



Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator

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The impartial spectator is a crucial part of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith talks about many kinds of spectators in his book. Some are informed, others are not. Some are impartial, others are not. Ultimately, Smith says that our moral judgment relies on the views of representative or supposed impartial spectators that we imagine given our ideas about a perfect impartial spectator. The representation of the ideal spectator can change based upon our circumstances. The representation can substitute for literal spectators when they are absent, or it can correct for biases or shortcomings of literal spectators when they are present. The representation must have extensive knowledge of us and our circumstances, as well as perfect moral sentiments. The representation of the ideal impartial spectator must necessarily be abstract, transcendent, and/or imaginary since no human being could have the perfect knowledge and moral sentiments without being God.

Christians, of course, will see the obvious possibility that the God-man, Jesus Christ, can be a literal, ideal impartial spectator. Yet Smith deliberately refuses to bring divine revelation and specific references to Christ or salvation into his works. This essay, therefore, will put aside the question of what Christ as the perfect impartial spectator would mean and instead examine what Smith may have had in mind. To that end, I think it is a useful exercise to consider our ideal impartial spectator as a category. What do I mean by this? Let me use the analogy of a chair to explain how an impartial spectator category works and why I have come to view Smith's ideal impartial spectator in this way.

Imagine a chair for a moment, any chair will do. How tall and wide is it? How hard? What is the shape of its backrest or legs? We have all experienced many different kinds of chairs—chairs of different shapes, different sizes, different colors, and so on. We all have some mental model or category of 'chairness' (for

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lack of a better word) by which we decide whether an object is a good or a bad chair, or whether it is even a chair at all. Perhaps it is a stool, or a couch, or a bed. Chairness is difficult to describe in every detail because there can be such a great variety in styles of chairs. In fact, many times people disagree over whether something even qualifies as a chair. Furthermore, though we have this category of chairness in our minds, the best chair for our circumstances may vary greatly. Most people would prefer one type of chair for writing, another for use at meals, perhaps a third kind for reading or watching TV, maybe a fourth for camping or being outdoors. The quality of a chair depends to some extent on the demands of circumstance *and* the tastes and preferences of individual people. Smith's ideal impartial spectator is very akin to chairness.

An important question is: How do we come to *know* what an ideal imaginary impartial spectator would be like if we only experience flawed and imperfect ones? The knowledge and benevolence that an impartial spectator needs to give appropriate approval or censure of our actions change over time, between cultures, and across circumstances. Furthermore, how can we apply what we learn from our limited experiences to the dizzying variety of contexts we can find ourselves in?

The answer has to do with how we come to understand categories in our minds. They are not logical deductions based on particular premises. Nor are they strict definitions. They are not Platonic forms we are born knowing. Our understanding of them is far more inductive and intuitive in the Aristotelian sense. There is also a large element of Michael Polanyi's tacit knowledge. When constructing or imagining an impartial spectator, we cannot consciously articulate every aspect, detail, or facet.

Instead we learn by observation, reflection, and experience: 'That is a chair. So is that, and that. But this one is not a chair, nor is that one.' We learn about impartial spectators in a similar way: 'That spectator is impartial, so is that one, but this one is not.' Or: 'That spectator may be impartial, but he is not fit to judge the situation because he lacks relevant knowledge, perspective, taste, experience, or virtue.' We learn how to discern these differences as we observe and interact with other people.

Another similarity between chairs and impartial spectators is their variegated manifestations and qualifications. Just as we don't want the same chair for every occasion, neither do we want the same impartial spectator—though we do want one. Is it the same for someone living in a different society or a different age? How can we use the impartial spectator procedure when we travel to different cultures? We must answer these questions before we can decide whether or not Smith's impartial spectator is universal.

The solution involves applying the ideal category to our local circumstances of time and place. That could involve bridging major cultural differences, or it

could involve addressing minor changes in our local circumstances. The highest or deepest impartial spectator is not a literal person or even a metaphysical person. It is an abstract ideal category that we clothe with flesh and blood, knowledge and perspective, to match our circumstances as best we are able.

