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# Sentiment and Sentimentality: Affective Attachment in Life and Art

Matthew Kieran (University of Leeds)

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**Abstract**

The received view holds that to judge something or someone as sentimental is to condemn. This account holds that an emotion is sentimental where it is excessive, misjudges its object and involves savouring a positive self-image. This paper presents two different challenges to the received view. First, the positive idealizations of sentimentality are no worse than other cognitive biases pervasive in our ordinary mental life. Moreover, where, as is often the case, sentimentality is good for our well-being, sentimentality looks broadly rational. Second, and more radically, sentimentality is not always to be evaluated in epistemic terms. Rather, sentimentality, often at least, is a matter of reminding us of or re-orientating our non-cognitive affective attachments. Sentimental works can renew or revolutionize our affective attachments for the good, whether that be towards love, family, causes, or the oppressed. Hence, in both art and life, sentimentality is sometimes a very good thing.

Keywords

sentimentality, emotion, idealization, attachment, affect, value, bias, rational, art, life

## I: Introduction

It may seem to be a truth *almost* universally acknowledged that sentimentality in attitude or expression is in want of some justification. In artistic criticism (especially with the advent of modernism) to accuse a work of sentimentality is usually to condemn it. Hence 'sentimentality' is typically used as a form of critical abuse. Indeed it is not uncommon to find critics praising works for avoiding sentimentality especially with respect to love, relationships, characters or even the world more

generally. Ezra Pound, for example, characterized the avoidance of sentimentality as part of the literary merit of Joyce's *Dubliners*:

Mr. Joyce's merit, I will not say his chief merit but his most engaging merit, is that he carefully avoids telling you a lot that you don't want to know. He presents his people swiftly and vividly, he does not sentimentalise over them, he does not weave convolutions. He is a realist. He does not believe "life" would be all right if we stopped vivisection or if we instituted a new sort of "economics." He gives the thing as it is. (Pound 1914: 267)

Pound's attitude was typical of modernists anxious to clear away Victorian sentimentalism in order to make art new and vital once more. For all their differences, Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot all abhorred sentimentality. This attitude is not peculiar to early twentieth century modernism. In contemporary critical circles we find that the term is used just as pejoratively. A contemporary edition of Dickens's *Hard Times*, for example, states that 'even some of Dickens's most devoted fans admit that he is often sentimental' (2004: 326) as if even the most blindly partial cannot but allow the fault (along with the frequency of its occurrence).

As in art, so too in life. To accuse someone of sentimentality is usually taken to ascribe a fault or vice. Thus, famously, Oscar Wilde condemned Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosey): 'the fact is that you were, and are I suppose still, a typical sentimentalist. For a sentamentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it. You think that one can have one's emotions for nothing. One cannot.' (Tanner 1976–77: 127).

To be guilty of sentimentality, it is assumed, is to be guilty of some kind of failing in attitude or character. Hence sentimentality is often identified in social comment as explaining failures in judgement or action. Thus we get newspaper headlines such as 'How to End the Housing Crisis: Forget Sentimentality and Build on the Green Belt', from *The Independent on Sunday* (Birrell 2015), or 'Why the Death of Sentimentality in Journalism is a Good Thing' from *The Washington Post*

(Cillizza 2015) or cultural comment pieces on how 'Sentimental Myths Harm Our History' in the *Times Educational Supplement* (Brighouse 2005). Sentimentality, it is standardly assumed, is a concept part of the content of which brings with it an inherently negative evaluation and the term can be applied to art works, agents, practices and institutions.

The thought that sentimentality is a bad thing is only *almost* universally acknowledged since there are significant dissenters. Within literary studies there has been a body of work devoted towards putting sentiment, sentimental literature and sentimentality in a much more positive light (prominent examples include Cohen 1999; Festa 2006; Shields 2010). There have also been one or two figures in the philosophical literature similarly inclined (Solomon 2004; Newman 2008). Nonetheless the standard view, as manifest in much folk judgement, critical practice and philosophical argument, seems to be that sentimentality is something to be condemned. However, as we shall see, if we examine the literary and philosophical accounts of the standard view a puzzle arises. There are many works or attitudes that seem to fit the standard characterization taken to explain why sentimentality is bad and yet which we (or at least many of us) are inclined to think good. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is subtitled 'A Sentimental Comedy' as her entire oeuvre might be and Frank Capra's or Charlie Chapin's films are highly sentimental. These are not bizarre outliers. Much religious art, political art, many romantic comedies (perhaps the genre itself), coming of age stories, domestic narratives and studies in self discovery would seem to fall under the received view's characterization of sentimentality. We would judge many works in these categories to be good partly in virtue of rather than despite their apparent sentimentality.

In what follows I will outline the received view's condemnation of sentimentality. I will then go on to explore various options as to how we may allow for good sentimental art within the terms set by the received view. Ultimately, however, it will be suggested that the fundamental problem with the received view is the presumption of a certain kind of cognitivist account of emotion which underwrites the (mis)identification of sentimentality as necessarily being in error.

I will argue that sentimentality is sometimes a matter of expressing, reinforcing or (re)aligning non-cognitive elements within our attitudes and emotions.

Hence, properly understood, either a) a certain kind of sentimentality is not always bad and sometimes a good making feature or b) what is often identified, falsely, as sentimentality by the received view (due to a category mistake), is no such thing. Indeed, it will be argued that sentimentality or what is often identified as such on the received view plays a significant and positive role in our lives generally and in much art in particular.

