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# CAN ADAM SMITH ANSWER THE NORMATIVE QUESTION?

by

SAM RICHARDS

Under the Direction of Eric E. Wilson

## ABSTRACT

In *The Sources of Normativity*, Christine Korsgaard argues that in order to avoid the threat of moral skepticism, our moral theories must show how the claims they make about the nature of our actions obligate us to act morally. A theory that can justify the normativity of morality in this way answers what Korsgaard calls “the normative question.” Although Korsgaard claims that only Kantian theories of morality, such as her own, can answer the normative question, I argue that Adam Smith’s sentimental moral theory, as presented in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, can answer the normative question as well. As a result, it is possible to respond to the moral skeptic in the way Korsgaard outlines without accepting some of the theoretical drawbacks of Korsgaard’s own moral theory.

INDEX WORDS: Adam Smith, Christine Korsgaard, Ethics, Normativity, Sentimentalism, Moral reflection, Moral skepticism

CAN ADAM SMITH ANSWER THE NORMATIVE QUESTION?

by

SAM RICHARDS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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2013

CAN ADAM SMITH ANSWER THE NORMATIVE QUESTION?

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August 2013

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my grandmother, Joanne Kruse Smith, who by all rights should have earned an M.A. of her very own, but instead ended up marrying a computer salesman and raising four incredible children: my mother and her three brothers. I would also like to dedicate it to my parents, Ted Richards and Markene Smith, who have been incredibly supportive as I've worked on my M.A. at Georgia State University.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people I'd like to thank, without whom this endeavor would not have been possible. Thanks to my thesis advisor, Eric Wilson, for patiently guiding me through the process of researching and writing this thesis. Thanks to all the other professors at Georgia State University who have supported me during my time here and taught me how to be a better philosopher, especially Christie Hartley, Sebastian Rand, and Andrea Scarantino. Thanks to everyone in my entering cohort for all the fun times and great conversations we've shared, especially Alex Economides, Maya Godwin, Rebecca Harrison, Getty Lustila, Shawn Murphy, and Andrew Wolter. Thanks to Casey Fowler, Katie Punsly, and Jacob Reisman for the friendship and support you've offered me during the thesis-writing process. Thanks to my friends from high school and college, especially Aaron Field, Sam Gespass, Brooke Hulteen, Doug Mosher, Richard Sears, and George Tretyakov, for putting my work into perspective and giving me a dose of reality when needed. Finally, thanks to Adam Fox, Marcos Gonzalez, and Morgan Thompson for the helpful feedback you gave me on my Ph.D. writing sample and for all the great talks we've had about philosophy and other things. I couldn't have done this without any of you!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. THE NORMATIVE QUESTION: CONDITIONS FOR JUSTIFYING MORALITY .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.1. Korsgaard’s Theory of Normativity.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2.2 Korsgaard’s Conditions and the Normativity of Reflection .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2.3 Reflective Endorsement and Justificatory Adequacy .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3. CAN ADAM SMITH ANSWER THE NORMATIVE QUESTION? .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.1. Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Judgment.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3.2. Adam Smith and the Reflective Agent .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>3.3. The Impartial Spectator’s Transparent Reasons.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.4. Adam Smith on Morality and Self-Worth .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3.5. Justificatory Adequacy in Adam Smith’s Moral Theory .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>4. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>36</b>



## 1 INTRODUCTION

Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*<sup>1</sup> presents an account of morality that grounds our normative behavior in our emotional lives and capacity to sympathize with other people. Smith's rich descriptions of human emotional states, theoretical insight, and use of intuitive examples from everyday life to illustrate key points make his book a classic of enlightenment moral theory. However, in *The Sources of Normativity*,<sup>2</sup> Christine Korsgaard argues that sentimental moral theories – accounts of moral behavior that, like Smith's "[argue] that the moral value of actions and objects is a projection of human sentiments"<sup>3</sup> – cannot ultimately show why we are obligated to act morally. Since sentimental moral theories often claim that our pro-social emotions are the basis of our moral behavior, Korsgaard thinks that such theories cannot rationally justify our moral behavior to a skeptical agent who distrusts his or her pro-social emotions for some reason. Sentimentalist theories of morality thus ultimately fail to answer what Korsgaard calls the normative question: the question of why moral claims should obligate us to act in a certain way. This is problematic for sentimental moral theories because if one cannot justify the normativity of moral judgments, which binds us to an obligatory course of action, then it is difficult to see why anyone should act based on those judgments in the first place.

In this thesis, I argue that it is, in fact, possible for a sentimental theory of morality to answer Korsgaard's normative question. The moral theory that Adam Smith presents in *The Theory of Moral Sentiment* can justify the normativity of morality just as effectively as the Kantian theory Korsgaard ultimately defends. This is important because Smith's view enjoys some major advantages over Korsgaard's theory. His success in answering the normative question means that Korsgaard does not need to resort to the Kantian theory she presents in the third lecture of *The Sources of Normativity* in order to justify our

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<sup>1</sup> Smith 2002. Henceforth TMS. When I cite this book, I will note the part, section, chapter, and passage number I am referencing, instead of the page number in the edition I'm using. (For example: TMS I.i.i.1.)

<sup>2</sup> Korsgaard 1996a. Henceforth SN. When I cite this book, I will refer to the page numbers in the paperback edition of it that I'm using. (For example: SN 1.)

<sup>3</sup> SN 50.

moral behavior. She can instead trust that our own natures render moral claims normative, which takes much of the pressure off of the project she sets up for herself.

I will proceed in two main stages. In the first stage, I will give a brief outline of Korsgaard's argument in *The Sources of Normativity* and the theoretical commitments that lead her to endorse the three conditions for a satisfactory answer to the normative question that she specifies at the beginning of the book (Section 2). In the second stage, I will discuss the key elements of Adam Smith's moral theory and show how it meets all three of the conditions that Korsgaard claims a satisfactory answer to the normative question must meet (Section 3). I conclude by outlining some criticisms of Korsgaard's moral theory and showing how Smith's answer to the normative question might help us keep the attractive elements of Korsgaard's theory, while jettisoning the less appealing elements (Section 4). The theory of normativity implicit in Smith's work is consistent with Korsgaard's primary theoretical commitments, but embraces a less restrictive view of moral reasoning and justification, thus resulting in a more satisfying answer to the normative question than the one Korsgaard provides.

## **2. THE NORMATIVE QUESTION: CONDITIONS FOR JUSTIFYING MORALITY**

If we want to assess whether or not Adam Smith can answer the normative question, we first need to know what constitutes a successful answer to the normative question. Korsgaard argues that a moral theory must satisfy three conditions in order to answer the normative question. First, a good moral theory must succeed in addressing someone who occupies "the first-person position of the agent who demands a justification of the claims which morality makes upon him." In other words, a moral theory should give a moral agent faced with an immediate decision a good reason to act morally instead of merely explaining why we judge certain actions as moral or immoral. Secondly, a good moral theory must meet a theoretical condition commonly called "transparency." In order for a moral theory to meet this condition, the moral theory in question cannot claim that the true source of our moral motives is concealed from us or that we act morally mostly for habitual reasons; we have to be able to willingly decide to be moral. Thus, if a

moral theory claims that the source of moral normativity lies in factors outside our control, such as our evolutionary history or social conventions in a given culture, it fails to answer the normative question. Finally, a moral theory that answers the normative question “must appeal, in a deep way, to our sense of who we are” This is because in some situations we might be required to risk a great deal – even our own lives – in order to act morally. In order for moral claims to still be normative under those circumstances, Korsgaard thinks that something just as important as our own lives must be at stake: our self-conception as human beings.

Korsgaard’s use of these conditions in developing an answer to the normative question leads her to endorse a modified version of Kant’s moral philosophy, which she views as the only sort of moral theory consistent with the naturalist claim that value is imposed onto the world by human agents. However, Korsgaard’s use of these conditions also gives us a proverbial checklist that we can use to determine whether or not it is possible for a non-Kantian moral theory to answer the normative question. In this section, I aim to show how the three conditions Korsgaard thinks a successful answer to the normative question must meet reflect some of the deeper theoretical commitments that influence Korsgaard’s discussion of the normative question. If this is the case, then demonstrating that Adam Smith can meet all three of Korsgaard’s conditions will also suffice as a demonstration that Adam Smith can answer the normative question. My discussion of Korsgaard’s moral theory will proceed in three parts. First, I will give a general outline of Korsgaard’s project and the moral theory she ultimately ends up endorsing. I will then show how Korsgaard’s conditions for answering the normative question draw on the same theoretical commitments that inform her moral theory and use those theoretical commitments to provide a deeper analysis of Korsgaard’s three conditions. With a clearer picture of Korsgaard’s project in hand, I will conclude by turning to her “knave lawyer” thought experiment, which she takes to be a substantial challenge to sentimental theories of morality, and discussing the specific threat that Korsgaard thinks cases of this sort pose to those theories, including Smith’s.

