The Demigod Within the Breast:
Reflections on Ben-Moshe's (over)-idealization of the moral point of view

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Forthcoming in the Adam Smith Review

The last thirty years have witnessed a renaissance of Smith scholarship. Once treated by philosophers largely as a footnote to Hume, Smith is now treated as an important moral philosopher in his own right. His accounts of virtue, sympathy, and moral judgment have received extensive attention, and the ways in which these accounts differ from (and arguably have meaningful advantages over) Hume's accounts of the same are widely recognized. Similarly, the 'Das Adam Smith Problem' that supposedly vexed Smith's account of the relationship between markets and morality has been thoroughly dispatched. But while Smith's moral theorizing has rightfully received attention from those favorably inclined to sentimentalism as well as those involved in the burgeoning PPE movement, his work has not received the attention it deserves among those engaged in the kinds of ethical debates shaped by whether one is inclined to be a Humean or Kantian about reasons (and the various meta-ethical implications of being one or the other).[1] Nir Ben-Moshe's new book *Idealization and the Moral Point of View: An Adam Smithian Account of Moral Reasons* promises to rectify this. His book begins by boldly pronouncing his aim to do for Smith what Korsgaard did for Kant – that is, to present a comprehensive and distinctively Smithian account of the nature of our normative reasons for action – and in that he thoroughly succeeds. Indeed, my biggest complaint about the book may be that there was room for Ben-Moshe to have been more ambitious than he in fact was (more on that in a moment). It also warrants mentioning that the book Ben-Moshe has produced is admirably concise despite engaging with several interesting and distinct debates, and despite the

[1] Stephen Darwall's *Second Person Standpoint* Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*. is a notable exception here.

fact that the explication of his view is very precise (almost to a fault).[2] That said, the point of an essay like this is not so much to flag what one admires and agrees with, as to explore the points where one has substantive disagreements, and in my case there are at least a couple of these. I will turn to those disagreements shortly, but before doing so it will be useful to also say something about the framing of the book, because I think that framing provides useful context for the points of disagreement I want to hash out here.

Ben-Moshe suggests that the target of the book is contemporary ethicists sympathetic to an anti-realist, naturalistic metaethical framework, and in particular to moral sentimentalism. That framing allows him to more fully explore the contours of his own view instead of having to survey the wide terrain of alternative views, and, more importantly, it allows him to do so without having to worry whether he has provided the best characterizations of views held by opponents he's unlikely to convert. However, as someone who falls squarely within Ben-Moshe's target audience, I think there was room for the book to have been a bit more ambitious in its framing. At the very least, the book could have done a bit more in the introduction to say something about why the way of thinking about morality it adopts is attractive. And since Ben-Moshe doesn't do this, I'll say here that I think a fruitful way of approaching the book is as an attempt to show why the Smithian account of reasons it develops makes an anti-realist, naturalistic metaethical framework more attractive and plausible than the realists tend to think. I should say, too, that I think that it would have been worth framing things this way not just because it would make the project relevant to a broader audience, but also because I suspect that Ben-Moshe himself is sympathetic to some of the claims made by realists. At the very least, Ben-Moshe seems to have implicitly endorsed some of the ways in which realists have framed debates about what it means for a reason to be a *moral* reason or for an account of morality to be persuasive, and as we will see in what follows most of the disagreements I have with his account stem from the fact that I'm more skeptical of these framings, and I think Smith arguably was as

[2] I say "almost to a fault" here not because the precision isn't warranted (indeed it is necessary at times). Rather, I simply mean that I sometimes found the formulation of his view so precise as to be distracting, in the sense that it occasionally made it difficult to grasp the view of the forest through the trees.

well. My hope, then, is that this exchange can provide an opportunity for Ben-Moshe to clarify where his sympathies lie in this regard.

On to the disagreements. My first point of contention is with Ben-Moshe's suggestion that the moral point of view is (or should be) universal. Second, I disagree with his argument that other-oriented sympathy is ultimately the "proper" form of sympathy, although here I should say that I think he's right that this form of sympathy constitutes a genuine normative and psychological achievement, and his argument for *that* claim is both important and persuasive. As we will see, in each case I also happen to disagree not only with the substantive theoretical claim Ben-Moshe is making, but with his arguments that these are claims that Smith would have (or could have) endorsed. I'll discuss the claims in order.