The theme and line of thought argued for is partly inspired by Peter Goldie in a number of respects. It is difficult to see how sentimentality could be anything other than bad on standard cognitivist views of the emotions. Yet Peter's work on the emotions, through emphasizing the roles both thought and feeling play, makes conceptual space within which we can see how sentimentality, at least sometimes, can be a good thing. Peter's account of the emotions (Goldie 2000) – along with that of others – sought to emphasis the nature of emotion according to which the conative and affective elements play as large a part as the more commonly focused upon cognitive element. Hence Peter's notion of 'feeling toward' the emotional object (Goldie 2002) which seems better suited to capturing the richness of our psychological economy, including wishes, hopes and affective orientations, than more traditional cognitivist accounts. Paying careful attention to the messy complexity and variety of our mental life was a great theme of Peter's work until the very last. One of the points Peter developed was the idea that we have natural tendencies to fictionalize our autobiographies (Goldie 2012). This is often a bad thing and may sometimes be corrected for. Yet there is also a strain of thought to be found in Peter's work that, despite everything, this can sometimes be a good thing. The stories we imagine about our future selves, which may fictionalize our self-image, can renew our moral resilience or commitments (Goldie 2012: 168–70). This seems consonant with the argument put forward later that the value of sentimentality is a contextual matter i.e. in some cases sentimentality may be a failing, yet in other cases a virtue. In particular I suggest that where our affections or attitude of care is strengthened or, in rarer cases, reorientated for the better, then sentimentality is a good thing. Hence what follows is also of a piece with a belief in the educative power of art. Much of Peter's philosophical methodology, and some of his argument, is predicated on the assumption that good art can educate. What follows might be thought of as a take on a neglected way in which this might be so, one which stands in contrast to the overly

narrow focus on gaining knowledge that is the preoccupation of much of the contemporary debate. Peter was an engaging, complex, considerate friend: dry one moment, sentimental (in a good sense) the next. I would like to think that this piece and the sentiment behind the volume might have provoked both responses in him. He is missed.

**II: The Standard Condemnation of Sentimentality**

What follows in this section is a laying out of the philosophical case for the received view (which the rest of the paper will then go on to question). In doing so it chimes with work by others such as Knight (1999: 412–414), Choi (2008) and Robinson (2012) who lay out the standard view in similar terms.

Excess feeling, as identified by Wilkie's (1967) survey of dictionary and literary handbooks, is the most commonly identified feature of sentimentality. The following characterization is typical:

'Sentimentality may show itself as pure gushiness or as a kind of hair-trigger emotional sensitiveness. But whatever form it takes, sentimentality always involves an implied demand on the part of the writer for more emotional response than the situation warrants; and it implies, on the part of the sentimental reader, a willingness to respond emotionally when the response is not actually justified.' (Brooks and Warren 1958: 373).

The characterization is given in terms of responses to literary representations but, as noted earlier, there is a wide range of attitudes, actions, personal dispositions, practices and representations that may be deemed sentimental. Moreover, we should bear in mind that there can be sentimental representations of non-sentimental attitudes, people or situations and, conversely, sentimental representations of non-sentimental attitudes or actions. Hence a representation of war may be deeply sentimental, as Orwell (2001) accused Auden's poem *Spain* of being, whilst a representation of romantic love, such as that to be found in David Foster Wallace's

*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), might not be. For present purposes we will assume we are concerned with the sentimentality of dispositional traits or states as manifested or where something is appropriately classified as a member of a form or class of objects whose authorized purpose is to express or solicit, with commendation, certain responses from us.

It is also worth emphasizing that the putative excess of sentimentality here is not to be equated with extremity of feeling. Love and bereavement, for example, often involve extremes of feeling and passion. Presumably the condemnation of sentimentality is not supposed to preclude extremes of feeling at the death of a child, lover or parent. Catastrophes, betrayals, deaths, accidents, crimes, tragedies, super human achievements, triumphs of love and more may all legitimate overwhelming feeling. Furthermore, much that is sentimental hardly concerns extremes of feeling at all. The sentimentality of domesticity or the past, for example, is often taken up with comparatively subdued feelings expressed in a more minor key. Nostalgic recall of a favourite café may manifest a kind of wistful sentimentality and yet not be particularly intense or extreme. Excess or disproportion of feeling is not to be equated with extremity of feeling. Thus we need to ask in virtue of what it is that something constitutes an excess?

Let us assume that emotions and higher order cognitive-affective attitudes are warranted or appropriate to the extent that a) the object, person or situation responded to has the relevantly ascribed feature(s), b) there is a relationship of (rational) fit between the nature of the response and the eliciting object or situation and c) the depth and intensity of the response or attitude is proportional. In general then feelings and cognitive-affective attitudes can deviate from what is appropriate or warranted in terms of the intensity, depth, kind of response or misascription of features of the object or situation it is predicated upon. Anger can be misdirected at someone, disgust overly sensitive, pining for someone overly obsessive or sadness at something can itself be too faint or extreme. Sentimentality, then, often seems to involve the indulgence of unwarranted emotions and attitudes. Yet in order to manifest sentimentality an emotional state, attitude or action must be inappropriate or unwarranted in a particular kind of way.

Sentimentality, minimally at least, seems to involve the cognitive error of distorting or misrepresenting the objects of cognitive-affective attitudes by idealizing them in order to indulge or gratify our desires. Idealization here just amounts to over-estimating desirable features in some respect and underestimating desirable ones (or at least the limitations of such):

'A sentimental mode of thought is typically one that idealizes its object under the guidance of a desire for gratification and reassurance. Derivatively, emotion is sentimental which is supported by such as thought. And we can see that such an attitude is one that may be directed not only towards other people and abstract causes [. . .] but also towards the self and, at the other extreme, towards the inanimate natural world' (Savile 2008: 340).

Savile's characterization is rather broad. We might think that someone overestimating how quickly she can complete a crossword to gratify her self-image or idealizing the attractiveness of a partner to reassure her vanity would not as such count as sentimental. Thus Savile seems to have identified a broad psychological genus of which sentimentality is only one particular species where the 'emphasis is upon such things as the sweetness, dearness, littleness, blamelessness, and vulnerability of the emotions' objects. The qualities that sentimentality imposes on its objects are the qualities of innocence. But this almost always involves a gross simplification of the nature of the object' (Jefferson 1983: 526–7). It does not matter whether sentimentality proper is to be identified with the genus Savile characterizes or, as Jefferson argues, the species of the genus that inherits the same fundamental problem with respect to themes such as innocence. What matters according to the received view is the fundamentally erroneous nature of sentimentality as identified. Sentimentality's errors are held to be intrinsically bad in virtue of abrogating the epistemic norms of judgement or belief. The idealizations involved constitute a motivated systematic, culpable inattention to and distortion of evidence, reasons or routes to belief and judgement about the object(s) concerned.