## 2.1. Korsgaard's Theory of Normativity

Korsgaard's interest in the normative question stems from her dissatisfaction with moral theories that aim to explain the origin of our moral practices without explaining how moral claims obligate us to act a certain way. Many different theoretical explanations of morality are available to us. Some moral theorists might claim that morality is the product of God's commands to us, as revealed by a specific prophet or holy texts, while others might claim that it is the result of the same evolutionary forces that gave us opposable thumbs. We can judge these sorts of claims about morality by appealing to a standard of explanatory adequacy similar to those used to judge scientific theories. However, even if we demonstrate that a given moral theory tells a plausible story about the natural (or supernatural) forces responsible for our moral practices, this will not be enough to demonstrate that the claims that morality makes on us are justified.

Let's say, for example, that a moral theory suggests that our moral practices are largely the result of pro-social dispositions that were favorably selected for over millions of years of evolution. This is a plausible empirical claim, but it says nothing about why I should face death instead of doing something immoral.<sup>4</sup> Korsgaard thinks that this consideration introduces a second criterion by which our moral theories should be judged: that of justificatory adequacy.<sup>5</sup> Because morality makes normative claims about what we ought to do in certain situations, our theories of morality need to explain why we should heed those claims. If a moral theory cannot do that, the result is normative failure; the moral theory in question will not be able to provide a clear directive for those who consult it to act a certain way, since it will always be possible for moral agents to doubt its normative force. So, for instance, if the evolutionary moral theory I just mentioned represents the whole truth of morality, Korsgaard does not believe that knowledge of this theory can obligate me to do anything, since I can always choose to ignore the pro-social dispositions that the theory claims are responsible for me acting morally. Korsgaard calls normative failure of this sort moral skepticism and devotes the bulk of *The Sources of Normativity* to addressing it. If a moral

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<sup>4</sup> See Nagel 1979a for a longer discussion of this point.

<sup>5</sup> SN 15.

theory can attain justificatory adequacy and overcome the threat posed by moral skepticism, then Korsgaard thinks it has satisfactorily answered the normative question.

Before presenting her answer to the normative question, Korsgaard considers three popular sorts of answers to it, all of which she thinks are inadequate. Voluntarism is the view that our moral values are externally imposed on us by the command of a legislative authority of some sort – either human or divine.<sup>6</sup> Korsgaard thinks that this view fails to answer the normative question because it requires that the commands of the legislative authority gain their normative force from the authority’s capacity to punish. This is problematic because it entails that if a crime or moral offense goes unpunished, then it is not properly a crime or moral offense; whatever the legislative authority allows is good and whatever the legislative authority forbids is bad. In an attempt to solve this sort of problem, moral realists ground the normativity of morality in the existence of intrinsically normative entities or facts. Korsgaard thinks that this view amounts to failing to even address the normative question at all.<sup>7</sup> When faced with the question of whether one should be moral, the moral realist can respond by saying “yes”, but cannot give an explanation for why one should act morally without appealing to dubious metaphysical entities.<sup>8</sup> Since both voluntarism and realism leave room for us to doubt their respective explanations for the normativity of morality, neither theory can provide the sort of deep justificatory adequacy that Korsgaard thinks is necessary in a good theory of morality.

Reflective endorsement theories of morality, such as Hume’s variant of sentimentalism or Bernard Williams’ contemporary variant of virtue ethics, represent something of an improvement over voluntarism and realism.<sup>9</sup> Theories of this sort defend the normativity of moral claims by showing that morality originates in some aspect of our human nature that we should be glad to possess, such as, for instance, our innate feelings of sympathy for others. This makes the normativity of moral claims a bit more challenging to doubt, since if reflective endorsement theorists are correct, the normativity of morality is not imposed

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<sup>6</sup> SN 18.

<sup>7</sup> SN 39.

<sup>8</sup> SN 38.

<sup>9</sup> SN 51.

on us by some external force, such as the authority of a sovereign or the existence of a mind-independent entity, but is instead the product of our own nature. Although Korsgaard recognizes this particular strength of reflective endorsement theories, she still thinks that theories of that sort can still result in normative failure, since they allow for cases where an agent acts morally only because he can't help himself.<sup>10</sup> In these cases, the agent in question would act immorally if he could overcome his innate dispositions, but is unable to do so, which leads him to act morally instead. Moral claims thus fail to gain a normative grip on agents in these cases, despite their outwardly moral behavior. As a result, Korsgaard thinks that reflective endorsement theories of morality cannot answer the normative question. They leave some wiggle-room for the moral skeptic to question the normativity of moral claims, even if such questioning does not result in immoral behavior.

In opposition to the theories of morality considered above, Korsgaard endorses a revised version of Kant's moral theory, which grounds the normativity of morality on our capacity for moral reflection. The main advantage Korsgaard sees in this strategy is that it shows that the normative claims morality makes on us are entailed by the same capacity for reflection that makes moral skepticism possible in the first place. If the same basic assumptions that lead one to be a moral skeptic can also demonstrate that morality has a normative grip on us, then moral skepticism can be conclusively refuted once and for all and the normative question can be satisfactorily answered. Korsgaard does not think that any of the other strategies for answering the normative question that she considers are up to this task. Voluntarism fails to answer the normative question because we can always ask why the sovereign's claims are justified. Realism fails to answer the normative question because we can always ask if intrinsically normative entities really exist. Reflective endorsement theories fail to answer the normative questions because we can always ask if we would like to have the sort of nature that the reflective endorsement theorist claims we have. Thus, in order to satisfactorily answer the normative question, Korsgaard thinks that we must accept some variant of the moral theory she ultimately endorses, which she calls an "appeal to autonomy."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> SN 88.

<sup>11</sup> SN 19.

Korsgaard's final theory of moral normativity is fairly sophisticated and incorporates elements of voluntarism, realism, and reflective endorsement theories. According to Korsgaard, any reflection on our moral activity necessitates a split between the thinking self and the acting self and presupposes that the thinking self orders the acting self to do something. This confirms the main insight of voluntarism: that norms must be administered to the moral agent by some authority. However, in order for the thinking self to administer any norms at all, intrinsically normative entities must exist for it to examine. Taking some cues from Wittgenstein and Nagel, Korsgaard claims that reasons are intrinsically normative entities of this sort, which makes moral realism fundamentally true as well. For Korsgaard, the sorts of reasons that can both motivate us to act and justify us acting in a certain way are ones that take the form of good moral maxims. Much like Kant, Korsgaard thinks that a moral maxim is a good one just in case "its internal structure...makes it fit to be willed as a [universal] law."<sup>12</sup> Because our capacity for reflection is what enables us to determine if the reasons we act on can be willed as laws, Korsgaard takes this capacity to be the source of normativity; the common element in all moral agents that enables moral claims to exert normative force over us and obligate us to act in a certain way.

As a complement to this picture of moral reflection, Korsgaard offers a transcendental argument, which she thinks can decisively refute moral skepticism once and for all. As Korsgaard sees it, in order to act at all, we must adopt some sort of practical identity: "a description under which [one] finds [one's] life to be worth living and [one's] actions to be worth undertaking."<sup>13</sup> The practical identities we adopt impose certain norms on us, which in turn structure the sorts of actions we take in given situations. For instance, if I adopt the practical identity of a professional philosopher, then I am motivated to spend large amounts of time reading philosophy articles and polishing my philosophical writing, and if I adopt the practical identity of a dutiful citizen, then I am motivated to vote in the upcoming election. Although specific practical identities are contingent insofar as any given person can choose to adopt or not adopt them, Korsgaard claims that it is necessary for us to adopt *some* sort of practical identity. Otherwise, Korsgaard

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<sup>12</sup> SN 108.

<sup>13</sup> SN 101.

thinks that we will not have any reason to value anything at all or do anything in particular. Thus, for Korsgaard, adopting any specific practical identity necessarily involves adopting a more general practical identity: that of a reflective human agent. Since reflection is a characteristic of this general practical identity, our endorsement of this general practical identity entails that we must endorse the universal laws that our thinking self is capable of administering to us

By showing that normativity of morality is built into the reflective structure of the human mind and that we are committed to valuing our capacity for reflection by undertaking any action at all, Korsgaard takes herself to have completely eliminated the threat posed by moral skepticism. Korsgaard's theory of moral normativity is specifically designed to provide a definitive answer to the normative question and justify the normative claims that morality makes on us once and for all.

## **2.2 Korsgaard's Conditions and the Normativity of Reflection**

At first glance, it is not clear how Korsgaard's project of grounding the normativity of morality on our capacity for reflection relates to her three criteria of adequacy. None of Korsgaard's three conditions explicitly states or requires that moral normativity has anything to do with our ability to reflect on reasons for moral action. To make matters worse, Korsgaard's exposition of the Kantian moral theory that she endorses in the third and fourth chapters of *The Sources of Normativity* does not refer back to the initial set of conditions she defends at the beginning of the book and instead emphasizes how Kant's moral theory incorporates the main insights of voluntarism, realism, and reflective endorsement theories of morality. Thus, it's difficult to see how meeting Korsgaard's three conditions could guarantee that any given moral theory can satisfactorily answer the normative question.

