Can Empathy Be a Moral Resource?
A Smithean Reply to Jesse Prinz

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ABSTRACT: This paper critiques Jesse Prinz's rejection of Adam Smith's model of impartial spectatorship as a viable corrective to empathic bias. I argue that Prinz's case is unconvincing, insofar as it rests on an underdeveloped account of Smith's view of critical self-regulation. By presenting a more detailed and attentive reading of Smithean impartial spectatorship, and exploring Smith's compelling account of structural supports for sympathetic engagement, this paper demonstrates how Smith's work is able to constructively engage with contemporary concerns regarding empathy's role in guiding moral behaviour.

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article présente une critique de la position de Jesse Prinz, qui refuse de reconnaître la fonction corrective des préjugés empathiques dans le modèle du «spectateur impartial» d'Adam Smith. Je soutiens que la thèse de Prinz n'est pas convaincante, car elle repose sur une interprétation insuffisante du pouvoir critique du sujet introduit par Smith. Cet article met au jour «l'engagement sympathique» de la philosophie de Smith. Celle-ci émane de la réponse créative du jugement moral que le «spectateur impartial» porte sur autrui. Cette lecture plus attentive de Smith permet de reconnaitre l'importance pratique de son travail et sa capacité à contribuer aux discussions contemporaines concernant ce rôle primaire que l'empathie peut jouer dans l'élaboration de nos conduites morales.

Keywords: empathy, imagination, Adam Smith, impartial spectatorship, Jesse Prinz

Theorists have paid increasing attention to the role of empathy in supporting moral agency. Broadly speaking, empathy refers to the capacity to enter into others' circumstances and experiences, and to be emotionally affected or

moved by them.[1] Empathy derives from the German term '*einfühlung*,' which means 'to feel one's way into.'[2] Our capacity to empathise with others is thought to provide a powerful source of moral motivation that judgments grounded purely in instrumental reason and abstract notions of duty lack.

In the literature on empathy, typically only a cursory nod is given to the work of early modern sentimentalist philosopher Adam Smith and his contemporary David Hume.[3] Smith and Hume used the term 'sympathy' to refer to what many theorists nowadays describe as 'empathy.' Sympathy in their view is not akin to a feeling of compassion or pity; rather, it refers to the psychological *mechanism* through which we share in the broad range of feelings displayed by others. For both philosophers, sympathy constitutes an important foundation for morality: it plays a crucial role in moral development, structures our moral judgments, and motivates moral behaviour. On this basis, theorists tend to run the Smithean and Humean definition of sympathy together with empathy, and accredit Hume and Smith with having been the first to offer a systematic account of the role of this capacity in establishing and sustaining moral communities.[4]

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1   Empathy itself is a slippery concept that admits of no precise, unified definition in existing scholarship. Empathy has been defined in various ways, ranging from a rudimentary form of emotional contagion to a more sophisticated capacity for imaginative perspective taking. See Daniel Batson (2009) for a useful account of the various ways in which empathy has been conceptualised.

2   The term '*einfühlung*' was introduced by Robert Vischer (1873) to explain how individuals experience inanimate aesthetic objects. Theodor Lipps (1903, 1905) later developed *einfühlung* within an interpersonal context, and used it to account for how individuals enter into the experiences of others. *Einfühlung* was translated into 'empathy' by Edward Titchener in 1909.

3   See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). All references to this work derive from Smith's substantially revised 6th edition, published in 1790, edited by David D. Raphael and Alec L. Macfie in 1982 (hereafter, TMS). See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). All references to this work derive from the Lewis A. Selby-Bigge edition, published in 1888, revised by Peter H. Nidditch in 1978 (hereafter, SBN).

4   Some theorists have rightly taken issue with attempts to equate Humean and Smithean sympathy with modern conceptions of empathy, in part because doing so has often resulted in highly reductive definitions of sympathy. For example, in "Against Empathy" (2011a), Prinz equates the Humean definition of sympathy with empathy, conceived of as a rudimentary form of vicarious arousal in which we come to mirror another person's feelings. He then argues that Humean sympathy so defined has marginal value as a moral resource, and that Hume's moral sentimentalist project is largely misguided. Theorists have argued that Prinz offers an overly narrow account of Humean sympathy that fails to capture this concept in its full meaning and complexity

