passions in Western literature and philosophy. Our disdain for sentimentality is the rationalist's discomfort with any display of emotion, warranted as well as unwarranted, appropriate as well as inappropriate. It is as if the very word "sentimentality" has been loaded with the connotations of "too much"—too much feeling and too little common sense and rationality, as if these were opposed instead of mutually supportive. It is as if sentimentality and its sentiments are never warranted and always inappropriate. The word has come to be used as the name of a deficiency or a weakness if not, as some critics have written, a malaise.

I take sentimentality to be nothing more nor less than the "appeal to tender feelings," and though one can manipulate and abuse such feelings (including one's own), and though they can on occasion be misdirected or excessive, there is nothing wrong with them as such and nothing (in that respect) wrong with literature that provokes us, that moves us to abstract affection or weeping. Sentimentality implies no deficiency in one's rational faculties and does not imply any inappropriateness, unwillingness, or lack of readiness to act. Sentimentality does not involve any distortion of the world, and it does not impede, but rather prepares and motivates, our reacting in "the real world." It is not an escape from reality or responsibility but, quite to the contrary, provides the precondition for ethical engagement rather than being an obstacle to it. Or this is what I will argue here.

From Sentiment to Sentimentality

Historically, I want to trace the fate of sentimentality to the parallel fates of the "sentiments" and their apparently doomed plea for ethical legitimacy in what was once called "moral sentiment theory." My thesis is that the sentiments have had a bad time in Anglo-American moral and social philosophy for well over a century, and that sentimentality has been held in contempt for just about the same period of time. During at least some of the eighteenth century, morality was thought to be, first of all, a matter of the proper sentiments (whether "natural" or "artificially" cultivated), and sentimentality, accordingly, was something of a virtue. But today, the "moral sentiment" theorists—David Hume and Adam Smith in particular—are studied only because of their many other ideas and insights. Despite some sophisticated efforts on the Continent to keep the tradition alive (e.g., in the work of Max

Scheler), the moral sentiment tradition was all but dead in moral philosophy by the middle of the twentieth century.⁵

Kant did away with “melting compassion” as an ingredient in ethics once and for all before 1800, in a single sarcastic comment in the *Groundwork* (“kindness done from duty . . . is practical, and not pathological . . . residing in the will and not in the propensions of feeling, in principles of action and not of melting compassion.”)⁶ The other “inclinations” did not fare much better in his philosophy, except perhaps for respect, dignity, and faith, which, because of their importance, were not treated as mere “sentiments.” It need not be said that most of ethics since Kant has been wholly absorbed in the vicissitudes of reason and the priority of various rational principles, and quite suspicious of the sentiments. Rational principles are universal. Feelings are too often particular and personal. Rational principles are “objective” and admit of argument and demonstration. Mere feelings are wholly “subjective” (which is multiply ambiguous) and (supposedly) not vulnerable to logic. Rational principles are (unlike love) truly forever, while feelings are capricious and come and go. Rationality is by its nature unemotional and disinterested. The sentiments as emotions are not only interested but absorbed, caught up in the circumstances and incapable of unbiased judgment. The Humean humanist emphasis on the sentiments was replaced, accordingly, by the still current scholastic debates about deontic semantics, and doing right became much more a matter of acting on the right principles (though not necessarily Kantian or deontological principles) and much less a matter of feeling the right feelings. Worst of all, on this account of ethics, was to feel the feelings alone and not entertain, in some more or less self-understanding way, the principles upon which one was bound to act. Mere sentiment—even the most tender sentiments—became an ethical liability.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that sentimentality had an even worse time of it and not only is excluded from most discussions of ethics but also, when discussed at all, is condemned as an ethical defect. To call someone a “sentimentalist” in ethics is to dismiss both the person and his or her views from serious consideration—adding, perhaps, a disdainful chortle and an implicit accusation of frivolousness. And in literature as in ethics, sentimentality is viewed as a serious defect. Sentimentality is kitsch. Sentimentality substitutes cheap manipulation of feeling for careful calculation of form or judicious development of character. But sentimentality as kitsch and sentimentality as an ethical defect are two very different charges, and part of the problem in the general condemnation of sentimentality is that it too readily identifies the two and treats them together. I abstain here from an opinion on kitsch, but I do want to defend sentimentality—and with it the role of emotions in ethics and literature—against the bad reputation it has recently acquired. (On kitsch, see chapter 11.)

