

***Irreligion and the Impartial Spectator  
in Smith's Moral System\****

*When we thus despair of finding any force upon earth which can check the triumph of injustice, we naturally appeal to heaven, and hope, that the great Author of our nature will himself execute hereafter, what all the principles which he has given us for the direction of our conduct, prompt us to attempt even here ... And thus we are led to the belief of a future state, not only by the weaknesses, by the hopes and fears of human nature, but by the noblest and best principles which belong to it, by the love of virtue, and by the abhorrence of vice and injustice.*

- Adam Smith (TMS, 3.5.10)

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A number of commentators on Smith's philosophy have observed that the relationship between his moral theory and his theological beliefs is "exceedingly difficult to unravel".<sup>1</sup> One obvious reason for this is that there is no detailed discussion of theological issues of either a metaphysical or moral kind in any of Smith's works. It is not possible, therefore to use Smith's other writings as a tool for clarifying his views in *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* as it concerns the ethics/religion relationship.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this, the biographical details concerning Smith's life and religious attitudes and practices do not settle this issue one way or the other. The available evidence, as generally presented, suggests that although Smith was not entirely orthodox by contemporary standards, he has no obvious or significant irreligious commitments or orientation.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to this view of things, I argue that behind the veneer of orthodoxy that covers Smith's discussion in *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* there are significant irreligious themes present in his work. Two irreligious themes, I maintain, are especially important. The first is that the impartial spectator, as described in Smith's moral system, serves to sustain and support moral conduct and practice without any reliance on the goodness and justice of God in a future state. By this means, Smith is able to show how moral life is grounded in human nature without collapsing into the scepticism and "licentiousness" associated with the moral systems of Hobbes and Mandeville. On the other hand, related to this first irreligious theme, Smith also points out that there is no perfect match between virtue and happiness in this life. More specifically, he notes that even the mechanism of the impartial spectator cannot protect the innocent person from the miseries associated with unjust condemnation by others in our society. The general force of Smith's observations on this matter is not to justify the credibility of the doctrine of a future state but rather to explain its deep psychological roots in our (human) moral nature. In the final section of this paper I argue that although these two irreligious themes are clearly present in *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, Smith does not manifest the kind of systematic hostility to the influence of religion on moral life that features prominently in Hume's writings. On this basis, I conclude that Smith's views on ethics should be characterized as "weakly irreligious" in contrast with Hume's "strongly irreligious" ethical views.

### ***I. God's Dual Role in Smith's Theory***

In the 18th century context in which Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* first appeared (1759) it was impossible to separate problems of ethics from problems of religion. Much of the debate between various schools of ethical theory took place within the wider context of the debate between defenders of the Christian religion and "freethinking" opponents or critics of established orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup> All contributors on the subject of ethical theory would certainly be well aware that the positions that they took up had religious significance and would be interpreted with this framework in mind. Considerations of this kind raise, of course, a number of familiar methodological problems. On one hand, authors at this time, when they advanced "dangerous" or "irreligious" doctrines, generally concealed or indirectly stated their views. On the other hand, irreligious intentions have often been falsely attributed to authors, and authors are not always aware of the irreligious implications of the position that they take up. The difficulty, therefore, is to accurately identify intended but concealed irreligious or unorthodox commitments, and distinguish them from views that are inadvertently or unintentionally irreligious or unorthodox. In the case of Smith's moral theory this problem is particularly acute.

In most taxonomies of moral theory Smith would naturally be placed along side prominent Scottish contemporaries in the moral sense tradition; specifically with his teacher Francis Hutcheson and his friend David Hume.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately this highlights, rather than resolves, the problems that we face in trying to make sense of the religious commitments of Smith's moral theory. On the one hand, Hutcheson is a more or less orthodox Christian thinker, who certainly has no irreligious or anti-Christian intent motivating his writings. On the other hand, Hume is a deeply and systematically anti-Christian thinker and moral theory plays a significant part in his irreligious program. It is evident, therefore, that locating Smith in this nexus does not, by itself, settle the issue of his religious commitments as they arise in his own moral theory. Moreover, these ambiguities are also manifest in Smith's text.

On the face of it, there are many passages that suggest that Smith is entirely orthodox in his religious commitments, along the same general lines as Hutcheson.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Smith gives God two particularly important roles to play in his account of moral life, both of which Smith refers to throughout his discussion. First, according to Smith God is the all wise and perfect "architect" and designer of "the great and immense machine" of the universe (TMS, 19,166, 235,253, 316). This mechanism is fine tuned by the Deity to produce and promote human "happiness" (TMS, 166). This central theme concerning God's benevolent and wise providence manifests an apparent religious optimism, which could be taken to have a foundational role in Smith's moral system.<sup>7</sup> God also plays another very different role as our ultimate judge, who will ensure that final justice

is done for each and every person by means of the system of rewards and punishments in a future state.<sup>8</sup> Smith presents this as a source of comfort, giving us hope that there is another world in which God's (benevolent and wise) plan for us is completed (TMS, 120-1, 169 – cp.111n). However, the fact that in this world there is no perfect fit between virtue and happiness introduces a pessimistic theme that -- although entirely orthodox in character -- stands in some tension with the optimism about God's "great machine" of nature being designed in a manner that is consistent with his (perfect) moral attributes.

