BETWEEN MIMESIS AND FICTION: RECOGNITION IN ADAM SMITH

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Abstract

In Adam Smith's ethics of sympathy, recognition is closely linked to seeking approval and esteem from other social actors. In the light of the undoubtedly great importance granted by Smith to social approval a series of questions arise, such as: Does the search for recognition necessarily imply the adoption by the individual of mimetic behaviours which, by replicating what is socially shared, guarantee approval and esteem? And to what extent does mimesis require a capacity for fiction? In this regard, is it not the case that individual moral evaluations risk being reduced to the conformist reverberation of those of society?

The aim of this essay is first of all to understand in which terms Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, understands the link between mimesis, fiction and recognition. To this end, the role played by mimesis and fiction will be scrutinised along the various interconnected dimensions that structure the complex phenomenon of recognition: the emotional, the one linked to public success, and the moral one. Finally, in the light of the peculiar account on mimesis developed by Smith on aesthetic grounds, also the ethical implications of this link will be discussed.

Keywords: Recognition, Sympathy, Mimesis, Fiction, Model.

In a recent volume[1] Axel Honneth has pointed to Adam Smith's ethics of sympathy as the most influential source for the philosophical notion of recognition. Recognition is there closely linked to seeking approval and esteem from other social actors. This process, as Honneth does not fail to point out, is presented by Smith in a positive light, namely due to its relevance in the constitution of both the social and the moral self.

1 Cf. A. Honneth, *Anerkennung. Eine Europäische Ideengeschichte*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2018. Although Smith does not exactly use the term recognition, he provides, Honneth maintains, a widely influential conceptual account which impacted both moral philosophy and common language.

In the light of the no doubt great importance granted by Smith to social approval – in which philosophers such as Max Scheler have even seen the enactment of a real "almighty social authority" –[2] a series of questions arise, such as: Does the search for recognition necessarily imply the adoption by the individual of mimetic behaviors which, by replicating what is socially shared, guarantee approval and esteem? And to what extent does mimesis require a capacity for fiction, whereby qualities that are not possessed are simulated and conducts which are not intimately adhered to are adopted? In this regard, is it not the case that individual moral evaluations risk being reduced to the mere and sometimes hypocritical conformist reverberation of those of society?

The aim of this essay is first of all to understand in which terms Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, understands the link between mimesis, fiction and recognition. To this end, the role played by mimesis and fiction will be scrutinised along the various interconnected dimensions that structure the complex phenomenon of recognition: the more strictly emotional dimension, the one linked to public success, and the moral one. Finally, in the light of the peculiar account on mimesis developed by Smith on aesthetic grounds[3] in the *Theory*, also the ethical implications of this link will be discussed.

1. *Copying feelings: emotional recognition and imperfect mimesis*

As is well known, according to Smith, both the search for social approval and the attribution of normative authority to others are closely

2 Cf. M. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, tr. by P. Heat, Routledge, New York 2008, p. 6. As part of a broader theoretical refutation of the ethics of sympathy, Scheler targets Smith for the excessive and contradictory role that he credits to sympathy in the self-evaluation judgment. Among the most recent contributions on the Scheler *Vs* Smith debate, see, among others: R. Debes, *From Einfühlung to Empathy*: *Sympathy in Early Phenomenology and Psychology*, in E. Schliesser (ed.), *Sympathy: a History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 286-321; A. Alfaro Altamirano, *Max Scheler and Adam Smith on Sympathy*, in "The Review of Politics", 79, 3, 2017, pp. 365-387.

3 In this respect, key is the reference to the essay on the imitative arts, the first draft of which dates to 1764, and which Smith reworked in 1777. On the elaboration of this text, see W.P.D. Wightman, *Introduction* to A. Smith, *Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes place in what are called the Imitative Arts*, in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects with Dugald Stewart's Account of Adam Smith*, ed. by W.P.D. Wightman, J.C. Bryce, I.S. Ross, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1982, p. 172 (henceforth: *IA*).

linked to our natural inclination to sympathy. The latter constitutes an original as well as fundamental intersubjective bond, thanks to which individuals enter into emotional connection with each other and experience the pleasure of the mutual sharing of feelings and passions. This pleasure is never independent from an evaluative component. Without evaluation it is possible to cognitively understand a feeling, but not to sympathetically take part in it.

The idea that sympathetic passions always imply formulating a judgment on the appropriateness of other people's feelings with respect to the situation that aroused them strongly suggests that Smith would be reluctant to consider them as the mere mimetic effect of a passive emotional contagion. Even in those situations in which a more immediate and reactive level of sympathy seems to prevail, as in the case of the jolts of our body while observing the "dancer on the slack rope",[4] Smith excludes that a mere mirroring might take place, and points to the essential function of the imagination. When we look at the tightrope walker, "is the impression of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy".[5] What we perceive on a sensorial and emotional level certainly depends on the observation of an "original" that our imagination, however, cannot really "copy", since our senses cannot directly perceive the feelings and emotions of the tightrope walker.

