



# Impartial Spectating and the Price Analogy

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A long time ago, when I was first starting to read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (henceforth TMS), an economist friend of mine told me that the impartial spectator was akin to prices. Over the years this insight has stayed with me.

In some respects such a conception is obviously false. Prices don't spectate, and they are not even conscious, so clearly it would seem that whatever Smith means by the impartial spectator could not be analogous to prices. And yet at least one important characteristic about prices is that they are completely impartial, being the product of no one in particular and yet everyone. Whatever else might be said, figuring out what sort of impartiality Smith is referring to could be even more critical than figuring out what he might mean by "spectator." Moreover, prices are a function of social interaction just as the principles and rules of morality are for Smith. They are, as it were, a socially embedded yet impersonal phenomenon. Hence, despite the apparent dissimilarity, the analogy between the impartial spectator and prices seems to me worthy of exploration, largely because of this combination of social interaction and impersonality. I shall admit upfront that I am neither completely clear nor completely certain just what Smith always means by the "impartial spectator" and whether he uses the term in a consistent way throughout TMS. Hopefully, exploring the price analogy will be helpful in reaching an understanding of at least some aspects of the impartial spectator.

We might begin with what the impartial spectator is not. The impartial spectator is not one's conscience or probably even, as Smith puts it, "the man

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within the breast.” In making this claim, I am in no way suggesting that there is not textual evidence for their identity. Consider the following:

But though man has, in this manner, been rendered the immediate judge of mankind, he has been rendered so only in the first instance; and an appeal lies from his sentence to a much higher tribunal, to the tribunal of their own consciences, to that of the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator, to that of the man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of their conduct. (TMS, III.2.32)

This passage is certainly not the only place where conscience or the man within the breast seems to be closely linked or identified with the impartial spectator (see, e.g., TMS, III.3.4, III.3.38). But note that the identification would have been closer in the passage just cited had Smith omitted the word “supposed.”<sup>2</sup>

One passage that I think can function as a partial foundation for a coherent interpretation is the following sentence, tossed off somewhat quickly, but which seems to allow for the important conclusion that the impartial spectator and conscience or the man within the breast are not the same.<sup>3</sup>

...the prudent man is always both supported and rewarded by the entire approbation of the impartial spectator, and the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast. (TMS, VI.i.11)

Whoever or whatever the impartial spectator might be, this passage opens the door to the notion that we should not equate the impartial spectator with the man within the breast. The latter is the “representative” of the former, leaving us with the problem of just what is being represented. Clearly something else is going on, something which precedes the representation we develop within our breast. Further evidence for the separation is provided in the sentences which directly follow the passage quoted. Here the impartial spectator surveys multiple actions by multiple individuals across time (TMS, VI.i.11). A conscience, by contrast, would seem to be limited to the single individual who possesses it.

The importance of not equating the two notions of conscience and the impartial spectator will be discussed in a moment, but for now we might ask whether the man within the breast is equivalent to one’s conscience. If we look

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2. Smith very often uses the term *supposed* in connection with the impartial spectator. Yet whereas we might use the term today to mean something close to ‘pretended,’ Smith uses it more in the sense of ‘presented,’ or ‘being present.’

3. As readers of Smith know, citing passages provides evidence, but not conclusiveness. There is much room for interpretation of—and ambiguity within—Smith to require that readers be circumspect in their claims about what Smith is saying on the basis of any given passage.

at the passage with which we began, it would perhaps allow differentiating the conscience, the impartial spectator, the well-informed spectator, and the man within the breast (TMS, III.2.32). In this regard, I would suggest that conscience and the man within the breast are probably of a piece, though the latter is somewhat broader in scope, including both conscience and the formulation of judgments based on conscience. No doubt spectating occurs within us, but the “breast” suggests more heart than head, which in turn suggests more of a *result* of any spectating than spectating itself.

The well-informed spectator and the impartial spectator—at least in their highest forms—also seem to be of a piece, but if they are, they may or may not link up with the other two terms, despite the natural reading of the passage as suggesting a commonality to all four terms. For example, having a conscience of some sort does not necessarily require that one be well-informed. Assuming that a division between “conscience” on the one hand and “well-informed” on the other holds, we are likely to have two forms of impartiality as well. One form would be simply having no particular interest in a situation or putting oneself into a frame of mind where one ignores one’s interest. The other form, using a term from the first passage cited, would be an even “higher” form of impartiality described below. That higher form, by the way, may extend all the way to God, depending on one’s view of Smith’s commitment to God and religion. But that issue will not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that if God is the quintessential impartial spectator, the view offered below is not inconsistent with, and is in some ways modeled after, that view.

The four terms mentioned above are no doubt meant to be grouped together even if they might not be identical. It is true that one could be impartial, in the sense of not having a particular stake or interest in a situation, without being well-informed. It is also true that one might also be impartial in this way without having much of a conscience. But the conscience that is the man within the breast necessarily exhibits impartiality, at least in the form of tamping down one’s own narrower interests, because conscience by nature is generalized and also because it overrides such interests (TMS, III.3.4). Moreover, conscience also carries with it the disposition of at least *trying* to be well-informed, even granting that having a conscience and being well-informed are logically distinct.

