

The Contemporary Relevance of Adam Smith's Moral Sentimentalism

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Abstract

You do not often hear “sentimentalism” listed among the ethical theories, but you might still want to know what this project of the Scottish enlightenment was trying to achieve. This essay is a partial defense of the claim that Adam Smith’s sentimentalism deserves more attention as a moral theory. Relying on G.E.M. Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy”, which was influential for its criticisms of prevailing ethical theories and an important inspiration for the development of modern virtue ethics, I claim that Smith provides an ethical framework that meets her demands. Smith’s moral sentimentalism provides a firm psychological ground for virtue theory without sacrificing its merits as a proper ethical theory.

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Abbreviations

TMS: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

WN: *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*

References

“I.i.1.1” = Part I.section i.chapter 1.paragraph 1

The Contemporary Relevance of Adam Smith's Moral Sentimentalism

Introduction

My claim in this paper is that Adam Smith (1723–1790) is relevant in contemporary ethics. My reasoning is that his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) provides a framework for an ethical theory that G.E.M. Anscombe is calling for in her paper “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958). Anscombe argues that the “top-down” ethics of her time was deeply flawed and proposes a “bottom-up” approach instead. Historically, “Modern Moral Philosophy” was a highly influential paper, both because of its criticism of existing ethics, and its proposed alternative.¹ I assume that the paper is still relevant. It might be argued, however, that Smith is ultimately a cultural relativist, but I will argue that he was not, and that he did not abandon his “bottom-up” approach to achieve this.

My essay is structured in the following way. First, I discuss Anscombe and retrieve some requirements for a bottom-up ethical theory. Anscombe’s challenge is to provide a naturalistic account of ethics with a proper notion of moral authority. Then, I discuss Smith and how he meets these requirements, first his moral psychology and then his normative ethics. Smith’s idea of a reflective process of perfecting moral judgments allows Smith to formulate an ethical theory that can meet Anscombe’s challenge. This becomes apparent when I finally face the challenge of a purported cultural relativism in Smith.

Anscombe’s criticism of modern ethics

In “Modern Moral Philosophy”, Anscombe claims that modern ethical theories—by which she means Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, consequentialism, and social contract theory—all fail to account for moral authority. Since they are all top-down and fail, Anscombe recommends that a bottom-up approach instead. She finds this in Aristotle’s virtue ethics. However, she requests a better understanding of his psychological terms. I will not argue for or against Anscombe, but I will use her criticisms and suggestions as requirements for Smith’s sentimentalist ethics.

¹ See Driver 2018, 5.1, and Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018, 1.

That modern ethical theories are top-down means that they think general rules are to decide the moral rightness of individual actions. They do not accept the antiquated “divine law conception of ethics”, where the “laws” are authorized by God (Anscombe 1958, 5-8). But their own ethical theories just replace “Divine law ought to be obeyed” with something like “The greatest happiness principle ought to be employed in all decisions” (ibid., 8). So they are all “law conceptions of ethics”, just without the “divine” in front. And none of them successfully account for why their “laws” ought to be followed, albeit not always for the same reasons (ibid., 2-3, 8-14). A repeated reason is that a practical general rule needs to describe the nature of the actions it is meant to be applied to (Anscombe 1958, 2-3). Otherwise, you would not always know when the rule was relevant. An ethical theory would avoid this problem if it did not conceive of morality as the application of general rules, in other words if it was bottom-up.

In the virtue ethics of Aristotle, the question is not first and foremost what to do, but who and how to be. Instead of a general rule deciding right and wrong in specific situations, the focus is on the individual and how it relates to its surroundings. The specific situations provide the source material for personal moral development—the acquisition of virtue. A virtuous person is someone who feels and acts appropriately in every situation (Anscombe 1958, 18), and acts as a role model for others. Virtue ethics, then, provides a bottom-up framework for morality.

In this way, ethics is also naturalized. For Aristotle, the best actions and emotions are those that are neither excessive nor deficient, but exactly in between.² Since they are just some average, a human being *ought* to perform a just action in the same way that a machine *ought* to be oiled, the only difference being that the former kind of “ought” relates to human actions and emotions (Anscombe 1958, 5).

However, the talk of “excess”, “deficiency”, and “ought” still implies some moral standard, so more explanation is needed. Aristotle’s answer is teleological, in line with his teleological view of nature. The goal of virtue, and the actions and emotions that make it up, is “human flourishing” (Anscombe 1958, 18). But this is a “doubtful” concept, according to Anscombe (ibid.). The ideal for virtue is as unclear as the general rules.

If you remove the teleological aspect, you need something to replace it with. Anscombe suggests that virtue is understood, at least to begin with, in terms of its constituents—actions, intentions, etc.—which requires an account of these, unfortunately

² See *The Nichomachean Ethics* II.6.1106b30ff.

something “Aristotle did not succeed in really making clear” (ibid., 4-5, 14-5). Fortunately, however, psychological concepts like “intention”, “motive”, “pleasure”, “wanting”, can be given a psychological account, without ethics. Thus there is a possibility of understanding morality in a naturalist, bottom-up way.

From Anscombe, I draw certain requirements for Smith’s ethical theory. First, it must be bottom-up, taking its starting point in psychology in order to build up a theory of virtue ethics. It should at least account for “virtue”, “action”, and “intention”, and I presume also “pleasure” and “emotion”. Second, it must be able to explain morality and what authorizes moral activity in way that does not ultimately rely on general rules. As far as I can tell from Anscombe, and my own common sense, moral authority requires that moral claims are justifiable, which means that they are universal, factual, and normative. If the moral theory does include general rules, these must be non-mysterious.

Why look to Adam Smith?

Why did Anscombe not look to sentimentalism and Adam Smith, if he is relevant for her interests? Then as now, sentimentalism was not on ethicists’ minds, and Adam Smith, then as now, was known for his economics theory.³

But Smith was a much broader thinker, and he would have been a natural place for Anscombe to look to. He agreed with Anscombe’s skepticism towards top-down theories. Smith laments the philosophers whose ethics “[considered] first the general rule, and then, secondly, whether the particular action under consideration fell properly within its comprehension”, as if they were “formed like the decisions of a court of judicatory” (TMS, III.4.11). More importantly, Smith provides what Anscombe asks for, a psychology underlying a virtue theory of ethics. According to Laurence Berns, “Smith gave impressively plausible psychological accounts of things, especially the sentimental side of ethics, that Aristotle observed, noted, and alluded to, but did not elaborate” (Berns cited in Carrasco 2004, 115). Like Aristotle, Smith can be said to give a naturalized explanation of morality, but unlike Aristotle, he did not have teleological notion of nature, thus not inclined to rely on a

³ The Adam Smith of WN has long overshadowed the Adam Smith of TMS. “The Adam Smith of popular repute is often referred to as the advocate of ‘market forces’, the enemy of government regulation, and believer in something called the ‘invisible hand’ to produce optimum economic outcomes. Yet if Smith is actually read, then this popular picture can be seen to be more a caricature than a faithful portrait” (Berry, Paganelli and Smith 2013b, v). The origin of the misconception of Smith was the highly popular reception of WN, and the subsequent reading of TMS in light of it. See, e.g., Ballestrem 2001 (in German) and Norman 2018 (in English).