It is worth noting that the offensive epithet “sentimentalist” has not long been a term of abuse: just two centuries ago, when Schiller referred to himself and his poetry as “sentimental” (as opposed to Goethe’s “naive” style, which Schiller much admired as the hallmark of true genius), he had in mind the elegance of emotion, not saccharine sweetness and the manipulation of mawkish passions.⁷ But in 1823, the poet Robert Southey dismissed Rousseau as a writer who “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.”⁸ This charge of elitism was soon to be reversed: hitherto a sentimentalist would have distinctively *inferior* feelings. If Rousseau’s audience was objectionable early in the century because it believed itself to have “finer” feelings, the object of Oscar Wilde’s scorn (the young Lord Alfred Douglas) was attacked as a “sentimentalist” because his feelings were fraudulent and contemptible. By the end of the nineteenth century, “sentimentalist” was clearly a term of abuse or ridicule.

I suggested that the status of “sentimentality” went into decline about the same time that the sentiments lost their status in moral philosophy, and that the key figure in this philosophical transformation was Immanuel Kant. But Kant’s unprecedented attack on sentiment and sentimentalism was at least in part a reaction, perhaps a visceral reaction, not only against the philosophical moral sentiment theorists (whom he at least admired), but also against the flood of popular women writers in Europe and America who were then turning out thousands of widely read potboilers and romances that did indeed equate virtue and goodness with gushing sentiment. It is no secret that the charge of sentimentalism has long had sexist implications as a weakness that is both more common (even “natural”) and more forgivable in women than in men, and one might plausibly defend the thesis that the moralist’s attack on sentimentality cannot be separated from a more general Victorian campaign against the rising demand for sexual equality.⁹ But in the purportedly nonpolitical, genderless world of philosophy, sentimentalism was forced into a confrontation with logic and became the fallacy of appealing to emotion. In ethics, to be accused of sentimentalism meant that one had an unhealthy and most unphilosophical preference for heartfelt feeling over hardheaded reason.

Meanwhile, sentimentalism more generally became a matter of moral bad taste, a weakness for easy emotion in place of the hard facts and ambiguities of human social life; and the literature that provoked and promoted such emotions became the object of moral—not only literary—condemnation. Not surprisingly, prime targets for such a charge were those same women’s novels—and the emotions they provoked—which were, and still are, dismissed as “trash” by the literary establishment.¹⁰ But though designated “sentimental rubbish” by their detractors, some of these novels achieved unprecedented

success, in terms not only of popularity but of moral and political influence as well. Harriet Beecher Stowe's much demeaned *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the first American novel to sell a million copies and perhaps the most politically influential book in postcolonial American history. Sentimentalism may have been dismissed as mere self-indulgence by its critics (including feminist critics),¹¹ but it was in fact a sufficiently powerful moral influence to warrant its status as the target (if not the explicit object) of Kant's renowned attack.

Sentimentality, Art, and Ethics

The great philosopher Kant was moved to attack sentimental gush in both morality and art (though he was no great connoisseur), and the two—bad art and an overly emotional sense of morals—have been conflated ever since. Of course, good art and correct morals had been tied together through the moral sentiments before, notably in Denis Diderot's deservedly famous criticism and in Schiller's positive praise of sentimentality, but one of my main aims here is to disentangle them. Bad art is one thing and sentimentality is another, and while bad literature in particular may try to prove its redeeming value by evoking tender feelings, its sentimentality is neither the cause of its badness nor a species of immorality. Sentimentality in certain circumstances can be in bad taste, of course, but sentimentality as such is not always (or even usually) in bad taste and bad taste does not always (or even usually) reflect bad character.

William James depicts a wealthy society matron who weeps at the plight of the characters on stage while her waiting servants freeze outside, and there is a story about Rudolf Hess weeping at the opera put on by condemned Jewish prisoners during the Holocaust. Such stories do demonstrate that sentimentality divorced from life may reflect a particularly despicable or dangerous pathology. But it is not sentimentality as such that is at fault in these two famous cases. Exactly the same charge might be leveled against that use of reason (as in "thinking the unthinkable") which entertains the hypotheses of game theory while deliberating the fate of millions. It is not sentimentality (or rationality) that is troublesome, but rather its utter inappropriateness in the context in question. Sentimentality is rarely the symptom (much less the cause) of moral deficiency. We can agree that certain sentiments and sentimentality can be inappropriate and excessive without granting that sentiments and sentimentality are immoral or pathological as such, and we can similarly agree that sentimentality in literature can be inappropriate and excessive without granting that sentimentality marks a deficiency in literature or in the reader who responds to it. It is simply not true

that sentimentality betrays cynicism. It is rather that sentimentality betrays the cynic, for it is the cynic and not the sentimentalist who cannot abide honest emotion.

