

DAWES HICKS LECTURE ON PHILOSOPHY
THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR

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ADAM SMITH is in one respect particularly fitted to be the subject of a Dawes Hicks Lecture because he was himself one of the first students of the history of philosophy. For an eighteenth-century writer the term 'philosophy' meant philosophy and science. Smith's three essays on the history of astronomy, of ancient physics, and of ancient logic and metaphysics are, I believe, the remains of his earliest project for a book. Towards the end of his life he thought of putting this together with his literary studies in 'a sort of Philosophical History of the different branches of Literature, of Philosophy, Poetry and Eloquence'.¹ 'Philosophical history'² had a special appeal for Adam Smith. His lectures on moral philosophy included a substantial treatment of the history of the subject; and his lectures on jurisprudence were basically a history of law within the framework of a history of forms of government and forms of society.

Smith's practice of philosophical history was much akin to our modern British approach to the history of philosophy. His interest was no less philosophical than historical. He studied the history of thought for the purposes of criticism and of building more soundly than his predecessors. While his historical researches were certainly designed to discover historical truth, he believed that there was also a philosophical truth to be found and that attention to history could help find it. Thus his essays on the history of astronomy, etc., were intended to confirm a theory of scientific method, and his survey of earlier theories of moral philosophy included critical appraisal, carrying the suggestion that his own theory was less defective. Intentions of course can differ from actual consequences. (No one knew that

¹ Letter of 1 November 1785 to the Duc de la Rochefoucauld.

² Some modern students of Smith's work have been captivated by the name of 'conjectural history' coined by Dugald Stewart. (He in fact suggested 'the title of *Theoretical or Conjectural History*'.) In my opinion the adjective 'conjectural' is seriously misleading when applied to most of the historical interests of Adam Smith.

better than Adam Smith, who in two celebrated passages wrote of men being led by an invisible hand to produce effects which they had not intended.) Smith went into the history of jurisprudence in the hope of 'establishing a system of . . . natural jurisprudence, or a theory of the general principles which ought to run through, and be the foundation of, the laws of all nations'.¹ He never succeeded in producing a theory of natural jurisprudence, but instead his inquiries led him to write the *Wealth of Nations*.

No doubt that is a symptom of the fact that Adam Smith's bent was scientific rather than philosophical. Despite his philosophic interests, shown in a tendency to make connections and to raise general questions, Smith was in one way markedly unphilosophical: paradoxical metaphysics left him cold. In an essay on the external senses he applauded Berkeley's interpretation of vision in terms of touch, but there is not the ghost of any reference to Berkeley's general idealism, though Smith must surely have read the *Principles of Human Knowledge* as well as the *New Theory of Vision*. Similarly with Hume. Adam Smith was one of the few people of his time who took the measure of Hume's positive achievements in philosophy; Smith's emphasis on the constructive role of the imagination in his theory of scientific method,² and the function which he assigned to nature

¹ TMS, VII. iv. 37 (i.e. *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 6th and subsequent editions, Part VII, section iv, paragraph 37). This is in fact the last paragraph of the book.

² I am thinking of Smith's essay on the history of astronomy, the lengthiest of his 'illustrations' of 'the principles which lead and direct philosophical enquiries'. Section ii is thoroughly Humean in its account of the imagination at work in the association of ideas, especially when the imagination 'endeavours to . . . fill up the gap' if the 'customary connection be interrupted'.

Some of Smith's closest associates must have thought so too. His heir, David Douglas, evidently sent to John Millar a description of Smith's remaining manuscripts, and Millar, in his reply of 10 August 1790, wrote: 'Of all his writings, I have most curiosity about the metaphysical work you mention. I should like to see his powers of illustration employed upon the true old Humean philosophy.' W. R. Scott, who printed this letter in *Adam Smith as Student and Professor* (311-13) added a note (313): 'There is no trace of this MS.' Elsewhere in the same book (115, note 3) Scott surmised that the 'metaphysical work' might be the 'Principles which direct Philosophical Enquiries' or else 'an unknown manuscript'. To my mind there is not the slightest doubt that it is the former. The titles of all three of the essays concerned state that the principles are 'illustrated' by the history of astronomy, etc., and this is clearly picked up in Millar's phrase 'his powers of illustration'.

It is, I think, commonly supposed that Hume's contemporaries fastened

in his ethical theory, must both have come from an appreciation of Hume. Yet the sceptical and paradoxical side of Hume's treatment of metaphysical problems such as causation, substance, and identity simply flowed off Smith's mind like water off a duck's back.

None the less it would be a mistake to dismiss Adam Smith from the history of philosophy as a great economist who happened to be a professor of philosophy before he found his true *métier*. Certainly Smith himself never thought that he had abandoned philosophy, and according to Sir Samuel Romilly he 'always considered his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* a much superior work to his *Wealth of Nations*'.¹ He spent his last years revising and expanding the *Moral Sentiments* to such an extent that the resulting sixth edition, published shortly before his death, was virtually a new book. The fact is that a man can be a philosopher of distinction without reaching eminence in both main branches of the subject. A Berkeley, a Russell, a Wittgenstein can count for much in the philosophy of knowledge and for nothing in the philosophy of practice. Conversely, a Rousseau, an Adam Smith, a Bentham can count for nothing in the philosophy of knowledge and for much in the philosophy of practice. The positive advance that Smith made in moral philosophy was as great as Hume's (though he could not match the negative force of Hume's assault on ethical rationalism) and represents the culmination of an important movement of empiricist ethics.

