

The Sympathetic Process and the Origin and Function of Conscience

Christel Fricke

I. Introduction: Conscience in the *TMS*

Smith's moral theory has recently attracted much attention even beyond the circles of academic scholars specializing in the history of Scottish moral philosophy. One of the reasons for this new interest arises from the awareness of Smith having pursued a bottom-up approach to morality which appears to be particularly promising at a time of an increasing sensitivity to and respect for the varieties of moral cultures to be found all over the world. Rather than defining and justifying general moral principles that can then be used for making moral judgments about agents and their actions from a third personal point of view without any particular concern for their personal circumstances and cultural identities – as a top-down approach to morality would – , Smith takes his starting point from actual social and moral practices within a particular society.¹ The core element of his moral theory is a close analysis of the so-called 'sympathetic process' which underlies every moral judgment. Smith describes the moral judge in terms of an 'impartial spectator'. But neither the impartiality nor the spectator role Smith ascribes to the moral judge prevents this judge from taking a second personal point of view of the agent who is the object of his attention and getting directly involved with him.² This involvement is guided by both emotional (in particular: sympathetic) and reflective elements and one can thus characterize Smith's moral theory as a kind of *reflective sentimentalism*.³ Conscience plays a key role in shaping the impartial spectator's sentiments towards an agent.⁴

Scholars of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* agree in reading this book as containing an account of moral judgment,⁵ an account of the socialization and moral education of the individual person,⁶ and an account of the shaping of a moral consensus within a particular social community over time.⁷ Whether Smith also developed a meta-ethical theory of the moral judgment is a matter of controversy: Did he try to argue for the claim that moral judgments can make justified claims to something like moral

¹ See for example Darwall 2006:70-90 and Sen 2009: 124-152.

² See Darwall 2004: 131, Carrasco 2011 and Carrasco: under review.

³ Frazer 2010: 10. Griswold already attributed to Smith a 'sophisticated emotivism' (Griswold 1999: 130 and 157/8). Carrasco uses the formula of a 'cognitive feeling' (Carrasco 2004: 100). Macfie already pointed out that, with his analysis of impartial sympathy, Smith rejected the Humean claim according to which 'reason is the slave of the passions' (Macfie 1967: 86-88).

⁴ According to Macfie, it was via his theory of conscience that Smith – in a 'most subtle piece of analysis' – reconciled 'his rationalist beliefs ... with the sentimental psychology' (Macfie 1967:93).

⁵ Raphael stresses the importance of this topic. See Raphael 2007: 10.

⁶ See Phillipson 1985 and Griswold 1999, the latter with a particular focus on the result of this education, the moral self.

⁷ See for example Campbell 1971 and Forman-Barzilai 2010.

rightness beyond the factual authority they might have for the members of a particular society or cultural group? And if so, did he succeed? The answer to these questions depends on the reflective power one attributes to the faculty of conscience as Smith presents it in the *TMS*: Does a person, by acquiring the faculty of conscience, merely internalize the social norms and rules of his society or cultural community or does he acquire the power of critically reflecting about these norms and rules, aiming at an understanding of morality which would be impartial and therefore really proper or right in virtue of being free from both personal and cultural prejudices?⁸

According to Smith, the acquisition of moral conscience is an essential part of a person's moral education. My claim is that moral conscience as conceived by Smith enables a person to intentionally take the role of an impartial spectator. Such a spectator makes moral judgments, either of himself or of other people, based on sympathetic processes rather than on the application of general moral principles.

For the fourth (1774) edition of the *TMS* exclusively, Smith added to the title page a subtitle containing a description of the content of the book which reads as follows:

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.⁹

As this subtitle makes explicit, moral self-judgment is a central concern of the *TMS*. Smith first introduces moral conscience as the faculty that enables a person to make such judgments. Some of the most important changes Smith made for the second (1761) and sixth (1790) edition of the *TMS* concern the standards and function of self-judgment for a person's moral character: The topic was indeed of special concern for Smith and he saw needs for further clarification until the last edition published during his lifetime. The editors of the Glasgow-edition of the *TMS* have claimed that 'Smith's special concept of the impartial spectator was developed to explain a man's moral judgments about himself' (Raphael and Macfie 1976/1984: 17).¹⁰ But one can just as well see it the other way round: The reflective skills which enable a person to make moral judgments about himself (or herself) also and essentially enable him (or her) to intentionally take the role of a properly impartial spectator – be it of himself (or herself) or of other people. This is what I shall argue for in this paper. Exercising these skills is essential for overcoming a person's natural partiality for himself and his closest family and friends as well as the partiality implicit in the cultural prejudices she has endorsed in the process

⁸ On culture as a source of prejudices and partial (and therefore improper) moral judgments of in the *TMS* see Fricke 2011.

⁹ Quoted by the editors of the Glasgow edition of the *TMS* in their 'Introduction' (Raphael and Macfie 1976/1984: 40).

¹⁰ Recently, this reading has been reaffirmed by Hanley who writes about Smith's 'mechanism' of the 'impartial spectator': 'The intention of this mechanism is to enable a person to become a self-spectator and thereby promote the development of conscience.' (Hanley 2009: 136) The notion of a 'mechanism' in this context has been used by other scholars as well. See for example Haakonssen 1989: 55 and Fleischacker 1991: 258; it is, however, misleading.

of her socialization within a particular society. Conscientious reflection is aiming at impartiality by searching for prejudices that stand in its way and trying to overcome them. The question is whether and how this reflection can reach not only beyond the confines of a family circle but also beyond the confines of a particular society or cultural community and embrace the whole of mankind. A moral judgment is justified in virtue of being made by a spectator who actually is morally conscientious and impartial. But impartiality – and thereby the justification of moral claims – comes in degrees. Even those who excel in conscientious reflection, the ‘wise and virtuous’, will never reach ideal impartiality.

In the following, I shall take my starting point from Smith’s account of a child’s moral education within the circle of its family. In the process of its socialization, a child learns to control its selfish passions and to adapt to the habits of its parents and masters, endorsing the social norms and rules implicit in these habits. The educators address the child with sympathy and ‘indulgent partiality’, and the child naturally submits to their guidance. The parents’ moral judgments are, even though based on sympathetic processes, informed by a naïve trust in the rightness or propriety of the previously endorsed social norms and rules. Judgments based on such naïve trust in norms and rules which have actual authority within a particular community cannot make any justified claims to impartiality beyond the confines of this very society: Selfish passions are not the only source of partiality (II.). Outside the family circle, a young person interacts with peers who do not feel any ‘indulgent partiality’ for her or him. Nevertheless, such an agent will be disposed to trust a critical judgment from the side of an unconcerned spectator: Not being concerned is a necessary condition for impartiality. But submitting to the guidance of unconcerned spectators is not always an option. In response to the challenge arising from disagreement among spectators, an agent tries to look at himself from an unconcerned spectator’s point of view and thereby learns to become his own spectator and judge: He acquires the faculty of conscience. (III.). The conscientious agent will challenge the impartiality of his unconcerned spectator. In some passages of the *TMS*, Smith’s seems to suggest that, in cases of a disagreement between a conscientious agent and his unconcerned spectator, preference should be given to the conscientious self-judgment of the agent. Several scholars have followed this line of understanding and provided different accounts of the way in which a conscientious agent could achieve a higher degree of impartiality than his unconcerned external spectator (IV.). These scholars, however, do not give enough weight to Smith’s claim that a disagreement between an agent and his unconcerned spectator represents a challenge not only for the agent but for the spectator as well. Neither the agent nor his spectator will dogmatically insist on their respective judgments. Rather, both of them will conscientiously search for possible errors they may have made in the sympathetic processes underlying their judgments. Such errors can stand in the way of reaching a properly impartial judgment on which both could agree. Conscience allows both of them to detect and eliminate such errors. As such, it is a necessary condition for becoming virtuous. Since human beings are subjects to self-deceit which can have a devastating impact on their moral self-judgment, Smith recommends many people to

rely on the ‘common rules of morality’ rather than on sympathetic processes alone. But such reliance represents merely a second best procedure for reaching a properly impartial moral judgment (V.). Only the ‘wise and virtuous’ will keep trying to understand what culturally unbound impartiality would be. They will look for sources of partiality even within the social norms and rules of a particular community and of the ‘common rules of morality’ in particular. But whereas they may well improve on the impartiality of the ‘common rules of morality’, even their moral judgments will never be perfectly impartial or certain beyond doubt (VI.). Finally, I shall summarize my argument and address the suspicion of an inconsistency in Smith’s moral theory (VII.).¹¹

