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# Naturalism and the Normative Domain. Accounting for Normativity with the Help of 18th Century Empathy-Sentimentalism

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**Abstract** Moral sentimentalism has seen a tremendous rise in popularity in recent years within contemporary meta-ethical theory, since it promises to delineate the normative domain in a naturalistically unobjectionable manner. After showing that both Michael Slote and Jesse Prinz's sentimental positions fall short of fulfilling this promise, this essay argues that contemporary sentimentalists are advised to take their clues from Adam Smith rather than David Hume. While Hume was absolutely right in emphasizing the importance of empathy in the moral context, his official description of the mechanisms of empathy as articulated in the *Treatise* falls fundamentally short for this purpose. Adam Smith's conception of empathy, a conception that in fact is closer to some of Hume's remarks in the *Enquiry* rather than the *Treatise*, as essentially involving perspective taking and his appeal to the impartial spectator perspective prove to be more fertile. Only in this manner do sentimentalists have any hope of accounting for the intersubjective normative and obligatory dimension of moral judgments.

KEYWORDS: Moral Sentimentalism; Empathy; Adam Smith; David Hume; Michael Slote; Jesse Prinz

**Riassunto** *Naturalismo e dominio normativo. Rendere conto della normatività con l'aiuto delle teorie dell'empatia e del sentimentalismo del XVIII secolo* – Negli ultimi anni il sentimentalismo morale ha conosciuto un incredibile incremento di popolarità nel dibattito meta-etico contemporaneo, poiché promette di delineare il dominio del normativo secondo una prospettiva inequivocabilmente naturalistica. Dopo aver mostrato come le posizioni sentimentaliste di Michael Slote e Jesse Prinz non siano in grado di mantenere questa promessa, in questo lavoro si afferma che i sostenitori contemporanei del sentimentalismo dovrebbero trarre ispirazione da Adam Smith piuttosto che da David Hume. Se Hume aveva assolutamente ragione nel sottolineare l'importanza dell'empatia in ambito morale, la sua descrizione ufficiale dei meccanismi dell'empatia, così come viene presentata nel *Treatise*, in fin dei conti non si mostra all'altezza di questo compito. La concezione dell'empatia di Adam Smith, che nei fatti è più vicina ad alcuni tratti dello Hume dell'*Enquiry* piuttosto che a quello del *Treatise*, implicando fondamentalmente l'assunzione di prospettiva e richiamando la prospettiva dello spettatore disinteressato, dimostra di essere più feconda. Solo così i teorici del sentimentalismo possono sperare di rendere conto del carattere necessitante e intersoggettivamente normativo dei giudizi morali.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Sentimentalismo morale; Empatia; Adam Smith; David Hume; Michael Slote; Jesse Prinz

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## Introduction

SINCE THE VERY START OF Western philosophy, certainly ever since the Socratic questioning so aptly illustrated in Plato's dialogues, philosophers have had a very hard time to account for the reality of normativity and the objectivity of our normative discourse.

From the time of the scientific revolution, this task has been made much harder through the inevitable march of the natural sciences to epistemic predominance and the associated ontological disenchantment with notions of preordained teleological structures, Platonic ideas, or normative facts. And yet a world devoid of normativity seems to be a world that is completely different from the world that agents, who have to make up their minds of how to act, encounter in very specific circumstances. Normativity always seems to reassert itself from the deliberative first-person perspective where we have to choose between alternative courses of actions and where we have to justify our choices to ourselves and to others. From this perspective, the world does seem to put demands on us, and there do seem to be ways of acting that are objectively right or wrong.

In some sense the above considerations express a typical philosophical conundrum. On the one hand we can't fully dismiss the reality of normativity in light of the inescapability of the first person perspective. On the other hand, as good philosophical naturalists who are disposed to believe in the ontological primacy of the explanatory scientific point of view, it seems we can do so only with a guilty conscience. We have, therefore, either to show that and explain why the first person perspective is illusory or we have to provide a better philosophical account that makes sense of the reality of norms *vis a vis* the natural world as it is revealed from the third person scientific perspective.

For that very reason, moral sentimentalism that traces its philosophical lineage back to David Hume has seen a tremendous rise in popularity in recent years within contempo-

rary meta-ethical theory. Moral sentimentalism promises to delineate the normative domain in a naturalistically unobjectionable manner by basing an account of moral judgment and moral agency on a plausible moral psychology, that is, a psychologically realistic account of the motivations of human agents that is backed by the results of empirical research in the psychological sciences including neuroscience, developmental and social psychology.

By viewing moral judgments as being in some sense grounded on human sentiments and emotions – and particularly empathy, the focus of this essay – rather than reason, sentimentalism seems to be also able to account for the motivational pull that is inherent in or internal to the making and accepting of specific moral judgments. In judging it to be bad to steal one is in some sense also motivated not to steal; a motivation that might be too weak to determine a course of action, but a motivation nonetheless.

