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EJW
ECON JOURNAL WATCH
Scholarly Comments on Academic Economics

ECON JOURNAL WATCH 22(2)
September 2025: 296–326

# The Impartial Spectator Rises

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LINK TO ABSTRACT

In "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," Roderick Firth (1952) advances the ideal observer approach in ethics. He explains that not all "ideal observers" qualify as God:

> [A]ny plausible description of an ideal observer will be a partial description of God, if God is conceived to be an infallible moral judge. But of course an ideal observer need not possess such characteristics as the power to create physical objects or even the power to reward and punish, if these characteristics appear to be irrelevant to God's capacities as a moral judge. (333)

We agree with Firth that one should predicate ethics upon a superhuman being who beholds the whole, a being signified as "God," "the impartial spectator," or some other term. Firth enumerates six characteristics of what he calls "an ideal observer." We have reservations about some of Firth's exposition[4] and terminology (including "ideal"), but, basically, we agree with Firth.

Such formulation makes for what Firth calls dispositional ethics: Ethical statements imply that "a certain being (or beings), either actual or hypothetical, is (or are) disposed to react to something in a certain way" (320). The being's disposition is affected by your being good or bad, virtuous or vicious. The being's

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[4] One of the main reservations we have about Firth's (1952) exposition of "ideal observer" is that he does not explicitly build universal benevolence into it; we think that one might as well make that feature explicit. And if doing so then requires the jettisoning of Firth's "dispassionate" feature, that is probably just as well.

sentimental reactions correspond for better or worse to the whole that he beholds, and the being's regard for a person's action (generally[5]) corresponds to the same.

Firth (318n2) invokes Adam Smith as one who, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), took such an approach, and we agree. Many scholars also agree that one of Smith's meanings of "impartial spectator" is a universal beholder characterized by superhuman knowledge and universal benevolence.

Other Smith scholars do not agree. These scholars, though often agreeing that "impartial spectator" has multiple meanings, stop short of such a universal, super-knowledgeable, benevolent beholder. For the most part, they allow meanings to rise only as high as the individual's conscience. They bound the polysemy of "impartial spectator" away from God or a God-like being. Some of these scholars explicitly reject such a meaning, while others, in treating "impartial spectator," simply fail to extend the meanings up to a universal, super-knowledgeable benevolent beholder. All of them have unduly flattened "impartial spectator." Hence we refer to them as "the flatteners."

Firth, as quoted above, said that a "description of an ideal observer will be a partial description of God." Accordingly, it is useful to name a being who is partly God-like, at least in being super-knowledgeable and universally benevolent, but who may lack other characteristics of God. We speak of her as "Joy." Think of Joy as a metaphorical or allegorical being. Joy is "God-light" in that, for instance, she is not necessarily the creator of the universe. We use "God/Joy" to mean God and/or Joy. Our "God/Joy" corresponds to Firth's "ideal observer," more or less.

The concept of a super-knowledgeable, universally benevolent beholder—God/Joy—may be termed an organon, for it constitutes part of a framework for organizing ethical thinking. The ethical approach engendered may be called beholderism. The present authors subscribe to beholderism. Such beholderism may appeal both to theists (such as Swanson and Young, who are Christian) and to non-theists (such as Klein, who is agnostic).

In what follows, we list many writers who indicate that "impartial spectator" does rise to something like God/Joy. On the other side of the issue are writers ("the flatteners") who treat "impartial spectator" and appear to indicate otherwise either explicitly or by implication from omissions; we survey writings by (listing alphabetically) T.D. Campbell, Samuel Fleischacker, Fonna Forman-Barzilai, Gilbert Harman, Gavin Kennedy, A.L. Macfie, James Otteson, Maria Pia Paganelli, D.D. Raphael, Eric Schliesser, Craig Smith, and Jack Russell Weinstein. (Our lists of

[5] We weaken the correspondence with "generally"—thus clarifying that we do imply always—because of the adventitious fringe: Someone's action may be quite proper and yet, in the instance, by some fluke of chance (or "fortune," as Smith would say), makes things worse than would have been the case, and similarly for an improper action making things better. God cannot reprove one for not seeing every lurking fluke and cannot commend one for acting as though one did when such vision is far beyond one's faculties.

scholars, either beholderists or flatteners, are not meant to be complete or comprehensive.)

As we will show, Smith scholarship is divided on whether "impartial spectator" rises to God/Joy. Those, like us, who hold that "impartial spectator" does rise to God/Joy face the challenge of making a textual case for that; we take up that challenge here.

We also face a further challenge: If "impartial spectator" rises to God/Joy, why didn't Smith make that clearer?

One might say that Smith did make it clear. He repeatedly writes of "the all-seeing" (121.12, 131.33)[6] or "the great" (134.35, 156.43) "Judge" of the "universe" or "world." Indeed, in Eds. 2–5 of TMS Smith called the conscience "the… substitute of the Deity" (130 note r). What follows below, from Ed. 6 (Smith's final revised edition), makes rather clear that "impartial spectator" rises to God/Joy.

Smith still could have made it plainer. For instance, where he affirms "God" as "this benevolent and all-wise Being" (TMS 235.3) by adding: *and our highest impartial spectator*. Or where Smith distinguishes the conscience from "the impartial spectator" (215.11) by adding: *which is God*. Doing so would have made it even harder for readers to stop short of a God/Joy meaning of "impartial spectator." Why didn't he? If "impartial spectator" rises to God/Joy, why didn't Smith provide a direct, concise statement saying that? We offer some potential reasons in the final section below.

## Distinguishing between God and Joy

By "God" we have in mind something involving at least the following:

1) super-knowledge (we prefer to avoid the word *omniscience*);

2) universal benevolence;

3) some kind of communication between God and the human being;

4) divine providence (creating, sustaining, and guiding the whole to God's ends);

5) Imago Dei, or humans as creatures made in God's image;

6) deliverance beyond the temporal world and a rendering of divine justice, involving the eternal.

[6] Parenthetical citations to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) are page.paragraph—for example, 121.12 is page 121, paragraph 12. We use the edition Smith (1976) listed in the references.

These facets of God comport with Christianity, the dominant religion of Smith's age. Facets 1 and 2, super-knowledge and benevolence, stand out; Smith mentions them repeatedly as facets of God, as when he writes of "that supreme wisdom and divine benignity which we necessarily ascribe to him" (166.7; see also 235.3, 305.18).

Since childhood, we have been exposed to the concept of God, and the six features listed above are familiar to us. As for Joy, the concept is not familiar, and, so, her features need some further description. She is a being we may admit into our imagination. Like God, Joy's facets include super-knowledge and universal benevolence. Those features of Joy are, each of them, well-beyond-human, but not necessarily to the same extent we associate with God.

The facets numbered 3, 4, 5, and 6, are trickier in relation to Joy. There is a way to avail ourselves of them without simply positing them as facets of Joy.

The way is to notice that, like us, Joy has an imagination. Imagine Joy as well as her imagination. In her imagination there is communication, providence, Imago Dei, and the eternal. That is, we humans tell ourselves a story involving a being, Joy, who, in our story, tells (or, if we do not give her the power to communicate, *would* tell) stories featuring some or all such things; Joy's imaginings bespeak her sensibilities and hence what she would, within our storytelling, approve and disapprove of. Though images within an image, those further elements (like items 3, 4, 5, and 6 above) then become cardinal aspects of whether we find Joy, as an imaginary figure, worth taking to heart. Joy is a being who tells (or would tell) *certain kinds* of stories, much as Smith is a writer who tells certain kinds of stories. But we have not built those aspects or traits into Joy as facets of Joy irrespective of what she imagines, but only into what she imagines. This kind of move—after John Lennon's tune:

> Imagine Joy as well as
> Her imagination

—can enable us to get a lot more of the patterns of actual Godly religions, actual theistic faiths, as well as the tremendous resources of their traditions, into a Joy version of beholderism. We counsel non-theistic beholderists to do just that.