You may object that we cannot have moral approval, censure, or mutual sympathy with a category. I quite agree. We cannot sit on categories either. Yet that doesn't stop us from sitting on chairs or appreciating chairness as a meaningful category. In fact, having a category lets us judge the quality of existing chairs and helps us design new ones. Though the ideal impartial spectator is ultimately a broad category, it is a category that allows us to create representative impartial spectators for our situations and exchange sympathy or approval with them.

The impartial spectator as an ideal is not meaningless—just as the term 'chairness' is not meaningless. The ideal impartial spectator carries moral weight not because it is a metaphysical being we desire approval from, but because it helps us know what a perfect literal impartial spectator would think *and* what it means to be praiseworthy and virtuous. We desire 'approval' from, or the congruence of our sentiments and behavior with, our representative impartial spectator.

Our need for a representative of the ideal explains why literal impartial spectators are so crucial to Smith's moral philosophy. Just as you would have difficulty creating a robust and useful category of chairs if you never saw chairs, so you could not create an ideal impartial spectator without experiencing real ones. Of course, the ideal impartial spectator category is vastly more complex and nuanced than that of a chair, which is why we actually need to cultivate our sense of the impartial spectator. We do not simply arrive at the perfect idealization. The complexity of the ideal impartial spectator makes the presence of literal impartial spectators indispensable. We need feedback from other people on the merits of our imagined impartial spectator. Are we getting the nuances just right? Have our passions and excesses blinded us as to how the amiable or the respectable virtues would apply to our situation? Other people can help us see defects or problems with our representative impartial spectator, and thereby with our understanding of the impartial spectator category.

Yet, almost paradoxically, our imaginary ideal spectator helps us evaluate the quality or authority of the spectators around us. The ideal spectator can correct for the informational or cultural biases of literal spectators. Perhaps they condemn us for doing something we believe is right. We reason that if the literal impartial spectators only knew every detail that we do, every emotion, every passion, and every motive of our actions, then they would approve of our choices. So we develop our ideal of an impartial spectator from a lifetime of interacting with literal spectators, but we also learn to judge literal spectators by the ideal.

Smith says that we judge people's behavior by two standards. First, we have the idea of perfect virtue and propriety. By this standard, no one is proper or virtuous—all fall short. Then there is a second standard, that of actual (literal) human examples. Someone may not be perfectly humble or amiable or beneficent, but she is far more so than the mass of mankind. Smith says it is proper to praise her virtue and humanity for rising above the common standard of propriety, even though it falls short of perfection. Smith says the similarity exists in judging art (or anything else like sports, research, speeches, cooking, etc). We judge the Masters by some imagined and high standard of perfection, under which even the best fall short and are deemed blameworthy. Yet compared to other artists, or what we would believe possible, they deserve great admiration and praise for their work. So it is with you and character. Perfection is unattainable. But becoming praiseworthy relative to one's peers is possible. Smith gives an example of this unattainable nature of perfection when he describes David Hume as reaching as near "the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit" (Corr., 221).

Smith begins *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) by talking about the fellow-feeling *bystanders* can have when they *imagine* another person's plight. He then goes on to explain that there is mutual fellow-feeling between the actor and the spectator:

as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continually placing themselves in his situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs, and thence conceiving some degree of that coolness about his own fortune, with which he is sensible that they will view it. (TMS, 22)

The actor and the spectator reach a harmony of feeling through mutual sympathy. Initially, the actor has much stronger feelings about his situation than the spectator has. In order to relate to the spectator, the actor must dampen his passions by exercising what Smith calls the "awful and respectable" virtues: self-command, temperance, fortitude, and courage. For the spectator to relate to the actor, he must amplify his feelings by exercising "amiable" virtues like kindness, tenderness, and humanity (TMS, 25).

It is significant that Smith develops the impartial spectator by beginning with simple examples and moving to more complicated and varied applications, including examples of what are not impartial spectators, until he reaches the point of describing *the* impartial spectator in purely abstract and ideal terms.

