



# On the Origins and Normative Status of the Impartial Spectator

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

Adam Smith's concept of the "impartial and well-informed spectator" (hereafter I keep with the common practice of leaving the "well-informed" implied) constitutes his attempt to solve a problem that is essential to the particular kind of moral theory he offers (TMS, III.2.32).

Like many other moral theories, Smith's tries to *explain* moral life and (most likely, though some have argued otherwise) tries to elaborate and defend a *normative* conception of moral life; thus, Smith's account of morality tells us both how we *do* judge and act and how we *should* judge and act. However, Smith's moral theory is specifically a theory of moral *sentiments*. To employ a crude but heuristically helpful dichotomy: On his view, we make moral judgments and perform moral actions fundamentally on the basis of feeling rather than reason.

Such a view obviously faces the problem of accounting for the fact that our moral judgments and motivations have features that our feelings often do not. For example, feelings are usually subjective and fleeting, while moral judgments and motivations are objective and stable. In contrast to Smith, if one were to ground moral judgment and motivation in rationality, this would not be a problem, as reason is definitively objective and stable. Thus, one of the primary challenges for theories like Smith's is to provide some account of how things objective and stable can be rooted in things subjective and fleeting.

For Smith, the impartial spectator solves this problem. According to Smith, when I make a moral judgment or act on moral considerations, I do not do so merely on the basis of how *I* feel but on the basis of how someone in a more objec-

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tive, more stable position would feel; the concept of the impartial spectator is the concept of this someone. In this regard, the impartial spectator is Smith's concept of conscience, the faculty that we employ when we make moral judgments and engage in moral deliberation.

This much is—gulp—certain. But (at least) two questions remain. How does Smith understand the origin of the impartial spectator? And how does Smith understand the normative status of its judgments? In what follows, I map out what I take to be the main possible responses to each question. With respect to the origin of the impartial spectator, I also indicate what I take the most promising view to be. With respect to the normative status of its judgments, I outline some kinds of investigations we might need to undertake in order to evaluate the possibilities.

There are at least three possible views on regarding how Smith understands the origin of the impartial spectator:

- I. The first is that the impartial spectator emerges from social interaction as a solution to a certain kind of coordination problem. For Smith, “nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary” (TMS, I.i.2.1). The trouble is that people don't automatically share each other's emotions, especially “with regard to those objects, which affect in a particular manner” one or the other of them (I.i.4.5). Thus, in order for them to achieve the sentimental concord they desire, people must use their imaginations. The spectator (the person observing a person feeling something) imagines what it is like to be the agent (the person experiencing the feeling), and the agent imagines what it is like to be the spectator; the result is that each moves towards a middle, more objective, impartial perspective. After enough social interaction, judging in terms of this new, created perspective becomes habitual.
- II. On the previous reading, the existence of the impartial spectator is explained in terms of human beings figuring out the best way to satisfy their desire to get along with their neighbors, manifested specifically in their desire for what Smith calls “mutual sympathy” with them. On another reading, the impartial spectator constitutes an innate faculty that is likely *awakened* via interactions like the one just described, but is *not an artificial* response to them. Thus, on this second view, the existence of the impartial spectator is explained in terms of the development of a natural human disposition to make and abide by impartial judgments.

- III. The third reading combines elements of the first two. On this reading, the impartial spectator is still a human creation in response to certain features of social interaction rather than a faculty awakened by them. But the nature of the response itself remains determined, in some sense, by human nature. So, on this view, the existence of the impartial spectator is explained by a natural tendency to create it under certain conditions.

In Smith's writing, there is evidence favoring the first reading (e.g., TMS, pp. 128–130 note *r*)<sup>2</sup> and evidence favoring the second reading (e.g., TMS, III.5.5). Insofar as the third reading can be understood as an attempt to incorporate all this evidence systematically, I take it to be the most promising one.

Things are more complicated with respect to the question of how to understand the normative status of the impartial spectator. I see four possible views, all of which seem consistent with the third explanatory account of the origin of conscience, but which seem to differ in their relationships with the other two explanatory accounts.

The first view is suggested (it may also be in some way implied) by the first answer to the origin question:

- i. On this view, Smith's argument that we *should* judge and act on the basis of what the impartial spectator says becomes something like, 'If you want to achieve mutual sympathy with others, this is the most effective way to go about it.'

