



*EJW*

ECON JOURNAL WATCH  
Scholarly Comments on  
Academic Economics

# Econ Journal Watch

## Scholarly Comments on Academic Economics

### Volume 13, Issue 2, May 2016

#### COMMENTS

CIA Interventions, Tariff Changes, and Trade During the Cold War: A Variation and New Results

*Bruno Ćorić*

[192–199](#)

#### INVESTIGATING THE APPARATUS

Langbert on Left-Leaning Industrial Relations: Bringing Balance to a Right-Leaning Account

*Bruce E. Kaufman*

[200–223](#)

Fruit Salad All the Way Down: Response to Kaufman on Industrial Relations

*Mitchell Langbert*

[224–228](#)

#### WATCHPAD

##### SYMPOSIUM

#### MY UNDERSTANDING OF ADAM SMITH'S IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR

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

*Daniel B. Klein*

[229–231](#)

The Impartial Spectator and Moral Judgment

*Vivienne Brown*

[232–248](#)

Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator

*María Alejandra Carrasco and Christel Fricke*

[249–263](#)

Impartial Spectating and the Price Analogy

*Douglas J. Den Uyl*

[264–272](#)

Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator: Symposium Remarks <i>Samuel Fleischacker</i>	273–283
Natural and Artificial Impartiality <i>Michael L. Frazer</i>	284–297
Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator: Autonomy and Extended Selves <i>Jimena Hurtado</i>	298–305
On the Origins and Normative Status of the Impartial Spectator <i>John McHugh</i>	306–311
Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator <i>Paul D. Mueller</i>	312–318
Is Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator Selfless? <i>Maria Pia Paganelli</i>	319–323
Peer Review and the Development of the Impartial Spectator <i>Craig Smith</i>	324–329
The Fair and Impartial Spectator <i>Vernon L. Smith</i>	330–339
The Logic of Reflection: Spectators Partial and Impartial <i>Robert Urquhart</i>	340–350
My Understanding of Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator <i>Jack Russell Weinstein</i>	351–358
<b>WATCHPAD (CONTINUED)</b>	
Foreword to "The Meaning of Competition" <i>Daniel B. Klein</i>	359
The Meaning of Competition <i>Friedrich A. Hayek</i>	360–372



# CIA Interventions, Tariff Changes, and Trade During the Cold War: A Variation and New Results

Bruno Ćorić<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

An *American Economic Review* article by Daniel Berger, William Easterly, Nathan Nunn, and Shanker Satyanath (hereafter “BENS”) provides evidence of CIA interventions affecting trade flows (BENS 2013). As the authors underline, history offers many examples of the use of political power to promote trade and other national interests. However, the question of whether political power is an important determinant of international trade is difficult to examine empirically, because the shifts in power relations between governments are often the result of decisions that are made behind the veil of government secrecy.

BENS put remarkable research effort into overcoming the problem. Using recently declassified CIA documents, they constructed a country- and year-specific measure of the influence of the U.S. government over foreign countries. The gravity model of international trade is then employed to estimate the reduced-form relationship between successful CIA interventions and imports from the United States.

Their results revealed that successful CIA interventions were followed by a large increase in the imports from the United States. Further investigation found that imports from other (non-U.S.) countries did not increase following successful CIA interventions, but rather that the U.S. influence caused a shift toward U.S. products. The results suggest also that the increase in the imports from the U.S. can be explained by direct government purchases of U.S. products, while other mechanisms such as changing tariffs and FDI policies did not have an important effect. Finally, the empirical investigation showed: that the increase in imports was largest in industries in which the U.S. had a comparative disadvantage; that

---

1. University of Split, 21000 Split, Croatia.

successful interventions were not followed by increase in imports from countries that were ideologically similar to the U.S.; and that the increases in economic aid, military aid, and loans cannot explain the detected increase in the imports from the United States.

This paper offers additional evidence on the matters investigated by BENS. I check their results for robustness by using an alternative data source and an alternative way for constructing countries' nominal GDP figures, which are used to obtain the dependent variable. I find evidence affirming a positive relationship between CIA interventions and imports from the U.S., as well as evidence affirming most of the other results reported by BENS. However, my estimates indicate there is an alternative explanation of the positive relationship between CIA interventions and imports from the U.S.: The detected increase in imports from the U.S. can be explained by changes in tariffs, which are unrelated to the CIA interventions.

## Alternative construction of the dependent variable

The results presented in BENS's study are obtained by estimating the following benchmark model (2013, 872, equation 7), and different specifications of the gravity model

$$\ln \frac{m_{t,c}^{US}}{Y_{t,c}} = \alpha_t + \alpha_c + \beta U.S. influence_{t,c} + \varphi \ln \tau_{t,c}^{US} - \varphi [\ln P_t^{US} + \ln P_{t,c}] + X_{t,c} \Gamma + \varepsilon_{t,c} \quad (1),$$

where the dependent variable,  $\ln \frac{m_{t,c}^{US}}{Y_{t,c}}$ , is the natural logarithm of imports into country  $c$  from the U.S. normalized by country  $c$ 's total GDP. The year and country fixed effects are represented by  $a_t$  and  $a_c$ , respectively. The main variable of interest is  $U.S. influence_{t,c}$ , which measures the influence of the U.S. government over foreign countries. The measure is constructed as an indicator variable that equals one, in a country and year, if the CIA either installed a foreign leader or provided covert support for the regime once in power. Bilateral trade costs and multilateral resistance terms, controlled by using a number of the observable terms, are denoted by  $\ln \tau_{t,c}^{US}$  and  $[\ln P_t^{US} + \ln P_{t,c}]$ , respectively.<sup>2</sup> A vector of time-varying control variables,  $X_{t,c}$ , includes: the natural logarithm of per capita income; an

---

2. For details see derivation of the model in BENS (2013, 870–872).

indicator for KGB interventions; an indicator variable that equals one if there is a change in leadership; a measure of the tenure of the current leader; and an indicator variable that equals one if an observation is a democracy.

Since the CIA documents for the post-Cold War period are still largely classified, BENS restricted their analysis to the 1947–1989 period. The dependent variable is constructed by using Katherine Barbieri et al.’s (2008) Correlates of War Trade Dataset, which reports annual bilateral trade flows measured in nominal U.S. dollars. Data on imports from the U.S. in nominal U.S. dollars for each country,  $m_{t,c}^{US}$ , are normalized by country’s total GDP,  $Y_{t,c}$ .

In choosing the source for total GDP, BENS decided to use data from Angus Maddison (2003). Maddison used a PPP-based exchange rate (Geary-Khamis PPP converter) to convert countries’ GDP figures in national currencies into real U.S. dollars (measured in 1990) as follows.

$$\text{GDP in 1990 International dollars} = \frac{\text{GDP in national currency}}{\text{Geary-Khamis PPP converter}} \quad (2)$$

Maddison calls this GDP in 1990 international dollars, where one international dollar is equal to one U.S. dollar in 1990. To match the trade data, which are in nominal U.S. dollars, BENS used the U.S. Consumer Price Index to convert the real GDP figures (GDP in 1990 international dollars) reported by Maddison to GDP in nominal U.S. dollars.

These GDP data are then employed together with the data on imports from the U.S. in nominal U.S. dollars to construct the dependent variable. As a result, in BENS’s dependent variable,  $\ln \frac{m_{t,c}^{US}}{Y_{t,c}}$ , the numerator is in ‘ordinary’ nominal U.S. dollars, while the denominator is in PPP-adjusted U.S. dollars.

To avoid having a numerator which is not PPP-adjusted and a denominator which *is* PPP-adjusted, I apply an alternative approach to calculate the nominal GDP in U.S. dollars. I use the approach applied by the IMF and World Bank. In their databases, nominal GDP figures in U.S. dollars are based upon nominal GDP in national currency converted to U.S. dollars using market exchange rates. Accordingly, I employ the widely used PWT 8.0 data (Feenstra et al. 2013) on the exchange rate and on nominal GDP in national currency to calculate the country-year data on nominal GDP in U.S. dollars as follows.<sup>3</sup>

---

3. In particular, I use variables *np\_gdp* (GDP at current national prices) and *xr2* (Exchange rate, National currency/USD, market+estimated) provided in the PWT 8.0’s National Account data file which are available at annual frequency from 1950 to 2011.

$$\text{Nominal GDP in U.S. dollars} = \frac{\text{Nominal GDP in national currency}}{\text{National currency/U.S. dollar exchange rate}} \quad (3)$$

These data on nominal GDP in U.S. dollars are then employed to construct the above described dependent variable and to check BENS's findings.<sup>4</sup>

## Results

Main results are reported in Table 1. Results reported in column 1 correspond to the results of BENS's benchmark model (BENS 2013, Table 1, column 3). Just as in BENS's study, my results show that the coefficients on the main variable of interest, *U.S. influence*, are positive and statistically significant at the conventional levels of statistical significance. The coefficient on *U.S. influence* shows that a country's imports from the U.S. in intervention years were on average 32 percent larger than in non-intervention years (compared to 29 percent in the original study). Coefficients on other variables are in line with the original estimates, although they are, in general, smaller and less significant.

The coefficients on the *U.S. influence* and most of the other variables remain consistent with the original estimates in the majority of other specifications. To preserve space here, I report those results in a separate document ([link to download](#)).

The results of my investigation support the main findings of BENS. An important discrepancy in the results is, however, detected in the empirical estimates that aim to explain why successful CIA interventions are related to the increase in imports of U.S. products. Namely, BENS provide evidence that the detected trade effect can be explained by increased government purchases of U.S. products. Then they provide a number of additional results which, among other things, show that the detected trade effect cannot be explained with alternative economic mechanisms, such as changing tariffs or FDI policies. But I find that when the alternative GDP data are used to test the robustness of the BENS findings, an economic explanation based on tariff changes cannot be dismissed.

---

4. These data are also used to construct all the other variables employed in the BENS's study in construction of which the data on nominal GDP in US dollars are employed, as well as to construct the new Baier and Bergstrand (2009) multilateral resistance terms.

TABLE 1. The effects of U.S. interventions on imports from the U.S.

	ln normalized imports from the U.S.		Tariff change	ln normalized imports from the U.S.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
U.S. influence	0.321*** (0.126)	0.196 (0.121)	0.008 (0.025)	0.062 (0.190)
U.S. influence $\times$ Post tariff change		0.155** (0.076)		
U.S. influence $\times$ Govt share of GDP				1.432** (0.571)
<i>Control variables</i>				
ln per capita income	0.303** (0.153)	0.351** (0.176)	0.099** (0.030)	0.293** (0.146)
Soviet intervention control	-0.334 (0.218)	-0.243 (0.215)	-0.028 (0.040)	-0.343 (0.219)
Leader turnover indicator	-0.007 (0.031)	-0.014 (0.034)	-0.048*** (0.019)	-0.009 (0.031)
Leader tenure	0.006 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.005 (0.006)
Democracy indicator	0.028 (0.068)	0.032 (0.070)	0.014 (0.021)	0.034 (0.067)
Govt share of GDP				-0.908 (0.679)
<i>Trade cost/B&amp;B MR controls</i>				
ln Distance	-0.229*** (0.080)	-0.251*** (0.082)	-0.006 (0.019)	-0.243*** (0.081)
Contiguous border indicator	0.080 (0.913)	-0.022 (0.886)	0.046 (0.353)	0.111 (0.861)
Common language indicator	0.841 (0.600)	1.075* (0.599)	-0.109 (0.160)	0.927* (0.570)
GATT participation indicator	-0.978 (0.734)	-0.890 (0.731)	0.006 (0.146)	-0.968 (0.733)
Regional Trade agreement indicator	-0.066 (0.280)	-0.001 (0.262)	-0.866*** (0.201)	-0.066 (0.281)
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,677	3,454	2,793	3,638
Note: *, **, and *** indicate the 10-, 5- and 1-percent significance levels. Standard errors are in parentheses.				

In particular, in contrast to the results reported in BENS's Table A4, my estimates in column 2 (Table 1) show that where the variable for tariff change (*U.S. influence  $\times$  Post tariff change*) is introduced into the model, it appears to be statistically significant. Here the size of this coefficient is more than five times larger than in BENS's estimate (the coefficient in BENS is 0.028). At the same time, the size of coefficient on the *U.S. influence* variable now declines substantially (64

percent) compared to the benchmark estimates in column 1, while in BENS the size of this coefficient remains almost the same. Most importantly, in contrast to the results reported in BENS, the coefficient on *U.S. influence* becomes statistically insignificant. These results suggest that the effect of CIA interventions on the imports from the U.S. become statistically insignificant after controlling for interventions that follow a change in the tariff structure during an intervention period.

At the same time, the small and insignificant coefficient on the *U.S. influence* reported in column 3 confirms the original BENS finding (2013, Table A4, column 5) that the CIA interventions had no impact on the probability of a change in the tariffs structure. Accordingly, the results presented in columns 2 and 3 suggest that when the alternative GDP data are used to test the BENS findings, economic explanation of the increase in imports from the U.S. cannot be ruled out.

It should be stressed that my results do not suggest that BENS's explanation, which relates the increased imports to direct purchases of U.S. products by foreign governments, is incorrect. The estimates of the model that allows the effect of successful CIA interventions to differ depending on the government's share of GDP in column 4 are consistent with BENS's results (2013, Table 2, column 2). In particular, the results reported in column 4 show that when the interaction variable between *U.S. influence* and government expenditure share ( $U.S. influence \times Govt share of GDP$ ) enters the model, the size of the coefficient on the *U.S. influence* variable becomes insignificant as in BENS. The coefficient on the  $U.S. influence \times Govt share of GDP$  is also positive and statistically significant as in the original research.

To summarize, the results here presented do not suggest that the political economy explanation advocated by BENS is necessarily incorrect. But I do find that empirical evidence drawn from the alternative data is also consistent with an economic explanation.

## Conclusion

This study offers a test of BENS's findings by using alternative data for nominal GDP in U.S. dollars to construct the main dependent variable, *ln normalised imports from the U.S.*, and other variables in construction of which the data on nominal GDP in U.S. dollars are used.

The results confirm most of the findings reported in BENS. In particular, the estimated coefficients on the main variable of interest, *U.S. influence*, appear to be significantly positive, confirming that successful CIA interventions are related to the increase in imports from the United States. The results also confirm BENS's



finding according to which this positive relationship may be a result of the use of political power by the U.S. to promote trade.

However, the results also indicate that the detected increase in imports from the U.S. can be related to changes in the tariffs that were undertaken by intervened-into countries. At the same time, I find no evidence that CIA interventions had an impact on the probability of a change in the tariffs. Overall, this study does not support political influence of U.S. on the intervened-into countries as the *only* explanation of the detected trade effect.

## Appendix

Available for download are [tables giving replication results](#), as well as a large file (90 MB) containing [all data and code used for this research](#).

## References

- Baier, Scott L., and Jeffrey H. Bergstrand.** 2009. *Bonus Vetus* OLS: A Simple Method for Approximating International Trade-Cost Effects Using the Gravity Equation. *Journal of International Economics* 77(1): 77–85.
- Barbieri, Katherine, Omar M. G. Keshk, and Brian M. Pollins.** 2008. Correlates of War Project Trade Data Set Codebook, ver. 2.0. *CorrelatesOfWar.org*.
- Berger, Daniel, William Easterly, Nathan Nunn, and Shanker Satyanath (BENS).** 2013. Commercial Imperialism? Political Influence and Trade During the Cold War. *American Economic Review* 103(2): 863–896.
- Feenstra, Robert C., Robert Inklaar, and Marcel P. Timmer.** 2013. The Next Generation of the Penn World Table. *American Economic Review* 105(10): 3150–3182. [Link](#)
- Maddison, Angus.** 2003. *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

## About the Author



**Bruno Ćorić** is an assistant professor at Split University, Croatia. He received his Ph.D. in 2009 from Staffordshire University in the United Kingdom. His research focuses on business cycles, economic growth, and monetary policy. His articles have appeared in the *Oxford Bulletin of Economics*, *International Review of Economics and Finance*, *Applied Economics*, and other scholarly outlets. He is also the co-author of a textbook on macroeconomic theory and policy. His email address is

bcoric@efst.hr.

[Go to archive of Comments section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5906>



# Langbert on Left-Leaning Industrial Relations: Bringing Balance to a Right-Leaning Account

Bruce E. Kaufman<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

For a number of editions of his principles text, Paul Samuelson (1964) starts the first chapter with a gestalt diagram. The lines and points are drawn such that some people look at it and see antelopes while others see flamingoes.

The previous issue of this journal featured an article by Mitchell Langbert, “The Left Orientation of Industrial Relations” (2016). Langbert presents his paper as a case study portrait of near-universal left dominance among academics in the social and behavioral sciences and an alert to “students, parents, taxpayers, policy-makers, and citizens,” who “need to know” about this (2016, 46). If I can paraphrase, Langbert looks at social science professors in universities and sees a large flock of bright pink flamingoes which stand on their left legs, bury their heads in the academic water, and slowly ruin the pond with counterproductive, left-biased research and teaching. Against this overall background, Langbert focuses attention on the industrial relations (IR) field and locates it on the distinct left side of the flock, considerably past the pale-pink economist flamingoes and near the flaming-pink sociologist flamingoes. The IR flamingoes stand together in a relatively small and shrinking collective group, distinguished by distinct traces of reddish social-democratic plumage.

---

1. Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA 30302; Griffith University, Nathan, QLD 4111, Australia.

But beauty is in the eye of the beholder, all human stories have two sides, and sometimes one person's flamingoes are another person's antelopes. When I read Langbert's account of industrial relations, I see some of the same flamingoes, although since I am closer to the pond (Kaufman 2004) many of the flamingoes look well on in years (few under 40 human years) and are less pink and active than in days gone by. For the same reason, I do not feel as alarmist about the flamingoes' left-winged habits nor am I as put off by their clannishness. Actually, as the flock gets smaller each year, some pond watchers wonder whether the flamingoes are headed for an extinction event, brought on by a harsher environment, more aggressive right-winged predators, and failure of the species to evolve and reproduce. Langbert, I get the sense, is happy (or not unhappy) to see the flock get smaller, perhaps as a healthy and overdue culling. But my sense is the union of flamingoes is necessary to maintain ecological balance and, without them, it could be a backward step to the law of the jungle where the powerful creatures dominate the weak, might makes right, and too much habitat competition can precipitate a destructive race to the bottom.

For context, I helped Langbert organize a session on ideology in industrial relations at the 2014 annual meeting of the main professional group, the Labor and Employment Relations Association (LERA, formerly Industrial Relations Research Association, IRRA). Then, early this year, he sent me a copy of his published paper. After reading it, I sent Langbert an email with congratulations and a set of plus and minus comments, presented as 'if I had been the referee.' He forwarded my email to EJW editor Daniel Klein, who invited me to turn it into a comment paper. Shortly after the editor's invitation, Langbert emailed and also encouraged me to take on this assignment. As the old adage says, however: Be careful what you wish for!

I divide my reviewer's report into three sections. The first section deals with the paper's conceptual and theory side; the second looks at its empirical and inferential side; and the third examines the role of external funding and ideology. Part of my review directly engages with Langbert's paper as he wrote it; another part broadens and reinterprets his analysis with an alternative conceptual framework meant to not only sharpen and reframe the critique but also engage and take forward the larger literature on academic left ideology. However, what I believe provides extra insight may look to him as reframing his paper in a way neither intended nor accurate.

## **Plot redux: Wrong turn at the ideological fork in the road**

We know that at an automobile crash scene the police officers often hear quite divergent eyewitness accounts of which driver did what, and when. Langbert looks at the industrial relations field, sees an academic crash scene, and reports to the readers of EJW that the guilty parties are the IR professors who persistently take the left-hand fork of the road even though it is clearly marked with flashing red lights and signs marked “Road to Serfdom” and “Poor House Dead Ahead.” Langbert mostly leaves it to his readers to infer what industrial relations professors should have done if they had instead practiced invisible-hand, value-free driving, although he cites professors in human resource management, marketing, and business strategy as a better role model (2016, 52).

But one surmises (with some tongue in cheek), certainly from some of the citations, that Langbert thinks IR professors should have instead taken the right-hand fork and traveled down the free-market, free-enterprise interstate (Friedman-Hayek Expressway, Inc.?) where all the signs and flashing green lights point to the shortest route, and also fastest without speed and safety laws and other ill-designed and intrusive government interferences, to the twin-cities destination of Libertyville and Wealthy Nation.

And, by taking this route, then, as a serendipitous unintended consequence, the IR professors would eventually see rising in the distance, as the union scales fall from their eyes, the Rocky Mountain-like majestic beauty and natural law truth of Adam Smith’s obvious and simple system of natural liberty. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, wisdom of the free-market, free-enterprise saints (Gospels of Adam, Ludwig, Friedrich, Milton, etc.), and born-again faith in the beneficence of the competitive Holy Ghost, these professors belatedly realize that the entire subject of industrial relations, and all of its counterproductive and coercive unions, minimum-wage laws, and other restrictions and exactions, is in the end an ill-considered and anti-social detour into leftist defective thinking that can be dropped from universities with savings for all.

Langbert has here an interesting plot. To shift metaphors, it is like going back to the Cold War period and imagining the socialists/communists take over Radio Free Europe, rotate the transmitters from east to west, and start beaming left-wing propaganda into American universities. Either because they are collectivist true believers or social-democratic dupes, industrial relations professors are among the most active and enthusiastic front-men (not too many front-women in IR) for the

leftist, totalitarian cause. Before you know it, formerly contented Walmart workers are out on strike and the Tea Party is demonstrating in front of the White House for single-payer healthcare. Maybe as a really clever plot twist, the European socialists send a coded radio message that activates a sleeper cell of radical sociologists who late at night switch the highway signs so the arrows to Libertyville and Wealthy Nation point down the left fork.

OK, I overdramatize, but the reader gets the idea. With plot summarized, the question is whether Langbert can fill it in with a compelling script that convinces readers and satisfies critics. Here is my reviewer's report.

## **IR left ideology: Concept and theory**

Langbert says the ideology of industrial relations “leans overwhelmingly to the political left” (2016, 46). Other descriptors are left-oriented, tendentious, social democratic, and impervious to opposing viewpoints. The main objective and contribution of his paper is to empirically document IR's political-ideological leftism, with some conceptual undergirding and explanation. A pre-existing literature on normative values and ideology in IR exists but does not get included (e.g., Godard 1995; Kochan 1998; Budd and Bhawe 2008; Darlington 2009). It too documents a left orientation, so no challenge to the Langbert thesis here—it's conventional wisdom—but with considerably different framing and explanation which could have usefully informed and rounded out his story.

A larger lapse, after crunching all the data and demonstrating left ideological orientation, is that Langbert does not provide a better-developed and more compelling answer to the ‘so what?’ question. He opens his article with the question “Why bother?” and answers in the next sentence, “One reason is that students, taxpayers, policymakers, and citizens, all influenced by academics, need to know that practically all academic fields in the United States are preponderantly left oriented” (2016, 46). But why do they need to know?

Langbert tells us that left ideology leads to academic groupthink, intellectual blinders and biases, and preaching to the converted and unsuspecting. But this conclusion only kicks the proverbial can down the road. The most we get are several scattered and unsupported claims that leftist ideology in academe leads to “defective” and “wrongheaded” thinking (2016, 46, 50)—manifest in IR as support for labor market regulations and labor unions. A schematic representation is (1) more left ideology → (2) more defective, wrongheaded thinking → (3) more support for unions and regulation.

We have here a model and it leads to hypotheses and policy implications. But I see some problem areas that weaken the argument or need strengthening in the next version.

It is important to carefully define and operationalize key concepts. A case in point is ideology. Langbert does not define ideology. General descriptors he uses are “sentiments” and “value system.” For the empirical analysis, he operationalizes ideology as “sentiment, argument, or evidence” (2016, 63). The alert reader or referee spots here a serious positive apples and normative oranges problem. Ideology is conventionally defined as a belief system that structures choice and guides action.<sup>2</sup> It is a normative and subjective concept grounded in psychology, sociology, and ethics. The first two elements in his ideology concept, sentiments and argument, fit this conceptualization. The third element, evidence, does not. Evidence is fact-based information and knowledge; it is a positive, value-free input that goes into creating an ideology. By mixing positive and normative within ideology, Langbert introduces serious conceptual and empirical problems. But more later.

Another lacuna with Langbert’s conceptualization of ideology is that it seems one-sided. A person reads the paper and sees left ideology on practically every page, but the term ‘right ideology’ (or ‘rightist,’ etc.) is not mentioned. If ideology is the main explanatory variable, per the three-step model above, the paper in conceptualization and design seems to suffer from severe truncation bias and penchant to frame the subject as a one-tail test.

A way to visualize the problem is to take some group of people, such as across social science departments or across regions of a nation, create a single-number empirical measure of their ideologies, and graph the data as a frequency distribution. Let’s for simplicity assume it resembles a normal distribution. The left-hand tail contains extreme left ideologies, the right-hand tail contains extreme right ideologies, and in the middle is the mean/average ideology in the population. The mean defines a natural centerline separating left ideologies on one side and right ideologies on the other. Moderates cluster around the centerline; as people become more left- or right-leaning they move out toward the tails. Evidently, each population has its own frequency distribution so that what may be right ideology in one (France, sociology departments) is left in another (the U.S., business schools).

The peculiar feature of Langbert’s conceptualization is that universities generally, and IR specifically, are not given their own ideological centerlines. Instead, Langbert judges them to be predominantly left, presumably relative to the centerline of some other frequency distribution that he has in mind, such as that of all American voters. But Langbert never makes clear the nature of the distribution

---

2. The *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary* gives this definition: “a theory or set of beliefs, esp. one on which a political system, party, or organization is based.”

or reference point he uses to establish left orientation in academe. His resulting depiction of IR scholars is that they generally adhere to a consensus ideology labeled ‘leftism.’ Langbert then moves to characterize non-left IR scholars as dissidents from consensus, rather than simply as comprising the right wing of IR’s ideological distribution. But that is not an accurate characterization. The *Journal of Labor Research*, and its former editor James Bennett—whom Langbert describes as a “classical liberal” rather than using a directional term—are regarded within IR as being right-of-center rather than dissident. Making explicit reference to a right-hand side of the IR distribution would have been a more accurate and balanced way for Langbert to underscore that non-left IR scholars are not brave escapees from ideological influences but are instead merely possessed of their own, rival ideologies.

Even if Langbert brings in both left and right sides of the ideology distribution, it is still too blunt to satisfactorily frame the location of industrial relations. A popular theory framework in industrial relations is called IR Frames of Reference (see Budd and Bhawe 2008). It distinguishes four, not two or one, belief systems (ideologies) about how labor markets and employment relationships work—and should work. The four would be placed along the horizontal axis of the frequency distribution, going in order from right to left. The individualist frame is an atomistic, competitive, free market view; the unitarist frame is an organic, unity of interest, mutual-gain view of organizations; the pluralist frame is a mix of structurally imperfect and power imbalanced markets and organizations with a mix of cooperation and conflict; and the radical frame is monopoly capitalism with class conflict and systemic exploitation and subordination.

I earlier said that Langbert’s study lacked nuance because it did not bring in IR theories and concepts. Here is a prime example. Industrial relations is often defined broadly to include all employment relationships and all four ideological frames; other times, however, it is defined narrowly to include only the pluralist component. Thus, by treating IR as having a consensus left-side ideology Langbert commits two types of specification error. If IR is broadly defined and includes all four frames, Langbert mistakenly makes IR too narrow and left-biased by excluding the right-leaning individualist and unitarist frames. On the other hand, if IR is defined narrowly to include only the pluralist frame, Langbert mistakenly makes IR too leftist by including the radical frame in the tail of the distribution. Regardless of which way IR is defined, most people in the field would regard it as much-too blunt and inaccurate to characterize IR—of the American variety—as subsuming the left side of the ideology continuum. British IR, on the other hand, mostly excludes the individualist and unitarist frames but includes the radical frame. Hence Britain is a better fit with Langbert’s left-side IR version (Darlington 2009).



To better indicate the full extent of IR's leftward tilt, Langbert compares the IR ideology score he calculates, based on political party affiliation, with similar scores for economics (Econ) and human resource management (HRM). The details are covered in the next section; the point of interest here is that all three are to the left of Langbert's centerline with HRM least left, Econ moderately more left, and IR considerably more left. As a reviewer, I put a plus mark on the paper's scoresheet for presenting an interesting and new empirical finding. Then, I look in the paper for some kind of theory or model that gives insight or formal explanation for this ordering. For example, instead of HRM, Econ, and IR, why isn't the order Econ, IR, HRM? Likewise, later in his paper Langbert is able to empirically rank IR journals and publications by degree of left orientation: *Journal of Labor Research* (JLR), the LERA annual proceedings, *Industrial Relations* (IR), *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* (ILRR). What accounts for this order? On this aspect I have to put a minus on the scoresheet.

Langbert devotes several pages to theory ideas, centered principally on a model by Daniel Klein and Charlotta Stern (2009a). As referee, I enter another plus on the scoresheet for giving some theoretical structure to the empirical analysis and, likewise, I give a plus mark to the model itself for illuminating why, once an ideology gets established in an academic field or organization, it tends to get locked in as part of the DNA of the group and resists internal change or external challenge. Key factors are majoritarianism in departmental hiring and promotion, which allows the dominant faculty group to maintain and expand control. Then, ideological conformity is solidified by factors such as left groupthink, left elite control of journals and top-ranked departments, and status emulation by people in the lower ranks. The explanation, as one can tell, is largely sociological. This aspect is fine for any IR person since sociology is part of the field's multidisciplinary coalition. A drawback, however, is that the model is largely silent on the antecedent question of how and why a particular ideology first gets established as the dominant belief system. Once the group has been cemented together, the social glue of solidarity also seems remarkably resistant to familiar forces of competitive undercutting, free-rider problems, and defection or non-cooperation.

A good referee not only points out shortcomings but also helps the author strengthen and clarify the theory part of the argument. Here are some suggestions with not only Langbert's paper in mind but also the broader literature on academic left ideology.

The schematic representation, sketched above, is (1) more left ideology → (2) more defective, wrongheaded thinking → (3) more support for unions and regulation. As Langbert says on the bottom of the first page, the sociological model does not explain why a left ideology gets established but it does explain why it

persists. In effect, then, Langbert takes dominance of left ideology as an exogenous stylized fact and devotes his analysis to the rest of the sequence.

I find it helpful in working through the ideas in the paper, and to also make progress on the antecedent issue of what factors shape a right-leaning vs. left-leaning research stance, to express them in terms of a regression model. The equation I come up with is of the form:  $\text{Truth Gap}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_j + \beta_2 \text{Ideo}_{ij} + \beta_3 X_{ij} + \varepsilon$ .

The dependent variable, Truth Gap, is measured across  $i$  professors working in  $j$  social science/humanities fields and disciplines. It represents the deviation, right toward excessive individualism and left toward excessive collectivism, between what they publish in research journals and teach to students and what represents value-free, objective truth on the subject. The notion of objective truth corresponds to Milton Friedman's (1953) conception of positive economics; that is, a value-free representation of the actual process in the economy generating the data. It also seems to correspond to Langbert's goal of getting ideology (or just left-wing ideology?) out of academic research so it is no longer defective and wrongheaded.

The control variable  $D$  is a dummy variable across the  $j$  fields to control for field-specific fixed effects, say with  $D_1 = \text{IR}$  set to zero as the omitted field. If, for expositional purposes, the only other field is HRM ( $D_2 = \text{HRM}$ ), then the expected sign is  $\beta_1 < 0$ . That is, *ceteris paribus*, the (alleged) truth gap in HRM is smaller ( $\beta_0 - \beta_1 D_2$ ) relative to IR.

The central explanatory variable is ideology (Ideo). Following Langbert, it is measured in two ways. In the first specification, ideology is measured using a discrete interval scale centered on 0 (value-free, or pure positive science) and bounded on one side by  $-5$  (extreme right ideology) and  $+5$  (extreme left ideology) for each of the  $ij$  professors. In the second specification, Ideo is a categorical 0, 1 measure, say with Republican = 0 and Democratic = 1. (Measurement details in the next section.) The predicted sign is  $\beta_2 > 0$ ; that is, *ceteris paribus*, the larger the ideological factor the greater the distortion in research and teaching and the larger the size of Truth Gap (in absolute value). Likewise, if Democrat = 1 then Truth Gap increases. The variable  $X$  is a vector of control factors, such as gender, public/private university, etc. The error term  $\varepsilon$  is not further considered.

This regression model reinforces some of the points made above, and leads to additional insights and areas for further work. For example, the referee's expectation is that when Ideo = 0 (value-neutral) then Truth Gap = 0 (no distortion from defective thinking) and, as Ideo takes on more extreme values, say  $-5$  or  $+5$ , then thinking becomes progressively wrongheaded and the size of Truth Gap deviations increase. The problem, however, is a disconnect with the prose, conceptual part of Langbert's argument where, as noted above (the one-sided problem), *only* left ideologies (apparently) cause defective thinking and Truth Gap deviations. In other words, positive values of Ideo (left IR) cause positive Truth Gap deviations but

negative values of Ideo (Friedman? Hayek? Bennett?) cause no similar defective thinking and thus Truth Gap remains at value-free 0.

Looking back at the regression model, a person also has to wonder if Langbert's findings and conclusions are distorted by a serious omitted variable problem. The only explanatory variable in the model is Ideology and, in particular, left ideology. But, really, is social science research, even in industrial relations or sociology, so cravenly political and reflexively groupthink-ish that support for unions and regulation has no other credible explanation than ideologically distorted, defective thinking? An alternative idea, at least worth thinking about, is that IR support for unions and regulation comes not from normative ideology but positive science. For example, the IR literature (and portions of labor economics) for the last century conclude that labor markets are among the most competitively imperfect and non-commodity like in the economy (Budd 2004; Kaufman 2010). A further conclusion is that the forces of demand and supply, or call it bargaining power, are in the general case tipped in favor of employers' interests and against labor's interests.

A reasonable person may well apply a discount/correction factor to this research to remove ideological bias. It seems unreasonable, however, to set the correction factor at 100%, or near it. Here I appeal to authority. It may be unusual to consider Adam Smith an IR economist, but the depiction of labor markets in *The Wealth of Nations* accords well with the description just given (Kaufman 2016). Smith seems to take a very IR leftist stance, for example, when he declares, "When the regulation, therefore, is in favor of the workmen, it is always just and equitable" (1976/1776, 157–158). He comes to this seemingly radical conclusion because employers in the normal case have the bargaining advantage in wage determination. He states, "It is not, however, difficult to see which of the two parties must, upon all ordinary occasions, have the advantage... the workman may be as necessary to his master as his master is to him; but the necessity is not so immediate" (ibid., 83–84). The tipped nature of labor markets is also noted by Richard Ely, a root stem founder of industrial relations. Ely observes, "Through contract the actually existing economic forces manifest themselves with all their inequalities and injustices. When economic forces make possible oppression and deprivation of liberty, oppression and deprivation of liberty express themselves in contract" (1908, 139). Langbert mentions Ely, but as an illustration of the symbiotic connection in IR between leftist ideology and support for unions and regulation. My reading of the Ely quotation, on the hand, suggests that Adam Smith could have equally well written it.

With these ideas in mind, I would encourage Langbert in a future paper to add an IR science variable to his model. Call it Scie. Conceptually, Scie measures, perhaps on a –5 to +5 scale, what IR theory, empirical evidence, and historical

experience indicate is the optimal level of regulation and union density ( $-5 =$  very low,  $+5 =$  very high). The expanded regression model is:  $\text{Truth Gap}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_i + \beta_2 \text{Ideo}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Scie}_{ij} + \beta_4 X_{ij} + \epsilon$ .

Truth Gap is the difference, for example, between what IR professors claim about the optimal level regulation and union density and what the actual optimal level is. In the Langbert model, positive and typically large values of Ideo lead IR professors to substantially inflate the socially optimal level of regulation and density and, hence, Truth Gap is large. However, it surely is going too far to suppose that the IR professors give 100% weight to ideology and none to science in making recommendations on optimal regulation and union density. Thus, if Scie has any truth content, and if IR academics give positive weight to Scie in their mental models, the inclusion of an IR science variable must improve the fit of the model—that is, reduce Truth Gap. Likewise, if Scie and Ideo are positively correlated, omitting Scie from the regression leads to upward bias in the estimated effect of ideology. Langbert, of course, may save his case by arguing that Scie is 100% driven by Ideo (but, note, it could also go the other way), making the two variables completely collinear so Scie has no explanatory power. I am going to guess, however, that not even for the most ardent sociologist is the relationship 100%.

## IR ideology: Empirical measurement and evidence

The larger part of Langbert's paper, and its most important area of contribution, is empirical measurement and analysis of IR ideology, and analysis of its variation across journals, universities, and leadership/status positions. Let me acknowledge, before going further, that it took Langbert a good deal of time and effort to assemble these data, and problem areas notwithstanding, he has made a contribution.

The empirical part of the paper is to work up measures of IR ideology. Here Langbert uses voter registration (after the manner of Cardiff and Klein 2005), political donations (after the manner of McEachern 2006), and his own scoring of content in the four IR periodicals.

Langbert measures the ideological position of IR academics on two different dimensions. The first is their Democratic vs. Republican political party affiliation and support; the second is the extent to which published IR research demonstrates a favorable (pro) vs. negative (anti) stance on, respectively, labor market regulation and labor unions. Consider first the party affiliation measure.

Langbert uses voter registration data from 30 states to determine if IR academics belong to the Republican or Democratic parties (counting Libertarians as Republican and members of two minor left parties as Democrats). He also uses information from the Federal Election Commission to identify the IR academics who have made financial contributions to either party. The sample of IR academics is people with at least one publication between 2009 and 2013 in *ILRR*, *IR*, *JLR*, or the LERA annual proceedings, and also LERA officers and journal editors and editorial board members (720 person observations, 916 population observations).

