and cool. This tension is not entirely resolvable but Smith seemed to think that reflective moral agents could navigate it more or less successfully.

C. HISTORICAL FAMILIARITY

Custom reconciles us to everything. (Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*)

The tenuous balance between physical and affective space is profoundly unsettled by a third space, likely the most relevant and complicated space in which sympathetic judgment moves in Smith’s thought: that of history, or culture. We saw in the previous two sections that Smith’s spectator was able, with varying degrees of success, to *transcend* both physical and affective concentricity and *enlarge* his moral perspective. In both cases, judgment was naturally biased toward the near, but was ultimately enlarged in various ways. In the case of physical space, for example, we saw that a vivid narrative or image could serve to bring the distant near and thus arouse our sympathy. In the case of affective space, we saw that Smith’s turn toward the impartial spectator helped us to transcend our affective biases. Overall, I think Smith’s description of sympathy and the impartial spectator are together a plausible account of how people learn to surmount affective bias. We might say that Smith succeeds in his project of affective *enlargement*.

But surely there are other sorts of bias than affective bias that a successful moral philosophy must address. I am thinking specifically of cultural bias, a subject of considerable importance and academic attention today. In this section, I argue that Smith’s account of sympathy and the impartial spectator, on its own, does not explain sufficiently how people might surmount cultural bias. My argument rests on the assertion, which I have explored already at length, that Smith’s account of the moral life should be interpreted as a highly original anthropology of culture formation – thicker, more textured and complex than perhaps any other in the eighteenth century. In the *Moral Sentiments* Smith described in rich detail how moral culture is shaped, sustained and perpetuated by its own participants, without a value-giver, without formal education, without traditional forms of authority. Smith’s description of the moral life, understood anthropologically, confirms that the

---

95 Luc Boltanski in *Distant Suffering* has a relevant discussion about the necessity of both hot and cool judgment for humanitarian thought and speech. He argues that Smith’s theory successfully integrates them. In Boltanski’s language, Smith’s system permits “reflexivity” which “makes it possible to introduce a symmetry which reduces the tension between an aperiodical objectivism and moral involvement” (p. 43).
standards people use when they judge themselves and others derive from their own social experiences and are thus largely particular to those experiences. I am not arguing here that moral cultures cannot overlap and coincide with one another and therefore become in varying degrees intelligible to one another on Smith’s model, but there is nothing in his anthropology to suggest that they must or will. Coincidence is left to chance.

Since Smith employed his spectator model to bridge affective distance between people—the fact that I as spectator cannot literally experience what you are experiencing but can use my imagination to get some “sense” of it—some interpreters have claimed that his theory has cosmopolitan significance, that it can help spectators transcend cultural bias and come to understand and generate fellow-feeling for those who are physically, affectively and culturally remote. In what follows I will argue that this kind of appropriation forces an alien agenda on Smith—and more important, that it neglects one of his most original insights: that sympathy is a social practice oriented around criteria that vary from one forum of ordinary experience to another. This has important anthropological implications for interaction across moral contexts. I argue here that Smith’s moral psychology has difficulties enlarging the perspective of spectators entangled within historical space. While it does generate a transitory, affective sort of coolness, moderating our selfishness and enlarging us by reminding us that “we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it,”[96] I argue that it is ultimately incapable of generating the sort of impartiality necessary for calling our own cultural experience into question, a critical space in which we might come to know ourselves better and to evaluate those who are culturally remote without assimilating them to ourselves. Because Smith’s moral psychology was ultimately an anthropological description of how moral culture develops and sustains itself over time, and not a theory of how we become conscious about that process or how we might transcend it when necessary, this enlargement is substantially more complex and difficult to realize in the case of cultural bias. Smith’s moral psychology thickly describes how deeply entrenched our perspectives really are, how difficult it is to cultivate a critical distance from ourselves, and to approach others without historical bias. It is for this reason, I submit, and not for his alleged cosmopolitanism, that Smith speaks most perceptively to moral and political theory today.[97]

[96] TMS III.3-4 (p. 137).
[97] For an excellent discussion of the tensions between anthropological relativism and philosophical universalism in Smith’s thought, see Fleischacker, “Smith and Cultural Relativism.”
The circle of humanity

CULTURE AND JUDGMENT

By designating this last space “historical” I am referring to the constructed, historical nature of the criteria spectators deploy when they judge — or, to use Smith’s language, the “standards and measures” against which they discern “propriety” in other people. Smith did not use the language of “culture” or “moral culture” to describe his project; but in contemporary terms this is precisely what he was doing. The “point of propriety” that Smith so often spoke of, which served to orient and constrain sentiment and action, is not a universally normative measure that can be grafted onto any moral context. What is proper in one moral culture might be rude and insensitive in another. You belch at my table and I am put off; I wear shoes at yours and you are. Smith’s anthropology reveals that the content of propriety — that which designates a given sentiment or action as “praiseworthy” and “proper” — is particular to those who articulate it, part of a moral culture and as such deeply consensual. We might say that the formal category of propriety is universal for Smith (all moral cultures have some understanding of it), but that the content is necessarily plural. It must not be confused with what some might wish to characterize as universally normative or transcultural. In Part V of the Moral Sentiments, Smith explored what we would call “cultural pluralism,” and there he concluded:

The different situations of different ages and countries are apt ... to give different characters to the generality of those who live in them, and their sentiments concerning the particular degree of each quality, that is either blamable or praiseworthy, vary, according to that degree which is usual in their own country, and in their own times.

I will have much to say later about Smith’s view of cultural pluralism in Part V and its relation to cosmopolitan theory today. In due course we will encounter thinkers who have attempted to draw cosmopolitan and universalist conclusions from Smith’s account of the moral life — but we will discover, with Knud Haakonsen, that Smith “does not have access to a universal morality nor is an underlying logos any part of his system.”

To better understand Smith’s orientation to historical space, let’s revisit his account of the criteria we use when we judge others, which I discussed at some length in Chapter 2. Our moral criteria are self-referential for Smith. He described them as such:

98 TMS I.i.3 (pp. 16–19). 99 TMS V.2.7 (p. 204).
I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I neither have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them.

And again:

when we judge in this manner of any affection ... it is scarce possible that we should make use of any other rule or canon but the correspondent affection in ourselves.

On Smith’s description, spectators do not judge others with abstract criteria, with a “view from nowhere.” Spectators employ a self-referential standpoint, which means that we judge the actions and opinions of others “as right, as accurate, as agreeable to truth and reality ... for no other reason but because we find that it agrees with our own.” He couldn’t be clearer about this. But the question of where our own perspectives come from is less obvious, and unfortunately not addressed by Smith in this context. But the source should be obvious to anyone familiar with Smith’s central account of the sympathy process. In a well-known passage that I discussed at length earlier Smith speculated that a person who grew up in solitude “could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face.” Along these lines, I have argued that a spectator comes to know who he is, what he believes, and the standards by which he will judge others, through a lifetime of gazing into the “mirror of society,” participating repetitively in sympathetic exchange over time with those around him. Our desire for love and approval motivates us to accommodate ourselves to what we believe spectators will indulge, to what Smith called a “point of propriety.” We come to know what this point is, what our world generally approves and disapproves of, through our experiences moving through it. Compounded over time, these experiences progressively constrain my understanding of myself and others, and serve to condition the moral criteria (“my ear,” “my reason,” “my resentment,” and so on) that I will deploy when I inevitably find myself in the position of spectator. Society thus provides the mirror of self-knowledge, and engenders – indeed, disciplines – the criteria by which the self will come to mirror and judge others.

This is what I mean when I say that Smith provided a rich account of culture formation. He described how what “we” know is engendered and transmitted through the process of sympathetic exchange: I absorb moral

101 TMS I.3.10 (p. 19), emphasis added. 102 TMS I.3.9 (p. 18). 103 TMS I.1.4.4 (p. 20). 104 TMS III.1.3 (p. 110).
culture as I gaze into the mirror of society, draw judgment upon myself, and adjust to what my society expects of me as a member of it. In turn, I generate culture as I become a mirror for others who gaze at me and are judged and disciplined by me. What emerges is a moral culture that is particular to those of us who participate in it. We share a language, shared understandings and expectations. A central theme in this book is that Smith's sociological account of our moral criteria culminates in a culturally insular portrait of the moral life. I agree with Samuel Fleischacker's claim that Smith's "procedure of moral judgment" makes "the standards of one's society largely determinative of one's moral judgments." And because this procedure is a universal one for Smith, based in "Nature" and therefore a description of how all moral cultures unfold, we are left with a picture of deep moral diversity — moral cultures particular to their participants, overlapping and communicable in some ways perhaps, but profoundly and deeply pluralistic.

The consequence of cultural plurality for moral judgment, of course, is that the criteria we deploy will be more appropriate when we judge those who share our cultural experiences, and less appropriate with those who don't — indeed, that we may be woefully imprecise when judging a person just before our eyes, or on our television screens, clearly as our eyes may receive the "facts." In the case of affective bias, we recall, Smith had invoked the impartial spectator to help enlarge our perspective and refine our judgments; but I will argue here that this transitory sort of enlargement that Smith achieved with his spectator model is not the sort of enlargement that is required to facilitate cross-cultural intelligibility and judgment.

Smith seems to have acknowledged this when he drew on Stoic oikeiôsis and observed that a spectator will always sympathize more "precisely" with members of his family than with his neighbors, and with his neighbors than with his fellow citizens:

He is more habituated to sympathize with them. He knows better how everything is likely to affect them, and his sympathy with them is more precise and determinate, than it can be with the greater part of other people. It approaches nearer, in short, to what he feels for himself.

