

# The Impartial Spectator

*Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*

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# 1

## Two Versions

Adam Smith is known to the world as the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, a pioneering classic in the field of economics. That work was first published in 1776, when Smith was almost 53 years old. He wrote the first version of his other book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, much earlier: it was published in 1759, when he was a young professor of 36. A drastically revised and expanded version, the sixth edition, appeared a few months before Smith's death in 1790 at the age of 67. The *Moral Sentiments*, unlike *The Wealth of Nations*, is not one of the great classical texts in its field, moral philosophy, but it has a prominent place among texts of the second rank. Smith himself is said to have thought it superior to *The Wealth of Nations*. Despite some long-winded sentences, the language is hardly ever obscure and the argument is easy to follow. Yet it has often been misunderstood and on that account it calls for an interpretation based on knowledge of what Smith wrote in his youth and in his relative old age.

One source of misunderstanding is that many of the commentators have been economists who have looked at the *Moral Sentiments* simply in order to find some relevance for *The Wealth of Nations*. This gave rise to the so-called Adam Smith problem, a supposed inconsistency between the psychological assumptions of the two books.

Another source of error has been a failure to note whether a particular passage was written for the first or for the sixth edition. Until the publication of the Glasgow Edition of Smith's works, most readers of the *Moral Sentiments* used a copy that reproduces the text of the sixth edition with no indication that the original version

differed. And even after the Glasgow Edition became available, some otherwise well-equipped scholars, arguing a case for the views of Adam Smith, have quoted passages without looking to see whether they were written for 1759 or 1790.

An example of unfortunate failure to check whether a passage was written for 1759 or 1790 affects a paper by Professor John Dunn when he was discussing the ‘practical atheism’ of Smith in his later years.<sup>1</sup> Dunn contrasts that attitude with, as he thinks, the views of the youthful Smith who wrote in the *Moral Sentiments* that ‘the very suspicion of a fatherless world, must be the most melancholy of all reflections’. That statement was in fact written by a no longer youthful Smith for the sixth edition of 1790.

A comparable error was made by Professor Jacob Viner in an important article on laissez-faire in Smith’s economics.<sup>2</sup> He contrasted the mature realism of *The Wealth of Nations* with the youthful idealism of the *Moral Sentiments*, and quoted five passages from the ethical work as evidence for his view of it. The first of his quotations was in fact written for the far from youthful sixth edition.

A third example is a lapse in a perceptive interpretation of the *Moral Sentiments* by Professor Charles L. Griswold, bringing out the influence of drama in Smith’s book.<sup>3</sup> He claims that, when Smith writes of the spectator’s moral judgement, he envisages the spectator of a dramatic performance seeing the agent as an ‘actor’ on the stage. The evidence that Griswold adduces is one instance of the word

<sup>1</sup> John Dunn, ‘From applied theology to social analysis: the break between John Locke and the Scottish Enlightenment’, in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 119, 128. Dunn is in fact aware (p. 120 n.) that the sixth edition of the *Moral Sentiments* differs significantly from the earlier versions, but by an unfortunate lapse he attributes to 1759 his quotation about a fatherless world (p. 128).

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Viner, ‘Adam Smith and Laissez Faire’, *Journal of Political Economy*, 35 (1927), 198–232; repr. in Viner, *The Long View and the Short* (Glencoe, Ill., 1958).

<sup>3</sup> Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 65–6, 87n. In discussing the theatrical character of the *Moral Sentiments* Griswold is much influenced by David Marshall, *The Figure of Theater* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). Marshall’s chapter on Smith is naturally concerned only with this feature of Smith’s book.

‘actor’ in place of ‘agent’ in the *Moral Sentiments* and one instance in the *Lectures on Rhetoric*. The *Moral Sentiments* instance occurs in part VI of the book, which was added to the sixth edition of 1790; so Griswold’s evidence cannot apply to Smith’s general conception of the spectator. There was in fact an instance of the word ‘actor’ in the first edition which was replaced by ‘agent’ in subsequent editions, showing that there was clearly no association with actors on the stage. This flaw in Griswold, however, does not lessen the value of his interpretation as a whole.