Langbert finds a Democratic-to-Republican ratio for authors publishing in the three “mainstream” IR outlets, *ILRR*, *IR*, and the LERA proceedings, plus LERA officers and members, that is 13:1; for the *JLR* authors, it is 3.4:1 (*JLR* is a newer and more conservative-leaning journal). When Langbert drops from the data set people included two or more times because of multiple publications, the ratio falls to 8.2:1. The data also show that the Democratic-to-Republican ratio for authors is an increasing function of school ranking (higher ranking → more Democratic) and is also higher if a person is a journal editor, editorial board member, or LERA officer.

The implications are, first, that the IR mainstream is quite leftist (Democratic) and becomes more leftist as one ascends the field’s institutional/status pyramid. The leftist orientation of IR is reinforced by comparisons with other research fields. A study of faculty in California universities found, using similar voter registration data (for 2004), a ratio of 1.3 Democrats to every 1 Republican for business school professors (Cardiff and Klein 2005). For economics the ratio is roughly three Democrats to one Republican and for all humanities and social sciences is in the range of 8 to 10 Democrats per Republican (Klein and Stern 2009b; Langbert 2016, 46 n.2). With regard to financial donations by participants in *ILRR*, *IR*, and LERA, the Democratic-to-Republican party ratio is 22:1; for the *JLR* it is 1.1:1.

The take-away conclusion is that for every one Republican among traditional IR academics there are roughly eight Democrats and, if weighted by number of publications, the ratio rises to thirteen Democrats for every one Republican. The implication, seemingly unavoidable, is that here is a sharply leaning left-oriented field. But really? Here are two pieces of contrary evidence.

If IR academics, and academics in general, are left-leaning then the policy/political positions they support presumably are noticeably left of the electorate. But, with respect to labor regulations and labor unions, the IR academics and the general electorate are *not* far apart.

Illustratively, Americans have for three decades (1987–2015) given an average 78% favorable response rate to a question that asks about an unspecified increase in the minimum wage. The favorable response rate only slightly declines

(74%) when the question specifies an increase of 26%–50%. One reason for such a favorable response is that 60% believe that a minimum-wage increase would either have no impact on jobs or increase jobs; another reason is that 52% believe a minimum-wage increase would improve the economy (Roper Center 2015). A recent Gallup poll (Saad 2013) found that even among self-rated political conservatives 54% favor an increase to \$9 per hour; among liberals the proportion is 94%.

Next consider public opinion on labor unions (Saad 2015). Over the same three-decade period, the favorable rating given to labor unions remained basically the same: 60% in 1987 and 58% in 2015. More respondents also said they wanted unions to have more influence than said they wanted them to have less. As with the minimum wage, Democrats are far more favorable toward unions (79%) but a substantial minority of Republicans also gave a favorable rating (42%).

I am not trying to marshal data in support of either unions or minimum-wage laws. What I am raising for consideration is whether characterizing IR academics as far to the left in the political spectrum is a meaningful generalization when large majorities of Americans express similar relatively strong favorable union and minimum-wage preferences. Actually, most at odds with Langbert's left-dominated 'defective thinking' thesis is that 62% of *employers*, when asked their opinion on raising the minimum wage, give a favorable response (CareerBuilder 2014). The proportion rises to 70% among employers who hire minimum-wage workers.

I cannot locate a poll of management professors on unions or minimum wages so unfortunately it is not possible to compare them relative to the American public. The Booth Business School at the University of Chicago, however, has a panel of nationally recognized economists and they were polled about the minimum wage (IGM Economic Experts Panel 2013). A slight majority (52%) gave support to a minimum-wage increase, albeit of small size (to \$9 per hour). Asked about the employment effect of an increase in the minimum wage to \$15 by 2020, 38% were uncertain, 26% said it would reduce employment. Only 4% agreed that a minimum-wage increase would be a significant stimulus to output growth. Compared to the general public, therefore, these poll numbers suggest that the average economist is noticeably more ideologically-politically conservative with respect to labor/employment policy issues. Recall, however, that Langbert cites a study of California universities that concludes economists are in the moderate political *left*—because the Democratic-Republican ratio was 3:1. But, compared to the public's position on minimum wages, economists are clearly to the *conservative right* of the public.

Also recall that the left-right ratio for economists in the California study is 3:1 but not far from 1:1 for business school professors. So, by logical inference, if economists are actually significantly right-oriented relative to the national average, and if economists are three times more liberal than business school professors,



where does this put management professors, such as Langbert? I think the conclusion is, with some irony, that IR professors are actually located in the broad middle of the American ideological spectrum (plausibly moderately center-left) while economists are located toward the right side and management professors, as a group, are probably a clear-cut case of 'right dominance.'

An anomaly lurking in the last several paragraphs also needs to be resolved. The anomaly is that party affiliation data indicate economists are moderately left, given the 3:1 ratio of Democrats to Republicans, yet as demonstrated above the polling data indicate economists are to the right of the public on labor/employment issues. My proffered resolution is that the Democratic vs. Republican dichotomy is not a close approximation of the 50-50 political-ideological center line in the American electorate. In particular, the ideological center of gravity of the Republican Party has steadily drifted rightward to the point that its right-side boundary has moved into the right-extremist tail of the frequency distribution and the left-side boundary, once near or overlapping the center (thinking of Dwight Eisenhower, Nelson Rockefeller, etc.), has also shifted rightward and no longer is near the center, at least in a numerically significant sense (Ellis and Stimson 2012). Thus, I conjecture, some center-right academics, two or three decades ago comfortable members of the moderate-liberal wing of the Republican party, have since the 1980s and 1990s seen the party shift increasingly right to the point that their ideological position no longer fits and they become independents or Democrats. Party affiliation, therefore, is an increasingly misleading measure of left vs. right ideology.

Adding to the inferential problem, educational attainment and voting Democratic are positively associated so one would naturally expect Ph.D. holders to be predominantly Democrats (Pew Research Center 2015). Presumably these Democrats, with their high level of education, are better informed and make better decisions. However, Langbert suggests just the opposite—that the Ph.D. holders get hired into leftist groupthink university departments and the warped ideology they acquire leads to deteriorated, incorrect thinking.

A second measure of academic leftism presented by Langbert is a scoring of 539 IR journal articles on a -5 to +5 scale with respect to ideological orientation on labor unions and employment regulation (-5 = most anti, +5 = most pro). The journals, identified earlier, are *ILRR*, *IR*, *JLR*, and the LERA proceedings. Here too was invested much time and effort, as Langbert read each article, wrote a summary description of the main findings (in Excel files on a web link), and determined respective union and regulation scores. Inevitably this process has a significant subjective element and an error term.

He finds a ratio of pro-regulation articles to anti-regulation articles of about 5:1 and a pro-union vs. anti-union ratio of about 7:1. Authors with a Democratic

party affiliation wrote more of the pro-regulation and pro-union articles. The three mainline IR publications grouped together with high pro-regulation and pro-union scores, while the newer and more right-oriented *JLR* (established 1981, compared to *ILRR* in 1947, *LERA* proceedings in 1948, and *IR* in 1961) was a neutral outlier. As with the other parts of the paper, these data tell a plausible story and reveal left vs. right regularities that are probably expected, or certainly not unexpected. And, again, probably the most eye-catching finding is the quite large pro-regulation and pro-union left tilt in the articles.

On the other side, no one in the IR field will be surprised by the right-side position of the *JLR*. It was created to provide a research focal point and publishing outlet for right-of-center IR/labor researchers, but with a proactive outreach to people from across the field. A look at *JLR* tables of contents, particularly in earlier years, reveals an ideological distribution of authors with large, ecumenical variance but right-of-centerline mean and Langbert's data nail down the conclusion. If Truth Gap is the difference between mission statement and tables of contents, the *JLR* scores a close-to-zero value.

If another reader considers using this type of scoring system, I counsel some revision. I looked through the spreadsheets where Langbert very helpfully lists every article, provides a brief summary review, and gives the two scores on regulation and unions. What stands out is a major interpretative problem. The intended purpose of the scores is to measure the normative, political-ideological dimension embedded in the articles. But this is not what is actually measured. The crucial sentence says, "I scored each article on a scale from  $-5$  to  $5$ , where negative scores indicate anti-regulation or anti-union sentiment, argument, or *evidence*" (Langbert 2016, 63, my emphasis). As noted earlier, ideology and normative values are present in sentiment and argument, but evidence, certainly in the spirit of scientific research, is by nature objective, factual, and positive. As an example, a free-market researcher may be resolutely opposed to minimum-wage laws and unions, and yet in good faith summarize in the literature review section of a journal article all the arguments in favor of minimum wages and unions and then, in the evidence section, fully report regression results which, unexpectedly, seem to support the pro-minimum wages, pro-unions side. The question is: How does this article get scored, and will the score give a meaningful measure of left vs. right ideology?

As examples of the problem, consider the articles by Hristos Doucouliagos and Paul LaRoche (2013) and Boris Hirsch, Thorsten Schank, and Claus Schnabel (2010). The Doucouliagos and LaRoche paper is titled "Unions and Innovation: New Insights from Cross-Country Evidence." The authors of the paper did a meta-regression analysis of the effect of unions on firm-level innovation. My evaluation is that the article is entirely factual and has no ideological or normative content. But the main finding from the empirical analysis has a definite negative ring. In the



conclusion, Doucouliagos and LaRoche (2013, 487) summarize “All the available evidence indicates that unions are associated with a depressed level of innovation.” Based on this statement and others, Langbert gives the paper a maximum anti-union score of  $-5$ .

The Hirsch, Schank, and Schnabel paper is titled, “Works Councils and Separations: Monopoly, Voice and Insurance Effects.” Langbert scores it as maximum pro-regulation and pro-union,  $+5$ ,  $+5$  (a works council is not a union, but perhaps this is a detail). It is a standard-type IR empirical paper with literature review followed by regression analysis of German works councils. This paper is also entirely factual and has no normative slant that I can detect. In addition, the  $+5$  and  $+5$  scores seem inflated and ambiguous. For example, the paper finds that works councils reduce turnover, have a monopoly-like positive effect on wages, and a weak voice effect on productivity. These effects are mixed, not uniformly positive for unions, and also not clear-cut for any particular ideology. For example, lower turnover may signal the works council or union has made the firm a better place to work or, alternatively, signal they are protecting the deadwood and restricting management’s flexibility to terminate and discipline.

To my surprise, I ranked in the worksheets as the most consistently ‘maximum left’ researcher in industrial relations. Langbert gave five of my papers scores of  $+5$ ,  $+5$ . I am happy to rank #1 in *something*, but I never would have guessed it is as the most leftist person in the field. I am in fact one of the more ideologically conservative members, per my several previous joint projects with *JLR* editor Bennett. The AFL-CIO will also find this ranking perplexing since among organized labor’s most despised employer practices is the company union, and I have raised many IR eyebrows to the  $-4$  or  $-5$  level by taking up the cause of company unions in books and articles. My articles are also being scored  $+5$ ,  $+5$  by Langbert in part for content/evidence reasons that have no correlation with my personal ideology. Illustratively, one of my articles on the worksheets is a history of thought piece on the labor market theory of Fabian socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and the  $+5$ ,  $+5$  score seems a case of guilt by association.

So, my own case study points to substantial measurement error. As another case study, Morley Gunderson of the University of Toronto, a well-published labor economist and IR participant, also has multiple entries in Langbert’s worksheet. Gunderson’s mean regulation score, modestly rounded up, is  $+4$ . The score strikes me as a considerable over-estimate. To double-check, I emailed Gunderson and requested that he self-rate his regulation and union ideology on the  $-5$  to  $+5$  continuum. (I did not reveal the purpose nor the article.) He replied with a 1, 0 score. I would probably self-rate as 2.5, 1. Perhaps, one concludes, too much Truth Gap error exists in these data to be comfortable.

## IR ideology: The financial side

Langbert devotes a section of his paper to “The financial dimension” and, in particular, the influence of external research money in shaping left ideology in academe. He observes, for example, “academic research is influenced by the markets for intellectual products” and “If these interests [the people giving the money] tend to favor government intervention, then a market-based explanation of left-orientation will reinforce the groupthink-based and historical explanations” (2016, 53). The reader notes, however, that this section contains only two paragraphs and the only data provided are a list of nine organizations (three companies, three unions, three joint company-union training programs) which, as sustaining members, contributed between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per year to LERA. One interpretation is that financial considerations have little explanatory role; my counter-argument is they are important but underdeveloped.

Translated into the microeconomic theory of rational choice, Langbert’s model explains IR’s ideological position as a choice outcome largely driven by left-leaning and sociologically structured indifference curves with little attention to the explanatory role of relative prices, incentives, and endowments, represented by the slope and position of budget constraints. This treatment is problematic because it creates a potential omitted variables problem in his explanatory model, particularly given the widespread presumption in economics that more of the variation in choice outcomes is explained by differences in budget constraints than indifference curves (Stigler and Becker 1977).

A useful exercise is to incorporate into the regression model the budget constraint factors of relative prices and incomes. For expositional convenience, lump them together into a composite variable Fund (dollars of external funding) that varies across the  $i$  professors and  $j$  academic units. The expanded model is  $\text{Truth Gap}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_i + \beta_2 \text{Ideo}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Scie}_{ij} + \beta_4 \text{Fund}_{ij} + \beta_5 X_{ij} + \epsilon$ . Incentive effects generated from external funding include both pecuniary and nonpecuniary factors. Examples include: many or no academic job offers, yes or no on promotion and tenure, low or high salary, small or large research resources, few or many external grant opportunities, endowed chair or named school, block grant from a foundation, funding for a research or teaching program, and a large annual travel budget.

Changes in prices and incomes, by rotating or shifting budget lines, may induce (or bribe?) a professor to move the content and tone of research and teaching to the right or left. Likewise, in an era of tight budgets and shrinking government support, universities are in sharp competition to bring in external

money which gives the donors, be it company, foundation, or wealthy individual, leverage to shape the research and teaching agenda toward left or right interests. For example, if the big check to the university comes from George Soros, one can confidently predict the research output has, on average, a left orientation to fit the agenda of, say, the Institute for New Economic Thinking. On the other hand, if the big check comes from Charles and David Koch, the research program with high probability tilts to the right to align with the policy agenda of, say, the Cato Institute. Note that the researchers at the two institutions may have identical ideological value systems (indifference curves) but yet, because they face different left vs. right incentive structures, produce research and teaching that exhibits noticeable left vs. right variation. Langbert's paper runs afoul of this identification problem, leading to probable over-emphasis on the role of ideological predispositions and sociological preference conformance.

Given theory, what evidence can be gleaned from available empirical data? First consider the role of external money in the IR field—where 'external' means from a source outside the university system. If the research focus is kept solely on the IR field, the amount of external funding in support of research and teaching is tiny by business school standards (the top twenty B-school gifts since 2000 total more than \$1.5 billion) and pennies on the street relative to total university charitable donations (\$40 billion in 2015 alone). The external funding trend for IR, unlike business schools and universities, is also trending downward.

As useful historical context, it is interesting to note that the first autonomous IR programs in American universities, starting with the IR Section at Princeton in 1922 and continuing with similar programs in the 1930s at MIT, Michigan, Cal Tech, and Stanford, were largely financed with charitable gifts from John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Rockefeller-connected foundations and philanthropists (Magat 1999; Kaufman 2004). In keeping with the 'money matters' hypothesis, all five of these IR programs emphasized the management side of industrial relations (a term then broadly defined to include HRM in nonunion companies), including management-oriented research and executive training.

After World War II, several dozen additional autonomous IR schools and institutes were established, exemplified by the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell. These new IR programs, although typically outside business schools, also had a management component. But the management component was distinctly secondary in size, prestige, and ideological preference relative to collective bargaining, union-management relations, labor law, social insurance, and dispute resolution, reflecting the post-New Deal surge in union density and labor market regulation. This pattern is also evident in the membership and organizational structure of the Industrial Relations Research Association. It was established in 1947 as an academic-practitioner association with practitioners representing

unions, management, and neutrals but with ‘management’ implicitly defined to favor managers from unionized companies.

Both the IR programs and IRRA gradually drifted over the 1950s–1970s to a more focused research/teaching emphasis, and normative support for, the union and collective bargaining sides of the employment relation. In reaction, the management side of IR among academics broke away and reestablished itself in business schools as the largely separate and competitive subject of personnel/HRM with the Academy of Management as the annual go-to conference. Management practitioners, in turn, shifted from IRRA to the Association for Personnel Administrators, later renamed Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). The relatively few management-side academics that remained in IR, particularly if on the right of the ideological spectrum, often came to feel unwelcome and out of place, much as Langbert describes from his own experience. For the record, I also deplore this narrowing in IR’s positive and normative frame of reference but, unlike Langbert, come to different conclusions and explanations.

This snippet of IR history is critical for appreciating why Langbert can only find two paragraphs of material for his section on the external money dimension. As documented below, very few companies, wealthy business people, and foundations have found it serves their purposes to give more than token amounts to what in practice is a pro-union, pro-regulation field. Similarly, while the union side in its heyday occasionally gave gifts of modest size to IR/labor studies programs (e.g., the Fraser Center and Reuther Library at Wayne State University), the main part of organized labor’s financial support came indirectly by using its political clout in state legislatures to ensure these programs received budget funding. However, as union density in the private sector plummeted over the last four decades from 35 percent to 7 percent, the labor movement lost much of its ability to make gifts to universities and much of the political clout to protect the IR programs’ budget allocations.

Here are a few empirical indicators of the anemic flow of external money to IR. Companies and wealthy individuals have given universities gifts from \$10 million to \$300 million to endow and name business schools. The most visible example is the \$300 million gift to the business school at the University of Chicago from David Booth, CEO and founder of Dimensional Investment, Inc., and which is now renamed the Booth School of Business. I scanned the membership list of the seventy IR/HRM programs which are members of the University Council of Industrial Relations and Human Resource Programs (list provided by the LERA office) for programs that are named after an external funder. Only one appeared—the W. T. Beebe Institute of Personnel and Employment Relations at Georgia State (my university; I was institute director for four years). The university received a gift of approximately \$500,000 from Delta Air Lines and, in return,

renamed its Institute of Industrial Relations in honor of former Delta CEO Tom Beebe and, in addition, changed the title and research and teaching focus to emphasize personnel/HRM. The take-aways are twofold: only one named program out of seventy points to very low external funding and, second, the Georgia State example illustrates that, inevitably, ‘money matters’ in shaping program content and ideology. (I can testify that Delta practiced complete hands-off regarding institute activities; nonetheless, the gift would not have been made if the program stayed IR-oriented.)

I also asked deans/directors of three well-known IR/HRM programs for information regarding the amount and type of external funding received. Two people replied. Both programs, as broad ballpark figures (neither respondent wants to be identified nor have specific figures cited), receive in the neighborhood of \$500,000 per year of external funds, mostly from research grants and contracts, followed by typically small-sized donations from alumni, with no gifts of significant size from companies, unions, or wealthy individuals. Most of the research grants and contracts, they said, are not related to unions and, increasingly, reflect the management/psychological training of the organizational behavior (OB) faculty who are gradually taking the place of IR-trained economists. The two take-aways from this data snippet are, first, that external funding for IR programs is very modest and substantially for non-union research projects and, second, the research/teaching content and ideological orientation of the programs are shifting rightward, due to student enrollment and new faculty hiring favoring HRM over IR, and thus are not as rigid and locked-in as Langbert portrays. Seeing these trends and career implications, few doctoral students major in IR—another ‘money matters’ effect—which reinforces the process of cumulative decline and ideological reorientation.

A third and final piece of evidence comes from external funding received by LERA, the main IR professional association. The organization, like the IR field in general, has suffered serious long-term loss of members with consequent necessity of budget cuts and retrenchments. Also like the field in general, LERA receives very modest-to-minimal external funding. As a ballpark figure (data provided by LERA but with request to not give specific numbers), LERA receives roughly \$50,000 per year from around fifteen companies, unions, and non-profits. The amount provided by organized labor is a modest fraction of the total. The take-aways from this example mirror those above.

Now let’s put the external funding situation for industrial relations into broader perspective. Here is where Langbert again presents only one part of the story. The main university competitors to IR programs are business schools, economics departments, and HRM programs. Arguments can be made back and forth on whether these three rivals are also left-oriented as Langbert suggests (citing

previous studies); however, what is not in dispute is that these other programs are less left and more right oriented. Data snippets also indicate that these three IR rivals, on balance, receive far greater external funding.

Level of external funding of business schools has already been indicated. I next did a Google web search using the words *donations economics departments*. Of the ten entries on the first page, eight deal with external funds received by economics departments from a network of foundations and initiatives financed by Charles and David Koch, wealthy oil company founders and libertarian activists. The leading recipient of Koch money is reported to be George Mason University. One of the entries ([link](#)) reports that the university received slightly under \$90 million over 2005–2014 from Koch foundations, approximately \$46 million went to the George Mason University Foundation, and states in the report, “The bulk of this funding [to the foundation] has gone to GMU’s economics department and GMU’s law and economics center.” From 2008–2013, Florida State University received \$1.5 million from Koch foundations, largely for the economics department ([link](#)). I next did a Google search using the words *donations human resource management*. The first entry is SHRM Foundation, grant-giving arm of the Society for Human Resource Management. The foundation’s web site provides a list of research grants funded in earlier years and the average annual amount for 2010–2014 is \$487,000.

The implication, admittedly based on only a few data points, is that academic and ideological rivals to industrial relations receive much greater levels of external funding. This funding surely has a greater-than-zero influence on the programmatic content and ideological complexion of the universities and individual departments and professors receiving it. If IR is pro-union and pro-regulation, it seems equally certain that the large amounts of external funding for business schools, selected economics departments, and HRM programs shifts the mix of research and teaching toward the neutral-to-anti position. Whether this funding-induced shift (the  $\beta_4\text{Fund}_{ij}$  term in the regression) leads to a smaller or larger value of Truth Gap is open to debate, with Langbert no doubt taking the affirmative side but many IR researchers taking the negative side. What I think can fairly be surmised, however, are two additional implications.

First, giving fuller consideration to external funding paints a much different picture than Langbert provides. In particular, it suggests that the funding disparity between IR and more right-leaning rival fields leads both at a point in time and over time to a shift in research and teaching toward an ideological position that is more aligned with free-market economics and union-free management. Second, Langbert should be greatly concerned about the small, declining, and perhaps soon-to-disappear place of industrial relations in universities if, as he says, in academe “uniformity is dangerous” (2016, 47) and causes students to “lack models as to how respectful deliberation can occur” (49). Without IR, where will students



learn about the positive side of unions, market regulation, and the social interest in protecting and advancing the conditions of labor? Thus, in my referee's report, I would ask Langbert to better reconcile his plea for pluralism, inclusiveness, and avoidance of groupthink in academe with the opposing theme that one-half of the ideological frequency distribution—the left-hand side—has (apparently) little-to-no constructive role in universities (per his blanket indictment “political leftism is wrongheaded,” p. 50).

Lastly, and to wrap up, Langbert devotes a section of his paper to “The *Journal of Labor Research* is different.” He says the *JLR* “stands apart from the rest of the IR field” (2016, 54). My own view is that the *JLR* has enriched the labor/IR field and I particularly applaud the journal's founder and former editor, James Bennett, for his demonstrated commitment to soliciting and publishing papers from across the ideological spectrum. Here is pluralism in word and deed—positively cited by Langbert but with some ambiguity as to whether the reason is the virtue of academic pluralism per se or, alternatively, its instrumental value as a conduit for more of the conservative, right-leaning, and correct-thinking perspective he favors.

Whatever the case, the *JLR* provides yet another example of money helping to shape the ideological configuration of a field of study. Langbert, for example, features a quotation from Bennett who says, “I went to the Olin Foundation in 1979 seeking funds to start a labor journal....” Langbert, however, does not pursue the Olin connection. The story is that from its 1953 founding the foundation spent hundreds of millions of dollars to promote conservative causes. An article in the *New York Observer* (Ratner 2005) notes the foundation distributed “grants to conservative think tanks and intellectuals—the architects of today's sprawling right-wing movement for a half century.” Thus, without the Olin Foundation there would be no *JLR* and, hence, less progress in minimizing Truth Gap.<sup>3</sup>

In closing, this observation leads back to the question raised at the beginning of the paper; that is, whether the small and diminishing flock of pink IR flamingoes can get the protection and resources needed to survive into the future. If I were to emulate Bennett and seek funds for a new IR/labor journal, but pitched in the opposite direction—inclusive but progressive or left-leaning—could I find an Olin substitute to fund the start-up? I suspect it is not likely, and that even in a growing IR market it would be quite difficult to find an external funder. Thus, while Langbert looks at the IR field and sees an overwhelmingly left-dominated gestalt, the gestalt I see is a field increasingly tipped to the free-market/union-free right with the flamingoes in danger of sliding off the edge to extinction, at least in individualist America if not social democratic Europe.

---

3. One also notes that *JLR* founder Bennett is a professor in the aforementioned economics department at George Mason University.

## References

- Budd, John W.** 2004. *Employment With a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity, and Voice*. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press.
- Budd, John W., and Devasheesh Bhawe.** 2008. Values, Ideologies, and Frames of Reference in Employment Relations. In *The Sage Handbook of Industrial Relations*, eds. Paul Blyton, Nicolas Bacon, Jack Fiorito, and Edmund Heery, 92–112. New York: Sage Publications.
- Cardiff, Christopher F., and Daniel B. Klein.** 2005. Faculty Partisan Affiliations in All Disciplines: A Voter-Registration Study. *Critical Review* 17(3–4): 237–255. [Link](#)
- CareerBuilder.** 2014. 62 Percent of Employers Think Minimum Wage Should Be Increased, Finds New CareerBuilder Survey. Press release, September 25. CareerBuilder, LLC (Chicago). [Link](#)
- Darlington, Ralph,** ed. 2009. *What's the Point of Industrial Relations? In Defence of Critical Social Science*. Manchester, UK: British Universities Industrial Relations Association.
- Doucouliafos, Hristos, and Paul LaRoche.** 2013. Unions and Innovation: New Insights from Cross-Country Evidence. *Industrial Relations* 52(4): 67–91.
- Ellis, Christopher, and James Stimson.** 2012. *Ideology in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ely, Richard.** 1908. Economic Theory and Labor Legislation. *American Economic Association Quarterly* 3rd series, 9(1): 124–153.
- Friedman, Milton.** 1953. The Methodology of Positive Economics. In *Essays in Positive Economics*, 3–34. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Godard, John.** 1995. The Ideologies of U.S. and Canadian IR Scholars: A Comparative Analysis and Construct Validation. *Journal of Labor Research* 16(2): 127–147.
- Hirsch, Boris, Thorsten Schank, and Claus Schnabel.** 2010. Works Councils and Separations: Voice, Monopoly, and Insurance Effects. *Industrial Relations* 48(4): 566–592.
- IGM Economic Experts Panel.** 2013. Minimum Wage. *IGM Forum* (University of Chicago Booth School of Business), February 26. [Link](#)
- Kaufman, Bruce E.** 2004. *The Global Evolution of Industrial Relations*. Geneva: ILO.
- Kaufman, Bruce E.** 2010. The Theoretical Foundation of Industrial Relations and Its Implications for Labor Economics and Human Resource Management. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 64(1): 817–851.



- Kaufman, Bruce E.** 2016. Adam Smith's Economics and the Modern Minimum Wage Debate: The Large Distance Separating Kirkcaldy from Chicago. *Journal of Labor Research* 37(1): 29–52.
- Klein, Daniel B., and Charlotta Stern.** 2009a. Groupthink in Academia: Majoritarian Departmental Politics and the Professional Pyramid. In *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope, and Reforms*, eds. Robert Maranto, Richard Redding, and Frederick Hess, 79–98. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute.
- Klein, Daniel B., and Charlotta Stern.** 2009b. By the Numbers: The Ideological Profile of Professors. In *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope, and Reforms*, eds. Robert Maranto, Richard Redding, and Frederick Hess, 15–37. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute.
- Kochan, Thomas.** 1998. What Is Distinctive About Industrial Relations? In *Researching the World of Work*, eds. Keith Whitfield and George Strauss, 31–50. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press.
- Langbert, Mitchell.** 2016. The Left Orientation of Industrial Relations. *Econ Journal Watch* 13(1): 46–74. [Link](#)
- Magat, Richard.** 1999. *Unlikely Partners: Philanthropic Foundations and the Labor Movement*. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press.
- McEachern, William A.** 2006. AEA Ideology: Campaign Contributions of American Economic Association Members, Committee Members, Officers, Editors, Referees, Authors, and Acknowledges. *Econ Journal Watch* 3(1): 148–179. [Link](#)
- Pew Research Center.** 2015. A Deep Dive into Party Affiliation. April 7. Pew Research Center (Washington, D.C.). [Link](#)
- Ratner, Lizzy.** 2005. Olin Foundation, Right-Wing Tank, Snuffing Itself. *New York Observer*, May 9. [Link](#)
- Roper Center.** 2015. Wages of Win: The Public and the Minimum Wage Debate. September 9. Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University (Ithaca, N.Y.). [Link](#)
- Saad, Lydia.** 2013. In U.S., 71% Back Raising Minimum Wage. March 6. Gallup (Washington, D.C.). [Link](#)
- Saad, Lydia.** 2015. Americans' Support for Labor Unions Continues to Recover. August 17. Gallup (Washington, D.C.). [Link](#)
- Samuelson, Paul A.** 1964. *Economics: An Introductory Analysis*, 6th ed. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1776]. *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, eds. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stigler, George J., and Gary S. Becker. 1977. De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum. *American Economic Review* 67(2): 76–90.

## About the Author



**Bruce E. Kaufman** is Professor of Economics in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University in Atlanta. He is also a Research Fellow with the Centre for Work, Organization and Wellbeing at Griffith University in Brisbane and, in addition, a Visiting Professor at Capital University of Economics and Finance in Beijing. Professor Kaufman publishes across the disciplinary areas of the employment relationship, including labor economics, human resource management, industrial relations, labor and employment law, and business and labor history. Professor Kaufman has written or edited eighteen books and over one hundred journal articles and chapters. Examples of books are: *The Global Evolution of Industrial Relations* (2004), *Managing the Human Factor: The Early Years of Human Resource Management in American Industry* (2008), and *Models of Labor Markets* (forthcoming, 2017). Professor Kaufman was selected in 2009 as his university's outstanding professor. His email address is [bkaufman@gsu.edu](mailto:bkaufman@gsu.edu).

[Mitchell Langbert's reply to this article](#)

[Go to archive of Investigating the Apparatus section](#)

[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5907>



# Fruit Salad All the Way Down: Response to Kaufman on Industrial Relations

Mitchell Langbert<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

In my article “The Left Orientation of Industrial Relations” (Langbert 2016), I document the left orientation of industrial relations (IR). I wrote the article in the hope of making people aware of the ideological orientation of the IR community. I want to make taxpayers, citizens, students, parents, and others aware, but more particularly I want to make researchers in IR self-aware. As I noted, my personal experience has been one of participant and observer. As a researcher and teacher, I know what it is like to try to get on in a field when one is out of step. My judgment—may I call it my *scientific* judgment?—is that society would be better off with dramatically less government involvement in labor relations, including fewer privileges for unions. Like Adam Smith, I favor a presumption in favor of freedom of association in labor relations. Smith believed that by and large the best practical remedy for corrupt or abusive business practices is natural liberty. A comparison of countries that take Smith’s advice with those that do not favors those that do.

Bruce Kaufman (2016) has written a good-natured, playful riff on my article. I think that Kaufman raises good points about problems in conceptualizing ideological space—an issue I will return to. But the main thrust of Kaufman’s piece is to elaborate an approach—actually represented by an equation—for exploring what he calls the “Truth Gap” in academic research:

The dependent variable, Truth Gap, is measured across  $i$  professors working in  $j$  social science/humanities fields and disciplines. It represents the deviation,

---

1. Brooklyn College, City University of New York, Brooklyn, NY 11210.

right toward excessive individualism and left toward excessive collectivism, between what they publish in research journals and teach to students and what represents value-free, objective truth on the subject. The notion of objective truth corresponds to Milton Friedman's (1953) conception of positive economics; that is, a value-free representation of the actual process in the economy generating the data. It also seems to correspond to Langbert's goal of getting ideology (or just left-wing ideology?) out of academic research so it is no longer defective and wrongheaded. (Kaufman 2016, 207)

By specifying an equation for the "Truth Gap," separated out as a variable that is dependent on certain independent variables including "ideology," Kaufman proposes to overcome what he regards as a defect in my article, namely the mixing of "positive apples and normative oranges" (2016, 204). Kaufman articulates for the reader what she should take to be the intended logic of my article, writing: "A schematic representation is (1) more left ideology → (2) more defective, wrong-headed thinking → (3) more support for unions and regulation" (ibid., 203).

To my mind, Kaufman's reaction to my article exemplifies the pattern that had moved me to write it. In my article, I openly express my point of view: Judgments such as support for minimum wages, union privileges, and other interventions represent an ideology. As well, opposition to such judgments represents an ideology. It is naive to think that scholarly formulations and arguments are separable from moral and ethical outlooks. Unlike Kaufman, I do not pretend to separate "positive apples and normative oranges." Rather, all social science combines positive and normative elements. If one were to ask Kaufman to tell us where to find the "positive apples," he would probably point to the research findings of leading IR journals!

I think that judgments are part of scholarship. Aspiration of value-free scholarship generally goes with a self-awareness deficiency. Because of the value-laden nature of social science, competition and debate are essential. Kaufman represents me as seeking "value-free" research, but I am comfortable with admitting values within scholarly judgments about advancing social betterment. It is apples and oranges together—fruit salad—all the way down.

Kaufman's thinking is revealed in his comments on my scoring of articles for their posture toward regulation and unions. In my article I explain that I examine the "sentiment, argument, or evidence" (Langbert 2016, 63). Kaufman comments: "Evidence is fact-based information and knowledge; it is a positive, value-free input that goes into creating an ideology. By mixing positive and normative within ideology, Langbert introduces serious conceptual and empirical problems" (2016, 204). Nevertheless, it is naive to think that evidence is somehow divorced from value judgments. It is naive to think that journals do not tend to favor the publication of findings or of theoretical models that support the editors' perspectives.

Within the groupthink hypothesis that I examine in my article, the editor's decision of whether to publish typifies the key nodes of the groupthink problem.

Kaufman comments at length on external funding of academic research. In my article, after I had elaborated on the groupthink hazard in the *academic* market, I offered a short section, in which I wrote:

If governments, lawyers, unions, or businesses sponsor research or create markets for research outputs, then that will tend to prosper academics who fit their interests, and it may lead some others to conform to those interests. If these interests tend to favor government intervention, then a market-based explanation of left orientation will reinforce the groupthink-based and historical explanations. (Langbert 2016, 53)

I regret how those words suggest that the “market-based explanation” stands apart from the groupthink-based and historical explanations. The latter two are interpretations of the faculty labor market, so they too are market-linked explanations. The point of my short section was simply to ask after the funding that flows into IR programs.

Kaufman riffs on my remarks, explaining that funding for IR programs has been declining. He writes: “Without IR, where will students learn about the positive side of unions, market regulation, and the social interest in protecting and advancing the conditions of labor?” At the close of his piece, Kaufman writes:

Thus, while Langbert looks at the IR field and sees an overwhelmingly left-dominated gestalt, the gestalt I see is a field increasingly tipped to the free-market/union-free right with the flamingoes in danger of sliding off the edge to extinction, at least in individualist America if not social democratic Europe. (Kaufman 2016, 220)

Yes, funding for traditional IR programs may be waning, and, yes, classical liberal and conservative sources give perhaps a few tens of millions of dollars per year to university-based programs. But the Council for Aid to Education (2016) reports that in 2015 there were \$40.3 billion in donations to colleges, and about 29 percent went to the top 20 universities—schools that are among the most left wing. A bit of math: the \$92-odd million in donations by Charles and David Koch *over eleven years* that Kaufman cites is 0.8 percent of \$11.7 billion, which is the amount that *just in 2015* went to top-20 universities, including Cornell, MIT, and Berkeley, key centers of industrial relations research and among the most ideologically left universities. An interesting question is why the left persistently harps on “Koch money” when it is a minuscule drop in a bucket mostly poured to nourish the aims of left-oriented academics at elite universities.

Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education reports that in the 2012–2013 academic year higher education paid about \$135 billion in the employment of faculty (Kena et al. 2015, 222). Extended over 11 years that would be \$1.485 trillion. That is the market for faculty. To suggest that \$92 million from non-left sources will undo the left orientation of the academy, or even break its stride, is misguided. (Another bit of math: \$92 million is 0.006 percent of \$1.485 trillion.) It is well established that the elite segment of the economics profession preponderantly votes Democratic, and most of the rest of the academy, especially among the top universities that are heavily represented in LERA, even more so. In some schools, especially the most elite schools, which receive the most generous private funding, there is scarcely a Republican voice to be heard. I find it remarkable that Kaufman suggests that students will stop hearing about “the positive side of unions, market regulation, and the social interest in protecting and advancing the conditions of labor” (2016, 220).

Finally, Kaufman presses the point that on labor policy issues the professoriate or the IR researchers in particular may not be much different than the median voter, as represented by Gallup and other polls. By what standard, then, is the professoriate tilted to the left? Here, let me first say that polls are sensitive to wording. Consider these two questions from a Gallup poll in 1996 (see Caplan 2005):

*Question 24:* Do you favor or oppose raising the minimum wage from four dollars and 25 cents an hour to five dollars and 15 cents an hour?

*Question 24 Alternate:* Would you favor or oppose raising the minimum wage if it resulted in fewer jobs available to low paid workers in this country?

	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
Q24	80.60%	17.39%	2.00%
Q24alt	40.41%	57.03%	2.56%

The variation of wording in the alternate question caused support to drop by half and opposition to triple.

Second, and more importantly, I come back to the main flaw in Kaufman’s reading of my piece. I document the left orientation of IR, and by ‘left,’ I do not mean some skewed measure from some objective neutrality. By ‘left’ I mean what that word has generally signified in America since the 1930s. I mean left tendencies in politics, which since the 1930s have been somewhat more consistently represented by the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. If the median voter or the median economist also seems to lean left, that doesn’t affect my description of IR. I admit that the term *left* has a misleading one-dimensional spatial connotation, but conventional political language does not leave us with very good options.

