



Adam Smith’s Impartial Spectator is Neither Divine nor an Ideal Observer

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

I have been asked to respond to “The Impartial Spectator Rises,” an article by Daniel B. Klein, Nicholas R. Swanson, and Jeffrey T. Young (KSY), published in this journal (Klein et al. 2025). I am grateful and honored to have the opportunity to do so. I believe their study is useful for scholars because it puts into stark relief a core interpretive question at the heart of Smith’s *corpus*: to what extent is the impartial spectator an ideal observer?

The problem, summarized, is this: the impartial spectator is the personification of Adam Smith’s theory of conscience in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS). By nature, moral actors grow to become virtuous by confirming the propriety of their actions and sentiments through social affirmation. Taken alone, this would subordinate all individual action to others’ judgment and community norms. It would also inhibit progressive moral growth. To forestall this, Smith describes his actors as cultivating their ability to imagine an impartial spectator: a second identity whose judgment is distinct from, and supersedes, the community. This imagined impartial spectator is the final arbiter of the moral actor’s self-evaluation, and virtuous people rely on it to confirm, deny, or modify social judgment.

Smith describes his moral psychology by intertwining two different frameworks of understanding. The first is a naturalism that seeks to explore individual and collective action through a Newtonian lens. Hume famously called this project

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“the science of man” (Hume 1739–40, 3–6).² The second involves theologically-coded language that grounds the impartial spectator’s judgment in God, whom Smith refers to in a variety of ways including “the Deity,” “the Author of Nature,” and “the man within the breast.” These frameworks are compatible from both a theistic and deistic point of view, but they are not compatible within naturalism.

The questions at hand, and the interpretive puzzles that Smith scholars struggle with, are these: What is the metaphysical status of the impartial spectator? What are its epistemological limits? Is it an agent of God through which someone can access divine knowledge, or is it a human creation limited by the fallibilities of the imagination? These two questions frame KSY and my response, here.

Klein, Swanson, and Young describe three possibilities for understanding Smith’s normative moral psychology. First, following Roderick Firth, an impartial spectator may be an ideal observer with divine grounding whose normativity comes from an Archimedean point of view.³ Second, the impartial spectator may be “flattened” in that it is a product of an individual agent’s imagination and therefore limited by the imaginer’s fallible capacities.⁴ They correctly cite me as someone who defends this second interpretation. Third, the impartial spectator may be a “weak” compromise of the other two: an abstract figure with special epistemological access that is compatible with, but not necessarily bound to, a Christian god. KSY argue for this third understanding and provide a literature review of those who hold opposing positions.

I take no issue with their presentation of the landscape of Smith scholarship. Nor do I have any concerns regarding their summary of my work, although I’d like to express my mild surprise at their reaching back three decades to my doctoral dissertation (and my pleasant relief that such an immature work was coherent enough to be relevant) (Weinstein 1998).

Instead, my goal in this response is to articulate why I continue to disagree with the divinely-infused interpretations of the impartial spectator and reject their compromise position. I will present conceptual, biographical, terminological, exegetical, and political objections to their argument, in that order. I will not summa-

² Many of the philosophers I discuss use gendered language. I intentionally avoid this but retain their direct quotes as they are, including Smith’s original spelling. I also choose not to gender the impartial spectator, who can be manifested by anyone, nor do I gender God, who does not, in my understanding, have such qualities. This will lead, occasionally, to some grammatical awkwardness and I ask the reader to be understanding when these occur.

³ They quote Firth as follows: “...any 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” (Firth 1952).

⁴ The term “flattened” is theirs and seems to imply a variation on the default—that Smith’s theory has been flattened. I would use different terms to classify these theories, perhaps “fallibilists” or something similar.

size the two alternative positions in detail, presuming my readers' familiarity with the Smithian debate and context. KSY's literature review far surpasses what I could present here, and I encourage all interested scholars to become familiar with it.

Is Theism Consistent with Smith's Science of Man?

Many scholars argue that *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*' theistic rhetoric betrays a divine metaphysics that grounds Smith's philosophical system. This includes Firth's claim that the impartial spectator is an "ideal observer" who inhabits a non-perspectival stance, providing normative justification for agents' moral judgment through its objectivity. This reliance on supernatural epistemology faces what I shall call a *prima facie* objection.

It is beyond dispute that Smith's impartial spectator is a product of the imagination. Therefore, if it were divine, Smith would have to be a mystic.⁵ His moral agents would have direct access to God's ethical perspective through contemplation, and the imagination would be a vehicle for revelation. Independent of exegetical nuances, this alone suggests that the ideal observer interpretation must be mistaken. Smithian mysticism is a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Not even Thomas Aquinas's natural law theory suggests something so extreme. For him and the tradition he inspired, the moral rules of the universe are not revelation but are derivable through reason or scriptural interpretation. They are deduced rather than intuited (Bix 2004).⁶

A mystical impartial spectator would be intuitionist and therefore profoundly inconsistent with Smith's system. Smith is an empiricist, although not a blank-slate theorist like John Locke. Yes, he argues that all people are motivated by a range of conflicting principles within human nature, including both a love of mutual sympathy and the perpetual desire to better their own condition. However, these do not designate a theological metaphysics. They are explanatory and justificatory principles.

Smith does not see a strict division between nature and nurture (Weinstein 2013, 80–81). He systematizes human behavior using dispositions and tendencies that share more in common with Aristotle's functionalist virtue ethic than Calvin-

⁵ I reference here the second definition of the word "mystic" in the OED: "belief in the possibility of union with or absorption into God by means of contemplation and self-surrender; belief in or devotion to the spiritual apprehension of truths inaccessible to the intellect" (Oxford English Dictionary 2025).