II. Moral education, the sympathetic process, and naïve moral judgment

According to Smith, human beings are essentially social: ‘Nature ... formed man for society’ (TMS III.2.6, 116). Their happiness depends to an important extent on enjoying the approval of other people and living in social harmony with them. But approval and social harmony are not the only objects of their natural desires. Among their further concerns is their own survival, health and general well-being. It is a person’s self-love, his selfish desire to survive and be well, which is a constant source of partiality:

Every man ... is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man ... (TMS II.ii.2.2, 82/3)

Acting from unrestrained selfish passions stands in the way of being approved by others. Smith speaks of the ‘violence and injustice of our own selfish passions’ (TMS III.4.1, 157).¹² One of the most important things children have to learn while growing up is to exercise control over their selfish passions and to restrict them to what is considered as socially acceptable.¹³ In particular, they have to become aware of their spontaneous and unrestrained emotional responses to other people’s actions as being a source of partiality, and to adapt them to what is generally considered as proper within their community.¹⁴ Actions arising from properly moderated self-love will be praised by others and thereby promote both the individual agent’s happiness and social harmony within his community.

According to Smith, a child has a natural instinct both to care about itself and to emotionally engage with other people. Still, a child has to learn how to satisfy its natural desires, and it does so with the help and guidance of its parents or whoever it is who takes care of it. On the one hand, it gradually learns what and how much to eat and

¹¹ I would like to thank Maria Alejandra Carrasco for extensive discussions on the subject of this paper. All remaining errors are of course, mine.

¹² See also TMS III.4.5 and 6, 158. And, as Hanley put it: ‘... for Smith the chief problem in practical ethics is the egoistic distortion of judgment that occurs when individuals are judges in their own cases...’ (Hanley 2009: 72).

¹³ See on this topic Heilbroner 1982: 431.

¹⁴ See TMS III.4.12, 161.

drink in order to be healthy and what to avoid in order not to become unwell or ill.¹⁵ On the other hand, it learns how to gain the approval of other people, driven by its ‘natural desire to please’ its educators, its ‘parents’, ‘masters’ and ‘companions’ (TMS III.2.31, 129). It learns how to adapt its behavior to their behavior and to gain their sympathy and approval. Its natural disposition to adapt is further encouraged by the parents’ and masters’ ‘indulgent partiality’ for the child (TMS III.3.22, 145). The child will gradually, even though not necessarily explicitly, endorse its parents’ and masters’ social habits and the social norms and rules underlying it.

These norms and rules have an implicit impact on the way in which educators, as spectators engaged in a sympathetic process, will judge a child – which is then in the role of an agent. Within such a process, the question how impartial these norms and rules are is not an issue. Furthermore, engaged in such a sympathetic process, parents and masters do not interact with the child as being their equal; the child is expected to adapt to the parents’ and masters’ behavior rather than to question the norms and rules underlying it.¹⁶

A sympathetic process in the full and specifically Smithian sense of the term is a process of interaction between an agent and his spectator or judge. It is a *sympathetic* process because this interaction is essentially, even though not exclusively, driven by the spectator’s and the agent’s natural ‘sympathy’ in general and by their natural desire for ‘the pleasure of mutual sympathy’ (TMS I.i.2.title, 13) in particular. It is because of their sympathy that humans generally feel ‘pity’ or ‘compassion ... for the misery of others’ (TMS I.i.1.1, 9). Sympathy allows them to have a ‘fellow-feeling’ with others’ responsive feelings of resentment and gratitude and with ‘any passion whatsoever’ (TMS I.i.1.5, 10). The spectator’s attention is drawn to the case of the agent, the person concerned by certain circumstances and actively responding to them, by witnessing this agent’s behavior and facial expression and by hearing him express his emotional concerns.¹⁷ What Smith is mainly interested in are not cases of spontaneous, unreflected ‘transfusion’ of passions from the agent to the spectator as they can take place even among higher developed animals (TMS I.i.1.6, 11). Rather, he is interested in cases where a spectator makes his sympathy for the agent observed dependent on his approval.

In order to perform as a moral judge, a spectator who observes an agent and his passionate response to certain circumstances has to avoid letting himself be the subject of a transfusion of passions. Still, his attitude to what he observes is partly emotional; his emotional response should, however, not be spontaneous but rather informed by a cool minded and sensitive awareness of the factual circumstances, including the particular cognitive and emotional disposition of the agent (see TMS I.i.1.10, 12). But

¹⁵ See TMS VI.i.2, 212.

¹⁶ See on this point Hope 1989: 105.

¹⁷ The spectator has access to what an agent feels by the ‘view of a certain emotion’ which the agent expresses in his ‘look and gestures’ (TMS I.i.1.6, 11) and by his ‘behavior’ (TMS I.i.1.6, 11).

factual information alone does not allow the spectator to judge the agent and his performance: The spectator's emotional response is constitutive of his evaluative attitude. This is because, according to Smith, making a spectatorial moral judgment is not a purely intellectual task. It does not simply consist in subsuming a particular case (an agent and his action in response to given circumstances) under a general moral principle. What the spectator does is to put himself imaginatively into the position of the agent, he 'enter[s] ... into his body', trying to 'become in some measure the same person with him' in order to 'form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them' (TMS I.i.1.1, 9). By this imaginative, emotional and cognitively informed manoeuvre the spectator gets an idea of what he, the spectator, would feel if he were someone like the agent and exposed to these very circumstances which actually affect him, and his imagining this feeling induces him to actually feel it himself. The imaginative feeling will, however, be lower in degree than the corresponding actual feeling. It will also be different in kind since it is not a passion immediately triggered by external events but based on an act of imagination and cool-minded and well informed reflection. The spectatorial feeling is a reflected sentiment, not a passion triggered immediately (without reflective mediation) by perceptual data. In order to finally reach his evaluative judgment of the actual performance of the agent, of his emotional and behavioral response to the respective circumstances, the spectator compares this agent's emotional state as expressed by him (through his facial expression, talk and behavior) with his own 'sympathetic emotions', that is, the emotional state he imagined to be in and actually felt to some degree himself when imaginatively taking the position of this agent in these circumstances:

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 him. 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, 16)

In this passage, Smith uses the notions of 'sympathy' and 'sympathetic emotion' for two kinds of feelings which have to be distinguished: The 'sympathetic emotion' is the emotion the spectator imagines he would feel (and then to some degree also feels) if he were someone like the agent and exposed to such circumstances; this 'sympathetic emotion', a reflected sentiment, is the point of comparison with the emotion the agent expresses in his observable behavior. The spectator's 'sympathy', however, is not an imagined and then imaginatively triggered actual first order feeling, but a second order feeling triggered by the discovery of emotional concord between the spectator involved

in his imaginative change of position and the agent.¹⁸ Should the spectator discover a lack of emotional concord instead, his first order feeling would still be a ‘sympathetic emotion’; but his second order feeling would not be ‘sympathy’ but rather ‘antipathy’ (TMS II.i.5.4 and 5, 75).¹⁹ Moral sentiments underlying moral judgments are feelings of sympathy of the second kind. But such feelings do not by themselves provide a judge with anything that would allow him to make justified claims to impartiality.

As this passage makes explicit, the spectator sets the standard for his evaluative judgment himself: He imagines how *he* would feel if he was someone like the agent and exposed to such circumstances and naively assumes that the way *he* would feel would be the *proper or right* way to feel. And he makes his sympathy with the agent dependent on this agent responding to the circumstances exactly as he, the spectator, imagines he would have responded himself.²⁰ What the spectator actually imagines he would feel depends partly on his human nature, his previous experience of his own vulnerability, and on his knowledge of the observed facts about the agent and his response to the given circumstances. Implicit in his spectatorial attitude to an agent is the assumption that the agent is as vulnerable as himself.²¹ Still, his ‘sympathetic emotion’ or imagined feeling on which he relies as a standard of propriety is also shaped by his underlying evaluative habits, by the social norms and rules he has endorsed in the course of his previous socialization within a family or local community – and he might not clearly distinguish these from his acquired personal tastes. His attitude as a spectator and moral judge is informed by a naïve trust in the propriety of his own standards of evaluation. He does not raise the question whether or not these standards allow for impartial moral judgments under all circumstances, whatever their particularities might be.