This essay tries to motivate the following claim in a programmatic manner: That in order to properly conceive of moral sentimentalism contemporary philosophers are advised to take their clues from Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* rather than to follow David Hume in order to account for normativity in a naturalistically plausible manner.<sup>1</sup> In order to do this it is not sufficient to focus on the motivational aspect of our normative judgments. Most importantly, a philosophical explication of moral judgment has first and foremost to account for what I would like to call its intersubjective normative dimension.

In judging stealing to be bad I am not merely providing myself with a motivational pep talk. I am also addressing and at times criticizing other agents. Moreover I regard my critical appraisal of their behavior in the context of morally judging it as an appraisal that addresses the other person not merely from an external perspective to which the agent has sworn absolutely no allegiance. In morally blaming or praising another person I address him or her according to standards and from a perspective to which all persons

qua human agents are implicitly committed.

It is exactly for this reason, or so I will argue, that we need to take the 18<sup>th</sup> century notion of sympathy and what we now call empathy as having central importance for properly conceiving of the perspective moral judgment.<sup>2</sup> In that respect I think Hume was absolutely right. But as I will also show, we should not be following Hume in his official understanding of the mechanisms of empathy as articulated in the *Treatise*. Rather, Adam Smith's conception of sympathy as essentially involving perspective taking and his appeal to the impartial spectator perspective proves to be more fertile for these purposes, a conception that in fact is closer to some of Hume's remarks in the *Enquiry* rather than the *Treatise*.

I will proceed in the following manner. In the next section, I will briefly discuss the shortcomings of positions articulated by contemporary moral sentimentalists who claim to be inspired by Hume focusing mainly on Michael Slote and, to a lesser extent, on Jesse Prinz, who in his account of moral judgment follows Hume in his emphasis on the emotions but regards empathy as unimportant in this context. Yet while I think that Hume is quite correct in emphasizing the importance of empathy for morality, I tend to think Hume's official account of the mechanisms of sympathy/empathy in the *Treatise* falls short. Nevertheless, Hume suggests that we are able to overcome our more individualized perspective that limits our natural ability to sympathize or empathize with others by conversing with mankind, that is by basically being forced to leave our more limited perspective and take the perspective of another. It is also in this manner that we are able to access a more generalized stance and that we recognize each other's common humanity. Hume however never explains why we should be normatively committed to «some general unalterable standard»<sup>3</sup> that we encounter in such conversations nor does his conception of sympathy or empathy officially acknowledge the fact that such conversations require imaginative perspective taking.

As I will argue in the third section of this essay, we should therefore turn our attention to Adam Smith whose position on moral judgment can be seen as fully developing what remains merely implicit in Hume's *Enquiry*. Most importantly, it allows us to understand the impartial spectator perspective as the court of appeal implicit in our attempt to make sense and to warrant other persons' and our reasons for acting in the continuous and mutual attempt to reenact those reasons by taking each other's perspective. It also enables us to think of the impartial spectator perspective in a dialogical manner and to appropriately and realistically conceive of moral discourse as an open-ended and on-going process involving a multiplicity of perspectives rather than as a static perspective of an in some sense ideal and almost God-like point of view.

In this manner we can conceive of the universality of the moral perspective exactly at the right level; that is, without falling prey to the "empty formalism" critique that has been legitimately voiced against a Kantian conception of moral universality.

### ■ Contemporary sentimentalism (Michael Slote and a little bit of Jesse Prinz)

At the center of Slote's moral sentimentalism lies his analysis of how empathy causes us to morally approve or disapprove another person's actions.<sup>4</sup> To understand the exact scope and motivation of Slote's specific conception of moral sentimentalism it is best to briefly contrast his position with Hume's sympathy based account of the feeling of moral approbation and disapprobation and his account of moral judgment, in explicit contrast to which Slote articulates his own position.<sup>5</sup>

Roughly, for Hume, feelings of moral approbation and disapprobation of character traits and actions arise because we are able to feel pleasure or pain based on psychological mechanisms of sympathy when reflecting on the benefits which a person's character traits and actions provide to himself and others

even if we have no personal connection to him. Yet for Hume those natural feelings of approbations can serve as the foundation of our moral judgments only if we have made sure that we have “corrected” for the natural – and from the moral point of view merely contingent – limitations in our ability to be “mirrors to one another”.<sup>6</sup>

Some such natural limitations, mentioned by Hume, consists in what we nowadays refer to as the “here and now” bias, or the fact that «sympathy with persons remote from us [is] much fainter than with person near and contiguous». <sup>7</sup> The distance Hume is talking about should however not merely be understood in a spatial sense. Rather the nature of a personal relationship, whether or not we regard others as friends or foes, affects the stance towards another person and affects the manner in which our disposition towards sympathy manifests itself in various circumstances. Hume suggests that we can overcome those limitations «by fixing on some steady and general points of view» <sup>8</sup> so that our capacity for sympathy enables us to «touch a string, to which all mankind have accord and symphony». <sup>9</sup>

At this stage, it is not so important to understand how Hume exactly conceives of the mechanisms of sympathy/empathy nor is it of great interest of how exactly he understands the notion of a general point of view (he also does not seem to say very much about it). In this section we are interested in Hume only as a useful foil for the sentimentalist position that Slote develops.

