The hidden theology of Adam Smith*

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Contrary to late readings of Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ as an essentially secular device, it is argued here that Adam Smith’s social and economic philosophy is inherently theological and that its Providentialist underpinnings cannot be removed without impairing his theory of social order. This is another way of saying that my intention here is to recover, defend and extend Jacob Viner’s contested claim that, owing to the secularization of the disciplines of economics and ethics, Smith’s system has been stripped of its ‘integral’ Providentialism (Viner 1972: 81–2).

The hidden or ‘secret’ theology of Smith is revealed by examining and disclosing the workings of his spontaneous generation or ‘invisible hand’ arrangement and by exploring its most important constituent elements: its faculty psychology and natural theology. It is argued that, far from being a purely secular, materialist or evolutionist approach, Smith works from the argument from design to construct a model that is manifestly teleological.

In a way, then, by endorsing Viner’s claim that Smith’s entire system of thought is unintelligible ‘if one disregards the role he assigns in it to the theological elements’ (Viner 1972: 81–2), I am offering here a kind of revisionist account of Smith. Though earlier readings of his work insisted on the role of a Creator (e.g. Bitterman 1940; Veblen 1919; Taylor 1929) more recent readings have argued that the ‘teleological arguments . . . may be excised without impairing the cogency of his analysis’ (Kleer 1995: 275). The argument tends to run along the lines that Smith’s model is a precursor of nineteenth-century Darwinism and is, therefore, fundamentally modern, sociological and secular. Glenn Morrow claims, for example, that Smith’s moral world is a totally secular arrangement ‘not the order of a divine law-giver’ (Morrow 1923: 71). Anthony Flew has decreed that it is ‘totally wrong . . . to construe Smith’s invisible hand as an instrument of

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supernatural direction’ either in the sense of special interventions or by reference to the design argument (1987: 200–1; see also Raphael 1975: 72–3; Hamowy 1987: 3–4). K. G. Ballestrem argues that Smith’s historiography is purely materialist and non-teleological (1983: 5–7) while Louis Schneider suggests that the ‘strong theological overtones . . . and . . . perfunctory pieties’ are not ‘actively operative’ (1967: L). Others equate the invisible hand with secular and scientific ‘Pareto efficiency’ or interpret it as a euphemism for the essentially profane mechanism of equilibrium in competitive markets (Perskey 1989: 197; Pack 1995: 289: Garrison 1985). (This is actually half true; the invisible hand is Smith’s euphemism for equilibrium, but by that he means the equilibrium which derives from Providentially endowed laws of motion, as will be shown.)

A popular secularist theme is lexical. Irving Kristol, Ralph Lindgren and D. D. Raphael all assert that Smith’s theological language was employed merely for rhetorical effect as a ‘stratagem . . . to obscure the unorthodoxy of his religious convictions’ (Lindgren 1973: 148; Raphael 1975: 36; Kristol 1980: 204). E. G. West suggests that the invisible hand is used ‘in the metaphorical sense and not in the sense of supra-natural or divine intervention’ (1990: 171) while John Kenneth Galbraith asserts that anyone who reads the invisible hand as anything more than a ‘metaphor’ does Smith ‘a grave disservice’ (1983: 112).

Some secularists adopt a perverse form of content analysis by taking a quantitative approach; for example, ‘the invisible hand is mentioned only once, twice or three times (depending how well read the exegete in question is) therefore it is incidental to his scheme’ (e.g. Perskey 1989: 196). Others ignore the overall context for Smith’s use of the phrase and focus on its etymological pedigree in order to elicit or infer Smith’s putatively secular meaning (Martin 1990: 274; Spiegel 1976: 489–91; Davis 1990). One misreading of Smith (in terms of his overall spontaneous generation scheme) argues that Smith used the term ‘ironic(ally)’ because it seems to insult or impugn the dignity of individual agents acting blindly. The conclusion is that in terms of Smith’s overall project, the invisible hand is merely ‘a sort of trinket’ (Rothschild 1994: 321). But, as will be demonstrated presently, the idea of agents acting blindly (from a long range perspective at least) is extremely important to Smith’s analysis and is perfectly consistent with his entire approach. Moreover it will be shown that far from being an aberrant ‘trinket’ Smith’s notion of a Providential invisible hand is, not only the centrepiece, but the unifying principle or ‘metaphysical core’ (Martin 1990: 273) of his entire oeuvre without which much of his thought makes little sense.

Another questionable secularist approach resorts to evidence of Smith’s character, his circle of acquaintance and his personal religious reputation.
On the one hand, authorities like Smith’s biographer John Rae have perceived Smith as someone who ‘lived, in the full faith of those doctrines of natural religion which he had publicly taught’ (Rae 1965: 430). On the other, there are those who identify him as an atheist. Edmund Burke and Karl Marx both regarded him as an ally of Hume who shared in the latter’s atheistic tendencies (Pack 1995: 291–2). Notwithstanding the unreliability of this type of ‘contagion’ argument, it will be shown that despite Smith’s anti-religious comments and regardless of any friendship with Hume, Smith made no attempt to imitate Hume’s decisive excision of first and Final Causes (leaving efficient causes to do all the important ordering footwork) from his own system. What the reader really needs to concentrate on in an analysis of this type is whether or not Smith’s order holds up in the absence of a theological infrastructure. Appeals to the use or absence of theological language should be ancillary to how important a Providential infrastructure is to the overall scheme. Although some ‘secularist’ commentaries do recognize that Smith espoused a form of deism, they also argue that his system still works well without the external assistance of God. The argument made here is that Smith’s system does not hold together in the absence of a creative demiurge.

Some secular readings of Smith’s invisible hand betray an insufficient knowledge of eighteenth-century discourse and the typical responses to religious dogma which were then popular. It is important to remember that teleology and the argument from design were still intellectual staples in Smith’s time, therefore any reading of Smith as an essentially secular mind ought to be approached with caution and suspicions of ahistoricity. Smith may have thought of himself as a ‘theist’ but this would, at best, commit him to nothing more than a belief in one God who stands in some kind of direct or personal relationship with human beings (though, strictly speaking, a theistic conception of divinity may be also polytheistic). Atheism was a dangerous but not unknown public position in the eighteenth century, particularly among members of the French enlightenment, but deism was more common (Hampson 1982: 131). Smith may even have thought of himself as a sort of Christian given that during the Enlightenment period ‘feeling oneself a Christian no longer entailed acceptance of all the dogmas established and recognized by the Church. Membership of the Church committed one only to those affirmations and articles of faith that one explicitly recognized oneself’ (Goldman 1973: 57). Given all these considerations, establishing Smith’s precise personal belief system here is probably an impossible task given the astounding array of categories and permutations for religious belief which emerged during the Enlightenment period; accordingly, I have sought to limit the discussion to identifying aspects of his theory that point to some sort of deistic or theistic bent and that depend on the design principle.
Jacob Viner suggests that the religious aspects of Smith’s thoughts have typically represented only ‘nuisance value’ for some critics (Viner 1972: 82). The solution sometimes invoked to dispel this nuisance is a variation of the ‘Adam Smith Problem’ (curiously, a theory to which Viner subscribed in his earlier work) which posits a fundamental moral (and hence theological) shift in outlook between the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*. I won’t tax the reader’s patience by rehearsing the various arguments here since I endorse D. D. Raphael’s view that Smith’s two main works, while addressing different subjects are quite compatible (Raphael in Smith 1976: 20). The deistic theology of the *Moral Sentiments* is carried through to the *Wealth of Nations* with the effect that Smith’s economic views are informed by the moral and theological assumptions set out in the *Moral Sentiments*.