Smith's main contribution to this movement lies in two things, his theory of imaginative sympathy and his notion of the impartial spectator. Each of these he developed from ideas that he had found in Hume, but in each the development was touched with a subtlety that makes the result original. The name of Adam Smith in the history of ethics is chiefly associated with the concept of the impartial spectator because the phrase sounds so distinctive. His concept of sympathy is in fact equally

upon the sceptical side of his theory of knowledge and failed to appreciate his positive doctrine of naturalism and the role which he assigned to the imagination, so well brought out in our own day by N. Kemp Smith (*The Philosophy of David Hume*) and H. H. Price (*Hume's Theory of the External World*). One is not surprised to find that Adam Smith's reaction to Hume differed from 'the Reid-Beattie interpretation' (Kemp Smith's phrase). It is, however, interesting to observe that Smith's friends, Douglas and Millar, not only recognized Smith's essays as having a Humean basis but were ready to speak of 'the true old Humean philosophy'.

¹ *Memoirs of Sir Samuel Romilly*, i. 403; quoted by John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*, 436.

distinctive and differs from the notion of sympathy in ethics employed by Hume before him and other writers after him.

A theory of moral judgement based upon the feelings of spectators is found in the three Scottish philosophers, Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith. Rationalist theories of moral judgement begin from the standpoint of the moral agent. So do those empiricist theories that presuppose an egoistic psychology. Francis Hutcheson was not the first empiricist philosopher to question an egoistic psychology, but he probably was the first to insist upon disinterested judgements as well as disinterested motives. Lord Shaftesbury and Bishop Butler both argued for disinterested motives, but neither of them could fully shake off the conviction that in the last resort an agent must justify an action on grounds of self-interest. At any rate, whether or not influenced by this conviction, Shaftesbury and Butler gave accounts of moral judgement in terms of the psychology of the moral agent alone. They spoke of the agent reflecting upon his motives and thereby forming a judgement. Shaftesbury used the *phrase* 'moral sense', but not to express the moral sense theory proper, which was invented by Hutcheson.

The moral sense, as understood by Hutcheson, is a disinterested feeling of approval naturally evoked when we come across the disinterested motive of benevolence (and a feeling of disapproval for motives with a tendency opposed to that of benevolence). Hutcheson compared the moral sense with the disinterested feeling of love or admiration aroused by objects that we call beautiful. This was not to say quite that beauty and virtue are in the heart of the beholder, for the *objects* of moral approval and aesthetic liking respectively have their own particular character; moral approval is directed upon benevolence, and aesthetic admiration is directed upon unity-in-variety. Nevertheless benevolence alone does not constitute virtue for Hutcheson, and unity-in-variety alone does not constitute beauty. Virtue is benevolence approved, and beauty is unity-in-variety admired. The reaction of a spectator is a necessary though not a sufficient condition. Since Hutcheson was at pains to stress the disinterestedness of moral approval and disapproval, he had to concentrate on the reaction of a spectator; approval of benevolence by the agent himself may well be, and approval by the beneficiary is almost bound to be, an interested approval. It is not surprising, then, that Hutcheson should often refer to 'spectators' or 'observers' in explaining his views. (I have added the italics in the quotations as given here.)

'Virtue is then called amiable or lovely, from its raising goodwill or love in *spectators* towards the agent';¹ 'does not *every spectator* approve the pursuit of public good more than private?'² 'it is more probable, when our actions are really kind and publicly useful, that *all observers* shall . . . approve what we approve ourselves';³ 'do these words [merit, praiseworthiness] denote the quality in actions, which gains approbation from *the observer*, . . . or . . . are these actions called meritorious, which, when *any observer* does approve, *all other observers* approve him for his approbation . . . ?'⁴

Hume added to this theory an explanation of the moral sense or 'moral sentiment' of approval and disapproval. It is, he said, a feeling of pleasure and displeasure of a particular kind, and it arises from sympathy with the pleasure or pain of the person affected by the action judged. Benevolence pleases the observer because it brings pleasure to the beneficiary. Hume did not follow Hutcheson in confining virtue to benevolence. That was too simple a scheme, and Hume saw that a satisfactory theory needed to give a more complex account of what he called the 'artificial' virtues, notably justice. Essentially, however, he founded all moral approval on sympathy. For the same reasons as Hutcheson he analysed moral judgement from the point of view of a spectator. 'The hypothesis which we embrace . . . defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary.'⁵ Hume distinguished the language of morals from the language of self-love. The language of morals, in being disinterested, expresses feelings common to all mankind. When a man speaks the language of self-love he expresses sentiments 'arising from his particular circumstances and situation'; but when he speaks the language of morals he must 'depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to him with others: he must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string, to which all mankind have an accord and symphony'.⁶ The 'sentiments' that Hume's spectator feels are impartial and (in a sense) rational; impartial because disinterested, and rational because universal. In one

¹ *Inquiry concerning Virtue* (ed. 4), I. viii; D. D. Raphael, *British Moralists 1650-1800*, § 314.

