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Adam Smith and the Problem of Parochialism:
Can the Impartial Spectator Engage in Social Critique?

by

Aaron Richardson

Under the Direction of Eric Entrican Wilson, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), Adam Smith offers an account of moral judgment centered around impartial spectatorship and the human conscience. For Smith, it is our consciences (in the form of imaginary impartial spectators) that we turn to when making moral judgments. However, some philosophers argue that our consciences make for poor judges of morality. Our consciences are shaped by socialization, and insofar as we socialize with biased and prejudiced people, our consciences may be similarly biased and prejudiced. I will argue that Smith's account of the human conscience is not nearly as vulnerable to this problem as one might initially think. Because our consciences are influenced by socialization—including *socialization with outsiders*—we can revise our moral judgments in ways that allow us to overcome our parochial biases and prejudices.

INDEX WORDS: Adam Smith, impartiality, impartial spectatorship, parochialism, sympathy

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2021

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1. INTRODUCTION

Adam Smith argues that, when we attempt to make moral judgments, we consult “the great demigod within the breast, the great arbiter of conduct”: our own consciences. For Smith, our consciences take the form of imaginary, impartial spectators who judge the propriety and merit of our actions and emotions by way of sympathy. According to Smith, our consciences, our “impartial spectators,” can only be developed in social contexts: a person who lived their entire life in isolation could never judge the morality of their own actions (TMS¹ III.1.3; Golemboski, 2015, p. 9). For Smith, the development of a conscience is inextricably tied to socialization.

This tie to socialization may create a serious problem for Smith’s moral theory. On some readings of the TMS, the impartial spectator (one’s conscience), takes its cues from the norms, attitudes, and judgments it encounters during socialization. Thus, the impartial spectator’s judgments may merely reflect the norms and values of the society in which one was raised—including, unfortunately, the biased and prejudiced norms and values that may corrupt said society. Golemboski calls this “the problem of parochialism”: while Smith’s spectator can ameliorate the undue influence of personal interest on moral judgment, the spectator may be unable to transcend the biased and prejudiced norms one internalizes via socialization (2015, 1). This limits the impartial spectator’s ability to contribute to social critique: having a conscience is nice, but if your conscience cannot tell you where conventional morality goes wrong, then its use as a tool for social justice becomes rather limited.

Parochialism is a serious issue not just for Smith, but for any social criticism rooted in the human conscience. If our consciences are inextricably parochial, if they are incapable of

¹ Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. I follow the standard practice of citing the TMS by part, section, chapter, and paragraph number.

overcoming the biases and prejudices prevalent within our social contexts, then how can we trust their guidance on critical social justice issues?

In this paper, I will argue Smith is not nearly as vulnerable to this problem as one might expect. In section 2, I will briefly outline Smith's account of moral judgment *à la* the impartial spectator. In section 3, I will discuss arguments made by David Golemboski, Samuel Fleischacker, and Gilbert Harman, each of whom give us reason to think that Smith's account may fall prey to the problem of parochialism. In section 4, I will argue Golemboski's proposed solution to this problem has some drawbacks. Then, in section 5, I will offer my own solution. I will argue that we can overcome parochialism through socialization with outsiders who do not share our biased and prejudiced norms. In sections 6 and 7, I will address two potential drawbacks to my solution, before drawing some final conclusions in section 8.

2. SMITH'S ACCOUNT OF MORAL JUDGMENT

For Smith, moral judgments are made primarily on the basis of sympathy. Smith characterizes sympathy in a few different ways, but in general, sympathy involves imaginatively placing oneself in another person's situation and imagining how they might feel (TMS I.i.1.2-5). According to Smith, we make moral judgments by imagining ourselves in the position of a fair, impartial, and well-informed spectator, and from that position, attempting to sympathize with other people (TMS I.i.3.1). When our sympathetic emotions match an agent's actual emotions, we judge their emotions to be *proper*: we think that their emotions are justified and that it is appropriate for them to feel the way they do, given their situation (TMS I.i.3.1-2). When our sympathetic emotions *don't* match the agent's actual emotions, we judge them to be *improper*. When I see a grown man crying over spilled milk, I imagine myself in his situation, feeling a set of sympathetic emotions. However, the sympathetic emotions I feel when I imagine myself in his

situation (some small amount of disappointment, annoyance, or frustration) don't match up with the actual emotions he is displaying (bitter grief and despair). Thus, I judge his emotions to be improper: the man acts inappropriately when he cries over spilled milk.