Some readers, above all theists, will naturally find the concept of God far more attractive and logically-consistent than the concept of Joy. Joy is an allegory after all—an allegory for God, some sort of God-like being, or for goodness and virtue—but Joy nevertheless does not exist in the way God exists. Given the contested, unknown nature of Smith's religious views, we offer Joy as a possibility for what Smith may have been thinking when he spoke of the "impartial spectator"—a way he could preserve a beholderist notion of virtue even if one is himself not a theist. (Whether Joy successfully preserves such a beholderist notion of virtue is a

subject on which the coauthors here will likely not all be in agreement.) So we do not necessarily disagree with those who find God superior to Joy, or even those who find logical-inconsistencies in Joy. But we are not so much interested in debating God vs. Joy in the present paper. We are most interested in proposing God and/or Joy as one beholderist camp—an alternative to those who would flatten the "impartial spectator." So, again, whatever the differences between God and Joy, those differences do not matter to what follows. It's all beholderism to us. To repeat, for us "God/Joy" means God and/or Joy.[7]

## Writers who also suggest something like God/Joy

We are not alone in maintaining that a meaning of "impartial spectator" is God/Joy for Smith. The scholars listed in Figure 1 appear inclined to agree with us.

In criticizing Smith, Theodore Jouffroy (1840) said that for Smith the impartial spectator "represents God" (191). Knud Haakonssen (1981) speaks of the "higher" conception of impartial spectator as "an ideal whom both agents and actual spectators can approach" (58, 56). Jerry Evensky (1987, 452) sees in Smith an impartial spectator who "fully appreciates the Design" and who is "a perfect arbiter among the sentiments." Vivienne Brown (1994) says that the impartial spectator "has been set up as an analogue of the wise Stoic's divine Being" (74). Ross B. Emmett (2011, 128) and Paul Mueller (2016) suggest that the impartial spectator comes to signify a category of ideal impartial spectating and judging. As noted, Roderick Firth (1952, 318n2) mentions Smith in expositing "the ideal observer." Jeffrey Young (1992, 74) affirms the place of an ideal or transcendent spectator, and distinguishes that from the man within the breast, who "has feet of clay and so his judgements can be wrong."

There are others, such as Ryan Hanley (2009, 2019), Paul Oslington (2012), and Russ Roberts (2014), who bring a religious view to their reading of Smith, and who see God as fundamental in Smith's ethics, but who, to our knowledge, have not clearly affirmed a Godly meaning to "impartial spectator." For example, Hanley

[7] An online symposium discussion hosted by Marcus Shera (and featuring this paper's co-author Daniel B. Klein) is especially relevant to the debate of God vs. Joy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDx4h2KWd84.

[9] Articles and book chapters are here denoted with parentheses while books and dissertations are here denoted with italics. Full citations appear in the references at the end.

[9] Witztum and Young (2013) argue that Rawls views the impartial spectator as a device for utility maximization for society (Rawls 1971, 27) and as proof that Smith was a Utilitarian. Witztum and Young (572–573) contest the claim that Smith was a Utilitarian, but Young agrees that Rawls gives Joy-like powers to the impartial spectator.

**Figure 1: Scholars who appear inclined toward a God/Joy meaning**[8]

| Author | Works | Year of Work | Pages favorable to God/Joy as a meaning: |
|---|---|---|---|
| Brown, Vivienne | *Adam Smith's Discourse: Canonicity, Commerce, and Conscience* | 1994 | 74 |
| Den Uyl, Douglas | "Impartial Spectating and the Price Analogy" | 2016 | 264–266 |
| Doran, Colin | "The man within the breast, the supreme impartial spectator, and other impartial spectators in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*" (co-authored) | 2018 | 1153–1168 |
| Emmett, Ross | "Man and Society in Adam Smith's Natural Morality: The Impartial Spectator, the Man of System, and the Invisible Hand" | 2011 | 128 |
| Evensky, Jerry | "The Two Voices of Adam Smith: Moral Philosopher and Social Critic" | 1987 | 452 |
| Firth, Roderick | "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer" | 1952 | 318n2 |
| Fitzgibbons, Athol | *Adam Smith's System of Liberty, Wealth, and Virtue* | 1995 | 64–65, 71, 164 |
| Griswold, Charles | *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment* | 1999 | 21 |
| Haakonssen, Knud | *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* | 1981 | 56–58, 79, 136–137 |
| Jouffroy, Theodore | "[From] Introduction to Ethics, Including a Critical Survey of Moral Systems" | 1840 | 191 |
| Klein, Daniel B. | "The man within the breast, the supreme impartial spectator, and other impartial spectators in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*" (co-authored) | 2018 | 1153–1168 |
| Long, Brendan | "Adam Smith's natural theology of society" | 2006 | 142, 144 |
| Matson, Erik | "The man within the breast, the supreme impartial spectator, and other impartial spectators in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*" (co-authored) | 2018 | 1153–1168 |
| Mueller, Paul | "Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator" | 2016 | 312–318 |
| Rawls, John[9] | *A Theory of Justice* | 1971 | 184, 263 |
| Reeves West, Kacey | *Three Essays on Business and Politics in Adam Smith* | 2024 | 17, 51-52, 55 |
| Young, Jeffrey | "Natural Morality and the Ideal Impartial Spectator in Adam Smith" | 1992 | 174 |

writes, "But the impartial spectator is itself merely an imperfect representative of the genuinely perfect judgment that Smith thinks God alone possesses" (2019, 131), yet never seems to affirm that one meaning of "impartial spectator" is God or a God-like being.

## Smith indicates that "impartial spectator" rises to God/Joy

In contending that "impartial spectator" rises to God/Joy, we could mount a case that is fuller than that contained in the present article. The fuller case would argue that Smith's theorizing best coheres only upon such understanding. Here, we limit our case to treating several TMS passages. These passages directly challenge those who do not allow "impartial spectator" to rise to God/Joy.

As a general matter, whenever a passage is quoted, interpreters may find themselves in disagreement from any of a number of problems in interpretation. One is differences in understanding the significations of particular words (such as "impartial spectator"). Another problem is whether Smith offers the passage as though it is an expression of his own belief; alternatively, Smith may be offering it as an expression of a belief of another. In what follows, we have been careful to use only passages that Smith offers *as though* expressions of his own belief.

If we accept a quotation as something that Smith offered as though expressions of his own belief, there remains the issue of the "as though." Many Smith scholars have suggested that Smith's exoteric affirmations of theism are not to be taken at face-value; Smith may have been ironic or dissembling from any of several motives, they say (e.g., Kennedy (2013)). Perhaps on matters of religion, Smith was rather like David Hume (who was at very least a critic of organized religion)? Perhaps Smith was genuinely ambivalent or agnostic. We raise this problem, not to attempt to answer it, but because it pertains to some of the passages we quote below.

However, in considering theistic affirmations, any irony, agnosticism, or dissembling on Smith's part would not justify the interpreter of Smith to erase the passage, as though it were never written. Rather, the passage should suggest swapping in Joy for God, thus preserving the beholderism implied by the passage.

