

Was Smith A Moral Subjectivist?

By Kevin Quinn

Prelude

This paper may appear quixotic in the extreme. Adam Smith's *Theory of The Moral Sentiments* has generally been seen as a species of the genus of moral sentimentalism. Moral sentimentalists agree in grounding our moral distinctions in our sentiments, as opposed to the world. They are in this respect the progenitors of various stripes of subjectivism in meta-ethics. I want to argue that Smith does not fit this picture. I think he can be easily read to do so, and that he was sometimes confused about what he was doing, but that we ought to, at a minimum, recognize an alternative, objectivist (and therefore, I think, correct) strain in Smith, in tension with his apparent subjectivism.

Parfit (2011, 378-80) identifies two variants of what he calls Moral Sentimentalism. An exponent might argue either that moral judgements make no claims at all - that they are disguised *expressions* of how we feel or what we approve of¹ - or that they are claims about what we either do feel or would feel under certain ideal conditions, not claims about the way things are. So "This is good," for the first type of subjectivist, may be analyzed as something like "Hurray for this!"², while for the second type it would be read as "I approve of this" or "We would approve of this", or "I would approve of this if I knew more". It is either an expression of

¹This is Moral Expressivism, for which the canonical reference is C. L. Stevenson.

²Parfit calls Expressivism the "Boo-Hurray Theory!"

approval or a statement of the fact that we approve. In either case, the statement is not, as it appears on its face and to common sense, a claim about how the world is, a claim that “this” has the non-natural property of “goodness.” Common sense takes in this respect an objectivist meta-ethical position. For common sense, the subjectivist has things backward: we approve of what is good, because it is good; our approval doesn’t make it good. Goodness pre-exists and calls forth our approval.³

The philosophers Charles Larmore and Derek Parfit have both argued for objectivism about norms generally, with moral norms a special case. Norms, in this usage, give us reasons, whether they are moral norms, practical norms, or epistemic norms: they state what we *ought to do* or believe, where the fact that we ought to do x or believe y is a non-natural fact about the world, something we discover⁴. Modern economics has given almost unquestioned allegiance to a subjectivism about practical norms, by identifying reasons with desires or preferences: that you ought to x means, in the subjectivist account, that you have some preferences which are best served by your x-ing. Subjectivist philosophers analyze “you have a reason to x” as “you either want x or would want x if fully informed.” (Parfit, 269). For an objectivist about norms, on the other hand, what we have reason to do, what we ought to do is objective (as Larmore (1996)

³ The great musical philosophers Rodgers and Hammerstein ask, in a famous lyric, “Do I love you because you’re beautiful, or are you beautiful because I love you.” If the former, we have objectivism about beauty; if the latter we have subjectivism.

⁴For Objectivists like Larmore and Parfit, it is a *non-natural* fact. There are objectivists who make norms natural facts. The work of Larmore, in *The Morals of Modernity* and *The Autonomy of Morality*, Parfit , in *On What Matters*, years in the making and his magnum opus, the late Jean Hampton, in *The Authority of Reason*, and Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of The Self* - all woke me from my dogmatic subjectivist slumber, as it were! The case they collectively make for the objectivity, the reality of reasons, irreducibly normative entities - however shocking it may be to a scientific age - is, for me, overwhelming and profound.

emphasizes, we “find” that we have a reason to do x) and needn’t necessarily coincide with what would fulfill either our actual or fully informed desires.

On the evidence of the Theory of Moral Sentiments, I believe Smith was neither a moral sentimentalist, in either variant identified by Parfit, nor a subjectivist about reasons. Prominent philosophers on both sides of the subjective/objective divide disagree.