Consider sentimentality about children. Dwelling on childish obedience, optimism, exuberance, charm and naivety at the expense of recognizing more animalistic drives may lead to apprehending them under the light of various evaluative concepts ranging from the cute, beautiful and innocent to the passive. The cognitive-affective apprehension of children in such a manner may enable indulgence in the warm glow of feelings at the ruby cheeked innocence of the young. However, where doing so involves ignoring or willfully averting attention from the less savoury aspects of the character of children it is to commit an epistemic error. A sentimental indulgence in such feelings remains blind to the darker aspects of child psychology, whereas a clear-sighted recognition of good children's behaviour does not. Hence the latter takes goodness to be an achievement whereas the former assumes all children to be naturally innocent and good.

The fundamental epistemic fault can itself become an artistic or moral one under certain conditions. In the aesthetic case consider many works by the American artist and illustrator Norman Rockwell. Extremely popular for most of his life, Rockwell specialized in sentimental portraits of ordinary folk, families, kids and scruffy pets. In *Happy Birthday Miss Jones* (1956), now owned by Steven Spielberg, we have a female teacher of a certain age facing toward her seated schoolchildren (and thus the viewer). Behind Miss Jones, spelt (and misspelt) out on the blackboard are scrawled messages of 'surprise' and 'Happy Birthday' written by the ramshackle kids keenly sitting up and looking towards her. The sentiment of warm delight on her face is one the viewer is prescribed to share. Technically the painting is accomplished with a strong pictorial design. The horizontal rows of seated children stand in sharp contrast to the mid vertical lines of the blackboard, which enhances the sense of pictorial depth. The teacher looks down upon her charges, and a sense of stillness is enhanced by the chalk and duster scattered unnoticed at her feet, which serves to indicate the previous moment's scurry as the scattered children rushed to their places. Yet for all the painting's technical skill its artistic value is fairly low. The visual interest is in the service of warm sentiments cheaply won since far from clarifying our thoughts or emotional responses in any cognitively illuminating way the picture merely holds up to us pleasingly false platitudes about childish innocence. If we assume that cognitive values can be internal to a work's value as art (Gaut 2009; Kieran 2005) or in so far as the prescribed responses sought from us are relevant to

work's value as art (Carroll 1996; Gaut 2009), the epistemic flaw thereby constitutes or contributes to an artistic flaw. For in so far as we should not think of children as all sweetness and light, the kind of sentimentality the Rockwell painting solicits from us is thereby unwarranted.

The moral case, at least in certain cases, is more pernicious. At the individual level parents' sentimentality about children may lead to them explaining away faults or indulging children's immediate desires in ways that turn out to be developmentally harmful. At a societal level, if public policy with respect to the justice system, social services and child care, for example, is predicated on a sentimentalized presumption of childhood innocence and goodness then it is not only unlikely to achieve its aims but may turn out to be positively destructive (Dalrymple 2010).

The intrinsic epistemic error sentimentality is charged with putatively explains a further charge, namely the claim that sentimentality renders people unable to deal with or navigate the world (Midgley 1979: 385). In setting up distorting expectations of innocence, goodness, passivity or presumptions that love will triumph over all else, sentimentality embeds unrealistic expectations concerning the ease with which our desires may be fulfilled, how benign the world is and how good people are. Those prey to sentimentality are set up for a particular kind of fall where the world continually seems to fail them. Hence the sentimental person may tend to range from gullibility to incomprehension at how and why people are often motivated as they in fact are.

Finally, the gratification of desire that drives sentimentality is often taken to concern the desire for and pleasure at the savouring of a positive self-image. The idea being that sentimentality involves a meta-response of delight at the goodness of the self-image afforded by the recognition of the warm and tender first order feelings as directed toward their objects (Savile 2010; Kupfer 1996).

In light of the above, the strongest case to be made for the standard condemnation of sentimentality is that it is a flaw in virtue of its i) indulgence of inappropriately excessive emotion ii) issuing from, leading to or partly constituted by a cognitive error of belief or judgement in idealization in order to satisfy desire iii) which involves an element of self-direction in being for the sake of or giving rise to a meta-response of pleasure at or approval of a subject's self image and which, given i)

– iii), thereby constitutes a flaw in the work as art or the agent's attitude, action or character.

**III: Assessing the Received View**

It is not enough to argue for sentimentality against the received view on the grounds that there is a descriptive sense according to which what is picked out just are the tender emotions (Solomon 2004) or certain literary genres and styles (Newman 2008). As has been pointed out (Knight 1999; Higgins 2009; Robinson 2012), such a defense may get us to see that openness to the tender emotions is often falsely dismissed as sentimentality in the stronger sense but this does not constitute a defense of it. What this section thus aims to do is challenge distinct elements of the received view as articulated above. It then proceeds to explore two different types of move that grant to the standard account that sentimentality always involves epistemic error and yet, nonetheless, tries to suggest how and why it may sometimes be a good thing.

It is hard to see why we should condemn sentimentality just because it involves self-directed feelings of pleasure or admiration as a meta-response to our first order feelings or self-image. Possessing many positively valued cognitive-affective attitudes is compatible with self-directed attitudes of approval or delight arising as a result of them. Perhaps it is supposed to be the fact that in sentimentality the first order responses are putatively sought out in order to give rise to the meta-response that renders it problematic. Yet why think this? We often find that complex self-directed meta-responses are innocent enough. Tragedy, it is sometimes claimed, enables a complexity of meta-response which goes some way to underwriting its high positive value (Feagin 1983). More pertinently consider a mother who conjures up sentimental memories of her daughter. She does so to indulge feelings of delight at the pleasure derived from her child's responses to her and how she turned out to be a better mother than feared. There seems to be nothing intrinsically wrong with indulging such feelings per se and the meta-response of pleasure at her self-directed relief and self-image seem entirely appropriate. More fundamentally it is unclear why we should consider sentimentality to be essentially self-involving. No doubt taking pleasure at feeling warmly toward the kinds of people, stories and relations that matter to us sometimes does give rise to feelings of being pleased with ourselves. Yet

sentimentality need not involve self-directed meta-responses. In Chaplin's *City Lights* the audience's hopes as to whether the blind flower girl will love the tramp on regaining her sight is symptomatic of romantic sentimentality. From love at first sight the tramp is prepared to do pretty much anything for the flower girl including paying to restore her sight and thereby risk losing her. We are prescribed to delight in the lengths the tramp is prepared to go to for love and hope that, if restored, the girl's sight won't reveal her love to have been illusory. Yet such hopes and fears appear to be sentimental independently of whether or not we happen to respond with delight at the contemplation of the successfully solicited first order feelings. Sentimentality need not be inherently self-regarding and even where it is this is not in and of itself automatically a bad thing.