---

105 Fleischacker, "Smith and Cultural Relativism"; also Fleischacker, Wealth of Nations, pp. 52–54.
106 See the connection that Fleischacker draws between the mirror of society in which we come to know ourselves and Smith's acknowledgment of cultural diversity: in Wealth of Nations, p. 81: "if Smith understands human nature to depend so heavily on viewing ourselves through the eyes of others, it would be extremely surprising if he overlooked the degree to which differences among different groups of those others will lead people to have different characters and aspirations." He then correctly points us to TMS V.
107 The possibility of overlap renders Smith a pluralist to my mind, rather than a relativist.
108 TMS VI.i.1.2 (p. 219).
Because we share a history, and have cultivated shared sources of meaning through habitual intercourse over time, I am likelier than a stranger is to make "precise and determinate" judgments about my family, friends, co-workers and fellow citizens (in this concentric order). I already understand their worlds of meaning and "how everything is likely to affect" them. As Richard Rorty put it:

You know more about your family than your village, more about your village than your nation, more about your nation than humanity as a whole, more about being human than about simply being a living creature. You are in a better position to decide what differences between individuals are morally relevant when dealing with those whom you can describe thickly, and in a worse position when dealing with those whom you can describe only thinly.\textsuperscript{109}

Note that historical familiarity works independently of affective connection. The subjects of affective and historical proximity will frequently overlap (I usually understand better those whom I care for), but they need not. Opposites sometimes attract; and sometimes people feel contempt for their own precisely because they understand them so well or tire of their annoying predictability.

That Smith invokes the faculty of "imagination" as the vehicle by which spectators "enter into" the motivations of others does not entail that imagination is boundless, or even that all people (such as the well-groomed nobleman \textit{vis-à-vis} his servant) wish to exercise their imaginations. For Smith, moral imagination is bounded by familiarity. To put it differently: we are biased in historical space toward the proximate, just as we are biased in both physical and affective space. This would seem to entail that when the moral imagination is thrust beyond the sphere of the spectator's experience and understanding, it can misfire and yield judgments that are at best "imprecise" and "indeterminate" (to invert Smith's language in the passage cited above) and at worst based on narrow criteria foisted presumptively onto a reified other (to use language entirely anachronistic and foreign to Smith). Today we call this "misrecognition."\textsuperscript{110}


\textsuperscript{110} See, for example, Patchen Markell, \textit{Bound by Recognition} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), who defines misrecognition as the "failure, whether out of malice or out of ignorance, to extend people the respect or esteem that is due to them in virtue of who they are" (p. 3).
Still, some have suggested that Smith’s spectator model in fact enables impartial judgment of others, culturally recognizable or not. With this, we return to Smith’s idea of the “impartial spectator,” a faculty he invoked throughout the *Moral Sentiments* to overcome the near-sightedness of our passive sentiments. Most claims about the transcultural or cosmopolitan potential of Smith’s thought focus on the impartial spectator, for obvious reasons. Smith argued that this ideal “third person,” whom he sometimes called “reason,” “principle,” “conscience,” “the man within,” helps us to become impartial judges, to rise above the natural consequences of having private desires and interests, of living in families and communities and thus feeling more affection and concern for some people than others. As such, the impartial spectator has struck some interpreters as the perfect cosmopolitan device for getting us beyond ourselves, permitting access into the worlds of others and generating an impartial vantage from which to judge their practices.

Martha Nussbaum for instance draws parallels between Smith’s spectator model and John Rawls’ device of the original position. She observes that the spectator’s position in Smith’s theory “is designed to model the rational moral point of view by ensuring that he will have those, and only those, thoughts, sentiments, and fantasies that are part of a rational outlook on the world.” No doubt Smith would have balked at Rawls’ proposition of a stripped-down spectator, one ignorant of who he himself is, but since Smith too sometimes strung “reason” together with “conscience,” he might have granted the observation that his own impartial spectator model, in the words of F. L. von Haykoon, “put reason on the throne again as the arbiter of moral sentiments”; or at least, as Knud Haakonsen put it, showed that “moral ideals can detach themselves from social morality.”

---


12 Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, p. 73.

Though Charles Griswold emphasizes Smith’s skepticism and his resistance to using reason in this sense, he nevertheless agrees with Nussbaum and Haakonsen that Smith’s impartial spectator is in some degree capable of “detaching” itself from “ordinary experience,” that it employs “standard of right ... over and above the judgments of the moment” and that it therefore succeeds in getting us beyond the trap of relativism and cultural perspectivism. So too Jennifer Pitts more recently, who argues that for Smith our judgments are “formed in social contexts, but they are also independent of such contexts.” Perhaps most extreme in this sense are Luc Boltanski who claims that Smith’s impartial spectator is “aperspectival” and can therefore sustain a humanitarian “politics of pity,” and Amartya Sen who argues that Smith’s spectator model enables “adequately objective scrutiny of social conventions and parochial sentiments.” But we need to ask Smith and those today who are persuaded of the cross-cultural implications of his theory: how do Smithian spectators do this? How do they detach themselves from their own experiences as agents disciplined in a world of values and overcome cultural bias? How, within the terms of Smith’s thick description of the disciplinary process through which spectators in historical space come to be proper members and gatekeepers of social morality, do they now become critical of and able to transcend historical space when they imaginatively enter into the conditions and motivations of others with potentially very different histories? How does sympathy avoid assumption and speculation, avoid becoming an arrogant, smothering intrusion?

Griswold was first rigorously to pursue these sort of questions about self-knowledge and knowledge about others in a discussion of Smith’s thought, and his orientation to the impartial spectator’s independence has had a profound influence on the way moral philosophy thinks and talks about Adam Smith today. In *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Griswold begins by dispelling a pervasive assumption in the humanities and the social sciences that grounding moral knowledge in ordinary human experience deprives us of foundations and condemns us to a relativist account of moral life. For Griswold, Smith demonstrated that morality could do

---

146 Pitts, *Turn to Empire*, pp. 43–52, at p. 43.
without a “philosophical” or “theoretical” apparatus precisely because ordinary human experience contained within itself a sufficient capacity for reflexivity and self-understanding. This reflexivity was based in ordinary moral psychology, which Smith described in the Moral Sentiments through his account of sympathy and the impartial spectator. Griswold praises Smith for demonstrating that moral psychology can steer a course between the empirical and the philosophical, that it can “preserve the integrity of the prephilosophical” without surrendering “its own character and aims as philosophy.”"119 Smith struck this balance, we learn, by offering an account of moral psychology that “in one crucial respect” was not simply “continuous with ordinary experience.”"120

This balance rests, for Griswold, on the impartial spectator’s ability to “detach” itself from ordinary experience. For Griswold, the impartial spectator was “rooted in time and place”"121 – this rootedness bases his claim that Smith privileged the prephilosophical. Its standpoint, however, was not fixed to this place but was rather “a reflexive refinement of the exchanges of ordinary moral life.”"122 The impartial spectator’s ability to reflect on the norms and practices of its own world was the basis of its “objectivity” – what Griswold also sometimes refers to as its “superior grasp of truth and reality.”"123 That Smith demonstrated the possibility of genuine critical reflection within the “cave” of ordinary experience, constitutes the “virtue” and “humanity” of his Enlightenment – hence the title of Griswold’s book."124 No ascent into the light was required, for the cave could be enlightened from within."125

But how does Smith’s impartial spectator in fact “stand at a critical distance from the mores of his own time”?"126 How does it become reflexive? How does it simultaneously emerge from “us” yet objectively evaluate “us”? Griswold describes a “form of moral self-awareness,” that we acquire “over time” and “by degrees” through the experience of “moral education.”"127 “Only through practice do we learn to feel what is appropriate to feel and, correspondingly, what is appropriate to praise and blame.”"128 With experience we learn to detach ourselves from prejudice and to judge the world in light of a “reasonable standard extrapolated from the thoughtful observations governing how individuals may be expected to behave or respond in just this or that sort of situation.”"129 This is how we become “responsible,” “self-determining moral agents.”"130 Thus, Griswold concludes that the impartial spectator is “all we really need for moral life.”"131 It brings sufficient objectivity to our moral judgments.

119 Griswold, Virtues of Enlightenment, p. 63. 120 Ibid., p. 362. 121 Ibid., p. 349.
127 Ibid., pp. 210–212. 128 Ibid., p. 211. 129 Ibid., pp. 131 and 136. 130 Ibid., p. 131.
131 Ibid., p. 138.
without any of the problematic claims about the transcendental status of reason, the reduction of emotions to “incentives” or “inclinations,” the meshing of “maxims” with the *a priori* machinery of the categorical imperative, or claims about the mysterious noumenal status of freedom.\[132\]

Sounds like a magic key. And maybe Smith thought he had one. But does Smith’s moral philosophy actually get us where Griswold says it does? In one breath Griswold admits freely that the impartial spectator “defines the moral point of view already latent in ordinary life”\[133\]—he even calls it a “personification of the public”\[134\]—but then he denies that it is a “function of any given social consensus.”\[135\] He admits that it is “a logical development … of traits of actual spectators,”\[136\] but then insists on its detachment and reflexivity and denies that it is a “sociological concept.”\[137\] In another essay, he asserts that morality “is something we communally determine for ourselves” but then characterizes it as “metaphysically constitutive.”\[138\] He seems to want it both ways: insisting on the impartial spectator’s sociality primarily to establish its “reality,” to avoid charges that its standpoint is either merely subjective, a “fantasy,” an “illusion in the mind,” something we each construct willy-nilly on our own, or else “an independent order of moral facts”;\[139\] but then emphasizing the impartial spectator’s reflexivity and objectivity to overcome the contextuality and historicity that its reality entails. Griswold moves back and forth between these claims with such rhetorical ease, and elaborates both so remarkably well, that it is sometimes easy to forget the point: that the two are very much in tension.\[140\]