Ben-Moshe develops an account of moral reasons / normative standards according to which the source of these standards are the judgments of a universal impartial spectator. According to Ben-Moshe universality is necessary so that our standards of correctness for moral judgments:

> 1) are not objectionably relativistic, that is "not dependent on what each one of us, or even a collection of us, approves and disapproves of," and
>
> 2) can make intelligible the idea that "we might all be wrong" in our judgments (and perhaps always have been).[3]

I agree that a universal impartial spectator of the sort Ben-Moshe describes would have these virtues, and I also agree with his argument that the standards derived from the judgments of such a spectator can be recognizable and motivationally efficacious for agents. I part ways with Ben-Moshe, however, insofar as it's not clear to me that the perspective of the impartial spectator needs to be universal to have these virtues. Put differently, I worry that Ben-Moshe runs together the concepts of impartiality and universality. While the former might be necessary to get

[3] Ben-Moshe, 108.

normative leverage on our practices that's sufficiently independent of our actual judgments and whatever biases infect them, it's not clear that universality is needed for this. Indeed, I worry that the aspiration for universal standards threatens to sever the connection to actual judgments and psychology that makes the sentimentalist picture so attractive. And, even if it doesn't do this, I worry that the aspiration for universality creates intractable questions about the times, places, and agents that we do (and don't) want to be able to hold our moral judgments fixed over.

Of course, this isn't meant to be a knock down objection. After all Ben-Moshe is far from the first moral philosopher to suggest that universality is a necessary or desirable trait for moral judgments to have. I just want to know more about why we need to aspire to universality.

Perhaps more importantly for our purposes, though, I want to push back on Ben-Moshe's suggestion that Smith thought of the impartial spectator as providing universal judgments because I read him quite differently. Of course, this isn't to say that there's no support for the reading of Smith that Ben-Moshe presents. As he ably shows, there are several places where Smith seems to suggest that the impartial spectator we really aspire to create will have "no connection at all" to either the agents being evaluated or to those affected by their actions.[4] But here I would note that there's a difference between aspiring for a judge that has no connection at all to the events being judged, and the presumption that the judgments we seek should always and everywhere be the same. While it may be true that we often aspire to a kind of universality, it's not clear that this is always true, nor are discomfited by the fact that our moral judgments are sometimes parochial. Indeed, I think the most persuasive reading of Smith places the tension between the aspiration for impartiality and the need for normative judgments to be parochial at the center of his thinking. Smith clearly thought this tension was inescapable, and my conjecture here is that he was concerned that taking this seriously makes the further demand for universality impractical and perhaps even undesirable. Consider for instance TMS III.2.31-35. These are the

[4] See for example the passages from TMS III.2 that appeared in editions 2-5 that Ben-Moshe discusses at length on p. 125 (as well as earlier in chapter 4.3 at note 122). As is customary, all references to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* are to the part, section, chapter, and paragraphs of the 6th edition of the Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Smith.

two paragraphs in the sixth and final edition of TMS that replace the replace the passage Ben-Moshe cites, along with the following three paragraphs which were not revised. Here Smith explicitly contrasts the perspective of the impartial spectator (or man within the breast) with both the immediate and less reflective judgments of the "man without" as well as with the those of the "all-seeing Judge of the world." And although Smith makes it clear that the judgments of the latter play an important role in comforting us in the face of the unavoidable fact that we won't always get what we deserve, it's not obvious he takes this perspective to be the operative standard for everyday social morality. Indeed, Smith explicitly calls attention to the "demigod" like nature of the man within the breast, and in doing so he makes a point of observing that aspects of the impartial spectator that distinguish it from the gods are precisely what make it an appropriate arbiter of human affairs.