## References

- Caplan, Bryan.** 2005. Yes Donald, Beliefs About Economics Do Affect Policy Preferences. *EconLog, Library of Economics and Liberty* (Liberty Fund, Inc., Indianapolis), June 4. [Link](#)
- Council for Aid to Education.** 2016. Colleges and Universities Raise Record \$40.30 Billion in 2015. Press release, January 27. Council for Aid to Education (New York). [Link](#)
- Friedman, Milton.** 1953. The Methodology of Positive Economics. In *Essays in Positive Economics*, 3–34. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kaufman, Bruce E.** 2016. Langbert on Left-Leaning Industrial Relations: Bringing Balance to a Right-Leaning Account. *Econ Journal Watch* 13(2): 200–223. [Link](#)
- Kena, Grace, Lauren Musu-Gillette, Jennifer Robinson, Xiaolei Wang, Amy Rathbun, Jijun Zhang, Sidney Wilkinson-Flicker, Amy Barmer, and Erin Dunlop Velez.** 2015. *The Condition of Education 2015*. NCES 2015-144. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. [Link](#)
- Langbert, Mitchell.** 2016. The Left Orientation of Industrial Relations. *Econ Journal Watch* 13(1): 46–74. [Link](#)

## About the Author



**Mitchell Langbert** is an associate professor of business at Brooklyn College. He holds an MBA from UCLA, an MBA from the St. John's University School of Risk and Insurance (formerly the College of Insurance), and a Ph.D. in industrial relations from the Columbia University Graduate School of Business. His research has been published in journals such as *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education Journal*, *Benefits Quarterly*, *Journal of Labor Research*, and *Journal of Economic Issues*. At Brooklyn College he teaches managerial skills, human resources, and business writing. His email address is [mlangbert@hvc.rr.com](mailto:mlangbert@hvc.rr.com).

[Go to archive of Investigating the Apparatus section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5908>





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

Daniel B. Klein<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

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

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

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

---

1. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030.



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

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

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

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

## References

- Brown, Vivienne.** 1994. *Adam Smith's Discourse: Canonicity, Commerce, and Conscience*. London: Routledge.
- Reeder, John,** ed. 1997. *On Moral Sentiments: Contemporary Responses to Adam Smith*. Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## About the Author



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

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5909>



# The Impartial Spectator and Moral Judgment

Vivienne Brown<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

## I.

In Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), morality is rooted in the sociality of mankind. Morality is learned in the process of growing up in human society, and the exercise of moral judgment requires skills learned in the social interactions that define human experience from birth onwards. According to TMS, if we could imagine a human being who had no experience of living with others, such a person would have no conception of morality and no means of making moral judgments. The starting point for the account of morality and moral judgment in TMS is thus not the isolated individual, or a solitary being wrestling with transcendental issues, but human beings living with others.

Deriving morality from human sociality, however, raises issues of its own. What exactly is human sociality? Is sociality itself a moral notion so that the account of morality in TMS involves a circular argument, in that moral judgments derive from human sociality which itself is explained in moral terms? How does the individual person relate to the wider social world? And how can morality be explained in terms of human sociality without reducing it to mere custom or convention?

This emphasis on human sociality means that TMS includes what might now be described as sociology, social psychology, moral psychology, and moral philosophy. In this it is very much a product of its own time, when the divisions of the modern academy were unthinkable. The questions it addresses are not always

---

1. Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK.

the questions that are familiar to us now, and its presuppositions might seem remote or arcane to us now even where we recognise them. The philosophical literature, in the broadest sense of polite learning, which an educated eighteenth-century audience was expected to be familiar with, from the literature and philosophy of ancient Greece to that of contemporary Europe, is far removed from the intellectual horizons of twenty-first-century readers. Furthermore, the social interactions depicted in TMS are characteristic of the world of eighteenth-century Britain, from the perspective of a male member of a relatively privileged social class.

Reading TMS is thus a complex process. In this paper I narrow the focus to address three main questions. One question concerns the nature of sociality in TMS and how it relates to moral judgments. Another question concerns how moral judgments are made by individual agents. This introduces the crucial role of the impartial spectator. A third question concerns in what sense these judgments, involving the impartial spectator, are moral judgments, which in turn raises the metaethical question of what is morality in TMS.

## II.

If moral judgments derive from the sociality of mankind, the starting point of our investigation has to be *sociality*.<sup>2</sup> A defining feature of sociality in TMS is the spectatoriality of human society (Brown 2011). According to TMS, all are spectators to each other: each person is a spectator to others, and these others are at the same time spectators to that person. Social life is thus construed in terms of an overarching spectatoriality in which mankind lives “in the eyes of the world” (TMS, I.iii.1.15, II.iii.3.2), “open to the eyes of all mankind” (I.iii.2.1), and accessible “to the view of the public” (I.iii.2.1, V.2.10). Spectatorship is an active notion in denoting the way that human beings interact with each other. All human life—from the immediate family, to circles of friends and acquaintances, to public life—is presented as an arena within which individuals live in the eyes of others.

According to this spectatorial model, an individual human being is incomplete without others since, if human beings live “in the eyes of the world,” without

---

2. I differentiate between *sociality* and *sociability*. Sociality is a species characteristic: Mankind lives in communities (large or small, simple or complex) and is dependent for its survival and well-being on the cooperation and coordination that living with others involves, even though living in communities is associated with animosities and war as well as affection and conviviality. Sociability is the harmonious engagement with others, such that a sociable person is one who seeks out and particularly enjoys the company of others. To my knowledge, the terms ‘sociability’ and ‘sociable’ are not used in TMS, although the notions are present in many places; and the term ‘sociality’ is used once, at VI.i.9, in arguing that a prudent person is not much disposed to general sociality or conviviality. ‘Sociality’ at VI.i.9 is what I would term ‘sociability.’

the eyes of others the life that is lived is not fully human. This is illustrated at both ends of the social spectrum. Social emulation and material self-betterment are presented in terms of the need to appear well in the eyes of the world. Smith asks from whence “arises that emulation which runs through all the different ranks of men, and what are the advantages which we propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition?” The answer is: “To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of...” (TMS, I.iii.2.1).<sup>3</sup> Those at the other end of the social spectrum, by contrast, attract disapproving looks or are shunned entirely, cut off from the spectatorial attention of others.<sup>4</sup>

Three aspects of this spectatorial model are crucial for TMS. The first is that agents’ conceptions of themselves are to some degree dependent on how they imagine others see them. This involves a *reflexive* conception of the human agent as a self-conscious being, in that agents have thoughts and feelings about their own thoughts and feelings, treating themselves as an object, ‘me,’ as well as a subject, ‘I.’ The individual agent is thus not a simple unity. The second is that this model involves an *intersubjective* conception of human beings as able (at least to some degree) to share in the thoughts and feelings of others, and to understand that others are similarly able to share in their own thoughts and feelings. The third is that this model ascribes an important role to the active human capacity of the *imagination*. Although human beings have no direct access to others’ thoughts and feelings, they are able to share in the thoughts and feelings of others by means of the imagination. Reflexivity, intersubjectivity, and the imagination are interdependent in this spectatorial model: It is because agents imagine what others are thinking and feeling that those thoughts and feelings of others impact on their understanding of themselves and their own thoughts and feelings, so that it is in interaction with spectators that agents develop as reflexive beings.

The social psychology of TMS is complex. I have tried (in Brown 1994) to capture some of this complex interplay in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of “dialogism” as multi-voicedness, and I have also argued that this multi-voicedness is evident in the style of TMS. As I have noted, in a way the distinction between dialogism and monologism is unstable in that all human discourses and interpretative activities are subject to multi-voicedness, but the distinction does capture something important in the degree to which different voices are in play, answering each other and representing different and possibly irreconcilable points of view. The notion of dialogism thus registers something of what is distinctive

---

3. I consider this passage in Brown (1994, 39–40; 1997, 699–700) and also in note 9 below.

4. This illustrates the distinction between sociality and sociability: Living in the eyes of others is an aspect of human sociality, but those eyes might be dismissive, unfriendly or even hostile.

about human social interaction in TMS; or, rather, the dialogism of TMS illustrates that in interacting with others something distinctively human is enacted.

This sociality of TMS is also what makes morality possible. Self-consciousness and intersubjectivity are not themselves inherently moral, but they make morality possible. To understand this we first need to examine Smith's account of sympathy.

### III.

The notion of sympathy is central to Smith's arguments about moral judgment, yet Smith's notion of sympathy is multidimensional and, unfortunately, the account of sympathy is not clearly laid out in TMS, a point made by Smith's contemporaries.<sup>5</sup> This requires some careful sifting of Smith's arguments in order to differentiate between distinct conceptions of sympathy (Brown 2012).

First there is the sense of sympathy that is closest to the everyday sense of sympathy as an emotional response to others' feelings. This is described in the first paragraph of TMS as pity or compassion for the misery of another (I.i.1.1), but it also includes joyful responses to others' happiness or success, as well as compassion for their sorrow (I.i.1.4–5). This expanded version of the everyday sense of sympathy I have termed *affective sympathy*.

Although affective sympathy introduces TMS, it is not the sense of sympathy that is relevant to the argument about the sympathetic basis of approbation. The core of the process of approbation involves a spectator's comparison of what another feels in a particular situation with his<sup>6</sup> own sympathetic emotions in observing the other's situation: "When the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects" (TMS, I.i.3.1; also see I.iii.1.9 n.\*, II.i.5.11). The process of approbation thus involves a comparison of two emotions.<sup>7</sup>

Identifying and disentangling these two emotions has caused some problems in the scholarly literature. Robert Gordon (1995, 740–741) recognises the impor-

---

5. "I observe that the word Sympathy seems not to have always the same fixed and determinate meaning in this System, nor to be so accurately defined as is necessary to make it the foundation of a distinct Theory of Morals" (Reid 1984, 313; 1997, 75).

6. This paper follows TMS in adopting the pronoun 'he,' as to substitute 'she' for 'he' would assume that the issue of gender makes no difference to Smith's theory.

7. There is a further emotion of the spectator. This is the "sentiment of approbation," which is always pleasurable even if the other two emotions are painful (TMS, I.iii.1.9 n.\*). This note was added to the second edition in response to David Hume's criticism that Smith could not explain the pleasure of approbation where the other's feelings are painful (Smith 1987, 42–44).

tance of the distinction between imagining what the other feels and imagining what one would feel if placed in the person and circumstances of the other, but he argues that Smith misses this distinction so that TMS lacks the conceptual resources that are necessary to sustain its core argument. Other influential scholars do not differentiate between these two imagined feelings. For example, Stephen Darwall (1998, 267) argues that to imagine what another feels is to approve of that feeling, whereas Charles Griswold (1999, 85) argues that one can sympathise with another yet not approve of that other. Although Darwall and Griswold arrive at opposing conclusions about the relation between sympathy and approval, they share an interpretative stance that does not differentiate between the two imagined feelings.

The problem, I suggest, is that scholars mistakenly interpret the second paragraph of TMS (I.i.1.2) as definitive of the notion of sympathy. The purpose of the second paragraph is not to introduce the process of approbation (that comes later) but to explain how it is that we can attain knowledge of what others feel. As the first paragraph of TMS explains affective sympathy in terms of our sympathy with others' feelings, the second paragraph raises and answers the question of how we can have any knowledge of what others are feeling, given that affective sympathy is impossible if we have no idea what others feel. As we have no direct or immediate experience of what others feel, the answer is that the only way in which we can form some idea of what another feels is to imagine what that person is feeling in their situation. Although this passage starts off by saying that we conceive "what we ourselves should feel in the like situation," it goes on to clarify this by saying that we imagine ourselves as the other and by this means imagine what that other feels. With its gruesome example of torture, it argues that "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation...we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations.... His agonies...when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us...' (I.i.1.2). In this example, the spectator imagines what X feels in X's situation by imagining what it is like for X in X's situation. This imagined feeling gives only "some idea" of what another feels, but that is the best we can do. I term this *epistemic sympathy*. It is a key intersubjective notion in TMS.

The spectator's sympathy that is compared with this epistemic sympathy in the process of approbation is what I term *normative sympathy*, which incorporates an element of judgment by the spectator. The clearest statement of normative sympathy is given towards the end of TMS in the context of sympathy for a parent whose only son has died. Here, the spectator imagines, not what X feels in X's situation, but what he [the spectator] would feel if he were X in X's situation:



When I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession, should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die: but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters. My grief, therefore, is entirely upon your account, and not in the least upon my own. (TMS, VII.iii.1.4)

In this passage Smith is contrasting his system with those that deduce the principle of approbation from self-love (e.g., those of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville), so it emphasises that the spectator's grief is not upon his own account but on account of the bereaved father. In condoling with someone upon the death of his son, the spectator thus imagines *not* what he would feel if his own son were to die, but what he would feel if he were the bereaved father. Normative sympathy for X is thus the spectator's *imagining what he would feel if he were X in X's situation*, in contrast with epistemic sympathy, which is the spectator's *imagining what X feels in X's situation*. A difference between normative sympathy and epistemic sympathy lies in whose feelings are being experienced in the spectator's imagination: In the case of normative sympathy, it is the spectator's feelings, though not as himself; in the case of epistemic sympathy, it is the other agent's feelings. In the case of normative sympathy, the spectator functions independently in assessing what he would feel if he were X in X's situation, and it is this independence that provides for the element of judgment in approving (i.e., entering into) or disapproving another's feelings.<sup>8</sup>

Approbation (or disapprobation) of another's feelings thus depends on a comparison of normative sympathy with epistemic sympathy, both of which are imagined feelings for the spectator. The spectator approves the feelings of another to the extent that he can enter into (what he imagines to be) the feelings of that other; that is, to the extent that he can normatively sympathise with (what he imagines to be) the original feelings of the other.

This raises a question of the criteria the spectator applies in normative sympathy. The issue of what the spectator would feel if he were X in X's situation cannot, however, be fully addressed until Part III of TMS, which considers how agents make moral judgments about themselves. That is, in judging the propriety of X's feelings in X's situation, a spectator imagines what it would be proper for himself to feel if he were X in X's situation. The model of normative sympathy in Part I thus has to be interpreted in the light of the analysis of Part III, which concerns judgments about oneself.

---

8. Brown (2012) follows Gordon (1995) in terming epistemic sympathy as "empathy" and normative sympathy as "sympathy."

According to the model of the impartial spectator in Part III, agents make moral judgments about themselves not in terms of actual spectators, but in terms of an imagined well-informed spectator who can judge impartially as between different agents. They judge themselves by imaging the extent to which such an impartial spectator sympathises with their own feelings, that is, can enter into their own sentiments and conduct. A morally competent person is to adopt this impartial viewpoint both when judging their own emotions and conduct *and* when making judgments about others. This is in contrast with someone who relies on actual spectators whose viewpoints might represent prevailing social criteria such as social norms and conventions. There are thus two distinct kinds of normative sympathy, depending on the standpoint of the judgment: *social sympathy* applies where the spectator adopts social criteria in judging himself and others, and *moral sympathy* applies where the spectator adopts the impartial viewpoint in judging himself and others. This distinction between social sympathy and moral sympathy is crucial for the argument that engagement with the impartial spectator enables agents to make moral judgments that are not reliant on prevailing social norms and conventions.

The relation between Parts I and III of TMS is thus not linear but interdependent. The explanation of judgments about oneself by analogy with how one makes judgments about others, as it is presented at the beginning of Part III, is not a simple analogy because it relies on two different distinctions: the distinction between judging others and judging oneself, and the distinction between social sympathy and moral sympathy. It is the latter distinction that requires the impartial spectator, which is first applied to judgments about oneself but then needs to be applied in making judgments about others, in what might be seen as a complex analogy between judging others and judging oneself. It follows that social judgments and moral judgments, whether about oneself or others, are fundamentally different, in that the former rely on social criteria and the latter rely on the impartial spectator.<sup>9</sup>

This distinction between the two kinds of normative sympathy is crucial for TMS and the development of its argument across editions. In the first edition, there was a passage, withdrawn in the second edition, in which moral agents judge themselves as they judge others, in that “we must look at ourselves with the same eyes with which we look at others: we must imagine ourselves not the actors, but the spectators of our own character and conduct” (TMS, p. 111 note *k*).<sup>10</sup> The

---

9. This distinction is similar to that I have made between the “social gaze” and the “moral gaze” (Brown 1997). In the continuation of Smith’s passage cited above (page 234), viz., “To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation” (TMS, I.iii.2.1), the “sympathy” is social sympathy, not moral sympathy. As I argue elsewhere (Brown 1994; 1997), this passage is not proposing that the impartial spectator is sympathetic towards such social aspirations.

10. In the first edition (Smith 1759), this text appears in section III.2, on page 257.

weakness of this phrasing is that it is too close to merely extending the notion of social sympathy to judgments about oneself, in that it requires that we judge ourselves according to how we imagine our actual spectators judge us. Although this process is said to involve “the greatest exertion of candour and impartiality” (*ibid.*), the notion of impartiality seems not to be developed beyond the need to look at ourselves as others look at us. It does not explain how such judgments differ from conventional judgments. This is the core of the criticism made by Sir Gilbert Elliot (see Smith 1987, 48–57). In response to this criticism, the impartial spectator is presented in the second edition not as an actual spectator but as a well-informed imagined spectator who can judge with impartiality between the agent and others (TMS, pp. 129–130 note *r*). Significantly, this imagined spectator is characterised in third-personal terms: “We must view them [those opposite interests], neither from our own place nor yet from his, neither with our own eyes nor yet with his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has no particular connexion with either, and who judges with impartiality between us” (TMS, III.3.3).<sup>11</sup> This third-personal stance, retained in later editions, is what characterises the impartial basis for moral sympathy, in contrast with the second-personal stance of actual spectators.

As a number of scholars have remarked, TMS is systematically influenced by Stoic philosophy (e.g., Raphael and Macfie 1976, 5–10, 18; Sorabji 2014). One aspect of this is that the third-personal stance of the impartial spectator is an analogue of the stance of the Stoic divine Being. In the essay on the Stoic philosophy, presented in Part I in editions one to five, a wise man “regards himself in the light in which he imagines the great Genius of human nature, and of the world regards him. He enters, if I may say so, into the sentiments of that Divine Being, and considers himself as an atom, a particle, of an immense and infinite system...” (TMS, p. 59 note *c–c*). According to Stoicism, the wise man views himself as he imagines the divine Being views him, and this enables him to see himself as merely one among many, an atom in an infinite cosmic system; according to the third-personal portrayal of the impartial spectator, the wise man views himself as he imagines the impartial spectator views him, and this enables him to view himself impartially with respect to others.

The model of the impartial spectator is further developed in the sixth edition and these revisions are accompanied by significant changes in the portrayal of Stoicism. The first five editions had been marked by praise of Stoicism. In the essay on Stoicism in Part I, Stoicism “affords the noblest lessons of magnanimity, is the best school of heroes and patriots, and to the greater part of whose precepts there can be no other objection, except that honourable one, that they teach us to aim

---

11. In the second edition (Smith 1761), this text appears in section III.2, on page 211.

at a perfection altogether beyond the reach of human nature” (TMS, p. 60 note *c–e*). In changes introduced into the second and retained until the fifth edition, the Stoic notion of “perfect propriety” is said to do “little more than unfold our natural ideas of perfection. There is nothing absurd or improper, therefore, in aiming at this perfect self-command. Neither would the attainment of it be useless, but, on the contrary, the most advantageous of all things...” (TMS, p. 141 note *x*). The sixth edition, however, retracts from these endorsements of Stoicism. The essay on Stoicism is shifted from Part I to Part VII, so that the reader is no longer introduced to the commendations of Stoicism early in TMS. A number of passages favourable to Stoicism are withdrawn (such as the passage just cited), and new ones critical of Stoicism are introduced. For example, the Stoic position is criticised for carrying its doctrine “a good deal beyond the just standard of nature and propriety” (III.3.8). Furthermore, the extended discussion of Stoicism in the sixth edition (III.3.11ff.) criticises the Stoic doctrine of “apathy,”<sup>12</sup> and replaces the earlier commendation of Stoic “perfect propriety” with the argument that an acceptable degree of propriety is achieved by taking on the perspective of the impartial spectator.

This change with respect to Stoicism is also reflected in the reworking of the essay on Stoicism in its new position in Part VII (TMS, VII.ii.1.15–47). It retains the passage, quoted above, that the wise man enters into the sentiments of the divine Being (VII.ii.1.20) and it includes another similar passage that “the Stoical wise man endeavoured to enter into the views of the great Superintendant of the universe, and to see things in the same light in which that divine Being beheld them” (VII.ii.1.39). It thus does not change its description of this central tenet of Stoic doctrine. What is different is that the Stoic doctrines are now criticised. The commendatory passage noted above, that the greatest objection to its precepts is the honourable one that it teaches us “to aim at a perfection altogether beyond the reach of human nature,” is removed. Stoicism is succinctly criticised at the end of this section (VII.ii.1.43–47) where it is said that Nature’s plan is altogether different from that of the Stoic philosophy (§43). Nature has not ordained the sublime Stoic contemplation for mankind, except as ultimate consolation for misfortune when all else fails (§44–46). To aim at a perfection beyond the reach of human nature and to attempt to take on the perspective of the “great Superintendant of the universe” are now criticised for going against Nature’s plan and system, which is that human beings should indeed be concerned with that “little department” of their own affairs and their own friends and country. Nature’s remedy for the excessive vehemence of these natural sentiments—“our private, partial and selfish

---

12. According to the Stoic doctrine of apathy, a wise man does not have passions that disturb his mental tranquillity. The Stoic wise man is thus not without any feelings, and he is not apathetic in the modern sense. For a succinct summary of Stoicism and the passions, see Long and Sedley (1987, 410–423).

affections” (§46)—is instead to be found in the impartial spectator, who is always at hand to “overawe them [those passions] into the proper tone and temper of moderation” (§44). These human sentiments as moderated, not eradicated, by the impartial spectator are validated by Nature as fitting for human beings. Here the Stoic doctrine of life according to Nature is turned against itself in denying the appropriateness of the cosmic stance for human beings. As it is the purpose of all systems of morality to direct the judgments of the impartial spectator, however, this still leaves a role for Stoicism in tutoring the feelings of the impartial spectator, as well as providing cosmic contemplation as ultimate consolation in time of misfortune (§47).<sup>13</sup>

Thus in the sixth edition the model of the impartial spectator is presented as Nature’s more humane analogue of the Stoic aspiration to regard oneself from the cosmic stance of the divine Being. The editors of the definitive edition of TMS, D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (1976, 16), point out that Smith made substantial revisions to TMS in the second (1761) and final, sixth (1790) editions, and they argue that by the end of this process Smith had come to rely more on the impartial spectator and less on actual spectators. Although Raphael and Macfie note Smith’s criticisms of Stoicism in the sixth edition, they argue that other changes to the sixth edition suggest that “Smith had now acquired an even warmer regard for Stoicism than he felt in earlier days” (1976, 9–10, 18). The interpretation proposed in this paper highlights two aspects of Smith’s revisions. One aspect is a development of the notion of the impartial spectator from second-personal to third-personal spectator, together with the implicit distinction between social sympathy and moral sympathy. The other aspect is that by the sixth edition the Stoic doctrine is no longer held out as an ideal, even though its influence is still very great, for example in the heightened significance of self-command (TMS, III.3) and in the new Part VI, as noted by Raphael and Macfie (1976, 18). These two movements together open up an enhanced space for the impartial spectator.

Although it is more humanly grounded than its cosmic analogue, the impartial spectator still carries some of the tensions of its Stoic source. There is the element of impossibility about the reflexive aspect of the spectatorial project of self-judgment, where an agent imagines himself and judges himself as from a standpoint that is not his own. In a passage introduced into the second edition and retained thereafter, Smith writes:

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

---

13. Sorabji (2014, 173) argues that in TMS paragraphs VII.ii.1.44–45 Smith “wrote virtually as if the ‘man within the breast,’ one of his descriptions of the impartial spectator, were Stoic.” This neglects the rejection and criticism of Stoicism in paragraphs 43–47.

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. ... But that the judge should, in every respect, be the same with the person judged of, is as impossible, as that the cause should, in every respect, be the same with the effect. (TMS, III.1.6)

This passage is important in elaborating upon the notion that an agent judges reflexively upon himself. In the final sentence, however, the passage states that it is impossible for the judge to be the same with the person judged of. In the case of the impartial spectator as imagined judge in the third person, the distance is even harder to bridge. Furthermore, TMS hesitates to say that agents identify with the impartial spectator. Even the “man of real constancy and firmness, the wise and just man who has been thoroughly bred in the great school of self-command” only “*almost* identifies himself with” and only “*almost* becomes himself that impartial spectator” (TMS, III.3.25, my emphasis). It is only retrospectively, after the feelings of the moment have subsided, that even the “wisest and firmest man” is able to identify with the impartial spectator (III.3.28–30).

I have argued that this “ethical dialogism” of the impartial spectator is characteristic of a range of ethical works, particularly self-interrogative works and explorations of conscience (Brown 1994). This also includes Stoic works such as those by Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus which are cited in TMS. What is striking about these wrestlings with oneself by avowedly Stoic writers is that they are struggles to instantiate the official Stoic position that the soul is unitary, in contrast with the Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines that the soul is structured (tripartite for Plato; dualistic for Aristotle). The ethical dialogism that is a characteristic of the impartial spectator process of moral judgment, even for the wise man, is thus also a characteristic of the Stoic literature that is cited in TMS.

#### IV.

It is sometimes asked whether moral judgments are endorsed by the impartial spectator because they are right, or whether moral judgments are right because they are endorsed by the impartial spectator (see Harman 2000, 185, 193). Similarly, a distinction has been made between a heuristic function for the impartial spectator and a constitutive function, such that according to the former the impartial spectator enables agents to discover what is right, whereas according to the latter the impartial spectator constitutes what is right (see Griswold 1999, 145). According to these accounts the role of the impartial spectator is resolved by the argument that agents attain the moral outlook by in part becoming an impartial spectator or by

attempting to identify with and become the impartial spectator (Harman 2000, 193; Griswold 1999, 145). But if agents cannot fully identify with the impartial spectator (except in retrospect), then a dialogic interpretation of the impartial spectator provides a means of interpreting its significance as a *process* of making moral judgments, the process of moral judging, rather than in terms of the outcome of the content of the judgments. The impartial spectator is thus a metaphor for a process of internal debate and self-interrogation in which the agent sometimes has to strive against what seem to be the limits of what is humanly possible.

This ethical dialogism of the impartial spectator is a consequence of two contrasting structures of argument in TMS, sentimental and Stoic. According to the sentimental structure of argument, human beings are creatures of emotion. As the opening paragraph argues, human beings are naturally concerned about the well-being of others, and this affective sympathy runs through social as well as familial life. TMS also illustrates how these feelings sometimes incorporate judgments about the feelings and actions of others and oneself. These normative sentiments are not natural feelings in the sense that affective sympathy is held to be natural, because they are tutored feelings that develop in, and are trained and influenced by, the ordinary course of interactions with others. According to the Stoic structure of argument, however, emotions that disturb mental tranquillity are to be avoided. Much of TMS, especially its emphasis on self-command and moderation of sentiment, is predicated on the Stoic structure of argument, even though in the final edition Stoicism is criticised for its notion of perfect propriety, its celebration of apathy, and its aspiration to adopt the stance of the divine Being. The reconciliation of these two structures of argument in the sixth edition is provided by the developed model of the impartial spectator, which is presented as Nature's reconciliation between the competing demands of the two structures of argument. Ethical dialogism in TMS, as represented by the metaphor (or model) of the impartial spectator, thus involves a process of attempting to reconcile *personal sentiment* with *impersonal impartiality*.

This emphasis on the deliberative process of making moral judgments, rather than on the content of the moral judgment, has a number of consequences for interpreting the impartial spectator. If the impartial spectator is a metaphor for the process of reconciling personal sentiment with impersonal impartiality, this suggests that in principle there is not necessarily any single 'right' thing to do, no single right answer as such. Thus is illustrated by an important distinction in TMS between virtues that cannot be codified into rules and so require judgment, and those that are codified, such as the rules of justice and rules of conventional behaviour. It is the former that require independent judgment. This distinction is illustrated, using a linguistic analogy, by contrasting those rules "which critics lay down for the attainment of what is sublime and elegant in composition" and



those that are “the rules of grammar.” The former are open to interpretation and judgment by the agent, whereas the latter are codified as rules that must be followed to the letter (TMS, II.ii.1, III.6, VII.iv.1). The former sort of virtues are “in many respects loose and inaccurate,” “admit of many exceptions,” and are “vague and indeterminate” (III.6.9); in the practice of such virtues conduct “should rather be directed by a certain idea of propriety, by a certain taste for a particular tenor of conduct, than by any regard to a precise maxim or rule” (III.6.10).

Furthermore, the process of deliberation takes place in particular circumstances, and these particularities are also relevant to an agent’s deliberations. This emphasis in TMS is illustrated by Smith’s recommendation of literature as a means of exploring the sentimental niceties of moral judgment in particular situations (III.3.14).<sup>14</sup> These particularities are also relevant in moral dilemmas. In the case of a moral dilemma characterised by opposing beneficent affections, the impartial spectator, in contrast to casuistic rules, is able to accommodate “to all the different shades and gradations of circumstance, character, and situation, to differences and distinctions which, though not imperceptible, are, by their nicety and delicacy, often altogether undefinable” (VI.ii.1.22). As an example in literature, TMS cites the “beautiful tragedy” of Voltaire’s *Orphan of China*, which is set in China at the time of the invasion of Genghis Khan, and in which a married couple are faced with the terrible prospect of sacrificing their own son in order to save the Emperor’s son (ibid.). Here it is the mother, not the father, who fights against the sacrifice of their son, thereby introducing issues of gender and parenthood into the specifics of moral deliberation.<sup>15</sup>

Accepted rules of behaviour are necessary for the good order of society. TMS expresses doubts as to whether the “coarse clay” of mankind is up to the demands of moral judgment proper, and so these rules of behaviour, including the rules of justice, are necessary for an orderly society. Although merely following the rules, without the appropriate sentiments that justify the rule, is second-best, the “sacred regard to general rules” enables most people to live with “tolerable decency” most of the time (III.5.1–2).

Emphasising the significance of the process of making moral judgments is suggestive of an imperfect process; or rather the notion of perfection, and therefore the opposite notion of imperfection, do not apply. Adjectives used in TMS such as *loose*, *inaccurate*, *vague*, and *indeterminate* capture the sense of the openness of the process of judging, in that there is not necessarily a right answer or specific judgment that ought to be made in the circumstances of the case. Instead, the moral agent is guided by his sentiments and “by a certain idea of propriety, by

---

14. Brown (1995) explores some aspects of ethical dialogism in works of literature.

15. Brown (2005) offers a reading of Voltaire’s *Orphan of China* in the context of TMS.

a certain taste for a particular tenor of conduct” (TMS, III.6.10). This suggests that moral judging is by its nature messy and incomplete. It also presupposes that the moral agent is free to decide what to do, without coercion (TMS, II.ii.1.3, II.ii.1.7; Brown 1994, 37).<sup>16</sup> The process of moral judging is thus inevitably affected by local customs, fashions, economic development, and historical period (TMS, V.2); these are not an aberration from true judgments but an inevitable part of the human process of judging, which is always local and situated, never from a cosmic standpoint. This does not deny a basis for critical engagement with other moral systems, since, even given economic or historical factors, the making of judgments is open to question about the balance between personal sentiment and impersonal impartiality.

The rules of natural justice can also be interpreted in terms of this process of moral judging, in so far as these rules are understood as the outcome of previous (historical) judgments that achieve a balance between personal sentiment and impersonal impartiality. In so far as the positive laws of a country are in accord with such principled judgments in the past, then these laws are in accord with natural justice. Patently, many laws are not in accord with natural justice, as chronicled in the *Wealth of Nations* and the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. This interpretation also suggests a means of reconciling the apparently universal aspiration of natural jurisprudence with the socio-historical and contextual approach of the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. Although Smith committed himself to writing a work of natural jurisprudence, this volume was never completed. We can only guess at what might have been Smith’s reconciliation, or attempted reconciliation, but his mature jurisprudence would have had to take into account the changes to the impartial spectator model which Smith made in the final edition of TMS, twenty-five years after the student notes on the jurisprudence lectures.

## V.

The questions raised in the Introduction to this paper can now be directly addressed.

The sociality depicted in TMS provides the basis for the morality of the impartial spectator, but this sociality is not itself moral, so there is no circular reasoning involved. The sociality in TMS incorporates the spectatoriality of human interconnectedness, the self-consciousness of individual agents, and a more or less workable degree of intersubjectivity such that agents imagine what others feel and understand that others imagine what they themselves are feeling. These features are

---

16. Brown (2009) discusses agency and freedom in TMS and the *Wealth of Nations*.

inextricably linked to approbation based on social sympathy, which is the sentiment that registers the conventional judgments of society and ensures that the society in question functions according to its conventional criteria of behaviour.

Moral sympathy is more complex in that judgment is exercised over the social criteria underlying social sympathy. The essence of the morality indicated by the metaphor of the impartial spectator is that agents attempt to reconcile personal sentiment with impersonal impartiality, thus providing a model of moral judging that is universal even though there is no such figure of the “impartial spectator” whose particular judgments are universal. This allows Smith to acknowledge the role of custom and fashion in morality, whilst also placing bounds on it. The resulting notion of morality can be interpreted as a mellower and more humane derivative of the Stoic doctrine, one that incorporates a place for moderated human sentiments—but the recognition that *attempting* to reconcile personal sentiment with impersonal impartiality, even where earnestly entered into, is not necessarily the same as reconciling them, registers the messy, incomplete and sometimes painful process this involves.

## References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M.** 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Brown, Vivienne.** 1994. *Adam Smith's Discourse: Canonicity, Commerce and Conscience*. London: Routledge.
- Brown, Vivienne.** 1995. The Moral Self and Ethical Dialogism: Three Genres. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 28: 276–299.
- Brown, Vivienne.** 1997. Dialogism, the Gaze and the Emergence of Economic Discourse. *New Literary History* 28: 697–710.
- Brown, Vivienne.** 2005. Moralische Dilemmata und der Dialogismus von Adam Smiths *Theorie der moralischen Gefühle* [Moral Dilemmas and Dialogism in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*]. In *Adam Smith als Moralphilosoph* [Adam Smith as Moral Philosopher], eds. Christel Fricke and Hans-Peter Schütt, 190–213. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Brown, Vivienne.** 2009. Agency and Discourse: Revisiting the Adam Smith Problem. In *Elgar Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Jeffrey T. Young (ed.), 52–72. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Brown, Vivienne.** 2011. Intersubjectivity, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the Prisoners' Dilemma. *Adam Smith Review* 6: 172–190.

- Brown, Vivienne.** 2012. Intersubjectivity and Moral Judgment in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In *Intersubjectivity and Objectivity in Adam Smith and Edmund Husserl*, eds. Christel Fricke and Dagfinn Føllesdal, 243–272. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Darwall, Stephen.** 1998. Empathy, Sympathy, Care. *Philosophical Studies* 89: 261–282.
- Gordon, Robert M.** 1995. Sympathy, Simulation, and the Impartial Spectator. *Ethics* 105: 727–742.
- Griswold, Charles L.** 1999. *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Harman, Gilbert.** 2000. *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Long, A. A., and D. N. Sedley.** 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Raphael, D. D., and A. L. Macfie.** 1976. Introduction to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, by Adam Smith, 1–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reid, Thomas.** 1984. Thomas Reid on Adam Smith's Theory of Morals. Edited by J. C. Stewart-Robertson and David Fate Norton. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45(2): 309–321.
- Reid, Thomas.** 1997. A Sketch of Dr Smith's Theory of Morals. In *On Moral Sentiments: Contemporary Responses to Adam Smith*, ed. John Reeder, 69–88. Bristol: Thoemmes Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1759. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1st ed. London: A. Millar.
- Smith, Adam.** 1761. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 2nd ed. London: A. Millar. [Link](#)
- Smith, Adam.** 1976a [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976b [1776]. *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*, eds. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1978. *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, eds. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1987. *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, eds. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sorabji, Richard.** 2014. *Moral Conscience Through the Ages: Fifth Century BCE to the Present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

### About the Author



**Vivienne Brown** is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Intellectual History at The Open University, UK. She is the author of *Adam Smith's Discourse: Canonicity, Commerce and Conscience* (1994) and the founding editor of *The Adam Smith Review*, for which she edited the first five volumes. She is currently working on issues of agency, sociality, social norms, and rationality. Her email address is [v.w.brown@open.ac.uk](mailto:v.w.brown@open.ac.uk).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5910>



# Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator

María Alejandra Carrasco<sup>1</sup> and Christel Fricke<sup>2</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

## Human interaction as the raw material of ethics

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

---

1. Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 7820436 Santiago, Chile. This research is supported by Project Fondecyt 1141208.

2. Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature, University of Oslo, N-0315 Oslo, Norway.

3. All parenthetical citations in this article are to Smith (1976/1790).

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

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

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

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



Our naive moral realism and our trust in being provided with normal emotional dispositions make us expect that other people will agree with the moral judgments we pass on others. But this expectation will not always be met. On the contrary, moral disagreement is a common phenomenon. How do we respond to the encounter of moral disagreement with other people? We take it seriously: Our naive moral realism makes us assume that, whenever there is moral disagreement, at least one of the disagreeing parties must be mistaken. And since we do not easily give up on our trust in the propriety of our own emotional dispositions, we assume that it is the other who has made a mistake. And so does the other. In order to settle a moral disagreement, we enter into a process of communication—a sympathetic process. But the wish to defend our naive moral realism and our trust in the normality (the propriety and commonness) of our emotional dispositions is not the only reason motivating us to engage in a sympathetic process: We suffer from being in a state of moral disagreement with others and long for settling it so that we can enjoy the pleasure of mutual sympathy. “[N]othing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary” (I.i.2.1).