Where sympathetic processes take place between a child and its educator, the roles are clearly distributed: The educator takes the role of a spectator and the child that of the agent who is the object of the spectator’s attention. If the educator, even though feeling an ‘indulgent partiality’ for the child, does not sympathize with the child’s response to particular circumstances, he will encourage it to change its behavior. The child is supposed to let itself be guided by the educator and not object to his judgment, and it is motivated to do so by its natural desire for praise and its unquestioned trust in his educator’s judgment.

But this does not mean that the child, while growing up, does not take the role of a spectator when interacting with his peers: Its natural sympathy drags its attention to

¹⁸ On the account of Smith’s spectatorial sympathy in terms of a second order emotion see also TMS VI.ii.i.1, 219. See already Griswold 1999: 121 and Carrasco 2004: 100.

¹⁹ In his famous objection to Smith’s account of sympathy, Hume overlooks the crucial distinction between first order ‘sympathetic emotions’ (which can be as manifold as first order emotions are and which can, in particular, be more or less agreeable) and second order ‘sympathy’ (which is always agreeable) or second order ‘antipathy’ (which is always disagreeable). See the footnote which Smith added to TMS I.iii.1.9, 46 in the second edition of the book.

²⁰ See on this topic Valihora 2001: 145.

²¹ See Fricke 2011.

agents responding to certain circumstances and induces it to get itself involved in a sympathetic process and judge the response of the agent according to its sympathy or antipathy with him. But just as its educators, its own performance as a spectator making moral judgments about other people is based on a naïve trust in the rightness of the social norms and rules it endorsed in the process of its socialization.

In cases where a naïve spectator sympathizes with the agent who is the object of his attention and approves of how he responded to certain circumstances, there is no need for the agent to be concerned about the propriety of his behavior. The agent can enjoy the approval and actual praise of his spectator. Social harmony between them is not in danger. Nor does the spectator see in such cases any reason for questioning the propriety and impartiality of his own judgment. But, outside the family circle, where people interact as peers, without the ‘indulgent partiality’ with which an educator addresses a child, and without the natural trust a child has in its educators, an agent can find himself confronted with the antipathy and disapproval of his spectator and moral judge, and this disapproval can represent a challenge for both of them.

III. Conscientious Moral Self-Judgment and the Explicit Concern for Impartiality and Praiseworthiness

According to Smith, children leave the exclusive circle of their families when they are ‘old enough to go to school’ and ‘mix with ... equals’ (TMS III.3.22, 145). Still, for an agent interacting with peers, moral disapproval from the side of a spectator continues to represent a serious challenge. This is because his desire for approval and social harmony is not limited to the members of his own family. According to Smith, spectatorial sympathy is the ‘sole consolation’ of an agent concerned and he therefore desires it strongly (TMS I.i.4.7, 22), not only from the members of his own family but also from anybody else. But since, outside family circles, the spectator is not normally in the position of an educator and the agent not normally in the position of a child who is naturally disposed to trust its educator, there is the question why the agent should trust the judgment of an antipathetic spectator outside the circle of his family.

Smith’s answer to this question is implicit in his account of a spectator’s impartiality, or, to be more precise, in his account of a necessary condition for a spectator’s impartiality: An agent can trust a peer-spectator’s judgment about him in so far as this spectator himself is not directly concerned by the circumstances to which the agent responds. Being ‘indifferent’ (TMS I.i.4.5, 21) to certain circumstances naturally qualifies a person to take the part of a spectator, just as being directly concerned naturally qualifies an agent (or anybody else directly affected by the consequences of his action, be it in a disadvantageous or in an advantageous way) to be the object of a spectator’s attention. In principle, any person can take the role of an agent’s spectator as long as he witnesses the agent and his behavior under certain circumstances and is at the same time not himself concerned by them. This lack of concern or indifference from the side of the spectator is crucial: Only if the spectators’ selfish interests are not at stake

can they look at the circumstances and the agent's response to them with a sufficiently cool mind, free from the prejudices and partiality which arise in spontaneous selfish passions and desires.²² But this lack of concern may only be 'momentary', induced by the spectator's natural sympathy for others; more selfish concerns constantly 'intrude' themselves on the spectator's state of indifference, first and foremost the relief they feel at the 'thought of their own safety' (TMS I.i.4.6, 21).

The agent's trust in the judgment of his unconcerned spectators and his desire for their sympathy motivate him to adapt to the spectators' judgment and the implicit standards of propriety and to 'lower[...] his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him' (TMS I.i.4.7, 22). However, this adaptive attitude to antipathetic, but unconcerned spectators is, for the agent, not always a promising strategy for achieving their praise and a state of mutual harmony. It may occur that an agent finds himself confronted with several unconcerned spectators who do not agree among themselves about how to judge his behavior. In such a case, trying to gain the sympathy of all of them would be an 'absurd project' (TMS III.2.31, 129).²³ And there is more for an agent to encounter in the world than just disagreement among unconcerned spectators. People might object to proper behavior of which an unconcerned spectator would approve because they find their selfish interests unfavorably affected by it:

The fairest and most equitable conduct must frequently obstruct the interests, or thwart the inclinations of particular persons, who will seldom ... have candour enough to enter into the propriety of our motives, or to see that this conduct, how disagreeable soever to them, is perfectly suitable to our situation. (TMS III.2.31, 129)²⁴

What can an agent do in a state of such confusion of 'partial judgments' (TMS III.2.31, 129)? One version of Smith's answer to this question reads as follows:

We soon learn ... to sett up in our minds a judge between ourselves and those we live with. We conceive ourselves as acting in the presence of a person quite candid and equitable, of one who has no particular relation either to ourselves, or to those whose interests are affected by our conduct who is neither father, nor brother, nor friend either to them or to us, but is merely a man in general, an impartial spectator who considers our conduct with the same indifference with which we regard that of other people. (TMS III.2.31, 129)²⁵

But how can anyone conceive of such a 'man in general'? In other passages, Smith chooses a psychologically more realistic way of describing this move of the confused agent: The agent is 'led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he was only one of the spectators of his own situation' (TMS I.i.4.8, 22), taking an unconcerned

²² See TMS I.i.4, 19-23.

²³ The passage appears in editions 2 to 5 of the *TMS* exclusively.

²⁴ The passage appears in editions 2 to 5 of the *TMS* exclusively.

²⁵ The passage appears in editions 2 to 5 of the *TMS* exclusively.

spectator as a role model. Suffering from a lack of approval on the one hand and not knowing whom he can trust as a spectator on the other, the agent gets himself involved in a sympathetic process, trying to look at himself from an unconcerned spectator's point of view. He tries to imagine himself in the position of such a spectator. And in so far as he succeeds in imaginatively switching roles with such a spectator, he becomes his own spectator, looking at himself and the circumstances to which he spontaneously responded with the cool and unprejudiced mind of a person unconcerned but sensitive to the feelings of others. He might, then, find himself displeased with his spontaneous emotional and behavioral response to the given circumstances and try to lower his passion so that pitch both he himself as his own unconcerned spectator as well as any other properly unconcerned spectators can sympathize with. By lowering his passions, he might succeed in gaining approval from the side of all properly unconcerned spectators and enjoy a state of mutual sympathy if not with everybody, at least with them.