Smith's particular account of the role of the impartial spectator suggests a way of closing the gap that threatens to open up between virtue and happiness in this world. Taking this route allows him to minimize the pessimistic concerns that appear to suggest that the "great machine" of nature is somehow imperfectly framed (i.e. fails to secure a proper fit between happiness and justice in this world). The general idea is that the impartial spectator serves to provide a source of happiness and security against misfortune in moral life that makes it largely unnecessary to appeal to God and a future state to provide a proper fit between virtue and happiness. At the same time, in addressing this (religious) difficulty, Smith also manages to deal with an important set of problems associated with various systems of (secular) ethics that had been advanced by freethinkers such as Hobbes, Mandeville and Hume. As I will explain, this introduces a deep irony into Smith's system: the more he is able to account for the ability of the moral life to find a fit between happiness and virtue, the more he develops a theory that is able to discard the metaphysical trappings of the doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments (which takes us firmly in the direction of deism). Conversely, in so far human nature and moral life fail to secure a perfect match, we have some reason to doubt that a perfectly benevolent and wise God governs its operations.

## ***II. Honour and the Society of Atheists***

One way to avoid the pessimistic suggestion that leads to the conclusion that the operations of moral life are imperfectly arranged is to maintain that virtue is its own reward. This "stoic" view was one that defenders of the doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments specifically condemned as leading to deism and atheism.<sup>9</sup> A number of important freethinkers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century argued that the most effective motives for virtue, and sanctions for vice, depend not on the doctrine of a future state, but rather on considerations of reputation or honour. Bayle argued, for example, that atheists can be moral, since they also care about their reputation and thus have reason to be virtuous.<sup>10</sup> This theme is developed in more detail in Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* – specifically in his *Inquiry*

*Concerning Virtue or Merit* (1699).<sup>11</sup> Shaftesbury argues that the satisfactions received from “consciousness of merit” and the “social love” it produces is the great reward of virtue.<sup>12</sup> Related to this, Shaftesbury also argues that being motivated to virtue by fear of rewards and punishments is corrupting and unreliable.<sup>13</sup> A similar theme appears in Hume’s *Treatise*, where it is argued that the virtuous individual is made happy through the mechanism of pride, which is supported by sympathy and the love we receive in society.<sup>14</sup> These mechanisms of “honour” and “pride” appear to secure happiness for virtue and misery for vice. Since they serve the purpose of “supporting” moral conduct in this way, the atheist is capable of virtue and morality does not depend on the doctrine of a future state.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear, nevertheless, that this system of honour, considered as a foundation for moral life, is liable to run into a number of difficulties. It may be argued, for example, that any system of this kind lends itself to relativism, if not moral scepticism. What one society approves of, another condemns, and we find no fixed, reliable standard to guide our conduct. To gain happiness through (social) approval we must conform to local and variable conceptions of virtue. Second, it may also be argued that the system of honour “debases” moral life by making our motive for moral conduct the desire for approval from others – which is mere vanity. A third difficulty is that, even if society’s conception of virtue is sound, and the virtuous person is not motivated by mere vanity, false and unjust condemnation can still, occur. Similarly, the vicious individual may go undetected by others and thereby succeed in escaping social condemnation and censure. Moreover, the virtuous person may encounter other calamities (e.g. illness or some other misfortune), while the vicious individual prospers. To this extent, the cloud of “pessimism” is not always lifted away by the mechanisms described in the various systems of honour.

### ***III. Smith contra Mandeville***

All these particular dangers and corruptions of the system of honour are apparent in Mandeville’s work. Smith devotes considerable time and attention to criticizing Mandeville’s “licentious system”.<sup>16</sup> He presents Mandeville as denying, with Hobbes, that there is any “real distinction between vice and virtue” (TMS, 308, 318). Smith also notes that this was a view that “was particularly offensive to theologians”, and he places himself securely in the camp of “all sound moralists” who reject the licentious view (TMS, 318). According to Mandeville’s system, it is mere love of praise, or vanity, which accounts for conduct which appears “selfless” or “disinterested”. Without approval from others there would be no motivation for such conduct. In Parts II and VII of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith attempts to show that this view is mistaken. We must, he says, distinguish the following (TMS, 309 - cp.117,127,255f):

(1) love of praise, or vanity, which is a simple desire for praise for qualities that either do not deserve it, or merit it only in a lesser degree.

(2) love of true glory, which is a desire for well-grounded fame and reputation.

(3) love of virtue, which is a desire to render ourselves proper objects of esteem and approbation.