“doubtful” concept like human flourishing. So, Smith is at least a philosopher it is worth looking more closely at if one is sympathetic to “Modern Moral Philosophy”.

Smith’s moral sentimentalism

Looking at Smith, I start with a big-picture view of how he conceives of morality, and then go step by step towards a full account. Taking his starting point in morality as a social phenomenon, it becomes clear that moral judgments play a crucial role. And looking at what they are and how they are made, I also describe Smith’s account of Anscombe’s low-level moral-psychological concepts. The most central of Smith’s psychological concepts, however, is not on Anscombe’s list, namely his notion of “sympathy”. All of these psychological terms are parts of Smith’s account of how we become virtuous. Virtue is the ability to level with others, either by heightening our sympathy towards other people’s emotions or lowering our emotions towards other people’s sympathy. I will start with Smith’s moral psychology, and then move on to explain how he provides a framework for an ethical theory.

There are two objections: One on the apparent lack of a normative project in Smith and one on the authority of conscience. Please note that although I have provided separate subtitles, the sections are not independent. No part should be read in isolation.

Low-level concepts: moral judgment, sympathy, emotion, action, virtue

What is morality for Smith? Morality takes its starting point in human interaction, as distinct, at least, from interaction between humans and inanimate objects. For example, there is a difference between someone being punched in the face and a rock falling on their head, even when the physical pain is the same. But what makes the difference? Smith would say that in the case of the person being punched, they do not just feel the physical pain, but also emotionally hurt. Being hurt, they think about the person hitting them in a way that they would not do about the rock. In addition, we do not only participate in the world, but also observe and learn about it. Hearing someone angry say that they were punched is different from hearing that a rock fell on them. In hearing about others’ emotional response to something, we form what Smith would call a moral judgment.

The concept of “moral judgment” is the bridge connecting Smith’s psychology and ethics. It is the building block for understanding action, virtue, and the formation of social rules, and it is built up from purely psychological terms.

What is a moral judgment? A moral judgment does not fall from the sky but concerns something that has happened between people. For Smith, in the first instance, a victim forms a normative, entirely partial⁴ judgment of whoever caused them pain. But the simplest form of what is more properly called a moral judgment involves three people: an agent, a victim, and a bystander or “spectator”. “Victim” is really a special case, since they could also be a beneficiary, so Smith uses the general “person principally concerned”. The basic moral judgment, a “judgment of propriety”, consists of the spectator’s judgment of the person principally concerned. In other words, not of the agent, which comes later. And it does not concern the person concerned’s *reaction*, i.e. what they chose to do as a result of what was done to them, but their *emotional* response. The spectator forms a judgment of the person concerned by comparing their emotional response with their own imagined emotional response, if they were in the same situation. If they match, they feel pleasure and approve, and if they don’t, they feel pain and disapprove. Smith’s psychological account of this involves his notion of “sympathy”.

Smith roughly defines sympathy as “fellow-feeling with any passion whatever”, the point being that there is no limit to which emotion a person can sympathize with (TMS I.i.1.5). In today’s English, “empathy” would be a better fit for Smith’s notion, because it implies entering into another person’s feelings. Smith denies that we can feel somebody else’s feelings directly, through some kind of transfusion (TMS I.i.1.6-7). What we feel only comes from our imagination, and by it we “feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike” what the person concerned feels (TMS I.i.1.2). We use our imagination and knowledge of the person concerned and their situation and respond emotionally to that imagined situation (*ibid.*). To the extent that we feel what someone feels by noticing external signs, it is only making us curious to learn more (TMS I.i.1.6-9). In order to obtain an accurate replication of what the other person is feeling, we need to learn as much as possible about their situation (TMS I.i.4.6). But this is not enough to form a judgment.

In order to form a judgment of propriety, we need more than knowledge of the person concerned’s emotions. We also need a standard to compare it to. What we compare is this original emotion and what we think we would feel if we were in the same situation. Here it can be asked: what is the difference? In both cases we are imagining ourselves in their situation. Smith is not explicit about this, and scholars do not seem to entirely agree on what

⁴ Perhaps “proto-moral”: see Fricke and Carrasco 2021.

Smith's solution should be.⁵ Perhaps the most straightforward way to understand Smith is that what the person concerned actually feels is informed by "witnessing this agent's behavior and facial expression and by hearing him express his emotional concerns" (Fricke 2013, 181). We compare this to imagining ourselves in the other person's shoes in the way Smith describes. The product of this comparison is a second-order sensation. If the original and our own, imagined emotion correspond, we feel "the pleasure of mutual sympathy". If they do not correspond, we feel "antipathy". Pleasure of mutual sympathy allows us to form a judgment of propriety, a positive judgment, and antipathy allows us to form the opposite, a judgment of impropriety (TMS I.i.3.1-2).

This way of forming moral judgments is called "the sympathetic process" in the literature.⁶ Engaging in it makes us virtuous. The sympathetic pleasure and pain motivates further engagement in the sympathetic process: the experience of the pleasure of mutual sympathy tempts us to reexperience it, and the pain of antipathy pushes us to try to understand and learn about the person concerned and their situation (). As spectators, faced with a discrepancy between a person's feelings and our own in the same, although imagined, situation, we strive to understand and learn more about their situation (). This way, we acquire the "soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues" (TMS I.i.5.1). At the other end of the sympathetic process, the person principally concerned also develops virtue, although of a different kind. But first, some clarification is in order.

Concerning antipathy, the question can be asked where the line goes between a disapproving judgment and further engagement in the sympathetic process. The answer is that Smith's emphasis is not to show who is morally right, but how to morally improve. Antipathy is not primarily a way to make negative judgments, but a desire to understand others and resolve disagreement. At no point in the sympathetic process does it feel good to disagree with others. We simply do not have time or give up, and leave the disagreement unresolved.

A question can also be asked concerning the relation between sympathy and the different emotions. Although Smith introduces sympathy as a "fellow-feeling with any passion whatever", all emotions are not equally interesting in forming moral judgments. "If the passion is too high, or if it is too low, he cannot enter into it. ... This mediocrity, however,

⁵ According to Maria Carrasco, when we learn about the original passion, we adopt the person concerned's "persons and characters" (TMS VII.iii.1.4), and when we learn how we would respond, we do not (TMS I.iii.1.9 footnote) (Carrasco 2011, 46-7). Samuel Fleischacker claims that Smith's opposition to Hume's notion of sympathy bars Smith's distinction between the different imagined emotions, and amends Smith theory with a more Wittgensteinian account (Fleischacker 2012). But I am not sure if the different accounts are incongruent.

