

# Sentiments and Spectators: Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Judgment<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Often, those who know something of Adam Smith are tempted by the following three claims: First, that in The Wealth of Nations Adam Smith argues that in a well structured market economy the private pursuit of interest works – as if guided by an invisible hand – to promote the public interest. Second, that in The Theory of the Moral Sentiments<sup>2</sup> Smith introduces the notion of an Impartial Spectator and appeals to the reactions of such a spectator as setting the standard for our moral judgments. And, third, the Impartial Spectator, properly understood, sets a standard that endorses actions and institutions in proportion as they contribute to the public good or over-all happiness.<sup>3</sup>

In obvious and satisfying ways, these three claims fit together well, attributing to Smith a systematic, coherent, and many think independently attractive, theory. Most notably, the three claims work to make clear how an appeal to the invisible hand would count, for Smith, as a specifically moral vindication of a (properly structured) market economy. In any case, I think it is fair to say that many have thought that Smith

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<sup>1</sup> Versions of this paper were given in Balliol College, Oxford, at a conference sponsored by the Adam Smith Society, on January 7, 2009; at the Australian National University, as the John Passmore Lecture on August 11, 2009, and at a conference on The Human Nature Tradition in Anglo-Scottish Philosophy, in Jerusalem, sponsored by the Shalem Center, on December 15, 2009. On each occasion I received very helpful questions and comments. I am especially grateful for comments from Geoffrey Brennan and Samuel Fleischacker.

<sup>2</sup> (Oxford University Press, 1976), ed. by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie.

<sup>3</sup> For just one suggestive passage concerning the approval of the Impartial Spectator, consider Smith's reflections on those who sacrifice themselves for society: "The patriot who lays down his life for...this society, appears to act with the most exact propriety. He appears to view himself in the light in which the impartial spectator naturally and necessarily views him, as but one of the multitude ... bound at all times to sacrifice and devote himself to the safety, to the service, and even to the glory of the greater number. But though this sacrifice appears to be perfectly just and proper, we know how difficult it is...and how few people are capable of making it." (TMS, VI.ii.2.2, p. 228) Roderick Firth is largely responsible for the idea that Smith's Impartial Spectator is best viewed as, specifically, an ideal observer. See Firth's "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1952, pp. 317-345. But John Rawls has contributed significantly to the sense that Smith's use of the impartial spectator was in the service of utilitarianism, even as Rawls recognized that the connection between impartial spectator theory and utilitarianism turns crucially on the supposed attributes of the impartial spectator. See A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 184-188.

embraced some version of utilitarianism and that he saw the principle of utility as vindicated by his account of moral judgment and as vindicating a market economy.<sup>4</sup>

Strikingly, however, when one turns to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the Impartial Spectator that emerges neither endorses, nor approves in a pattern that conforms to, the principle of utility. In fact, Smith goes out of his way to reject the idea that utility either explains or sets the standard for our moral judgments. To complicate matters, Smith's Impartial Spectator suffers a number of 'irregularities of sentiment' – irregularities the impact of which Smith then defends by appeal to their utility. These irregularities play an important role in explaining why the Impartial Spectator neither endorses, nor approves in conformity with, the principle of utility. At the same time, though, the irregularities seem to undermine the Impartial Spectator's qualifications as a standard for our moral judgments, while Smith's defense of them apparently presupposes utility as the fundamental standard of morality.

These complications, in particular, are my concern in this paper. Specifically, I argue that Smith has a sophisticated account of moral judgment that allows him (i) to embrace the Impartial Spectator, irregularities and all, as setting the standard for our moral judgments, (ii) to then appeal to utility in defending that standard as the correct one, and yet (iii) to reject utility as a fundamental standard of morality.

As a first step, let me offer a very brief summary of the view Smith offers in [A Theory of Moral Sentiments](#).<sup>5</sup>

### Smith's Theory in Brief

Smith sets out to explain the principles humans actually, as a matter of fact, use in making moral judgments. This is, he insists, a matter of fact, not of right. He is not concerned to identify, he says, how it would be good for us to judge if we were not so "weak and imperfect" as we are, but were instead, say, Gods. Nor does he mean to

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<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, this view is far from universal. Perhaps as influential is the suggestion that Smith shouldn't be seen as holding a single systematic view at all, but as developing in intriguing ways a collection of insights in to human nature and political economy that don't add up to a single coherent position, despite their evident value.

<sup>5</sup> For an extended exploration of the Impartial Spectator in Smith's moral theory, see D. D. Raphael, [The Impartial Spectator](#) (Oxford University Press, 2007). See also T. D. Campbell's [Adam Smith's Science of Morals](#) (Rowman and Littlefield, 1971) as well as Alexander Broadie's "Sympathy and the Impartial Spectator" and Robert Shaver's "Virtue, Utility, and Rules," in [The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith](#), ed. by K. Haakonssen (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 158-188 and pp. 189-213, respectively.

recommend a new standard for us. He is concerned, rather, to identify -- and explain the emergence of -- the standard we actually use.<sup>6</sup>

Of course the standard in question is a standard we use in judging how things – people, actions, institutions – *should* be, not how they happen to be. So part of Smith’s burden is to articulate a standard that we can recognize as being for judgments of that distinctive kind. As a result, Smith needs to make sense of the difference between our thinking something happens to be a certain way and our thinking that it ought to be that way (or different). We’ll come back to this point, but it is worth noting here that one of the worries about the Impartial Spectator being less than ideal is that in falling short of the ideal the Impartial Spectator may seem unqualified to set a standard for judging how things ought to be.

In The Theory of Moral Sentiments Smith starts where he thinks we all start: evaluating other people. Early on, he thinks, we find ourselves approving or disapproving of what others do and why they do it. In judging others, he thinks, we focus in particular on why they are doing what they do – on the “sentiment or affection of the heart from which any action proceeds.” And, he argues, we look at the sentiment or affection in light of two distinct considerations -- its “relation to the cause that excites it, or the motive which gives occasion to it” and its “relation to the end which it proposes, or the effect which it tends to produce.”<sup>7</sup>

Judgments that focus on the first relation, in effect on the circumstances of the agent and, thus, on the grounds she might have for performing the actions in question, are what Smith calls judgments of “propriety” (and “impropriety”). Those that focus on the second relation, in effect on what the (intended) outcome of the action is, or would be, are what Smith calls judgments of “merit” (and “demerit”). As Smith puts it,

The sentiment or affection of the heart from which any action proceeds, and upon which its whole virtue or vice must ultimately depend, may be considered under two different aspects, or in two different relations; first, in relation to the cause which excites it, or the motive which gives occasion to it; and secondly, in relation to the end which it proposes, or the effect which it tends to produce.