The best way to resolve this apparent problem is to take a look at Korsgaard's larger project and show how the theoretical commitments that inform Korsgaard's Kantian moral theory also inform the conditions Korsgaard thinks a satisfactory answer to the normative question must meet. If those commitments inform both the conditions that the normative question must meet and the answer Korsgaard gives to the normative question, then drawing them out will give us a theoretically consistent picture of her pro-



ject in *The Sources of Normativity*: one in which she is both asking and answering the same question throughout. This will also give us a clearer sense of how meeting Korsgaard's conditions might enable other moral theories to answer the normative question.

One of Korsgaard's main theoretical commitments, which I outlined in the previous section, is a hierarchical model of the self, in which the thinking self reflects on reasons for action and administers those reasons to the acting self as norms that govern action. Korsgaard largely borrows this conception of selfhood, reflection, and agency from Harry Frankfurt's work on free will, especially Frankfurt's discussion of the distinction between first-order and second-order desires.<sup>14</sup> First-order desires are desires that we immediately experience, while second-order desires are desires about our first-order desires. If we can endorse one of our first-order desires upon second-order reflection, then Frankfurt would say that we identify with that desire; it is a desire that we want to have. Frankfurt claims that the sort of person that one is thus informed by the first-order desires that one identifies with and *vice versa*. For instance, if I am a Pink Floyd fan, then I presumably identify with my desire to listen to Pink Floyd frequently and if I identify with my desire to listen to Pink Floyd frequently, then I am presumably a Pink Floyd fan. However, if I compulsively listen to Pink Floyd over and over without really enjoying the music or taking myself to be a Pink Floyd fan (thus endorsing my first-order desire to listen to Pink Floyd from a second-order perspective), then I am not much of a Pink Floyd fan, even if my behavior seems to indicate otherwise. For Frankfurt, then, our capacity to reflect on our desires and endorse them from a second-order perspective is strongly linked to our sense of personal identity and *vice versa*. Korsgaard's discussion of reflection and practical identity in *The Sources of Normativity* is in many ways an elaboration on Frankfurt's ideas, especially since she sees a strong link between our capacity for reflection and our capacity to adopt a practical identity of some sort.

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<sup>14</sup> See Frankfurt 1988 for a full exposition of this distinction. Korsgaard doesn't explicitly mention Frankfurt in the main text of SN, but mentions that the connection between her thoughts on reflection and agency and Frankfurt's "should be obvious" in SN 99n8. Also see Cohen 1996, Bratman 1999, and Okrent 1999 for discussions of the similarities between Frankfurt and Korsgaard.

Since reasons for action play an important role in Korsgaard's theory of moral normativity, her views on moral motivation are also relevant to her project in *The Sources of Normativity*. Much like Bernard Williams,<sup>15</sup> Korsgaard defends moral internalism: the thesis that "if someone knows or accepts a moral judgment then she must have a motive for acting on it."<sup>16</sup> Korsgaard explores the thesis at length in her Kant scholarship from around the same time. In her essay "Kant's Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of *Groundwork I*,"<sup>17</sup> Korsgaard reads Kant as claiming that duty can both motivate us to act and require us to act a certain way, thus providing us with both a reason for action and a motivation to act on that reason. Since good actions are those done from the motive of duty, Korsgaard concludes that for Kant, "the reason why [an] action is right is a reason for doing it,"<sup>18</sup> thus making his theory of moral motivation strongly internalist. This theory of moral motivation is important for Korsgaard's argument in *The Sources of Normativity*, since Korsgaard claims that moral norms take the form of reasons that we are capable of endorsing upon reflection. If those reasons cannot motivate us to act a certain way, then they cannot serve as action-guiding norms, which in turn leads to moral skepticism and normative failure. Moral internalism is thus a major assumption in Korsgaard's theory of moral normativity; without it, morality may well lose its normative grip on us. In fact, Korsgaard states explicitly that the argument she provides in *The Sources of Normativity* are "operating under [the assumption]... that internalism... is correct"<sup>19</sup> and that she ultimately thinks that "no externalist theory has a chance of establishing [moral] normativity."<sup>20</sup>

Now that I have elaborated on two of Korsgaard's major theoretical commitments, let's turn back to the conditions Korsgaard thinks a satisfactory answer to the normative question must meet and see how knowledge of those theoretical commitments helps clarify Korsgaard's use of those conditions. Given the theoretical commitments I have just explicated, Korsgaard's first condition, which states that moral theo-

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<sup>15</sup> Williams 1982 .

<sup>16</sup> Korsgaard 1996b, pg. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Korsgaard 1996b.

<sup>18</sup> Korsgaard 1996b, pg. 43. See also Korsgaard 1996e, pg. 316.

<sup>19</sup> SN 81.

<sup>20</sup> SN 82n63.

ries must directly address someone in “the first-person position of the agent who demands a justification of the claims which morality makes upon him,”<sup>21</sup> can be read as stating that moral theories must provide agents with reasons to act morally that are accessible when those agents reflect on that behavior from a second-order perspective. Recall that for Korsgaard, our capacity for moral agency is dependent on our capacity to reflect on reasons for action. Since this is the case, if a moral theory succeeds in addressing a moral agent, this means that it can provide us with reasons for action that we approve when we reflect on them. If a moral theory fails to take our reflective natures into account, then it also fails to take us seriously as moral agents – at least, according to Korsgaard. This is a problem, since the primary goal of any moral theory is to tell us what actions to perform; if we are not moral agents, then this goal is impossible to meet. Thus, we can best read Korsgaard’s first condition as ensuring that a moral theory provides reflective agents with reasons for action and is not trying to trick us into being moral.

Reading the first condition as ensuring that moral theories provide us with appropriate reasons for action helps show why Korsgaard thinks the second condition – that a moral theory provides transparent moral reasons – is implied by the first condition.<sup>22</sup> Korsgaard borrows the technical term “transparency” from Bernard Williams<sup>23</sup> and claims that it only applies to moral theories that tell a story about why we act morally that we would accept upon reflection. A transparent moral theory thus restricts the sort of reasons that can justify our moral behavior in a special way: namely, by claiming that the only sorts of reasons that can justify moral behavior are ones that an agent could be fully aware of and still be motivated to act on. The link between reasons and motivation to act on those reasons that Korsgaard seeks to establish by introducing the condition of transparency is therefore strongly analogous to the one posited by moral internalism, since both moral internalism and the condition of transparency limit the sorts of acceptable reasons for action to those that can motivate an agent to act. Reading Korsgaard’s commitment to transparency as a way of ensuring that a moral theory will provide something like an internalist account of moral motivation is thus a helpful exegetical strategy. It gives us a clearer picture of why Korsgaard

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<sup>21</sup> SN 16.

<sup>22</sup> SN 17.

<sup>23</sup> SN 17n17. See also Williams 1985, pg. 101.

thinks reasons can be normative and, furthermore, demonstrates how that theoretical commitment is implicitly present in Korsgaard's initial formulation of the normative question.

Korsgaard's third condition, which states that a good moral theory "must appeal, in a deep way, to our sense of who we are,"<sup>24</sup> helps complete the picture of moral normativity established by the other two conditions by providing us with a clear strategy for obtaining the sorts of reasons that can motivate a moral agent to act morally. Later in the book, Korsgaard reveals that the "sense of who we are" that she thinks our moral theories must appeal to is constituted by the practical identities that we adopt; teacher, friend, lawyer, and so on. However, on a more general level, Korsgaard's claim about reasons for action gaining motivational force by appealing to our sense of self seems to be largely inspired by Frankfurt's conceptions of identification and personhood.<sup>25</sup> As I previously mentioned, Frankfurt thinks that the first-order desires one identifies with from a second-order perspective are informed by the sort of person one is and *vice versa*. If this is the case, then if we want to convince someone to want to be moral, then it is a good strategy to show that acting morally is implicit in being the sort of person that our interlocutor already takes herself to be. There are a number of ways for a moral theorist to pursue this sort of argumentative strategy. One moral theorist could, for example, follow Korsgaard's lead and attempt to construct a transcendental argument showing that accepting moral norms of some sort are implicit in acting in any meaningful way. Another moral theorist could use rhetoric to make her audience feel as though acting immorally would be particularly damaging to their self-conceptions as respectable people. The point to stress is that a moral theory that meets this condition has a clear way to provide the sorts of reasons that can motivate a moral agent to want to be moral, which makes it easier to show how morality can exert a normative grip over us.

The picture of morality and normativity that informs the three conditions Korsgaard lists for a satisfactory answer to the normative question is an attractive one. It emphasizes many aspects of human nature that have historically been held to be significant, including our ability to act based on principles that

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<sup>24</sup> SN 17.

<sup>25</sup> See Frankfurt 1988 for a more detailed exposition of these concepts and their interrelation.

we reflect upon and our ability to create identities that center around the things, people, and ideas that we care about. However, Korsgaard argues that many of the great theories of morality in the Western canon, including some forms of sentimentalism, fail to meet her conditions. In the next section, I will outline Korsgaard's attack on sentimentalist theories of morality in further detail and discuss what would need to be the case for a sentimentalist theory such as Smith's to successfully answer the normative question.