The next three views fit more smoothly (with similar caveats regarding the possibility of some kind of implication) with the natural, innate-faculty explanation of the origin of the impartial spectator.

- ii. Smith's argument that we *should* judge in terms of what the impartial spectator says might become, 'Doing so is the best way to satisfy the particular natural disposition we have towards sympathy with an impartial perspective, however this disposition is understood.'
- iii. Depending upon how we understand the role that the natural faculty of conscience plays in the human psyche and upon whether we want to accept a teleological account of human nature, the normative argument might become 'Doing so is the only way to fulfill your natural function

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2. I refer here to text from the second edition of TMS, included in an editors' footnote.

and thus to allow yourself to flourish in the only way that beings like you are capable of flourishing.’

- iv. Depending on what we think about the metaethical status of this natural faculty’s verdicts, the normative argument might become, ‘Doing so is the only way to make, and act on the basis of, accurate moral judgments.’

View (iv) seems totally consistent with both views (ii) and (iii), in that we might be understood to have a natural disposition towards making true moral judgment and that this disposition might be understood to be dictated by a natural teleological orientation.

How do we evaluate the four possibilities? The first one (that is, view (i)) requires the fewest assumptions, but it generates the weakest conception of moral reasons. On such a view, the strength of moral reasons would depend on these assumptions or conditions obtaining: (1) our having the relevant desire for mutual sympathy; (2) this desire best being satisfied by adopting the perspective of the impartial spectator; *and* (3) this desire not being outweighed by other desires we might have. The second view (that is, view (ii)), in grounding the impartial spectator in a distinct natural disposition, avoids dependence on assumption (2), but it is hard to see how it can avoid assumption (3) or even assumption (1). In avoiding all of these assumptions or conditions obtaining, the third view (that is, view (iii)) generates the strongest conception of moral reasons, but it does so at the cost of requiring major metaphysical assumptions about the hierarchical and teleological structure of human nature. And the fourth, view (iv), requires major metaethical assumptions about the status of sentiment-based moral judgments, i.e., that there is a coherent way to understand how they can be ‘accurate’ or ‘true’; what view (iv) implies about moral reasons depends upon the nature of the relationship between concern for making accurate or true moral judgments and the reasons we have for acting on them.

Evaluating the four views (i–iv) regarding the normative status of the impartial spectator is perhaps more difficult than evaluating the three views (I–III) regarding the origin of the impartial spectator. Interpretative challenges in evaluating the views on normative status arise from the fact that Smith does not say all that much explicitly favoring any of positions (i–iv); thus, we must do difficult and controversial exegetical work to arrive at a conclusion. Compounding this challenge is the fact that completing this interpretive work will likely involve formulating straightforward philosophical arguments for and against each view *per se*; since Smith does not say much here, we will likely need to formulate these arguments independently and then see if they fit with more explicit features of his philosophical orientation. Formulating these arguments is a hard thing to do.

Above, I mentioned challenges to each reading in terms of its respective assumptions and accounts of how strong moral reasons are. But arguments can be made on behalf of all these assumptions and on behalf of both weak and strong accounts of moral reasons.

However, we are not at a total loss. Several investigative strategies suggest themselves. Since philosophers who influenced Smith such as Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Joseph Butler deal more explicitly than he does with the questions involved in the choice of favoring options (i), (ii), or (iii), it seems that the best place to start in determining where Smith comes down on these issues is with careful thought of the impact these thinkers must have had on his views. The same is true to some extent regarding view (iv). However, progress in this regard first requires thinking deeply about the logical structure of Smithian moral judgment, given how the Smithian sympathy mechanism works. Smith's conception of moral judgment differs from those of his fellow sentimentalists Hutcheson and Hume because it does not seem to model moral judgment on the perception of and/or reaction to a quality in its target. For Smith, moral judgment essentially involves perception of and/or reaction to *agreement* between one's own evaluative sentiments and another's. The fact that we have evaluative sentiments prior to the moment of agreement makes it hard to determine *when* the moral judgment takes place. Do we *first* make the judgment and then *complete* it via mutual sympathy? Or is the moral judgment complete but not yet *moral* prior to mutual sympathy? We must grapple with these kinds of questions before we can grapple with the question of whether Smith believes that moral judgments are even capable of being true or false.

## References

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