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SOCIAL SYMPATHY AND THE FICTION OF MORAL TRUTH: ADAM SMITH'S IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR THEORY[1]

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Abstract: *The present paper discusses Adam Smith's theory of the impartial spectator from an epistemological point of view. Inextricably lined to the concept of 'sympathy', as theorised in The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), the impartial spectator takes centre stage in a world in which the gaze of others accounts for appropriate or inappropriate feelings and actions. Eager to pass judgement on my own adequate or inadequate conduct, I have to check whether my own judgement is influenced by the views of others in order not to fall prey to my own feelings of self-love or self-interest. Inspired by both David Hume's and Francis Hutcheson's moral philosophy and, particularly, debates on the mechanism of sympathy stemming from disinterested benevolence, Smith's spectator places himself in a theatrical situation, in which he is not a simple onlooker, but an inquisitive entity that makes use of the practice of the imagination in order to understand others' feelings in the public sphere. Deemed as a personification of our conscience, the allegedly impartial spectator is employed by Smith in order to emphasise sympathy as a universal fellow-feeling which can contribute to the development of what Hume calls "the Science of Man" (Hume, "Treatise" x).*

Along with David Hume, Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid, Adam Smith belongs to a philosophical paradigm commonly known as the Scottish Enlightenment, which augured a method of enquiry in contradistinction to Kant's deontological ethics rooted in reason as the sole moral imperative for human action. Deeply interested in the role moral sentiments play in making morally judicious decisions, the Scottish philosophers juxtapose the function of the imagination with sympathy as an epistemological means of substantiating ethical relations. It was particularly the influence of David Hume and of his disciple Adam Smith that shaped modern philosophical thought by refuting reason as inappropriate for actions that are actually steeped in human sentiments generated by sympathetic responses upheld by an active moral imagination. Furthermore, Smith reworked Hume's theory of sympathy so as to elevate it to a normative model meant to establish an ethics of relations bearing on the imagination as a middle ground between sense and judgement. By focusing on *The*

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Theory of Moral Sentiments, I argue that sympathy, as theorised by Smith, becomes a vehicle for judging the feelings of other fellows in the public sphere, where people appear as spectators able to experience fellow-feeling. I thus contend that sympathy is only conducive to a fictional moral truth, since, as David Marshall has cogently observed, "everyone and everything seem motivated by the gaze of spectators" (604), of allegedly impartial spectators we imagine scrutinizing our behaviour in order to set the standard for our moral judgements.

First published in 1759, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* stresses both the relevance of the imagination as an aesthetic category for moral judgements and the role of sympathy in a world where people act as "spectators and spectacles" (Marshall 592). Far from being a mere onlooker who, like Joseph Addison's aristocratic spectator, is engaged in contemplating the way of the world, Smith's observer is mindful and inquisitive, driven by virtuous feelings, and, most importantly, involved in a process of understanding the other. Moreover, he poses as a moral agent who can generate a change in the person observed by revealing a reasoned evaluation of his emotional response to the person under scrutiny. It is important to underline that the major reason why Smith's spectator is apt to produce a change in the person observed is the other's wish to be approved of. The person seeks the spectator's approval while the latter seeks to approve, and if the person observed is judged to have exaggerated or inappropriate sentiments in relation to their situation, the person will attempt to assess their own situation through the eyes of the spectator in order to accurately understand it. Predicated on the exercise of the imagination, the person's effort to grasp the significance of their own situation will lead to a change in their feelings, which ought to comply with those of the spectator. This enterprise will result in mutual sympathy.