Through a similar method, we can judge the *merit* of an agent's actions. Judging the merit of an action involves sympathizing with both the agent who acts and the subjects affected by said actions (TMS II.i.5.1-2). If I feel gratitude when I sympathize with the people affected by an action, and I judge the agent's motivating sentiments to be proper, then I judge the agent's behavior to be meritorious (TMS II.i.5.2). In contrast, if I feel resentment when I sympathize with the victims of an agent's actions, and I judge the agent's motivating sentiments to be improper, then I judge their actions to be *demeritorious* (TMS II.i.5.4). Meritorious actions are worthy of praise and reward, while demeritorious actions deserve blame and punishment.

According to Smith, humans naturally want to be both proper and meritorious (TMS I.i.2.1-6, III.2.1). We derive great pleasure from mutual sympathy: we want other people to think that our emotions are justified, that they are appropriate, and that anyone would feel the way we feel, if only they were in our place (TMS I.i.2.1-6). And we also want to be genuinely worthy of praise: we want to have those qualities that we admire in other people and to know that we deserve praise and reward for the ways we act (TMS III.2.1). These dual desires are what first impel us to judge our own emotions and behaviors. As children, we begin developing our consciences when we learn that other people judge us the same way that we judge them (TMS III.3.22). When we learn that other people judge our actions and emotions, we become concerned with our propriety and merit, fearing that other people may not sympathize with us or that we might be in some way contemptible for our actions (TMS III.1.5). So, we begin judging ourselves.

But Smith argues that “We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us” (TMS III.1.2). If we want to get a view of our own propriety and merit, we can only do so by attempting to sympathize with ourselves from someone else’s perspective. At first, we attempt to view ourselves by imagining ourselves in the position of our actual spectators (our parents, teachers, peers, etc.). But we soon realize that these spectators are often prejudiced in their judgments: they lack information, they play favorites, and they are partial towards themselves and their friends (TMS III.2.31 footnote; Fleischacker, 2011, p. 28). So, to protect ourselves from prejudiced judgments, we begin to imagine an idealized spectator, someone who is fair, well-informed, and impartial. It is from this imaginary person’s perspective that we judge our own propriety and merit. For Smith, this is the origin of one’s conscience: it arises through habitually attempting to sympathize with oneself from an ideal observer’s perspective.

3. THE PROBLEM OF PAROCHIALISM

According to Smith, we obey the dictates of our consciences because we want the sympathy of those around us and because we want to be genuinely worthy of praise. But some have argued that our concern for mutual sympathy problematically biases the impartial spectator in favor of conventional norms and values (Fleischacker, 2011; Golemboski, 2015; Harman, 1986). Suppose the impartial spectator merely internalizes the moral standards common within one’s community. In that case, it will have little to say in critique of the community’s standards—even when those standards are morally suspect. In this section, I will examine arguments from David Golemboski (2015), Samuel Fleischacker (2011), and Gilbert Harman

(1986), each of which supports the idea that Smith's impartial spectator falls prey to the problem of parochialism.

3.1 Golemboski

Golemboski argues that Smith falls prey to the problem of parochialism because Smith offers a "closed" account of impartiality (Golemboski, 2015, pp. 4-6).² Not all accounts of impartiality are created equal: according to Amartya Sen, whose work Golemboski draws upon, accounts of impartiality differ in the degree to which outside perspectives are considered during the formation of impartial judgments (2002, p. 445). According to *closed* accounts of impartiality, only the perspectives of members of one's own group need to be considered to arrive at an "impartial" judgment. Closed accounts focus on eliminating personal sources of partiality, thus ensuring that private interests, grievances, affections, and desires do not bias one's moral judgments.

Sen argues that closed accounts of impartiality suffer a serious weakness. While such accounts may be able to eliminate the influence of self-interest from the judgments of in-group members, they are ill-equipped for engagement with less personal sources of partiality (Sen, 2002, p. 447). Because closed accounts of impartiality only require one to consider the perspectives of one's fellow in-group members when forming impartial judgments, such accounts take for granted the conventional beliefs and assumptions commonly held within the group. The focal group's shared norms and values are treated as an acceptable standard against which impartial judgments can be made. This conceals the ways in which a group's shared conventions might themselves be sources of partiality. Insofar as closed accounts of impartiality ignore the shared biases and prejudices of one's in-group, they can add little to a critique of the

² See Sen 2002 and Sen 2009 for arguments against this position.

in-group's norms, values, and institutions. Thus, they are vulnerable to the problem of parochialism.