Mimetic is therefore above all the sympathetic imagination,[6] thanks to which we can place ourselves in the situation of the other and even pretend to be "into their body".[7] The so achieved mimesis, clearly, is not entirely based on the lived experience of others, but rather requires the essential reference to the lived experience of the spectator. This point is even clearer, if one takes into account that, according to Smith, authentic sympathetic passions do not primarily ensue from the movements or attitude of the observed person, but rather require an overall understanding of their conduct and an interpretation of the context of their passion.[8] Someone's crying can generally sadden us, but only after having understood the reasons for their suffering, having placed it in a context in which it acquires meaning,

4 A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1982 (henceforth: *TMS*), here, p. 10.

5 *TMS*, p. 9.

6 In this regard, cf. J. Chandler, *Adam Smith as Critic*, in Ch. Berry, M.P. Paganelli, C. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 128.

7 *TMS*, p. 9.

8 "Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites", *TMS*, p. 12.

and having deemed it appropriate, can "any actual sympathy that is very sensible"[9] take place and be accompanied by emotional participation. Only then can the imaginary displacement in the position of the other take place and generate a fitting sympathetic passion.

As it exceeds emotional mirroring and operates more at the level of the imagination than at that of the senses,[10] the mimesis at play in sympathetic passions is, however, constitutively imperfect. Whenever we strive to reproduce within ourselves the experience of others, the "secret consciousness"[11] in us that authentic identification is impossible never fades out. Even the deepest and most complete identification is, in fact, still an imaginary swapping of places, in which our feelings and passions are distinct from those of the agents; they are weaker and less lively than theirs.[12] Compared to the "original sensations", made of one's own pleasures and pains, those of others are "reflected or sympathetic images", they are "shadow" compared to the "substance".[13]

The sympathetic process therefore has an essentially asymptotic nature, which likens it under many respects to the relationship Smith sees between original and copy in the imitative arts.[14] Sympathetic feelings are not original. Their genesis is linked to the feelings of another individual, which we try to understand and feel by taking their point of view. They are therefore "copies" which, however, do not imply a "servile" imitation,[15] nor do they achieve a total identification with the original. While resembling it, they maintain a substantial difference with the original, which in Smith's eyes is not in the least problematic. It does not,

9 *TMS*, p. 11.

10 Sympathetic passions, in fact, can also be aroused in the spectator by feelings that the agent does not show openly or does not even feel. Smith writes: "We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality", *TMS*, p. 12.

11 *TMS*, p. 22.

12 *TMS*, p. 22.

13 *TMS*, p. 219.

14 Cf. *IA*, Part I. In this essay the disparity between the imitating and the imitated is connected to two key concepts in Smith's theory of sympathy: that of analogy and that of imagination. In this regard, see A. Zanini, *Adam Smith. Morale, jurisprudence, economia politica*, Liberilibri, Macerata 2014, p. 72. Due attention is laid on Smith's accounts on music in order to capture "the asymptotic nature of sympathy" in C. Labio, *Adam Smith's Aesthetics*, in Ch. Berry, M.P. Paganelli, C. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, cit., pp. 117 ff.

15 *IA*, p. 175.

in fact, affect the moral and social relevance of sympathetic feelings, which manage nevertheless to guarantee the amount of correspondence between our emotional life and that of others that is "sufficient for the harmony of society".[16] Furthermore, similarly to what happens in the case of artistic mimesis,[17] it is precisely the awareness of the disparity between the actor's "original" feelings and those "copied" by the viewer that makes sympathy so pleasant. Precisely because we are aware that it is impossible to achieve a complete identification with the experience of others, precisely because it is never accessible as direct experience, we take pleasure in experiencing the mutual concordance of our feelings. Although my friend's suffering is and remains different from the compassion I feel for them, our feelings correspond, and this correspondence, even in sharing pain, is pleasant for both of us. In fact, they too desire understanding and, in order to foster it, they mitigate, if not their passions, at least their manifestation, trying to make them easier to share for the viewer. This effort, in which it is once again crucial to imagine taking the point of view of the other, allows the agent to sense even the weakest sympathetic passion in the viewer. It also bears testimony, according to Smith, to the key corrective and regulatory mediation function of real spectators. By sympathizing with that imperfect "copy" of their feelings, in fact, their own suffering will be mitigated not only by the pleasure of mutual sympathy, but also by the fact that, in this way, they are able to see it in a more "candid and impartial" light.[18]

In the sympathetic process, mimesis appears, therefore, first of all as functional to achieve a sort of emotional recognition, linked to specific feelings and passions, and embedded in specific situations. While identifying with the other, trying to "copy" and relive their joy, we do not sympathise with joy in general, but with that of a person who, for example, has just achieved great success at work. But what happens when we do not just acknowledge their joy and want to share it, but we rather want to be, like them, the object of general approval and sympathy? Under what conditions and in what terms does emotional mimesis become behavioral mimesis?