Scholars have long since examined Adam Smith's concept of 'the impartial spectator' in tandem with social and ethical behaviour theorised by Francis Hutcheson and David Hume. Labelled as "an ideal observer, an ordinary innocent bystander, the voice of the people, the normative values of society, absolute standards, the superego, and simply a hypothetical, abstract third person" (Marshall 592), Smith's spectator is constructed in line with Hume's view, according to which we imagine ourselves in the circumstance experienced by another individual. However, Smith's theory focuses on the individual's sympathetic response as the only means of sparking an emotional reaction in the observer, and argues that a judgement of real sympathy is indispensable and that the observer must assess the emotional response by having recourse to its prior causes. This is, according to Smith, the prerequisite for sharing the compassion of the spectator. D.D. Raphael claims that Smith initially employed the term "impartial" with strict reference to justice and equity in the first version of his lectures on moral philosophy preserved at Glasgow University Library. Around 1752, claims Raphael, Smith had not yet formulated the doctrine of the impartial spectator, who "is not an interested party, but any observer with normal human feelings" (34).

In discussing the theatricality of Smith's sentiments, David Marshall makes reference to Hume's concept of 'sympathy' as spectacle, to Hutcheson's *theatrum mundi* metaphor, and also to Jonas Barish's commentaries on *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in order to endorse the scopophilic dimension of Smith's convoluted moral system which "is concerned with the inherent theatricality of both presenting a

character before the eyes of the world and acting as a beholder to people who perform acts of solitude" (594). For Hume, sympathy as spectacle and, implicitly, the spectator's ability to pass moral judgements stem from the power of the imagination, since we cannot have access to other people's minds, but only to other people's visible or recognisable emotions, and the imagination permits us to place ourselves in the observed situation. Also, he avers that sympathy itself must be premised on benevolence seen as social sympathy. Echoing Shaftesbury's civic humanist theory based on "moral sense",[2] according to which the individual should sacrifice his self-interest for the benefit of the community, Hume correlates sympathy with disinterestedness, in opposition to Thomas Hobbes's personal selfishness, arguing that amiable feelings towards others do account for the happiness of society. Alexander Broadie suggests that "knowledge of the spectator's sympathy does not imply knowledge of the spectator's feeling but, rather, knowledge of the way he came by the feeling" (165). Similar to Shaftesbury, Hume articulates a theory of moral sense which proves to be an appropriate foundation on which to build a harmonious society in which justice should prevail as a result of people's spontaneous desire to help, rather than doing harm to others. This socio-ethical line of thought is echoed by Francis Hutcheson, for whom virtue is all a matter of benevolence whereas the spectator is an ultimately disinterested moral agent engrained in amiable virtues: "Virtue is then called Amiable or Lovely, from its raising Good-will or Love in Spectators toward the Agent; and not from the Agent's perceiving the virtuous Temper to be advantageous to him, or desiring to obtain it under that View" (Hutcheson 218). Like Hume, Hutcheson's anti-Hobbesian argument insists on "good will" and "love" as being tightly connected to the pleasure of doing good, which stands for social virtue. Viewed in this light, pleasure is regarded not as a cause of "the virtuous temper", but "as an effect, in the agent, of his awareness of the virtuousness of his temper" (Broadie 159). By privileging the spectator's judgement over the agent's, Hutcheson seeks to discover a means of observing the latter in a benevolent and impartial manner. This idea is also discussed in *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections: With Illustrations upon the Moral Sense* (1728), where the *theatrum mundi* metaphor is filtered through the lens of various spectacles on the world as stage, in which people act as spectators to the grief or joy experienced by others. Hutcheson's philosophical inquiries, therefore, contextualised the concept of 'the impartial spectator' over a decade before the publication of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and nearly thirty years before Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* came out.

Building on the legacy left by Hutcheson and Hume, Smith juxtaposes sympathy with the impartial spectator whom, however, he never defines in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith's account of sympathy – inextricably linked to the spectator as an active onlooker – occurs by having recourse to the imagination, rather than to sight or the other senses alone:

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[2] Considered to have been the first to consider moral judgements as entrenched in sentiments, Shaftesbury defines 'moral sense' as a purveyor of instinctive universal good which, filtered though an inward eye, is capable of generating good actions for the benefit of others.