⁶ (Fricke 2013) (Carrasco 2011)

in which the point of propriety consists, is different in different passions. It is high in some, and low in others” (TMS I.ii.intro.1-2). In other words, some passions facilitates the sympathetic process more than others, and in different ways. Our different degrees of sympathy is a result of, one, our opportunity to understand the emotion in question, and, two, its relation to other people than the person concerned. Since we can only recreate another person’s feelings by imagining their situation, it makes a difference what the cause of the feeling was for our possibilities to recreate it. We cannot, for example, feel hunger just from seeing a hungry person, or at least not very much, and the same goes for private fantasies or fancies like someone relating a dream or showing you a place that means a lot only to them (TMS I.ii.1-2).⁷ Our sympathy is more engaged with someone who got a job after looking for a long time, or suffered a loss in the family (TMS I.ii.5). But what our sympathy engages most attentively with are feelings that were caused by another person, for example when someone angrily tells us that they have been insulted, or cheerfully that they have received a gift (TMS I.ii.3-4). With anger and similar “unsocial passions”, we are conflicted, because we cannot sympathetically agree with both the person concerned and the agent (TMS I.ii.3). With gratitude and similar “social passions”, we feel “double sympathy”, the combination of the pleasure in the friendly attitude the agent has towards the person concerned and the reciprocal pleasure of the person concerned (TMS I.ii.4). Sympathy with the unsocial and social passions forces us to go beyond a simple judgment of propriety of the person concerned and make a judgment of the agent as well. It is these moral judgments that preoccupy us the most, especially sympathetic engagement with the unsocial passions.

Although the spectator takes the part of making moral judgments, the focus is on the person principally concerned. And the sympathetic process is not just a process of forming a moral judgment. It is also a process of being the object of a moral judgment and learning to conceive of ourselves as a moral subject.

Being the object of a moral judgment affects us. The pleasure of mutual sympathy is indeed mutual, and so is the pain of antipathy: “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). Like the spectator seeks to sympathize with the person concerned, so the person concerned seeks to be sympathized with. Feeling the spectator’s positive sympathy is an additional source of happiness when we are happy and a source of relief when we are distressed (TMS I.i.2.1-2). But this can rarely be

⁷ Except for hunger, the examples in this paragraph are mine.

obtained without some effort on our own part (TMS I.i.4.7). Under the eyes of the external spectator, the person concerned strives to make themselves understandable, by “lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectator can go along with” (ibid.). This is achieved by assuming the perspective of the spectator, imagining the “coolness” with which they see him (TMS I.i.4.8). As their sympathetic feeling is weaker than his, his “reflected” feeling is even weaker, and “necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before” (ibid.). Given that it is possible that the spectator’s sympathy is stronger than our own original emotion (), it should also be possible that we through their sympathy can feel more strongly, but this would be rare. In any case, engaging in this process makes us virtuous.

At the other end of the sympathetic process, we thus acquire the other kind of virtue, “the great, the awful and respectable” virtues (TMS I.i.5.1). In addition, recognizing other people’s judgment of us teaches us who we are. Whatever idea of ourselves that we had before we met others had no moral qualities (TMS III.1.3). When we look at ourselves through the eyes of others, we form an image of ourselves from the outside.

So, moral judgments, in the form of the sympathetic process, engages us to become good at learning what others feel, and adjusting our own feelings to the level of others. Remembering Anscombe’s call for understanding psychological terms, it is worth emphasizing that pleasure and pain play important roles in Smith. This is where he derives the normativity of moral judgments from. Sympathetic pleasure and pain is also what motivates us to morally improve. Smith does not say much about pleasure and pain formally. They are private, in the sense that no-one can feel another persons feelings, and they can be both sensory and psychic, and, lastly, pain is felt more strongly than pleasure, whereas pleasure is closer to people’s normal state and easier to sympathize with (TMS I.i.1.2; I.ii.1-2; I.iii.1.3,7). But Smith is not interested in giving a biological account of psychology. His psychology is systematic and descriptive, probably based on his own observations of society, history, art, and presumably himself, and appeals more to common sense than any prevailing science of his own time.

Smith says more about the emotions, which essentially connect pain and pleasure with beliefs, and he has especially much to say about gratitude and resentment. Emotions entail both a backwards-looking and forwards-looking belief: they can be regarded in relation to their cause, or the effect they suggest (TMS I.i.3.5, II.iii.intro.2). Resentment and gratitude are spontaneously provoked by any object that causes us pleasure or pain, but they can only be properly directed at an object where they can be “gratified”, meaning that the object can understand that it was the cause of that feeling in us (TMS II.iii.1). Thus animals, who can

feel resentment and gratitude, are (for humans) still not proper objects of those feelings, since they cannot understand that they were the cause of them (TMS II.iii.1.4). When we realize we are being angry at an improper object, like a rock, we stop being angry at it (TMS II.iii.1.1). So, emotions are connected to pain and pleasure, and beliefs that, if altered, also alter that pain and pleasure. Sympathetic pleasure and pain are second-order emotions (III.5.5).

Our ability to alter our emotions also provides Smith with a notion of agency. Actions and emotions are intrinsically connected in Smith, since actions are always motivated by an emotion (TMS I.i.35-7, II.i.1.intro). An intention, then, is whatever emotion motivated a particular action (TMS II.iii.intro.1). Actions can also be regarded in their bodily movement and their consequences, but it is their intention that we are most interested in when making moral judgments of them (*ibid.*), and it is the part we have the power to adjust (TMS III.3.26).

As spectators, we are not just interested in persons principally concerned, but also agents, although our judgment of the former is logically and temporally prior to the latter. As mentioned, resentment and gratitude involve beliefs about an agent. Judgments of proper resentment and gratitude, then, not only invite consideration for the agent who provoked said emotion, but sometimes also necessitate a judgment of them. Say the person concerned is angry. They then believe that the agent caused them harm. If we believe that they responded properly, we must also share their belief that the agent caused them harm. But did they? According to Smith, we only properly judge people for their intentions (TMS II.iii.intro.3),⁸ so we can only properly agree with the person concerned if the agent intended to do harm. If we, after investigating, find no fault with the agent's intention, then we are forced to think that the person concerned responded improperly (TMS II.i.3). If, on the other hand, we do find faults with the agent's action, and we otherwise find the victim's response proper, we are forced to adopt their judgment of the agent (*ibid.*). This agreement with the victim's proper response is a "judgment of demerit" of the agent (TMS II.i.intro). If, instead, the person concerned is properly grateful, the agent receives a judgment of merit (*ibid.*).⁹ (TMS In cases where the victim is absent, like in murder, judgments of the agent "bracket" the person principally concerned, because here, the spectator only cares about their proper assessment of the agent, not their actual (TMS II.i.5.11)). So, judgments of agents are in this way different from judgments of persons concerned, but receiving such a judgment and conceiving of ourselves as agents is not very different from being a person concerned.