16 *TMS*, p. 22.

17 See what Smith states about sculpture and painting. The latter, reproducing three-dimensional objects on a flat surface, features greater disparity between the imitating and the imitated than sculpture does. And it is precisely this greater disparity that makes pictorial imitation not only more interesting but also more enjoyable. Cf. *IA*, I.6 ff.

18 *TMS*, p. 22.

2. *Imitating behaviors: public recognition between fashion and models*

Needless to say, sympathizing with someone does not in itself imply a desire to identify with them: although it is easy to acknowledge the appropriateness of pain in someone who has suddenly lost their job and to share their despair, certainly none of us would want to imitate or emulate their deeds. On the contrary, according to Smith, a widespread tendency can be observed in people not only to sympathise with but also to imitate the rich and powerful: sympathy towards them translates into the desire to be like them.

Whereas it is clear that, in the case of sympathy for pain, the natural disposition to preserve oneself and avoid situations of suffering does not make the condition of the sufferer desirable, this disposition does not explain why "all the toil and the bustle of this world"[19] are employed in the attempt to reach power and wealth. Why not be contented by the well-being ensuing from satisfying all basic natural needs, which guarantees a peaceful life? Why try at all costs to improve one's condition and become rich and powerful? According to Smith, the answer is to be found first of all in the great social esteem linked to these conditions. Due to their pleasantness, these are associated with a series of feelings so pleasant as to attract the sympathy and awe of people.[20] Unlike poverty, which, due to its unpleasantness, is ignored if not rejected, placing the ones who experience it "out of the sight of mankind", in an "obscurity" almost more painful than disapproval, wealth and power are illuminated by the "daylight of honour and approbation".[21]

Not to remain in the shadows, conquer this light for themselves too, this is what people aspire to, according to Smith: "To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation"[22] are the advantages people wish to obtain by ascending the social

19 *TMS*, p. 50.

20 Decisive for Smith's account on sympathy for the rich and powerful is Hume's contribution on this topic in the *Treatise*. Cf. D. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge, P.H. Nidditch, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1978, II.II.5.

21 *TMS*, p. 51. On the asymmetries of sympathy with respect to the suffering of the poor and the happiness of the rich, and on the processes of identification with the latter which determine their imitation and lead to the social exclusion of the poor, see L. Bréban, *Sensitivity to prosperity and adversity: What would a Smithian function of happiness look like?*, in "European Journal of the History of Economic Thought", 19, 4, 2012, pp. 551-586; A. Alvarez, J. Hurtado, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Modern Economics, Social Interactions, and Smith's Sympathy*, in "Iberian Journal of the History of Economic Thought", 2, 1, 2015, pp. 1-20.

22 *TMS*, p. 50.

ladder. They direct all their efforts to it not only and not so much for the advantages or for the prosperity that derive from it, but rather for the approval, admiration and esteem that accompany it.

Fully aware that "our credit and rank in the society", as well as "the respect of our equals",[23] depends largely, although not exclusively,[24] on the possession of external goods, they desire them as a means to satisfy a deeper aspiration: that of the social and public recognition that they ensure. And it is based on this aspiration that Smith ultimately explains both the phenomena of competitiveness and competition[25] motivated by individual ambition, and the enactment, on a collective level, of certain aesthetic and behavioral models. A good example is provided, in this sense, by the phenomenon of fashion that Smith sees as "a particular species"[26] of custom, resulting precisely from the human tendency to admire and imitate the rich and powerful. Since they have primacy in social esteem and attention, they are automatically recognised as models to follow and to be inspired by in order to be able, at least in part, to enjoy the same esteem and attention that surround them: "The graceful, the easy, and commanding manners of the great, joined to the usual richness and magnificence of their dress, give a grace to the very form which they happen to bestow upon it".[27] Even if what they wear is "indifferent", our imagination keeps linking it to the magnificence that usually characterises people of their rank and, "on account of this relation, [it seems] to have something about it that is genteel and magnificent too".[28]

This mechanism, Smith observes, works not only in relation to clothing but also to behavior. The power of the public recognition enjoyed by those at the top of human societies is such that people, in order to be able to resemble them, go as far as to imitate them also in their "vices and follies",[29] and are willing to pretend to have qualities that they do not possess or that

23 *TMS*, p. 212.

24 Smith points out that our character as well as our behaviours are important elements in acquiring social credit. However, unlike what a virtuous person might wish, these are not the only aspects taken into consideration, and even less, the most decisive ones. Cf. *TMS*, p. 213.

25 On the links between competition for social esteem and competition in the economic market, cf. among others A. Kalyvas, I. Katznelson, *The Rhetoric of the Market: Adam Smith on Recognition, Speech, and Exchange*, in "The Review of Politics", 63, 3, 2001, pp. 549-579.

26 *TMS*, p. 194.

27 *TMS*, pp. 194-195.

28 *TMS*, p. 195.