The TMS passages treated below all advance beholderism. We divide them into (1) those that are rather explicitly theistic and do not use "impartial spectator," and (2) those that are not explicitly theistic and do use "impartial spectator."

## (1) Beholderist TMS passages that are explicitly theistic

Writing as though the statement is an expression of his own belief, Smith composed a chapter title affirming that "the general Rules of Morality… are justly regarded as the Laws of the Deity" (161). In that chapter, Smith writes the following in speaking about our moral faculties:

> Since these [our moral faculties], therefore, were plainly intended to be the governing principles of human nature, the rules which they prescribe are to be regarded as the commands and laws of the Deity, promulgated by those vicegerents which he has thus set up within us. All general rules are commonly denominated laws: thus the general rules which bodies observe in the communication of motion, are called the laws of motion. But those general rules which our moral faculties observe in approving or condemning whatever sentiment or action is subjected to their examination, may much more justly be denominated such. (165.6)

Elsewhere in the book, Smith wrote of *Imago Dei* and "vicegerents":

> He [the all-wise Author of Nature] has made man, if I may say so, the immediate judge of mankind; and has, in this respect, as in many others, created him after his own image, and appointed him his vicegerent upon earth, to superintend the behaviour of his brethren. (130.31)

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term vicegerent, in Smith's time, could be "[a]pplied to rulers and magistrates as representatives of the Deity" or be a "person appointed by a king or other ruler to act in his or her place or exercise certain of his or her administrative functions." Either way, Smith is suggesting that each of us holds a station in God's moral order, to fulfill and police the general rules of morality. God is obviously the beholder of the moral order and of how we perform within it. In fulfilling those duties, we may "be said, in some sense, to co-operate with the Deity, and to advance as far as in our power the plan of Providence" (166.7). Smith also writes: "That to obey the will of the Deity is the first rule of duty, all men are agreed. But concerning the particular commandments which that will may impose upon us, they differ widely from one another" (176.12). There are three occasions in which Smith speaks of our moral faculties or "the man within the breast" having been "set up" within us (132.33, 165.5, 166.6). Also relevant is Smith's repeated use of "confirmed" in speaking of moral principles being confirmed by philosophy and moral researches (163.3–166.8). It must be acknowledged, however, that "confirmed" here may mean inculcated, as opposed to proven to be true. One might suggest a theistic element in some uses of

the word "sacred," for example when Smith writes of "[t]he most sacred laws of justice" (84.2). And so on.

More passages could be added, but the foregoing suffice to show that TMS abounds with beholderist statements that are exoterically theistic. Let us emphasize again: we cite Smith's theistic affirmations not to prove that Smith was a theist but to prove the weaker claim that Smith was a beholderist.

## (2) Beholderist TMS passages that feature "impartial spectator"

All occurrences of "impartial spectator" in TMS have been collected and analyzed in an Excel file (here). A majority of the occurrences were new to Ed. 6. All of the new occurrences come in Parts III, VI, and VII. Of these, a significant portion refers to the conscience, or "the man within the breast," which is often called "the supposed impartial spectator." Some occurrences, old and new, refer to a human being who is spectating and presumptively partial to neither party in the spectacle. But some occurrences, we argue, clearly signify God/Joy. We will look at the three instances—at 294.49, 225.19, and 215.11—all of which were new to Ed. 6.

The following is a complete paragraph that Smith inserted near the end of a long chapter on "Systems which make Virtue consist in Propriety":

> None of those systems either give, or even pretend to give, any precise or distinct measure by which this fitness or propriety of affection can be ascertained or judged of. *That precise and distinct measure can be found nowhere but in* the sympathetic feelings of the **impartial and well-informed spectator**. (294.49; italics and boldface added)

Smith had expounded on how the rules of all the virtues, except commutative justice, are "loose, vague, and indeterminate" (174–175.9–11, 327.1), that is, that there is no accessible "precise and distinct measure." Only God/Joy achieves such precision, which it obtains by definition, as it were. Smith's purpose in the paragraph just block-quoted (294.49) is not to suggest that a source for precise guidance is readily "found," but, rather, to tell us how to conduct our search for guidance: Study the circumstances and heed sages to ascend the staircase of wisdom, with a God/Joy concept lending coherence to the ascent.

In Part VI, Smith writes:

> Nature, which formed men for that mutual kindness, so necessary for their happiness, renders every man [for example, a fellow named Jim] the peculiar object of kindness, to the persons to whom he himself has been kind. Though their gratitude should not always correspond

> to his beneficence, yet the sense of his merit, the sympathetic gratitude of the **impartial spectator**, will *always* correspond to it. (225.19; boldface and italics added)

It is quite apt to understand this "impartial spectator" as God/Joy. The sympathetic regard of this being "will always correspond" to Jim's kindness. Yet Smith himself had (at 174.9) expounded on how the basic rule of gratitude (returning equal value for any kindness) is "in the highest degree loose and inaccurate, and to admit of ten thousand exceptions." Yet the impartial spectator here "always" gets it right, and on the many occasions spanning multiple "persons to whom he himself has been kind." Neither Jim's most revered human exemplar nor Jim's own conscience can do that. This impartial spectator seems superhuman in both "contextual knowledge" and "system knowledge" (Haakonssen 1981, 79). This impartial spectator must be God/Joy.

Finally, we consider the following very special paragraph:

> In the steadiness of his industry and frugality, in his steadily sacrificing the ease and enjoyment of the present moment for the probable expectation of the still greater ease and enjoyment of a more distant but more lasting period of time, the prudent man is always both supported and rewarded by the entire approbation of **the impartial spectator, and of the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast**. The impartial spectator does not feel himself worn out by the present labour of those whose conduct he surveys; nor does he feel himself solicited by the importunate calls of their present appetites. To him their present, and what is likely to be their future situation, are very nearly the same: he sees them nearly at the same distance, and is affected by them very nearly in the same manner. He knows, however, that to the persons principally concerned, they are very far from being the same, and that they naturally affect *them* in a very different manner. He cannot therefore but approve, and even applaud, that proper exertion of self-command, which enables them to act as if their present and future situation affected them nearly in the same manner in which they affect him. (215.11; italics original, boldface added)[10]

Let's again use the name Jim for the man principally concerned.[11] It is worth

[10] We refer repeatedly to TMS 215.11 (page.paragraph) in the pages to come. For clarity for those using an alternative edition of TMS, this paragraph corresponds to Part VI, Section 1, Paragraph 11 of the 6th and subsequent editions of the work.

[11] "The persons principally concerned" is a phrase Smith uses repeatedly in TMS (e.g., 10.4) to describe the one who's conduct is being assessed.

enumerating several aspects of the paragraph that greatly illuminate Smith's "impartial spectator":

1. Smith clearly, unequivocally distinguishes the impartial spectator from Jim's man within the breast.

2. Smith describes the relationship between those two: Jim's man within the breast (i.e., conscience) is a "representative" of the impartial spectator. (It is worth noting that, in Eds. 2–5, Smith had referred to "the man within" as "This inmate of the breast, this abstract man, the representative of mankind, and substitute of the Deity" (130 note r); and, in Eds. 1–5, Smith had, "Man is accountable to God and his fellow creatures" (111 note k).)

3. This impartial spectator surveys Jim's conduct and thus seems to have knowledge of Jim's conduct. This impartial spectator seems to have intimate intelligence of Jim's present situation, and also of "what is likely to be" Jim's future situation.