Hume and Smith recognised, however, that there are many potential issues associated with a sympathy-based morality, among these being the constraints that bias and prejudice place on our capacity to sympathise with and respond morally to others. Hume's and Smith's concerns regarding the partial nature of our sympathetic responses have been reinforced by contemporary theorists, who note the potential for various forms of bias (similarity bias, proximity bias, group bias, and so on) to undermine our capacity to empathise with and be moved by the experiences of others. Given empathy's susceptibility to an array of biases, Jesse Prinz concludes that it is only fit for local travel: it may be useful for motivating and guiding moral behaviour within our narrow circle of family and friends, but fails to be a genuine moral resource in our encounters with distant and unfamiliar others.[5]

In the literature on empathy, a crucial aspect of Hume's and Smith's moral sentimentalism is frequently overlooked. For both theorists, morality is not grounded in feeling alone: our ability to correct for the effects of bias and prejudice on our feelings relies on our capacity to critically reflect on and to adjust our feelings towards others.[6] On Hume's and Smith's accounts, it is through adopting an imagined impartial perspective and regulating our feelings in light of this perspective that our feelings come to express a moral viewpoint. This imagined impartial viewpoint is captured by what theorists refer to as Hume's 'general point of view,' and by Smith's 'impartial spectator.'

While there are notable differences between these two corrective devices, the general idea behind each is that we arrive at unbiased moral judgments through abstracting from our particular standpoint, and imagining what we would feel if

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for Hume, and by extension, for Smith. Julia Driver, for example, claims that sympathy for Hume and Smith is not a matter of crude emotional contagion; rather, it refers to the capacity to grasp and identify with the feelings of others upon reflection (2011). Despite the plausibility of Driver's account, I think we err in attributing a singular, unitary definition of sympathy to Hume, and especially to Smith. This is because there is much evidence in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and even more evidence in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to suggest that both theorists held a pluralist conception of sympathy. In their respective works, Hume and Smith use the term 'sympathy' to refer to several related yet distinct phenomena, some of which involve a degree of identification and reflection and some of which do not. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the terms 'empathy' and 'sympathy' interchangeably to broadly refer to the capacity to enter into and be emotionally affected or moved by others' circumstances and experiences. However, I do so in recognition of the fact that this definition does not capture every instance of sympathy, as identified by Hume and Smith.

5 Prinz (2011a, 2011b).

6 Exceptions to this rule include Driver (2011), Prinz (2011a, 2011b) and more recently, Antti Kauppinen (2014).

we were an impartial observer. I hereafter refer to this capacity as 'reflective empathy.' To the extent that Smith presents a much more rigorous and detailed account of how individuals correct for their biased sympathetic responses, his account of impartial spectatorship will be central to my discussion of reflective empathy in this paper.

Notably, Prinz rejects Smith's device of the impartial spectator as a potential corrective measure to our empathic biases, on the grounds that self-regulation by an ideal perspective is too practically demanding for everyday individuals to exercise of their own accord.[7] In Prinz's view, the impracticability of reflective empathy prevents it from playing a substantive role in moral deliberation and action.[8] He concludes that our empathic biases are so entrenched and so difficult to correct for that we ought not to rely on empathy as a moral guide, particularly when it comes to dealing with different others who fall outside the scope of our close acquaintances.[9]

In this paper, I argue that Prinz's argument regarding the (im)practicability of impartial spectatorship fails to conclusively undermine an appeal to reflective empathy as a viable corrective to our empathic biases. First, I point out the ways in which Prinz's construal of Smith's impartial spectator as a highly idealised standpoint is misleading. By offering a more faithful reading of Smith's model, I demonstrate how Smith can accommodate Prinz's concern that the practice of reflective empathy is too far beyond the reach of everyday individuals to be a genuine moral resource. Second, I extend Prinz's worries regarding the limitations of reflective empathy to the problem of implicit bias and individual resistance to empathic engagement. The problem of implicit bias refers to the limited capacity of individuals to independently recognise the influence of bias on their feelings towards others, given that social biases frequently operate below the level of explicit awareness, and may influence people's behaviour in ways that go against their standing beliefs. The issue of empathic resistance refers to the (often unconscious) motivation among individuals to

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[7]   Prinz (2011b, p. 228).

[8]   Prinz (2011a, p. 228).

