



# My Understanding of Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

The impartial spectator may be both the least misunderstood and the most controversial aspect of Adam Smith's work. It is the least misunderstood, because Smith scholars largely agree on its nature. What disagreement there is, tends to be about the details of Smith's moral psychology. It is the most controversial, however, because many casual Smith readers don't understand how it fits into his economic theories. This confusion stems from general misperceptions about the unity of Smith's corpus, but it also speaks to a misunderstanding about the nature of impartiality in general.

The impartial spectator is a product of the imagination, in the most literal sense. It exists only in the mind of actual spectators. Since Smith is an empiricist who famously eschews overt metaphysical claims, it is safe to assert that the impartial spectator is not *real* in any Platonic sense. It may have the same ontological status as Homer Simpson or Anna Karenina, but not as the Abrahamic soul or even René Descartes's mental substance.

It is possible to think of the impartial spectator as a construction (I do, at times), but since *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* predates Immanuel Kant's relevant work, the Hegelian idealists, and John Rawls, it is unclear what would follow from classifying it as such. Doing so would not make the spectator's decision objective in the way that Christine Korsgaard argues ethical constructivism demands.<sup>2</sup> But, it

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2. Rules, while not moral facts independent of the moral system, become objective because of the procedure used to develop them. As Korsgaard writes, "what makes the conception correct will be that it solves the problem, not that it describes some piece of external reality.... the truths that result describe some constructed reality" (2003, 117).

may be useful to think of it as such when using Smith as a filter through which to critique contemporary political theory, because it gives Smith and Rawls a common lexicon. This is however, more of a rhetorical strategy than a metaphysical one.

Ultimately, the imaginary nature of the impartial spectator ends up limiting its detachment. Despite its name, it does not achieve complete neutrality. Because it is imagined by an imperfect person, it is only as objective as its imaginer. It has access to the same information and calls upon identical experiences—it is a standpoint, not a discrete perspective. And, while Smith refers to the human conscience—the impartial spectator in action—as God’s “vicegerent upon earth” (TMS, III.2.32, III.5.6), he does not suggest it has mystical access to any privileged information.<sup>3</sup> The impartial spectator is a metaphor for a reflective agent who has taken deep breaths and does the work to enter “as it were” into the perspective of others. “As it were” is Smith’s way of indicating that we are not supposed to think that anyone ever actually truly adopts the perspective of others (see TMS, I.i.1.2, III.1.6). As Amartya Sen puts it, the impartial spectator is “a device for critical scrutiny and public discussion” (2011, 135). Objectivity and impartiality are not the same thing (*ibid.*, ch. 5).

The development of the impartial spectator is, ultimately, a growth in character. For Smith, moral evaluations are made before and after we act (TMS, III.4.2). Whatever judgments are made in the moment are the products of habit and personality. Smith is, after all, a virtue ethicist who is relying heavily on both Aristotle and the Stoics.<sup>4</sup> Moral actions are different than moral evaluations, and the impartial spectator is focused on the latter, not the former. As with Aristotle, though, Smith sees repeated attention to an impartial spectator’s judgment as helping to improve behavior. “Vice is always capricious: virtue only is regular and orderly,” Smith writes, and “an instructed and intelligent people...are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one” (TMS, VI.ii.1.19; WN, V.i.f.61).<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to my claims, there are times when Smith seems to suggest a more powerful, more Archimedean impartial spectator, particularly when he is focusing on its sympathetic foundation. He argues, for example, that a man can sympathize with women in childbirth (TMS, VII.iii.I.4) and that the living can imagine what it is like to be dead (I.i.1.13). But Smith qualifies both of these examples, arguing that

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3. I argue that Smith’s use of God in TMS is a rhetorical device rather than a true commitment to the divine, with no real philosophical consequences. For an opposing view, see Minowitz (1993), who “recasts” the Adam Smith Problem: “In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, God is almost omnipresent; in the *Wealth of Nations* God is never mentioned” (Minowitz 1993, 8; see also Oslington 2011).

4. For a full-length defense of reading Smith as a virtue ethicist, see Hanley 2009.

5. The role of education in learning and acculturation are central to my interpretive thesis in Weinstein 2013.

even in imagining childbirth, it is “impossible” that a man “should conceive himself as suffering her pains in his own proper person and character.”

Smith casts doubt on men’s sympathy towards women throughout his corpus, highlighting the many ways in which the males in power fail to enter into the female perspective (Weinstein 2013, 91–95). And, regarding the dead, his explanation of what it means to see their perspective is laughably unpersuasive. What he describes is neither a fear of the nothingness of death nor the horrors of a punitive afterlife, but rather a claustrophobic fear of being buried alive. Smith knows we are being unsophisticated in our fears of “being deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut from life and conversation,” and so forth, and he criticizes thanatophobics for “overlooking what is of real importance in their situation” (TMS, I.i.1.13).