The crucial point, for Smith, is that neither “the desire of doing what is honourable”, nor even the “desire of acquiring esteem for what is really estimable”, should be confused with (frivolous) vanity (TMS, 309, 311). The desire to be praiseworthy is not the same as the desire to be praised in actual fact (TMS, 117, 126). It is Smith’s contention that “ignorant and groundless praise can give us no real solid joy” (TMS, 115). In contrast with this, even when “no praise should actually be bestowed upon us, but our conduct deserves it, it is often “a real comfort” to reflect on this (TMS, 115). Clearly, then, we must presuppose a real distinction between virtue and vice, in order to understand the difference between mere vanity, which secures little happiness, and love of virtue, which secures a reliable and steady happiness for the agent. Smith grounds his rejection of Mandeville’s cynicism about moral motivation on his rejection of moral scepticism. Like other “sound moralists”, Smith insists on a natural distinction between right and wrong, which allows to draw the related distinction between mere vanity and a true sense of honour.

According to Smith, Mandeville’s licentious system is deeply flawed because it fails to note these crucial distinctions. Nevertheless, as Smith also points out, Mandeville’s genealogy of the morals, must “border upon the truth” in important respects, otherwise it would not have produced the reaction that it did (TMS, 313-4). Smith’s alternative genealogy does not so much abandon the system of honour, as it aims to modify it in a way that deals with three central objections described above. The challenge Smith faces, therefore, is to find an alternative account of the ethics of honour that avoids moral scepticism; the reduction of moral motivation to mere vanity; and secures a (closer) fit between virtue and happiness.<sup>17</sup> The impartial spectator plays a key role in each of these aspects.

#### ***IV. The Mirror of Society and the Impartial Spectator***

Fundamental to Smith’s system is the claim that we are social beings whose happiness depends on the “good and bad opinion” that others have of us (TMS, 61-2, 84-5, 110-11, 113-4, 117-8, 213 – and cp. 171). In other words, we care about our “reputation” (TMS, 144, 213). We become an object of pleasure or aversion, of happiness or misery, to ourselves through the “mirror” of society (TMS, 110-11). We begin by judging ourselves as we judge others and as they judge us (TMS, 111n; cp. 83). While we may be accountable to God, we are, in the first place,

aware of being accountable to other people, such as our parents (TMS, 111n) This is the natural evolution or moral development of self-approval and disapproval.

On the basis of our awareness of how others judge us, we come to judge ourselves, and it is at this stage that the role of the impartial spectator comes into play. We learn to internalize the (external) view of others by dividing ourselves into two persons:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct... it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation... The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and whose conduct, under the character of the spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion.... (TMS, 113)

When a person views his agreeable conduct in the same light as the impartial spectator, says Smith, “he regards himself, not so much according to the light in which [mankind] actually regard him, as according to that in which they would regard him if they were better informed” (TMS,116). In this way, the virtuous agent is able to anticipate “the applause and admiration which ... would be bestowed upon him, and he applauds and admires himself by sympathy with sentiments, which [need not] actually take place” (TMS, 116). There are, therefore, “two tribunals” that we are accountable to.

The all-wise Author of Nature has, in this manner, taught man to respect the sentiments and judgments of his brethren; to be more or less pleased when they approve of his conduct, and to be more or less hurt when they disapprove of it...[But] he has been rendered so only in the first instance; and an appeal lies from his sentence to a much 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. The jurisdiction of those two tribunals are founded upon principles which, though in some respects resembling and akin, are, however, in reality different and distinct. The jurisdiction of the man without, is founded altogether in the desire of actual praise, and in the aversion to actual blame. The jurisdiction of the man within, is

founded altogether in the desire of praise-worthiness, and in the aversion to blameworthiness... (TMS, 130-31)

Contrary to Mandeville, we do not rely only on “the lower tribunal” of the opinion of others. We have the “demigod within the breast” (TMS, 131, cp. 247) who we can appeal to in support of our own conduct and self-evaluations. In important respects, as Smith’s language suggests, the impartial spectator becomes an internalized, naturalized “God” to whom we can appeal in circumstances where the “lower tribunal” of public opinion proves flawed or imperfect.

### V. “*Shadows of Blame*”

The role of the impartial spectator in providing a sense of approval and disapproval as it regards our own conduct also serves as an independent source of happiness and unhappiness. To the extent that we can rely on the “higher tribunal” of the impartial spectator, and free ourselves from the variable and imperfect evaluations of the “lower tribunal” of the opinions of others, so to that extent our happiness and unhappiness in respect of our moral conduct does not depend on what others may actually feel about us. This strategy enables Smith to respond effectively to the three difficulties that Mandeville’s “licentious system” encounters. In the first place, the impartial spectator provides an independent check or standard by which we may mark “the natural distinction between right and wrong” (TMS,318). Whether we are praiseworthy or not is a different question from whether we are actually praised by others in our society. Moreover, the impartial spectator provides a source of moral motivation that is entirely distinct from vanity. Since our own conscience is more significant source of our happiness and unhappiness, it can override any “frivolous” considerations that concern whether we will actually be praised or not. Finally, in so far as we rely on the evaluations of the impartial spectator as a source of our happiness, we can expect a better fit between virtue and happiness and vice and unhappiness. Indeed, as the “demigod within” becomes our principal judge, with infallible knowledge and sentiments about us, we have no need to reach beyond and rely on the Deity. On the face of it, therefore, Smith’s impartial spectator is a middle figure, situated between those whom we actually deal with in society and a God to whom we are answerable in a future state (TMS, 128n). The impartial spectator, on this account, becomes both our moral guide and the primary source of the self-evaluations on which our happiness ultimately depends.