[9]   In place of reflective empathy as a moral resource, Prinz (2011a) endorses an 'anti-empathic, neo-sentimentalist' stance that promotes the cultivation of particular emotions towards certain action types (e.g., contempt for theft, horror in response to genocide, and so forth). Since his anti-empathic neo-sentimentalism excludes any reference to victims' feelings and focuses exclusively on action types, Prinz claims that it avoids the problem of empathic bias and the distorted moral judgments that such biases are likely to produce. While I find Prinz's alternative approach to be unsatisfying for various reasons, such a critique lies beyond the scope of this paper. In this paper, I focus my critique on Prinz's rejection of the concept of reflective empathy, as it appears in Smith's work.

refrain from empathically engaging with perspectives and experiences that present a challenge to their perceived self-interest.

Smith, I argue, has the resources in his account of sympathy to address these obstacles to relying on empathy as a moral guide. To support this view, I highlight important extracts from Smith's text, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), that construe impartial spectatorship as a social, dialogical practice rather than an individualistic, introspective exercise—one that relies on embodied interactions with others to prompt critical self-awareness. I then explore Smith's account of institutional incentives and other forms of structural support for sympathetic engagement as playing a key role in encouraging and refining individual practices of sympathy. In doing so, I show how these important and underappreciated aspects of Smith's theory are able to constructively engage with contemporary concerns regarding the limitations of empathy as a moral resource.

I Empathy as a Foundation for Morality: Adam Smith's Moral Sentimentalism

In keeping with their sentimentalist roots, Smith and Hume maintained that sentiment rather than reason constitutes the foundation for morality. On their accounts, our sympathetic responses to others form the basis of our moral judgments and underpin moral motivation. Moral judgments are grounded in 'moral sentiments' of approval ('approbation') or disapproval ('disapprobation') that arise through sympathy with others' feelings. As Hume argued, the fact that our moral judgments are rooted in sympathy explains why they are strong motivators for us to act. Reason alone cannot form the basis of our moral judgments, for, if it did, our judgments would possess none of their characteristic motivational force.[10] For Smith, as it was for Hume, reason has a role to play in morality, albeit a minor one: instrumental reason is needed to discover the facts of a situation, or to discern the means to satisfy a particular desire or passion.[11] However, it remains the case that reason alone is unable to discover moral distinctions or to generate feelings that move us to action.[12] This capacity lies uniquely with sympathy, defined by Smith as the mechanism through which we

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[10] Hume and Smith opposed the moral rationalist position of Ralph Cudworth (1731), Samuel Clarke (1706), and John Balguy (1728–9) by maintaining that abstract rules and maxims derived from reason alone cannot form the basis for morality, insofar as they produce moral judgments that fail to have motivational force.

[11] Hume (1739/1978, SBN 416–417).

[12] Exercising one's capacity for instrumental reason is distinct from exercising one's capacity for critical reflection, on the Humean-Smithean view. Reflection for both theorists involves regulating our situated feelings from an imagined impartial standpoint. It is from this standpoint that we moderate our pre-reflective and potentially biased passions.

experience 'fellow-feeling' with others' lived experiences (for example, compassion for their suffering or happiness for their joy).[13]

Smith is explicit that our fellow-feeling often hinges upon whether and to what extent we find the other's response to be fitting to her situation. If we judge the agent's response to be appropriate (both in terms of its character and intensity), then we "entirely sympathise" with her through a full-blooded experience of fellow-feeling:

> To *approve* of the passions of another, therefore, is to observe that we *entirely sympathise* with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathise with them (TMS I.i.3.1. My emphasis).

Smith notes that, when we are confronted with cases where one person is harmed by another, we 'divide' our sympathy between the feelings of the sufferer and the motives of the actor (TMS I.ii.3.1).[14] Actions and the motives that produced them are then judged right or wrong on the basis of sentiments of approval or disapproval that arise from imaginatively 'bringing home' each person's situation "in all its minutest incidents," (TMS I.i.4.6) and making a judgment as to whether we find their conduct to be warranted by their situation. Smith acknowledges that we will never be able to exactly replicate another person's experience in imagination, owing in part to the fact that we cannot literally inhabit others' bodies (TMS I.i.1.2). As such, our sympathy will always be "extremely imperfect" (TMS I.i.1.9). Nevertheless, in his view, we are able to develop and refine our capacity for sympathetic understanding through being well informed about the relevant facts of others' circumstances and through educating ourselves about others' perspectives (TMS I.i.4.6. See also TMS V.2.9).