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

Why is moral disagreement so common? What explains its origin? One major source of moral disagreement is the strong impact of our self-love on our responsive sentiments: “Every man...is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man” (II.ii.2.1), and we trust that the same applies to women. Self-love is a natural source of partiality; whenever we find our self-interest impacted by another’s action and its consequences, we tend to forget that we are “but one of the multitude”: “[T]o the selfish and original passions of human nature, the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance...than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connexion” (II.ii.2.1, III.3.3). In other

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The sympathetic process and the impartial spectator**

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

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

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

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

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

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

## From the unconcerned to the impartial spectator

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

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

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

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

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

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



## From the impartial spectator to moral conscience

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## References

**Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## About the Authors



**María Alejandra Carrasco** is Professor of Philosophy at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in Santiago. She is the author of numerous papers on Adam Smith, including ones recently published in the journals *Crítica*, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, the *Journal of Value Inquiry*, and the *Adam Smith Review*. She is co-editor of the monographic issue on Adam Smith for the journal *Empresa y Humanismo* (2009) and author of the book *Consecuencialismo: Por qué no* (1999, Eunsu). Her email address is [mcarrasr@uc.cl](mailto:mcarrasr@uc.cl).



**Christel Fricke** holds a Ph.D. in philosophy and a Habilitation from Heidelberg University. Since 2003, she has been a professor of philosophy at the University of Oslo, Norway. From 2007–2010, she was the founding director of the Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature. She is a fellow of the Norwegian Academy of Science and of the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters. She has written extensively on moral theory, aesthetics, and the philosophical Enlightenment,

as in articles such as “The Challenges of Pride and Prejudice: Adam Smith and Jane Austen on Moral Education” (*Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 2014). She defends a constructivist account of morality, strongly inspired by the work of Smith. She is co-editor of *Intersubjectivity and Objectivity in Adam Smith and Edmund Husserl* (with Dagfinn Føllesdal, 2012, Ontos Verlag) and *Adam Smith and the Conditions of a Moral Society* (a special issue of the *Adam Smith Review*), and she is also editor of *The Ethics of Forgiveness* (2011, Routledge). Her email address is [christel.fricke@csmn.uio.no](mailto:christel.fricke@csmn.uio.no).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5911>



## Impartial Spectating and the Price Analogy

Douglas J. Den Uyl<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

A long time ago, when I was first starting to read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (henceforth TMS), an economist friend of mine told me that the impartial spectator was akin to prices. Over the years this insight has stayed with me.

In some respects such a conception is obviously false. Prices don't spectate, and they are not even conscious, so clearly it would seem that whatever Smith means by the impartial spectator could not be analogous to prices. And yet at least one important characteristic about prices is that they are completely impartial, being the product of no one in particular and yet everyone. Whatever else might be said, figuring out what sort of impartiality Smith is referring to could be even more critical than figuring out what he might mean by "spectator." Moreover, prices are a function of social interaction just as the principles and rules of morality are for Smith. They are, as it were, a socially embedded yet impersonal phenomenon. Hence, despite the apparent dissimilarity, the analogy between the impartial spectator and prices seems to me worthy of exploration, largely because of this combination of social interaction and impersonality. I shall admit upfront that I am neither completely clear nor completely certain just what Smith always means by the "impartial spectator" and whether he uses the term in a consistent way throughout TMS. Hopefully, exploring the price analogy will be helpful in reaching an understanding of at least some aspects of the impartial spectator.

We might begin with what the impartial spectator is not. The impartial spectator is not one's conscience or probably even, as Smith puts it, "the man

---

1. Liberty Fund, Inc., Indianapolis, IN 46250.



within the breast.” In making this claim, I am in no way suggesting that there is not textual evidence for their identity. Consider the following:

But though man has, in this manner, been rendered the immediate judge of mankind, he has been rendered so only in the first instance; and an appeal lies from his sentence to a much higher tribunal, to the tribunal of their own consciences, to that of the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator, to that of the man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of their conduct. (TMS, III.2.32)

This passage is certainly not the only place where conscience or the man within the breast seems to be closely linked or identified with the impartial spectator (see, e.g., TMS, III.3.4, III.3.38). But note that the identification would have been closer in the passage just cited had Smith omitted the word “supposed.”<sup>2</sup>

One passage that I think can function as a partial foundation for a coherent interpretation is the following sentence, tossed off somewhat quickly, but which seems to allow for the important conclusion that the impartial spectator and conscience or the man within the breast are not the same.<sup>3</sup>

...the prudent man is always both supported and rewarded by the entire approbation of the impartial spectator, and the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast. (TMS, VI.i.11)

Whoever or whatever the impartial spectator might be, this passage opens the door to the notion that we should not equate the impartial spectator with the man within the breast. The latter is the “representative” of the former, leaving us with the problem of just what is being represented. Clearly something else is going on, something which precedes the representation we develop within our breast. Further evidence for the separation is provided in the sentences which directly follow the passage quoted. Here the impartial spectator surveys multiple actions by multiple individuals across time (TMS, VI.i.11). A conscience, by contrast, would seem to be limited to the single individual who possesses it.

The importance of not equating the two notions of conscience and the impartial spectator will be discussed in a moment, but for now we might ask whether the man within the breast is equivalent to one’s conscience. If we look

---

2. Smith very often uses the term *supposed* in connection with the impartial spectator. Yet whereas we might use the term today to mean something close to ‘pretended,’ Smith uses it more in the sense of ‘presented,’ or ‘being present.’

3. As readers of Smith know, citing passages provides evidence, but not conclusiveness. There is much room for interpretation of—and ambiguity within—Smith to require that readers be circumspect in their claims about what Smith is saying on the basis of any given passage.

at the passage with which we began, it would perhaps allow differentiating the conscience, the impartial spectator, the well-informed spectator, and the man within the breast (TMS, III.2.32). In this regard, I would suggest that conscience and the man within the breast are probably of a piece, though the latter is somewhat broader in scope, including both conscience and the formulation of judgments based on conscience. No doubt spectating occurs within us, but the “breast” suggests more heart than head, which in turn suggests more of a *result* of any spectating than spectating itself.

The well-informed spectator and the impartial spectator—at least in their highest forms—also seem to be of a piece, but if they are, they may or may not link up with the other two terms, despite the natural reading of the passage as suggesting a commonality to all four terms. For example, having a conscience of some sort does not necessarily require that one be well-informed. Assuming that a division between “conscience” on the one hand and “well-informed” on the other holds, we are likely to have two forms of impartiality as well. One form would be simply having no particular interest in a situation or putting oneself into a frame of mind where one ignores one’s interest. The other form, using a term from the first passage cited, would be an even “higher” form of impartiality described below. That higher form, by the way, may extend all the way to God, depending on one’s view of Smith’s commitment to God and religion. But that issue will not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that if God is the quintessential impartial spectator, the view offered below is not inconsistent with, and is in some ways modeled after, that view.

The four terms mentioned above are no doubt meant to be grouped together even if they might not be identical. It is true that one could be impartial, in the sense of not having a particular stake or interest in a situation, without being well-informed. It is also true that one might also be impartial in this way without having much of a conscience. But the conscience that is the man within the breast necessarily exhibits impartiality, at least in the form of tamping down one’s own narrower interests, because conscience by nature is generalized and also because it overrides such interests (TMS, III.3.4). Moreover, conscience also carries with it the disposition of at least *trying* to be well-informed, even granting that having a conscience and being well-informed are logically distinct.

So the four terms on balance are natural allies. They apply jointly to impartial spectating about the actual actions and characters of individuals. Consequently, to offer more appropriate moral judgments for Smith, one must put oneself in a position where one tries to obtain fuller information, abstract oneself from one’s own particular interests, and consult the moral principles that inform one’s conscience. After the manner of calling a provisional chairperson the ‘acting’ chair, perhaps we might think of this as the acting impartial spectator, that is, a man within

the breast called upon in practice to represent the higher impartial spectator in the making of actual moral judgments.

My interest in the price analogy, however, concerns the higher impartial spectator. To make this case it must be plausible to distinguish types of impartial spectating (that is, to distinguish *higher* from *acting*). The passage with which we opened<sup>4</sup> appears in a section where Smith himself allows the impartial spectator to be distinguished into two parts:

[T]his demigod within the breast appears, like the demigods of the poets, though partly of immortal, yet partly too of mortal extraction. When his judgments are steadily and firmly directed by the sense of praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness, he seems to act suitably to his divine extraction: But when he suffers himself to be astonished and confounded by the judgments of ignorant and weak man, he discovers his connexion with mortality, and appears to act suitably, rather to the human, than to the divine, part of his origin. (TMS, III.2.32)

Just after this passage Smith refers to a still higher tribunal of the “all-seeing Judge” to which we might finally appeal (III.2.33). But we need only focus upon the “divine” portion of our demigod to make our point here. In this respect our thesis is quite simple and perhaps also a bit surprising: *Impartial spectating is not in the first instance, or essentially, about spectating on the actions and characters of others. It is instead spectating upon the principles of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, which are then applied to the actions and characters of others.* There is a hint of support for this thesis in the passage just cited. The higher or “divine” portion is so defined because the impartial spectator senses the principles of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness alone and in pure form. The word “sense” suggests, moreover, a direct link to the imagination, and with the word “spectator” that link evokes the visual. The “mortal” part applies to the active representations we make of the divine portion in practice, as just mentioned above.

I take a central pillar of support for my thesis to come from Smith’s discussion of the distinction between the love of praise and that of praiseworthiness and his claim that the former is a function of the latter.

[S]o far is the love of praise-worthiness from being derived altogether from that of praise; that the love of praise seems, at least in a great measure, to be derived from that of praise-worthiness. (TMS, III.2.3)

---

4. Though appearing in numerous places, the discussion of the impartial spectator seems most complete in this section on duty (TMS, Part III). That may be no accident, since acting out of duty does seem most like acting as an impartial spectator.

If the love of praise is a function of the love of praiseworthiness, then a grasp of what is praiseworthy must not only precede the love of praise but must be the basis for any evaluation of actual praise (and similarly for blameworthiness and blame). Just above this passage Smith mentions the impartial spectator and how we must put ourselves in that frame of mind to consider whether we ourselves are admirable, and not simply admired (III.2.3). Thus, we actively evaluate ourselves through the same process we evaluate others. In doing so we are outwardly oriented from the outset, that is, our desire to incorporate ourselves into society manifests itself in a search for standards ‘out there’ that can guide us in the various ways in which we need to integrate ourselves. The view that our love of praise is derived from our love of praiseworthiness implies both that our principal motivation is to discover evaluative standards of actions and character in order to know how to fit into society, and that when we do evaluate actions we do so by means of the standards we have gleaned through our spectating on those very standards.

The jurisdiction of the man within, is founded altogether in the desire of praise-worthiness, and in the aversion to blame-worthiness; in the desire of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we love and admire in other people; and in the dread of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we hate and despise in other people. (TMS, III.2.32)

The motivating factor in our love of praiseworthiness is in Smith’s view a primal desire that we all have “to be fit for society” (TMS, III.2.7). Praiseworthiness is the principled expression of what it means to be fit for society, and that is why we seek it almost from the beginning. Notice too that this passage suggests that the process is also somehow rooted in numerous interactions of sentiment among individuals.

The principles to which we look to guide us in being fit for society are reflected through the sentiments of the members of society, so we look to the general expression of those sentiments as reflecting the principles needed to guide our own actions as we try to fit ourselves into the social order. People, Smith notes, generally seek to “reconcile themselves, at least in their own imagination, to the natural sentiments of mankind” (TMS, III.2.9).<sup>5</sup> Our spectating on these principles is largely an act of imagination upon the terms that govern whether and how one would fit into society. Those terms define one’s worthiness to so fit into society and represent the normative principles embedded in the value structure of society generally. Once grasped, we then apply them to ourselves and others.

---

5. The cited phrase is not used in exactly the same way I am using it here, though the more general usage seems to me justified.

This is why Smith says in TMS that the man within the breast is the *representative* of the impartial spectator. We first draw our conclusions about the nature of what is praiseworthy and blameworthy, and then we represent those conclusions in the form of a conscience or as the judgments of the man within the breast. We render these evaluations through our imagination so that we may not only readily grasp them but also feel them, and thus convey them as sentiments to which we and others might “correspond,” as Smith uses that concept in the opening parts of TMS. It must be imagination and not reason that is central here, first because this is a process that must be common to all (reason is less readily deployed than imagination), and secondly because imagination can be associated with sentiments in a way reason cannot. It is by means of the imagination that we integrate circumstances, sentiments, and principles when we contemplate the actions and characters of others or ourselves as we all interact. Noting this point about the centrality of imagination also links our discussion to the pivotal role imagination plays more generally in Smith’s philosophy (see, e.g., Smith 1980; TMS, IV.2).

It may now perhaps seem as though we are some distance from our opening analogy to prices, but the similarities can be made clear. Prices are, as it were, ‘out there,’ and we as consumers spectate about them as we consider how to behave with respect to them. They belong to no one, yet are present everywhere. Any given individual might try to offer a new or different price, but that same individual would be unable to affect the general price level in a dramatic way. Prices are a social function in the sense of being the generalized result of an untold number of social interactions. Prices are also not Platonic forms or natural objects, but rather are predicated upon the human interactions that give them standing. Take away those interactions and prices disappear, but given those interactions prices appear to be almost as objective and outside of us as a Platonic form. They are influenced by the subtleties of individual actions, but controlled by no one.

It seems easy enough now to see the power of the analogy. The values we use to make moral judgments also seem to be objective, outside of us, even though they too would be for Smith a kind of distillation of the values circulating generally and permanently in society at large. Given a disposition to be a member of society, our first acts would be to imagine what we need to do to fit in, rather than to merely look for praise.

If he would act so as that the impartial spectator may enter into the principles of his conduct, which is what *of all things he has the greatest desire to do*, he must, upon this, as upon all other occasions, humble the arrogance of his self-love, and bring it down to something which other men can go along with. (TMS, II.ii.2.1, my emphasis)

We need, in other words, first to identify the principles of praiseworthiness (and blameworthiness) apart from the usual motivation of action, namely, self-interest.<sup>6</sup> We have the greatest desire to do this because that desire is a function of our desire to be fit for society. Impartiality is actually built in to the process. The act of looking for a standard is of its nature impartial because, like prices, our interest does not determine the standard itself, any more than a price we may want to set determines the general price level. Moreover we must grasp—that is spectate about—what those standards of value are before we can apply them. At the higher level, then, ‘impartial spectating’ just is what one is doing when one comprehends the standards needed for evaluating actions and character. When one drops down to the human level, however, all the difficulties of application become apparent and impartial spectating becomes active through the deployment of the four terms mentioned earlier.

It is important not to misunderstand here. As Smith points out in the early chapters of TMS, our initial acts toward fitting in are motivated by the desire for a “correspondence of sentiments” with those around us (I.i.4.6). That desire for correspondence triggers a search for standards we can then use as we encounter numerous others and look for those places in which we are able to cooperate, given our own talents and resources. Hence our first acts of spectating or socializing may not be our acts of *impartial* spectating. We may be correspondence seekers and partial spectators before we become impartial ones. Nevertheless, for reasons given, we are strongly motivated to impartially spectate. Our principal gaze for Smith is then turned upon the norms of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness—our principal gaze is, then, our gaze upon principles.

Analogies all break down somewhere—they are, after all, not identities. One possible area of dissimilarity may be the relative stability of our sentiments as compared to that of price levels in actual markets. In the foregoing account I have treated the impartial spectator as largely a price taker. I look at the impartial spectator that way because that is how the text strikes me. In the real world, however, prices are a function of numerous bids and offers, making for a system more dynamic than that represented here with respect to the principles of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. Perhaps this difference reflects a difference between moral norms and prices in a market. Perhaps the difference is a function of a misreading on my part. In some ways, the interpretation makes little difference, for even if I am right that impartial spectating at the “divine” level is like price taking, a very interesting thought experiment would be to loosen the tightness of the price taking analogy and then imagine the development of moral norms on that

---

6. For some empirical evidence that people separate thinking about moral norms from actions, see Chituc et al. 2016.

basis. In other words, even if Smith's view of the impartial spectator was analogous to only a price taker, there is much to be gained by imagining a more market-like understanding of prices, where bids and offers dominate, and then applying that model to moral rules.

Yet even on my reading of the impartial spectator, there are complicating factors in the real world regarding moral standards that could be as upsetting to the stability of moral norms as any disturbances in the price level. Smith identifies these when he speaks of the "irregularities" of our moral sentiments and when he speaks of the influence of fashion and custom upon our sentiments (TMS, II.iii, V). Active impartial spectating may thus be a complicated matter, but our argument here has been that those complications are preceded by the "divine" portion of the demigod within us grasping first standards of appropriateness that in turn inform our judgments of actions and characters. Like prices, those standards of appropriateness are dependent upon a history of innumerable efforts to achieve correspondences of sentiment by multiple actors which, when achieved, reinforce the standards themselves through expressions of sentiment. "[A]ll the...passions of human nature, seem proper and are approved of, when the heart of every impartial spectator entirely sympathizes with them, when every indifferent bystander entirely enters into, and goes along with them" (II.i.2.2).

## References

- Chituc, Vladimir, Paul Henne, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, and Felipe De Brigard.** 2016. Blame, Not Ability, Impacts Moral "Ought" Judgments for Impossible Actions: Toward an Empirical Refutation of "Ought" Implies "Can." *Cognition* 150: 20–25.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790]. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1980 [1795]. *The History of Astronomy*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman. In *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. S. Skinner, 33–105. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



## About the Author



**Douglas J. Den Uyl** attended Kalamazoo College (B.A. in Political Science and Philosophy), the University of Chicago (M.A. in Political Science), and Marquette University (Ph.D. in Philosophy). He has published essays or books on Spinoza, Smith, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, and others. With Douglas Rasmussen he has authored *Norms of Liberty* and *The Perfectionist Turn*. He co-founded the American Association for the Philosophic Study of Society, The North American Spinoza Society, and The International Adam Smith Society. He taught Philosophy and was Department Chair and Full Professor at Bellarmine University before coming to Liberty Fund where he is now Vice President of Educational Programs. His email address is [ddenuyl@libertyfund.org](mailto:ddenuyl@libertyfund.org).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5912>



# Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator: Symposium Remarks

Samuel Fleischacker<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

The prologue provided by Dan Klein (2016) posed eight questions. My remarks are set out in five segments, which speak to the eight questions, but not in direct serial fashion.

---

The impartial spectator first enters Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) as a bit of common sense, something that we are supposed to recognize ourselves as using in daily life. Unrestrained anger, says Smith early in Book I, is "detestable." What we admire is the person who suffers "the greatest injuries" while responding to them only with the controlled indignation that "an impartial spectator" would feel towards such injuries (TMS, 24). It is perhaps no accident that the phrase appears in the course of a discussion of resentment, a passion of which Smith thinks we need to be especially wary.<sup>2</sup> But Smith invokes the impartial spectator as well, in these early pages, when discussing the need to restrain our selfishness (78, 82–83), and implies, at least, that it should govern our grief. Whenever we need to control our emotions, we should, and generally do, try to lower them to "that pitch of moderation, in which the impartial spectator can...enter into them" (26).

The "impartial spectator," in these contexts, is clearly supposed to be a familiar notion. It appears without fanfare, as if it had no technical significance, and appeal to its judgments seems not terribly different from appealing to the judg-

---

1. Department of Philosophy, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607.

2. Its third appearance in the book also concerns resentment (TMS, 38).

ments of *actual* spectators. The phrase first appears in the course of a discussion initiated by Smith's remark that "spectators" naturally try to enter imaginatively into the circumstances of the people they are trying to sympathize with, while the latter try to "assume [the circumstances] of the spectators" (TMS, 22). Nothing about "impartial" spectators shows up until pretty late in this discussion, and Smith similarly moves from speaking in one sentence of "every impartial spectator" to speaking in the next of "every human heart," as if these were the same thing, at the beginning of Part II (69). The word "impartial" seems here to be thrown in just as a reminder that, when looking to spectators as a guide to how we should feel or act, we of course don't want to rely on a spectator who happens to be our mother, or best friend, or bitter rival in love or business. When we look to the sympathetic feelings of actual spectators as a way of correcting for the excesses or errors in our own feelings, we want impartial spectators rather than partial ones. But again, this point is supposed to be a bit of uncontroversial common sense, not something that requires us to engage in abstruse philosophical argument. And the impartial spectators we look to here are real people—just not our mothers or hated rivals—with real passions and capacities, not Platonic paragons of virtue or moral judgment.

I think it is essential to bear in mind these humdrum beginnings when we come to Smith's more formal account of the impartial spectator in Book III. We get there by way of the process by which we are led to develop a notional impartial spectator inside ourselves, in response to the ill-informed or biased criticisms that actual others often make of our feelings or actions, and then to use this notional standpoint as a basis for our moral judgments of everyone. This notional and internal standard is eventually called a "demigod within the breast," with a "divine" as well as a human origin (TMS, 131).

Despite these last remarks—to which I'll return in a moment—I think Smith's impartial spectator remains throughout an idea culled, if refined a bit, from our experience of the real human beings around us, with nothing of the pure rationality and dispassion to be found in, say, the "ideal observer" of Roderick Firth (1952). In the first place, the impartial spectator *enters into our passions* rather than lacking all passions; it also, in Book II, shares some of the "irregularities" of our everyday judgments (TMS, 97). As I've indicated, moreover, on the most natural way of reading TMS, the impartial spectator of Book III seems clearly to be a further development of the eminently human character alluded to casually in Books I and II. The account in Book III of how we develop the impartial spectator within ourselves also draws on the psychology of ordinary people. Smith says that the impartial spectator is "partly of immortal, *yet partly too of mortal* extraction," and to have a "human" as well as a "divine" origin (131, my emphasis): I think he clearly

intends it to derive from spectators we have actually known, and to be only a partial, not a full, idealization of these actual spectators.

This reading fits with Smith's philosophical method in general, as I understand it. Smith always tries to draw philosophical systems out of everyday thought, rather than to impose a rational grid on that thought from above,<sup>3</sup> and he is particularly insistent that *moral* philosophy be conducted that way (TMS, 313–314). It would therefore be surprising if he called on us to correct our ordinary moral judgments by way of a Platonic ideal. It makes far better sense that he would try to draw out that corrective from *within* our ordinary forms of moral judgment.

Why, then, the language of “demigods” and “divinity”? Well, first we should note that Smith also calls *actual* human beings God's “viceregent upon earth, [appointed] to superintend the behaviour of [their] brethren” (TMS, 130). Nature has set things up so that we constantly “censure” and “applaud” one another: judge one another, and enforce our judgments with favorable or unfavorable attitudes. If nature has been created by a God,<sup>4</sup> then, this process of judgment should represent at least a first pass at God's judgment of us; it certainly *feels* to us, if we believe in God, like a sign of how God may see us. And the judgment of our own consciences—of the “supposed impartial and well-informed spectator” within our breasts—is a second pass at that judgment: a “higher tribunal” that comes closer to how we think God may judge us (131). The impartial spectator is thus a *representative* of God, if God has any representative in nature, a pointer towards God's judgment—but not itself (fully) divine. It is a “demigod,” not a full god, half human/mortal and half divine/immortal, and when we are unsure which of its aspects we are hearing from, we appeal (or *may* appeal, if we are believers) “to a still higher tribunal, ...that of the all-seeing Judge of the world, whose eye can never be deceived, and whose judgments can never be perverted” (ibid.). 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.

In short, Smith's impartial spectator is much more like Dan Klein's Rick—“some seemingly impartial guy observing the scene”—than like God (Klein 2016, 230). 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. Smith also presumes that the “Rick” to whom we are appealing *cares* about us—is trying to sympathize with us. But the impartial spectator knows only as much, cares only as much, and is only

---

3. For a fuller defense of this view, see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 1 sec. 4.

4. As Smith seems to assume in TMS and in any case grants to his theistic readers (see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 2 sec. 9).

as impartial as a human being we can imagine can be; it never becomes a god. It is “well-informed” rather than omniscient, and neither its caring nor its impartiality will ever be perfect. A good way to think about its judgments is indeed to imagine what the best imaginable “Rick” you know—a thoughtful and concerned neighbor, or a fair and scrupulous juror<sup>5</sup>—might think of what you or someone else does. If such a spectator seemed to err because of a gap in information, you would presumably ask him, “But Rick, what about  $x$ ? Doesn’t that change your verdict?” And if he seemed to show a bias of some sort in his judgment, you would call that to his attention, and expect him to change his mind, if he thinks your charge is reasonable. What a best-imaginable-Rick certainly *wouldn’t* say to these questions is “Thanks, but I’ve got all the information I care to have,” or “Thanks, but I’ve checked all the biases I feel like bothering with.” A best-imaginable-Rick will be *concerned to look out for the best information he can gather* about a situation he is judging, and *concerned to be as impartial as he can be* in his judgments; his judgments will always be open to improvements along these dimensions. But he need not and never will be perfectly informed nor need he or will he ever attain perfect—divine—impartiality.

---

The central function of the impartial spectator in Smith’s moral philosophy is to answer a problem in David Hume’s version of moral sentimentalism. Hume had said that the feelings of approval and disapproval we take “by the survey or reflexion” of people’s motives and characters “constitute our praise or admiration” of those motives and characters (1978/1740, 575, 471). They *are* our moral judgments. We have a “moral taste” much like our aesthetic taste—a pleasure or disgust that arises simply “upon the contemplation or view of particular qualities and characters” (ibid., 581)—and moral judgment is the expression of that taste. Hume recognized, however, that this account of morality seems in some ways ill-suited to our moral practice. We may feel greater love and kindness for “a familiar friend or acquaintance” than for a hero of ancient Greece (581), yet we normally judge the ancient hero to be far more virtuous than our friend or servant. Hume accounts for this by saying that we take up certain “steady and general points of view” by which we correct “our [moral] sentiments, or at least, ...our language” (581–582). If we did not make these corrections, we could never make use of moral *language*. The corrections enable us to uphold “some general inalterable standard[s]” for moral approval and disapproval, which “are ... sufficient for discourse, and serve all our

---

5. Something we may presume that Smith, trained in law as he was, had in mind. He indeed occasionally uses “impartial judge” (or “equitable judge”) instead of “impartial spectator” for his device (TMS, 85, 110, 228).

purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools" (603). That does not entail that our feelings will accord with these standards: "Our passions do not readily follow" them (582). So the needs of society and conversation come into moral judgment from *outside* our sentiments, molding us towards an impartiality that we do not necessarily feel. Nevertheless, our reason leads us to see the value of having impartial, socially shared standards for moral judgment. So we accede to them.

This is an uncomfortable halfway house for a moral sentimentalist theory, thinks Smith. Hume starts by saying that our sentiments are the source of our moral judgments, but then he concedes that they are too partial to do that job adequately, and he brings in standards from outside to correct them. In essence, Hume's theory concedes that our sentiments, just as such, are *non-moral*: bald, non-normative facts about us. Smith argues instead that normativity is built into our sentiments. The idea that we *should have* certain sentiments is built into those sentiments themselves: We want to have the right kind of approving and disapproving sentiments, and we are willing and able to change ourselves so that we have these sentiments. Smith tells a developmental story showing how the desire to have the feelings of an impartial spectator arises in us, and he is far more optimistic than Hume about our ability to internalize the judgments of this spectator. The "wise and just man," says Smith, "does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel" (TMS, 146–147). All of this amounts to a claim that for Smith, but not for Hume, *we have feelings that seek their own improvement*. We *want* to become good moral judges, and characters of whom those judges would approve; we desire to have desires that correct themselves. Smith thus drives a wedge, within our sentimental constitution, between what (we ourselves would regard as) merely *apparent* moral approval and what (we ourselves would regard as) *real* moral approval. The idea that we are naturally led to develop the impartial spectator within ourselves, and to shape our feelings to its judgments, amounts to a claim that self-correction, hence normativity, is built into our emotional structure; it doesn't need to be imposed from outside.

I think Smith takes this to be a significant improvement on Hume's moral theory, and I think he is right to think that. But it is important that it is an improvement *only insofar as* it builds normativity into our everyday moral sentiments. It follows that Smith would be ill-served by an impartial spectator that resembled God, or a Platonic or other rationalist ideal. Such an impartial spectator would be something quite *extra-ordinary*, out of the reach of most or all of us. Smith wants to show that our ordinary moral sentiments are richer, more robustly open to normative correction, than Hume supposed. He did not want to *replace* these

ordinary moral sentiments with a moral standard that only a skilled philosopher might come up with. That is what makes Smith so psychologically plausible, and so appealing to philosophers who want their moral theories to be psychologically plausible.

---

But precisely these appealing features of Smith also raise problems. On my construal of Smith's impartial spectator, it is hard to see how that device will correct for entrenched cultural biases. The better informed and less partial spectator that, in the course of moral development, we come to internalize is built on a foundation of what we hear from actual spectators; the standards it uses as a basis of moral judgment will be those of our society. Can we correct those standards themselves for the biases that circulate in our society? In some cases we can: An increased knowledge or understanding of the facts about black people, women, Jews, etc., will sometimes change a society's ways of looking at these people.<sup>6</sup> But we have no guarantee that this will happen. We can try to draw our best-imaginable-Rick's attention to what we take to be an implicit sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, etc., in his judgments, but if those features are deeply built into his cultural milieu, we cannot be confident that he will agree with us. "How can my wanting women to take care of their children possibly be sexist?" he says, as we complain about his views on differential roles for men and women. Or, he can't see the anti-Semitism in thinking that Jews like business and should stick to doing that. In cases like these, we are likely to disagree irremediably with Rick about which facts are morally salient or about the implications of the facts we do agree on. Prejudices have long survived the amassing of facts that would seem to undermine them; they have also survived attempts to get the prejudiced to empathize with the people against whom they are prejudiced. But Smith has no other moral tools by which to change prejudices. He himself was remarkably unprejudiced for his day, launching a remarkable defense of the virtues of Africans and Native Americans (TMS, 205–207) and never sneering at Jews. But he has no *a priori* arguments against views of black people as incompetent or Jews as evil. He has no general moral rule, either, like the principle of utility, that can readily be used to override a society's everyday moral judgments. He has no ideal rational standard by which to correct what results from our reliance on an improved, but far from perfect, 'Rick within the breast.'

For reasons of this sort, I have argued elsewhere that Smith's moral system readily slides toward cultural relativism (Fleischacker 2011/2005). Others disagree

---

6. Smith himself, I have argued elsewhere, tried to change prejudices against the poor in just this way (see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 10 sec. 51).



with me on that (see esp. Sen 2009), and some have argued that the impartial spectator should be conceived as a self-correcting device that can in principle overcome any cultural prejudice (see esp. Sayre-McCord 2010). I continue to think that there is no guarantee that the impartial spectator will achieve this goal.

At the same time, I'm not sure that the threat of relativism makes Smith's project any worse than other moral systems. In the first place, more idealized moral systems have notoriously been used to justify the cultural prejudices of their authors and followers. There is a well-known, long history of racist and sexist utilitarians and Kantians, including Immanuel Kant himself (see Mills 2005)—utilitarians and Kantians who indeed *used* their systems to *justify* racist and sexist policies. It's not at all clear that Smith's approach to morality does worse, in practice, than these alternatives.

In the second place, improving the degree to which people know the situations of those against whom they harbor a prejudice—and imagine themselves into those situations—does indeed seem to be an important way of breaking down biases, in a culture. Do we really have any approach likely to do better in this regard?

Finally, the tie of Smith's impartial spectator to its cultural milieu is part of what makes it such a plausible device. It makes good sense that people in all societies develop within themselves a model of how they should see themselves and others derived from the way their neighbors see them, and that they correct the actual judgment of those neighbors for misinformation and bias. It makes good sense that this way of seeing ourselves is the touchstone of what people in all cultures regard as moral judgment. The psychological and sociological plausibility of this story about moral development, the easy accessibility of the device that results from this story, and the fit of the issuances of this device with what we ordinarily regard as moral judgments, are all points in favor of Smith's construal of morality. But it is only to be expected that morality so construed will be heavily influenced by culture and that it will be difficult to see how a judgment could be seen as moral in any culture if it radically defied what that culture believes. So the disadvantages of Smith's theory are deeply tied in with its advantages. I see those advantages as worth the price of the disadvantages. This is especially so, given that other moral theories don't generally do a better job of overcoming cultural prejudices, and that Smith has a plausible resource—improving our information about other people, and trying to imagine ourselves in their shoes—to contribute to that job.

---

I think the account of the impartial spectator I have given thus far responds to Klein's questions 1–4 and 7–8. My answer to his fifth question follows readily from this account. The impartial spectator is a device of representation, not a real

person, so in itself it is neither selfish nor selfless. That said, the device arises from our acquaintance with real people—“Rick” and others—and these real people, like all real people, will have selfish interests. Smith did not believe that people are always and only selfish. That view, associated in his day with Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville, he regarded as ridiculous. With Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Butler, and Hume, Smith thought instead that we combine selfish with benevolent concerns. With Hutcheson, Butler, and Hume, he also thought that even our selfish concerns can be morally innocent. As against Hutcheson, but still with Butler and Hume, he thought that a certain concern for ourselves is indeed part of virtue, that we have a *duty* to take care of ourselves. The impartial spectator requires that of us.<sup>7</sup>

But of course selfish concern can get in the way of impartiality. For that reason, the impartial spectator calls on us to abstract from our selfish concerns when making moral judgments. Klein’s question may be directed at that call. How can our best-imaginable-Rick judge situations in which his selfish interests conflict seriously with moral demands: when, say, his entire fortune is at stake?

Well, what would a real Rick, the fairest and wisest person we know, do if called upon to judge a situation in which his entire fortune was at stake? He would recuse himself, that’s what he’d do. He wouldn’t *give up* on his concern for his fortune. But he’d know that his selfish concerns are likely to get in the way of his making a fair judgment in a case like this. And we, if we wanted to use him as our model of an impartial spectator in assessing this situation, would ask ourselves questions like, “What would Rick do in this situation *if his own fortune were not involved?*” We would change the facts of the case, that is, so as to bring in Rick’s gifts for fair and wise judgment, while abstracting from his selfish interests.

So the impartial spectator, as a device, is neither selfish nor selfless, but it approves of a significant degree of self-concern in us. It just demands that we not be unduly influenced by that concern when making moral judgments.

---

I conclude with a word on Klein’s sixth question. Is there a connection between the impartial spectator and the invisible hand? Yes, in a sense: The impartial spectator should and would approve, for Smith, of the outcomes of many “invisible hand” processes. That is, many of those outcomes—a more bountiful supply of grain, and of goods in general, in a free market; the enfeeblement of feudal lords and consequent increase of “liberty and independency” (Smith 1976b/1776, 399), that comes with commerce; the reduction of churches, where they lack state support, to small local entities that depend on the decency and reasonableness of

---

7. On these points, see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 5 secs. 19 and 22.

their leaders for their survival—are *good* ones, and if we doubted that, we could confirm it by seeing what an impartial spectator would think of them. But this is just a loose and contingent connection between Smith's two famous devices. It would be a mistake to think that the impartial spectator and the invisible hand are two aspects of the same being or process. That would be a mistake, most simply, because the impartial spectator is a device of *moral justification* while the invisible hand is a device of *social explanation*. But this simple distinction deserves a bit of elaboration.

There's a lot of debate about what exactly Smith meant by "the invisible hand"—a phrase he uses just three times, in three quite different contexts, two of which give it a theistic connotation, while the third and most important, in the *Wealth of Nations* (WN), has no such implication. Some say that even the WN usage involves a lingering appeal to Providence; Emma Rothschild (2001, ch. 5) has suggested that it is ironic, meant almost to mock the idea that Providence works through the free market; I think it is meant quite seriously, but that it can and should be given a wholly naturalistic reading, on which it is simply a colorful way to make Smith's insistence that society shapes individual tastes and opportunities far more than individuals shape society.<sup>8</sup> The merchant who sets out to engage in the carrying trade, in the passage that evokes the invisible hand in WN, is led by forces beyond his control to promote domestic industry as well. A would-be hunter in a society that has turned mostly to agriculture is likely to find it hard to get the resources he needs unless he too takes up farming. Buyers and sellers of grain, when there is a shortage, will find themselves naturally rationing it, if the market for grain is left alone to find its own level. In all these cases, the individual's self-interest is yoked to his or her society's needs and circumstances. So it is likely, in cases like these, that things will work out well for most people in the society if its individual members simply pursue their self-interest, rather than being told what to do by government officials.

This is a *likelihood* rather than a necessity, and Smith is careful not to say that the invisible hand always has beneficial results. He says that the merchant in the carrying trade is led "in this, *as in many other cases*"—not in *all* cases—"led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was not part of his intention" (WN, 456). No general, metaphysical principle, this, and Smith makes clear that there are cases in which undirected individual choices will have no such beneficial result. In part, that can be because of what today we would call "prisoners' dilemmas" (see especially WN, 726, on why highways need to be publicly controlled); in part, it can

---

8. For an identification of the invisible hand with Providence, see Fitzgibbons 1995, 89, 193–194. For Rothschild's view, see Rothschild 2001, ch. 5; for my response to Rothschild, see Fleischacker 2004, ch. 7 sec. 34.

be because of distortions in the human makeup that lead us, for instance, to ignore the suffering of the poor (see TMS, 50–66). In addition, even where it could be beneficial, the invisible hand may be difficult or impossible to access: because of the power of feudal lords, say, or of church leaders or influential merchants.

So the invisible hand does not always govern society, and where it does, its effects are not always good ones. When they *are* good ones, as they often are, the impartial spectator will approve of them: that is what it means to say that they are good. But even here, the analytic devices in play are distinct. The invisible hand explains *how* society arrives at a certain effect; the impartial spectator explains *why* that effect is a good one. To conflate them is to run sociology and morals together—a mistake that Smith, unlike some of his followers, never made.

