

## Kantian Elements in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Walter C. Okshevsky  
*Memorial University*

Daniel DeNicola provides an interesting reconstruction of some aspects of Adam Smith's theory of morality and moral development. My response will focus on his claim that "Smith traces morality neither to reason nor to our ability to apprehend and apply principles, but rather to a natural capacity for emotional ties between people." I will argue that Smith's position is somewhat more complex and ambiguous, and suggest that aspects of Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*) are actually closer on a number of counts to a conception of morality of the kind proffered by Immanuel Kant than DeNicola's reading allows. For Smith, contrary to such views as Richard Rorty's "ethnocentrism" and Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue relativism, principles of universalization underwrite both the psychological nature and the moral justifications of our sympathies and sentiments, which are intricately bound up with the "impartiality" of the Impartial Spectator as a posited universally valid norm of moral assessment. Moral development, on this construal, is the progression of the will's movement from an empirical version of universalization to moral universalizability in Kant's sense.

For Smith to be able to respond successfully to the two criticisms DeNicola identifies, Smith would need to answer the Kantian question: "why does the impartial judge (who is not one of the participants) accept what is generally good and why does he attain satisfaction from this good?"<sup>1</sup> For Kant, Smith's account of morality, on its own terms, requires a principle of universalization grounding the impartiality of deliberation and judgment in a non-question-begging way. The Categorical Imperative is precisely intended to provide that objectivity, impartiality, and universality. But how does a universal grounding emerge in *TMS*?

Smith appeals to an empirical version of a principle of universalization by positing that the Impartial Spectator embodies a perspective believed to be held not by any particular individual or culture, but by humankind as a whole. In judging the moral propriety of our conduct and emotions, we are to think of what "the common sentiments of mankind" have to say about our conduct and which of our actions and sentiments "mankind will go along with."<sup>2</sup> Here, this humanity-wide perspective is said to sympathize with our decent passions and to withhold sympathy from indecent passions (*TMS*, 27). "Mankind" for Smith refers to an actually given and shared comprehension of the virtuous life, a common moral consciousness: "All men, even the most stupid and unthinking, abhor fraud, perfidy and injustice" (*TMS*, 89). We all naturally respond, cognitively and affectively, to the "humanity" in ourselves and others, a humanity embodying "the general fellow feeling which we have with every man merely because he is our fellow-creature" (*TMS*, 90). With certain properly formulated maxims, we find that "there is nobody who does not agree to it. Its self-evident justice is acknowledged by all the world and there is not a dissenting voice

among all mankind" (*TMS*, 93). Our deliberations themselves should deploy general rules that "are universally acknowledged" (*TMS*, 160).

As if to heed Kant's warning that "empiricism...destroys at its roots the morality of disposition,"<sup>3</sup> Smith appeals to a normative version of a principle of universalization, to moral universalizability, through the recognition that the Impartial Spectator could not restrict his/her judgment and perspective of impartiality to what is actually believed or valued, even if believed and valued by the whole of humankind. The mere fact that sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation are founded in passions and judgments that are universal among humans ("human nature") is in itself an insufficient ground for the justifiability ("correctness") of our sentiments and judgments. Smith clearly recognizes that at certain times, and within certain circumstances, our actually held sentiments "may be somewhat warped," (*TMS*, 200) and the cultural customs we encounter may sanction egregious violations of our humanity (*TMS*, 210). "So partial are the views of mankind with regard to the propriety of their own conduct...and so difficult is it for them to view it in the light in which any indifferent spectator would consider it" (*TMS*, 158).

The will that has come to appropriate a principle of universalizability as a moral norm is a more autonomous will, based in moral assessments that are no longer empirically and heteronomously grounded in experiences such as "the resentment and indignation of mankind," or the fear of "being thrown out from the affections of mankind" (*TMS*, 84). Rather, the agent's autonomy requires an assessment as to whether what is taken to be the judgment of humankind is indeed correct. S/he is now concerned with whether, for any given case of conduct, the judgment or affective response is "the proper object" of an act of approbation or disapprobation (*TMS*, 164 and 138). Is the actual approval or praise of my conduct by others really worthy of such a response (*TMS*, 117)?