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. (Smith 9)

However, Smith claims that the imagination alone is helpful to the extent that it copies the impressions of our senses in order to be able to represent to ourselves the feelings of sorrow or pity experienced by the person we witness. The imagination, says Smith, allows us to place ourselves in the agent's situation and "become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them" (Smith, "Theory" 9). Notwithstanding the presence of the person we scrutinise, we only "form some idea of his sensations", a statement which is ultimately indicative of a fictitious understanding of his feelings, or of "a presence *in idea*" which "can feel like real presence" (Marshall 595; emphasis in the original). Though undefined in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the spectator is associated with the act of reading. Any text we read is, like any person, a fiction, an idea brought forth in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, in which Smith maintains that a tragedy we have read many times is not new to us, but the events it describes are new to its protagonists, whose emotional reactions enable us to sympathise with them and thus to imagine what they are going through. By putting ourselves in the other person's shoes, we are affected and "we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels" (Smith, "Lectures" 9). Such an instance of sympathy, in which the spectator attempts to understand the feelings of the person observed by placing himself in the situation and mind of the other, is labelled by Smith, via Hume, as "fellow-feeling" (Smith, "Theory" 10), which is nothing but an epistemological conundrum, as long as the person in distress has no idea, or cannot grasp the spectator's feelings when they interact. What is more, mutual sympathy remains only a desideratum because the sufferer himself must imagine what the spectator's imagination prompts him to feel for the former:

> As they are constantly considering what they themselves would feel, if they actually were the sufferers, so he is as constantly led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he was only one of the spectators of his own situation. As their sympathy makes them look at it, in some measure, with his eyes, so his sympathy makes him look at it, in some measure, with theirs, especially when in their presence and acting under their observation. (Smith, "Theory" 22)

Despite the fact that both the observer and the other person play the role of spectator and spectacle in turns, their sympathetic attitude cannot be equal in terms of intensity and persistence. The sufferer "desires a more complete sympathy" (Smith, "Theory" 22) and, consequently, he wants to bridge the gap between himself and the spectator. According to Marshall, "the need for this concord [with the emotions] more than doubles the theatrical positions Smith sees enacted in sympathy by compelling us to become spectators to our spectators and thereby spectators to ourselves" (597).

This is because being aware of the sufferer's situation is crucial for the spectator's sympathetic response. Nevertheless, not the same can be said about the agent's own feelings, which are less relevant or simply unimportant because he does not possess the same feelings that the spectator has for him. More specifically, far from experiencing the other person's grief, the spectator is only able to figure out how he would feel in the said situation by configuring its ideal picture in mind. Speaking about sympathy as an imagined feeling, D.D. Raphael is right in saying that "in the real world spectators are replaced by an imagined impartial spectator conjured up 'in the breast' (15). Smith encapsulates this point as follows:

> We either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station, we either can or cannot entirely enter into and sympathize with the sentiments and motives which influenced it. We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them. (Smith, "Theory" 109-10)

This removal "from our natural station" is translated both as a public theatre and an expression of the impartial spectator able to assess his own actions and judgements as a spectator to himself with a view to determining if he is able to enter into another person's feelings. According to Smith's ethical system, sympathy implies a double identification of oneself as a judge and as a person under scrutiny: "I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of" (Smith, "Theory" 113). Split into two different selves, someone is, in Smith's view, both an actor and a spectator of his own nature or, as Marshall contends, an actor "who can dramatize or represent to himself the spectacle of self-division in which the self personates two different persons who try to play each other's part, change positions, and identify with each other" (599). Acting as Smith's conscience, the impartial spectator is by necessity a judge who takes his *persona* as an object of introspection of his own character and conduct. In this sense, Smith's *Theory* proposes "a theory of individual and psychological harmony" predicated on a relationship "between the upwardly refining 'private' senses and the downwardly domesticating 'public' understanding" (McKeon 378). Intent upon creating social harmony, the imagination is deemed as an ethical vehicle, as long as a certain individual is set against the background of social existence and experience, which allows him to identify with others and thus absorb publicness into his own private self. Although concerned with social harmony and social interaction achieved through the imagination, Smith's treatise fails to discriminate between sense and feeling. According to McKeon, Smith only depicts "a process of 'bringing home' that applies equally to spectator and person principally concerned because the only significant difference between them is also their sameness, the fact that each is an other to the other" (379).