⁶ While philosophers may disagree as to whether moral imperatives are propositions of a different type than the principles of natural science, according to the natural law tradition, such truths are still discovered and not revealed. By this I mean that there is debate as to whether "murder is wrong" and "matter is neither created nor destroyed" are different categories of propositions.

ist predestination or grace. A useful contemporary analogue to his approach is historian Ian Morris's assertion that history can be explained by attending to the interactions between biology, sociology, and geography (Morris 2010, 614). Morris suggests that humanity progresses because "like other animals, we are inquisitive but also greedy, lazy, and fearful" (Ibid., 598). This is the kind of observation that Smith would make; it does not call upon the supernatural.

Consider Smith's other mechanism that is frequently associated with an interventionist God: the invisible hand.⁷ In all three of its mentions, Smith uses the metaphor to mitigate human motivation in the face of ignorance, not as a gateway to knowledge, as with the impartial spectator. In his *History of Astronomy* (HA), "the invisible hand of Jupiter" is an example of primitive mythology explaining natural phenomena (HA III.2). In *The Wealth Nations* (WN), the invisible hand denotes economic actors' inability to manipulate the market for their or societies' benefit (WN IV.ii.9). In TMS, it describes a pattern of equal material distribution that results from nature's "deception" (IV.1.10).⁸

That progress for Smith is built on deception has received less attention among scholars than I think it deserves. According to Smith, the poor man's son falsely believes wealth will bring happiness, and he sacrifices family and virtue to achieve them. Broken, tired, and at the end of his life, he is devastated to learn that his life's ambition was corrupt. Power and riches are "enormous and operose machines contrived to produce a few trifling conveniencies to the body" (IV.1.8). They mislead individuals, yet without them, humanity would not advance:

It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. It is this which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth (IV.1.10).

Were the invisible hand divine manipulation as some suggest, its purpose would be to guide people away from what they think is best to the unintended consequences of a designer's unknown plan. The invisible hand directs social movement according to macro-patterns and manipulates collectives in the face of faulty individualistic judgment. It serves to overcome humanity's ignorance. This is consistent with TMS as a whole, in which gestures to the Deity seem to be references

⁷ I do not agree that the invisible hand is divine any more than I do the impartial spectator. I am only considering this interpretation for the sake of argument.

⁸ All Smith citations refer to TMS, unless otherwise indicated.

to design, not identifiable and nameable behaviors.⁹

As an illustration of this, consider Smith's eight references to the "author of nature." Seven of them describe capacities that are part of the human condition, not specific actions: the human preference for punishments that enforce social rules (III.1.4.10), the purpose of irregularity of sentiment (2.iii.intro.6), human approval of just punishment (II.3.iii.3), the natural respect people have for the judgment of others (III.3.31), the capacity for happiness in "mankind, as well as of all rational creatures" (III.5.7), the ability to live in accordance to the principles of nature (VI.ii.1.16), and virtue as "the surest and readiest means of obtaining both safety and advantage" (VII.2.2.13). The eighth, the outlier, has Smith using the phrase "author of nature" to refer, not to people, but to God's "scheme" to "establish...the happiness and perfection of the world" (III.5.7). This is also about design, not individuality.

Returning to our main question, an ideal observer theory suggests that the impartial spectator's judgment would be the sole moment during which an interventionist God provides individuals knowledge, a significant departure from the architectural references of the invisible hand and the author of nature. It would be anachronistic. It would found Smith's ethics on theological commitments fundamentally foreign to his political, economic, scientific, and social theories. Such a *deus ex machina* would lead to, at best, a massive new Adam Smith Problem, and at worst, a complete violation of the Newtonian Enlightenment method that Smith himself actively commits to.¹⁰

Was Smith a believing Christian?

Klein, Swanson, and Young do not claim divine intervention per se. In the compromise interpretation they call "beholderism," they suggest a dual interpretive method that allows Smith's reader to substitute "Joy" for God, so as to decouple supernatural judgment from denominational theology. They explain that Joy should be understood "as a metaphorical or allegorical being. Joy is 'God-light' in that, for instance, she is not necessarily the creator of the universe" (Klein et al. 2025, 297). They indicate that Joy exists to make spaces for the commonplace belief that Enlightenment philosophers were deists rather than theists.

According to KSY, God has six facets: superior knowledge, benevolence, communication between God and the human being, divine providence, a humanity

⁹ I argue elsewhere that "the invisible hand is not in itself an argument. It does no philosophical 'work.' It is instead a rhetorical device Smith uses to emphasize claims of varying importance" (Weinstein 2013, 233).

¹⁰ Peter Minowitz argues that the presence of God in TMS results in yet another "Adam Smith Problem" given God's presence in TMS and absence in WN. I do not endorse this claim, but it is certainly related to my comments here (Minowitz 1993).

made in God's image, and eternal deliverance and justice (Klein et al. 2025, 298). Joy shares these facets but to a much lesser extent. Joy is still, nevertheless, "well-beyond-human, but not necessarily to the same extent we associate with God" (Ibid., 299).

I do not see this difference as meaningful for two reasons. The first, which they acknowledge, is that both have capacities beyond human imaginations (although they qualify this by admitting that ascribing some of these facets to Joy is "tricky"). As such, the objections "flatteners" have with a theistic interpretation will apply to Joy as well.

Klein, Swanson, and Young recognize this, explaining that "whatever the differences between God and Joy, those differences do not matter to what follows. It's all beholderism to us" (Klein et al. 2025, 300). As such, the main issue for me remains whether Smith believed, and whether it is coherent to suggest, that an actor can conjure up superhuman capacities at all.