In contrast to closed accounts, *open* accounts of impartiality allow (and sometimes require) one to invoke the perspectives of outsiders in the formation of impartial judgments (Sen, 2002, p. 446). While both open and closed accounts are designed to eliminate personal sources of partiality, open accounts are designed to also eliminate sources of partiality emerging from the shared norms and values of one's group. Open accounts ask one to consider how *any* disinterested spectator might judge—not just one from one's own community. This allows them to identify sources of partiality that closed accounts typically fail to identify. Having an outside perspective can help one identify the biases and prejudices that a group of people share. This, in turn, allows open accounts of impartiality to engage fruitfully in social criticism: using an open account, one can leverage the perspectives of outsiders to identify and criticize the shared biases and prejudices of one's own group.

Golemboski, adopting Sen's framework, argues that Smith's account of impartial spectatorship is an example of closed impartiality, and that it therefore falls prey to the problem of parochialism (2015, pp. 8-11). He bases his argument on the strong connection Smith draws between impartial judgment and the process of socialization. Golemboski suggests that the capacity for judgment, on Smith's account, is dependent on the acquisition of standards obtained through socialization (2015, p. 9). The impartial spectator personifies, refines, and reflects the conventional norms of one's society, inviting individuals to assess their own conduct through the eyes of an impartial spectator (Golemboski, 2015, p. 9). Taking up the perspective of an impartial spectator, on this reading, merely amounts to imagining what idealized versions of the people one has socialized with would think. My impartial judgments take into account my fellow

group members' perspectives—but, crucially, they simply cannot account for the perspectives of people I *have not* socialized with, including people from outside of my community. This has both a benefit and a cost. The benefit is that, by prompting agents to examine their behavior from the perspective of an impartial member of their community, the impartial spectator fosters social cohesion (Golemboski, 2015, p. 9). People are better able to cooperate when they have a strong understanding of the norms and expectations of the people with whom they need to cooperate.

That said, the cost of reading Smith's account in this way is that it makes Smith vulnerable to accusations of parochialism: if the impartial spectator merely asks people to apply conventional moral standards impartially, then it will be giving *really bad* advice whenever those conventional standards are biased or prejudiced. For instance, if one is raised in a society that accepts slavery as an institution, then the impartial application of conventional norms would demand that slaves obey their masters, and that all the awful violence that comes along with slavery be accepted as a matter of course (Golemboski, 2015, p. 5). This is, obviously, an undesirable outcome for a theory of moral judgment.

And the danger does not lie solely in past issues of social justice: our consciences may be as silent on some important issue today as the consciences of people in the not-so-distant past were on the matter of slavery. What if history bears out in favor of some exceptionally demanding account of ethics, one which conventional moral norms seem to disregard? If we cannot rely on our consciences to recognize something potentially on par with slavery as evil, how can we trust them *at all* when it comes to moral judgments?

3.2 Fleischacker

While Golemboski deals directly with the problem of parochialism and the possibility of social critique for Smith's account, Fleischacker deals more broadly with the conflicting strains

of universalism and relativism in the TMS. Still, Fleischacker identifies three things in Smith's account which might lead us to question whether Smith can truly participate in social critique.

First, Fleischacker points out that Smith argues by appeal to what "we think", "we admire", "we approve", etc. (2011, pp. 24, 27). This, according to Fleischacker, opens Smith up to the objection that what "we" think and feel may be very different, depending on what community we find ourselves in (2011, p. 27). "We" do not all think and feel the same way about things, insofar as we come from different societies with different ideas about what is appropriate and admirable. Fleischacker argues that, insofar as Smith relies on common-sense methodology to make his arguments, Smith's account is vulnerable "to the threat that common-sense philosophy characteristically faces: that common sense is relative to communities" (2011, p. 27).

Second, Fleischacker discusses the role that the desire for mutual sympathy plays in Smith's account. According to Smith, we seek the approval of the people around us because we desire mutual sympathy: we want other people to approve of our sentiments when they sympathize with us, so we each modify our own emotions to bring them closer to what the people around us would feel, were they to envision themselves in our places (Fleischacker, 2011, pp. 27-28). The effect of this desire is to establish emotional equilibrium within a group, with different groups arriving at different types of emotional equilibrium, depending on the types and strengths of emotion that are prevalent within them: "If the people around me are warmly effusive while the people around you are colder or more reserved, then you and I will seek to be different kinds of people, and will approve and disapprove of different kinds of actions and reactions in others" (Fleischacker, 2011, p. 28). Because different communities reach different

types of emotional equilibrium, they will have different norms and expectations about how individuals should behave.