In the suitableness or unsuitableness, in the proportion or disproportion which the affection seems to bear to the cause or object which excites it, consists the propriety or impropriety, the decency or ungracefulness of the consequent action.

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<sup>6</sup> TMS, footnote, II.i.5.6, p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> TMS, II.i.3.5, p. 18.

In the beneficial or hurtful nature of the effects which the affection aims at, or tends to produce, consists the merit or demerit of the action, the qualities by which it is entitled to reward, or is deserving of punishment.<sup>8</sup>

While the terms Smith uses to describe the judgments may seem a little stilted to our ears, the judgments he has in mind are, I think, familiar and, indeed, ubiquitous. For instance, in thinking someone's action proper, in Smith's sense, we are thinking that her reactions, and consequent actions, are (as we might put it) appropriate and called for, under the circumstances. And in thinking someone's action as having merit, in Smith's sense, we are thinking that what she did was (as we might put it) praiseworthy, under the circumstances.

On Smith's account, we judge the propriety of someone's reaction to her situation by, in effect, putting ourselves in her place and seeing whether we would respond as she does. If we would, then (on noticing this) we approve of her reaction and take it to be proper; if we wouldn't, then (on noticing this) we disapprove of her reaction and think of it as, in some respect, improper. Smith distinguishes here cases in which doing what is appropriate or called for is neither difficult nor unusual, from cases in which it is difficult or unusual or both, arguing that this difference shows up, within our judgments of propriety, in the distinctions we draw between what is, and what is not, admirable. Often, he notes, doing what is proper is no special accomplishment.

On Smith's account, we judge the merit of someone's reaction to her situation by, in effect, putting ourselves in the place of those who are, or would be, affected by her action and seeing whether we feel either gratitude or resentment towards her in her place. If we feel gratitude, then (on noticing this) we approve of their being grateful and see the action that prompts our gratitude as being worthy of praise and reward. If, alternatively, we feel resentment, then (on noticing this) we approve of their being resentful and see the action that prompts our resentment as being worthy of blame and punishment.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to judgments of merit, Smith emphasizes that our approval of either gratitude or resentment depends in large part on whether we see as proper the original action that might prompt either gratitude or resentment. So, for instance, he argues that we will not approve of

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<sup>8</sup> TMS, Li.3.5-7, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> In the course of setting out this account, Smith offers some wonderfully subtle observations about the nature of gratitude and resentment. Among other things, he stresses the ways in which these sentiments are they are intimately bound up with wanting to be the agent of, and the recognized the grounds for, the object of the gratitude (or resentment) enjoying some benefit (or suffering some loss).

the resentment of one man against another, merely because this other has been the cause of his misfortune, unless he has been the cause of it from motives which we cannot enter into. Before we can adopt the resentment of the sufferer, we must disapprove of the motives of the agent, and feel that our heart renounces all sympathy with the affections which influenced his conduct. If there appears to have been no impropriety in these, how fatal soever the tendency of the action which proceeds from them to those against whom it is directed, it does not seem to deserve any punishment, or to be the proper object of any resentment.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, he argues that our judgments of gratitude are sensitive to what we think of the original action towards which someone might feel gratitude. He maintains that we are able fully to approve of the gratitude, and thus able to see the action as meritorious, only if we think the action was itself proper.<sup>11</sup>

Underwriting Smith's account of when and why we approve of various sentiments and actions are (i) our capacity for sympathy -- our feeling certain ways as a result of imagining ourselves in other peoples' situation<sup>12</sup> -- and (ii) our capacity for approbation (and disapprobation) -- our approving on noticing that our reactions coincide (and disapproving on noticing that they do not) of the people in question.<sup>13</sup> For our

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<sup>10</sup> TMS, II.i.4.3, pp. 73-74.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Smith recognizes an asymmetry between gratitude and resentment, in that while our capacity to sympathize with resentment depends entirely on our not seeing the original action as proper, he seems to see that we might sympathize with gratitude for actions even when we don't see the original action as proper. Thus while he thinks we "cannot at all sympathize" with resentment directed towards an action we deem proper, we simply can't sympathize "thoroughly and heartily" with gratitude directed towards an action we deem improper, though it seems we might sympathize a bit. TMS, II.i.4.3-4, pp. 73-74.

<sup>12</sup> "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, ...we enter as it were into his body, 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." TMS I.i.1.2, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Smith's account of sympathy shifted under pressure from Hume. Smith originally identified approval of some sentiment with sympathizing with it. But he agrees with Hume that approval was always pleasant while also agreeing with Hume that some sympathetic feelings were themselves unpleasant, as when, for instance, we sympathize with someone else's suffering. To reconcile these views, Smith ends up identifying approval not with the sympathetic feelings (which after all might be painful) but with recognizing the coincidence, i.e. the sympathy, in feelings -- which he thinks our social nature makes always pleasant. According to Smith, "...in the sentiment of approbation there are two things to be taken notice of; first, the sympathetic passion of the spectator; and, secondly, the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned. This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful. The other may either be agreeable or disagreeable, according

vicarious reactions to coincide with someone else's is for us to sympathize with them. And noticing this sympathy, Smith argues, gives rise to approval of what we sympathize with (while noticing a failure of sympathy gives rise to disapproval).

In the course of articulating this account of approval, and its dependence on our capacity for, and discoveries of, sympathy, Smith emphasizes the ways in which our judgments of other peoples' beliefs are paralleled by our judgments of their sentiments. He maintains that our approval of what others think or feel, of their beliefs as well as their sentiments, rests on whether we share those beliefs and sentiments.

To approve of another man's opinions is to adopt those opinions, and to adopt them is to approve of them. If the same arguments which convince you convince me likewise, I necessarily approve of your conviction; and if they do not, I necessarily disapprove of it; neither can I possibly conceive that I should do the one without the others. To approve or disapprove, therefore, of the opinions of others is acknowledged, by every body, to mean no more than to observe their agreement or disagreement with our own. But it is equally the case with regard to our approbation or disapprobation of the sentiments or passions of others.<sup>14</sup>

There are, not surprisingly, all sorts of nice complexities here, when it comes to distinguishing between thinking someone's beliefs are true or her sentiments fitting and thinking that they are understandable or even justified under the (perhaps misleading) circumstances in which they are held or felt. Thus we might recognize that we would share someone's belief, if we were in her situation, without thinking her belief is true, and we might similarly recognize that we would have the very same sentiments, if we were in her situation, without thinking her sentiments are actually fitting.

