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# The Logic of Reflection: Spectators Partial and Impartial

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Spectatorship abounds in the world of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*; it is its primary medium. Human beings are actors in this world, but they are all also spectators, and spectatorship is what mediates their relations with one another, and through these, with themselves. This world is then, in an odd way but above all, a *dramatic* world—and not simply a stage for the actors, but a theater, a hall for the audience, the spectators, to sit in. But this theater must have a particular property that most theaters do not have: It must be possible for everyone to be sitting among the audience and acting on the stage simultaneously. This capacity for constant interchange between actor and spectator, which must be a capacity of the theater itself, is the first indication of the oddness of TMS's dramatic world. But the oddness is also in the character of the drama, and in the method of acting in which the drama is played out in the theater. We may explore this oddness by thinking through the character of spectatorship itself, as Smith understands it. We can come to understand not only the partial but also the impartial spectator, who will turn out to be something like the god among spectators (as, for Karl Marx, money is the god among commodities). The character of the drama and the method of acting are, then, bound up with the theater's capacity for allowing the constant interchange of spectator and actor. I want to think this through in terms of what can be called the logic of reflection.

Smith repeatedly indicates both the similarities and the contrasts between the impartial spectator and all the other, partial spectators. The logic of reflection is common to both. The impartial spectator's role is to approve or disapprove the

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actions and thoughts of an individual. He (I will use Smith's preferred pronoun throughout) is impartial, and views the individual as from outside, but he is also within, the man *in* the breast. This complexity of the optics of spectatorship is a continuation of the ordinary situation of the individual as always on both sides of the footlights, actor and spectator, seeing and being seen. This is where reflection comes in. Smith shows the necessity of others not only for the moral development of the individual but also of self-consciousness itself, and he does this by invoking the image of the mirror: We see ourselves reflected in others, and in the approval or disapproval that we see in their eyes (TMS, III.1.3). This mirroring begins in earliest childhood and is the foundation for all later moral development.

When Hume used the image of the mirror, it was a metaphor; for Smith it is *not*. We actually *see* our reflection in the eyes of the other. (Smith says that when we are worried about our physical appearance we "examine our persons limb by limb, ... by placing ourselves before a looking-glass" (TMS, III.1.4).) Seeing is as much a part of the concrete, sensuous world as is touch, hearing, taste, smell. And actual sense-perception is pervasive in TMS as the medium that bears the medium of spectatorship: To be a spectator, and not just to be an actor, you must also have eyes, and ears as well, you must have legs to take you to or away from things, arms with which to reach out for them or fend them off, hands to grasp them, and all of these animated by feeling and emotion, attraction or disgust. Smith most frequently invokes sight and sound, light, darkness, color, but all the other senses are there as well. The phenomenological aspect is ever present.

Smith develops the idea of reflection, including its perceptual dimension, as the means by which we judge ourselves: "In order to do this, we must look at ourselves with the same eyes with which we look at others: we must imagine ourselves not the actors, but the spectators of our own character and conduct" (TMS, p. 111 note  $\kappa$ ). This is from the first edition; the later editions say that when "I endeavour to examine my own conduct...I divide myself, as it were, into two persons.... The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation.... The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself.... The first is the judge; the second the person judged of" (TMS, III.1.6). Both versions are important. The first not only makes explicit the necessity for us all to be continually both actors and spectators, it also specifies the peculiar optics of spectatorship: I can look at myself as other because I am looking *with my own eyes*. The second makes clear that what I must do is to split myself in two, and that only one of me is "the person whom I properly call myself." It also emphasizes that the relation between the two is that of judge and judged.

It is hard to recognize the full importance of this reflection/sense-perception line of thought in Smith, first because even in TMS it is often in the background,