4. If this impartial spectator is a human spectator, someone perhaps named Rick, it seems remarkable that he would have such personal knowledge and not be partial to Jim (or to present-time Jim). Yet this spectator is not partial to Jim.

5. What's more, this impartial spectator has such present-and-future intelligence not only about Jim, but about all of "those whose conduct he surveys." Whereas Jim's man within the breast is clearly individuated to Jim, the impartial spectator clearly is not.

6. This impartial spectator regards each surveyed person's present and future situations "nearly at the same distance, and is affected by them very nearly in the same manner." What human spectator could have such knowledge and such detachment over some unspecified set of surveyed persons? Moreover, what human spectator would "not feel himself worn out by the present labour of those whose conduct he surveys"?

7. Smith begins the paragraph speaking of the "prudent man" (here "Jim") in the singular. But notice what he then does. After distinguishing between the impartial spectator and the conscience, Smith consistently refers to the impartial spectator in the singular ("he") but begins to refer in the plural to "*those* whose conduct he surveys" and "*their* present," and so on. Smith is clearly distinguishing the oneness of the impartial spectator from

the multiplicity of the subjects the impartial spectator beholds. If the impartial spectator is not God/Joy, it would seem logical to use the plural to refer to it as there are multiple spectators in a lower non-God/Joy sense.

8. In the last sentence of the paragraph Smith distinguishes the impartial spectator from virtuous people. He says that "proper exertion of self-command… enables them to act as if their present and their future situation affected them nearly in the same manner in which they affect him." The word "nearly" suggests a superiority of the impartial spectator above even men of proper exertion of self-command. The impartial spectator can never be fully matched.

9. Most importantly: Smith implies that everyone surveyed by the impartial spectator has, within his or her own breast, a representative of that same being. Who is the being who is to be represented by those different, possibly many, possibly *all*, persons' individual consciences? Clearly, the being described here cannot be a human being (save Jesus).

It is our hope the preceding nine comments lead one to conclude Smith probably had in mind God or some God-like being such as Joy in using the phrase "impartial spectator." Indeed, one way to make sense of paragraph 215.11 is to see "the impartial spectator" as a being who is universal, super-knowledgeable, and universally benevolent. Furthermore, this being is the represent*ee* of each person's conscience. On this reading, the impartial spectator of paragraph 215.11 is God/Joy. Yet other passages show that the representee of our conscience must be God/Joy, and not some other human being: At 165–6.6, Smith speaks of "those vicegerents of God within us" which have been "set up within us;" at 131.32 he speaks of the conscience as "this demigod within the breast," partly of "divine extraction."

Thus, God/Joy is one way to make sense of paragraph 215.11. Is there any other way? Not that we can see. None of the scholars that we criticize below offer a coherent interpretation of what paragraph 215.11 says about the impartial spectator. They either ignore that paragraph entirely or treat it only glancingly. Anyone who rejects our God/Joy interpretation of "the impartial spectator" in paragraph 215.11 must offer an alternative interpretation of that paragraph.

Before moving on, let us note that the God/Joy meaning of "impartial spectator" is worth recognizing in part because it helps one recognize when "impartial spectator" does *not* signify God/Joy. Eight times in TMS, Smith writes "every impartial spectator," and those do not signify God/Joy. Moreover, God/Joy is *not* signified when Smith writes "supposed impartial spectator." Rather, all occurrences of "supposed impartial spectator" signify the man within the breast (i.e., the conscience). For the three passages treated in this section (that is, passages from

294.49, 225.19, 215.11), the reader may wish to try an experiment: Insert "supposed" before "impartial spectator." Such an insertion may strike the reader as either quite inappropriate or quite pointless: It is inappropriate if *supposed* is understood as "sup-po-sed" (meaning alleged and connoting skepticism) and pointless if understood as "sup-pos'd" (meaning posited as in "as we have supposed"). If the insertion does seem inappropriate or pointless, the reason, we suggest, is that "supposed impartial spectator" signifies the man within the breast, while these passages are about God/Joy.[12]

## Writers who stop short of God/Joy

Among the Smith scholars who have treated "impartial spectator" in a way that seems to stop short, either explicitly or by implication, of God/Joy and hence flatten Smith's "impartial spectator" are T.D. Campbell, Samuel Fleischacker, Fonna Forman-Barzilai, Gilbert Harman, Gavin Kennedy, A.L. Macfie, James Otteson, Maria Pia Paganelli, D.D. Raphael, Eric Schliesser, Craig Smith, and Jack Russell Weinstein. Here we survey one at a time (in alphabetic order) their treatments of the "impartial spectator."

### T.D. Campbell[13]

Campbell (1971) criticizes Firth's notion of the ideal observer (128–137). Campbell distinguishes his interpretation of the impartial spectator from scholars who see an "idea of a spectator who is ideal in that he represents certain normative standards which go beyond those to be found in the average spectator" (127).

Campbell (1971) argues that the impartial spectator reflects the "normal reactions" of a typical human being (127). He expounds further:

> The spectator is 'ideal' in the sense that he excludes all those features of actual spectators which relate to their special interests as particular individuals involved in the actual situation which they are observing; he is 'empirical' in the sense that, once this abstraction is made, the responses of the spectator are identified with the consensus towards which any actual group of persons can be observed to approximate in their attitudes to the behaviour of their fellows. (127)

[12] For a more systematic treatment of Smith's use of "supposed" as an occasional qualifier to "impartial spectator" that concurs with our view, see Klein, Matson, and Doran (2018).

[13] Campbell was a student of D.D. Raphael (treated below), and according to Raphael there is "very little difference" between Campbell's and Raphael's understandings of the impartial spectator (Raphael 2007, 4). Raphael served as Campbell's doctoral thesis advisor for what became Campbell (1971) (Raphael 2007, 4).

The impartial spectator is for Campbell a "consensus" reflection of human reactions.

Campbell (1971) argues that there is essentially nothing special about the impartial spectator relative to the ordinary human being. He writes, "the impartial spectator is very much a creature of flesh and blood whose characteristics are to be seen in the behaviour of each and every human person; there is no suggestion that he has any attributes not present 'in every human heart'" (135). The impartial spectator is "impartial" in that he is not personally affected by the situation at hand; hence, he is akin to a "juryman" (135). Again, the impartial spectator is more like an exemplary human being named Rick than God/Joy.

Campbell (1971) says more: the impartial spectator is "for the most part 'well-informed'" (intra quote is from Smith) but not "omniscient" (136). He writes, "Smith never attributes to the spectator knowledge beyond that which it is usually possible to obtain, and which is normally considered necessary before an observer can decide whether or not he sympathizes with the agent concerned" (136). Such would preclude knowledge of the future as posited in paragraph 215.11.

The impartial spectator is likewise not "omnipercipient" for Campbell (1971, 136). He is "subject to all the failings or irregularities which alter the usual operations of the moral sentiments" (136). Campbell cites various examples of such failings discussed by Smith: the tendency for man to be affected by fortune in our judgement of others and the habit to be allured to a fault by wealth (136-7). All this leads Campbell to breathtakingly conclude: "There is, therefore, nothing docetic in Smith's image of the impartial spectator: *all his characteristics are fully human, and he possesses these only to the degree which is common in the average person*" (137, italics added). For Campbell, there is no God/Joy to the impartial spectator!