## References

- Firth, Roderick.** 1952. Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12: 317–345.
- Fitzgibbons, Athol.** 1995. *Adam Smith's System of Liberty, Wealth and Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fleischacker, Samuel.** 2004. *On Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations": A Philosophical Companion*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Fleischacker, Samuel.** 2011 [2005]. Adam Smith and Cultural Relativism. *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics* 4(2): 20–41. [Link](#)
- Hume, David.** 1978 [1740]. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., eds. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Klein, Daniel B.** 2016. My Understanding of Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator: A Symposium Prologue. *Econ Journal Watch* 13(2): 229–231. [Link](#)
- Mills, Charles W.** 2005. Kant's *Untermenschen*. In *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls, 169–193. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Rothschild, Emma.** 2001. *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey.** 2010. Sentiments and Spectators: Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Judgment. In *The Philosophy of Adam Smith*, eds. Vivienne Brown and Samuel Fleischacker, 124–144. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Sen, Amartya.** 2009. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976a [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Smith, Adam.** 1976b [1776] (WN). *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, eds. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## About the Author



**Sam Fleischacker** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is the author, most recently, of *The Good and the Good Book* (Oxford, 2015) and *What Is Enlightenment?* (Routledge, 2013). Prior publications include *On Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations": A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton, 2003), and *A Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment and Freedom in Kant and Adam Smith* (Princeton, 1999), in addition to articles on Smith and cultural relativism, Smith and self-deception, and Smith's reception in Germany and the United States. Together with Vivienne Brown, he edited the collection *The Philosophy of Adam Smith* (Routledge, 2010). From 2006 to 2010, he was President of the International Adam Smith Society. His email address is [fleischert@sbcglobal.net](mailto:fleischert@sbcglobal.net).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5913>



# Natural and Artificial Impartiality

Michael L. Frazer<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

The ways in which we interpret philosophers of the past can reveal much about the blind spots of philosophy in the present. Nowhere is this more diagnostically revealing than with the undue emphasis on the imaginary over the actual in recent discussions of Adam Smith’s conception of an “impartial spectator” (1776/1790). Amartya Sen, for example, says that “the Smithian ‘impartial spectator’” is primarily “a device for critical scrutiny and public discussion” (2009, 135). Like the impossibly ignorant agents in John Rawls’s “original position” (1999/1971)—or, in an even closer analogy, like the “ideal observer” first described by Roderick Firth (1952)—this impartial spectator is not a real person, but the protagonist of a thought experiment. By appealing to this imagined figure, Smith is thought to be primarily concerned with constructing an artificial perspective which any of us can and should adopt at will in order to provide the proper viewpoint for moral evaluation, rather than describing a social category to which some of us may already belong.

Yet while none of us ever find ourselves suddenly behind Rawls’s “veil of ignorance,” or in the position of Firth’s ideal observer, we are all regularly impartial spectators. As T. D. Campbell observes, in most instances where Smith speaks of an impartial spectator he is merely speaking of “the ordinary person when he is in the position of observing the behavior of any person with whom he has no special connection and whose behavior does not affect him more or less than it affects anyone else” (Campbell 1975, 70–71; see also Campbell 1971, 134–145). Whenever we find ourselves evaluating competing claims in a conflict where we have nothing at stake and in which we have no affinity for any participant over any other, we are in the position of an impartial spectator. There is nothing either unusual or praiseworthy about being in this position. Smith’s impartial spectator is an ideal

---

1. University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK.

type primarily in the Weberian, descriptive-sociological sense, and only secondarily in the normative, moral sense.

Throughout Smith's ethics, the perspective most often taken is of a disinterested spectator evaluating the actions of others. Only later does Smith set out to explain why when we are not in the position of an impartial spectator—when we form moral evaluations of our friends, family or ourselves, for example—we still feel that our moral judgments ought to remain impartial. It is then, and only then, that we must artificially attempt to examine our conduct or that of those close to us “as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it” (Smith 1976/1790, III.1.2). To overcome our natural perspective in this way is a morally praiseworthy feat of imagination, one which we typically fail to accomplish fully. Smith's discussion of these cases legitimately inspires Sen and others today to describe an imaginary impartial spectator as a “device” for improving moral judgment. Yet such cases, for Smith, are the exception, and not the rule (Martin 1990, 118; Frazer 2010, 95–96). In most of our judgments of most other people most of the time, Smith believed that our natural impartiality as spectators was sufficient to produce fair and unbiased conclusions, without appeal to an imagined spectator of greater impartiality than our own.

Regardless of whether Smith was correct in believing that this is true most of the time, it is certainly true at least some of the time. In this respect, the natural perspective of impartial spectators can be a valuable resource for fair judgments in both philosophy and practice. This is a resource, however, which most recent philosophers have chosen to forego. Convinced that those who do not actively participate in a scheme of mutual cooperation need have no say in determining the fairness of that cooperation, most today exclude all spectators—impartial or otherwise—from the formulation of principles of justice. In order to achieve impartiality, participants in social cooperation are imagined to rely entirely on their own ability to screen out the natural biases caused by their competing interests.

This essay is an attempt to shift theorists of justice away from exclusive focus on the perspective of participants in social cooperation to include consideration of the perspective of impartial spectators, ending the exclusive reliance on what I call *artificial impartiality* in a way that makes room for what I call *natural impartiality*. Such a shift in perspective would not only serve to improve theories of justice, like Sen's own, which take direct inspiration from Smith's conception of an impartial spectator. More generally, it would make impartial theories of justice both easier to formulate in theory and easier to implement in practice with the right institutional design.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the mere fact that one philosophical approach is easier than

---

2. I have discussed the practical topic of institutional design at length in an essay (Frazer 2014) that overlaps to a limited extent with the present one.



another is not necessarily a decisive reason to adopt it. Like many things worth doing in life, formulating impartial theories of justice may be unavoidably difficult. There is no reason, however, to make it any more difficult than it needs to be.

## Background and definitions

Questions of justice arise in social situations where, although individuals may have many interests in common, they also have interests in conflict. Following Rawls, who in turn was following David Hume and Adam Smith, recent theorists of justice have understood society as such to be a scheme of mutual cooperation in which imperfectly altruistic individuals wish to increase their share of the benefits from this cooperation while decreasing their share of the burdens. It is taken as axiomatic that principles of justice designed to resolve such conflict should be impartial in the sense they should not favor the interests of any parties over those of any others. Ideally, impartiality should be absolute—no greater weight whatsoever may be given to the interests of any party. In our less than perfect world, however, we can also speak of impartiality as a matter of degree. Although some favor may be shown to the interests of some parties over others, the decision which results is more impartial (or, less partial) than one in which even greater favor is shown.

The central distinction of this essay is between two ways that individuals can experience the moral demand for impartiality. In cases of natural impartiality, the demand isn't actually demanding at all. In such cases, one simply has no interest in favoring, and no reason to favor, the interests of one participant in a given conflict over those of any other.<sup>3</sup> To make use of the visual metaphors so common in this area, we can say that, from the perspective of those with natural impartiality, all parties to a conflict look the same. Naturally impartial individuals see the interests at stake from a distance sufficient to obscure any differences between them which might lead us to treat them unequally. As with impartiality in general, we can also speak of natural impartiality as a matter of degree. Individuals shows greater natural impartiality than they otherwise might to the extent that they have less of an interest in favoring some over others.

Natural impartiality in this sense can be contrasted with artificial impartiality. Here, although one has a reason to favor the interests of one party to a given conflict, one also has a reason to not do so. This latter is a reason to disregard the former. That is, one has a reason to view the dispute as if one had natural impartiality, to see the situation in a way that makes all parties look the same even

---

3. For purposes of this essay, I can remain agnostic on the infamously complex relationship between interests in something being done and reasons to do that something.

though they do not appear so initially. Such impartiality is artificial in the sense that it involves adopting a perspective on the situation which is not naturally one's own. In order to achieve artificial impartiality, an individual must impose what David Hume called "a proper violence on his imagination" (Hume 1985/1777, 240). When we speak of artificial impartiality as a matter of degree, we are speaking of the extent to which individuals succeed in departing imaginatively from their natural perspective on the world, adopting some artificial perspective in its place.

Committed as they are to democracy, recent theorists of justice have taken the responsibility to determine impartial principles of justice to reside only with the parties to a conflict themselves. The paradigmatic case to be resolved is isolated from all outside influence. Ronald Dworkin (2002) imagines castaways dividing up the resources on a desert island, while Bruce Ackerman (1981) describes the crew of a spaceship drawing up principles of justice to govern their colonization of an uninhabited planet. These are not isolated examples; the operating assumption of virtually all 'contractarian' (and/or 'contractualist') social theory is that participants in a conflict are responsible for drafting their own social contract.

What qualifies parties in a given conflict as parties is that their own, first-order interests are at stake. By *first-order* interests, I mean interests which do not make reference to other interests, either one's own or those of anyone else. An interest I may have in advancing the interests of someone else, or the interest I have in advancing my own first-order interests, is an example of what I will call a *higher-order* interest.

The distinction between first- and higher-order interests is different from the distinction which is often made between self- and other-regarding interests. All other-regarding interests are higher-order interests, since they necessarily make reference to the interests of others. Yet not all higher-order interests are other-regarding, since they can also make reference to one's own interests. Nor do I believe all first-order interests to be self-regarding. While it is true that first-order interests cannot be other-regarding, the distinction between self- and other-regarding interests is not exhaustive. We can also have what can be called principle-regarding interests, perhaps grounded in what Rawls called "principle-dependent desires" (see Rawls 2000). Such interests do not make any reference to one's own interests, but they also do not make reference to the interests of others. Instead, one takes a direct, first-order interest in abiding by some principle, moral or otherwise.

When the first-order interests of an individual are at stake in a conflict, that individual may find herself actively taking part in the settlement of the conflict. Yet I will classify individuals as parties to a conflict solely on the basis that their first-order interests are at stake, even if they are not actively involved in defending them, or in settling the dispute any other way. Those who are not actively involved in a conflict although their first-order interests are at stake can be called *passive*

*parties* in the conflict, as opposed to *active parties*. The distinction between active and passive parties in a conflict may have important repercussions for some theories of justice—particularly those concerning international justice, where the interests of those outside a given state may be profoundly affected by the results of deliberations in which they, as non-citizens, are excluded from active participation.

A spectator can be understood as an individual whose first-order interests are not at stake in a given conflict. The distinction between parties to and spectators of a conflict is exhaustive. With regards to any given conflict, all of us are either parties or spectators. All of us either have first-order interests involved or we do not; all of us are either inside the conflict or outside it. Of course, passive parties may be outside in the different sense that they are not actively involved in settling the matter, but their interests remain inside even if their voices do not.

While passive parties may not be actively involved in a given conflict despite the fact that they have first-order interests at stake in it, spectators may become involved in a given conflict even though they have no first-order interests at stake. When they are involved, they cannot be involved in the same way that active parties often are—involved, that is, through defending their first-order interests. By definition, they have no first-order interests to defend. While they may become involved so as to defend their second-order interests, active spectators can also become involved as arbitrators—those who take a role in a dispute involving the interests of others.

**Claim 1. Being a spectator of, rather than a party to,  
a given conflict is necessary, but not sufficient,  
for absolute natural impartiality.**

In order to defend Claim 1, it is first necessary to refute the opposing claim that it is not necessary to be a spectator to a given conflict to have absolute natural impartiality—that participants, too, are capable of absolute natural impartiality. It is then necessary to refute the quite different opposing claim that being a spectator of, rather than a participant in, a given conflict is sufficient for absolute natural impartiality.

1. In order to address the first of these counter-claims, I must make clear that I refuse to assume that participants in a conflict are purely self-interested. First, I am happy to admit that virtually all of us (with the possible exception of clinical psychopaths) have other-regarding interests—that is, higher-order interests in seeing that the interests of others are advanced. Other-regarding interests may have emotional foundations in sympathy or fellow-feeling, but they may also stem from a more direct desire to see others thrive for their own sake. We may also

have a self-regarding, second-order interest in advancing the interest of others or pursuing impartial principles to govern our cooperation, since doing so is often the best available means of achieving our first-order interests. We may also have strong, first-order, principle-dependent interests—interests which make no reference to our own interests or those of anyone else. For example, we may have a principle-dependent interest in determining and abiding by fair terms of social cooperation, or acting only on principles which no other participant in a given situation can reasonably reject. We may even have first-order, principle-dependent interest in being impartial simply for its own sake.

In order to establish that parties to a conflict cannot have absolute natural impartiality, it is sufficient to show that their (first- or higher-order) interests in impartiality cannot be the only first-order interests at stake in a conflict. The most obvious way to defend this claim is through appeal to the empirical realities of human psychology. Although we can grant the reality of both principle-dependent, first-order and other-regarding, higher-order interests, none would deny that we also have self-regarding first-order interests. In a world of limited resources, our self-regarding interests will often come into conflict with both our own other-regarding interests and the self-regarding-interests of others. It is this conflict which impartial principles of justice are meant to resolve, and without which they would not be necessary. As long as parties to a conflict have self-regarding as well as other-regarding interests at stake, they have an interest in favoring their own selfish interests over those of others, and are not absolutely naturally impartial. Their other-regarding and principle-dependent interests may give them both a relatively high degree of natural impartiality and a very strong reason to strive for absolute artificial impartiality, but they cannot provide them with absolute natural impartiality as long as conflicting, self-regarding interests are also at stake.

While sufficient, this appeal to the empirical reality of conflicting self-regarding interests is actually unnecessary to prove my point. The point can also be defended conceptually. In order for a conflict to qualify as such, the parties to a conflict must have competing first-order interests. Of course, we can imagine a world without competing interests—and hence without conflict—but this would be a world in which issues of justice do not arise. The natural impartiality of participants grows greater only as impartiality becomes less necessary—that is, as conflicts grow weaker—and becomes absolute only when conflict disappears entirely.

It is also important to note that even a world of saints whose only first-order interests are in abiding by impartial principles would not necessarily be a world without conflict. Different saints might interpret the demands of impartiality differently; their competing first-order interests might involve abiding by these different, allegedly impartial principles. Despite their strong commitment to impartiality, in the conflict between these principles they would not be absolutely

naturally impartial. They may nonetheless have both a relatively high degree of natural impartiality and a very strong commitment to resolving the dispute through some form of artificial impartiality.

2. Just as the mere fact that parties to a conflict may have strong interests in impartiality does not render them absolutely naturally impartial, the mere fact that one is a spectator to a given conflict does not imply that one is absolutely naturally impartial with regard to it. First, and most obviously, a spectator may have a greater higher-order interest in advancing the first-order interests of some parties to a conflict than they do in advancing the first-order interests of others. Our other-regarding, higher-order interests often come into conflict—as when the first-order interests of the children of one pair of selfless parents are in conflict with the first-order interests of another’s. Parents are notoriously partial arbitrators of conflicts between their children: My little angel was clearly in the right when he punched your brat, and you probably believe the same about your little angel when he punched back. Partial spectators with other-regarding, higher-order interests which favor the first-order interests of different participants in a given conflict can themselves be understood as higher-order parties to the conflict.

Yet spectators do not need to have a strong higher-order interest in the first-order interests of only some of the participants in a conflict in order to remain naturally partial. There are many reasons a spectator might choose to favor the interests of some over others, some of which might be tied only very loosely to the spectator’s own interests, higher-order or otherwise. A biased spectator might simply take a liking to a particular participant and a disliking to others, for reasons that might not be entirely explicable. Taking a shine to some participants and developing an inexplicable antipathy to others might not give one a very strong higher-order interest in their first-order interests, but it nonetheless may be sufficient to prevent absolute natural impartiality. As with parties whose own first-order interests are at stake, however, even partial spectators may both show a significant degree of natural impartiality and have very good reasons for overcoming their natural biases through appeal to artificial impartiality.

**Claim 2: The natural impartiality of a spectator is sometimes sufficient to render fair judgment without appeal to artificial impartiality.**

The basic insight behind Rawls’s original position is that when we are entirely blind to the differences between participants in a conflict, differences which otherwise might lead us to favor the interests of one over others, the principles we construct for resolving the conflict will be absolutely impartial. Since Rawls assumed

that parties to the conflict would themselves be the ones formulating the principles, he argued that it was necessary to obscure the differences among them behind an imagined veil of ignorance. Since, as has now been established, no party to a conflict is entirely naturally impartial, Rawls is correct in believing that some such device of artificial impartiality is necessary for such purposes.

The situation changes, however, when it is spectators of rather than parties to a conflict who are asked to formulate impartial principles to resolve it. In cases where these spectators are naturally partial to some degree, a device of artificial impartiality may also be necessary for them. Yet there are also cases in which spectators are naturally impartial—if not absolutely so, then at least sufficiently so as to render reasonably fair judgments.

Real-world spectators to conflicts, through no doing of their own, may be as blind to the differences between participants in a conflict as are the imaginary agents behind the veil of ignorance. The blindness may be a result of simple ignorance—here real rather than imagined. But it may persist even in a situation of full information. From the point of view of a sufficiently detached spectator, there may simply be no relevant differences to see, and hence no reason to favor the interests of one party to a conflict over another.

Of course, there is still a possibility of partiality in these cases by arbitrary whim. Simply knowing that spectators have no noticeable reason to favor any participant in a conflict—that they have no personal connections to any of the parties involved, or particular affinities for some over others—is not sufficient to establish their absolute natural impartiality. There is still a possibility of arbitrary favoritism. Only the introspection of the spectators themselves can reveal that such capriciousness is not at work, and even they cannot know with any certainty whether such factors are at play on a subconscious level. Yet even though the fact that a certain group of spectators are utterly detached from all the participants in a conflict is not sufficient to establish that they are absolutely naturally impartial, that fact is nonetheless good evidence that they probably have a relatively high degree of natural impartiality. Arbitrary whims are rarely known for their strength or vehemence, after all.

What is more, there are real-world techniques that spectators can use to increase their natural impartiality but that are unavailable to participants. If the appearance (including the race and gender) of a potential bandmate would bias an audition process, candidates can perform behind a curtain—a practical analogue to the veil of ignorance. To take an example more familiar to the likely readers of this essay, if the name of the author of an academic article would bias reviewers, a journal can establish a system of blind review. Such techniques are unavailable to parties to a conflict. Short of a lobotomy, there is no way to increase their natural ignorance of the interests and identities of the parties to a conflict, since these

interests and identities are their own. While journal editors and bandleaders can experiment with real-world techniques to increase the impartiality of spectator-judges, only thought experiments are available to participant-judges.

These real-world techniques are deliberate contrivances and, in that sense, they are artificial. Yet the impartiality which results from them is still natural impartiality in the relevant sense, since the spectators involved are still viewing the world from their own, everyday perspective. Nor do they deserve any moral credit for doing so. The journal editor who establishes a system of blind review may be deserving of praise for his sense of fairness, but the reviewer who simply never learns the name of the author of an article is not praiseworthy by virtue of the natural impartiality which results from such unchosen ignorance.

Through a combination of the detached position from which they view a conflict and the use of techniques designed to shield them from possible sources of bias, spectators may reach a very high degree of natural impartiality. Even if we can never be certain that a natural impartiality is absolute, it seems reasonable to suppose that, at least in some situations, it would be sufficient to render judgments quite fair indeed, and to do so without the need for further appeal to some form of artificial impartiality. And in those cases where the natural impartiality of spectators is insufficient to render an adequately fair judgment, the greater is the degree of natural impartiality that the spectators already possess, the easier it would be for them to achieve the artificial impartiality necessary to do so. Mere whims and weak second-order interests are relatively easy to overcome through sufficient imaginative effort when compared with stronger first- or second-order interests.

Of course, there are difficult questions of what degree of impartiality is necessary for judgments to qualify as fair, and of how fair judgments need to be for purposes of adequate justice. I will not try to put forward an elaborate theory of when a high but imperfect degree of justice or fairness can be considered good enough in our always imperfect world—a theory of justifiable complacency, if you will. But there is no doubt that utopian dreams of perfect justice will never be fulfilled, and that absolute impartiality, whether natural or artificial, need not be our goal.

This anti-utopian note may seem dissonant given that, in the previous section, I seemed to hold it against parties to a conflict that they can never achieve absolute natural impartiality, although they may show both natural and artificial impartiality to a relatively high degree. Might the natural impartiality of parties to a given conflict be good enough, just as the natural impartiality of spectators has just been defended as good enough? Perhaps, but for the reasons outlined in the previous section, the natural impartiality of parties to a conflict is greatest when it is least necessary. This is not the case, however, with the natural impartiality of spectators. Participants in a conflict will only show a high degree of natural impar-



tiality when their shared interest in impartiality is significantly stronger than their conflicting interests, hence rendering their conflict a relatively weak one. Yet the natural impartiality of spectators can be very high even while the heat of conflict is very high, as long as the force of competing interests is limited to the participants and does not spread to the detached spectators. No matter how intense the competition between those trying to be published in a given journal may become, blind reviewers naturally have a position above and outside the fray.

**Claim 3: Those without natural impartiality can more easily achieve artificial impartiality if they can model their artificial impartiality on the natural impartiality of an existing spectator.**

Let us suppose that Firth is correct in his argument that the morally right course of action in any given situation is the one which would be approved of by an ideal observer. Such being is omniscient (with full knowledge of both all things past and all things future), “omnipercipient” (with perfect powers of imagination), perfectly disinterested, perfectly rational, and (now for the punchline) “in other respects...normal” (Firth 1952, 344). In order for Firth’s analysis of moral rightness to be action-guiding, we must now imagine our way into the perspective of his ideal observer, and figure out what this impossible creature would and would not approve of. Given that the ideal observer is so radically unlike any of us, and that there is nothing even approximating an actual ideal observer available for consultation, it is not clear how the project could even get off the ground. Perhaps that is why there has been so little normative theory which reaches any concrete moral or political judgments—let alone a full theory of justice—on the basis of Firth’s ideal observer theory.

The opposite, of course, is true of the equally impossible beings behind Rawls’s veil of ignorance in the original position, beings who have served as a starting point for much of the normative theorizing of the past four decades of moral and political philosophy. The great advantage of Rawls’s theory over Firth’s is that the former’s is a workable model of artificial impartiality designed to produce concrete conclusions. As anyone who has taught an introductory class on Rawls knows, however, it is no easy task to imagine one’s way into the perspective of the original position. Even those who succeed in doing so often come to different normative conclusions depending on the different ways they imagine the original position to work.

It seems clear that an attempt at artificial impartiality would be made much simpler were it possible to consult an actually existing, naturally impartial spectator. The claim that it is easier to achieve artificial impartiality when a naturally impartial spectator is available—either in person or through some sort of indirect communication—is admittedly an empirical one, and hence a better subject for experimental testing than for mere philosophical speculation. As far as I am aware, however, there have yet to be any psychological studies as to whether those without natural impartiality can more easily form impartial judgments about a conflict when they can consult the decisions of an existing impartial spectator.

There is, however, growing evidence that what some psychologists call “surrogation” can be an effective means of practical deliberation in other contexts. For example, subjects in one study could more accurately predict their affective reactions to a future event when they know how a neighbor in their social network reacted to the event than when they know about the event itself. Dan Gilbert et al. (2009) found that undergraduates could better predict how they would feel about particular partners while speed-dating on the basis of how acquaintances (or “surrogates”) felt after dating these individuals than they could on the basis of extensive personal profiles. In this and other contexts, the emotional reactions of a surrogate are more useful in predicting one’s own emotions than is information about the object of one’s future reaction. Although we must wait for more studies on the matter, there is reason to believe that surrogation provides a means of making up for weaknesses in our imaginative abilities. Gilbert et al. conclude that “because surrogation does not rely on mental simulation, it is immune to the many errors that inaccurate simulations produce” (2009, 1617).

Of course, it might be questioned to what extent failures in affective forecasting and failures in impartiality are analogous to one another, but both can be attributed to failures of imaginative accuracy—failure to imagine future events’ effects on oneself accurately in the former case, and failure to imagine the effects of one’s judgment on all the parties to a conflict accurately in the latter case. If anything, however, surrogation is likely to be an even more effective strategy with regards to impartial judgments than it is with regards to self-interested affective forecasting. The differences between individuals might make one a poor surrogate for predicting another’s happiness, but impartial judgments do not depend on the idiosyncrasies of individual psychology in this way.

Even in cases where an impartial spectator cannot be directly consulted, simply being able to model one’s own attempt at an artificially impartial perspective on the existing perspective of an actual person may make one’s task much easier. Although it is very difficult indeed to know what it would be like to see a conflict from the point of view of a god-like ideal observer or an impossibly ignorant agent in the original position, it is much easier to imagine what it would be like to see it

from a perspective which, while not one's own, can and has been taken by other individuals. It would be easiest if these spectators could be asked for their impartial opinions. When this is impossible, their very existence can serve as a guide for coming to an artificially impartial perspective of our own.

Of course, before impartial spectators can either be consulted or have their perspectives recreated imaginatively, they have to be identified. Doing so is no easy task, even with the purest of intentions. Since it is not easy to catalogue individual interests, we may never be certain that someone does not have any interest at stake in a conflict simply because these interests are not readily apparent. The situation is made worse once we remember that each party to a conflict has an interest in having it resolved in a way biased in her favor. One way to accomplish this is to claim falsely that someone who is actually on her side in the conflict qualifies as an impartial spectator, and to insist that this partial spectator's perspective govern the resolution of the conflict.

In order to avoid such problems, we may have no choice but to rely on a party's own artificial impartiality. It may never be possible to do away with the political need for artificial impartiality entirely; it will play an important role even in theorizing about justice that relies primarily on natural impartiality. Yet just as the advocates of natural impartiality need not and cannot exclude artificial impartiality from both theory and practice, so too should the advocates of artificial impartiality not exclude natural impartiality.

Here is hardly the place to even begin constructing a new theory of justice on the basis of primarily natural rather than primarily artificial impartiality. The present essay should be considered an invitation for others to do so—to imaginatively consider an impartial alien offering advice to Ackerman's space explorers, or the residents of another island (perhaps within shouting distance, but inaccessible across rough, shark-infested waters) helping Dworkin's castaways. Nor should our use of natural impartiality be confined to the speculative fictions of philosophers' imaginations—we should draw on all the empirical literature available from across the humanities and social sciences so as to increase our understanding of actually existing, naturally impartial spectators and their potential role in resolving conflict.

I can make no claims to where this turn to natural impartiality would lead, but I have great expectations for the results. It may turn out that Adam Smith's greatest contribution to political philosophy today will be to remind us of a rather obvious fact that we have somehow forgotten: Impartial spectators are around us all the time, and it would be foolish to ignore their actual, everyday perspectives in order to construct baroquely imagined, often impossible perspectives for thinking about justice.

## References

- Ackerman, Bruce A.** 1981. *Social Justice in the Liberal State*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Campbell, T. D.** 1971. *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Campbell, T. D.** 1975. Scientific Explanation and Ethical Justification in the *Moral Sentiments*. In *Essays on Adam Smith*, eds. Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dworkin, Ronald.** 2002. *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Firth, Roderick.** 1952. Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12: 317–345.
- Frazer, Michael L.** 2010. *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frazer, Michael L.** 2014. Including the Unaffected. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 22(4): 377–395.
- Gilbert, Daniel T., Matthew A. Killingsworth, Rebecca N. Eyre, and Timothy D. Wilson.** 2009. The Surprising Power of Neighborly Advice. *Science* 323: 1617–1619.
- Hume, David.** 1985 [1777]. *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Martin, Marie A.** 1990. Utility and Morality: Adam Smith's Critique of Hume. *Hume Studies* 16: 107–120.
- Rawls, John.** 1999 [1971]. *A Theory of Justice*, revised ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, John.** 2000. *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Sen, Amartya.** 2009. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790]. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## About the Author



**Michael L. Frazer** is a Lecturer in Political and Social Theory at the University of East Anglia. The author of *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today* (Oxford University Press), he received his B.A. from Yale, his Ph.D. from Princeton, and has previously held positions at Brown and Harvard. His email address is [michael.leo.frazer@gmail.com](mailto:michael.leo.frazer@gmail.com).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5914>



## Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator: Autonomy and Extended Selves

Jimena Hurtado<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

Much has been written about Adam Smith's impartial spectator as the central figure of his explanation of the formation of moral judgment. But as much as has already been said, this figure continues to be studied not only to better understand Smith's moral philosophy and influence, but also to build a connection with modern behavioral research on the formation of moral character and moral communities. In this text I focus on a question that touches both of these aspects: How we build our own character in the process of building and being part of a moral community? I believe the impartial spectator is at the center of this process, and it expresses our profound social nature as well as our responsibility with ourselves and others as free members of a community in a shared world.

Asking *what* the impartial spectator is instead of *who* it is or represents widens the inquiry because it immediately sets the stage of the discussion beyond a single individual or even a group of individuals that share something in common. The impartial spectator is more than a figure or a representation. It is a reminder of what we are, and how we come to be.

To a historian of economic thought, the question of building a moral community confirms the importance of the permanent dialogue we maintain with authors no longer alive as a touchstone and a source of inspiration. It reminds the economist of the central place of moral anthropology in the configuration and development of the discipline of economics, and also of the shortcomings of disciplinary thinking. My understanding of the impartial spectator is, without a doubt, as much the result of reading and conversing with Adam Smith (and Jean-

---

1. Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá D.C., Colombia.

Jacques Rousseau) and Smithian scholars as it is of reading economics (and much else) through a Smithian perspective. So as Maria Pia Paganelli (2015, 365) has reminded us recently about the Scottish Enlightenment, this is all about “thinking for yourself, but not by yourself.”

I believe the impartial spectator, in a high and deep sense, can be understood as a constant feedback process between ourselves as individuals and active participants in social interactions—a process that leads us to build our extended selves, going back and forth between our inner worlds and social life. This extended self does not mean we might be lost in or fused with others; rather, it means we build and preserve our autonomy and uniqueness through and with others. The impartial spectator in its highest or deepest sense implies a transcendent sense of freedom-in-the-world-with-others. I would not be so bold as to assert that this is Smith’s highest or deepest sense, but I will try to show how it can be traced back to him.

This meaning of the impartial spectator can be decomposed into several elements as we further our exploration of what its highest or deepest sense is: The impartial spectator is our conscience, a social construct, an incarnation of individual and social values, the highest authority or judge of human conduct, and an image of ourselves. It reflects and personifies Smith’s belief in the social character of human nature.

If we accept with Istvan Hont (2015) that this social character has to do with our search for social recognition, we find at the heart of our social interactions our constant effort to make ourselves loveable and worthy of others’ love because “man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love,” as Smith writes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS, III.2.1). The impartial spectator is one of the main ‘results’ of this search for acceptance. Participating in the affective communication associated with the sympathetic process, each individual learns how to be with others through the education of individual passions, or moral education, which also leads to the development of self-command. In this process we learn as much about others and the community we belong to as we do about ourselves. We learn how to be accepted and belong, and we learn what we can expect from others. This also means that this impartial spectator recreates, up to a point, the values and beliefs of the community where we build our character. Our identity then highly depends upon our milieu, although it does not make us a simple reflection of others, or of others’ values and opinions. We might clash with the community we belong to, or we might belong to more than one community. But there is a risk that this process might recreate existing values within a community that carry some prejudice or discrimination against others who do not belong to that community.

The whole process relies on our capacity of seeing each other and putting ourselves, through our imagination, in the other’s circumstances. The disinterested



and spontaneous interest we have for each other, prompted by the natural tendency to sympathize, makes us visible to each other, as when we see someone crying in the street or someone smiling in the bus or anyone who stands out just because they express some feeling. Visibility is essential, and it depends upon physical and psychological distance.<sup>2</sup> Social interactions are not completely transparent. Putting ourselves in the place of others, and imagining how we would feel and react in their circumstances, can be more easily done when we have more information about the one we are seeing. So the first step towards the impartial spectator is the possibility of seeing and being seen, which requires some level of identification. We can see others, in the sense affective communication requires, only if they are close enough, if we feel we share something that could make it possible for us to be in their circumstances. The risk then is that there are others we won't see because they are too far from us, psychologically or physically. Such invisibility may entail a particular form of symbolic violence in that those who are invisible do not count; this can amount to their non-existence or even the denial of their humanity. This is particularly significant in some of the cases Smith considers: Sometimes we would rather turn around and not see the miserable. We exclude them from any affective communication, and thus of the possibility of belonging to our community.

There is indeed something we all share: our search for our fellows' approval. "Nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend his brethren. She taught him to feel pleasure in their favourable, and pain in their unfavourable regard. She rendered their approbation most flattering and most agreeable to him for its own sake; and their disapprobation most mortifying and most offensive" (TMS, III.2.6). So this common desire is a demand for approval, a demand we make on others, but which does not mean that they feel or express the approval we want. It is possible there might be an excess demand that will not be met. This common desire makes a strong foundation for affective communication to take place; we are open to and eager for the regard of others even if we might not get it. The first step in this process involves individuals looking at each other with no particular relationship between them, simply as bystanders.

The bystander is the first figure of the impartial spectator. We participate, as it were, in a game of mirrors where we look and see each other, and thus learn of "the propriety and impropriety of [our] own passions, the beauty and deformity of [our] own mind[s]" (TMS, III.1.3). We learn who we are and our place in society through the affective communication associated with this game of mirrors if it is

---

2. Remember the asymmetry of sympathy: We sympathize more easily with happiness than with sadness, with fortune than with misery (TMS, I.iii.1.5; see also Álvarez and Hurtado 2015). We should also keep in mind how the poor and the miserable seem to be buried in obscurity (TMS, I.iii.2.1).

successful, and even if sometimes we find approbation and other times disapprobation in our affective communication. We observe each other and ourselves as spectators through our own eyes but also through the eyes of others.

This also means there is more to the mutual exchange of looks than is at first suggested with the image of the game of mirrors. Mirrors only reflect images; they have no depth; they are cold and insensible. The eyes of our fellow beings reflect more than our own image. We look back at each other with some emotion, some reaction, and some judgment. We see more than ourselves in others' eyes, and more of ourselves than a mirror can show. This is the essence of the affective communication of sympathy, which means building and contacting our inner worlds through others, which can be an agreeable or a painful experience.

Our social experience is at the center of this process. Our inner world profoundly involves in Smith this extended self, whose construction is only possible in the presence of a bystander, who acts as an observer and also as a reflection and as a mirror. This bystander is generally perceived as a passive figure because she is not directly affected by the situation. But not to be affected might not mean the same as not to be involved, precisely because such involvement has to do with identification, which requires sharing our common desire for approval. In this sense, someone with whom we communicate is someone with whom we share and try to come to an affective harmony or concord. Therefore, this first spectator, our first other, is impartial but concerned, open, and receptive—and at the same time, we are this other for someone else.

Such affective receptivity, this first identification, means we become the measure by which we judge others (TMS, I.i.3.10); we compare ourselves with each other confirming this shared element, our commonality; this comparison enables us to judge each other and to establish general rules of conduct. We look at each other, and the sympathetic process enables us to feel the possibility of communication by the simple fact that we can imagine ourselves in the other's situation. We can imagine what we would feel, and we can see if these feelings coincide or not with what the other is expressing or doing. If they do, we consider them appropriate, and if they don't, we deem them inappropriate. Our moral judgment expresses our accord. And this accord is something we can enjoy and share, even between perfect strangers. We can generalize our social experience and come to agreements on what we consider appropriate or inappropriate conduct: "Moral judgment is socially embedded since moral codes come from social interaction," as Leonidas Montes writes (2004, 53).

This experience allows us to interiorize these rules, but not as external rules or rules the community or others impose on us. Smith's explanation is one of the genealogy of moral conduct and rules. Each member of the community of spectators and agents is part of the source of these rules, which allow social stability

and order. Participating in the emergence of such rules reinforces our social nature but does not mean that we lose ourselves or that we fuse into a homogeneous social body. It can mean, however, that some people are set aside or left outside the social body, or must comply with rules they did not help produce. On the one hand, Smith is very clear in saying that sympathetic feelings are different than the original sensations, that they are shadows of the substance (TMS, VI.ii.1.1), and that we can never exactly feel what others are feeling (I.i.1.2; I.i.4.7). On the other hand, in the imaginary change of places we do not become the other person; we put ourselves in their circumstances and imagine what we would feel.

Besides, the sympathetic process involves spectators that, we must keep in mind, are impartial. As mentioned before, impartiality does not mean indifference. On the contrary, affective receptivity characterizes all spectators, but it is when we are not under the influence of envy or malevolent and unsocial passions that we are open to the communication needed for the sympathetic process to take place. We change places with the agent always knowing we are not really in her circumstances; we observe from the safety of our own real situation knowing we are not at risk; distance keeps us safe. This distance, be it psychological or physical, allows us to observe in a cool, detached manner. However, as said before, too great a distance hinders the process, and sometimes too small a distance may also. The effort required to sympathize with misery, be it physical or emotional, might be too much, thus deterring us from participating in affective communication, leaving the agent alone in her suffering. It may also be possible that we feel so close to the suffering person that we do not bear the feeling of putting ourselves in her place because the safety of the distance is lost. Another possible situation is that our strong identification with those who are closer does not let us see those who are further away, and in order to gain acceptance from close ones we condone actions that might hurt those further away. This is why sympathy implies emotional contagion but goes beyond this first stage as it leads to moral judgment of others and ourselves. This is how we build our conscience, the internal or supposed impartial spectator (see, e.g., Montes 2004; Raphael 2007).

The building of the conscience happens because we interiorize the process of looking at ourselves through the eyes of an other: "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" (TMS, III.1.6). In this case, as with any other bystander, two figures are involved: the spectator and the agent. But in this case the spectator has much more information, and the physical and psychological distance with the agent is much smaller, making the sympathetic process more accurate.

The internal spectator is impartial and also well-informed. It knows us and our preferences in a way nobody else does. Self-deceit is particularly complicated

because the internal spectator knows what our true motivations are. Even when the external spectators praise or blame us, the internal spectator will call on us to make us understand whether we are worthy of such appraisal. We might choose to ignore its voice, and, especially in the case of blame, it might sound hesitant (TMS, III.2.32), but it is not possible to deceive it.

Impartiality, in the case of our conscience, means that we are capable of correcting the “natural misrepresentations of self-love” (TMS, III.3.4) because we are able to look at ourselves from this cool and detached perspective. The sympathetic process, our communication with the external and the internal impartial spectators, counters self-love and self-deceit. It involves us in a moral education that gives us perspective, helps us form a general point of view that may tend towards universality but is always context dependent, and forms our character. Our character then is a reflection of sociability and society (Paganelli 2015, 370), expressing our extended selves and, at the same time, our own identity and uniqueness.

