

# The Partially Impartial Spectator

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**Abstract:** According to Adam Smith, we appeal to the imagined reactions of an ‘impartial spectator’ when justifying moral judgements of others and aspire to be impartial spectators when making judgements of ourselves. However, psychological research has shown that trying to be impartial will often have the paradoxical effect of reinforcing other-directed prejudice and self-serving bias. I argue that we can get around this problem by aspiring to be ‘partially impartial spectators’ instead.

**Keywords:** Adam Smith; impartial spectator; partial impartiality; ethical ideal; naïve realism; fundamental attribution error; bias; motivated reasoning; accuracy goal; directional goal

**JEL Classification:** B120, B310, B400

We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any fair and impartial spectator would examine it.

— Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (III.1.2, 129)<sup>1</sup>

“You listen to me. This is one time you’re not going to get away with twisting everything I say. This just happens to be one damn time I know I’m not in the wrong. You know what you are when you’re like this?” “Oh God, if only you’d stayed home tonight.” “You know what you are when you’re like this? You’re sick. I really mean that.” “And do you know what you are?” Her eyes raked him up and down. “You’re disgusting.”

— Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (2011, 35)

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent references to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, abbreviated as ‘TMS’, will be to the Cambridge edition (Smith 2002). References include, in this order, part (in upper case Roman numerals), section (where applicable, in lower case Roman numerals), chapter, and paragraph (in Arabic numerals).

If the two of us disagree, we may call upon a third person to help settle our conflict. Frequently, however, no third person is at hand, and we are left to our own devices. Fortunately, as Adam Smith notes, those devices include the ability to imagine what a third person, a spectator, would think, if present.

Unfortunately, as Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* reminds us, it is rarely easy for two people in conflict to agree what the reaction of this imaginary spectator would be.

This is true even if we agree that the imaginary spectator should be both "well-informed and impartial" (TMS, III.2.32, 150). A large body of evidence from research on psychological bias indicates that the very effort to "see our conduct from without, as any impartial spectator would see it" (TMS, III.1.2, 129) will backfire. Rather than getting a more impartial impression of ourselves, we each end up convinced that "this just happens to be one damn time I know I'm not in the wrong". Fast on the heels of this conviction comes the seemingly logical but disastrous conclusion that, if the other fails to agree, there must be something wrong with *them*: "You know what you are when you're like this? You're sick".

It is not immediately apparent how we are to avoid this outcome. We might try harder to be well-informed and impartial, but, as we shall see, this also easily backfires, leaving us worse off than we were before making the extra effort. Instead, I will argue, we can make at least some headway on the problem by trying *smarter*. Specifically, we can modify the ideal of the "impartial and well-informed spectator" (TMS, III.1.2, 129) to account for some of the most pernicious and commonplace biases that distort our moral judgements, and then aim for this modified ideal instead. Before I go into my argument for why and how we should aim to be 'partially impartial spectators', let me give you a brief history of the idea and ideal of the impartial spectator as Smith conceived of it.

## I. THE IMPARTIAL SPECTATOR AS A MORAL ANCHOR

One of the thickest threads running through the yarn of Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is that of the impartial spectator. That epithet is sometimes applied to actual people who happen to be sufficiently "indifferent" to judge us impartially (TMS, I.ii.4.1, 47). Its most important referent, however, is the *idea* of such a spectator, playing the role of an ethical ideal in our moral judgements (I.ii.2.1 97).

In a sense, the idea of the impartial spectator arises out of frustration. Smith saw humans as fundamentally sociable, driven by “an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend” other people (TMS, III.2.6, 135). In order to please and not offend, we “accustom ourselves” to consider our behavior from the perspective of other people (TMS, III.2.6.32, 152, n22). Then, we try to predict what will please—or at least avoid offending them—and do that.<sup>2</sup>

Experience, however, soon teaches us to abandon the “impossible and absurd project of gaining everybody’s good will and approbation” (TMS, III.2.6.32, 152, n22). First, we learn that people often judge us for things we have not done, or for “motives that had no influence on [our] action” (TMS, III.2.32, 150). Second, through acting to help one person, we will frequently find that we have angered another. If we question why, we will frequently discover that we are judged, not by whether our action was appropriate to our situation, but by whether it was suitable to their interests (TMS, III.2.6.32, 152, n22).

With this double realization, we begin to second-guess people’s judgments of us. We do so by imagining how someone who was not hampered by their lack of information or biased by their vested interests would react to our actions. We begin in other words to imagine how an “impartial and well-informed spectator” would judge us, if such a spectator were present (TMS, III.2.6.32, 152, n22).

Because this imagined spectator is better—“better” informed, “more” impartial—than most real ones, the hypothetical reactions of this ideal spectator gradually take on a normative priority over the actual reactions of most real spectators. The way we think an ideal spectator would react thus becomes how we think a real spectator should react (TMS, III.2.25, 147).

From this point onwards, we always have recourse from the “tribunal” of other people to the “higher tribunal” of “the man within the breast” (TMS, III.2.32, 150): the well-informed and impartial spectator that we can imagine judging us as we ought to be judged.