Campbell (1971) makes a further point. It is true our sentiments are often influenced by custom as Smith acknowledges in TMS (see TMS 200.1-211.16). From such passages in TMS Campbell argues the impartial spectator is a morally relativistic concept:

> There are… many spectators… The impartial spectator takes on a variety of guises in different societies and in different groups within the same society. To talk of the impartial spectator is simply a short-hand way of referring to the normal reaction of a member of *a particular social group*, or of a whole society, *when he is in the position of observing* the conduct of his fellows (145, italics added).

Surely Smith did acknowledge that ethical formation results in part from one's surroundings. But notice Campbell does not say the impartial spectator has in mind "the whole of humanity" (all particular societies) but rather "a whole society" (a single particular society). God/Joy possesses universal knowledge—an ability to

see the good of the whole and judge human conduct in a super-knowledgeable, omnitemporal fashion. For Campbell, each impartial spectator (because there are many in his view) is limited, each with its own discrete standard, only able to spectate on a particular society, and only from certain vantage points ("when he is in the position of observing").

Campbell (1971) acknowledges the heavy theological thread running through Smith's work. For example, he asserts that the invisible hand "is a figure of speech used to suggest that the total operations of nature betoken the ultimate planning of a benevolent God" (61). Likewise, he indicates Smith "endorses the theological belief that all laws, prescriptive and descriptive, are, in the end, to be regarded as the commandments of God" (60). But Campbell unfortunately never cites paragraph 215.11 in the entire book. Even though he seemed to grasp Smith's, at very least, enthusiastic deistic worldview, he did not see how the impartial spectator could take on a God/Joy connotation. Impartial spectator remains at the level of conscience.[14]

## Samuel Fleischacker

Fleischacker (2016) writes of the impartial spectator: "It appears without fanfare, as if it had no technical significance, and appeal to its judgments seems not terribly different from appealing to the judgements of *actual spectators*" (273–4). Fleischacker is more willing than others to see a theological dimension associated with the impartial spectator. In wrestling with the theological language of TMS used in conjunction with the impartial spectator, Fleischacker maintains, "The impartial spectator is… a representative of God, if God has any representative in nature, a pointer towards God's judgment—but not itself (fully) divine" (275). But Fleischacker is quick to reject a reading of the impartial spectator as God/Joy. He writes, "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" (275). It is not clear how Smith's use of theological language "makes clear" that the impartial spectator is "not divine" and "never becomes a God" (276).

According to Fleischacker, the impartial spectator is more pedestrian than divine:

> Smith's impartial spectator is much more like Dan Klein's Rick—

[14] "Conscience, then, is the mechanism whereby the individual comes to adopt the standpoint of the spectator in order to assess and guide his own conduct, and so gain the approbation of actual spectators, including his own approbation in those moments when he is reflecting on his own conduct. In this way conscience opposes the 'natural' (spontaneous and pre-moral) preference which each man has for his own pleasure, and encourages the practice of such mild forms of altruism as exist in unsocialized man" (1971, 147–8).

> 'some seemingly impartial guy observing the scene'—than like God... 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. (2016, 275)

At most, Fleischacker thinks of the impartial spectator as a sort of internal faculty of man that in some sense reflects or represents God. But the impartial spectator lacks the characteristics of God. It is not omniscient and possesses only imperfect impartiality (276). Nowhere does Fleischacker (2016) cite TMS 215.11.

Fleischacker (2021) restates, and in many places reproduces, the position of Fleischacker (2016) on the impartial spectator (see especially 2021, 108–113). Fleischacker (2021) does cite TMS paragraph 215.11 but just once in the entire book: "In Part VI, he frequently appeals to the impartial spectator to set the standard for what should count as virtue (see for instance 215, 228, 244–8)." Hence, he mentions the paragraph only in passing, making no serious attempt to unpack its richness and the implicit possibility that the impartial spectator is more than "merely a pointer towards the divine and the ideal."

## Fonna Forman-Barzilai

Above in Figure 1 we cite Charles Griswold as one who appears to appreciate a God/Joy sense of the impartial spectator. Forman-Barzilai (2010) criticizes Griswold, offering: "he underestimates the historical and cultural implications of Smith's moral psychology when he links the 'impartial spectator' with truth" (175).

Forman-Barzilai (2010) thinks Smith's impartial spectator provides an apt means of "overcom[ing] *affective* bias." She describes such as the ability to "cool[] self-preference, augment[] concern for others, or even cultivate[] a tolerant, open-minded stance toward others" (179). The "impartial spectator," however, fails to obtain "unbiased cross-cultural judgements" (184). For Forman-Barzilai, the impartial spectator succeeds as a means of directing individuals to impartially apply their own prevailing cultural standards. But it is not altogether successful in assessing alien cultural standards or in questioning the goodness of one's own cultural standard. Forman-Barzilai's argument is somewhat tenuous, and she seems unwilling to make a definitive case (perhaps given the prevalence of passages in TMS that seem to rebut the gist of her argument). But the gist is that impartial spectator far and away lacks the characteristics of God/Joy. Nowhere does Forman-Barzilai (2010) cite TMS 215.11.

## Gilbert Harman

Harman (2000) compares and contrasts David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, and Smith's notions of the impartial spectator. Harman admits that "In the twentieth century, this sort of theory was sometimes discussed under the name 'ideal observer theory'" and cites Firth (181). But according to Harman, "Smith… disagrees with both Hume and Hutcheson about the relevance of benevolence. Smith argues that neither agents nor spectators are much influenced by benevolence" (193–4). Harman argues Smith's impartial spectator is rather "conventionalistic" (190). He writes:

> But, if the spectator were in the agent's circumstances, he or she would try to modify an otherwise natural reaction so as to accord with the imagined reactions of other, not necessarily ideal, spectators. This means that a spectator will be influenced strongly by his or her expectations of how people ordinarily act and react. (190)

Harman hence underplays the role of potentially "ideal" spectators. Harman (2000) is aware of Firth's argument, but he does not signal agreement with it, nor does he explicitly address a God/Joy meaning of the impartial spectator. Nowhere does Harman (2000) cite TMS 215.11.

## Gavin Kennedy

In his book *Adam Smith's Lost Legacy* (2005), Kennedy presents the impartial spectator as the inner voice of one's conscience, never raising it to something higher and never engaging TMS 215.11. At his blog, Kennedy writes: "The impartial spectator is the 'judge within the breast'" and "No outsider can decide if another person's impartial spectator is a 'true' spectator" (2007).

## J. Ralph Lindgren

Lindgren (1973) cites Firth's ideal observer theory and its relation to Smith but writes the following: "For Smith the disposition of the impartial spectator was not that of a bloodless ideal observer, but the tone of temper which all parties to moral judgment would and to some degree do support" (36). Lindgren says the impartial spectator is an "ideal" but not in the God/Joy sense: "That ideal, however, is not a heavenly prototype which can never be achieved by merely human effort. The temper of the impartial spectator is an ideal which is attainable in principle by real people within the constraints of their natural circumstances" (30). Lindgren (1973, 50) does cite TMS 215.11 but only once, and the reference is glancing.[15]

[15] Lindgren (1973, 50) writes, "The prudent man promotes his own well-being by taking approximately equal interest in both the short and the long term benefit of any action (MS, p. 314)." Pages 314 in the

## A.L. Macfie

Macfie (1967) devotes a chapter to the impartial spectator. He argues that none of the following can alone constitute the "measure" of Smithian morals: utility, proportionality, reason, moral intuition, and sympathy (84–88). Macfie stresses in particular that sympathy alone is not the source of morality for Smith:

> The thesis in the present discussion is founded on Smith's own statement that sympathy can inspire, or be felt for *any passion whatsoever*. (It cannot therefore, alone, supply a principle for moral discrimination.) He further insisted that such a principle could develop only through the slow and imperfect processes of individual judgement, based on sympathy, but guided by social education and socially established rules of behaviour. (91)

Macfie sees the impartial spectator as formed by a sort of double helix: sympathy and cultural conditioning. Macfie's discussion is verbose, at times hard to decipher. But the gist of what he says seems to indicate he would dissent from a God/Joy reading of the impartial spectator. "The pressures for good behaviour—to deserve approval—come rather from outside, from the standards developed in social growth over the slow centuries," he writes (90). Nowhere does he cite TMS 215.11. And nowhere does Macfie (1967) address a higher connotation to the impartial spectator.