### 2.3 Sentimentalism and Justificatory Adequacy

So far, nothing I have said about Korsgaard's theory of moral normativity or the conditions she thinks an answer to the normative question must meet specifically precludes Adam Smith from answering the normative question. However, it is clear from Korsgaard's analysis of Hume's variant of sentimentalism in *The Sources of Normativity* and her discussion of Smith's sentimentalist theory in other places<sup>26</sup> that this is not an option for her. Much like the theory of morality Hume presents in his *Treatise of Human Nature* and other historical and contemporary sentimentalist moral theories, Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* presents an account of morality that grounds our normative behavior in our emotional lives and capacity to sympathize with other people. As a result, Smith is often cited as one of the "big three" sentimentalist moral philosophers of the enlightenment era, along with Hume and Hutcheson.<sup>27</sup> Korsgaard notes in her discussions of sentimentalism outside *The Sources of Normativity* that Smith's moral theory "has more to say about moral motivation"<sup>28</sup> and "comes closer to an agent-centered theory [of morality]"<sup>29</sup> than the theories of either Hume or Hutcheson. However, she also notes that for Smith, like other sentimentalists, "the approval or disapproval of others is the fundamental moral phenomenon, from which all our moral ideas spring,"<sup>30</sup> which seemingly places the source of moral normativity in something other than the reflective structure of the human mind. This all seems to indicate that, much like Hume's moral

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<sup>26</sup> See especially Korsgaard 1996b, Korsgaard 1996c, and Korsgaard 1996d.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Harman 2000 and Korsgaard 1996d.

<sup>28</sup> Korsgaard 1996b, pg. 71n25.

<sup>29</sup> Korsgaard 1996c, pg. 186n21.

<sup>30</sup> Korsgaard 1996d, pg. 189.

theory, Smith's theory should lead to the sort of normative failure Korsgaard brings to light in her "knavish lawyer" thought experiment and, in doing so, fail to answer the normative question.

Korsgaard's thought experiment is as follows:

Our knave is the lawyer for a rich client who has recently died, leaving his money to medical research. In going through the client's papers, the lawyer discovers a will of a more recent date, leaving the money instead to the client's worthless nephew, who will spend it all on beer and comic books. The lawyer could easily suppress this new will, and she is tempted to do so. She is also a student of Hume, and believes the theory of the virtues that we find in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. So what does she say to herself?<sup>31</sup>

According to Korsgaard, the lawyer "says to herself that she would disapprove of herself if she [suppressed the new will]."<sup>32</sup> Why would the lawyer disapprove of herself? Because actions of that sort "have a general tendency to bring down the whole system of justice."<sup>33</sup> Korsgaard does not think that this is a sufficient justification for the knavish lawyer's moral actions. After all, regardless of whether or not the lawyer destroys the will, the whole system of justice does not literally hang in the balance; this is only a *general* rule of morality. As Korsgaard notes, "if [the lawyer] could cure herself of [her moral feelings] then that is what she would do."<sup>34</sup> Thus, even if the lawyer's emotions cause her to act morally, they will not have *obligated* her to act morally and will therefore have failed to exert a genuinely normative power over her. Since no one else is present to observe the lawyer's actions and approve or disapprove of them, the lawyer does not seem to have a clear, rational motive to act morally in this case, other than a fear of experiencing negative emotions.

Korsgaard believes that the example of the knavish lawyer brings out a crucial flaw in sentimental theories of morality. The lawyer "has asked herself whether her feeling of disapproval is really a *reason* – and now I mean a normative reason – not to do the action, and in this case she has found that it is not. She only disapproves of justice because it is usually counterproductive."<sup>35</sup> In the absence of any reflective justification for moral action, the lawyer's moral sentiments are all that prevent her from de-

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<sup>31</sup> SN 86.

<sup>32</sup> SN 86.

<sup>33</sup> SN 86-7.

<sup>34</sup> SN 88.

<sup>35</sup> SN 88.

destroying the will is her conscience. However, if she could simply strip herself of these sentiments and destroy the will anyways, she would. Why, then, should the knavish lawyer be moral in this situation? What justifies the claims her moral sentiments make on her? The fact that the lawyer is even asking this question demonstrates to Korsgaard that a further justification for moral action is needed. Although Hume's moral theory might show us that the desires we have been conditioned to have are good for us, Korsgaard does not think that it can make us genuinely want to be moral in a reflective, second-order sense. At best, all Hume can do is point towards our natural dispositions and persuade us that they are good, thus bypassing the ability to reflect on reasons and act on them that Korsgaard thinks is essential to establishing the normativity of morality.

The "knavish lawyer" thought experiment thus presents a clear, but not insurmountable, challenge to Adam Smith's moral theory. If I wish to claim that Adam Smith can answer the normative question, I will have to show that Smith's theory can provide moral agents with action-guiding moral norms that gain their normative force through some sort of reflective process, instead of simply encouraging moral agents to approve of the behavior they have been conditioned to perform. This will differentiate Smith's moral theory from Hume and Hutcheson's theories and thereby exempt it from Korsgaard's criticisms. If I can demonstrate that Smith's theory both meets all three of Korsgaard's conditions and can avoid "knavish lawyer" cases, then that will be as good evidence as any that Smith's moral theory can answer the normative question.

### **3. CAN ADAM SMITH ANSWER THE NORMATIVE QUESTION?**

In this chapter, I will outline Adam Smith's moral theory, as presented in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and show how it contains all the conceptual resources necessary to answer the normative question. In order to show how Smith might be able to overcome the criticisms Korsgaard levies against sentimental theories of morality, I will proceed in two main steps. First, I will give a brief overview of Smith's theory of moral judgment, which relies on three basic concepts: the impartial spectator, praise-

worthiness, and self-command. I will then systematically discuss how Smith's use of these and other related concepts allows his moral theory to meet Korsgaard's three criteria for a satisfactory answer to the normative question. Just like the revised version of Kantianism that Korsgaard ultimately endorses, Smith's moral theory is able to directly address the moral agent, provide that agent with transparent reasons for moral action, and ground our moral behavior in our innate sense of identity and self-worth. Since this is the case, Smith should be able to avoid the sort of "knave lawyer" cases that create problems with Hume's variant of sentimentalism. I will close the section by demonstrating how Smith's theory can avoid the specific criticism that Korsgaard levies against other sentimentalist moral theories.

### 3.1. Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Judgment

Adam Smith presents his theory of moral judgment in Parts I-III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.<sup>36</sup> In Part I, Smith introduces and elaborates on the two main concepts that form the cornerstone of his moral philosophy: sympathy and the imagination.<sup>37</sup> Smith uses the word "sympathy" to "denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever."<sup>38</sup> For Smith, our capacity to sympathize with another person is dependent on our capacity to see ourselves in her situation, which he calls the imagination. We use the imagination whenever we imagine ourselves in a given situation and see if we can sympathize with the actions of the person in that situation. Thus, as D.D. Raphael notes, the use of the imagination that Smith details is "more pervasive than the actual experience of sympathy"<sup>39</sup> in our everyday practice of moral judgment.

After introducing sympathy and the imagination in the first few pages of the book, Smith spends much of the rest of Part I discussing how these two capacities inform our judgments of other people's emotions and actions as proper or improper. For Smith, judgments of propriety or impropriety, when directed at a specific action or sentiment, reflect our capacity to sympathize with the agent given the situa-

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<sup>36</sup> The account of Smith's overall project in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that I present in this chapter is largely indebted to Harman 2000 and Raphael 2007.

<sup>37</sup> See Raphael 2007, pg. 12 for more about this.

<sup>38</sup> TMS I.i.1.5.

<sup>39</sup> Raphael 2007, pg. 13.



tion she is placed in and are ultimately judgments regarding the motives of an action.<sup>40</sup> Thus, if an action is judged to be proper, this means that a spectator can sympathize with the motives or sentiments that direct it and *vice versa*. Likewise, if an action is improper, then this means that it does not “fit” with the situation in which it is performed and spectators are unable to sympathize with it.

Smith further elaborates on the other-regarding aspects of his moral theory in Part II of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where he discusses judgments of merit and demerit. For Smith, the amount of merit or demerit that we ascribe to someone based on a given action depends largely on the emotions that action’s consequences evoke in us. If an action is meritorious, then its consequences lead us to experience the emotion that Smith calls gratitude, which makes us want to reward the person who performed that action. Likewise, if an action’s consequences make us feel resentment towards the person who performed it, then we wish to punish that person and the action in question is demeritorious.<sup>41</sup> Smith’s account of judgments of merit and demerit, along with the account of the account of judgments of propriety and impropriety he provides in Part I, form the basis of his analysis of moral judgments concerning the actions of others. Although Smith notes that “all approbation or disapprobation, of any kind, which can justly be bestowed on any action”<sup>42</sup> must ultimately stem from judgments regarding motive, which relate to the propriety or impropriety of an action, he also acknowledges a certain “irregularity of sentiment”<sup>43</sup> which often ties our judgments about specific actions to the actual consequences of those actions. Smith sees this irregularity as generally beneficial, since it “promote[s]... such changes in the external circumstances both of [the moral agent] and others, as may seem most favorable to the happiness of all”<sup>44</sup> and contributes to the general well-being of society and the agents who comprise it. Judgments of merit and demerit thus play a crucial role in Smith’s theory of other-regarding moral judgments, even though he takes judgments of propriety and impropriety to be more fundamental.