This is Smith’s story of how we develop a standard of propriety, a standard embodied in the idea of the impartial spectator. For present purposes, I will treat this story as an instance of what Dugald Stewart called “conjectural history”: A history not of how things in fact come about, but

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<sup>2</sup> Smith argued that blame and negative emotions hit us harder and are more powerful motivators than is praise and positive emotions (TMS, III.2.15, 141–142). For a more recent treatment of what is now known as ‘negativity bias’, see Rozin and Royzman (2001).

of how they plausibly could have come about, given what we take to be the “principles of human nature” (Stewart 1861, xxxv).<sup>3</sup>

One of the motivations for offering such a conjectural history is that it can help us identify the main functions of the thing thus explained, or the psychological needs to which it responds. Smith’s conjectural history of the impartial spectator suggests that one of the original functions of this hypothetical spectator is to give us an *anchor of stability* in the changing sea of others’ opinions of us. By developing an internal moral standard, we can fall back on the “man within” to correct “false judgement[s]” passed on us by ill-informed or partial others, effectively reassuring ourselves that the praise or blame in question is undeserved, and therefore not deserving of our attention (TMS, III.2.32, 150).

This is only one of several functions that a moral standard might serve. But seeing the impartial spectator as an anchor allows us to recognize two problems that may afflict our efforts to employ this standard in everyday deliberation and action: It sometimes gets stuck when we really should be heaving anchor, and sometimes slips when we need mooring the most.<sup>4</sup>

The second of these two problems, the problem of relying *too little* on our own conscience, certainly merits the attention it has got in research on how persuasion, conformity, and situation (instigated by Milgram 1963; Asch 1956; and Harman 1999, respectively) affect our moral judgements and actions. Smith himself noted how outside influence may sometimes overwhelm our own considered judgements, leaving us with a warped sense of propriety:

The violence and loudness, with which blame is sometimes poured out upon us, seems to stupify and benumb our natural sense of praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness; and the judgments of the

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<sup>3</sup> As for whether Smith is right about the desire to please and aversion to offend being fundamental parts of our psychology, there is evidence to suggest that autism may be the result of reduced social motivation (Chevallier et al. 2012). If so, a high level of social motivation cannot be *constitutive* of being human but may be typical.

<sup>4</sup> Note that this way of framing the problem neither presupposes nor prejudices the choice of any particular *metaethical* account of moral truth or absence thereof. To perpetuate the metaphor of the moral anchor: our anchor may always be dragging around in the silt (non-realism), or also sometimes chance upon solid bedrock (realism). The question with which I am concerned is not which of these two descriptions of the seabed is true. I am concerned with the problem, epistemic if you like, confronted by the individual in deciding when to rely on one’s present anchorage (whatever one’s beliefs about the constitution of the seabed), and when to seek new moorings. The metaethical theory you prefer *can* have an effect on this but need not. This caveat extends to my usage of ‘realist’ and ‘relativist’ in the penultimate section of the article.

man within, though not, perhaps, absolutely altered or perverted, are, however, so much shaken in the steadiness and firmness of their decision, that their natural effect, in securing the tranquillity of the mind, is frequently in a great measure destroyed. (TMS, III.2.32, 150–151)

However, when it comes to disagreements and conflict resolution, the more pressing problem is the first one, namely our tendency to rely *too much* on our own judgement. Research on the psychology of conflict and disagreement suggests that a significant chunk of our difficulties in this area stems from a kind of inflexibility in our perception and reasoning about other people. This inflexibility gets in the way of giving ground in situations where giving ground would, in fact, be requisite (and appropriate) for resolving disagreement. This inflexibility can be traced to two interrelated biases: The so-called ‘naïve realism’ bias and the ‘fundamental attribution’ error.

## II. THE BIASES THAT TRIP US UP

The ‘naïve realism’ bias gets its name from the idea that most people operate on the basic assumption that their idiosyncratic construal of the world is a direct and objective perception of a single, uncomplicated reality (Ichheiser 1949b, 6; Ross and Ward 1995, 278–284).

As first documented in the classic study ‘They Saw a Game’ (Hastorf and Cantril 1954), two groups of people can perceive the same objective reality quite differently, depending on what they are motivated to see. In that study, a student’s home team was consistently seen as more fair than the opposing team (for a more recent example and overview of research on this effect, see Madrigal and Chen 2008).

The effects of motivation on perception have since been demonstrated in other domains, such as politics (see LaMarre, Landerville, and Beam 2009; Kahan, Hoffman, Braman, and Evans 2012), and may run all the way down into our preconscious visual processing (Balcetis and Dunning 2006). Small wonder, then, if we are often unaware of just how our motivations shape our perception of a situation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The discussion of construal and motivational influences on perception in psychology at some point bleeds into a related but distinct debate about ‘cognitive penetrability of perception’. In that debate, ‘naïve realism’ is the name of a particular philosophical theory, rather than a bias. For more on this debate, see Montemayor and Haladjian (2017), for example.

An apparent corollary of our tendency to naïve realism is our tendency to assume that other people who, like us, are normal and impartial, will see things the same way we do (Ross and Ward 1995, 278; for a recent test of this, see Schwalbe, Cohen, and Ross 2020). To the extent that we are naïve realists, our first impulse when confronted with someone who does not share our opinion may be charitable: They only disagree because they do not know what we know (Ross and Ward 1995, 280). If so, we will also tend to think that it will be easy to get them around to our point of view: We just have to inform them of what we know; present them with the evidence (Ross and Ward 1995, 280).

