



Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator: Symposium Remarks

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The prologue provided by Dan Klein (2016) posed eight questions. My remarks are set out in five segments, which speak to the eight questions, but not in direct serial fashion.

The impartial spectator first enters Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) as a bit of common sense, something that we are supposed to recognize ourselves as using in daily life. Unrestrained anger, says Smith early in Book I, is “detestable.” What we admire is the person who suffers “the greatest injuries” while responding to them only with the controlled indignation that “an impartial spectator” would feel towards such injuries (TMS, 24). It is perhaps no accident that the phrase appears in the course of a discussion of resentment, a passion of which Smith thinks we need to be especially wary.² But Smith invokes the impartial spectator as well, in these early pages, when discussing the need to restrain our selfishness (78, 82–83), and implies, at least, that it should govern our grief. Whenever we need to control our emotions, we should, and generally do, try to lower them to “that pitch of moderation, in which the impartial spectator can... enter into them” (26).

The “impartial spectator,” in these contexts, is clearly supposed to be a familiar notion. It appears without fanfare, as if it had no technical significance, and appeal to its judgments seems not terribly different from appealing to the judg-

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2. Its third appearance in the book also concerns resentment (TMS, 38).

ments of *actual* spectators. The phrase first appears in the course of a discussion initiated by Smith's remark that "spectators" naturally try to enter imaginatively into the circumstances of the people they are trying to sympathize with, while the latter try to "assume [the circumstances] of the spectators" (TMS, 22). Nothing about "impartial" spectators shows up until pretty late in this discussion, and Smith similarly moves from speaking in one sentence of "every impartial spectator" to speaking in the next of "every human heart," as if these were the same thing, at the beginning of Part II (69). The word "impartial" seems here to be thrown in just as a reminder that, when looking to spectators as a guide to how we should feel or act, we of course don't want to rely on a spectator who happens to be our mother, or best friend, or bitter rival in love or business. When we look to the sympathetic feelings of actual spectators as a way of correcting for the excesses or errors in our own feelings, we want impartial spectators rather than partial ones. But again, this point is supposed to be a bit of uncontroversial common sense, not something that requires us to engage in abstruse philosophical argument. And the impartial spectators we look to here are real people—just not our mothers or hated rivals—with real passions and capacities, not Platonic paragons of virtue or moral judgment.

I think it is essential to bear in mind these humdrum beginnings when we come to Smith's more formal account of the impartial spectator in Book III. We get there by way of the process by which we are led to develop a notional impartial spectator inside ourselves, in response to the ill-informed or biased criticisms that actual others often make of our feelings or actions, and then to use this notional standpoint as a basis for our moral judgments of everyone. This notional and internal standard is eventually called a "demigod within the breast," with a "divine" as well as a human origin (TMS, 131).

Despite these last remarks—to which I'll return in a moment—I think Smith's impartial spectator remains throughout an idea culled, if refined a bit, from our experience of the real human beings around us, with nothing of the pure rationality and dispassion to be found in, say, the "ideal observer" of Roderick Firth (1952). In the first place, the impartial spectator *enters into our passions* rather than lacking all passions; it also, in Book II, shares some of the "irregularities" of our everyday judgments (TMS, 97). As I've indicated, moreover, on the most natural way of reading TMS, the impartial spectator of Book III seems clearly to be a further development of the eminently human character alluded to casually in Books I and II. The account in Book III of how we develop the impartial spectator within ourselves also draws on the psychology of ordinary people. Smith says that the impartial spectator is "partly of immortal, *yet partly too of mortal* extraction," and to have a "human" as well as a "divine" origin (131, my emphasis): I think he clearly

intends it to derive from spectators we have actually known, and to be only a partial, not a full, idealization of these actual spectators.

This reading fits with Smith's philosophical method in general, as I understand it. Smith always tries to draw philosophical systems out of everyday thought, rather than to impose a rational grid on that thought from above,³ and he is particularly insistent that *moral* philosophy be conducted that way (TMS, 313–314). It would therefore be surprising if he called on us to correct our ordinary moral judgments by way of a Platonic ideal. It makes far better sense that he would try to draw out that corrective from *within* our ordinary forms of moral judgment.