The history of the moral sentiments in connection with art and literature made it almost inevitable that the turn against the sentiments would be both paralleled by and identified with a turn against sentimentality in the arts as well. Diderot insisted, in his review of one of Jacques-Louis David's more provocative political paintings, that he wanted first of all, that art should "move me, astonish me, break my heart, let me tremble, weep, stare, be enraged." One would be hard put to imagine a similar demand from an art critic today, but Diderot was very much a part of the moral sensibility that made up the moral sentiment movement. That link between emotions, art, and ethics, once forged, would not easily be broken. But whereas the evocation of emotions was once a great virtue in a novel, poem, or painting, it now became something of a vice, a reason not only to disparage the quality of the work but also to doubt the sincerity and the integrity of the writer or the artist. Superb technique could always be criticized as "manipulative" and the emotions evoked could always be said to be "false"—for how could a work of fiction be expected to evoke a "true" emotion? Sentimental art and literature thus became "bad" art and literature, and this in turn reflected a moral as well as an aesthetic flaw in art and artist as well as in the audience.

What this presupposes is that sentimentality itself is somehow blame-worthy, cynical, or vicious. But if there is nothing essentially wrong with sentimentality (though of course there are pathological excesses and inappropriate objects), then there is nothing wrong with sentimentality in literature. On the contrary, sentimentality is essential to both ethics and literature. The real worry is those many moralists who think and don't feel and, in literature, writers who sell and readers who buy pure narrative or entertainment devoid of tender feelings, as well as those avante-garde writers who plot the deconstruction of their own writing and leave us with nothing. The excessive manipulation of tender feelings is not the problem of sentimentality; the problem of sentimentality is the lack of tender feelings altogether.

Sentimentality is variously conceived (1) in terms of the "tender" emotions (I call this the "minimal" definition), (2) in terms of emotional weakness or "excessive" emotion (the "loaded" definition), and (3) in terms of emotional self-indulgence (the "diagnostic" definition). Sometimes it is identified by the "epistemological" definition (4) in terms of its "false" or "fake" emotions, though one must then provide an account of what a "false" or a "fake" emotion (as opposed to a merely make-believe emotion) might be. Obviously the case that can be made for (or against) sentimentality depends upon the

neutrality or the bias of the definition. My main concern is the defense of sentimentality in terms of the minimal definition, as an expression of and appeal to the tender emotions. If the tender emotions (pity, sympathy, fondness, adoration, compassion) are thought to be not only ethically irrelevant but also ethically undesirable, then it is not sentimentality that should be called into question but the conception of ethics that would dictate such an inhuman response. My central argument, here and throughout this book, is that no conception of ethics can be adequate unless it takes into account such emotions, not as mere “inclinations” but as an essential part of the substance of ethics itself. It is thus that I want to defend sentimentality as an ethical virtue and suggest that sentimentality in literature might best be conceived as the cultivation and “practice” of our moral-emotional faculties.

On the other hand, if sentimentality is defined or diagnosed as an ethical defect, as weakness or self-indulgence (though it is far from entirely clear that weakness and self-indulgence are as such *ethical* defects), that loads the issue against sentimentality and makes it hard to see how a defense of it would be possible. Indeed, the very pronunciation of the term “sentimentalist” and the characterization of “sentimentality” indicate deep disdain for emotions as intrusions and for emotionality as vulnerability. For instance, it is difficult to see how strong sentiments could constitute a weakness unless there is already operating some powerful metaphor that views our sentiments as alien and the integral self as a will which is supposed to contain or control them but fails to do so. So, too, sentimentality seems to be self-indulgence if a person is seen to indulge in his or her emotional weaknesses.

One could thus view the reader as the willing victim of the emotionally manipulative author, just as an alcoholic is seen as the willing victim of that first drink. Sentimentality is “giving in,” and a preference for sentimentality suggests a perverse willingness to make oneself vulnerable. Thus, according to this unflattering picture, the reader indulges in sentiments that are not his or her own but are caused by a more or less skillful storyteller, and the moral flaw is the failure to control and contain these emotions. The author, on the other hand, is something of a seducer, though the fruits of a successful seduction may be only a tear or two. Sentimental literature violates the reader’s sense of self by provoking these unwelcome emotional intrusions at an intensity that cannot be controlled (except, perhaps, by firmly putting down the book in question). And if one adds to this any one of a familiar set of ideas about aesthetic “detachment” or “appreciation of form,” the ethical flaw becomes a failure in aesthetics as well. Whatever else literature is supposed to do to us, goes this account, it ought not to “manipulate” the reader’s emotions, interfering with both autonomy and aesthetic appreciation. Any normal reader will feel some emotion, to be sure, but this is as irrelevant to good literature as it is to doing the right thing in ethics.