The second reason I disregard the distinction between Joy and God is that Joy amounts to smuggling in a Christian god under a different name. A supernatural creature, even an allegorical one, that has even some measure of communicative ability with humans, is omnibenevolent, has control over divine providence, participates in divine Justice, and stands outside of time, is for all intents and purposes a Christian God. At minimum, it is a description of a genus of gods that would include Christianity's.¹¹ I also don't know what having lesser control over divine providence or a more truncated role in divine justice can mean. These are non-corporeal, non-quantifiable, non-human traits. One would need a very complex and sophisticated theology to explicate a spectrum of divinity, as KSY suggest.¹²

Klein, Swanson, and Young reference these traits because they "comport with Christianity, the dominant religion of Smith's age" (Klein et al. 2025, 299), and they enumerate Smith's reference to it throughout the paper. While they recognize that Smith's theology is "contested [and] unknown" they also claim that TMS's religious framework "did make it clear" and "couldn't be plainer" (Ibid., 298–299). This all seems like sleight of hand.

I will put aside the fact that KSY are too extreme in their initial description—Christianity was only the dominant religion of Smith's region, not his age. Islam dominated wide swaths of the world in the eighteenth century, as did Hinduism and Buddhism. My objection is that there is indeed significant biographical evidence that Smith himself did not identify personally, intellectually, or ritualistically with Christianity of any stripe, particularly not the Scottish Presbyterian Kirk. The

¹¹ There is a theological debate to be had as to whether this six-faceted God would qualify as a Muslim God, but this is beyond my capabilities and certainly beyond the scope of this paper.

¹² Hinduism might offer something along these lines but it required almost five millennia's worth of mythology to describe such complexity.

evidence for his non-belief far outweighs the evidence for any meaningful religious observance.

Ian Ross recounts that, while Smith was raised in a religious home and benefitted from it intellectually, he resisted the expectations and pressures to become a minister, and “rebelled” against “orthodoxy” on multiple occasions (Ross 2010, 28). Nicholas Phillipson reports that Smith was said to “become a disciple of Voltaire’s in matters of religion” at Oxford (Phillipson 2010, 58). He describes lifelong “suspicion about [Smith’s] religious beliefs” (Ibid., 84). He also shows that the clergy of Glasgow were aware of his “infidelity” toward their beliefs, citing Boswell’s reference to Smith as “an infidel in a bag-wig” (Ibid., 281). Phillipson even documents a published comment from his contemporary addressed to Smith directly, “o venerable, amiable, and worthy man, why was you not a Christian?” (Ibid., 281)

This is fairly well-trodden ground, as are the facts that Jesus’s name appears only once in Smith’s corpus, during a description of where the clergy and Pope claimed to derive their authority (LJB 187), and that Christianity itself is mostly found in Smith’s historical passages, not philosophically substantive argument. As such, linking the claim of divine presence in Smith’s impartial spectator to Smith’s immersion in a Christian culture is circumstantial at best.

What is less well-known is Gavin Kennedy’s powerful account of the social pressures Smith faced to present himself as a believer, and the textual changes in TMS that he made after his mother died.¹³ Kennedy calls the alterations in the sixth edition “qualifying expressions and deliberate obfuscations, or omissions” (Kennedy 2011, 394). He also references an exchange between two of Smith’s contemporaries, in which William Robertson suggests to James Hutton that Hutton ought to soften his theological critiques to forestall attack from the Kirk, specifically directing him to “consult our friend Mr. Smith and on following his advice you will be safe” (Kennedy 2011, 390).

Most relevant to our discussion is Kennedy’s enumeration of the instances in which the final edition of TMS weakens the impartial spectator’s divine associations specifically. Kennedy summarizes Smith’s changes by citing a particular passage in TMS, arguing that it is Smith’s own view: “Man has, in this manner, been rendered the immediate judge of mankind” who must appeal to “a much higher tribunal, to the tribunal of their own consciences” (III.2.32; Kennedy 2011, 396–97). In this formulation, spectators have knee-jerk judgments they must critically reflect on by appealing to their own moral commitments, not a divine presence.

Kennedy lists the changes in detail:

The sixth edition drops the pompous theological prose of the earlier editions: “throne of eternal justice,” “the grandeur and importance of so mighty an ob-

¹³ Klein, Swanson, and Young cite Kennedy’s 2005 book, but not the relevant 2011 article (Kennedy 2011).

ject,” “fuller revelation of the intentions of providence,” “to tremble and exult as they imagine that they have either merited his [God’s] censure or deserved his applause.” Our “established” judgments are governed according to “certain principles of Nature,” which, “sensible to us, and to every impartial spectator,” are deserving of “merited applause” or “shame” from “condemnation.” With the impartial spectator secularized, so to speak, Smith describes the society we grow up in as the “mirror” by which we learn to judge ourselves (TMS III.1.3, pp. 110–111), because while “we are all very forward to observe” how others affect us, “we soon learn, that other people are equally frank” about ourselves (TMS III.1.5, p. 112)” (Kennedy 2011, 397).

Notice Kennedy’s claim that Smith “secularized” the impartial spectator in his final edition.

Following Kennedy then, there is significant evidence to suggest that Smith’s theological comments are strategic political rhetoric, not confessions of belief. In the end, it is unlikely that Smith’s point of view comported with Christianity after all. Instead, he was probably “hedging” as Willie Henderson would say (Henderson 2004). Smith was, in the words of Emma Rothschild, an “extraordinarily cautious and circumspect writer”(Rothschild 2001, 221).

What Does Impartiality Mean?

Klein, Swanson, and Young cast their lot with Firth’s interpretation of the impartial spectator as an ideal observer, even as they seek to soften its connection to God through Joy. They see judgment representing or deriving from, “a universal beholder characterized by superhuman knowledge and universal benevolence” (Klein et al. 2025, 297).

There is no reason to presuppose that this is what impartiality meant for Smith or that it must mean so for anyone else. I am impartial with my students when I treat them similarly despite their idiosyncrasies or biography; there is no connection to superior knowledge there. I am also impartial if I choose amongst them by rolling dice, or if I redact their names and grade their papers anonymously. These are instances of process-based impartialities that differ from, for example, judicial impartiality, parental impartiality, bureaucratic impartiality, and the scientific impartiality of the experimental method.

