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My Understanding of Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator: A Symposium Prologue

Daniel B. Klein¹

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In Adam Smith's own time, his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter 'TMS') was seemingly well received; published commentary was minimal, but the performance was generally praised. Over some decades following Smith's death, however, dissatisfaction with TMS was frequently expressed publicly. Criticisms mounted (many of which are collected in Reeder 1997), and they focused on some of TMS's distinctive features. One of TMS's distinctive features is the impartial spectator. Within a few decades after Smith's death, TMS fell into oblivion.

But the fortunes of TMS have changed dramatically in the past several decades. Interest in and affection for TMS swells, and seemingly in all parts of "moral philosophy," from economics to history to philosophy to psychology to aesthetics. It seems that those features that in 1820 had been off-putting are, today, not so off-putting; indeed, features that had been off-putting seem to hold appeal today.

In TMS, where Smith first introduces "spectator" (at I.i.1.4) he seems to mean someone like, say, Rick, who happens to be on the scene and happens to be taking in the conduct in question—or spectating. And when he first introduces "impartial spectator" (at I.i.5.4), it seems natural to think about some such Rick who happens, also, to be, so far as we know, not partial to any of the parties involved, and hence presumptively impartial. The impartial spectator seems to start as some such presumptively impartial Rick.

1. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030.

But it seems (to me, anyway) that Smith proceeds to give the expression *the impartial spectator* more abstract meaning—both deeper and higher, odd as that combination sounds. The further we go in TMS, the more we get the feeling that the impartial spectator is not some local, ordinary, seemingly impartial Rick taking in the particular scene of conduct in question, but a being who beholds more and maintains impartiality more deeply than does an average Rick. It is suggested by Vivienne Brown, for example, that the impartial spectator “has been set up as an analogue of the wise Stoic’s divine Being” (1994, 74).

The impartial spectator is one of TMS’s most mysterious features, and so it is not surprising that Smith scholarship has not arrived at a definitive interpretation of it. An interpretation might treat any of a number of questions about the impartial spectator. Here I pose seven questions, offered as prompts to contributors.

1. How does the impartial spectator relate to a Rick, that is, some seemingly impartial guy observing the scene? (Important: Here and in the questions that follow I use *the impartial spectator* to refer specifically to whatever it is that, in *your* view, is *the deepest/highest figure* so denominated in TMS.)
2. How does the impartial spectator relate to “the man within the breast”?
3. Is the impartial spectator in one or more senses universal? If so, in what senses? How would such universality allow due significance to particularities of the situation of the conduct or character being judged, including the cultural context and specific history of the situation?
4. What can we say about the knowledge known by the impartial spectator? In what sense, if any, is the impartial spectator’s knowledge super-human, that is, beyond the ken of any actual human being?
5. Is there a sense in which the impartial spectator (again, in the deepest/highest sense) is selfless? If so, in what sense? Also, would some such selflessness then make the impartial spectator different from all human beings? (Of course, the impartial spectator might be different in other respects as well.)
6. Is there any sense in drawing a connection between the impartial spectator and the being implied in Smith’s “invisible hand” passages—that is, the being whose hand is invisible? If so, what is the connection?
7. Did Smith see the impartial spectator as related to God? If so, what was the relation?
8. Is the impartial spectator an attractive feature of Smith’s moral system? Why/why not?

With this prologue we invited individuals to offer their interpretation of Smith's impartial spectator. They were invited to pivot off of some or all of the eight questions, or to disregard them altogether. We are gratified and grateful for the 13 responses found here, and we extend our thanks to the 14 contributing scholars: [Vivienne Brown](#), [María Alejandra Carrasco](#) and [Christel Fricke](#), [Douglas Den Uyl](#), [Samuel Fleischacker](#), [Michael Frazer](#), [Jimena Hurtado](#), [John McHugh](#), [Paul Mueller](#), [Maria Pia Paganelli](#), [Craig Smith](#), [Vernon Smith](#), [Robert Urquhart](#), and [Jack Weinstein](#).

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About the Author



Daniel Klein is the editor of *Econ Journal Watch*, a professor of economics at George Mason University (where he leads a program in Adam Smith), the JIN Chair at the Mercatus Center at GMU, a fellow of the Ratio Institute in Stockholm, and the author of *Knowledge and Coordination: A Liberal Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2012). His email address is dklein@gmu.edu.

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