29 *TMS*, p. 64.

they intimately disapprove of, just because they belong to their "models". That is how we get coxcombs, who are convinced that mimicking the poses and attitudes of kings and princes makes them like them; or the hypocrites, who know very well that they have none of the qualities that are the object of public admiration, but who, if vain, pretend to possess the external ones, such as wealth, and if astute, the internal ones, such as religiosity or virtue.[30]

Through this small gallery of obsessively "mimetic" individuals, Smith emphasises one of the potentially negative implications of the imitative impulse towards the rich and powerful. Although it is necessary in order "to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society", it constitutes, at the same time, "the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments".[31] More than ensuring success, it risks causing both moral and economic ruin.[32] Fuelled by self-love, the desire to be pleased with oneself while seeing one's reflection in the admired and sympathetic gaze of society exposes the individual to fatal inauthenticity, making mimesis a sort of "cosmetics", even of a moral nature. Hence the willingness to pretend, conceal, deceive, in the illusion that, once a position of power has been conquered, the resulting "lustre" will completely cover "the foulness of the steps"[33] that led the person to success.

The rather merciless portrait that Smith paints of these essentially inauthentic personalities does not, however, lead to a condemnation either of the imitative disposition typical of human beings, or of the human ambition connected to it. Both, in fact, have a fully legitimate object: "To deserve, to acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind".[34] The point, Smith maintains, is that this common object can be pursued through "two different roads":[35] on the one hand the acquisition of wealth and power, on the other the pursuit of wisdom and the practice of virtue. These two paths do not necessarily diverge, especially in those medium-low ranks of society where success depends as much on professional skills as on a "prudent, just, firm, and temperate conduct".[36] However, in

30 *TMS*, p. 65.
31 *TMS*, p. 61.
32 Cf. *TMS*, pp. 64 ff. In this regard, see S. Tegos, *Adam Smith: Theorist of Corruption*, in Ch. Berry, M.P. Paganelli, C. Smith, *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, cit., in particular pp. 366-367.
33 *TMS*, p. 64.
34 *TMS*, p. 62.
35 *TMS*, p. 62.
36 *TMS*, p. 63.

the higher ranks more often than not they do not coincide at all. According to Smith, at the courts of sovereigns, where success is often linked to the "fanciful and foolish favour of ignorant, presumptuous, and proud superiors", to be favoured are "the external graces, the frivolous accomplishments of that impertinent and foolish thing called a man of fashion" to the detriment of the "solid"[37] virtues of those who carry out their professional activity with wisdom and balance.[38]

Nevertheless, regardless of the specific social contexts and of the aspects that in each of them seem more readily to ensure public recognition, according to Smith, these two paths appear to each individual in terms of two different character "models", from which one can take inspiration and shape oneself and one's behaviour: "the one, of proud ambition and ostentatious avidity" and that of "humble modesty and equitable justice".[39] The respective power of attraction is, Smith maintains, radically different, and directly dependent on the most immediate, although superficial, effect of the former in terms of public recognition. In fact, whereas the one "forc[es] itself upon the notice of every wandering eye" because "more gaudy and glittering in its colouring", the other attracts only the attention of the "most studious and careful" observer.[40] The latter, while being "more correct and more exquisitely",[41] is devoid of that dazzling semblance that immediately draws the admiring gaze of people. Consequently, compared to "great mob of mankind" that accounts for the "admirers and worshipers, and, what may seem more extraordinary, most frequently the disinterested admirers and worshipers, of wealth and greatness",[42] only a small group really admires wisdom and virtue.

3. *The mimetic artist and the impartial spectator: moral recognition*

The search for wisdom and virtue, although in some cases it may appear alternative to that of wealth and power, does not imply for Smith a contempt for fame or glory, but rather the desire to obtain it when it is right

37 *TMS*, p. 63.
38 On Smith's open criticism of the aristocracy, in the name of the values of the new bourgeois society, see P. Donatelli, *Etica. I classici, le teorie e le linee evolutive*, Einaudi, Torino 2015, p. 336.
39 *TMS*, pp. 62 and 63.
40 *TMS*, p. 62.
41 *TMS*, p. 62.
42 *TMS*, p. 62.

and due. This desire inspires a real love for virtue which, within Smith's ethical device, coincides with the love for self-approval, that the wise and virtuous consider "alone sufficient, and [they are] contented with it".[43] In judging and evaluating themselves, in fact, people disregard the primacy of the sympathetic feelings of the real spectators, i.e. of the "man without", and rather give priority to those of "man within", that is to say, the ideal impartial spectator,[44] asking themselves whether such an onlooker may or may not sympathise with their conduct and approve of it.

As a result, one further and decisive relational dynamic comes to the fore in the definition of moral recognition: that between the subject and the man within, that is, the imaginary and well-informed impartial spectator. Although this takes place in the inner space of moral conscience, it is not without a mimetic dimension. Precisely in the relationship that the wise and virtuous person establishes with the impartial spectator, Smith finds indeed a further and morally paradigmatic function of mimesis.