Having criticized those three scholars, I should add that several other recent commentators on Adam Smith, Professors Knud Haakonssen, Gloria Vivenza, Vivienne Brown, Stephen Darwall, Emma Rothschild, and Samuel Fleischacker, do take account of differences between the first and the sixth editions of the *Moral Sentiments*.<sup>4</sup> Haakonssen and Fleischacker take account also of a surviving fragment of a lecture giving a still earlier version of Smith’s treatment of justice.<sup>5</sup> Fleischacker’s book is mainly focused upon *The Wealth of Nations* but includes some subtle analysis of the *Moral Sentiments*—and indeed of the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* known to us from student reports.

An earlier commentator, Professor T. D. Campbell, was well aware of differences in the various editions of the *Moral Sentiments* and takes note of them in his book *Adam Smith’s Science of Morals*.<sup>6</sup> Like

<sup>4</sup> Knud Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 150–1, 217; Gloria Vivenza, *Adam Smith e la cultura classica* (Pisa: Il pensiero economico moderno, 1984), 63–5; English version, revised and enlarged, *Adam Smith and the Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54–5, 57; Vivienne Brown, *Adam Smith’s Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 134–40; Stephen Darwall, ‘Sympathetic Liberalism: Recent Work on Adam Smith’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 28 (1999), 153–4; Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), ch. 5; Samuel Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 48, 83, 112–14, 148–9.

<sup>5</sup> See appendix II of the Glasgow Edition of Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976; corrected reprint, 1991), 389, 397. In my subsequent notes the work is cited as *TMS*.

<sup>6</sup> T. D. Campbell, *Adam Smith’s Science of Morals* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971).

Fleischacker, he also considers relevant material from the lectures on jurisprudence, which he read in the actual student manuscript before it was reproduced in print. Tom Campbell is a former colleague of mine, and his book on Adam Smith is a revised version of a Ph.D. thesis that he wrote under my supervision, though I may say that he needed very little supervising, so that the book owes virtually nothing to me. I refrained from rereading it before writing this book lest it might affect what I had to say; I wanted to stick to my own thoughts, which have arisen from frequent reading of Smith's work as an editor. Having reread Campbell's book now in the final stage of preparing my own book, I have found that there is in fact very little difference between Campbell's interpretation and mine. There is, however, enough difference between the character of the two books to justify their separate existence. Campbell's book emphasizes Smith's aim to produce a work of science and discusses the moral philosophy as a part of that aim. My account goes into more detail on the particular content of the *Moral Sentiments* and suggests that the concept of the impartial spectator is especially concerned with moral judgements about one's own actions.

In contrast to my substantial agreement with Campbell, I have some criticisms to make of the views of Viner, Brown, and Fleischacker, and I shall return to them in Chapter 13. The references by Haakonssen, Vivenza, Darwall, and Rothschild to different editions of the *Moral Sentiments* do not call for comment. Vivenza's book is notable for its illuminating account of the influence of Greek and Roman thought, especially Stoicism, on Adam Smith. That is an important topic but one on which I have no particular competence and which I have therefore left alone. Haakonssen is chiefly concerned with jurisprudence. I am told that Darwall has a more substantial discussion of Smith's ethics in a book, *Second Person Standpoint*, due to be published shortly. Rothschild's discussion of Adam Smith is mainly about *The Wealth of Nations* and includes a chapter on the invisible hand, in which she is well aware of the differences between the first and sixth editions of the *Moral*

*Sentiments*. I am not altogether persuaded by her ingenious argument that Smith's use of the invisible hand is ironic, but it does not affect the essentials of his ethical theory.

Let me recall briefly the facts of publication of the *Moral Sentiments*. The first edition appeared in 1759. A second edition, with revisions of some substance, was published in 1761, and was followed by third, fourth, and fifth editions in the years 1767, 1774, and 1781. Revisions in those three editions were light, though not negligible in the case of the third edition. All these changes, however, including those of the second edition, are minor matters when compared with the sixth edition, which was submitted to the printer at the end of 1789 and published in May 1790. The sixth edition includes a whole new part, on the character of virtue, and some drastic revision elsewhere. My co-editor of the work, the late Professor A. L. Macfie, was apt to say in consequence that the sixth edition is a different book. That is an exaggeration, but the sixth edition is certainly a much altered book.