Going beyond the theatrical spectacle of the 'I', Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* reveals his Stoic approach to sympathy. The spectator's feelings, writes

Smith, "will still be very apt to fall short of the violence of what is felt by the sufferer" ("Theory" 21). Acutely aware of the impossibility to experience full sympathy, the person in distress is able to understand that no one can enter into his suffering and properly grasp it: "It is indecent to express any strong degree of those passions which arise from a certain situation or disposition of the body; because the company, not being in the same disposition, cannot be expected to sympathize with them" (Smith, "Theory" 27). Smith illustrates this point with an account of a man who lost his leg by a cannon shot. The man, suggests Smith, is rewarded with "the applause of every candid and impartial spectator", who approves both "the manhood of his countenance" and "the sedateness and sobriety of his judgment" ("Theory" 148). Smith's Stoic ideas are expressive of an "antitheatrical sensibility" (Marshall 604), which means that the sufferer's emotions ought not to be displayed unless they urge the impartial spectator to sympathise with them as a result of his imaginative representation, the sine qua non of fellow-feeling. Smith's ethic of Stoic self-discipline recommends temperance and pent-up emotions if they do not elicit the spectator's sympathy. For Smith, humanity and self-command are emblems of the perfection of human nature, which is "a combination of Christian and Stoic virtue" (Raphael 34). Though the impartial spectator does not metonymically embody social judgement, he echoes the existence of real spectators engaged in scrutinising their fellows in an impartial way. Acting as "the man within the breast" (Smith, "Theory" 130), the impartial spectator is actually the internalised version of real spectators, "using them as mirrors to reflect ourselves as we seek images of the proper action to take" (Broadie 182). By the same token, the image of the impartial spectator is metaphorically rendered as "the invisible hand" in *The Wealth of Nations*, in which Smith joins social harmony with political economy. Self-interest, or self-love, is determined by domestic profit, necessities and advantages meant to contribute to the benefit of society: "It is his own [individual] advantage, indeed, and not that of the society, which he has in view. But the study of his own advantage naturally, or rather necessarily leads him to prefer the employment which is most advantageous to the society" (Smith, "Wealth of Nations" 454). Sympathy acquires, therefore, an economic dimension that is apt to transform private goods into market/public exchange commodities. Furthermore, sympathy adjusts self-interest to the general social interest, which makes the market "the measure of disinterestedness" (McKeon 381).

Unlike the Stoics, however, Smith's ethical system banks on an ethic of social relations embodied by the modern configuration of the crowd as the public sphere in which people are deeply interested in the appearance they display in the eyes of other fellow human beings. Talking about the exposure of both poor and wealthy people, Smith makes analogies with concepts like 'barter' and 'exchange', amply treated in *The Wealth of Nations*. Similar to two merchants who bargain for the worth of their merchandise with the purpose of settling an agreement meant to lead to the exchange of their goods, the spectator and the person observed are engaged in a process of negotiating their judgements and ensuing feelings until they are attuned to each other. It is always a pleasure to observe the rich on the theatrical stage of fellow-feeling, and always a disquieting spectacle when the poor are surprised by the gaze of others. Smith tells us that the latter category, far from being embarrassed by its low rank, is aware that other spectators cannot grasp their own anguish and, therefore, cannot sympathise

with them because they cannot imagine what being poor means. Smith's assertion, according to which "we pursue riches and avoid poverty" ("Theory" 50) in order to avoid the impossibility of sympathy, casts fellow-feeling into the mould of economic language and points out that "the economist is prefigured by the moral philosopher who explains the wealth of nations with a theory of moral sentiments" (Marshall 605). In doing so, Smith claims that the market is analogous to the mechanism of sympathy whereby private feelings are subject to imaginative identification with those experienced by others in the public sphere.

