



Peer Review and the Development of the Impartial Spectator

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Together with the idea of sympathy, the impartial spectator is perhaps the most memorable part of Adam Smith's moral theory. In what follows I want to outline how this central concept of Smith's thinking comes to the fore in his attempts to reply to a series of objections which arose from his peers in their reception of the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter TMS). Before doing so I will provide a sketch of what I take to be the functional role of the impartial spectator.

It is important to note two key features of Smith's overall project in TMS. First Smith was dissatisfied by the existing state of moral philosophy. He came to feel that moral philosophy, both ancient and modern, had failed to provide a satisfactory account of actual cases of moral judgment. Attempts to reduce morality to a single principle, whether self-interest in the case of Bernard Mandeville, or benevolence in the case of Francis Hutcheson, failed to capture important aspects of how we actually experience morality. Second, he drew on his friend David Hume's attempt to create an empirically based account of moral psychology, an account which depended on the observation of everyday moral thinking (Campbell 1975).

Smith's aim was to provide an accurate theory of all aspects of moral judgment. As a result his theory appears eclectic, as it attempts to bring together many of the past attempts to understand morality. His account has a place for reason, for conscience, for utility, for general rules, for habit and custom, for the virtues, and for self-interest. And it must have a place for each, because each is, in fact, a part of moral life. The lynchpin of all of this is his account of the moral sentiments as mediated by sympathy. But it is important to note that Smith does not reduce

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morality to sympathy, nor does he argue that sympathy is the single principle which dictates the content of morality.

Moreover, Smith's account of moral sentiment does not depend on the identification of a cognitive faculty or moral sense. Instead it is an account of the nature of moral experience through human emotions. Central to the account is human sociability and fellow-feeling. Smith's sympathy is a "fellow-feeling" with "any passion whatever" (TMS, 10). From here he builds an account of how shared beliefs about appropriate sentimental responses are developed amongst a group. It is important to note that Smith's account of the operation and development of this system of beliefs about morality has no active role for a Deity. Whatever the role of religion in society, it has no functional role in Smith's account of sympathy and moral sentiment.

Social life is not simply the playing field upon which morality takes place, it also plays a causal role in the generation of morality itself. Human beings are social, and social experience shapes our ability to control our moral sentiments. We are aware that others judge our behaviour, and as a result we come to attune our reactions to socially generated norms of moral behaviour. We experience pleasure from "mutual sympathy" (TMS, 13) and this explains how we are able to come to shared beliefs about right and wrong.

Central to Smith's account is the role of imagination. Imagination allows us to put ourselves in the situations of others and to assess their likely reaction to our behaviour. This allows us to anticipate and identify behaviour that is in line with socially generated notions of propriety. The process, both imaginative and sentimental, is undertaken alongside our judgments of others. The process is one that checks the likely propriety of behaviour against our imagination's model of how we would react in similar circumstances. Thus spectatorship becomes central to Smith's account of moral experience. We spectate and are spectated upon in turn in a process that mediates the sentiments and, through self-command, allows us to secure the approval of our fellows.

It is at this point that we need to consider what Smith regarded as the strongest objection to his first, 1759, version of the theory. Smith was accused, by Gilbert Elliot (later 3rd Baronet of Minto), of producing a theory of moral conventionalism that left him with no solid basis upon which to criticise the content of particular moral beliefs. In a long letter replying to Elliot, the gist of which would eventually find its way into the second, 1761 edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith responds to this concern by developing the account of self-spectatorship through his account of the impartial spectator (Corr., 48–49).² D. D. Raphael (2007) makes the analysis of these revisions the heart of his account of the impartial spectator.

2. Elliot's letter to Smith does not survive.

Smith's initial version of the theory was acutely aware that our experience of the moral sentiments and sympathy was imperfect; for instance, it tends to generate biases in favour of those close to us. We judge our friends and family more leniently, and are in turn judged more leniently by them. This problem, and Smith's development of a reply to it, led him to the account of conscience as a mode of self-judgment. From the second edition Smith develops the role of the impartial spectator in this part of his account. This is a development of the actual impartial spectators of the first edition: people who judge us but who are not close to us. In subsequent editions, Smith couples the account of conscience from the first edition with an enhanced role for an imaginative internalised impartial spectator who assesses our conduct in the light of what we imagine an actual impartial spectator would think.

The idea is that we internalise the process of judgment that provides us with an impartial assessment of others and apply it to our own behaviour. I am able to reflect on my behaviour while stripping out my own partiality, to distance myself from my passions and exercise self-command. This process of splitting our self into two persons and dispassionately examining our own conduct becomes habitual and is often drawn upon in an immediate fashion. The process remains both imaginative and driven by the passions. The judgment of our conscience is a felt experience as the impartial spectator's feelings are used to shine a light on our own. Indeed we often feel that we are doing the wrong thing without knowing why, showing us that the impartial spectator speaks to our emotions as much as to our reason.

For Smith: "Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love" (TMS, 113). This is extended into a desire to be not only praised but praiseworthy. And this desire prompts us to develop and apply the imaginative impartial spectator. We develop a habit of passing judgment on ourselves. We practice self-judgment to such a degree that we are dissatisfied with approbation unless we, as judges of our own behaviour, are satisfied that we are worthy of such approbation. We "turn our eyes inwards" (*ibid.*, 115) and find that approbation that results from misperception simply does not cut it for us.