But the questions remain: can Smith’s impartial spectator stand at a critical distance from its own experience, or does it perceive only the shadows? Has Smith enlightened the cave from within, “redeemed” the ordinary?\[141\] Griswold poses the decisive question himself, but insists that the impartial spectator need not be “blinded” or “unalterably cooped up in its particular historical milieu.”\[142\] Situatedness need not undermine our ability to “grasp the truth” about ourselves or even about different societies.\[143\] This may well be. But does Adam Smith’s thought bring us to this appealing

\[132\] Ibid., p. 139.  
\[133\] Ibid., p. 145.  
\[134\] Ibid., p. 135.  
\[135\] Ibid., p. 143.  
\[136\] Ibid., p. 138.  
\[137\] Ibid., p. 143.  
\[140\] Fleishacker observes that Smith himself was caught in this trap between anthropological and philosophical approaches to morality. Fleishacker, “Smith and Cultural Relativism,” p. 15.  
\[142\] Ibid., pp. 349–351.  
\[143\] Ibid., p. 350.
conclusion? Does he pave the likeliest route to intelligibility? If the impartial spectator is, as I have argued, a “socialized conscience” or, what Griswold himself calls, a “personification of the public,” how is it capable of making ordinary experience intelligible? How does it cultivate the “superior grasp of truth and reality” that Griswold attributes to it?  

Griswold’s argument about the impartial spectator’s “reflexivity” and “superior grasp of truth and reality” has important implications for how a spectator judges others, and particularly those beyond his own historical space. It is here that the most troubling implications of Griswold’s argument reveal themselves. He insists on a “basic transparency of human beings to each other.” Surely imagination cannot carry us completely beyond ourselves and into the worlds of others, he admits. This is an inevitable fact about our physical separateness. But this does not mean that we lose all capacity to understand those who are quite differently placed, and to “evaluate” their unique experiences from a “moral point of view.” One need not be an American slave or a starving person or a refugee to grasp the truth of their suffering. This obviously sounds right. Smith gives the example of a man sympathizing with a “woman in child-bed” though “it is impossible that he should conceive himself as suffering her pains in his own proper person and character.”  

As I write these words in San Diego, wildfires are raging uncontrolled just miles from where I sit. A half-million of my neighbors have been evacuated from their homes and sleep in shelters tonight. With the thick stench of destruction hanging in the air, and soot gathering on my window sill, I can sympathize, grasp the truth of their suffering, though I am “here” safe writing and they are “there” refugees suffering, perhaps homeless tomorrow. Griswold has recently carried this Smithian way of bridging perspectives into a discussion about forgiveness – how injured parties, through recognition of their shared humanity with their injurer, and acquaintance with the injurer’s story, might come to cultivate forgiveness toward the injurer.

Ultimately, Griswold wants to emphasize the accessibility of others’ experiences to avoid the perspectivist trap of identity politics. Making “shared

144 Ibid., p. 135.
145 Ibid., p. 371. Again, I do argue that there are other resources in Smith’s thought, which will be addressed later.
146 Ibid., p. 350. 147 Ibid., pp. 95–96.
148 TMS VII.iii.14 (p. 317). Smith used this example when discussing the problems of conceiving of sympathy as a selfish act, but I draw on the example here since it demonstrates Smith’s belief in the bridgeability of perspective quite well.
149 Charles L. Griswold, Jr., Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. ch. 2.
experience” a criterion for sympathy would amount to, what Griswold calls, an “actor-centered” or “expressivist” morality that devolves quickly into the “irrationalism,” “relativism,” “vulgarized skepticism” and “group narcissism,” all so prevalent in contemporary thought.\(^{150}\) The subversion of the standpoint of the spectator into that of the actor has the result that “individuals and groups see themselves as beholden only to their own standards”\(^{151}\) and that it is therefore “impossible for those who are not members to understand the group in question.”\(^{152}\)

Luc Boltanski agrees about the pit of perspectivism. In *Distant Suffering* he draws on Smith’s thought to overcome what he calls a contemporary “crisis of pity” in which so many of us have become cynical and suspicious of “any form of political action oriented towards a horizon of moral ideals.”\(^{153}\) Boltanski regrets that contemporary debate over humanitarian action tends to get stuck in the binary languages of “abstract universalism” and “narrow communitarianism”:

the first siding with global solidarity against national particularisms and preferences, while the second unmarks the hypocrisy or, at best, naive eirenic idealism which ignores the primacy of interests and ties forged by history.\(^{154}\)

Boltanski maintains that Smith’s theory of spectatorship sustains a twenty-first-century humanitarian theory of political commitment that is unburdened by this tension since it provides an “apparatus” capable of unifying sentiment from a distance, of establishing and nourishing genuine connections between people quite differently situated, “without force”\(^{155}\) and “without recourse to communal identification or to an Edenic fusion.”\(^{156}\) Because Smith emphasized the “radical distinction” between a detached, impartial observer and the individual whom he or she is observing, and did not seek to impose “the same ethical values” upon them, his theory helps demonstrate that humanitarian impulses need not be censured as an arrogant, Western assertion of partial understandings and preferences, a “smug celebration of the return of kindness,” a sort of narcissistic declaration of moral superiority.\(^{157}\)

For both Boltanski and Griswold, Smith’s theory helps us to avoid the messy, fragmented plurality and particularity of identity politics. But as life goes, avoiding messiness often creates new messes. To make his point, Griswold emphasizes a pervasive and (from an egalitarian perspective) somewhat troubling “asymmetry” in Smith’s thought between spectators and agents which, he says, establishes the “normative superiority” of the

\(^{153}\) Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p. xvi.  
spectator’s standpoint. He describes sympathy as “spectator-centered” rather than “agent-centered” and states that this “asymmetrical relation of actor and spectator becomes lexical insofar as judgments of value and truth are concerned.”158 This is where the problem really emerges for me. One can accept fully Griswold’s resistance to moral perspectivism and the basic claim he shares with Nussbaum, Sen, Boltanski and many others in the cosmopolitan debates that human suffering is fundamentally communicable without embracing perspectival “asymmetry” and making so decisive a move into prioritizing standpoints. If he is right here, this “prioritization” pierces the egalitarian heart of Smith’s sympathy model which Stephen Darwall has developed so convincingly.159

The evidence Griswold uses to establish the spectator’s priority has troubling implications, particularly when applied in multicultural and global contexts, where power is often distributed in such radically unjust ways. Griswold claims that Smith asserted a lexical “asymmetry” of standpoints when he described the moralizing impact that spectatorship has upon agents. In other words, the fact that spectatorship produces a change in the behaviour of agents on Smith’s description establishes for Griswold the moral priority of the force that produced the change – dare I say, that might is right. No doubt, Smith argued that sympathy disciplines. I spent a great deal of time exploring the disciplinary dimension of sympathetic activity in Chapter 3. Its power to discipline is what gave sympathy its moral teeth in Smith’s thought, for sure. But does this mean that spectators are always right? If this is Smith’s argument, then egalitarians should reject it tout court. But even Smith acknowledged in countless places that spectators were sometimes terribly misguided, deluded and corrupt. Indeed, I have argued here that the corruptibility of our moral sentiments is a central theme in Smith’s book, and largely responsible for inspiring Smith’s obsessive revisions over thirty-one years. Nevertheless, Griswold argues that since agents in Smith’s theory adjust their passions to the spectator’s standpoint, while the spectator’s standpoint “does not undergo any great modification,” the agent’s standpoint is therefore merely contingent, malleable, a “social artifact” – and thus, normatively inferior.160

160 Griswold, Virtues of Enlightenment, pp. 103–106. In a symposium on Griswold’s Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment convened at the American Political Science Association in 2000, and later published in Perspectives on Political Science, Griswold argued that I deny the textual evidence that Smith normatively prioritized the spectator’s standpoint. I do not deny the textual evidence at all. Indeed, the essential point in my account of sympathy (and the reason I used Foucault in earlier chapters) is that spectator’s have extraordinary power in Smith’s theory to motivate conformity. So, I
 Asserting the spectator’s normative priority, as Griswold does, confuses truth with power – an absolutely impermissible move if we are to believe that sympathy for Smith was situated in a “moral community among independent equal persons,” as Darwall presses – and to my mind a perilous move after the horrors of the twentieth century. Establishing the objectivity or truth of a standpoint, requires far more than noting the situational power that spectators have to discipline and extract conformity from agents. Again, if this was Smith’s claim, we should reject it. If through my judgment (as an individual, as a moral community) I should happen somehow to change or through shame to repress the behavior of an Amish woman home educating her child, or a man engaging in consensual homosexual acts, or a Muslim schoolgirl in France wearing her headscarf, or a mohel carving off an infant’s foreskin, or those who sleep in a family bed, or an African American speaking Ebonics, or a polygamist – does that mean my standpoint embodies truth and reality; or does it simply mean that I have the power to coerce, motivate, or shame change? Surely there may be good reasons for my standpoint. I am not denying that at all. As a political theorist committed to the values of democratic equality and human dignity I have strong positions on many, many things. We all do. But asserting these positions requires additional arguments – arguments that I am eager to make. That I judge, even that I motivate and change behavior through my judgment, implies nothing whatsoever about the truthfulness of my standpoint.