² *Illustrations upon the Moral Sense* (ed. 3), I; Raphael, § 362.

³ *Illustrations*, IV; Raphael, § 370.

⁴ *Illustrations*, V; Raphael, § 373.

⁵ *Enquiry concerning Morals*, Appendix I; ed. Selby-Bigge, § 239.

⁶ *Enquiry*, IX. i; ed. Selby-Bigge, § 222.

place Hume wrote of 'a judicious spectator',¹ and elsewhere of 'every spectator'² or 'every bystander'.³ The concept, though not the precise name, of an impartial spectator is there already in Hume.

What is original in Adam Smith is the development of the concept to explain the judgements of conscience made by an agent about his own actions. A spectator theory accounts most easily for judgements made in the third person and well enough for second-person judgements, but is apt to be in difficulties with judgements made in the first person. It is also more comfortable with passing verdicts on what has been done in the past than with considering and deciding what should be done in the future. Ethical rationalists concentrated on the idea of duty and on a criterion for determining one's duty. Hutcheson and Hume thought more of virtue and the assessment of virtue by third parties; on the idea of duty or obligation they were decidedly weak.

Smith's theory of the impartial spectator did not, like Athena, spring fully armed at its first appearance from the head of its creator. A distinct development can be seen in changes made both in the second edition of the *Moral Sentiments*, published a couple of years after the first, and in the sixth edition, published thirty years later. A recently discovered letter shows that the relevant new material added in the second edition was in answer to a criticism made privately to Smith by Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto. I believe there is evidence enough to say that the earliest version of Smith's lectures on moral philosophy did not contain the theory at all. Glasgow University Library possesses a short manuscript⁴ which is unquestionably, in my opinion, the latter part of one of Smith's lectures on ethics from which he later composed the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. (Indeed the manuscript contains that expression as his name for the subject.) In this fragment there is no mention of the impartial spectator although much of the discussion is concerned with reactions that

¹ *Treatise of Human Nature*, III. iii. 1; ed. Selby-Bigge, p. 581. So did Hutcheson in his lectures, published posthumously in 1755 as *A System of Moral Philosophy* (vol. i, p. 235).

² *Treatise*, III. iii. 1; ed. Selby-Bigge, p. 591: *Enquiry*, V. i; ed. Selby-Bigge, § 172.

³ *Enquiry*, Appendix III; ed. Selby-Bigge, § 260.

⁴ I have published the text, and have discussed several questions affecting the manuscript, in an article entitled 'Adam Smith and "the infection of David Hume's society"', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, xxx (1969), 225-48.

go to form the sense of justice and the measure of just punishment. Smith spoke of what 'we' feel, of 'our heart' or of 'mankind' naturally applauding a punishment. In one place he wrote that the magistrate who hears a complaint of injustice 'promises . . . to give that redress which to any impartial person shall appear to be just and equitable'; and when he reproduced this passage in the *Moral Sentiments*¹ it became simply 'the magistrate . . . promises to hear and to redress every complaint of injury'. The word 'impartial' in the manuscript is significant only of its normal usage in a context of justice and equity. Since Smith wrote 'any impartial *person*' he clearly had not, at this date (c. 1752), formulated the doctrine of the impartial spectator. Nor had he done so when he first wrote the shorter form of words that eventually appeared in the *Moral Sentiments*. In the lecture Smith said that there was no precise rule for determining the proper degree of resentment or punishment, and that this aspect of justice (though not others) was loose and indeterminate, like beneficence. By 1759, when the *Moral Sentiments* was first printed, he had reached the view that there was a precise criterion: the proper or just degree of resentment or punishment was that degree which had the sympathy of the impartial spectator.²

In the course of editing the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* I have spent a good deal of time collating the text of all editions published in Adam Smith's lifetime and working out the exact nature of the revisions he introduced. That kind of exercise gives one an eye for spotting earlier and later composition. There are many passages in the *Moral Sentiments* which appear to me to come from an early draft and which, like the manuscript lecture on justice, speak of moral judgements as expressing the feelings, not of a 'spectator', but of 'us' or 'mankind' or 'other people' or 'the company' or 'strangers'. ('We' and 'mankind' are especially common.) The theory, no less than the theories of Hutcheson and Hume, begins from the spectator's point of view, but it does not need to stress the word 'spectator' at that stage. Nor does it need Adam Smith's special concept of the *impartial* spectator so long as it is confined to judgements made in the second or the third person. The spectator is 'indifferent' in the sense of not being an interested party, and he expresses a universal point of view in being representative of any observer

¹ VII. iv. 36. The reference is to the sixth and subsequent editions, but the words were written for the first edition and remained unchanged.