Finally, Fleischacker argues that, if the impartial spectator is to defend us from the prejudiced judgments of our fellow community members, it must apply fundamentally the same standards as those community members (even if said standards are in-themselves flawed) (Fleischacker, 2011, p. 28). While the impartial spectator eliminates the influence of misinformation and partiality from the *application* of a community's standards, it does nothing to correct errors in the standards themselves (Fleischacker, 2011, p. 28). If it did, then it would be unable to engage with the prejudiced judgments of one's fellow community members, and would therefore be no defense against them (Fleischacker, 2011, p. 28). Here, Fleischacker argues in a similar vein to Golemboski: Smith's impartial spectator corrects for partiality and misinformation at the level of individuals, but if it is going to foster cooperation between in-group members, it has to make judgments according to the norms and values accepted by the group (2011, p. 28).

That said, Fleischacker does allow that the impartial spectator can make *some* criticisms against societal standards. For instance, the impartial spectator can point out when societal standards are founded on false information or partiality toward one subgroup or another within one's group (Fleischacker, 2011, p. 29). Fleischacker claims that "Better information about Africans, or a better realization of how negative sentiments toward Africans served the interests of slave owners, might have led people in America to abandon such ugly sentiments—especially if they also engaged in a serious attempt to imagine themselves in the place of the Africans affected by these sentiments" (2011, p. 29). But Fleischacker also argues that access to this sort of new information probably is not enough to reform many corrupt attitudes (2011, p. 30).

Prejudiced people are notoriously hard to influence by way of better information: even when they accept the data (which, in the age of “fake news”, they are unlikely to do anyway), such information gets filtered through their biases and prejudices, such that even evidence of a group’s virtues can be taken as evidence for their viciousness (Fleischacker, 2011, p. 30).

Taken together, Fleischacker’s arguments give us reason to think that Smith’s account may be vulnerable to the problem of parochialism. If “common sense” ideas about morality vary by community, if our desire for mutual sympathy leads to the development of different norms and values depending on the community one finds oneself in, and if the impartial spectator must use conventional norms in order to foster mutual sympathy, then Smith’s impartial spectator may be unable to escape parochialism.

3.3 Harman

Harman, like Golemboski and Fleischacker, argues that Smith’s spectator is heavily influenced by convention (1986, p. 9). On Smith’s account, when one individual sympathizes with another, the individual imagines how they would act and react in the other’s situation. However, as Harman points out, any spectator who imagined themselves in another person’s situation would imagine modifying their own, natural emotions to bring them into line with the emotions of other spectators (1986, pp. 9-10). After all, humans naturally desire mutual sympathy; so, naturally, even an impartial spectator would try to modify their own emotions and behaviors, to bring them into line with what other, not-necessarily-impartial spectators would be able to sympathize with (Harman, 1986, p. 10).

Because of this, Harman argues that impartial spectators will be influenced by their expectations about what other people can sympathize with (1986, p. 10). When they imagine themselves in someone else’s situation, an impartial spectator that desires mutual sympathy will

imagine thinking and acting in ways that will make other spectators more likely to sympathize with them. This also means that an impartial spectator's imagined actions and reactions will be skewed in favor of conventional behaviors. As Harman argues, "Conventional ways of acting and reacting serve as evidence about the feelings of other impartial spectators" (Harman, 1986, p. 10). Thus, the conventions of one's community may have strong effects on what sorts of behaviors one thinks an impartial spectator will be able to approve of.

If the impartial spectator is influenced by convention in the way that Harman suggests, then it is easy to see why Smith's spectator might not be well-suited to the task of social critique. Insofar as "impartial" judgments are influenced by non-universal elements of social convention, they can be influenced by the local biases and prejudices held in common by members of the community.

4. GOLEMBOSKI ON SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF PAROCHIALISM

The arguments presented by Golemboski, Fleischacker, and Harman indicate a serious difficulty for Smith's account. If the impartial spectator is so heavily influenced by convention that it cannot improve on the norms and values it inherits from society, then Smith is going to have a hard time explaining why we should ever trust our impartial spectators to provide accurate answers to moral questions. Golemboski presents three possible solutions to this problem: we could interpret the impartial spectator in terms of immanent critique, divine inspiration, or moral pluralism. Before discussing my own solution, I think it would be useful to examine each of these possibilities in turn.