How, for Griswold, do spectators in Smith’s theory know more or better than the agents they are judging? From where do they derive this knowledge? Griswold himself asserts that spectators are situated in the world – again, this rootedness bases his claim that Smith privileged the prephilosophical. But he often dodges the implications that this being-in-the-world has for the spectator’s standpoint. In fact, if we are at all persuaded by Smith’s typically Scottish argument about the sociological basis of morals, then we already know that the spectator’s “superior” standpoint is no less contingent and malleable, no less a “social artifact” than the “inferior” standpoints of agents. A spectator will approve of behavior in others that is consistent with whatever he has
don’t at all deny the textual evidence. But I am troubled by the implications of this dimension of Smith’s thought in contexts characterized by unjust gaps in power and influence. Smith may correctly have described how perspectives are “harmonized,” and how social order is achieved. But this sort of success has nothing to do with “truth.” I simply wish to emphasize here the historicity of the spectator’s standpoint, a subject Griswold himself has elaborated with more grace and lucidity than any other interpreter of Smith’s thought. Does it not follow that normative priority, in this sense, would seem to rest on a moving foundation? See Griswold, “Reply to My Critics,” pp. 164–165.

The circle of humanity

learned to esteem. In an anthropological key, Fleischacker nicely refers to the spectator’s standpoint as a “taboo.” Spectators learn what they know and derive the criteria they deploy by being agents themselves, observed and judged by other spectators who, in turn, are simply agents. In the *Enquiry*, Hume understood well the sociological origins of our “standards.” He observed:

The more we converse with mankind, and the greater social interaction we maintain, the more shall we be familiarized to these general preferences and distinctions without which our conversation and discourse could scarcely be rendered intelligible to each other.

And again, noting the intransigence of these “preferences and distinctions”:

The intercourse of sentiments ... in society and conversation, makes us form some general unalterable standard by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners.

This way of thinking about the origins of moral judgment was a commonplace in eighteenth-century Scottish social thought. We see it come through clearly in the work of Smith’s student, John Millar in his treatise, *An Historical View of the English Government*. Note how he echoed the master’s observations regarding the origins of propriety:

individuals form their notions of propriety according to a general standard, and fashion their morals in conformity to the prevailing taste of the times.

Like his friend and like his student, Smith argued that moral knowledge is intersubjectively produced, that our standards (the content of “my ear,” “my love”, “my resentment” and so on) are disciplined though sympathetic exchange with those around us. This means that we are all agents sometimes, all spectators sometimes – receptacles as well as producers of culture. This is how we learn and teach others what it means to be “us.” There is no static class of spectators or agents, no lexical ordering of standpoints. Spectators are not an elite class of impartial citizens with special access to some self-standing reality. As David Levy and Sandra Peart put it “there is no outside vantage from which to judge the universe. There is no external vantage to which a philosopher might escape and obtain God’s view of the

---

162 See Fleischacker, “Smith and Cultural Relativism,” p. 3.
166 Griswold insists that the impartial spectator is not a philosopher (see *Virtues of Enlightenment*, pp. 136, 147 and 369), but the distinction seems to blur sometimes.
universe." Spectators are just "us"; their standpoint is "ours," a product of ordinary moral experience, a representation of what "we" already know.

And I’m not convinced that Charles Griswold wouldn’t ultimately agree here. Why else would he turn to Socrates in the epilogue of *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, and conclude that a “completion” of Smithian moral philosophy would require the radical “disruption” of Socratic examination? Socratic dialogue, he says, might “clear a space for discerning judgment” to help us distinguish “reality” from “received social practice,” from that which is “intersubjectively” made. This is no small concession in a book committed to demonstrating the adequacy of Smithian “therapy.” Griswold’s final appeal to a “pared-down Platonism” might just suggest that the impartial spectator’s autocritique was not critical enough, that the cave was still too dark.

**TRANSCENDENT FRAMES**

Stephen Darwall was correct that *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* “may be the first truly comprehensive and philosophically probing account of Smith’s moral and political thought ever written. To read it is to understand why Smith deserves such a treatment.” I agree absolutely; Griswold is obviously my most important interlocutor here. There is no book from which I have learned more about Smith, and to which I return more often to sharpen my own interpretation. And yet, I believe he underestimates the historical and cultural implications of Smith’s moral psychology when he links the “impartial spectator” with truth. In fact it is Griswold’s remarkably rich and sensitive account of ordinary morality in Smith’s thought that provides us with every reason not to accept the reconciliation he offers. As a good student I believe I have taken Griswold’s interpretation to its logical limits. A key theme in my account here is that the tension Griswold illuminates so well between ordinary experience and reflective transcendence remains productively unresolved in Smith’s thought, and that we stand to learn much about ourselves,

---

167 Levy and Peart, “Adam Smith and His Sources,” p. 60.
171 In "Reply to My Critics," Griswold resists the claim I am making here. He insists that his gestures at the end of the book "are not meant to suggest that Smith’s moral theory is a failure." I also do not believe that Smith’s moral theory is a failure if it is understood in an affective key, as a technique for bridging self and society. When applied in historical space, however, I believe it runs into more difficulties – though potentially not insurmountable ones, as I will suggest in Chapter 7.
172 Darwall, “Sympathetic Liberalism.”
our limitations, and our relations with others by accepting the irresolution and living with the tension. Much as the perfectionist urge in me aligns with Griswold’s philosophical desire for something firmer, something larger, the anthropologist/historian in me has come to terms that Smith’s moral psychology doesn’t get us there. It doesn’t within its own logic provide a way to transcend itself. Any progress in that regard is left to chance, fortuitous.

My central argument here might be restated productively as such: different sorts of impartiality are required for different sorts of judgment, and I believe Griswold and others have conflated them. The sort of impartiality Smith achieves with his impartial spectator model might be effective in adjusting physical and affective shortsightedness (in other words, enlarging bias in the first two spaces I discussed in this chapter). But it is not the sort required to render unbiased cross-cultural judgments. Note, I am not denying the general possibility of self-distancing. I too resist postmodern assertions about the absolute impenetrability of otherness, and that historical variability renders knowledge about self inaccessible and illusory. In this, I share what Amanda Anderson characterizes as a commitment to cosmopolitan self-distancing in an “aspirational” sense, envisioned as an “ambivalent, hesitant, uneasy, and sometimes quite thoughtfully engaged … complex process of self-interrogation and social critique.”

But I am less convinced than Griswold and others that Adam Smith’s theory of conscience is the most plausible or compelling way to initiate in such a process. Smith’s spectator model surely generates a highly effective, transitory sort of coolness – for example, restraining someone who in the heat of passion or group fanaticism is tempted to act aggressively toward a stranger or group of strangers. Observe the following passage, in which Smith invokes the impartial spectator to “temper” the “vehemence” of group attachment:

Should those passions be, what they are very apt to be, too vehement, Nature has provided a proper remedy and correction. The real or even the imaginary presence of the impartial spectator, the authority of the man within the breast, is always at hand to overawe them into the proper tone and temper of moderation.

---

173 I will argue in Chapter 7 that Smith’s idea of negative justice may do more work in this regard.
175 TMS VII.ii.1.44 (p. 292).
The impartial spectator “overawes” our emotions, tempers and moderates the “vehemence” of our affective attachments here. This was its role in Smith’s theory. On its own terms, Smith’s model succeeds in mediating our self-regarding and other-regarding tendencies, disciplining propriety, and ensuring relatively stable and sociable communities. But rendering cross-cultural judgments that don’t simply reduce the other to oneself requires something much different: that a spectator be able to transcend not merely the vehemence of his physical and affective “connexion” to self and specific others, but more fundamentally, to interrogate and sometimes to subvert the very measure by which he has become accustomed to judging himself and the world. These are two very different sorts of activities. In other words, while Smith is primarily concerned with social coordination, the problem of historical self-consciousness and critique is an epistemic one and in many respects beyond the scope of his theory.

Therefore, to say that moral judgment is “an ongoing process of adjustment, a continual search for equilibrium,” as Griswold, Haakonssen, Hope, Pitts and others correctly do – or as a “refinement” as Karen Valihora does (in a particularly fine essay on Smith’s Kantian aesthetic model of moral judgment), or as Emma Rothschild describes as an “oscillation … from the world to the mind, and from the mind to the world” – does not get us any closer to an explanation of how Smithian spectators might transcend historical bias. Jennifer Pitts in A Turn to Empire and Amartya Sen in his recent work on justice have made perhaps the most progress in this regard. Pitts, for example, argues that “our moral judgment is likely to improve as our circle of comparison broadens.” She is admirably attuned to the particularity of moral judgment in Smith’s thought – “that morality is developed necessarily within the context of a particular group or society,” that “our moral judgments are formed within particular social contexts,” and so forth. Her account of cultural/moral diversity in Part V of the Moral Sentiments is wonderfully rich and insightful, an important contribution to scholarship on Smith. One particularly textured dimension of her presentation is the way she distances herself from “relativist” readings of Smith’s system, like that of T. D. Campbell (which equates relativism with a resistance to speaking in overtly universalist terms), and ultimately

176 That Smith was concerned more with moral action than with moral epistemology see Samuel Fleishacker, “Kant and Adam Smith,” pp. 255–256.


178 Rothschild’s reference to “oscillation” comes from “Dignity or Meanness,” p. 154.

179 Ibid., p. 43.

180 Ibid., p. 45.
The circle of humanity

turns to Smith’s jurisprudence to save him from this fate – a move that I am sympathetic with and will address at greater length myself in Chapter 7. The problem emerges with Pitts’ second argument against a relativist reading that seems to conflate the very affective and historical spaces that I am trying to keep distinct here. She argues that cross-cultural judgments are “possible” for Smith, that an impartial spectator can judge unfamiliar practices morally from within a particular social context, since moral judgment is a “process by which we continually revise our opinions in response to new experiences and new opportunities for comparison with the views of others.” Again, we see the idea of “process” and “reflective refinement” that Haakonssen and Griswold so emphasize, but given here a multicultural twist. Pitts goes on to include in her depiction of these “new experiences and new opportunities” interaction with “broader circles,” with unfamiliar others, with less partial spectators (which she transforms into those who are culturally remote, and not just affectively remote as I believe Smith suggested), and concludes that Smith’s theory encourages “openness toward unfamiliar values and practices.”

