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MORAL PAROCHIALISM AND THE LIMITS OF IMPARTIALITY

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One of the central problems of contemporary political and moral thought is how to reconcile the cultural and social roots of morality with its objectivity or rational warrant, whether in the personal or political sphere. David Golemboski’s reconstruction of Adam Smith’s impartial spectator (*European Journal of Political Theory*, onlinefirst February 23rd 2015) provides a useful first approximation to this problem. What interests me is not whether Golemboski’s critique of Smith’s impartial spectator hits the mark, but rather, to what extent Golemboski’s reconstruction of Smith’s impartial spectator succeeds at addressing the problem of moral parochialism, as Golemboski claims. I shall argue in what follows that upon examination, Golemboski’s reconstructed impartial spectator, far from resolving the problem of moral parochialism, actually exposes the limits of the value of impartiality as a resource for overcoming parochial prejudice, and the necessity of framing the problem of parochialism less as a matter of social and cultural bias than as a matter of the conditions of possibility of *sound moral judgment*.

One of the central problems of contemporary political and moral thought is how to reconcile the cultural and social roots of morality with the supposed objectivity or rational warrant of moral principles and judgments, whether in the personal or political sphere. We are keenly aware that our moral judgments are enabled and conditioned by the process of socialization, and that many aspects of our morality bear the distinctive marks of our culture, yet we are also aware that our moral judgments are only fully intelligible if they rely on principles of right and wrong, good and bad, propriety and impropriety, that have some independent rational warrant over and above what we ‘happen to think around here.’

This may explain why Rawls’s political liberalism, with its proposal to organize and mutually reconcile the prevailing principles and values of the political cultures of modern liberal democracies,¹ without offering any *independent justification* of liberal democratic culture, has met with considerable philosophical resistance and has been accused by numerous critics of being morally parochial and relativistic.² It would also explain why Rorty’s open embrace of cultural relativism, his claim that liberalism is nothing but the accidental product of Western philosophy and culture, has proved so controversial in academic circles.³

Unqualified moral and cultural relativism seems to reduce the animating ideals of Western civilization, ideals such as freedom, equality, human dignity, and civility, to arbitrary social constructs with no objective claim on us other than the fact that they are ‘ours’ or that they ‘work for us.’ If the claims of relativism are conceded, then critiques of religious persecution, torture, physical mutilation, and unjust exclusion of minorities from social life, whether at home or abroad, collapse into special pleading or cultural imperialism. Thus, the great challenge we face, not only as political and moral philosophers, but as human beings who wish to live rightly

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and justly, is to secure some objective rational warrant for the moral principles and values we live by without denying that they are transmitted and informed by a morally fallible process of socialization.

If we affirm the objective rational warrant of our moral principles and values but ignore the ways they are socially and culturally informed and transmitted, we fall into a form of unwitting parochialism, whereby we mistakenly treat the contingent and partially flawed beliefs of a particular culture as if they were universal moral truths. This is the sort of naive parochialism associated with colonial oppression, in which the colonizers take for granted the superiority of their own culture and appear blind to its contingency and imperfections. If, on the other hand, we deny that morality has any objective rational warrant, reducing it to a *mere* product of socialization, we fall into a self-conscious moral parochialism that reduces the civilizing and restraining influence of morality to an accidental prejudice, and the very notion of ‘getting it right’ or living a good life to an illusion or a convenient attachment to convention. This sort of ‘proud’ parochialism, much like that affirmed by Richard Rorty, openly devalues and relativizes morality, leaving us with no moral compass beyond the arbitrary prejudices of social convention.