and is not fully worked out. Second, by the *Wealth of Nations* (hereafter WN), it has vanished without trace, and has no place at all in Anglo-American thought more or less until the twentieth century (the role of Jeremy Bentham in its disappearance can hardly be overstated). Seeing what happens when it makes a comeback helps us to see its full importance. In Anglo-American thought the key figure is George Herbert Mead, who is quite explicitly criticizing the atomist/individualist approach typical of Anglo-American thought (the basic presentation is in *Mind, Self, and Society*, chs. 18–22). For Mead, the self-conscious individual is always a social being, and self-consciousness can only occur through relations with others. Specifically, he argues, the very term *self-consciousness* implies the central element of this process: that I achieve the capacity to view myself as an *object*. As with Smith, the process is one of reflection, in which I see the other, and then put myself in the other's place and so see myself as other. For Mead, also, I must split myself, becoming two, and this splitting is worked out in the difference between *I* and *me*: "He had in him all the attitudes of others, calling for a certain response; that was the 'me' of that situation, and his response is the 'I'" (Mead 1967/1934, 176). This is not quite the same as the distinction Smith makes in speaking of "the person whom I properly call myself," but it is parallel to it, and the parallel is established by the logic of reflection. Finally, for Mead the completion of the process of becoming a self-conscious self is the attainment of a recognition of what he calls the *generalized other*. I begin by recognition of particular others, individuals and groups of individuals; but the generalized other is the sum of attitudes and standards of the society in which I live. Self-consciousness requires this impersonal achievement, and the generalized other is in this way something like an amalgam of the impartial spectator and what Smith calls the *general rules* of morality.

As far as I know, Mead was not familiar with TMS, though he was at least aware of the broad argument of WN. The point however is not to trace influences but rather to see that the logic of reflection is fairly binding. It is true that the one who worked this logic out most fully—G. W. F. Hegel—was a primary influence on Mead, and Hegel *had* read TMS and WN, and thought highly of Smith (and of James Stewart). (In fact, I am adopting the rather ponderous phrase "*logic* of reflection" in acknowledgement of Hegel's extraordinary exposition of it in the second moment of his *Logic*, the doctrine of essence.) In any event, what is interesting and important (and more interesting and important than if there had been any direct influence) is the re-emergence of lines of thought so close to Smith's mirror passage not only in Mead, but in phenomenology, psychoanalysis, critical theory, and other lines of twentieth-century thought. Such lines had never vanished from Continental thought, but, as accounts of individuality and society, they were muted by Hegel's final absorption of everything—logic, nature, individuals, society, history—into Absolute Spirit. Thus in Continental thought as well, new de-

velopments had to await the twentieth century. Finally, perhaps the most striking development is in the neurophysiology of mirror neurons, dating back only to the 1990s. Giacomo Rizzolatti (2004, 5), one of the pioneers in this work, says that one of his motivations was to find the neurophysiology behind Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, which he regarded as substantially correct—and the discovery of mirror neuron confirmed this.

Even more recently, the entire line of thought has been perfectly manifested in a phenomenon of a very different kind, that of the *selfie*, especially when aided by the *selfie stick*. For the selfie stick carries me beyond what Mead calls the *manipulatory area* (Mead 1980/1932), that is, it carries me beyond my own reach into a place that could only be occupied by another; while the phone/camera effects the displacement of my eyes—"the same eyes with which we look at others"—to that place—"placing myself in his situation"—so that I am truly looking at myself from another's standpoint. Whether or not selfies typically lead their makers to *judge* themselves as others see them is of course open to question; they certainly do advance us in thinking about the logic of reflection and the strange contradictions that its optics involve. But we need to think more about this, and another very valuable example takes us back to Smith's time.

Around 1786, the French painter Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun made a painting of her daughter, Julie, then about six years old. In it, Julie is holding a mirror parallel to the picture plane, and her reflection is as though she were looking straight into it, full face. She, however, is standing in profile, looking down at the mirror from the side. (One of the many engaging features of the painting is that she is holding the rectangular mirror at an angle, and the tilt of her head and the tilt of the mirror correspond.) That is, the painting is a fully actualized and *real* depiction of something impossible: for Julie quite clearly *is* looking straight into the mirror at herself even though the image in the mirror seems to tell us that she can't be. The most important thing about this painting is that it is one of the most beautiful, charming, and moving paintings of a child ever—and, not coincidentally, one painted by her mother. But it doesn't do damage to it to think a bit more about what is going on. Julie is looking at herself in the mirror—the title of the painting says Julie Le Brun is "looking *in* a mirror" (my emphasis)—but in the mirror she is looking straight out at us, the spectators of the painting, so we are seeing ourselves in the mirror, *she is us*. But also, evidently, her actual looking was happening while the painting was being painted, so she is looking out at the painter, her mother whose reflection, then, is in the mirror. We are Julie and her mother; her mother is herself and Julie; and Julie is herself, her mother, and us. It would be wrong to impose on the painting Smith's account of the child seeing approval and disapproval reflected in the parent's eyes, but clearly, the relation between mother and daughter depicted here is a formative one, in which Julie is becoming herself.