No doubt, this is an ingenious and intuitively appealing argument. I am deeply drawn to the sort of openness Pitts describes here. But this claim that the spectator can refine his judgments by “broadening” his “circle of comparison” to (presumably) cultural strangers strikes me as a wishful addendum to Smith’s thought, resonant with contemporary multicultural theory, but really quite alien to what I have been describing here as Smith’s preoccupation with overcoming affective bias, and relatedly his preoccupation with local social order.

Surely he argued that “impartial” spectators help us cool our self-preference, individually and in groups, as Pitts correctly notes. Like his friend Edmund Burke, Smith was a notorious critic of fanaticism and faction, and he encouraged people in the grip of group frenzy to cool off by surrounding themselves with less partial observers. I will have more to say about this in my discussion of Smith’s international political thought in the next chapter. But note for now that in such passages, Smith recommended situating oneself among spectators that are less partial affectively, who cool us down precisely because they are uninvolved, untouched by the heat of our frenzy.

---

181 Ibid., pp. 43–52. If any method of enlarging historical perspective exists in Smith’s thought, I believe it emerges in his jurisprudence as Pitts (citing Haakonssen) ultimately argues convincingly, and not, as I argue, from within his moral psychology, which is inescapably particularistic, and yet highly instructive for that very reason. I will address Smith’s jurisprudence in this context later in Chapter 7.

182 Pitts, A Turn to Empire, p. 45.

183 Ibid., p. 45.

Surely this group of affectively impartial observers might coincide or overlap with those who are less partial culturally, but Smith’s focus here was clearly on cooling affective fanaticism—and I am not persuaded that this has anything to do in Smith’s argument with “broadening” our cultural sensibility and helping us make “moral” judgments about others beyond our historical space. Certainly Smith never thought about “cooling down” in these terms. Surrounding ourselves with impartial spectators enables a person or group to overcome affective bias, to become less fanatically self-absorbed, and perhaps to cultivate some awareness and concern for broader circles (circles which in Smith’s time were incidentally generally very narrow, and close to home). But these affective acts of cooling self-preference, augmenting concern for others, or even cultivating a tolerant, open-minded stance toward others, are entirely different sorts of activity, different sorts of enlarging, than the act of judging the values and practices of unfamiliar others with unbiased criteria. This is precisely why I have differentiated affective and historical bias in this chapter. The process of refining and enlarging our perspective works very differently in each space.

Amartya Sen offers an argument very similar to Pitts’—and equally appealing on an intuitive level—concluding that Smith’s theory has resources for “scrutinizing ... the impact of entrenched tradition and custom.” Because he links his interpretation of Smith explicitly to a twenty-first-century humanitarian agenda, I would like to explore it in some detail. Sen’s essay differentiates what he calls “closed” and “open” variants of impartiality—the first of which attempts to “eliminate partiality toward the vested interests or personal objectives of individuals in the focal group”; the second of which seeks “to address the limitations of partiality toward the shared prejudices or biases of the focal group itself.” This distinction maps quite exactly onto the distinction I have asserted in this chapter between affective and historical bias. Sen characterizes Rawls’ contractarianism as a prime illustration of closed impartiality, a device that claims universality and objectivity for itself, but erroneously so since its “program of impartial assessment [is] confined only to members of the focal group,” and is thus “parochial” and “polity-prioritized” in scope. Smith, on the other hand, offers a theory of open impartiality through his device of the impartial spectator, which Sen believes has more solid claims to universality and objectivity because it reaches beyond the focal group to “outsiders,” to those both “far and near,” to “real spectators at a distance.”

---

The circle of humanity

Echoing Pitts’ argument that the spectator refines his judgments as he comes into contact with “broader circles,” Sen observes that Smith “saw the possibility that the impartial spectator could draw on the understanding of people who are far as well as those who are near.” Thus, he asserts that Smith’s open view of impartiality is likelier than Rawls’ closed view to instigate a “forceful scrutiny of local values,” to “guarantee an adequately objective scrutiny of social conventions and parochial sentiments.”

I find Sen’s distinction between closed and open impartiality very helpful, for it resonates significantly with the distinction I have drawn in this chapter between two sorts of self-distancing – from bias that is affective in nature (what Sen in his formulation would call “interested” or “personal” partiality) and from bias that is historical or cultural in nature (what Sen would characterize as focal group partiality). But for reasons I have explored at length in this chapter, I am not convinced by Sen that Smith’s impartial spectator model amounts to a theory of open impartiality. I have been characterizing Smith’s theory as distinctively closed, in Sen’s sense. I believe Sen’s interpretation is noble and hopeful, but flawed for two related reasons. He both overplays Smith’s use of the distant spectator; and under-emphasizes the importance in Smith’s theory of intimacy and proximity for accurate and well-informed judgments. A word now about each. First, one mustn’t forget that Smith’s account of spectatorship was primarily a descriptive one. When he referred to the “eyes of other people” – a formulation Sen seizes on repeatedly as the key to Smith’s “openness” – Smith was primarily concerned with describing the effects of spectatorship on moral sentiment in relatively close quarters. The “eyes of other people” tended most often to be the eyes of those with whom an individual came into contact most frequently – those he already knew, those he already loved, those with whom he was already most inclined to agree on a variety of subjects. Spectatorship was primarily a local, visual affair for Smith; he valued it in a distinctively modern way for producing social harmony and moral consensus without traditional forms of coercion. Therefore, although Smith’s impartial spectator model is not procedurally contractarian like Rawls’ “veil of ignorance,” the consensus it yields tends to share the same “parochial” and “polity-prioritized” scope that Sen rejects in Rawls. Certainly Sen is accurate that Smith spoke occasionally in the Moral Sentiments about the usefulness of the distant, stranger-spectator. But he places far too much emphasis on it. And like Pitts, he doesn’t adequately contextualize Smith’s use of the stranger-spectator, and therefore fails to notice that Smith invokes this figure very specifically in the case of

subduing intense factional (read: affective) prejudice. Smith does not in any sense invoke the stranger-spectator for purposes of cultural self-awareness, or in Sen’s words, to scrutinize “the impact of entrenched tradition and custom.” Whatever we might wish to make of it for present purposes, distant spectatorship served for Smith as a coolant of fanatical passion – of course, not in itself an altogether unimportant contribution in light of today’s most vexing global problems.

The second shortcoming of Sen’s interpretation is that he de-emphasizes the importance in Smith’s theory of intimate spectatorship for well-informed judgments, a subject of profound importance when attempting to engage unfamiliar cultures with openness and respect, and which I have explored at length earlier in this chapter.

In the end, I believe Smith’s version of impartiality was far less “open” on Sen’s own terms, and that, in fact, the moral “progress” entailed by the Smithian view of self-correction, of “reflective refinement,” of moral maturity, of making more objective judgments, may actually entrench the spectator more deeply in his own world of meanings. Haakonssen is very helpful here when he observes that the “process” of refining our judgments for Smith “is a continual weeding out of behaviour which is incompatible with social life.” Moral maturity for Smith seems to entail that we become even more disciplined, in “command” of ourselves, proper, sociable, polite – whatever these things mean in our particular moral universe. With maturity, in other words, we enlarge our affective scope beyond our little selves by attuning ourselves more closely to our own society’s particular expectations of us. We become better and better interpreters of our own cultural signals. Again, this all reinforces my argument that Smith was concerned primarily with social coordination. But how does this process of becoming a more mature, proper and congenial member of my society help me to better know myself, or better understand someone who has learned (through the same process as I have, for sympathy is a universal process) what it means in her world to be “in command” of herself, proper, sociable, polite? In fact, it seems that as my capacity for sympathetic judgment “progresses” and “matures” in Smith’s theory, I become more deeply entrenched culturally, more docile, less critical, less inclined to understand myself and others. Fleischacker put it well, capturing my distinction between affective and cultural space: Smith’s “focus is on self-correction and not on the reform of social standards of morality.”

103 Fleischacker, “Smith and Cultural Relativism,” p. 20, n. 16.
The circle of humanity

without the reflective space that is necessary for critical self-awareness and cross-cultural judgment. Surely some might find ways to reach beyond, but as Fleischacker notes, "this will be fortuitous, not built into the very nature of Smith's moral method." 

Critics of course will point to Smith's thoughts on praise-worthiness in Part III of the Moral Sentiments. At various points, no doubt, Smith argued that a mature spectator will learn to distinguish what is inherently "praise-worthy" from that which is conventional, merely praised, and therefore less worthy. I spent considerable time in Chapter 3 discussing this perfectionist amalgam of Stoic, Rousseauian and Kantian elements that Smith grafted onto his empirical description of moral judgment, spurred by a letter Smith had received from his old friend Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto soon after the Moral Sentiments was published in 1759. Smith's distinction between praise and praise-worthiness would seem to provide the spectator with some measure of critical distance from his own history, and a capacity for cultivating a more impartial, less insular view of the world. Since it is easy to see why one might wish to hang one's cosmopolitan hat on this perfectionist evolution in Smith's thought, let's explore it further.