We are thus led to the burning question, is it possible to vindicate the rational warrant of morality while also accommodating its social roots? In other words, can we give an account of the socialization process according to which it both *informs* an individual person’s moral beliefs and attitudes, *and* permits him to make moral judgments that have some validity independent from the judgments and values typical of his social peers?⁴ David Golemboski’s reconstruction of Adam Smith’s impartial spectator (*European Journal of Political Theory*, onlinefirst, February 2015) provides a useful first approximation to this problem.⁵ Although Golemboski intends his account simply as a friendly amendment to the impartial spectator rather than as a full-fledged account of moral judgment, the limits of his proposal *as a solution to the problem of moral parochialism* are instructive enough that they warrant close attention, independent of the validity of his critique of Smith. What interests me in particular is not whether Golemboski’s critique of Smith’s impartial spectator hits the mark, but rather, to what extent Golemboski’s reconstruction of Smith’s impartial spectator succeeds at addressing the problem of moral parochialism, as Golemboski claims. I shall argue in what follows that upon examination, Golemboski’s reconstructed impartial spectator, far from resolving the problem of moral parochialism, actually exposes the limits of the value of impartiality as a resource for overcoming parochial prejudice, and the necessity of framing the problem of parochialism less as a problem of social and cultural bias, and more as a problem of securing the conditions of possibility of *sound moral judgment*.

Golemboski is critical of Smith’s impartial spectator, because while he may enable individuals to overcome the prejudices of their immediate social context and interests, he does not free their judgments from the prejudices of their wider social context, since ‘the spectator serves to reflect back socially-transmitted moral norms to the agent,’ undermining the agent’s ‘ability to critique the practices of her own society’ (10). In short, on Golemboski’s interpretation, Smith’s impartial spectator, while he may overcome the prejudices and interests of individuals and groups within a society, is nonetheless mired in the moral prejudices of his own general societal and cultural context. Consequently, Golemboski proposes a ‘slight amendment’ to the way we conceptualize the impartial spectator, designed to achieve some degree of impartiality not only between individual agents and groups but between different *societies and cultures*. Golemboski proposes that a broader interpretation of the impartial spectator, informed by ‘active exposure to and consideration of alternative moral perspectives and normative systems’ (15), can enable the spectator to ‘overcome the problem of parochialism’ (17), i.e. the distorting effects of social convention.

I am sympathetic to Golemboski's claim that exposure to the perspectives of other societies and cultures could provide us with some critical leverage for recognizing the moral blindspots in our own societies and cultures. However, the ambitious fruits he presumes to reap from his 'slight amendment' to the impartial spectator, namely the ability to 'overcome the problem of parochialism' (allegedly) plaguing Smith's impartial spectator, seem to me rather premature. For at bottom, the cultural and social distortion of morality is not simply a failure of impartiality, analagous to favoritism exercised by a judge toward one of the parties to a lawsuit, but a failure of *sound moral judgment*. Sound moral judgment is not simply a matter of resisting the pull of self-interest, personal preferences, or collective prejudices, but of developing an objectively sound criterion and moral sensibility for distinguishing good from evil and right from wrong. Without this criterion and sensibility, no amount of cultural 'impartiality' can rescue our moral judgments from arbitrariness and social distortion. While it may be useful to '[curate] an array of moral outlooks [arising from different social contexts] that [one] may bring to bear in formulating moral judgments' (15), at best this simply enlarges the range of moral perspectives which inform one's judgments. One's judgments themselves are not constituted by the internalization of different moral outlooks, but by a critical synthesis of those different outlooks within a more or less coherent view. So something more needs to be said if we are to understand how an agent's judgments can achieve some degree of rational warrant in the face of morally arbitrary social and cultural prejudices.⁶

The concept at the heart of Golemboski's analysis of the problem of parochialism—and to be fair, in this respect he is following Smith—is that of *impartiality*. Golemboski borrows Raz's very general concept of impartiality, according to which an impartial judge gives weight to *relevant* reasons and shuns *irrelevant* considerations 'that favor [the agent] or people or causes dear to [his heart].' In addition, the impartial judge's evaluation of a situation is not distorted by the fact that people or causes involved happen to be 'dear to [him]' (quoted on p. 5). Clearly, local societal or cultural values may prove to be an obstacle to the agent's capacity to make impartial moral judgments, insofar as they may mislead an agent by imposing themselves upon him as if they were valid and binding reasons, in situations where they are in fact *irrelevant* or interfere with sound judgment. Golemboski suggests that we can gain some critical distance from our social context and thus distinguish when the prevailing values of our society are truly relevant and when they are not, if we allow our judgments to come under the sway of the standpoint of an imagined impartial spectator 'as a product of a wide formative process involving exposure to and consideration of actual moralities affirmed by various persons and peoples' (15).