This impartial spectator, our conscience, is a synthesis of reason and passions. It is a product of our social interactions with others that allow us to arrive at properly cultivated feeling, and it acts as the arbiter of our conduct. It has more or less authority over us depending on our self-command, and its voice reminds us that “we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration.” It transforms self-love from a selfish uncultivated passion to a “stronger love, a more powerful affection...the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters” (TMS, III.3.4).

This also means that the spectator’s impartiality does not imply selflessness. From the first sentence of TMS, it could be possible to say that we are all selfless to some degree because “there are evidently some principles in [our] nature, which interest [us] in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to [us], though [we] derive[] nothing from it.” But the end of the sentence points to a key element in our concern for others, something we do derive from others’ happiness, “the pleasure of seeing it.” It makes us, each one of us as individuals, feel good.

Moreover, when the internal or the supposed impartial spectator looks at us, it is not selfless either, precisely because it acts on this stronger love, this more powerful affection for our own character. Our relation with our conscience is a relationship with ourselves that takes into account what could be called the “circles of sympathy” (Forman-Barzilai 2011) or the order in which individuals and societies are recommended to our care, attention, and beneficence.<sup>3</sup> “Every man, as the

---

3. As in the titles of the first two chapters of the second section of the sixth part of TMS.

Stoics used to say, is first and principally recommended to his own care; and every man is certainly, in every respect, fitter and abler to take care of himself than of any other person" (TMS, VI.ii.1.1). Therefore the main concern of our conscience is ourselves; it leads us in the way of propriety to be worthy of praise, and to satisfy our desire for the love of others. Our conscience is our guide, telling us how we should act and whether our feelings are appropriate to our situation. As a result of our social experience, our conscience tells us how others see us, and, at the same time, as it knows exactly the motivation of our actions, it can tell us if this regard is justified or not. It gives us a sample of the enjoyable or painful communication we might experience with others.

The source of the impartial spectator's authority goes beyond social sanction or public opinion. It lies within ourselves, "in the desire of praise-worthiness, and in the aversion to blame-worthiness; in the desire of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we love and admire in other people; and in the dread of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we hate and despise in other people" (TMS, III.2.32). We learn how to become praiseworthy in our social interactions, which lead us to form a general idea of exact propriety and perfection. We gradually arrive at this idea "from [our] observations upon the character and conduct both of [ourselves] and of other people" through the "slow, gradual, and progressive work of the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct" (VI.iii.25). This idea will guide our conduct through the impartial spectator's judgments.

This process makes us aware of our co-existence, the formal characteristics of our interactions, our place in society, and the conduct we should adopt if we want to be worthy of our fellows' praise. Since the conditions for its success are not always met, it also implies risks of exclusion and denial of others' humanity. Nevertheless, when individuals can see each other, identify, recognize, and affectively communicate with each other, we arrive at this extended self, guided by the inhabitant of the breast.

The impartial spectator, in its highest or deepest sense, personifies our possibility of giving ourselves the rules under which we can accomplish our goals and live a life worth living with others. In this sense, it personifies freedom as autonomy and human flourishing; it implies this transcendent sense of freedom-in-the-world-with-others.

## References

- Álvarez, Andrés, and Jimena Hurtado. 2015. "Out of Sight, Out of Mind": Social Interactions and Smith's Asymmetrical Sympathy. *Iberian Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 2(1): 1–20. [Link](#)
- Forman-Barzilai, Fonna. 2011. *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy: Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hont, Istvan. 2015. *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, eds. Béla Kapossy and Michael Sonenscher. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Montes, Leonidas. 2004. *Adam Smith in Context: A Critical Reassessment of Some Central Components of His Thought*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Paganelli, Maria Pia. 2015. Recent Engagements with Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment. *History of Political Economy* 47(3): 363–394.
- Raphael, D. D. 2007. *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam. 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## About the Author



**Jimena Hurtado** is associate professor of the Economics Department at Universidad de los Andes. Her main areas of interest are economic philosophy and the history of economic thought, especially the works of Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Recently, she has explored the formation of Colombian economic thought in the nineteenth century, in particular during the Liberal Republic. Her email address is [jihurtad@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:jihurtad@uniandes.edu.co).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5915>



# On the Origins and Normative Status of the Impartial Spectator

John McHugh<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

Adam Smith's concept of the "impartial and well-informed spectator" (hereafter I keep with the common practice of leaving the "well-informed" implied) constitutes his attempt to solve a problem that is essential to the particular kind of moral theory he offers (TMS, III.2.32).

Like many other moral theories, Smith's tries to *explain* moral life and (most likely, though some have argued otherwise) tries to elaborate and defend a *normative* conception of moral life; thus, Smith's account of morality tells us both how we *do* judge and act and how we *should* judge and act. However, Smith's moral theory is specifically a theory of moral *sentiments*. To employ a crude but heuristically helpful dichotomy: On his view, we make moral judgments and perform moral actions fundamentally on the basis of feeling rather than reason.

Such a view obviously faces the problem of accounting for the fact that our moral judgments and motivations have features that our feelings often do not. For example, feelings are usually subjective and fleeting, while moral judgments and motivations are objective and stable. In contrast to Smith, if one were to ground moral judgment and motivation in rationality, this would not be a problem, as reason is definitively objective and stable. Thus, one of the primary challenges for theories like Smith's is to provide some account of how things objective and stable can be rooted in things subjective and fleeting.

For Smith, the impartial spectator solves this problem. According to Smith, when I make a moral judgment or act on moral considerations, I do not do so merely on the basis of how *I* feel but on the basis of how someone in a more objec-

---

1. Denison University, Granville, OH 43023.



tive, more stable position would feel; the concept of the impartial spectator is the concept of this someone. In this regard, the impartial spectator is Smith's concept of conscience, the faculty that we employ when we make moral judgments and engage in moral deliberation.

This much is—gulp—certain. But (at least) two questions remain. How does Smith understand the origin of the impartial spectator? And how does Smith understand the normative status of its judgments? In what follows, I map out what I take to be the main possible responses to each question. With respect to the origin of the impartial spectator, I also indicate what I take the most promising view to be. With respect to the normative status of its judgments, I outline some kinds of investigations we might need to undertake in order to evaluate the possibilities.

There are at least three possible views on regarding how Smith understands the origin of the impartial spectator:

- I. The first is that the impartial spectator emerges from social interaction as a solution to a certain kind of coordination problem. For Smith, “nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary” (TMS, I.i.2.1). The trouble is that people don't automatically share each other's emotions, especially “with regard to those objects, which affect in a particular manner” one or the other of them (I.i.4.5). Thus, in order for them to achieve the sentimental concord they desire, people must use their imaginations. The spectator (the person observing a person feeling something) imagines what it is like to be the agent (the person experiencing the feeling), and the agent imagines what it is like to be the spectator; the result is that each moves towards a middle, more objective, impartial perspective. After enough social interaction, judging in terms of this new, created perspective becomes habitual.
- II. On the previous reading, the existence of the impartial spectator is explained in terms of human beings figuring out the best way to satisfy their desire to get along with their neighbors, manifested specifically in their desire for what Smith calls “mutual sympathy” with them. On another reading, the impartial spectator constitutes an innate faculty that is likely *awakened* via interactions like the one just described, but is *not an artificial* response to them. Thus, on this second view, the existence of the impartial spectator is explained in terms of the development of a natural human disposition to make and abide by impartial judgments.

- III. The third reading combines elements of the first two. On this reading, the impartial spectator is still a human creation in response to certain features of social interaction rather than a faculty awakened by them. But the nature of the response itself remains determined, in some sense, by human nature. So, on this view, the existence of the impartial spectator is explained by a natural tendency to create it under certain conditions.

In Smith's writing, there is evidence favoring the first reading (e.g., TMS, pp. 128–130 note *r*)<sup>2</sup> and evidence favoring the second reading (e.g., TMS, III.5.5). Insofar as the third reading can be understood as an attempt to incorporate all this evidence systematically, I take it to be the most promising one.

Things are more complicated with respect to the question of how to understand the normative status of the impartial spectator. I see four possible views, all of which seem consistent with the third explanatory account of the origin of conscience, but which seem to differ in their relationships with the other two explanatory accounts.

The first view is suggested (it may also be in some way implied) by the first answer to the origin question:

- i. On this view, Smith's argument that we *should* judge and act on the basis of what the impartial spectator says becomes something like, 'If you want to achieve mutual sympathy with others, this is the most effective way to go about it.'

The next three views fit more smoothly (with similar caveats regarding the possibility of some kind of implication) with the natural, innate-faculty explanation of the origin of the impartial spectator.

- ii. Smith's argument that we *should* judge in terms of what the impartial spectator says might become, 'Doing so is the best way to satisfy the particular natural disposition we have towards sympathy with an impartial perspective, however this disposition is understood.'
- iii. Depending upon how we understand the role that the natural faculty of conscience plays in the human psyche and upon whether we want to accept a teleological account of human nature, the normative argument might become 'Doing so is the only way to fulfill your natural function

---

2. I refer here to text from the second edition of TMS, included in an editors' footnote.

and thus to allow yourself to flourish in the only way that beings like you are capable of flourishing.’

- iv. Depending on what we think about the metaethical status of this natural faculty’s verdicts, the normative argument might become, ‘Doing so is the only way to make, and act on the basis of, accurate moral judgments.’

View (iv) seems totally consistent with both views (ii) and (iii), in that we might be understood to have a natural disposition towards making true moral judgment and that this disposition might be understood to be dictated by a natural teleological orientation.

How do we evaluate the four possibilities? The first one (that is, view (i)) requires the fewest assumptions, but it generates the weakest conception of moral reasons. On such a view, the strength of moral reasons would depend on these assumptions or conditions obtaining: (1) our having the relevant desire for mutual sympathy; (2) this desire best being satisfied by adopting the perspective of the impartial spectator; *and* (3) this desire not being outweighed by other desires we might have. The second view (that is, view (ii)), in grounding the impartial spectator in a distinct natural disposition, avoids dependence on assumption (2), but it is hard to see how it can avoid assumption (3) or even assumption (1). In avoiding all of these assumptions or conditions obtaining, the third view (that is, view (iii)) generates the strongest conception of moral reasons, but it does so at the cost of requiring major metaphysical assumptions about the hierarchical and teleological structure of human nature. And the fourth, view (iv), requires major metaethical assumptions about the status of sentiment-based moral judgments, i.e., that there is a coherent way to understand how they can be ‘accurate’ or ‘true’; what view (iv) implies about moral reasons depends upon the nature of the relationship between concern for making accurate or true moral judgments and the reasons we have for acting on them.

Evaluating the four views (i–iv) regarding the normative status of the impartial spectator is perhaps more difficult than evaluating the three views (I–III) regarding the origin of the impartial spectator. Interpretative challenges in evaluating the views on normative status arise from the fact that Smith does not say all that much explicitly favoring any of positions (i–iv); thus, we must do difficult and controversial exegetical work to arrive at a conclusion. Compounding this challenge is the fact that completing this interpretive work will likely involve formulating straightforward philosophical arguments for and against each view *per se*; since Smith does not say much here, we will likely need to formulate these arguments independently and then see if they fit with more explicit features of his philosophical orientation. Formulating these arguments is a hard thing to do.

Above, I mentioned challenges to each reading in terms of its respective assumptions and accounts of how strong moral reasons are. But arguments can be made on behalf of all these assumptions and on behalf of both weak and strong accounts of moral reasons.

However, we are not at a total loss. Several investigative strategies suggest themselves. Since philosophers who influenced Smith such as Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Joseph Butler deal more explicitly than he does with the questions involved in the choice of favoring options (i), (ii), or (iii), it seems that the best place to start in determining where Smith comes down on these issues is with careful thought of the impact these thinkers must have had on his views. The same is true to some extent regarding view (iv). However, progress in this regard first requires thinking deeply about the logical structure of Smithian moral judgment, given how the Smithian sympathy mechanism works. Smith's conception of moral judgment differs from those of his fellow sentimentalists Hutcheson and Hume because it does not seem to model moral judgment on the perception of and/or reaction to a quality in its target. For Smith, moral judgment essentially involves perception of and/or reaction to *agreement* between one's own evaluative sentiments and another's. The fact that we have evaluative sentiments prior to the moment of agreement makes it hard to determine *when* the moral judgment takes place. Do we *first* make the judgment and then *complete* it via mutual sympathy? Or is the moral judgment complete but not yet *moral* prior to mutual sympathy? We must grapple with these kinds of questions before we can grapple with the question of whether Smith believes that moral judgments are even capable of being true or false.

## References

- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## About the Author



**John McHugh** is Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Denison University. He received his Ph.D. at Boston University. He has published on Smith in the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* and the *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*. He is also the editor of *Francis Hutcheson: Selected Writings* (Imprint Academic, 2014). His email address is [mchughj@denison.edu](mailto:mchughj@denison.edu).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5916>



# Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator

Paul D. Mueller<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

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

---

1. King's College, New York, NY 10004.

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

- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1987 (Corr.). *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, eds. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## About the Author



**Paul Mueller** is an assistant professor of economics at The King's College in Manhattan. Before joining King's, he completed his Ph.D. at George Mason University. He received his bachelor's degree in economics and political science from Hillsdale College. His interests include monetary economics, financial markets, public choice economics, the history of economic theory (particularly the works of Adam Smith), and Austrian economics. He has published articles in the *Adam Smith Review*, *Journal of Private Enterprise*, *Review of Austrian Economics*, and the *Quarterly Review of Austrian Economics*. He has also written columns about Smith's ideas for the Cato Institute. His email address is [pmueller@tkc.edu](mailto:pmueller@tkc.edu).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)

[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5917>



# Is Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator Selfless?

Maria Pia Paganelli<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

The invitation to write this paper came with some suggested questions about the nature and role of the impartial spectator. The invitation also suggested that the contributors could “perhaps treat a few, or bypass them entirely. But the chief intent of your contribution should be to communicate your interpretation of the impartial spectator.” One of the suggested questions implied that the impartial spectator is selfless. I will use the contrast between Adam Smith’s description of the man who achieves the most self-command and man who achieves the most humanity to show how, in my interpretation, the impartial spectator is not an abstract entity independent of an individual, but rather is an integral part of each individual. In this context talking about a selfless impartial spectator becomes meaningless.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith describes the moral development of human beings in the following way. We are born with the imaginative capacity to put ourselves in the place of another person and evaluate how we would react if we were in that situation. This mechanism, achieved through the work of our imagination, is what Smith calls sympathy.<sup>2</sup> It is a natural and universal mechanism, of which we may or may not be conscious. This ability of our imagination is used to evaluate the conduct of others as well as our own conduct. When we do something, with our imagination we split ourselves into two: the I-agent and the I-spectator. The I-spectator tries to see the I-agent as if it was a different and unknown person. The I-spectator puts himself in the shoes of the I-agent and thinks how he would react in that situation had the I-spectator been the I-agent (TMS, III.1).

---

1. Trinity University, San Antonio, TX 78212.

2. Smith uses sympathy also in other ways, but they are irrelevant for this paper.

The spectator, being me looking at someone else's behavior or my I-spectator looking at my I-agent's behavior, evaluates the behavior of the person looked at: If the spectator would behave in the same way as the agent, the agent is worthy of approval. If the spectator would have acted differently, the agent is not worthy of approval and may instead be blameworthy.

This means that when we see a praiseworthy behavior in others, and when the majority of other people around us also sees that behavior as praiseworthy, we make a mental note and will try to behave in the same way under similar circumstance so that we too can be the object of praise. Similarly when we see a blameworthy behavior in others, and that the majority of other people around us also see that behavior as blameworthy, we make a mental note to ourselves to avoid that behavior to avoid being the object of blame (TMS, III.2).<sup>3</sup>

The first implication of being motivated by the desire to be praiseworthy and not to be blameworthy is that, when we sacrifice ourselves to benefit others, we are not motivated by the love for others nor by the "love for mankind" nor even by the "feeble spark of benevolence". What drives us is just the "love of what is honourable" (TMS, III.2.28, III.3.4).

The second implication of being motivated by the desire to be praiseworthy and not to be blameworthy is that we need to tame our self-love.

Our ability to be the proper object of praise and to avoid being the proper object of blame is our ability to develop morally. The problem we incur in self-evaluation is that we are naturally biased by our self-love. We love ourselves too much to admit we are wrong. Our I-spectator is partial to us because of his proximity and love toward us. So we need to train ourselves to decrease this bias and try to distance ourselves from ourselves as much as possible, that is, we need to train ourselves to create more space between the I-actor and the I-spectator. The closer the spectator is to the agent, the more indulgent and partial the spectator will be, that is, the more biased he will be. This training is achieved through self-command (TMS, III.3).

As children we have no self-command until we start playing with our peers. It is when we meet our playfellows that out of necessity we start restraining our passions. Even as adults, controlling our passions is extremely difficult because our innate egocentrism. It can be achieved, for the most part, only partially over a lifespan, and only then with great discipline. When we develop that great discipline to control our passions and behave toward ourselves as if we were behaving toward

---

3. There are particular circumstances in which the actual spectator may disagree with the I-spectator, but that does not affect the general mechanism just described, which is the mechanism through which the rules of just conducts, which are the base of the judgment of the I-spectator, are formed (TMS, III.3).



a stranger, we can judge ourselves impartially, and we properly think we deserve approbation (TMS, III.3.22–25).

The more self-command a situation requires the more self-approbation it generates. This implies that we have a higher chance of mastering self-command and therefore our ability to detach ourselves from ourselves if we are often and regularly exposed to hardship, danger, and misfortunes (TMS, III.3.26).

But rather than praising this achievement, Smith seems to condemn it! “Under the boisterous and stormy sky of war and faction, of public tumult and confusion, the sturdy severity of self-command prospers the most, and can be the most successfully cultivated.” Under these hard circumstances self-command will prosper—but it does so at the expense of humanity. Humanity needs to be neglected, and every time we neglect humanity we weaken it. “But, in such situations, the strongest suggestions of humanity must frequently be stifled or neglected; and every such neglect *necessarily* tends to weaken the principle of humanity” (TMS, III.3.37, my emphasis). Situations in which a soldier needs to violate the property and the life of others “*always* tend to diminish, and too often to extinguish altogether, that sacred regard to both, which is the foundation of justice and humanity” (ibid., my emphasis).<sup>4</sup>

When self-command is strongest, so that we are completely detached from ourselves, we become selfless, but that means we lose our humanity, our sensibility to the feelings of others, which is the foundation of manhood (TMS, III.3.34). The man who suffers the loss of his father or of his son in the same way as the loss of the father or of the son of a stranger is a moral monster, not a moral hero: “such

---

4. This may not mean the complete and categorical impossibility of achieving both perfect humanity and perfect self-command at the same time. In theory the humanity and self-command could be achieved simultaneously. But Smith seems to imply that in practice it is highly unlikely. “The person best fitted by nature for acquiring the former of those two sets of virtues, is likewise best fitted for acquiring the latter. The man who feels the most for the joys and sorrows of others, is best fitted for acquiring the most complete control of his own joys and sorrow. The man of the most exquisite humanity, is naturally the most capable of acquiring the highest degree of self-command. *He may not, however, always have acquired it; and it very frequently happens that he has not*” (TMS, III.3.36, my emphasis). And more explicitly: “The situations in which the gentle virtue of humanity can be most happily cultivated, *are by no means the same* with those which are best fitted for forming the austere virtue of self-command. The man who is himself at ease can best attend to the distress of others. The man who is himself exposed to hardships is most immediately called upon to attend to, and to control his own feelings. *In the mild sunshine of undisturbed tranquillity*, in the calm retirement of undissipated and philosophical leisure, the soft virtue of humanity flourishes the most, and is capable of the highest improvement. But, in such situations, the greatest and noblest exertions of self-command have little exercise. *Under the boisterous and stormy sky of war and faction*, of public tumult and confusion, the sturdy severity of self-command prospers the most, and can be the most successfully cultivated. But, in such situations, the strongest suggestions of humanity must frequently be stifled or neglected; and every such neglect *necessarily tends to weaken the principle of humanity*” (III.3.37, my emphasis). Maybe we should aim at achieving both humanity and self-command, but in practice we will face a trade-off: if we are under a mild sunshine, we cannot at the same time be under a stormy sky.

unnatural indifference, far from exciting our applause, would incur our highest disapprobation” (III.3.13).

Smith condemns the “two sets of philosophers” which preach that morality is based on selflessness. The “whining and melancholy moralists” (TMS, III.3.9) who want to annihilate ourselves by raising others to our level—with the “love of mankind.” The “ancient Stoics” (III.3.11) want to annihilate ourselves by diminishing ourselves to the level of others—with the most perfect self-command. “Both, perhaps, have carried their doctrines a good deal beyond the just standard of nature and propriety” (III.3.8).

The development of the I-spectator from partial to impartial is a lifetime project, and even then it is never perfectly achieved. Yet, our ability to see the behavior of others and of ourselves from a distance, as a spectator who is not connected to us or the others would do, is our potential to judge impartially our own behavior and the behavior of others. This development of an impartial spectator within us is a universal feature of humankind. It is the mechanism through which our morality develops, regardless of the content of our morality. And it is a process that requires a self. The annihilation of our self by raising others to our level, by making us feel for others in the same way we feel for ourselves, would make us like the “whining moralists.” The annihilation of our self by lowering ourselves to the level of others, by making us as indifferent to ourselves as we are indifferent to strangers, would make us like the “ancient Stoics”: lacking humanity. A well-developed human being is a person able to recognize and cultivate his own self and to place it at the proper distance, to observe it neither from too close nor from too far, to balance his self-command with his humanity, and not to crush it with one or the other.

The potential development of our I-spectator as an impartial viewer and judge of our actions is therefore a universal feature of humankind. But the impartial spectator cannot be selfless—it cannot be too far away—just like it cannot be self-centered—it cannot be too close—it requires a balanced cultivation of our self.

## References

- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## About the Author



**Maria Pia Paganelli** is an Associate Professor of Economics at Trinity University. Dr. Paganelli works on Adam Smith, David Hume, eighteenth-century monetary theories, and the links between the Scottish Enlightenment and behavioral economics. She is the author of numerous articles and is the co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*. Her email address is [maria.paganelli@trinity.edu](mailto:maria.paganelli@trinity.edu).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)

[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5918>



# Peer Review and the Development of the Impartial Spectator

Craig Smith<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

Together with the idea of sympathy, the impartial spectator is perhaps the most memorable part of Adam Smith's moral theory. In what follows I want to outline how this central concept of Smith's thinking comes to the fore in his attempts to reply to a series of objections which arose from his peers in their reception of the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter TMS). Before doing so I will provide a sketch of what I take to be the functional role of the impartial spectator.

It is important to note two key features of Smith's overall project in TMS. First Smith was dissatisfied by the existing state of moral philosophy. He came to feel that moral philosophy, both ancient and modern, had failed to provide a satisfactory account of actual cases of moral judgment. Attempts to reduce morality to a single principle, whether self-interest in the case of Bernard Mandeville, or benevolence in the case of Francis Hutcheson, failed to capture important aspects of how we actually experience morality. Second, he drew on his friend David Hume's attempt to create an empirically based account of moral psychology, an account which depended on the observation of everyday moral thinking (Campbell 1975).

Smith's aim was to provide an accurate theory of all aspects of moral judgment. As a result his theory appears eclectic, as it attempts to bring together many of the past attempts to understand morality. His account has a place for reason, for conscience, for utility, for general rules, for habit and custom, for the virtues, and for self-interest. And it must have a place for each, because each is, in fact, a part of moral life. The lynchpin of all of this is his account of the moral sentiments as mediated by sympathy. But it is important to note that Smith does not reduce

---

1. University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK.

morality to sympathy, nor does he argue that sympathy is the single principle which dictates the content of morality.

Moreover, Smith's account of moral sentiment does not depend on the identification of a cognitive faculty or moral sense. Instead it is an account of the nature of moral experience through human emotions. Central to the account is human sociability and fellow-feeling. Smith's sympathy is a "fellow-feeling" with "any passion whatever" (TMS, 10). From here he builds an account of how shared beliefs about appropriate sentimental responses are developed amongst a group. It is important to note that Smith's account of the operation and development of this system of beliefs about morality has no active role for a Deity. Whatever the role of religion in society, it has no functional role in Smith's account of sympathy and moral sentiment.

Social life is not simply the playing field upon which morality takes place, it also plays a causal role in the generation of morality itself. Human beings are social, and social experience shapes our ability to control our moral sentiments. We are aware that others judge our behaviour, and as a result we come to attune our reactions to socially generated norms of moral behaviour. We experience pleasure from "mutual sympathy" (TMS, 13) and this explains how we are able to come to shared beliefs about right and wrong.

Central to Smith's account is the role of imagination. Imagination allows us to put ourselves in the situations of others and to assess their likely reaction to our behaviour. This allows us to anticipate and identify behaviour that is in line with socially generated notions of propriety. The process, both imaginative and sentimental, is undertaken alongside our judgments of others. The process is one that checks the likely propriety of behaviour against our imagination's model of how we would react in similar circumstances. Thus spectatorship becomes central to Smith's account of moral experience. We spectate and are spectated upon in turn in a process that mediates the sentiments and, through self-command, allows us to secure the approval of our fellows.

It is at this point that we need to consider what Smith regarded as the strongest objection to his first, 1759, version of the theory. Smith was accused, by Gilbert Elliot (later 3rd Baronet of Minto), of producing a theory of moral conventionalism that left him with no solid basis upon which to criticise the content of particular moral beliefs. In a long letter replying to Elliot, the gist of which would eventually find its way into the second, 1761 edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith responds to this concern by developing the account of self-spectatorship through his account of the impartial spectator (Corr., 48–49).<sup>2</sup> D. D. Raphael (2007) makes the analysis of these revisions the heart of his account of the impartial spectator.

---

2. Elliot's letter to Smith does not survive.

Smith's initial version of the theory was acutely aware that our experience of the moral sentiments and sympathy was imperfect; for instance, it tends to generate biases in favour of those close to us. We judge our friends and family more leniently, and are in turn judged more leniently by them. This problem, and Smith's development of a reply to it, led him to the account of conscience as a mode of self-judgment. From the second edition Smith develops the role of the impartial spectator in this part of his account. This is a development of the actual impartial spectators of the first edition: people who judge us but who are not close to us. In subsequent editions, Smith couples the account of conscience from the first edition with an enhanced role for an imaginative internalised impartial spectator who assesses our conduct in the light of what we imagine an actual impartial spectator would think.

The idea is that we internalise the process of judgment that provides us with an impartial assessment of others and apply it to our own behaviour. I am able to reflect on my behaviour while stripping out my own partiality, to distance myself from my passions and exercise self-command. This process of splitting our self into two persons and dispassionately examining our own conduct becomes habitual and is often drawn upon in an immediate fashion. The process remains both imaginative and driven by the passions. The judgment of our conscience is a felt experience as the impartial spectator's feelings are used to shine a light on our own. Indeed we often feel that we are doing the wrong thing without knowing why, showing us that the impartial spectator speaks to our emotions as much as to our reason.

For Smith: "Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love" (TMS, 113). This is extended into a desire to be not only praised but praiseworthy. And this desire prompts us to develop and apply the imaginative impartial spectator. We develop a habit of passing judgment on ourselves. We practice self-judgment to such a degree that we are dissatisfied with approbation unless we, as judges of our own behaviour, are satisfied that we are worthy of such approbation. We "turn our eyes inwards" (ibid., 115) and find that approbation that results from misperception simply does not cut it for us.

We can see then that Smith has created a psychological mechanism in the impartial spectator which he believes is both accurate to actual moral experience and which allows individuals to distance themselves from their own passions. Smith's naturalistic account of conscience as the impartial spectator provides a "higher tribunal," an imaginative "man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter" of our conduct (TMS, 130). He also provides an account of how we are able to pass judgment on the actual customary beliefs of our society. An issue of conscience is one in which our imaginative invocation of the impartial spectator has the

capacity to put us at odds with the judgments of actual spectators and, ultimately, to choose to prefer our own judgment to what we regard as the mistaken views of our peers. 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. Smith clearly felt that this development was in line with the original spirit of his account and was also sufficient to deal with Elliot's objection. In the sixth edition of 1790 the role of the spectator and the section on conscience are further expanded, giving a sense that Smith continued to regard the direction he had taken as a suitable response to what he took to be Elliot's serious objection.

The impartial spectator explains how passion-driven creatures, weak and partial as they are, are able to gain a sense of the "real littleness" of their concerns (TMS, 137). While our passions still provide the motivating force of our actions, we now subject them to assessment and control in a way that draws a clear line between Smith's account and accounts that depend on a contagion of manners. Elliot believed that Smith's theory collapsed into conventionalism because it contained no aspect which allowed for a claim to have objective moral value beyond what was authorised by the current practice of any society at any given time. The force of Elliot's objection lies in a deep-seated intuition that morality must be more substantive than mere social norms. Smith's development of the role of conscience and the impartial spectator was supposed to accommodate this intuition whilst maintaining the naturalistic form of the sentimental account.

It seems, however, that Elliot's objection continued to have influence despite Smith's attempts to develop the impartial spectator. In an unpublished manuscript, Adam Ferguson relates an imaginary conversation in which one interlocutor makes a very similar charge against Smith's account. He writes: "You began with calling Sympathy to explain Moral Sentiment. You now call up moral sentiment to explain itself: what is a well informed & impartial observer, but a Virtuous Person whose Sympathy may be relied on as a Test of Virtue? If he be well informed, of what is he informed?" (Ferguson 1960, 229). The rest of Ferguson's text has Smith replying that his revisions to the 1761 second edition were supposed to have removed this objection. Yet Ferguson seems to be suggesting that Smith has simply complicated the account and created a circular argument.

Smith's theory, even with the introduction of the impartial spectator, leaves him a "completely consistent conventionalist" (Haakonssen 2003, 216) because the impartial spectator is imagined by an individual who is socialised and passion-driven. Ferguson's point was that it may be a particularly vivid account of conscience, but it nonetheless depends upon a notion of a virtuous man, and the content of the virtuous man's knowledge is that of the individual in question. 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. The impartial spectator is merely another mode through which to consider our actions. The only sense in which the impartial spectator is universal is that all normally functioning humans have it (or else they are what we in modern terms would call a sociopath). While Smith clearly thought that the moral sentiments were universal, and that they often react in a similar way given the universal human nature, he was likewise comfortable with the idea of culturally and historically diverse judgments. The impartial spectator identifies moral truth for people like us, not moral truth in some objective and unchanging sense. The only knowledge that the impartial spectator has but that actual spectators do not comes from his access to our innermost thoughts and feelings. He is thereby able to make an accurate judgment of our motives and to demand that we are praiseworthy as well as praised. This, Smith believed, distinguished his account from mere conventionalism. But it seems instead to have added a reflective element to an account that remains deeply embedded in the knowledge of actual individuals.

Similarly, the impartial spectator is not in any straightforward sense selfless. While it is true that it allows us to exercise self-command to do what an actual impartial spectator would approve—to tone down our selfishness, if you like—it is not governed by any principle of benevolence. That was Hutcheson's error. The impartial spectator will, when appropriate, approve of self-regarding actions. It will recognise when we have special duties to particular individuals. An impartial spectator will approve of us caring more for our own children than those of others, just as it will disapprove of us actively harming the children of others to advance our own interests. In this way Smith's explanation of the content of conscience is truer to actual moral behaviour than is a system that demands perfect selflessness.

There is then no creature called the impartial spectator separate from our own consciousness of our self. There is no mystery to it, and no idealised perspective where the voice of conscience is supposed to have complete knowledge of all relevant information. The impartial spectator is not an ideal spectator; he still depends on the knowledge of partial individuals about what impartial actual spectators would think of them. In many respects it is precisely this which makes the impartial spectator such an attractive part of Smith's account. It is a recognisably human moral psychology that makes no unrealistic claims on individuals in the name of some supposed eternally true moral principle. Smith simply wasn't involved in that kind of philosophical project. He wanted to explain how actual people actually experience moral judgment. As a result the judgment involved will always be imperfect, as humans are imperfect. In this sense the impartial spectator makes us more humane, while recognising that we are, in the end, merely human.

## References

- Campbell, T. D.** 1975. Scientific Explanation and Ethical Judgment in the Moral Sentiments. In *Essays on Adam Smith*, eds. Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson, 68–82. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ferguson, Adam.** 1960. “Of the Principle of Moral Estimation: A Discourse Between David Hume, Robert Clerk, and Adam Smith”: An Unpublished MS by Adam Ferguson. Edited by E. C. Mossner. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21(2): 222–232.
- Haakonssen, Knud.** 2003. Natural Jurisprudence and the Theory of Justice. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie, 205–221. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Raphael, D. D.** 2007. *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith’s Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1987 (Corr.). *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, eds. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## About the Author



**Craig Smith** is the Adam Smith Senior Lecturer in the Scottish Enlightenment in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow. He was educated at the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, and taught in the Department of Moral Philosophy at the University of St. Andrews before taking up his present appointment. He is the author of *Adam Smith’s Political Philosophy: The Invisible Hand and Spontaneous Order* (Routledge) and was one of the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*. He is Book Review Editor of the *Adam Smith Review*. His email address is [craig.smith@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:craig.smith@glasgow.ac.uk).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5919>



# The Fair and Impartial Spectator

Vernon L. Smith<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

*[T]here are indeed some universal moral norms and values, but to think that ‘fairness’ is among them is an Anglocentric illusion.*

—Anna Wierzbicka (2006, 162)

Adam Smith refers to the “impartial spectator” over sixty times in his first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but only once as the “fair and impartial spectator”: “We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it” (TMS, III.1.2).

This form of the metaphor best enables us to understand Smith’s conception of the maturation process wherein we become social creatures by gradually modifying our behavior to follow other-regarding general rules that meet with the approval, and avoid the disapproval, of our neighbors.

I will use propositional statements to articulate and develop Smith’s model of human sociability, and the central role of the impartial spectator, beginning with some background axioms and principles. The power of Smith’s work is that it accommodates the observed tendency for humans to be other-regarding in their more intimate groupings, explains the emergence of property as it occurs in the civil order of government, and accounts seamlessly for the prominence of self-interested action in impersonal markets and thence to the causes of the wealth of nations. We are strapped in finding a modern equal to Smith’s grand accounting for the deep meaning he extracted from carefully observing the diversity of human conduct.

**PROPOSITION 1.** Learning to become social is not about altering our self-interested or self-loving nature, but rather is about incorporating our self-loving nature into a theory of the emergence of socializing rules through processes of cultural consent.

---

1. Chapman University, Orange, CA 92866.

In modern language each person is characterized by strictly increasing individual utility functions defined on their own valued outcome, say  $U(own)$ . If we think of an outcome as having a monetary equivalent, then utility is strictly increasing in monetary amount. This non-satiation axiom, that for each of us more is better and less is worse, is common knowledge. Thus,

Every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care; and as he is fitter to take care of himself than of any other person, it is fit and right that it should be so. (TMS, II.ii.2.1)

...every animal was by nature...endowed with the principle of self-love... (VII.ii.1.15)

We are not ready to suspect any person of being defective in selfishness. This is by no means the weak side of human nature, or the failing of which we are apt to be suspicious. ... Carelessness and want of oeconomy are universally disapproved of, not, however, as proceeding from a want of benevolence, but from a want of the proper attention to the objects of self-interest. (VII.ii.3.16)

Smith's model is in no sense based on the hypothesis that individual preferences are the source of the concern people have for others. This is explicitly stated and defended in the above quotations, and implicitly assumed in the key propositions on beneficence (7 and 8) and justice (9 and 10) below. Common knowledge of self-love is essential if the impartial spectator is to make appropriate judgments concerning proper conduct in human social relations. Contrary, however, to neo-classical economics, self-love for Smith did not imply that individuals would in all, or perhaps even in most, circumstances choose actions to maximize the utility of own outcome,  $U(own)$ . Rather, the non-satiation axiom enables all in an interactive community (extended family, neighbors, associates) to know that a given action is hurtful to anyone who receives less, and beneficial to anyone who receives more. In Smith's model of sympathetic fellow-feeling, common knowledge of how alternative actions hurt or benefit others as well as yourself provides the foundation whereby people learn to follow rules that are appropriately other-regarding, that properly take into account the feelings—the gratitude and resentments—of others.

The neoclassical and modern error is to apply the  $\text{Max } U(own)$  calculus to all decisions, regardless of circumstances, and without regard for the pattern of benefits and hurts in our more intimate groupings where enforcement was, and always had been, endogenous. Generations of economists were indoctrinated with a thought process in which every action maps into an outcome and thence into preference and, implicitly, in which this mapping can be reversed via individual maximization.

PROPOSITION 2. Social motivation is based on the desire for praise and praise-worthiness and the desire to avoid blame and blame-worthiness, which serve as indicators of propriety and harmony in the evolution of local order from local rules.

Man...desires, not only praise, but praise-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise. He dreads, not only blame, but blame-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be blamed by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of blame. (TMS, III.2.1)

Hence, the motivation for action in our more intimate groupings is not itself utilitarian; rather Smith models the process whereby we modify self-interested choices in the light of learning what other people will go along with. Praise and praise-worthiness are indicators of that social approval, but the resulting approved conventions require each to know the pattern of hurts and benefits resulting from an action. Since all are self-interested, we can judge who is hurt or benefits from an action and integrate that essential knowledge into our learning of rules in which our actions are praised/praise-worthy or are not blamed/blame-worthy. Thus, other-regarding behavior does not derive from other-regarding utility,  $U(own, other)$ , but rather is the result of  $U(own)$  as an input to our socialization.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in impersonal markets we also rely on  $U(own)$  in choosing to take action.<sup>3</sup> There is no need to model the individual as a divided self; rather, we can model one self-interested individual in imperfect self-command of his local relationships while simultaneously responding to the external order of prices in markets.<sup>4</sup>

PROPOSITION 3. The process of learning to be sociable—maturation—is to learn propriety.

---

2. The contemporary utilitarian would modify Smith's model by assigning everyone an individual social preference function  $U(own, other)$ , then proceeding to maximize. But modern utilitarians failed to follow this path until after they were shaken up by the rejection of neoclassicalism in small group experiments, especially two-person trust and other games (Berg et al. 1995 was the key paper that initiated a large subsequent literature; Smith 2008, chs. 10–12, provides a summary and discussion of the experimental two-person game results of the 1980s and 1990s). By then Smith's work already had two centuries of priority, and it deserves our careful examination of how he was able to model that behavior within the framework of self-interested individuals.