Taking a spectatorial, unconcerned and cool-minded, even though sensitive point of view and looking at oneself and one's spontaneous response to certain circumstances from it is, according to Smith, a matter of conscience. Conscience is, for Smith, an acquired faculty, it can only be learned from others who actually take the role of unconcerned spectators. A human being who grew up in full deprivation of society could not learn to be conscientious.²⁶ The role of conscience and, in particular, the role of moral self-judgment in the moral practice of a person is the main topic of Part III of the *TMS*. According to Smith, once they have acquired conscience, people can judge about the propriety or impropriety of their own feelings, intentions and actions in a way analogous to that in which they judge those of other people:

The principle by which we naturally either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, seems to be altogether the same with that by which we exercise the like judgments concerning the conduct of other people. (*TMS* III.1.1, 109)

Smith's use of the notion of a 'principle' should not mislead the reader: His claim is that, for judging the propriety of our own behavior, we have to engage in a sympathetic process of the same kind as the one we previously relied on in order to pass an impartial judgment on another agent. Only that, in the case of self-judgment, it is one and the same person who plays both the part of the spectator or judge and the part of the person being judged: When judging the propriety of our own behavior, 'we suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behavior and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us', thereby dividing ourselves 'into two persons' (*TMS* III.1.5 and 6, 112 and 113). Smith describes an agent's acquisition of the faculty of conscience in terms of an act of internalizing the external unconcerned spectator to whose judgment he was previously exposed: Judgments of conscience are judgments of 'the man within'

²⁶ See *TMS* III.1.3, 110-111 and Berry 1997: 165 and 2003: 253. Griswold makes the same point in the following terms: 'Our awareness of the "voice" of conscience is not a "fact of reason", to borrow Kant's phrase, or some innate "moral sense" but rather an acquired form of moral self-awareness.' (Griswold 1999: 131)

(TMS III.1.32, 131) or the ‘judge within’ (TMS III.3.1, 134). Just as any external judge, this ‘judge within’ has to make an effort and try to be ‘fair and impartial’ (TMS III.1.2, 110); and he cannot succeed unless he is as cool-minded and well-informed, unprejudiced, indifferent and impartial as any unconcerned and impartial external spectator would be.

Conscience enables a person to be aware of himself or herself as an agent who can exercise control over his actions and is taken responsible for them by other people. But whereas the acquisition of a certain amount of self-control is part of what a child learns from his parents, conscience as a particularly moral faculty enables a person to critically judge his own responsive attitudes and behavior and to question their impartiality.²⁷ What motivates a conscientious person to exercise control over his behavior are not merely psychological and social concerns for approval and praise, but first and foremost *normative concerns* to understand what is really proper and what should therefore be approved by an unconcerned spectator, whether there is anybody around who actually takes the role of such an unconcerned spectator or not.²⁸ This is particularly explicit in Smith’s distinction between actual praise and real praiseworthiness of an agent:

Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love. He naturally dreads, not only to be hated, but to be hateful; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of hatred. He desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be blamed by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of blame. (TMS III.2.1, 113-114)²⁹

Conscience makes a person aware of his being ‘but one of the multitude’ (TMS III.3.5, 137), of the fact that, as one of the multitude, he cannot make any claims to special treatments of the kind a child would naturally expect and receive from his loving parents. Making such unjustified claims would express a lack of respect for others as equals, as persons with equal rights to be respected and to be treated with fairness and justice.³⁰

Describing conscience as an acquired faculty can be misleading: It is not a new sense, a kind of moral sense, that people acquire by learning to be conscientious. Smith

²⁷ See for example TMS III.2.9, 118 and Carrasco (forthcoming).

²⁸ For Smith’s insistence on the difference between a merely psychological and a properly normative concern about acting properly see TMS III.2.32, 130-131. Carrasco has pointed out that one has to distinguish between two kinds of self-command a child has to learn: self-command as a condition for social adaptation and moral self-command which aims at impartiality and moral propriety. See Carrasco: forthcoming.

²⁹ Most of the chapter which contains the text quoted here was ‘added or re-written’ for the 6th edition of the TMS (see TMS 113, editorial footnote a). The distinction is indeed made much more explicit in the 6th edition and it is also given more weight (see the whole chapter TMS III.2, 113-134, but in particular III.2.25, 126). Still, the distinction has been present since the 1st edition. See for exp. TMS III.1.7, 113.

³⁰ See also TMS III.3.6, 138. On the role of equality of people in Smith’s moral theory see Fricke 2011.

explicitly rejects the claim that people have a particular moral sense – be it a natural or an acquired sense.³¹ Conscience, as Smith understands it, is a faculty of critical self-reflection and self-judgment:

... it is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. (TMS III.3.5, 137)

In so far as conscience enables a person to be explicitly concerned about his impartiality as a moral judge, to be aware of selfish passions as sources of partiality and to exercise control over them, to intentionally take the role of an unconcerned spectator and not let any selfish concerns intrude themselves on his state of indifference, one can conclude that conscience is a spectator's skill that cannot be reserved to those spectators involved in self-judging exclusively. The conscientious spectator can just as well pass judgments on other people. Conscience is not conditional for taking the role of an unconcerned spectator as our natural sympathy motivates us to do so without thinking about it. But the conscientious spectator does not depend on the working of his natural sympathy exclusively for silencing any selfish concerns and engage in a sympathetic process with an agent: He can do so intentionally, he can make an explicit effort to be unconcerned. But there is the question why an agent has a reason to trust his own 'judge within' (TMS III.3.1, 134) any more than an external spectator.

IV. Conscientious moral self-judgment

The conscientious self-judgment of an agent will not always bring forth an agreement between him and his external spectators. In cases of such disagreement, should preference be given to the agent's self-judgment? Does conscience open a window through which an agent can see absolute moral truth, an answer to the question what is absolutely proper or right to do under particular circumstances? And is this moral intuition such that it cannot be shared with others? There are, especially in the 6th edition of the *TMS*, but also in editions 2 to 5, passages where Smith seems to answer this question in the positive. Indeed, sometimes Smith speaks as if conscience gave a person direct access to the moral judgments of a 'higher tribunal': Thus, in editions 2 to 5 of the *TMS*, he describes the 'judge within' as a 'higher tribunal' and distinguishes this tribunal from the 'inferiour tribunal' provided by an external spectator (TMS III.2, 128). And this way of speaking prevails in the 6th edition where Smith speaks of an agent's 'own conscience' as of a 'higher tribunal' (TMS III.2.32, 130). In these passages Smith seems to imply that the only function of an external spectator is educational and psychological, that he has to provide a role model which an agent can internalize, and that an agent, once he has acquired the faculty of conscience, is independent of others in his moral self-judgment.

³¹ See TMS III.4.5, 158.

Several scholars have followed this line of interpretation, first and foremost the editors of the standard Glasgow edition of the *TMS*.³² But they have provided different accounts of Smith's understanding of conscientious moral self-judgment. Vivienne Brown³³ and Emma Rothschild³⁴ have denied that an external spectator could be a moral judge at all, since he could not be explicitly concerned about impartiality and make any claims to justified authority of his judgment – as if a conscientious person could only make moral judgments about herself or himself and not just as well rely on her or his conscience for taking the role of an unconcerned spectator who judges other agents. According to their readings, the properly impartial spectator or moral judge can only be a virtual spectator.³⁵ But what makes the conscientious agent less naïve in his self-judgment than any external spectator would be? What entitles the conscientious person to speak in the name of a 'higher tribunal'? James Otteson,³⁶ Ann Firth³⁷ and, most recently, Ryan Hanley³⁸ have attributed to Smith the view that conscience gave a person access to moral principles arising from a transcendent source – as if the conscientious person did not have to take other people's points of view imaginatively into account before making a properly impartial, moral judgment. But, as Fleischacker has already pointed out, 'viewing moral laws *as if* they issued from God, ... was highly unusual in the eighteenth century'.³⁹

Others have denied that, by the acquisition of conscience, an agent could have access to any kind of superior moral standards, to standards that were not accessible to all. In particular, they have denied that any impartial spectator, not even the conscientious 'judge within', was capable to question whether and to what extent the social norms and rules he endorsed in the process of his socialization might themselves be sources of partiality. Fonna Forman-Barzilai has most explicitly rejected the idea that the conscientious agent's moral judgment could reach beyond the confines of his own society or cultural community and embrace the whole of mankind.⁴⁰ And Samuel Fleischacker has claimed that an impartial spectator could inspire trust and have authority only for an agent who was a member of the same social community or cultural group as himself, as if sympathetic processes could only take place among people within the circles of their social and cultural familiarity.⁴¹ According to such a

³² See above, p. 2.

³³ See Brown 1994: chapter 3.

³⁴ For a particularly explicit statement of this view see Rothschild 2004: 153.

³⁵ Vivienne Brown reads Smith's conception of the moral judgment as 'soliloquy', arising from an 'inner debate' of the conscientious agent with himself (Brown 1994: 48). She does not deny that a person depends, for acquiring conscience, on social interaction with external spectators. But once a person has acquired conscience, his moral concerns are self-centred, since 'moral excellence is an intensely private form' (Brown 1994: 183).

³⁶ See Otteson 2002: 240 and 245-252.

³⁷ See Firth 2007: 119.

³⁸ See Hanley 2009: 141-144.

³⁹ Fleischacker 1991: 254. See also Griswold 1999: 160-161, Broadie 2006: 186-187 and 2010: 217-218.