⁸ In reality, we are not able to ignore consequences in judgments of actions (TMS II.iii...).

⁹ Naturally, the agent does not receive a judgment of merit just because the person concerned is wrong to be angry with them ().

Although agents are by definition action oriented, they always start out as persons concerned. Like them, they respond emotionally to something, and want to be an object of approval. But agents, as a result of their actions, feel the judgment of others in a somewhat stronger way, and learn to love praise and dread blame (TMS III.1.5, III.2.6, III.3.22). But an understanding of an agent is action oriented. An agent can regard their action from two viewpoints: before the action and afterwards (TMS III.4.2), and their ability to control it stems from regarding it beforehand. They imaginatively see it in the eyes of others and can in this way calm their passion and prevent themselves from acting out (TMS III.3.23-4). Reverse, they might take inspiration for acting from the same consideration: imagining the praise they would receive might inspire an action otherwise relinquished (TMS III.2.8). But this is not a very strong sense of agency, since they are only concerned with what others want from them. We form a stronger sense of agency when we acquire conscience.

In the account given so far, focusing on Smith's low-level psychology, it should be clear how Smith provides a system of psychological concepts that he can use in order to form a bottom-up ethical theory. He accounts for the important psychological concepts Anscombe asks for, in addition to others that are central to his theory: pain and pleasure, emotion, sympathy and (naïve) moral judgments, intention, action, and virtue. This is not a complete account of Smith's psychology, but the remainder, along with a more detailed account of sympathy and virtue, take him into a more properly called moral sphere. So far, however, moral judgments do not seem very authoritative, and thus actions do not seem very well-formed either. As spectators, we learn to improve our judgment, but we still only take ourselves, the person concerned and the agent into account. As agents, we learn to improve our emotions, but only by correcting our spontaneous, subjective responses to take heed of the viewpoint of people in our immediate surroundings. That does not mean that what we have so far is worthless, but in order to provide a full ethical theory, Smith introduces a few more essential components. To be fully moral, we also need a conscience, awareness of the general rules of society, and an idea of the impartial spectator.

High-level concepts: conscience, the impartial spectator, general rules

Anscombe required that an ethical theory can explain morality and what authorizes it. What morality is for Smith, has now been given a partial answer. It concerns human emotions, and actions and judgments of those, and happens in the interchange between someone who is directly affected by something and someone who is unaffected. And in the most significant

forms of this interchange, the person concerned and the spectator are coming to an agreement on how to judge the agent and their action. This process is “sentimental” in two ways: first, the emotional response of the person concerned informs their entirely partial judgment of the agent; second, the sympathetic interaction between the spectator and the person concerned involves sympathetic pleasure and antipathy which informs a less partial judgment. The further advancement towards less partial moral judgments makes for Smith’s moral theory.

Anscombe also requested a notion of authority. Without some notion of moral authority, Smith’s theory would be nothing more than descriptive psychology. Anscombe criticized top-down ethical theories for lacking authority, or justification, in their moral “laws”. With Smith, the question is not about laws, but about moral judgments. So, what justifies a moral judgment? Or, what does a moral judgment need in order to be justified? I took Anscombe to request factuality, universality, and normativity. With Smith, the factual and normative aspect of moral judgments is straightforward, but not the universal aspect. Universality seems to be a ubiquitous criterion in ethics for moral judgments. This is something a top-down ethics gets for free, so to speak, since they take their starting point in overreaching moral “laws”. But a bottom-up theory lacks a straightforward account for why something morally true in one situation should be true in another.

Anscombe suggests that the general rules are replaced with the idea of a perfectly virtuous person, where “perfectly virtuous” is analogous to “has a complete set of teeth” (Anscombe 1958, 14-5). And having a model virtuous person as a role model would provide a universal, normative ideal. But it is not straightforward what a perfectly virtuous person is like. Smith himself is not against influence of virtuous role models (TMS III.2.3), but, for one, his notion of virtue is not biological, like Anscombe seems to suggest.¹⁰ Second, with his own conception of virtuous role models, who we admire and want to be like (), his problem is that we are apt to admire the wrong qualities. We frequently, even normally, idolize what we imagine as a perfect state of happiness, represented by the “rich and the powerful”, which only serves to corrupt us (TMS I.iii.2.2, I.iii.3.1). Instead of this, Smith provides an account of his notion of impartiality, where universal appeal and ideal perfection are distinct. And a truly impartial moral judgment is not something we can get for cheap. Like moral judgments, impartiality is a composite and complex concept.

¹⁰ It seems closer to the notion of virtue described by (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018) as an “excellent character trait”.

For impartiality, a necessary step is the acquisition of conscience. Conscience is our ability to form judgments of ourselves (TMS III.1.1). In order to be able to do this, we must become our own spectator. For *this*, we must have an idea of what we look like, morally speaking.

We learn to judge ourselves from our experience of judging others and others judging us. As briefly mentioned earlier, we form an image of who we are when we are faced with others' moral judgments of us: we imagine what they see when they are looking at us. And we must understand that this image is of us. Otherwise, we could not understand their judgment. Smith insists that this is the only way we can form an idea of our own character: without the existence of external spectators, a man "could no more think of ... the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face" (TMS III.1.3). So having an idea of who we are, at least morally speaking, is an acquired ability.

When we are our own spectator, we take both the role of a spectator and a person principally concerned (and agent). We divide ourselves "as it were, into two persons" (TMS III.1.6). And we also have motivation to do this. Because we seek the approval of others, but different spectators of us form different judgments, we realize that we cannot accommodate everyone (TMS III.2.31.n.r; III.1.3). And so, we either have to choose which external spectator's judgment we listen to, or to form our own judgment (TMS III.1.4-5). In either case, we have to make up our own mind: we are forced to be independent or constantly change our mindset and be stuck between different opinions of us and our conduct. But when we form an opinion of ourselves, what standard can we use?

Smith denies that we can use ourselves as a standard. "Virtue is not said to be amiable, or to be meritorious, because it is the object of its own love, or of its own gratitude; but because it excites those sentiments in other men" (TMS III.1.7). But if we do it, we are not committing a complete tautology, since we have two different perspectives to compare—what we feel and what we imagine we would feel in the same situation. Assuming we respond emotionally to something, we first notice our own, actual response. When we then look at ourselves from the outside and imagine what we would feel in that situation, we feel less, since sympathetic emotions are weaker than original ones. There may be other benefits of this as well, but we are not really learning anything new, and it seems weird to say that we are forming a moral judgment. Smith would say that subjective self-judgments like these are not morally relevant.¹¹ We need some other standard.

¹¹ Anscombe makes a similar claim about Kant's notion of self-legislation (1958, 2).