Smith's account of the role of sympathy in guiding moral agency raises the question of what motivates individuals to step outside of their perspectives and their spheres of personal concerns in order to vividly imagine others' lived experiences. Smith claims that most people harbour a natural desire for harmony, equilibrium, and tranquillity. Discord and conflict is experienced as unpleasant and jarring. The harmony, or what Smith refers to as the "concordance" of feeling

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[13]   Smith (1759/1790, TMS I.i.1.3). Smith writes:

> Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others. Sympathy, though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote *our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever* (TMS I.i.1.3. My emphasis).

[14]   In line with Smith's terminology, I refer to those individuals who bear witness to some set of circumstances as 'spectators.' Those individuals who initiate some action or who are directly affected by some action, I refer to interchangeably as 'actors,' 'agents,' 'victims' or 'sufferers.'

(TMS I.i.4.7) that is produced when spectators imaginatively enter into and experience fellow-feeling with others, is a source of pleasure for all parties involved, and provides spectators with an incentive to exercise their capacity for imaginative perspective taking.[15] Smith notes that agents have an added motivation to imaginatively adopt the perspectives of spectators. This is because observing others' hearts "beat time" with the agent's own has the cathartic effect of alleviating his suffering, and satiates his natural and intense desire for others' approval (TMS I.i.4.7). This has a strong disciplinary effect on the agent's behaviour: the pleasure of receiving others' sympathy motivates him to flatten the intensity of his response to a level that a spectator is able to enter into. Therefore, just as the spectator projects herself into the agent's situation, so too the agent reflects on his situation from the perspective of the spectator. This leads him to view his situation in a "candid and impartial light" and to moderate the "tone" and "pitch" of his response:

> He can only hope to obtain this [fellow-feeling] by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him. He must flatten … the sharpness of its natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him (TMS I.i.4.7).

As Karen Valihora puts it, Smithean sympathy involves "a complex activity of reciprocal perspective taking," wherein the agent imaginatively adopts the point of view of the spectator, who is also considering the agent's point of view.[16] For Smith, the "concordance" of sentiments that is produced by this exchange is central to motivating moral behaviour, and to creating and sustaining harmonious social communities (TMS I.i.4.7).

II Reflective Empathy: Smith's Impartial Spectator

Smith recognised that, while our capacity to enter into and identify with others' feelings is central to moral agency, it is liable to be influenced by an array of factors, including physical proximity, shared socio-cultural standing, and self-interest. We are likely, for example, to be more strongly affected by our own minor hardships than by the serious plight of distant others (See, for example, TMS III.iii.4). We are also more likely to wholly sympathise with

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[15] Smith claims that individuals derive pleasure from the harmonisation of feeling that is produced through sympathy even in instances where the feeling that is being sympathised with is painful (TMS I.i.2.6). Charles Griswold aptly describes the pleasure derived from the concordance of sentiment produced through sympathy as a "second-order," "disinterested," or "aesthetic" pleasure, and argues that, for Smith, our drive to sympathise with others is closely linked with our love of beauty (1999, pp. 111–112, 121).

[16] Valihora (2001, p. 146).

those who share our cultural customs and values (See, for example, TMS V.2.7). The effect of these biases may be to distort our moral judgments and to inhibit ethical concern for others' suffering.

The partiality and parochialism that Smith acknowledged to be characteristic of our sympathetic responses have been well documented in the empirical literature on empathy.[17] Recent studies have suggested that the various biases to which our empathic responses are subject have serious practical consequences, including marked disparities in criminal sentencing and in medical treatment for pain.[18]

How, then, does Smith suppose that something as variable and fluctuating as sympathetic feeling is able to support moral agency? Smith's answer lies in the ability of individuals to regulate their feelings through embodied practices of critical self-reflection. This capacity for critical self-reflection finds expression in Smith's device of the impartial spectator. Smith presents impartial spectatorship as an activity of critical self-assessment that draws on our capacity for imaginative perspective taking. In his view, we are capable of adopting a more impartial perspective, free from the distorting influence of bias, through imaginatively abstracting from our particular standpoint. An exercise of impartial spectatorship relies on our capacity to imagine into existence a "fair and judicious" spectator (TMS III.iii.38) who has no particular connection to, or special interest in, the parties or circumstances involved. By adopting the perspective of an impartial spectator and viewing ourselves through his or her eyes, we adjust our feelings to a level that we imagine this "great judge and arbiter" could go along with (TMS III.iii.4). In this sense, the process of reflecting on and correcting for our biased sentiments involves a sympathetic exchange between ourselves and a hypothetical spectator—one that mirrors the kind of sympathetic exchange that takes place between actual spectators and agents.