Sentimentality and Self-Indulgence

The unspoken premise in the attack on sentimentality is the unflattering nature of the sentiments, the emotions themselves. It is emotional engagement as such that is alien to the properly rational and ideally detached self, feeling and its expressions in place of ends-means calculation and reason-directed action. Our emotions, even in their mildest forms, are by their very nature self-involved and self-indulgent. That makes them too self-interested to allow for deliberate or reasoned judgment. Any emotion, on such accounts, is excessive, for an emotion or a sentiment as such is a disruption of the life of reason and an obstacle to ethical analysis and aesthetic appreciation rather than an essential part of them.

“Excessive” sentimentality may indeed be a vice, but sentimentality and the sentiments are not as such excessive—unless, of course, one thinks that the emotions are necessarily self-interested intrusions in an otherwise rational life. But I reject this view of emotions in life, and I also reject the idea that emotions are by their very nature self-involved and self-indulgent. Although I question the starkness of his dichotomy and his “master-slave” metaphor, I tend to agree with David Hume that reason ought to serve the passions. And the idea that emotions are by their very nature self-involved (much less self-indulgent) is one more version of an ancient fallacy in moral psychology: that because an inclination is motivated, it must be self-motivated. For instance, because one has a desire, it must be a desire for oneself, and its satisfaction must be self-satisfaction. But one can passionately desire the good of another. One can passionately desire that some state of affairs (e.g., the outcome of an election) should become the case. So, too, in literature. One can passionately desire the positive resolution of a novel without any hint of *self*-interest. There need be no taint of self-interest in many emotions.

Moreover, most of the critical literature against sentimentality does not in fact employ these charges and misunderstandings. Arguments by Jefferson, Tanner, and Midgley, for example (as well as those implicit in Oscar Wilde), do not take the word “sentimentality” to mean “too much,” but charge that the character of sentimentality, even conceived in the minimal sense, leads to self-indulgence and, consequently, ethical impropriety or inaction. These further arguments turn on the subtle nature and consequences of sentimentality, the alleged falseness of the component sentiments, the “distortions” that these impose on perception and judgment, and the dangers of what is argued to be the unrealistic simplicity of the sentimental worldview.

But the charge of self-indulgence is a particularly serious one, quite apart from the misunderstanding about the supposed self-interest of all emotions as such and its subsequent consequences. It is also quite different from—and in some forms opposed to—the criticism of sentimentality as a weakness.

The positive insight behind the charge of self-indulgence is that we in fact *enjoy* having emotions, sometimes quite apart from what in particular that emotion is about. Thus one can enjoy a good piece of fiction despite the fact that the story is not, strictly speaking, “about” anything at all, for the characters do not exist (and have never existed) and the circumstances described are wholly fictitious. One can enjoy a good cry quite regardless of what initiates or triggers one’s tears; indeed, it may be preferable that the initiating stimulus is unimportant or inappropriate, a mawkish novel or a trivial accident, rather than a real-life tragedy that would fully justify such hysterics. So, too, it is far preferable for most of us to enjoy the thrills of high adventure, the horrors of nature run amok, and the suspense of a threatened murder quite detached from the circumstances in real life that would inspire such emotions. We enjoy the thrill, the horror, the suspense without ever being in any real danger ourselves. But is such behavior self-indulgent? Is it wrong to enjoy an emotion for its own sake? And isn’t it even worse to willfully provoke such feelings through the use of literature and the imagination, instead of paying attention to real-life tragedies and hardships that we can in fact do something about?

I think that one mistake here is the idea that there is such a thing as “an emotion for its own sake.” Every emotion has its context, its implications, its place in our personality whether or not it has objects that are real or appropriate (as opposed to fictional or merely convenient). I do not want to argue that sentimentality (or emotions in general) is “good in itself.” Whether a particular emotion is “appropriate” depends upon the situation, including the object and the nature of the emotion in question, the identity and character of the person having the emotion, and the overall social context. So, too, whether sentimentality is appropriate, good or bad, morally uplifting or self-defeating or humiliating depends upon the situation, including the object and nature of the sentiment in question, the identity and character of the “sentimentalist,” and the overall social context. Weeping at an opera while Jews are being gassed at one’s command nearby is grotesque, but weeping at an opera ordinarily is not.

We cultivate and enjoy as well as suffer emotions, but we do not do so wholly apart from context, minimally the context of our own self-consciousness. We pride ourselves on our sensitivity, and we enjoy feelings of power as well as, on safe occasions, powerlessness. We may well speculate about why people voluntarily provoke fear and suspense in themselves (e.g., by reading semifictional accounts of impending doom or adventure thrillers that provide something more than Agatha Christie whodunit curiosity), but there seems to be little mystery why people would want to cultivate the tender emotions. Whatever else may be going on (and Nietzsche, for one, suggests that a great deal else is “going on”), we feel good about ourselves when we

experience the tender emotions, and we feel even better when, reflectively, we perceive ourselves as the sort of people who feel such feelings.