Why, then, the language of “demigods” and “divinity”? Well, first we should note that Smith also calls *actual* human beings God's “viceregent upon earth, [appointed] to superintend the behaviour of [their] brethren” (TMS, 130). Nature has set things up so that we constantly “censure” and “applaud” one another: judge one another, and enforce our judgments with favorable or unfavorable attitudes. If nature has been created by a God,⁴ then, this process of judgment should represent at least a first pass at God's judgment of us; it certainly *feels* to us, if we believe in God, like a sign of how God may see us. And the judgment of our own consciences—of the “supposed impartial and well-informed spectator” within our breasts—is a second pass at that judgment: a “higher tribunal” that comes closer to how we think God may judge us (131). The impartial spectator is thus a *representative* of God, if God has any representative in nature, a pointer towards God's judgment—but not itself (fully) divine. It is a “demigod,” not a full god, half human/mortal and half divine/immortal, and when we are unsure which of its aspects we are hearing from, we appeal (or *may* appeal, if we are believers) “to a still higher tribunal, ...that of the all-seeing Judge of the world, whose eye can never be deceived, and whose judgments can never be perverted” (ibid.). Smith's introduction of this third, fully divine level of judgment makes clear, I think, that the impartial spectator is not divine, not ideal: merely a pointer towards the divine and the ideal.

In short, Smith's impartial spectator is much more like Dan Klein's Rick—“some seemingly impartial guy observing the scene”—than like God (Klein 2016, 230). Smith's impartial spectator is an *improved* Rick, to be sure: not seemingly impartial but actually so, or as close to that as a person can come, and as “well-informed” (TMS, 131, 294) as a person can possibly be. Smith also presumes that the “Rick” to whom we are appealing *cares* about us—is trying to sympathize with us. But the impartial spectator knows only as much, cares only as much, and is only

3. For a fuller defense of this view, see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 1 sec. 4.

4. As Smith seems to assume in TMS and in any case grants to his theistic readers (see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 2 sec. 9).

as impartial as a human being we can imagine can be; it never becomes a god. It is “well-informed” rather than omniscient, and neither its caring nor its impartiality will ever be perfect. A good way to think about its judgments is indeed to imagine what the best imaginable “Rick” you know—a thoughtful and concerned neighbor, or a fair and scrupulous juror⁵—might think of what you or someone else does. If such a spectator seemed to err because of a gap in information, you would presumably ask him, “But Rick, what about *x*? Doesn’t that change your verdict?” And if he seemed to show a bias of some sort in his judgment, you would call that to his attention, and expect him to change his mind, if he thinks your charge is reasonable. What a best-imaginable-Rick certainly *wouldn’t* say to these questions is “Thanks, but I’ve got all the information I care to have,” or “Thanks, but I’ve checked all the biases I feel like bothering with.” A best-imaginable-Rick will be *concerned to look out for the best information he can gather* about a situation he is judging, and *concerned to be as impartial as he can be* in his judgments; his judgments will always be open to improvements along these dimensions. But he need not and never will be perfectly informed nor need he or will he ever attain perfect—divine—impartiality.

The central function of the impartial spectator in Smith’s moral philosophy is to answer a problem in David Hume’s version of moral sentimentalism. Hume had said that the feelings of approval and disapproval we take “by the survey or reflexion” of people’s motives and characters “constitute our praise or admiration” of those motives and characters (1978/1740, 575, 471). They *are* our moral judgments. We have a “moral taste” much like our aesthetic taste—a pleasure or disgust that arises simply “upon the contemplation or view of particular qualities and characters” (ibid., 581)—and moral judgment is the expression of that taste. Hume recognized, however, that this account of morality seems in some ways ill-suited to our moral practice. We may feel greater love and kindness for “a familiar friend or acquaintance” than for a hero of ancient Greece (581), yet we normally judge the ancient hero to be far more virtuous than our friend or servant. Hume accounts for this by saying that we take up certain “steady and general points of view” by which we correct “our [moral] sentiments, or at least, ...our language” (581–582). If we did not make these corrections, we could never make use of moral *language*. The corrections enable us to uphold “some general inalterable standard[s]” for moral approval and disapproval, which “are ... sufficient for discourse, and serve all our