Our confusion about our moral status in the eyes of others lead us to take an interest in what can truthfully be said about us, and in order to find this out, we have to make up our own minds. But this always has a “reference to the sentiments of others” (TMS III.1.7). We are forming a judgment of what other people “naturally ought” to think of us (TMS III.2.25). This judgment is a judgment of either “praise-worthiness” or “blame-worthiness” (TMS III.2.title). Smith sharply distinguishes our desire for actual praise and dread of actual blame from our desire for praise-worthiness and dread of blame-worthiness (TMS III.2.2ff). In other words, we have a natural desire “to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise,” and dread “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). And the only way to know this, or even to believe that we deserve a particular judgment, is to “become the impartial spectators of our own character and conduct” (TMS III.2.3). Forming judgments with the impartial spectator in mind is similar to using ourselves as a standard for judgments of ourselves. The difference is that, instead of imaginatively standing outside of ourselves, we imagine a third kind of perspective, not quite our own, and not quite anyone else’s either, but one that tries to take all of these into account. This is the perspective of the impartial spectator.

How do we form the idea of the impartial spectator? The answer, given Smith’s most explicit account of the term, is a special kind of abstraction. To explain the formation of the idea of the impartial spectator, Smith makes the comparison to our idea of the sizes of objects. We do not judge the size of a distant mountain by comparing it to the window that we are looking at it through (TMS III.3.2.). That would be completely disproportionate. Instead, we imagine a perspective equidistant from the window and the mountain, and far enough away that it can encompass the view of both at the same time (ibid.). The perspective is abstract, but it is far more accurate than what our immediate sensory eyesight informs us. And we do it so automatically that we do not notice that we are doing it (ibid.). This is an example of how an abstraction can be more objective than any individual perspective, and an unthinking part of how we understand and orient ourselves in the world. And it is in a similar way, Smith claims, that we form the idea of the impartial spectator (TMS III.3.3).

Just like a window close to us appears bigger to us than a mountain far away, the “very small” objects of our own emotions seem more important to us than the “greatest concern” of a stranger (TMS III.3.3). In this partial mindset, we do not even care if we hurt them in our private endeavors (ibid.). To be able to think of the stranger and ourselves on equal terms “we must change our position” (ibid.). So, like we view the mountain and the window from an

imagined distance, we view our opposing interests “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” (ibid).

Smith’s explanation here is not very detailed. But all the psychological capabilities needed have already been described: the ability to regard ourselves and others from an imagined point of view, and to synthesize multiple perspectives into one. First, the ability to see ourselves from an imagined point of view was acquired by imagining what other people see when they see us—world-referring, but still imagined. Second, such an imagined perspective was also used to regard others, in judgments of merit. So there should be no limit to who an imagined spectator can look at. Third, there should be no problem in synthesizing different viewpoints, in other words acquire a single perspective that takes multiple people into account, also exemplified in judgments of merit. In sum, it should be no problem for us to imagine a perspective which has no reference in the world and takes multiple people into account. The effort is to imagine a perspective without particularity, a “man in general” (TMS III.2.31n.r, p. 129). Again, these are not Smith’s words, and I do not believe it is his full account. I will expand in the next section (p. 23).

With these psychological tools acquired through experience, we have now also acquired the ability to see ourselves as just one among many, “but one of the multitude” (TMS III.3.4). With the imagined eyes of the impartial spectator we judge ourselves and others in the same way (TMS III.1.2). This entails that we do not only prevent ourselves from elevating our interests above those of others, but also that we do not regard our interests as less important than others’ either.¹² In his most explicit account of the impartial spectator, Smith refers to it as a “sense of propriety and justice” (TMS III.3.3). Certainly, here is a sense of seeing all human beings, at least everyone we know of, as equal.

We also acquire a much stronger sense of agency. Our knowledge of the misfortune of strangers makes a very small impression on our “passive feelings” (TMS III.3.4). Even a “man of humanity” would be much more bothered by the prospect of losing his little finger than the knowledge of the “ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren”—“provided he never saw them” (ibid.). But our “active principles” would never allow us, for example, to cause this ruin to save our little finger (ibid.). We do not even allow very big misfortunes of our own to be a source of inconvenience to others (ibid.).

¹² Also implicit in I.i.5.5. In VI.iii.18 and several other places Smith mentions that we can feel to little for ourselves.

With the perspective of the impartial spectator, we can form moral judgments of ourselves. And it is not limited to us. We are now also able to judge others in a way that goes beyond subjective opinion. We are not just comparing others' responses to our own imagined responses but are able to assess the quality of our own judgment by imagining the perspective of an impartial spectator.

What is the authority of moral judgments that are mindful of the view of the impartial spectator? If the impartial spectator is regarded as a kind of elevated standpoint, someone might object that this standpoint is merely fictional, and therefore has no authority. We can indeed not point to the impartial spectator when someone asks us for our reasoning in a moral judgment. But the impartial spectator provides us with a point of view that everyone can agree with, because under it, no-one has preference over any other. A real-world spectator will never be entirely well-informed and unconcerned (). So, a properly impartial judgment, in Smith's sense, cannot be made until we form the idea of an impartial spectator, someone who cannot take a side, but is simply human. Our idea of the impartial spectator provides a perspective which is physically disconnected from the world but is still attached to it with knowledge and imagination, allowing for sympathy without distraction, conflict of interest, or error. Including the impartial spectator in the sympathetic process takes Smith's theory properly into the sphere of morality.

As mentioned, Smith is looking for impartiality to overcome partiality. Perhaps the most obvious difficulty is our partiality towards ourselves, and the development of conscience at least allows us to attempt at being impartial. By the ability to make moral judgments of ourselves by imagining an unaffected person, and see ourselves as only one among many, we are able to critically assess the partiality of our own judgment and treat everyone involved in the judgment on equal terms.

But this ability is not sufficient for making impartial judgments. The fact that we have access to a new way of looking at things, does not mean that we will no longer stick to our old ways. There are further challenges. "The propriety of our moral sentiments is never so apt to be corrupted, as when the indulgent and partial spectator is at hand, while the indifferent and impartial one is at a great distance" (TMS III.3.41). As a stranger to the person we are trying to understand, it is hard to be well-informed. And as a person familiar to the person we are trying to understand, or ourselves being that very person, it is hard to be unaffected. For example, when we are engaged in interaction with people of a different country, the impartial spectator is "very far away" (TMS III.3.42), and it is for this reason difficult for us to look at ourselves and the other from the same imagined perspective of the impartial spectator. You

we may have a corrupted sense of what is universally approved conduct, by being surrounded by people who are wrong in the same way. But this is not the only way our conscience can be misled. As agents, we may know, with the impartial spectator within us, that we should be doing one thing, but our emotions are screaming for us to do another thing. Our emotions “cloud” and “overawe” the perspective of the impartial spectator.

[T]he violence and injustice of our own selfish passions are sometimes sufficient to induce the man within the breast to make a report very different from what the real circumstances of the case are capable of authorizing (TMS III.4.1).