⁴⁰ See Forman-Barzilai 2010: 86-105.

⁴¹ See Fleischacker 2005.

skeptical reading of Smith's moral theory, neither sympathy nor conscience allow a moral judge to recognize the social and moral norms that define a social community or cultural group as potential sources of partiality that stand in the way of reaching real propriety or impartiality of a moral judgment.

Carola von Villiez and Maria A. Carrasco interpret Smith's account of conscience in terms of a special kind of reasoning in which the conscientious moral judge gets involved. Von Villiez has argued that, while an external spectator was inevitably naïve, judging in accordance with the social norms and rules he endorsed in the process of his socialization (the 'communal moral rules' as von Villiez calls them) without questioning them, only the conscientious agent in his self-judgment could leave this naïve trust in the communal moral rules behind: The conscientious 'judge within' gets involved in a thought experiment, following the Rawlsian method of reflective equilibrium, in order to make sure that his moral judgment takes all relevant facts about all people directly or indirectly concerned into account. Thereby, he can achieve ultimate justification of moral judgments, without however transcending the circles of the respective social community, that is without challenging the moral intuitions the members of this community share.⁴² In this reflective process, 'general principles' as they are contained in the communal moral rules of a community, play a part analogous to the Principles of Justice in Rawls' account of the method of reflective equilibrium.⁴³ Von Villiez does not raise the question whether or not Smith attempted at providing more than a normative account of moral judgment within a social community or cultural group, whether he actually aimed at providing a meta-ethical theory of a moral judgment that could rightly claim authority for all people. Her reading of Smith does not explicitly address objections of the kind Forman-Barzilai has brought forward.

Maria A. Carrasco attributes to Smith the aim of providing such a meta-ethical theory. According to her reading of the *TMS*, the conscientious moral judge relies on practical reasoning – of a kind similar to that of the Aristotelian *phronimos* – in order to leave all human selfish concerns behind and take the point of view of a properly and absolutely impartial spectator, referring in particular to the passages where Smith speaks of the impartial spectator in terms of the 'man in general', of the 'abstract man' or the 'representative of mankind' (*TMS* III.2, 129-130).⁴⁴ Carrasco reads Smith's impartial spectator as identifying an 'impersonal standpoint' as it has been described by Thomas Nagel, a standpoint which is in no way affected by the limitations of standpoint relativity or partiality but still a human standpoint, rather than a 'view from nowhere' which abstracts even from humanity.⁴⁵

The controversial interpretations of Smith's meta-ethical ambitions and of his account of moral conscience in particular reveal a difficulty inherent in any moral theory that tries to combine a naturalistic understanding of the origins of morality in human

⁴² See von Villiez 2006: 121-123.

⁴³ See von Villiez 2006: 127-128.

⁴⁴ See Carrasco 2011: 18 and the quote above, p. *.

⁴⁵ See Carrasco 2004: 105-106 and Nagel 1991: 12.

emotions and sociality with a straightforwardly normative project of attributing to the moral judgment more than factual authority within a particular social community or cultural group, namely an authority that all human beings have reason to respect. That Smith did have such far reaching meta-ethical ambitions is most explicit in the following passage from part VI of the *TMS* (which was in its entirety written for the 6th edition):

Though our effectual good offices can very seldom be extended to any wider society than that of our own country; our good-will is circumscribed by no boundary, but may embrace the immensity of the universe. (*TMS* VI.ii.3.1, 235)

Smith himself was aware of the challenge implicit in his bottom-up approach to morality which aimed at a normative and universal understanding of the authority of moral judgments nevertheless. This becomes evident in his exchange with Gilbert Elliot.

Elliot, an attentive reader of the first edition of the *TMS*,⁴⁶ already understood Smith's account of the external spectator of an agent as being intrinsically naïve, as someone relying his judgment of the agent on principles of common good manners without questioning their impartiality. Elliot then wondered why Smith thought that an agent, by relying on his conscience and judging himself, could improve on the impartiality of the moral judgments made about him by an external spectator.⁴⁷ The letter to Smith in which he raised this question has not been preserved. But we have Smith's answer to him, a letter which Smith sent to his thoughtful critic with manuscripts for revisions of the text of the *TMS* for the second edition, asking him for his 'opinion'. Smith's answer to Elliot does not provide any evidence for Smith's thoughts having undergone any substantive changes in the course of the two years between the first and the second edition of the *TMS*. In particular, Smith did not change his mind about the self-judgments an agent makes about the propriety of his emotions and actions: Not only can they diverge from those made by an external spectator about the same agent, they can also improve on the impartiality of the latter. Smith wrote back to Elliot in the following terms:

You will observe that it [the revised text of the *TMS*] 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 show that, *notwithstanding this*, real magnanimity and conscious virtue can support itself under the disapprobation of all mankind. (Corr, 49, ital. CF)

In this passage, Smith makes a twofold claim: On the one hand, he confirms his view that moral judgment is a matter of – actual or virtual – interaction between an agent and

⁴⁶ For more details about Elliot see Phillipson 2010: 163-165.

⁴⁷ Elliot was not alone with this reading. It seems that Thomas Reid read Smith's moral theory in the same way – and objected to it with very similar concerns. See Hanley 2009: 145-146. Hanley also quotes further contemporary critics joining in this objection to Smith. See Hanley 2009: 146fn23.

his spectator in a sympathetic process: Be the interaction merely virtual or actual, there is in both cases a need for ‘reference to the sentiments of some other being’. On the other hand, he wants to ‘make Virtue sufficiently independent of popular opinion’ (Corr, 49), implying that virtue can only be achieved by relying on one’s conscience – rather than by adapting to the judgments and expectations of external spectators. And the ‘notwithstanding this’ in his reply to Elliot makes explicit that Smith is aware of its not being self-evident that these two claims are mutually compatible: It sounds as if he was endorsing the importance of popular opinion for spectatorial self-judgments and rejecting it at the same time. The most important of his revisions of the text of the *TMS* for the second and then, almost 30 years later, for the sixth edition address this problem.

How can Smith meet this suspicion of inconsistency? In order to answer this question, I shall again focus on Smith’s account of the sympathetic process and, in addition to that, on his theory of virtue. Implicit in this account is the assumption that the agent and his spectator involved in a sympathetic process are not supposed to try and overcome any disagreement between them by manipulating the respective other’s judgment, by exercising any kind of power or coercion over the respective other, or by simply disrespecting and ignoring the other or putting him (or her) to silence – even though in actual processes of communication between agents and their spectators such manoeuvres are not uncommon.⁴⁸ Both have to try and understand what is really proper, morally right, or praiseworthy, be it in accordance with any social norms and rules or not.

V. Conscience, Virtue, and the Problem of Erroneous Moral Judgment

In the text of the second edition of the *TMS*, Smith’s makes Elliot’s concern explicit in the following terms:

But though this tribunal within the breast be thus the supreme arbiter of all our actions, though it can reverse the decisions of all mankind with regard to our character and conduct, and mortify us amidst the applause, or support us under the censure of the world; yet, 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, 129)⁴⁹

Here, Smith confirms that the external spectator of an agent and the agent himself in his conscientious self-judgment (the ‘judge within’) rely on the same procedures for making their judgments of the propriety of the agent’s response to certain circumstances. How can their judgments diverge nevertheless? Since ‘nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast’ and since we are never ‘so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary’

⁴⁸ Smith mentions explicitly the procedures of ‘intrigue’ and ‘cabal’ and of ‘[bribing] all the judges’ on which a person might rely to obtain their approval. See *TMS* III.2.24, 126.

⁴⁹ This passage was removed from the 6th edition.

(TMS I.i.2.1, 13), the occurrence of the spectator's antipathy alarms not only the agent but also the spectator himself. Both of them would much rather enjoy a state of mutual sympathy.⁵⁰ In cases of explicit divergence between the judgment of a conscientious external spectator of an agent (a spectator who is not manipulating the agent but, like him, concerned about understanding what is morally right) and that of the conscientious agent himself (the 'judge within'), further efforts for finally reaching a state of mutual sympathy can be made: Both the external spectator and the agent or internal spectator have to make sure that they have not committed any *errors* in their respective judgments. Errors can prevent agreement.