Often, however, our ‘evidence’ will fail to persuade those who disagree with us. What is obvious to us turns out not to be so obvious to them, and what then? What we do not usually do—conspicuously so—is to take our failure to persuade others as a clue that we might be wrong. Instead, we tend to insist that this is ‘one damn time’ we know we are right and conclude that there must be something wrong with them to stop them from seeing straight (Ichheiser 1949a, 39; Ross and Ward 1995, 278). This is where the ‘fundamental attribution’ error comes into play.

The ‘fundamental attribution’ error is the name given by Ross to the tendency of people (at least in western cultures, see Miller 1984; Henrich et al. 2022) to “underestimate the impact of situational factors and to overestimate the role of dispositional factors” when attributing someone’s behavior to some cause or set of causes (Ross 1977, 183, cf. Sabini, Siepmann, and Stein 2001).<sup>6</sup>

The logic behind this discrepancy is as follows: if we think we perceive the world as it is, and we think that our reaction is an appropriate reaction, then it follows that our reaction is an appropriate reaction to the world as it is (Pronin, Gilovich, and Ross 2004, 794). If someone else comes along and reacts in a manner that contradicts our own, it follows that their reaction is not an appropriate reaction to the world as it is. The explanation for why they act as they do must lie in the person herself (Ross and Ward 1995, 280–281).<sup>7</sup>

Let us pause here for a moment to consider how strikingly this picture of humans under the influence of bias fits with that sketched by Smith in

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<sup>6</sup> Fundamental in the sense of being the “first [...] and most frequently cited bias or error” in this area, not in the sense of its place in a hierarchy of biases (Ross 1977, 183). Also called the ‘correspondence bias’ (Gilbert and Malone 1995). For more nuance, see Malle (2006).

<sup>7</sup> A recent meta-analysis indicates that this effect is primarily associated with negative events (Malle 2006).

his conjectural history of the impartial spectator: once we come to trust our own judgements, presumed to be reflected through the perspective of an impartial spectator (naïve realism), we begin to see judgements by others that fail to coincide with our own as evidence of their failure to live up to this ideal (fundamental attribution error). If someone else reacts to a situation in a manner we cannot understand, we do not stop to consider whether their construal of the situation might differ from our own. Instead, we think that the other is either ill-informed or partial (or both). And if we are particularly frustrated by our inability to understand the other, we might agree with Frank Wheeler: ‘You’re sick’!

The problem with this is not that other people are never wrong. As Ward and Ross point out, we will often be at least partly right to think badly of those who disagree with us:

Other people in general, and adversaries in particular (so the naïve realist readily observes), rarely hold views or advocate propositions whose acceptance would threaten their economic, social, or psychological well-being. In fact, they generally seem to hold views whose acceptance would plainly advance their individual or collective interests. (Ross and Ward 1995, 281)

But as they go on to note:

What generally will be lacking [...] is recognition on the part of the naïve realist that his or her own interests, ideological beliefs, and construals of facts and evidence are similarly congruent. (Ross and Ward 1995, 281)

In other words, the trouble with naïve realism and the fundamental attribution error is not (primarily) that we are mistaken in thinking that others are partial—they frequently are. The trouble is that we fail to consider that the same may be true of ourselves—and that it frequently will be.

This is part of a broader point: The biases that shape our reasoning are not necessarily bad. Indeed, the case has been made that biases like the ones we discuss here are pieces of a bigger puzzle. Studied in isolation, they may appear ill-suited if not inimical to our ideas of rationality. Once the puzzle is laid, however, a portrait emerges of a person who is pretty close to optimally rational faced with the limited evidence of uncertain quality to which the messy world presents us (Hahn and Harris 2014).

Stereotyping and confirmation bias, to take two other well-known biases that are relevant to moral judgement, may in fact and in the main be adaptive, whether by shaping our beliefs to match reality or the other way around (Peters 2020). The problem is that these biases create paths of least resistance, paths which may lead us astray in certain kinds of situations. One of the most pernicious paths runs from observing differences of opinion to concluding that those who disagree with us are mentally incapable of making correct, impartial judgements.

Seen this way, it would be tempting to conclude that the real issue is a kind of cognitive laziness on our part, and that we should simply *try harder* to be truly impartial spectators. ‘Try harder’ would then mean something like investing more effort into closing the gap between our take on the reactions of an impartial spectator and the reactions an actual impartial spectator would have, if she were present (TMS III.4.1, 182).

The literature on ‘motivated reasoning’ gives limited reason to be optimistic about our prospects for improving our reasoning through added effort.

### III. THE PROMISE AND PERILS OF MOTIVATION

‘Motivated reasoning’ (Kunda 1990) might sound bad by definition, but the motivation in question may simply be the wish to arrive at the *right* conclusion, whatever this might be. In that case, our reasoning is motivated in a way most people would find not only unproblematic, but admirable.