Impartiality may also indicate judgment about activities that one does one not have a personal stake in, such as in the case of umpires and fiduciaries. Amartya Sen argues that it is this freedom from bias that Smith had in mind. He refers to it as “open impartiality” because it is “fair” and “disinterested,” as if spectators were judging from outside a particular society (Sen 2011, 124–26). He even argues that Smith’s particular approach “has some claim to being the pioneering idea in

the enterprise of interpreting impartiality and formulating the demands of fairness which so engaged the world of the European Enlightenment” (Ibid., 124).

There is, in short, no reason to privilege one definition of impartiality before interpreting Smith, particularly a notion that presupposes superhuman capacities. Any account of Smith’s moral psychology should recognize that a reliable impartial spectator depends on an imagination formed by familiarity and education.

Many scholars have documented the tension between proximity and sympathy, using phrases such as “circles of sympathy,” “the familiarity principle,” and “spheres of intimacy” (See: Forman-Barzilai 2010; Griswold 1998; Otteson 2002). In my own work, I rely upon the term proximity (Weinstein 2006; 2013). I have also spent the lion’s share of my career documenting Smith’s philosophy of education, and the ways in which acculturation and schooling cultivate or inhibit the sympathy that lies at the core of human normative judgment (Weinstein 2006; 2007; 2015a; 2019a). I do not wish to rehearse these lengthy studies here, other than to remark that sympathy can both interfere with impartiality and motivate agents to identify when to be impartial. I also argue that a paradigmatic case of building sympathy towards impartiality is found in Smith’s attempts to persuade hardened agents to abolish slavery (Weinstein 2019b; 2006; forthcomingb).

The point here is that if the impartial spectator had access to divine knowledge, education would be of questionable use, despite its centrality in Smith’s moral psychology. Does one gain supernatural knowledge by reading Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, or, as Smith cites, Voltaire’s *Mahomet* (TMS III.6.13)? This is unlikely. A divinely motivated agent would have to focus inward rather than outward to enable Klein, Swanson, and Young’s depiction of Smith’s “man within the breast.”

To illustrate this, consider Smith’s comments during his discussion of stoicism. Here he argues that philosophical education, not divine intuition, can move people towards impartiality:

The reasonings of philosophy, it may be said, though they may confound and perplex the understanding, can never break down the necessary connection which Nature has established between causes and their effects. The causes which naturally excite our desires and aversions, our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, would no doubt, notwithstanding all the reasonings of Stoicism, produce upon each individual, according to the degree of his actual sensibility, their proper and necessary effects. The judgments of the man within the breast, however, might be a good deal affected by those reasonings, and that great inmate might be taught by them to attempt to overawe all our private, partial, and selfish affections into a more or less perfect tranquillity. To direct the judgments of this inmate is the great purpose of all systems of morality. That the Stoical philosophy had very great influence upon the character and conduct of its followers, cannot be doubted; and that though it might sometimes incite them to unneces-

sary violence, its general tendency was to animate them to actions of the most heroic magnanimity and most extensive benevolence (VII.ii.1.47).

Summarized, Smith is explaining that despite Hume casting doubt on an empiricist's ability to conclusively demonstrate cause and effect, it is still the case that Stoicism might be able to persuade individuals to overcome their own biased passions. This is what all moral philosophy is designed to do, according to Smith, and "the man within the breast," can, in fact, be reasoned with.

What Does "The Man Within the Breast" Mean?

As discussed, Klein, Swanson, and Young claim that they do not intend to argue that Smith was a theist. Instead, they aim only "to prove the weaker claim that Smith was a beholderist." There are no Oxford English Dictionary entries for "beholderism" or "beholderist," and searches for the term on Google Scholar, Google Books. My university databases provide no English language references to it, other than the article at hand and Klein's 2025 book *The Spirit of Smithian Laws*, which shares many of the same arguments as their article (Klein 2025).

I will confess, just as I do not fully grasp the God/Joy distinction, I am not entirely clear on the meaning of beholderism—they do not offer a succinct definition. As I understand it, the term refers to the ability of a spectator to combine "superhuman knowledge and universal benevolence" with a separate capacity that resolves the tension between an actor's specific actions and "the whole" of creation. The term "behold" seems intended to replace "spectating" or "viewing," evoking the monumental and exclusive nature of this epistemological capability. If I may risk speculating, my sense is that to behold is akin to grasping the sublime, and therefore necessitated a more exalted ethos, which the term "beholding" provides.

If I am correct, then the issue at hand is whether the ideal spectator transcends the actual spectator who imagines it, as I noted earlier. This would be more than the creation being an exemplar of a whole being larger than the sum of its parts.¹⁴ Instead, according to beholderism, Smith regards the impartial spectator as being able to access a God's/Joy's point of view. This interpretation indicates there is something special and unique in its creation that transcends human limitations. I have already used the term Archimedean to describe this stance, but it is my own term, not theirs.

My *prima facie* objection once again comes to mind. If this were what Smith had in mind, it would imply a complex and robust metaphysics that Smith never

¹⁴ In other words, a beholderist impartial spectator can't be described by comparing, for example, the collective superiority of The Beatles to the individual mediocrity of John, Paul, George, and Ringo.

provides. More than Joy, which I was referring to above, beholderism's glimpse of the whole surpasses Christian epistemological structures and presents a revelation closer to Hindu or Buddhist enlightenment. Beholderist impartial spectators are not communing with God as Abraham or Moses did. Imaginers seem able to access a form of knowing that transcends the legal reportage of *Leviticus* or the Gospels, evoking an interconnectedness more similar to that which transformed Prince Sidhartha.

As previously mentioned, such an impartial spectator would be powerfully anachronistic in Smith's system, but disregarding that, I fail to see how this kind of understanding allows for the context-specific moral judgments required of spectators. Under Buddhist theology, specifically, the individual perspective is an illusion, not a point of view to be evaluated normatively, so beholderism cannot be analogous to this. Under Judaism, YHWH ceases to intercede and remains distinct from the creation, post-Job (cf. Miles 1995). This would also preclude access to a universal perspective that affirms an individual's actions, and therefore beholderism cannot be compatible with a Jewish God.