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<sup>40</sup> TMS I.i.3.5-6. Also see Raphael 2007, pg. 22-4 for a more detailed exposition of this claim.

<sup>41</sup> TMS II.i.1.1-7.

<sup>42</sup> TMS II.iii.Int.3.

<sup>43</sup> TMS II.iii.Int.6.

<sup>44</sup> TMS II.iii.3.3.

So far, I have only mentioned the other-regarding aspects of Smith's moral theory, which are fairly similar to those present in other classic sentimental theories of morality, such as Hume and Hutcheson's. However, unlike Hume and Hutcheson, Smith goes into extensive detail about self-regarding moral judgments, which captures much of what Korsgaard thinks gives morality its normative force.<sup>45</sup> Most of Smith's discussion of self-regarding moral judgment takes place in Part III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Much like Korsgaard, Smith thinks that reflection about our moral behavior splits the self into two parts: a reflective self and an active self.<sup>46</sup> The *spectator*, or reflective self, reflects on norms for one's actions and delivers its judgment to the *agent*, or active self. The norms administered by this spectator contain judgments of the propriety or impropriety of one's potential actions, which are derived from how other people might perceive those actions and the emotional state motivating them. The guiding principles of other-regarding moral judgments that Smith establishes in Parts I and II thus substantially inform the content of our self-regarding moral judgments.

Near the very beginning of Part III, Smith gives a clear summary of how he thinks self-regarding moral reflection usually works:

We endeavor to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. If, upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influenced it, we approve of it, by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed equitable judge. If otherwise, we enter into his disapprobation, and condemn it.<sup>47</sup>

As this passage shows, Smith thinks that the practice of self-regarding moral reflection essentially involves observing our actions and emotions from a sufficiently impartial standpoint and judging them the way we would judge the same actions or emotions if experienced by someone else. This process is more analogous to watching a play based around our lives and determining how much we sympathize with our own actions and motives than it is to determining if our actions and motives are in accordance with a rational law of some sort.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the impartial spectator described in the above passage is not simply an

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<sup>45</sup> Harman 2000 gives a detailed analysis of the similarities and differences between Smith's moral theory and Hume and Hutcheson's respective moral theories.

<sup>46</sup> TMS III.i.6.

<sup>47</sup> TMS III.i.2.

<sup>48</sup> Chapter 3 of Griswold 1999 contains a good discussion of this point.

“ideal observer” or a theoretical construct meant to perform some kind of utilitarian calculus.<sup>49</sup> Instead, Smith’s impartial spectator plays a role analogous to that of the conscience in folk psychology; it is the part of us that examines our moral behavior and passes judgment upon it.<sup>50</sup> The impartial spectator holds us to an extraordinarily high standard of behavior. As Smith notes, “if we saw ourselves in the light in which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all, a reformation [in our moral behavior] would generally be unavoidable. We could not otherwise endure the sight”.<sup>51</sup>

It is important to distinguish between the self-regarding moral judgments made by the impartial spectator, or “the man within,” and the other-regarding moral judgments directed at oneself made by other people in one’s social environment, or “the man without.” As Smith notes, “the jurisdiction of the man without, is founded altogether in the desire of actual praise, and in the aversion to actual blame.”<sup>52</sup> On the other hand:

...The jurisdiction of the man within, is founded altogether in the desire of praise-worthiness, and in the aversion to blame-worthiness; in the desire of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we love and admire in other people; and in the dread of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we hate and despise in other people.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, while other people assign praise or blame to our specific actions, the impartial spectator assigns *praiseworthiness* or *blameworthiness* to the moral agent as such. When we consult the impartial spectator, we are not just trying to determine if a specific action is good or bad in itself, but are also trying to determine whether performing that action would make us a good or bad *person*. The general question we ask the impartial spectator is: “Should I approve of this action or emotion if someone else performs or displays it in this situation?” Although Smith thinks that actual praise and blame are judgments of the *praiseworthiness* and *blameworthiness* of another person’s actions, we do not always assign them justly, since we have limited epistemic access to the full range of actions and motives that constitute other peo-

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<sup>49</sup> See Raphael 2007, pg. 45-6 for a more detailed discussion of the difference between Smith’s conception of an “impartial spectator” and the conception at play in some utilitarian moral theories.

<sup>50</sup> As Harman 2000 notes on pg.189, “Smith’s normative theory is more stoical than utilitarian.”

<sup>51</sup> TMS III.iv.6.

<sup>52</sup> TMS III.ii.32.

<sup>53</sup> TMS III.ii.32.

ple's moral lives.<sup>54</sup> Because we are consciously aware of our own actions and motives and have a sense of self based upon those actions and motives, the impartial spectator is able to gain more information about those actions and motives than anyone else and, thus, pronounce more accurate judgments of our praiseworthiness or blameworthiness than other people.

Smith thinks that we put the judgments of the impartial spectator into practice through exercising the virtue of self-command. He sees self-command as the ability to control one's own passions in order to live and act in accordance with the norms administered by the impartial spectator and describes as essentially the foundation of all the other virtues, such as prudence, justice, and beneficence. As he puts it, "self-command is not only itself a great virtue, but from it all the other virtues seem to derive their principal lustre."<sup>55</sup> We exercise self-command whenever we adjust our emotional responses and behavior to fit the norms administered the impartial spectator. While this process usually involves conscious reflection, it can also happen almost instantaneously, depending on the passion that's being controlled. The exercise of self-command consists in three distinct stages:

- 1) We feel an immediate passion in response to some element in our environment.
- 2) We consider the propriety or impropriety of this passion from the perspective of the impartial spectator.
- 3) We "switch gears" to the passion that would be most proper or fitting, given our current circumstance.

Smith thinks that self-command is something that we must continually work to acquire through constant practice and constant attention to the judgments of the impartial spectator. While this process has its roots in a young child's or infant's response to discipline from adults, one genuinely "enters into the great school of self-command" when one is "old enough to go to school, or to mix with [one's] equals."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Smith takes this to follow from his claim that sympathy is largely dependent on the imagination and makes this fact a centerpiece of the account of sympathy he provides in Part I of TMS. As Smith notes in TMS I.i.1.2, "It is the impressions of our own sense only, not those of [the person we are sympathizing with], which our imaginations copy [when we sympathize with someone]."

<sup>55</sup> TMS VI.iii.11.

<sup>56</sup> TMS III.iii.22.

Thus, the process of acquiring self-command seems to be directly linked to participating in a social environment amongst peers who are not necessarily favorably disposed or sympathetic to one's own point of view. In the middle of the third chapter of Part III, Smith outlines a possible trajectory for the acquisition of self-command, starting with a description of a young child who displays no self-command at all and ending with a description of a "wise and just man who has been thoroughly bred in the great school of self-command."<sup>57</sup> A key thread that ties these portraits together is attention to the impartial spectator. A weak man who does not possess much self-command or a well-developed notion of the impartial spectator can pull himself together when other people are present, but completely abandons himself to his emotions when he's alone.<sup>58</sup> By contrast, a "man of real constancy and firmness" pays such great attention to the impartial spectator that he might be said to "almost become... [the] impartial spectator."<sup>59</sup> The norms administered by the impartial spectator are so thoroughly entrenched in him that he rarely considers himself outside of his relations to other people and almost never experiences emotions or undertakes actions that might be considered to be improper, given his circumstances.

Now that I have outlined the main components of Smith's moral theory, I will discuss how Smith can meet Korsgaard's three conditions and successfully avoid "knaveish lawyer" cases. If Smith can directly address reflective agents faced with a moral decision, provide us with transparent reasons for action, and appeal to our deep sense of self-worth, then he will have met all the conditions Korsgaard thinks a moral theory must meet to answer the normative question. If his moral theory is not threatened by "knaveish lawyer" cases, then it will be immune to what Korsgaard takes to be the strongest objection to other sentimental theories of morality, such as Hume's. Thus, if I establish that Smith's moral theory can meet Korsgaard's three conditions and is not threatened by "knaveish lawyer" cases, then we can safely assume that it answers the normative question and does so in a way that Korsgaard does not find inherently problematic.

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<sup>57</sup> TMS III.iii.25.

<sup>58</sup> TMS III.iii.23.

<sup>59</sup> TMS III.iii.25.

### 3.2. Adam Smith and the Reflective Agent

In Section 2.2, I argued that Korsgaard's first condition, which states that moral theories must directly address a reflective moral agent in order to answer the normative question, can be rephrased as claiming that moral theories must provide agents with reasons for acting morally that those agents can identify with when they reflect on those reasons from a second-order perspective. Thus, in order for Smith's moral theory to meet this condition, it must meet two sub-conditions. First, Smith must place our capacity for second-order reflection at the center of his discussion of moral deliberation. Second, Smith must give a detailed account of how our capacity for second-order moral reflection can provide us with norms capable of guiding our actions. If Smith's theory meets these sub-conditions, it can likely generate the direct reasons for acting morally that a reflective agent who asks the normative question seeks access to. We can then safely assume that Smith is not trying to trick us into moral and is attempting to engage us as the reflective agents that we are and take ourselves to be in everyday life.