What then of the charge that sentimentality involves being prey to unrealistic expectations, for example concerning relationships or children, thereby rendering someone less able to navigate the world successfully due to the kind of epistemic error in idealization involved. How credible is this charge?

The first point to make is that if the charge rests on the idea that sentimentality falsely biases us toward an optimistic world view (with respect to matters such as love or relationships) then it is far from obvious that doing so is either specific to sentimentality or that being so biased harms us. Indeed, there is good reason to think that sentimentality as a kind of positive false bias is beneficial. We are subject to all sorts of positive biasing distortions which far from harming us often help us to navigate the world successfully and flourish.

People are standardly overly optimistic about, amongst other things, what they can do, how well they can do it, the control they can exercise in doing it, how creative they are, how nice they are, how attractive they are, how important they are to others, how good their kids are and how good their relationships are. Taylor and Brown (1988) is the classic source for the identification of positive illusion bias as pervasive in ordinary thought and Elga (2005: 5–6) gives an engaging characterization of why this really is evidence for positive self-overrating. In the last thirty years or so there has been an exponential growth in research devoted to exploring the reliability with which normal people have false positive biases, the many different kinds of positive biases there are and their beneficial effects including, for example, illusions of control

(Davis, Sundahl and Lesbo 2000), judging the self to be above average (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak and Vredenburg, 1995; Wenger and Fowers 2008) and overly optimistic personal predictions (Sweeny, Carroll and Shepperd, 2006; Krizan and Windschitl, 2007).

In one study (Buunk 2001), 141 Dutch undergraduates were asked to complete a relational interaction satisfaction scale questionnaire. Subjects were presented with statements such as 'I feel happy when I'm with my partner' and 'We have quarrels' and asked to rate how much they agreed with each statement on a Likert scale to assess relationship satisfaction. They were then asked to estimate, respectively, the percentage of students in a close relationship who were happy and unhappy with their relationship. Finally subjects were asked to compare the state of their relationship with that of most other students (rating from 1 = much worse to 5 = much better). Most subjects assumed the majority of people to be happy in their relationships and perceived their relationship on average as better than that of others. The greater the relationship satisfaction the greater the assumption of perceived superiority, suggesting that the more satisfied an individual is with his or her close relationship the greater the illusion of superiority.

Crucially the positive illusions we are subject to often seem to be positively beneficial. Self-serving positive attributions influence positive moods and enhance feelings of happiness, facilitate social bonding and practical functioning, making it more likely that one will help others, produce more creative work and persevere with difficult tasks or goals (Taylor and Brown, 1988). This seems fairly obvious. Optimistic folk with high self-evaluations are more likely to commence new projects or take on problems and in so doing achieve more. The self-assured and confident are more likely to find equable partners and friends. Those with positive self-conceptions are likely to feel good about themselves and indeed life more generally. More surprisingly there is psychological research which suggests that unrealistic optimistic beliefs may not only enable people to adapt to stressful situations or events but might be protective of physical health (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, Grunewald, 2000).

It is also worth noting the converse psychological phenomenon of depressive realism. Whilst evidence for this is more controversial, meta-analyses suggest there is some good reason to hold that subjects who are clinically depressed are systematically

more accurate with respect to matters such as judging their control over events (Ackerman and DuRubeis 1991; Moore and Fresco 2012) and, even more especially, their superiority or relative importance when compared with others (Zai-ting and Shen-ing 2007). In contrast with normal subjects, who systematically distort the world in positive ways that promote their happiness and ability to function, depression seems to strip away positive illusions and attempts to rectify residual distortions in the clinically depressed may be more harmful than beneficial (Ghaemi 2007; Stone Dodrill and Johnson 2001).

In general then there are many cases where, far from undermining our ability to function in the world, positive illusion biases enable us to flourish. In so far as the charge against sentimentality involves the claim that the idealizations involved are bound up with overly optimistic attitudes or assessments, and thus in cognitive error, it is certainly no worse than many other positive illusion biases that help us to get through life. Moreover, with respect to sentimentality in particular, perhaps we should be particularly grateful that we are subject to positive illusion biases regarding romantic relationships, bringing up children and other such tender hearted matters. Sentimentality may thus enable us to seek out or persevere with relationships of the heart in ways we might otherwise find more difficult (or may not). This type of move against the standard view holds that sentimentality, even though in cognitive error, nonetheless helps us to realize important human goods. Hence, on this view, in many cases sentimentality turns out to be both rational and a good thing.

Yet defenders of the received view can just hold there ground. No matter how much sentimentality promotes well-being the charge remains that strictly speaking sentimentality involves epistemic error. Beneficial side effects notwithstanding, sentimentality still involves inappropriate or unwarranted cognitive-affective attitudes. Beliefs aim at truth via justification. In so far as sentimentality engenders beliefs that pull away from what we are justified in believing toward what we desire, it thereby abrogates basic epistemic norms or duties. Thinking of your romantic relationship as more special than most may well be good for you or the relationship but it does not thereby make the belief somehow more justified or true.