As far as the external spectator is concerned, in cases of a remaining lack of mutual sympathy with the conscientious agent, he has to make sure that his attitude towards the agent has been entirely free from any concern for himself and his own wellbeing and that he has looked at the agent and his circumstances with the greatest sensitivity, care and attention to detail; he has to bring home to himself 'every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer' and 'adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents' (TMS I.i.4.6, 21). Sources of error the external spectator has to avoid include the lack of sufficient attention, a particular challenge when the agent observed is a stranger to him, and the distraction arising from being 'employed about other things' (TMS I.i.3.5, 18). If the spectator is as unconcerned and cool-minded as he should be, he can take many more aspects of the respective circumstances into account than the agent concerned did in his state of spontaneous passion induced by self-love. All this the external spectator can only achieve if he is conscientious and does not naively – or dogmatically – trust in the propriety of his own judgment and of the social norms and rules underlying it. Smith describes this attitude in terms of 'virtue'.

By acquiring conscience, people are disposed to acquire 'two different sets of virtues', corresponding to the roles of the agent and the spectator in sympathetic processes respectively: As spectators, they acquire the 'soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues, the virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity'; and as agents they acquire the 'great, the awful and respectable, the virtues of self-denial, or self-government, of that command of the passions which subjects all the movements of our nature to what our dignity and honour, and the propriety of our own conduct require' (TMS I.i.5.1, 23). The development and perfection of these virtues is a lifelong enterprise – and in real life, there are plenty of sources of distraction on the way to achieve this noble goal, first and foremost the natural disposition of people 'to admire the rich and the great' (TMS I.iii.3, 61-66). Only a few people actually succeed – sometimes – in restraining their selfish and indulging their benevolent passions to a high degree and get close to what Smith calls 'the perfection of human nature', a state of character which 'can alone

⁵⁰ See also TMS I.i.2.6, 15: 'As the person who is principally interested in any event is pleased with our sympathy, and hurt by the want of it, so we, too, seem to be pleased when we are able to sympathize with him, and to be hurt when we are unable to do so.'

produce among mankind that harmony of sentiments and passions in which consists their whole grace and propriety' (TMS I.i.5.5, 25):

Virtue is excellence, something uncommonly great and beautiful, which raises far above what is vulgar and ordinary. (TMS I.i.5.6, 25)

By acquiring conscience people finally understand what virtue would consist in, and they are motivated to become virtuous – even though human vanity and pride represent common weaknesses that can discourage people from taking the path to virtue.⁵¹ Conscience enables them to get actively and fruitfully involved in sympathetic processes, aiming not only at mutual sympathy in general but at mutual sympathy in accordance with real praiseworthiness in particular. However, in order to be involved in such processes, be it in the role of the agent or in that of an external spectator, a person does not need to have acquired total wisdom and perfect virtue. Smith distinguishes between 'ordinary' and 'uncommon' degrees of moral education; the latter depends on the achievement of a high degree of wisdom and virtue, whereas the former, restricted to 'mere propriety', is what ordinary agents and spectators rely on when making moral judgments (TMS I.i.5.6, 25). Accordingly, he distinguishes between 'two different standards' by which we determine 'the degree of blame or applause which seems due to any action': the ideal standard of 'complete propriety and perfection' and the degree 'the greater part of men commonly arrive at' (TMS I.i.5.9, 26).⁵² For the 'bulk of mankind' (TMS III.5.1, 162) it is sufficient to respect the 'common rules of morality' (TMS III.4.8, 159), the 'established rules of behaviour' or 'of duty' (TMS III.5.1, 162).

For making his judgment, the conscientious or virtuous spectator should be as well informed as possible. But there are certain limits to what he can do himself for taking in all relevant information: As an external spectator, he has to rely on observation of the agent and his circumstances. He has no direct access to the agent's actual thoughts, beliefs, emotions and intentions and depends on the agent's making them explicit either by articulating them verbally or by expressing them in his face or general behavior. This dependency can be abused by the agent: He may mislead his external spectator, either intentionally or not, he can be a 'liar' or a 'coxcomb' (TMS III.2.4, 115), and the external spectator may remain unaware of either.

Since the agent has privileged access to his own thoughts, emotions and intentions, he might realize certain misunderstandings and errors that mislead his external spectator in his judgment. In such cases, he will or at least should be 'more indifferent about the applause, and, in some measure, despise the censure of the world' (TMS III.1.5, 112).⁵³ Whatever the external spectator has to do in order to avoid an error of his judgment goes for the internal spectator as well. Now, given the agent's privileged access to his own

⁵¹ On vanity and pride see TMS VI.iii.35-53, 255-262.

⁵² For Smith's distinction between two standards of propriety see also TMS I.i.5.6, 25.

⁵³ See also TMS III, 111: 'We must enter, in short, either into what are, or into what ought to be, or into what, if the whole circumstances of the conduct were known, we imagine would be the sentiments of the others, before we can either applaud or condemn it.' This passage was removed from the text for the 2nd edition.

emotions, intentions and beliefs, one might expect that he himself as his internal spectator has a natural advantage over his external spectator. These cognitive advantages of the internal spectator are, however, counterbalanced by certain disadvantages: An agent who relies on self-judgment exclusively rather than exposing himself also to the judgment of an external spectator is likely to deceive himself: ‘... there is not in the world such a smoother of wrinkles as in every man’s imagination, with regard to the blemishes of his own character’ (TMS III, 112).⁵⁴ Self-judgments based on self-deceit may well be incompatible with the corresponding judgment of an external spectator: ‘... self-deceit’, says Smith, ‘is the source of half the disorders of human life’ (TMS III.4.6, 158).

The agent’s privileged access to his own thoughts, emotions and intentions allows him to make himself an object of self-judgment already in the state of intention:

There are two different occasions upon which we examine our own conduct, and endeavour to view it in the light in which the impartial spectator would view it: first, when we are about to act; and secondly, after we have acted. (TMS III.4.2, 157)

Smith is aware of the danger of self-deceit in both cases; but he sees a comparatively greater challenge to overcome partiality while an agent is under the ‘eagerness of passion’, when he is responding emotionally to circumstances and about to act: ‘... the eagerness of passion will seldom allow us to consider what we are doing, with the candour of an indifferent person’ (TMS III.4.3, 157). Therefore, we have often occasion to look back at our past actions with ‘vain regret and unavailing repentance’ (TMS III.4.5, 158). This regret and repentance are the driving forces of moral learning through involvements in sympathetic processes, especially with one’s ‘judge within’. But Smith is perfectly aware of the fact that the exercise of self-control over the selfish passions represents a constant challenge: Regret over past actions does not always secure us ‘from the like errors in time to come’ (TMS III.4.5, 158).

Given the challenges involved in taking an impartial spectator’s view of oneself when under the influence of passion, Smith recommends that a person who is about to act relies on ‘general rules of morality’ (TMS III.4.8, 159) for making his choices. His device should be that ‘all such actions are to be avoided, as tending to render us odious, contemptible, or punishable, the objects of all those sentiments for which we have the greatest dread and aversion’ (TMS III.4.7, 159). This meta-rule recommends acting always in accordance with the general rules of morality. For making the general rules of morality explicit, an agent can rely on previous experience of behavior that was generally approved, as well as on inductive reasoning.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ This passage was removed from the text already for the 2nd edition.

⁵⁵ See also TMS III.4.7-8, 159-160; III.2.5, 116; VII.iii.2.7, 320. At TMS III.5.2, 163, Smith speaks of these rules in terms of ‘the general rules of civility and hospitality’.

Smith is optimistic that the general rules of morality widely respected by the members of a social community do not normally miss real propriety entirely: After all, at least some of the social norms and rules which members of a community have agreed to respect in a continuous process over generations will have been constituted through sympathetic processes in which people get naturally involved, due to their sympathy.⁵⁶ One should, however, not overlook that relying on these rules for making a moral self-judgment is second best in comparison to properly engaging in a sympathetic process. This is because, general as these rules inevitably are, they may be ‘loose’ and ‘inaccurate’ when it comes to judging about a particular case (TMS III.6.2, 171).⁵⁷ Given their general nature, they do not allow for a sensitivity to detail – concerning both the individual agent and the circumstances which affect him and to which he responds – as it characterizes the attitude of the impartial spectator.⁵⁸ But, on the other hand, ‘without ... [a] sacred regard to general rules, there is no man whose conduct can be much depended upon’ (TMS III.5.2, 163). And since these rules represent inductive generalizations of previously observed behavior that was generally found socially acceptable, they presuppose sympathetic processes of socialization and moral education. Indeed, Smith is optimistic in his claim that ‘there is scarce any man, ..., who by discipline, education, and example, may not be so impressed with a regard to general rules, as to act upon almost every occasion with tolerable decency, and through the whole of his life to avoid any considerable degree of blame’ (TMS III.5.2, 163).