Before we act, we may be so agitated that we are almost completely unable to look at the action from any other perspective than our own—the “passions ... all justify themselves” (TMS III.4.3). After we act, and the passion has dissipated, we almost become strangers to our own past selves, and look at our action with more indifference, but “our judgments now are often of little importance in comparison of what they were before; and can frequently produce a nothing but vain regret and unavailing repentance” (TMS III.4.4). In fact, unable to accept the shame of regret, we may stick to our old selves, by ignoring circumstances and enlivening our old mistaken emotions (TMS III.4.4).

How do we overcome these situations? In matters of bad self-judgment, we would change our ways if self-deceit did not prevent us from viewing ourselves in the eyes of well-informed strangers: “We could not otherwise endure the sight” (TMS III.4.6). In simple cases, we can alleviate our partiality by thinking about others’ actual perspective to remind ourselves that we are one among many (). But in more difficult situations, we quickly retreat to our partiality. To overcome this, we rely on the “general rules of morality” (III.4), certain social norms that we learn and follow that makes it easier for us to avoid doing things we are going to regret, as a kind of support for conscience. The general rules of morality inform sympathetic processes, and individual judgments, with far more experience than what the people involved in the process have on their own.

These social norms are called “general rules of conduct, morality,” and similar, and are formed through people’s experiences of particular situations. In the first instance, when we observe others, we can be “shocked” at an action of theirs and hear that everyone around us responds in the same way. We see, we experience, that this is a bad thing to do, in that we and everyone around us disapprove of the action. We never want to be the object of this disapprobation and as a result make it a general rule not act in this way. We do this without thinking. The converse is true for objects of approbation (TMS III.4.7). And the way that these judgments are formed is by sympathizing with the victim of the action (). So, the general rule is formed by proper moral judgments of the action. By being inductively

generalized, the sympathetic processes undergone by a community over time eventually build up these rules (). Two things are happening here: we identify an action as a kind, and resolve (not) to act in this kind of way. If we were to prevent ourselves from acting in a particular way, we would have to be able to identify our action (beforehand) as an instance of this kind.

There are in fact two different sets of rules. Norms of society are not always formed in this way, but may, for example, be corrupted by admiring “the rich and great”.

This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments (TMS I.iii.3.1).

This sounds like a sad case for humanity: our good and natural inclinations lead us to a society where these inclinations are “corrupted”. This might be worse than it sounds: our sense of propriety is in large part shaped and informed by actual society and the opinions of other people. Does this mean that humanity is lost in a spiral of delusional “attention economy”? No. Smith distinguishes between the properly formed and improperly formed rules.

Consequently, there are two different persons we can strive to become, either someone who appears respectable in the eyes of most others or someone who is respectable in the eyes of the “most studious and careful observer”. In some cases, the roads to become respected and respectable is similar. This is the case for people in the “middling and inferior stations of life”, people who are not the center of attention, but can only attain respect by acquiring the goodwill of other people. The opposite is the case in the “superior stations of life”, where “the abilities to please, are more regarded than the abilities to serve”. People here are more concerned with “fashion”, our disposition to admire and therefore imitate the rich and great. “Even their vices and follies are fashionable”. People pretend to have qualities they do not admire etc.

This sounds a bit quaint for us today, so it might be worth thinking of a more contemporary example. This might not be the best example but imagine growing up as gay in a conservative Christian society. You yourself believe that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, and that this is a more fundamental dogma than that man and woman was created for each other. But all of your family and all of your friends believe that homosexuality wrong. You have two choices: either you ignore your own sexuality and faith and pretend to be what

everyone around you expects or wants you to be, or you rebel against them and openly live as a gay person.¹³

Smith is clear that the general rules are ultimately founded on experience, and not the other way around, that instances are originally judged by reference to general rules. Our judgments are spontaneous (TMS III.4.8). And it is only on the basis of observing this spontaneous judgment that the general rules should be formed (TMS III.4.10). After formed, the general rules are referred to as the standard of judgment in questions of uncertainty and the ultimate foundation of justice. This has misled philosophers to make ethical systems where it looks like judgments of right or wrong “were formed like the decisions of a court of judicatory” (TMS III.4.11).

I promised Anscombe that if Smith’s theory included general rules, they must be non-mysterious, and it must be clear how general rules and particular actions translate. How do the general rules inform our notion of actions? In this process, we must also learn to translate between kinds of actions and instances of these. Since the rules are formed “bottom-up” it is not mysterious how kinds and instances are related, but Smith does not explicate how we learn the rules and how to apply them once they have been established (?). Presumably, we learn from seeing other people’s reactions and descriptions of different actions. Another question is how kinds of actions can be good or bad. Since the kinds are formed by generalizing instances of positive and negative assessments, it seems that what an action is and what moral status it has come together in one package. So, this is not mysterious either.

What is the authority of the general rules of morality? Smith writes that the rules are “justly regarded as the laws of the Deity” (?), but the implications of this sentence is unclear. What is clearer, is that they are maintained by the particular moral community in which they were formed. This opens Smith up to the objection of cultural relativism. As mentioned, the rules make it easier to act correctly in fits of passion. But in extreme cases, even the general rules may be broken by passion (TMS III.4.12). it’s important that there are two sets of rules, because, then, there are ideal rules that are formed through properly impartial sympathetic processes, despite the fact that the actual rules of a society are rarely formed in this way.

There is also a basic rule of justice. It ensures that everyone is included in sympathetic processes.

Among equals each individual is naturally, and antecedent to the institution of civil government, regarded as having a right both to defend himself from injuries, and to exact a certain degree of punishment for those which have been done to him. Every generous spectator not only approves of his

¹³ Hannah Arendt’s biography of Rahel Varnhagen is a similar example.

conduct when he does this, but enters so far into his sentiments as often to be willing to assist him (TMS I.ii.1.7).

... man, who can subsist only in society, was fitted by nature to that situation for which he was made. All the members of human society stand in need of each others assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries (TMS I.ii.3.1).

Society “cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another” (TMS I.ii.3.3). Justice is the “pillar” of society, if it is removed, society “crumbles into atoms”. Therefore, nature implanted “the consciousness of ill-desert, those terrors of merited punishment”, which prevents us from harming strangers for our benefit (TMS I.ii.3.4).

Objections and answers

The question of the status of moral rules and the scope of Smith’s theory in general is a controversial topic in the literature.¹⁴ The suspicion of cultural relativism threatens the scope of moral judgments and the appeal of Smith’s moral theory. If we acquire the general rules from our community, circle, society (in general: culture), and the effective way that we face emotionally challenging situations is to consider the general rules, then Smith’s theory seems culture relativistic. Since the rules were formed at a particular place by particular people, they are relative to that place and those people. But Smith’s account of the general rules of morality is not just a description. It is also a prescriptive account of which rules are proper. In other words, it is possible to form moral judgments independently of the rules. Instead, they are formed regarding impartiality.