The wise and virtuous are identified based on their ability to continually examine their own conduct in the same light in which a sympathetic impartial spectator would see it. What for many represents an episodic or discontinuous effort, hindered by the egoistic drive of self-love and by the self-deceit that it engenders,[45] is for the wise and virtuous person a habit, that is, the result of a true training in "modelling" or "endeavouring to model, not only [their] outward conduct and behaviour, but, as much as [they] can, even [their] inward sentiments and feelings, according to those of this awful and respectable judge".[46] The objective of this process of tak-

43 *TMS*, p. 117.

44 On this key figure in Smith's ethics and on its function in relation to the development of an autonomous capacity for judgment, see: S. Fleischacker, *Philosophy in Moral Practice: Kant and Adam Smith*, in "Kant-Studien", 82, 1991; A. Firth, *Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy as Ethical Self-formation*, in G. Cockfield, A. Firth and J. Laurent (eds.), *New Perspectives on Adams Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham and Northampton 2007, pp. 106 ff.; D.D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator. Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007; E. Lecaldano, *Simpatia*, Cortina, Milano 2013, pp. 52-59; F. Forman-Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circle of Sympathy. Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010; S. Songhorian, *Sentire e agire. L'etica della simpatia tra sentimentalismo e razionalismo*, Mimesis, Milano 2016, pp. 122 ff.

45 On the link between self-love and self-deceit, I refer the reader to M. Anzalone, *Mentire a se stessi. Male e coscienza morale in Adam Smith e Immanuel Kant*, in R. Garaventa, O. Brino (eds.), *Il male e le sue forme. Riconsiderazioni moderne e contemporanee di un problema antico*, in "Itinerari", 2017, pp. 31-47.

46 *TMS*, p. 147.

ing on the feelings of the impartial spectator is full identification, thanks to which the wise and virtuous "almost become [themselves] that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of [their] conduct directs [them] to feel".[47]

But, given that the impartial spectator is a fictitious figure, how is this process of imitative identification to be understood? It entails first of all the identification with a neutral feeling, free from the partiality and conditioning of self-love that commonly characterise human evaluations. Consequently, it requires the control of one's selfish passions and it implies renouncing the idea that one's feelings are universal models and measures of appropriateness. The aim is to adopt new feelings, based on an idea of "exact propriety and perfection"[48] of character and conduct. The wise and virtuous are such precisely because they measure themselves against this idea, which, in line with the empiricist horizon in which Smith develops his theory, is progressively formed in all human beings based on repeated observations and self-observations, but which is all the more precise, the more these observations have been conducted with sensitivity and accuracy.[49]

Unlike the majority of individuals, who assess themselves based on the ordinarily achieved "degree of approximation" to this idea, the wise and virtuous distinguish themselves by the constant attempt to assimilate their own character to the model of this "archetype of perfection".[50] Imitating it means, however, to imitate "the work of a divine artist, which can never be equalled".[51] This is then an attempt to fully correspond to an instance of absolute impartiality, as conveyed by the impartial spectator, but which, par excellence, belongs only to God and his "tribunal".[52] Consequently, the wise

47 *TMS*, p. 147.

48 *TMS*, p. 247.

49 Smith compares this idea to an image with more or less clear outlines and more or less vivid colours, depending on how attentively and scrupulously each individual examines their own conduct and that of others. Its formation process is presented as "the slow, gradual, and progressive work" of the impartial spectator, since this latter embodies the need for complete impartiality and full information, and on this ground the idea of impartiality develops in the human mind. Cf. *TMS*, p. 247.

50 *TMS*, p. 247.

51 *TMS*, p. 247.

52 In some paragraphs, added in the fourth edition, Smith contrasts the "inferior" tribunal of society with the "superior" tribunal of the impartial spectator, to which we can appeal against the often erroneous sentences that others issue. However, when everyone condemns us and, despite the support of the man within, this throws us into despair, we can find consolation in thinking about the divine tribunal and about divine justice, that ultimately embodies the authentic universality and impartiality of judgment. Cf. *TMS*, pp. 128 ff.

and virtuous person cannot fail to notice "in how many different features the mortal copy falls short of the immortal original".[53] While establishing an explicit parallel with the imitative arts,[54] Smith observes that wise people are in a position analogous to that of the great artist, in that they are "more sensible than any man" and they assess the gap between their action and that ideal perfection that they "imitate as well as [they] can, but which [they] despair of ever equalling".[55] But, while for the artist the mimetic effort is limited to artistic production, for the wise and virtuous person it is much more burdensome, because it affects all areas of existence.

