



Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator

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Human interaction as the raw material of ethics

In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith puts social interaction at centre stage: “Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct...than of the beauty or deformity of his own face” (III.1.3).³ Social interaction is necessary both for one to learn to be a self-conscious moral person, a person with moral sentiments and moral conscience, and to make proper moral judgments. Indeed, Smith was aware of the fact that it is in the sphere of social interaction where we find the raw material of ethics; this is where moral conflicts between people arise and where such conflicts are to be addressed: We are vulnerable, not only to the impact of an outside world but also to the actions of other people. We can be positively or negatively affected by these actions, and respond with feelings either of gratitude or of resentment. And we judge agents accordingly: We morally approve of those whose actions make us grateful and disapprove of those whose actions we resent. Smith’s moral theory is sentimentalist in kind; it is an inquiry into the conditions under which such sentiment-based moral judgments are justified or proper. His claim is that moral judgments are proper if the senti-

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ments on which they are based are proper. But which sentiments are proper, and proper in virtue of what? According to Smith, those sentiments are proper which are or can be approved of by an impartial spectator.

As the notion of a ‘spectator’ suggests, Smith’s focus is on social interaction in public: Agents and the people affected by their actions are observed by spectators. Sometimes, Smith speaks as if any indifferent bystander were an impartial spectator (see I.i.1.4, II.i.2.2). However, such an indifferent bystander is not as such a properly impartial spectator; she merely fulfils a necessary condition for spectatorial impartiality, namely that of not being directly affected by what she observes. But what else is required for spectatorial impartiality? To answer this question, one has to inquire into the sympathetic process. The sympathetic process is the process of communication in which people—both people in the role of persons concerned and people in the role of spectators—engage in to address moral disagreements, and in the course of which they learn to be impartial, at least more impartial than they were originally.

Naive moral realism, the role of moral disagreement, and the sympathetic process

Smith makes an assumption that we understand as containing a *naive moral realism*: People trust their spontaneous moral sentiments; they trust their gratitude and resentment to be *adequate responses* to the agents whose actions they believe to have triggered these sentiments; and they trust that these sentiments, in virtue of being adequate responses, justify the moral judgments based on them. Indeed, we trust our responsive sentiments up to the point that we judge of the moral propriety or impropriety of other people’s responsive sentiments by their concord with our own. Underlying such trust is our self-conception as a normal person with normal sentimental responses, and the normality has both a normative dimension and a statistical dimension: We trust that our spontaneous moral sentiments are *adequate responses* to what we believe triggered them, and at the same time we trust that we are *similar to all or most other people* as far as their sentimental responses are concerned: “Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight...” (I.i.3.10). And what applies to the normality of our systems of visual perception applies analogously to our emotional dispositions. Since I trust my emotional disposition to be normal, I judge “of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them” (I.i.3.10).

Our naive moral realism and our trust in being provided with normal emotional dispositions make us expect that other people will agree with the moral judgments we pass on others. But this expectation will not always be met. On the contrary, moral disagreement is a common phenomenon. How do we respond to the encounter of moral disagreement with other people? We take it seriously: Our naive moral realism makes us assume that, whenever there is moral disagreement, at least one of the disagreeing parties must be mistaken. And since we do not easily give up on our trust in the propriety of our own emotional dispositions, we assume that it is the other who has made a mistake. And so does the other. In order to settle a moral disagreement, we enter into a process of communication—a sympathetic process. But the wish to defend our naive moral realism and our trust in the normality (the propriety and commonness) of our emotional dispositions is not the only reason motivating us to engage in a sympathetic process: We suffer from being in a state of moral disagreement with others and long for settling it so that we can enjoy the pleasure of mutual sympathy. “[N]othing 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” (I.i.2.1).

First and foremost, the function of the sympathetic process is to enable the disagreeing parties to settle their moral disagreement and reach a state of mutual sympathy. By settling their disagreement, they agree on what is the adequate sentiment to be felt by a person responding to an action. And finally, in the course of this process they adapt their own responsive sentiment to the sentiment found to be the adequate or proper response to the action in question. Thus, the sympathetic process is a way to settle moral disagreements, to bring about mutual sympathy, to constitute jointly accepted standards of proper sentiments and moral judgments, and to adapt one’s own sentiments to these standards. Smith’s claim is that a sentiment-based moral judgment on which conflicting parties have agreed by going through a sympathetic process is justified in virtue of being the result of such a process.