In short, Smith is explicit about the limitations of the impartial spectator and the human imagination in general. He writes that falling short of perfection should not mitigate moral approbation (TMS, I.i.5.9) because human beings are themselves “weak and imperfect” (TMS II.i.5.10; see also I.i.5.8, II.i.5.9, II.i.5.10, II.iii.3.3, III.6.12, VI.iii.27). Our understanding of the sentiments of others is always “weaker in degree” (I.i.1.2), and at one point Smith even refers to the original sentiment as “the substance” and its imagined copy as “the shadow” (VI.ii.1.1).

Smith may be read to imply perfection when he writes that the impartial spectator is exact in his or her judgment and is the final arbiter of propriety, adding that it “allows no word, no gesture, to escape it beyond what this more equitable sentiment would dictate” (TMS, I.i.5.4). However, these are descriptions of Smith’s “abstract and ideal spectator” (III.3.38) not a particular instantiation of one. It references an ideal of propriety created through social interaction and personified, in no less of an idealized way, the impartial spectator (Weinstein 2013, 72). The term “impartial” is itself a misnomer since it is only an approximation of impartiality—the best an agent can imagine.

Roderick Firth (1952) disagrees, famously calling the impartial spectator an ideal observer theory; Rawls agrees with Firth (1971, 184, 263).<sup>6</sup> But if the impartial spectator were Archimedean, much of Smith’s work would be unnecessary. A great deal of his writing is designed to encourage activity in the context of the imperfection of humanity. He wants to make us the best we can be despite our shortcomings.

This is worth elaborating on. The impartial spectator plays two roles in Smith’s theory, one as an aspirational ideal and one as the anthropomorphized individual conscience. The former is what we strive for but cannot achieve; the latter is the actual moral psychological process that allows us to make moral judg-

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6. D. D. Raphael puts an optimistic spin on this, claiming that Rawls “treated Smith’s theory as a rival to his own theory of justice” (2007, 43).

ments. Actors, under Smith's account, must try as hard as they can to be as impartial as they are able, but they will never achieve perfect impartiality. At most, they will become virtuous.

This approach is not unique to Smith's moral psychology. He relies on the same comparative method in his philosophy of history. In it, he compares an idealized conjectural historiography to the way history actually unfolds, spending a significant amount of time in the *Wealth of Nations* pondering why actual events did not follow the ideal pattern (Weinstein 2013, ch. 10). Smith also expects consumers to compare market price to natural price, himself engaging in elaborate data analysis to ask why the actual prices of goods deviate from where they should be (*ibid.*, 148–154).

Smith is interested in the question of imperfection, or why systems don't function according to plan, a theme he introduces in his *History of Astronomy*. His sage advice that the “man of system” is more enamored with aesthetics than with reality (TMS, VI.ii.2.17; see also HA, IV.8, IV.25), and his observation that one cannot predictably manipulate either markets or other people's actions for “publick good,” are both built on his continuous reassertion that actuality does not meet ideal standards (WN, IV.ii.9). The closest he comes to postulating an ideal is in glorifying the prudence of the “great legislator,” who has carried the virtue to “the highest degree of perfection” and represents “the best head joined to the best heart” (TMS, VI.i.15, VI.ii.2.14). But his language here is mythological, and he tempers his glorification with the acknowledgment that successful leaders are usually egotists far beyond what their accomplishments deserve (VI.iii.28). Perhaps he would have clarified the legislative character if he had finished his work on “the general principles of law and government” (VII.iv.37), but regardless, it is clear that Smith simply does not appear to believe in achieving ideals. He summarizes this skepticism most poetically in his comments on the death of his friend David Hume, a person “approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit” (Corr., 221).

The upshot of the fallibility of the impartial spectator is that Smith's theory becomes an unrealizable egalitarian perfectionism. Any person can cultivate an impartial spectator, but to do so, he or she must commit to improving his or her own perspective. The average person—the average “Rick” to use the name posed in the prologue to this symposium—is only excluded from the process of self-improvement if the social and political institutions that govern daily life prevent equal access to education and acculturation (Weinstein 2013, chs. 8, 9). But what he or she does achieve is itself characteristically human.<sup>7</sup> It is imperfect and fraught with complexity. It is universal in the sense that all people are capable of creating

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7. The limits of the human is actually quite controversial in Smith (see Weinstein 2014).

an impartial spectator and all can modify it with input from others, but it is not universal in the sense that represents a singular point of view that all people share. Each impartial spectator is perspectival and unique to its imaginer, and each culture's impartial spectators are limited, in part, by the norms, education, and information available to its members.

This leads to a problem: The impartial spectator tends towards the status quo and runs against social change, by default. It masks sympathetic processes as intuition and endorses the familiar, hence Smith's use of the term "the man within the breast" (TMS, VII.ii.1.44). This makes genuine change harder, especially if the average "Ruth" wants to be considered as having the same perspectival legitimacy as "Rick." Again, Smith acknowledges the inequities of gender throughout his work.

