

# Adam Smith's Impartial Spectator: His Reliance on Societal Values, Limits in Inspiring Altruism, and Application in Today's Context

Jung Min Shin

College of Arts and Science, Vanderbilt University

In his comprehensive overview of moral philosophy, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith made a key contribution through the concept of the “impartial spectator”—an imagined third party who allows an individual to objectively judge the ethical status of his or her actions. Also called the “man within the breast,” the impartial spectator is a tool through which individuals divide themselves into the “judge” and “the judged” to examine their own conduct in an unbiased manner. While Smith conceptualizes this imaginary figure as an embodiment of universal morality, and hence not limited to the values of one's immediate community, I argue that this is largely impossible due to the character's society-reliant nature. The impartial spectator is inevitably a local figure, a judge who, while objective, adjudicates based on the context of one's immediate social milieu. Furthermore, due to his dependence on community norms, the impartial spectator is unable to motivate individuals to care for those outside conventional society's concerns, and is ultimately restricted in his capacity to inspire moral improvement. Interestingly, however, the “man within the breast's” society-driven nature seem less problematic and debilitating to Smith's overall self-evaluation method in the context of today's globalized, equality-driven world. His reliance on community norms does not serve as a key hindrance factor for inspiring altruism today, which demonstrates that Smith's introspective technique may be better-suited for application in the present than in the philosopher's time.

## INTRODUCTION

In his comprehensive overview of moral philosophy, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith made a key contribution through the concept of the “impartial spectator”—an imagined third party who allows an individual to objectively judge the ethical status of his or her actions. Also called the “man within the breast,” the impartial spectator is a tool through which individuals divide themselves into the “judge” and “the judged” to examine their own conduct in an unbiased manner. While Smith conceptualizes this imaginary figure as an embodiment of universal morality, and hence not limited to the values of one's immediate community, I argue that this is largely impossible due to the character's society-reliant nature. The impartial spectator is inevitably a local figure, a judge who, while objective, adjudicates based on the context of one's immediate social milieu. Furthermore, due to his dependence on community norms, the impartial spectator is unable to motivate individuals to care for those outside conventional society's concerns, and is ultimately restricted in his capacity to inspire moral improvement. Interestingly, however, the “man within the breast's” society-driven nature seem less problematic and debilitating to Smith's overall

self-evaluation method in the context of today's globalized, equality-driven world. His reliance on community norms does not serve as a key hindrance factor for inspiring altruism today, which demonstrates that Smith's introspective technique may be better suited for application in the present than in the philosopher's time.

## UNCOVERING THE NATURE OF THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR: SMITH'S CONCEPTUALIZATION

In laying the foundation for how individuals judge their own actions through the impartial spectator, Smith first explains the way in which they judge other people's actions by using the concept of sympathy. Defining sympathy as a “concord” or sharing of emotions, he explains that an individual feels sympathy for an action's agent when the act is approvable, or “[strikes] as being just and proper, and suitable to their objects” (6). On the other hand, when an act strikes as “unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes that arouse [it],” one disapproves of it and hence does not feel sympathy for the agent (6). Through this description, Smith characterizes sympathy as essentially arising from approval, the sense that an action is appropriate for its context.

Smith incorporates his account of judgment and sympathy into explaining the workings of the impartial spectator. He states that judging one's actions on the grounds of moral propriety "involves two exercises of sympathy: the imagined spectator's sympathy with my actual motives and feelings...and my sympathy with those feelings of the spectator's" (62). The first type of sympathy, from the "judge" to "the judged," occurs when the impartial spectator evaluates the objective approvability of the "judged's" actions. For a morally upright, approvable action, the impartial spectator sympathizes with the "judged," agreeing with his or her motives and feelings. On the other hand, for a morally decrepit, disapproval-provoking action, he shows no sympathy because he disagrees with the motives and sentiments involved in it. As for the second type of sympathy, that from "the judged" to the "judge," it occurs with the "judged's" approval of the impartial spectator as a legitimate adjudicator for the moral propriety of his actions. With this approval and delegation of authority comes sympathy, the sharing of emotions. When the "judge" approves or disapproves of the "judged's" actions, the "judged" agrees to his sentiment and adjusts his own opinion about the action accordingly. In other words, if the "judge" approves of his action, he approves of it too, and if the "judge" does not, he disapproves of it too, since he accepts the "judge" as a proper guidance figure. Smith's self-examination framework, therefore, involves an agreement structure between the "judge" and "the judged" on the basis of sympathy.