Why is moral disagreement so common? What explains its origin? One major source of moral disagreement is the strong impact of our self-love on our responsive sentiments: “Every man...is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man” (II.ii.2.1), and we trust that the same applies to women. Self-love is a natural source of partiality; whenever we find our self-interest impacted by another’s action and its consequences, we tend to forget that we are “but one of the multitude”: “[I]n the selfish and original passions of human nature, the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance...than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connexion” (II.ii.2.1, III.3.3). In other

words, an agent and a person affected by the action will not inevitably agree on what is the adequate response to his action: They look at the scenario in which the action took place from different standpoints. Each considers his own interest much more important than that of the other.

Imagine the scenario of an accident on a path where bicycles and pedestrians travel: A cyclist has bumped into a pedestrian and knocked her over. The cyclist himself fell off his bike. They are both hurt. And they both claim innocence for themselves and blame the other as having caused the accident. The cyclist asserts that the pedestrian moved into the path without taking notice of the oncoming cyclist. The pedestrian asserts that the cyclist failed to account for the pedestrian being in the path.

Each claims to be victim rather than agent, and feels resentment towards the other. They do not agree on what would be adequate responses. They do not even agree in their accounts of the accident. Nor are they cool-minded enough to step back and inquire whether their beliefs about the accident are supported by the evidence, whether their spontaneous resentment is an adequate response, and whether this resentment is a basis for making a justified moral judgment.

This is where the spectator enters the picture. Smith's account of the attitudes of two conflicting parties such as the cyclist and the pedestrian reads as follows:

Before we can make any proper comparison of those opposite interests, we must change our position. We must view them, neither from our own place nor yet from his...but from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has no particular connexion with either, and who judges with impartiality between us. (III.3.3)

It is the spectator, the unconcerned bystander, who provides the standpoint of a third person. It is from this standpoint—if from any standpoint at all—that the question about propriety or impropriety of any of the conflicting parties' spontaneous responsive sentiments can be judged.

Such a spectator, in virtue of not being personally involved in the conflict, is neutral; her self-interest does not draw her to either side. But this does not mean that the spectator is uninterested or indifferent to the conflict. From her disposition to share other people's feelings, her attention is attracted nevertheless, and she is disposed to understand and evaluate the responsive sentiments, that is, to enter into a sympathetic process with each of the conflicting parties.

The term *spectator* suggests a theatre, where the conflicting parties, the persons concerned (the cyclist and the pedestrian), are on stage, while the spectator is observing them from the auditorium. But this is not an adequate description of the role Smith attributes to the spectator. As long as the spectator merely observes

what is happening on stage, she takes a third-person point of view without getting engaged with the persons concerned, that is, the persons on the stage. But Smith requests the spectator to invite the persons involved to leave the stage and join her in the auditorium, so to say, to turn to her and engage in a sympathetic process with her. While providing the standpoint of a third person, the spectator is not supposed to take a third-person point of view of the persons concerned; rather, she takes a second-person point of view, inviting them separately to look at her and see whether she feels disposed to approve of their responsive sentiment and to sympathize with it. The sympathetic process is the process of communication in which both parties of a conflict, either simultaneously or one after the other, engage with an unconcerned spectator.

The task of the spectator is not to pass a judgment on which of the conflicting parties is in the right and which in the wrong, relying for this purpose on general rules of adequate behavior, on abstract social or moral norms. Any such procedure would be incompatible with Smith's sentimentalist account of moral judgment. Rather, the spectator judges the propriety of the responsive sentiments of each person concerned by their concord with how she imagines she would feel if involved in a similar conflict. But why would any of the persons concerned accept such a spectatorial assessment of the propriety of his responsive sentiments? The mere fact that the spectator is not personally affected by the respective conflict does not as such provide her with the authority of a judge to whose judgment any person concerned would submit without further questions. Only an impartial spectator could rightly request such authority. But in virtue of what is a spectator impartial?