On Smith's model, our drive to sympathise with the perspective of the impartial spectator derives from the same source as our drive to sympathise with the perspectives of actual spectators: a desire for approval. Smith explains that, just like the agent who is motivated to adjust her feelings in order to receive the sympathetic approval of spectators, the pleasure of winning the approval of the impartial spectator within motivates us to adjust the "tone" and "pitch" of our sentiments. It is these corrected sentiments that ground our moral judgments, and that motivate moral behaviour. In sum, Smith's device of the impartial spectator represents,

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17 For example, a study by Xu et al. (2009) showed that the Caucasian participants were more strongly empathic towards the pain of other Caucasians than towards the pain of ethnically Chinese persons, while the converse was also true for Chinese participants. Group bias in empathic responses has also been recorded by Gutsell and Inzlicht (2010).

18 See, for example, Johnson et al. (2002); Drwecki et al. (2011); Kaseweter, Drwecki, and Prkachin (2012).

in Valihora's words, "a means of judging judgement … of impartially judging the self so as to make one's judgments expressive of a distinctly moral point of view."[19]

Importantly, ensuring that our judgments are adequately informed and impartial on this model does not require us to adopt the kind of highly abstract and idealised standpoint that is characteristic of contemporary 'ideal observer' theories, which posit a purely disinterested, dispassionate, and omnipercipient standpoint from which to formulate reliable and unbiased moral judgments.[20] The perspective of the impartial spectator is not equivalent to a God's Eye view: adopting the impartial standpoint produces moral judgments that are well informed and responsive to all of the relevant facts of the situation, but which are not necessarily perfectly informed. Furthermore, while Smith refers to the impartial spectator as an "indifferent" or "cool" spectator (I.ii.3.8, I.ii.4.1), this figure is not indifferent or disinterested in the sense of being wholly unemotional; the impartial spectator may not have the same degree of emotional investment as situated spectators in the relevant circumstances, but this kind of emotional detachment or distance is precisely what is required for impartial judgment. The feelings of the impartial spectator are engaged, yet are free from the overwhelming and corrupting influence of self-regarding emotions (such as envy or jealousy) that may stem from being too close to the circumstances and parties involved.[21] Finally, adopting the perspective of Smith's impartial spectator does not require individuals to do what is essentially impossible; that is, to adopt a purely objective, disembodied standpoint that exists outside the self. The standpoint that spectators and agents employ in the process of moral deliberation is "self-referential."[22] As Smith writes:

> I judge of your sight by my sight, of your ear by my ear, of your reason by my reason, of your resentment by my resentment, of your love by my love. I never have, nor can have, any other way of judging about them (TMS I.iii.10).

For Smith, we "never have, nor can have," any other means of judging the feelings and conduct of another than by bringing her case 'home' to ourselves through an exercise of imagination, and judging by our own standards as to whether her response is appropriate to her circumstances. Since, as we have seen, Smith was well aware that our situated judgments risk being inflected with bias or prejudice, we engage in a process of self-division and self-examination, and reflect on whether and to what extent an impartial observer ("the examiner and judge") could sympathise with our response:

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[19]   Valihora (2001, p. 145).

[20]   Roderick Firth (1952), for example, defines the ideal observer position in terms of disinterestedness, impassivity, and omnipercipience with regards to non-moral facts.

[21]   Griswold (1999, p. 136).

[22]   Forman-Barzilai (2013, p. 70).

When I endeavor to examine my own conduct, when I endeavor to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, 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 (TMS III.i.6. My emphasis).

This kind of self-division allows us to gain a degree of critical self-distance and to view our feelings in a more detached, candid, and impartial light.

III Jesse Prinz's Critique of Reflective Empathy: A Smithean Reply

In his reflections on empathy as a moral resource, Prinz briefly acknowledges Smith's device of the impartial spectator as a potential corrective to our empathic biases.[23] However, he argues that adopting the position of this "ideal observer" is extremely demanding and that individuals rarely have epistemic access to this "truly ideal position of observation."[24] In other words, Smith's "ideal observer" is too cognitively demanding as a regulative device, in Prinz's view: attempting to access this viewpoint exceeds our everyday epistemic capabilities.