Slote distinguishes himself from Hume explicitly in two respects: First, Slote is to a much lesser degree concerned about the natural and contingent limitations of our empathic capacities than Hume and Smith. Indeed he embraces a certain partiality towards the here and now as being of the essence of our ordinary moral understanding and certain commonsensical judgment according to which we have a greater moral obligation to help the people who are in some sense close to us than people that are further away from

us.<sup>10</sup> Second, following Smith rather than Hume, moral evaluation has primarily to do with the evaluation of agents in light of their motivation for action.

More specifically, Slote suggests thinking of moral approval as being constituted by a spectator’s empathy with an agent’s empathy or empathic concern towards other people in that such “empathy with empathy” will create a feeling of warmth in the spectator and subsequent moral approval of the agent’s action. Moral disapproval, on the other hand, is constituted by a feeling of chill due to the spectator’s recognition that there is no agential empathy towards others.<sup>11</sup>

As I have elaborated elsewhere in greater detail,<sup>12</sup> I am rather skeptical about the empirical plausibility of the psychological mechanisms that Slote postulates in order to make sense of his account of moral approval and judgment.<sup>13</sup> It is also not clear why a feeling of warmth towards the agent is leading me to morally approve and thus to be also motivated to do that action. A feeling of warmth towards an agent does not necessarily lead us to imitate his actions even though it might lead us to seek his company and so on. Similarly, why does noticing the lack of agential empathy lead us to a feeling of chill, rather than feeling nothing or being indifferent towards the agent whom we observe?

More importantly for our purposes, even if we grant Slote his psychological account of how moral judgment supposedly come about, his account would be unable to explicate what I have called the intersubjective normative dimension of moral judgments, that is, of how another person’s moral judgment makes a moral demand on us.<sup>14</sup> In criticizing another person from a moral point of view we do not intend to criticize him or her from an arbitrary third-person perspective to which the agent himself has sworn no allegiance such as when we would criticize a soccer player according to the rules of baseball.

Since a soccer player does not subscribe to the rules of baseball such critique is not legitimate even if it is expressed in an emotional ri-

gorous manner, that is, in the manner that die-hard Red Sox or Yankees fan tend to express their emotions. Rather in morally blaming and praising an agent we assume that we address him or her according to standards that all human beings qua moral agent should abide by.

Blaming an agent from a moral point of view presupposes that we address him in a manner that he himself should take seriously by the standards that he himself subscribes to. Pointing out that he was morally wrong is supposed to provide him with categorical reasons to correct his behavior. These are reasons that have to do with the fact that he is a member of the human race and not merely with the fact that he belongs to a particular group.

If I understand Slote correctly, moral blame from a third person point of view is effective through a process of «empathic contagion or osmosis»<sup>15</sup> in that the person blamed feels the chill expressed in moral blame and is set back on the moral path in that manner. I tend to agree with Slote that Hume indeed talks about the effects of sympathy/empathy in this manner. Moreover Hume and Smith are both right in pointing out that human beings as social animals are very much interested in the good opinion and sympathy of others and that we have a desire to be praised. In short, we all like to be liked. But if that is all that there is to say about the manner in which moral judgments work, then moral judgments are nothing more than a glorified form of peer pressure. The only reason for listening to the moral exhortations of your peers would be the following hypothetical imperative: In order to get along with members of a group you have to synchronize your actions and emotional reactions with them.

Notice however that the above problem has nothing to do with the fact that Slote follows Hume in seeing empathy as being foundational for our moral judgments. Jesse Prinz, who is otherwise an avowed sentimentalist in all things moral, strongly disagrees with Humean sentimentalism in arguing that

empathy, understood as the vicarious sharing of another person's emotion, is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral judgment, moral development, and moral conduct and that it also «should not play an integral role in morality».<sup>16</sup>

In making this argument Prinz focuses on what he calls the “dark side” of natural and uncorrected empathy, that is, its rather biased and limited scope, while dismissing any attempt to correct for such biases with the help of the impartial spectator perspective rather quickly and dismissively.<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, Prinz suggests that emotions like anger, disgust, guilt, and shame more appropriately track the domain of moral judgment and that the empirical evidence strongly supports the claim that these emotions, rather than empathy, are responsible and are essential for our moral development and moral conduct. Yet, if Prinz is correct, why should we take such sentiments expressed in moral statements to be something that we should normatively care about, beside the fact that we want to get along with our peers?

