Moral Observation in a Twenty-First Century Media World

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The Scottish philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith are credited with developing a moral philosophy that does not depend solely on reason, but rather on feeling and sentiment. This argument depends on a sophisticated theory of human nature and on a process of human socialization that trains individuals to care about what others think of them. This is done rhetorically when one learns the rules pertaining to audiences, and morally when one acts as a moral observer to the actions of others. It is keeping up with the Joneses as a moral theory that is kept from solipsism and relativism by socializing individuals to imagine how their conduct is and should be seen by others. Although this does tinge ethics with public opinion, Hume and Smith were anxious to give sentiment its due beside reason. A question that confronts us now is whether such a moral system can be relevant in a televisual world where actions can be observed at distances more considerable than was possible in Smith’s time. This paper explores the relevance and possibilities of moral observation and sympathy in the twenty-first century media world.