Golemboski's first solution involves understanding the impartial spectator in terms of immanent critique (Golemboski, 2015, p. 12). According to Golemboski, immanent critique appeals to the norms and values that a society ostensibly affirms, and leverages those norms and

values to criticize practices that seem to run counter to them: for instance, “in a society where abortion is widely condemned as a violation of human dignity, an established regime of capital punishment may be vulnerable to critique on the basis of the same commitment to human dignity that rules out abortion” (2015, p. 12). Smith’s spectator might operate as an immanent critic, leveraging the norms and values given to it to by socialization to criticize the biased and prejudiced behaviors, attitudes, and institutions that are prevalent in society.

Golemboski identifies two problems with this solution. First, he argues that such an approach would mean admitting that the impartial spectator cannot identify injustices that are deeply embedded within an agent’s culture (Golemboski, 2015, p. 13). If the problem is the norms themselves (and not just the realization of those norms), then the impartial spectator will not have much to say. Though the impartial spectator would be able to spot surface-level flaws in the implementation of a society’s standards, the standards themselves would have to go unremarked upon—and this would simply not be sufficient moral guidance for those who live in societies with deeply flawed conventional norms and values (e.g., the Antebellum South).

Second, Golemboski argues that resolving stalemates between contrary values sometimes requires an outside perspective (2015, p. 13). What might look like a necessary compromise between contradictory but deeply important values to an insider might look like an unnecessary compromise between a worthy value and a biased/prejudiced one to someone with an outside perspective. If you were, for instance, a German soldier during World War II, you might be asked to balance your perceived obligations toward honor, loyalty, and racial purity against values like kindness and human decency. In such a case, the right answer would not be to compromise these values against each other, to only commit a little genocide; the right answer would be to disregard one set of values and fully favor the other. Resolving conflicts like this

sometimes requires a fresh, outside perspective; an immanent critic will not satisfy (Golemboski, 2015, p. 13).

Golemboski's second potential solution to the problem of parochialism involves interpreting the impartial spectator as a divinely-informed conscience (2015, pp. 13-14). Perhaps the impartial spectator could transcend parochialism with divine input. If the impartial spectator had divine insight on what biases and prejudices plague society, then perhaps it could effectively engage in social critique. Yet, according to Golemboski, such an interpretation of the impartial spectator would be at odds with Smith's overall project (2015, p. 14). Having divine insight would make the socially-informed part of the impartial spectator superfluous: if the divine perspective is morally authoritative, then the proper question is not "How would a reasonable, well-informed, impartial observer judge my actions?" but rather, "How would *God* judge my actions?" (Golemboski, 2015, p. 14).

Golemboski's final solution involves a not-insignificant amendment to Smith's account. He argues that "the possibility of a thorough social critique... requires consideration of perspectives from outside the social context" (Golemboski, 2015, p. 15). In order to foster such consideration, he argues that we should amend Smith's account, and conceive of the impartial spectator as being capable of internalizing and invoking multiple sets of moral norms (2015, p. 14). Rather than thinking of the impartial spectator as synthesizing and making consistent the standards of actual spectators encountered during socialization, we should conceive of the impartial spectator as a conscience informed by moral pluralism, capable of deploying different moral standards on command (2015, p. 14).

Golemboski argues that a conscience informed by a wide array of moral perspectives has a better chance of recognizing bias and prejudice within its native context (2015, p. 16). A

person who lives in a multicultural society, who can internalize and impartially apply the conventional norms of multiple communities, will be better able to spot the biases and prejudices present within each. So, while access to multiple perspectives cannot guarantee that an individual will get closer to “exact propriety” over time, it at least provides a method by which one *could* improve (Golemboski, 2015, p. 16). Golemboski’s amendment addresses our basic concern with parochialism: it opens up the possibility of improving upon the standards we internalize through socialization.

However, there are good reasons to think that merely having access to multiple perspectives is not enough to overcome parochialism. David Thunder argues that Golemboski’s solution only works if one already has the capacity for sound moral judgment (2016, p. 5). What good is having access to multiple moral standards if one cannot distinguish the good from the bad in each? If, for instance, one lived in a deeply racist society and one had internalized the moral standards of an egalitarian society, how would one recognize that it was the *racist* values that needed criticism, rather than the egalitarian ones? Increasing the number of moral perspectives available to a person doesn’t do them any good unless the person can already differentiate good standards from bad ones (Thunder, 2016, p. 3).