In a famous discussion of kitsch and sentimentality in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera writes:

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.¹²

But notice that this charge (a peculiar kind of “self-indulgence”) does not suggest that tender emotions as such are somehow illegitimate; rather, we have tender emotions precisely in order to feel better about ourselves. We might now ask, What’s wrong with this (in contrast, for example, to the feeling of self-righteousness that may accompany doing one’s moral duty or moralizing in terms of this or that moral principle)? Kundera, of course, is concerned with a particular kind of political propaganda that intentionally eclipses harsh realities with emotion and uses sweet sentiments to preclude political criticism. To be sure, sentimentalizing fascism is one of the clearest possible examples of the “inappropriate” uses of sentimentality, but it does not follow that this is the true nature of sentimentality or that sentimentality is cynical or bad in itself. If the emotion were disgust or fear, would similar reflections (on the shared virtue of recognizing the world’s vulgarity or fearsomeness) be similarly sentimental?

Why is it only the tender sentiments that come in for such criticism and abuse? More recently, Kundera has written, “Kitsch is the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling. It moves us to tears for ourselves, for the banality of what we think and feel.”¹³ Here the charge is not self-indulgence at all, but rather our banal and unoriginal ideas. But why must an honest feeling claim originality, and why, again, are only the tender sentiments (as opposed, for example, to such vulgar negativities as fecal monism) subject to such a test? We can readily share Kundera’s concern for the use of kitsch as a cover for totalitarianism; but then it is not sentimentality that is at fault, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with our being moved by the children playing on the grass and then by our being moved by our being moved. Is the “second tear” self-indulgence or is it what, in philosophical circles, what would normally be called simply “reflection,” the precondition of the examined life? Why should reflection be tearless, unless we are wedded to an indefensible divorce between reason and the passions, the latter wholly self-absorbed and without reason, the former merely an “ideal spectator,” wholly dispassionate and wholly without feeling?

Sentimentality, Inaction, and Falsity

Michael Tanner raises a similar but more powerful objection against sentimentality. It is worth noting that he takes sentimentality in music as his paradigm (a starting point that threatens incoherence between the non-representational nature of instrumental music and the intentionality of emotions. There may also be a problem where the enjoyment of music is purely aesthetic.) But despite his paradigm, Tanner is concerned only secondarily with sentimentality in art and comes out strongly against sentimentality as such. He echoes Wilde's suggestion that the feelings which constitute sentimentality are "in some important way unearned, being had on the cheap, come by too easily. . . . to be sentimental is to be shallow." But Tanner's real objection to sentimentality is that it "doesn't lead anywhere" (p. 130). It is this gap between sentimentality and action that Tanner rejects. In "emotional generosity," which Tanner contrasts directly with sentimentality, one "acts on [one's] feelings without anxiety about the point and value of doing so . . . feeling and action become fairly closely linked." Sentimental people, by contrast, "avoid following up their responses with *appropriate* actions, or if they do follow them up appropriately, it is adventitious" (pp. 139–140).

If this objection could be sustained, much of what we are arguing here would be fatuous, namely, that sentiment is essential in ethics. But it seems to me that the manipulative sentimentality of a novel such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows quite conclusively that sentimentality is not nearly so ill-directed nor so ineffective as Tanner suggests. On the contrary, being deeply moved by some specific (even if fictional) circumstance (for example, the death of little Eva—which Jane Tompkins calls "the epitome of Victorian sentimentalism") would seem to be a much more reliable prod or at least conduit to action (e.g., in raising an outcry against slavery) than a well-rationalized set of categorical imperatives. It is true, of course, that one can do very little about political situations in a foreign country that arouse our indignation or sympathy (in neither instance a case of what is usually called "sentimentality"), but that does not make the emotion "cheap" or "easy to come by." Direct action may be rather costly, though one can always write a letter or send a check. (There is the existentialist impulse. You have to *do something!*)

Does the sentimentalist act (if and when he or she acts) only with anxiety about doing so? Granted there is always room for hypocrisy, self-deception, and incontinence, but is there any greater danger here than elsewhere in the realm of human behavior? And where the object is fictitious, what sort of action would be appropriate and what would be adventitious? (It is worth noting that some critics of sentimental kitsch—Karsten Harries, for instance¹⁴—object to sentimentality because it *lacks* that distance to which Tanner objects.) There are people, of course, who become so caught up in

their own emotional reactions that they block their access or attention to action, and there are people who are sentimental all of the time, inappropriately responding to situations as “moving” or “sweet” when they would be better viewed as disgusting or dangerous. But such pathological sentimentalists are hardly fair examples of sentimentality as such. The supposed gap between emotion and action is not an objection against sentimentality.