Smith could have left matters here. However, Smith makes clear that things are not as neat as this. As a psychological realist, he is careful to resist the simplifications attractions of abstract theory, which tend to obscure the messy complexities and empirical details of moral life.

The fundamental problem, he observes, is that we are not entirely immune to the variable and imperfect assessments of others with whom we must live, at least when it comes to their negative reactions to our conduct or character. While it is true that the wise person receives little satisfaction or pleasure from “ignorant and groundless praise” or “false glory” (TMS, 115, 311), it is nevertheless also the case that “by a strange inconsistency, false ignominy is often capable of mortifying those who appear the most resolute and determined” (TMS, 311). “Unmerited applause”, Smith observes, “a wise man rejects with contempt upon all occasions, but he often feels very severely the injustice of unmerited censure” (TMS, 121). One general reason for this asymmetry between unmerited praise and blame, is that pain is “in almost all cases, a more pungent sensation” (TMS, 121). More importantly, however, even the innocent are not sufficiently confident in judging their own conduct and character in a way that leaves them unaffected by the adverse judgment of others.

But an innocent man, though of more than ordinary constancy, is often, not only shocked, but most severely mortified by the serious, though false, imputation of a crime ... He is humbled to find that any body should think so meanly of his character as to suppose him capable of being guilty of it. Though perfectly conscious of his own innocence, the very imputation seems often, even in his own imagination, to throw a shadow of disgrace and dishonour upon his character. (TMS, 119)

The cruelest misfortune that it is possible for innocence to suffer is when an innocent man is brought to the scaffold for execution.<sup>18</sup> What torments the person in this situation is not only the fear of the punishment itself, but also the “horror at any thoughts of the infamy which the punishment may shed upon his memory” and the associated “loss of reputation” (TMS, 120, 144). These “shadows of blame”, Smith maintains, reflect the (desirable) importance that we all attach to society and the bonds that hold it together (TMS, 84-5, 128-30).

When innocence is injured in this way a person’s good character will not be sufficient to “protect him”. More importantly, not even the approval of the impartial spectator can relieve this person of their distress at the loss of the “trust and good opinion of his friends and neighbours” (TMS, 122, 131). In these circumstances, “religion can alone afford any effectual comfort” (TMS, 120, 131-2, 169)

Our happiness in this life is thus, upon many occasions, dependent upon the humble hope and expectation of a life to come: a hope and expectation deeply rooted in human nature... That there is a world to come, where exact justice will be done to every man... is a doctrine, in every respect so venerable, so comfortable to the weakness, so flattering to the grandeur of human nature, that the virtuous man who has the misfortune to doubt of it, cannot possibly avoid wishing most earnestly and anxiously to believe it.

(TMS, 132 – my emphasis)

In this way, according to Smith, “we are led to the belief of a future state, not only by the weaknesses, by the hopes and fears of human nature, but by the noblest and best principles which belong to it, by the love of virtue, and by the abhorrence of vice and injustice” (TMS, 169). It is true, of course, as Smith also observes, that religion can be a force that can corrupt no less than console (TMS, 170). The effects of religion on morality, therefore, are neither wholly good nor wholly evil. It has, as Smith sees it, a mixed influence on both our moral sentiments and moral practice.

#### ***VI. Fortune, Pessimism and the Design Argument***

In so far as Smith provides us with grounds for believing in the existence of God, and his perfect benevolence, wisdom and justice, his remarks suggest that it is founded on the design argument (TMS, 19,87,166, 169-70, 289, 316). However, his observations about the “folly and injustice” that we discover in this world in respect of “unmerited censure” (TMS, 144) suggest that the beauty, harmony and order of “the great machine of the universe” is less than perfect and needs correction in a future state (TMS, 120-1, 169). The fact is, according to Smith, that “fatal accidents” where the innocent are unjustly condemned (e.g. Jean Calas), although they happen rarely, nevertheless, “happen sometimes in all countries, even in those where justice is in general very well administered” (TMS, 120) Observations of this kind put any confidence that we have in God’s moral attributes in some doubt. Since our evidence for God’s perfect wisdom, justice and benevolence is based on our experience of this world, evidence of an imperfect distribution of happiness in this life must erode our confidence in God’s existence (i.e. as a morally perfect being).