5. Something we may presume that Smith, trained in law as he was, had in mind. He indeed occasionally uses “impartial judge” (or “equitable judge”) instead of “impartial spectator” for his device (TMS, 85, 110, 228).

purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools" (603). That does not entail that our feelings will accord with these standards: "Our passions do not readily follow" them (582). So the needs of society and conversation come into moral judgment from *outside* our sentiments, molding us towards an impartiality that we do not necessarily feel. Nevertheless, our reason leads us to see the value of having impartial, socially shared standards for moral judgment. So we accede to them.

This is an uncomfortable halfway house for a moral sentimentalist theory, thinks Smith. Hume starts by saying that our sentiments are the source of our moral judgments, but then he concedes that they are too partial to do that job adequately, and he brings in standards from outside to correct them. In essence, Hume's theory concedes that our sentiments, just as such, are *non-moral*: bald, non-normative facts about us. Smith argues instead that normativity is built into our sentiments. The idea that we *should have* certain sentiments is built into those sentiments themselves: We want to have the right kind of approving and disapproving sentiments, and we are willing and able to change ourselves so that we have these sentiments. Smith tells a developmental story showing how the desire to have the feelings of an impartial spectator arises in us, and he is far more optimistic than Hume about our ability to internalize the judgments of this spectator. The "wise and just man," says Smith, "does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel" (TMS, 146–147). All of this amounts to a claim that for Smith, but not for Hume, *we have feelings that seek their own improvement*. We *want* to become good moral judges, and characters of whom those judges would approve; we desire to have desires that correct themselves. Smith thus drives a wedge, within our sentimental constitution, between what (we ourselves would regard as) merely *apparent* moral approval and what (we ourselves would regard as) *real* moral approval. The idea that we are naturally led to develop the impartial spectator within ourselves, and to shape our feelings to its judgments, amounts to a claim that self-correction, hence normativity, is built into our emotional structure; it doesn't need to be imposed from outside.

I think Smith takes this to be a significant improvement on Hume's moral theory, and I think he is right to think that. But it is important that it is an improvement *only insofar as* it builds normativity into our everyday moral sentiments. It follows that Smith would be ill-served by an impartial spectator that resembled God, or a Platonic or other rationalist ideal. Such an impartial spectator would be something quite *extra-ordinary*, out of the reach of most or all of us. Smith wants to show that our ordinary moral sentiments are richer, more robustly open to normative correction, than Hume supposed. He did not want to *replace* these

ordinary moral sentiments with a moral standard that only a skilled philosopher might come up with. That is what makes Smith so psychologically plausible, and so appealing to philosophers who want their moral theories to be psychologically plausible.

But precisely these appealing features of Smith also raise problems. On my construal of Smith's impartial spectator, it is hard to see how that device will correct for entrenched cultural biases. The better informed and less partial spectator that, in the course of moral development, we come to internalize is built on a foundation of what we hear from actual spectators; the standards it uses as a basis of moral judgment will be those of our society. Can we correct those standards themselves for the biases that circulate in our society? In some cases we can: An increased knowledge or understanding of the facts about black people, women, Jews, etc., will sometimes change a society's ways of looking at these people.⁶ But we have no guarantee that this will happen. We can try to draw our best-imaginable-Rick's attention to what we take to be an implicit sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, etc., in his judgments, but if those features are deeply built into his cultural milieu, we cannot be confident that he will agree with us. "How can my wanting women to take care of their children possibly be sexist?" he says, as we complain about his views on differential roles for men and women. Or, he can't see the anti-Semitism in thinking that Jews like business and should stick to doing that. In cases like these, we are likely to disagree irremediably with Rick about which facts are morally salient or about the implications of the facts we do agree on. Prejudices have long survived the amassing of facts that would seem to undermine them; they have also survived attempts to get the prejudiced to empathize with the people against whom they are prejudiced. But Smith has no other moral tools by which to change prejudices. He himself was remarkably unprejudiced for his day, launching a remarkable defense of the virtues of Africans and Native Americans (TMS, 205–207) and never sneering at Jews. But he has no *a priori* arguments against views of black people as incompetent or Jews as evil. He has no general moral rule, either, like the principle of utility, that can readily be used to override a society's everyday moral judgments. He has no ideal rational standard by which to correct what results from our reliance on an improved, but far from perfect, 'Rick within the breast.'