² TMS, II. ii. 2. 1-2 (i.e. Part II, sect. ii, ch. 2, paras. 1-2).

with normal human feelings. For Adam Smith, however, the theory of Hutcheson and Hume could as well be stated in terms of 'mankind' or 'us' or 'strangers'.

Smith began to stress the impartiality of the spectator only when he came to theorize about the *effect on the agent* of the reactions of spectators. Smith's spectator is first called 'impartial' in the chapter that distinguishes between 'the amiable and the respectable virtues', the virtues of humanity on the one hand and of self-command on the other. Humanity is a more than average degree of sympathetic feeling and is the result of an effort by the spectator to heighten his sympathy so as to match the experience of 'the person principally concerned'. Self-command is conversely a virtue of 'the person principally concerned' and is the result of an endeavour to control natural emotion and to lower its pitch to that which the ordinary (not the especially humane) spectator feels by sympathy. It is in this latter context that Smith first used the phrase 'the impartial spectator'.¹ Humanity and self-command together constitute for Smith 'the perfection of human nature', a combination of Christian and Stoic virtue. 'As to love our neighbour as we love ourselves is the great law of Christianity, so it is the great precept of nature to love ourselves only as we love our neighbour, or, what comes to the same thing, as our neighbour is capable of loving us.'² Self-command is essentially to feel for ourselves only what we see others can feel for us.³

So too, according to Adam Smith, the approbation and disapprobation of oneself that we call conscience is an effect of judgements made by spectators. Each of us judges others as a spectator. Each of us finds spectators judging him. We then come to judge our own conduct by imagining whether an impartial spectator would approve or disapprove of it. 'We examine it as we imagine an impartial spectator would examine it.'⁴ Conscience is a social product, a mirror of social feeling. Without society, Smith wrote,⁵ a man 'could no more think of

¹ I. i. 5. 4.

² I. i. 5. 5.

³ In III. 4. 6 Smith writes of seeing ourselves 'in the light in which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all'. Professor A. L. Macfie (*The Individual in Society*, 66) has remarked that this must surely have inspired Burns's 'To see oursels as others see us' since Burns knew and valued Smith's book.

⁴ III. 1. 2, but with the wording of eds. 1-5. Ed. 6 expands the sentence to: 'We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it.'

⁵ III. 1. 3.

his own character, . . . of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face'. For both he needs a mirror. The mirror in which he can view his character 'is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with'. We are all anxious to stand well with our fellows. 'We begin, upon this account, to examine our own passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to them. . . . We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct.'¹

The 'supposed impartial spectator', as Smith often called him, is not the actual bystander who may express approval or disapproval of my conduct. He is a creation of my imagination. He is indeed myself, though in the character of an imagined spectator, not in the character of an agent.

To judge of ourselves as we judge of others . . . is the greatest exertion of candour and impartiality. In order to do this, we must look at ourselves with the same eyes with which we look at others: we must imagine ourselves not the actors, but the spectators of our own character and conduct. . . . We must enter, in short, either into what are, or into what ought to be, or into what, if the whole circumstances of our conduct were known, we imagine would be the sentiments of others, before we can either applaud or condemn it.²

On revising this passage for edition 2, Smith was more explicit:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, . . . it is evident that . . . I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator. . . . The second is the agent. . . .³

The impartial spectator, 'the man within', may judge differently from the actual spectator, 'the man without'. The voice of conscience reflects what I imagine that I, with all my knowledge of the situation, would feel if I were a spectator instead of an agent.

It is easy to miss this distinction and to suppose that conscience for Smith is purely a reflection of actual social attitudes. The misunderstanding is especially easy if one concentrates on

¹ III. 1. 5.

² This passage appeared in ed. 1 following what is now III. 1. 3.

³ III. 1. 6.

a passage that in edition 1 appeared at an early stage in the discussion:

To be amiable and to be meritorious; that is, to deserve love and to deserve reward, are the great characters of virtue; and to be odious and punishable, of vice. But all these characters have an immediate reference to the sentiments of others. Virtue is not said to be amiable, or to be meritorious, because it is the object of its own love, or of its own gratitude; but because it excites those sentiments in other men. The consciousness that it is the object of such favourable regards, is the source of that inward tranquillity and self-satisfaction with which it is naturally attended, as the suspicion of the contrary gives occasion to the torments of vice.¹

The view that conscience reflects actual social attitudes faces a difficulty: if this view were correct, how could conscience ever go against popular opinion, as it clearly sometimes does? This must have been the objection put to Smith by Sir Gilbert Elliot in a letter written soon after the publication of the first edition of the *Moral Sentiments*. Smith replied on 10 October 1759 and sent Elliot a copy of a lengthy revision obviously written as an instruction to the printer.² He said in his letter that the revision was 'intended both to confirm my Doctrine that our judgements concerning our own conduct have always a reference to the sentiments of some other being, and to shew that, notwithstanding this, real magnanimity and conscious virtue can support itself under the disapprobation of all mankind'. The revision differs in some slight details from that which was subsequently incorporated in edition 2 of the book, published late in 1760 (and imprinted 1761). In principle, however, the development of the doctrine of the impartial spectator in edition 2 was due to the objection made by Elliot.