There seems to be a deep tension between the two roles that Smith’s moral system assigns to the Deity. If God is a perfect creator then we should expect to find in this world no flaws or “irregularities” in the distribution of (human) moral sentiments of the kind that Smith has

described (e.g. unjust condemnation and blame). On the other hand, if there already exists a perfect distribution of praise and blame, rewards and punishments, in this life, then there is no need for God to “complete his plan”, in the form of rectifying justice, in a future state (TMS, 169). Clearly, then, the two roles assigned to God by Smith work against each other. One particular reason have for supposing that Smith would not be blind to this feature of his system is that his close friend David Hume had just highlighted this problem in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>19</sup> The very features of moral life that naturally drive us into the arms of religion for “comfort” serve (e.g. unjust condemnation and blame) serve, philosophically speaking, to discredit any confidence that we may have that this world is designed by an infallible, perfectly just “architect”.

It may be argued that Smith’s parallel observations concerning the influence of “fortune” and the “irregularities” of our moral sentiments in respect of the influence of the consequences of actions, as detailed in Part II, show that this conclusion is mistaken. According to Smith we experience “irregularities” in our moral sentiments when they vary according to consequences of action that the agent has no control over (i.e. as opposed to being correlated with the agent’s immediate intentions). Nevertheless, these irregularities, Smith maintains, are of general social utility because it forces human beings to take the consequences of their conduct seriously and not rest satisfied with mere good intentions (TMS, 105). For this reason, Smith suggests, “we may admire the wisdom and goodness of God even in the weakness and folly of man” (TMS, 106).<sup>20</sup>

There are two reasons why this line of reply does not serve to ease any worries that we may have about cases of “unmerited censure” providing evidence against God’s moral attributes. First, even in the case of the influence of fortune as it affects moral sentiments through the influence of consequences, it appears that God’s justice is compromised by this arrangement. Indeed, God’s benevolence, in the form of general social utility, is purchased by sacrificing just treatment of all individuals according to an “equitable maxim” of justice that Smith claims that we all reflectively endorse (TMS, 93). Secondly, and more importantly, the irregularities that we discover in cases of unmerited censure have no evident rationale, much less justification, in terms of (hidden) social benefits. No (further) purpose or end is served by falsely condemning the innocent. We can, in other words, discover no sign of God’s wisdom and goodness in circumstances where an innocent person is condemned; all we can hope for is that it will be suitably rectified in a future state. Nevertheless, the fact that some “correction” is called for tells against the assumption that the creator of this world is evidently just and benevolent. We are left, therefore, on Smith’s own analysis, with a psychological account of why we naturally want to believe in the existence of a future state, but this account serves to undermine any philosophical

confidence that we may have that this world has been created by a perfectly wise, just and benevolent Deity. The question that we are left with is whether or not is simply an unseen incoherence in Smith's (sincere) religious and ethical views or if it is evidence that Smith's own views, discreetly presented, are much less orthodox than a superficial examination of his text might suggest?

A superficial glance over *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* suggests that Smith's religious commitments are more or less orthodox. In particular, Smith stands squarely beside "all sound moralists" who reject the "licentious system" of Hobbes and Mandeville. This puts him, as he points out, in the same company as the theologians who ranked among the strongest critics of Hobbes and Mandeville. Moreover, in many passages Smith invokes God's role as a benevolent, just and wise creator who has arranged and ordered moral life on the fabric of human nature; and he also refers to the role of God as an "all-seeing Judge" who will, in "another world", correct the "folly and injustice" that inevitably occurs in this world (TMS, 121, 144, 169). Beyond this, Smith in many passages emphasizes the importance of religion as a source of "comfort" for those who are subject to "unmerited censure" and as a motive to the practice of virtue (TMS, 120-1, 170, 171). In all of this, there is no evident sign of hostility to religion, much less any systematic critique of the religious foundations of moral life.

When we look more closely at the details of Smith's position, however, a more ambiguous, and ambivalent, attitude to the role of religion in moral life emerges. Two particularly important points emerge. (1) In the first place, despite the sharp criticism of Mandeville's "licentious" principles, Smith does not really discard the system of honour so much as revise and amend it, in order to remove objections that may be raised against it. The "mirror of society" is transformed, through a natural process of moral development, into an impartial spectator. The impartial spectator is a "demi-god within the breast" who not only guides our moral conduct, but also rewards or punishes us by means of our sentiments of self-approval or disapproval. In this way, the impartial spectator does the work of God by both motivating and supporting moral practice and virtue. The role of the impartial spectator, therefore, enables us, in large measure, to escape, not only the limitations and weaknesses of our own society and its fallible judgment, but also any need to rely on a (transcendent) God and the doctrine of a future state. The foundations of moral life are rooted in human nature and these are secure enough to maintain and preserve society and moral practice. From this perspective moral life becomes self-supporting, and even the atheist can rely on the influence of the impartial spectator to guide and support the practice of virtue. On these points of fundamental importance, therefore, Smith stands closer to irreligious

thinkers such as Bayle, Shaftesbury and Hume than he does to the theological critics of Hobbes and Mandeville.

