



# Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator: Autonomy and Extended Selves

Jimena Hurtado<sup>1</sup>

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Much has been written about Adam Smith's impartial spectator as the central figure of his explanation of the formation of moral judgment. But as much as has already been said, this figure continues to be studied not only to better understand Smith's moral philosophy and influence, but also to build a connection with modern behavioral research on the formation of moral character and moral communities. In this text I focus on a question that touches both of these aspects: How we build our own character in the process of building and being part of a moral community? I believe the impartial spectator is at the center of this process, and it expresses our profound social nature as well as our responsibility with ourselves and others as free members of a community in a shared world.

Asking *what* the impartial spectator is instead of *who* it is or represents widens the inquiry because it immediately sets the stage of the discussion beyond a single individual or even a group of individuals that share something in common. The impartial spectator is more than a figure or a representation. It is a reminder of what we are, and how we come to be.

To a historian of economic thought, the question of building a moral community confirms the importance of the permanent dialogue we maintain with authors no longer alive as a touchstone and a source of inspiration. It reminds the economist of the central place of moral anthropology in the configuration and development of the discipline of economics, and also of the shortcomings of disciplinary thinking. My understanding of the impartial spectator is, without a doubt, as much the result of reading and conversing with Adam Smith (and Jean-

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1. Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá D.C., Colombia.

Jacques Rousseau) and Smithian scholars as it is of reading economics (and much else) through a Smithian perspective. So as Maria Pia Paganelli (2015, 365) has reminded us recently about the Scottish Enlightenment, this is all about “thinking for yourself, but not by yourself.”

I believe the impartial spectator, in a high and deep sense, can be understood as a constant feedback process between ourselves as individuals and active participants in social interactions—a process that leads us to build our extended selves, going back and forth between our inner worlds and social life. This extended self does not mean we might be lost in or fused with others; rather, it means we build and preserve our autonomy and uniqueness through and with others. The impartial spectator in its highest or deepest sense implies a transcendent sense of freedom-in-the-world-with-others. I would not be so bold as to assert that this is Smith’s highest or deepest sense, but I will try to show how it can be traced back to him.

This meaning of the impartial spectator can be decomposed into several elements as we further our exploration of what its highest or deepest sense is: The impartial spectator is our conscience, a social construct, an incarnation of individual and social values, the highest authority or judge of human conduct, and an image of ourselves. It reflects and personifies Smith’s belief in the social character of human nature.

If we accept with Istvan Hont (2015) that this social character has to do with our search for social recognition, we find at the heart of our social interactions our constant effort to make ourselves loveable and worthy of others’ love because “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,” as Smith writes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS, III.2.1). The impartial spectator is one of the main ‘results’ of this search for acceptance. Participating in the affective communication associated with the sympathetic process, each individual learns how to be with others through the education of individual passions, or moral education, which also leads to the development of self-command. In this process we learn as much about others and the community we belong to as we do about ourselves. We learn how to be accepted and belong, and we learn what we can expect from others. This also means that this impartial spectator recreates, up to a point, the values and beliefs of the community where we build our character. Our identity then highly depends upon our milieu, although it does not make us a simple reflection of others, or of others’ values and opinions. We might clash with the community we belong to, or we might belong to more than one community. But there is a risk that this process might recreate existing values within a community that carry some prejudice or discrimination against others who do not belong to that community.

The whole process relies on our capacity of seeing each other and putting ourselves, through our imagination, in the other’s circumstances. The disinterested

and spontaneous interest we have for each other, prompted by the natural tendency to sympathize, makes us visible to each other, as when we see someone crying in the street or someone smiling in the bus or anyone who stands out just because they express some feeling. Visibility is essential, and it depends upon physical and psychological distance.<sup>2</sup> Social interactions are not completely transparent. Putting ourselves in the place of others, and imagining how we would feel and react in their circumstances, can be more easily done when we have more information about the one we are seeing. So the first step towards the impartial spectator is the possibility of seeing and being seen, which requires some level of identification. We can see others, in the sense affective communication requires, only if they are close enough, if we feel we share something that could make it possible for us to be in their circumstances. The risk then is that there are others we won't see because they are too far from us, psychologically or physically. Such invisibility may entail a particular form of symbolic violence in that those who are invisible do not count; this can amount to their non-existence or even the denial of their humanity. This is particularly significant in some of the cases Smith considers: Sometimes we would rather turn around and not see the miserable. We exclude them from any affective communication, and thus of the possibility of belonging to our community.

There is indeed something we all share: our search for our fellows' approval. "Nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend his brethren. She taught him to feel pleasure in their favourable, and pain in their unfavourable regard. She rendered their approbation most flattering and most agreeable to him for its own sake; and their disapprobation most mortifying and most offensive" (TMS, III.2.6). So this common desire is a demand for approval, a demand we make on others, but which does not mean that they feel or express the approval we want. It is possible there might be an excess demand that will not be met. This common desire makes a strong foundation for affective communication to take place; we are open to and eager for the regard of others even if we might not get it. The first step in this process involves individuals looking at each other with no particular relationship between them, simply as bystanders.