The conscientious external spectator and the equally conscientious agent can disagree in their moral judgments about the agent and his response to certain circumstances because none of them is immune to error. Disagreement will represent a challenge for both of them, and they will try to detect their errors and eliminate them. Still, disagreement between them may prevail. This brings us back to Smith’s claim according to which more authority, more independence ‘of popular opinion’ (Corr, 49) should be accorded to the self-judgment of an agent rather than to that of a conscientious external spectator.⁵⁹ But why? Would one not – in the light of what Smith says about the dangers of self-deceit – , draw the opposite conclusion and say that, in cases of remaining disagreement, the conscientious external spectator should be trusted more than the agent and his self-judgment? After all, it is the ‘judge within’ who has to rely on ‘the general rules of morality’ rather than on sympathetic processes exclusively for preventing self-deceit. And the ‘general rules of morality’ (TMS III.4.8, 159) are likely to represent an important part of ‘popular opinion’.

⁵⁶ See on the topic of the constitution of social norms and rules TMS III.4.7-8, 159-160.

⁵⁷ See also TMS VI.ii.1.22, 227. This does, however, not apply to the rules of justice, but these rules are of a different kind and function anyway. See TMS III.6.10, 175 and Fricke 2011.

⁵⁸ Carrasco makes this point, referring it back to Aristotle and to Douglas S. Hutchinson’s reading of Aristotle in particular. See Carrasco 2004: 90 and 108. More recently, the point has been repeated by Amartya Sen. See Sen 2009: chap. 1.

⁵⁹ See above, p. *. See also Broadie 2006: 180: ‘The impartial (internal) spectator ‘cannot simply be a repository of social opinion, nor is it possible to reduce the judgment of the impartial [internal] spectator to the judgment of society ...’.

Smith does not claim that, when disagreement prevails even between a conscientious agent and his equally conscientious spectator after they have tried to detect and eliminate errors in their respective moral judgments, preference should be given to the self-judgment of the agent. On the level of common morality, such a disagreement cannot be overcome. Only a wise and virtuous person can help to detect remaining errors and pave the way to an agreement and a state of mutual sympathy. Smith's idea, it seems to me, is that common people, when engaged in sympathetic processes, be it as agents or as spectators, will tend to respect 'the common rules of morality' rather than questioning them. But this does not mean that they are – or should be – concerned about praise for respecting the common rules of morality rather than about real praiseworthiness. Wide-spread respect for 'the common rules of morality' enables a society to exist.⁶⁰ But these rules vary from one society to another. Implicit in Smith's account of an uncommon degree of wisdom and virtue and in his distinction between two standards of propriety is his denial that moral judgments or self-judgments about particular agents made in accordance with the 'common rules of morality' can as such claim to tell us what is really proper or morally right, what is really praiseworthy and what is not. People can only reach beyond the communal morality of 'mere propriety' and understand what real propriety consists in by becoming 'wise and virtuous'. But this is a challenge and only few people actually make the effort.

VI. The 'wise and virtuous'

In order to understand the role Smith attributes to conscience in a person's questioning the common rules of morality and trying to acquire an idea of what real propriety or impartiality consists in, we have to look at his account of the 'wise and virtuous', of those few men⁶¹ who have acquired more than common virtue, who raise 'above what is vulgar and ordinary' (TMS I.i.5.6, 25) and understand better than others – even though still not perfectly – what real propriety or moral truth consists in: They direct their attention to 'the idea of exact propriety and perfection' rather than to 'that degree of approximation to this idea which is commonly attained in the world' (TMS VI.iii.23, 247).

What is it, that distinguishes the uncommonly 'wise and virtuous' man from ordinary people? What is it, that his conscience allows him to achieve what ordinary conscientious people do not achieve? Smith's answer to this question is surprisingly simple: What he attributes to the uncommonly 'wise and virtuous' is nothing but an extraordinary degree of self-command, combined with more comprehensive knowledge of the facts relevant for a moral judgment about a particular agent at a particular time and place, responding to particular circumstances. Both features are essential for

⁶⁰ See TMS III.5.2, 163.

⁶¹ Indeed, Smith speaks exclusively of 'men' in his account of uncommon degrees of wisdom and virtue. But there is nothing in his theory that stands in the way of allowing women to achieve such a degree of wisdom and virtue just as well.

enabling the wise and virtuous to be really impartial and to always ‘regard ... the rules of justice’ (TMS VI.i.15, 216). Other than the common rules of morality, these rules are ‘accurate in the highest degree, and admit of no exceptions or modifications’ (TMS III.6.10, 175) and impose on the wise and virtuous man ‘a sacred and religious regard not to hurt or disturb in any respect the happiness of ... [his] neighbour, even in those cases where no law can properly protect him’ (TMS VI.ii.intro.2, 218). Lack of self-command and lack of relevant information are sources of partiality and might come in the way of unconditionally respecting the rules of justice.

What characterizes the wise and virtuous is that they are more suspicious than ordinary people, not only about themselves and their own passions, but also about the prejudices and partiality that might be inherent in the common morality of their culture: They suspect remaining partiality, be it in favor of themselves or in favor of those whose cultural habits they share. Rather than trusting the common rules of morality, they try to look at an agent and his action from the point of view of all those who might, be it directly or indirectly, be affected by the respective consequences, be it within or outside the respective community. Their point of reference is not limited to a particular community but reaches out to the whole of mankind.⁶² In their search for hidden or commonly overlooked or ignored sources of partiality, they have to rely on as much information as they can get hold of and which might be relevant for the moral evaluation of the agent. There are indeed several passages where Smith underlines the importance of comprehensiveness of relevant information for making an impartial judgment.⁶³

The sympathy of a ‘wise and virtuous’ spectator is a ‘reflected passion’ (TMS I.i.4.8, 22). But his capacity of moral reflection should not prevent the wise and virtuous moral judge from directly addressing the agent who is the object of his reflection, and this agent may well be some other person. The wise and virtuous man as Smith describes him does not have to be in a state of withdrawal from society, he is not exclusively an internal, virtual spectator morally judging himself. But there may be societies where corruption is so widely spread that no agent is willing to engage in a sympathetic process with a wise and virtuous man. In such cases, he cannot help but relying on his self-judgment exclusively, without hoping to achieve a state of mutual sympathy with anybody else.⁶⁴

Still, the uncommonly wise and virtuous man should not be too sure about the superiority of his moral understanding in comparison with ordinary people. The feeling of superiority can be still another source of prejudice and partiality. A man’s wisdom and virtue should always be accompanied by a certain amount of self-criticism, by the constant awareness of ‘the imperfect success of all his best endeavours’ and of the difficulty to successfully avoid all spectatorial errors as they arise in ‘want of attention’ or ‘want of judgment’ (TMS VI.iii.25, 247). He should have ‘real modesty’ in judging

⁶² See above, p. *.

⁶³ See TMS III.2.5, 116, III.4.6,159, and VI.iii.1,237.

⁶⁴ See for exp. TMS VI.iii.18, 245.

his achievement in the realm of self-command and knowledge (TMS VI.iii.25, 248). His real modesty includes a constant memory of the fact that ‘he is but one of the multitude’ (TMS II.ii.2.1, 83) and that the superiority of his self-command and knowledge does not raise him above this multitude once and for all times.