(2) Smith is not, however, a perfect Stoic who takes the optimistic view that virtue is its own reward, requiring no external support from society. On the contrary, as we have noted, Smith stresses that even the mechanism of the impartial spectator cannot protect the innocent person from the miseries associated with unjust condemnation by others his own society. The “shadows of blame” are not something that we can protect ourselves from by relying on the support of the impartial spectator. These inescapable features of human life naturally drive us to the comforts of religion. The force of Smith’s remarks on this subject is not to justify or defend the credibility of the doctrine of a future state, but to explain its deep psychological roots in human nature and the moral sense itself. We have a need to believe this doctrine, whether it is true or not, because of the “folly and injustice” that we encounter in this world. The irony about these claims, however, is that they serve to philosophically discredit any confidence that we may have, based on our experience and observation of this world, that God is indeed a perfectly wise, benevolent and just creator. Smith’s insistence on the influence of “fortune” in human affairs and moral life, and the unfair distribution of happiness and misery that results from it, contains the seed of a scepticism about the perfect order and harmony of the moral order itself. In other words, the pessimistic observations about moral life that drive us into the comforts of religion, serve at the same time to discredit the optimistic assumption that our experience of this world serves to sustain and support our belief in God’s moral attributes. Smith was either blind to these irreligious implications in his own position or, as is more likely, he presents them in a concealed manner that avoids direct confrontation with the Christian orthodoxies of his time.

### ***VII. Smith’s Weak Irreligious Intentions***

It is evident from these observations concerning the two dominant irreligious themes that are present in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that Smith’s views are considerably different from those of more orthodox thinkers such as Hutcheson. What is not so clear, however, is the extent to which Smith’s irreligious commitments in this work are similar to those that can be found in Hume’s writings. The general challenge that Hume faced, as Smith did after him, was to show how a secular system of ethics of this kind could avoid the three basic objections to the “licentious system” as described above (i.e. that it involves relativism and scepticism; reduces moral motivation to egoism and mere vanity; and that it fails to secure any match between virtue and happiness). Hume’s answer to each of these issues is, of course, complex but the essential elements are clear enough. Following the lead of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, he employs the

resources of moral sense to insist on some real distinction between virtue and vice.<sup>21</sup> Hume also argues that mere vanity (i.e. “love of praise”) could never motivate moral conduct, although in contrast with Smith he places greater emphasis on the influence and importance of “love of true glory” than “love of virtue” as such.<sup>22</sup> Regarding the match between virtue and happiness, Hume’s position is that there is a sufficient correlation between them, due to the natural operation of sympathy and the passions, to sustain and support virtue and moral conduct – although plainly there is no perfect or exact fit.<sup>23</sup> In sum, then, there are broad parallels between Hume’s and Smith’s (irreligious) efforts to show that moral life does not depend on religion and that secular morality does not imply any moral scepticism or “licentiousness” of the kind associated with Hobbes and Mandeville.

It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to conclude from this that there are no important points of contrast between Hume’s and Smith’s irreligious commitments as they relate to ethics. We can distinguish several different claims concerning the relationship between ethics and religion. Among the most important are the following:

- (1) Morality does not require religion or religious belief.
- (2) Religion plays an important role in support of virtue and moral conduct (e.g. as a source of consolation in face of unjust condemnation).
- (3) Religion springs from our “noble” (human) moral dispositions.
- (4) Religion tends to corrupt our moral sentiments and moral practices.
- (5) Religion springs primarily from fear, ignorance and the need for control over the masses by their political masters.

When Hume takes up the question of the relationship between religion and morality he is systematically hostile to the influence of religion.<sup>24</sup> Religion is presented by him as essentially corrupting of moral life and having little or no constructive role to play in it (i.e. claim #4 above).<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the roots of religion, on Hume’s analysis, are essentially pernicious, such as fear, ignorance and the desire for power (i.e. claim #5 above). Smith does acknowledge that religion can corrupt moral practice and sentiments (TMS, 170).<sup>26</sup> He insists, nevertheless, that the roots of our “great hopes” in a future state lie not only in fear and other weaknesses of human nature, but also in “the noblest and best principles which belong to it, ... the love of virtue, and ...abhorrence of vice and injustice” (TMS, 169) (i.e. claim # 3 above). If the roots of religion in human nature are of some merit, so too is its influence. Smith maintains that religion serves to “comfort” the innocent faced with injustice and that belief in God, considered as the “great avenger of injustice”, serves as a powerful motive to the practice of virtue (TMS, 170, 171) (i.e. claim #2 above).

Clearly, then, we find a degree of ambivalence in Smith's approach to the relationship between religion and morals. On the one hand, Smith provides a naturalistic explanation for the psychological roots that explain why we need religion – the tendency of this explanation being to discredit the doctrine of a future state. On the other hand, Smith is not so sure that this doctrine does not have an important and useful role to play in human life and society. From one point of view, therefore, we are naturally drawn to an illusion of this kind. From another point of view, it is not evident, to Smith, that it is wholly desirable to free human beings from a doctrine that provides them with comfort and supports the practice of virtue.