Smith first mentions the “impartial spectator” in TMS on page 24, though by that point he has been describing the idea for some time. He starts talking about spectators and bystanders in the first couple pages before introducing impartiality on page 19. But at this introduction Smith clearly refers to a literal spectator who is impartial, not to some metaphysical ideal imbued with perfect benevolence and perfect knowledge. By page 38 he says that people should “diligently” consider the sentiments of “the cool and impartial spectator.” It may seem like Smith has a single ideal impartial spectator in mind here, but he is still thinking literally. He goes on to compare the impartial spectator to indifferent bystanders: “when the heart of every impartial spectator entirely sympathizes with them, when every indifferent by-stander entirely enters into, and goes along with them” (p. 69). Smith also refers to *every* impartial spectator refusing to sympathize with others’ selfishness (78–79). He says “*no* impartial spectator can go along with” people indulging themselves at the expense of others (82, my emphasis). The uses of “every” and “no” necessarily imply a plurality of impartial spectators.

Smith later says “we must become the impartial spectators of our own character and conduct” (TMS, 114). To do this, we must “endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it” (110). The context for this quotation strongly suggests that the impartial spectator refers to people around us who are not affected by a given situation. We try “to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them” and we consider what “the judgment of others” would be or ought to be. We look for the approbation of this “supposed equitable judge” (*ibid.*).

But Smith does move beyond literal impartial spectators. He makes many references to the “supposed impartial spectator” (TMS, 131, 134, 226, 262, 287). Here the role and content of the impartial spectator get more nuanced. We have a “man within the breast” who must come to terms with our imagined impartial spectator through internal dialogue or exchange. This is the representation or supposed impartial spectator, not the category. We then try to become impartial spectators of our own conduct. Now the representative impartial spectator is the “great judge and arbiter of our conduct” (226–227).

Yet Smith returns to talking about “every candid and impartial spectator” (TMS, 249) as well as the “indifferent and impartial spectators” (246), *plural!* Even after developing an ideal representative impartial spectator from the general category we have come to know, he seems to think it important to come back to literal impartial spectators. Then he goes right back to talking about an ideal again: “The real, revered, and impartial spectator” (155). It doesn’t make much sense to revere Jim or Mary or John for being impartial spectators. Smith must be referring to an ideal or perfect impartial spectator.

There is also a direct reference to the presence of an imaginary impartial spectator. If our passions are too extreme to control, “Nature has provided a proper remedy and correction. The real or even the imaginary presence of the impartial spectator, the authority of the man within the breast, is always at hand to overawe them into the proper tone and temper of moderation” (TMS, 292). As you can see, there is interplay between literal and imaginary impartial spectators. As we learn from experience, we continue to refine our understanding of virtue, propriety, and even of sentiments and sympathy. Smith says that we learn to rely on our internal representative impartial spectator for determining whether we are indeed praiseworthy. External spectators simply cannot know enough, and are too likely to be biased, for us to rely exclusively on their approval to justify our choices and judgments.

Smith’s development of the impartial spectator is consistent with his empirical inductive method. People learn from experience and develop a category of the impartial spectator based upon their repeated observation and interaction with others. Yet as their category becomes more defined, they begin to use their representative impartial spectator to refine and interpret the views of literal spectators around them. They also use the category to formulate interpretations of our experiences. The ideal impartial spectator, then, is a rich category that we are continually refining. As Smith writes:

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. (TMS, 293)

Moral philosophy involves refining and directing the judgments of our representative impartial spectators. It means moving beyond relying solely on the judgments of others to affirm or to check our behavior.

Maturing in our views of the impartial spectator fits the chair analogy. When we were very young, we were not qualified to pass judgment on the quality, usefulness, or even the chairness of the chairs we encountered. But eventually we moved beyond childhood when adults had to identify chairs for us. As our view of chairs developed and matured, we could move beyond simply accepting objects as chairs to passing judgment on whether something is a chair or, more importantly, whether it is a good or useful chair. We go through the same process with the impartial spectator. Our ultimate goal is to learn to see ourselves through the eyes of an ideal impartial spectator. The approval of this ideal impartial spectator renders us praiseworthy and makes us less concerned about receiving actual praise from imperfect literal spectators.

The final advantage of viewing the impartial spectator as a category is that it gives both flexibility of interpretation across cultures, people, and time, while also not being meaningless or subject to pure relativism. We can have a substantive debate about the nature of chairs and what constitutes a good one or a bad one. So too can we debate the merits of various ideal impartial spectators in our lives and in our culture. And that, I think Smith would say, is exactly what we should do.

References

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