Since in their mind the idea of ideal perfection is particularly clear and detailed, all the more they perceive the disparity between this normative model and their conduct. Here too, however, the asymptotic nature of the effort of this sort of mimetic artist does not diminish their value but rather contributes to the moral beauty[56] of their character and behaviour. Their lucid awareness of the difficulties in imitating a model of ideal perfection translates, in fact, into the ability to contain the egoistic expansion of self-love and the deceptive self-justification that derives from it. While reaching a level higher than that of common morality, they feel a "very moderate estimation of [their] own merit", and at the same time, have a "full sense of the merit of other people".[57] Their "real modesty" clearly sets them apart from those who, content with assuming ordinary perfection as their criterion of evaluation, have less awareness of their moral weaknesses and indulge in presumptuous, proud self-admiration. The latter, Smith bitterly remarks, often "dazzles the multitude",[58] ensuring an easy but superficial recognition; what the

53 *TMS*, p. 247.

54 The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is rich in analogies between ethical and aesthetic experience, that can be explained in reference to the decisive role that perception and imagination play in Smith's moral epistemology. In this regard, see: J.R. Harrison, *Imagination and Aesthetics in Adam Smith's Epistemology and Moral Philosophy*, in "Contributions to Political Economy", 14, 1995, pp. 91-111; C. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 110 ff.; R. Fudge, *Sympathy, Beauty, and Sentiment: Adam Smith's Aesthetic Morality*, in "Journal of Scottish Philosophy", 7, 2, 2009, pp. 133-146.

55 *TMS*, p. 249.

56 Once again we can point to the close similarity with what Smith claims about the imitative arts and, specifically, concerning imitation between objects of different genres, where the beauty of imitation is seen as proportional to the disparity between imitating and imitated object. Cf. *IA*, I.14.

57 *TMS*, p. 248.

58 *TMS*, pp. 248-249.

wise and virtuous person undertakes to achieve is, instead, a well-deserved social recognition and morally justified not by the approval of the mass, but by another ideal.

The mimetic relation with the fictitious figure of the impartial spectator illustrates how, for Smith, on a moral level, recognition does not imply an automatic homologation to the conduct that is the object of general esteem and admiration within the community of reference. Although it is true that the relation with the impartial spectator could never be established in the absence of a social relationship with real spectators,[59] since it arises following the experience of their partiality and fallacy of judgment, this does not entail a passive and undisputed internalization.[60] On the contrary, the impartial spectator stands for the configuration of a space of independence and evaluative autonomy, by virtue of which behaviours disapproved of by real external spectators may be adopted for the sake of the sympathy they arouse in the ideal internal spectator. After all, Smith observes, the more people are able to adhere to the point of view of the impartial spectator and to evaluate themselves according to the standard of ideal perfection it embodies, the more the approval or disapproval of other real people loses in importance.[61]

4. *Mimesis, normativity and recognition*

In the light of what has been seen so far, a clear link emerges in Smith's accounts between mimesis, fiction and recognition, substantiated by a corresponding theory of mimesis. This latter is understood not as a direct

59 According to Smith, if we were to grow up in a situation of total isolation, without any intersubjective relationship with real spectators, not only would we not be able to imagine the impartial spectator, but we would also be deprived of the ability to formulate any kind of judgment about ourselves. The first criteria of judgment, the first ideas on what is right, what is good, and what is beautiful, in fact, come from the others.

60 The non-coincidence between the point of view of the impartial spectator and that of society is repeated by Smith himself in his reply to the objections that Gilbert Elliot raised in the aftermath of the publication of the first edition of the *Theory*. To avoid any misunderstanding, Smith revised the text, adding some paragraphs concerning the role of the impartial spectator. Cf. *TMS*, pp. 113 ff. In this regard, see D.D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator*, cit., pp. 36 ff.

61 This obviously does not mean a total indifference to the judgment of social spectators, which can certainly shake and upset the moral conscience, although, according to Smith, it cannot completely modify its judgments; cf. *TMS*, pp. 130-131.

process of linear identification between the imitating and the imitated, but rather as a dual relationship mediated by the reference to a third element.[62] This third element is, as matter of fact, a normative model whose defining traits determine the various aspects of recognition and also the positive or negative impact of fictional mechanisms.

On a purely emotional level, this model is made of our feelings and passions. What we usually experience firsthand on a daily basis becomes the scheme to which we turn, in the first instance, to decode and try to "copy" the feelings of others, as well as to evaluate their appropriateness. At this level, what is mimetic is first of all the imagination that supports the identification effort using a series of fictional devices, thanks to which the spectator exchanges places with the actor. Whereas in this case the fiction performs a positive function and, rather than opposing reality, allows a better understanding of it, when we transition to behavioural mimesis this function becomes more ambivalent.

In behavioural mimesis the relationship between the imitating and the imitated presupposes the reference to models that can be found externally or internally to the individual. The external models, legitimised by public recognition, are mainly conveyed by the rich and powerful in whose condition we imagine the realisation of "the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state […] which […] we had sketched out to ourselves as the final object of all our desires".[63] The internal model, conveyed by the impartial spectator, refers instead to an idea of perfection, of absolute impartiality and fairness, which is formed, albeit more or less accurately, in all people.