Smith's system makes it clear that the virtuous person can operate without either the comforts of religion or the comforts of social approval. By and large, the mechanism of the impartial spectator serves all the necessary ends of a system of secular ethics (i.e. as per claim #1 above). More specifically, a wise person will rely on the approval of the impartial spectator. Such a policy, however, has a risk: in face of unjust censure the innocent person cannot support himself or escape the miseries involved. While virtuous atheism is possible, it is not immune to the influence of fortune. In this way, Smith's optimism evidently has a pessimistic tinge. The role of the impartial spectator cannot secure a perfect fit between virtue and happiness and religion and the doctrine of a future state finds its place in the gap that falls between them.

The contrast between Smith and Hume's positions on this subject can, I think, be characterized as the difference between a "weak" and "strong" irreligious ethical system. Whereas Hume's strong irreligious view presents religion as essentially corrupting, and rooted in unpalatable human weaknesses and failings, Smith suggests a view that is more accommodating to the place of religion in moral life. More specifically, Smith travels a middle-path between, on one side, theologically-minded moralists who argue that morality is impossible without religion and, on the other, more radical freethinkers, such as Hume, who maintain that religion is inherently corrupting of our moral sense and conduct. The truth about the relationship between morality and religion, on Smith's account, is the inverse of the orthodox view. That is to say, while Smith denies that moral life requires or depends upon religion he maintains, nevertheless, that our moral nature is a significant source and psychological foundation of our religious dispositions. Considered from this perspective, religion is the child of our ethical nature and it is an off-spring that our ethical nature finds difficult – although not impossible – to live without. For this reason, any plausible irreligious system, on Smith's account, must understand and consider the ("noble") ethical roots of our religious dispositions as much as it does the potential corruptions and dangers of religion.

### Footnotes

1. T. D. Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), 225. References are to Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D.D. Raphael & A.L. Macfie eds., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). [Hereafter abbreviated as TMS.]
2. There are, nevertheless, several illuminating passages in Smith's other writings that give some insight into his theological views. See in particular Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 Vols., R.H. Campbell & A.S. Skinner (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981), II, 788f. Smith discusses the economic and political forces that are involved in supporting and maintaining the clergy. He also quotes a lengthy passage from Hume's *History of England*, where Hume describes certain "pernicious" tendencies in the clergy to corrupt religion and disturb society. [Hume, *The History of England*, 6 Vols, (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983), III, 135-6.] The irreligious tone of the particular passage cited, as well as the irreligious reputation of its author [i.e. Hume], may be read as evidence that Smith's views on this subject are not entirely orthodox.
3. See Ian Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Ross does not suggest any definitive picture of Smith's religious views or commitments, but he does point out the "orthodox religious overtones" of parts of TMS and notes that Smith was inclined to avoid religious controversy. In his editorial introduction to TMS, Raphael suggests that although Smith "moved away from orthodox Christianity" he nevertheless did not "follow Hume into scepticism" [TMS, introduction, 19]. (See note 5 below.)
4. The focal point of much of the discussion and debate concerning the relationship between religion and morality was Hobbes, who was widely regarded as the leading representative of "atheism" throughout the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, Hobbes was by no means the only thinker of this period who was identified as having ethical doctrines that were of an "atheistic" or irreligious character.
5. Some of the details concerning Smith's close friendship with Hume provide insight into Smith's own attitude to religion. Two episodes relating to Hume's death (in 1776) are especially significant. First, when Hume was dying he asked Smith to oversee the publication of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Smith refused this request, apparently on the ground that he wanted to avoid controversy. On the other hand, early in 1777 Smith did write a letter firmly praising the character and virtue of his friend. Ironically enough, this letter, which was published along with Hume's *My Own Life*, generated considerable controversy and criticism. [For details on these two episodes see Ross, *Life of Smith*, 338-42; and also