## James Otteson

Otteson (2011) lays out what, according to Smith, he sees as the main characteristics of an impartial spectator: An impartial spectator is "reasonable," able to practice judicious "interpretation," tends to sound "judgement," and is "fully informed and disinterested" (94–5). Discussing Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Otteson identifies a parallel Smithian impartial spectator theory of property (95).[16] Otteson makes several remarks that signal he would stop short of a God/Joy interpretation of the impartial spectator. For one he describes how moral development begins in childhood but culminates in "the creation of an imaginary and idealized Impartial Spectator that serves as one's conscience" (95–96). Otteson notes that "A given individual's imagined Impartial Spectator is based on generalizations that individual has drawn from his past experience of what other actual spectators (including himself) have approved or disapproved in various circumstances"

edition Lindgren cites corresponds to TMS 215.11 in the variorum edition we cite.

[16] It is worth pondering whether there is actually any meaningful difference between an impartial spectator theory of property and an impartial spectator theory of morality. Property rights are moral rights according to Smith.

(96). Otteson seems to think the impartial spectator, in the highest sense, refers to the conscience and that the conscience is formed via the experience of peer-to-peer interaction. But could the impartial spectator represent God/Joy even if it is not itself God/Joy? Otteson equivocates: "No—and yet perhaps" (96). All in all, Otteson appears skeptical. It is a "no" in the sense that the impartial spectator is "fallible" and an "all-too-human construction" but a "perhaps" in the sense that the human conscience is "as close to an idealized perfection as could be hoped for from limited and fallen creatures" and hence in that sense might "perhaps" be a "direct representative of the Divinity" (96–7). But Otteson does not consider that one meaning of the impartial spectator is "the Divinity." Hence it is not surprising Otteson (2011) never cites TMS 215.11.

## Maria Pia Paganelli

Paganelli (2016) examines Smithian moral development by noting the tendency of humans to use "our imagination" to "split ourselves into two: the I-agent and the I-spectator" (319). The I-spectator, which evaluates the actions of the I-agent, must go on a journey of improvement, whereby ideally it becomes a more impartial arbiter of human conduct. Paganelli writes, "The development of the I-spectator from partial to impartial is a lifetime project, and even then it is never perfectly achieved" (322). She describes such development as a balancing act of "self-command" and "humanity." A disproportionate amount of either will tend to "crush" the self (322). Paganelli omits any discussion of a higher dimension to the impartial spectator, and she never cites TMS 215.11. Elsewhere Paganelli (2023) downplays the role of "Providence" in Smith.

## D.D. Raphael

Noted Smith scholar D.D. Raphael consistently stopped short of a God/Joy interpretation throughout his career, even while he often acknowledged, sometimes reluctantly, theological dimensions to Smith's thought.

Raphael (2007) in his final book (Graham undated) focuses squarely on Smith's impartial spectator. Raphael sees the impartial spectator as borne out of one's repeated social observation and interaction. He writes, "Conscience is a social product, a mirror of social feeling" (2007, 35). Raphael claims that the "supposed impartial spectator" is "a creation of my imagination" (35). The conscience, according to Raphael's reading of Smith, while formed by real-life social interactions, abstracts from living and breathing spectators (e.g., a wise Rick 9) to create "an *imagined* impartial spectator conjured up 'in the breast'" (2007, 15). Hence the impartial spectator is essentially synonymous with the conscience. Nowhere does it represent an ideal or divine figure.

In what sense is the impartial spectator indifferent? It is not "an interested party" in the moral case under consideration (2007, 34). When one consults his conscience via the impartial spectator "conjured up 'in the breast,'" he pictures a being without a stake. In what sense is the impartial spectator universal? Raphael comments that "he expresses a universal point of view in being representative of any observer with normal human feelings" (34). The impartial spectator is a man of the people, a reflection of normal human reactions.

In what sense is the impartial spectator ideal? It is important to first note that in our interpretation of TMS 215.11, when Smith speaks of the "approbation of the impartial spectator, and of the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast," we consider the former impartial spectator to be a higher, perfect impartial spectator (i.e., God/Joy) (as what follows in that passage seems to indicate as we explained above) and the latter impartial spectator to be a lower, imperfect representative of the former. In commenting just once in the book on TMS 215.11, Raphael reads the passage quoted above in the reverse: the former reference to the impartial spectator refers to everyday living and breathing spectators like Rick 1 or Rick 9 (i.e., someone superior in virtue to Rick 1) while the latter refers to a higher, more perfect, and hence ideal impartial spectator found in the conscience. Raphael's reading is clearly dubious for the reasons spelled out in our discussion above of 215.11.

According to Raphael, the conscience for Smith is thus the highest up one can go in that it represents the wisdom of the masses while possessing the knowledge only "the persons principally concerned" can access. Raphael expounds:

> The man within is 'ideal' because he seeks to be praiseworthy more than to be actually praised by 'the man without'. The judgement of conscience is superior to that of actual spectators simply because the agent can know better than bystanders what he has done or not done, and what was his motive for acting as he did. He is 'well-informed' but he is not omniscient. His superior knowledge is a matter of common experience. (2007, 45)

Similar to Hayekian knowledge, one's imagined impartial spectator is superior because he possesses the local knowledge that external, living and breathing spectators lack. But even if one's imagined impartial spectator has access to local knowledge of self that external spectators lack, it, just as in Hayek's account, has only limited, imperfect knowledge—hence there is no omniscience, no omnitemporal perch. Such limitedness again belies paragraph 215.11.

Raphael explicitly rejects a divine imputation to the impartial spectator: "The impartial spectator is still a man, not a god, and indeed a perfectly normal man" (2007, 45). While there are passages in which he acknowledges Smith's likely belief

in God (e.g., 2007, 104), Raphael sees passages that imply a God/Joy meaning to the impartial spectator (e.g., conscience as the "substitute of the Deity") to reflect "an element of rhetoric," whereby Smith was merely attempting to underscore how the imagined impartial spectator, conjured up in the conscience through social experience, has a more impartial view than particular spectators like Rick 1 or Rick 9 (2007, 44–5).