The first sub-condition is easy for Smith to meet. As I discussed in Section 3.1, an account of reflection and selfhood similar to Korsgaard's forms the cornerstone of Smith's theory of self-regarding moral judgment. Much like Korsgaard, Smith thinks that self-regarding moral reflection necessarily splits the self into two parts: a reflective component, which he calls the spectator, and an active component, which he calls the agent.<sup>60</sup> The specific sort of moral reflection that the spectator engages in primarily involves evaluating whether or not one can sympathize with the motives and passions that underwrite a given action.<sup>61</sup> This sort of evaluation then produces a judgment of approbation or disapprobation. Since the process of reflecting on one's motives and passions ultimately results in a judgment about whether or not one should want to act on those and passions, it seems fair to say that second-order reflection is central to Smith's account of moral reflection.

Although Smith's specific response to the second sub-condition substantially differs from Korsgaard's, the basic structure of his response is similar enough to her desired approach to meet it. As I

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<sup>60</sup> TMS III.i.6.

<sup>61</sup> TMS III.i.2.

mentioned in Section 2.1, Korsgaard's account of moral reflection involves the reflective component of the self administering norms to the active component of the self, which take the form of good moral maxims. Smith's moral theory posits a similar overall structure of moral reflection, in which the impartial spectator administers norms that the moral agent acts on, but sharply diverges from Korsgaard's theory with respect to the exact sort of norms that the reflective component of the self administers. Unlike Korsgaard, Smith claims that the norms that in question are emotional judgments of approbation and disapprobation, which are grounded in facts about the situation that is being reflected upon. These judgments are not universally applicable in all situations and, thus, need not take the form of maxims that can be willed as universal laws.

If the norms that Smith claims the impartial spectator administers do not take the form of universal reasons that anyone can share in, then how can they gain any sort of normative force over a reflective moral agent? It is a bit easier to see how the impartial spectator's judgments can obligate us to act in a certain way if we look at Smith's discussion of remorse, which he takes to be an especially bad form of self-disapprobation. According to Smith, when "the violator of the more sacred laws of justice"<sup>62</sup> (which, in this case, would be a murderer or a thief or a promise-breaker<sup>63</sup>) reflects on his past misdeeds in a sufficiently fair and impartial light, his life becomes a living nightmare. As Smith observes:

[Someone who is guilty of such an offense] dares no longer look society in the face, but imagines himself as if he were rejected, and thrown out from the affections of all mankind. He cannot hope for the consolation of sympathy in this his greatest and most dreadful distress. The remembrance of his crimes has shut out all fellow-feeling with him from the hearts of his fellow-creatures. The sentiments which they entertain with regard to him, are the very thing he is most afraid of. Every thing seems hostile, and he would be glad to fly to some inhospitable desert, where he might never behold the face of a human creature, nor read in the countenance of mankind the condemnation of his crimes.<sup>64</sup>

Since Smith admits from the very start of his book that we are naturally social creatures who desire to perform actions that others can sympathize with and approve of,<sup>65</sup> the knowledge that one has acted in a

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<sup>62</sup> TMS II.ii.ii.3.

<sup>63</sup> TMS II.ii.ii.2.

<sup>64</sup> TMS II.ii.ii.3.

<sup>65</sup> TMS I.i.1.1.

genuinely blameworthy manner and is thus the proper object of moral resentment exacts a heavy emotional toll on anyone who suffers from remorse, even if he is never exposed to actual blame for his actions. Presumably, no one in her right mind would wish to experience an emotion of the sort that Smith describes in the above passage; the emotional costs are simply too great. Since this is the case, the emotional judgments of approbation and disapprobation that the impartial spectator administers should clearly be able to exert the sort of normative force over us that Korsgaard associates with the norms administered by the thinking self.

Since Smith both places our capacity for second-order reflection at the center of his discussion of moral deliberation and gives a detailed account of how our capacity for moral reflection provides us with norms capable of guiding our actions, it seems fair to say that his moral theory can directly address a reflective moral agent faced with a moral decision. For Smith, reflection and moral agency are very closely linked and, furthermore, the sorts of judgments that form the content of moral reflection according to his theory can exert a great deal of normative force over our behavior. As a result, the moral theory Smith defends in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is capable of meeting Korsgaard's first condition for a satisfactory answer to the normative question.

### 3.3. The Impartial Spectator's Transparent Reasons

Although I've just established that Adam Smith's moral theory can meet Korsgaard's first condition for a response to answer the normative question, I still have to show that his moral theory can provide transparent reasons for acting morally: reasons that do not depend on the moral agent being left in the dark about what the real purpose of morality is. This is a harder condition for Smith's theory to meet than the first condition, since Korsgaard does not think that reasons for moral action grounded in our emotional states are sufficient for justifying the normative claims that morality makes on us.<sup>66</sup> Thus, in addition to demonstrating that Smith's theory can provide the sort of transparent reasons for acting morally that Korsgaard is interested in, I will have to show how Smith's theory can avoid this specific objection.

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<sup>66</sup> SN 88-9.



As I argued in Section 2.2, Korsgaard's condition that a theory of morality provide transparent reasons for action draws heavily on her commitment to moral internalism, which she interprets as stating that "the reason why [an] action is right is a reason for doing it."<sup>67</sup> Once we view Korsgaard's interest in transparency in this light, it is fairly easy to see how Smith's moral theory can provide the sort of transparent reasons that Korsgaard requires. Much like the other classical sentimentalists, Smith claims that an action is right to perform just in case an impartial spectator would approve of it.<sup>68</sup> For Smith, "the very words, right, wrong, fit, improper, graceful, unbecoming, mean only what pleases or displeases [our] faculties [of moral judgment]."<sup>69</sup> As I showed in Section 3.1, these faculties consist of a reflective aspect of oneself that views the actions performed by oneself and others from an impartial perspective and attempts to sympathize with those actions. This alone does not substantially differentiate Smith's moral theory from Hume's. However, as Gilbert Harman notes, Smith's account of moral motivation strongly differs from Hume's and is, in fact, strongly preferable to Hume's. According to Hume, a moral agent is "concerned with the reactions of others because he or she wants them to continue dealing with him or her."<sup>70</sup> This clearly cannot provide the sorts of transparent reasons for moral action that Korsgaard is interested in. If we act morally because we want others to like us, then we will inevitably run into "knaveish lawyer" cases, in which moral claims fail to exert normative force over us whenever we have the opportunity to act immorally without anyone noticing that we have done so.<sup>71</sup>

Smith, on the other hand, provides a much more nuanced and plausible theory of moral motivation, since he claims that our inherent desire for praiseworthiness is what ultimately makes us want to act morally.<sup>72</sup> Since judgments of praiseworthiness or blameworthiness are ultimately grounded in the impar-

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<sup>67</sup> Korsgaard 1996b, pg. 43

<sup>68</sup> As Harman 2000, pg. 193 puts it, "[Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith] agree that right acts are right because they would be favored by impartial spectators who favor these acts for other reasons than that the acts are right." Also see Gibbard 1999, pg. 120.

<sup>69</sup> TMS III.v.5.

<sup>70</sup> Harman 2000, pg.188. For the purposes of this paper, I am mostly interested in distinguishing Smith's theory of moral normativity from the one that Korsgaard and Harman attribute to Hume. I will thus assume that Korsgaard and Harman are reading Hume accurately and charitably.

<sup>71</sup> This is presumably why Korsgaard 1996d, pg. 189 claims that "there is something very unattractive about taking the assessment of others as the starting point in moral philosophy."

<sup>72</sup> See, for instance, TMS III.ii.6-7.

tial spectator's approval or disapproval, the impartial spectator's judgment that an action is praiseworthy both makes that action right to perform and motivates the moral agent to perform that action. For Smith, then, the reason why an action is right and the reason why an agent is motivated to perform that action are one and the same. This captures what Korsgaard takes to be the most attractive element of moral internalism and also guarantees that the impartial spectator can provide transparent reasons to moral agents. Smith does not say that morally good actions are right to perform because they have a generally have useful consequences or because they tend to cause other people to like us. Instead, he claims that morally good actions are right to perform because we can fully sympathize with those actions and be motivated to perform them when we observe those actions from a sufficiently impartial perspective. The reasons for moral action that the impartial spectator can provide us with are thus quite transparent; do not represent an attempt to trick us into being moral or attempt to justify moral behavior in a manner that a reflective agent could not fully support.