The primary purpose of the work is to expound a *theory* of ethics. In saying this I do not rely on the title, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, though that does tend to confirm what I have just said. The title is not meant to be a name for Smith's own theory: rather, it is a name for the subject matter, as we may see from the surviving manuscript fragment (mentioned above) of Smith's lecture on justice at Glasgow University. He writes there of the rules that constitute 'what is called Natural Jurisprudence, or the Theory of the general principles of Law. they make a very important part of the Theory of moral Sentiments.' That, of course, implies that Smith's own contribution is an essay in theory. However, the chief evidence of Smith's primary purpose is the content of the book: by far the largest component of it is philosophical analysis.

I stress the point because a number of commentators have laboured to derive from the book Smith's personal stance on moral questions; and at least one well-informed commentator, Professor Griswold, has emphasized Smith's 'protreptic' purpose, that is to say, his desire

to promote the practice of virtue.<sup>7</sup> There is nothing wrong with such an approach to Smith's work. Philosophers who write on ethics do often have a particular personal stance on some moral questions, and when one of those philosophers is a famous world-figure for other reasons, it is both natural and legitimate to seek to elicit his character and personality from his writings as well as his actions. And while some philosophers, notably Smith's friend David Hume,<sup>8</sup> think that the philosophical explanation of ethics is muddled by mixing it with the promotion of morality, it is true enough that Smith goes in for this—though far more in the new part VI of the sixth edition than in the original work: you will find little of it if you read the first edition. The primary object of the book in all editions is to contribute to ethical theory.

When Smith wrote that natural jurisprudence is part of the theory of moral sentiments, he could just as well have said 'part of moral philosophy'. That is what he meant, taking 'moral philosophy' in the wide sense that it had for the Scottish universities of his time. Why does he call it the theory of moral *sentiments*? To answer that question one needs to recall the recent previous history of the subject.

Francis Hutcheson and David Hume were the two most prominent Scottish contributors to moral philosophy before Smith. They had criticized the view of rationalist philosophers, such as Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston, that the judgement and the motive of moral action are functions of reason, an understanding of necessary truth analogous to mathematical thinking. Hutcheson and Hume, in contrast, took the view that moral judgement is affective, rests on feeling, and that the motive for acting upon that judgement must likewise be affective, since reason alone does not have the power to stir bodily behaviour. Hume was a particularly trenchant critic: he began his discussion of morals in book III of his *Treatise of Human*

<sup>7</sup> Griswold, *Adam Smith*, ch. 1, §2, and epilogue, p. 366.

<sup>8</sup> Letter of 17 September 1739 to Hutcheson; *Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), i. 32–3. Hume is referring to the manuscript of book III of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Some scholars think that he did not maintain this opinion in his later work.



*Nature* with a battery of arguments to show that ‘moral distinctions’ are ‘not deriv’d from reason’ and concluded that they are ‘deriv’d from a moral sense’. He borrowed the term ‘moral sense’ from Hutcheson, but used it only in the title of the relevant section; in the body of his discussion he wrote instead of ‘feeling’ or, much more often, of ‘sentiment’.

I think Adam Smith took it for granted that Hume had demonstrated beyond challenge his conclusion that moral distinctions arise from feeling. Smith therefore proceeded on the assumption that any further contribution to moral philosophy must make ‘sentiment’, in the sense of feeling, the basic element of its account.

The scope of Smith’s contribution is relatively narrow. Its main concern is the nature of moral judgement, as is recognized in a lengthy subtitle that first appears in the fourth edition. The earlier editions had borne only the main title, ‘The Theory of Moral Sentiments’, but the fourth edition is more explicit: ‘The Theory of Moral Sentiments, or An Essay towards an Analysis of the Principles by which Men naturally judge concerning the Conduct and Character, first of their Neighbours, and afterwards of themselves’. The analysis is of a matter of fact, the principles (general rules) that human beings do in fact follow when they pass judgement on conduct and character.

It is an explanation in terms of psychology and sociology. Adam Smith does not, like his Scottish predecessors, describe his project as an inquiry into the ‘original’ (Hutcheson) or ‘origin’ (Hume) of ethical ideas and judgements, but all three philosophers are doing the same thing, seeking a genetic explanation. Hutcheson’s inquiry is conducted almost entirely in terms of psychology. Hume follows suit in the main, but brings in sociology at times—for example, when he draws an important distinction between natural and artificial virtues. With Adam Smith sociology looms larger. This is not to say that psychology recedes into the background: the psychological element in Smith’s explanation of ethics is vivid, often strikingly original, and usually persuasive. It is, however, all the more illuminating for being allied with acute sociological observation.