Much of Raphael (2007) is reproduced from Raphael (1975), an article in which he similarly stops short of firmly positing a God/Joy reading of the impartial spectator (see especially 1975, 95). Like his later piece, Raphael (1975) does quote TMS 215.11:

> What of the description in edition 2 of 'this abstract man, the representative of mankind, and substitute of the Deity', or of the phrases used in edition 6, the 'ideal' man or 'demigod' within the breast? There is an element of rhetoric here, designed to emphasize the superior authority of conscience when opposing the judgement of actual spectators. The impartial spectator is still a man, not a god, and indeed a perfectly normal man. The 'substitute of the Deity' in edition 2 is also 'the representative of mankind'. The metaphorical 'demigod' or 'ideal man within the breast' of edition 6 is given a literal interpretation in another late passage added to that edition, where Smith wrote of ***'the approbation of the impartial spectator, and of the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast'*** (VI.i.II.). The man within is 'ideal' because he seeks to be praiseworthy more than to be actually praised by 'the man without'. The judgement of conscience is superior to that of actual spectators simply because the agent can know better than bystanders what he has done or not done, and what was his motive for acting as he did. He is 'well informed' but he is not omniscient. His superior knowledge is a matter of common experience. (95; italics and boldface added)

Elsewhere in TMS Smith speaks of "the man without" (e.g., TMS 131.32) to refer to how the stylized ordinary human spectator, possessing only a bystander's knowledge, would assess the conduct of some person. "The man without" could refer, for example, to an ordinary spectator named Rick. In the above passage Raphael quotes Smith speaking of "the man without."

With such context in place, a few comments regarding Raphael (1975)'s reference to 215.11 are warranted. Most importantly, Raphael wrongly conflates the "impartial spectator" in 215.11 with "the man without." It is true one meaning of "impartial spectator" could be "the man without." But Raphael only quotes a small snippet of 215.11, and the broader quote (as explained earlier in our paper)

makes clear that the "impartial spectator" of 215.11 refers to something far beyond the capabilities of an ordinary human spectator. And furthermore, 215.11 makes clear that the "impartial spectator" is superior to "the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast." Hence, it simply doesn't make sense to interpret, as Raphael appears to do, Smith's reference to the "impartial spectator" in 215.11 with the imperfect, humanly banal "man without" that Smith speaks of elsewhere in TMS. Raphael omits the sentences before and after the part he quotes from TMS 215.11 that help shed light on the meaning of "impartial spectator." Hence in both Raphael (1975) and Raphael (2007), Raphael makes about the same error in interpreting TMS 215.11.

## D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie

Raphael and Macfie were the co-editors of the Glasgow edition of TMS.[17] In the introduction, Raphael and Macfie (1976) express their agreement with Raphael (1975), writing that "According to Smith, conscience is a product of social relationship. Our first moral sentiments are concerned with the actions of other people" (15). They posit that Smith's "imagined impartial spectator" is "more objective… than actual spectators" merely because "Imagination can conjure up a spectator free from those limitations, just as it can enable us to reach objective judgements of perception" (16). Raphael and Macfie surmise that Smith's impartial spectator was inspired by Stoicism (7).

Raphael and Macfie (1976, 9) quote TMS 215.11, but their quotation ends immediately before the following words: "and of the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast." Raphael and Macfie hence omit the critical words in which Smith clearly distinguishes between the impartial spectator and its representative ("the man within the breast"). Raphael and Macfie made the conscious decision to quote 58 words from this passage—they clearly recognize its heft—but gloss over its most substantial part. In toto, Raphael and Macfie do not envision a God/Joy interpretation of Smith's impartial spectator.

## Eric Schliesser

Schliesser (2017) describes the impartial spectator accordingly:

> In general, the impartial spectator just is the internalized judgment of a properly impartial, properly indifferent (but not unfeeling), properly distant, well-informed person whom we imagine within us and who

[17] This variorum edition of TMS (used in this paper), first published by Oxford University Press and now by Liberty Fund, is widely considered the standard scholarly edition of TMS.

> then engages 'us' in the sympathetic process by way of counterfactual reasoning. (142)

Schliesser criticizes Rawls and Firth's ideal observer theories: "Smith's impartial spectator only shares with Firth's Ideal Observer the quality of disinterest" (136–7). Schliesser elsewhere argues that Smith's discussion of an "archetype of a perfection" and a "divine artist" may simply be a way of instrumentalizing the divine for pedagogical purposes rather than firmly asserting theism (144). Such is surely a possibility in Smith, but Schliesser does not see how the "divine artist" might also be for Smith the "impartial spectator." Schliesser (2017) never cites TMS 215.11.

## Craig Smith

Craig Smith (2016) argues that Adam Smith began developing the concept of the impartial spectator in the second edition of TMS in response to criticism by Gilbert Elliot (325–6).[18] According to C. Smith, Adam Smith "has created a psychological mechanism in the impartial spectator" (326). C. Smith notes that "So strong is the influence of conscience, so thoroughly have we internalised the impartial spectator, that we accept it as the final court of appeal on moral matters" (327). The impartial spectator hence amounts to a psychological instrument at work in the human conscience. It helps the conscience decide with a level of impartiality and judiciousness that would not be available otherwise. C. Smith differentiated Adam Smith's impartial spectator from "mere conventionalism" (328), but C. Smith (2016) not only fails to consider a higher dimension to the impartial spectator but rejects it. The impartial spectator is "the final court of appeal on moral matters."

Likewise, C. Smith (2016) makes his position even clearer:

> The impartial spectator has no God's-eye view, no knowledge superior to that of the individual himself. His judgments are not judgments of universal moral truth, but rather an imaginative self-reflection on the beliefs of a being, which are embedded in inter-subjectively generated social beliefs. (327–8)

The impartial spectator is "universal" only to the degree that "all normally functioning humans have" this psychological tool (328). It nowhere takes on an "ideal" form, is not mysterious or infallible, and does not "have complete knowledge of all relevant information" (328). C. Smith (2016) never cites TMS 215.11.

[18] Raphael and Macfie confirm the point: "There is substantial development in his theory in edition 2 of TMS, especially of his notion of the impartial spectator" (1976, 5).

## Jack Russell Weinstein

Weinstein addresses the impartial spectator in his dissertation (1997), summarizing his perspective:

> The impartial spectator is not meant to be an ideal, abstract, universal, omniscient person. Instead, the spectator is subject to all of the failings of the human perspective. The spectator is meant to illustrate the process by which moral actors attempt to remove themselves as much as possible from any situation and to be as aware as possible of whatever biases might impair their rational deliberation. The impartial spectator is an essential component of Smith's theory of conscience which allows individuals to hold opinions that differ from the community and encourages them to try to understand those people who also choose to hold opinions other than their own. Those who hold differing opinions, however, are not insulated from bad-feeling or from the possibility that they might be wrong. The impartial spectator represents human judgment and unlike the ideal-observer which Rawls associates with Smith, the impartial spectator is fallible. (176)

Weinstein also distinguishes the impartial spectator from religion in his dissertation (157 and 161). He argues that religion is likely for Smith a tool of human construction, useful for helping inculcate the general rules of morality (157, 161, 180). Weinstein asserts that Smith sees religious education as useful (even if he thinks religiosity is false) in that it carries with it an incomparably powerful authority for encouraging upright conduct, something approximating the impartial spectator. But nowhere does Weinstein indicate Smith might have seen the impartial spectator as God/Joy. He explicitly rejects both Firth and John Rawls' ideal observer interpretation of Smith (111, 176, 181). And nowhere in the dissertation does he cite TMS 215.11.