Korsgaard might respond to this line of argument by claiming that Smith's theory still gives us room to question the validity of the emotional responses that would lead the impartial spectator to view our actions as praiseworthy or blameworthy in the first place. This would result in a slightly more sophisticated variant of the "knave lawyer" case in which the lawyer knows that acting immorally would make her blameworthy, but does not think that viewing herself as blameworthy is a particularly bad thing, aside from the obvious emotional costs involved. My tentative response to this potential criticism is that in the aforementioned scenario, the lawyer would be viewing her decision from a faulty, partial perspective and thus, would not have fully consulted the impartial spectator in the first place. As I noted in Section 3.1, Smith thinks that viewing one's behavior as an impartial spectator would is a skill that often takes a lifetime to develop and admits that the ability to do so widely varies between different people. If the lawyer in my revised example does not think that it is genuinely bad to act in a morally blameworthy manner and has difficulty exercising self-command, then her moral growth is likely stunted, which means that she has trouble viewing her actions from the perspective of an impartial spectator.

Given these considerations, the problem in the revised “knave lawyer” case is not that the impartial spectator’s judgments cannot, by principle, provide transparent reasons for action, since they are grounded in emotional responses. Instead, the problem is that the lawyer has not developed the sort of moral skill necessary to give the impartial spectator’s judgments their due importance. For Smith, paying attention to the impartial spectator’s judgments and exercising self-command mutually reinforce each other, thus making the reasons that the impartial spectator gives for moral action fully transparent. Further reflection on the impartial spectator’s judgments of approbation or disapprobation will only lead an agent to be *more* motivated to act based on them, which further illustrates how the impartial spectator provides the sort of transparent reasons for moral action that Korsgaard requires.

### **3.4. Adam Smith on Morality and Self-Worth**

In Section 2.2, I claimed that Korsgaard’s third condition, which states that a good moral theory must appeal to our deep sense of self, could be met in a variety of different ways. Korsgaard’s attempt to meet it involves an appeal to the norms implicit in practical identities we adopt in our everyday lives, which she thinks we only adopt insofar as we take ourselves to be reflective agents. This leads her to make a transcendental argument claiming that in order to act at all, we must value our capacity for reflection and, thus, both our own humanity and the humanity of others. In the conclusion of this thesis, I will discuss some potential weaknesses in this strategy, but for now, I would like to focus on how Adam Smith’s moral theory can appeal to our deep sense of self and, in doing so, answer the last of the three conditions Korsgaard thinks a satisfactory answer to the normative question must meet.

Instead of providing the sort of transcendental argument Korsgaard is interested in, Smith uses rhetoric to directly engage with the reader and prompt him or her to act morally. Smith elucidates his use of this practice towards the very end of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, when he discusses how ancient moralists, such as Cicero and Aristotle, attempt to encourage moral behavior through proper use of rhetoric. As Smith notes:

By the vivacity of their descriptions [the ancient moralists] inflame our natural love of virtue, and increase our abhorrence of vice; by the justness as well as delicacy of their observations they may often help both to correct and to ascertain our natural sentiments with regard to the propriety of conduct.<sup>73</sup>

Smith's use of rhetoric in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* has a great deal in common with the ancient moralists he discusses in the above passage. Like the ancient moralists, Smith devotes much of his book to painting intricate portraits of virtue and vice, as we might encounter them in our everyday lives, and uses these portraits to increase our knowledge of how to act morally.

Take, for instance, the passage I mentioned in Section 3.1 where Smith discusses a possible trajectory for the acquisition of self-command. In that passage, Smith describes several different people who display different amounts of self-command and implicitly asks us which one we would most want to emulate. Do we want to be like the "weak man," who in the face of distress, "abandons himself... to slights and tears and lamentations"<sup>74</sup> or the "man of real constancy and firmness" who "maintains... control of his passive feelings upon all occasions?"<sup>75</sup> Smith thinks that the answer is obvious if we reflect on the portraits he presents: we want to be like the latter person. Since Smith takes himself to be engaging in this sort of direct dialogue with the reader, it is not much of a stretch to claim that his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is written in such a way to make the reader strongly identify with moral behavior and, by doing so, appeal to the reader's deep sense of self.

Smith's use of rhetoric in this manner echoes the way in which the impartial spectator provides us with reasons to act morally. For example, in the passage on remorse that I discussed in Section 3.2, Smith notes that a person who experiences remorse "imagines himself as if he were rejected, and thrown out from the affections of all mankind,"<sup>76</sup> since "the remembrance of his crimes [shuts] out all fellow-feeling him from the hearts of his fellow-creatures."<sup>77</sup> The judgment of extreme blameworthiness that the impartial spectator administers in this situation thus takes the form of a vividly imagined scenario in which the

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<sup>73</sup> TMS VII.iv.6.

<sup>74</sup> TMS III.iii.23.

<sup>75</sup> TMS III.iii.25.

<sup>76</sup> TMS II.ii.ii.3.

<sup>77</sup> TMS II.ii.ii.3.

agent's concealed behavior, to his horror, gets the exact response that it properly warrants from others. The sense of self-worth and membership in the greater moral community that the agent values is threatened by his former actions, which he presumably would not have performed if he had known that they would threaten his self-worth in this way. Examples of this sort clearly illustrate how the impartial spectator has the power to appeal to the agent's deep sense of self and how this sort of appeal helps give the impartial spectator's judgments strong normative force.

Since Smith's moral theory is able to address a moral agent faced with a decision, provide transparent reasons for moral action, and appeal to the agent's deep sense of self, it meets all three of the conditions that Korsgaard thinks a satisfactory answer to the normative question must meet. Adam Smith can therefore satisfactorily answer the normative question. However, if this is the case, then Smith's moral theory must be able to avoid the "knave lawyer" cases that, according to Korsgaard, highlight a serious deficiency in sentimentalist theories of morality. In the next section, I will turn back to Korsgaard's knave lawyer thought experiment and show why it does not pose a challenge to Smith's view.

### **3.5. Justificatory Adequacy in Adam Smith's Moral Theory**

In Section 2.3, I discussed how Korsgaard's "knave lawyer" thought experiment reveals what she takes to be a major flaw in sentimentalist moral theories: they allow for a moral agent to act morally without truly believing that "the claims our moral feelings make on her... are well-grounded."<sup>78</sup> When the lawyer reflects on her decision not to destroy the will, she does not feel as though she can fully identify with or justify it; instead, she acts as she does simply because she is overwhelmed by pro-social emotions. Although this results in good behavior on her part, the lawyer's emotions do not provide her with transparent, normative reasons to act a certain way and certainly do not appeal to her capacity to reflect on moral norms and identify with them. All this, for Korsgaard, is indicative of a failure to answer the normative question. Thus, if Adam Smith can answer the normative question, his moral theory should be able to avoid "knave lawyer" cases, in which an agent's moral behavior ultimately springs from emotions

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<sup>78</sup> SN 88.

over which the agent has little control. The impartial spectator's dictates must be transparent and must be the sorts of reasons for actions that a reflective agent can identify with in a second-order sense.

As I have hopefully shown in Sections 3.2 and 3.3, Smith's moral theory does, in fact, differ from Hume's in ways that allow it to respond better to "knave lawyer" cases. As Korsgaard admits, Smith "takes the agent to act from specifically moral thoughts"<sup>79</sup> that originate from a reflective perspective, thus making his theory "more sensitive to the perspective of the agent than those of his predecessors."<sup>80</sup> Korsgaard still finds Smith's theory of moral normativity faulty compared to Kant's, though, because unlike Kant, Smith takes projected emotional judgments of approbation or disapprobation generated by an internalized spectator to form the basis of moral claims. This seems to entail a primarily other-directed moral theory, which reduces morality to conditioned emotional responses that one can always choose to ignore or try to overcome. However, as I discussed in Section 3.1, Smith views self-regarding judgments as the ultimate source of moral normativity and in fact accords more normative weight to them than he does to other-regarding judgments directed towards oneself by members of one's community.

Smith's moral theory can thus give a much stronger response to "knave lawyer" cases than Hume's can. If Korsgaard's lawyer were to consult Smith's impartial spectator, she would gain transparent norms for action that she could identify with upon reflection. Most likely, those norms would take the form of the lawyer imagining hearing about someone else – a colleague, perhaps – destroying a valid will and identifying with the resentment she would feel regarding this breach of professional ethics. A lawyer who destroys her client's will flagrantly violates the norms implicit in the lawyer-client relationship and, thus, fully deserves the blame and disapprobation of her colleagues. As Smith's discussion of remorse nicely illustrates, knowing that one is properly blameworthy for an immoral action is a punishment in its own right; it is something that any reflective agent would be strongly motivated to avoid. Thus, far from being held captive by her emotions, the knave lawyer who consults the impartial spectator will have clear reasons to refrain from destroying her client's will that she can fully identify with upon reflection.

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<sup>79</sup> Korsgaard 1996c, pg. 186n21.

<sup>80</sup> Korsgaard 1996d, pg. 213n3.

Those reasons will not be externally imposed on the lawyer by forces outside her control and, by appealing to the lawyer's deep sense of self-worth, will often suffice to make the lawyer genuinely want to not destroy the will.