I. Smith’s Moral Objectivism

Take first Charles Griswold (1999), whose *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* marked the beginning of a new interest in Smith among moral philosophers, for whom he hitherto been not much more than a footnote to Hume, if noticed at all. Commenting on Smith’s notion of the Impartial Spectator, perhaps the lynchpin of TMS, he writes:

Since the agent’s disapprobation of self or other must be reached from the standpoint of a spectator, moral judgements cannot be simply expressions of our own emotion. Smith’s theory of moral sentiments is not emotivist in a narrow sense of the term...it’s a sophisticated emotivism according to which the emotions that the judgement of an informed and judicious spectator finds warranted (or appropriate, suitable, fitting) are moral.(1999: 129-30)

and

Smith’s account of morality in terms of emotions is subjectivist, in the sense that the meaning of moral terms is determined by what pleases or displeases the impartial spectator and not by some altogether external stimulus or state of affairs. (1999: 158)

Griswold sees Smith as a sophisticated emotivist, a nuanced subjectivist, and he is friendly to such a position. Reviewing Griswold’s book, in *The New Republic*, Charles Larmore,

who is a full-throated moral realist, and so opposed to subjectivism, nevertheless agrees with Larmore that this was indeed Smith's position:

For Smith, morality is .a point of view that we develop more as members of society than as separate individuals. In large part, conscience amounts to society within. (Larmore, 1999: 45)

And:

For Smith, the proper standards of moral judgement are simply the ones we imagine an impartial spectator using, not the ones an impartial spectator would be well-equipped to discover. In ordinary life people may believe that our moral judgements answer to the way things are, morally speaking. But in this belief, Smith only saw, as Hume had put it, 'the mind's great propensity to spread itself on external objects.'(Ibid)

And he contrasts an understanding of the impartial spectator as "someone well-placed to discern the correct principles of morality" with Smith's view that he is "the very author of their validity."

In this last distinction, we recognize the Rodgers-and Hammerstein question: does an impartial spectator approve of this because it is good, or is it good because an impartial spectator approves of it⁵? I think Smith, on balance and *pace* Larmore and Griswold, takes the former, objectivist, answer to the question. He writes:

⁵It is also the question raised by voluntarist theologians, who claimed that "God commands the good" should be read not, as their opponents held, as constraining God to command what can be independently defined as good, but as *defining* the good as "that which God commands."

Whatever judgement we can form {concerning our own sentiments and motives} must always bear some secret reference, either to what are, or to what, upon a certain condition would be, or to what, we imagine, *ought to be* the judgement of others. We endeavor to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. (Smith, 1976: 110; emphasis added).

Any subjectivist reading of this passage is brought up short - very short!- by the “ought to be” in this passage. For subjectivists, in this context, the idea is to analyze “what we ought to do” as “what others in fact judge, or would judge with full information, to be right.” If we make the test what others “ought to” judge, we are arguing in a circle. Compare “It is good because an impartial spectator approves” with “It is good because an impartial spectator *correctly* approves.” The latter formulation quite obviously fails to reduce “the good” to a natural fact about us - to our approving it- because the criteria of *correct* approval appeal to standards independent of our approval.

Look again at the quote from Griswold above. For Smith, he says, “the emotions that the judgement of an informed and judicious spectator finds warranted (or appropriate, suitable, fitting) are moral.” If this is what Smith says, he certainly is a subjectivist. But in contexts like this, as in the quoted material above, Smith would add another ‘warrant’ here; so that it would be not what the spectator *finds* warranted, but what the spectator *would be warranted in finding* warranted, that marks the moral. And this would spoil the subjectivism.

Smith fleshes out his notion of the connection between morality and the Impartial Spectator in ways which confirm my objectivist reading, I think. In Part 3, Chapter 2, “Of the Love of Praise, and of that of Praise-worthiness; and of the Dread of Blame, and of that of Blame-worthiness,” we see how the impartial spectator is the vehicle that takes us from the first

to the second of each of these pairs. Examining our own conduct, morality involves imagining what a spectator would be warranted in approving, not what he would in fact approve. Doing what is praise-worthy, what a spectator would be warranted in praising, is doing one's duty. To seek praise independent of praise-worthiness is vanity:

Praise and blame express what actually are; praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness what *naturally ought to be* the sentiments of other people with regard to our character and conduct. The love of praise is the desire of obtaining the favorable sentiments of our brethren. The love of praise-worthiness is the desire of rendering ourselves the *proper objects* of those sentiments. (Smith, 1976: 126, emphasis added.)

There is nothing in the least subjectivist about this. A subjectivist would be unable to mark this distinction, would reduce praise-worthiness to praise, and virtuous behavior to vanity. For Smith, this is what "the licentious philosophy" of Mandeville does, and this is what makes it licentious.