This has more than a grain of truth to it. However, cultural impartiality only functions as a corrective to arbitrary social prejudices if we think there is already a stable objective framework of values accessible to human cognition that can be put in jeopardy by local biases or distortions. This might be the case, for example, for a judge bound by a fixed system of law. The basic values and criteria of judgment are already established. The judge must avoid allowing certain sympathies and interests, whether financial or emotional, to interfere with his equal application of the rules to all. To do this, it may suffice for the judge to imaginatively put himself in the shoes of a disinterested observer. But we should be careful not to extrapolate too quickly from the case of the judge applying the rules of a legal system, to the case of a person applying the rules of morality.

In the case of the judge, we largely take for granted the validity of the rules of the legal system, and only put in question whether or not they are correctly applied. But in the case of a general system of values and norms governing the day-to-day life of a society, we cannot assume in advance that its principles are in general objectively valid or relevant for the moral judgments of agents. We have no reason to assume that it is only special sorts of local distortion, such as

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self-interest or personal sympathy, that stand in the way of correct moral judgment. It is quite possible that many of the conventional values or rules to be applied are themselves mistaken or harmful. It is even possible that the general framework of judgment prevalent in one's society is mistaken or distorted by false assumptions about what is objectively worthwhile or valuable (for example, practices such as infanticide, genital mutilation, and foot-binding, even if integral to a given society's system of values and norms, may in fact violate objective human interests and/or rights). Under these circumstances, it is hard to see how merely occupying the perspective of a disinterested third party from a different society can correct systemic distortions in one's society's values—unless we assume that third-party cultures have superior value systems, which would seem like an arbitrary assumption or one in need of some independent justification.

The inadequacy of the notion of social and cultural impartiality as a counterweight to morally arbitrary social influences can be seen if we think about the way social and cultural conventions in fact get translated into our moral judgments. The assumption behind Golemboski's presentation of the problem of moral parochialism (whether or not this is also Smith's assumption does not matter for present purposes) is that the basic values, attitudes, norms, and sensibilities of a society or culture can in fact be distilled into a single, more or less coherent, perspective (that of the culture's 'impartial spectator'—impartial with respect to the array of available perspectives within the culture), and that this perspective is what tends to inform an agent's moral judgments. On this view, the problem of parochialism arises insofar as the arbitrary prejudices of a culture get assimilated by its impartial spectator, and this spectator is then the model of correct moral judgment for members of the culture in question. Solving this problem would be a question of inhabiting a perspective outside the culture so as to achieve some critical distance or impartiality with respect to the culture's internal biases.

But as a description of the process through which we form our moral judgments, this is surely an oversimplification. There is no single perspective that authoritatively embodies the moral values, attitudes, and norms of a society or culture. Although certain values, attitudes, and norms are statistically dominant in a culture, when agents attempt to form correct judgments, they are not guided merely by what they perceive to be statistically dominant, but what they perceive to be the values of their society *at their best*.⁷ And this is an essentially contested question, at least in morally and religiously heterogeneous societies such as those we encounter in much of the world today. In such societies, we can expect that numerous competing interpretations of the standpoint of the impartial spectator will arise. While these competing standpoints may be constrained in a very broad sense by the outer limits of a society's moral imagination and sensibilities, what matters for present purposes is that they are in fact dynamic and contested, constituted by extended, intergenerational conversations among members of the society. Thus, the problem of forming a correct moral judgment is presented to the agent not as a matter of adopting a single perspective, that of 'his culture' or 'his society,' but as a matter of discerning which of the competing perspectives available in his society to affirm, and indeed of whether to affirm it unequivocally, or with some modifications of his own.