It is at least in the realm of possibility that Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun knew of TMS. It was being read (both in English and in translation) in French aristocratic circles at the time. Smith was still alive, and he had personal connections to the Physiocrats. Vigée Le Brun was an intimate, and preferred portrait painter, of Marie Antoinette, whose brothers Joseph and Leopold—both of whom became Holy Roman Emperor—were adherents of physiocracy (she also initially favored A. R. J. Turgot, but then secured his dismissal).



“Jeanne Julie Louise Le Brun se regardant dans un miroir,” by Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun (photo by Yann Caradec / CC BY)

However, no matter how nice it would be to think that Vigée Le Brun had in mind Smith’s mirror passage, and perhaps offering a gentle critique of it, the main point once again is the imperative of the logic of reflection. Once we begin to reflect on reflection we enter an optical world that is necessarily rooted in, and stems from, the ‘real’ or ‘natural’ world of optics, but that is, equally necessarily, impossible in that world. We must become other than ourselves, our eyes (“the same eyes”) must become another’s eyes, we must see ourselves as other, as objects. Perception is necessary to becoming an individual, but it must be transcended—or, perhaps we should say that perception, for us, can never be reduced simply to its “natural” form. Perception is always already meaningful; meaning is integral to it and cannot be reduced to perception’s ‘natural’ functioning. William Wordsworth, not many years after the painting was made, says something like this in writing “of all the mighty world / Of eye and ear, both what they half-create, / And what perceive” (1981/1798, 116): The depiction of perception in the painting of Julie is *correct*.

Smith almost always speaks of the impartial spectator in the singular: the *man* in the breast. (When he says that “we must become the impartial spectators of our own character and conduct” (TMS, III.2.2), the plural is an indication that

we will not attain full impartiality.) But presumably everyone has one, or at least ought to have one. So we can ask: Is there just one impartial spectator or are there many? We can approach this question in two ways: from the structure of spectatorship, including its optics; and from the content of the impartial spectator's judgments. Spectatorship is always between a self and an other (or others), and through the mirror of another's eyes I must learn to see myself as other (so, be another to myself). This is how I come to learn the distinction between proper and improper, good and bad, as well as how I become myself. But any particular, partial, spectator—whether I am looking at another (including myself) or the other is looking at me—is bound up with his own particular sensibilities, passions, interests; that is simply what it is to be partial, and for partial spectators it always matters who the other is. Now, for me, the impartial spectator is *in* me, he is the man in *my* breast, but he has no particular relation to me, and he is not partial *to me*. For him, I could be anyone. Moreover, what he must teach me is how to look at myself as though I were anyone *other* than myself. If the impartial spectator in me regards me as the same as anyone else, then for him all individuals are the same, interchangeable for him, so he is always the same in them, and, so, just one.

As to content, Smith says that the complexity of moral judgment, both in its subtleties and fine gradations, and in the sheer number of the different situations in which it must be exercised, mean that even “the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection” the capacity for moral judgment (TMS, III.3.22). This almost suggests an Aristotelian sense of the singularity of situations to which the virtuous man must respond with a *virtuosity* that recognizes the absence of a universal principle. But Smith stops short of this. He does seem to think that there is one, and only one, entirely correct judgment for any situation. However complex, a universal principle exists that does cover all possible situations, and all individuals *should* respond to each situation in the same way. Here again, then, the impartial spectator *should* be the same for everyone, so, again, just *one* of him.

But the ‘should’ is important. For it is almost as though the impartial spectator must be two things at once. He is the man, the demigod, in the breast, “the great judge and arbiter of our conduct,” who “calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions” (TMS, III.3.4). *But*: “this demigod within the breast appears...though partly of immortal, yet partly too of mortal extraction.” He can be “astonished and confounded” by “the vehemence and clamour of the man without” (III.2.32). What is also true, and partly implied by this, is that the impartial spectator for me must come into existence over time, and gradually, in a process that seems to parallel my gradual comprehension of the general rules of morality, so that he is the personification of these rules in my breast. That this must happen, that the impartial spectator can only come to be in

my breast in part by my own effort, accounts for his double character as the perfect “abstract and ideal spectator” (III.3.38), and as the actual, concrete spectator, of partly mortal extraction.