The bystander is the first figure of the impartial spectator. We participate, as it were, in a game of mirrors where we look and see each other, and thus learn of "the propriety and impropriety of [our] own passions, the beauty and deformity of [our] own mind[s]" (TMS, III.1.3). We learn who we are and our place in society through the affective communication associated with this game of mirrors if it is

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2. Remember the asymmetry of sympathy: We sympathize more easily with happiness than with sadness, with fortune than with misery (TMS, I.iii.1.5; see also Álvarez and Hurtado 2015). We should also keep in mind how the poor and the miserable seem to be buried in obscurity (TMS, I.iii.2.1).

successful, and even if sometimes we find approbation and other times disapprobation in our affective communication. We observe each other and ourselves as spectators through our own eyes but also through the eyes of others.

This also means there is more to the mutual exchange of looks than is at first suggested with the image of the game of mirrors. Mirrors only reflect images; they have no depth; they are cold and insensible. The eyes of our fellow beings reflect more than our own image. We look back at each other with some emotion, some reaction, and some judgment. We see more than ourselves in others' eyes, and more of ourselves than a mirror can show. This is the essence of the affective communication of sympathy, which means building and contacting our inner worlds through others, which can be an agreeable or a painful experience.

Our social experience is at the center of this process. Our inner world profoundly involves in Smith this extended self, whose construction is only possible in the presence of a bystander, who acts as an observer and also as a reflection and as a mirror. This bystander is generally perceived as a passive figure because she is not directly affected by the situation. But not to be affected might not mean the same as not to be involved, precisely because such involvement has to do with identification, which requires sharing our common desire for approval. In this sense, someone with whom we communicate is someone with whom we share and try to come to an affective harmony or concord. Therefore, this first spectator, our first other, is impartial but concerned, open, and receptive—and at the same time, we are this other for someone else.

Such affective receptivity, this first identification, means we become the measure by which we judge others (TMS, I.i.3.10); we compare ourselves with each other confirming this shared element, our commonality; this comparison enables us to judge each other and to establish general rules of conduct. We look at each other, and the sympathetic process enables us to feel the possibility of communication by the simple fact that we can imagine ourselves in the other's situation. We can imagine what we would feel, and we can see if these feelings coincide or not with what the other is expressing or doing. If they do, we consider them appropriate, and if they don't, we deem them inappropriate. Our moral judgment expresses our accord. And this accord is something we can enjoy and share, even between perfect strangers. We can generalize our social experience and come to agreements on what we consider appropriate or inappropriate conduct: "Moral judgment is socially embedded since moral codes come from social interaction," as Leonidas Montes writes (2004, 53).

This experience allows us to interiorize these rules, but not as external rules or rules the community or others impose on us. Smith's explanation is one of the genealogy of moral conduct and rules. Each member of the community of spectators and agents is part of the source of these rules, which allow social stability

and order. Participating in the emergence of such rules reinforces our social nature but does not mean that we lose ourselves or that we fuse into a homogeneous social body. It can mean, however, that some people are set aside or left outside the social body, or must comply with rules they did not help produce. On the one hand, Smith is very clear in saying that sympathetic feelings are different than the original sensations, that they are shadows of the substance (TMS, VI.ii.1.1), and that we can never exactly feel what others are feeling (I.i.1.2; I.i.4.7). On the other hand, in the imaginary change of places we do not become the other person; we put ourselves in their circumstances and imagine what we would feel.

Besides, the sympathetic process involves spectators that, we must keep in mind, are impartial. As mentioned before, impartiality does not mean indifference. On the contrary, affective receptivity characterizes all spectators, but it is when we are not under the influence of envy or malevolent and unsocial passions that we are open to the communication needed for the sympathetic process to take place. We change places with the agent always knowing we are not really in her circumstances; we observe from the safety of our own real situation knowing we are not at risk; distance keeps us safe. This distance, be it psychological or physical, allows us to observe in a cool, detached manner. However, as said before, too great a distance hinders the process, and sometimes too small a distance may also. The effort required to sympathize with misery, be it physical or emotional, might be too much, thus deterring us from participating in affective communication, leaving the agent alone in her suffering. It may also be possible that we feel so close to the suffering person that we do not bear the feeling of putting ourselves in her place because the safety of the distance is lost. Another possible situation is that our strong identification with those who are closer does not let us see those who are further away, and in order to gain acceptance from close ones we condone actions that might hurt those further away. This is why sympathy implies emotional contagion but goes beyond this first stage as it leads to moral judgment of others and ourselves. This is how we build our conscience, the internal or supposed impartial spectator (see, e.g., Montes 2004; Raphael 2007).