There are other problems with Golemboski’s solution. For instance, Golemboski’s characterization of social convention seems inaccurate. As Thunder points out, Golemboski talks as if the disparate attitudes, norms, assumptions, and sensibilities held by the members of a group can be distilled down to a single perspective, which can then be taken up by an impartial spectator (2016, p. 4). He talks as if *groups* have impartial spectators, when really the impartial spectator is a device by which an *individual* may attempt to create an impartial standard. No group’s system of values has only a single plausible interpretation, so whatever it is that

individuals are internalizing on Golemboski's account, it can't amount to the impartial spectator of a group. Rather, it must be an individual's *interpretation* of the group's values. This ends up being a problem for the internalization of both foreign standards and the standards of one's own group. If there are a variety of plausible ways to interpret both one's own group's standards and the standards of foreign groups, then what exactly are we internalizing on Golemboski's account?

This problem runs even deeper. On Golemboski's reading of Smith, the impartial spectator refines and reflects the moral norms present within one's group. But that refinement never seems to go so far as to actually change one's norms. According to Golemboski, we absorb the conventional standards of our communities (as if there were only one plausible view on what those "conventional" standards could be), and we apply them impartially to ourselves and other people without significantly altering them. But here, Golemboski's argument runs directly counter to Smith's stated position on moral development: Smith does not think that morally mature individuals naively trust the norms they grew up with, nor does he think that those norms remain static over time (TMS VI.iii.23-25). Morally mature individuals are characteristically skeptical of their own norms, ever vigilant for any hint of partiality that might appear within them (TMS VI.iii.25). Part of impartial spectatorship for Smith is the natural suspicion that the norms we're familiar with are flawed and partial in ways that we do not yet detect. Thus, morally mature individuals are always on the lookout for partiality in their own standards. They do not achieve a state of impartiality and then become confident in their own moral superiority. Rather, they remain vigilant, and each day they seek to get a little closer to true impartiality.

This speaks to a very different potential reading of Smith. In the next section, I will develop this reading to show that Smith can address the problem of parochialism without radically changing the nature of impartial spectatorship.

5. WHEN DOES MORAL DEVELOPMENT STOP?

I will now argue that Smith's account is not "closed" in the way that Golemboski alleges, and that—for similar reasons—Fleischacker's and Harman's arguments are not quite as damaging as they may seem. Smith *can* adequately address the problem of parochialism without radically adjusting his views. Smith's impartial spectator is more "open" to outside influence than any of these theorists credit.

Golemboski argues that Smith's account needs an amendment because, without the ability to consider alternate sets of moral norms, the impartial spectator will have no standard against which it can criticize conventional norms. If it has no standard against which it can criticize conventional norms, then it is doomed to affirm and support potentially biased and prejudiced conventions. In other words: without the ability to internalize outside perspectives, the impartial spectator will be unable to engage in social critique.

However, a different reading of Smith would show that the impartial spectator can already consider outside perspectives. Instead of reading Smith's account as providing a tool for propagating conventional norms and values, we can read Smith as outlining a process by which individuals acquire *and improve upon* conventional morality through socialization.

Individuals look toward the people they interact with to form their judgments about what an "impartial" spectator would judge. But this is not something they stop doing once they have internalized some hypothetical impartial spectator to their culture; rather, it is something they continuously do throughout their lives (VI.iii.25). A morally mature individual who, for the first

time, encountered a person from an alien social context would not necessarily reject the foreign standards by which they were being judged; instead, they might attempt to integrate those standards into their own ideas about impartial spectatorship. The same might happen on the other side, with the foreigner attempting to integrate the other person's standards into their own. Because both desire mutual sympathy, and because both want to be genuinely praiseworthy, they each have an incentive to modify their own emotions and behaviors so that the other will approve of them. If one of them has a biased or prejudiced set of norms, then interacting with someone who does not share those norms could cause them to recognize that their own norms are problematic, and that they are unlikely to gain sympathy for their biased passions or gratitude for their prejudiced actions. Norms and values diffuse across group boundaries precisely because humans are naturally concerned with their own propriety and merit, and because our ideas about what is proper and meritorious are informed by socialization with people in different groups. The very same desires which Fleischacker and Harman argued put pressure on the impartial spectator to side with biased norms and values can *also* put pressure on the impartial spectator to adopt *better* norms and values, ones which aren't biased or prejudiced.

All of this goes to show that Smithian consciences are more open to change than Golemboski, Fleischacker, and Harman indicate. We do not need to make the impartial spectator pluralistic for it to take seriously the perspectives of people from outside an agent's native community: it already takes those views seriously, because of its desire for mutual sympathy and genuine praiseworthiness.