We can see then that Smith has created a psychological mechanism in the impartial spectator which he believes is both accurate to actual moral experience and which allows individuals to distance themselves from their own passions. Smith's naturalistic account of conscience as the impartial spectator provides a "higher tribunal," an imaginative "man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter" of our conduct (TMS, 130). He also provides an account of how we are able to pass judgment on the actual customary beliefs of our society. An issue of conscience is one in which our imaginative invocation of the impartial spectator has the

capacity to put us at odds with the judgments of actual spectators and, ultimately, to choose to prefer our own judgment to what we regard as the mistaken views of our peers. So strong is the influence of conscience, so thoroughly have we internalised the impartial spectator, that we accept it as the final court of appeal on moral matters. Smith clearly felt that this development was in line with the original spirit of his account and was also sufficient to deal with Elliot's objection. In the sixth edition of 1790 the role of the spectator and the section on conscience are further expanded, giving a sense that Smith continued to regard the direction he had taken as a suitable response to what he took to be Elliot's serious objection.

The impartial spectator explains how passion-driven creatures, weak and partial as they are, are able to gain a sense of the "real littleness" of their concerns (TMS, 137). While our passions still provide the motivating force of our actions, we now subject them to assessment and control in a way that draws a clear line between Smith's account and accounts that depend on a contagion of manners. Elliot believed that Smith's theory collapsed into conventionalism because it contained no aspect which allowed for a claim to have objective moral value beyond what was authorised by the current practice of any society at any given time. The force of Elliot's objection lies in a deep-seated intuition that morality must be more substantive than mere social norms. Smith's development of the role of conscience and the impartial spectator was supposed to accommodate this intuition whilst maintaining the naturalistic form of the sentimental account.

It seems, however, that Elliot's objection continued to have influence despite Smith's attempts to develop the impartial spectator. In an unpublished manuscript, Adam Ferguson relates an imaginary conversation in which one interlocutor makes a very similar charge against Smith's account. He writes: "You began with calling Sympathy to explain Moral Sentiment. You now call up moral sentiment to explain itself: what is a well informed & impartial observer, but a Virtuous Person whose Sympathy may be relied on as a Test of Virtue? If he be well informed, of what is he informed?" (Ferguson 1960, 229). The rest of Ferguson's text has Smith replying that his revisions to the 1761 second edition were supposed to have removed this objection. Yet Ferguson seems to be suggesting that Smith has simply complicated the account and created a circular argument.

Smith's theory, even with the introduction of the impartial spectator, leaves him a "completely consistent conventionalist" (Haakonssen 2003, 216) because the impartial spectator is imagined by an individual who is socialised and passion-driven. Ferguson's point was that it may be a particularly vivid account of conscience, but it nonetheless depends upon a notion of a virtuous man, and the content of the virtuous man's knowledge is that of the individual in question. The impartial spectator has no God's-eye view, no knowledge superior to that of the individual himself. His judgments are not judgments of universal moral

truth, but rather an imaginative self-reflection on the beliefs of a being, which are embedded in inter-subjectively generated social beliefs. The impartial spectator is merely another mode through which to consider our actions. The only sense in which the impartial spectator is universal is that all normally functioning humans have it (or else they are what we in modern terms would call a sociopath). While Smith clearly thought that the moral sentiments were universal, and that they often react in a similar way given the universal human nature, he was likewise comfortable with the idea of culturally and historically diverse judgments. The impartial spectator identifies moral truth for people like us, not moral truth in some objective and unchanging sense. The only knowledge that the impartial spectator has but that actual spectators do not comes from his access to our innermost thoughts and feelings. He is thereby able to make an accurate judgment of our motives and to demand that we are praiseworthy as well as praised. This, Smith believed, distinguished his account from mere conventionalism. But it seems instead to have added a reflective element to an account that remains deeply embedded in the knowledge of actual individuals.

Similarly, the impartial spectator is not in any straightforward sense selfless. While it is true that it allows us to exercise self-command to do what an actual impartial spectator would approve—to tone down our selfishness, if you like—it is not governed by any principle of benevolence. That was Hutcheson's error. The impartial spectator will, when appropriate, approve of self-regarding actions. It will recognise when we have special duties to particular individuals. An impartial spectator will approve of us caring more for our own children than those of others, just as it will disapprove of us actively harming the children of others to advance our own interests. In this way Smith's explanation of the content of conscience is truer to actual moral behaviour than is a system that demands perfect selflessness.

There is then no creature called the impartial spectator separate from our own consciousness of our self. There is no mystery to it, and no idealised perspective where the voice of conscience is supposed to have complete knowledge of all relevant information. The impartial spectator is not an ideal spectator; he still depends on the knowledge of partial individuals about what impartial actual spectators would think of them. In many respects it is precisely this which makes the impartial spectator such an attractive part of Smith's account. It is a recognisably human moral psychology that makes no unrealistic claims on individuals in the name of some supposed eternally true moral principle. Smith simply wasn't involved in that kind of philosophical project. He wanted to explain how actual people actually experience moral judgment. As a result the judgment involved will always be imperfect, as humans are imperfect. In this sense the impartial spectator makes us more humane, while recognising that we are, in the end, merely human.

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