In the literature, this kind of motivation is usually known as an ‘accuracy goal’ (Kunda 1990, 481), and is sometimes associated with the (self-) image of the reasoner as an ‘intuitive scientist’ (Baumeister and Newman 1994, 4). Simply put, accuracy goals can help us reason better by motivating us to put extra effort into forming our judgement (Kunda 1990, 481–482). If for example you exhort students to be fair and open-minded when mediating a conflict between two college dorm roommates (McPherson Frantz and Janoff-Bulman 2000, Study 2), they will invest extra effort in seeing all sides of the case, evaluating merits and demerits. Indeed, they may even consciously control for what they suspect are their own implicit biases, giving some credence to the idea that trying harder is the solution we seek (Baumeister and Newman 1994, 6–11; Kunda 1990, 481–482).

Unfortunately, an accuracy goal only really works in the absence of its troublesome twin, the ‘directional goal’. If an accuracy goal is the desire to find the *right* conclusion, regardless of what it might be, a directional



goal is the desire to reach a *particular* conclusion, regardless of what the 'right' one might be (Kunda 1990, 482). Operating with a directional goal, the reasoner behaves as an 'intuitive lawyer' building a case for a client belief (Baumeister and Newman 1994, 5).

To continue with the example of the college dorm disagreement: you can give the student mediator a directional goal by presenting one of the roommates as gregarious and likeable and the other as overly serious and aloof. This will tend to give the mediator a directional goal to rule in the favor of the likeable student in the dispute between the two (McPherson Frantz and Janoff-Bulman 2000, Study 2). The question now is whether exhorting the mediator to be fair and open-minded can help counteract the biasing effects of this directional goal.

In fact, the opposite happens. The mediator does invest extra effort, but that extra effort goes into building a *stronger* case for the desired conclusion, namely that the more likeable student is right (Baumeister and Newman 1994, 7-8; McPherson Frantz and Janoff-Bulman 2000, 38-41). Having a directional goal tends to make the mediator partial, and adding an accuracy goal on top only exacerbates their partiality. Indeed, this particular combination could be said to produce the *worst* kind of partial judge: one who is supremely confident that she is, in fact, being fair and impartial, thanks to all the effort she has put into reaching her conclusion (McPherson Frantz and Janoff-Bulman 2000, 40). This point is worth repeating: if I am already partial, my partial judgements may only become *more entrenched* if I try harder to be impartial (McPherson Frantz 2006).

It should be noted that this rule has an exception: if the evidence in the case points unanimously and unambiguously towards a different conclusion than the one we desire, we will tend to concede that the desired conclusion is wrong and that the undesired conclusion is right (Baumeister and Newman 1994, 16; Kunda 1990, 487, 490). In the social realm, however, unanimous and unambiguous evidence is hard to come by (Uhlmann and Cohen 2007, 215). As long as we can sift the extant evidence for an argument to 'persuade a dispassionate observer' (Kunda 1990, 483), any added effort will tend to go into strengthening the case for the desired conclusion.

Moreover, in contrast to a real defense lawyer, we are not necessarily aware of the fact that our reasoning is under the influence of a directional goal. Indeed, most directional reasoning probably involves a degree of

self-deception, since, under a constraint of rationality, we must also convince ourselves that our argument is sound (Baumeister and Newman 1994, 5; cf., Rosenzweig 2016, on how we may be willing to dispense even with this semblance of consistency). Therefore, the self-image of the directionally motivated reasoner is not typically that of an ‘intuitive lawyer’. Instead, he will tend to think that he is behaving as an unbiased scientist, merely out to get the facts straight (Baumeister and Newman 1994, 5).

In this way, our motivations can play into and exacerbate our naïve realism: we assume that we see the world in a direct and uncomplicated matter, and if motivated to justify our views, we will tend to expend that extra effort on building the case that we were right all along. The way we see things is, in fact, the way things are: “what you see is all there is” (Kahneman 2013, ch. 7).

If you and I *both* reason in this manner, the effect is liable to be reinforced. Instead of trying to understand each other’s points of view and impartially evaluate the merits of each other’s arguments, we will expend our efforts in bolstering our own sense that we are right. We may allow ourselves to become more and more partial to our own position and willfully ill-informed about that of the other. Research on the role of bias in the escalation of conflict supports this. When one party to a disagreement infers that the other’s lack of comprehension is the result of bias, that party is likely to act more ‘conflictfully’ towards the other. This other in turn perceives (not unjustly) the first party to be *really* biased, thus acting more conflictfully in return—and so on in a downwards spiral (Kennedy and Pronin 2008).

Thence the painful familiarity of how, in the quote with which I started this discussion, the exchange between April and Frank rapidly degenerates: when Frank calls April “sick” for “twisting” everything he says, April is not thereby persuaded by the superiority of Frank’s (implied sane) perspective. Instead, she replies: “and do you know what you are?” [...] ‘You’re disgusting’, whereupon their quarrel escalates to a fight and goes ‘out of control’” (Yates 2011, 36–37).

In sum, the literature on cognitive biases suggests that we are unaware of the importance of construal to perception and judgement, and all too eager to ascribe differences in opinion to defects in the mind or character of those who disagree with us. The literature on motivated reasoning suggests that we can overcome some of the negative impact of these biases by striving to be impartial spectators, but only if we are not already partial. If we are already partial—or, as is particularly pertinent to the present

discussion, self-partial agents trying to see ourselves from the perspective of an impartial spectator—then *aspiring* to be impartial and well-informed is likely to result in us being *just as partial and ill-informed as ever*, with an unshakable confidence that any impartial spectator would agree with our view, to boot.