3. Wilson (2010, 78–81) contrasts how “preference” is used to interpret market decision with how it applies to social interactions.

4. However, economic and social policy is threatened by human failure to understand that the rules of the local order cannot be applied to those of the extended order, or vice versa, without damage to the one or the other (see Hayek 1988, 18).

Smith uses an ingenious mental experiment—his *soziale Gedankenexperiment*—to articulate the socializing process. We are asked to imagine an individual growing up without any communication with another human being. For Smith such a solitary individual “could no more think of...the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face” (TMS, III.1.3; also see IV.2.12). A solitary person can see none of these things in the absence of a social mirror. Raise him in society, and that mirror is supplied in the form of the “countenance and behavior” of all who he lives with, who never fail to express their sense of the propriety or impropriety of his actions (III.1.3). From this experience each is able to internalize a view of the appropriateness of his own conduct and gradually acquire personhood. For Smith “mind” is a social creation, whether it involves our conduct in the choice of context-dependent action or our perceptions of facial or body beauty. There is no individual psychology separate and distinct from social psychology. Psychology in this sense must begin with principles acquired from our human sociability.

PROPOSITION 4. The concept of ‘fairness’ lives in rules space, and it corresponds to the sports metaphor of fair play in which people are motivated to choose actions that avoid committing fouls.

Hence, Smith uses *fair* in its eighteenth-century meaning that was, and is, a unique English word. As observed by the distinguished and influential linguist, Anna Wierzbicka:

The ubiquity of the words *fair* and *unfair* in modern English discourse, across a wide range of registers, is all the more remarkable given that these words have no equivalents in other European languages (let alone non-European ones) and are thoroughly untranslatable. (Wierzbicka 2006, 141)

And again,

...‘fairness’ is a uniquely Anglo concept, without equivalents in other languages, except, as for example in German, as a loan from English (*das is nicht fair*, “that’s not fair”).<sup>[5]</sup> At the same time, in Anglo culture this concept is so central that many speakers of English imagine it must be universal, perhaps even innate. ... there are indeed some universal moral norms and values, but

---

5. And in Polish it is *to nie fair* (see Wierzbicka 2006, 163, where she reports resisting this word loan when her bilingual daughters, contrary to her own native language and cultural experience, are thinking in terms of the English word).

to think that ‘fairness’ is among them is an Anglocentric illusion. (Wierzbicka 2006, 160, 162)

Her final summary applies without modification to my representation of Smith and his concept of the impartial spectator in this paper: “In a way, sport—especially team sport—provides a perfect model for ‘fair’ interaction because the emphasis is on rules and procedures, which are blind to the individual players’ interests and which everyone voluntarily accepts” (Wierzbicka 2006, 166).

**PROPOSITION 5.** The metaphor of the fair and impartial spectator defines the processes whereby we first judge the conduct and character of our neighbors, then devolve or pass judgment concerning the conduct and character of ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

The judgment concerning our own conduct gradually takes the form of self-command which evolves from our two-state experience with failures of character in the marginal moment (the man of yesterday) that are reconsidered in the cooler light of subsequent reevaluation (the man of today). Thus there are two occasions wherein we are afforded the opportunity to view our conduct from the perspective of the impartial spectator: The first is at the time we are poised to act. The second is after having acted. In both cases our sentiment is quite partial, but it is the most partial when it is important that it be impartial. At the time of action the passion of the moment interferes with an impartial evaluation. Although afterwards the prompting circumstances and passion allow a cooler impartial judgment, too often—in comparison with the heat of the moment—the consequence seems unimportant, and except for vain regret we fail to secure ourselves from like errors in the future (TMS, III.4.2–6).

This self-deceit, this fatal weakness of mankind, is the source of half the disorders of human life. If we saw ourselves in the light in which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all, a reformation would generally be unavoidable. We could not otherwise endure the sight. (III.4.6)

**PROPOSITION 6.** We are rescued, however, from the frailties of our conscious judgments by our stronger tendency toward ingrained rule-following conduct—general rules that map particular circumstances into actions that inspire the gratitude, and avoid the resentment, of others.

---

6. These two parts of the judgment process are paraphrases of the subtitle of TMS from the fourth edition, which appeared in 1774 (see Raphael and Macfie 1976, 40).



Fortunately for our species, nature provides a remedy; she has not entirely abandoned us to the delusions of self-deceit triggered by our self-love. From our earliest exposure to the conduct of others, we gradually become attuned to general rules that constitute acceptable “fit and proper” actions sensitive to the context in which they take place (TMS, III.4.7).

According to Smith our conduct takes key categorical forms that I will summarize in the next four propositions. The first two govern beneficent actions; the second two concern hurtful actions, and they encapsulate Smith’s theory of justice and property rights.

**BENEFICENCE PROPOSITION 7.** Intentionally beneficent actions alone deserve reward because of the gratitude invoked in others (TMS, II.ii.1.1).

This proposition provides the emotional foundations of reciprocity, a universal concept requiring an explanation.<sup>7</sup> Our beneficence is most naturally directed to those whose beneficence we have already experienced, and therefore kindness begets kindness (TMS, VI.ii.1.19). In repeat interaction with our associates, reputational gains from sociability yield human betterment, and “tend to unite men in society, to humanity, kindness, natural affection, friendship, esteem” (VI.iii.15). This phenomenon is captured in the modern phrase ‘I owe you one,’ common across many languages, in which the beneficence of another is acknowledged by an implicit obligation to do a future favor in return. The debt is discharged by an ‘in kind’ transfer, i.e., in the same way, with something similar. One cannot resist interpreting the exchange as *de facto* ‘in kind-ness.’

**BENEFICENCE PROPOSITION 8.** The want of beneficence cannot provoke resentment and punishment, because beneficence is freely given and cannot be extorted (TMS, II.ii.1.3).

These two propositions have been tested in the context of extensive form trust games (Smith and Wilson 2014; 2016). Under anonymous pairing, the traditional game-theoretic analysis predicts no cooperation. However, in accordance with Proposition 7, half or more of first-movers beneficently offer cooperation, and two-thirds of their paired counterparts eschew the more lucrative opportunity to defect, instead rewarding the first mover by choosing the cooperative outcome. A modification of the same game is used to test Proposition 8. If first movers

---

7. Thus for Smith, reciprocity is not an entirely satisfactory explanation of the choice outcomes in trust games, as in McCabe et al. 1996. Rather, ‘reciprocity’ is an un-modelled name for the result we observe. For a careful treatment of reciprocity as explanation see Wilson 2008.

choose not to offer cooperation, play passes to second movers who are provided a costly option to punish their paired counterpart for failing to offer cooperation. None choose this option. Implicitly, the second mover's response acknowledges the right of the first not to act beneficently. Proposition 7 back-predicts the findings in early trust games better than neoclassical economic analysis.

JUSTICE PROPOSITION 9. Intentionally hurtful actions alone deserve punishment because of the resentment invoked in others. The greater the hurt, the higher the resentment, and, in proportion, the greater the punishment (TMS, II.ii.1.2, II.ii.2.2).

This proposition is the foundation of Smith's theory of property rights. Our human impulse is to punish intentional actions of a hurtful nature:

Resentment seems to have been given us by nature for defence, and for defence only. It is the safeguard of justice and the security of innocence. It prompts us to beat off the mischief which is attempted to be done to us, and to retaliate that which is already done; that the offender may be made to repent of his injustice, and that others, through fear of the like punishment, may be terrified from being guilty of the like offence. (TMS, II.ii.1.4)

Accordingly, in the civil order of government we find that murder, the greatest evil, commands the greatest punishment; theft and robbery, which deprive us of our lawful possessions, command a greater punishment than violation of contract which merely frustrates our expectation of gain (II.ii.2.2).

Justice for Smith is a negative virtue that results in a large residue of allowable actions after using proportioned punishment to limit specified unjust hurtful actions. In Smith's conception we do not set our sights on a positive ideal of justice—an abstract, slippery and uncertain state. Rather, we address ourselves to specific acts of injustice where—as I interpret Smith—we are likely to find common agreement because of our common experience of the circumstances, nature, and extent of the hurt. Eliminate these one by one, and in this evolutionary process we gradually produce a more just society, but always within a framework of freedom to act and explore all options not specifically interpreted as unjust.

At this juncture it is natural to ask which of the two sentiments—beneficence or justice—is the more essential to human society. On this Smith leaves us with no uncertainty as to his views. We are informed that society will certainly flourish if it is bound by a common bond of gratitude, friendship, and esteem, but where these conditions do not exist, the society, though reduced in happiness, may nevertheless not be dissolved. For society can subsist merely from a common sense of its usefulness (utility), as with a group of merchants, and be supported by “a mercenary

exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation.<sup>8]</sup> Society, however, cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another” (TMS, II.ii.3.2–3). Hence beneficence is less critical to a society’s existence than justice. Although society may subsist in the absence of beneficence it will soon be destroyed by rampant injustice.<sup>9</sup>

JUSTICE PROPOSITION 10. Choosing to forgo actions of a hurtful nature does not merit reward (TMS, II.ii.1.9–10).

While in the civil order of law we punish infractions of justice we do not reward people for obeying the law. There is no reward for stopping at a red light or for leaving your neighbor undisturbed. These are your duty, and call for no explicit rewards, though in following the law we hope that others will do likewise and all benefit.

PROPOSITION 11. There is an asymmetry between gains and losses: “We suffer more...when we fall from a better to a worse situation, than we ever enjoy when we rise from a worse to a better” (TMS, VI.i.6).<sup>10</sup>

The asymmetry between gains and losses essentially follows from the asymmetry between joy and sorrow. Most people, reasonably situated and not destitute, can rise above that state, but little can be added to this state in comparison with what can be taken from it. “Adversity, on this account, necessarily depresses the mind of the sufferer much more below its natural state, than prosperity can elevate him above it” (TMS, I.iii.1.8). Moreover, this asymmetry is not only a private, or utilitarian, experience: “It is averse to expose our health, our fortune, our rank, or reputation, to any sort of hazard. It is rather cautious than enterprising, and

---

8. This contrast, between a more intimate social in-group and one bound by a general recognition of the usefulness of association, is illustrated in the evolution of an experimental economy studied by Kimbrough, Smith, and Wilson (2008). The economy consisted of three dispersed villages, each consisting of four houses and their associated fields. Each village produced two of three world products, and each village member received private utility from all three products. Hence, each village had to trade with at least one other village to fully prosper. Two members in each village were empowered to travel to a common “merchant” area where trade could occur, then return to their home villages. In the course of the experiment each village attained a degree of closeness never matched by the merchant area. The village chat rooms were alive with the use of “we,” whereas “the interactions in the merchant meeting area are noticeably more impersonal than those in the villages” (ibid., 1025).

9. Smith’s oppositions to slavery, mercantilism, imperialism, colonialism, and taxation without representation were firmly rooted in his theory of socioeconomic development.

10. Note that Smith’s fundamental concept of the asymmetry between gains and losses is a modern idea, rediscovered in experimental psychology, and an important element in the recognition of Daniel Kahneman (2003, 1454–1458) for the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics.

more anxious to preserve the advantages which we already possess, than forward to prompt us to the acquisition of still greater advantages. The methods of improving our fortune, which it principally recommends to us, are those which expose to no loss or hazard” (VI.i.6).

If Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* is read as a sequel to his earlier work, the continuity in his thought is compelling, and it contrasts sharply with post-neoclassical economic thought in the 20th century. For Smith, economic development is the next great step in a culture that has evolved rules of fair play and is accustomed to well-practiced social interaction; trade comes from the same sociability, and thus begins his second book.

## References

- Berg, Joyce, John Dickhaut, and Kevin A. McCabe.** 1995. Trust, Reciprocity, and Social History. *Games and Economic Behavior* 10: 122–142.
- Hayek, Friedrich A.** 1988. *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, ed. W. W. Bartley III. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kahneman, Daniel.** 2003. Maps of Bounded Rationality: Psychology for Behavioral Economics. *American Economic Review* 93(5): 1449–1475.
- Kimbrough, Eric, Vernon L. Smith, and Bart J. Wilson.** 2008. Historical Property Rights, Sociality, and the Emergence of Impersonal Exchange in Long-Distance Trade. *American Economic Review* 98(3): 1009–1039.
- McCabe, Kevin A., Stephen J. Rassenti, and Vernon L. Smith.** 1996. Game Theory and Reciprocity in Some Extensive Form Experimental Games. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences* 93: 13421–13428. [Link](#)
- Raphael, D. D., and A. L. Macfie.** 1976. Introduction to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, by Adam Smith, 1–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976a [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976b [1776]. *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, eds. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Vernon L.** 2008. *Rationality in Economics: Constructivist and Ecological Forms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Vernon L., and Bart J. Wilson.** 2014. Fair and Impartial Spectators in Experimental Economic Behavior. *Review of Behavioral Economics* 1(1–2): 1–26. [Link](#)
- Smith, Vernon L., and Bart J. Wilson.** 2016 (forthcoming). Sentiments, Conduct, and Trust in the Laboratory. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 33(1).

- Wierzbicka, Anna.** 2006. *English: Meaning and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, Bart J.** 2008. Language Games of Reciprocity. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 68: 365–377.
- Wilson, Bart J.** 2010. Social Preferences Aren't Preferences. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 73: 77–82.

## About the Author



**Vernon L. Smith** is George L. Argyros Chair in Finance and Economics at Chapman University and President, International Foundation for Research in Experimental Economics. Purdue University awarded him an Honorary Doctor of Management degree in 1989. Dr. Smith was elected member, National Academy of Science, 1995, received Cal Tech's Distinguished Alumni Award in 1996, and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002. He was named Kansan of the year (*Topeka Gazette*) in 2002, and published *Discovery – A Memoir* in 2008. He received a Distinguished Alumni award from the University of Kansas in 2011, and in 2014 an Honorary Doctor of Science degree. His email address is [vsmith@chapman.edu](mailto:vsmith@chapman.edu).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5920>



# The Logic of Reflection: Spectators Partial and Impartial

Robert Urquhart<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

Spectatorship abounds in the world of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*; it is its primary medium. Human beings are actors in this world, but they are all also spectators, and spectatorship is what mediates their relations with one another, and through these, with themselves. This world is then, in an odd way but above all, a *dramatic* world—and not simply a stage for the actors, but a theater, a hall for the audience, the spectators, to sit in. But this theater must have a particular property that most theaters do not have: It must be possible for everyone to be sitting among the audience and acting on the stage simultaneously. This capacity for constant interchange between actor and spectator, which must be a capacity of the theater itself, is the first indication of the oddness of TMS's dramatic world. But the oddness is also in the character of the drama, and in the method of acting in which the drama is played out in the theater. We may explore this oddness by thinking through the character of spectatorship itself, as Smith understands it. We can come to understand not only the partial but also the impartial spectator, who will turn out to be something like the god among spectators (as, for Karl Marx, money is the god among commodities). The character of the drama and the method of acting are, then, bound up with the theater's capacity for allowing the constant interchange of spectator and actor. I want to think this through in terms of what can be called the logic of reflection.

Smith repeatedly indicates both the similarities and the contrasts between the impartial spectator and all the other, partial spectators. The logic of reflection is common to both. The impartial spectator's role is to approve or disapprove the

---

1. University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208.

actions and thoughts of an individual. He (I will use Smith's preferred pronoun throughout) is impartial, and views the individual as from outside, but he is also within, the man *in* the breast. This complexity of the optics of spectatorship is a continuation of the ordinary situation of the individual as always on both sides of the footlights, actor and spectator, seeing and being seen. This is where reflection comes in. Smith shows the necessity of others not only for the moral development of the individual but also of self-consciousness itself, and he does this by invoking the image of the mirror: We see ourselves reflected in others, and in the approval or disapproval that we see in their eyes (TMS, III.1.3). This mirroring begins in earliest childhood and is the foundation for all later moral development.

When Hume used the image of the mirror, it was a metaphor; for Smith it is *not*. We actually *see* our reflection in the eyes of the other. (Smith says that when we are worried about our physical appearance we "examine our persons limb by limb, ... by placing ourselves before a looking-glass" (TMS, III.1.4).) Seeing is as much a part of the concrete, sensuous world as is touch, hearing, taste, smell. And actual sense-perception is pervasive in TMS as the medium that bears the medium of spectatorship: To be a spectator, and not just to be an actor, you must also have eyes, and ears as well, you must have legs to take you to or away from things, arms with which to reach out for them or fend them off, hands to grasp them, and all of these animated by feeling and emotion, attraction or disgust. Smith most frequently invokes sight and sound, light, darkness, color, but all the other senses are there as well. The phenomenological aspect is ever present.

Smith develops the idea of reflection, including its perceptual dimension, as the means by which we judge ourselves: "In order to do this, we must look at ourselves with the same eyes with which we look at others: we must imagine ourselves not the actors, but the spectators of our own character and conduct" (TMS, p. 111 note *k*). This is from the first edition; the later editions say that when "I endeavour to examine my own conduct...I divide myself, as it were, into two persons.... The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation.... The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself.... The first is the judge; the second the person judged of" (TMS, III.1.6). Both versions are important. The first not only makes explicit the necessity for us all to be continually both actors and spectators, it also specifies the peculiar optics of spectatorship: I can look at myself as other because I am looking *with my own eyes*. The second makes clear that what I must do is to split myself in two, and that only one of me is "the person whom I properly call myself." It also emphasizes that the relation between the two is that of judge and judged.

It is hard to recognize the full importance of this reflection/sense-perception line of thought in Smith, first because even in TMS it is often in the background,



and is not fully worked out. Second, by the *Wealth of Nations* (hereafter WN), it has vanished without trace, and has no place at all in Anglo-American thought more or less until the twentieth century (the role of Jeremy Bentham in its disappearance can hardly be overstated). Seeing what happens when it makes a comeback helps us to see its full importance. In Anglo-American thought the key figure is George Herbert Mead, who is quite explicitly criticizing the atomist/individualist approach typical of Anglo-American thought (the basic presentation is in *Mind, Self, and Society*, chs. 18–22). For Mead, the self-conscious individual is always a social being, and self-consciousness can only occur through relations with others. Specifically, he argues, the very term *self-consciousness* implies the central element of this process: that I achieve the capacity to view myself as an *object*. As with Smith, the process is one of reflection, in which I see the other, and then put myself in the other's place and so see myself as other. For Mead, also, I must split myself, becoming two, and this splitting is worked out in the difference between *I* and *me*: "He had in him all the attitudes of others, calling for a certain response; that was the 'me' of that situation, and his response is the 'I'" (Mead 1967/1934, 176). This is not quite the same as the distinction Smith makes in speaking of "the person whom I properly call myself," but it is parallel to it, and the parallel is established by the logic of reflection. Finally, for Mead the completion of the process of becoming a self-conscious self is the attainment of a recognition of what he calls the *generalized other*. I begin by recognition of particular others, individuals and groups of individuals; but the generalized other is the sum of attitudes and standards of the society in which I live. Self-consciousness requires this impersonal achievement, and the generalized other is in this way something like an amalgam of the impartial spectator and what Smith calls the *general rules* of morality.

As far as I know, Mead was not familiar with TMS, though he was at least aware of the broad argument of WN. The point however is not to trace influences but rather to see that the logic of reflection is fairly binding. It is true that the one who worked this logic out most fully—G. W. F. Hegel—was a primary influence on Mead, and Hegel *had* read TMS and WN, and thought highly of Smith (and of James Steuart). (In fact, I am adopting the rather ponderous phrase "*logic* of reflection" in acknowledgement of Hegel's extraordinary exposition of it in the second moment of his *Logic*, the doctrine of essence.) In any event, what is interesting and important (and more interesting and important than if there had been any direct influence) is the re-emergence of lines of thought so close to Smith's mirror passage not only in Mead, but in phenomenology, psychoanalysis, critical theory, and other lines of twentieth-century thought. Such lines had never vanished from Continental thought, but, as accounts of individuality and society, they were muted by Hegel's final absorption of everything—logic, nature, individuals, society, history—into Absolute Spirit. Thus in Continental thought as well, new de-

velopments had to await the twentieth century. Finally, perhaps the most striking development is in the neurophysiology of mirror neurons, dating back only to the 1990s. Giacomo Rizzolatti (2004, 5), one of the pioneers in this work, says that one of his motivations was to find the neurophysiology behind Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, which he regarded as substantially correct—and the discovery of mirror neuron confirmed this.

Even more recently, the entire line of thought has been perfectly manifested in a phenomenon of a very different kind, that of the *selfie*, especially when aided by the *selfie stick*. For the selfie stick carries me beyond what Mead calls the *manipulatory area* (Mead 1980/1932), that is, it carries me beyond my own reach into a place that could only be occupied by another; while the phone/camera effects the displacement of my eyes—"the same eyes with which we look at others"—to that place—"placing myself in his situation"—so that I am truly looking at myself from another's standpoint. Whether or not selfies typically lead their makers to *judge* themselves as others see them is of course open to question; they certainly do advance us in thinking about the logic of reflection and the strange contradictions that its optics involve. But we need to think more about this, and another very valuable example takes us back to Smith's time.

Around 1786, the French painter Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun made a painting of her daughter, Julie, then about six years old. In it, Julie is holding a mirror parallel to the picture plane, and her reflection is as though she were looking straight into it, full face. She, however, is standing in profile, looking down at the mirror from the side. (One of the many engaging features of the painting is that she is holding the rectangular mirror at an angle, and the tilt of her head and the tilt of the mirror correspond.) That is, the painting is a fully actualized and *real* depiction of something impossible: for Julie quite clearly *is* looking straight into the mirror at herself even though the image in the mirror seems to tell us that she can't be. The most important thing about this painting is that it is one of the most beautiful, charming, and moving paintings of a child ever—and, not coincidentally, one painted by her mother. But it doesn't do damage to it to think a bit more about what is going on. Julie is looking at herself in the mirror—the title of the painting says Julie Le Brun is "looking *in* a mirror" (my emphasis)—but in the mirror she is looking straight out at us, the spectators of the painting, so we are seeing ourselves in the mirror, *she is us*. But also, evidently, her actual looking was happening while the painting was being painted, so she is looking out at the painter, her mother whose reflection, then, is in the mirror. We are Julie and her mother; her mother is herself and Julie; and Julie is herself, her mother, and us. It would be wrong to impose on the painting Smith's account of the child seeing approval and disapproval reflected in the parent's eyes, but clearly, the relation between mother and daughter depicted here is a formative one, in which Julie is becoming herself.

It is at least in the realm of possibility that Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun knew of TMS. It was being read (both in English and in translation) in French aristocratic circles at the time. Smith was still alive, and he had personal connections to the Physiocrats. Vigée Le Brun was an intimate, and preferred portrait painter, of Marie Antoinette, whose brothers Joseph and Leopold—both of whom became Holy Roman Emperor—were adherents of physiocracy (she also initially favored A. R. J. Turgot, but then secured his dismissal). However, no matter how



"Jeanne Julie Louise Le Brun se regardant dans un miroir," by Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun (photo by Yann Caradec / CC BY)

nice it would be to think that Vigée Le Brun had in mind Smith's mirror passage, and perhaps offering a gentle critique of it, the main point once again is the imperative of the logic of reflection. Once we begin to reflect on reflection we enter an optical world that is necessarily rooted in, and stems from, the 'real' or 'natural' world of optics, but that is, equally necessarily, impossible in that world. We must become other than ourselves, our eyes ("the same eyes") must become another's eyes, we must see ourselves as other, as objects. Perception is necessary to becoming an individual, but it must be transcended—or, perhaps we should say that perception, for us, can never be reduced simply to its "natural" form. Perception is always already meaningful; meaning is integral to it and cannot be reduced to perception's 'natural' functioning. William Wordsworth, not many years after the painting was made, says something like this in writing "of all the mighty world / Of eye and ear, both what they half-create, / And what perceive" (1981/1798, 116): The depiction of perception in the painting of Julie is *correct*.

Smith almost always speaks of the impartial spectator in the singular: the *man* in the breast. (When he says that "we must become the impartial spectators of our own character and conduct" (TMS, III.2.2), the plural is an indication that

we will not attain full impartiality.) But presumably everyone has one, or at least ought to have one. So we can ask: Is there just one impartial spectator or are there many? We can approach this question in two ways: from the structure of spectatorship, including its optics; and from the content of the impartial spectator's judgments. Spectatorship is always between a self and an other (or others), and through the mirror of another's eyes I must learn to see myself as other (so, be another to myself). This is how I come to learn the distinction between proper and improper, good and bad, as well as how I become myself. But any particular, partial, spectator—whether I am looking at another (including myself) or the other is looking at me—is bound up with his own particular sensibilities, passions, interests; that is simply what it is to be partial, and for partial spectators it always matters who the other is. Now, for me, the impartial spectator is *in* me, he is the man in *my* breast, but he has no particular relation to me, and he is not partial *to me*. For him, I could be anyone. Moreover, what he must teach me is how to look at myself as though I were anyone *other* than myself. If the impartial spectator in me regards me as the same as anyone else, then for him all individuals are the same, interchangeable for him, so he is always the same in them, and, so, just one.

As to content, Smith says that the complexity of moral judgment, both in its subtleties and fine gradations, and in the sheer number of the different situations in which it must be exercised, mean that even “the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection” the capacity for moral judgment (TMS, III.3.22). This almost suggests an Aristotelian sense of the singularity of situations to which the virtuous man must respond with a *virtuosity* that recognizes the absence of a universal principle. But Smith stops short of this. He does seem to think that there is one, and only one, entirely correct judgment for any situation. However complex, a universal principle exists that does cover all possible situations, and all individuals *should* respond to each situation in the same way. Here again, then, the impartial spectator *should* be the same for everyone, so, again, just *one* of him.

But the ‘should’ is important. For it is almost as though the impartial spectator must be two things at once. He is the man, the demigod, in the breast, “the great judge and arbiter of our conduct,” who “calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions” (TMS, III.3.4). *But*: “this demigod within the breast appears...though partly of immortal, yet partly too of mortal extraction.” He can be “astonished and confounded” by “the vehemence and clamour of the man without” (III.2.32). What is also true, and partly implied by this, is that the impartial spectator for me must come into existence over time, and gradually, in a process that seems to parallel my gradual comprehension of the general rules of morality, so that he is the personification of these rules in my breast. That this must happen, that the impartial spectator can only come to be in

my breast in part by my own effort, accounts for his double character as the perfect “abstract and ideal spectator” (III.3.38), and as the actual, concrete spectator, of partly mortal extraction.

The impartial spectator teaches me, but I also have to learn, to some extent on my own, to create him; we constitute one another. Thinking about how the learning and teaching goes on brings us back to the theater. For above all, what I must learn to do is to *act well*. For this, the impartial spectator must be both my acting teacher and a particularly severe theater critic. And now the oddness of Smith’s theater comes up again. The impartial spectator demands a particular style of acting, and one that employs the logic of reflection in a particular way. We are all on the stage, acting, but we must also continually be “imagin[ing] ourselves not the actors, but the spectators of our own character and conduct.” That is, we must not become too bound up with, or immersed in, our performance. Even as we act, we must also be spectators in the audience, judging, and as actors, we must respond to this judgment, adjusting our performance. Our acting should never be spontaneous. The Aristotelian view encourages *virtuosity*, improvisation in the virtuous man made possible by the practice of virtue. But the impartial spectator certainly does not want me to be a *virtuoso*. Smith describes what we must do as an act of *imagination*, but it is imagination in the service of restraint. Restraint is not only the goal in regard to the impartial spectator’s own judgment, but also what he commands in our performance for all the other partial spectators. (The impartial spectator himself seems to be the only one, in fact, who is ever allowed to cut loose and really get into his role, as when he “calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions.”) For I must remember, especially in adversity, that no one else will enter into my feelings to anything like their full extent, so I must always restrain my expression of them. I must hold back. In the interests of the highest morality I must always be calculating, calibrating my actions in a way that always makes them a response to another’s judgment, even if that judgment has not yet been made. This is the drama that should unfold in Smith’s theater; this is how we should all be acting. It is going to be a particularly exhausting form of acting. The drama is going to be a rather dull one.

To call the impartial spectator an agent of repression is not at all foreign to Smith’s account, and the heart of the man in the breast’s teaching is self-command. Smith makes a broad division between “the soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues, the virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity” and “the great, the awful and respectable, the virtues of self-denial, of self-government, of that command of the passions which subjects all the movements of our nature to what our own dignity and honour, and the propriety of our own conduct require” (TMS, I.i.5.1). He is willing to give some place to the former, but the latter clearly take precedence, and this is brought out in his account of children (III.3.22). Interestingly, he does



not impute to children the soft, amiable virtues; the emotions he lists are fear, grief, and anger. But the chief point, the very beginning of the paragraph in which he speaks of children and their education, is: “A very young child has no self-command.” The child’s entry “into the great school of self-command” when it begins to go to school is the true beginning of its moral education, and this education must be the central task for the rest of its life. Thus, when we split ourselves into spectator and actor, judge and judged, the judge stands over “the person whom I properly call myself” as superior.

“The person whom I properly call myself” is partial, with particular feelings, passions, likes, and aversions often coming from “a peculiar turn or habit that [the imagination] has acquired.” Such peculiar turns are “but little sympathized with” because others do not have them. Love between “two persons of different sexes” is Smith’s outstanding example of this, and it is always ridiculous (TMS, I.ii.2.1). There is obviously a very great deal to say about this, but I want to concentrate on the way it follows from Smith’s understanding of the logic of reflection. Anything particular or peculiar to me is not visible in reflection. The other cannot take on my eyes and put me in his place; nor can I do this in regard to his peculiar turns. If this is so, then Smith’s world of spectatorship, his theater, excludes everything that uniquely distinguishes a person, that is, it excludes individuality. But the exclusion of individuality really follows from the fact that there is only one impartial spectator: it turns out that the impartial spectator was right to see us all as all the same, interchangeable. He is right because in what makes us self-conscious moral beings—that is, spectators—we are all the same.

Smith himself doesn’t seem to be too concerned about the exclusion of individuality. Mead, however, is, and it is worth thinking of the similar problem that he faces because of his similar view of the logic of reflection. Mead very much wants individuals to be imaginative, creative, and active centers of initiative, but it is not at all clear that he can have them so. He has given so much away to the reflection of the other, and especially the generalized other, that the ‘I’ almost vanishes. This is a complicated question, not to be elaborated here, but it is worked out very well, and very sympathetically, by Mitchell Aboulafia (1986) in *The Mediating Self: Mead, Sartre, and Self-Determination*. But the reason to bring Mead in here is to point out a particular understanding of the logic of reflection that he and Smith share. This is their emphasis on the splitting of the individual in the process of reflection. For Smith, the splitting should result in the incorporation of the impartial spectator in my breast; for Mead, it results in internalizing the generalized other.

Staying with Smith, now, I can ask: Do I want a man like this in my breast? To which I have to answer, speaking only for myself: Hell, no. I don’t, firstly, just because of what this man is supposed to be like, and what his relationship to me

is supposed to be: He has not the slightest interest in me, in “the person whom I properly call myself.” Why should I accept this man’s judgments on my character and conduct above any other’s? Second, though, even if I must have something alien in me, judging me, I do not see why I must accept its/his judgments uncritically, and as absolute commands. One need have only a very glancing knowledge of Sigmund Freud to link the impartial spectator with the superego. While Freud thinks that the superego is necessary for the existence of civilization, he certainly does not think that I should be passive before it. The struggles among id, ego, and superego are essential to mental health for Freud, and, in any event the superego is not rational.

I think it is fair to bring Freud in here first because of his own remarkable critique of Immanuel Kant, in which he links the categorical imperative not only to the superego but to the Oedipus complex, and there are clear links between Smith and Kant here. Second, though, I think that Smith himself opens his argument to this line of questioning when he says: “While [the child] remains under the custody of such partial protectors [parents and nurse], its anger is the first and, perhaps, the only passion which it is taught to moderate. By noise and threatening they are, for their own ease, often obliged to frighten it into good temper; and the passion which incites it to attack, is restrained by that which teaches it to attend to its own safety” (TMS, III.3.22). Smith is actually quite sympathetic to children, in the somewhat cold manner of a lifelong bachelor. He does not at all blame children for being demanding, for lacking self-command—they are naturally so. Nonetheless, the clarity with which this passage foreshadows Freud’s account of the formation of the ego to save the id from itself by replacing the pleasure principle with the reality principle is so striking that it demands to be subject to Freudian criticism. That is, even in 1759 it is reasonable to ask whether the simple and forcible repression of anger, grief, and fear can be regarded as an appropriate approach to child-rearing.

Smith and Mead run into difficulties because of the specific way in which they deploy the logic of reflection, but this is not to say that there is a problem with the logic as such. It remains true that Smith is a great pioneer of the view that individuality can only arise among individuals, and not in one alone—a view that rests on the logic of reflection. Mead is one of the great developers of the idea. And the problems that they face are largely resolved in other versions, notably those of psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and critical theory. The critique of Smith that I have sketched is from within a broad perspective of which he remains a living part.

There is another very different issue with the impartial spectator that I will simply mention. Smith offers two different but parallel accounts of the development of moral judgment, one through the impartial spectator, the other through the general rules of morality. I would say that the impartial spectator line is much more interesting than the general rules line. It is possible to think that the two go



together: The general rules require a personal representative in the breast. However, it also seems possible that the general rules render the impartial spectator superfluous. But that is a question for another time.

However that may be, though, the two accounts have much in common. Both are founded on “the great school of self-command,” on “the great, the awful and respectable...virtues of self-denial,” etc. But there is also a third very different line of thought in TMS, smaller, quieter, more intimate, linked to “the soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues.” It is not developed nearly as fully as the other two, but nevertheless appears in short but emphatic passages throughout the work. Even though Smith seems so clearly to favor the two stern views, he can’t quite bring himself actually to rule out the “gentle” as the possibly definitive one. It offers a very different view of what human life not only should but also could be like, one in which the impartial spectator, general rules, great and awful virtues, etc., will be far less important. Vigée le Brun’s lovely painting of her daughter expresses it, in contrast to her portraits of grand aristocrats, of Marie Antoinette. That is, the logic of reflection continues to be necessary, if in a very different way. Its simplest, most perfect expression is in one short sentence from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, my favorite in the entire book: “Humanity does not desire to be great, but to be beloved” (III.5.8).

## References

- Aboulafia, Mitchell.** 1986. *The Mediating Self: Mead, Sartre, and Self-Determination*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F.** 1975 [1873]. *Logic, Being Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. William Wallace. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mead, George Herbert.** 1967 [1934]. *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mead, George Herbert.** 1980 [1932]. The Physical Thing. In *The Philosophy of the Present*, 119–139. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice.** 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge.
- Rizzolatti, Giacomo.** 2004. Understanding the Actions of Others. In *Functional Neuroimaging of Visual Cognition, Attention and Performance XX*, eds. Nancy Kanwisher and John Duncan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Wordsworth, William.** 1981 [1798]. Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798. In *Lyrical Ballads*, by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, eds. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones. London: Methuen.

## About the Author



**Robert Urquhart** is an Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Denver. He has written fairly extensively on Adam Smith, James Steuart, and other eighteenth-century political economists. He is now working on a theory of the individual according to which individuality is necessarily constituted through relations among individuals. His email address is [Robert.Urquhart@du.edu](mailto:Robert.Urquhart@du.edu).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5921>



# My Understanding of Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator

Jack Russell Weinstein<sup>1</sup>

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

The impartial spectator may be both the least misunderstood and the most controversial aspect of Adam Smith's work. It is the least misunderstood, because Smith scholars largely agree on its nature. What disagreement there is, tends to be about the details of Smith's moral psychology. It is the most controversial, however, because many casual Smith readers don't understand how it fits into his economic theories. This confusion stems from general misperceptions about the unity of Smith's corpus, but it also speaks to a misunderstanding about the nature of impartiality in general.

The impartial spectator is a product of the imagination, in the most literal sense. It exists only in the mind of actual spectators. Since Smith is an empiricist who famously eschews overt metaphysical claims, it is safe to assert that the impartial spectator is not *real* in any Platonic sense. It may have the same ontological status as Homer Simpson or Anna Karenina, but not as the Abrahamic soul or even René Descartes's mental substance.

It is possible to think of the impartial spectator as a construction (I do, at times), but since *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* predates Immanuel Kant's relevant work, the Hegelian idealists, and John Rawls, it is unclear what would follow from classifying it as such. Doing so would not make the spectator's decision objective in the way that Christine Korsgaard argues ethical constructivism demands.<sup>2</sup> But, it

---

1. University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202.

2. Rules, while not moral facts independent of the moral system, become objective because of the procedure used to develop them. As Korsgaard writes, "what makes the conception correct will be that it solves the problem, not that it describes some piece of external reality.... the truths that result describe some constructed reality" (2003, 117).

may be useful to think of it as such when using Smith as a filter through which to critique contemporary political theory, because it gives Smith and Rawls a common lexicon. This is however, more of a rhetorical strategy than a metaphysical one.

Ultimately, the imaginary nature of the impartial spectator ends up limiting its detachment. Despite its name, it does not achieve complete neutrality. Because it is imagined by an imperfect person, it is only as objective as its imaginer. It has access to the same information and calls upon identical experiences—it is a standpoint, not a discrete perspective. And, while Smith refers to the human conscience—the impartial spectator in action—as God’s “vicegerent upon earth” (TMS, III.2.32, III.5.6), he does not suggest it has mystical access to any privileged information.<sup>3</sup> The impartial spectator is a metaphor for a reflective agent who has taken deep breaths and does the work to enter “as it were” into the perspective of others. “As it were” is Smith’s way of indicating that we are not supposed to think that anyone ever actually truly adopts the perspective of others (see TMS, I.i.1.2, III.1.6). As Amartya Sen puts it, the impartial spectator is “a device for critical scrutiny and public discussion” (2011, 135). Objectivity and impartiality are not the same thing (*ibid.*, ch. 5).