Yet Smith's view, importantly, is not that approval reflects what one believes one would think or feel were one in another person's situation. Rather, on his account, approval reflects the thoughts and feelings one actually has, having put oneself, in imagination, in her place. This restricts which beliefs might be endorsed by us as true to those we actually end up sharing and similarly restricts the feelings we approve of to those we actually end up sharing. As a result, to think of someone's belief or feeling

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to the nature of the original passion, whose features it must always, in some measure, retain." TMS, I.iii.1.9, note, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> TMS, I.i.3.2, p. 17. Similarly, he argues, "To approve of the passions of another... 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. The man who resents the injuries that have been done to me, and observes that I resent them precisely as he does, necessarily approves of my resentment. The man whose sympathy keeps time to my grief, cannot but admit the reasonableness of my sorrow." TMS, I.i.3.1, p. 16.

that it is understandable – perhaps exactly the belief or feeling one would actually have, without fault, were one in her position -- is compatible with thinking the belief false and the feeling improper, since it is compatible with not actually believing or feeling that way, having put oneself, in imagination, in her place.

Needless to say, working out this sort of view requires making good sense of how one might successfully imagine oneself in another's situation, and might as a result think or feel a certain way, without believing that were one actually in that person's situation one would think or feel that way. Smith speaks to this a bit, discussing the ways in which we might imagine ourselves in the situation of someone who is dead and vicariously feel sadness or resentment, even as we recognize fully that a cadaver feels nothing. For example, if we consider the case of someone who has been killed in a fight

...we put ourselves in his situation, as we enter, as it were, into his body, and in our imaginations, in some measure, animate anew the deformed and mangled carcass of the slain, when we bring home in this manner his case to our own bosoms, we feel upon this, as upon many other occasions, an emotion which the person principally concerned is incapable of feeling, and which yet we feel by an illusive sympathy with him. The sympathetic tears which we shed for that immense and irretrievable loss, which in our fancy he appears to have sustained, seem to be but a small part of the duty which we owe him. The injury which he has suffered demands, we think, a principal part of our attention. We feel that resentment which we imagine he ought to feel, and which he would feel, if in his cold and lifeless body there remained any consciousness of what passes upon earth.<sup>15</sup>

How this all works is nicely puzzling, and what counts as having successfully put oneself in another's place, in imagination, needs to be worked out. But the phenomena Smith is relying on here look familiar and the basic outlines of his explanation of when and why we might approve of what others think and feel is at least on to something.

### Approving vs. Seeing as Approvable

As Smith recognizes, our natural disposition to approve and disapprove of others is quickly turned on ourselves, as we come to recognize that others are regarding what we do sometimes with approval and sometime not. Smith argues that we naturally hope to secure the approval of others in a way that gives rise to a problem. For we learn that, no matter what we do, not everyone will always actually approve, and even

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<sup>15</sup> TMS, II.i.2.5, p. 71.

in cases where people do approve, it is not always (we know) for how we have actually responded to our circumstances in feeling or action.

This problem forces us to figure out whose approvals to try to secure and, in the process, generates for us a distinction between doing what will, as a matter of fact, garner approval, and doing what is *approvable* (that is, approval-worthy). As Smith notes, man

...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 praise-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise. He dreads, not only blame, but blame-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be blamed by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of blame.<sup>16</sup>

On Smith's view, our need to distinguish among those whose approval we might seek, and the attendant distinction between what is merely approved and what is approvable, go hand in hand with privileging the approval of certain actual or imaginable people in preference to others.

In particular, Smith maintains, we rule out the reactions of those who misunderstand either our circumstances or our reactions to those circumstances (as we take them to be),<sup>17</sup> and we rule out too those who have a personal stake in what is happening that would influence their reactions.<sup>18</sup> That is, we restrict our concern for the approval of others, at least to the extent we are interested in whether we have acted with propriety and merit, to the reactions of one who is appropriately informed and

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<sup>16</sup> TMS, III.2.1, pp. 113-114.

<sup>17</sup> "The most sincere praise can give little pleasure when it cannot be considered as some sort of proof of praise-worthiness. It is by no means sufficient that, from ignorance or mistake, esteem and admiration should, in some way or other, be bestowed upon us. If we are conscious that we do not deserve to be so favourably thought of, that if the truth were known, we should be regarded with very different sentiments, our satisfaction is far from being complete. The man who applauds us either for actions which we did not perform, or for motives which had no sort of influence upon our conduct, applauds not us, but another person. We can derive no sort of satisfaction from his praises." TMS, III.2.5, pp 115-116.

<sup>18</sup> In places Smith describes the relevant sort of impartiality as a matter of the spectator being "indifferent." But the indifference at stake here needs to be compatible with being engaged, when imagining being in the positions of the people "principally concerned." Being indifferent is being unbiased, not being insensitive.

impartial.<sup>19</sup> The Impartial Spectator comes on the scene, constituting our conscience and setting a standard for what is worthy of approval.

At the same time, and crucially, we acquire the resources to review our own pattern of approvals, directed at others, asking of them whether they are of what is approvable. Our reliance on what we happen to approve of, in judging of others, is thus augmented in ways that allow us to evaluate the standards we actually rely on asking both whether they pick out what is in fact approvable and whether they themselves are approvable.<sup>20</sup>

We thus begin to be able to ask not simply whether we do approve of some sentiment or action, but whether that sentiment or action is, in fact, approvable. Now, and not really earlier, Smith has on hand not simply an account of what we might approve of, an account grounded in the discovery of a sympathy with the feelings of others, but an account of our thinking of others, and of ourselves, as not merely approved but as approvable.

### How Ideal is the Impartial Spectator?

It is worth noting that, at this point, the distinction between approving of some sentiment or action, and thinking it approvable, is a matter of thinking it would secure the approval of an Impartial Spectator. And it is worth noting too, that at this point, the pressure on spectators, for them to count as setting a standard for our what is approvable, goes only so far as is necessary for them to have an accurate understanding of the peoples' particular situations, sentiments, and intentions, and have no personal stake in the situation.