You might say that this must limit the character of Smith's explanation of ethics: his evidence is drawn from his own society and lacks the universality that is sought by philosophers who reflect on general human experience rather than the experience of a particular section of mankind at a particular period of time. This suggestion cannot be dismissed, but it is overdrawn.

Smith certainly thought he was reflecting on general human experience, and his evidence was not limited to his own society. He had a fairly wide knowledge of history, including the history of ancient Greece and Rome, and he took a keen interest in such anthropological reports as were available, notably reports about the indigenous inhabitants of North America. He knew that the behaviour and the ethics of the American Indians differed markedly in some respects from what was found in Europe, and he knew, too, that the ethics of ancient Graeco-Roman civilization differed, in other respects, from the ethics of Christianity. He was also aware of minor differences in the mores of at least some European societies (France and Italy as compared with Britain and with each other); his description of these differences is given in the first edition of 1759, before he had set foot on the continent of Europe so as to see for himself what went on in France.

Despite all these sociological observations on variations in behaviour and moral outlook, Smith still thought he could appeal to an agreed consensus among his reflective readers on the relative merits of differing codes of conduct. He may have been too sanguine in supposing that this consensus had a universal truth. Still, even if the scope of his explanation may be limited, it remains enlightening for us today, since our ethics are not radically different from the ethics of Adam Smith's time and place.

To be sure, there have been some changes of attitude. For example, there is less deference now to 'the rich and the great' than there was in Smith's day, and a weaker trace of the ancient ethic of honour and shame that Smith finds among the 'gallant and generous part of mankind' (*TMS* I. iii. 1. 15). But such changes do not cast doubt upon Smith's explanation of moral judgement, because the

sociological facts on which he relies for his explanation are of a more general nature.

He tells us that moral approval is related to the sympathetic and antipathetic feelings of spectators. If the use of those feelings changes, in respect of social status or anything else, so does the use of moral judgement: a reduction or cessation of deference to the rich and the great implies that one no longer feels a special moral obligation to meet their wishes. But the general thesis, that moral judgements depend on the feelings of spectators, remains as before. It seems impossible to imagine a set of human beings whose moral judgements are not linked to general social attitudes. Even in the fantastic fictional society of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, where moral condemnation is applied to illness while criminal behaviour is greeted with commiseration, both classes of judgement depend on shared social attitudes. In Hobbes's fictional state of nature, human beings are represented as influenced solely by egoistic aims; but the consequence of that, Hobbes tells us, is a complete absence of right and wrong.

Towards the beginning of the final part of the *Moral Sentiments* Smith writes:

In treating of the principles of morals there are two questions to be considered. First, wherein does virtue consist? Or what is the tone of temper, and tenour of conduct, which constitutes the excellent and praiseworthy character, the character which is the natural object of esteem, honour, and approbation? And, secondly, by what power or faculty in the mind is it, that this character, whatever it be, is recommended to us? Or in other words, how and by what means does it come to pass, that the mind prefers one tenour of conduct to another, denominates the one right and the other wrong; considers the one as the object of approbation, honour, and reward, and the other of blame, censure, and punishment? (*TMS* VII. i. 2)

One would expect such a programmatic statement to come at the beginning of the book, not near the end. It stands at the beginning of a history of moral philosophy, specifically a history of theories about the two questions that Smith says constitute the subject. There is

plenty of evidence that both of Smith's books were developed from his lectures. It is also plain that his usual method of inquiry was to begin with the history of his subject and to reach his own views in the light of his survey of history. I have therefore conjectured<sup>9</sup> that the passage quoted above was originally the beginning of his lectures on moral philosophy and that the lectures then continued with the critical survey of history before turning to Smith's own theory.