So the four terms on balance are natural allies. They apply jointly to impartial spectating about the actual actions and characters of individuals. Consequently, to offer more appropriate moral judgments for Smith, one must put oneself in a position where one tries to obtain fuller information, abstract oneself from one’s own particular interests, and consult the moral principles that inform one’s conscience. After the manner of calling a provisional chairperson the ‘acting’ chair, perhaps we might think of this as the acting impartial spectator, that is, a man within

the breast called upon in practice to represent the higher impartial spectator in the making of actual moral judgments.

My interest in the price analogy, however, concerns the higher impartial spectator. To make this case it must be plausible to distinguish types of impartial spectating (that is, to distinguish *higher* from *acting*). The passage with which we opened<sup>4</sup> appears in a section where Smith himself allows the impartial spectator to be distinguished into two parts:

[T]his demigod within the breast appears, like the demigods of the poets, though partly of immortal, yet partly too of mortal extraction. When his judgments are steadily and firmly directed by the sense of praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness, he seems to act suitably to his divine extraction: But when he suffers himself to be astonished and confounded by the judgments of ignorant and weak man, he discovers his connexion with mortality, and appears to act suitably, rather to the human, than to the divine, part of his origin. (TMS, III.2.32)

Just after this passage Smith refers to a still higher tribunal of the “all-seeing Judge” to which we might finally appeal (III.2.33). But we need only focus upon the “divine” portion of our demigod to make our point here. In this respect our thesis is quite simple and perhaps also a bit surprising: *Impartial spectating is not in the first instance, or essentially, about spectating on the actions and characters of others. It is instead spectating upon the principles of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, which are then applied to the actions and characters of others.* There is a hint of support for this thesis in the passage just cited. The higher or “divine” portion is so defined because the impartial spectator senses the principles of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness alone and in pure form. The word “sense” suggests, moreover, a direct link to the imagination, and with the word “spectator” that link evokes the visual. The “mortal” part applies to the active representations we make of the divine portion in practice, as just mentioned above.

I take a central pillar of support for my thesis to come from Smith’s discussion of the distinction between the love of praise and that of praiseworthiness and his claim that the former is a function of the latter.

[S]o far is the love of praise-worthiness from being derived altogether from that of praise; that the love of praise seems, at least in a great measure, to be derived from that of praise-worthiness. (TMS, III.2.3)

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4. Though appearing in numerous places, the discussion of the impartial spectator seems most complete in this section on duty (TMS, Part III). That may be no accident, since acting out of duty does seem most like acting as an impartial spectator.

If the love of praise is a function of the love of praiseworthiness, then a grasp of what is praiseworthy must not only precede the love of praise but must be the basis for any evaluation of actual praise (and similarly for blameworthiness and blame). Just above this passage Smith mentions the impartial spectator and how we must put ourselves in that frame of mind to consider whether we ourselves are admirable, and not simply admired (III.2.3). Thus, we actively evaluate ourselves through the same process we evaluate others. In doing so we are outwardly oriented from the outset, that is, our desire to incorporate ourselves into society manifests itself in a search for standards ‘out there’ that can guide us in the various ways in which we need to integrate ourselves. The view that our love of praise is derived from our love of praiseworthiness implies both that our principal motivation is to discover evaluative standards of actions and character in order to know how to fit into society, and that when we do evaluate actions we do so by means of the standards we have gleaned through our spectating on those very standards.

The jurisdiction of the man within, is founded altogether 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)

The motivating factor in our love of praiseworthiness is in Smith’s view a primal desire that we all have “to be fit for society” (TMS, III.2.7). Praiseworthiness is the principled expression of what it means to be fit for society, and that is why we seek it almost from the beginning. Notice too that this passage suggests that the process is also somehow rooted in numerous interactions of sentiment among individuals.

The principles to which we look to guide us in being fit for society are reflected through the sentiments of the members of society, so we look to the general expression of those sentiments as reflecting the principles needed to guide our own actions as we try to fit ourselves into the social order. People, Smith notes, generally seek to “reconcile themselves, at least in their own imagination, to the natural sentiments of mankind” (TMS, III.2.9).<sup>5</sup> Our spectating on these principles is largely an act of imagination upon the terms that govern whether and how one would fit into society. Those terms define one’s worthiness to so fit into society and represent the normative principles embedded in the value structure of society generally. Once grasped, we then apply them to ourselves and others.

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5. The cited phrase is not used in exactly the same way I am using it here, though the more general usage seems to me justified.