Immediately preceding the chapter under discussion, Smith remarks:

To be amiable and to be meritorious; that is, to deserve love and to deserve reward, are the great characters of virtue; and to be odious and punishable, of vice. But these characters have an immediate reference to the sentiments of others.

In light of what follows, it would be a mistake to give the last sentence a subjectivist import, to make the sentiment of others constitutive of amiability and merit. What the sequel supports, rather, is the idea that it is essential to goodness that the sentiments of *good* people (people able to deploy the correct criteria of goodness) would approve of it. The "characters" have an immediate reference, that is, not to the sentiments, but to the *warranted* sentiments of others, or

so it will turn out.

Now, to say that warranted sentiments are not reducible, in Smith, to actual sentiments, and that moral sentiments are the former rather than the latter, is not to deny any empirical connection between the two. Albeit very tenuously, and in some cases even inversely, praise can track praise-worthiness. Your conviction that you are acting in praise-worthy ways may be and likely will be biased in your favor, and the absence of any actual praise, coupled with the presence of clamorous actual blame may lead you to re-evaluate yourself, coming closer to the truth. In addition, a big theme, arguably the biggest, in TMS is the pilgrim's progress, by dint of his essential sociality, from the natural to the normative. By taking account of what other people think of us, we may learn better who we really are and become better people.

Smith gives these ideas a theological cast in the closing pages of Chapter 2. He tells us that our concern for the actual sentiments of others has been implanted in us by “the all-wise Author of Nature:”

He has made man, if I may say so, the immediate judge of mankind; and has, in this respect, as in many others created him after his own image, and appointed him his vice-regent upon earth, to superintend the behavior of his brethren....

But though man has in this manner been rendered the immediate judge of mankind, he has been rendered so only in the first instance; and an appeal lies from his sentence to a higher tribunal, to the tribunal of their own consciences, to that of the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator, to that of the man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of their conduct. (1176 129-30).

Following Smith's metaphor, a subjectivist would make the decisions of the lower courts- the actual sentiments of mankind- constitutive of the law. For Smith, that is only true of the Supreme Court. We can ask whether a lower court's decision is lawful. It makes no sense ask whether the Supreme Court's decision is lawful. It makes sense to ask of any actual or hypothetical moral sentiments whether they are warranted. It makes no sense to ask the same

question of our warranted sentiments.

Now I suppose one might use this passage to declare that Smith is a sentimentalist after all, but that he is a Divine Sentimentalist - that would be a sophisticated sentimentalism, indeed! But I don't think this works. The God Smith has in mind is almost certainly not the voluntarist God whose decision defines the good. In fact, as many have noted, God in TMS is synonymous with Nature, where the latter is advisedly capitalized, because it is not the physicist's facts shorn of any value, but the Stoic's thoroughly normativized Nature, from which we can read off our duty.

Finally, this passage patently contradicts Larmore's claim, cited above, that for Smith, conscience is "society within." Just beyond the cited passage, glossing it, Smith identifies society, the immediate judge, with "the man without," by contrast with conscience, the man within. They are clearly distinct.

For Smith then, though distinct, praise and praise-worthiness are not unrelated: the lower courts can faithfully apply the law. On the other hand, praise can sometimes track praise-worthiness, as I said, inversely. This is what Smith calls "the corruption of our moral sentiments, which is occasioned by this disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise or neglect persons of poor and mean condition" (1776: 61. This is the title of Part 1, Section 3, Chapter3):

That wealth and greatness are often regarded with the respect and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue; and that the contempt, of which vice and folly are the only proper objects, is often most unjustly bestowed on poverty and weakness, has been the complaint of moralists in all ages. (Ibid)

Notice that a moral sentimentalism in the traditional sense could find no meaning to the notion that our moral sentiments are "corrupt." If morality is essentially a matter of

sentiments, however sophisticated, how can they fail to track the good?!

This completes my case that Smith is a Moral Objectivist, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. But those appearances haunt me. There is no doubt that Smith's project breathes a subjectivist air, as it were. And he always seems on the verge of subjectivism, with some normative qualification –“warranted,” “proper”- pulling him back from the brink, while making him sound puzzlingly circular. Why?