Smith's own theory, as given in the first five editions, is for the most part a theory of moral judgement—that is to say, it is an answer to the second question set out in the initial description of the subject of philosophical ethics. I do not say that it contains nothing about the first question, the character of virtue: there is a relatively short discussion of a distinction between the 'amiable' and the 'respectable' virtues, summarized as sensibility and self-command, and a longer discussion of the contrast between justice and beneficence. But there is no thoroughgoing inquiry of what constitutes the character of virtue, as required by the first of the two questions, even though the historical survey at the end of the book deals with both questions in turn and, as it happens, gives more space to the first topic, the character of virtue, than to the second, the nature of moral judgement.

The fact is that Smith did not reach a distinctive view on the first topic. He has a distinctive view of the content of virtue, that is to say, a view of what are the cardinal virtues; but he does not give us an explanation of what is meant by the concept of moral virtue, how it arises, how it differentiates moral excellence from other forms of human excellence. The main subject matter of the first version of the book is well described in the long title added for the fourth and later editions: it is a detailed explanation of moral judgement, as passed first on the actions of other people and then on the actions of oneself. I think that, when Smith came to revise the work for the sixth edition, he realized that he had not dealt at all adequately with the first of the two questions, and for that reason he added the new part VI,

<sup>9</sup> *TMS* VII. i. 2, editorial n. 1.

entitled 'Of the Character of Virtue', to remedy the omission. It is not, in my opinion, an adequate remedy, and it certainly does not match Smith's elaborate answer to the second question. It does, however, bring out the exceptional role of self-command among the virtues and thereby shows Smith's theory of virtue to be a distinct advance on that of his predecessors. Self-command has a place in the earlier version, as a marker of the 'respectable' (as contrasted with the 'amiable') virtues; in the later version it looms larger, being the determinant of a superior form of any virtue.

Since the second of the two topics, the nature of moral judgement, is the main subject of both versions of Smith's book, I shall give it priority in what follows. There is in fact a clear development in Smith's view of this topic, especially in his conception of the impartial spectator, the most important element of Smith's ethical theory. Hence the title of my book.

## 2

# Sympathy and Imagination

The first chapter of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is entitled ‘Of Sympathy’, and the first chapter of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* is entitled ‘Of the Division of Labour’. In each instance, I think, the title is meant to indicate the primary cause of the subject matter of the book: the moral sentiments are founded on sympathy, and the increase of national wealth is founded on the division of labour. So far as the *Moral Sentiments* is concerned, the name of the primary cause has a wider sense than you might suppose. Smith notes that in common usage the term ‘sympathy’ tends to be limited to pity, fellow-feeling with distress, and he makes a point of telling us that he is using the term, as its etymology allows, to mean the sharing of any kind of feeling.

If, as I have suggested, the title of the first chapter is intended to pinpoint the primary cause of the book’s theme, ‘imagination’ should be added to ‘sympathy’; and of the two, imagination plays the larger part. In saying this I do not imply that sympathy is always accompanied by imagination, that sympathy, as understood by Smith, cannot get going until one has consciously imagined oneself into the shoes of another person. Smith’s first examples of sympathy seem to belie that idea: they describe a spontaneous repetition of feeling and observed behaviour.

When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer. The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they

see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation. Persons of delicate fibres and a weak constitution of body complain, that in looking on the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggars in the streets, they are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the correspondent part of their own bodies. (*TMS* I. i. 1. 3)

Smith himself does not distinguish such examples from explicitly imagining oneself in the place of another person. He thinks that imagination is involved in almost all instances, and he gives the examples of the above quotation to illustrate the fact that our awareness of the feelings of other people can only come from imagining ourselves in their shoes and seeing what *we* would then feel. Smith does, however, go on to mention other examples of sympathy that are entirely spontaneous and are not accompanied by the exercise of imagination.

Upon some occasions sympathy may seem to arise merely from the view of a certain emotion in another person. The passions . . . may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously . . . Grief and joy, for example, strongly expressed in the look and gestures of any one, at once affect the spectator with some degree of a like painful or agreeable emotion. A smiling face is, to every body that sees it, a cheerful object; as a sorrowful countenance, on the other hand, is a melancholy one. (*TMS* I. i. 1. 6)

Whether we think that sympathy without imagination is confined to the second set of examples or occurs in the first set also, it is a fairly unusual phenomenon. On most occasions imagination is a prerequisite for sympathy.