Smith believed he had advanced on the conventionalism of Humean common sense when he proposed an impartial spectator that could improve itself by learning to distinguish praise-worthiness from mere praise. Surely they agreed on much: Hume and Smith both observed that affective bias can wreak havoc on our morals, leading us to exaggerate the importance of that which affects us and to underestimate that which does not. Accordingly they both asserted that moral judgment demands a firmer, more impartial foundation than our sentiments can provide. Hume discovered this foundation in the "general unalterable" standards that emerge through social intercourse:

it is necessary for us, in our calm judgments and discourse concerning the characters of men, to neglect all these differences, and render our sentiments more public and social ... The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners.

At first, this looks much like Smith's account of ordinary moral life, which we explored in Chapter 2. Indeed, it was a staple in Scottish social theory that convention was efficient in diverting us from ourselves and enlarging

194 Ibid., p. 20, n. 15. 195 TMS III.2.7 (p. 117); TMS 2.32 (pp. 130–131).
the natural bias of our passive feelings. As such, Smith’s account of sympathetic exchange greatly resembled Hume’s “intercourse of sentiments.” But one of the most interesting differences between them, from the perspective of this chapter, is that Smith was troubled by the “unalterable” quality of Humean common sense, which comes through nicely in the passage cited above. As we saw in Chapter 3, Smith ached over the problem of conventionalism. Humean efficiency was not reason enough to surrender our moral judgments to convention, to what is merely praised. What if convention happens to be corrupt, profane, bellicose – or today, say, racist, sexist, antisemitic, homophobic? Corrupt societies are often very successful in socializing their members, and highly efficient in this sense (think here of Bettelheim’s account of totalitarian obedience197), but they nevertheless inevitably cultivate deeply disturbing judgments – for example, when a slaveholder is affirmed by the values of his slaveholding society,198 or when a Hitler youth is celebrated as courageous and patriotic for surrendering his parents to the Gestapo. This phenomenon was not lost on Smith who spoke at length in Part V of the Moral Sentiments about:

Those … who have had the misfortune to be brought up amidst violence, licentiousness, falsehood, and injustice; lose, though not all sense of the impropriety of such conduct, yet all sense of its dreadful enormity, or of the vengeance and punishment due to it. They have been familiarized with it from their infancy, custom has rendered it habitual to them, and they are very apt to regard it as, what is called, the way of the world.199

“Custom reconciles us to everything,” Edmund Burke observed, in an oft-cited passage from the Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.200 Corrupt moral cultures as all moral cultures function as habits, and do not require for their success a critical space for reflection and analysis of their assumptions, beliefs and the practices they sustain. In fact one can see precisely how such a critical space might become offensive and annoying to members of a moral culture who are invested, self-consciously or not, in sanctioning, propagating and protecting it. Think here of Socrates as gadfly nipping at the corrupt and self-righteous ass of

198 Smith uses this example himself at WTV, vii, b (p. 54); L/A (iii (pp. 104–105 and 114–117); and L/B (pp. 134–136). See Haakonssen’s discussion of Smith’s argument here in Haakonssen, Science of a Legislator, p. 132.
199 TMS V.2.2 (pp. 200–201).
Athenian moral culture – and his fate. Smith spoke explicitly about “just” individuals who brave the “general contagion” of groupthink, and “incur” the “contempt, and sometimes even the detestation of his fellow citizens” – and particularly so in times of public turbulence:

there are, no doubt, always a few, though commonly but very few, who preserve their judgment untainted by the general contagion. They seldom amount to more than, here and there, a solitary individual, without any influence . . . All such people are held in contempt and derision.\textsuperscript{\textendash}201

That Smith was troubled by the relativity of Hume’s conventionalist approach to coordinating our sentiments seems to be one key reason he attempted to locate a more stable foundation for moral judgment in the “impartial spectator” and its ability to identify corruption within its own very constitution.

But there are two fundamental problems with believing that Smith succeeds in achieving cultural reflexivity and sustaining unbiased cross-cultural judgments through his attempt to further stabilize judgment by positing an impartial spectator capable of identifying its own perversion. The first is historical, and relates to the reason Smith first began to differentiate praise from praise-worthiness. Concerns about moral relativity have a distinctly contemporary ring to them; mine are driven by discomfort with many culturally sanctioned violations of human liberty and dignity. To the extent that Smith was troubled by moral relativity, he was motivated not by humanitarian or cosmopolitan concerns, but by the very local corruption of European moral culture. As I argued in Chapter 3, Smith wanted to stabilize moral judgment, to locate something firmer, because he was revolted by the vulgar displays of wealth and power that had disguised themselves as virtue in eighteenth-century European life. Corrupt people (Smith singled out “profligates” and politicians) too often paraded themselves as “virtuous” and succeeded in deluding a pliable and envious public into esteeming and emulating them.\textsuperscript{\textendash}202 The corrupt few, in other words, tended to set the standards of taste and value for the many. This cultural elevation of profligacy is one way Smith believed common sense – “the way of the world” – can very easily become corrupted. For Smith, the sympathy process (notably our desire “to assimilate and to accommodate . . . our own sentiments, principle, and feelings to those which we see fixed and rooted in the persons with whom we are obliged to live and converse a great deal with”) is the very “cause of the contagious effects of both good and bad company”:

\textsuperscript{\textendash}201 TMS III.3.43 (p. 155). \textsuperscript{\textendash}202 TMS I.iii.2–3 (pp. 50–66).
The man who associates chiefly with the wise and virtuous, though he may not himself become either wise or virtuous, cannot help conceiving a certain respect at least for wisdom and virtue; and the man who associates chiefly with the profligate and dissolute, though he may not himself become profligate and dissolute, must soon lose, at least, all his original abhorrence of profligacy and dissolution of manners.\textsuperscript{203}

Thus, when Smith drew a perfectionist line between praise and praise-worthiness, or related between “ordinary perfection” and “exact propriety and perfection,” or between the ends of “wealth and greatness” and “wisdom and virtue,” he was not interested in “universalizing” the standards of moral judgment, the way a cosmopolitan today might conceive of such an activity. In fact, Smith’s obsession with social order and his focus on the moral capacities of “middling men” rather than exceptional ones, on the “tolerably good soldier” rather than the “saint” (which I explored at length in Chapter 4 in the context of his resistance to Christian and Stoic perfectionism), would have made him more concerned with avoiding the corrosive effects of praise in corrupt contexts than with elevating the perfection of praise-worthiness as a universal moral standard. In other words, Smith was a localist, and his discussion of praise-worthiness was driven by his local anxieties. In this sense, I depart somewhat from Donald Winch, who suggested that Smith had adopted a “cosmopolitan standpoint,” in which his overall “method” and “rationale” were oriented around “being part of a much larger political unit.”\textsuperscript{204} I tend instead to agree with Jennifer Pitts that Smith was preoccupied primarily with social order and “metropolitan” prosperity.\textsuperscript{205} Exaggerating here perhaps, but only a little, I suspect that conventionalism would not have troubled Smith, might not even have crossed his mind, had he lived in a society that esteemed what he believed was properly estimable.

The second, and from a moral philosophic perspective more fundamental problem with believing that Smith succeeds in achieving cultural reflexivity and sustaining unbiased cross-cultural judgments through his attempt to further stabilize judgment by positing an impartial spectator capable of identifying its own perversion, is that Smith asserted the distinction between praise and praise-worthiness without saying a word about how

\textsuperscript{203} TMS II.ii.1.17 (p. 224).


\textsuperscript{205} See Pitts’ excellent discussion of Smith’s “metropolitan” orientation — and its relation to universalist dimensions of his thought in Turn to Empire, pp. 25–58.
ordinary people within his empirical description come to know the difference, how they differentiate these standards. Surely he argued that the distinction exists, that there is indeed a form called “the praise-worthy” – a perfectionist moment in his thought no doubt – but we need to address the plausibility of asserting such a distinction within the logic of Smith’s moral method. The distinction seems to be an epiphenomenal assertion, divorced from Smith’s description of the sociological process through which the standards of judgment are formed. Understanding when common sense is perverted, understanding the difference between what is praise-worthy and what is merely praised, requires a critical distance that Smith’s moral psychology, on its face, fails to supply. As Samuel Fleischacker notes:

There is little in Smith’s construction of the idealized spectator to correct for the surrounding society’s standard of judgment; the idealized figure takes over those standards and corrects merely for their partial or ill-informed use. If the moral standards, the basic moral sentiments, of a society are profoundly corrupt – if a feeling of contempt for Africans or hatred for Jews or homosexuals, say, has become confused with a moral feeling, and a society’s judgments of these people’s actions have been comprehensively skewed as a result – the impartial spectator within each individual will share in, rather than correcting for, that corruption.206

Smith’s foray into “is” and “ought,” his distinction between that which is praise-worthy and that which is merely praised, never explained how the impartial spectator comes to know the difference, how he knows that his standards have become perverted, or where this new knowledge about the world might come from. As Fleischacker asks, “How are we supposed to tell whether our society is bigoted or not?”207 To maintain that the impartial spectator is like an Aristotelian phronimos, as Griswold does – or a “public purged of defects,” as John Durham Peters does208 – is not the same thing as saying that Smith’s theory has the resources to transform ordinary spectators into phronimoi.209 Smith tried to finesse the problem by crafting a deistic argument about the divinity of praise-worthiness – recall the 1790 argument that conscience is best understood as a “demigod” residing in the breast – but he never explained to a secular audience where its knowledge comes from. Surely some people find a way beyond. As I said earlier, I tend to take an aspirational, process-oriented approach to self-critique. I certainly am

209 In “Reply to My Critics,” Griswold argues that I have conflated the standpoint of the spectator with that of the impartial spectator” in Smith’s thought. He insists that the impartial spectator becomes, for Smith, an Aristotelian phronimos who can resist social convention, and that his theory has the “resources” to do so. I still believe this needs analysis. See Griswold, “Reply to My Critics,” pp. 164–166.
not suggesting that people cannot adopt a critical stance toward their own moral cultures. Smith himself acknowledged that even in the worst, most corrupted of times, a few—"though commonly but a very few"—will manage "to preserve their judgment untainted by the general contagion." Indeed, Smith did so with regard to British prejudices in favor of slavery and empire. The sober point, however, is that most people do not. And Smith knew this. Most people conform, often times even when asked to do something that overtly violates a deeper gut sense of wrongfulness. How else can we make sense of the horrors of the last century? Studies of genocide in the twentieth century—perhaps the most extreme case of social conformity running afoot of the instincts of basic human inhibition—affirm again and again that this question about human motivation is settled. Smith tried to address the problem by temporarily suspending the thick empiricism which generated his sociological account of moral life and by shrouding the impartial spectator in theological garb—which may have settled the matter for some. But I believe we learn more about the depth of the problem through Smith’s struggles than about resolving it through his solutions.