The most common charge against sentimentality is that it involves false emotion. But what is it for an emotion to be false? It is not, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁵ for the emotion to be “vicarious.” The fact that an emotion is vicarious (in some sense “secondhand”) does not mean that it is not a real emotion or that it is not an emotion of the morally appropriate type. Sympathy for a fictional character in a novel is nevertheless genuine sympathy. Horror provoked by the grisly view of an apparently decapitated cat on a movie screen is real horror, perhaps accompanied by real disgust and real nausea, no matter that the viewer knows it to be another one of Hollywood’s many tricks and the special effects man to be a cat lover. Indignation about the maltreatment of blacks in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is rightful indignation, whether or not the character evoking sympathy and the situation provoking indignation are actual or modeled after an actual character and situation.

Nor is an emotion “false” if it is divorced from action. It is the nature of some emotions (e.g., grief) to be cut off entirely from effective action and open only to “adventitious” expression. Self-indulgence in an emotion may make it “false” in the sense that one exaggerates either its importance or its effects, but it is not the emotion itself that is false. So, too, excessive self-consciousness of one’s emotions may well lead to the suspicion that an emotion is overly controlled or “faked,” but as I pointed out (with reference to Kundera), emotional self-consciousness is not itself fraudulent but rather an important philosophical virtue, and a thoroughly righteous emotion (such as indignation) may well be self-conscious without in the least undermining its claims to legitimacy.

One prominent suggestion is that sentimentality yields “fake” emotions because the object of the emotion is not what it claims to be. It is *displaced*. A sentimentalist only pretends to be moved by the plight of another; he or she is really reacting to a much more personal plight. A sentimentalist sobs his or her way through a tearjerker novel, but he or she is really weeping for a lost lover, a dying aunt, a recent humiliation at work. One can imagine Milan Kundera claiming that even the first tear is fake because it is not really about the children but about oneself. We should note that this is different from the charge that the emotions involved in sentimentality are vicarious, that is, based on fictional situations or situations which (though real) are not one’s own. Vicarious emotions have (in some complex sense) unreal objects, but the

emotion is nevertheless directed toward those objects. Displaced emotions only seem to be directed toward their putative objects but in fact are directed elsewhere. Thus there is a suggestion of hypocrisy in the displacement charge which is not at all evident in the claim that sentimentality is vicarious.

But many emotions are displaced. (Indeed, some Freudians and symbolists would claim that all are.) Displacement has nothing special to do with sentimentality, and does not generically make an emotion false. A man, angry with his boss at work, comes home and yells at his misbehaving kids. His anger is displaced, but it is nevertheless not the case that “he isn’t really angry at his kids,” even if it is true that, in a more mellow mood, he would tolerate their screaming without such explosive irritation. Another man is shattered when his lover leaves, but the very next week he falls madly in love with a woman who looks remarkably like the one who just made her exit. “Love on the rebound” is a form of displacement but, again, one cannot hastily conclude that it is therefore false. What is presupposed in such discussions is a kind of quantitative zero-sum or qualitative unidirectional assumption such that an emotion can “really” have one and only one object. If the man is really angry at his boss, he cannot also be angry at his kids, and if the other man is still in love with the first woman, he cannot also be in love with the second. But there is no reason to accept such monotopical restrictions on our emotional life, and if sentimentality is to a considerable extent a phenomenon of displacement (why else would we respond to some of those novels and movies?), then it should be credited with enriching and enlarging our emotional lives. It would be a nightmare, not a matter of integrity, if we could direct our emotions only at their primary objects, if we could not express and satisfy ourselves with secondary, derivative, and fictional objects as well.

One long-standing argument is that sentimentality is objectionable and its emotions false because it is *distorting*. Mary Midgley, for instance, argues that “the central offence lies in self-deception, in distorting reality to get a pretext for indulging in *any* feeling.” Returning to the much-discussed example of the death of Little Nell in Dickens’s *Old Curiosity Shop* (which Wilde insisted could not be read without laughing), she claims:

Dickens created in little Nell and various other female characters a figure who could not exist and was the product of wish-fulfilment—a subservient, devoted, totally understanding mixture of child and lover, with no wishes of her own. This figure was well-designed to provoke a delicious sense of pity and mastery, and to set up further fantasies where this feeling could continue. One trouble about this apparently harmless pursuit is that it distorts various expectations; it can make people unable to deal with the real world, and particularly with real girls. Another is that it can so absorb them that they cannot react to what is genuinely pitiful in the world around them.¹⁶