Impartiality is a character trait that people can only acquire by engaging in sympathetic processes. As such, it is a kind of virtue, just as patience and hospitality are. The spectator who invites a person concerned to enter into a sympathetic process with her offers to be a partner in communication; the aim of this communication is to find a joint assessment of the propriety or impropriety of the concerned person's responsive sentiment. Furthermore, should the person concerned and his spectator agree on the impropriety of this responsive sentiment, they will inquire into what a proper sentiment for the person concerned would have been. Conflicting parties do not engage in sympathetic processes with an unconcerned spectator because such a spectator can help them to find a compromise. They do so for *constructing* a joint understanding of what would have been the proper way to feel and act, for both conflicting parties, in response to the circumstances which brought them into conflict in the first place.

In the sympathetic process, the person concerned and his spectator encounter each other as partners in communication; they are on equal footing, morally speaking. As naive realists about matters of moral sentiments and judgments, they

both suppose equal moral competence. The only advantage the spectator can claim over the person concerned is that she is herself unconcerned and therefore less likely to be partial than the latter. But this does not mean that, should they disagree about the propriety of the concerned person's response, the spectator will inevitably be in the right. Disagreement—in the form of mutual antipathy—will motivate both of them to inquire into whether either of them has made a mistake in the course of forming his or her assessment of the propriety of the respective sentiment. They will try to identify and eliminate these mistakes, adjust their respective sentiments, and thus settle their disagreement and reach a state of mutual sympathy. Should both of the disagreeing parties enter into a sympathetic process with a third person, an unconcerned spectator, and should they manage to settle eventual disagreements with her and reach a state of mutual sympathy with her, they would thereby also settle the conflict between them: A spectator cannot approve of two originally conflicting parties and reach a state of mutual sympathy with both of them unless one or both of them revise their originally conflicting sentiments in such a way that they too can be in a state of mutual sympathy. Mutual sympathy is based on a joint understanding of what is the proper responsive sentiment for a person affected by the consequences of another's action: "But these, as well as all the other passions of human nature, seem proper and are approved of, when the heart of every impartial spectator entirely sympathizes with them, when every indifferent by-stander entirely enters into, and goes along with them" (II.i.2.2). According to Smith, moral propriety is relational, it is a relation between particular circumstances that affect people in particular ways, people furthermore with particular vulnerabilities. Those sentiments of a person concerned are morally proper which are properly adapted to the circumstances to which the person emotionally responded, to the way these circumstances concern this person, and to the particular vulnerabilities of this person.

The sympathetic process and the impartial spectator

Smith describes the sympathetic process in great detail. His basic idea is that both participants, the person concerned and his spectator, take turns in looking at matters from the point of view of the other:

[T]he spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to

render as perfect as possible, the imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded. (I.i.4.6)

Similarly, the agent places himself in the standpoint of the spectator, and hence is “led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he was only one of the spectators of his own situation” (I.i.4.8).

The aim of this change of perspectives is to share factual information about the external circumstances to which the concerned person responded and about his and his spectator’s particular vulnerabilities. Smith requests both the person concerned and his spectator do more than merely imagine himself in the position and under the circumstances of the respective other; he also asks them to imagine to be like the other. This is what he says about the attitude they both are asked to take: “[I]his imaginary change is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize. . . . I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters” (VII.iii.1.4). Besides sharing information about external circumstances and personal vulnerabilities, the exchange of standpoints and attempt at seeing oneself from the perspective of the other unveils various kinds of prejudices each of them might have, prejudices that might stand in the way of properly understanding how the other feels and of reaching a state of shared moral judgment and mutual sympathy.

Ideally, the person concerned and his spectator will, after having shared all relevant information about the external facts and about their specific individual vulnerabilities, reach an informed agreement both about the facts and about the proper way for the person concerned to respond to them. The sympathetic identification with the other and the process of exchanging standpoints make up an essential procedure for capturing the particularities of each situation and of each person concerned. Those who succeed with that procedure are in a good position to assess what would be the proper emotional response for each particular person involved in this particular situation. The moral judgment on which a person concerned and his spectator agree in a sympathetic process is *particular* in kind: “We shall stand in need of no casuistic rules to direct our conduct. These it is often impossible to accommodate to all the different shades and gradations of circumstance, character, and situation, to differences and distinctions which, though not imperceptible, are, by their nicety and delicacy, often altogether indefinable” (VI.ii.1.22). Moral propriety is first and foremost the propriety of a particular person’s response to a particular situation. But this person cannot randomly pick selective features of this situation and adapt his response only to them: “The propriety of a person’s behaviour, depends not upon its suitableness to any one circumstance of his situation, but to all the circumstances, which, when we bring his case home to ourselves, we feel, should naturally call upon his attention” (V.2.5).