With these contrasting traditions in mind, I find it unclear how one might adopt this universal point of view without invoking the miraculous. Were that Smith's intention, we can reliably assume that his good friend David Hume would have pounced accordingly. Hume's definition of a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature" is apt here (Hume 1999, 173). Smith's project is to discover the natural principles that govern individuals and societies; beholderism requires more than that. It is simply unsupported by Smith's texts.

The impartial spectator is fallible in the way that beholderism disallows. This is a position I have long held, and Klein, Swanson, and Young cite both my dissertation and a more recent article from this journal to summarize it (Weinstein 1998; 2016). They do not reference my 2013 book, *Adam Smith's Pluralism*, which I have already relied upon in this article and in which I address the issue of fallibility directly.

Regarding the imperfections of the imagined knowledge, I explain:

For Smith, agents are neither perfect nor purely objective judges. The impartial spectator is an ideal toward which an agent may strive (TMS VI.iii.27), but not one that Smith ever expects him or her to achieve. Smith continually reminds readers of the imperfection in the human condition (TMS I.i.5.8, II.i.5.9, II.i.5.10, II.3.iii.3). He resists any direct comparison of persons to perfection (TMS I.i.5.9, III.6.12, VI.iii.27) or to "the Deity" (TMS VII.ii.3.2, VII.ii.3.18). He insists that sympathy is itself imperfect (TMS I.i.1.9, I.iii.2.9) and that moral judgment is fallible (TMS III.6.12, VII.4.28). He is also well aware of the impact our emotions have on the process of judgment (TMS I.i.5.8, III.4.12). We judge our conduct both before and after we act (TMS III.4.2).

A sentiment-based moral system must acknowledge that ephemeral and sometimes unreliable emotions will significantly impact our decision-making process; much of TMS is geared toward moderating their effect....at TMS III.4.12, we see Smith's actors struggling to subordinate their desires to their duty, a struggle heightened in times of extreme passion. According to Smith, actions are kept in check by duty, community opinion, and the imagined impartial spectator... (Weinstein 2013, 110–11).

My contention is that, because the impartial spectator is imagined by a real person, it is bound by their human limitations. It is inherently imperfect, and cannot access a holistic view of the universe because no human being can conceive of this, let alone access it. This portrayal of the impartial spectator's knowledge-as-bounded parallels Smith's theory of history. There, he postulates an ideal natural history (or historiography) constructed by theorists to use as a benchmark for evaluating and learning from actual history (Weinstein 2013, chap. 10). This is indicative of Smith's entire corpus being thematically reliant upon the tension between "the ideal and the actual" (Ibid., 143, 159, 166, 218, 232, 237, 258). It is also consistent with Smith's conviction, "that which divides us also unites us" (Ibid., 25, 85). The creation of the impartial spectator illustrates both well.

Klein, Swanson, and Young's attack on the fallibilist argument hinges on their centering of Smith's phrase "the man within the breast." They cite several passages that they interpret as illustrating supererogatory epistemological capacities, including what they refer to as a "very special paragraph" that holds particular power for them, TMS' VI.i.II (Klein et al. 2025, 305). What did Smith mean by the term?

The precise phrasing, "the man within the breast," appears to be Smith's alone; I found no earlier usage. He uses it seventeen times in TMS and nowhere else. It is almost always found within two textual groupings. The first is a three-chapter sequence on conscience, self-deception, and obedience to the rules of morality: III.2.32, 34; III.3.25, 26, 28, 29, 38; III.4.2, 5. The second is found within a discussion of prudence: VII.ii.1.34, 44, 45, 47. Of the two exceptions, VI.i.11 is part of a different discussion of prudence and VI.ii.1.21 is a component of Smith's claim that individuals are responsible for their own care.

This already tells a story. For Smith, the impartial spectator is a vehicle of self-reflection. As he puts it,

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 (III.1.6).

The term "as it were" is of particular importance and is placed throughout TMS to indicate when a description should not be taken literally. In the passage

above, Smith is telling us that we don't actually split into two—a strike against the beholderist interpretation—and in this next passage, Smith's remarks are along the same lines. He doesn't expect spectators to actually become others:

But as we put ourselves in his situation, as we enter, as it were, into his body, and in our imaginations, in some measure, animate anew the deformed and mangled carcass of the slain, when we bring home in this manner his case to our own bosoms, we feel upon this, as upon many other occasions, an emotion which the person principally concerned is incapable of feeling, and which yet we feel by an illusive sympathy with him (II.1.3.1).

Recalling Sen's open impartiality, Smith uses "as it were" to acknowledge the inability of someone to truly leave their own circumstances behind:

We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us (III.1.3).

He also relies upon it to describe a victim of injustice's sense that society banished them, despite their not actually being exiled:

The thought of this perpetually haunts him, and fills him with terror and amazement. He dares no longer look society in the face, but imagines himself as it were rejected, and thrown out from the affections of all mankind. He cannot hope for the consolation of sympathy in this his greatest and most dreadful distress (II.ii.2.3).

There are other instances of Smith's using the phrase "as it were," but these selections are sufficient to illustrate what they have in common: Smith regards the human experience as fundamentally physical, and rejects any notion that a person can transcend their discreteness to bridge multiple consciousnesses.

Smith is a materialist and not an idealist. As he puts it:

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, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, 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.1.3.10).