Admittedly, the picture is bleak. We should, however, not let the negative focus of our review occlude the fact that we sometimes also do quite a good job of seeing ourselves and our social surroundings accurately (Krueger and Funder 2004). Thus, while a simple ‘try harder’ is unlikely to have the desired effect of making us more like our ideal of the impartial and well-informed spectator, this does not signify that we are incorrigible.

Smith, despite all his insights into our frequent failings, also had faith in our ability to do better, and is sometimes quite optimistic on our behalf (see, for example, his discussion about the limits to self-love in TMS, III.3.4-5, 157-159). Charles Griswold suggests we read Smith’s optimistic descriptions of our capacities for sympathy and impartiality as part of a *protreptic rhetoric* meant to inspire us, his readers, to live up to our own ideals (Griswold 1998, 49, 104). In the context of our present attempt to tease out some better advice than ‘try harder’, this rhetoric merits a closer look.

Smith’s protreptic rhetoric can be seen to comprise two steps.<sup>8</sup> The first step is to show or remind us *what* our ideal is. Smith takes us through this step in his conjectural history of the advent of the impartial spectator, as related above. The second step is to show us when, how, and why we fall short of this ideal. Smith undertakes this second step over the course of a number of passages that are alternately entertaining and painfully recognizable in their accurate descriptions of our wonderful powers of self-deceit. One example is Smith’s description of the lengths we are willing to go to maintain a positive self-image:

We endeavor by artifice to awaken our old hatreds, and irritate afresh our almost forgotten resentments: we even exert ourselves for this miserable purpose, and thus persevere in injustice, merely because we once were unjust, and because we are ashamed and afraid to see that we were so. (TMS, III.4.4, 183-184)

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<sup>8</sup> I do not mean to imply that Smith passes through these steps, only that we can think of the protreptic rhetoric as comprising these two, distinct kinds of revelations.

After having followed Smith through the two steps of the protreptic rhetoric, we should know what our goal is, and the dangers that we need to avoid in order to attain that goal. The psychological research I have reviewed so far complements the second step of the Smiths' protreptic rhetoric by revealing in detail when, how, and why we make mistakes in our judgements of others and become overconfident in the probity of our own.

But how, exactly, does going through this second step equip us for the struggle to be more like the impartial spectator identified in the first step? The most obvious answer would be that, by being made aware of the operation of such biases, we are now in a position to overcome the negative impact they have on our judgements (for evidence supporting this approach, see Petty et al. 2007, 269-273; Nasie et al. 2014).

This, however, would be premature. The problem is not just that we are unaware of the impact of bias on our judgements: people frequently continue to believe themselves to be free of bias after being made aware of its likely impact on them, and even as they condemn others for failing to take biases into account in their judgements (Hansen et al. 2014; McPherson Frantz 2006; Pronin, Gilovich, and Ross 2004, 788; Pronin, Lin, and Ross 2002). On its own, therefore, mere awareness of bias is unlikely to be an effective remedy (Bezrukova et al. 2016). For this knowledge to be turned into a power to do better, we must find some way of integrating it into our striving.

Consider the following: the problem pointed out by research on naïve realism is that we tend to rely too much on what we *take* to be the perspective of an impartial spectator. This creates a world of trouble because what we take to be the perspective of an impartial spectator is invariably a version of our own perspective, which will often, if not always, be less than fully informed and impartial. That said, we can do better if we try: the potential for accuracy goals to improve our reasoning partly vindicates this premise of Smith's protreptic rhetoric.

What matters, then, is *how* we try. Simply trying harder will not do: given that accuracy goals exacerbate rather than ameliorate the biased reasoning associated with directional goals, trying harder to be impartial spectators is apt to backfire, making us even less like the impartial spectators we strive to be. The answer thus cannot be 'try harder', it must be 'try smarter'.

#### IV. TRYING SMARTER

As for how we should ‘try smarter’, it is worth remembering that the whole process leading up to the idea of a hypothetical impartial spectator starts out with our imagining the perspectives of actual spectators in an effort to predict what they will like and dislike. Only because of inconsistencies in the approval and disapproval of these actual spectators do we gradually shift towards imagining the reactions a hypothetical ideal spectator would have in their stead.

Seen from this perspective, the evidence from research on the impact of bias and motivated reasoning on interpersonal judgement and conflict reveals that many of us shift too far towards taking only the perspective of (our idiosyncratic construal of) the ideal spectator. An element of humility appears to have gone missing: we assume that we are right, we assume that any impartial spectator would agree that we are right, and we assume that anyone who disagrees with us does so out of a failure to take the perspective of such an impartial spectator. If this is indeed our problem, there would seem to be a simple solution: being a bit more humble.

But how, you may ask, are we to re-introduce the element of humility that appears to have gone missing (if it was ever present in the first place) into the reasonable aspiration to be more like the impartial spectator? Consider this: if we have shifted too far towards only taking the perspective of the hypothetical impartial spectator, then we have also shifted too far away from taking the perspectives of the real spectators around us. Trying smarter must therefore include shifting the balance back towards taking the perspective of other people.