An explicit exercise of the imagination is certainly part of Smith's account of moral judgement. In that context imagining oneself in someone else's place is more pervasive than the actual experience of sympathy.

Let us consider first Smith's account of the judgement that an action is proper or improper. He writes also of the judgement that an affection, a feeling, is proper or improper, and here he is not confining himself to the feeling, the motive, of an agent: he would include the feeling of the person or persons affected by an action, and also the

feeling of a person affected by an event, such as the death of a relative or friend. It is, however, convenient to begin with the judgement that an action is proper. In principle though not in precise detail, Smith is talking about the simple judgement that an action is right or wrong. Smith calls it a judgement of propriety or impropriety, an assertion that an action is appropriate or inappropriate, suitable or unsuitable, to the cause that has prompted the agent to do it. The primary form of such judgement, according to Smith, is made by a spectator on an action done or contemplated by another person. The spectator's judgement arises from imagining himself in the agent's place and comparing the motivating feeling of the agent with the feeling that he himself would have in the imagined situation. If his own imagined feeling is the same as the actual feeling of the agent, he is 'sympathizing' with the agent, and his awareness of the sympathy (fellow-feeling) is given expression in approval, declaring that the action is appropriate (right). If, on the other hand, his own imagined feeling differs from that of the agent, he lacks sympathy with the agent, and his awareness of this is given expression in disapproval, declaring that the action is inappropriate (wrong).<sup>1</sup>

Smith does not confine disapproval to a positive feeling of antipathy (a word that he uses very rarely), but seems to think that any degree of difference in feeling will give rise to disapproval of the action concerned. The possibilities for disapproval are therefore manifold in kind, though not necessarily more frequent than the occurrence of approval. However, the exercise of imagination is required for all the possibilities, while the experience of sympathy is

<sup>1</sup> One of the Press's advisers says some scholars claim that, 'for Smith, the very act of imaginative identification is itself an act of "sympathizing" with the agent', and he asks for textual evidence to the contrary. In his first chapter Smith defines sympathy as fellow-feeling and says that 'changing places in fancy with the sufferer' is 'the *source* of our fellow-feeling' (emphasis added). Changing places in fancy is an act of the imagination; if it is the source of fellow-feeling, it cannot be itself the fellow-feeling. The adviser gives only one name, saying that Charles Griswold, 'at moments, seems to be one such', citing Griswold's reference to Smith's example of sympathy with the dead. I think Griswold takes my view. He writes (*Adam Smith*, 90) of 'This "illusion of the imagination" *thanks to which* we sympathize with the deceased' (emphasis added): the sympathy is an effect of the act of imagination.



confined to only one of them. Hence I say that imagination is more pervasive than sympathy in the forming of moral judgements.

There are further reasons for saying that Smith thinks of imagination as more pervasive than feelings of sympathy. He notes that the moral reflection of a spectator often does not depend on any actual perception of a correspondence with, or difference from, the feeling of the agent. 'We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality' (*TMS* I. i. 1. 10). We feel compassion for the deranged (or even for the dead), because, by an 'illusion of the imagination' (*TMS* I. i. 1. 13), we attribute to them feelings of distress which they do not have but which we suppose that we, being rational instead of deranged (or being alive and conscious instead of dead), would have if we were in their situation. In these examples, as Smith portrays them, there is compassion for the deranged or the dead, but it is not a *sympathetic* compassion, because we know that the objects of our compassion are not in fact feeling distress; we are illusorily imagining a distress that we, retaining our present faculties, would feel in their situation.

Later, when he comes to deal with moral judgements on our own conduct, Smith gives the imagination an elaborate double role: we have to imagine what spectators would feel if they imagined themselves in our situation; and, while sympathy, or the lack of it, comes into the picture in characterizing the feeling of the spectators, that feeling is an *imagined* feeling; and indeed, in the end, spectators in the real world are replaced by an *imagined* impartial spectator conjured up 'in the breast'.

I come back to the starting point. A spectator observes or hears of an action done or contemplated. He knows its 'cause'; that is to say, he knows what has prompted the agent to act or think of acting. Let us suppose that the agent has come upon a child struggling to swim to the bank of a river; he dives in to help. The 'spectator' imagines himself in the agent's place and notes that he would be prompted to act likewise. In other words, he finds that he 'sympathizes' with

the agent's feelings and consequent action. He gives expression to his sympathy by approving of the action as right or proper, an appropriate response to the situation.