The development of the impartial spectator is, ultimately, a growth in character. For Smith, moral evaluations are made before and after we act (TMS, III.4.2). Whatever judgments are made in the moment are the products of habit and personality. Smith is, after all, a virtue ethicist who is relying heavily on both Aristotle and the Stoics.<sup>4</sup> Moral actions are different than moral evaluations, and the impartial spectator is focused on the latter, not the former. As with Aristotle, though, Smith sees repeated attention to an impartial spectator’s judgment as helping to improve behavior. “Vice is always capricious: virtue only is regular and orderly,” Smith writes, and “an instructed and intelligent people...are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one” (TMS, VI.ii.1.19; WN, V.i.f.61).<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to my claims, there are times when Smith seems to suggest a more powerful, more Archimedean impartial spectator, particularly when he is focusing on its sympathetic foundation. He argues, for example, that a man can sympathize with women in childbirth (TMS, VII.iii.I.4) and that the living can imagine what it is like to be dead (I.i.1.13). But Smith qualifies both of these examples, arguing that

---

3. I argue that Smith’s use of God in TMS is a rhetorical device rather than a true commitment to the divine, with no real philosophical consequences. For an opposing view, see Minowitz (1993), who “recasts” the Adam Smith Problem: “In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, God is almost omnipresent; in the *Wealth of Nations* God is never mentioned” (Minowitz 1993, 8; see also Oslington 2011).

4. For a full-length defense of reading Smith as a virtue ethicist, see Hanley 2009.

5. The role of education in learning and acculturation are central to my interpretive thesis in Weinstein 2013.

even in imagining childbirth, it is “impossible” that a man “should conceive himself as suffering her pains in his own proper person and character.”

Smith casts doubt on men’s sympathy towards women throughout his corpus, highlighting the many ways in which the males in power fail to enter into the female perspective (Weinstein 2013, 91–95). And, regarding the dead, his explanation of what it means to see their perspective is laughably unpersuasive. What he describes is neither a fear of the nothingness of death nor the horrors of a punitive afterlife, but rather a claustrophobic fear of being buried alive. Smith knows we are being unsophisticated in our fears of “being deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut from life and conversation,” and so forth, and he criticizes thanatophobics for “overlooking what is of real importance in their situation” (TMS, I.i.1.13).

In short, Smith is explicit about the limitations of the impartial spectator and the human imagination in general. He writes that falling short of perfection should not mitigate moral approbation (TMS, I.i.5.9) because human beings are themselves “weak and imperfect” (TMS II.i.5.10; see also I.i.5.8, II.i.5.9, II.i.5.10, II.iii.3.3, III.6.12, VI.iii.27). Our understanding of the sentiments of others is always “weaker in degree” (I.i.1.2), and at one point Smith even refers to the original sentiment as “the substance” and its imagined copy as “the shadow” (VI.ii.1.1).

Smith may be read to imply perfection when he writes that the impartial spectator is exact in his or her judgment and is the final arbiter of propriety, adding that it “allows no word, no gesture, to escape it beyond what this more equitable sentiment would dictate” (TMS, I.i.5.4). However, these are descriptions of Smith’s “abstract and ideal spectator” (III.3.38) not a particular instantiation of one. It references an ideal of propriety created through social interaction and personified, in no less of an idealized way, the impartial spectator (Weinstein 2013, 72). The term “impartial” is itself a misnomer since it is only an approximation of impartiality—the best an agent can imagine.

Roderick Firth (1952) disagrees, famously calling the impartial spectator an ideal observer theory; Rawls agrees with Firth (1971, 184, 263).<sup>6</sup> But if the impartial spectator were Archimedean, much of Smith’s work would be unnecessary. A great deal of his writing is designed to encourage activity in the context of the imperfection of humanity. He wants to make us the best we can be despite our shortcomings.

This is worth elaborating on. The impartial spectator plays two roles in Smith’s theory, one as an aspirational ideal and one as the anthropomorphized individual conscience. The former is what we strive for but cannot achieve; the latter is the actual moral psychological process that allows us to make moral judg-

---

6. D. D. Raphael puts an optimistic spin on this, claiming that Rawls “treated Smith’s theory as a rival to his own theory of justice” (2007, 43).

ments. Actors, under Smith's account, must try as hard as they can to be as impartial as they are able, but they will never achieve perfect impartiality. At most, they will become virtuous.

This approach is not unique to Smith's moral psychology. He relies on the same comparative method in his philosophy of history. In it, he compares an idealized conjectural historiography to the way history actually unfolds, spending a significant amount of time in the *Wealth of Nations* pondering why actual events did not follow the ideal pattern (Weinstein 2013, ch. 10). Smith also expects consumers to compare market price to natural price, himself engaging in elaborate data analysis to ask why the actual prices of goods deviate from where they should be (*ibid.*, 148–154).

Smith is interested in the question of imperfection, or why systems don't function according to plan, a theme he introduces in his *History of Astronomy*. His sage advice that the “man of system” is more enamored with aesthetics than with reality (TMS, VI.ii.2.17; see also HA, IV.8, IV.25), and his observation that one cannot predictably manipulate either markets or other people's actions for “public good,” are both built on his continuous reassertion that actuality does not meet ideal standards (WN, IV.ii.9). The closest he comes to postulating an ideal is in glorifying the prudence of the “great legislator,” who has carried the virtue to “the highest degree of perfection” and represents “the best head joined to the best heart” (TMS, VI.i.15, VI.ii.2.14). But his language here is mythological, and he tempers his glorification with the acknowledgment that successful leaders are usually egotists far beyond what their accomplishments deserve (VI.iii.28). Perhaps he would have clarified the legislative character if he had finished his work on “the general principles of law and government” (VII.iv.37), but regardless, it is clear that Smith simply does not appear to believe in achieving ideals. He summarizes this skepticism most poetically in his comments on the death of his friend David Hume, a person “approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit” (Corr., 221).

The upshot of the fallibility of the impartial spectator is that Smith's theory becomes an unrealizable egalitarian perfectionism. Any person can cultivate an impartial spectator, but to do so, he or she must commit to improving his or her own perspective. The average person—the average “Rick” to use the name posed in the prologue to this symposium—is only excluded from the process of self-improvement if the social and political institutions that govern daily life prevent equal access to education and acculturation (Weinstein 2013, chs. 8, 9). But what he or she does achieve is itself characteristically human.<sup>7</sup> It is imperfect and fraught with complexity. It is universal in the sense that all people are capable of creating

---

7. The limits of the human is actually quite controversial in Smith (see Weinstein 2014).

an impartial spectator and all can modify it with input from others, but it is not universal in the sense that represents a singular point of view that all people share. Each impartial spectator is perspectival and unique to its imaginer, and each culture's impartial spectators are limited, in part, by the norms, education, and information available to its members.

This leads to a problem: The impartial spectator tends towards the status quo and runs against social change, by default. It masks sympathetic processes as intuition and endorses the familiar, hence Smith's use of the term "the man within the breast" (TMS, VII.ii.1.44). This makes genuine change harder, especially if the average "Ruth" wants to be considered as having the same perspectival legitimacy as "Rick." Again, Smith acknowledges the inequities of gender throughout his work.

There is significant disagreement among scholars as to how much the impartial spectator can overcome cultural norms. Fonna Forman-Barzilai (2010) is among the most resistant, arguing that the impartial spectator is reminiscent of the panopticon and that a Smithian society is susceptible to Michel Foucault's cultural critiques, as he presents them in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). I, in turn, offer a more optimistic vision of the power of education and the ways in which Smith's corpus itself is an educative tool (Weinstein 2013; 2015).

I do not seek to resolve my disagreement with Forman-Barzilai here. Instead, I simply want to suggest that the tension between the ideal and the actual exists in the impartial spectator because it exists in everyday life. Our imagination is epistemologically limited by the circumstances we find ourselves in. As I put it in *Adam Smith's Pluralism*, the things that unite us divide us (Weinstein 2013, 25, 85), and that if there is a reliable method to help us see past social norms, it involves triangulating education, experience, and history. Smith, I argue there (ibid., ch. 11), believes in progress, opposing Foucault's skeptical attack on progressivism. History is the story of moral experimentation, for Smith. It is a complement to the scientific, economic, and political processes of trial and error that build the social institutions, which give individuals the liberty to act on their impartial spectators as they see fit.

All of this is to say that Smithian impartiality is often misunderstood by Smith's more casual readers, a confusion that is exacerbated by textual debates among scholars. But this misreading of impartiality has also arisen from the fact that the connections between his ethics, economics, and his other writings are not always clear. Most serious readers recognize the systematic design of Smith's work and see a fundamental compatibility between his works. As Dogan Göçman (2007) points out, the impartial spectator makes an appearance in *The Wealth of Nations*, when Smith uses the phrase "the general interest of the society" (WN, I.xi.p.8), and Smith declares himself to be impartial in the "Introduction and Plan" of the book



(he “endeavoured...to explain, as fully and distinctly” as he could, the rival theories he evaluated (WN, Intro.8)). Impartiality is also present, as indicated above, when people compare value using the market price as a benchmark, a price that ignores individual preference and considers supply and demand, systemically. Finally, although it seems counterintuitive, even Smith’s focus on selfish action is, in some sense, impartial, because he forces us to recognize that in the grand scheme of things, *other* people’s desires matter as much as ours. Our own interest is paramount to ourselves, but market-wise, we are all equally important.

Obviously, much more could be said about both the connection of ethics and economics, and about the ubiquity of the impartial spectator in Smith’s work. I would conclude, however, by suggesting that regardless of the controversies, Smith’s struggle to describe the situatedness of the human conscience is of tremendous importance, and his decision to describe it as an impartial spectator is powerful and still relevant. It embodies many questions we still ask today. Smith’s person is a socialized agent and so is the impartial spectator. Does this mean that the impartial spectator has an ethnicity? A gender? A sexual preference? This remains to be seen. The impartial spectator also has epistemological limitations. Does this require that agents prioritize norms over truth, and do we end up claiming that those who cannot adequately imagine a reliable impartial spectator are uneducated or perverse? Do we simply think they are broken? These questions fall directly into contemporary discourse about the relationship between the self and others, individual and collective responsibility, and the nature of identity. As I discuss throughout *Adam Smith’s Pluralism*, Smith helped pave the way for modern identity politics.

The above questions aside, I would suggest that the impartial spectator is still important because it reminds us how relevant the imagination is to human interaction. While empathy in itself had a resurgence of political interest in the last few years (see, e.g., Slevin 2009), there has been little discussion in the United States of the role of the imagination in education or politics. Standardized tests measure our children’s content knowledge, but there is virtually no attention to assessing creativity. This suggests that, for example, the ability of the most partisan Republicans to see the perspective of most partisan Democrats, and vice versa, is stunted at the earliest stage of civic education.<sup>8</sup> Such ineptitude extends outwards with Smith’s “circles of sympathy”: Despite all the media attention, Americans and

---

8. There is significant argument about the relationship between policy and political parties. One theory is that people choose political positions because of their party affiliation and not the other way around. In other words, a person may not be a Republican because he or she denies climate change, but rather, he or she will deny climate change because of the desire to be thought of as a ‘good’ Republican. (Climate change is just an example. I do not mean to suggest that it is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for Republican membership.) If this is the case, then perspective becomes that much harder to share simply by

the British seem ever less able to empathize with Syrian war refugees (Nardelli 2015).

We live in a Smithian world, one in which self-interest has priority, if not selfishness itself. The impartial spectator is a tool for balance between our own interests and others' interests. It serves as a reminder that both moral and economic considerations require more than myopia. Smith insists that we must step outside of ourselves to truly see the world. The fact that we cannot achieve a God's-eye view does not mean that imagined impartiality is without merit. It only means that empathy is just another way in which human beings fall short of perfection.

## References

- Adams, James F., Samuel Merrill III, and Bernard Grofman.** 2005. *A Unified Theory of Party Competition: A Cross-National Analysis Integrating Spatial and Behavioral Factors*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Firth, Roderick.** 1952. Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12(3): 317–345.
- Forman-Barzilai, Fonna.** 2010. *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy: Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, Michel.** 1995 [1977]. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
- Göçmen, Dogan.** 2007. *The Adam Smith Problem: Reconciling Human Nature and Society in "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" and "Wealth of Nations."* London: I. B. Tauris.
- Hanley, Ryan Patrick.** 2009. *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Korsgaard, Christine M.** 2003. Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy. *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28(Supp.): 99–122.
- Minowitz, Peter.** 1993. *Profits, Priests, and Princes: Adam Smith's Emancipation of Economics from Politics and Religion*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Nardelli, Alberto.** 2015. Syrian Refugees: Empathy Wanes in US and UK as More Voters Say Shut Borders. *The Guardian*, November 20. [Link](#)
- Oslington, Paul.** 2011. *Adam Smith as Theologian*. New York: Routledge.
- Raphael, D. D.** 2007. *The Impartial Spectator: Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rawls, John.** 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

---

virtue of the labels we place on people. For more on the relationship between parties and policy, see Adams et al. 2005.

- Sen, Amartya.** 2011 [2009]. *The Idea of Justice*, reprint ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Slevin, Peter.** 2009. In Filling Supreme Court Vacancy, Obama Looks for a Jurist With Empathy. *Washington Post*, May 13. [Link](#)
- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1776] (WN). *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*, eds. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1976 [1790] (TMS). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1980 [1795] (HA). *The History of Astronomy*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman. In *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. S. Skinner, 33–105. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam.** 1987 (Corr.). *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, eds. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weinstein, Jack Russell.** 2013. *Adam Smith's Pluralism: Rationality, Education, and the Moral Sentiments*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Weinstein, Jack Russell.** 2014. What My Dog Can Do: On the Effect of *The Wealth of Nations* I.ii.2. In *Propriety and Prosperity: New Studies on the Philosophy of Adam Smith*, eds. David F. Hardwick and Leslie Marsh, 147–165. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Weinstein, Jack Russell.** 2015. Adam Smith and the Educative Critique: A Response to My Commentators. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34(5): 541–550.

## About the Author



**Jack Russell Weinstein** is a Chester Fritz Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and the Director of the Institute for Philosophy in Public Life at the University of North Dakota. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including *On Adam Smith* (Wadsworth, 2001) and *Adam Smith's Pluralism: Rationality, Education, and the Moral Sentiments* (Yale, 2013). He is also the host of public radio's call-in philosophy show *Why? Philosophical Discussions About Everyday Life* ([link](#)). His email address

is [jack.weinstein@und.edu](mailto:jack.weinstein@und.edu).

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5922>



## Foreword to “The Meaning of Competition”

In certain chambers there echo tales of men who justify free enterprise and liberalization with perfect competition and other phantasms. Yet scarcely ever have there been such men, ones of straw aside. As Friedrich A. Hayek suggests in the essay republished here, and as superbly elaborated by Frank M. Machovec in *Perfect Competition and the Transformation of Economics* (Routledge, 1995), those who would bridle and fetter voluntary enterprise are, in fact, the ones who, double in their standards of failure, rely most on perfect competition. If you know persons entering into such echo chambers, the following may help to save them from themselves, and the rest of us.

Daniel B. Klein  
May 2016

# The Meaning of Competition<sup>\*</sup>

Friedrich A. Hayek

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

## I.

There are signs of increasing awareness among economists that what they have been discussing in recent years under the name of ‘competition’ is not the same thing as what is thus called in ordinary language. But, although there have been some valiant attempts to bring discussion back to earth and to direct attention to the problems of real life, notably by J. M. Clark and Fritz Machlup,<sup>1</sup> the general view seems still to regard the conception of competition currently employed by economists as the significant one and to treat that of the businessman as an abuse. It appears to be generally held that the so-called theory of ‘perfect competition’ provides the appropriate model for judging the effectiveness of competition in real life and that, to the extent that real competition differs from that model, it is undesirable and even harmful.

For this attitude there seems to me to exist very little justification. I shall attempt to show that what the theory of perfect competition discusses has little claim to be called ‘competition’ at all and that its conclusions are of little use as guides to policy. The reason for this seems to me to be that this theory throughout assumes that state of affairs already to exist which, according to the truer view of the older theory, the process of competition tends to bring about (or to approximate) and that, if the state of affairs assumed by the theory of perfect competition

---

<sup>\*</sup> This essay reproduces the substance of the Stafford Little Lecture delivered at Princeton University on May 20, 1946. [This essay was published in F. A. Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 92–106. For kind permission to republish the essay here, *Econ Journal Watch* thanks University of Chicago Press, publisher of *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek*, and the editor of the *Collected Works*, Bruce Caldwell.]

1. J. M. Clark, “Toward a Concept of Workable Competition,” *American Economic Review*, vol. 30, June 1940, pp. 241–56; Fritz Machlup, “Competition, Pliopoly, and Profit,” *Economica*, n.s., vol. 9, February and May, 1942, pp. 1–23, 153–73.

ever existed, it would not only deprive of their scope all the activities which the verb 'to compete' describes but would make them virtually impossible.

If all this affected only the use of the word 'competition,' it would not matter a great deal. But it seems almost as if economists by this peculiar use of language were deceiving themselves into the belief that, in discussing 'competition,' they are saying something about the nature and significance of the process by which the state of affairs is brought about which they merely assume to exist. In fact, this moving force of economic life is left almost altogether undiscussed.

I do not wish to discuss here at any length the reasons which have led the theory of competition into this curious state. As I have suggested elsewhere in this volume,<sup>2</sup> the tautological method which is appropriate and indispensable for the analysis of individual action seems in this instance to have been illegitimately extended to problems in which we have to deal with a social process in which the decisions of many individuals influence one another and necessarily succeed one another in time. The economic calculus (or the Pure Logic of Choice) which deals with the first kind of problem consists of an apparatus of classification of possible human attitudes and provides us with a technique for describing the interrelations of the different parts of a single plan. Its conclusions are implicit in its assumptions: the desires and the knowledge of the facts, which are assumed to be simultaneously present to a single mind, determine a unique solution. The relations discussed in this type of analysis are logical relations, concerned solely with the conclusions which follow for the mind of the planning individual from the given premises.

When we deal, however, with a situation in which a number of persons are attempting to work out their separate plans, we can no longer assume that the data are the same for all the planning minds. The problem becomes one of how the 'data' of the different individuals on which they base their plans are adjusted to the objective facts of their environment (which includes the actions of the other people). Although in the solution of this type of problem we still must make use of our technique for rapidly working out the implications of a given set of data, we have now to deal not only with several separate sets of data of the different persons but also—and this is even more important—with a process which necessarily involves continuous changes in the data for the different individuals. As I have suggested before, the causal factor enters here in the form of the acquisition of new knowledge by the different individuals or of changes in their data brought about by the contacts between them.

The relevance of this for my present problem will appear when it is recalled that the modern theory of competition deals almost exclusively with a state of

---

2. See the essays "Economics and Knowledge" and "The Use of Knowledge in Society" [Hayek 1937; 1945].

what is called ‘competitive equilibrium’ in which it is assumed that the data for the different individuals are fully adjusted to each other, while the problem which requires explanation is the nature of the process by which the data are thus adjusted. In other words, the description of competitive equilibrium does not even attempt to say that, if we find such and such conditions, such and such consequences will follow, but confines itself to defining conditions in which its conclusions are already implicitly contained and which may conceivably exist but of which it does not tell us how they can ever be brought about. Or, to anticipate our main conclusion in a brief statement, competition is by its nature a dynamic process whose essential characteristics are assumed away by the assumptions underlying static analysis.

## II.

That the modern theory of competitive equilibrium *assumes* the situation to exist which a true explanation ought to account for as the effect of the competitive process is best shown by examining the familiar list of conditions found in any modern textbook. Most of these conditions, incidentally, not only underlie the analysis of ‘perfect’ competition but are equally assumed in the discussion of the various ‘imperfect’ or ‘monopolistic’ markets, which throughout assume certain unrealistic ‘perfections.’<sup>3</sup> For our immediate purpose, however, the theory of perfect competition will be the most instructive case to examine.

While different authors may state the list of essential conditions of perfect competition differently, the following is probably more than sufficiently comprehensive for our purpose, because, as we shall see, those conditions are not really independent of each other. According to the generally accepted view, perfect competition presupposes:

1. A homogeneous commodity offered and demanded by a large number of relatively small sellers or buyers, none of whom expects to exercise by his action a perceptible influence on price.
2. Free entry into the market and absence of other restraints on the movement of prices and resources.
3. Complete knowledge of the relevant factors on the part of all participants in the market.

---

3. Particularly the assumptions that *at all times* a uniform price must rule for a given commodity throughout the market and that sellers know the shape of the demand curve.



We shall not ask at this stage precisely for what these conditions are required or what is implied if they are assumed to be given. But we must inquire a little further about their meaning, and in this respect it is the third condition which is the critical and obscure one. The standard can evidently not be perfect knowledge of everything affecting the market on the part of every person taking part in it. I shall here not go into the familiar paradox of the paralyzing effect really perfect knowledge and foresight would have on all action.<sup>4</sup> It will be obvious also that nothing is solved when we assume everybody to know everything and that the real problem is rather how it can be brought about that as much of the available knowledge as possible is used. This raises for a competitive society the question, not how we can 'find' the people who know best, but rather what institutional arrangements are necessary in order that the unknown persons who have knowledge specially suited to a particular task are most likely to be attracted to that task. But we must inquire a little further what sort of knowledge it is that is supposed to be in possession of the parties of the market.

If we consider the market for some kind of finished consumption goods and start with the position of its producers or sellers, we shall find, first, that they are assumed to know the lowest cost at which the commodity can be produced. Yet this knowledge which is assumed to be given to begin with is one of the main points where it is only through the process of competition that the facts will be discovered. This appears to me one of the most important of the points where the starting point of the theory of competitive equilibrium assumes away the main task which only the process of competition can solve. The position is somewhat similar with respect to the second point on which the producers are assumed to be fully informed: the wishes and desires of the consumers, including the kinds of goods and services which they demand and the prices they are willing to pay. These cannot properly be regarded as given facts but ought rather to be regarded as problems to be solved by the process of competition.

The same situation exists on the side of the consumers or buyers. Again the knowledge they are supposed to possess in a state of competitive equilibrium cannot be legitimately assumed to be at their command before the process of competition starts. Their knowledge of the alternatives before them is the result of what happens on the market, of such activities as advertising, etc.; and the whole organization of the market serves mainly the need of spreading the information on which the buyer is to act.

The peculiar nature of the assumptions from which the theory of competitive equilibrium starts stands out very clearly if we ask which of the activities that

---

4. See Oskar Morgenstern, "Vollkommene Voraussicht und wirtschaftliches Gleichgewicht," *Zeitschrift für Nationalökonomie*, vol. 6, August 1935, pp. 337–57.

are commonly designated by the verb 'to compete' would still be possible if those conditions were all satisfied. Perhaps it is worth recalling that, according to Dr. Johnson, competition is "the act of endeavouring to gain what another endeavours to gain at the same time." Now, how many of the devices adopted in ordinary life to that end would still be open to a seller in a market in which so-called 'perfect competition' prevails? I believe that the answer is exactly none. Advertising, undercutting, and improving ('differentiating') the goods or services produced are all excluded by definition—'perfect' competition means indeed the absence of all competitive activities.

Especially remarkable in this connection is the explicit and complete exclusion from the theory of perfect competition of all personal relationships existing between the parties.<sup>5</sup> In actual life the fact that our inadequate knowledge of the available commodities or services is made up for by our experience with the persons or firms supplying them—that competition is in a large measure competition for reputation or good will—is one of the most important facts which enables us to solve our daily problems. The function of competition is here precisely to teach us *who* will serve us well: which grocer or travel agency, which department store or hotel, which doctor or solicitor, we can expect to provide the most satisfactory solution for whatever particular personal problem we may have to face. Evidently in all these fields competition may be very intense, just because the services of the different persons or firms will never be exactly alike, and it will be owing to this competition that we are in a position to be served as well as we are. The reasons competition in this field is described as imperfect have indeed nothing to do with the competitive character of the activities of these people; it lies in the nature of the commodities or services themselves. If no two doctors are perfectly alike, this does not mean that the competition between them is less intense but merely that any degree of competition between them will not produce exactly those results which it would if their services were exactly alike. This is not a purely verbal point. The talk about the defects of competition when we are in fact talking about the necessary difference between commodities and services conceals a very real confusion and leads on occasion to absurd conclusions.

While on a first glance the assumption concerning the perfect knowledge possessed by the parties may seem the most startling and artificial of all those on which the theory of perfect competition is based, it may in fact be no more than a consequence of, and in part even justified by, another of the presuppositions on which it is founded. If, indeed, we start by assuming that a large number of people

---

5. Cf. G. J. Stigler, *The Theory of Price* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), p. 24: "Economic relationships are never perfectly competitive if they involve any personal relationships between economic units" (see also *ibid.*, p. 226).

are producing the same commodity and command the same objective facilities and opportunities for doing so, then indeed it might be made plausible (although this has, to my knowledge, never been attempted) that they will in time all be led to know most of the facts relevant for judging the market of that commodity. Not only will each producer by his experience learn the same facts as every other but also he will thus come to know what his fellows know and in consequence the elasticity of the demand for his own product. The condition where different manufacturers produce the identical product under identical conditions is in fact the most favorable for producing that state of knowledge among them which perfect competition requires. Perhaps this means no more than that the commodities can be identical in the sense in which it is alone relevant for our understanding human action only if people hold the same views about them, although it should also be possible to state a set of physical conditions which is favorable to all those who are concerned with a set of closely interrelated activities learning the facts relevant for their decisions.

However that be, it will be clear that the facts will not always be as favorable to this result as they are when many people are at least in a position to produce the same article. The conception of the economic system as divisible into distinct markets for separate commodities is after all very largely the product of the imagination of the economist and certainly is not the rule in the field of manufacture and of personal services, to which the discussion about competition so largely refers. In fact, it need hardly be said, no products of two producers are ever exactly alike, even if it were only because, as they leave his plant, they must be at different places. These differences are part of the facts which create our economic problem, and it is little help to answer it on the assumption that they are absent.

The belief in the advantages of perfect competition frequently leads enthusiasts even to argue that a more advantageous use of resources would be achieved if the existing variety of products were reduced by *compulsory* standardization. Now, there is undoubtedly much to be said in many fields for assisting standardization by agreed recommendations or standards which are to apply unless different requirements are explicitly stipulated in contracts. But this is something very different from the demands of those who believe that the variety of people's tastes should be disregarded and the constant experimentation with improvements should be suppressed in order to obtain the advantages of perfect competition. It would clearly not be an improvement to build all houses exactly alike in order to create a perfect market for houses, and the same is true of most other fields where differences between the individual products prevent competition from ever being perfect.

### III.

We shall probably learn more about the nature and significance of the competitive process if for a while we forget about the artificial assumptions underlying the theory of perfect competition and ask whether competition would be any less important if, for example, no two commodities were ever exactly alike. If it were not for the difficulty of the analysis of such a situation, it would be well worth while to consider in some detail the case where the different commodities could not be readily classed into distinct groups, but where we had to deal with a continuous range of close substitutes, every unit somewhat different from the other but without any marked break in the continuous range. The result of the analysis of competition in such a situation might in many respects be more relevant to the conditions of real life than those of the analysis of competition in a single industry producing a homogeneous commodity sharply differentiated from all others. Or, if the case where no two commodities are exactly alike be thought to be too extreme, we might at least turn to the case where no two producers produce exactly the same commodity, as is the rule not only with all personal services but also in the markets of many manufactured commodities, such as the markets for books or musical instruments.

For our present purpose I need not attempt anything like a complete analysis of such kinds of markets but shall merely ask what would be the role of competition in them. Although the result would, of course, within fairly wide margins be indeterminate, the market would still bring about a set of prices at which each commodity sold just cheap enough to outbid its potential close substitutes—and this in itself is no small thing when we consider the insurmountable difficulties of discovering even such a system of prices by any other method except that of trial and error in the market, with the individual participants gradually learning the relevant circumstances. It is true, of course, that in such a market correspondence between prices and marginal costs is to be expected only to the degree that elasticities of demand for the individual commodities approach the conditions assumed by the theory of perfect competition or that elasticities of substitution between the different commodities approach infinity. But the point is that in this case this standard of perfection as something desirable or to be aimed at is wholly irrelevant. The basis of comparison, on the grounds of which the achievement of competition ought to be judged, cannot be a situation which is different from the objective facts and which cannot be brought about by any known means. It ought to be the situation as it would exist if competition were prevented from operating.

Not the approach to an unachievable and meaningless ideal but the improvement upon the conditions that would exist without competition should be the test.

In such a situation how would conditions differ, if competition were 'free' in the traditional sense, from those which would exist if, for example, only people licensed by authority were allowed to produce particular things, or prices were fixed by authority, or both? Clearly there would be not only no likelihood that the different things would be produced by those who knew best how to do it and therefore could do it at lowest cost but also no likelihood that all those things would be produced at all which, if the consumers had the choice, they would like best. There would be little relationship between actual prices and the lowest cost at which somebody would be able to produce these commodities; indeed, the alternatives between which both producers and consumers would be in a position to choose, their data, would be altogether different from what they would be under competition.

The real problem in all this is not whether we will get *given* commodities or services at *given* marginal costs but mainly by what commodities and services the needs of the people can be most cheaply satisfied. The solution of the economic problem of society is in this respect always a voyage of exploration into the unknown, an attempt to discover new ways of doing things better than they have been done before. This must always remain so as long as there are any economic problems to be solved at all, because all economic problems are created by unforeseen changes which require adaptation. Only what we have not foreseen and provided for requires new decisions. If no such adaptations were required, if at any moment we knew that all change had stopped and things would forever go on exactly as they are now, there would be no more questions of the use of resources to be solved.

A person who possesses the exclusive knowledge or skill which enables him to reduce the cost of production of a commodity by 50 per cent still renders an enormous service to society if he enters its production and reduces its price by only 25 per cent—not only through that price reduction but also through his additional saving of cost. But it is only through competition that we can assume that these possible savings of cost will be achieved. Even if in each instance prices were only just low enough to keep out producers which do not enjoy these or other equivalent advantages, so that each commodity were produced as cheaply as possible, though many may be sold at prices considerably above costs, this would probably be a result which could not be achieved by any other method than that of letting competition operate.

## IV.

That in conditions of real life the position even of any two producers is hardly ever the same is due to facts which the theory of perfect competition eliminates by its concentration on a long-term equilibrium which in an ever changing world can never be reached. At any given moment the equipment of a particular firm is always largely determined by historical accident, and the problem is that it should make the best use of the given equipment (including the acquired capacities of the members of its staff) and not what it should do if it were given unlimited time to adjust itself to constant conditions. For the problem of the best use of the given durable but exhaustible resources the long-term equilibrium price with which a theory discussing 'perfect' competition must be concerned is not only not relevant; the conclusions concerning policy to which preoccupation with this model leads are highly misleading and even dangerous. The idea that under 'perfect' competition prices should be equal to long-run costs often leads to the approval of such anti-social practices as the demand for an 'orderly competition' which will secure a fair return on capital and for the destruction of excess capacity. Enthusiasm for perfect competition in theory and the support of monopoly in practice are indeed surprisingly often found to live together.

This is, however, only one of the many points on which the neglect of the time element makes the theoretical picture of perfect competition so entirely remote from all that is relevant to an understanding of the process of competition. If we think of it, as we ought to, as a succession of events, it becomes even more obvious that in real life there will at any moment be as a rule only one producer who can manufacture a given article at the lowest cost and who may in fact sell below the cost of his next successful competitor, but who, while still trying to extend his market, will often be overtaken by somebody else, who in turn will be prevented from capturing the whole market by yet another, and so on. Such a market would clearly never be in a state of perfect competition, yet competition in it might not only be as intense as possible but would also be the essential factor in bringing about the fact that the article in question is supplied at any moment to the consumer as cheaply as this can be done by any known method.

When we compare an 'imperfect' market like this with a relatively 'perfect' market as that of, say, grain, we shall now be in a better position to bring out the distinction which has been underlying this whole discussion—the distinction between the underlying objective facts of a situation which cannot be altered by human activity and the nature of the competitive activities by which men adjust themselves to the situation. Where, as in the latter case, we have a highly organized

market of a fully standardized commodity produced by many producers, there is little need or scope for competitive activities because the situation is such that the conditions which these activities might bring about are already satisfied to begin with. The best ways of producing the commodity, its character and uses, are most of the time known to nearly the same degree to all members of the market. The knowledge of any important change spreads so rapidly and the adaptation to it is so soon effected that we usually simply disregard what happens during these short transition periods and confine ourselves to comparing the two states of near-equilibrium which exist before and after them. But it is during this short and neglected interval that the forces of competition operate and become visible, and it is the events during this interval which we must study if we are to 'explain' the equilibrium which follows it.

It is only in a market where adaptation is slow compared with the rate of change that the process of competition is in continuous operation. And though the reason why adaptation is slow *may* be that competition is weak, e.g., because there are special obstacles to entry into the trade, or because of some other factors of the character of natural monopolies, slow adaptation does by no means necessarily mean weak competition. When the variety of near-substitutes is great and rapidly changing, where it takes a long time to find out about the relative merits of the available alternatives, or where the need for a whole class of goods or services occurs only discontinuously at irregular intervals, the adjustment must be slow even if competition is strong and active.

The confusion between the objective facts of the situation and the character of the human responses to it tends to conceal from us the important fact that competition is the more important the more complex or 'imperfect' are the objective conditions in which it has to operate. Indeed, far from competition being beneficial only when it is 'perfect,' I am inclined to argue that the need for competition is nowhere greater than in fields in which the nature of the commodities or services makes it impossible that it ever should create a perfect market in the theoretical sense. The inevitable actual imperfections of competition are as little an argument against competition as the difficulties of achieving a perfect solution of any other task are an argument against attempting to solve it at all, or as little as imperfect health is an argument against health.

In conditions where we can never have many people offering the same homogeneous product or service, because of the ever changing character of our needs and our knowledge, or of the infinite variety of human skills and capacities, the ideal state cannot be one requiring an identical character of large numbers of such products and services. The economic problem is a problem of making the best use of what resources we have, and not one of what we should do if the situation were different from what it actually is. There is no sense in talking of a use of re-



sources ‘as if’ a perfect market existed, if this means that the resources would have to be different from what they are, or in discussing what somebody with perfect knowledge would do if our task must be to make the best use of the knowledge the existing people have.

## V.

The argument in favor of competition does not rest on the conditions that would exist if it were perfect. Although, where the objective facts would make it possible for competition to approach perfection, this would also secure the most effective use of resources, and, although there is therefore every case for removing human obstacles to competition, this does not mean that competition does not also bring about as effective a use of resources as can be brought about by any known means where in the nature of the case it must be imperfect. Even where free entry will secure no more than that at any one moment all the goods and services for which there would be an effective demand if they were available are in fact produced at the least current<sup>6</sup> expenditure of resources at which, in the given historical situation, they can be produced, even though the price the consumer is made to pay for them is considerably higher and only just below the cost of the next best way in which his need could be satisfied, this, I submit, is more than we can expect from any other known system. The decisive point is still the elementary one that it is most unlikely that, without artificial obstacles which government activity either creates or can remove, any commodity or service will for any length of time be available only at a price at which outsiders could expect a more than normal profit if they entered the field.

The practical lesson of all this, I think, is that we should worry much less about whether competition in a given case is perfect and worry much more whether there is competition at all. What our theoretical models of separate industries conceal is that in practice a much bigger gulf divides competition from no competition than perfect from imperfect competition. Yet the current tendency in discussion is to be intolerant about the imperfections and to be silent about the prevention of competition. We can probably still learn more about the real significance of competition by studying the results which regularly occur where competition is deliberately suppressed than by concentrating on the shortcomings of actual competition compared with an ideal which is irrelevant for the given facts. I say advisedly “where competition is deliberately suppressed” and not merely “where it is absent,” because its main effects are usually operating, even if more slowly,

---

6. ‘Current’ cost in this connection excludes all true by-gones but includes, of course, ‘user cost.’

so long as it is not outright suppressed with the assistance or the tolerance of the state. The evils which experience has shown to be the regular consequence of a suppression of competition are on a different plane from those which the imperfections of competition may cause. Much more serious than the fact that prices may not correspond to marginal cost is the fact that, with an entrenched monopoly, costs are likely to be much higher than is necessary. A monopoly based on superior efficiency, on the other hand, does comparatively little harm so long as it is assured that it will disappear as soon as anyone else becomes more efficient in providing satisfaction to the consumers.

In conclusion I want for a moment to go back to the point from which I started and restate the most important conclusion in a more general form. Competition is essentially a process of the formation of opinion: by spreading information, it creates that unity and coherence of the economic system which we presuppose when we think of it as one market. It creates the views people have about what is best and cheapest, and it is because of it that people know at least as much about possibilities and opportunities as they in fact do. It is thus a process which involves a continuous change in the data and whose significance must therefore be completely missed by any theory which treats these data as constant.

## References

- Clark, J. M.** 1940. Toward a Concept of Workable Competition. *American Economic Review* 30: 241–256.
- Hayek, Friedrich A.** 2014 [1937]. Economics and Knowledge. In *The Market and Other Orders (The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek, vol. XV)*, ed. Bruce Caldwell, 57–77. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hayek, Friedrich A.** 2014 [1945]. The Use of Knowledge in Society. In *The Market and Other Orders (The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek, vol. XV)*, ed. Bruce Caldwell, 93–104. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Machlup, Fritz.** 1942. Competition, Pliopoly and Profit. *Economica* 9(33): 1–23 and 9(34): 153–173.
- Morgenstern, Oskar.** 1935. Vollkommene Voraussicht und wirtschaftliches Gleichgewicht. *Zeitschrift für Nationalökonomie* 6(3): 337–357.
- Stigler, George J.** 1946. *The Theory of Price*. New York: Macmillan.

### About the Author



**Friedrich A. Hayek** (1899–1992) was a social philosopher born and raised in Austria but who spent most of his career in Britain, the United States, and Germany. In 1974, Hayek was a co-recipient of the Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel.

[Go to archive of Watchpad section](#)  
[Go to May 2016 issue](#)



Discuss this article at Journaltalk:  
<http://journaltalk.net/articles/5923>