Intriguingly, there is evidence to suggest that naïve realism and other psychological barriers to conflict resolution can, in fact, be addressed by getting the opposing parties to take each other's perspective (Batson and Ahmad 2009; Baumeister and Newman 1994, 7; Bruneau and Saxe 2012; Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000; Long and Andrews 1991). It must, however, be done properly. Overcoming the negative impact of naïve realism requires more than just ‘activating’ our ability to perspective-take, although this is an important first step (Epley and Caruso 2014, 300). Activation is insufficient because in trying to adjust our perspective to bring it closer to that of someone else, we may adjust too little, too much, or in the wrong direction, and yet, in an echo of motivated reasoning, think that we are doing it right (Epley and Caruso 2014, 302-307).

Therefore, merely reminding ourselves to imagine the perspective of the other will not be enough. Indeed, those who are the worst at understanding other people also think they are the best at it (an example of the Dunning-Kruger effect, see Ames and Kammrath 2004). Therefore, those who are most likely to fail to properly consider the point of view of the other are also those who are most likely to think that they are already taking it into consideration. Trying smarter cannot, therefore, merely be a matter of reminding ourselves about the importance of perspective-taking. Doing so may just make us that much more indignant in the failure of others to take ours.

Nor can trying smarter, as we have already seen, be a matter of exhorting ourselves to be ‘impartial’ or ‘unbiased’. This will often serve no other function than to entrench our biased beliefs. Nor, finally, can it be a matter of informing ourselves about the negative impact of bias. This, as we have also seen, will frequently do little more than confirm us in our belief that everybody else is biased beyond redemption, and hence unworthy even of the effort to see things from their (‘sick’) perspective.

We need to increase both the *likelihood* that we will consider the point of view of the other, and the *quality* of our perspective-taking. How do we do that? There is really only one way of improving the quality of our perspective-taking. We must let ourselves be informed by “the person principally concerned” (TMS I.i.4.6, 26). We must listen to the other.<sup>9</sup> Since this will not happen by itself, we need some way of reminding ourselves to listen to them. Especially when we are *least* disposed to do so. What can serve this function? I would like to argue that the ideal of the impartial spectator can serve this function—if we reshape it.

Consider again the second step of Smith’s protreptic rhetoric. It shows us when, how, and why we make mistakes in our judgements of others and become overconfident in the probity of our own. This knowledge is meant to help us be more like impartial spectators. Above, we saw that knowing about biases is not, on its own, enough to make us more like impartial spectators. The second step of the protreptic rhetoric thus appears to fail its purpose. But we can draw a different conclusion from these results if we look at the two steps of the rhetoric under one:

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in a study of people’s tendency to give too little weight to the opinions of others in making accurate judgements, Liberman et al. (2012) found that this ‘underweighting’ phenomenon was mediated by naïve realism, and that this could best be eliminated by asking people to talk their way to a shared estimate.

*If* we strive for the ideal of the impartial spectator, *then* knowing about directional goals and naïve realism will not in itself help us and may, in fact, only make matters worse.

The failure of the second step thus invites us to reconsider the first step in light of this failing. We should, that is, consider what role the ideal of the impartial spectator *itself* plays in generating the kind of trouble we find ourselves in, and whether there is something to be done to minimize this negative impact while maintaining the positive influence of having an ideal to which to aspire.

## V. A PARTIAL SOLUTION

We have already established that ‘trying smarter’ must include shifting the balance away from the impartial spectator, and back towards the perspective of other people. This is right in the sense that we need to invest more effort into understanding others compared to defending ourselves. Battling the beast of bias requires a return to the basics of ‘sympathy’ as Smith understood it, a return to the effort to “bring home to our own breast” other people's situation (TMS, II.i.5.3, 88).

We cannot, however, abandon the ideal of the impartial spectator only to go chasing after other people's incongruous ideas of praise- and blame-worthiness. We have already been there, tried that, and rejected it as an unsupportable mode of living; doing so would be a reiteration of the “impossible and absurd project of gaining everybody's good will and approbation” (TMS, III.2.6.32, n22, 152) that led to the invention of the impartial spectator in the first place. Abandoning the ideal would just restart the cycle.

The solution, therefore, is not to abandon the ideal, but to reshape it.<sup>10</sup> We must reshape the ideal spectator because the first casting produced an ideal that was simultaneously too malleable and too inflexible: Too malleable because too easy to mold into a model of ourselves, so that considering what an impartial spectator would think too easily turned

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<sup>10</sup> This reshaping of the ideal of the impartial and well-informed spectator also serves a response to the claim, in Forman-Barzilai (2010, 159), that Smith's ideal is practically incoherent because of a deep tension between being impartial and being well-informed. As Sivertsen (2019, 66) argues, the ideal of the impartial and well-informed spectator may yet be rescued as an ideal for practical moral deliberation if it is reshaped to be less ideal, more psychologically realistic. The partially impartial spectator is my proposal for such a psychologically informed, non-ideal, regulatory conception of the ethical ideal of the impartial spectator.

into an exercise in convincing ourselves that we were impartial all along; too inflexible because too difficult to change once set in this mold.