This is my tentative suggestion. David Hume is seen by most people as an out and out subjectivist, with respect to both moral and practical reasons generally. Hume was an intellectual giant. Hume was Smith's friend and they were mutual admirers of each other's work. But I don't think Smith would have considered himself Hume's equal in moral philosophy, just as I don't think Hume would have considered himself to be Smith's equal in political economy.

Hume's subjectivism was new and it was radical. Smith, while to some extent deferring to Hume in matters moral, nevertheless profoundly disagreed with Hume on the issue of how thorough-going subjectivism could be. Might Smith not have taken the new Humean subjectivist bottles and filled them with old, objectivist, common-sense wine? Is this why the ghosts of subjectivism surrounding TMS are so hard to bust?

Utility, Propriety, and Love of System

Smith, I have argued, was no expressivist, not even a collective expressivist. The criterion for what is right and good is neither what we approve individually, nor is it what an impartial spectator would approve, but rather what an impartial spectator *ought to* approve. I am arguing that Smith's *meta-ethics* were not, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, subjectivist.

But among meta-ethical objectivists we may distinguish more or less *Substantively* subjectivist⁶ positions. On the subjectivist extreme, a utilitarian, for example, believes that the property that makes something objectively good is that it maximizes the utility or preference satisfaction of the greatest number. The ability to satisfy preferences or desires is the exclusive moral-reason-giving property. (Notice that at the level of the Collective, as opposed to the individual, this substantive subjectivism is very hard to distinguish from meta-ethical subjectivism - what is good is what We desire, albeit not necessarily what you or I desire. “We desire what is good” becomes tautological- the hall-mark of meta-ethical subjectivism.)

⁶ I am using term “substantively subjectivist” differently from Parfit in *On What Matters*. He uses it in the context of his examinations of normative reasons generally (not moral reasons alone) to refer to the view that we have objective reason to do whatever best satisfies our desires (the latter usually filtered in some way - e.g what we would desire in ‘ideal’ conditions). This counts as substantive subjectivism as a view of moral reasons as I am using the term, too, but so does utilitarianism (which Parfit holds to be true in important respects and not substantively subjectivist, since it doesn’t make exclusive pursuit of *the agent’s* desires to be what we have most reason to do.)

In what follows I want to argue that Smith was not a substantive Subjectivist, either. But I find his objectivism much less full-throated than it could be, due, I think to the deference he pays to Hume. The best place to see this tension at work, I think, is the short part 4 of *TMS*, called *Of the Effect of Utility Upon the Sentiment of Approbation*, containing just two chapters, “Of the beauty which the appearance of utility bestows upon all productions of art, and of the extensive influence of this species of beauty” and “Of the beauty which the appearance of utility bestows upon the characters and actions of men, and how far the perception of this beauty may be regarded as one of the original principles of approbation.”

This short section contains several of the most widely-quoted passages in *TMS* (including the single use of the phrase “the invisible hand” in the entire volume). And the whole of the two chapters is a running argument with Hume: the first chapter quarrels with Hume’s contention that “the utility of any object pleases the master by perpetually suggesting to him the pleasure or conveniency which it is fitted to promote (179)” and the second with Hume’s attempt, as Smith thinks, “to resolve our whole approbation of virtue into a perception of this species of beauty which results from the appearance of utility (188).”

Smith will argue, in the first chapter, that objects which provide utility are appreciated as much for the art and contrivance they display – or, out of what Smith calls our ‘love of system’ – as for the utility they provide. Similarly, in Chapter 2, concerning the evaluation of human character, he argues that “the sentiment of approbation always involves in it a sense of propriety quite distinct from the perception of utility.”

Now the particular positions of Hume that Smith is criticizing here are not a minor part of the Humean legacy. Indeed, they form the basis for the common view of Hume as a proto-utilitarian. Why, then, is Smith often lumped with Hume in precisely this respect – as a forerunner of utilitarianism? I think it is because Smith’s criticism takes place in the context of what may appear to be a fundamental agreement with Hume that utility is the sole criterion of objective value. What he appears to argue, that is, is that while our moral sense is guided by our sense of propriety- which is of course tied for Smith to the (warranted) views of an impartial spectator, that either:

- i. Our sense of propriety in fact tracks what is useful (the Author of Nature has so seen to it), or, where it does not
- ii. Our moral sentiments can be mistaken, just insofar as they fail to track utility.