Given the complicity of the impartial spectator in reinforcing "the way of the world," how do we "enter into" contexts of meaning that are unfamiliar to us without speculating about the other, and forcing their practices into our own frames of reference, demanding that they conform to "my sight," "my ear," "my reason," and so on? Modern social science traditionally sends us into the field, to do "fieldwork in unfamiliar places," to come to know who inhabits these places by observing them, talking with them, being among them. The Renaissance skeptic Michel de Montaigne, who generated some frenzy for defending the integrity of Amerindian cannibalism, was probably first rigorously to pursue this mode of thinking about cultural bias and how to overcome it:

110 TMS III.3.43. This passage comes from Smith’s remarks about faction, difficulties of resisting it.

111 For Griswold this resistance to prejudice is evidence that Smith’s theory has "critical punch." "Reply to My Critics," p. 165. Jennifer Pitts’ rich and insightful discussion of Smith’s critical reaction to many social practices in Turn to Empire strikes me as potentially more convincing. She does not attribute such judgment to the "impartial spectator’s" ability to distance itself from social convention, as Griswold does, or that a practice is "self-evidently immoral." But she describes Smith’s more "modest and careful" attempt to "contextualize" a practice in the very reasons that a particular society first adopted it. All practices are adaptations for Smith, "reasonable responses to circumstance," she suggests. Judgment, then, consists in an assertion that a given practice "persists(s) long after circumstances have stopped justifying them." Pitts, A Turn to Empire, pp. 48–52. See also Haakonsen, Science of a Legislator, pp. 59–64; and Shaver, "Virtues," p. 200.

112 See, for example, James Waller, Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
The circle of humanity

This great world which some do yet multiply as several species under one genus, is the mirror wherein we are to behold ourselves, to be able to know ourselves as we ought to do in the true bias. In short, I would have this to be the book my young gentleman should study with the most attention. So many humours, so many judgments, opinions, laws, and customs, teach us to judge aright of our own, and inform our understanding to discover its imperfection and natural infirmity, which is no trivial speculation.\textsuperscript{213}

So too René Descartes, who managed to render Montaigne’s insights compatible with a rationalist critique of prejudice – that of others as well as our own:

It is a good thing to know something of the customs and manners of various people in order to judge of our own more objectively and so not think everything which is contrary to our ways is ridiculous and irrational, as those who have seen nothing are in the habit of doing.\textsuperscript{214}

The idea that encountering the other might help us better to know ourselves and others became a touchstone for modern skeptics, and remains central for those today who wish to navigate beyond relativism while acknowledging deep cultural diversity. Observe for example Richard Madsen and Tracy Strong’s recent claim in their introduction to a collection of essays on ethical pluralism:

one needs to strive for a full understanding of the other, because without such an understanding, one cannot truly know oneself. Full self-understanding is initially restricted by our horizon of unexamined assumptions. The attempt to understand other cultures and systems of morality leads to a “fusion of horizons” in which we gain a broader set of terms to reflect critically on our identity.\textsuperscript{215}

This all seems to resonate with the claim Sen shares with Pitts that for Smith “our moral judgment is likely to improve as our circle of comparison broadens.”\textsuperscript{216} And indeed this is very likely the best we can do. But we also must acknowledge that encountering unfamiliar and perplexing things – without something more – need not produce openness. Coming

\textsuperscript{213} Michel de Montaigne, \textit{Essays}, I, 25.


\textsuperscript{216} Pitts, \textit{A Turn to Empire}, p. 43.
upon something strange or ugly without a predisposition of openness, without a suspension of certitude, without a willingness to learn and broaden oneself, may actually reinforce one’s prejudices, lead one to “dig in one’s heels” so to speak, even to transform or destroy what one encounters. One need look no further than European encounters in the “New World,” a subject Smith himself discussed at some length in Part V of the *Moral Sentiments*, which he devoted to the subject of custom. Smith described the Europeans’ sense of astonishment when encountering Amerindian practices that rubbed hard against their more delicate civilized sensibilities.217 He castigated the hypocrisy of European civility for condemning the barbarity of such practices while Europeans themselves engaged in a host of barbarities, including slavery, imperialism and the corsetting of women. In Part V, Smith clearly did not believe that encounter will lead necessarily to openness and a broadening of one’s perspective. I will have more to say about Part V later.

For the moment, consider the old Hasidic tale attributed to the Baal Shem Tov that tells of a gentle standing before a window through which he sees a group of Hasidim dancing in circles, sweaty and red-faced, extremities and talit flailing fast, furious and in every direction, and assumes he has come upon a den of madmen. That I have difficulties understanding the sense of liberation that some Muslim women report living life with their faces covered has much to do with the particular Western understanding of agency and expression that I have been disciplined to value. When we encounter the unfamiliar, especially when it rubs hard against deeply entrenched beliefs, “something will have to stay behind the lens.”218 As Thomas Nagel put it: “However often we may try to step outside of ourselves ... something in us will determine the resulting picture, and this will give grounds for doubt that we are really getting any closer to reality.”219 Engaging in a dialogue with my shrouded sister, allowing her “identity story” to unfold,220 I might acquire a new respect for her resolve and the worldview that sustains it. But physical proximity might actually serve to reinforce my biases and presuppositions, substantiating my sense of the sheer discomfort and humiliation of wearing a hijab, confirming what I already knew about the woman who does and the culture that forces her to accept and defend her conditions. How do we “enter into” contexts and worlds of meaning that are unfamiliar to us without

217 *TMS* V.I.9 (p. 199).
218 Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, p. 86.
219 Ibid., p. 68.
speculating or reifying, *museumizing*, the other, and forcing their practices into our own frames of reference? Smith seems to be very right when he asserted that we have no other way of judging others than by assimilating them to ourselves (to “my sight,” “my ear,” “my reason,” “my resentment,” “my love”). Does assimilating the other to myself in this fashion bring me any closer to understanding others – or, for that matter, understanding myself?

In this sense the Stoic cosmopolitan project of assimilation, of collapsing the circles inward toward the self, seems highly presumptuous. Uday Singh Mehta in *Liberalism and Empire*, a book that addresses the prevalence of this phenomenon in nineteenth-century European thought, differentiates what he calls a “cosmopolitanism of reason” from a “cosmopolitanism of sentiment.”222 The first, which is endemic to the liberal imperial mindset on Mehta’s reading, is exercised through practices of “fusion” and “assimilation” and is premised on the assumption “that the strange is just a variation on what is already familiar” – “only spots on a map or past points on the scale of civilizational progress, but not dwellings in which peoples lived and had deeply invested identities.”223 I do not always agree with Mehta’s sweeping indictments of liberalism and the Enlightenment, though his ire is sometimes understandable given that his primary case is British atrocity in India, surely one of liberalism’s darkest hours.224 What I value most about Mehta’s narrative for my purposes here is his emphasis on a second variant of cosmopolitanism that he believes opens itself to “wider bonds of sympathy.”225 In other words, as vivid as his account of British arrogance in India may be, he does not preclude the possibility of knowledge and care across cultural boundaries. Instead he emphasizes humility, and the agonistic and processual dimensions of learning through encounter. In this light he draws on Edmund Burke to develop the idea of a “cosmopolitanism of sentiments” which is exercised through “dialogue with the unfamiliar” and is willing to “risk... being confronted with utter opacity – an intransigent strangeness, an unfamiliarity that remains so, an experience that

---


223 Ibid., pp. 20–21.

224 I am inclined to read large swathes of eighteenth-century thought more generously on these issues, in line with various insights in Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Pitts, *Turn to Empire*.

225 Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, p. 22.
cannot be shared, prejudices that do not really fuse with a cosmopolitan horizon, a difference that cannot be assimilated.\textsuperscript{226} On Mehta's reading collapsing the Stoic circles would amount to a violent assimilation of the other into the worldview of the conqueror (though of course cosmopolitans would fiercely deny the imperialistic nature of their project). In a similar vein Margaret Chatterjee, who discusses cosmopolitan linkages between Hierocles, Smith and Gandhi notes that the act of collapsing the circles inward must be conceived as a "mutual matter," and that the outer circles may in fact resist being drawn in — that there might be a "question mark about willingness."\textsuperscript{227} Like Mehta, Chatterjee helps us think about the resistance of the "periphery" to being collapsed into a regime of cosmopolitan judgment and care.