Smith was aware of the problem that his naturalized bottom-up approach to ethics was vulnerable to objections of cultural relativism. It was an objection he was met with in his own time, evident in his communication with Gilbert Elliot.¹⁵ Elliot had read the first edition of TMS and sent a letter to Smith with comments. Elliot’s letter is lost, but his comment can be gathered from Smith’s response. In the words of the editors of the Glasgow edition of TMS: “Elliot’s objection must have come to this: if conscience is a reflection of social attitudes, how can it ever differ from, or be thought superior to, popular opinion?” (Raphael and Macfie 1982, 16). In other words, if conscience was a reflection of the values of a moral community, then how could anyone’s conscience form moral judgments that go against that moral community? As far as Elliot could tell, Smith had provided a sociological account of the generalization process of social norms, and he did not see how conscience, with its reference

¹⁴ See (Fricke 2013, 188-90) for an overview.

¹⁵ Another, perhaps harsher, contemporary critic was Thomas Reid. See (Hanley 2009, 145-6).

to others, could make someone better able to form moral judgments of themselves (i.e. with conscience) than an external spectator could.

Smith is clear that the general rules of morality are the products of sympathetic processes, but once they have been established and become part of a moral community and the upbringing of its members, what power does an individual have to reject them? Smith's answer must be that not any rules will do, and that it is possible to challenge the rules. Imagine the rules of games that children form. The children notice that they are having fun in a certain kind of situation, and formulate, explicitly or implicitly, rules that can recreate it. They agree to play this "game" because they think it is fun, and if they do not like it, they stop playing or may change the rules. In this way, the rules are made and remade procedurally. But games like this often go too far and someone ends up hurt. The same thing happens with adults playing a sport, like ice hockey. The general rules of morality Smith that talks about are not about having fun, but about avoiding harm, so these kinds of rules are not good enough. With the rules of a game, only agreement matters, so it is reasonable to assume that it is not sufficient that our moral self-judgments are formed by reference to rules that are products of a process of agreement. What is also clear is that Smith must have a strong notion of morality that is independent of these rules.

Objections like Elliot's are still brought forward in the literature on Smith. Although not in the form of an objection, Ryan Hanley recently (2009) denied that Smith thought that conscience can be independent of a moral community by natural means alone. Hanley believes that Smith sought to solve this problem by appealing to religion. Unlike Elliot, Hanley is not interested in Smith's description of the production of general rules, but only in how we acquire conscience. Conscience, taken by itself as a method of self-judgment based on experience with judgments of others, is not enough for impartiality. Therefore, says Hanley, Smith needs, and implies, a transcendent source of good. The goal, Hanley says, of "Smith's system of practical ethics ... is not merely the establishment of an intersubjective ethics of mutual recognition but the transcendence of a dependence on recognition" (2009, 99). At one point, Smith writes that the "All-wise Author of nature" has created man "after his own image" and invested him with a "'divine' side" (TMS III.2.31-2). Hanley takes this as "evidence for [Smith's] awareness of 'the ultimate dependence of morality upon a trans-moral good'" (2009, 141-2). In other words, that human beings have the capacity to act in accordance with their "divine side", leaving their mortal side behind (ibid.). Hanley is not claiming that Smith is trying to prove that religious belief is true, but that it is a "natural

belief” (ibid.). For example, our belief in the afterlife is a product of “our natural love of justice and our natural desire for happiness” (ibid.).

Hanley is not the first to interpret Smith with a religious tint. The editors of the Glasgow edition saw Smith’s final solution to Elliot’s problem (in the 6th edition of TMS) as an abandonment of the relevance of popular opinion altogether (Raphael and Macfie 1982, 16). Instead, “Smith’s ethical doctrines are in fact a combination of Stoic and Christian virtues” (ibid., 6). Smith frequently talks in theological and teleological terms, so it does not seem like a far-fetched idea that Smith made religion a part of his theory. For example, Smith claims that religion and the thought of the justice of the afterlife is the only consolation for the innocent convict (TMS III.2.11-2), and he describes the general rules of morality as the “Laws of the Deity” (TMS III.5.title).

It is not a problem for Hanley if Smith relies on religion. But if Smith’s solution to the problem of cultural relativism is to rely on a transcendent source, then I am back to square one. Smith would just be building a ladder to a top-down ethical theory, and I would fail to hold my promise to Anscombe. To be clear, the problem is not that Smith often refers to religion, or that Smith recommends religious faith for a happy life, which I do not think you need to agree with Smith on in order to agree with his ethical theory. The problem is Hanley’s claim that Smith sought to *transcend* sentimentalism: “[Smith] promotes and embraces a vision of life dedicated to the transcendence of sentimentality” (Hanley 2009, 208). In support of Hanley, the question can be asked why Smith would see the need to provide a naturalized account of ethics, which is my claim, when he had no essential issue with religious faith. But I think that Smith has a reason for this, and that Smith has solution to the problem of cultural relativism which does not require a notion of “trans-moral good”.

I will not try to vindicate Smith by looking for holes in Hanley’s argumentation. Instead, I will, one, retrieve from Smith a different solution to the problem of cultural relativism. Successfully arguing against Hanley would just leave me with this problem anyways. Two, I will provide a reason for why Smith did not want to use religious arguments. Elliot’s objection can be answered at the same time.

Smith’s answer to Elliot shows that his solution to this problem was already a part of his project in TMS. With his response, Smith sent Elliot a draft revision of parts of TMS, and he writes that

it is intended both to confirm my Doctrine that our judgments concerning our own conduct have always a reference to the sentiments of some other being, and to shew that, notwithstanding this, real magnanimity and conscious virtue can support itself under the disapprobation of all mankind (Smith quoted in Fricke 2013, 190-191).

Smith insists that, somehow, our conscience is both dependent on and independent of others. To the draft revision he sent to Elliot, Smith added a longer passage which explains how, although moral judgments are founded upon a moral community, they do not rely on it. He repeats the point that he made in his letter to Elliot, but he is clearer about what the independence consists of:

The applause of the whole world will avail but little if our own conscience condemns us; and the disapprobation of all mankind is not capable of oppressing us when we are absolved by the tribunal within our own breast ... But tho this tribunal within the breast be thus the supreme arbiter of all our actions, ... if we enquire into the origin of its institution, its jurisdiction, we shall find, is in a great measure derived from the authority of that very tribunal, whose decisions it so often and so justly reverses (TMS III.2.31n.r, p. 129).