The impartial spectator teaches me, but I also have to learn, to some extent on my own, to create him; we constitute one another. Thinking about how the learning and teaching goes on brings us back to the theater. For above all, what I must learn to do is to *act well*. For this, the impartial spectator must be both my acting teacher and a particularly severe theater critic. And now the oddness of Smith’s theater comes up again. The impartial spectator demands a particular style of acting, and one that employs the logic of reflection in a particular way. We are all on the stage, acting, but we must also continually be “imagin[ing] ourselves not the actors, but the spectators of our own character and conduct.” That is, we must not become too bound up with, or immersed in, our performance. Even as we act, we must also be spectators in the audience, judging, and as actors, we must respond to this judgment, adjusting our performance. Our acting should never be spontaneous. The Aristotelian view encourages *virtuosity*, improvisation in the virtuous man made possible by the practice of virtue. But the impartial spectator certainly does not want me to be a *virtuoso*. Smith describes what we must do as an act of *imagination*, but it is imagination in the service of restraint. Restraint is not only the goal in regard to the impartial spectator’s own judgment, but also what he commands in our performance for all the other partial spectators. (The impartial spectator himself seems to be the only one, in fact, who is ever allowed to cut loose and really get into his role, as when he “calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions.”) For I must remember, especially in adversity, that no one else will enter into my feelings to anything like their full extent, so I must always restrain my expression of them. I must hold back. In the interests of the highest morality I must always be calculating, calibrating my actions in a way that always makes them a response to another’s judgment, even if that judgment has not yet been made. This is the drama that should unfold in Smith’s theater; this is how we should all be acting. It is going to be a particularly exhausting form of acting. The drama is going to be a rather dull one.

To call the impartial spectator an agent of repression is not at all foreign to Smith’s account, and the heart of the man in the breast’s teaching is self-command. Smith makes a broad division between “the soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues, the virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity” and “the great, the awful and respectable, the virtues of self-denial, of self-government, of that command of the passions which subjects all the movements of our nature to what our own dignity and honour, and the propriety of our own conduct require” (TMS, I.i.5.1). He is willing to give some place to the former, but the latter clearly take precedence, and this is brought out in his account of children (III.3.22). Interestingly, he does

not impute to children the soft, amiable virtues; the emotions he lists are fear, grief, and anger. But the chief point, the very beginning of the paragraph in which he speaks of children and their education, is: “A very young child has no self-command.” The child’s entry “into the great school of self-command” when it begins to go to school is the true beginning of its moral education, and this education must be the central task for the rest of its life. Thus, when we split ourselves into spectator and actor, judge and judged, the judge stands over “the person whom I properly call myself” as superior.

“The person whom I properly call myself” is partial, with particular feelings, passions, likes, and aversions often coming from “a peculiar turn or habit that [the imagination] has acquired.” Such peculiar turns are “but little sympathized with” because others do not have them. Love between “two persons of different sexes” is Smith’s outstanding example of this, and it is always ridiculous (TMS, I.ii.2.1). There is obviously a very great deal to say about this, but I want to concentrate on the way it follows from Smith’s understanding of the logic of reflection. Anything particular or peculiar to me is not visible in reflection. The other cannot take on my eyes and put me in his place; nor can I do this in regard to his peculiar turns. If this is so, then Smith’s world of spectatorship, his theater, excludes everything that uniquely distinguishes a person, that is, it excludes individuality. But the exclusion of individuality really follows from the fact that there is only one impartial spectator: it turns out that the impartial spectator was right to see us all as all the same, interchangeable. He is right because in what makes us self-conscious moral beings—that is, spectators—we are all the same.