Smith's identification of sympathy as a key factor involved in using the impartial spectator mechanism reveals the parallels between this introspective process and the way in which individuals judge other people's actions. Similar to how individuals form sympathetic sentiments about others, depending on whether or not they approve of someone else's actions, the "man within the breast" also feels sympathy based on approval, depending on whether or not he agrees to the motives and feelings that the self had when executing an action. The similarity between the impartial spectator's method of judgment and that of individuals in general suggests that "the man within the breast" may simply be the voice of an actual spectator within one's community. It implicitly portrays Smith's self-evaluation mechanism as a process where individuals turn the critical gaze that they normally cast on other people's actions inward, determining whether or not they would consider their own action as sympathy-worthy if it had been done by someone else. Notably, however, Smith distinguishes the impartial spectator from the voice

of society or an actual spectator within one's community. The philosopher refers to society's spectators as the "man without," and describes them as a "lower court" for arbitrating the moral value of actions, while describing the "man within the breast" as the "higher court" and "tribunal of [one's] own conscience" (69). Smith then goes on to explain that "the jurisdictions of those two tribunals are based on principles that are...different and distinct:" "[that] of the man without is wholly based on the desire for actual praise, and aversion to actual blame," whereas "that of the man within is wholly based on the desire for praiseworthiness and aversion to blameworthiness" (69). Smith thus portrays society's spectators as superficial, concerned only with the external effects of an action, and contrasts them to the impartial spectator, who judges based on actual moral virtue. The fact that Smith portrays the "man within the breast" as adjudicating on the grounds of real merit is particularly significant given his belief in an "all-wise Author of Nature" (68). Smith trusts in an "all-seeing Judge of the world," who has already legislated an absolute standard of morality and unerringly judges humans and their deeds according to that law (69). Hence, Smith's conception of morality is God-given and universal, not relative or determined by society. Given his worldview, Smith's notion of actual virtue is informed by absolute morality—he views them as qualities which God himself has determined as good, although men often seek to merely exemplify them externally instead of actually possessing them. If real merit relies on universal ethics, Smith's impartial spectator, who judges based on those qualities, is an enforcer of absolute morality. Hence, he would be able to transcend the standards set by one's immediate community and propel individuals toward respecting the God-given standard of ethics. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Smith also refers to the impartial spectator as a "demi-god," portraying him as a smaller version of God within each individual that provides guidance on universal moral laws (130). Therefore, Smith clearly distinguishes the impartial spectator from the voice of society and its members, portraying the former as internally enforcing God-given morality and the latter as imposing a flawed, man-made standard of behavior.

#### SMITH'S IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR AS A SOCIETY-RELIANT, LOCAL CHARACTER

Despite Smith's assertion that the impartial spectator represents universal morals and thus is able to overcome man-made societal values, I argue that the "man

within the breast” is inevitably a local voice of conscience that largely echoes community norms. The impartial spectator springs out of one’s desire to be at harmony with others. According to Smith, humans by nature desire to be praised and to avoid criticism (64). Given this innate affinity for approval and dread for blame, individuals tailor their behaviors according to how others would respond to them. Out of this mechanism rises the impartial spectator, a tool that individuals employ to construe the social ramifications of their actions. It is a self-examining tactic initiated through social needs rather than a strong aspiration to follow a God-given conception of morality. Thus, considered in light of his social roots, the “man within the breast” does not embody universal morals, unlike what Smith suggests. He is simply a figure who helps individuals receive praise and avoid blame from others.

Interestingly, Smith anticipates this criticism and offers a counterargument. He asserts that men actually desire to be worthy of approval over actual approval and seek to avoid blameworthiness more so than actual blame (64). Smith thus qualifies his previous statement that individuals simply love praise and hate blame by characterizing humans as having a more profound yearning, namely the desire for actual virtue. The impartial spectator, then, would supposedly rise from people’s desire for real merit, and thus would encourage one to follow the absolute, God-given standard of morality, the source of those genuine virtues. Therefore, through this more nuanced viewpoint on human nature, Smith attempts to refute the claim that the impartial spectator is a local voice of conscience that is grounded only in society’s often superficial values.

Unfortunately, however, the supposedly more profound yearnings of humans which Smith argues does not disprove the fact that the impartial spectator relies on community norms. One’s conceptions of approval-worthiness and blameworthiness are also heavily influenced by one’s society, and thus yearning for the former and avoiding the latter does not signify a desire toward fulfilling the universal, God-given morality. Smith causes the downfall of his own argument by defining the desire to be approval-worthy as the “desire to be what [one] approves in others” (66). Considering that humans are generally swayed by community norms, one’s decision to approve another person’s traits is, more often than not, biased. For example, certain cultures are individualistic while others are collectivist, and depending on which culture one dwells in, one’s notion of approval-worthiness would be different. In an individualistic community, one would consider a confident, assertive type of person as approval-worthy,

while in a collectivist community, one would deem a more reserved, obedient individual as ideal. Given the contrasting conceptions of approval-worthiness that could exist depending on one’s cultural context, one’s judgment of whether another person has praiseworthy traits is usually not reflective of the universal, objective morality that Smith advocates. Essentially, the “desire to be what [one] approves in others” is a desire to exemplify one’s biased conception of “approval-worthiness,” an image that has been significantly swayed by society. Therefore, to desire the actual virtue of approval-worthiness is not much better than wanting others’ approval, since both are heavily influenced by one’s community, and the same applies to wanting to avoid blameworthiness more than actual blame.