Of course, Prinz is right to point out that exercising impartial spectatorship may be demanding; however, his description of Smith's impartial spectator as an 'ideal observer' is misguided if by this he has in mind an all-seeing, all-knowing figure

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[23] Prinz (2011b, p. 228). In Prinz's earlier paper, "Against Empathy," he dismisses Hume's general point of view as a viable corrective device for empathic bias, on the grounds that our vicarious, 'knee-jerk' empathic responses invariably overwhelm our capacity to adopt a reflective viewpoint (2011a, p. 228). This point fails to be convincing as a critique of Smith's impartial spectator in my view. If it were the case that the feelings generated through sympathising with others always took the form of contagious or vicarious affect, devoid of intentional or evaluative content, then indeed any attempt to assess or correct for such feelings would be futile. However, Smith's account of the central role played by imaginative perspective taking in facilitating sympathy—and even Prinz's own later definition of sympathy as a form of emotional mimicry that may be produced through an exercise of imaginative perspective taking (2011b)—gives us good reason to think that our sympathetic responses often embody evaluative judgments about others and their circumstances, where such judgments may be informed or misinformed, biased or unbiased (See Griswold, 1999, p. 137). It follows, then, that our sympathetic feelings have the capacity to be modified through discovering and correcting for any factual errors, and through exercising our capacity for critical self-reflection. Given the general plausibility of the claim that our sympathetic responses often embody cognitive appraisals of others and their circumstances that are accessible to reflection and modification, I take it we have reasonable grounds for rejecting the idea that our partial sympathetic feelings are wholly intractable and impervious to the kind of correction and adjustment that Smith promotes in his account of impartial spectatorship.

[24] Prinz (2011b, p. 228).

whose standpoint we must adopt if our moral judgments are to be reliable and impartial. As I have established in this paper, Smith's impartial spectator is not ideal in this sense. Ensuring that our feelings come to reflect a moral viewpoint is a matter of engaging in sufficiently informed (though not perfectly informed), attentive, and critically self-reflective exercises of imaginative perspective taking— exercises that enable a less 'imperfect' and unbiased sympathy with others.

Nonetheless, one could argue in a similar vein to Prinz that reflective empathy is incapable of playing a substantive role in moral thought and action, to the extent that engaging in informed, disciplined, and reflective exercises of imaginative perspective taking (either concurrently or after the fact) is simply too complicated and too time consuming, and that the practical demands of everyday life do not allow for such practices. Smith, I suggest, has the resources to respond to this issue. Some of his remarks in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* suggest that, with sufficient corrective experiences over time, the task of reflecting upon and correcting for our uninformed and biased empathic responses can be carried out more spontaneously. In one passage, Smith writes that the "wise and virtuous" person who continually works to refine his capacity for moral deliberation and judgment:

> does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He readily adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel (TMS III.3.25).

The idea that we may come to automatically and consistently identify with our conscience through the repeated experience of correcting for the bias embodied by our feelings inspires the thought that reflective empathy need not always involve a conscious and deliberative effort, and that the process of reflecting on and correcting for our immediate feelings can become more habitual and automatic with practice over time.[25] This possibility finds support from numerous empirical studies that reveal that the regulation of our feelings can occur with or without conscious effort,[26] and that show that habitually engaging

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[25]   In the philosophical literature, Kauppinen (2014) supports the view that regulation of one's emotions can occur implicitly and automatically, and need not always involve a conscious effort. Kauppinen draws on the work of Hume and Smith to develop his concept of 'ideal-regulated empathy,' defined as an "affective response to another's perceived situation that is regulated by reference to an ideal perspective." In a similar vein to this paper, he then proceeds to argue from empirical evidence that "taking on a more or less impartial perspective before reacting with blame or praise is something that can become habitual and automatized" (2014, p. 105. See also p. 103).

[26]   See, for example, Bargh and Williams (2007); Fiori (2009); Koole (2009); Mauss, Bunge, and Gross (2007).

in conscious regulative practices may engender more implicit exercises of emotional regulation.[27]

Further issues arise, however, when we consider the viability of reflective empathy as a corrective to modern forms of social bias and prejudice that commonly manifest as unconscious, implicit attitudes rather than as explicit judgments, and that influence our behaviour without our awareness and in ways that may be in tension with our standing beliefs.[28] As such, we have reason to doubt a person's ability to independently acknowledge that her feelings in a given situation may be distorted by bias and prejudice, and require adjustment.