The underlying agreement that what is in fact good is what is useful would in that case make Smith’s comments a fundamentally friendly emendation to Hume’s proto-utilitarian position.

But I don’t think all of what Smith says in these chapters can be squared with either i. or ii.

There is a residual that speaks to a reluctance on Smith’s part to accept the reduction of all values to utility, I believe.

In Chapter 2, there is a clear statement of (i.). Concerning Hume’s view that “no qualities of the mind... are approved as virtuous, but such as are useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others,” Smith says:

Nature herself seems to have so happily adjusted our sentiments of approbation and

disapprobation, to the conveniency of both the individual and of society that...I believe this is universally the case.

But, he says, “the view of this utility or hurtfulness is not the first or principal source of our approbation and disapprobation,” and that these sentiments are “originally and essentially different from this perception.” For, he says:

It seems impossible that the approbation of virtue should be a sentiment of the same kind with that by which we approve of a convenient and well-contrived building; or that we should have no other reason for praising a man than that for which commend a chest of drawers.

He does not say, *nota bene*, that we *think we have* other reasons for praising a man than the utility he creates for himself or others: he says we in fact have other reasons.

He goes on to consider qualities which are approved as virtuous because they are useful to ourselves, reason and understanding, on the one hand, and self-command, on the other. With respect to reason, he points out that “superior reason and understanding are originally approved of as just and right and accurate, and not merely as useful or advantageous.” Again, Smith’s language betrays him: is approval of the justness and rightness of reasoning merely the way in which the underlying exclusive objective value of reasoning – its utility – appears to us, or are these in fact independent grounds of value?

Smith’s position is unstable. This is because his account of propriety, as I have argued above, is based not on the brute sentiment but the *warranted judgement* of an impartial spectator. If that is so, then to establish that propriety is not transparently utilitarian in its evaluation is thereby to establish that an exclusively utilitarian account of objective value is wrong.

Finally, let me turn to the love of system, of art and contrivance, that Smith analyzes in Chapter 1. He argues that we come to value the means to the end of utility for their own sake. The poor man's son, famously in Smith's telling, who spends his life striving for, and finally achieves, wealth and greatness is no happier and no more secure that he would have been had remained poor. The trappings of wealth and greatness are merely elaborate contrivances.

Here we have something that seems to fit (ii.): the value we place on art and contrivance, our love of system apart from any utility it may bring, is a mistake. Concerning the "beauty of that accommodation which reigns in the palaces and economy of the great:"

If we consider the real satisfaction which these things are capable of according, by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling. But we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light. We naturally confound it in our imagination with the order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine or economy by means of which it is produced. The pleasures of wealth and greatness, when considered in this complex view, strike imagination as something grand and beautiful and noble, of which the attainment is well worth the toil and anxiety we are so apt to bestow upon it. (183)

What does Smith conclude from this? Having diagnosed, like a modern behavioral economist, a serious failure in our ability to choose in utility-maximizing ways, does he suggest a fix, a nudge? On the contrary:

It is well that nature imposes on us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. It is this which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forest of nature into agreeable and fertile plain, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth.

It is well?! We have just been told that the strivers for wealth and greatness, at a great cost in anxiety and toil, find themselves no happier. Is there an argument that the unintended

consequences Smith describes here so eloquently produce enough happiness to offset the cost? Not at all: what he lists here are all “contrivances,” means to happiness at most. I submit that they are valuable in themselves, apart from any happiness they might bring, and that this is the best way to make sense of Smith here. Science and Art *ennoble and embellish* human life – whatever they do for happiness. The founding of great cities and commonwealths, the creation of a civilization is intrinsically valuable, whatever the consequences for happiness. Despite his deference to Hume, I think, Smith’s fundamental differences with both Hume and the modern economist, for whom, like Hume, preference satisfaction is all there is, are undeniable.

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