In both cases, imitation is associated with being aware of the existing gap between us and the model, and involves the use of fictional mechanisms. But, while in the case of the imitation of the rich and powerful, fiction, understood as deceptive dissimulation and simulation, acts on an interpersonal level and aims to try, at least apparently, to close this gap, in the case of the imitation of the impartial spectator, it acts on an intra-personal level, placing a hurdle on the path of imitation. Fiction, in fact, translates into self-deception, in an attempt to escape, rather than adhere to the feelings of the impartial spectator, in order to cling to the selfish sentiment of self-love that legitimises and justifies even the most violent and mean passions. In

62 Cf. *IA*, I.7, p. 179. On Smith's theory of mimesis, see among others: W. Seidel, *Zählt die Musik zu den imitativen Künsten? Zur Revision der Nachahmungsästhetik durch Adam Smith*, in J.P. Fricke (ed.), *Die Sprache der Musik: Festschrift Klaus Wolfgang Niemöller zum 60. Geburtstag*, Gustav Bosse, Regensburg 1989, pp. 495-511; J. Chandler, *Adam Smith as Critic*, cit., pp. 131 ff.

63 *TMS*, pp. 51-52.

this way, by aiming at fashioning a false image of oneself,[64] fiction contrasts the mimetic tension towards the impartial spectator. However, it is also true that, when exercised as an ability to create such a fictitious image, it is an indispensable tool for the very originating of that imitative process which represents the highest moral challenge for every person.

Granted that both fiction and mimesis, although closely connected to the articulated process of recognition, are not necessarily the cause of more or less hypocritical moral conformism, where to look for it then? According to Smith, a deciding factor is the type of desire[65] that triggers mimesis and the fictional mechanisms associated with it and that also guides the search for recognition. In his opinion, in fact, people desire: "not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise".[66] When an uncontrolled self-love makes the desire for effective praise prevail over that for well deserved praise, people favour mere public recognition, adapting to successful behavioural models, even if they are not morally respectable and shareable.

Smith, however, is optimistically confident that, in every "well-formed mind", the desire to be worthy of approval and praise is more strongly present, and this is a desire that inspires a true love for virtue. When this latter prevails,[67] primacy is granted to moral recognition, the reference model is that conveyed by the impartial spectator, and mimesis contrasts, rather than indulging, the claims of blind self-love. In this situation, the more continuous the mimetic effort, the more the individual will be able to appeal to the "inner tribunal" and dispense with social confirmation.

It might seem paradoxical and contradictory to believe, as Smith does, that imitation is also essential for the establishment of the self-evaluative

64 In this regard, I refer the reader to M. Anzalone, *L'immagine di sé. Coscienza morale e duplicità dell'io in Adam Smith,* in "Estetica. Studi e ricerche", VIII, 2, 2018, pp. 309-321.

65 As Elena Pulcini pointed out, especially in the mimetic relationship with the rich and powerful, Smith outlines the same mimetic configuration of desire investigated, in more recent times, by René Girard, who sees in it the core structure of the social relationship. Cf. E. Pulcini, *Riconoscimento, autenticità, autoriconoscimento*, in C. Mancina, P. Valenza, P. Vinci (eds.), *Riconoscimento e comunità. A partire da Hegel*, in "Archivio di Filosofia", LXXVII, 2-3, 2009, p. 211.

66 *TMS*, p. 114.

67 Concerns have been raised on this priority claim, which is seen as inaccurate on the descriptive level and as disadvantageous on the regulatory level. See G. Brennan, *Self-esteem and social esteem: Is Adam Smith right?*, in "Human Affairs", 30, 3, 2020, pp. 302-315.

dimension, that defines moral recognition and turns this latter into a sort of self-recognition.[68] However, in actual terms, the recourse to imitation also in the moral context is perfectly consistent with the structure of Smith's ethics. Based on the affective and perceptive experience of the individual, namely on feeling sympathetically understood, Smith's ethical theory can never be divorced from the reference to the feelings of others.[69] As they express approval or disapproval, they are the first to push us to imitate the behaviours recognised as worthy of praise and avoid those deserving of contempt,[70] in a process of progressive and reciprocal correction that finds its highest expression in the figure of the impartial spectator. Referring to this spectator's sympathetic feelings, therefore, does not exclude imitation at all, but rather determines its direction: the spectator's compass will not be the feelings that others actually feel, but those they should feel if they were impartial and well-informed. And it is precisely in the ability to keep these two levels distinct, wishing not only to look like we are "made" for society, but to really be it,[71] that according to Smith one can avoid reducing the vital need for recognition to a vain conformist exercise merely seeking social approval and public consensus.

In this respect, Smith openly reacts to those, like Mandeville, who detach recognition from the desire for well-deserved praise, and rather link it to the mere desire for praise, which is fuelled by pride and "self-liking".[72]

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68 Cf. E. Pulcini, *Riconoscimento, autenticità, autoriconoscimento*, cit.; the author, however, sees this domain as fundamentally alien to mimetic dynamics, which instead define social recognition.