Note, however, that my reshaping the ideal is undertaken for the express purpose of improving our chances of actually being impartial spectators. The theoretical, ethical ideal of the impartial spectator is to be kept, but it must be kept thoroughly in the background, at least in the kind of interpersonal dispute that we are dealing with here. What we are after, therefore, is a new foreground or *regulative* ideal, something for which we can aspire and through which we can actually improve. To borrow a pair of well-known terms from political philosophy: we need a non-ideal principle to guide us, one that takes into consideration the biases and limitations in our thinking, in order to bring us closer to the ideal principle of the impartial and well-informed spectator.

The main task of this foreground ideal is to increase the likelihood and quality of our perspective-taking with the other(s) involved in the dispute. What shape must we give our mold to achieve this? It must, I think, be what I will call a *sophisticated relativist*.<sup>11</sup>

The sophisticated relativist is different from the naïve realist in two ways: she asserts i) that many, if not all, social situations of moral import—like that of an interpersonal disagreement between friends or lovers—admit of several, apparently incompatible, valid construals (that’s the relativist bit), and ii) that her construal might not be one of the valid ones (that’s the sophistication).

You might wonder whether it would not be enough for our foreground ideal only to assert ii), leaving open the question whether there is a single truth of the matter in moral matters—or even positively asserting that there is a single valid construal of most if not all social situations of moral import. You might wonder, that is, whether the smallest change needed to shape the impartial spectator into a usable foreground ideal is not simply to make it a *sophisticated realist*. After all, if our problem is our naïve belief that *our* construal is the only right one, we only need the humble admission that *it might not be* to get us closer to true impartial spectatorship.

It might be true that all we need is ii), but, as I have already argued at length, the kind of self-critical thinking that is needed to acknowledge ii) is hard to come by (for further evidence supporting this, see Lilienfeld,

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<sup>11</sup> The ‘relativist’ label is only intended as a rough and ready complement to the ‘realist’ of naïve realism, inspired by Donna Haraway’s discussion of realism and relativism in science (1988).



Ammirati, and Landfield 2009). The whole point of the exercise with which I am presently engaged is to discover some *other* route to that realization, some route that, if habitually followed, might allow for the development of the courage requisite to go directly to ii)—a courage Smith compares to the boldness of a “surgeon ... whose hand does not tremble when he performs an operation on himself” (TMS, III.4.4, 183). This is why we need the assertion that many, if not all, situations of moral import admit of several valid construals.<sup>12</sup>

By ‘we’ I mean people like me: *partisans to the cause of I*, who nonetheless aspire to be impartial spectators. We suffer from the naïve realism bias and are all too apt to fall into the trap of the fundamental attribution error when confronted with someone who does not share our view. We need a foreground ideal to remind us that we are not the only ones in the room who might be right, and the surest route, I claim, goes through i), the relativist aspect of the sophisticated relativist.

Note, however, that the sophisticated relativist, in contrast to what—following the naming convention I have adopted here—may be called the *naïve relativist*, does not accept all takes on a situation as equally valid. The sophisticated relativist knows that the real problem is naiveté: merely substituting relativist for realist notions may shift the battleground, but it does nothing to resolve the conflict.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the sophisticated relativist insists that our construal and judgement are only worthy of consideration if they are the result of an honest attempt at being impartial. The-impartial-spectator-as-sophisticated-relativist is still an aspirational ideal, still something we have to *strive* for.

Aspiring to be a sophisticated relativist thus means striving to see oneself and others as one imagines an impartial spectator would see us, while always acknowledging that whatever impartiality we may lay claim to is at best a *partial* impartiality. Partial not in the oxymoronic sense, but

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<sup>12</sup> Another option, worthy of further study, is the potential application here of the Jainist principle of *anekantavada*, or ‘no-one-perspectivism’, often illustrated by the fable of the five blind men and the elephant. Each of the men, perceiving only an isolated part of the whole, thinks that it must be a tree (the trunk), a rope (the tail), a wall (the side), a pillar (a leg) or a huge fan (an ear). A sixth man resolves the dispute by explaining how each of them is partially right because they each perceive a part of the whole elephant. Hence, a complete understanding of the truth of any matter (the *satya*) requires the consideration and acceptance of multiple, apparently incompatible points of view (see Mehta 2018).

<sup>13</sup> In the case of naïve realism, we admit only the truth of our own point of view. In the case of naïve relativism, we admit only the truth that all points of view are equally valid. In both instances, we fail to admit the possibility of error in our own point of view and truth in the perspective of another (see Haraway 1988, 584).

in analogy to Donna Haraway's 'partial objectivity' (1988): more demanding and more impartial than the naïve embrace of one's idiosyncratic perspective, but still only a part of a bigger picture, a picture others who are likewise engaged in striving to be *partially impartial spectators* must also contribute (see also Frein von Villiez 2006).

This invites the question of how we are to identify those others who are thus engaged. How are we, that is, to identify those whose diverging opinion we have to take seriously? How do we decide when to listen and give ground, and when to speak and stand fast? This is a difficult question, and I am not sure that there is an easy answer. There is, however, a method we can employ that may help us discover *whether* our interlocutor is interested in resolving the dispute through mutual rapprochement.

This method is simply to *unilaterally* apply the ideal of the partially impartial spectator in a dispute (see 'GRIT' in Osgood 1959). In other words, instead of waiting to discover whether our opponents are willing to listen to us, we should start by listening to them. If our opponents are similarly motivated, they will eventually reciprocate. If they do not reciprocate, we will have an indication that they are not motivated to reach an understanding, and we will have to decide whether to continue with our effort to resolve the dispute.