- E.C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), Chps. 39, 40.] These episodes suggest that Smith shared at least some of Hume's unorthodox tendencies. At the same time, unlike Hume, he was reluctant to express his views on the subject of religion in a form that would stir up controversy. What is not clear is the extent to which Smith shared Hume's hostile attitude to the Christian religion.
6. The sixth edition of TMS appeared shortly before Smith died in 1790. Smith made several changes to the text that suggest that he "had become more sceptical about orthodox religion; or perhaps that he felt less inclination or obligation to express pious sentiments once he had quitted a Professorship of Moral Philosophy". [Raphael, TMS, 383f (Appendix II); see also Raphael's comments at TMS, introduction, 18f.]
  7. This theme, concerning God's benevolent intentions as regards human nature in general and moral sense in particular, features prominently in Hutcheson's writings. See, e.g., Hutcheson, *Philosophical Writings*, R.S. Downie, ed., (London: Dent, 1994), 5,75, 113, 138, 145.
  8. The importance of the doctrine of a future state, considered as an essential foundation for moral and social life, was generally taken for granted by orthodox divines and moralists. Prominent theological figures, such as Samuel Clarke and Joseph Butler, devoted considerable philosophical attention to this matter.
  9. See, e.g. Samuel Clarke, *The Works of Samuel Clarke*, 4 Vols. (1738; reprinted New York: Garland: 1978), II, 645.
  10. Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. with notes by R.C. Bartlett (Albany: SUNY, 2000), esp. letters #8 and 9.
  11. Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), esp. I, 293-317 [*Inquiry*, II,ii,1]. Shaftesbury specifically argues that atheism does not itself corrupt our "moral sense" [*Characteristics*, I, 261f; *Inquiry*, I ,iii, 2].
  12. Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, I, 298, 305, 309.
  13. Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, I, 267, 270, 274-5.
  14. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [THN], D.F. Norton & M.J. Norton, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See, e.g., Hume's remarks in his conclusion to Book III where he describes the "peace and satisfaction" we feel when the mind can "bear its own survey" (3.3.6.6).
  15. This theme in Hume's philosophy is discussed in more detail in Paul Russell, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. Chp. XI.
  16. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 2 Vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988). See also Mandeville, *An Enquiry into the Origins of Honour and the Usefulness of*

*Christianity in War* (1732) [translated into Italian by A. Branchi; *Ricerca sull' origine dell' onore e sul' utilita del cristianesimo in Guerra* (Firenze 1998)].

17. These objectives also feature prominently in Hume's (irreligious) moral theory, which is discussed in more detail below.
18. Smith cites the example of Jean Calas (TMS, 120), a Calvinist who was falsely accused and condemned for the murder of his own son. Calas was executed in 1762, but owing to the efforts of Voltaire he was declared innocent in 1765. The example provided is not without religious (and irreligious) significance.
19. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, T.L. Beauchamp, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Sect. XI. Hume's *Enquiry* was first published in 1748.
20. On this subject see Paul Russell, "Smith on Moral Sense and Moral Luck", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 16 (1999), 37-58.
21. See, e.g., Hume's remarks at THN, 3.1.1.26: "Nothing can be more real..."; and cp. EM, 1.2: "Those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions..." A more full account of Hume's ethical system would need to say more about his views on justice and the "artificial virtues" – where the (sceptical) influence of Hobbes and Mandeville is more pronounced.
22. Hume emphasizes the point that our self-evaluations are vulnerable and ineffective when they are not supported or confirmed by others. See, e.g., THN, 2.1.11.9-14. As I have explained, Smith's device of the impartial spectator is employed as a way of getting around this problem. For further discussion of this general issue see my *Freedom and Moral Sentiment*, 155-7.
23. Unlike Smith, Hume has little to say about the role of the doctrine of a future state considered as a source of consolation and support for virtue. Beyond this, his views on this subject are explicitly sceptical. From one point of view he argues that the metaphysical assumption of the immortality of the soul is entirely suspect and from another he argues that the doctrine of a future state has little practical influence on how humans conduct themselves. On this aspect of Hume's thought see my "Butler's 'Future State' and Hume's 'Guide of Life'", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 42 (2004), 425-48.
24. See, in particular, Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Pt. XII; and also Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, sections IX, X, and XIV [both reprinted in J.A.C. Gaskin, ed., *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) ].
25. Hume's *Natural History of Religion* emphasizes the roots that religion has in human ignorance and fear. In respect of this "negative" genealogy Hume is drawing on earlier work by irreligious thinkers such as Lucretius, Hobbes and Spinoza.

26. The potential for religion to corrupt moral sentiment is a central theme of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*. [See, e.g., *Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit*, I iii, 2 and 3.] This theme is not so prominent in TMS. The most important source of "corruption" of our moral sentiments, according to Smith, is our disposition to admire the rich and powerful and to despise the poor (TMS, 61).

## *Irreligion and the Impartial Spectator in Smith's Moral System*

By Paul Russell

### Abstract:

In this paper I argue that behind the veneer of orthodoxy that covers Smith's discussion in *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* Smith presents theists with a fundamental dilemma: if there exists a fit between virtue and happiness in this world then there is no need for a future state – since a future state is meant to rectify the injustices of this world. On the other hand, if there is no such fit then there is no basis for believing that this world is created and governed by a perfectly just and benevolent being. It is Smith's view that: (a) that the mechanism of the impartial spectator serves to sustain and support moral conduct and practice without any reliance on the goodness and justice of God in a future state (i.e. deism); and (b) there is nevertheless in this life no perfect match between virtue and happiness. More specifically, not even the mechanism of the impartial spectator can protect the innocent person from the miseries of unjust condemnation by others in society. What follows from this is that the fit between virtue and happiness is tight enough for us to do without the doctrine of a future state but it is not tight enough for us to conclude that the world is created and governed by a perfectly just and benevolent being.