An individual’s society-influenced notions of approval-worthiness and blameworthiness also render his or her “man within the breast” to a biased figure, since he essentially enforces community standards instead of universal morality. The community-swayed nature of the impartial spectator can be seen by extending the aforementioned example of collectivist versus individualistic cultures. Consider a scenario in which one approaches a neighbor who owns a dog that barks a lot and asks him to be more wary about the disturbance it causes. Unfortunately, the dog owner takes offense from one’s suggestion, and this encounter sours one’s relationship with him. Depending on which cultural context this situation takes place, the impartial spectator would evaluate one’s action differently. If one belongs to a collectivist society, which values social harmony over individual expression, the figure would disapprove of one’s approach to the barking dog issue, for openly voicing one’s opinion is not an approval-worthy trait in that culture. On the other hand, if one belongs to an individualistic society, the “man within the breast” would wholeheartedly approve and sympathize with one’s deed despite the negative outcome, since it exemplifies the approval-worthy traits of confidence and boldness. Hence, the impartial spectator merely echoes one’s culturally-informed notions of approval-worthiness and blameworthiness, which renders Smith’s attempt to counter the criticism about the figure’s reliance on societal values largely unsuccessful.

Given the discussion of one’s society-influenced notions that inevitably sways the impartial spectator, it is worth noting that the scope of these biased conceptions is extremely wide. In fact, almost any type of value judgment made by an individual depends largely on community standards, and society actively molds individuals

to hold certain ideas and exhibit particular behaviors. Whether a certain act is acceptable, unthinkable, or odd all hinges on society's standards, which becomes an individual's internalized lens for judging others as well as themselves. Considering that the impartial spectator is a character brought into existence through the imagination of these society-swayed individuals then, his lack of independence from one's own predispositions and learned values is not all that surprising.

#### THE LIMITATIONS OF SMITH'S IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR, IN LIGHT OF ALTRUISM: THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR AND ALTRUISM FOR DISTANT SUFFERERS

Essentially, Smith's self-evaluation mechanism using the impartial spectator is meant to help one improve one's moral uprightness, guiding one towards a better sense for the objective ethical value of one's actions. Having established the figure as heavily influenced by society in the previous section, I now examine how this dependence impacts his capacity to inspire moral improvement in individuals. To do so, I explore whether or not the impartial spectator can motivate a person toward altruism, the relinquishment of one's self-interest for the sake of others, for two different groups: distant sufferers and those neglected within one's community. I focus on these groups because helping them constitutes a relatively pure form of altruism, in which there is not much to gain from for the self-sacrificing individual, as these groups most likely would not be able to reciprocate the favor.

In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith briefly addresses the topic of distant sufferers through the case of Chinese earthquake victims in Part 3 Chapter 3. He explains that a "humane man in Europe" who has no connection to China would "first strongly express his sorrows for the misfortunes of that unhappy people" and various other "humane sentiments" (72). However, Smith comments that he would soon "go about his business or his pleasure...with the same ease and tranquility as if no such accident had happened," adding that even the most "paltry misfortune of his own," such as the loss of his little finger, would disturb him much more than the miseries of the earthquake victims (72). Through this explication, Smith portrays even the most caring individuals as lacking a durable concern for distant sufferers. While they do feel sympathy for the victims, this sentiment is often short-lived and easily overpowered by one's own, often minor, misfortunes. Hence, Smith shows that in the case of distal sufferers, self-interest largely prevails over the interest of others.

Given that Smith criticizes the European man's relatively insufficient concern for the earthquake victims, he implicitly suggests that individuals should care more about sufferers in distant communities. In achieving this greater level of care, then, does the impartial spectator help individuals? Would the "man within the breast" convict individuals of their selfishness in promoting their own comfort while numerous people cry out with pain in a distant nation? To answer these questions, it is necessary to take a closer look at the way in which the impartial spectator urges individuals to relinquish their own interests for the sake of others. Smith describes this process in Part 3 Chapter 3, stating that the "man within immediately tells us that we are valuing ourselves too much and other people too little, and that by [choosing the self-interested option] we make ourselves the proper object of other people's contempt and indignation" (73). Intriguingly, Smith portrays the impartial spectator as capitalizing on the fear that one will become the "proper object of contempt and indignation of [one's] brethren." There are two key points worth noting from this aspect of the impartial spectator's persuasion strategy. First, similar to the other value judgments discussed in this essay's previous section, what constitutes the "proper object" of societal scorn is also largely determined by community standards. While Smith assumes that the impartial spectator's emphasis on the actual virtue over seeming merit, in this case blameworthiness over actual blame, allows the figure to overcome societal norms and enforce universal morality, he fails to note that "actual virtues" are also heavily determined by society. Hence, in persuading an individual to avoid being the "proper object" of the brethren's indignation, the impartial spectator tells him or her to conform to the society-determined conception of blameworthiness.