If I understand him correctly, Prinz embraces this implication.<sup>18</sup> From that perspective, moral debate is nothing more than a rhetorically embellished strategy of imposing one's own values, an expression of our Nietzschean will to power. On this account, the fight about slavery in American history was nothing more than, as the South has always argued, an attempt to impose Northern and arbitrary sensibilities on the way of life cherished in the South.

Yet that certainly cannot be right, in regarding slavery as morally wrong we judge it to be so regardless of whether my peers approve of it or not. We also do not regard the issue to be solved through a declaration that we go our separate ways, and that we form our separate communities. The point I am making does not depend on the possibility of ever reaching a moral consensus on specific issue. Rather a philosophical account of moral judgment should at least be able to explicate the possibility of a stance from which I could sensibly claim to address another per-

son in the above manner.

That is, contemporary sentimentalism should allow us to understand how it is that my recognition of the moral disapproval by the other person is more than a person expressing a chill or other sentiment. As far as I am concerned such chills do not have to be taken seriously from a normative point of view. Additionally, there is a serious gap in Prinz's sentimentalism in that he also owes us a psychological and causal account of how it is that I am sensitive to such emotions in the first place.

And it is exactly for this reason fruitful to look back more closely at 18<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of sympathy/empathy in Hume and particularly Smith who thought that questions like these can only be answered in light of our empathic capacities involving also our capacity for perspective taking and the impartial spectator perspective.

### ■ Hume and Smith on sympathy: Towards a dialogical conception of empathy and the perspective of the impartial spectator

As we already saw in the last section, for Hume, empathy is important in enabling moral judgment because it allows us to track morally significant features of a situation, that is the pleasure that others feel due to the benefits that actions and character traits provide them with. I think that Slote, following Adam Smith, is right to reject this quasi-utilitarian foundation for moral judgment. But this is not my major concern here. I am more interested in investigating whether Hume provides us with an adequate conception of the mechanisms of empathy in order to make progress toward addressing the diagnosed shortcomings of contemporary sentimentalism.

I think Hume's official conception in the *Treatise* is inadequate in this regard but that we should view some of his remarks in the *Enquiry* as pointing in the right direction, a direction that Adam Smith has developed more fully in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Hume describes the mechanism of sympa-

thy/empathy in the following manner.

When an affection is infus'd by sympathy it is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it. The idea is presently converted into an impression and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection.<sup>19</sup>

'Tis indeed evident, that when we sympathize with the passions and sentiments of others, these movements appear at first in *our* mind as mere ideas, and are conceiv'd to belong to another person, as we conceive any other matter of fact [...] No passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are only sensible to its causes or effects. From *these* we infer the passion: and consequently *these* give rise to our sympathy.<sup>20</sup>

Despite a certain vagueness in the description of the exact mechanism involved here, if I understand him correctly, Hume conceives of sympathy as a causal process that is mediated essentially by a folk psychological theory. That is, he provides an account of sympathy/empathy that is very close to how theory theorists understand our empathic capacities.

According to this line of thought we vicariously share the emotions of another by first theoretically determining the emotions that he feels, we infer it from evidence given by his facial expressions or from knowledge of what might have caused such an emotion in a particular situation. Sharing the feeling of another person is thus not necessary for knowing what the other person feels, and it is exactly in this respect that a theory theory account of affective empathy differs from an account offered by simulation theorists.

For the simulation theorist, our recognition of what the other person feels is mediated by sharing his or her feeling whereas for the

theory theorist a cognitive judgment about what the other person feels is prior to sharing the feeling. For theory theorists, we share feelings because of secondary causal mechanisms, maybe by being reminded of our own past sad experiences that are linked in some way to our concept of sadness and so on.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Hume insists that the process of enlivening an abstract idea of an emotion with a vivid impression of that very same emotion is always mediated and enabled by our impression of the self, which always accompanies or is part of, even if only implicitly, of any conscious phenomena in our mind. In this sense it is «always intimately present with us».<sup>22</sup> Yet for Hume the known limitations of empathy, its bias toward the “here and now,” does not have to do with whether or not we actually have had a certain experience. Rather, it has to do with a perceived similarity or “semblance” between ourselves and the other person whom we empathize with.