Significantly, Smith spends no time whatsoever suggesting that Impartial Spectators have still more information -- about the long term effects of one's actions, or the alternatives available to, but not appreciated by, the agent, or about the full range of non-moral facts. Nor are Impartial Spectators characterized by Smith as being

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<sup>19</sup> As Smith notes, "The love and admiration which we naturally conceive for those whose character and conduct we approve of, necessarily dispose us to desire to become ourselves the objects of the like agreeable sentiments, and to be as amiable and as admirable as those whom we love and admire the most. Emulation, the anxious desire that we ourselves should excel, is originally founded in our admiration of the excellence of others. Neither can we be satisfied with being merely admired for what other people are admired. We must at least believe ourselves to be admirable for what they are admirable. But, in order to attain this satisfaction, we must become the impartial spectators of our own character and conduct." TMS, III.2.3, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> These resources, which play, I think, a crucial role in giving Smith a plausible theory of moral judgment, are regularly ignored or underplayed. I will be relying on them towards the end of the paper when I contrast Smith's account of the standard of moral judgment with the standards that might be set by Ideal Observers.

equally concerned about all who might be affected or moved to approve in proportion as people are benefitted. Nor does Smith elaborate the characteristics of the Impartial Spectator in any other way that might underwrite thinking the approvals of such spectators would either support or correspond to anything like the principle of utility.

Still, in places Smith does speak of the Impartial Spectator as an “ideal spectator”<sup>21</sup> and “the ideal man within the breast”<sup>22</sup> and he clearly sees the Impartial Spectator, in standing as the voice of conscience, as being free of defects that would undermine his role as setting the standard for our judgments of propriety and merit. This all might reasonably recommend thinking that a fuller specification of the Impartial Spectator – fuller than the one actually offered by Smith – would naturally extend the list of his attributes to include omniscience and an equal-concern for all who might be affected. The result would be a standard for our judgments of propriety and merit that make them, properly understood, answerable to the expected or actual effects, on everyone, of the sentiments, actions, and reactions in question.

Yet Smith explicitly rejects such a standard, arguing specifically that our judgments of propriety and merit are both focused much more narrowly, on the people “principally concerned” (the agent and his or her circumstances, for questions of propriety and the intended or usually effected others, for questions merit) always with an eye primarily looking to the circumstances that prompted the behavior, and the impact on those who might be directly effected in ways that would prompt gratitude or resentment, and not to the general and long term effects of the action (or reaction).

Smith does of course make important room for the relevance of particular effects. And he clearly thinks that intentionally acting to help others, depending on who one would be helping, and how, can be both proper and meritorious. So he acknowledges that the effects of people’s sentiments, actions, and reactions, can all matter morally.

But he thinks their moral significance is not properly seen as depending primarily - let alone exclusively -- on their contribution to overall happiness or welfare.<sup>23</sup> In fact,

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<sup>21</sup> TMS, III.3.38, p. 153.

<sup>22</sup> TMS, III.3.26, p. 147; III.3.28, p. 148; III.3.29, p. 148; III.4.4, p. 158.

<sup>23</sup> “The utility of those qualities, it may be thought, is what first recommends them to us; and, no doubt, the consideration of this, when we come to attend to it, gives them a new value. Originally, however, we approve of another man's judgment, not as something useful, but as right, as accurate, as agreeable to truth and reality; and it is evident we attribute those qualities to it for no other reason but because we find that it agrees with our own. Taste, in the same manner, is originally approved of, not as useful, but as just, as delicate, and as precisely suited to its object. The idea of the utility of all qualities of this kind, is plainly an after-thought, and not what first recommends them to our approbation.” TMS Ii.4.4, p. 20. Also: “Nature, indeed, seems to have so happily adjusted our sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, to the conveniency both of the individual and of the society, that after the strictest examination it will be found, I believe, that this is universally the case. But still I affirm, that it is not the view of this utility or hurtfulness which is either the first or principal source of our approbation and

he argues that our concern for overall happiness makes sense only against a background concern, on other grounds, for the happiness of particular people.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, he thinks that the moral importance of the happiness of particular people itself turns on consideration of how and why they might be made happy. Improper happiness and happiness that is properly resented are not, according to Smith, of moral value. At the same time, he argues that even where the value of the outcome is not in question, our actual interest is not so much in securing the outcomes (in utility, that is) but in good design. The suitability of things to certain ends recommends them to our approval, often more than what they might actually produce:

If we examine... why the spectator distinguishes with such admiration the condition of the rich and the great, we shall find that it is not so much upon account of the superior ease or pleasure which they are supposed to enjoy, as of the numberless artificial and elegant contrivances for promoting this ease or pleasure. He does not even imagine that they are really happier than other people: but he imagines that they possess more means of happiness. And it is the ingenious and artful adjustment of those means to the end for which they were intended, that is the principal source of his admiration.<sup>25</sup>

It is not simply that Smith thinks that our judgments happen to be influenced by considerations other than, and sometimes at odds with, utility. Smith's own sincere judgments run counter to what an exclusive concern for utility would countenance. This means he is committed to thinking not merely that people's judgments happen to be sensitive to things other than utility, but that their correctness turns on their being sensitive in this way – that the standard for the judgments in question is not set by someone who approves in proportion as sentiments, actions, or reactions either do or are expected to contribute to overall utility.

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disapprobation. These sentiments are no doubt enhanced and enlivened by the perception of the beauty or deformity which results from this utility or hurtfulness. But still, I say, they are originally and essentially different from this perception." TMS IV.2.3, p. 188.

<sup>24</sup> "The concern which we take in the fortune and happiness of individuals does not, in common cases, arise from that which we take in the fortune and happiness of society. We are no more concerned for the destruction or loss of a single man, because this man is a member or part of society, and because we should be concerned for the destruction of society, than we are concerned for the loss of a single guinea, because this guinea is a part of a thousand guineas, and because we should be concerned for the loss of the whole sum. In neither case does our regard for the individuals arise from our regard for the multitude: but in both cases our regard for the multitude is compounded and made up of the particular regards which we feel for the different individuals of which it is composed." TMS II.ii.3.10, pp. 89-90.

<sup>25</sup> IV.1.8, p. 182. What causes admiration, he notes, "is not so much the utility, as the aptness ... to promote it." TMS IV.1.6, p. 180.