In short, moral values in a modern culture are simply too contested and dynamic to constitute a single, potentially distorting perspective. Of course, agents are subject to social influences that create moral blindspots or insensitivities. But it is not especially helpful to think of these as part of a comprehensive moral 'filter' given by the perspective of our culture or society as a whole. It seems more accurate to think of social influences as cross-cutting patterns of belief and attitude that reinforce certain values and discourage others, and that operate in different ways depending on their sources and sphere of influence. Individual agents are confronted with the task of either taking the path of least resistance and conforming to the prejudices of their immediate social groups, or of attempting to sort through competing values, to arrive at a view they

find plausible or compelling or true. The task of overcoming arbitrary ‘parochialism’ is not so much the task of overcoming the arbitrary parochialism of society at large, as the task of overcoming the many arbitrary parochialisms associated with different social groups which play a role in an agent’s life, whether his family, school, workplace, social club, neighborhood, or church.

It is precisely at this point, however, that the insufficiency of mere exposure to cultural diversity becomes quite obvious. Neither the ‘internalization’ of diverse cultural standpoints, nor a critical survey of them, will help the agent set aside arbitrary social values unless the agent already has some primordial capacity to recognize the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. Serial exposure to different standpoints does alert an agent to a range of conceptual and normative possibilities, and to that extent it may help him understand the contingency of certain standpoints. However, other moralities are just as contestable as one’s own, and their host societies may not be particularly disinterested with respect to the issue under consideration, so it is not clear how exposure to them can serve to uncover the defects of one’s own morality. Just as mathematical truths do not impose themselves upon the human mind unless the mind is in fact ‘wired’ to recognize them, in a similar way the superiority of a moral perspective cannot impose itself upon a subject by mere exposure to it unless the agent already has a certain moral sensibility or a latent capacity to recognize the difference between sound and unsound values.

Put simply, Golemboski’s emphasis on ‘wide impartiality’ as a way of putting parochial values in their place is misleading on two counts: first, insofar as it identifies the main source of moral distortion as the collective prejudices of an entire culture or society, when in fact moral distortion can occur at all levels of a social order; and second, insofar as it suggests that the main corrective to parochialism is imaginatively inhabiting other cultural standpoints, when the only possible corrective of moral parochialism is sound moral judgment, which in turn presupposes some primordial capacity on the part of the agent to distinguish between good and evil, and right and wrong.

In order to illustrate both of these points, let us consider the issue of chattel slavery in antebellum America. Let us assume for now the conclusion that most people ended up embracing and that few today would dispute, namely, that slavery was profoundly unjust and degrading to the enslaved. Coming to a sound moral conclusion in this case depended on an individual’s capacity to recognize the values at stake and above all to fully recognize the dignity of the enslaved. Certainly, internalizing the perspective of the slave would have helped one understand how devastating and degrading slavery was for those caught up in it. But it is not clear whether occupying the standpoint of a *different culture or society* would have contributed anything essential to the process of arriving at a correct moral judgment on the question at issue—after all, another culture’s moral judgments do not necessarily have any more moral authority than one’s own.

While perceptions of slavery were undoubtedly distorted by pro-slavery social conventions and habits of mind, these did not represent the whole content of the public mind in America, let alone in the Western world. While the customs and ideas of a society may mark the outer boundaries of acceptability, and makes certain moral positions much easier to acquiesce in than others, it is ultimately the agent himself who must decide which of the prevailing values of his social context constitute unharmed distortions, and which do not, and this requires a capacity to see matters clearly, so as to form a correct moral judgment. Forming a correct moral judgment certainly requires one to take seriously the perspective of a range of different parties, but it may or may not require one to have knowledge of other cultures.