1. Adam Smith’s natural theology

It should be noted at the outset that Smith’s natural theology is opaque and quite difficult to penetrate without some determined textual effort. His reader can only speculate as to how much clearer it might have been had his lectures on ‘natural theology’ been preserved (MacFie 1971: 597). Smith seems to have been deliberately evasive about his precise personal convictions (hence the allusion to his ‘hidden theology’); nevertheless it is possible to detect a synthetic if somewhat patchwork theology in his assorted writings.

Smith requires his readers to do some heavy conceptual work of their own; to glue together mentally into a coherent theological system a constellation of elements which derive from such various sources as Aristotle, the Stoics, Christianity and Newton, with the greatest emphasis on Stoicism (or at least Smith’s perception of Stoic teachings). A consistent impression emerges: Smith’s natural religion is never pious for the mere benefit of a religious readership, nor in any way profanely ‘ironical’ as has been suggested (Rothschild 1994: 321). He leaves no doubt that he finds little attraction in Christian doctrine except where it coincides with an enlightened and ‘rational’ (i.e. deist) theology and he obliquely identifies himself as a theist in designating theism, by which is meant a belief and devotion to a single, universal ‘God of all’, as the starting point of the type of natural science he admires and seeks to promulgate (1980: 112–13). This declaration distances him from conventional Christianity while at the same time committing him to a belief in one God who stands in some kind of unique relationship to human beings.

From his writings we can gather that Smith’s belief system seems to involve the following commitments: a belief in first and Final Causes; a
belief in the existence of a benevolent ‘Providence’; a belief in the limited extent of human control over events and, finally, an imitation of Stoic theodicy in his elaborate rationalization of apparently vicious human tendencies as indirectly beneficial. God exists, the world is the product of design and the observable order of regularity in human affairs is a direct result of this design and purpose in Nature.

2. ‘Scientific’ religion

Smith disparaged Christian enthusiasm and asceticism, but was attracted to the natural theology of Stoicism. ‘The spirit and manhood of [Stoic] doctrines’, he opined, ‘make a wonderful contrast with the desponding, plaintive, and whining tone of some modern systems’ (1976: 134, 283). Smith thought that the only reputable religion is one which has been subject to the trials and rigours of market forces. The trouble with the Christian religion is that it has always enjoyed a state protected monopoly whereas a ‘pure and rational’ religion (like Stoic deism) would be the likely end result of ‘natural’ competition between independent sects. Perfect competition between a diversity of denominations would yield a culture of tolerance and mutual respect whereby over time ‘the doctrine of the greater part of them (would be reduced) to that pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism, such as wise men have in all ages of the world wished to see established’ (1979: 792–3; Levy 1978: 674).

It was common for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century deists to perceive God as a creative demiurge who desisted from direct intervention in human affairs via miracles, visions and so on. On this view, God is the First Cause, a ‘general’ rather than special ‘providence’ pre-existing the world, creating it perfect and equipping it with uniform laws of Nature in order to keep it in motion. Smith agreed with Isaac Newton that God has ordained Nature to operate by second causes and that to know the laws of Nature is to know the decrees of God’s will (McGuire 1968: 202–7). For Smith, the correct (i.e. ‘scientific’) apprehension of God is embodied in Stoic cosmogony and physics which posit the ‘idea of an universal mind, of a God of all, who originally formed the whole, and who governs the whole by general laws, directed to the conservation and prosperity of the whole’ (Smith 1980: 113). Although it has been suggested that Smith rejected the Christian and Greek notion of a God who transcended the world in favour of one that inhered in its profane details (Fitzgibbons 1995: 29–30), taxonomically speaking Smith’s model is both immanent and transcendent. The Divine Architect created the universe and yet simultaneously inheres in it. The design principle dominates the entire scene and Smith’s psychology or
‘pneumatics’ is set in the context of a monistic, rather than pluralistic, conception of the universe. Though God never makes special interventions in human life ‘He’ operates in and through Nature; all the parts of Nature, including the external environment, were designed to operate in concert to produce a harmonious, purposive result conceived anthropocentrically and hierarchically in terms of the happiness and well being of humanity.

Smith was attracted to the ‘scientific religion’ of Stoicisn because of its organic interpretation of the universe as a designed and integrated system. Such a vision was, Smith claims, entirely unknown to the early Greeks hence science proper did not commence until ‘the Universe was regarded as a complete machine, as a coherent system, governed by general laws and directed to general ends, viz. Its own preservation and prosperity’ (Smith 1980: 113; 116–17). Scientific religion is marked by a shift in preoccupation from ‘irregular’, catastrophic events to ‘regular events governed by predictable laws’. Accordingly ‘as ignorance begot superstition, science gave birth to the first theism’ (Smith 1980: 112–17; Fitzgibbons 1995). Smith was not, therefore, hostile to the kind of pure, ‘rational’ or natural religion proffered by the Stoics.