Sentimentality, Midgley argues, centers around the “flight from, and contempt for, real people.” In literature, kitsch characters—Dickens’s Nell or Stowe’s Eva—are one-dimensional, inspiring an excessive purity of emotion. These girls don’t do any of the nasty things that little children do. They don’t whine. They don’t tease the cat. They don’t hit other children. They don’t have any blemishes on their perfect cuteness. They are, accordingly, false characters and our feelings are distorted. So, too, Mark Jefferson argues that “sentimentality involves attachment to a distorted series of beliefs.”¹⁷

But the reply to this objection is, first of all, that all emotions are distorting in the sense intended. Anger looks only at the offense and fails to take account of the virtue of the antagonist; jealousy is aware only of the threat and not of the wit and charms of the rival; love celebrates the virtues and is not appreciative of the vices of the beloved; envy seeks only the coveted object and remains indifferent to questions of general utility and the fairness of the desired redistribution. But why call this “distortion” rather than “focus” or “concern”? And what is the alternative—omniscience? always attending to everything that one knows or remembers about a subject? (reviewing the history of Denmark as well as the literature on stepchild relations before one allows oneself to be moved by *Hamlet*)? never having a nice thought without a nasty one as well? What is wrong with sentimentality is not a matter of distortion of reality for the sake of emotion, for all emotions construct a perspective of reality that is specifically suited to their natures.

There are, of course, ways of carving up the world, ways of selecting the sweet from the surrounding circumstances, that are indeed falsifying, distorting, and dangerous. We can sentimentalize the situation of the Southern plantation slaves before the Civil War, the patriotic motives of the “freedom fighters” in Nicaragua. We can sentimentalize mischievous children who are bound for reform school (or worse), or all mammals that are on farms or in zoos, circuses, or experimental laboratories. Gwynne Dyer warns us, in his terrifying study of war, against the temptation to “sentimentalize war.”¹⁸ It is obvious that in such cases we are already in ethical territory, but what is at stake here is the mode of categorization, not sentimentality. One might (and many do) reach the same results through the affectless application of rational or ideological principles. It is not the nature of the feelings that characterize such problematic cases of “sentimentality,” but rather the inappropriate or even dangerous way of misperceiving an ethically loaded situation. This is how we should react to the example of the Jewish prisoners’ opera. It was not Hess’s weeping that is damnable but his evil ability to block out reality that ought to inspire horror and revulsion in any civilized human being.

Mark Jefferson has one example—and I think that it is a very telling example—of how sentimentality can become a danger to morality. In

E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* the English fiancée (Miss Quested) becomes sentimentalized as the symbol of "the purity, bravery and vulnerability of English womanhood."¹⁹ Her alleged attacker (Dr. Aziz) is complementarily cast as "lust-ridden and perfidious" (along with his people). But I would argue that the point has much more to do with chauvinism and racism than with sentimentality, and it has little of that innocence of feeling which constitutes sentimentality. There is some confusion between the alleged innocence of Miss Quested and the innocence of the emotions the reader feels about her. There is also an ambivalence about the relationship of sentimentality and action, for while Tanner and others tend to indict sentimentality for its "distance" from action, here is Jefferson complaining that sentimentality provokes actions of the most violent kind. But it is not sentimentality that provokes (directly or indirectly) the vilification of Aziz and his people, and the "simple-minded sympathies" bestowed upon Quested are hardly an example of sentimentality. Here, again, I think we see the danger of that zero-sum sense of emotion, in this case manifested in a confusion between idealization on the one hand and a dichotomizing conflict on the other. One need not, in celebrating the virtues of an Englishwoman, imply or conclude anything unflattering about the non-English. Competitive winners may entail the possibility of losers and praise may entail the possibility of blame, but there are many forms of idealization that do not entail such contrasts.

So, too, Jefferson's examples of World War I propaganda—of Germans ("Huns") bayoneting Belgian babies—do not tell us anything about the dangers of sentimentality. They do tell us something about war paranoia and they do presuppose the tender sentiments we all have for babies that make such depictions loathsome. (cf. the "dead baby" jokes that are popular among teenagers, which intentionally play on this assumption.) But these sentiments will be degraded as "sentimental" only if they are perversely demeaned or grotesquely misunderstood. If caring about babies is sentimentality, then why would Jefferson wonder "What's Wrong with Sentimentality?" This is neither "malaise" nor "a distortion of the way things are," nor is it a "fiction" to be "associated with brutality." Caring about babies is one of those sentiments that can rightly be assumed in any civilized human being. The abuse of babies rightly provokes an emotional reaction. There is nothing distorting about that, or about stories that capitalize on that. Nevertheless, such stories (e.g., Germans bayoneting babies) may be false.