On the one hand Smith wanted to retain the traditional view that the voice of conscience represents the voice of God and is superior to popular opinion. On the other hand he believed that conscience is initially an effect of social approval and disapproval; in the first instance, *vox populi* is *vox Dei*. 'The author of nature has made man the immediate judge of mankind, and has, in this respect, as in many others, created him after his own image, and appointed him his vicegerent upon earth to superintend the behaviour of his brethren.'³ Although the developed conscience is a superior tribunal, 'yet, if we enquire into the

¹ III. 1. 7.

² The letter and the accompanying revision are in the National Library of Scotland, Minto papers 6. 5.

³ III. 2. 31, but as it appears in the draft sent to Elliot and in ed. 2.

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'.¹

How, then, does the superior tribunal acquire its independence? We find by experience that our first fond hopes of winning everyone's approbation are unattainable; 'by pleasing one man, we . . . disoblige another'. In practice bystanders tend to be biassed by partiality and ignorance. And so we imagine an impartial spectator. '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.' Smith then went on to describe the impartial spectator as 'this inmate of the breast, this abstract man, the representative of mankind, and substitute of the Deity'. As in perception, true judgements require the use of imagination. Smith illustrated the analogy with his perception of distant hills through the windows of his study. To the eye the hills are enclosed within the small space of the window-frame; in order to obtain a true judgement of the relative sizes of the vista and the window, one needs to imagine oneself at roughly equal distances from both.²

It is significant that at one place edition 2 dropped a paragraph which had appeared in edition 1 about the unreliability of the imagination as a 'moral looking-glass'. After speaking of the function of the imagination as the mirror in which we see our own character, Smith had added that, while ordinary mirrors can conceal deformities, 'there is not in the world such a smoother of wrinkles as is every man's imagination, with regard to the blemishes of his own character'.³ In the second edition he trusted the imagination more and society less.

This process was carried farther still in edition 6, where Smith wrote that it was the mark of vanity to be flattered by the praise of society and to ignore the truer judgement of conscience. Evidently Smith still felt the force of the objection that conscience was independent of social attitudes. Experience of the

¹ This quotation, and the two that follow it, occur shortly after the preceding one in the draft sent to Elliot and in ed. 2, but were removed from ed. 6. See below.

² In ed. 6 this comparison appears at III. 3. 2.

³ The paragraph followed what is now III. 1. 5.

world had in fact made him more distrustful of popular opinion. He was especially moved by the fate of Jean Calas, unjustly condemned at Toulouse in 1762 to torture and execution for the alleged murder of his son. Any educated European would have heard of the case from the prolonged advocacy of Calas's innocence by Voltaire; but Adam Smith knew more than that. He spent eighteen months at Toulouse in 1764-5 and must have heard much discussion of the city's *cause célèbre*. Smith referred to Calas in the course of a virtually new chapter added to edition 6 of the *Moral Sentiments* (III. 2), distinguishing the love of praise from that of praiseworthiness and the dread of blame from that of blameworthiness. Such a distinction was implicit in edition 2, where the approval and disapproval of actual spectators may be opposed by the judgement of conscience that one does not merit approval or disapproval. But whereas in edition 2 Smith had said that the jurisdiction of conscience 'is in a great measure derived from that very tribunal, whose decisions it so often and so justly reverses', in edition 6 he withdrew that statement and wrote instead that 'the jurisdictions of those two tribunals are founded upon principles which, though in some respects resembling and akin, are, however, in reality different and distinct'.¹ He was even ready to reverse the causal relationship in some instances. 'The love of praise-worthiness is by no means derived altogether from the love of praise.' The happiness which we receive from the approval of conscience is confirmed when actual spectators also approve. 'Their praise necessarily strengthens our own sense of our own praise-worthiness. In this case, so far is the love of praise-worthiness from being derived altogether from that of praise; that the love of praise seems, at least in a great measure, to be derived from that of praise-worthiness.'²

Adam Smith added some further elaboration of his theory in other new passages written for edition 6. As I have noted earlier, he first spoke of the 'impartial' spectator when describing the Stoic virtue of self-command, which he placed on a par with the Christian virtue of love. In edition 2 he followed up his reply to Sir Gilbert Elliot's objection with a discussion of the necessity of conscience to counter the force of self-love.³ The Christian virtue of love or benevolence or humanity, he said, is not strong enough for this purpose. (The words 'benevolence' and 'humanity' suggest an implicit criticism of the theories of Hutcheson and of Hume.) 'It is reason, principle, conscience,

¹ III. 2. 32.

² III. 2. 2-3.