Next, the impartial spectator specifically uses a negative consequence-based argument to convince the individual instead of a positive-result based one. While he could emphasize that promoting the interest of others exemplifies generosity and hence is approval-worthy, the "man within the breast" uses blameworthiness, a negative outcome, as his main persuasion strategy. Through this explication, Smith suggests that a positive-outcome based argument is not powerful enough to prompt one to relinquish self-interest on behalf of others. If so, convincing an individual toward altruism always requires a negative argument, as it is by definition the forgoing of one's interests. The question of whether the impartial spectator propels one toward caring for distant sufferers can then be distilled to the following: Is there a negative consequence



involved in refraining from the altruistic act? More specifically, is it blameworthy to prioritize one's self-interests over the plight of faraway victims in one's societal context?

Unfortunately, there is no strong socially-defined element of blameworthiness associated with promoting one's self-interest over the concern for distant sufferers. There are two criterions which Smith provides to determine whether an action causes one to be the "proper object of the contempt of [one's] brethren," and concern for distant sufferers fails to meet both standards. The two requirements, which Smith delineate in Part 3 Chapter 3, are what I label as the harm principle and the care-worthy principle.

The former pertains to the question of whether one's self-interested decision inflicts harm to a certain group. Smith explains that "when the happiness or misery of others depends in any way on how we behave, we dare not follow self-love's hint" because doing so would render one into the "proper object of other people's contempt and indignation" (73). As a result, Smith states that the "man within" would immediately exhort one not to execute the action. On the other hand, for situations where there is no harm involved with the self-interested act, one would not become the "proper object" of societal blame. In describing the no-harm scenario, Smith states that "when the happiness or misery of others...in no respect depends on our conduct...we do not always think it so necessary to restrain...[the] anxiety about our own affairs" (73). Notably, the philosopher does not mention the role of the impartial spectator in discouraging one's selfish action in this case, nor the "contempt of the brethren" that would result from the deed. Hence, he suggests that the "man within the breast" would not necessarily disapprove of the self-driven act, given its lack of blameworthy value.

Applying this logic to the case of distant sufferers, then, the impartial spectator would not disagree with the self for prioritizing self-interest over the group's misery, due to the lack of harm inflicted by the action. For example, if one spends disposable income buying unnecessary clothes instead of donating it for overseas disaster relief, the "man within the breast" would not morally convict one for blameworthiness because there is no harm involved with the purchase. Buying extra garments does not in any way cause a negative impact on the lives of the disaster victims, and hence the impartial spectator cannot argue for the blameworthiness of the action.

Ultimately, then, the impartial spectator has a neutral stance to one's self-interested deed, since there

is nothing particularly blameworthy or approval-worthy about it. In the end, however, the mediocre response of the "man within the breast" implicitly condones one's disengagement toward distant sufferers. He suggests to the self that it is permissible to not care for them, and demonstrates his own powerlessness in discouraging self-interest in the absence of negative repercussions. This limitation speaks to the figure's weakness in facilitating moral improvement through altruism, since he can only prompt the self to forgo its interests when there is a clear causation of harm.

While analysis based solely on the harm principle already gives permission to the self to prioritize one's own interests over the plight of faraway victims, a secondary analysis, based on the care-worthy principle, exposes the further shortcomings of the impartial spectator in promoting altruism. A caveat to the first criterion, the second principle concerns whether a group that would supposedly face harm through one's self-interested decision is worth caring for. Smith briefly describes this rule when he discusses scenarios in which one's action inflicts harm on others, stating that the "great judge and arbiter of our conduct...calls to us" and "tells us...that we are only one of the multitude" (72). He adds that the "man within" reminds us that "we are valuing ourselves too much and other people too little," and this attitude would render one into the "proper object of the [brethren's] contempt" (73). In this secondary analysis, the impartial spectator appeals to the idea of equality, emphasizing that "we are just one of multitude," and that committing the harmful and selfish deed violates this notion. The act elevates oneself over the individuals who would be harmed, and hence causes one to become blameworthy. Therefore, Smith identifies the underlying presupposition of equality as a key factor that allows the impartial spectator to discourage self-interested actions.