The building of the conscience happens because we interiorize the process of looking at ourselves through the eyes of an other: "I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of" (TMS, III.1.6). In this case, as with any other bystander, two figures are involved: the spectator and the agent. But in this case the spectator has much more information, and the physical and psychological distance with the agent is much smaller, making the sympathetic process more accurate.

The internal spectator is impartial and also well-informed. It knows us and our preferences in a way nobody else does. Self-deceit is particularly complicated

because the internal spectator knows what our true motivations are. Even when the external spectators praise or blame us, the internal spectator will call on us to make us understand whether we are worthy of such appraisal. We might choose to ignore its voice, and, especially in the case of blame, it might sound hesitant (TMS, III.2.32), but it is not possible to deceive it.

Impartiality, in the case of our conscience, means that we are capable of correcting the “natural misrepresentations of self-love” (TMS, III.3.4) because we are able to look at ourselves from this cool and detached perspective. The sympathetic process, our communication with the external and the internal impartial spectators, counters self-love and self-deceit. It involves us in a moral education that gives us perspective, helps us form a general point of view that may tend towards universality but is always context dependent, and forms our character. Our character then is a reflection of sociability and society (Paganelli 2015, 370), expressing our extended selves and, at the same time, our own identity and uniqueness.

This impartial spectator, our conscience, is a synthesis of reason and passions. It is a product of our social interactions with others that allow us to arrive at properly cultivated feeling, and it acts as the arbiter of our conduct. It has more or less authority over us depending on our self-command, and its voice reminds us that “we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration.” It transforms self-love from a selfish uncultivated passion to a “stronger love, a more powerful affection... the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters” (TMS, III.3.4).

This also means that the spectator’s impartiality does not imply selflessness. From the first sentence of TMS, it could be possible to say that we are all selfless to some degree because “there are evidently some principles in [our] nature, which interest [us] in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to [us], though [we] derive[] nothing from it.” But the end of the sentence points to a key element in our concern for others, something we do derive from others’ happiness, “the pleasure of seeing it.” It makes us, each one of us as individuals, feel good.

Moreover, when the internal or the supposed impartial spectator looks at us, it is not selfless either, precisely because it acts on this stronger love, this more powerful affection for our own character. Our relation with our conscience is a relationship with ourselves that takes into account what could be called the “circles of sympathy” (Forman-Barzilai 2011) or the order in which individuals and societies are recommended to our care, attention, and beneficence.<sup>3</sup> “Every man, as the

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3. As in the titles of the first two chapters of the second section of the sixth part of TMS.

Stoics used to say, is first and principally recommended to his own care; and every man is certainly, in every respect, fitter and abler to take care of himself than of any other person” (TMS, VI.ii.1.1). Therefore the main concern of our conscience is ourselves; it leads us in the way of propriety to be worthy of praise, and to satisfy our desire for the love of others. Our conscience is our guide, telling us how we should act and whether our feelings are appropriate to our situation. As a result of our social experience, our conscience tells us how others see us, and, at the same time, as it knows exactly the motivation of our actions, it can tell us if this regard is justified or not. It gives us a sample of the enjoyable or painful communication we might experience with others.

The source of the impartial spectator’s authority goes beyond social sanction or public opinion. It lies within ourselves, “in the desire of praise-worthiness, and in the aversion to blame-worthiness; in the desire of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we love and admire in other people; and in the dread of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we hate and despise in other people” (TMS, III.2.32). We learn how to become praiseworthy in our social interactions, which lead us to form a general idea of exact propriety and perfection. We gradually arrive at this idea “from [our] observations upon the character and conduct both of [ourselves] and of other people” through the “slow, gradual, and progressive work of the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct” (VI.iii.25). This idea will guide our conduct through the impartial spectator’s judgments.

This process makes us aware of our co-existence, the formal characteristics of our interactions, our place in society, and the conduct we should adopt if we want to be worthy of our fellows’ praise. Since the conditions for its success are not always met, it also implies risks of exclusion and denial of others’ humanity. Nevertheless, when individuals can see each other, identify, recognize, and affectively communicate with each other, we arrive at this extended self, guided by the inhabitant of the breast.

The impartial spectator, in its highest or deepest sense, personifies our possibility of giving ourselves the rules under which we can accomplish our goals and live a life worth living with others. In this sense, it personifies freedom as autonomy and human flourishing; it implies this transcendent sense of freedom-in-the-world-with-others.

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## About the Author



**Jimena Hurtado** is associate professor of the Economics Department at Universidad de los Andes. Her main areas of interest are economic philosophy and the history of economic thought, especially the works of Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Recently, she has explored the formation of Colombian economic thought in the nineteenth century, in particular during the Liberal Republic. Her email address is [jihurtad@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:jihurtad@uniandes.edu.co).

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