Now suppose instead that the agent cannot himself swim. There is no point in his diving into the water; that would not help the child and would simply add a second person in danger of drowning. He cannot see a lifebelt or a rope or another passer-by, and so he takes off his shirt and uses that as a sort of rope. Let us hope that it works; anyway he thinks it is the best he can do. The 'spectator', who hears about the episode, imagines himself in the agent's shoes—and sharing the agent's inability to swim. He finds, reluctantly but inescapably, that here again he would be prompted to act in much the same way as the agent, and so he approves of the action as appropriate to the situation.

Let us now suppose that the agent meets someone who, having heard a garbled account of the incident, accuses him of cowardice. The agent, aggrieved at the taunt, punches the scoffer on the nose. When the 'spectator' learns of this and imagines himself in the agent's shoes, he finds that he too would feel aggrieved but would not be disposed to respond with a punch. Since he does not fully sympathize, he disapproves of the punch and says it was wrong, inappropriate to the situation.

The example, with its two components, illustrates the base of Smith's theory. Moral judgement begins with the reaction of spectators to the actions and motives of other people. The 'spectators' in question are normal fellow-members of society. Smith assumes that nearly all of them will react in much the same way. They include you and me, and for the most part Smith writes of what 'we' feel and think about the conduct of other people. But in key passages of his explanation he writes of 'the spectator' (occasionally 'spectators'), because the relevant feelings and thoughts that 'we' experience have come to us in our capacity as spectators. He sometimes writes of 'mankind' or 'every body', but he knows that unanimity cannot always be guaranteed and so he sometimes introduces a slight qualification, as in 'every impartial spectator' or 'every indifferent

by-stander' (*TMS* II. i. 2. 2); but, since the passage containing those phrases is almost immediately followed by 'every human heart', the qualification counts for little. Smith in fact takes it for granted that a spectator or bystander will be impartial just because he is not a party to the conduct judged.

What precisely is the relation between sympathy and approval? When introducing his theory, Smith says: 'To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them' (*TMS* I. i. 3. 1). A little later, having compared moral approval and disapproval with approval and disapproval of opinions, Smith repeats the thesis with a slight difference of language: 'To approve or disapprove, therefore, of the opinions of others is acknowledged, by every body, to mean no more than to observe their agreement or disagreement with our own' (*TMS* I. i. 3. 2).

Approval of others 'is the same thing as', 'means no more than', observing agreement with our own attitude. Yet Smith begins the chapter by saying this:

When the original passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the sympathetic emotions of the spectator, they necessarily appear to this last just and proper, and suitable to their objects; and, on the contrary, when, upon bringing the case home to himself, he finds that they do not coincide with what he feels, they necessarily appear to him unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes which excite them. (*TMS* I. i. 3. 1)

That passage surely gives a different *meaning* to the two clauses of each statement; it makes the spectator's judgement an effect, a necessary consequence, of his finding a correspondence, or a lack of correspondence, in feeling. Likewise, after saying that approval 'is the same thing' as awareness of sympathy, Smith continues with further statements implying a relation of cause and effect, not of identity proper, a relation of factual, not logical, necessity.

The man who resents the injuries that have been done to me, and observes that I resent them precisely as he does, necessarily approves of my resentment. The man whose sympathy keeps time to my grief, cannot but admit the reasonableness of my sorrow. He who admires the same poem, or the same picture, and admires them exactly as I do, must surely allow the justness of my admiration. He who laughs at the same joke, and laughs along with me, cannot well deny the propriety of my laughter. (*TMS* 1. i. 3. 1)

The spectator ‘must surely allow’, ‘cannot well deny’, propriety. These expressions would be out of place if approval were ‘the same thing’, had ‘the same meaning’, as awareness of sympathy.

More decisively still, when Smith proceeds to give examples of the apparent incidence of approval ‘without any sympathy or correspondence of sentiments’, he says: ‘A little attention, however, will convince us that even in these cases our approbation is ultimately founded upon a sympathy or correspondence of this kind’ (*TMS* 1. i. 3. 3). Approval that is ‘founded upon’ sympathy is undoubtedly an effect and cannot be simply identified with awareness of the sympathy.