One option is to distinguish, sharply, sentimentality in life from sentimentality in art and argue that whilst the former is to be condemned, the latter may be blameless

or a moderately good making feature. Robinson (2012) richly develops a version of this strategy, arguing that even though sentimentality in life is to be condemned the harmless pleasures of sentimental works can be valuable. Sentimental works may not constitute the highest or greatest of art works, given they can hardly aim at genuine insight or profundity. Nonetheless such works can be of some value as art in successfully soliciting certain sweet, idealizing emotions or attitudes. From the associations of popular songs to the pleasures of films such as *Love Actually*, people often enjoy the expression of sentiment even if cheaply won. Choi (2008), in a rather different vein, grants that sentimentality in life is to be condemned, but argues that artistic sentimentality can sometimes be a good thing in works as art. Her informative discussion of work by Lars von Trier, amongst others, suggests that even highly reflexive, avant-garde art, can make use of sentimentality for the purposes of aesthetic experimentation and, at least in knowing audiences, prompt moral reflection (Choi 2008).

A second option is to argue that whilst it may be true enough to say that sentimentality is strictly speaking in epistemic error, there is more to rationality than the standard view allows. We can ask, in broad terms, whether or not something is practically or prudentially rational in helping us to realize our aims. It may strictly speaking be epistemically imperfect to be sentimental about one's close romantic relationship in considering it superior to others and yet rational in a broader practical sense to do so. The thought can be cashed out by arguing that narrowly epistemic reasons for believing are only one kind of reason that go into the mix. Narrowly epistemic reasons can clash with and be overridden by other kinds of reason such as the desire to believe or agential ends favouring something's being believed.

The problem with this line of thought, at least from the first person perspective, is that it is difficult to see how the judgements or beliefs involved could be assented to on non-epistemic grounds. To assent to a proposition as a belief is to take it to be true. Hence epistemic reasons to believe seem to be constitutively normative rather than contingently or contextually so. This is not to say that such an argument cannot be made. There are various arguments put forward for doxastic voluntarism (Montmarquet 2008) or according to which we can will to believe propositions under circumstances of ambiguity and underdetermination (Ginet 2001). Nonetheless the putative fact that believing one's relationship is superior makes for a

better, happier relationship, does not in and of itself give evidence for or epistemic reason to believe it. Indeed, presumably once we are aware of the fact that the falsely positive overestimations implicit in our sentimental attitudes are endemic, we ought to take that as reason to revise, fairly radically and systematically, our estimations in a much more parsimonious fashion.

Yet even given the recognition that this is so, it seems difficult, at least from the first person point of view, to apprehend our sentimental attachments so clear sightedly. This is certainly not true for many beliefs. If I have reason to believe that my heuristics for estimating distance are systematically biased then it seems like it would be easy enough to adjust them accordingly by doing the appropriate calculations or building in correctives (if I need to). Yet when inter-acting with my romantic partner, at least when things are going well, my estimation of how special our relationship is and the kind of reasons adduced often seem impervious to the recognition that there is good reason to suppose that this involves systematically over-estimating desirable features in some respects and underestimating undesirable ones.

Now according to Nagel (1986) there is a deep contrast between an internal viewpoint upon the world, where we are acting from and perceiving the world framed by our subjective desires, interests and concerns, and an external viewpoint upon the world, the most extreme version of which is taking up the objective stance towards one's interests and desires as just those belonging to one individual amongst many. Independently of controversies over whether the most objective viewpoint, independently of any particularity of time, place or interest, is achievable or not, we can all recognize that there is a continuum from being fully possessed by and seeing the world from one's particular viewpoint in the grip of present desires, and taking up a more objective viewpoint where one is capable of reflecting from a more impartial point of view upon such. As Elga (2005) has argued, perhaps we should just distinguish between non-reflective self-overrating and a more reflective perspective in light of which we can correct for and recalibrate (downwards) our non-reflective ratings. Applying this to sentimentality then, the capacity to take up a more objective or reflective stance, on this view, enables us to achieve a more realistic perspective upon those things that we are sentimental about. Thus whilst we might not be able to escape sentimentality from the most subjective, nonreflective viewpoint, especially when taken up with expressions of love and desire in the moment, the epistemically

virtuous will be more clear sighted about their sentimental overatings from an objective or reflective point of view (Elga 2005).

If something like this is on the right lines then, according to this line of thought, there is a more nuanced account available. Bad sentimentalists are people who recognize that there is reason to think we idealize what we are sentimental about and yet even from the objective point of view tend to claim that their romantic relationships, children, familial attachments and so on really are more special than and superior to others. The good sentimentalist is one who, when proceeding from the subjective point of view, will tend to be sentimental about their romantic partners, children and relationships. This can be, as we saw above, a very good thing. Nonetheless, when considering matters from a more objective point of view he or she will be sensitive to the reasons and evidence that suggest his or her evaluations from the subjective point of view tend to be positively idealized. The advantage of this approach is that it also provides the basis for a distinction between Austen's or Dickens' novels, Chaplin's films, much good religious or political art and egregiously sentimental works such as, say, the novels of Barbara Cartland, bad romantic comedies and Norman Rockwell's *Happy Birthday Miss Jones*. Both classes of works solicit emotional responses and attitudes that are sentimental about love, children and so on. However, the first class of works, unlike the second class, also proffer up something like an external perspective from which audiences can see or be reminded that such first person idealized attitudes and responses are just that i.e. idealizations. There is a parallel between good sentimental art and the good sentimentalist as characterized above.

Both the options explored above have a lot going for them though they remain dissatisfying for the following reason: it is granted to the standard view that sentimentality is by its nature epistemically defective. Whilst the two different type of moves identify excusing or permissibility conditions that allow for a distinction between good and bad sentimentality, both moves remain open to the charge that to be guilty of sentimentality is to be in cognitive error. In the next section I will critically examine this central assumption.

**Sentimentality, Affective Attachments and Orientation**

Standard cognitivists about emotions hold that they are essentially constituted, at least in part, as special types of judgements or evaluative thoughts (Solomon 1976; Nussbaum 1994). The condemnation of sentimentality presupposes cognitivism about emotions (see Jefferson 1983: 521 and 526–529). It is particularly noteworthy that Solomon (1976) is celebrated as a cognitivist about the emotions and yet attempts to defend certain aspects of sentimentality. It is hard to see how the two views are compatible (unless at least one of two options explored in the previous section are thought to do the job). Minimally, on standard cognitivist accounts, experiencing the emotion of joy or hope incorporates some propositional content as constituting its formal object to the effect that it has certain properties and these are to be evaluated as good. The trouble with someone's sentimentality about a partner or children, say, is held to follow from the putative fact that the idealization contains falsely positive overall beliefs (including evaluative judgements) about them.