For reasons of this sort, I have argued elsewhere that Smith's moral system readily slides toward cultural relativism (Fleischacker 2011/2005). Others disagree

6. Smith himself, I have argued elsewhere, tried to change prejudices against the poor in just this way (see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 10 sec. 51).

with me on that (see esp. Sen 2009), and some have argued that the impartial spectator should be conceived as a self-correcting device that can in principle overcome any cultural prejudice (see esp. Sayre-McCord 2010). I continue to think that there is no guarantee that the impartial spectator will achieve this goal.

At the same time, I'm not sure that the threat of relativism makes Smith's project any worse than other moral systems. In the first place, more idealized moral systems have notoriously been used to justify the cultural prejudices of their authors and followers. There is a well-known, long history of racist and sexist utilitarians and Kantians, including Immanuel Kant himself (see Mills 2005)—utilitarians and Kantians who indeed *used* their systems to *justify* racist and sexist policies. It's not at all clear that Smith's approach to morality does worse, in practice, than these alternatives.

In the second place, improving the degree to which people know the situations of those against whom they harbor a prejudice—and imagine themselves into those situations—does indeed seem to be an important way of breaking down biases, in a culture. Do we really have any approach likely to do better in this regard?

Finally, the tie of Smith's impartial spectator to its cultural milieu is part of what makes it such a plausible device. It makes good sense that people in all societies develop within themselves a model of how they should see themselves and others derived from the way their neighbors see them, and that they correct the actual judgment of those neighbors for misinformation and bias. It makes good sense that this way of seeing ourselves is the touchstone of what people in all cultures regard as moral judgment. The psychological and sociological plausibility of this story about moral development, the easy accessibility of the device that results from this story, and the fit of the issuances of this device with what we ordinarily regard as moral judgments, are all points in favor of Smith's construal of morality. But it is only to be expected that morality so construed will be heavily influenced by culture and that it will be difficult to see how a judgment could be seen as moral in any culture if it radically defied what that culture believes. So the disadvantages of Smith's theory are deeply tied in with its advantages. I see those advantages as worth the price of the disadvantages. This is especially so, given that other moral theories don't generally do a better job of overcoming cultural prejudices, and that Smith has a plausible resource—improving our information about other people, and trying to imagine ourselves in their shoes—to contribute to that job.

I think the account of the impartial spectator I have given thus far responds to Klein's questions 1–4 and 7–8. My answer to his fifth question follows readily from this account. The impartial spectator is a device of representation, not a real

person, so in itself it is neither selfish nor selfless. That said, the device arises from our acquaintance with real people—“Rick” and others—and these real people, like all real people, will have selfish interests. Smith did not believe that people are always and only selfish. That view, associated in his day with Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville, he regarded as ridiculous. With Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Butler, and Hume, Smith thought instead that we combine selfish with benevolent concerns. With Hutcheson, Butler, and Hume, he also thought that even our selfish concerns can be morally innocent. As against Hutcheson, but still with Butler and Hume, he thought that a certain concern for ourselves is indeed part of virtue, that we have a *duty* to take care of ourselves. The impartial spectator requires that of us.⁷

But of course selfish concern can get in the way of impartiality. For that reason, the impartial spectator calls on us to abstract from our selfish concerns when making moral judgments. Klein’s question may be directed at that call. How can our best-imaginable-Rick judge situations in which his selfish interests conflict seriously with moral demands: when, say, his entire fortune is at stake?

