



## Is Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator Selfless?

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[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).

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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

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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

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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

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## About the Author



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