For Hume these limitations can however be overcome when we converse with mankind since in such conversations we are forced out of our more limited point of view and made to encounter and adopt other persons’ points of view. It is exactly in this manner that Hume suggests that we are able to adopt a more common point of view and recognize «some general and unalterable standard» that are more appropriate for moral judgment.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless such appeal to a common standard should not be understood as implying that empathy ceases to be involved in our moral approval. Rather it should be seen mainly as a corrective mechanism of our fundamentally empathic reaction to others without which no approbation or disapprobation would take place.

There is by now quite an extensive literature addressing the question about whether or not Hume did change his view from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiry* regarding his associationist account of empathy and whether he even regarded empathy still as central for moral judgments in the later work. I do not

intend to engage with this literature and have, for exegetical reasons, become quite persuaded that he probably did not change his point of view in this regard.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless I do think that Hume definitely *should* have given up on his account or should have at least extensively modified it, since in my opinion it falls short both for explanatory and normative reasons.

First, his preferred mechanism of empathy cannot be regarded as the sole mechanisms for the variety of empathy related phenomena that even Hume admits. It certainly cannot be thought of as being responsible for primitive cases of emotional contagion (that even small infants are subject to). More importantly however, if this is indeed the primary mechanism for affective empathy, we have to wonder why empathy would be biased and limited in the manner that Hume explains it. If a theoretical judgment is primarily activating the mechanism that leads me to vicariously share an emotion with another person, why does it matter that the person is close to me, or that I directly see him in front of me?

After all, the primary cause of the enlivening processes would be my idea of the emotion that the other person has. Once I have grasped the nature of that emotion on an abstract and theoretical level, it seems that it would be more plausible to suggest that I can and will enliven that idea as long as I have experienced similar emotions before rather than whether or not I am similar to the other person. It seems to be rather inexplicable that this mechanism would not be activated if we are told that another person far away is in a dire situations, is gravely ill, and so on.

Moreover, why should it matter in what sensory modality the information about the other persons is presented to me whether or not I feel with him? Why does it matter whether the information is presented in the «indifferent and uninteresting stile» of Suetonius or comes from «the masterly pencil of Tacitus»?<sup>25</sup>

Finally, from the perspective of Hume’s favorite account of the mechanisms of em-



pathy it seems to be difficult to explicate the normative relevance of a more common perspective that we encounter in the conversation with mankind, that is, why should we regard that perspective as normatively more compelling than our more limited perspective based on our natural empathic capacities?

Just to be told that such more common perspective is what we mean by the moral perspective seems to be begging the question in the philosophical context of trying to account for the nature of that perspective and its normative relevance for the evaluation of our behavior and that of other people. Regardless of how Hume himself thought about the mechanisms of empathy, some of his remarks about conversing with mankind in the *Enquiry* certainly point beyond them. What they suggest is that we should regard the capacity of imaginative perspective taking as being central for our empathic abilities and that we should regard it as a capacity that matures in the continuous and mutual attempt of making sense of each other by taking each other's point of view.

To converse with each other, rather than merely talking to each other, is characterized by such perspective taking and it is in such conversations that a common point of view is revealed. And I think that it is exactly in this respect that Adam Smith takes up Hume's suggestions by providing a simulative account of sympathy, that is by directly conceiving our ability to vicariously share other person's thoughts and feelings in terms of our ability to put ourselves in his or her shoes, by imagining ourselves to be in the other person's situation, «by changing places in fancy», and by our ability to look at a situation from his or her point of view.

Accordingly, Smith emphasizes the fact that the fellow feeling of sympathy «does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from the situation which excites it».<sup>26</sup>

In taking the perspective of the other person we are thus primarily taking up a perspective on a particular environment and are in this manner able to make sense of another

person's thoughts and feelings. In being oriented towards a certain environment we are however not merely looking at features of the situation that causes a certain mental state in the other agents. Rather in taking the perspective of another person we treat him as a rational agents for whom aspects of the situation provide reasons for acting and for feeling a certain due to his outlook on the world, including his beliefs, desires, values and social and cultural commitments.

Otherwise it would not be really clear why Smith would regard perspective taking as the essential mechanism for sympathy, as knowledge of merely causal relation between events (even between features of the world and internal mental states) are best thought of as being provided by theoretical knowledge. Smithean sympathy is thus very much like what I have called reenactive empathy required for understanding another person's thoughts as his reasons for acting.<sup>27</sup>

As is well known, Smith ties our ability to reenact the thoughts and feelings of another person (and to make sense of his thoughts and feelings in this manner) to our approval of those feelings and thoughts. For simplicity sake I will focus mainly on the question of the propriety of another person's sentiments and actions and not their merit or demerit.