From the unconcerned to the impartial spectator

As we have seen, there is a natural distinction between a person concerned and his spectator: The spectator is by definition unconcerned. But otherwise their roles in the sympathetic process are very similar. Both have to exchange their original standpoint with that of the other, and this means that they both will have to take the role of a spectator of the respective other as well as that of a spectator of themselves—they meet, so to say, in the auditorium rather than on stage. In a sense, they are both spectators, and as such they are both supposed to be, or rather to become, impartial spectators. But what is required of them for becoming impartial? When they enter into the sympathetic process, neither is properly impartial, even though the spectator, simply in virtue of being unconcerned, is likely to be less partial than the person concerned. Proper impartiality requests an adequate level of information about the facts to which the person concerned responded as well as proper information about their respective particular vulnerabilities (note that the concerned person's particular vulnerability might be different from that of his spectator). Furthermore, it requests freedom from various kinds of evaluative prejudices and private convictions. In the beginning of the sympathetic process, none of the participants is likely to be properly informed and free in her evaluation.

But both parties will, in the course of the sympathetic process, learn to become, if not ideally impartial, at least more impartial than they originally were. Impartiality comes in degrees. No human being will ever reach ideal or perfect impartiality. Ideal impartiality requires omniscience and complete absence of corruption and self-deceit, something no human being can ever hope to achieve. This does not imply that we should not even strive to constantly increase the level of our own impartiality. Although our basic naive realism in matters of moral judgment proposes that moral judgments be accorded a universal authority, the limitations of our knowledge about the external world as well as about our own vulnerabilities and those of other people readily humble us about the degree of adequacy of our moral understanding. Rather than making rigorous or categorical moral claims, we should remain open-minded about encountering new reasons for revising our moral judgments.

Engaging in a sympathetic process is challenging for both parties. One particularly important challenge arises from the psychological limitations of sympathy. It is much easier to sympathize with those who are closer to us—both in geographical and emotional terms—than with those that are far off: “We expect less

sympathy from a common acquaintance than from a friend... We expect still less sympathy from an assembly of strangers” (I.i.4.9). Furthermore, it is easier to sympathize with those who are similar to us in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, social status, culture, religious beliefs, etc. But these challenges can be met; at least, we have to make an effort. After all, we are all humans, and as such we are similar to each other, similar enough to enter into a sympathetic process.

The success of the sympathetic process depends mainly on the success of each participant’s imaginary identification with the other. While the task is challenging, it is not hopeless, since both parties are equally human beings. Not only the person concerned, but also his spectator is a person who has desires, interests, and attachments, who is involved in various social relations with family, friends, and enemies, and who is provided with all the affective dispositions, prejudices, and experiences that make the raw material of ethics. Moreover, given that we sympathize much more easily with the responsive sentiments of a person concerned if we recognize his sentiments as sentiments we have ourselves felt before, we can conclude that a competent spectator will be able to rely on rich real-life experience—both as an agent and as a person affected by the consequences of other people’s actions—when trying to sympathize with a person concerned and his responsive sentiments. In any case, participants in the sympathetic process need to be well-informed, open-minded and attentive to all the circumstances to which the person concerned responded, and sensitive to his particular responsive sentiment. The closer they get to meeting all these challenges, the more impartial they become—both the person concerned and his spectator.

The impartial spectator, according to Smith, is not the representative of an institution for passing moral sentences; rather, it is a normal person who has learned to become impartial through numerous engagements in sympathetic processes, be it in the role of a person concerned or in that of an unconcerned spectator. Learning to become an impartial spectator is not the exclusive privilege of those who take the part of an unconcerned spectator in a sympathetic process; it is also an opportunity available to the persons concerned. Spectatorial impartiality is a character trait, a matter of virtue, and all people should learn to be virtuous, that is, to be impartial spectators: Impartial spectators have learned to feel proper sentiments of gratitude or resentment, sentiments that are based on adequate factual information, free from bias, and properly adapted to the external situation they are responding to as well as to their own particular vulnerabilities. These spectators can pass adequate moral judgments both about others and themselves.