This is why Smith says in TMS that the man within the breast is the *representative* of the impartial spectator. We first draw our conclusions about the nature of what is praiseworthy and blameworthy, and then we represent those conclusions in the form of a conscience or as the judgments of the man within the breast. We render these evaluations through our imagination so that we may not only readily grasp them but also feel them, and thus convey them as sentiments to which we and others might “correspond,” as Smith uses that concept in the opening parts of TMS. It must be imagination and not reason that is central here, first because this is a process that must be common to all (reason is less readily deployed than imagination), and secondly because imagination can be associated with sentiments in a way reason cannot. It is by means of the imagination that we integrate circumstances, sentiments, and principles when we contemplate the actions and characters of others or ourselves as we all interact. Noting this point about the centrality of imagination also links our discussion to the pivotal role imagination plays more generally in Smith’s philosophy (see, e.g., Smith 1980; TMS, IV.2).

It may now perhaps seem as though we are some distance from our opening analogy to prices, but the similarities can be made clear. Prices are, as it were, ‘out there,’ and we as consumers spectate about them as we consider how to behave with respect to them. They belong to no one, yet are present everywhere. Any given individual might try to offer a new or different price, but that same individual would be unable to affect the general price level in a dramatic way. Prices are a social function in the sense of being the generalized result of an untold number of social interactions. Prices are also not Platonic forms or natural objects, but rather are predicated upon the human interactions that give them standing. Take away those interactions and prices disappear, but given those interactions prices appear to be almost as objective and outside of us as a Platonic form. They are influenced by the subtleties of individual actions, but controlled by no one.

It seems easy enough now to see the power of the analogy. The values we use to make moral judgments also seem to be objective, outside of us, even though they too would be for Smith a kind of distillation of the values circulating generally and permanently in society at large. Given a disposition to be a member of society, our first acts would be to imagine what we need to do to fit in, rather than to merely look for praise.

If he would act so as that the impartial spectator may enter into the principles of his conduct, which is what *of all things he has the greatest desire to do*, he must, upon this, as upon all other occasions, humble the arrogance of his self-love, and bring it down to something which other men can go along with. (TMS, II.ii.2.1, my emphasis)

We need, in other words, first to identify the principles of praiseworthiness (and blameworthiness) apart from the usual motivation of action, namely, self-interest.<sup>6</sup> We have the greatest desire to do this because that desire is a function of our desire to be fit for society. Impartiality is actually built in to the process. The act of looking for a standard is of its nature impartial because, like prices, our interest does not determine the standard itself, any more than a price we may want to set determines the general price level. Moreover we must grasp—that is spectate about—what those standards of value are before we can apply them. At the higher level, then, ‘impartial spectating’ just is what one is doing when one comprehends the standards needed for evaluating actions and character. When one drops down to the human level, however, all the difficulties of application become apparent and impartial spectating becomes active through the deployment of the four terms mentioned earlier.

It is important not to misunderstand here. As Smith points out in the early chapters of TMS, our initial acts toward fitting in are motivated by the desire for a “correspondence of sentiments” with those around us (I.i.4.6). That desire for correspondence triggers a search for standards we can then use as we encounter numerous others and look for those places in which we are able to cooperate, given our own talents and resources. Hence our first acts of spectating or socializing may not be our acts of *impartial* spectating. We may be correspondence seekers and partial spectators before we become impartial ones. Nevertheless, for reasons given, we are strongly motivated to impartially spectate. Our principal gaze for Smith is then turned upon the norms of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness—our principal gaze is, then, our gaze upon principles.

Analogies all break down somewhere—they are, after all, not identities. One possible area of dissimilarity may be the relative stability of our sentiments as compared to that of price levels in actual markets. In the foregoing account I have treated the impartial spectator as largely a price taker. I look at the impartial spectator that way because that is how the text strikes me. In the real world, however, prices are a function of numerous bids and offers, making for a system more dynamic than that represented here with respect to the principles of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. Perhaps this difference reflects a difference between moral norms and prices in a market. Perhaps the difference is a function of a misreading on my part. In some ways, the interpretation makes little difference, for even if I am right that impartial spectating at the “divine” level is like price taking, a very interesting thought experiment would be to loosen the tightness of the price taking analogy and then imagine the development of moral norms on that

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6. For some empirical evidence that people separate thinking about moral norms from actions, see Chituc et al. 2016.

basis. In other words, even if Smith’s view of the impartial spectator was analogous to only a price taker, there is much to be gained by imagining a more market-like understanding of prices, where bids and offers dominate, and then applying that model to moral rules.

Yet even on my reading of the impartial spectator, there are complicating factors in the real world regarding moral standards that could be as upsetting to the stability of moral norms as any disturbances in the price level. Smith identifies these when he speaks of the “irregularities” of our moral sentiments and when he speaks of the influence of fashion and custom upon our sentiments (TMS, II.iii, V). Active impartial spectating may thus be a complicated matter, but our argument here has been that those complications are preceded by the “divine” portion of the demigod within us grasping first standards of appropriateness that in turn inform our judgments of actions and characters. Like prices, those standards of appropriateness are dependent upon a history of innumerable efforts to achieve correspondences of sentiment by multiple actors which, when achieved, reinforce the standards themselves through expressions of sentiment. “[A]ll the...passions of human nature, seem proper and are approved of, when the heart of every impartial spectator entirely sympathizes with them, when every indifferent bystander entirely enters into, and goes along with them” (II.i.2.2).

## References

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