3. Proof of God’s existence

Smith provides some evidence of a genuine faith in the existence of God, appealing as he does in passing to four of the most popular Western philosophical defences for the existence of God, these are: the cosmological argument; the teleological argument; the moral argument; and finally a fourth, putatively empirical or ‘anthropological’ defence known as the argument from universal consent. The cosmological argument supposes the contingent or caused Nature of the world as moved by a first, non-contingent cause. Smith seems to approve Aristotle’s (and later Bishop Cudworth’s) (Smith 1976: 318–19) conception of God as ‘an eternal, immovable, unchangeable, unextended being, whose essence consists in intelligence . . . the first and supreme mover of the Universe’. He also refers to the teleological argument, which was a popular Protestant variant on the design argument: the apparent purposefulness of all created life suggests the existence of a designer (1976: 87, 166, 170). Another defence is the moral argument. The moral argument (which is really a component of the design argument) states that since the universe has produced ethical animals there must be a transcendent moral source for our moral Nature (1976: 116–17, 128–30, 165). Finally, he invokes the ‘argument from the common consent of humankind’; since belief in the existence of God is universal, such a belief must be natural. Accordingly God’s existence is probable.
It is important to recognize that when Smith is referring to world order he does not mean that there is no design or purpose to the universe; rather his point is that human design is redundant. On the other hand, he is consistently emphatic about the existence of a designing mind, a ‘divine architect’ who has organized the human world via entelechy. Smith’s entire vision is underpinned by the design principle and by a belief in Final Causes; indeed he rejects as untenable any explanation that refers solely to efficient causation (1976: 87). Smith augments the Stoic and Aristotelian dimensions of his theology with elements of ‘scientific’ Newtonianism. Smith idolized Newton and consciously emulated the latter’s approach to scientific explanation (1980: 98, 104–5, 244; 1983: 124). Newton conceived the planetary system in mechanical terms as ‘a closed, autonomous system, ruled by endogenous, mutually interdependent factors ... moving towards a determinate, predictable point of equilibrium’ (Weisskopf 1979: 870). Like Newton, Smith also found himself confronted with the problem of explaining the original placement of the miraculously balanced elements of Nature. He needed to fill a gap which could not be accounted for solely in terms of efficient laws of motion. Smith particularly wanted to show how and why it came to be that private acts (apparently) worked to the good of all. He concluded that this convenient arrangement suggested the existence of an order superior to that of any human contrivance. The introduction of divine intelligence was necessary to give this structure meaning. Smith imitates the theodicy of Stoicism (and later of Lord Shaftesbury) by conceiving the universe in optimistic terms as perfect and self-regulating. Like Marcus Aurelius he seems to have believed that ‘[w]hat ever happens, happens rightly’ (Marcus Aurelius 1964: 66; Fitzgibbons 1995).

4. Teleology

In recent decades there has been a rash of readings which assert either that Smith eschews teleology altogether or that, while teleological arguments are present in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, they may be ‘excised without impairing the cogency of his analysis’ (Kleer 1995: 275). Knud Haakonsen has argued that for Smith ‘nothing hinges on teleological explanations and thus on a guarantor of a teleological order’ and that ‘wherever a piece of teleology turns up in Smith’ its ‘real’ explanation may be found in ‘efficient causes’ (1981: 77; see also, Campbell 1971: 61, 69–73). Milton Myers agrees: ‘true causes’ for Smith are ‘efficient causes’ (Myers 1983: 104). David Hume’s views are of particular relevance to this part of the discussion and it would be an oversight to neglect him here given his close
relationship to Smith and his important and influential views on the problem of causation.

4.1 Smith’s relationship to Hume

Hume, Smith and Ferguson were close friends and mutual admirers, professionally speaking. That Hume was a theological sceptic who shared with Smith an abhorrence of religious enthusiasm does not bear further discussion here but the common assumption that Smith agreed with him in all theological matters does (though their mutual approval of a number of important Epicurean principles should not be disregarded here either). A major point of disagreement centres on the question of cause. Hume associated himself with the Godless and ‘materialist’ system of Epicureanism via his denial of Final Causes and the possibility of evincing a Divine purpose (Kettler 1965: 123). He believed instead that order is achieved endogenously via inner self-regulation and growth. By contrast, Smith posits a monistic, externally generated teleology with the universe portrayed as a single interdependent and designed unit rather than as a collection of autonomous mini-systems (which seems to be the case with Hume).

Smith contradicts Hume on the question of cause by invoking Aristotle and the Stoics. Specifically Hume outlines the following contentious general rules regarding cause and effect: first, that ‘[t]he cause and effects must be contiguous in space and time’ and second that ‘the cause must be prior to the effect’ (Hume 1962: 173; 1990: 56–7). Hume does not deny that order derives from design, simply that this can’t be proved and that we should accept as possible only that which can be observed. But he does note that all things seem to embody their own inner causal mechanisms and that there appear to be no causes external to them: ‘A tree bestows order and organisation on that tree, which springs from it, without knowing the order: An animal, in the same manner, on its offspring: A bird on its nest’. Why then, he asks, should order ‘by its Nature’ be ‘inseparably attached to thought’ rather than ‘matter’? He concludes on a note of finality: it will never be ‘within the reach of human capacity to explain ultimate causes’ (Hume 1990: 89).

Adam Ferguson, Smith’s contemporary, also contradicted Hume’s claim that ‘effect is correlative to cause and they are inseparable’ on the grounds that ‘there may be existence without any cause external to itself’. In other words, Ferguson postulates the existence of an original unmoved mover (Ferguson 1792, I: 153). Smith follows suit: God is at work ‘in every part of the universe’ where we may ‘observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce’ (1976: 87). Both also reject Hume’s denial of the possibility of discerning a divine purpose. Hume had
argued that any attempt to penetrate the mind of God necessarily entailed a vulgar identification of the Creator’s mind and methods with our own. In addition, Hume was convinced that even if we could evince the Creator’s purpose this knowledge would be of no practical use to a reasonable person (1987: 593; Kettler 1965: 122). Smith seemed to hold to the view that such knowledge is not only supremely useful but also substantially within our grasp; hence his attempt to investigate and disclose the purposes and inner workings of the divine blueprint. Though Smith denies that we can ever gain a truly synoptic view of events in progress, nevertheless we are certainly enabled to discern God’s decrees by examining our own constitutions, a move that would, of course, implicate him in the naturalistic fallacy were he working with secular/scientific assumptions. It is the manifest task of philosophy to aid this investigation and in this he seems to be endorsing the Stoic view that the philosopher’s mission is to discern the laws of Nature in order that people might conform to them all the better.

Smith replies to Hume with an eloquent defence of teleology, a reply that seems to have confounded some commentators (see following quote): its importance to understanding Smith warrants its complete reproduction here:

In every part of the universe we observe means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce; and in the mechanism of a plant, or animal body, admire how everything is contrived for advancing the two great purposes of Nature, the support of the individual and the propagation of the species. But in these and in all such objects, we still distinguish the efficient from the Final Cause of their several motions and organisations. The digestion of the food, the circulation of the blood, and the secretion of the several juices which are drawn from it, are operations all of them necessary for the great purposes of animal life. Yet we never endeavour to account for them from those purposes as from their efficient causes, nor imagine that the blood circulates, or that the food digests of its own accord, and with a view or intention to the purposes of circulation or digestion. The wheels of the watch are all admirably adjusted to the end for which it was made, the pointing of the hour. All their various motions conspire in the nicest manner to produce this effect. If they were endowed with a desire and intention to produce it, they could not do it between. Yet we never ascribe any such desire or intention to them, but to the watch-maker, and we know that they are put into motion by a spring, which intends the effect it produces as little as they do. But though . . . in accounting for the operations of bodies, we never fail to distinguish in this manner the efficient from the Final Cause, in accounting for those of the mind we are apt to confound these two different things with one another. When by natural principles we are led to advance those ends, which a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us, we are very apt to impute to that reason, as to their efficient cause, the sentiments and actions by which we advance those ends, and to imagine that to be the wisdom of man, which in reality is the wisdom of God. Upon a superficial view, this cause seems sufficient to produce the effects which are ascribed to it; and the system of human Nature seems to be more simple and agreeable when all its different operations are in this manner deduced from a single principle. (1976: 87)
In this analogy humans are the spring – the efficient cause of the motion – while God is cast in the role of the watchmaker, the First Cause and architect of the watch’s Final Cause or purpose. ‘He’ alone is cognisant of the full meaning of the events in progress hence the emphasis on the quality of blindness of the actions of its components. As Smith says: ‘The administration of the great system of the universe . . . the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God, and not of man’ (1976: 237). This reliance upon Nature and the invisible hand is a recognition on Smith’s part that the social order embodies a rationality that is more than the rationality of human capabilities. Rather than testifying to Smith’s disavowal of Final Causes, the watch analogy is Smith’s clearest and most emphatic declaration of their importance.\textsuperscript{13}

For Smith, there is no question of inner self-regulation and growth as the potential source of order. Order was imposed externally at the moment of creation in inwrought laws of Nature. He believes that by acting through immediate and base instincts like thirst, hunger, sexual desire, avoidance of pain and so on, humans ‘co-operate with the deity’ and serve to ‘advance’ his ‘plan’. But Smith was careful to point out that the respective contributions of the conspirators were not to be confused, for this would constitute a commission of the gravest intellectual error, that is, the confutation of final with efficient causes. It is absurd in the extreme to attribute the harmonious order of human existence to ‘the wisdom’ of mere mortals (1976: 87).

Human existence has a purpose, and that purpose is also its cause. The Greek term \textit{telos} is understood here in its fullest sense, not merely as ‘aim’ or purpose but also as the Final Cause of our development, just as the acorn contains the potential of an oak tree, \textit{causing} it to become an oak tree and not an elm (Heidegger 1977: 8; Edel 1982: 64). Smith believes that cause may in fact be posterior, rather than prior to an event (or even both simultaneously), a kind of magnet pulling growth towards it, or alternatively, as potential unfolding through time. As with Aristotelian entelechy, ‘God’ is the magnet of the universe, unattainable yet perpetually drawing all things towards ‘Him’. This is not to imply that free will is a fiction; human beings are the principal bearers of history exercising considerable independence in the process, yet they are also engaged in fulfilling the Creator’s telic plans for a generalized order and progressivism in human affairs. Hume’s temporal and spatial conditions are therefore dismissed as inadequate for explaining the causes of phenomena as complex as the infinite equilibria of the natural world.

Smith thus uses pre-Humean and anti-Humean arguments in expounding his theology. He relies heavily on teleological arguments while his argument from design embodies an explicit identification of God’s mind with our own in associating the apparent purpose and order of the universe with
‘thought’ and the type of design evident in human contrivance (Smith 1980: 112–14). When we look carefully at the internal workings of Smith’s system we begin to appreciate how intimate and necessary is the relationship between efficient and Final Causes (1976: 293). Causes are not contiguous in space and time but may be better understood as seeds, gradually disclosing and unfolding their potential towards a (softly) determined goal. Note that Smith is no hard determinist; he takes on board the Christian doctrine of free will and fuses it with the modern idea of asymptotic progress. Human development is an infinite upward spiral with its broad outlines planned stadially but with its precise content contingent on human variability (to be discussed).

5. Smith’s *telos* and the naturalistic fallacy

Smith perceives in the miraculous order of Nature a divine purpose. The human constitution and the entire human environment is designed with a hedonistic goal in view: our happiness, prosperity, perpetuation and material comfort. The system of Nature is demonstrably moral because it promotes human happiness (1976: 236–7). That God’s ‘original purpose’ in creating us was to make us happy is made evident ‘by the abstract considerations of his infinite perfections’. This conclusion is later ‘confirmed’ by observing ‘the works of Nature’ which operate together as a coherent system which has been designed to generate and facilitate human flourishing. It is clear from the divine plan of life that its benevolent author ‘intended to promote happiness, and to guard against misery’ (1976: 166, 77). The *telos* of human activity is not, as might be expected, the attainment of moral perfection, a state of grace or some other desirable point of repose; Smith rejects these more orthodox understandings of the Creator’s purpose by replacing them with the definition of *telos* in anthropocentric and utilitarian terms as material abundance and earthly ‘happiness’ (1976: 166, 236).

The use of the teleological argument, combined with the substitution of a utilitarian emphasis on worldly prosperity for conventional definitions of the divine purpose, underlines Smith’s location in a transitional phase of the history of ideas. Rather than abandoning Providentialism and teleology, Smith attempts to ‘modernize’ these categories by displacing conventional understandings of God’s purpose. Christian anthropocentricism and Stoic theodicy are re-worked to mesh easily with emergent liberalism’s humanism, utilitarianism and political economy. Were God’s intentions to be limited to the survival and perpetuation of our species progress beyond the age of hunters would be redundant it is ‘the happiness of mankind’
which ‘seems to have been the original purpose intended by the author of Nature’ (1976: 166) and for Smith, happiness is a function of material prosperity (1979: 96). Witness the ‘serenity and happiness’ of the wealthy compared to the ‘misery and distress’ of the poor (1976: 51); contrast the forlorn poverty of the ‘savage’ age with the ‘general security and happiness which prevail in the ages of civility and politeness’ (1976: 205). Smith describes a universe in which greed (euphemistically cited as ‘self interest’) is the cause of all growth, improvement and ‘public’, ‘national’ and ‘private’ opulence (1979: 343). Economic activity is no zero-sum game in which only a privileged few benefit but rather a scene of infinite mutual enablement.16 Smith’s picture of market society is implicitly normative, characterized as it is by desired and desirable goals: more and more material gain and more and more commodious innovations.