From the impartial spectator to moral conscience

Even though we are, commonsensically speaking, naive realists in matters of moral judgment, we soon learn about the limitations of our moral competence, about our need to limit our natural partiality and to improve on our impartiality, that is, the need of engaging in sympathetic processes. We can claim justified authority only for those of our moral judgments with which others agree, not accidentally or because of our upbringing and socialization within the same society, but in virtue of having gone with us through a sympathetic process. Moral judgments are the better justified—or the more impartial—the more people were involved in the sympathetic processes that brought them about. This applies equally to the moral judgments we pass on others and to those we pass on ourselves.

According to Smith, “the principle by which we naturally either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, seems to be altogether the same with that by which we exercise the like judgments concerning the conduct of other people” (III.1.2). We have to engage in a sympathetic process for passing moral judgments on ourselves as much as for passing moral judgments on other people: “We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. If, upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influenced it, we approve of it, by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed equitable judge” (ibid.).

But how can we pass justified moral judgments on ourselves when there is nobody at hand with whom we can get involved in a sympathetic process, nobody to play the part of an unconcerned spectator? In such a case, Smith requests us to engage in an imaginary sympathetic process in which we ourselves play both parts, that of the person concerned and that of the unconcerned spectator:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, 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. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself. . . (III.1.6)

Smith speaks of this imagined internal spectator as “the man within the breast” (III.3.28), “the inhabitant of the breast,” “the man within,” or “the great judge and arbiter of our conduct” (III.3.4).

In the course of our constant efforts to pass justified moral judgments on ourselves, we acquire a habit of passing such reflective moral self-judgments, the habit of listening to this internal spectator. Listening to the judgment of this internal spectator is a matter of relying on one’s conscience: “It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct” (III.3.4). Smith describes the wise and just man, the man of virtue, as the one who has made it a habit to regard whatever relates to himself with the eyes of this internal spectator: “This habit has become perfectly familiar to him [the wise and just man]. He has been in the constant practice, and, indeed, under the constant necessity, of modelling, or of endeavouring to model, not only his outward conduct and behaviour, but, as much as he can, even his inward sentiments and feelings, according to those of this awful and respectable judge” (III.3.25).

However, even these wise and just men are not immune to moral error: “Even in good men, the judge within us is often in danger of being corrupted by the violence and injustice of their selfish passions, and is often induced to make a report very different from what the real circumstances of the case are capable of authorizing” (p. 141 note x). Whereas the main challenge of engaging in sympathetic processes with real others is the difficulty of sympathizing with how they feel, and to distinguish actual praise and praiseworthiness (see III.2.24, VI.iii.36), the main challenge of engaging in imaginative sympathetic processes is not to fall prey to self-deceit, “this fatal weakness of mankind...the source of half the disorders of human life” (III.4.6).

When describing the “man within the breast” in terms of the “great judge” or of the “higher tribunal” (III.2.32) who passes moral judgments on us, Smith seems to imply that the voice of conscience is the voice of God. However, Smith distinguishes three possible tribunals for judging of our actions, and according to this threefold distinction, the divine tribunal is not the tribunal of conscience. The first of these tribunals is that of the “man without” (*ibid.*): This can be any external spectator of our responsive sentiments and conduct who, after engaging in a sympathetic process with us, will approve or disapprove of our actions. The second is the tribunal of our conscience or “that of the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator, ...the man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of [our] conduct” (*ibid.*). And then there is a further, third tribunal to which we may appeal (in case that we believe in its existence), namely “that of the all-seeing Judge of the world, whose eye can never be deceived, and whose judgments can never be perverted” (III.2.33).

Moreover, what speaks most decisively against the claim that Smith follows Bishop Butler and others who identified the voice of conscience with that of God is that, according to Smith, the voice of conscience can by no means claim absolute authority. Again, the voice of conscience is not immune to the misleading impact of self-deceit: “In solitude, we are apt to feel too strongly whatever relates to ourselves: we are apt to over-rate the good offices we may have done, and the injuries we may have suffered. . . . The man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be awakened and put in mind of his duty, by the presence of the real spectator” (III.3.38). In other cases it is the judgment of the man without that is perverted; then, we better listen to the man within.