³ To be found, with some revision, at III. 3. 3-5 of ed. 6.

the inhabitant of the breast, the man within. . . . It is from him only that we learn the real littleness of ourselves, . . . and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator.' This function of conscience is closely akin to self-command, and in edition 6 Smith proceeded in the same chapter to explain the origin and development of self-command in terms of 'that great discipline which Nature has established for the acquisition of this and every other virtue; a regard to the sentiments of the real or supposed spectator of our conduct'.¹ A child, Smith wrote, first learns to control emotion in order to gain the favour and avoid the contempt of his schoolfellows. A man of weak character is like a child; in misfortune he can control his feelings only when others are present. A man of greater firmness remains under the influence of the impartial spectator at all times, so much so that the division of the self into two persons, the imagined spectator and the agent, almost disappears; imagination virtually takes over from reality. 'He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel.'² But even the most stoical of men cannot altogether escape self-interested feelings in 'paroxysms of distress', such as losing a leg in battle. 'He does not, in this case, perfectly identify himself with the ideal man within the breast, he does not become himself the impartial spectator of his own conduct. The different views of both characters exist in his mind separate and distinct from one another, and each directing him to a behaviour different from that to which the other directs him.'³ Yet agony does not last for ever, and in due time the man who has lost a leg recovers his equanimity. He identifies himself again with 'the ideal man within the breast' and no longer laments his loss. 'The view of the impartial spectator becomes so perfectly habitual to him, that, without any effort, without any exertion, he never thinks of surveying his misfortune in any other view.'⁴

Here, as elsewhere, Smith distinguished the impartial 'supposed' spectator from the 'real' one. The rudimentary stage of the virtue of self-command, found in the child or the man of weak character, depends on the feelings of actual spectators. The higher stage, reached by the man of constancy, depends entirely on conscience. What is new in this passage is the view that the agent can identify himself with the imagined spectator to the extent of obliterating the natural feelings of self-regard.

¹ III. 3. 21.² III. 3. 25.³ III. 3. 28.⁴ III. 3. 29.

Smith returned to self-command in a later section also added in edition 6, and here he wrote of two different standards of moral judgement concerning ourselves. 'The one is the idea of exact propriety and perfection. . . . The other is that degree of approximation to this idea which is commonly attained in the world, and which the greater part of our friends and companions, of our rivals and competitors, may have actually arrived at.'¹ The first is the judgement of the impartial spectator. 'There exists in the mind of every man an idea of this kind, gradually formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other people. It is the slow, gradual, and progressive work of the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct.'² The second standard is reached from observing the actual behaviour of most people. Smith's distinction in this passage between two standards of judgement is not quite the same as the earlier distinction between the judgement of conscience and that of actual spectators, for the second standard discussed here is derived from the practice of others, not from their reaction as spectators of practice. Still, this distinction is like the earlier one in contrasting the normative ideals of conscience with the positive facts of social life.

Throughout the development of Smith's concept of the impartial spectator, his fundamental position was unchanged. In the first edition he stressed the effect of men's social situation more than the work of the imagination; in the second and the sixth editions he reversed the emphasis. But both were elements in his theory at all stages. Even before any sharp contrast between the man within and the man without, Smith's view was that an agent can judge his own character and conduct only if he imagines *himself* in the position of a spectator. And even in his latest thoughts on self-command added to edition 6, Smith wrote of 'a regard to the sentiments of the *real or supposed* spectator of our conduct' and said that the child and the man of weak character acquire self-control from adjusting their feelings to those of actual spectators.

The impartial spectator has been mentioned in some modern discussions of ethical theory. The ideal observer theory of Professor Roderick Firth and others has been, understandably enough, compared with Adam Smith's theory of the impartial spectator. More recently Professor John Rawls in his important

¹ VI. iii. 23.² VI. iii. 25.

book *A Theory of Justice* has written of the impartial spectator as a device of utilitarian theory for regarding the interest of society as if it were the interest of a single person. It is, however, a mistake to suppose that either of these conceptions comes near to Adam Smith's theory of the impartial spectator.

Differences between Professor Firth's ideal observer and Adam Smith's impartial spectator have been admirably brought out by Dr. T. D. Campbell in his book *Adam Smith's Science of Morals* (ch. 6). According to Professor Firth, moral judgements are to be analysed as statements of the hypothetical reactions of an observer who is ideal in being omniscient, omnipercipient, disinterested, and dispassionate. As Dr. Campbell says,¹ this theory makes the ideal observer more like a god than a man and revives some of the difficulties that face a Christology. Adam Smith's impartial spectator is disinterested, but neither omniscient nor omnipercipient, and he is certainly not dispassionate. He has the normal feelings of a normal human being. He approves and disapproves according to his sympathies with or antipathies to the feelings of agents and of people affected by action. So far as judgements about others are concerned, Adam Smith's spectator simply is any normal observer who is not personally affected.

But what of the later development of Smith's theory when dealing with judgements about ourselves? What of the description in edition 2 of 'this abstract man, the representative of mankind, and substitute of the Deity', or of the phrases used in edition 6, the 'ideal' man or 'demigod' within the breast? There is an element of rhetoric here, designed to emphasize the superior authority of conscience when opposing the judgement of actual spectators. The impartial spectator is still a man, not a god, and indeed a perfectly normal man. The 'substitute of the Deity' in edition 2 is also 'the representative of mankind'. The metaphorical 'demigod' or 'ideal man within the breast' of edition 6 is given a literal interpretation in another late passage added to that edition, where Smith wrote of 'the approbation of the impartial spectator, and of the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast'.² The man within is 'ideal' because he seeks to be praiseworthy more than to be actually praised by 'the man without'. The judgement of conscience is superior to that of actual spectators simply because the agent can know better than bystanders what he has done or not done, and what was his motive for acting as he did. He is

¹ 133.