Weinstein (2001) also explicitly rejects Firth's ideal observer theory (50). He goes on to write:

> The impartial spectator is subject to the limitations of the agent who created it. It is informed by community standards and practices. Its creation is a product of a life-long history of sympathy and illustrates that a person's self-image is irrevocably intertwined with the judgements others have made in regards to the agent. It is a creation of the imagination, and is only as reliable as the person whose imagination it is. (50)

Weinstein's description of the impartial spectator fits the conscience, but his emphasis on its "limitations" is incompatible with a God/Joy reading. Weinstein later

argues that the impartial spectator is relativistic and non-divine: "Morality is a product of human reasoning. It is reliable without divine influence, and its standards may differ from situation to situation" (56). Furthermore, Smith's project aims "to divorce morality from religion, and relies upon the natural human capacities for a reliable ethics" (56). Weinstein's reading of Smith rejects a realm for "absolute, *Archimedean*, a priori standards in which to judge actions" (56). Nowhere in the volume does Weinstein cite TMS paragraph 215.11.

Weinstein (2016) zeroes in on the impartial spectator. There he largely reiterates the same position of Weinstein (1997) and Weinstein (2001). There he says: "The impartial spectator plays two roles in Smith's theory, one as an aspirational ideal and one as the anthropomorphized individual conscience" (2016, 353–354). But he never suggests God or Joy. Not once does he cite TMS 215.11.

## Some remarks about the flatteners

The purpose of the previous section was to prove that many Smith scholars flatten "impartial spectator," omitting or explicitly rejecting God/Joy. Our preceding discussion should dispel any thought of overlooking God/Joy. Nevertheless we here make some general remarks about what the flatteners say.

First, the flatteners persistently fail to distinguish the impartial spectator from the conscience. Hence the flatteners tend to see the highest sense of the impartial spectator as something akin to the conscience, rather than God/Joy. This error could have been corrected for had the flatteners not glossed over paragraph 215.11 in which Smith clearly distinguished the two.

Second, the flatteners repeatedly emphasize the limitations of the impartial spectator, with its rather humanlike characteristics in their mind. Their emphasis on humanlike limitation would be fitting if "impartial spectator" only rose to the conscience (or as ordinary human beings). But as paragraph 215.11 makes clear, the impartial spectator in the highest sense is not the conscience and possesses traits manifestly superior to those of ordinary human beings.

Third, sometimes the flatteners say the impartial spectator represents God but is not God. Here they seem to mean the conscience might be or relate to the individual's characterization of God's view. They are correct in saying as much but nonetheless still fail to identify the impartial spectator, in the supreme sense, as God/Joy.

Fourth, the flatteners often accuse Smith's impartial spectator of falling prey to moral relativism. But such an accusation does not stand if the impartial spectator is super-knowledgeable and universally benevolent (as we have posited). It would therefore be able to take into account pertinent history, traditions, expectations, and so on when judging an action yet nonetheless maintain a universal view over

all histories. The impartial spectator is hence immune to accusations of relativism because its standard is universal. God/Joy affords a dissolution of a foundationalist demarcation between 'absolutism' and 'relativism.'

Fifth, we want to acknowledge that some of the flatteners see a role for God/Joy in Smith's thought. But they often tend to acknowledge it in passing—as a sort of trite peculiarity, rather than as central to Smithian ethics. Where they go wrong is in overlooking the possibility that God/Joy is, for Smith, the highest sense of "impartial spectator." Hence there is a tendency amongst flatteners who acknowledge God/Joy to underplay its importance.

Finally, we encourage the reader to dwell for a moment on why the flatteners, scholars after all, so consistently gloss over paragraph 215.11.

## Why wasn't Smith clearer?

If our interpretation of the impartial spectator is correct it is fair to ask: *why wasn't Smith clearer that the impartial spectator in the highest sense is God/Joy*?

We offer the reader several plausible explanations. These explanations can work irrespective of how consciously Smith decided to be less clear than he might have been. Also, to some extent these explanations illuminate that the ideas themselves are complex and hence being clear or definite about them might just be exceptionally difficult.

First, Smith may have been engaging in what Arthur Melzer (2014) calls "pedagogical esotericism." Melzer notes that the drive for clarity in philosophical prose is a relatively recent phenomenon (207–210). There is a reason Plato wrote in dialogues, and philosophers, such as Smith, routinely hid their ideas behind obscure, often mysterious prose. Rather than simply spoon-feed, yesteryear's philosophers saw greater value in prompting their audience to read between the lines. For one, it prevents "mental passivity" (Melzer 2014, 214). As Thomas Aquinas put it, "The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds" (as quoted in Melzer 2014, 213). One who has had the experience of finally grasping some difficult concept after much mental strain knows that such experience is uniquely rewarding and edifying. Perhaps Smith was somewhat opaque about the impartial spectator because he wanted readers to develop a deep, reasoned conviction that it is God/Joy. Philosophical opaqueness is arguably more convincing than philosophical spoon-feeding.

A second possibility is that Smith wanted to appeal to both theists and non-theists. If he had been clearer, he may have felt the need to pick either God or Joy. If he had picked God, he would have alienated non-theists. Even if non-theists were a small minority in Smith's time, it is probable Smith understood the import of TMS and hoped it would have enduring influence past his death. Perhaps

he foresaw the growth of irreligiosity and wanted TMS to appeal in an age when theism had gone out of vogue.[19] On the other hand, if he had clearly picked Joy (even if just to convince non-theists), he would have alienated theists, of which the vast majority of his countrymen were. As Klein and Merrill (2021) remind us, "Like a politician, Smith used ambiguity, equivocation, dispersal, and inconsistency to keep from alienating certain quarters" (714). The ambiguity of the impartial spectator allows for the concept to appeal to both theists (indeed Swanson and Young prefer the God interpretation) and non-theists (indeed Klein depends on the Joy interpretation).

A third reason for Smith's ambiguity about the impartial spectator might be that he wanted to avoid being seen as deferring moral authority to self-righteous expressions of Christianity. Jerry Muller (1993) makes the case that Smith was opposed to the "austere morality" of strict Scottish Presbyterians and that, in fact, "many of Smith's friends were members of the Moderate clergy" (162).[20] We think it plausible that the ambiguity and mystique surrounding the impartial spectator may have served Smith's preference to not wade into the complicated web of 18th century Scottish Christianity and to avoid bestowing moral authority on certain Christians that Smith felt were self-righteous, obnoxious, or overly austere. Indeed, for theists generally, not just Christians—and indeed, beholderists generally—Smith may have felt that if he had provided a clear enunciation of "impartial spectator" as a universal and super-knowledgeable beholder, that might have bred a militancy and arrogance in those who felt confident in their own access and communication with The Beholder.

Fourth, perhaps Smith wants to accommodate a point of view that holds that "impartial spectator," even in some highest sense, is not apt as a descriptor of God. The problem is not in the word *impartial*, but rather, *spectator*. If one were to ask God whether he is "the impartial spectator," he might answer "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14) and add "Though I am a universal beholder, I am never a mere *spectator*." In every earthly spectacle, God is a player, not a mere spectator. On this point of view, there is both God *and* Joy, with Joy the highest meaning of "impartial spectator."

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[19] We thank Lotta Stern for this observation.

[20] Muller (1993) adds the following: "in order to win over members of the lower classes for whom the austere system of morality had a natural appeal, the clergy of the new sects favored this system over the liberal system [of morality] characteristic of the upper classes" (160). Perhaps Smith's ambiguity about the impartial spectator relates to concerns about the rise of such new sects.

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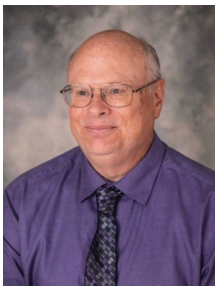

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