Some people in antebellum America were adamant that slavery was an injustice wrongfully sanctioned by the social conventions of the day, while others accepted that particular social

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convention as morally legitimate. In accounting for the fact that the abolitionists came to different conclusions to the majority of their social peers, even at great personal cost, it does not seem plausible to suggest that what enabled them to escape the distortions of social convention was their exposure to cultural perspectives outside of their own society. For first of all, the abolitionists were contesting the dominant interpretation of their *own* culture, rather than appealing to foreign cultural perspectives; and second, it seems perfectly plausible to assume that some defenders of slavery were just as versed in the habits and customs of other cultures as their abolitionist peers. It seems that if we are to explain the contrasting positions of abolitionists and supporters of slavery we must point out that they reached different personal judgments concerning the practices of their society. Assuming that the abolitionists came out on the right side, the only way to explain this is that they were capable of a certain moral insight or judgment and a certain clear-headed recognition of the humanity and personal dignity of slaves, that their adversaries, for reasons of short-sightedness, cowardice, greed, or whatever, lacked.

What our consideration of the slavery debate brings out is that taking on board the standpoint of another society or culture serves no useful purpose *unless the agent himself is capable of discerning the truth* in each standpoint he considers. Thus, the notion of impartial spectator appealed to by Golemboski would be better replaced by the notion of *practical wisdom*, through which an agent detects genuine values and disvalues in a situation, and discerns the actions they imply. While certain forms of impartiality, such as impartiality among disputing parties, are often necessary for reaching correct moral conclusions, this presupposes the capacity of the agent to make sound moral judgments against the background of generally applicable criteria of good and bad, right and wrong. It is sound moral judgment above all, rather than moral or cultural impartiality, that enables the agent to distinguish between salutary and unsalutary social conventions, between the 'wisdom of the ages' and arbitrary prejudices unworthy of his allegiance.

If I am right in claiming that practical wisdom rather than impartiality is what enables us to free our moral judgments from arbitrary social prejudice and convention, then this leaves us with a few pressing questions: first, what are the conditions that enable the acquisition and exercise of practical wisdom? Second, how can we affirm the possibility of sound moral judgment freed from social prejudice while simultaneously accepting that moral values are learnt through a process of socialization? Finally, if impartiality is less important than sound moral judgment for the task of recognizing and rooting out arbitrary moral prejudices, then what positive role is left for impartiality in a theory of moral judgment?

It should be obvious that I cannot pretend to do full justice to these three questions in the space of a short critical essay. However, since I have been critical of Golemboski's reconstructed impartial spectator as a solution to moral parochialism, it only seems fair that I at least indicate in very rough terms what an alternative solution to the problem of parochialism might look like, and how impartiality fits into this revised picture.

The first question is, what are the enabling conditions of practical wisdom, i.e. the conditions that either impede or make possible sound moral judgment? Decent people coincide in many judgments of justice and goodness much of the time, even across cultures. For example, there are rules against theft, lying, adultery, cheating, assault, and murder in practically all human societies, and some form of friendship, family life, knowledge, wisdom, reverence for the dead, and artistic expression are valued in all known human civilizations. These convergences constitute prima facie evidence that there are distinctively human goods and bads, and that most people of goodwill share a sufficient degree of moral insight or sensitivity to identify such goods and to recognize social rules that protect them. The impressive coincidence of moral judgment across cultures may be explained by the fact that there are certain things that are good for us as

human beings, things such as friendship, cooperation, gift-giving and receiving, honesty, truthfulness, trust, nutrition, security, bodily integrity, family life, sexual companionship, knowledge, and so forth, and that we have a basic capacity to experience these things *as good*, and to judge them to be good for us. 281-284