To be clear, my claim here is not that Smithian consciences are inherently pluralistic. Rather, I argue that Smithian consciences can synthesize a *single* standard from the disparate perspectives they encounter during socialization. This enables them to consider outside

perspectives when forming impartial judgments *without* requiring that they internalize those outside perspectives wholesale. The synthesis of a single standard using insights from many perspectives allows Smithian spectators to overcome parochial biases.

Sen argues that “closed” accounts of impartiality fall prey to the problem of parochialism because they fail to make a procedural commitment to eliminate local group prejudices (2002, p. 447; 2009, p. 139). But here, we see that Smith can provide just such a procedural commitment. If our consciences are shaped by socialization, even socialization with outsiders, then we can overcome local group prejudices by socializing with people who do not share our conventional norms and values.

6. “SOLVING” THE PROBLEM OF PAROCHIALISM

That said, even having access to outside perspectives is no guarantee that an individual will achieve perfect judgment. Even if our consciences can learn from social experience with outsiders, this does not render them immune to bias and prejudice. As Golemboski points out, having access to outside perspectives only increases one’s chances of recognizing problematic standards—it does not guarantee that any particular individual will overcome their biases or prejudices (2015, p. 16). So Smith’s spectator is still subject to parochial problems, and judging “impartially” in line with Smith’s account does not guarantee that one’s judgments will not be racist, sexist, or otherwise suspect. While Smith does argue that no society could be built on pure injustice (V.2.16), it is still possible for a society to have certain wildly awful features that are endorsed by custom and accepted by the majority. It is still possible for people to fall prey to parochial biases and prejudices.

Smith himself provides a prime example of such a possibility: at the end of Part V of the TMS, Smith discusses the ancient Greek practice of exposing unwanted infants to the elements,

allowing them to starve or be eaten by wild animals (V.2.15). Infanticide among ancient Athenians was apparently considered acceptable and was practiced “whenever the circumstances of the parent rendered it inconvenient to bring up the child” (V.2.15). Smith alleges that this practice most likely started in “times of the most savage barbarity”, when poverty and extreme hunger sometimes made it so that a parent could not hope to support both themselves and their children (and he allows that these facts might have made the practice excusable). Critically, he also notes that the practice continued into more civilized ages, and that custom made it acceptable for a parent to abandon their child merely for their own convenience (which, undoubtedly, is *not* excusable) (V.2.15). Smith also notes that both Plato and Aristotle wrote favorably of the practice: two of history’s greatest philosophers either did not recognize that the practice was abhorrent or outright defended it (V.2.15).

Clearly, being a morally mature individual does not guarantee that one will be immune to moral error. Even the wise are sometimes led astray by custom, and there is always the danger that one will end up like Aristotle, defending infanticide (or for that matter, Aristotle, defending misogynistic social and political structures), even if one is a mature individual with access to a diverse array of moral outlooks.

However, this problem does not go unacknowledged by Smith. Smith thought of the process of moral development as a lifelong project, and he freely acknowledged that morally mature agents do not have perfect standards of judgment:

“Every day some feature is improved; every day some blemish is corrected... But [the morally mature individual] imitates the work of a divine artist, which can never be equaled. He feels the imperfect success of all his best endeavours, and sees, with grief and affliction, in how many different features the mortal copy falls short of the immortal original” (VI.iii.25).

The problem of parochialism, of how to recognize and overcome the biased and prejudiced norms and values one internalizes during the process of socialization, is built into the fabric of Smith's account. Smith treats the problem of parochialism not as a damning indictment of his own position, but as a problem that all of us face throughout our lives. It is not something to be overcome or defeated, but something to be grappled with continually over the course of one's life. The morally mature individual is ever watchful for partiality in their own standards and conduct, always open to the possibility of new information exposing some heretofore unnoticed flaw. The best we can hope for, even if we adopt my reading of Smith's account, is not moral perfection, but moral improvement.

I take this to be one of the more descriptively realistic elements of Smith's account. Smith is not just explaining how we *should* make moral judgments; he's explaining how we *actually* make them. Smith's account of moral judgment can show both how our consciences can get better over time, and why they sometimes dramatically fail to recognize evil. Through time, effort, and experience, we can get better at judging what is really proper and meritorious; but if we lack time, if we do not put in the effort, or if we lack the proper experiences, we can make incredibly biased and prejudiced judgments—especially if we happen to find ourselves in a morally inept group.