More specifically, in the paragraphs just mentioned Smith notes that man – through his reverence for the sentiments and judgments of his brethren – has been rendered the immediate judge of mankind.[5] But here Smith reminds us that the immediate judgments of man tend to be founded in "the desire of actual praise, and in the aversion to actual blame," and so he goes on to suggest that these judgments provide only provisional normative standards insofar as they are always subject to the scrutiny of the "much higher tribunal" provided by the impartial spectator whose judgments are founded instead "in the desire of praise-worthiness, and in the aversion to blame-worthiness."[6] The verdicts rendered by the higher tribunal of conscience are not necessarily dispositive, though. While the man within is usually able to correct the false judgments of men in cases where we are praised or blamed for actions we did not perform (or motives that did not influence us), Smith notes that there are cases where this is not always so, and his discussion of these cases is nuanced enough to be worth quoting at length.

> "The man within seems sometimes, as it were, astonished and confounded by the vehemence and clamour of the man without. The violence and loudness with which blame is sometimes poured out upon us, seems to stupify and benumb our natural sense of

[5] TMS III.2.31

[6] TMS III.2.32

> praiseworthiness and blameworthiness; and the judgments of the 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. We scarce dare to absolve ourselves, when all our brethren appear loudly to condemn us. The supposed impartial spectator of our conduct seems to give his opinion in our favour with fear and hesitation; when that of all the real spectators, when that of all those with whose eyes and from whose station he endeavours to consider it, is unanimously and violently against us. In such cases, this demigod within the breast appears, like the demigods of the poets, though partly of immortal, yet partly too of mortal extraction. When his judgments are steadily and firmly directed by the sense of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, he seems to act suitably to his divine extraction: but when he suffers himself to be astonished and confounded by the judgments of ignorant and weak man, *he discovers his connection with mortality, and appears to act suitably rather to the human than to the divine part of his origin*."[7]

Smith's analogy of the impartial spectator to a demigod requires some interpretation. One might think that Smith is here simply pointing to an imperfection in our actual psychologies, but that doesn't exactly square with Smith's suggestion that we "act suitably" in sometimes discounting the voice of our conscience.[8] More importantly, I think Smith's discussion in the subsequent paragraphs tells against a reading that privileges the perspective of either the spectator or even something more idealized. There Smith notes that when the impartial spectator is overwhelmed by the ordinary less reflective judgments of man, we are apt to appeal to the "still higher tribunal . . . of the all-seeing Judge of the world, whose eye can never be deceived, and whose judgments can never be perverted."[9] And, though such appeals are "deeply rooted in human nature" and may well provide "effective consolation" for us, as Smith also notes, they do so at the cost of

[7] TMS III.2.32, emphasis added

[8] Notably Ben-Moshe points to Smith's analogy of the impartial spectator to a demigod, *and to the fact that this entails limits on the extent to which its judgments are idealized*, in responding to Sayre-McCord's 'standards-for-standards' challenge to ideal observer theories. See Ben-Moshe, *Idealization and the Moral Point of View: An Adam Smithian Account of Moral Reasons*, chap. 4.5, especially p. 110., where he is referencing Sayre-McCord, "Sentiments and Spectators"; Sayre-McCord, "Hume and Smith on Sympathy, Approbation and Moral Judgment.". As my argument suggests, though, Ben-Moshe makes less of these constraints on the impartial spectator than I do.

[9] TMS III.2.33

making "our happiness in this life" dependent upon the "hope and expectation. . . that there is a world to come, where exact justice will be done to every man."[10] Moreover, Smith suggests that, as attractive as the notion that there may be a world in which cosmic justice is realized may seem, it is rightfully subject to derision insofar as its demands have been "too frequently in direct opposition to all our moral sentiments."[11]

To return to the conjecture with which this discussion began, then, what I think Smith is sketching in the passages discussed above is a picture of social morality and the reasons it offers us in which multiple perspectives have normative authority, and where, crucially, we should be hesitant to privilege the authority of the most idealized perspectives. Having spent quite a bit of time on these passages, though, I don't want to give the impression that the exegetical argument I'm engaged in here with Ben-Moshe hangs on just the few paragraphs I've discussed above. Rather, I think one finds support for this view in the numerous places where Smith reminds us that the judgments of the impartial spectator are arrived at by weighing considerations and perspectives that may well vary from one place to another, and indeed in a handful of other places where he suggests that the judgments of the impartial spectator itself are weighed against other judgments. Consider, for instance, Smith's suggestion that not only utility but the appearance of utility has an effect on the sentiment of approbation, as does our sensitivity to custom and fashion.[12] Of course, Smith does not go as far as Hume in founding our sense of virtue entirely