Beyond these basic convergences, there is a form of excellence in judgment which classical moral philosophers since Socrates have called practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Practical wisdom is a disposition to judge the goodness and evil of human action soundly, even in situations of considerable complexity. It involves a capacity to discern the good in matters that frequently admit of variation, may involve conflicting goods, and are rarely resolvable based on simple formulas. Practical wisdom thus requires a type of discernment or insight into human affairs that cannot be taken for granted or assumed to be the universal patrimony of humanity. It requires cultivation, apprenticeship, and experience. 285-292

Neither the recognition of obvious moral truths nor the cultivation of a more refined moral sensibility—practical wisdom—are attainable outside of community or without socialization into the language and experience of living with others and holding oneself accountable to them for one's actions. We need to be taught by teachers and role models, starting with our own parents, how to embody the good in our choices and lifestyle, and how to judge the difference between good and evil.⁸ Ideally, this formative process brings the agent to a point where he can start to take on personal responsibility for living a good life and making good choices himself. If, on the other hand, he is deprived of positive moral influences and role models in his childhood, he may be more inclined to embark on destructive and anti-social lifestyles, or feel much less confident in his judgments of right and wrong, good and evil, than he might otherwise be. 293-302

Assuming that community is necessary for the learning of moral wisdom, the mode of learning is not purely didactic or theoretical, akin to a mathematics class, but intensely *practical*, implicating the formation of moral character. For the capacity for sound moral judgment depends on the cultivation of moral virtues, such as compassion, sincerity, and justice. These sorts of virtues not only sensitize our mind to the needs of others, but they dispose our wills to respond positively to those needs, and to see the interests of the people around us as a matter of personal concern. Virtues such as empathy, generosity, compassion, and sincerity tend to enhance our capacity to make sound moral judgments, as we become more fully attuned to the values at stake in different situations; while vices such as cruelty, greed, and insincerity will often detract from our capacity to make sound moral judgments, hardening us to relevant values, including at times the value of the human person himself. 303-313

The acquisition of moral virtue and wisdom may be fine-tuned over time through the accumulation of a rich life experience. Many of our opinions and perceptions are refined over time, and many things we thought vitally important are proven by experience to be of minor importance, while other things one thought of trivial importance prove over time to be very important for a well-lived life. A young person, for example, may be inclined to place a premium on physical beauty and pleasure, whereas over time he may come to see, by experiencing first-hand the passing and superficial nature of physical beauty and pleasure, that this is not a sufficient basis for living a rich and fulfilling life. 314-321

In short, while there is significant convergence among persons of goodwill of different societies and cultures on basic rules of social life, more refined and complex judgments of justice and injustice, good and bad, right and wrong, require the virtue of practical wisdom. But this virtue can only be properly cultivated in a community in which suitable role models make their presence felt, and its possession depends on supporting virtues such as empathy, generosity, and sincerity. Practical wisdom also requires a certain amount of life experience, through which an 322-327

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agent learns from trial and error. Together, this is a relatively demanding set of conditions, and it may explain much of the divergence in moral values both within and across cultures.

So far, so good. But some readers might be left wondering, how we can affirm the possibility of sound moral judgment, i.e moral judgment with rational warrant, while simultaneously accepting that moral values are learnt through a culturally inflected process of socialization? Surely the social genesis of moral wisdom, the fact that it is taught through the prism of culture, converts it into an arbitrary product of socialization with no objective rational warrant? Indeed, the dramatic divergence in moral judgment across different persons and cultures seems to provide prima facie evidence for the vulnerability of moral judgment to arbitrary socialization.

While it is true that the opinions and customs of different cultures do diverge significantly, it is also true that there is remarkable convergence in the values and norms of different cultures, on issues such as truth-telling, loyalty, parental responsibility, promise-keeping, and the duties of friendship. This convergence seems to suggest that human beings do in fact share a certain common ‘moral sense’ or capacity to distinguish what is good from what is bad, what is just from what is unjust. And to the extent that there is genuine divergence, some of this may be explained by legitimate cultural variation (forms of greeting and familial duties, for example, need not be identical in different societies), and some of it may be explained by the fact that sound moral judgment is a difficult moral achievement, not something to be equated with socialization into the rudiments of civility.