In short, having the partially impartial spectator as a moral ideal means always being ready to listen to the other because regardless of how certain we feel that we possess the truth, this is at best only a part of a bigger truth, and our opponents may well, regardless of how certain we feel that they do not, possess other parts of that truth.

Another worry remains. What if the only effect of adding 'partially' to 'impartial spectator' is to replace the conviction that we are *right* with the conviction that we are right *enough*?

What if, that is, the effort we are trying to channel away from the construction of ever more elaborate rational justifications for fundamentally biased beliefs does *not* end up going towards the amelioration of that bias through better perspective-taking? After all, these energies may be turned to other projects, or simply dissipate.

This is indeed a real danger, and one I cannot see any easy way of heading off. One imperfect option is to point to the fundamentally social nature of our being and reiterate Smith's point about our desire for mutual sympathy. This is an imperfect option, because we may seek that community where there is least resistance to our views. It is nevertheless

a worthwhile option to consider, since the experience of mutual sympathy, the experience of being able to reach an understanding with someone, is inherently positive, and thus may serve to reinforce our commitment to trying smarter in being impartial spectators.

In the end, my whole argument amounts to a wager. I wager that holding something like the partially impartial spectator as a moral ideal will improve our chances of resolving the kind of interpersonal dispute exemplified by April and Frank Wheeler in the opening quote of this article.

Whether this wager can ever be fully decided by empirical research is, I think, an open question. We might, however, get some indication of whether the ideal of the partially impartial spectator has any merit by plugging a description of this ideal into established empirical paradigms for testing, for example, the effects of accuracy goals on directional reasoning (e.g., McPherson Frantz 2006). If thinking like a partially impartial spectator ameliorates the negative impact of bias in such cases, this would be an indication that I am right.<sup>14</sup> If the opposite turns out to be the case, and the ideal of the partially impartial spectator exacerbates bias as much as, or more, than do exhortations to be 'fair' and 'unbiased', this would be an indication that I am wrong.<sup>15</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

The naïve assumption that we see the world as it is, in a direct and uncomplicated manner, gets in the way of our seeing it impartially. It does so because instead of listening to those who disagree with us, we too easily conclude that there must be something wrong with them to stop them from seeing what to us is plain truth.

Knowing about this unfortunate tendency of ours is not enough, on its own, to bend our deliberations in a better direction. As long as we are trying to be impartial spectators, we will continue to fall into the trap of mistaking our attempts at being impartial for actually succeeding, and in this mistake, condemn those who disagree with us as hopelessly partial.

What we need, therefore, is to redirect our strivings away from that ideal, and towards other people. Only by being less concerned with what a hypothetical impartial spectator would think of our disagreement, and

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<sup>14</sup> For evidence of the converse effect, see Uhlmann and Cohen (2007). Also, for overconfidence, see Harvey (1997), and for a possibly analogous case of the impact on judgement of different explanations of an apparently self-evident concept, see the case of 'reasonable doubt' in Horowitz and Kirkpatrick (1996).

<sup>15</sup> For what it's worth (which is not much), my own, very personal experiments with this are so far inconclusive.

more concerned with what actual others think, can we hope to balance our belief in our own pre-eminence with willingness to listen to others who might see us less favorably.

However, we cannot simply abandon our striving to be more like the impartial spectator. Even if we are, at present, egregious egocentrists, our problems are not solved by becoming abject allocentrists. Therefore, we need a reshaped ideal for which we can strive, and in striving for which we can actually improve.

In practice, a partial impartiality is the best any of us can hope to achieve on our own. Incorporating this limitation in our personal conception of the ideal spectator, we combine intellectual honesty with ethical humility and openness to others into the very thing for which we strive. If we thus choose the partially impartial spectator as a regulative ideal of our own moral judgements, then no matter how great our capacity for self-delusion, we will always, if we stop to consider it, recognize the potential for improvement in what are necessarily imperfect moral judgements, and be reminded of the need to listen to those who disagree with us.

When Frank Wheeler jumps from his certainty that he is right—“This just happens to be one damn time I know I’m not in the wrong”—to the conclusion that there must be something wrong with his wife April—“You know what you are when you’re like this? [...] You’re sick. I really mean that”—he is operating on the default logic of naïve realism. If I am right, and I think any impartial spectator would agree, then, if you refuse to admit that you are wrong, there must be something wrong with you. While it may already be too late for April and Frank at this point, breaking the logic of naïve realism is one way of stopping the downwards spiral of disagreement into conflict.

Adopting the partially impartial spectator as a foreground ideal for moral deliberations breaks the logic of naïve realism by breaking the link between my certainty that I am right and my belief that you must be wrong. It does so by replacing, in practice, the monolithic ideal of the impartial spectator with a multifarious one. I may still believe that I am right, and I may be convinced that I am a partially impartial spectator of myself, but this does not mean that there is anything wrong with you, since two partially impartial spectators may well differ in their opinions without either being ‘sick’ or ‘disgusting’. Or so both of us might think, and so both of us may be that more willing to listen to the other.

Whether this will work or not is, at least in part, an empirical question, and given the potential benefits, I think it worth investigating further.

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