While Smith does not address the cases in which the equality premise is not met, one can deduce from the impartial spectator's persuasion strategy that the figure would fail to convince an individual to forgo self-interest when the harmed group is considered somehow unequal to oneself. If the damaged group does not belong to the equal, care-worthy "multitude" the impartial spectator cites, there would be no blameworthiness attached to the selfish deed. Hence, the impartial spectator would not disapprove of one's promotion of self-interest, making the decision permissible even if it inflicts harm. This aspect is especially problematic considering that determining the worth of another being is a society-influenced value judg-

ment, and communities often explicitly or implicitly label certain groups as inferior. These discriminated groups, then, would not be protected by the impartial spectator, since the figure would fail to cause any moral compunction in the self for harming these groups through one's action.

Given that the care-worthy test is only necessary after concluding the causation of harm, it would be generally unnecessary to conduct this analysis for the case of distant sufferers. However, there are particular cases in which one's self-interested would arguably cause harm to a distant multitude, such as investing in a flourishing company that exploits child workers in a faraway nation. While the investment itself is not the immediate cause of the child laborers' misfortunes, it encourages the exploitative practice by funding the expansion of the company's business, which would create more child labor victims. Considering this case as a harm-causing scenario, then, I apply the care-worthy principle and examine whether distant sufferers are deemed as part of the equal "multitude" which Smith describes. Unfortunately, according to societal standards, faraway individuals are less valuable than community members, due to their lack of societal membership. While there could also be cultural biases that encourage one to view foreigners as inferior beings, especially in Smith's time, the primary reason for society's discrimination against distant individuals is their status as outsiders. Society typically promotes the well-being of its own members as a reciprocation for the contributions they make for the community. As a result, it deems geographically distant people as less significant and care-worthy, since they do not contribute to the community. To apply this reasoning to the faraway child workers, then, an individual would most likely be influenced by societal standards and view them as relatively unimportant. Accordingly, the impartial spectator would not disapprove of one's investment in the flourishing company, since doing so does not render one into a "proper object" of societal blame. Hence, the "man within the breast" would allow the self to use the convenient excuse of geographical distance to justify one's self-interested decision and gloss over its severely negative consequences. Altogether, while based on the arguable premise that certain self-interested deeds inflict tangible harm on distant multitudes, this analysis further exposes the impartial spectator's reliance on society's standards and limited authority. The "man within the breast" can only encourage one to relinquish self-interest when doing so not only causes harm but also inflicts the damage to those who satisfy the often biased

"equality premise."

### THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR AND ALTRUISM FOR NEGLECTED GROUPS WITHIN ONE'S COMMUNITY

Having identified the problematic aspects of the impartial spectator in the case of the distant sufferers, I next examine his ability to encourage altruism toward neglected groups within one's community. These groups are victims of mainstream society's systemic discrimination, such as the pariah caste in ancient South India, slaves during the colonization era, and the Jews in Germany under the Nazi regime. In carrying out this investigation, I continue to use Smith's description of the "man within the breast's" workings found in Part 3 Chapter 3, in which the figure capitalizes on the socially-informed notion of blameworthiness, a negative outcome, to convince individuals to relinquish their own interests on behalf of others.

First, I apply the harm principle, one of the two factors that dictate the blameworthiness of an action, to the case of neglected groups within one's community. Similar to distant sufferers, marginalized groups are usually not directly harmed by an individual's self-interested decision. To re-use the aforementioned clothes purchase example, there is no harm done to societally neglected individuals when one uses disposable income on unnecessary garments instead of helping those groups financially. A similar example can be made with time investment as well, such as spending one's free time to knit for pleasure instead of using it to raise awareness for the plight of the marginalized. There is no direct harm inflicted upon the locally neglected group through one's decision to spend time knitting, and hence there is no blameworthy value attached to the act. In situations that do not meet the harm principle, the impartial spectator does not discourage the self-driven deed, due to the lack of blameworthiness associated with it. Hence, in the case of neglected groups within society, the "man within the breast" would also generally fail to encourage one to forgo self-interest.

Next, I examine the case of the locally neglected in light of the care-worthy principle. In order to do so, I first identify a situation where there is a somewhat tangible connection between an individual's self-interested deed and its negative impact on the marginalized group. Suppose that one is from ancient South India, and finds an individual from the pariah caste on the streets. He is clearly famished, impoverished, and homeless, but one passes by without providing any type of assistance, making the self-interested choice of saving resources and time. While