The “jurisdiction” of what Smith here refers to as “the tribunal within our own breast” is “derived” from the “tribunal” of external spectators. You cannot believe (although you can pretend to believe) a judgment that you do not agree to, and this is more than a subjective opinion, through some sort of reference to others. Smith suggests looking into origin of “the tribunal within” and goes on to discuss the moral development of a child. It is here that he mentions that we discover a conflict in other people’s opinion of us, and therefore “sett up in our minds a judge between ourselves and those we live with” (ibid.). That does not mean that we stop caring about other people’s opinion of us, indeed the “weak, the vain and the frivolous ... may be mortified with the most groundless censure or elated by the most absurd applause,” and these are “slaves of the world” in the way that Elliot was worried about (ibid., p. 130). But the “man who has, upon all occasions, been accustomed to have recourse to the judge within” will listen to the judgment of “this impartial spectator,” which makes the “sentiments of all mankind ... appear to be of small moment” (ibid.). People with the integrity to not take the judgments of others at face value, despite their inclination for praise and agreement, are able to assess, rather than copy, the judgments of others, and to form their own opinion. The skepticism we acquire when we experience others’ ambiguous judgment of us invites our concern with truth, and once we think we have found it, the simple mass of other people disagreeing with us cannot change our opinion. The fact that other people disagree with us is not information we can use to alter our opinion.

On the other hand, we can at no point be entirely certain about our own opinion, which means that we must keep inviting input from others: “Our uncertainty concerning our own merit, and our anxiety to think favorable of it, should together naturally enough make us desirous to know the opinion of other people concerning it” (TMS III.2.24).

Conscience allows us to take ourselves into account when we are forming moral judgments. It is not a moral high ground, but part of a reflective process involving others.

Reaching impartiality is, however, very difficult. When the inhabitants of two countries fail to sympathize with each other, the impartial spectator is “too far away” (TMS III.3). I think Smith is here referring to his allegory with the mountain and the window. If you move back far enough, you can see the Arctic and Antarctic at the same time, but it is difficult to make out the details. And it is not the geographical distance that is the problem, but the unanimity of the opinions of the inhabitants in each country. (Thus, factions are even worse, who demonize the enemy.) But the “wise and virtuous” can reach beyond the borders, they can sympathize past their moral community. How does one become wise and virtuous? The wise and virtuous are not different from other people, they have simply perfected the amiable and awful virtues, those that allow us to attune to the mental state of others. So, by the unending perfectibility of moral judgments, there is no limit to the scope and applicability of them, and they do not succumb to cultural relativism.

Going back to Hanley, a further argument in his favor is the account Smith gives of the impartial spectator given above. Here, the impartial spectator is likened to an abstract perspective in a judgment of the size of objects. Smith uses the word “position” both to describe how we obtain this abstract perspective and the perspective of the impartial spectator. This looks a lot like we are acquiring a new, impartial standpoint which allow us to abandon the old, partial one. But if we are no longer “clouded” with our own subjective, sentimental mindset, what interest do we have to form a moral judgment? It seems like we need a notion of a “trans-moral good”.

The full answer to Smith’s solution to the problem of cultural relativism also involves the reason for why it does not go for a top-down ethical theory. The reason is that if we abandon the sentimental aspect of moral judgments, then we remove the normative aspect, we remove the reason that we care about moral issues in the first place. But we don’t want to remove the subject, because then we remove the normative part of the moral judgment, and there is not really anything to discuss anymore.

Smith is clear about this. There are two cases, Smith says, in which we care about other people’s judgment: when we want their assessment of an independent object; and when one of us are hurt or for some other reason want the sympathy of another. When two of us engage in the sympathetic process regarding an object neither of us are affected by, the only thing that can get in the way of mutual sympathy is different degrees of attention and sensitivity (TMS I.i.4.2). We admire someone who has noticed and understood things we had not (TMS I.i.4.3). But when one of us is directly affected by the object, we “do not view [it] from the same station” (TMS I.i.4.5). One of us is much more affected and concerned with

their private passions, and the other, conversely, is unconcerned. The two important qualities of impartiality is being well-informed and unconcerned because we want to synchronize our emotions when one of us is lacking the information needed to feel what the other is feeling and the other is lacking the distance needed to feel what the first one is feeling. This, and the whole rest of Smith's account of the person concerned, the agent, the spectator and the workings of society concerns the sentimental process of moral development.

Concerning religion, I think Smith would say that we presume that God is a moral being. But morality is a particularly human quality. Smith gives the impression that morality is a human issue, and that God's will is God's business. Nature's great purposes are supporting the individual and propagating the species, and the means to this is found "adjusted with the nicest artifice". But we still distinguish between how these are (efficiently) caused from the final cause they support. Digestion, blood circulation etc. are necessary for the purpose. But we never try to account for these mechanisms by reference to their final cause in the same way as to their efficient cause, nor that these mechanisms operate by their own accord with "a view or intention" to their purposes. Yet with the mind, the efficient and final causes are often confused.

When by natural principles we are led to advance those ends, which a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us, we are very apt to impute to that reason, as to their efficient cause, the sentiments and actions by which we advance those ends, and to imagine that to be the wisdom of man, which in reality is the wisdom of God (TMS II.ii.3.5).

When we are by nature led to advance ends which "a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us", we ascribe sentiments and actions as the efficient cause to this reason and ascribe to man the wisdom of God. But these sentiments do not have God's perspective.

Smith translates perfect universality into indefiniteness. What allows moral judgment to have universal appeal is that it is always open to revision. By letting go of moral absolutism, Smith can naturalize ethics without letting go of claims to universality.

I have now explained which moral judgments there are (including judgments of propriety, merit and conscience), how they are formed and how we are motivated to make them and improve them, and how they have more and less authority.

Conclusion

To summarize, Smith provides a "bottom-up" ethical theory that can answer Anscombe's challenges. Smith provides a psychological account of terms required for a moral theory which is ultimately virtue ethical. However, Anscombe laments the lack of absolute moral

judgments in her criticism of consequentialism (1958, 19), and Anscombe would probably not be happy about the fact that Smith does not provide this. To this, I think Smith would say: given that the perfection of moral judgments gets to the point where no one can reasonably disagree, what is the point of introducing an even higher standard? In all, however, I think Anscombe would be happy about Smith. She writes that “Anyone who has read Aristotle’s *Ethics* and has also read modern moral philosophy must have been struck by the great contrasts between them” (Anscombe 1958, 1). As someone who has read Aristotle’s *Ethics* and TMS, I am struck by their great similarity. Further, the indecision and perfection in our moral constitution does not seem like something Anscombe should be altogether against:

That legislation can be “for oneself” I reject as absurd; whatever you do “for yourself” may be admirable; but is not legislating. Once one sees this, one may say: I have to frame my own rules, and these are the best I can frame, and I shall go by them until I know something better: as a man might say “I shall go by the customs of my ancestors.” Whether this leads to good or evil will depend on the *content* of the rules or of the customs of one’s ancestors. If one is lucky it will lead to good. Such an attitude would be hopeful in this at any rate: it seems to have in it some Socratic doubt where, from having to fall back on such expedients, it should be clear that Socratic doubt is good; in fact rather generally it must be good for anyone to think “Perhaps in some way I can’t see, I may be on a bad path, perhaps I am hopelessly wrong in some essential way” (Anscombe 1958, 13-4).

The success of Smith’s theory is a much bigger question, but Smith can orient an ethical discussion in a naturalistic direction, even in the framework of modern philosophy.

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