In examining ourselves from the normative perspective of the Impartial Spectator, we concern ourselves with how humankind *ought to* judge, and with the judgments that are *justly* made by "all rational creatures" (*TMS*, 85). The agent's autonomy is now the ground of moral authority and it eschews an identity between the Impartial Spectator as moral norm and the judgment of humankind within a recognition of the possibility "that the perspective of mankind isn't properly informed" (*TMS*, 116). It is this disposition of autonomy that Smith emphasizes in his repudiation of any consensus theory of moral judgment: for the person who appropriates the normative perspective of the Impartial Spectator, "his self-approbation...stands in need of no confirmation from the approbation of other men" (*TMS*, 117).

Onora O'Neill writes:

Those who propose *reasons for acting* to "the world at large" must aim not only for intelligibility: they must propose principles of action that others not merely can follow in thought, but could adopt as principles of action. I do not offer reasons for action to all if I propose principles of action that I know some others *cannot* adopt. Another way of putting this requirement is to say that those who wish to offer practical reasons to an unrestricted

audience must act only in accordance with that maxim through which [they] can at the same time will that it become a universal law.<sup>4</sup>

If my reading is correct, it appears that certain aspects of Kant's Categorical Imperative appear in Smith's view of morality as a normative principle of universalizability that functions to identify maxims that humankind as such could rationally accept. Smith thus shares with Kant the conviction, articulated by O'Neill, that the moral worth of judgment and disposition is a matter that could be agreed upon by rational beings. Smith consistently refers to the "Impartial Spectator" in the singular, indicating that the Spectator's judgments intend to be acceptable to all and could be accepted by all. Smith also shares with Kant a specific comprehension of the fundamental function and aim of morality: to circumscribe permissible promotion of self-interest and maxims motivated by inclination. Kant's understanding of moral impermissibility in terms of contradiction, illegitimate self-exemption, and violations of the Principle of Equal Respect for Persons as ends-in-themselves, is closely approximated by Smith:

When he views himself in the light in which he is conscious that others will view him, he sees that to them he is but one of the multitude in no respect better than any other in it. If he would act so as that the impartial spectator may enter into the principles of his conduct, which is what of all things he has the greatest desire to do, he must...humble the arrogance of his self-love. (*TMS*, 83)

In the end, Kant would of course reject that aspect of Smith's account that persists in claiming that moral obligation, judgments regarding the rightness or wrongness of rules and maxims willed, are formed by and founded upon "immediate sense and feeling" (*TMS*, 320). For Kant, Smith's relapse into an empiricist universalism misleads him into the view that such a faculty provides us with "our first perceptions of right and wrong" (*TMS*, 32) and those particular "experiences of merit and propriety" which we inductively generalize into moral rules (*TMS*, 159 and 319). Kant would insist that Smith expresses a more accurate position on the worthiness of our sentiments and feelings as candidates for universalization, by acknowledging their "uncertain and precarious" status as grounds of moral judgment (*TMS*, 319). And Kant may well have had Smith in particular in mind when he wrote:

[O]ne must first value the importance of what we call duty, the authority of the moral law, and the immediate worth that compliance with it gives a person in his own eyes, in order to feel that satisfaction in consciousness of one's conformity with it, and bitter remorse if one can reproach oneself with having transgressed it.<sup>5</sup>

1. Quoted in Samuel Fleischhacker, "Philosophy in Moral Practice: Kant and Adam Smith," *Kant-Studien* 82, no. 3 (1991), 251.

2. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). This work will be cited as *TMS* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 61.

4. Onora O'Neill, "Kant: Rationality as Practical Reason," in *Oxford Handbook of Rationality*, eds. Alfred R. Mele and Piers Rawlings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 101 (emphasis in original).

5. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 35. See also 63, 65, and 77–9.