Well, what would a real Rick, the fairest and wisest person we know, do if called upon to judge a situation in which his entire fortune was at stake? He would recuse himself, that’s what he’d do. He wouldn’t *give up* on his concern for his fortune. But he’d know that his selfish concerns are likely to get in the way of his making a fair judgment in a case like this. And we, if we wanted to use him as our model of an impartial spectator in assessing this situation, would ask ourselves questions like, “What would Rick do in this situation *if his own fortune were not involved?*” We would change the facts of the case, that is, so as to bring in Rick’s gifts for fair and wise judgment, while abstracting from his selfish interests.

So the impartial spectator, as a device, is neither selfish nor selfless, but it approves of a significant degree of self-concern in us. It just demands that we not be unduly influenced by that concern when making moral judgments.

I conclude with a word on Klein’s sixth question. Is there a connection between the impartial spectator and the invisible hand? Yes, in a sense: The impartial spectator should and would approve, for Smith, of the outcomes of many “invisible hand” processes. That is, many of those outcomes—a more bountiful supply of grain, and of goods in general, in a free market; the enfeeblement of feudal lords and consequent increase of “liberty and independency” (Smith 1976b/1776, 399), that comes with commerce; the reduction of churches, where they lack state support, to small local entities that depend on the decency and reasonableness of

7. On these points, see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 5 secs. 19 and 22.

their leaders for their survival—are *good* ones, and if we doubted that, we could confirm it by seeing what an impartial spectator would think of them. But this is just a loose and contingent connection between Smith's two famous devices. It would be a mistake to think that the impartial spectator and the invisible hand are two aspects of the same being or process. That would be a mistake, most simply, because the impartial spectator is a device of *moral justification* while the invisible hand is a device of *social explanation*. But this simple distinction deserves a bit of elaboration.

There's a lot of debate about what exactly Smith meant by "the invisible hand"—a phrase he uses just three times, in three quite different contexts, two of which give it a theistic connotation, while the third and most important, in the *Wealth of Nations* (WN), has no such implication. Some say that even the WN usage involves a lingering appeal to Providence; Emma Rothschild (2001, ch. 5) has suggested that it is ironic, meant almost to mock the idea that Providence works through the free market; I think it is meant quite seriously, but that it can and should be given a wholly naturalistic reading, on which it is simply a colorful way to make Smith's insistence that society shapes individual tastes and opportunities far more than individuals shape society.⁸ The merchant who sets out to engage in the carrying trade, in the passage that evokes the invisible hand in WN, is led by forces beyond his control to promote domestic industry as well. A would-be hunter in a society that has turned mostly to agriculture is likely to find it hard to get the resources he needs unless he too takes up farming. Buyers and sellers of grain, when there is a shortage, will find themselves naturally rationing it, if the market for grain is left alone to find its own level. In all these cases, the individual's self-interest is yoked to his or her society's needs and circumstances. So it is likely, in cases like these, that things will work out well for most people in the society if its individual members simply pursue their self-interest, rather than being told what to do by government officials.

This is a *likelihood* rather than a necessity, and Smith is careful not to say that the invisible hand always has beneficial results. He says that the merchant in the carrying trade is led "in this, *as in many other cases*"—not in *all* cases—"led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was not part of his intention" (WN, 456). No general, metaphysical principle, this, and Smith makes clear that there are cases in which undirected individual choices will have no such beneficial result. In part, that can be because of what today we would call "prisoners' dilemmas" (see especially WN, 726, on why highways need to be publicly controlled); in part, it can

8. For an identification of the invisible hand with Providence, see Fitzgibbons 1995, 89, 193–194. For Rothschild's view, see Rothschild 2001, ch. 5; for my response to Rothschild, see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 7 sec. 34.

be because of distortions in the human makeup that lead us, for instance, to ignore the suffering of the poor (see TMS, 50–66). In addition, even where it could be beneficial, the invisible hand may be difficult or impossible to access: because of the power of feudal lords, say, or of church leaders or influential merchants.

So the invisible hand does not always govern society, and where it does, its effects are not always good ones. When they *are* good ones, as they often are, the impartial spectator will approve of them: that is what it means to say that they are good. But even here, the analytic devices in play are distinct. The invisible hand explains *how* society arrives at a certain effect; the impartial spectator explains *why* that effect is a good one. To conflate them is to run sociology and morals together—a mistake that Smith, unlike some of his followers, never made.

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