² VI. i. 11.

'well-informed' but he is not omniscient. His superior knowledge is a matter of common experience.

If the man without should applaud us, either for actions which we have not performed, or for motives which had no influence upon us; the man within can immediately humble that pride and elevation of mind which such groundless acclamations might otherwise occasion, by telling us, that as we know that we do not deserve them, we render ourselves despicable by accepting them. If, on the contrary, the man without should reproach us, either for actions which we never performed, or for motives which had no influence upon those which we may have performed; the man within may immediately correct this false judgment, and assure us, that we are by no means the proper objects of that censure which has so unjustly been bestowed upon us.¹

For Professor John Rawls, the concept of the impartial spectator is a device of utilitarian theory. 'Endowed with ideal powers of sympathy and imagination, the impartial spectator is the perfectly rational individual who identifies with and experiences the desires of others as if these desires were his own.'² He can thus organize the interests of society into a single system analogous to the system of self-interested desires which everyone constructs for himself. In working out this notion Professor Rawls was probably influenced more by Hume than by Adam Smith, though he has described his account as 'reminiscent' of both these thinkers³ and has included both in his list of classical utilitarians.⁴

Far from being a utilitarian, Adam Smith was a severe critic of utilitarianism in many parts of his ethics and jurisprudence. Of course he wrote in the *Wealth of Nations* about a natural harmony of individual and social interests, but there he was abstracting economic activity from the whole of social life, and in any event that harmony owed nothing to sympathy. In Adam Smith's theory of approval, the spectator's sympathy is concerned first with the motive of the agent. The spectator imagines himself in the shoes of the agent, and if he finds that he would share the agent's feelings, the correspondence of sentiments constitutes his 'sympathy' (as Smith used the term) and causes him to approve the agent's motive as right and proper. In some circumstances a second species of sympathy may be added to this first one. If the agent's action benefits another person, the spectator may find that he sympathizes with the beneficiary's

¹ III. 2. 32; added in ed. 6.

² *A Theory of Justice*, 27.

³ 184.

⁴ 22, note 9.

gratitude as well as with the agent's benevolence. This double sympathy causes the spectator to approve of the action as meritorious. That is Smith's theory of approval in a nutshell. He agreed with Hume that utility pleases a spectator through sympathy with the pleasure given to the direct beneficiary, but he entirely disagreed with Hume's view that this kind of sympathetic pleasure is the sole or main constituent of moral approval. In his final account of the matter Smith listed four grounds or 'sources' of moral approval, and made a regard to utility the last and the least of these.

What sort of thing was Adam Smith's theory of the impartial spectator meant to be, and what was it meant to do? It was meant to be a sociological and psychological explanation of some moral capacities. Not a task that any modern philosopher would attempt; but philosophical theories continue to be rather odd, and it is as well to observe the glass houses of the modern counterparts before throwing stones at Adam Smith's construction. Professor Firth proposes his ideal observer theory as an analysis of the *meaning* of moral judgements, and as such it is surely incredible. The suggestion is that when you or I say that an action is right, we mean, we intend to assert, that it would evoke a favourable reaction in a hypothetical observer who was omniscient, omnipercipient, disinterested, and dispassionate. We have all been making moral judgements happily—or unhappily—from early youth, but it is a safe bet that none of us had the remotest thought of connecting them with an omniscient and dispassionate observer until we heard of Professor Firth and his theory. Professor Rawls is doing something different. He presents the impartial spectator version of utilitarianism as a possible alternative to his own, contractual, theory of justice. He does not regard either theory as an analysis of meaning. Rather he thinks of them as hypotheses of what logically could have produced our present thoughts, though he does not for a moment suppose that either of these possible causes was an actual cause. Like Hobbes, Professor Rawls evidently thinks that one can explain something by reasoning from known effects to *possible* causes. Such a procedure may possibly improve our understanding, but it seems no less bizarre than Professor Firth's interpretation of the ideal observer hypothesis as an analysis of meaning. Adam Smith at any rate did not anticipate either of these modern theorists. He was certainly not giving an analysis of the meaning of moral judgements, nor was he putting forward a hypothesis of a purely *possible* cause. He was presenting

a hypothesis of the actual causal process whereby judgements of conscience are formed. No doubt this is a scientific rather than a philosophical function. Fortunately the division of labour had not been carried that far in Adam Smith's time.