A different approach worth exploring is the idea that sentimentality is not always up for straightforward epistemic evaluation in such terms or, if it is, the evaluation should sometimes be in terms of partial rather than all things considered judgements or beliefs. Neo-Jamesians hold that emotions are more akin to noncognitive embodied affective appraisals (Damasio 1994; Prinz 2004; Robinson 2007) with various possibilities in between (such as Greenspan 1988; Helm 2001; D'Arms and Jacobson 2000). Neo-Jamesians account for emotions as the somatic appraisal of something as, say, joyful or hopeful, which marks it out as something positively valenced in the relevant way and thereby gears us up for action. There is much disagreement amongst non-cognitivists about what constitutes appropriateness. According to some (Robinson 2007) appropriateness is a matter of cognitive states that typically arise from the emotional state. According to others (Prinz 2004) appropriateness is a complex relation to fittingness considered in more or less evolutionary terms. On a more cognitively sympathetic view emotions irreducibly involve appraisals embodied in feelings towards objects (Goldie 2000: 50–83; 2002) and are more akin to perceptual construals (Roberts 2003) though, crucially, feeling or emotion appearances do *not* automatically express overall judgements or evaluations. The point here is that if we think of some emotional states as either non-cognitive affective appraisals, along with the neo-Jamesians, or as more akin to perceptual construals, along with the neo-cognitivists, then sentimentality – or what is

often identified on the standard view as sentimentality – may not be in the kind of epistemic error for which, on standard cognitivist accounts of the emotions, it is to be condemned.

Rather than manifesting an overall belief or judgement that aims at knowledge (e.g., an accurate prediction or self ascription) sentimentality is often concerned with something else. In particular sentimentality is often concerned with vivifying, affirming, reinforcing or re-orientating our emotional perspective and attachments. Sentimentality, as a dispositional state, an occurent process or indeed as manifest in action, often cultivates or reinforces a sense of social or personal attachment. Sentimental gestures ranging from surprise gifts to declarations often express emotional hopes or attachments and in so doing can reaffirm or help to develop personal relationships. This is consistent with the possibility that such gifts or declarations can sometimes result in misunderstanding, mismatched expectations or even aversion (Belk and Coon 1991). It is far from always being the case that sentimental gestures are greeted warmly. Whether it be with respect to family, friends or hoped for romantic partners, most of us are familiar with tales of someone's sentimental gesture being rebuffed rather than welcomed (in some cases all too predictably it has to be said). Nonetheless the point of sentimental gestures and responses is often to affirm or further emotional attachments. Hence there are many social conventions that systematically serve (or seek to exploit) our need to belong in terms of affirming or developing personal, group and institutional attachments. The conventions surrounding gift exchange on festival days, birthdays or Valentine's Day are but one example. Indeed in the romantic case there is a complex dance of individual negotiation around the set of social expectations and conventions governing the expression of sentimental attitudes as a relationship starts to develop.

Now sentimental gestures, in order to be effective, have to be presented as and taken to be authentic. This no doubt explains the aversion some have to certain conventions such as those bound up with Valentine's Day. The motivating thought is that sentimental expressions of love and care should be genuine and the normative expectations set up by the social convention casts doubt on the authenticity of the emotions expressed. In other words the conventional sentimentality may be performed as a duty and might thus be insincere, fake or manufactured. Note how the kind of objection to the social convention here is of a kind with the criticism we saw earlier of

sentimentality itself as somehow involving fake or manufactured emotion. Perhaps part of the reason this objection tends to arise in relation to Valentine's Day as opposed to the gift giving conventions bound up with, for example, birthdays, is because Valentine's Day is taken to be bound up with romantic feelings. Nonetheless notice that how someone meets or abrogates the conventions can itself be a mark of insincerity or authenticity. A Valentine's Day present of money, for example, would presumably not do the trick, and, somewhat stereotypically, someone farming the task out to a personal assistant is similarly underwhelming. By contrast the kind of personalized thought and effort that goes into meeting the convention clearly can betoken genuine love and attachment (as can the development of conventions fairly unique to the couple concerned such as always going to a gig on Valentine's Day as 'their thing'). Social conventions can make expressions of affection easier to fake but the very existence of such conventions signals the underlying motivation to express and develop emotional attachments through sentimental actions and declarations. As should be clear this is not something particular to romantic relationships since this is just as true of familial relationships and friendships.

Simply being subject to or feeling sentimental toward someone or something, independently of expression in action, can cultivate or reinforce social attachments. Indulging in sentimental memories of loved ones, for example, can often remind one of, revivify or strengthen a sense of connection to and love for them. Furthermore in reminding us of or reinforcing such attachments sentimentality serves to remind us that we are or once were cared for. Thus sentimentality can help not merely to enhance our mood but help to ward off a sense of loneliness and isolation (as opposed to being solitary).

One way of bringing this out is to consider what happens both when developing relationships are going particularly well or going awry. In both cases people are often sentimental about how the relationship is or once was, as well as sentimental about relationships more generally. In doing so sentimentality, as an attitude in the service of emotional attachment, might concentrate attention upon good aspects of the relationship and even increase the ease with which positive memories are accessed (Baldwin et al 1996). If a particular relationship is in trouble this might prompt someone to become contrastingly more sentimental about previous relationships, indulge in sentimental imaginings about possible relationships or seek

out sentimental romantic fiction such as Pride and Prejudice or Bridget Jones. This seems to be a common enough phenomenon and is consistent with psychological research that suggests when the deterioration of relationships is salient people tend to focus attention on representations of deep or solid attachments (Knowles and Gardner 2008). More generally, where individuals have a strongly salient need to belong or feel socially isolated they are often especially susceptible to sentimentality as manifested, for example, in nostalgia for the past (Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010).