I mentioned earlier the possibility of an individual whose conscience was informed solely by the conventions of a society that accepted slavery as an institution. For that person, conscience would seem to demand that slaves obey their masters, and that all the awful violence that comes along with slavery be accepted as a matter of course. I said that this was an obviously undesirable outcome for a theory of moral judgment; however, it is remarkably accurate as a *description* of how people sometimes make moral judgments. Historically speaking, many

people went along with conventional norms, accepting horror and violence as part of the natural and proper order of the world. And, at the same time, other people did not accept conventional norms. Criticism of slavery did not come solely from outside of the communities involved: often, men and women of conscience came to their own conclusions about the morality of slavery. This too is something that Smith's account of conscience can explain.

7. "OUTSIDE" PERSPECTIVES

So, the problem of parochialism can be addressed, but not solved, by having consciences whose standards can be improved via socialization with outsiders. However, this leaves us in a precarious position: it makes it seem like only individuals who have direct social experience with foreigners will be able to overcome parochial biases and prejudices. After all, the only people who won't share the norms and values of a given community are people from outside that community, right?

Not necessarily. As Thunder points out, while there may be certain norms, values, and attitudes which are statistically dominant in a culture, individuals "are not guided merely by what they perceive to be statistically dominant, but what they perceive to be the values of their society at their very best" (2016, p. 4).³ We don't accept the norms and values of our groups as they are given to us; instead, we form our own ideas about how those norms and values should be arranged. Smith argues that individuals, through continuous observation of themselves and other people, come to develop an idea of "exact propriety and perfection" which goes far beyond what convention typically demands of a person (TMS VI.iii.23). It is in comparison with this imaginary, ideal standard that the conventional norms of one's society are revealed to be far from

³ It might be pointed out that individuals often have very poor perception when it comes to what "the values of their society at their very best" might look like. This is a fair objection, and one that Smith himself devotes no small amount of time to addressing in the TMS; for more detail, see TMS I.iii.3, III.4, and V.1-2.

perfect. Accordingly, individuals do not necessarily accept whatever norms are statistically dominant within their community as the gold standard of moral judgment. Instead, they can develop their own ideas about what perfect propriety demands, over and above what their peers demand.

And people *do* often develop different ideas about what perfect propriety might demand. Most people are not born into communities where total agreement has been reached on how to interpret the moral world. No matter how monolithic a culture is in a given community, there are always a variety of plausible ways to interpret and prioritize the norms and values it reports to uphold. As Thunder points out, “There is no single perspective that authoritatively embodies the moral values, attitudes, and norms of a society or culture” (2016, p. 4.). So, when individuals begin refining the conventional standards handed down to them through socialization, they are not starting with a clear-cut standard against which they can judge the world; instead, they are working with a somewhat contradictory hodge-podge of ideas that can be plausibly interpreted in a variety of ways.

A child’s first task when they realize that they are subject to other people’s judgments is to start trying to put together a coherent picture of the norms and standards against which they are being judged. But that picture can be put together in a variety of ways. The fact that impartial spectatorship begins with an act of interpretation means that individuals who start out in the same community do not necessarily start with the same standards. Depending on how they interpret the moral information in their environment, different people will arrive at different (sometimes *radically* different) ideas about how an ideal impartial spectator would judge in a given situation. Thus, individuals from “inside” the same group can still be “outsiders” to each other, in terms of the standards they use to judge what is proper and meritorious.

We can overcome our parochial biases and prejudices by interacting with outsiders, with people who do not share our norms and values. But we should remember that “outsiders” can come from anywhere—even within our own communities. While living in a multicultural society may provide some benefit when it comes to the accessibility of outside perspectives, we do not need to worry about conscience-based social critique being something exclusively available to societies like our own. Smith can account for this sort of social critique in any sort of human society.

8. CONCLUSION

There are two ways in which Smith’s account of impartiality is more open than we might have thought at first: first, there is the fact that impartial spectators are informed by socialization throughout an individual’s life, including socialization with “outsiders”; and second there is the fact that individuals can arrive at radically different interpretations of what morality demands, even when they socialize with all the same people. While Golemboski, Fleischacker, and Harman each give us reason to think that Smith may be vulnerable to the problem of parochialism, I think it is clear that Smith can adequately address this issue without significant alteration to his view. Our consciences do not just naively absorb and regurgitate the norms of our communities; rather, morally mature people put great effort into improving their ability to make moral judgments. Specifically, they learn from socializing with other people, including people from outside of their local community, which enables them to productively criticize the norms and values held by their fellow community members.

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