Another important (though related) telos for Smith (later picked up by F. A. Hayek and used as a measure of order success) is population growth.17 Smith strikes a Malthusian chord18 by describing population increases as a spontaneous by-product of material prosperity (1979: 39, 44, 97, 99, 180; 1978: 159). The ‘heterogeneity of ends’ aspect is prominent here. Smith notes that the propagation of the species is ensured, not by a conscious desire to secure the continuation of the species, but by the circumscribed and narrow ‘passion which unites the sexes’, a fact that might tend to obscure its Providential origin (1976: 77–8). There is also a natural tendency for humans to care more tenderly for the young than the old because ‘parental tenderness’ is always stronger than ‘filial piety’. Again, Nature has a clear purpose in view for the ‘continuance and propagation of the species depend altogether upon the former and not upon the latter’ (1976: 142, 219). In typical laissez-faire fashion Smith insists that ‘regulations that tend to population growth do not always produce that effect’ (1978: 159). Population levels are subject to the laws of equilibrium, of supply and demand; ‘the demand for men, like that of any other commodity, necessarily regulates the production of men’ (1979: 98, 566).19 Because human reason is unreliable, efficient causes (in this case sexual desire) do all the survival legwork. This seemingly profane and voluptuous arrangement in no way denotes a Godless world; rather, it testifies to God’s love for us and speaks of our destiny to thrive in prosperity and happiness.

Smith’s insistence here on the benevolence of the social order would only constitute a commission of the naturalistic fallacy were his system genuinely profane whereas under a Providential regime there is good cause for unbounded optimism and a belief that ‘whatever is, is right’. By what other means could Smith possibly have reconciled his claim that universal happiness and prosperity results from the free play of avarice and other voluptuous desires?20 The competitive market only delivers the greatest social
good because of the ‘invisible hand’ of Providence (Stikkers 1987: 236). In the absence of an organizing Providence, Smith’s optimism is unwarranted if not inexplicable.

6. Chain of being and anthropocentrism

Smith seems to be working within a chain of being framework when he suggests that all of Nature was created for the benefit of humanity and for its telos (happiness). The species are arranged hierarchically with humanity at its zenith and everything in Nature existing, ultimately, to serve it (Aristotle 1959: 16; Lovejoy 1964). Smith depicts a monistic universe with humanity at the centre of activity. The world is a coherent system: ‘[E]ven the smallest of the co-existent parts of the universe, are exactly fitted to one another, and all contribute to compose one immense and connected system’ (1976: 289). At the apex of this great system sits humanity, God’s crowning achievement and most cherished and cosseted creation. Humanity was ‘destined . . . to be the governing animal in this little world’ with the remaining ‘mean{er} and weak{er}’ species designated as our ‘subjects’. This explains why human beings feel such compassion for other species; we were, Smith explains, created to serve as God’s agents on earth, the benign despots of the natural world (1980: 136).

7. Spontaneous generation

Perhaps the best way of understanding Smith’s body of work as a coherent system is to examine the elements of his best known contribution to social science: his theory of spontaneous order. Though he is better known for his economic conception of spontaneous generation, Smith also applied the idea of an invisible hand to every aspect of his system of thought, including his moral and political theory, his historiography, his explanation for the generation of social institutions and his model of human motive forces (Hamowy 1987: 13–22).

The invisible hand theory is arguably the unifying principle of Smith’s entire body of work and is his homage to the lauded grand theory of Plato and the Stoics (1980: 113). Smith is commonly understood as hostile to grand theory, but careful readers of his work will notice that he limits his critique to the products of mortal rationalistic constructivism, to the hubris of the ‘man of system {who} is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government’ (1976: 233–4; 1979: 687).
Smith does accept that the existence of an ultimate metatheory immanent in God’s plan for the ‘invisible hand’ is his shorthand for the operations of the law of the heterogeneity of ends and his ideal system of ‘natural liberty’: the system of spontaneous order. The universe is a vast equilibrium generated and upheld by divinely endowed natural laws. In particular, human social life is supported by laws which inhere in the human constitution. Sympathy, for example, minimizes vice and moderates all forms of human interaction in order to render them benign and useful. Other examples (and the following list is far from exhaustive) of natural laws of spontaneous generation include the following: selfishness and greed inadvertently produce universal abundance (1976: 183–4; 1979: 456); the division of labour, which is responsible for so much of human progress and material abundance, emerges as an incidental by-product of the instinct ‘to truck barter and exchange’; specialization, in turn, leads to amazing and infinite technical developments (1979: 21–5; 1978: 527); wealth inequalities are beneficial due to the trickle-down effect (1976: 184–5); the ‘gradual improvements of arts, manufactures, and commerce’ destroyed the undesirable system of feudalism and the power of the medieval Church (1979: 418–19, 422, 802–4); the consumer’s natural preference for domestic over foreign goods, benefits her/his own country (1979: 456); well-regulated government is the incidental effect of a peculiar aesthetic desire for ‘love of art and contrivance (1976: 185–6); wealth stimulates population growth (1979: 98, 566); ‘sympathy’ and the need for approbation leads to spontaneous justice (1976: 130). The uncoordinated, self-regarding acts of individuals, ultimately form part of a wider beneficent pattern orchestrated by Providence and geared towards human happiness and material prosperity. Smith notes that we often attribute the order secured by our instincts to temporal rationality simply because their effects are so commodious, orderly and felicitous whereas nothing could be further from the truth (1976: 87). Smith’s is a two-tiered model with the first tier represented by the individual goal level and the second by the social systems level. There is a clear line of demarcation between the individual and social systems realms. Neither private individuals nor the state should attempt to interfere in the latter sphere of activity which is the realm of Final Causes and therefore reserved for God (1979: 687) who has ‘from all eternity contrived and conducted the immense machine of the universe’. Since human beings possess only a feeble rational faculty, their sole duty is to respond to immediate drives and to desist from social engineering and large-scale planning. As Smith says: ‘To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suited to the weakness of his powers and narrowness of his comprehension: the care of his own happiness’. Nature would never leave her ‘darling care’ (the happiness of human beings) to so flimsy and fallible
faculty as ‘the slow and uncertain determinations of our reason’ (1976: 77–8). Since ‘God’, for Smith is a ‘General’ rather than ‘Special’ Providence order appears to derive exclusively from efficient causes whereas these causes are actually triggered by first and Final Causes (1976: 165–6). The explanatory primacy of secondary or ‘efficient’ causes, is not, therefore, incompatible with a Providential view of motion.

8. Smith’s faculty psychology

Individual agents represent efficient causes in Smith’s system; they are invested with immutable, uniform instincts and even defects in order to trigger the disclosure of the divine blueprint through time. Smith perceived all of our psychological apparatus as Providential and therefore in no way vicious. To renounce or disown our internal drives is to misguided ‘obstruct . . . the scheme which the Author of Nature has established for the happiness and perfection of the world, and’ thereby ‘declare ourselves . . . the enemies of God’ (1976: 166). The resignation dimension of Stoicism is recovered and modernized as the injunction to obey the dictates of Nature and allow God to handle the big picture (1976: 236–7, 274; Marcus Aurelius 1964: VI, 10). The grandiose schemes of ‘Great Legislators’ are cast in a blasphemous light as heresies against an already perfect, divine order. Truly pious agents will imitate the ‘perfect confidence’ in God of the Stoics and concern themselves only with the ‘propriety’ of their own restricted ‘endeavours’ while trusting in the Creator’s ‘superior power’ to ‘{turn} it to that great end, which he himself was most desirous of promoting’ (1976: 164–5, 277).