this action does not seem to inflict any direct harm at first, I suggest that it does make the neglected individual worse off. First, passing by without helping directly communicates indifference to the pariah, which hurts him emotionally. It reminds him that his caste is considered worthless by all of society, which breeds scorn and hopelessness in the individual. Furthermore, while a more indirect repercussion, deliberately walking away reaffirms the inferiority of the pariah caste not just to the neglected individual but to the rest of society as well. Because the action takes place on the streets, a communal space open to observation, it publicly conveys the permissibility and the lack of blameworthy value attached to ignoring the marginalized group. Hence, although the act itself is not very attention-grabbing, it is nonetheless an overt reaffirmation of the caste's insignificance, which implicitly encourages others to display the same negligent attitude. In the long run, then, more and more people would ignore the pariah and his caste, further pushing them into the abyss of marginalization. This negative consequence, in addition to the emotional harm inflicted on the specific individual, demonstrates that promoting one's interest can inflict damage to the locally neglected in certain cases. Hence, albeit somewhat indirect, the harm principle is met in this situation, which leads to the analysis on care-worthiness.

In applying the care-worthy test to the case at hand, one has to evaluate whether the pariah individual is considered equally valuable as the action's agent. Unfortunately, the man on the street does not qualify as "one of the multitude" that Smith describes, due to the society-imposed caste system which labels him as a detestable, inferior being. Therefore, he is deemed significantly less important than the average member of ancient South Indian society and thus not care-worthy. Given his lowly status, making a self-interested decision that inflicts harm on him and his caste does not render one into the "proper object" of the brethren's indignation. Accordingly, the impartial spectator would not convict one for walking away from the pariah, demonstrating his inability to instill altruism toward locally neglected groups even when the harm principle is met.

While the result of the care-worthy test is similar for the locally marginalized and the distant sufferers, given that both groups are devalued by society, the downgrading of the former is perhaps more dangerous than that of the latter. First, there are more cases in which the locally neglected are directly harmed by an individual's self-interested choice than cases in which distant sufferers are harmed. This owes simply to the fact that the former

group is physically present in the community, which allows for much more direct contact between them and other members of society. In light of the aforementioned pariah case, the same situation—physically passing by a member of the devalued group—would not be possible with distant sufferers, unless one were to travel to the foreign community. Hence, given that self-interested, public acts of indifference can only take place for groups who are physically within society, distant sufferers are not susceptible to the same amount of harm as the locally neglected. The care-worthy test, then, is more pertinent to the locally neglected than faraway victims, as it is a secondary analysis that only takes place after concluding the causation of harm. Unfortunately, as mentioned before, the analysis reveals that the locally marginalized are considered unequal and not care-worthy by society. This result, then, signifies grave danger to this group—not only are they susceptible to a greater range of situations where the self-interested choice of their community members could inflict harm on them, but they are outside the category of people whom the impartial spectator is able to protect. The locally marginalized are thus completely left to suffer the consequences of the numerous harm-inflicting choices done by others, because there is nothing, including the impartial spectator, that could stop individuals from pursuing the self-interested option.

An additional but equally significant factor that makes the results of the care-worthy test more problematic for the locally neglected than for distant sufferers is the contrasting reasons that are used to devalue each group. The former are considered unequal on the basis of their supposed inherent inferiority as people, whereas the latter are discriminated for their lack of community membership. While any reason justifying harm toward a specific multitude is morally questionable, the one used to devalue the locally marginalized is much more controversial than that for distant sufferers. To label an entire group of people as inherently inferior offends the notion of innate human dignity, and thus provokes an ethical condemnation. On the other hand, basing a group's value according to their contributions to one's society is a rather inevitable side effect of the exclusive nature of communities, and thus relatively more permissible. Ultimately, the key difference between the two justifications is that the inferiority-based one exposes a pathological aspect of society—namely, the unjust discrimination against particular groups—while that based on community membership does not.

Given this observation, then, the impartial specta-

tor's failure in convincing one to protect, or at least refrain from harming certain multitudes, is more troublesome in light of locally marginalized groups than distant sufferers. In the case of faraway victims, although the "man within" fails to inspire individuals to execute actual deeds of altruism, individuals at least feel some degree of sympathy toward the sufferers. However, in the case of the locally neglected, individuals do not even feel the basic emotion of pity toward the victims, as they adopt society's perspective and view them as dispensable and even subhuman beings. In the latter case, therefore, there is a greater need for the "man within the breast" to correct their sentiments and behavior; as previously explained, however, the impartial spectator significantly falls short of this imperative task, acquiescing to society's pathological side instead of correcting it.

All in all, the powerlessness of the "man within" in encouraging individuals to care for those devalued by conventional society reinforces his conceptualization as a local figure who is unable to overcome community norms. Unfortunately, he is a voice that molds individuals into good citizens of the community, but no more than that. Interestingly, however, while I have primarily discussed the impartial spectator's dependence on societal norms as a shortcoming, it is also the factor that makes the figure powerful. As Smith describes, humans naturally want to form harmony with their neighbors, and following the impartial spectator to modify their behaviors allows them to fulfill that goal. Hence, heeding the "man within" potentially increases the happiness of individuals, although he does not improve them as objectively moral people. The impartial spectator's embodiment of societal values, then, is a double-edged sword, a factor that strengthens his persuasive powers but limits the scope of his influence.