We are by nature social animals. In our emotional economy sentimentality often serves a need to establish and strengthen social or personal attachments. In so doing it can manifest a heartfelt care for others and remind someone that they too are or have been cared for.

Sentimentality may also serve to reinforce or develop our self-conceptions. Sentimental actions or attitudes often express and develop our sense of what is important to us ranging over our biography, aptitudes, projects and activities. Hearing a particular song may make provoke someone's sentimental memories of a particular time and phase in their life. In general sentimental memories often concern events that were or are particularly meaningful for an individual and bound up with a sense of who they are or once were. There are complexities here. After all sentimental memories of one's past self often serve to highlight discontinuities as much as continuities. A sentimental memory of one's past self may be such partly in virtue of the identification with and sympathy for one's past self as much as for its very foregrounding of significant differences in character, aspiration or outlook. Nonetheless sentimentality often serves to foreground and strengthen an individual's sense of what is important to them and makes them the kind of person she is (or was) thereby cultivating a sense of self-esteem or worth.

Sentimentality then is often directed toward manifesting or cultivating emotional attachments toward others, one's self or indeed what is already cared about. In doing so it not only deepens relationships or a sense of what one cares about but facilitates social connectedness, positively valenced affective states or attitudes, mitigates against loneliness and reinforces self esteem.

It is worth noting that the benefits of sentimentality as outlined might not always arise given that some individuals will be cynical about, aversive to or lack opportunities for personal intimacy. This may be due to a range of factors such as the presumption that people are untrustworthy, cannot be relied upon to be supportive or fear of rejection. In such cases sentimentality about past relationships, for example, may serve only to highlight and increase present loneliness and misery. Furthermore the extent to which individuals are subject to or susceptible to sentimentality will no doubt vary. Individuals who are more given to experiencing sentimentality might be or conceive of themselves as more emotional than others, have a greater need for social connectedness or need to experience personal relations as meaningful or constituting an achievement.

On this approach sentimentality is a disposition to feel warmly and think positively toward the objects of our affections. We are often motivated to be sentimental to reinforce our sense of social connectedness or our self-conceptions. Where sentimentality does so our sense of self-esteem, confidence and meaningfulness can be enhanced. No doubt people can tend to do so all too easily and self-indulgently, just as some people may tend not to do so enough. What is far from clear is that sentimentality as such is a bad thing. Indeed, when viewed from an emotional point of view, as contrasted with a strictly epistemic one, sentimentality is surely often a very good thing indeed.

**Educating the Heart and Sentimental Art**

What implications if any does this have for sentimental art? Sentimentality in art may be a good rather than bad making feature in virtue of reinforcing or bringing about sentimental attachments that enhance rather than undermine the work's value as art. This is of a piece with a more general line of thought I have argued for elsewhere that holds certain features that are often defects in art works, including emotional and moral aspects, can sometimes turn out to be a virtue in others (Kieran 2010). If sentimentality is taken to be something that is always in cognitive error then this looks like a difficult position to hold to, especially if it is in straightforward cognitive terms that one is prone to evaluate it. Thus, assuming one is prepared to grant that cognitive value can contribute to a work's value as art, sentimentality in a work may

be taken as an obvious defect. It is to misrepresent how the world is. However if we recognize that sentimentality is often a matter of manifesting, reinforcing or aligning emotions then what is often identified as sentimentality in art can often be a good thing. In other words either a) as with other aspects of our emotional engagement with art (Kieran 2010), sentimentality is not always bad and can sometimes be a good making feature or b) what is often identified as sentimentality is no such thing due to a category mistake born from an overly narrow cognitivist conception of emotion. Moreover, the point is not particular to art but holds with respect to what we might think of as rhetoric and indeed life more generally.

Consider in this light speeches made by figures as diverse as J. F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Barack Obama. Political speeches are often criticized for being self-serving or manufacturing false sentiment. Yet good speeches often put sympathy for personalized, innocent figures at their centre to engage our emotions and bring home the concrete, human significance of some event, oppression or cause. Consider Cobbett's Parliamentary History report of William Wilberforce's speech in favour of the abolition of slavery (see Carey 2003 for the insightful analysis to which the following is indebted). At one point in the speech Wilberforce examines evidence provided by Mr. Norris, a Liverpool slave trader, with an admixture of sensationalism and irony. Norris had claimed that 'song and dance are promoted' on the ships as if the slaves pursued some kind of enjoyable exercise on the voyage. Wilberforce exposes the use of 'promoted' as a euphemism showing that 'the truth is, that for the sake of exercise, these miserable wretches, loaded with chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness, are forced to dance by the terror of the lash, and sometimes by the actual use of it' (Carey 2003: 290). What follows then is surely sentimental:

As to their singing, what shall we say when we are told that their songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure which, while they sing, are always in tears insomuch, that one captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings (Carey 2003: 290).

As Carey (2003: 290–1) points out, amongst other rhetorical devices being deployed here, the passage alludes to the Bible's Old Testament and specifically Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept,

when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof,

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song;

and they that wasted us required of us mirth,

saying, 'Sing the songs of Zion'.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

The biblical allusiveness both keys the audience in to the recognition that this part of Wilberforce's speech is a sentimental parable and one which takes on many of the overtones of those depicted in Psalm 137. Hence the audience is solicited to respond with sentimentality and benevolence toward the slaves as innocent, God fearing and righteous amidst their suffering. Note also the rhetorical manner in which Wilberforce contrasts the audience's implied solicited response to the false sentimentality manifested by the slave ship captain which is itself starkly contrasted with the genuine tears and lamentations of the slaves. The parable serves not only to distance the audience emotionally from the fake sentiments of the captain but to orientate and cultivate sympathy for the slaves in the audience (and flatter the audience since they may then derive pleasure in identifying the ironic comment on the 'feeling' captain). The audience is not just orientated toward and made sensitive to the suffering identified but the speech cultivates compassion for the oppressed. What is the purpose of Wilberforce doing this? He is aiming at orientating his audience emotionally so they will thus become more open to the argument due to follow this passage (for the abolition of slavery). The psychological orientation of the audience's feelings and the compassion of genuine sentiment is what the speech evokes prior to

the detailing of the horrific mortality rates of slaves when on board ships, when waiting to be sold and during the seasoning period. What we see in Wilberforce's speech is an extremely common and important feature of good rhetoric. It is not enough to identify or individualize suffering. Rather the audience must be moved by genuine warm emotions towards those oppressed and the concomitant compassion for their plight enables the significance of the argument to be taken to heart (in this case as a motive to act to abolish the slave trade). Indeed, in such cases the aim is to orientate and cultivate emotional attachment to those otherwise opposed or who have not considered slaves in such a light before. Thus sentimentality – or what would be identified as sentimentality by the received view – is a good making feature of the speech.