As much as we need to inculcate conscientious self-judgment to become virtuous persons who can pass justified, impartial judgments both about others and ourselves, habits can also come in the way of our moral improvement: Those who habitually engage in a disgraceful action hardly ever have any sense of the disgrace (see III.2.13). Actual social norms and customs (“the way of the world” (V.2.2)) may also represent a challenge to the impartiality of the internal spectator. So can our vanity, which makes us listen to praise without inquiring into our own praiseworthiness. Indeed, a moral person “desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise” (III.2.1). However, our anxiety for being approved of by other people may result in the attempts “both to obtain praise, and to avoid blame, by very unfair means” (III.2.24).

Thus, there are various sources of deceit of our conscientious self-judgment. Smith recommends to the common man who wants to avoid all these sources of deceit a reliance on moral rules for passing judgments on himself rather than engagement in an imaginative sympathetic process: “Nature, however, has not. . . abandoned us entirely to the delusions of self-love. Our continual observations upon the conduct of others, insensibly lead us to form to ourselves certain general rules concerning what is fit and proper either to be done or to be avoided” (III.4.7). Later, “when [those general rules of conduct] have been fixed in our mind by habitual reflection, [they] are of great use in correcting the misrepresentations of self-love concerning what is fit and proper to be done in our particular situation” (III.4.12). However, rule-following can only be a morally justified device if the rules are morally justified. Moral rules are not justified simply in virtue of representing social norms that enjoy actual authority within a particular society, as a moral relativist would assume. Smith rejects moral relativism. According to him, only those moral rules are justified which represent inductive generalizations based on particular moral judgments on which people have come to agree through sympathetic

processes: “The general maxims of morality are formed, like all other general maxims, from experience and induction” (VII.iii.2.6).

The impartial spectator, the “man of system,” and the “invisible hand”

We do not think of Smith’s account of the impartial spectator as having any close connection to the bearer of the famous “invisible hand” (IV.i.10). According to the only passage in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* where Smith uses the metaphor, this hand is supposed to guide people towards the common good, even if they are motivated by self-love and pursue their own interest. At first sight, Smith’s claim reminds one of Bernard Mandeville’s doctrine according to which private vices bring about public benefit. But Mandevillian cynicism does not fit neatly into Smith’s moral theory in general or into his account of communication in the form of a sympathetic process in particular.

The metaphor of the “invisible hand” has been misinterpreted and abused, mainly for the purpose of presenting—or, rather, misrepresenting—Smith as an advocate of political libertarianism. We suggest reading the metaphor as containing Smith’s implicit critique of the “man of system” (VI.ii.2.17) who pretends to have a superior knowledge of the common good and therefore requests the power and authority to guide others and to tell them what to do in order to bring it about. Smith warns us against the men of system, and this warning is informed by his general epistemic skepticism, which also extends to his account of moral knowledge. We are committed to truth, both in matters of facts and in matters of morals. This commitment underlies our naive realism about perceptual and moral knowledge (see III.3.2–3). But whereas there is nothing wrong with this commitment, we should, as we have said above, be modest in the account of what we can actually achieve: We can achieve neither absolute truth in our perception-based knowledge of the world nor absolute impartiality in moral matters. This modesty is an adequate response to the actual limitations of our perceptual systems, of our intellectual capacities, of our sensitivity to ourselves and others, and of our self-command. We can be less modest and more certain in cases of knowledge—factual or moral—that concern matters in our immediate vicinity. But the more remote these matters are, remote either in time or space, the less certain we can be about them.

The limitations of our perceptual, intellectual, and sensitive faculties do not force us to give up on our claims to universal truth; they do not represent any good reasons for embracing either epistemic or moral relativism. But in the light of these limitations, we can never be certain about the knowledge we have acquired,

even if we share the respective evidence with others and if there remains no actual disagreement with anybody. We have at all times to remain open for further revision of our factual and moral beliefs, for taking new evidence into account that is incompatible with our current beliefs. Given the limitations of our factual and moral knowledge, we have to trust the “invisible hand” when it comes to our actions’ contribution to the common good of society. But as long as we remain committed to being impartial in our moral judgments of ourselves and others, as impartial as possible, and as long as we can trust other people to share this commitment, as long as we can hope to become increasingly impartial in the course of processes of lifelong learning, we have reason to trust in the guidance of the invisible hand.

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