69 As Smith makes clear while arguing with Mandeville (cf. *TMS*, pp. 308 ff.), this reference is not in itself a sign of vanity. On the subject, see among others: J. McHugh, *Pursuing Sympathy without Vanity: Interpreting Smith's Critique of Rousseau through Smith's Critique of Mandeville*, in M.P. Paganelli, D.C. Rasmussen, and C. Smith, *Adam Smith and Rousseau: Ethics, Politics, Economics*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2018, pp. 109-124; B. Walraevens, *Vanity, pride and self-deceit: Excessive self-esteem in Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in "Review of Economic Philosophy", 20, 2, 2019, pp. 3-39.

70 One should bear in mind, moreover, that, according to Smith, the authority of those general rules of conduct, which allow us to adopt appropriate behaviours even in the absence of appropriate feelings, is based on the motivating power of sympathetic feelings. In this case, there is neither hypocrisy, nor dissimulation, nor a form of utilitarian egoism, but rather an awareness of the weakness and conflictuality that often characterises our feelings, combined with respect for that "principle of the greatest consequence in human life" which is the "sense of duty", to which the impartial spectator defers us. *TMS*, pp. 162 ff.

71 See *TMS*, p. 117.

72 Cf. B. Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. by F.B. Kaye, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1924, 2 voll., in particular I, p. 137 and II, pp. 129-132. On the relation-

Furthermore, he also takes a stand against those, like Rousseau,[73] who provide a radically negative account of the mimetic dynamics triggered by the need for recognition, while establishing a linear connection between this latter and the assembling of fictitious identities, which would be then shaped based entirely on social expectations.[74] In opposition to this viewpoint, according to which the need for recognition leads to social conflicts and moral corruption and the subject is held hostage to other people's judgement, Smith presents a clearly more optimistic theory.[75] Indeed, he sees recognition as the vehicle of both individual growth and social integration. He also believes its effects to be measurable not only with respect to the social modulation and harmonization of individual feelings, but also with respect to the development of an autonomous faculty of moral judgement.

Smith does not deny that experiencing the conditioning and pressure of other people's expectations can provoke in those longing for recognition some behaviours leaning on compliant and more or less utilitaristic homologation. Nevertheless, he sees these experiences as key to learning how to recreate in the inner space of one's individual conscience the normative instance of control which is embodied in the first place by society. Certainly, should this recreation be a mere mechanical duplicate with no emanci-

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ship between Smith and Mandeville, see also P. Sagar, *Smith and Rousseau, after Hume and Mandeville*, in "Political Theory", 46, 1, 2016, pp. 29-58. Sagar claims that, concerning these matters, Smith mainly engages in a conversation with Mandeville, rather than with Rousseau.

73 Cf. B. Carnevali, *Romantisme et Reconnaissance. Figures de la conscience chez Rousseau*, Droz, Genève 2012.

74 See, in particular, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755), where, as Honneth remarks, Rousseau outlines a "negative" theory of recognition (A. Honneth, *Anerkennung. Eine Europäische Ideengeschichte*, cit., Chap. 2). Among the most recent contributions on the philosophical dialogue between Smith and Rousseau, see: D.C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Societies. Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 2006; C. Fricke, *The Role of Interpersonal Comparisons in Moral Learning and the Sources of Recognition Respect: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's amour-propre and Adam Smith's Sympathy*, in M.P. Paganelli, D.C. Rasmussen, and C. Smith, *Adam Smith and Rousseau*, cit., pp. 55-79; C. Griswold, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith. A Philosophical Encounter*, Routledge, New York 2018.

75 Honneth insists on this aspect and identifies in Rousseau and Smith two opposite paradigms of recognition, which, developing under specific social and cultural conditions, diverge in their understanding of recognition as well as of its effects on the individual and society. Cf. A. Honneth, *Anerkennung. Eine Europäische Ideengeschichte*, cit., in particular Chap. 5 where the author compares the two models.

pation from the original, it might prove detrimental for the moral identity of the subject. A mere copy stands in fact for an individual deprived of the ability to develop an autonomous instance of self-control. Also in this case, similarly to what happens in the realm of art, mimesis accomplishes its task provided it does not cancel out, but preserves, through similarity, the gap between the imitating and the imitated.

The gap and discrepancy, which in Smith's aesthetic contributions bestow artistic value on mimesis, while establishing its difference from mechanically reproductive imitation, is then also a distinctive feature of Smith's understanding of recognition. This is in fact the far-reaching result of one's awareness, developed through sympathy, that among each individual lived experience there is neither absolute discrepancy nor absolute identity. This original awareness that it is possible to sympathetically share feelings, grasping similarity and possibly uniformity, although what is felt by others is never exactly replicated and discrepancy never fades away, is, according to Smith, both the main precondition and the main motive for the quest for recognition. Both at individual and affective level, this quest develops under the sign of a neither impossible nor absolute mimesis, which is imperfect by definition.*

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