## Irregularities of Sentiment

Smith's characterization of the Impartial Spectator does go beyond crediting him with understanding the circumstances and sentiments of those principally concerned and with not having any personal stake in the situation. In particular, Smith notes that our sympathetic responses are consistently more moderate than the feelings had by those in the situations we are (merely) imagining ourselves in, with the result that the feelings spectators (impartial or not) sympathize with, and so approve of, are regularly milder than those people tend to experience directly.<sup>26</sup> The upshot is that morality recommends and approves self-control and moderation. Specifically, morality valorizes limitations on the expression of grief at the loss of a loved one, calmness in the face of danger, as well as restraint when in the grip of love and controlled enthusiasm in the face of good fortune.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Smith identifies a number of "irregularities of sentiment" that shape an Impartial Spectator's approvals no less than anyone else's, all of which then have an impact on what counts as proper or meritorious. Thus, for instance, Smith notes that precisely because sympathy relies on the imagination, we end up being better able to sympathize with passions "which take their origin from the imagination" than with pleasures and pains of the body. The former are simply more accessible to the imagination, and so to sympathy.<sup>28</sup>

Along the same lines, he maintains that "It is because mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than with our sorrow, that we make parade of our riches, and conceal our poverty."<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Smith maintains, our judgments of both propriety and merit are heavily influenced by fortune, with our approvals being sensitive not merely to how people

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<sup>26</sup> TMS, I.i.4.7, pp. 21-2.

<sup>27</sup> In general, Smith's focus is on the expression of sentiments, rather than the sentiments themselves, with the sympathetic responses of the Impartial Spectator setting a standard not so much for how one is to feel as for how one should express the feelings one has. In some places, in fact, Smith's account of what counts as a virtue plays out taking for granted a certain feeling, of grief, or fear, or hunger, as given and focusing simply on the manner and degree such feelings might properly be expressed. See Robert Shaver's "Virtues, Utility, and Rules," for a very nice description of the ways in which Smith's theory regularly focuses more on the expression of passions than on the passions themselves. *Op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> "The loss of a leg may generally be regarded as a more real calamity than the loss of a mistress. It would be a ridiculous tragedy, however, of which the catastrophe was to turn upon a loss of that kind. A misfortune of the other kind, how frivolous soever it may appear to be, has given occasion to many a fine one." And this is because we are able to engage sympathetically with the suffering felt on losing a mistress, but not with the pain felt on the loss of a limb. TMS, I.ii.1.7, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> TMS, I.iii.2.1, p. 50.

reacted to their circumstances in feeling and action, but to what the effects of their reactions turned out to be, even where they had no control over those effects. We are more grateful, Smith notes, to those who have actually helped us, than to those who have tried just as hard, but not succeeded. And we blame, and punish more severely, those who have actually committed murder than those who have attempted and failed. These are not merely differences in how *we* happen to react. They are differences reflected as well in the responses of Impartial Spectators, and they then make a difference to what counts as meritorious or not..<sup>30</sup>

In the same spirit, Smith goes on to note the extent to which the workings of sympathy make spectators, impartial and otherwise, subject to the influence of fashion, custom, and rank, all in ways that shape dramatically what secures approval.

Smith's attitude towards these influences is complex. On the one hand, he is manifestly unwilling to countenance everything that is a matter of good fortune, is fashionable, or customary, or done by those in power. In each case, he mentions examples that would, he maintains, properly secure the disapproval of an Impartial Spectator. On the other hand, Smith just as clearly thinks that differences in fortune, fashion, custom, and rank do make a difference to what is proper or meritorious, and do so in a way that is reflected in, and vindicated by, the reactions of an Impartial Spectator.

So when, why, and to what degree should we see imaginative accessibility, fortune, fashion, custom, and rank, as having an impact on an appropriately specified Impartial Spectator? The answer to this question will, of course, make a substantive difference to the standard the Impartial Spectator then sets. Yet Smith's answer is less than clear, to say the least.

### Explaining vs. Justifying Our Judgments

One natural thought is that Smith neither has, nor owes, an answer. After all, one might argue, Smith's aim is simply to describe our moral judgments, not justify them. As long as he is right that, as a matter of fact, our judgments of propriety and merit are

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<sup>30</sup> Smith is intriguingly ambivalent about how to think of the Impartial Spectator's liability to the influence of fortune. On the one hand, at one point he argues that the Impartial Spectator's reaction, being "just and well-founded" will also be "a steady and permanent one, and altogether independent of ... good or bad fortune." Yet he immediately follows that claim with the observation that, in fact, Impartial Spectators are influenced by fortune, approving "with the most enthusiastic admiration" what he would condemn as imprudence and injustice in the absence of success. TMS, VI.III.30, p. 252. Moreover, having cataloged the various influences of fortune, he proceeds to defend the impact of fortune. Smith's ambivalence finds an echo, I think, in most peoples' thoughts about what has come to be called "moral luck." See Bernard Williams' "Moral Luck" and Thomas Nagel's "Moral Luck," both in the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, supplementary volume 50, 1976, pp. 115-135 and 137-151, respectively.

influenced in the ways he describes, which seems plausible enough, he will have accomplished his goal. Going beyond that to argue that the standard we rely on in making our judgments is the right one may seem to be no part of his project.

But this is too quick. Consider the parallel project of explaining our judgments of size and shape, which Smith sees as analogous.<sup>31</sup> No doubt a catalog of the various things (light, perspective, attention) that might influence such judgments would be important. Equally important, however, would be an account of what the difference is between thinking, say, that something is circular and thinking that it is square. Having some account of that difference is crucial and is accomplished by articulating the standard in light of which some things count as circular and others as square. Only against this background will we be in a position to explain peoples' judgments that things are circular. Of course, providing such an account does not involve justifying particular judgments of shape, nor does it require justifying thinking in terms of shape at all. Explaining what it is to make a shape judgment (the judgment, for instance, that something is circular) is not the same as justifying such judgments. Nonetheless, the explanation will barely be started unless it has on hand a standard of shape to rely on in sorting the judgments as being of one shape rather than another (or none at all).