Reflecting on the contemporary problems of cultural insularity and chauvinism, proponents of "multicultural education" today advocate exposing children early to cultural diversity. This is a rich and contested field that crosses many disciplines, but the overall thrust is that early exposure to a variety of cultural practices and belief systems — what we might think of, for our purposes, as a sort of simulated physical proximity, a simulated encounter — ultimately makes a difference in how children understand themselves and others, their similarities and differences with others both near and far, and their relative place in a deeply diverse and interconnected world.\textsuperscript{228} If we deliberately add multicultural sensitivity to the "curriculum" of beliefs and conventions already in circulation, which children inevitably internalize through the education of social experience,\textsuperscript{229} perhaps it might engender humility and a stance of genuine openness toward others. Surely this was not Adam Smith's agenda — not at all. But I find it plausible and intuitively appealing that the moral life he so richly described might become more reflexive, ultimately more conscious of itself, if supplemented by exogenous encounters through ideas, narratives, and images during childhood, as the young and malleable conscience

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., p. 22. \textsuperscript{227} Chatterjee, "Oceanic Circle," p. 152.


\textsuperscript{229} Peters calls Smith's ordinary morality a "school of virtue": "Publicity and Pain," p. 662. Knud Haakonssen similarly described the education of ordinary morality in Smith as such: "From the hand of nature all men are basically alike, but education can make them different for education consists in exposure to a variety of situations from which new lines of behaviour and thinking are picked up through mutual sympathy with other participants in the educational process." Haakonssen, Science of a Legislator, pp. 59–60.
is developing.\textsuperscript{230} Indeed, as Plato put it, “the beginning of any process is most important, especially for anything young and tender.”\textsuperscript{231}

Of course from a cosmopolitan or multicultural perspective, Smith himself provided a woefully insular account of education in the \textit{Moral Sentiments}.\textsuperscript{232} As a localist preoccupied with social order, he was suspicious of sending children to foreign schools, or supplementing university education with foreign travel, since these practices tended to “hurt most essentially the domestic morals.”\textsuperscript{233} A cosmopolitan education might have helped a spectator in Smith’s theory contextualize a curious foreign spectacle before him, and anchor his judgment more firmly on “the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents,” as Smith put it elsewhere.\textsuperscript{234} But this sort of thinking is entirely absent from Smith’s narrative on education because, again, he was primarily concerned with maintaining “domestic morals.” And in this light, he believed that the best education is the one we receive from the physically near and familiar. Only when you “educate them in your own house” and “let their dwelling be at home,” Smith warns, will you have children who are “dutiful, kind and affectionate.”\textsuperscript{235}

\textbf{A WORLD WITHOUT SYMPATHY?}

After the original publication of the \textit{Moral Sentiments} in 1759 Smith attempted to refine and stabilize his theory of moral judgment in a variety of ways. In Chapters 3 and 4, I examined some of the more substantial ones: his further conceptualization and refinement of his impartial spectator theory, amplification of Stoic themes of self-command and moral maturity, the characterization of conscience as a “demigod,” a rather anxious discussion about fortifying judgment with “moral rules” that reflect the “Infinite Wisdom and Infinite Power!” of God’s will. I have argued that all of these adjustments and enhancements were motivated by Smith’s preoccupation with maintaining “the very existence of human society,” the “fabric of human society” – to ensure that it would not “crumble into nothing.”\textsuperscript{236} The \textit{Moral Sentiments} is primarily a description of how the self learns to calm passionate self-preference and harmonize with the other selves that it

\textsuperscript{230} See Martha Nussbaum’s defense of cosmopolitan education in \textit{Cultivating Humanity}.

\textsuperscript{231} Plato, \textit{Republic} 377a (p. 52).

\textsuperscript{232} TMS VI.i.1.10 (p. 222).

\textsuperscript{233} TMS VI.i.1.10 (p. 222).

\textsuperscript{234} TMS LI.4.10 (p. 21).

\textsuperscript{235} TMS VI.i.1.10 (p. 222). For this reason, I am uncomfortable with attempts to enlarge the spectator’s perspective from within Smith’s theory of education. See, for example, Jack Russell Weinstein, “Sympathy, Difference, and Education: Social Unity in the Work of Adam Smith,” \textit{Economics and Philosophy}, vol. 22, no. 1 (2006), pp. 1–33.

\textsuperscript{236} TMS III.5.2 (p. 163); TMS II.i.3.4 (p. 86).
most often comes into contact with. This the role that sympathy and the impartial spectator play in Smith's moral philosophy as a whole. Smith sought to demonstrate that people could live together peaceably and productively without coercive forms of moral policing long associated with religious authority, the “laws of the magistrate,” and casuistic moral education and consensus on moral foundations. The first two Parts of the Moral Sentiments describe a self-regulating process of sympathetic exchange through which ordinary people in their daily interactions coordinate their sentiments and generate social norms. In short, Smith believed that our sentiments were capable of ordering our moral lives. They coordinate and unify.

They also, however, engender moral culture as a by-product of this coordination, which can sometimes go awry, yield disturbing conventions, and creating serious problems for the stability Smith sought. Despite his general faith in the moral capacities of ordinary people, Smith was a perceptive analyst of human behavior, and observed that sentiment was inherently unstable, susceptible to a variety of irregularities, distortions and delusions that threatened to compromise our moral judgments, producing unsociable and even violent outcomes. Thus, when Smith sought to adjust his theory of the impartial spectator theory in subsequent editions of the Moral Sentiments, he did so very deliberately with an eye to this fundamental problem of social coordination.

This preoccupation with social order helps explain Smith's localism, which is evident throughout the Moral Sentiments - from his description of moral culture to his emphasis on caring for one's own, to his sharp rejection of Stoic cosmopolitanism. I believe that the Moral Sentiments was ultimately dedicated to addressing this problem of social coordination among those who lived in relatively close proximity with one another; who tended already in varying degrees to care for one another as neighbors, fellow citizens, Christians, moderns; and who tended already in varying degrees to be unified by shared views and beliefs about many fundamental things. But our focus in this chapter has shifted ultimately away from Smith's concerns with social coordination among those who tend to share physical, affective and historical space, and toward coordination in realms that are spatially far more complicated. How did Smith conceptualize a society that might exist beyond the narrow spaces that in past ages limited our physical contact with distant strangers, our knowledge and understanding about their condition, our efficacy in assisting them, and ultimately any conventional moral duty we had towards them?

Obviously we cannot know whether Smith might have paid his Oxfam dues – whether he might have expanded the duty to commiserate beyond
The circle of humanity

closest had he known of the power of the media to bring the faces of suffering people into our living rooms, or about the variable successes of international and transnational institutions like the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and what Alex de Waal has memorably referred to as the "humanitarian international" of NGOs such as Amnesty International and the Red Cross. But after examining Smith's moral psychology in the first five chapters of this book, we seem to be left with a strikingly parochial ethics.

But is Smith ultimately a radical localist and particularist, who believed that our moral horizon fades out at the edges of physical immediacy, affective "connexion" and historical familiarity? Did Smith's oikeiosis remain intact "all the way down," so to speak? Such an assertion would make his thought seriously uninteresting, isolationist communitarianism at its absolute worst, relativist at its core, and of no help in thinking through the most salient issues today in ethical and political thought. Was his notorious belief in a divine economy Smith's final word about the cosmopolis—a system in which God minds the happiness of the universe, leaving each of us free to indulge ourselves, blind to the world we harm through our actions or neglect? Some would have us believe this. But I join the wave of scholarship in recent decades that rejects the claim that Smith celebrated avarice. The interesting observation for contemporary thought is how Smith ultimately addressed larger and broader circles in light of the localism and particularism inevitably generated by his moral psychology. We might characterize Smith's orientation here as troubled or perhaps conflicted for he was well aware that localism and particularism often provoke suspicion, jealousy and conflict in the international sphere (or at least supply little incentive against them), and thus continually threaten to undermine international peace and harmony, which Smith sincerely wished for.

I shall argue in the next two chapters that unlike many localist and particularist reactions to cosmopolitan and universalist thinking today, Smith did not abandon his international political thought to anarchy nor his moral philosophy to relativism. Though I have argued to this point that Smith's moral psychology exposes serious practical problems for any cosmopolitan agenda, I will suggest that Smith ultimately gestures toward the possibility of just such a cosmopolitan frame in different and (in this context) comparatively neglected dimensions of his thought, making him an interesting and salient voice in contemporary debates about international

---

and cross-cultural ethics. In the final two chapters, I will disentangle two “strands” of modern cosmopolitanism in Smith’s thought, each largely independent of his moral psychology, that cogently confront the dangers of localism and particularism. The first strand, to be discussed in Chapter 6, is Smith’s international political economy, which might be described in this context as a theory of commercial cosmopolitanism that produces good effects without good intentions, thus challenging an assumption in realist international political thought that the world is anarchic and fundamentally conflictual. The second strand, to be discussed in Chapter 7, is Smith’s theory of justice conceived “negatively” as the avoidance of human cruelty, which Smith himself described as “universal” and independent of positive institution. If Smith’s commercial cosmopolitanism in Chapter 6 addresses the problems of physical and affective bias in the international realm, his negative justice in Chapter 7 addresses the problem of cultural bias.

Ultimately I will resist the argument that a spectator’s situatedness definitively closes the possibility of understanding and judging the beliefs and practices of cultural “others,” or of adopting what Pheng Cheah has called a “cosmopolitical frame of analysis.” If that were the case, only historical curiosity would justify reading Smith’s book today. We would simply dismiss him as a relativist, and place his book on display alongside the cultural artifacts that his theory refuses to let us discuss or touch. What I have suggested here is that Smith’s moral psychology in the Theory of Moral Sentiments cannot easily generate such a cosmopolitical frame of analysis. Sympathy and the impartial spectator are far too contingent. Those of us who are interested in cultivating such a frame need to look elsewhere. I suggest next that we might look to other dimensions of Smith’s thought.


Cheah, “Given Culture,” p. 290.