Korsgaard might argue in response to this claim that the knavish lawyer can still ask why the moral judgments produced by the impartial spectator are worth following in the first place. The lawyer is, after all, knavish, so judgments about the importance of following a code of professional ethics and treating one's clients with respect might fall on deaf ears in her case. As I noted in Section 3.3, however, if the lawyer takes this attitude towards the judgments of the impartial spectator, she probably has not viewed her behavior from a sufficiently impartial perspective, which, for Smith, means that she has failed to properly consult the impartial spectator in the first place. This is roughly equivalent to the knavish lawyer opening up a copy of *The Sources of Normativity*, starting to read the third lecture, and casting the book aside for some arbitrary reason.

Korsgaard cannot say anything to an agent who does not want to listen to her and neither can Smith's impartial spectator. However, Smith can arguably say more than Korsgaard about why it's important to pay attention to moral claims, which makes his response to this particular sort of concern more attractive. As I mentioned in Sections 3.1 and 3.4, Smith frequently presents his readers with scenarios from everyday life that illustrate the importance of consulting the impartial spectator and exercising self-command. Smith employs this rhetorical strategy in part because he thinks it mirrors the natural process by which we acquire the capacity to view our actions from an impartial perspective and act in a morally correct manner. Thus, for Smith, simply living in society and desiring to gain the approval of one's peers is usually sufficient to motivate an agent to act morally. Korsgaard, however, presents her answer to normative question in the form of a detailed reconstruction of an argument she takes Kant to have made in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Although this argument ultimately claims that our everyday interactions with others imply a commitment to morality, Korsgaard says very little about why we

should ultimately want to pay attention to her argument in the first place.<sup>81</sup> This leaves a great deal of room for real-life “knavish lawyers” to reject Korsgaard’s argument, even if she does succeed in providing an adequate response to their concerns (thus making the “knavish lawyers” in question irrational as well as knavish). Since Smith relies less heavily on explicit argumentation to make his case for moral normativity, his moral theory makes fewer theoretical demands on the moral agent who consults it than Korsgaard’s theory. Smith’s potential response to “knavish lawyer” cases is thus fully adequate in the sense that Korsgaard specifies and is even preferable to Korsgaard’s own response in some ways.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Now that I have demonstrated that Adam Smith’s moral theory can answer the normative question, I would like to conclude by briefly examining the upshot of Smith’s answer. As I noted at various points in Chapter 3, Smith’s moral theory differs from Korsgaard’s in several respects, despite its many similarities to the “appeal to autonomy” that Korsgaard thinks provides the strongest answer to the normative question. Some of these differences actually make Smith’s answer to the normative question more attractive than Korsgaard’s, since they exempt his theory from some of the stronger criticisms of Korsgaard’s theory of moral normativity in the current literature. I will now discuss two of these criticisms and show how Smith might be able to respond to them.

In his review of *The Sources of Normativity*,<sup>82</sup> Michael Bratman targets Korsgaard’s claim that any reflective endorsement of a specific action requires an endorsement of a general principle or universal law that would support us acting that way. According to Korsgaard, we must necessarily act as a unified agent, instead of a bundle of desires and inclinations motivated by causal forces outside of our control. Korsgaard thinks that the proverbial “glue” that holds together our self-conception as agents is our endorsement of universal laws that guide our actions. Bratman, however, claims that we can arrive at the

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<sup>81</sup> Korsgaard does assume that the person asking the normative question wants a genuine answer to it (see, for instance SN 17). However, it is still unclear if “knavish lawyers” would accept Korsgaard’s specific sort of answer.

<sup>82</sup> Bratman 1998.



sort of unified agency Korsgaard deems essential for action without endorsing any universal law of that sort and defends this claim against two permutations of Korsgaard's view. If we're more interested in our unified agency in the moment of action, then Bratman notes that it is possible to act in a unified way in one situation (and to reflectively endorse this action) without endorsing the same sorts of actions in other situations. If we're more interested in our commitment to future courses of action, then it is possible to make a decision about the future and then change one's mind at a later date. Either way, Bratman thinks that one can act as a unified agent without using the sort of universal laws Korsgaard is interested in defending. If it is possible to act as a unified agent without endorsing a moral maxim in the form of a universal law, then Korsgaard's transcendental argument is substantially weakened. The sorts of norms that Korsgaard claims the thinking self administers are not "implicit in every human choice,"<sup>83</sup> which means that her strategy for establishing their authority over us cannot be entirely successful.

Bratman's criticism highlights a major difficulty implicit in Korsgaard's claim that moral norms take the form of maxims that can be willed as universal laws: sometimes, we accept reasons for moral action that are not universally applicable in all similar cases, but can still guide our actions in a satisfactory manner. It would seem, then, that a moral theory that answers the normative question should make room for these sorts of norms and explain how they can both show us why something is right to do and motivate us to do it. As it happens, Smith addresses this concern very well in his discussion of general rules in Part III of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For Smith, general rules are typically common-sense guidelines for behavior such as "don't kill anyone"<sup>84</sup> or "don't cheat on your spouse"<sup>85</sup> that more or less anyone would accept as action-guiding, since to not do so would result in social disorder.<sup>86</sup> General rules play a similar role to Korsgaard's moral maxims insofar as they direct us to act out of a "sense of duty"<sup>87</sup> and provide us with clear guidelines for action that universally apply to all similar cases.<sup>88</sup> However,

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<sup>83</sup> SN 122.

<sup>84</sup> TMS III.iv.8.

<sup>85</sup> TMS III.v.1.

<sup>86</sup> TMS III.v.2.

<sup>87</sup> TMS III.v.1.

<sup>88</sup> TMS III.iv.8.

Smith does not think that general rules are derived from purely rational consideration of the merits of any given sort of action. Instead, Smith thinks that general rules are established “by finding from experience, that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstanced in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of.”<sup>89</sup> Since this is the case, the impartial spectator’s judgments about specific cases play a large role in forming general rules and following those general rules in the future. The universal applicability of the norms that guide our actions is thus much less important for Smith than it is for Korsgaard, which helps protect his theory from Bratman’s criticism.

In “Morality as Consistency in Living: Korsgaard’s Kantian Lectures,”<sup>90</sup> Alan Gibbard presents a similar, yet broader, critique of Korsgaard’s theory of moral normativity. Gibbard’s chief objection is that Korsgaard relies too much on what he calls “moral logicism:” the view that knowledge of the implicit logic of agency is sufficient for deriving the rules of morality. This commitment to moral logicism leads Korsgaard to adopt the overly-ambitious transcendental argument I discussed in the previous section. According to Gibbard, the reach of such an argument far exceeds its grasp, which dooms Korsgaard’s project to certain failure. Take, for instance, Korsgaard’s assumption that adopting any practical identity whatsoever entails adopting the practical identity of a reflective agent.<sup>91</sup> Gibbard notes that adopting some practical identities does not necessarily imply that I adopt the practical identity of a reflective agent. For instance, if I adopt the practical identity of an Achaean warrior and thus value courage on the battlefield above all else, then there is no need for me to value my humanity and others’ humanity. Adopting that practical identity only implies that I value protecting my friends and killing my enemies and the sort of moral reflection Korsgaard is interested in might actually conflict with these duties. Korsgaard’s transcendental argument is thus weaker than she thinks. Adopting practical identities, sharing in reasons, and other everyday human activities don’t necessarily entail the sort of strong claims about morality she wishes to make, at least when considered logically.

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<sup>89</sup> TMS III.iv.8.

<sup>90</sup> Gibbard 1999.

<sup>91</sup> Gibbard 1999, pg. 154.

Gibbard's critique draws out a serious weakness in her approach to establishing the normativity of morality: if just one step of Korsgaard's transcendental argument doesn't work, her entire argument is flawed and morality cannot be shown to be normative after all. Much like Bratman's criticism, however, Gibbard's critique does not apply to Smith's theory of morality, since Smith never claims to produce a watertight argument that will refute moral skepticism once and for all. All Smith aims to do is point towards some elements of our emotional phenomenology and our day-to-day interactions with other people, note what tends to be at stake in those emotions and interactions, and show us we can live happier lives and have better interactions with other people based on this information. Whether or not the normativity of morality can be established through a transcendental argument is thus irrelevant to Smith, even though he gives an account of moral judgment similar to Korsgaard's and is committed to similar views about the ultimate source of moral normativity.<sup>92</sup>

Adam Smith's answer to the normative question is an attractive one. It is consistent with many of the theoretical insights that inform Korsgaard's interest in reflective agency and practical identity, but at the same time manages to avoid Korsgaard's reliance on universal moral maxims and transcendental argumentation, instead grounding the normativity of morality in our ability to sympathize with other people and view our own actions from an impartial perspective. Furthermore, Smith's theory captures the normative, self-regarding element of ethics in a much more pronounced way than most classical or contemporary sentimental moral theories,<sup>93</sup> it can still make a substantive contribution to contemporary ethical debates.

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<sup>92</sup> As Griswold 1999, pg. 139 points out, "The impartial spectator... give[s] us at least part of what Kantian moral reason is meant to provide... 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 reason." Also see Carrasco 2004, which argues that Adam Smith's moral theory gives such a sophisticated account of practical reason that it should not properly be regarded as a sentimental moral theory.

<sup>93</sup> I am thinking specifically of Prinz 2007 and Slote 2010, although these are only two of the most popular contemporary sentimental theories of morality.

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