Similarly, any attempt to explain our judgments that things are appropriate or inappropriate, right or wrong, praiseworthy or blameworthy, has to provide an account of what the differences are among these various thoughts and what distinguishes them from thoughts of other kinds. Discovering what might influence such judgments plays out against an at least implicit understanding of what one is doing in thinking (mistakenly or not) that something is appropriate, or right, or praiseworthy. Of course, again, providing such an account does not involve justifying particular moral judgments, nor does it require justifying thinking in moral terms at all. Explaining what it is to make a moral judgment is not the same as justifying such judgments. Nonetheless, the explanation will barely be started unless it has on hand a moral

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<sup>31</sup> "As to the eye of the body, objects appear great or small, not so much according to their real dimensions, as according to the nearness or distance of their situation; so do they likewise to what may be called the natural eye of the mind: and we remedy the defects of both these organs pretty much in the same manner. In my present situation an immense landscape of lawns, and woods, and distant mountains, seems to do no more than cover the little window which I write by and to be out of all proportion less than the chamber in which I am sitting. I can form a just comparison between those great objects and the little objects around me, in no other way, than by transporting myself, at least in fancy, to a different station, from whence I can survey both at nearly equal distances, and thereby form some judgment of their real proportions. Habit and experience have taught me to do this so easily and so readily, that I am scarce sensible that I do it; and a man must be, in some measure, acquainted with the philosophy of vision, before he can be thoroughly convinced, how little those distant objects would appear to the eye, if the imagination, from a knowledge of their real magnitudes, did not swell and dilate them." TMS, III.3.2, pp. 134-135.

standard to rely on in sorting the judgments as being of one moral sort rather than another (or none at all).<sup>32</sup>

So, even giving due attention to the difference between explaining moral judgments and justifying them, Smith's project calls for some account of the standard(s) in light of which things count as proper or meritorious. Smith's official answer, of course, seems to appeal directly to the Impartial Spectator. But his perceptive description of the irregularities of the sympathetic responses of even Impartial Spectators (influenced as they are by imaginative accessibility, fortune, fashion, rank, etc.) threatens to discredit the view. It is worth noting why. The problem is that the various irregularities all look as if they constitute *defects* that disqualify those who suffer them as setting a standard for our moral judgments.

One might, at this point, think that Smith's apparent comfort with allowing the influences he describes is due to his failure to keep a clear eye on the difference between explaining our making the judgments we do (accurate and inaccurate alike) and identifying the standard in light of which accurate judgments are to be distinguished from inaccurate ones. We may well be influenced, in the ways Smith catalogues, by failures of imagination, by fortune, fashion, custom, and rank. The same is likely true of the real spectators we might actually turn to in checking our reactions against those of others. Yet granting that is compatible with holding that all the resulting judgments are distorted and that the standard for our judgments is set by someone not subject to such influences.

### A Defective Standard?

If the irregularities do render defective a putative standard for our moral judgments, we will have reason, whatever Smith thinks, for holding that he has gotten wrong the standard for our moral judgments. This thought recommends a familiar proposal. Wouldn't an improved version of Smith's theory, one that retains his appeal to a suitably described spectator as setting the standard of moral judgment, be one that idealizes away these defects, and any others, so as to have, a defect free standard? Isn't the right standard constituted by an appropriately characterized Ideal Observer?

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<sup>32</sup> One could avoid this argument by embracing a version of non-cognitivism according to which the "judgments" in question are not judgments at all and that what distinguishes judgments of, for instance, merit from others has nothing to do with its content. In that case the contrast between thinking something meritorious and thinking it otherwise will not presume a standard of merit. But this is pretty clearly neither what Smith has in mind nor what he is hoping for. His project would be especially frustrated, I think, if he ended up being unable to draw the distinction between something securing approval and it meriting that approval. That distinction plays a key role in Smith's story of the nature of moral motivation and conscience. This means, I think, that the noncognitivist alternative would stand as, at best, a fall-back interpretation if Smith turns out not to have available any plausible account of the standard for moral judgments.

One suggestion might be that the right standard is set by a spectator (i) who knows not merely the circumstances of, and effects on, those principally involved, but all the facts as they relate to all who might be affected, (ii) who is not merely impartial in Smith's sense, but who is equally concerned for the welfare of all who might be affected, and (iii) who is not subject to the irregular influence Smith catalogs but instead consistently responds proportionately to the actual feelings of the people involved. But other suggestions of course will be in the offing, depending on which characteristics one regards as defects and on what one might think would eliminate or correct for them.<sup>33</sup>

Smith, though, seems not to think of the Impartial Spectator, as he describes him, as suffering defects at all, despite the irregularities of sentiment Smith highlights. It is true that Smith does, in one place, refer to the influence of fortune as a reflection of a "a great disorder in our sentiments"; but he immediately comments, in the same sentence, that it is by "no means, however, without its utility; and we may on this, as well as on many other occasions, admire the wisdom of God even in the weakness and folly of man."<sup>34</sup> And Smith does begin his discussion of the influence of fortune with a principled argument for thinking that fortune is irrelevant to virtue. Yet, without criticizing the argument, he goes on directly not merely to argue that fortune does have an influence but to defend that influence. In the course of doing so, he appears to attribute the argument's apparent force to our considering things only in abstract and general terms without regard to particular cases.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, Smith consistently follows up his discussion of the ways in which fortune, fashion, custom, and rank, influence sympathy, with arguments meant to show that the influences are salutary and so should be welcomed, not rejected.

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<sup>33</sup> The description I have just offered corresponds fairly closely to the one defended by Roderick Firth, and would work to vindicate a version of utilitarianism. But variations on the same theme, with different substantive implications, have been offered by others. See, for instance, Richard Brandt's [A Theory of the Good and the Right](#) (Oxford University Press, 1979) and Michael Smith's [The Moral Problem](#) (Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> TMS, VI.iii.30, p.253.

<sup>35</sup> Although, this discussion is intriguingly ambiguous. Smith clearly thinks that we "seem to be persuaded of the truth of this equitable maxim [that fortune is irrelevant merit and demerit]" only if we consider things in the abstract. Attention shows that "when we come to particular cases, the actual consequences which happen to proceed from any action, have a very great effect upon our sentiments concerning its merit or demerit," which shows that we are not really persuaded of the principle. Still, Smith remarks that "we all acknowledge" that the principle "ought entirely to regulate" our sentiments. Whether he is simply registering that we all find the argument for the principle, considered in the abstract, convincing, or he is holding that the particular cases are misleading, is unclear. What is clear is that he thinks allowing fortune its influence serves a purpose "which the Author of nature seems to have intended by it." TMS, II.iii.intro.5-6, p. 93.