There is significant disagreement among scholars as to how much the impartial spectator can overcome cultural norms. Fonna Forman-Barzilai (2010) is among the most resistant, arguing that the impartial spectator is reminiscent of the panopticon and that a Smithian society is susceptible to Michel Foucault's cultural critiques, as he presents them in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). I, in turn, offer a more optimistic vision of the power of education and the ways in which Smith's corpus itself is an educative tool (Weinstein 2013; 2015).

I do not seek to resolve my disagreement with Forman-Barzilai here. Instead, I simply want to suggest that the tension between the ideal and the actual exists in the impartial spectator because it exists in everyday life. Our imagination is epistemologically limited by the circumstances we find ourselves in. As I put it in *Adam Smith's Pluralism*, the things that unite us divide us (Weinstein 2013, 25, 85), and that if there is a reliable method to help us see past social norms, it involves triangulating education, experience, and history. Smith, I argue there (ibid., ch. 11), believes in progress, opposing Foucault's skeptical attack on progressivism. History is the story of moral experimentation, for Smith. It is a complement to the scientific, economic, and political processes of trial and error that build the social institutions, which give individuals the liberty to act on their impartial spectators as they see fit.

All of this is to say that Smithian impartiality is often misunderstood by Smith's more casual readers, a confusion that is exacerbated by textual debates among scholars. But this misreading of impartiality has also arisen from the fact that the connections between his ethics, economics, and his other writings are not always clear. Most serious readers recognize the systematic design of Smith's work and see a fundamental compatibility between his works. As Dogan Göçman (2007) points out, the impartial spectator makes an appearance in *The Wealth of Nations*, when Smith uses the phrase "the general interest of the society" (WN, I.xi.p.8), and Smith declares himself to be impartial in the "Introduction and Plan" of the book

(he “endeavoured . . . to explain, as fully and distinctly” as he could, the rival theories he evaluated (WN, Intro.8)). Impartiality is also present, as indicated above, when people compare value using the market price as a benchmark, a price that ignores individual preference and considers supply and demand, systemically. Finally, although it seems counterintuitive, even Smith’s focus on selfish action is, in some sense, impartial, because he forces us to recognize that in the grand scheme of things, *other* people’s desires matter as much as ours. Our own interest is paramount to ourselves, but market-wise, we are all equally important.

Obviously, much more could be said about both the connection of ethics and economics, and about the ubiquity of the impartial spectator in Smith’s work. I would conclude, however, by suggesting that regardless of the controversies, Smith’s struggle to describe the situatedness of the human conscience is of tremendous importance, and his decision to describe it as an impartial spectator is powerful and still relevant. It embodies many questions we still ask today. Smith’s person is a socialized agent and so is the impartial spectator. Does this mean that the impartial spectator has an ethnicity? A gender? A sexual preference? This remains to be seen. The impartial spectator also has epistemological limitations. Does this require that agents prioritize norms over truth, and do we end up claiming that those who cannot adequately imagine a reliable impartial spectator are uneducated or perverse? Do we simply think they are broken? These questions fall directly into contemporary discourse about the relationship between the self and others, individual and collective responsibility, and the nature of identity. As I discuss throughout *Adam Smith’s Pluralism*, Smith helped pave the way for modern identity politics.

The above questions aside, I would suggest that the impartial spectator is still important because it reminds us how relevant the imagination is to human interaction. While empathy in itself had a resurgence of political interest in the last few years (see, e.g., Slevin 2009), there has been little discussion in the United States of the role of the imagination in education or politics. Standardized tests measure our children’s content knowledge, but there is virtually no attention to assessing creativity. This suggests that, for example, the ability of the most partisan Republicans to see the perspective of most partisan Democrats, and vice versa, is stunted at the earliest stage of civic education.<sup>8</sup> Such ineptitude extends outwards with Smith’s “circles of sympathy”: Despite all the media attention, Americans and

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8. There is significant argument about the relationship between policy and political parties. One theory is that people choose political positions because of their party affiliation and not the other way around. In other words, a person may not be a Republican because he or she denies climate change, but rather, he or she will deny climate change because of the desire to be thought of as a ‘good’ Republican. (Climate change is just an example. I do not mean to suggest that it is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for Republican membership.) If this is the case, then perspective becomes that much harder to share simply by

the British seem ever less able to empathize with Syrian war refugees (Nardelli 2015).

We live in a Smithian world, one in which self-interest has priority, if not selfishness itself. The impartial spectator is a tool for balance between our own interests and others' interests. It serves as a reminder that both moral and economic considerations require more than myopia. Smith insists that we must step outside of ourselves to truly see the world. The fact that we cannot achieve a God's-eye view does not mean that imagined impartiality is without merit. It only means that empathy is just another way in which human beings fall short of perfection.

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virtue of the labels we place on people. For more on the relationship between parties and policy, see Adams et al. 2005.

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