If upon bringing the case home to our own breast [...] we find that the sentiments which it gives occasion to coincide and tally with our own, we necessarily approve of them [...] if otherwise, we necessarily disapprove of them.<sup>28</sup>

At the end of the last section, we however were concerned with how to account for the intersubjective normative dimension of moral judgments.<sup>29</sup> That is, why should I normatively be concerned whether or not somebody else can reenact my feelings in looking at my situation in the manner that Smith has suggested?

So far, the reason still seems to resemble a case of peer pressure, that is, we do in fact

care because we want to live together and as a matter of fact enjoy bathing in feelings that are magnified by others. It is clear that for Smith, as far as proper moral approval is concerned, the approval is indexed to the ability of an impartial spectator to enter into the mind and feelings of the agent while putting himself in his place. Yet for our purposes merely pointing to the perspective of the impartial spectator does not really answer the normative question either. It indeed raises two questions.

First why would I in fact care about the approval of such an impartial spectator since such a spectator seems to have merely an imagined existence?

The enjoyment that I get from such approval seems to be similar to the enjoyment that I get from merely imagining having a lot of money. If you ask me, I prefer actually having a lot of money. But even more importantly why should we take the perspective of the impartial spectator normatively seriously and regard it as a standard that we ourselves are committed to. Smith attempts to answer the question by distinguishing between two different desires, the desire for praise and the desire for praiseworthiness.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas this might answer the question of why we in fact care about an impartial spectator, it does not really answer the question of why we should care about it. In order to answer this question we need to be provided with a different line of argument that would somehow ground the normative relevance of the impartial spectator perspective and the desire for praiseworthiness and show it to be the relevant standard to which we are implicitly committed.

In the remaining part of this essay I will try to suggest a way to answer these questions by providing a reconstruction of how one can understand the standard of the impartial spectator more precisely as arising out of our everyday encounter with each other and our everyday perspective taking of each other as rational agents for whom aspects of the situations provide reasons for acting. *Prima facie*,

such encounters do not necessarily lead to an outright moral condemnation, but more to a low-grade form of normative approval and disapproval in the sense of “Yeah, that makes sense to me” or “I just do not get you, why do you do that”?

Such disapproval, I would however maintain, diminishes our self-conception as rational agents and it is exactly for this reason that we are committed to being appropriately evaluated by referring to a court of appeal, suggesting that we have been misunderstood, in that our perspective has not been appropriately taken into account.

For that purpose, I think it is useful to consider more precisely of how we take the perspective of another person and how exactly Smith might have thought about it. Psychologists distinguish commonly between two types of perspective taking, that is, between “self-focused” and “other-focused”<sup>31</sup> or between imagine-self and imagine-other<sup>32</sup> role-taking.

Typically, in an imagine-self conditions subjects are asked “to imagine how you yourself would feel if you were experiencing what has happened to the person being interviewed and how this experience would affect your life,” whereas in the imagine-other condition subjects are asked to try to imagine how the person being interviewed feels about what has happened and how it has affected his or her life.

One way of thinking about the difference is that in the imagine-other position I am more sensitive to the differences between me and the other person in terms of character traits, financial situation and so on and make sure that those differences do not interfere with my ability to simulate his feelings and thoughts in a certain kind of situation. To think about a primitive example, if I am told that a rich person’s car has been stolen I might just imagine how I would feel if my car has been stolen. In the imagine- other condition I would however try to imagine how owning twenty cars and being rich might affect my relationship to one car and so on, that is I am more careful about trying to quarantine my

own outlook that I know is different from the other person's point of view from the attempt of putting myself in his situation.

As far as Smith is concerned, there is a certain ambiguity in his writing. He talks about «conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation», but also of entering into the situation of the other person «as if we were in his body».<sup>33</sup> I also approve of another person's opinion and argument by asking myself whether it convinces me.<sup>34</sup> In order to counter the objection that sympathy/empathy is a selfish principle, Smith however also declares that

when I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief, I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die; but I consider what I should suffer I was really you; and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters.<sup>35</sup>

All of this seems to suggest that Smith thinks of perspective taking on the model of other-focused perspective taking. Yet if we take these quotes as Smith's all things considered judgment about how to conceive of perspective taking we have the following problem: the more we think ourselves into the situation of the other, or become the other person, the less likely it seem that we are able to disapprove of his sentiments. Just think about trying to understand teenagers for whom the opinion of their peers is their all and nothing criterion for evaluating the appropriateness of their actions. If we indeed put ourselves in their shoes, quarantine our normal rational capacities while reenacting them, what is there not to like and understand about their silly behavior?

In everyday life there is a range of self and other-focused perspective taking and I probably think that Smith was quite aware of that fact. Yet if one reflects on the last case (trying to make sense of teenagers), one also

realizes that self- and other-focused perspective taking can create normative tensions between different perspectives that oneself is able to occupy, that is ultimately through perspective taking such tensions have become internal ones. For that very reason, such tensions require a resolution addressing the question of which assumptions manifested in these different perspectives are more plausible or reasonable and so on.