That being said, it is of course true that our moral judgments are often culturally inflected and are expressed in the language, concepts, and values that have been transmitted to us through our experience of living in society. But this influence does not rule out the possibility of sound or rationally warranted moral judgment. For the moral concepts and values we learn as children, teenagers, and adults, are dynamic and contestable, not fixed quantities. They demand to be interpreted and applied by us. Thus, the judgments of persons and the conventions of social life enter into a dialectical relationship in which the capacity for individual judgment, in spite of its social context, is often preserved. If we were simply products of our cultures, we would have to explain away historical examples of individuals ‘bucking the system’ and coming to conclusions that many of their peers find morally abhorrent or deeply mistaken.

Finally, if impartiality is less important than moral wisdom for the task of recognizing and rooting out arbitrary moral prejudices, then what positive role is left for impartiality in a theory of moral judgment? To gain some clarity on this question, we need to identify different ways in which our moral judgments can be distorted or falsified. Consider, by way of example, the following two situations: (1) I fail to perceive that a handicapped child has the right to live, so I advocate infanticide in case of the birth of a handicapped child; (2) I raise the grade of a student because I have compassion on her when I hear about the death of her parents, even though in principle I accept traditional grading rules. Now, it seems to me that the first of these cases of distortion in moral judgment—assuming for the sake of argument that infanticide is in fact gravely wrong—is not necessarily caused by some form of local partiality or prejudice, and therefore it cannot be remedied exclusively by adopting a detached or impartial perspective on the situation; while the second case of distortion does involve a fairly obvious form of partiality, and therefore can be remedied by an effort to occupy the perspective of an impartial observer.

The first case, that of the person who advocates the killing of handicapped children—assume, for the sake of argument, that the position is a violation of their rights—could be viewed as a blindness to the value of the handicapped child’s human dignity. Notice that what is at stake is not merely the application of a rule within an established practice, but whether or not a particular rule—the rule exempting handicapped children from the protection of the law against homicide—is or is not morally valid. Insofar as moral blindness is what is at stake, it seems that the

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correction to this particular distortion is not to occupy the standpoint of another culture (another culture has no automatic moral authority in such matters), nor is the solution necessarily to occupy the standpoint of an 'impartial observer' within one's own culture (since one's own cultural values may happen to be equally blind to the value of handicapped children), but to empathize more fully with the humanity of the handicapped child, to open one's eyes to his humanity, to somehow reawaken one's moral sensibility, something that may require a significant effort of the heart and mind, or even some sort of dramatic personal conversion.

Now, consider the case of raising the grade of a student out of compassion for the loss of her parents. While the sentiment of compassion may be admirable, there is clearly a distortion at work here, namely the distortion of identifying oneself too closely with the interests and feelings of the student. The interests and feelings of the student become so overbearing in one's imagination that one sets aside the norms of fairness and professionalism and marginalizes the rights and interests of other students in the class. In this case, the rational warrant of the rules of the grading system is not what is at issue, but rather, the correct application of those rules. The teacher, by hypothesis, assumes that the grading system is morally acceptable, but must decide how best to apply those rules to a particular case. As it happens, in the case in question, the application of the rules appears to be distorted by an exaggerated compassion for a distressed student. This compassion must be offset by an impartial consideration by the teacher of his relationship with all of his students, and his duty to protect their legitimate interests. Such impartiality may be achieved by imaginatively occupying the standpoint of a third-party observer who understands the rules of the system and their underlying spirit but has no special interests at stake in the situation.