Teleologically speaking, the seeds of spontaneous order are located in human psychic or biogenetic conditions. Smith constantly emphasizes the distinction between human and divine agency; he refers to the drives of ‘{h}unger, thirst, the passion which unites the two sexes, the love of pleasure and the dread of pain’ on the one hand and their tendency to produce ‘beneficent ends which the great Director of Nature intended to produce by them’ on the other. Nature has always ‘endowed mankind with an appetite for the end which she proposes but likewise with an appetite for the means by which alone this end can be brought about, for their own sakes and independent of their tendency to produce it’. All our drives are conceived, not as evolutionary adaptations to external exigencies, but as purposeful and contrived. Some examples follow: Nature ‘formed man for society’ and accordingly equipped ‘him with the instincts which make social life possible (1976: 77, 84–5, 116–17; 1980: 136); humans were destined for progress therefore they are endowed with progressive drives (1979: 343); humans are destined to command their physical world hence ‘the
benevolent purpose of Nature in bestowing upon us the sense of seeing’ (1980: 156). Perhaps his most revealing claim lies in his defence of the self-regarding passions. Smith builds upon the Stoic view that self-preservation is the first task suggested to us by Nature (1976: 272), reflecting God’s love for us, and ‘His’ desire for our physical safety, security, prosperity and perpetuation. Such a task must be entrusted to our completely dependable ‘original and immediate instincts’, in other words, the self-regarding passions (1976: 77; 1979: 26–7; 1978: 527). Indeed, self-regarding acts are far more likely to protect the interests of others than other-regarding acts (1979: 456). Benevolence may be the ‘sole principle of action in the Deity’ but it could never be relied upon to secure the welfare of a being so completely dependent on external supports (1976: 304). Benevolence, altruism and acts of charity are superfluous because of the ‘universal benevolence’ which inheres in the ‘Divine Masterplan’. The apparent secularism of Smith’s cold calculation is really a product of his faith in a divine order which infallibly delivers prosperity and happiness for all. Though Smith admits that this arrangement is apt to ‘shock all [our] natural sentiments’, he is keen, nevertheless, to reassure his reader that it was ‘established for the wisest and best purposes’ (1976: 168).25

It is important to remember that although Smith insists on a benevolent and moral deity he perceives God’s action in the banal and sometimes voluptuous workings of daily life; in physical and social survival, the perpetuation of the species, in the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain and the pursuit of the ‘natural joy of prosperity’ (1976: 139). Smith believed that all the apparent vices, ‘errors and evils of men’ are fully intended by a benevolent Creator, thereby aligning himself with the Stoic view that:

(1976: 36; 105–6)

The profane tenor of the paradoxes contained in Smith’s passages are, therefore, initially quite misleading. Rather than attesting to a secular Smith they may be better understood as his peculiar contribution to eighteenth-century theodicy.27

Smith regards humanity as God’s favourite creature created in ‘His’ ‘own image’ and appointed as His agents or emissaries on earth. Each of us is invested with a moral sense (the impartial spectator) which Smith describes in Stoic terms as the ‘demigod within the breast’ partly ‘immortal, yet partly
too of mortal extraction’. This innate sense generates a kind of spontaneous moral system which makes social and economic life both possible and rewarding. Moral conduct is policed, not by God directly, but indirectly via regulatory principles which inhere in the human mind. We have a mandate from God ‘to superintend the behaviour of [our] brethren’. The pantheistic deity of Stoicism, the ‘mind-fire spirit’ which permeates and unites all rational souls, is extremely reminiscent in these passages. The necessity for a direct, personal relationship with God or for special acts of providence are obviated by the fact that the Creator has made us ‘his vicegerant upon earth’ (1976: 130–1, 165), reliable bearers of his plans and purposes.

The other significant, yet commonly overlooked, element of Smith’s moral system is its ultimate reliance on an absolute rather than relative ethic standard. This hidden dimension was detected long ago by Adam Ferguson in his trenchant critique of Smith’s theory of ‘sympathy’. Of course, the majority of what Smith says about morality leads us to a view that his theory is all about contingent values,28 the avoidance of ‘pain and social anxiety’29 and on the need to ‘accommodate and assimilate’ moral principles (1976: 224) rather than on conforming to absolute ethical standards. But Ferguson draws our attention to what happens when Smith himself attempts to deal with cases where sympathy fails to deliver. Smith’s theory is philosophically incoherent, according to Ferguson, because it relies ultimately on the external moral judgements of ‘a well informed . . . observer when “actual Sympathy fails”’. Ferguson seems to be well justified in asserting that Smith derails his own project by conceding that, at the end of the day, ‘“[v]irtue” itself must be made to stand “as the test of Just Sympathy”’ (Ferguson 1960: 228–9).30

9. Evolutionism versus design

Interpreters of Smith’s as a secular system sometimes detect prescient strains of evolutionism in his writings. F. A. Hayek, for example, has argued for a proto-Darwinistic Smith and claims that there is evidence that he influenced Darwin,31 while Flew regards Smith’s edifice as genuinely Darwinistic, first, because Smith does not see order as necessarily and always a good thing and, second, because the institutions and practices Smith describes evolve so gradually (Flew 1987: 202). This latter argument does not hold up well under examination. Smith goes to great pains to show that human progress is a slow and gradual process but what he continually insists upon is that it is evolution by design. Flew seems to be unappreciative of the fact that Smith’s approach varies significantly from earlier conceptions of creationist and great chain of being models in the sense that he conceives
creation, not as a single or simultaneous event but as a continuous, asymptotic process driven by the unremitting desire in humans for improvement (Whitney 1934: 151; Smith 1979: 341–3; 1976: 50). As we have seen, he consistently argued that all societies had, or would move through a sequence of distinct stages of development. Since he perceived a distinct and universal pattern to this development he concluded that it was Providential. Smith’s model is therefore evolutionistic only in the narrow ‘gradualist’ sense that practices and institutions develop slowly, ‘insensibly and by degrees’. His theory of social development is thus comparable with what Hayek would later describe as (institutional) social Darwinism (Hayek 1973: 23). But rather than anticipating some kind of open-ended, evolutionary theory of progress (as with Hayek), Smith’s model locates itself in the ‘chain of being’ tradition (albeit with a modernist progressive twist) because it is predicated on the design principle and refers, ultimately, to Final Causes. In other words: human adaptivity is achieved via entelechy and is a function of the neat symmetry and mutual accommodation of a perfectly designed system.