Sentimentality and Self-Deception

What becomes more and more evident, as one pursues the objections to sentimentality, is that the real objection to sentimentality is the rejection (or

fear) of emotion, and a certain kind of emotion or sentiment in particular, variously designated as “tender” or “sweet” or “nostalgic” (Harries: “cloying sweetness,” “sugary stickiness”). We find relatively few objections in either art or ethics, we might note, to one-dimensional cynicism, to that gloomy view of the world which commonly co-opts the name “realism.” Karsten Harries warns us: “How easy it is to wax lyrical over despair, to wallow in it, to enjoy it.”²⁰ Mary Midgley points out that “thrillers” have much in common with sentimentality, although they distort reality and manipulate emotion to a very different end: “to let the reader feel pleasingly tough and ruthless.” But in practice the charge of sentimentality is almost always aimed at some common tender human sentiment—our reactions to the laughter of a child or to the death of an infant, for example.

It is true that such matters, especially if presently baldly, unambiguously, and without subtlety, are virtually guaranteed to arouse emotion, and they therefore provide a facile vehicle for second- or third-rate painters and novelists. But if such incidents are clichéd, it is because they are such a common and virtually universal concern, and the fact that this may make for some very bad art and literature should not be used to encourage our embarrassment at experiencing these quite natural sentiments or to discourage those sentiments themselves. Telephone advertisements pressing us to “reach out” to a grandmother or a grandson or a long-absent friend may be annoying because they are so crassly commercial, but it is not the strong, tender feelings evoked that ought to be the target of our disdain. Somewhat similar public service announcements for Save the Children and CARE provoke similar feelings without the accompanying disdain, and it seems perfectly right and proper for them to do so. How else should one appeal for donations to feed a starving family or inoculate a stricken village against the ravages of disease? By appealing to our Kantian sense of duty?

Nostalgia is a form of sentimentality, and given the unfortunate fact that most of our experiences are at least tinged with unpleasantness, nostalgia requires considerable effort in selecting, editing, and presenting memories. But, as I argued earlier, this does not necessarily mean that the memories are false or falsified, although that may sometimes be the case. To remember grandpa on what may have been his one healthy and happy day in a decade is not to have a false memory. Nostalgia as sentimentality is the ability to focus on or remember something pleasant in the midst of what may have in fact been tragedy and horror. To take an extreme example, old soldiers fondly remember the camaraderie of a campaign and try hard to forget the terror, bloodshed, and death that surrounded them. But unless such nostalgia is used as a dubious defense of the “glory” of war, why should this be cause for indignation? One can “sentimentalize war,” of course, and there the problem is neither sentimentality nor distorted memory but a much more serious

ethical offense. But that is not the usual purpose of such selective memories, and a preemptive general strike hardly seems called for.

What I am suggesting is that the attack on sentimentality is wrongheaded and, possibly worse, a matter of self-deception or serious self-denial. (That, of course, is just what the critics say about sentimentality.) The usual attack on sentimentality is, I am convinced, too often an attack on innocence and the innocent enjoyment of one's own tender and therefore "soft" emotions. Mark Jefferson makes this point quite convincingly, though he then goes on to join in the attack himself. He argues that sentimentality distorts reality and is "ill-formed," but then he wisely concludes that "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."²¹ And yet Jefferson resists extending this concession to sentimentality as such. As it turns out, it is almost always the soft emotions that come most under fire. Jefferson goes on to catalog a number of such "dishonest or self-deceptive appraisals of the world," including "thrill seekers" and people who are by cultivation melodramatic and disdainful. At the end of his list (not all of its items seem to me to be either "dishonest or self-deceptive") comes the sentimentalist, whose "trick is to misrepresent the world in order to feel unconditionally warm-hearted about bits of it."

But it is not at all clear to me that the usual examples (Little Nell in Dickens, Little Eva in Stowe) "distort" reality in anything like the damnable sense that Jefferson, supporting Midgley, suggests. Allowing oneself to become teary-eyed about the tragic death of an impossibly idealized girl does not "make us unable to deal with the real world"; rather, it activates our sensitivity to lesser as well as equal actual tragedies. There is always the aberrant case of the parents who go misty-eyed over the child they physically abuse, but again, it is a grotesque mistake to conflate such inappropriate and (pathologically) inconsistent sentimentality with the brutality that goes with it. The sum-total vision of our emotional economy, according to which we have only so much sympathy to spend, seems to me to be a particularly ill-considered and corrupting doctrine (as it has seemed to several other authors, such as Jerome Neu and Ronald de Sousa).²² It is true that a single trauma can exhaust our emotional resources, but it is unlikely that reading about Little Nell or Little Eva and experiencing "melting compassion" will do that to us. Indeed, that is precisely the virtue of sentimentality: that it stimulates and exercises our sympathies without straining or exhausting them. So considered (perhaps as a sort of spiritual exercise), sentimentality is not an emotional vice but a virtue.