Given these limitations, I fail to see where Smith leaves room for beholderism. To continue the story Smith presents by grouping together his references to the man within the breast: TMS also reports that individuals are burdened with the responsibility of being honest, prudent, self-aware, and balancing their inner voice with the rules of society. These requirements are not supererogatory; Smith

always presents a caveat. The rules they follow must be “regarded as” the laws of the deity, although they are not certain to be so (III.v). I will return to this below. The impartial spectator can be “real or imaginary” (VII.ii.x.43). Smith calls the conscience the “supposed” impartial spectator (III.2.32). He references a “weakness and despondency of the mind” affected by “perturbation and astonishment of the man within the breast” that can only be mitigated by the “humble hope” of an afterlife (III.2.34). It is, again, an “ideal,” and not an actual impartial spectator (or man within the breast) that Smith references, a specific terminological qualification he uses four times, at III.1.3.26, 29, 38 and III.4.5.

This is not the language of “superhuman knowledge and universal benevolence.” Consider this passage:

That consolation may be drawn, not only from the complete approbation of the man within the breast, but, if possible, from a still nobler and more generous principle, from a firm reliance upon, and a reverential submission to, that benevolent wisdom which directs all the events of human life, and which, we may be assured, would never have suffered those misfortunes to happen, had they not been indispensably necessary for the good of the whole (VII.ii.1.43).

Here, Smith is contrasting the man within the breast with the “still nobler and more generous principle,...that benevolent wisdom which directs all the events of human life” (VII.ii.x.43). In other words, the impartial spectator is less than an imagined directing deity.

Smith uses similar wording to discuss another imperfection: that individuals must, from time to time, sacrifice their own good for the general welfare, especially soldiers. As we saw above, Smith invokes the language of God when he finds individual judgment lacking. This occurs here as well, as Smith explains that the soldier must trust in God, not people, and that they rightly place themselves at risk for reasons they cannot understand:

No conductor of an army can deserve more unlimited trust, more ardent and zealous affection, than the great Conductor of the universe. In the greatest public as well as private disasters, a wise man ought to consider that he himself, his friends and countrymen, have only been ordered upon the forlorn station of the universe; that had it not been necessary for the good of the whole, they would not have been so ordered; and that it is their duty, not only with humble resignation to submit to this allotment, but to endeavour to embrace it with alacrity and joy. A wise man should surely be capable of doing what a good soldier holds himself at all times in readiness to do (VI.ii.3.4).

This leaves VI.i.11, the “very special” paragraph that Klein, Swanson, and Young emphasize. They put so much stock in this paragraph that they quote it in full, even bolding the text of the clauses that reference the man within the breast.

As indicated above, that paragraph is part of a discussion of prudence. Its chapter begins by reporting that nature has designed human beings to learn their bodily needs before attending to outward considerations. This involves developing control of one's appetites which, as we will soon see, is essential for crafting character.

People want to become "the proper objects of...respect, of deserving and obtaining...credit and rank among our equals" (VI.1.3). This can only be achieved by depending entirely on the "character and conduct, or upon the confidence, esteem, and good-will" of those whom we live with (VI.i.4). Notice the tension in people wanting to become "proper" and "deserving" objects of respect while only learning of their success through the approval of others. This disconnect makes Smith's account of prudence susceptible to Aristotle's criticism of honor. For Aristotle, honor signifies nothing about the moral worth of the person being honored; it only informs about those who confer the honor upon the honoree (Aristotle 1999, lines 1095b22–26). To put this in contemporary terms, being popular is not the same as being good.

Prudence is the virtue individuals cultivate to achieve this social approval. It involves "the care of the health, of the fortune, of the rank and reputation of the individual, the objects upon which his comfort and happiness in this life are supposed principally to depend" (VI.1.5). Its first goal is security since, as Smith argues, there is more suffering in losing status than there is in the effort to gain it (VI.1.6).

Smith then offers a laundry list of characteristics that describe the prudent character's behavior. Prudent people: do not expose themselves to excessive risks; learn actual skills and are industrious in their profession; seek to truly understand what they claim to know, not simply profess to; are never imposters who rely on "cunning devices"; are never ostentatious and always participate in "simple and modest" conversation; rely on their own abilities, not the tricks of networking; are sincere without being too frank and open; welcoming of friendship without being overly social—they rarely frequent social events; hate the idea of being dishonest, petulant, or rude; and are ultimately, "in his conduct and conversation,... an exact observer of decency, and respects with an almost religious scrupulosity, [of] all the established decorums and ceremonials of society" (VI.i.10, see also: Weinstein 2015b).

It is hard to know whether Smith is being descriptive or prescriptive here. He presents his list as normative, but it is easily read as purely strategic. These attributes are clearly culture-bound, and are included among what Dierdre McClosky calls "bourgeois virtues" (McCloskey 2006). They anticipate Weber's "protestant ethic" in some ways, although I argue elsewhere that Smith's account of work and labor is not Weberian (Weinstein forthcominga). This list only intensifies the Aristotelian

concern that prudence is simply the mechanism through which someone gains social approval without attending to intrinsic moral value.

This is the context of the passage Klein, Swanson, and Young highlight. It reads in full (with the same bolded clauses):

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 their future situation affected them nearly in the same manner in which they affect him (VI.i.II).

On the one hand, I can see why Klein, Swanson, and Young emphasize this selection. Smith clearly writes as if the impartial spectator is capable of its own emotion; this is peak personification of the abstract spectator. On the other hand, there is nothing here that suggests supernatural capacities, nor is there any text that is not easily interpreted metaphorically. I will return to this shortly.

In the above paragraph, Smith begins with the admission that the activities prudence requires are tiring, and that the prudent person's behavior is motivated by future "expectations." Notice the qualification that the prudent person anticipates success but isn't guaranteed it. The moral actor must therefore seek inspiration and support of an ever-present impartial spectator who never tires, does not wear out, and recognizes the actor's suffering, pains which do not affect the impartial spectator. This moves the impartial spectator to "approve, and even applaud, that proper exertion of self-command" which motivates the actor.

This passage is clearly an important instance of Smith using the impartial spectator as an independent moral standard. Nevertheless, it does not offer any more clarity as to the metaphysical status of the imagined companion. There is nothing unique or distinct about it. For example, while Smith claims that the man within the breast is the "representative" of the impartial spectator, he offers no explication as to what the term is supposed to mean.