In contrast to the wealthy, "the wise and the virtuous" are "more correct and more exquisitely beautiful" (Smith, "Theory" 62) because they are the masters of propriety, a standard of behaviour which they aim to cultivate among the members of the public sphere. Furthermore, they become an object of emulation and also a model of philosophical enquiry favoured by "the most studious and careful observer" (Smith, "Theory" 62). This clearly shows that for Smith philosophy goes in tandem with the theatrical stage of the world, since the imaginative connections that are established between the spectator and the agent allow for "a pleasurable movement of the mind in its contemplation of the world" (Packham 162). I agree, with Marshall, that Smith's particular concern for "the wise and the virtuous" is germane to his discussion of the impartial spectator, an objective and disinterested observer of other people, who "can be seen as a more reliable witness than the public" (Marshall 608). In stark opposition to real spectators, who may withhold their sympathy, the impartial spectator – the creation of our imagination and, by extension, the symbol of our conscience translated by Smith as a mirror of feelings exchanged within society – is the supreme instance or the all-seeing eye that can do moral justice in the world: "… the only effectual consolation of humbled and afflicted man lies in an appeal to a still higher tribunal, to that of the all-seeing Judge of the world, whose eye can never be deceived, and whose judgments can never be perverted" (Smith, "Theory" 131). Smith equates the inner spectator of our own being to God in a world dominated by social interaction. Like Smith's philosophy founded on the imagination and sympathy as fundamental ingredients for the mechanics of social relations, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* explores the nature of our moral judgements in a dramatic way that explains the vital role of sympathy seen as theatricality of emotions which "poses us on the stage, where we must act our parts and appear before spectators who threaten to theatricalise us" (Marshall 609). By associating the impartial spectator with God, Smith seeks to find an answer to the question whether belief in God is closely related to moral categories, such as propriety, impropriety, approbation, disapprobation, merit and demerit, which serve as our *modus operandi*. As Broadie has pertinently suggested, Smith endeavours to show that "a theory of moral sentiments, one sufficient to accommodate the moral framework within which most of us operate, can be developed without recourse to theological materials" (187). Regarded in this way, Smith's theory has the potential to stress the importance not only of the experiential and experimental reasoning of the spectator, but also of a naturalistic way of contributing to the moral welfare and happiness of society. Concurrently, Smith discriminates the impartial spectator from the real spectators of the public sphere by having him inculcate God's ethical principles into all members of society.

The impartial spectator theory, therefore, lies at the intersection of two significant moral and epistemological routes: a harmonious society made possible through a concord of feelings and a just yet imaginative way of understanding the sentiments of the agent. Such an ideal case, which I call a fiction of moral truth, is "an interplay and interchange of places, positions, persons, sentiments, and points of view" (Marshall 610) which underlies the theatricality of social situations in which we depend on the gaze of others, believing that they can annihilate the distance between them and us in order to enter into our body. As I have shown, Smith's impartial spectator seeks to place himself as well as he can into the agent's situation with the help of the imagination. In doing so, he acquires the status of a critic able to determine whether his sympathetic response is accurate and appropriate or whether it can be revised so as to correspond to the agent's act of suffering. Not only does the impartial spectator rely on "critique and improvement", two significant Enlightenment concepts which "underlie Smith's account of the spectator" (Broadie 175), he also puts the imagination to work in order to examine various states of mind and modes of interaction in society. One of the major components of Smith's complex ethical system, which Smith himself cannot always clarify, the impartial spectator is "the man within the breast" (Smith, "Theory" 130), the voice of our own conscience which imaginatively – and theatrically – prompts adequate moral judgements or dismisses inaccurate moral judgements without having recourse to *a priori* principles that may be employed to assess the agent's feelings. To quote Marshall again, "the situation of theater determines our views and relations, for better or for worse" (610).

Much in the vein of his mentor David Hume, Smith considered moral philosophy to be of paramount importance for the development of what Hume calls "the Science of Man" (Hume x). Consubstantial with Francis Hutcheson's morality, which discards reason as the absolute yardstick of moral truth, pulverizing it into emotions as value judgements, Smith's ethic of social relations – grounded as it is in empirical observation – allowed him to analyse a set of universal moral qualities rooted in the mechanism of sympathy.

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