Flew’s other justification for an evolutionistic Smith lies in the well-established fact that Smith was often dissatisfied with the effects of the system of natural liberty. Flew cites as a key example the deleterious effects of the division of labour (1987: 200–1). But Smith’s views here must be viewed in context. While he does indeed outline the bad consequences of advanced specialization in graphic detail in The Wealth of Nations and in his Lectures on Jurisprudence (1979: V.i. passim; 1978: 539–40) it should be understood that, on balance, he sees them as far and away outweighed by the benefits. Smith repeatedly celebrated the enormous benefits wrought by the division of labour and attributed to it almost all of the progress and prosperity in the commercial age (1979: 22). It should also be borne in mind that in Smith’s universe work rarely has intrinsic value; job satisfaction is rare and the majority of us find that our sole compensation is pecuniary (1979: 266). The mind-numbing effects of the division of labour are therefore of relatively minor importance in the grand scheme of things; Smith’s entire body of work testifies to a sanguine belief that, on balance, the world is neatly and propitiously ordered despite any negative (but generally correctable) side effects of that order. Accordingly, Smith never recommends any devolvement in specialization functions but believed that its attendant problems could be solved within existing social and political arrangements (that is, through a state funded education programme) (1979: 781–8). Such a view is consistent with his general faith that the world is imbued with a multitude of self-governing and self-correcting mechanisms.32

Although Darwin may well have been influenced by Smith’s remarks on the amazing adaptive significance of all our drives and moral sentiments
Smith by no means intended them as an argument from evolution. Smith seems to be firmly convinced that the adaptive capacity of all of created Nature is a product of intention and design: ‘Nature’, he says, ‘never bestows upon any animal any faculty which is not either necessary or useful’. ‘Seeing, hearing, and smelling’, for example, ‘seem to be given to us by Nature’ in order to alert us to any dangers or benefits present in our environment (1980: 168). While there are indeed many elements of a proper theory of evolution in Smith, he made no such link himself. His insistence on the immutability, distinctiveness and superiority of the species places him much closer to traditional theological perspectives on the origin of the human species than with the type of early evolutionism proffered by Monboddo and later Darwin (Spiegel 1976: 481; Smith 1979: 25–6; 1978: 352–3).

Even if Smith had intended to promulgate a theory of evolution, this would not explain why the order he describes delivers happiness and the good life as opposed to mere survival of the fittest. Smith’s insistence on happiness as a telos is itself strong evidence of his Providentialism. As Richard Kleer suggests:

> No evolutionary theory . . . posits a connection between natural selection and human happiness; yet the latter is one of the purposes which Smith attributes to nature . . . the moment one argues that the theory of evolution has something to contribute to his analysis, my main point is already granted – that the principle of a divine author of nature cannot be removed without impairment to Smith’s moral theory.

(Kleer 1995: 300)

Demoting the invisible hand to a mere euphemism for a profane competitive/equilibrium mechanism is a complete distortion of Smith’s intention because, as David Martin notes, it ‘removes the critical coordinating role of Providence’ from his system and places far too great a burden on competition as the ‘causal force . . . necessary to achieving an optimal outcome’ (Martin 1990: 273). As a social scientist without recourse to anything like a theory of evolution Smith would have resisted ascribing to chance the sophisticated and perfect calibration of our drives towards the delivery of ‘human happiness’; therefore the concept of a benevolent and designing deity is his only and most logical explanatory resort.

10. Defects

Perhaps the most compelling evidence in support of a Providentialist reading of Smith is his idea of defects as deliberately incorporated in the human constitution as a means for realizing the Creator’s ends. In both WN and TMSSmith depicts human defects in teleological terms; our weaknesses
are deliberately endued by the Creator for the express purpose of securing human happiness and prosperity. Smith begins by telling us that it is not basic material needs which lead individuals to create a distinctively human existence because the needs of subsistence are relatively few and easily satisfied (1976: 50). The rich and the poor alike are subject to the same physical limitations, so that in terms of basic requirements there can be little difference between them (1976: 184–5; 1979: 180). Nor are we led to pursue wealth and social distinction from the utility to be derived from them. The factor which induces individuals to labour beyond the satisfaction of these basic needs originates in the uniquely human preoccupations of aesthetics, conspicuous consumption and vainglory: ‘The pleasures of wealth and greatness’, says Smith, ‘strike the imagination as something grand and beautiful and noble, of which the attainment is well worth all the toil and anxiety which we are so apt to bestow upon it’ (1976: 182–3; 1978: 335–6). The desire ‘to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation’ and to emulate the rich ‘first prompted {mankind} to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish life’ (1976: 183). Translated to the economic sphere, these factors give rise to the unremitting ‘desire of bettering our condition’ which ‘comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us until we go into the grave’ (1979: 341).

Our entirely natural urge to lord it over our neighbours is satisfied via the accumulation and consumption of material goods, a process that is the very engine of progress and which is partly responsible for the transition from one historical period to the next. Yet, significantly, Smith states that any thoughtful person will appreciate that the objects of material ambition are ‘in the highest degree contemptible and trifling’. Our ‘natural’ esteem of trinkets is a deliberate ‘deception’ engineered by God but one which is the most important source of human progress. This innate regard for ‘frivolous objects . . . is often the secret motive of the most serious and important pursuits of both private and public life’ and it ‘is well’, Smith suggests, ‘that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind’ (1976: 181–3). Without it our species would be stalled at a stage of indigent barbarism. The progress of society is not the product of a naturalistic, open-ended process of adaptive evolution; without this Providential sleight of hand, our species would never have advanced beyond the age of hunters, when a basic subsistence was readily procured. In other words, it is not adaptive necessity that has brought progress, but the providentially implanted desire to better one’s condition and acquire fundamentally
useless consumer goods. Humans are endowed with the false perception that acquisitiveness is meaningful and worthwhile and that those who excel at conspicuous consumption are entirely deserving of our admiration. Moral integrity loses out to material acquisition when it comes to estimating and venerating our ‘fellows’. In designing and creating the human constitution God deliberately incorporated this moral weakness in order to realize ‘His’ hindermost goals. In this, Smith advises us, we ought to ‘admire the wisdom of God even in the weakness and folly of man’ (1976: 105–6). These frivolous values, in turn, feed into another unanticipated but socially useful effect.

Smith applauds the wisdom of Nature in placing the burden of leadership, not as we might imagine, upon the shoulders of the wise and virtuous, but upon those of the rich:

Nature has wisely judged that the distinctions of ranks, the peace and order of society would rest more securely upon the plain and palpable difference of birth and fortune than upon the invisible and often uncertain determinations of wisdom and virtue.