Smith uses "representative" one other time in previous editions of TMS. Had

it remained in the text for the final edition, it would have appeared at III.2.31.¹⁵ That deleted passage is replete with divine language, although it suffers from the same interpretive ambiguity as the passage above. Smith's deletion of it is further evidence for Kennedy's observation that the final edition "secularizes" the impartial spectator, and that Smith intentionally minimized the book's religiosity.

The relevant sentence in the deleted passage reads:

This inmate of the breast, this abstract man, the representative of mankind, [mankind draft] and substitute of the Deity, whom nature [Nature draft 4] has constituted [has appointed draft] the supreme judge [supreme arbiter draft] of all their actions, [actions draft] is seldom [seldome draft] appealed to by them (Smith 1982a, 130).

Smith is claiming that imprudent people do not look towards the inmate of the breast for moral confirmation—presumably, this is their downfall—but this observation is buried under many technicalities. For example, does "substitute" mean the Deity does not exist or that the "abstract man" is simply a proxy? We don't know. We do know that there is nothing inherently supernatural about Smith's description. If we take Smith at his word, and the abstract man is the substitute for the Deity, then said Deity need not exist. We might also say that someone adopted a dog as a substitute for the child they never had. In this instance, the child also does not exist. Placeholders are often symbolic and the passage references perfectly mundane metaphors that can easily be taken for granted. Frankly, all of Smith's divine references fall into categories Lakoff and Johnson refer to as ontological, container, and personification metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 24–35).

To elaborate: one of the things that I have learned as a father is that my daughter is "always with me" even when she is not, and that I frequently imagine her judgment when I strive for her approval. She is the most important person in my life, even more important to me than I am to myself, a conviction that most parents feel. I regard her as a profoundly moral person, and I would be distraught if I did something she condemned. She is my moral guidepost. She gives me energy. I cannot count the number of times I have used her as a motivation to overcome my own physical and existential exhaustion. When I conjure her image—when I really confront my love for and trust in her—I most certainly feel it in my breast. This is not unlike countless descriptions of feeling like there's a pit in your stomach or exclaiming that your heart hurts.

One could easily substitute my daughter for Smith's man within the breast in the above passage. In fact, in my book *Israel, Palestine, and the Trolley Problem* (2024), I use language analogous to Smith's to make a similar point. In the introduction,

¹⁵ Smith's use of the term in the rest of his corpus is consistent with its everyday meaning as a political representative.

lamenting how horrendous the political realities are, I wrote: “I am heartbroken at my own conclusions, but I needed to put them out there anyway, particularly because, to steal a famous slogan from a kosher hot-dog company, ‘I answer to a higher authority.’ I wrote this essay so that I could look my eighteen-year-old daughter, Adina, in the eye” (Weinstein 2024, x).

No one could possibly interpret this introductory remark as suggesting that when I imagine my daughter as an impartial judge of my morality, I am thinking her into existence. Nor does it require that my idealized romanticized parental version of my child be accurate. She will, I am sure, turn out to be just as flawed as the rest of us, and given her age, there is no doubt that she has had many failures and shortcomings that she has kept from me. Yes, my image of her is real in some meaningful sense, and based on something independent of me, but so is my image of Homer Simpson. Anselm and Descartes are wrong in suggesting that we could not conceive of a perfect God without one actually existing. There is no reason why an imaginer can’t postulate an impartial spectator who is perfect while failing to be able to create one. Klein, Swanson, and Young’s emphasis on VI.i.II adds nothing new to the argument. It is not the proverbial smoking gun.

It is important, I think, to step back and acknowledge that the disagreement about Smith’s divine language is just another instance of the interpretive problem that has always plagued religious texts: should one read scripture literally or metaphorically? I do not need to rehearse these well-known arguments, but I would like to mention a particular example from Maimonides, who specifically addresses imagery in the Hebrew Scriptures that portray God sitting on a throne. He instructs that this is impossible because God is incorporeal and cannot be supported by a physical object (Maimonides 1963, chap. 10). Keep in mind that Maimonides is often regarded as the greatest of all Jewish philosopher-theologians, and was a well-sought out leader in his time. He was absolutely intending for religious Jews to accept his interpretation. He could be metaphorical and still be observant.

The impartial spectator is also incorporeal, so how can it be “within” the breast any more than God can sit on a throne? Smith’s description can remain coherent only if it is a container metaphor. As such, if some of Smith’s language is to be taken literally and some metaphorically, Klein, Swanson, and Young would have to provide independent and defensible criteria as to which passages we should read in which way and why. Of course, they do not.

Smith was perfectly familiar with metaphors. He discusses them frequently in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. He even describes the aesthetic power of corporeal metaphors, telling his students that they must be used interestingly or they will fail:

Now it is evident that none of these metaphors can [can] have any beauty unless it be so adapted that it gives the due strength of expression to the object to be

described and at the same time does this in a more striking and interesting manner. When this is not the case they must either carry us to bombast on the one hand or into burlesque on the other (LRBL I,66).

I don't think any of us would claim that the man within the breast and its related imagery are not striking and interesting. They are still metaphors.

None of this is incidental, and I do not mean to suggest that Smith's use of metaphor is a compromise or to be lamented. It opened up a world of discovery for him. Much like Plato's dialogues can be understood as a bridge between the oral and written cultures of his historical lineage (Havelock 1982, vii), Smith is introducing the use of metaphor to allow for better multi-disciplinary contexts (allowing, of course, for the very different disciplinary structure of the eighteenth-century map of knowledge). Sergio Cremaschi explains it this way:

His achievement was shaped by a handful of metaphors that produced fresh ways of seeing as. The partially sceptical epistemology he had learned from his friend David Hume helped in a way, namely in making his mind soft enough. He knew too well that the economy could not really be made of motions and attractions, dams and rivers, vessels and fluids; for he knew too well that even Newton, the intellectual hero of his century, had not lifted the veil which hides the concealed mechanism of nature. The legacy of Hume's moderate scepticism left him free of dogmas. But he did not limit himself to describing the phenomena. Indeed, he looked at the phenomena through his preferred metaphors and made his successors see them in a different way (Cremaschi 2002, 109).