What these examples suggest is that impartiality has a subsidiary or second-tier function in a theory of moral judgment. First, one must establish, or accept as plausible, the rational warrant of the rules one wishes to apply; and second, where the correct application of those rules is liable to be distorted by the tug of favouritism, special interests, personal commitments, or immoderate emotional responses, one imaginatively inhabits the perspective of the impartial observer, who is assumed to understand the relevant rules and their underlying spirit. But the rules of morality cannot themselves be validated by the impartial observer. The impartial observer might corroborate the validity of secondary or tertiary rules, but only in light of certain higher-order rules that he is assumed to accept and understand. In short, the impartial observer, far from being a guarantor of morality, is more like an auxiliary interpreter of moral rules that must be discerned and accepted by the agent himself on some independent grounds.

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I began this discussion by observing that David Golemboski's use of Smith's impartial spectator to tackle the problem of moral parochialism presented a good opportunity to think through the problem of reconciling the social sources of morality with its objective validity or rational warrant. I acknowledged that there are situations, such as that of the application of the law by a judge, and the awarding of grades by a teacher, in which some version of the impartial spectator plays a critical role in informing sound moral judgments. But I went to some lengths, with the help of examples such as the morality of slavery in antebellum America, to show that the effort to occupy an impartial position, whether among persons or cultures, plays an auxiliary role, and in some cases no role at all, in the overcoming of arbitrary moral prejudices. Instead, I argued that arbitrary moral prejudices are the result of unsound moral judgment, and that the only basis for distinguishing between morally sound cultural influences and arbitrary forms of

parochialism is morally sound judgment, which in turn requires the cultivation of *practical wisdom* and a range of supporting virtues such as sincerity, compassion, and a sense of justice. The conditions for the acquisition of practical wisdom, involving among other things the availability of virtuous role models and the cultivation of virtue, are highly demanding. It therefore should come as no surprise that persons and societies often diverge from each other in their moral judgments, and that people often conform uncritically to the prejudices of their age rather than subjecting them to proper moral scrutiny. Golemboski is right in arguing that freeing ourselves from the arbitrary influences of socialization is an essential task if we are to mature as moral agents. But his solution to the problem of parochialism is mistaken, or at best highly misleading, in giving such great importance to the value of impartiality, and so little to the virtue of practical wisdom.

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Notes

- 1 See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). The idea is to bring our general principles and particular judgments into 'equilibrium' with each other, what Rawls famously calls a 'reflective equilibrium.'
- 2 See for example Allan Bloom, 'Justice: John Rawls Vs. The Tradition of Political Philosophy' *The American Political Science Review* 69, no. 2 (1975) and Brian Barry, 'John Rawls and the Search for Stability' *Ethics* 105, no. 4 (1995).
- 3 See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For critiques of Rorty's relativistic position and replies by Rorty, see Robert P. Brandom, ed. *Rorty and His Critics* (Blackwell, 2000).
- 4 Obviously, reconciling the social factors conditioning morality with its objective warrant is one of the problems of our age, which has a heightened sensitivity to the role of culture, history, and socialization in moral reasoning. Since I am interested in highlighting the limits of impartiality as a response to this problem, a full survey of the literature addressing the problems of moral parochialism and relativism is not necessary here. But let me at least mention a few notable contributions: Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985); Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2002); Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Moral Relativism, truth, and justification,' in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume I* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*; Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009); and Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

5 See David Golemboski, 'The Impartiality of Smith's Spectator: The Problem of Parochialism and the Possibility of Social Critique' *European Journal of Political Theory* (2015). First published online February 23rd, 2015 as doi:10.1177/1474885115572921.

6 I am not suggesting that Golemboski would equate moral judgment with the internalization of diverse moral perspectives. But his reliance on exposure to diversity does not do sufficient justice to the qualitative leap from information and comparative analysis to moral judgment.

7 This attempt to understand one's society's values 'at their best' could be thought of as analogous to Dworkin's standard of constitutional interpretation, whereby the ideal judge attempts to arrive at the most just and coherent available interpretation of the laws undergirding the society in question. See Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1986).

8 The extraordinary degree of our dependency on other persons and on communities of persons in order to grow and develop as persons is underlined in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago and Lasalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1999).

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