His modesty enables the wise and virtuous man to sacrifice his own private interest to the public interest.⁶⁵ But this does not mean that he should be willing to sacrifice himself. His being one of the multitude means that he is neither better nor worse than any other, and for this reason he should not neglect himself either.⁶⁶ Furthermore, even for the wise and virtuous absolute certainty in moral matters is not possible. The ‘approbation of ... conscience can scarce ... content the weakness of man’ (TMS III.3.1, 134), and the wise and virtuous man is no exception.⁶⁷ His superior self-command and knowledge should not induce him to rely on his conscience and ‘judge within’ exclusively when making moral judgments. He should continue to take the part of an external spectator and get involved in sympathetic processes with other agents:

Our uncertainty concerning our own merit, and our anxiety to think favorably of it, should together naturally enough make us desirous to know the opinion of other people concerning it. (TMS III.2.24, 126)⁶⁸

The man of the most perfect virtue, the man whom we naturally love and revere the most, is he who joins, to the most perfect command of his own original and selfish feelings, the most exquisite sensibility both to the original and sympathetic feelings of others. (TMS III.3.35, 152)

Due to his conscientious self-command and high degree of information, a wise and virtuous man can make justified claims to a higher degree of impartiality for his moral judgments than other people. But since even he cannot make any claims to ultimate certainty,⁶⁹ he should not insulate himself from others but stay involved with them: On the one hand, he can be a role model for others,⁷⁰ and on the other, there may be other people who, even though being neither wise nor virtuous, challenge the moral judgments by the wise and virtuous by relying on their natural sympathy alone.

VII. Conclusion

We can now see that the suspicion of inconsistency raised by Elliot concerns the interface of Smith’s moral psychology with his explicitly normative meta-ethics. An

⁶⁵ See TMS VI.ii..3.3, 235.

⁶⁶ See TMS VI.iii.18, 244-245. But there are exceptions for military personal, for exp. soldiers. See TMS VI.ii.3.4, 236.

⁶⁷ See also III.2.24, 126 and 128

⁶⁸ See also TMS III.2.28-29, 127.

⁶⁹ This is an aspect of Smith’s conception of moral judgment that has been stressed by Emma Rothschild. See Rothschild 2001: 38-39. See also Ballestrem 2001: 79.

⁷⁰ See TMS VI.ii.17, 224.

agent learns from his external spectator to look at himself as his own spectator. This is a natural move for the agent to make in response to untrustworthy judges and external spectators who disagree among each other: The agent cannot please all of them. The motivation for the agent to make this move can be explained in psychological and pragmatic terms. But underlying it is the agent's concern for understanding what is really proper or right, rather than just trusting the appearances (appearances – in the shape of actual praise – do not provide a consistent idea of what is really proper). The agent, by becoming his own conscientious judge, is explicitly concerned about real praiseworthiness, he does not any more trust actual praise to reveal what is really praiseworthy. By acquiring conscience, however, he does not endorse the external spectators apparently naïve trust in the rightness of the standards underlying his moral judgments. His concern for impartiality induces him to question the impartiality of his external spectators.

In his suspicion of inconsistency, Elliot overlooked the transition from the merely psychological to the normative realm of Smith's moral theory – a transition every rational agent has to make in the course of his moral education. When the distinction between Smith's enquiry into moral psychology on the one hand and his normative moral theory on the other is made explicit, the apparent inconsistency disappears.

In any case should a person, in all states of her or his moral development, rely on sympathy and sympathetic processes for making a moral judgment – rather than on general principles exclusively. The 'wise and virtuous' are no exception from this device. Notwithstanding this, respect of the 'common rules of morality' in self-judgment can be instrumental for avoiding the dangers of self-deceit. But this is merely a pragmatic point. These rules are not sacrosanct. They may be challenged, but only uncommonly wise and virtuous people should endeavor to do so. Wisdom and virtue do not depend on access to some kind of absolute moral knowledge. Wisdom and virtue simply consist in an uncommon high and persistent degree of self command and factual information. For the evaluative part of their judgment, the wise and virtuous depend on their natural sympathy – just as everybody else.

Bibliography

Smith, Adam (1976/1984) *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Smith, Adam (1977/1987) *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*. Ed by Ernest Campbell Mossner and Iam Simpson Ross. Indianapolis: Libert Fund.

Ballestrem, Karl Graf (2001) *Adam Smith*. München: Beck.

Berry, Christopher J. (1997) *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Berry, Christopher J. (2003) 'Sociality and Socialization'. In: Alexander Broadie (ed) *The Scottish Enlightenment*. Cambridge: CUP, 243 – 257.

Broadie, Alexander (2006) 'Sympathy and the Impartial Spectator'. In: Knud Haakonssen (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*. Cambridge: CUP.

Brown, Vivienne (1994) *Adam Smith's Discourse. Canonicity, commerce and conscience*. London/New York: Routledge.

Alexander Broadie (2010) *A History of Scottish Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Campbell, T.D. (1971) *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield.

Carrasco, Maria Alejandra (2004) 'Adam Smith's Reconstruction of Practical Reason'. *The Review of Metaphysics* 58/1, 81 – 116.

Carrasco, Maria Alejandra (2011) 'From psychology to moral normativity'. In: *The Adam Smith Review* VI, 9-29

Carrasco, Maria Alejandra (forthcoming) 'Self-command, Practical Reason and Deontological Insights'. In: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*.

Carrasco, Maria Alejandra (under review) 'Varieties of Spectatorial Ethics'.

Darwall, Stephen (2004) 'Equal Dignity in Adam Smith.' In *The Adam Smith Review* I, 129-134.

Darwall, Stephen (2006) *The Second Person Standpoint. Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge/Massachusetts and London/England: Harvard University Press.

Firth, Anne (2007) 'Adam Smith's moral philosophy as ethical self-formation'. In: Geoff Cockfield, Ann Firth, John Laurent (eds) *New Perspectives on Adam Smith's 'Theory of Moral Sentiments'*. Cheltenham, UK / Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar.

Fleischacker, Samuel (1991) 'Philosophy in Moral Practice: Kant and Adam Smith'. In *Kant-Studien* 82, 249-269.

Fleischacker, Samuel (1999) *A Third Concept of Liberty. Judgment and Freedom in Kant and Adam Smith*. Princeton/New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Fleischacker, Samuel (2005) 'Smith und der Kulturrelativismus'. In: Fricke und Schütt (eds), 100-127.

- Forman-Barzilai, Fonna (2010) *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy. Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Fricke, Christel and Schütt, Hans-Peter (eds) (2005) *Adam Smith als Moralphilosoph*. Berlin/New York: deGruyter.
- Fricke, Christel (2011) Adam Smith and the ‘Most Sacred Rules of Justice’. In *The Adam Smith Review* VI, 46-74.
- Frazer, Michael L. (2010) *The Enlightenment of Sympathy. Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today*. Oxford: OUP.
- Griswold, Charles (1999) *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Haakonssen, Knud (1989) *The Science of a Legislator. The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Hanley, Ryan Patrick (2009) *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Heilbroner, Robert L. (1981) ‘The socialization of the individual in Adam Smith.’ *History of Political Economy* 14/3, 427-439.
- Hope, V.M. (1989) *Virtue by Consensus. The Moral Philosophy of Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Macfie, A. L. (1967) *The Individual in Society. Papers on Adam Smith*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Muller, Jerry Z, (1993) *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours. Designing the Decent Society*. New York: The Free Press.
- Nagel, Thomas (1991) *Equality and Partiality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Otteson, James R. (2002) *Adam Smith’s Marketplace of Life*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Phillipson, Nicholas (1985) ‘Adam Smith as civic moralist.’ In: Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds) *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*. Cambridge: CUP, 179-202.
- Phillipson, Nicholas (2010) *Adam Smith. An Enlightened Life*. London: Penguin Books.
- Raphael, D.D. (2007) *The Impartial Spectator. Adam Smith’s Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Raphael, D.D. and Macfie, A.L. (eds) (1976/1984) ‘Introduction.’ In: Adam Smith. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1-52.

- Rothschild, Emma (2001) *Economic Sentiments*. Cambridge/Massachusetts and London/England: Harvard University Press.
- Rothschild, Emma (2004) 'Dignity or meanness.' In: *The Adam Smith Review* 1, 150-164.
- Sen, Amartya (2002) 'Open and Closed Impartiality'. In *The Journal of Philosophy* XCIX/9, 445-469.
- Sen, Amartya (2009) *The Idea of Justice*. London: Penguin Books.
- Skinner, Andrew Stewart (1996) *A System of Social Science. Papers Relating to Adam Smith*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Tugendhat, Ernst (1997) 'Die Erweiterung des Kantischen Konzepts im Anschluß an Adam Smith: universalistisch gebilligte intersubjektive Handlungen.' In: Ernst Tugendhat, *Vorlesungen über Ethik*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 282-309. English translation (2004) in *The Adam Smith Review* I, 88-104.
- Valihora, Karen (2001) The Judgement of Judgement: Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41/2, 138-161.
- Young, Iris Marion (1997) *Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*. Princeton/New Jersey: Princeton University Press.