Rather than lamenting the influence of fortune, for instance, Smith argues that our disposition to judge of people by the effects of their actions, and not merely by their intentions, both introduces a welcome incentive that would otherwise be lacking and removes what would otherwise be a strong temptation to probe invasively in to peoples' intentions. And he defends our liability to the influence of fashion, custom and rank as all being crucial to establishing social order and rendering political authority stable. In short, he defends the irregularities of sentiment on the grounds that their influence is useful.

Of course, one might think that Smith is simply defending the utility of making false judgments or of being subject to the illusions caused by the various irregularities he recognizes. If so, then the defense would be compatible with seeing the irregularities as defects of the Impartial Spectator, considered as a standard for our judgments, even if not as defects in our making judgments that meet the defective standard. Smith himself, however, seems to think the judgments, while surprising until one moves to particular cases, are neither false nor illusions. The standard he articulates is one he embraces.

Alternatively, one might see Smith's defense of the Impartial Spectator, sentimental irregularities and all, on the model of his invisible hand defense of a market economy.<sup>36</sup> In the case of the market, Smith emphasizes that people perfectly properly pursue their private interest, without regard to public welfare or the happiness of mankind, even though it is the resulting contribution to welfare and happiness that justifies the workings of the market. Analogously, one might suggest, Smith may be supposing that people perfectly properly regulate their moral judgments by appeal to the standard set by the Impartial Spectator, having no further end in view, even though it is the resulting contribution to public welfare and the happiness of mankind that justifies our judging in this way.

Just as our political economy is vindicated by its contribution to over all happiness, one might argue, so too is our moral economy vindicated by its similar contribution. While this view does not have Smith embracing an Impartial Spectator who, in turn, endorses utility as the standard of judgment, it has the virtue of stressing an appealing structural parallel within Smith's views, and makes sense of Smith's explicit appeals to utility in defending both markets and the Impartial Spectator.

Nonetheless, the proposal quickly runs into problems if we take seriously Smith's criticisms of utility as an over-arching or fundamental principle of morality. Most significantly, Smith rejects the idea that happiness, no matter whose, no matter how secured, is valuable. That someone might take pleasure in some activity is no defense

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<sup>36</sup> Smith in fact mentions the invisible hand explicitly in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in arguing that social and economic inequalities work to "advance the interest of the society." at IV.1.10, pp. 184-185.

of the activity, if the pleasure is improper, nor does the fact that some action might promote happiness work to justify the action, if the happiness depended on doing something wrong. On Smith's view, happiness is not unconditionally valuable. Its value depends on it meeting, or at least not running contrary to, another standard.<sup>37</sup> This means that any appeal to a system's contribution to happiness or public welfare will itself presuppose some independent standard, an independent standard which it was manifestly Smith's hope to identify.

Smith has no problem with such appeals to happiness or public welfare, of course. Still, on his view, they play out within a context set by some other standard which cannot itself initially and primarily be justified by its contribution to happiness or to the public welfare.

### Standards for Standards: A Puzzle

Smith's aim, recall, is to account for the nature of moral judgment, and doing this involves successfully identifying the standard for such judgments. So Smith cannot appeal to an independent and prior standard -- especially one that his standard rejects (when in the unqualified form it would be, were it fundamental) -- in defending the Impartial Spectator as being defect-free. But that leaves us with a puzzle.

How is Smith thinking of the standard he has identified such that it makes sense to defend it, as he does, against worries that it is defective, while holding that it is defensible and yet doesn't presuppose (for its defense) some other standard?

The place to look for an answer is Smith's discussion of Hutcheson's moral sense theory. As Smith highlights, Hutcheson, in pressing the analogy between the moral sense (as he conceived of it) and our other senses, notes that the qualities "which belong to the objects of any sense, cannot, without the greatest absurdity, be ascribed to the sense itself. Who ever thought of calling the sense of seeing black or white, the sense of hearing loud or low, or the sense of tasting sweet or bitter?" Similarly, Hutcheson claims, "it is equally absurd to call our moral faculties virtuous or vicious, morally good or evil. These qualities belong to the objects of those faculties, not to the faculties themselves."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This view of Smith's is nicely echoed by Kant, in Section I of the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, where he notes that "The sight of a being who is not graced by any touch of a pure and good will but who yet enjoys an uninterrupted prosperity can never delight a rational and impartial spectator. Thus a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of being even worthy of happiness." [393], (Hackett Publishing, 1993), trans. by James Ellington, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> TMS, VII.iii.3.8, p. 323. As Hutcheson puts it no one "can apply *moral Attributes* to the very *Faculty* of perceiving *moral Qualities* ; or call his *moral Sense* *morally Good* or *Evil*, any more than he calls the *Power of Tasting*, *sweet*, or *bitter*; or of *Seeing*, *strait* or *crooked*, *white* or *black*." An Essay on the

On the contrary, Smith argues,

...surely if we saw any man shouting with admiration and applause at a barbarous and unmerited execution, which some insolent tyrant had ordered, we should not think we were guilty of any great absurdity in denominating this behaviour vicious and morally evil in the highest degree, though it expressed nothing but depraved moral faculties, or an absurd approbation of this horrid action, as of what was noble, magnanimous, and great.<sup>39</sup>

And this highlights a crucial resource unavailable to Hutcheson which is important for solving our puzzle.

As Smith points out, we can and do morally evaluate peoples' sense of morals, our own and other's. In doing so we are not pulling our standards out of thin air, nor are we relying on standards that have been established *ex ante* and *a priori*, independent of the standards we currently embrace. Rather, inevitably, our judgments of others, and our judgments concerning the standards we rely on in making those judgments, implicate and rely on the standards we currently have. But they also reflect the resources we have to take seriously and, potentially, respond to, worries that the standards we use are problematic.

That we rely on the standards we have in thinking about whether our standards are justified doesn't mean that the standards end up vindicated. There is a real possibility that once we uncover and examine our standards, we'll discover that, by our own lights, they don't stand up to scrutiny. In those cases, we will then have found reason to change them. Alternatively, though, we might discover that our standards, once examined and understood, actually withstand the test well and emerge as not subject, after all, to the worry we might otherwise have had. How things turn out can't be settled ahead of time, nor can they be settled for all time, given that new grounds for worry, and new discoveries about the standards themselves, might come in to view. But when our standards do survive reflective scrutiny they are appropriately seen as having been shown to be, at least in the respects explored, defect-free, so far as we can tell.<sup>40</sup>

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Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense, by Francis Hutcheson, ed. by Aaron Garrett (Liberty Fund, 2002), p. 149.