Cremaschi calls Smith's choices "blissful" and observes that they allowed Smith to "imagine counterintuitive connections among traditionally separated fields of phenomena and shape new hypotheses to be tested, while nothing in the 'observed' phenomena would have suggested such hypotheses" (Cremaschi 2002, 110).

All of this is meant to show that the phrase "the man within the breast" cannot do the exegetical work that Klein, Swanson, and Young rely upon. There are simply too many textual ambiguities and qualifications to claim that Smith postulated human beings who can light upon objective, independent, beholderist, or divinely-endorsed normative standards that come from an all-encompassing perspective. The impartial spectator will always be perspectival and never objective. This is the best any of us can do.

I therefore end this section by highlighting a passage that reads as if Smith himself anticipated our current conversation. Also cited by Sen in his account of open impartiality, it seems to clearly assert that a truly impartial stance is impossible. Taken in conjunction with our discussion of "as it were" and Smith's references to judging "my sight by your sight," this declaration of empirical limitations on the part of the imagined impartial spectator appears conclusive:

We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them (III.1.2).

Conclusion: Smith Tells Us Why He Used the Language of the Deity

I have reviewed Gavin Kennedy's evidence of the social and political pressure Scottish philosophers faced to use religious language. There is good reason to believe that Smith was rhetorically savvy enough to forestall backlash from the Kirk while simultaneously trying not to upset his mother. I have also discussed the philosophical liberation that accompanies Smith's use of metaphors. He could not have developed the system he did without relying on layered imagery. However, I would suggest that there is also something else happening, and it illustrates the overlap between philosophy and politics that permeates Smith's corpus.

I made passing reference to Smith's titling TMS chapter III.5 "Of the influence and authority of the general Rules of Morality and that they are justly regarded as the Laws of the Deity." The word "justly" complicates things, but Smith largely ignores it in the pages that follow and prioritizes "regarded as" instead.

In the previous chapter he explored the ease and dangers of self-deceit. In this one he asserts that "there is scarce any man...who by discipline, education, and example, may not be so impressed with a regard to general rules, as to act upon almost every occasion with tolerable decency, and through the whole of his life to avoid any considerable degree of blame" (III.5.1). The question Smith is concerned with is how to cultivate educated and law-abiding citizens. As he tells us elsewhere, "an instructed and intelligent people...are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one" (WN V.i.f.61).

TMS chapter III.5 is a discussion of the nature and limits of moral education, during which Smith observes that philosophy is too slow and too uncertain to provide reliable social control. Happiness and political stability are too important to wait for philosophical proof or capacity to reliably persuade people en masse. Politicians must therefore rely on the "terrors of religion" to "enforce the natural sense of duty" and to keep their population under control (III.5.4).

Smith's history shows that it has been perpetually necessary and expedient to mythologize social expectations:

When the general rules which determine the merit and demerit of actions, come thus to be regarded as the laws of an All-powerful Being, who watches over our

conduct, and who, in a life to come, will reward the observance, and punish the breach of them; they necessarily acquire a new sacredness from this consideration (III.5.12).

Religion, for Smith, is political strategy and not revelation. Its unmatched appeal will haunt Smith's political system. He will spend a great deal of time in WN discussing ways to curb fanaticism, relying on political liberty, denominational competition, and both public and institutional education of people of all ages to temper extreme beliefs (WN IV.1.g, Weinstein 2013, 61-62, 207-8). This is a lengthy and complex topic, and requires more in-depth discussion than I provide elsewhere (Weinstein 2012).

Klein, Swanson, and Young believe the impartial spectator to be beholderist because Smith wants them to. Smith intentionally postulates the divine grounding of moral judgment to make intuitions and conclusions feel more natural, more intimate, and more binding. Yet, like the lure of power and riches, this is a deception. It misleads the average person while providing resources for the ideal legislator, the person whom Haakonsson describes as a "man of public spirit who will strike the perfect Smithian balance between the enlightenment of 'Some general, and even systematical, idea of the perfection of policy and law,' and the piecemeal action to alleviate concrete evils" (Haakonssen 1989). Suffice it to say, there is reason to believe that Smith, who admired, cited, and visited Voltaire multiple times, would have been sympathetic to his friend's famous quip that if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him (Pearson 2008, 315).

In the end, it is my contention that Smith's writing describes the practical effect of the religious sheen society exploits to function, but presents his scholarly readers with enough evidence to see through the theological fiction. Of course, this reopens Smith to accusations of relativism, and makes his attempts at political pluralism all the more complex. However, these issues are unavoidable because they are endemic to the human experience. In Smith's own words, TMS does not concern "a matter of right" but rather "a matter of fact" (III.i.5.10).

Perhaps Smith could have told us more about his personal beliefs, but he was inscrutable, so we are left with the most likely scenario of preserving the internal consistency of his system. An impartial spectator that has access to, in Klein, Swanson, and Young's words, "superhuman knowledge and universal benevolence" and a view of "the whole" of creation juxtaposed against an individual human perspective, is simply incompatible with the rest of his writing and what we know about him as a person. As Smith himself writes, "[w]e are not at present examining upon what principles a perfect being would approve of the punishment of bad actions; but upon what principles so weak and imperfect a creature as man actually and in fact approves of it" (II.i.5.10).

Yes, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is ambiguous enough to prop up a more

robust theology, but these ambiguities are what make it so believable. They are also what keeps us scholars in business. I am therefore grateful to Klein, Swanson, and Young for inviting me to explore Smith's complexities with them.

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