The identity view is in any event far-fetched, while the causal connection view seems a reasonable account of the psychological explanation that Smith has in mind. I conclude that the two statements of identity are a rhetorical lapse, intended to emphasize the necessity of the connection between sympathy and approval.

Smith clarifies his position in a footnote added to the second edition (*TMS* 1. iii. 1. 9). The purpose of the footnote is to answer a criticism of Hume querying an apparent implication that all sympathy is pleasant, a view inconsistent with the plain fact that sympathy can be a sharing of painful feelings: Smith himself, Hume writes, rightly says that ‘it is painful to go along with grief’. Smith takes the objection to be concerned with his theory of approval: ‘It has been objected to me that as I found the sentiment of approbation, which is always agreeable, upon sympathy, it is inconsistent with my system to admit any disagreeable sympathy.’ Smith replies by describing two different feelings involved in the

sentiment of approbation: first, the spectator's feeling of sympathy with the feeling of the person judged, which can be either pleasant or unpleasant; secondly, 'the emotion which arises' from the spectator's awareness of the correspondence between the feelings of the two persons. 'This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful.' So here Smith distinguishes between the feeling of sympathy, the observation of correspondence, and a consequent emotion which is the feeling of approbation. This is a more elaborate analysis than that given in the ambiguous statements of the first edition.

In one of the quotations given above, Smith compares moral with aesthetic judgement: he says that the man who sympathizes with my resentment or my grief must approve of my feelings as appropriate, and he then goes on to compare this with sharing, and consequently approving of, my admiration of a poem or a picture, or my enjoyment of a joke. This is not to say that the morally approved feelings, resentment (of injury) or grief (in bereavement, for example), are similar in character to the aesthetic feelings of admiring the beautiful or enjoying the comic. It is to say that the spectator's *approval* is similar in the two types of experience. Elsewhere, as we shall see in due course, Smith has more detailed views about an affinity between ethics and aesthetics. Here he is simply emphasizing the connection between sympathy and approval by noting that it is not confined to moral approval. He finds such a connection in a concord of aesthetic reaction too, and even in a concord of opinion. After elaborating the effect of concordance or discordance in the moral and aesthetic examples, Smith turns to opinion.

To approve of another man's opinions is to adopt those opinions, and to adopt them is to approve of them. If the same arguments which convince you convince me likewise, I necessarily approve of your conviction; and if they do not, I necessarily disapprove of it; neither can I possibly conceive that I should do the one without the other. To approve or disapprove, therefore, of the opinions of others is acknowledged, by every body, to mean no more than to observe their agreement or disagreement with our own. (*TMS* I. i. 3. 2)

Here again we find Smith saying that the expression of approval *means* the same as being aware of a concord. As before, he is led into error by his emphasis on concordance. He reasonably says, in the second sentence, that he approves of another man's opinion if that opinion has been reached by attention to argument which he himself has found convincing. So the ground for approval of the other person's opinion, as for his own acceptance of the opinion, is that there is (what he takes to be) sound argument for the opinion, not the mere fact that he himself shares the opinion.

At the end of the chapter Smith lets himself be carried away into a ridiculous generalization of the concordance view.

Every faculty in one man is the measure by which he judges of the like faculty in another. I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them. (*TMS* I. i. 3. 10)

This is certainly not true of 'every faculty'. I am short-sighted and would not dream of judging the accuracy of another man's sight by my own. In my old age I am a little deaf and would therefore not trust my ear as a criterion of the ear of others. Knowing that some people have perfect pitch, I would never have been so foolhardy as to judge their capacity to distinguish tones by my own capacity to do so. Smith is simply wrong in saying that we have no other way of judging all the faculties of other people. In the case of sight and hearing we can judge by other forms of perception. When my neighbour sees a firm straight edge where I see a fuzzy one, I can check by touch. If he hears a sound when I do not, I can check by consulting a third person, known to have acute hearing. Smith's aim in this discussion is to persuade us of the relevance of sympathy to moral approval and disapproval. It is necessary and reasonable to show how this applies to resentment. It is quite unnecessary, and indeed counter-productive, to bring in the judgement of opinion, and then of 'every faculty'.