I suggest that the issue of implicit bias need not wholly undermine an appeal to reflective empathy as a moral resource. Rather, it serves to highlight that the activity of exercising impartial spectatorship cannot be an entirely individualistic practice. Acquiring critical self-awareness will often rely on interactions with different others who may alert us to the prejudicial assumptions and lack of understanding embodied by our sentiments. The conception of impartial spectatorship as a social, dialogical practice is supported by Smith's remarks in the following passage, where he acknowledges that the embodied presence of others—particularly those with whom we have no particular connection—is often required to jolt us into awareness of the bias embedded in our sentiments, and of the need to adjust our perspective through critical self-reflection:

> The man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, *requires often to be awakened and put in mind of his duty, by the presence of the real spectator* … (TMS III.3.38. My emphasis).

The claim that impartial spectatorship must often take the form of a more social, dialogical practice rather than an individualistic, introspective exercise in light of the issue of implicit bias raises questions about how to facilitate interaction and communication between different groups of people in society, particularly when pervasive social prejudices may lead people to unconsciously avoid contact with members of certain social groups. It also leaves open to question how individuals may, of their own volition, overcome the difficulties they are prone to experience in the process of exercising their capacity to imagine things from their interlocutor's perspective. As Smith himself notes, there is real potential for exercises of imaginative perspective taking to generate discomfort and resistance, since engaging in such exercises may compel us to confront a

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[27]   See, for example, Gyurak, Gross, and Etkin (2011).

[28]   In the existing literature, implicit bias is distinguished from what is commonly referred to as 'old-fashioned' bias, which manifests as a set of explicit, consciously held negative attitudes and beliefs, directed at a particular group target. See Dovidio and Gaertner (1986) for further discussion.

jarring and undesirable image of ourselves. He claims that such an experience frequently leads us to refrain from exercising our capacity for reflective empathy:

> *It is so disagreeable to think ill of ourselves, that we often purposely turn away our view from those whose circumstances might render that judgment unfavourable.* He is a bold surgeon, they say, whose hand doesn't tremble when he performs an operation on his own person; and he is often equally bold who does not hesitate to pull off the mysterious veil of self-delusion, which covers from his view the deformities of his own conduct (TMS III.4.4. My emphasis).[29]

In such cases, self-interest overwhelms the second-order pleasure that one derives from achieving a harmony or 'concordance' of feeling with others.

While the problem of implicit bias and resistance to empathic engagement present significant obstacles to relying on empathy as a moral resource, these obstacles are not insurmountable. This becomes particularly clear when we consider the real potential for institutions to support empathic engagement with different and unfamiliar perspectives. The need for institutional structures and practices to develop and refine our capacities to empathise with difference is explicitly acknowledged by Smith in his later work, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776).[30] Here Smith argues that participation in the commercial and artistic life of society plays a key role in familiarising individuals with the lives and perspectives of differently situated others, and in cultivating sociability and civility. For example, Smith notes that the commercial marketplace facilitates embodied encounters between different groups of people in society, and encourages individuals to acquaint themselves with others' distinct perspectives. In his view, a thriving marketplace in which everyone has the opportunity to participate on fair and equal terms establishes relations of co-operation and interdependence between differently situated individuals. Such relations compel individuals to recognise and engage with the perspectives of those with whom they deal. Smith claims that commercial self-interest (for instance, the desire among buyers to accumulate goods at a cheap price) provides a strong incentive for buyers to imaginatively adopt the

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[29]   In this passage, Smith can be read as anticipating the phenomenon of what contemporary theorists have referred to as 'willful' or 'active' ignorance. Roughly speaking, this phenomenon refers to a resistance to correcting for one's erroneous beliefs and to gaining a more accurate understanding of others' lives, circumstances, histories, and experiences, owing in part to the fact that doing so would go against one's perceived self-interest (Sullivan and Tuana 2007).

[30]   All references to this work derive from the R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner, and W.B. Todd edition, published in 1976 (hereafter, WN).

perspective of the seller, and to regulate their conduct in light of the seller's interests.[31]

Apart from commercial societies in which individuals are able to participate on rough terms of fairness and equality, Smith argued that literature, poetry, theatre, and painting are crucial to the moral education and development of citizens, and ought to be supported by the state (WN V.i.g.15). Smith often speaks of modern tragedies and romances as conjuring up vivid depictions of human predicaments and lived experiences that serve to expand the (limited) imaginative capacities of their respective audiences and to elicit compassion for distant suffering (TMS I.ii.2.2–I.ii.2.4).[32] Smith also acknowledged the capacity for great works of art to sensitise individuals to important contextual

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[31]   Smith (1776/1976, WN I.ii.2). Smith writes:

> It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. *We address ourselves*, not to their humanity, but *to their self-love*, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages (WN I.ii.2. My emphasis).