In addressing this issue one is implicitly appealing to a perspective that one regards as a neutral and thus impartial dimension within which the conflict of opinions can be resolved. And it is in this manner that I suggest that the impartial spectator perspective that Smith refers to as a court of appeals is revealed as an implicit commitment of agents who negotiate their mutual intelligibility through their ability of imaginative and empathic perspective taking. In conceiving of empathy/sympathy as involving imaginative perspective taking Smith is able to situate the common standard, which according to Hume reveals itself in the conversations with mankind, directly within our empathic practices of intersubjective sense making. In this manner, Smith provides (or at least hints at) an answer to the question of why we should normatively care about such perspective or common standard and why it is a perspective that is not an external or arbitrarily imposed perspective.

Certainly, one needs to say much more about how exactly a perspective is constituted as an impartial one. Most importantly, the fundamental question is whether moral sentimentalism will have the resources to provide such answers on purely sentimentalist grounds. At the end of this essay, I can only point in the direction for proceeding in order to satisfactorily address this question. It needs to be emphasized that Smith's impartial spectator position is the perspective in which each agent is treated as an equal interlocutor and in which each persons' (agents' or victims') individuality and humanity is taking fully into account in light of the interlocutors'

abilities to enter into their perspective and share their feeling, thoughts and emotions that constitutes their reasons for acting.

In this sense it is very much the perspective of proper moral judgment. In contrast to Kant, the perspective of the impartial spectator is not only the perspective of moral reason. More generally, it is the perspective of practical reason wherein agents acting for reasons discuss the validity and warrant of their reasoning about and their reasons for acting. That is, it is the perspective in which the propriety of all actions, whether selfishly or altruistically motivated, are evaluated and the propriety of all character traits ranging from mere prudential traits like frugality, industriousness, cleanliness, punctuality to genuinely moral ones such as honesty. That perspective does contain an element of universality with which Kant in his moral philosophy was so concerned.

Yet it is a conception of universality that is at the same time tied to the specificity of an agent's situation. It is exactly this type of universality that rational agents acting for a reason are implicitly committed to. More specifically, what is at issue from the perspective of the impartial spectator perspective is the question of whether an agent's supposed reasons for acting in that type of situation can stand up to scrutiny and be declared a good reason for acting. A positive answer to that question is forthcoming if it is possible for all potentially impartial spectators to reenact another person's reasons as their reasons for acting.

Furthermore, while the perspective to the impartial spectator perspective is, as the above remarks have shown, in some sense an *a priori* commitment, the question of whether impartiality has been realized in a particular judgment can be empirically challenged. It is in this very context that questions about biases of our empathic capacities or other shortcomings of our cognitive capacities are of central importance for the impartial spectator perspective. As Adam Smith has in my opinion already emphasized, re-

flection on the nature of the impartial perspective and how various factor influence or corrupt our moral sentiments has to be seen as being an integral part of the impartial spectator perspective itself. It is here that considerations from empirical psychology can prove to be helpful.

The impartial spectator perspective certainly lacks the noumenal clarity that Kant has associated with moral reasoning and judgment. On the other hand, in propagating the universality of the perspective of the impartial spectator Smith avoids the common complaint first articulated by Hegel that Kantian moral philosophy and the universality associated with the perspective of the categorical imperative is merely an "empty formalism" in that it does not allow us to derive any concrete moral norms. Seen in this light, the fact that there might no guarantee that a final and unanimous judgment about the merit of an action will be ever had even among impartial spectators may not be such a bad thing.<sup>36</sup> The conversation among impartial spectators is better understood as being fallible and as an open-ended conversation. That just seems to be a fact of life, even of the moral life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article should be understood as providing a first step in this direction. It also does not claim to provide a comprehensive survey or discussion of contemporary sentimentalism in all of its variety. It is too vast a field to do so in one article. In particular it will not discuss the position of rational sentimentalism, which is developed by Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson. See for example J. D'ARMS, D. JACOBSON, *Sentiment and Value*, in: «Ethics», vol. CX, n. 4, 2000, pp. 722-748. For a more comprehensive discussion, see R. DEBES, K. STUEBER (eds), *Moral Sentimentalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> See K. STUEBER, *Empathy*, in: E.N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2008/entries/empathy>>

<sup>3</sup> D. HUME, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), Hackett, Indianapolis 1983, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> See M. SLOTE, *Moral Sentimentalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

<sup>5</sup> For the following see particularly G. SAYRE-MCCORD, *Hume and Smith on Sympathy, Approval, and Moral Judgment*, in: «Social Philosophy and Policy», vol. XXX, n. 1-2, 2013, pp. 208-236; G. SAYRE-MCCORD, *On Why Hume's "General Point of View" isn't Ideal – and Shouldn't Be*, in: «Social Philosophy and Policy», vol. XI, n. 1, 1994, pp. 202-228.