Adam Smith's theory can certainly stand comparison with the best known of modern psychological explanations of conscience, Freud's account of the super-ego. This is similar to Smith's view in taking conscience to be a second self built up in the mind as a reflection of the attitudes of outside persons. Freud's hypothesis is presumably helpful in the diagnosis and treatment of certain neuroses. But if regarded as a general theory of the formation of conscience, normal as well as abnormal, it is less satisfactory than Adam Smith's account because it takes too narrow a view of the causal agencies. Freud concentrated (though not exclusively) on the attitude of parents, while Adam Smith spoke of the reaction of society in general and mentioned the influence of teachers and schoolfellows as well as parents when referring to the growth of conscience in children. A more important difference is that Freud emphasized the negative attitudes of disapproval on the one side and fear of punishment on the other, and so he represented the super-ego as predominantly (though again not exclusively) a restrictive or censorious element in the mind. He accounted for the excessively rigid conscience produced by a repressive upbringing but not for the more liberal kind produced by an affectionate upbringing. Adam Smith, unlike Freud, did not stress the force of disapproval and fear. He spoke of both favourable and unfavourable attitudes on the part of society as having a place in the formation of conscience.

What was Smith's theory meant to do? It was meant to provide a satisfactory alternative to *a priori* accounts of conscience and morality generally. Like Hutcheson and Hume before him, Smith was a good empiricist. They all aimed at giving an explanation of ethics in terms of 'human nature'—empirical psychology, we should say today. But Adam Smith appreciated that the theories of Hutcheson and Hume were inadequate to account for the peculiarities of conscience. Hutcheson in his later years accepted Bishop Butler's description of the authority of conscience, but without explaining how this could be fitted into the moral sense theory. At first Adam Smith followed the example of his teacher. There is one passage in the *Moral Sentiments*¹ where Smith wrote as if he were unconsciously

¹ III. 5. 5-6.

quoting Butler, even to the extent of inferring divine intention from the character of moral judgement. This is a relic of the earliest version of Smith's lectures, written before he had developed his own theory of conscience. In due course he came to see (no doubt influenced by Hume) that the use of empirical method required one to explain, not just to assert, the existence of peculiar qualities. Hutcheson had not been empirical enough in regarding the moral sense as an original endowment of human nature; and Butler had not been empirical enough in taking the authority of conscience to be a simple datum, intelligible only by reference to theology. Both phenomena could be explained as the natural effects of ordinary experience.

In evaluating Adam Smith's theory, the first question that arises is whether Smith, any more than Butler, remained true to the empirical method. He wanted to explain ethics in terms of empirical psychology and sociology, yet he ended up with the apparently conventional thesis that moral rules are equivalent to divine laws and that conscience has an authority superior to social approval and disapproval. The reader is apt to think that about half-way through the book Smith abandoned empiricism and slipped into the traditional views of theists and rationalists without noticing the inconsistency. A more careful scrutiny of his theory shows that this is not so. His concept of the impartial spectator remained empirical throughout, as I hope will be clear from what I have said. It would need another lecture to show that the same thing is true of Smith's account of moral rules, an account that is no less ingenious, but perhaps less impressive, than his theory of conscience.

A second question that arises is whether it is reasonable to attribute greater complexity to moral judgements made about ourselves than to those made about others. If Smith had been giving an analysis of meaning, this would be a fair criticism. There is no reason to suppose that the statement 'I ought to pipe down' has a more complicated meaning than the statement 'You ought to pipe down'. Smith's theory does not have that implication. His view was that the making of the first statement has a more complicated history. Still, if he were right, might we not expect to see some traces of a difference of character between first-person moral judgements and the rest? Well, there is one respect in which we do differentiate between them. We not only recognize that an agent's judgement about himself may be independent of the judgement of others about him. We also accept the principle (with some reservation, I think, for social

contexts in which the rights of others are affected) that it is a man's moral duty to follow his conscience even though it may be misguided. The judgement of conscience in directing one's own conduct is given a priority over the judgement made by other people. This does nothing to confirm Adam Smith's particular theory, but it does rebut the suggestion that an account of moral judgements concerning ourselves should be on all fours with an account of moral judgements concerning others.

Finally, however, I wish to pose a criticism of a different kind about the complexity of Adam Smith's hypothesis. It seems to me that his concept of the impartial spectator is too complicated to be acceptable when one works it out fully in terms of his general theory of approval. An ordinary spectator approves of an agent's conduct if he finds that, after imagining himself in the agent's shoes, he would feel and act as the agent does. An agent who consults his conscience has to imagine himself in the position of an uninvolved spectator while retaining his present knowledge of the facts. He has to imagine that he is an uninvolved spectator who in turn imagines himself to be in the position of the involved agent; and having performed this feat of imagination doubling back on its tracks, the agent has to ask himself whether the feelings that he imagines he would then experience do or do not correspond to the feelings that he actually experiences now. The process is not impossible but it seems too complicated to be a common occurrence.

W. R. Scott once suggested that Adam Smith had exceptional powers of imagination himself and 'as a Moral Philosopher he insisted in crediting everyone with his own genius'.¹ That too is not impossible but again unlikely if only because the quoted words imply that Smith was rather unimaginative in his social observation. I prefer to think that Smith, like anyone else, could make a mistake in the details of his theory. The difficulty which I have described becomes apparent only when one spells out Smith's theory of conscience in terms of his theory of approval. The idea of the impartial spectator seems persuasive when taken by itself, with an unanalysed notion of approval. This suggests that the trouble lies in Smith's initial theory of approval. But that is another story.

¹ *Adam Smith: an Oration* (1938), 11.