In other words, as buyers we moderate or temper our offers by what we imagine to be in the seller's interests. Of course, Smith's idea that commercial societies help to cultivate a regard for others and to establish relations of civility between different groups of people in society will be greeted with cynicism by contemporary audiences—and rightly so. However, it is worth keeping in mind that the commercial marketplace of Smith's day bears little resemblance to modern capitalist markets. Smith's marketplace was a highly localised one in which individuals engaged in face-to-face interactions with others for the exchange of goods and services. In this sense, Smith's account inspires the thought that institutional structures that facilitate embodied encounters between different social identities, and which provide individuals with meaningful opportunities and incentives to associate and co-operate respectfully with others, are important for maintaining flourishing social communities. This is in large part because such structures assist individuals to practice and develop their capacity for sympathetic perspective taking.

[32]   As I outlined earlier, our failure to conjure up a particularly forceful or lively idea of others' lived experiences in the course of our everyday lives may be grounded in various factors, including self-interest and bias. This failure may also be traced to our limited capacity to imaginatively 'bring home' the experiences of others who have radically different histories, lives, values, and beliefs—a task that would presumably require a large degree of imaginative capaciousness and flexibility. In responding to these issues, it is plausible to think that the kind of apprenticeship that is involved in our engagement with art may not only function to circumvent the problem of empathic resistance that was of significant concern to Smith, but also to overcome the limitations of the individual imagination. This view finds support from Gregory Currie, who notes that:

factors—those "different shades and gradations of circumstance, character and situation" (TMS VI.ii.i.22)—that may frequently escape their attention, or which they may be tempted to overlook, in their everyday interactions with others. By inviting audiences to attend to the nuances and complexities of human lived experience, artistic productions assist, in Smith's view, in expanding and refining people's capacities for sympathy, fellow-feeling, and moral judgment.[33]

In finishing, Smith's work provides a compelling case for why the obstacles to reflective empathic engagement need not entail a rejection of an empathy-based morality. By presenting a close reading of Smith's impartial spectator, I have sought to demonstrate the viability of impartial spectatorship as a corrective for empathic bias. While it may be true that the task of engaging in critical self-reflection and correcting our pre-reflective feelings represents a robust capacity, I have argued *contra* Prinz that it is not so robust as to stretch the capacities and resources of everyday individuals entirely beyond their limits. Critical self-regulation of the kind described by Smith can become more habitual and less time consuming with practice over time—or so the empirical evidence suggests. Nevertheless, as Smith himself recognised, the ability of individuals to enter into the experiences of others and adjust their own feelings may only extend so far. This is particularly true in contemporary contexts where implicit bias and empathic resistance pose significant challenges for reflective empathic engagement. In this paper, I have endeavoured to show how Smith's work is able to constructively engage

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> Good fictions give us, through the talents of their makers, access to imaginings more complex, inventive and instructive than we could often hope to make for ourselves. Constructing my own imaginings would also require of me a prodigious capacity to stand aside from my own immediate desires, since a natural tendency is to rig the narrative so as to get from it the lesson we want to hear. Better on the whole to listen to the narrative of another, more competent teller of tales (1998, p. 171. See also Nussbaum 1997, 1998).

[33]   Smith offers Voltaire's tragedy *The Orphan of China* (*L'Orphelin de la Chine,* 1756) as an example of a morally edifying work that encourages a sensitivity among its audience to the complex particulars of character and context:

> In that beautiful tragedy of Voltaire, the Orphan of China, while we admire the magnanimity of Zamti, who is willing to sacrifice the life of his own child, in order to preserve that of the only feeble remnant of his ancient sovereigns and masters; we not only pardon, but love the maternal tenderness of Idame, who, at the risque of discovering the important secret of her husband, reclaims her infant from the cruel hands of the Tartars, into which it had been delivered (TMS VI.ii.i.22).

The sensitivity to perspectival differences that is cultivated through engagement with art helps in Smith's view to develop our capacity for reflective sympathetic feeling and moral judgment.

with these issues, first by offering an innovative interpretation of Smithean impartial spectatorship as a social, dialogical practice, and second by exploring Smith's illuminating account of structural supports for sympathy. These overlooked aspects of Smith's moral sentimentalism provide valuable resources for thinking through how to support empathic engagement across difference.

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