<sup>6</sup> D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Clarendon Press, Oxford 1978, p. 365.

<sup>7</sup> D. HUME, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, cit., p. 49; see also D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, cit., 580-587.

<sup>8</sup> D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, cit., pp. 581-582.

<sup>9</sup> D. HUME, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> In this context, Slote only appeals to the notion of a fully matured and well-developed empathy. However he does not sufficiently explicate that notion.

<sup>11</sup> M. SLOTE, *Moral Sentimentalism*, cit., pp. 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> K. STUEBER, *Moral Approval and the Dimensions of Empathy: Comments on Michael Slote's Moral Sentimentalism*, in: «Analytic Philosophy», vol. LII, n. 4, 2011, pp. 328-336.

<sup>13</sup> J. D'ARMS, *Empathy, Approval, and Disapproval in Moral Sentimentalism*, in: «Southern Journal of Philosophy», vol. XLIX, Supplement, 2011, pp. 134-141.

<sup>14</sup> These are specific issues that Stephen Darwall addresses extensively in S. DARWALL, *The Second Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006.

<sup>15</sup> M. SLOTE, *Moral Sentimentalism*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> J. PRINZ, *Against Empathy*, in: «Southern Journal of Philosophy», vol. XLIX, Supplement, 2011, pp. 214-233, here p. 213.

<sup>17</sup> In this respect see particularly Kauppinen's astute critique of Prinz's objection towards empathy in A. KAUPPINEN, *Empathy, Emotion Regulation, and Moral Judgment*, in: H. MAIBOM (ed.), *Empathy and Morality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, pp. 97-121. I wholeheartedly agree with Kauppinen that any plausible sentimentalist account of moral judgment needs to appeal to empathy that is corrected by an ideal or impartial spectator perspective or what he calls "regulated empathy". Yet Kauppinen does not really say anything about why, according to sentimentalism, we are normatively committed to

such an impartial perspective. Besides this article see in this respect also R. DEBES, K. STUEBER (eds), *Moral Sentimentalism*, cit.

<sup>18</sup> J. PRINZ, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 120-121.

<sup>19</sup> D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, cit., p. 317.

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, p. 319 and 576.

<sup>21</sup> See S. NICHOLS, S. STICH, A. LESLIE, D. KLEIN, *Varieties of Off-Line Simulation*, in: P. CARRUTHERS, P. SMITH (eds.), *Theories of Theories of Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 39-74.

<sup>22</sup> D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, cit., p. 317.

<sup>23</sup> D. HUME, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, cit., p. 49 and also p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> See particularly R. DEBES, *Humanity, Sympathy, and the Puzzle of Hume's Second Enquiry*, in: «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», vol. XV, n. 1, 2007, pp. 27-57; R. DEBES, *Has Anything Changed? Hume's Theory of Association and Sympathy after the Treatise*, in: «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», vol. XV, n. 2, 2007, pp. 313-338.

<sup>25</sup> D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, cit., p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> A. SMITH, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Liberty Classics, Indianapolis (IN) 1982, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> See K. STUEBER, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk psychology, and the Human Sciences*. The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006; K. STUEBER, *Reasons, Generalizations, Empathy, and Narratives: The Epistemic Structure of Action Explanation*, in: «History and Theory», vol. XLVII, n. 1, 2008, pp. 31-43.

<sup>28</sup> A. SMITH, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> In this article I focus mainly on the question of how to account for the intersubjective normative dimension of moral judgments from the perspective of moral sentimentalism. I do not explicitly focus on the question of how it is linked to motivation. Ultimately I tend to think that empathic perspective taking can account for the motivational perspective, if we think of such reenactment as reenacting reasons. Such perspective taking can motivate in the same manner that my deliberation involving imagining hypothetical scenarios can motivate me. This is a rather complicated issue and needs further clarification especially in light of Batson's findings that empathy can motivate altruistic but amoral behavior. Batson distinguishes therefore strictly between moral and altruistic motivation. In this respect see C.D. BATSON, *Altruism in Humans*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

<sup>30</sup> A. SMITH, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, cit.,

p. 114.

<sup>31</sup> M. HOFFMAN, *Empathy and Moral Development*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 54.

<sup>32</sup> C.D. BATSON, S. EARLY, G. SALVARINI, *Perspective Taking: Imagining How Another Feels Versus Imagining How you Would Feel*, in: «Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin», vol. XXIII, n. 7,

1997, pp. 751-758.

<sup>33</sup> A. SMITH, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 317.

<sup>36</sup> See C. GRISWOLD, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.