[10] TMS III.2.33

[11] TMS III.2.33. Smith further reinforces this assessment in the final paragraph of the chapter (TMS III.2.35) where he contrasts the safe confines of a monastery within which a monk might pursue a life of virtue with the 'ennobling' hardships and hazards of war. "To suppose that one day, or one hour, employed in the former should, in the eye of the great Judge of the world, have more merit than a whole life spent honourably in the latter, is surely contrary to all our moral sentiments," he says. And, yet, it is this spirit which, "has condemned to the infernal all the heroes, all the statesmen and lawgivers, all the poets and philosophers of former ages; all those who have invented, improved, or excelled in the arts which contribute to the subsistence, to the conveniency, or to the ornament of human life; all the great protectors, instructors, and benefactors of mankind; all those to whom our natural sense of praiseworthiness forces us to ascribe the highest merit and most exalted virtue."

[12] See TMS parts IV and V

upon such considerations, but in allowing that they might appropriately have some influence, Smith seems to make our normative assessments sensitive to considerations that will tend to vary significantly from one time and place to another. Or consider Smith's reflections in the final two sections of TMS where he clearly commits himself to the view that only some parts of morality – namely, the rules of justice – are amenable to being enumerated in a precise and accurate way, while all other virtues are "loose, vague, and indeterminate."[13] As I've discussed at length elsewhere, though, perhaps the most convincing evidence that Smith would have been skeptical of the degree of idealization demanded by the aspiration for universality comes from his discussion of the role the impartial spectator plays in mediating our "irregular sentiments" in TMS II.iii.[14] And perhaps even more directly (if less clearly) in his tendency throughout TMS to refer to the "supposed impartial spectator" where it's not obvious that the "supposed" qualification is being invoked as a way of discounting the impartial spectator's normative authority.

Of course, to be fair to Ben-Moshe, he doesn't claim to be offering an account of Smith's view. Instead, he's defending a view that is recognizably Smithian. And while I have my reservations about the way in which Nir depicts the impartial spectator, I wholeheartedly agree with him that Smith's impartial spectator and his account of sympathy allow Smith's account to overcome several challenges that plague Hume's account of normative judgments. For my part though I think the worry with Hume's account is less that our judgments will be parochial than that Hume has a less persuasive account of how societies will come to converge on normative judgments, and a less persuasive account of how the general point of view gets motivational

[13] TMS VII.iii and VII.iv, especially VII.iv.1-2. Note that in section 4.3 Ben-Moshe points to Smith's claim that we can enumerate general rules of justice as evidence that the impartial spectator is capable of generating universal moral principles. But in doing so, he ignores Smith's subsequent qualification that this is not true of other aspects of morality.

[14] See Hankins, "Adam Smith's Intriguing Solution to the Problem of Moral Luck." Here it's worth noting that Ben-Moshe also acknowledges the relevance of these passages in the same section referenced in note 8 above. Once again, though, he seems to think that these passages do less to reign in Smith's view than I do.

traction on us.[15]

It's perhaps also worth noting that Ben-Moshe doesn't take himself to be presenting the kind of view that I (and perhaps more importantly Smith) are skeptical of. As Ben-Moshe notes in the introduction to his book, his motivation for developing a Smithian account of reasons is precisely that he believes Smith develops arguably the most promising version of a modest ideal observer theory within an anti-realist and naturalistic framework. So perhaps the complaints I've laid out here are an example of countenancing one man's modesty for another's licentiousness. That said, I want to reiterate my worry that the view Ben-Moshe presents is idealized enough that it risks losing the motivational grip on us that the commitment to modest idealization is supposed to retain. And before moving on to other matters I also want to suggest that, insofar as Ben-Moshe's goal of developing an account of a universal impartial spectator is motivated by a desire to have the resources for grappling with the fact that the received consensus about our truth or falsity of our moral judgments might be wrong, it bears noticing that the demand that our normative judgments be universalizable is no guarantor that they are in fact correct.