### THE VALUE OF SMITH'S IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR IN TODAY'S CONTEXT

Given the double-edged quality of the impartial spectator's reliance on community standards, is Smith's self-evaluation method a commendable model to follow? As previously explained, due to his dependence on societal norms, the "man within the breast" does help individuals improve their behaviors to make them more socially approvable. Therefore, there is certainly merit to the introspective technique, although not without limitations. Interestingly, however, the impartial spectator's inherent reliance on societal values actually seems less problematic and debilitating to Smith's overall self-evaluation technique in today's context. The integration of the world and

changes in societies' standards, which better reflect virtues of justice and equality than in the past, naturally decrease the impartial spectator's dependence on local norms and allow him to enforce a more universal standard of behavior. With this in mind, perhaps the "man within the breast" is more effective in instilling moral improvement in the present than in Smith's time, which illuminates the value and relevance of the philosopher's self-assessment method in today's context.

Compared to Smith's time, the world today is a significantly smaller place, due to a myriad of economic, social, and political factors. To name a couple, international trade and economic interdependence between nations, free flow of ideas and sharing of information through the internet and other forms of media, political cooperation, and multilateral diplomacy have all contributed to global integration. These changes have inevitably expanded people's conceptions of community and the "brethren," with many individuals today viewing themselves as not only members of their immediate society but also citizens of the world at large. Applying Smith's notion of human nature into this context, then, people today desire to be both at harmony with their immediate neighbors as well as their fellow global citizens, desiring to win praise and avoid criticism from both multitudes. Accordingly, the impartial spectator today would naturally be closer to a universal figure than in the past, voicing not only local norms but global ones as well. Given that local standards have increasingly incorporated and adjusted to international ones, the "man within the breast" would help individuals tailor their behaviors to a more universal, commonly agreed upon value system than in the past.

A significant aspect of today's global standard of ethics, which the impartial spectator would encourage individuals to follow, is the respect for human rights. The notion refers to the acknowledgement of every person as inherently valuable and deserving of certain guarantees and benefits, such as the freedom from persecution, the freedom of expression, the right to a decent standard of living, and the right to health ("Universal Declaration of Human Rights"). Human rights is a widely agreed upon, universal concept today, given the numerous global treaties on its behalf, which have been ratified by the majority of nations, its codification into international law, and the myriad of non-governmental organizations that advocate it. Given its place in the global value system, then, the impartial spectator would urge individuals to respect the notion.

I suggest that the "man within the breast's" es-



pousal of human rights increases his capabilities to spur moral improvement in individuals, including the pursuit of altruism. In order to demonstrate this idea, I examine how the figure would respond to the aforementioned cases of distant sufferers and locally marginalized groups in the present context. Notably, both entities can be deemed as groups whose human rights have been violated—the former in terms of the right to decent living, and the latter in terms of the right to equal treatment. Hence, whether the impartial spectator in the human rights-respecting 21st century inspires individuals to be altruistic toward these two groups is a highly relevant query.

While the values enforced by the “man within the breast” change with social context and over time, I assume that his fundamental workings remain the same. Hence, in order to motivate individuals today toward altruism—the forgoing of their own interests for the sake of others—he would need to establish that failing to be altruistic results in becoming the “proper object” of contempt from one’s brethren, the global community in this case. The task at hand, then, is to determine whether prioritizing one’s self-interest over the plight of distant sufferers and locally marginalized groups causes one to become blameworthy in the 21st century.

In answering this question, I apply the same indicators of blameworthiness, the harm principle and the care-worthy principle. In regards to the former, there are increasingly more situations in today’s globalized context where a self-interested decision could inflict harm onto other individuals. This change is especially applicable to the case of distant sufferers, whom I described in the previous section as relatively less vulnerable to such scenarios compared to the locally marginalized. Through international integration, however, an individual’s choice on one side of the globe may easily have ramifications on the opposite side, as in the child laborer example. Hence, distant sufferers are increasingly more susceptible to the harmful repercussions of self-interested decisions that are made by those outside their physical community. Therefore, for both faraway victims and the locally marginalized, there are numerous cases today in which a self-driven choice inflicts harm on them.

Remarkably, in the human rights-accepting context of the 21st century, there is no need to even examine the care-worthy principle if a self-interested decision meets the harm principle. Under the premise of universal human dignity, every individual is inherently worth caring for, and thus if one’s decision in any way inflicts harm on another person, one becomes the “proper object” of global

society’s scorn. Hence, in both the case of distant sufferers and the locally neglected, the impartial spectator would automatically discourage individuals from prioritizing their own interest, if the choice indeed does cause harm to these groups.