Smith himself doesn’t seem to be too concerned about the exclusion of individuality. Mead, however, is, and it is worth thinking of the similar problem that he faces because of his similar view of the logic of reflection. Mead very much wants individuals to be imaginative, creative, and active centers of initiative, but it is not at all clear that he can have them so. He has given so much away to the reflection of the other, and especially the generalized other, that the ‘I’ almost vanishes. This is a complicated question, not to be elaborated here, but it is worked out very well, and very sympathetically, by Mitchell Aboulafia (1986) in *The Mediating Self: Mead, Sartre, and Self-Determination*. But the reason to bring Mead in here is to point out a particular understanding of the logic of reflection that he and Smith share. This is their emphasis on the splitting of the individual in the process of reflection. For Smith, the splitting should result in the incorporation of the impartial spectator in my breast; for Mead, it results in internalizing the generalized other.

Staying with Smith, now, I can ask: Do I want a man like this in my breast? To which I have to answer, speaking only for myself: Hell, no. I don’t, firstly, just because of what this man is supposed to be like, and what his relationship to me

is supposed to be: He has not the slightest interest in me, in “the person whom I properly call myself.” Why should I accept this man’s judgments on my character and conduct above any other’s? Second, though, even if I must have something alien in me, judging me, I do not see why I must accept its/his judgments uncritically, and as absolute commands. One need have only a very glancing knowledge of Sigmund Freud to link the impartial spectator with the superego. While Freud thinks that the superego is necessary for the existence of civilization, he certainly does not think that I should be passive before it. The struggles among id, ego, and superego are essential to mental health for Freud, and, in any event the superego is not rational.

I think it is fair to bring Freud in here first because of his own remarkable critique of Immanuel Kant, in which he links the categorical imperative not only to the superego but to the Oedipus complex, and there are clear links between Smith and Kant here. Second, though, I think that Smith himself opens his argument to this line of questioning when he says: “While [the child] remains under the custody of such partial protectors [parents and nurse], its anger is the first and, perhaps, the only passion which it is taught to moderate. By noise and threatening they are, for their own ease, often obliged to frighten it into good temper; and the passion which incites it to attack, is restrained by that which teaches it to attend to its own safety” (TMS, III.3.22). Smith is actually quite sympathetic to children, in the somewhat cold manner of a lifelong bachelor. He does not at all blame children for being demanding, for lacking self-command—they are naturally so. Nonetheless, the clarity with which this passage foreshadows Freud’s account of the formation of the ego to save the id from itself by replacing the pleasure principle with the reality principle is so striking that it demands to be subject to Freudian criticism. That is, even in 1759 it is reasonable to ask whether the simple and forcible repression of anger, grief, and fear can be regarded as an appropriate approach to child-rearing.

Smith and Mead run into difficulties because of the specific way in which they deploy the logic of reflection, but this is not to say that there is a problem with the logic as such. It remains true that Smith is a great pioneer of the view that individuality can only arise among individuals, and not in one alone—a view that rests on the logic of reflection. Mead is one of the great developers of the idea. And the problems that they face are largely resolved in other versions, notably those of psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and critical theory. The critique of Smith that I have sketched is from within a broad perspective of which he remains a living part.

There is another very different issue with the impartial spectator that I will simply mention. Smith offers two different but parallel accounts of the development of moral judgment, one through the impartial spectator, the other through the general rules of morality. I would say that the impartial spectator line is much more interesting than the general rules line. It is possible to think that the two go

together: The general rules require a personal representative in the breast. However, it also seems possible that the general rules render the impartial spectator superfluous. But that is a question for another time.

However that may be, though, the two accounts have much in common. Both are founded on “the great school of self-command,” on “the great, the awful and respectable...virtues of self-denial,” etc. But there is also a third very different line of thought in TMS, smaller, quieter, more intimate, linked to “the soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues.” It is not developed nearly as fully as the other two, but nevertheless appears in short but emphatic passages throughout the work. Even though Smith seems so clearly to favor the two stern views, he can’t quite bring himself actually to rule out the “gentle” as the possibly definitive one. It offers a very different view of what human life not only should but also could be like, one in which the impartial spectator, general rules, great and awful virtues, etc., will be far less important. Vigée le Brun’s lovely painting of her daughter expresses it, in contrast to her portraits of grand aristocrats, of Marie Antoinette. That is, the logic of reflection continues to be necessary, if in a very different way. Its simplest, most perfect expression is in one short sentence from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, my favorite in the entire book: “Humanity does not desire to be great, but to be beloved” (III.5.8).

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