Having registered my concern about universality, I now want to conclude by briefly turning to a second worry about the respective roles that Ben-Moshe ascribes to self- vs. other-oriented sympathy.[16] As Ben-Moshe describes them, self-oriented sympathy is derived from imagining oneself in another's position, while other-oriented sympathy derives from imagining *being the other person in their situation*. I want to spend some time on this distinction and work it does for Ben-Moste because I think he has produced an important and persuasive account of how other-oriented sympathy represents a psychological and normative achievement. However, there are several places where he seems to suggest that is other-oriented sympathy alone that we ultimately want to use to construct the judgments of the impartial spectator, and that provides our normative standards, while self-oriented sympathy is merely important in helping us

[15] For these arguments see Hankins and Thrasher, "Smithian Sympathy and the Emergence of Norms."

[16] Ben-Moshe develops this argument at length in chapter 3.

develop the capacity for other-oriented sympathy.[17] And while I agree with Ben-Moshe that other-oriented sympathy is important, I think he is too quick to discount self-oriented sympathy. Given my previous worry this probably isn't surprising, but the worry itself is distinct from my previous concerns and also has some different implications so I think it's worth sketching in more detail.

As I read Smith, the impartial spectator is meant to be a mechanism that mediates our judgments/sentiments and those of others. To do so we utilize both self-oriented and other-oriented sympathy (as well as whatever other inferences we can make about what others think/feel based on what they say/do/outwardly express). So, while other-oriented sympathy is a normative achievement that is absolutely crucial to generating an impartial spectator that can deliver authoritative normative guidance, we shouldn't necessarily privilege "what I think you would feel in your shoes" over "what I would feel in your shoes." Indeed, I don't think we should even entirely privilege what an idealized neutral party would feel in your shoes over those other perspective. Instead, what we want (and, more importantly, what I think Smith thought we needed) was a way of mediating between all of these perspectives. But that requires holding on to a certain degree of partiality in all of our judgments. Or, at the very least, it requires holding onto the thought that all of our individual perspectives have a valuable normative contribution to make that deserve independent normative weight.

Of course, at this point, it bears repeating that Ben-Moshe's goal is not to present an account of Smith's view, let alone a defense of it. Rather, his goal is to defend a view that is recognizably Smithian. And the view he presents *is recognizably Smithian*. Furthermore, I agree with Ben-Moshe that Smith may not have fully appreciated the difference between self- and other-oriented sympathy, and, as a result, his account of sympathy is less clear and persuasive than it could have been.[18] My worry here is simply that, to the extent that Ben-Moshe has departed from Smith's own view in prioritizing other-oriented sympathy, he's given up on something

[17] See, e.g., Ben-Moshe chap. 3.5, especially fn. 104, and his later discussion at pp. 153-154.

[18] Ben-Moshe makes this conjecture at pp. 62-63 and then develops his argument for the claim in chap. 3.2.

important. In fact, I think there are two real costs to embracing a view that downplays the *normative* significance of self-oriented sympathy. The first is that an account of the impartial spectator rooted entirely in other-oriented sympathy strikes me as less motivationally efficacious. As Ben-Moshe convincingly argues, the development of other-oriented sympathy is a normative achievement. And a fully developed impartial spectator requires that perspective. But while some individuals might be capable of reasoning from *and being motivated by* a perspective that doesn't privilege their own standpoint at all, most won't be. Second, and more importantly, I think giving up on the normative (as opposed to developmental) significance of self-oriented sympathy threatens to take away something of genuine normative value. It's not just that the average person is unlikely to fully take up an other-oriented perspective. Rather, the problem is that bringing our self-oriented sympathy to bear on the deliberations of the impartial spectator is perhaps the crucial mechanism through which we draw attention to the unique perspectives we bring to bear on the world. After all, individuals almost always have privileged access to their own feelings and motivations. And while their perception of these things might not be accurate, they are clearly of normative significant. Furthermore, individuals are often aware of aspects of events they are involved in that others are not aware of, and, more importantly, that others would still not have been aware of even if they had been in our position. My worry, then, is that privileging other-oriented perspectives over self-oriented perspectives encourages us to lose sight of the value of this information.

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