The more important analysis in determining the impartial spectator’s efficacy in promoting altruism in the present involves cases that do not meet the harm principle. Can the “man within the breast” help one relinquish self-interest for the sake of others, even when the self-driven act does not cause harm? I suggest that in the context of today’s society, the impartial spectator is capable of doing so, due to global society’s demand for each individual to take responsibility for upholding human rights. In adopting the notion of universal human rights and acknowledging it as important, the global community becomes responsible for ensuring that the idea is respected by all its members. This burden then is partially delegated to each individual within the international community, given the reciprocation-based relationship between society and its members. Any type of community, including the global village, requires its members to contribute to realizing its overall goals in turn for the benefits they receive from the membership. If one does not contribute to this endeavor, one becomes the “proper object” of the brethren’s contempt due to neglecting one’s proper role as a society member. In the case of today’s world, then, the key community-wide objective is to uphold human rights, and one’s failure to contribute to this goal would cause one to become blameworthy. While this failure could involve an active refusal to respect human rights, such as blatantly carrying out actions that harm others, it could also be done in a more passive way. For example, the consistent, unwavering prioritization of one’s self-interest over that of human right-deprived groups is another way one could resist the community-wide goal of upholding human dignity. Individuals who exhibit this behavior ignore and trivialize the pains of human right violation victims by always placing their own interests above the sufferers’, and hence implicitly express that human rights is not an attention-worthy cause. Thus, they undermine the significance of a core society value, which renders them into the “proper object” of contempt from their global brethren. Ultimately, this demonstrates that even in cases where there is no harm inflicted, one’s prioritization of self-interest over the concern for human rights-violated groups could lead to blameworthiness. While the caveat is that the selfish deeds have to be executed on a consistent basis, this newly-established blame-value nonetheless opens

up possibilities for the impartial spectator to encourage a more active level of care for disadvantaged groups. Given the individual's duty to uphold human rights today, the "man within the breast" would generally encourage individuals to relinquish their self-interest on behalf of rights-deprived groups, even in the absence of harmful repercussions. He would remind them that the consistent failure to do so would result in blameworthiness, and hence they should generally exhibit an active level of care for the disadvantaged groups. Applying this analysis to the cases of distant sufferers and the locally marginalized, then, the "man within" would urge for an active sense of altruism for these groups, given that they qualify as those whose rights have been violated. Altogether, in today's context, the impartial spectator is capable of prompting individuals to forgo their self-interested choice on behalf of rights-deprived groups even in the absence of harm, which demonstrates the figure's greater capacity for instilling altruism in the present.

In addition to the newly-instated blameworthy value attached to self-interested deeds, another factor that allows the impartial spectator to more effectively inspire altruism in today's society is the global information environment. Given the media's and the internet's fast-paced dissemination of news from all around the world, one can easily see and hear the plights of people who are outside one's immediate physical, economic, and cultural milieu. Perhaps, then, genuine and long-lasting sympathy for rights-deprived groups in the global community is much more possible and probable today. The increased exposure to the challenging circumstances of these groups allows individuals to form a more tangible connection to the sufferers than before, and therefore creates a better emotional environment to hold sympathy for them. In particular, distant sufferers benefit from this aspect, as the lack of detailed knowledge about their sufferings was the major factor that prevented people from sharing their pain in the past. Given people's greater capacity and likelihood for sympathy, then, it is perhaps easier for the impartial spectator today to convince individuals to relinquish their self-interest on behalf of underprivileged groups. The "man within the breast" would be encouraging an action that naturally extends from their already-existing sympathy for rights-deprived groups, and hence would have an easier time persuading them. All in all, the change in the information environment contributes to the effectiveness of the impartial spectator in promoting altruism, which portrays Smith's self-evaluation method as well-suited for today's context.

## CONCLUSION

While Smith envisioned the impartial spectator as an enforcer of universal, God-given morality, I have demonstrated throughout this paper that the figure is inevitably reliant on societal standards. In Smith's context, the impartial spectator's dependence on community norms serves as a pivotal shortcoming, a key limitation to the figure's ability to encourage altruism in cases where there is no blameworthy value attached to promoting one's self-interest. This factor, however, does not significantly hinder the "man within the breast" from inspiring altruistic behaviors in today's context, where the boundary between local and global norms have been largely blurred and society overall has adopted more virtuous, equality-respecting standards. Hence, the impartial spectator in the present is an effective guidance figure who inspires moral improvement in individuals, convincing them to relinquish their self-interest for the sake of the more disadvantaged. Hence, the role of the "man within the breast" today is much closer to what Smith envisioned, a powerful inner voice that facilitates critical self-evaluation and ethical progress.

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