Rhetoric and art are often rather similar. What sometimes matters is that sentimentality brings about, reinforces or expands emotional attachments. Works often aim to move us sentimentally in order to serve the purposes of emotional solidarity or motivate care for certain types of people. Sentimentality can serve to bring others into the moral compass of care and concern where reason alone may be insufficient or at the very least less readily relied on. It is, after all, a common feature of religious, romantic, moral or political art that it sentimentalizes in this way, in order to reinforce or bring about emotional openness and attachment to those often unconsidered, subject to prejudice or badly treated. Classic literary examples includes the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain and Charles Dickens.

To take just one case consider the initial and revised endings Dickens gave to *Great Expectations*. The original, unpublished ending has Pip accidentally bumping into a remarried Estella and then reflecting;

'I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, in her face, and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be.' (2000: 401)

Dickens subsequently revised the place of their meeting to Miss Haversham's old estate with Estelle still widowed and, finally;

'I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.' (2000: 399)

The revised ending is much more sentimental in promising the prospect of the yearned, hoped for ending with Pip and Stella wondering into the future together (albeit under a shadow cast by what has gone before). Yet the sentimentality of the revised ending makes for a better completion of the work. *Great Expectations* is all the greater for it.

Even Norman Rockwell had his moments. His *The Problem We All Live With* (1964), part of the Norman Rockwell Museum collections, visually alludes to famous news photographs from the previous year. Ruby Bridges had been escorted by U.S. Marshalls as the first black child to attend an all white school in the south of the USA at the time of the civil rights movement. Rockwell's painting is far from identical to the photographs and relevant differences include artistic devices designed to enhance sentimental orientation and attachment. Amongst other features the picture plane cuts off the deputies in Rockwell's painting so the adult figures are faceless. The white male, suited figures almost seem to be marching the black child along, giving a martial air to the procession so that the adults are both ambiguously protective and threatening. The yellow armbands worn by the suited figures reinforce this impression. The suits themselves provide a contrast with the brilliant white of the black child's dress, socks and shoes which is itself reinforced by the contrast against the child's dark skin. Visual symbolization of her innocence is further reinforced by the school textbooks and ruler held in her left hand. Against the wall behind them we see the splattered remains of a hurled tomato and much of the word 'nigger' scrawled across it. The fact that the only full figure and face we see is the little girl's, plus the very tight picture plane which gives the viewer a sense of being right up close

magnifies the dramatic, emotional impact of the painting. Here we have a Rockwell painting that solicits sentimentality as a means of reinforcing or bringing about psychological orientation. The painting solicits sentimental attachment to the individualized, innocent child and, in doing so, to those more generally fighting for their civil rights. This is hardly an exception. In fact many great works of popular art are artfully sentimental in ways that affirm or seek to re-orientate emotional attachments. In some cases, as with *Great Expectations*, the sentimentality will be directed toward more individual hopes, aspirations and ideals (such as romantic love). In other cases, as with the Wilberforce speech or *The Problem We All Live With*, the sentimentality will be directed toward social causes. Hence, as Carroll (2013) shows in some detail, works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Philadelphia* bring artistic resources to bear in structuring the emotional engagement of their contemporary audiences in order to effect a social change in moral attitudes.

It is important to note that my argument allows for a principled distinction between fantastical sentimentality and sentimentality which is an appropriate expression of sentimental attachment. Fantastical sentimentality of this kind involves indulging the emotion or attachment in Wilde's sense i.e. as an untroubled emotional free rider. The emotional attachment or ideal expressed is not earned. In the cognitive case the fundamental error is one of belief. In the non-cognitive attachment case the fundamental error is in terms of what has or has not been done to earn the right to express emotional tenderness or attachment. Whether someone's expression of emotional attachment to an ideal is genuine or justified will depend at least partly upon the history of a relationship, say, what the sentimental person has done and is disposed to do (especially in the face of difficulties). This is true of sentimentality in both life and art.

Bad sentimental art (in the non-cognitive attachment sense) refuses to face up to potential difficulties. Thus Mendelsohn characterizes Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* along the following lines. The novel starts with the brutal rape and murder of a teenage girl, and proceeds to follow the characters left behind as she looks down from some kind of heavenly limbo. Whilst the novel's opening suggests uncomfortable honesty about the darker side of humanity, 'darkness, grief and heartbreak are what *The Lovely Bones* scrupulously avoids. This is the real heart of its appeal' (Mendelsohn 2008: 5). Why? Since 'instead of making you confront dreadful things,

Sebold's novel, if anything, keeps assuring you that those things have no really permanent consequences – apart from the feel good emotional redemptions' (Mendelsohn 2008: 8). Superficially the novel takes on difficult issues whilst nonetheless showing emotional attachment and loves as all too easy, thereby allowing the reader to indulge unearned positive emotions. Good sentimental art, by way of contrast, recognizes the difficulties and thereby earns the right to express the ideals and attachments of the heart. It is not that good sentimental art does not traffic in idealizations or unlikely happy endings. However, good sentimental art is at least prescient of emotional difficulties, makes us aware of them and, in that light, affirms or reorientates our attachments. This is what we see in much religious art, good romance novels, Austen's novels, much of Dickens, Chaplin's *City Lights*, Rockwell's *The Problem,* the television series *The West Wing* and many more works. Good sentimental art does so in ways that affirms or re-orientates our affections for the better thereby rendering such works valuable as art.[1]

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