<sup>39</sup> TMS, VII.iii.3.9, p. 323

<sup>40</sup> Smith's view here is reminiscent of Hume's vindication of the "General Point of View" as a standard for moral judgment. In particular, they both recognize that the standards we do in fact embrace (whether set by the Impartial Spectator, or how things would appear from the General Point of View, or in some other way) will inevitably play a role in any attempt we make to respond to substantive worries about those very standards. See my "On Why Hume's 'General Point of View' Isn't Ideal – and Shouldn't Be," in *Social Philosophy & Policy*, volume 11, number 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 202-228.

Smith's discussion and defense of, as well as his comfort with, the irregularities of sentiment, as well as all the other features of the Impartial Spectator, should be understood against this background. Having, as he thinks, successfully articulated the standard that we do rely on in making moral judgments, Smith explores the concerns we might have about it, relying, in the process, on the only criteria we have for determining whether the concerns are well-founded (those set by the Impartial Spectator). Thus, when Smith highlights the benefits of a standard that lets fortune have its effect, he is not reaching back to a different and independent standard set by the principle of utility. He is relying on (if he is right) our standard, the standard we do in fact embrace -- the standard set by the Impartial Spectator -- which countenances an appeal to utility, not as an unrestricted or fundamental principle, but as a consideration that, when sensitive to propriety and merit, carries real weight (with an Impartial Spectator).<sup>41</sup>

It is worth noting, though, that Smith's main concern, in his discussion of Hutcheson, is not to respond to the puzzle I have been pressing, though it provides the resources he needs. Smith's main concern is to take issue with Hutcheson's view that moral judgments are properly seen as strictly analogous to the other sorts of judgments we make. Smith thinks this fails to get right the distinctive nature of moral judgment and so mistakes the principle of approbation that underwrites those judgments.<sup>42</sup> In the process, Smith suggests an account of the distinctive nature of moral judgments that has a great deal of promise, I think, though Smith himself doesn't pursue the issue.

According to this account, what is distinctive about our moral judgments is that the standard(s) we rely on in making them are liable to challenge as unjustified and such challenges are, as we might put it, probative with respect to whether we have the standard(s) right. If, by our own lights, a standard we have been relying on in making our moral judgments fails to meet our standards, then we have reason to think the standard itself is wrong as a standard for what is morally proper or meritorious. "Correct moral sentiments," Smith maintains "...naturally appear in some degree laudable and morally good." And this means that if we discover of some sentiments that they do not appear laudable and morally good, we have grounds for thinking they are not correct.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This whole structure is built on the account Smith offers of how we move, first, from approving or disapproving others, through discovering that they likewise are responding to us, to distinguishing what is approved from what merits approval, to subjecting our own patterns of approval to the standard of merit, on, finally, to asking whether the standard of merit itself merits approval.

<sup>42</sup> Smith thinks making a mistake about this principle is "of the greatest importance in speculation," though he thinks it "is of none in practice." TMS, VII.iii.intro.2, p. 315

<sup>43</sup> TMS, VII.iii.3.10, p. 323.

It is worth stressing that Smith is neither advancing nor presupposing a view according to which any imaginable standard of moral judgment is vindicated, if only it manages to secure its own approval. Reflexive endorsement is no evidence of truth, just a reflection of the fact that in light of the standard one has, it measures up. We might well be in a position to think of some standard that it is defective even if, by its lights, no defect emerges.

The idea, rather, is that our standards for moral judgments are themselves liable to moral evaluation in light of which we may find reason not merely to think that the standards are morally wrong but that, because of that, the judgments they inform are not correct. In contrast, to the extent our perceptual and other nonmoral judgments might be liable to moral evaluation, the result may call into question whether we are morally justified in making the judgments, but they won't thereby show that the judgments are incorrect. (Moreover, if somehow (contra Hutcheson and seemingly Smith too) our perceptual faculties came within their own purview, the fact that our faculty of vision, say, had one or another visible quality would be irrelevant to whether the judgments to which it gives rise are correct.)

What marks moral judgments as distinctive is that in making them we are committing ourselves, at least implicitly, to thinking of the standards we are using as morally justifiable. To discover they aren't, which is what happens when we discover they don't live up to their own standards, is to discover that the standard they need to be changed and that the judgments they underwrote are not correct.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

At the beginning, I sketched three claims that, taken together, characterized Smith as having a systematic view, in light of which (i) the Impartial Spectator sets the standard of moral judgment, (ii) that standard is one of utility, and (iii) that explains and underwrites the moral significance of Smith's appeal to utility in defending market economies.

I have argued that, indeed, the theory that Smith develops in A Theory of Moral Sentiments explains and underwrites the moral significance of Smith's appeal to utility in defending market economies. But the explanation comes via appeal to an Impartial

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<sup>44</sup> Smith is concerned exclusively with moral judgments and what distinguishes them from judgments that depend on ideas derived from our various senses. However, I think he has hit upon a principled contrast that lines up almost perfectly with what has come to be thought of as the difference between normative and non-normative judgments, where the former include, in addition to moral judgments, judgments of rationality (in action and belief) and others that carry the implication that we have reason to do or feel something, on the one hand, and non-normative judgments, that have no direct implications, considered in themselves, for what there is reason to do or feel. I explore and work to defend this more general account in "Rational Agency and the Nature of Normative Concepts," (manuscript).

Spectator who differs significant from any that would endorse, wholesale, anything like the principle of utility.

I have also argued that it would be a mistake to see Smith's work as playing out in a way that relies on the principle of utility as an independent standard of morality in defending a (perhaps admittedly non-utilitarian) Impartial Spectator or in defending a market economy.

Yet my main concern has not been to defend Adam Smith's non-utilitarian credentials, but to highlight the sophisticated and attractive account of moral judgment that lies behind Smith's specific substantive judgments and the standards he defends. It is an account that explains the emergence of our capacity to think in moral terms, mobilizing standards that distinguish between accurate and inaccurate moral judgments. It does this without supposing that there are *a priori* or otherwise independently available principles we might use for evaluating those standards. And it makes sense of how the standards we actually use are liable to challenge or criticism even as they might, at least in principle, also be defensible.