(1976: 226)

The ‘undistinguishing eyes’ of ‘the great mob of mankind’ are incapable of distinguishing a ‘wise’ and virtuous person from a foolish and vicious one but they can easily detect the presence of wealth (1976: 226). God has therefore endowed people with a reverence for those qualities immediately appreciable to even the most unsophisticated among us. We all admire the rich and cannot help but ‘sympathize’ with them. This ‘disposition’ to sympathize ‘with all the passions of the rich and powerful’ is the foundation for ‘the distinction of ranks’, that is, the system of social stratification upon which depends the good ‘order of society’. Smith never suggests that the rich are in any way innately superior because we are all born with roughly equivalent potential (1979: 28–9; 1978: 348). He simply feels that it is preferable for political leadership to fall to those who were ‘bred’ for positions of authority. The superior education of the rich, their greater familiarity with the trappings and protocols of power and privilege, make them highly suitable candidates for positions of authority. Success in the restricted endeavour of material gain results in the unforeseen garnering of the respect requisite for positions of public office. The limits of reason and conscious choice are once again emphasized here.

This aspect of Smith’s analysis (that is, of human defects as deliberately and purposefully endued) is extremely strong counter-evidence of any purely evolutionist interpretation and reflects the influence of Stoicism at work; all of Nature’s works, including apparent defects, are accommodated within a vast, purposeful, beneficent perfection.
11. Conclusion

Readings of Smith’s oeuvre as a secular or evolutionary enterprise are probably, in part at least, a product of the late-modern separation of the disciplines of economics, moral philosophy and theology. Jacob Viner seems to have been justified when he admonished Smith scholars to resist the ahistorical trap of abstracting Smith’s economics and social theory from his moral philosophy and theology.\(^\text{36}\) Whereas modern spontaneous order elaborators like F. A. Hayek seek to posit the possibility of wholly secular, evolutionistic systems of spontaneous order, for Smith the logic of spontaneous order rests on the ‘fact’ that the world with all its miraculous equilibria is the product of a benign and loving creative demiurge.

Smith’s apparently cold, utilitarian equations are deceptive; although he initially strikes us as a secular mind, his realism is better understood as a function of his sincere belief that world order is underwritten by the beneficent and guiding hand of God. In this regard we might think of Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ elaboration as his particular contribution to eighteenth-century theodicy.

Smith’s universe is logically dependent upon a divine invisible hand. This is suggested, first by the fact of his insistence upon happiness (as opposed to survival) as the Final Cause of Nature. But the best evidence for this logical dependence is found in Smith’s inability to evade an absolute ethical framework and his arguments about the deliberate endowment of defects in the human frame, neither of which make sense without the supposition of purposeful design. Far from being incidental to his scheme, it is the theological constructs – the design principle and a teleology which embodies first, final and efficient causes – which make the system work.

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Notes

* The author gratefully acknowledges the comments provided by two anonymous referees. The usual disclaimer applies.

1 David Martin has suggested that the motive for purging the theological content from Smith’s invisible hand is purely ideological, motivated by a desire ‘to retain Smith’s progressive harmony by excluding the view that the economy needs EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE (sic.), either by Divine or human management’ (Martin 1990: 278).

2 I am in the company of several other scholars here: Richard Kleer has written an authoritative article on the subject of final causes in Smith in which he concludes that the latter’s ‘commitment to a natural teleology seems omnipresent and genuine’ (Kleer 1995: 300; see also Martin 1990: 272; Baumol 1991: 31–3; Oswald 1995; Fitzgibbons 1995: 25–44).
According to Camic: ‘Like his beloved friend Hume, Smith allowed Providence no role in the explanation of the causes of human action and granted God no direct entry whatever into the natural sequence of earthly event’ (Rae 1965: 63; Campbell 1971: 61).

Indeed, the design principle was probably the unit idea of the eighteenth century. ‘Unit ideas’, as Arthur Lovejoy defines them, are ‘endemic assumptions’ which control ‘the course of [our] reflections on almost any subject’ (cited in Myers 1983: 3; see also, Lovejoy 1964: 10–15).

Repudiating Tawney’s claim that teleology had been exiled from moral philosophy by the eighteenth century, Jacob Viner says: ‘Eighteenth-century British social philosophy was in fact soaked in teleology. I know of no British writer before Bentham who frankly renounced teleology, and of no important writer except Mandeville and David Hume – and perhaps also Thomas Hobbes – who could plausibly be interpreted on the basis of their actual writings as not honestly accepting it. There is no logical conflict between teleology and automatism if ends or design have been built into the automatic mechanism itself, as was universally affirmed’ (Viner, 1972: 60). Taylor supports such a view (Taylor 1929: 211).

Peter Minowitz, for example, posits just such a shift between TMS and WNS by arguing that Smith moves from deism in the former to atheism in the latter. Smith’s system in WNS apparently ‘operates without an “administrator”, “Director” or “Author”. Smith’s political economy transcends his moral philosophy by offering a picture of order without design’ (Peter Minowitz, Profits, Priests, and Princes: Adam Smith’s Emancipation of Economics from Politics and Religion, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1973: 132). An exhaustive literature on the subject has left me unconvinced of any discrepancy between Smith’s major works; they simply focus on different subject matter but are in all other respects compatible.

The distinction between ‘General’ and ‘Special Providence’ is that the former ‘refers to God’s action in the original creation of Nature. In the beginning God created the material frame of Nature and He structured it to function in obedience to the laws of Nature which He also created’ whereas Special Providence denotes ‘a particular act of direct divine intervention that cancels or contravenes the ordinary course of natural operations’ (Force 1984: 519).

Spinoza had earlier made an almost identical contrast between primitive and scientific (i.e. theistic) conceptions of God. He wrote: ‘the vulgar believe God’s power and Providence do most plainly, appear when they see anything strange and unusual happen in nature [whereas] . . . I take God’s disposing or direction, to be the fixed order and immutable course of nature’ (cited in Ahmad 1990: 142). Like Spinoza, Smith’s natural history was ‘scientific’ in the sense that it dealt with immutable ‘laws’ of ‘universal application’ (Skinner 1967: 46).

Nevertheless, Smith is sceptical about other aspects of Aristotle’s cosmogeny (1980: 116).

Smith regards theism as a natural effect of intellectual progress (1976: 163–4). Smith’s contemporary, Adam Ferguson also used this universal consent argument, refusing to countenance any claims to relativism on the subject, (1978: 114–16). For a summary of all these types of theological argument see Richardson and Bowden (1983: 237–9).

Ferguson also modelled his theology on aspects of Newton’s thought (792, I: 200, 312). See also Redman 1993: 210–20,

It should be noted however that Smith and Hume did share some Epicurean beliefs in common. For all the Stoic allusions, there is much of the Epicure in Smith; he
describes the Epicurean system as the 'most imperfect' of all the ancient schools (Smith 1976, VII.ii.4.5: 307) yet the central place accorded to the 'virtue' of 'prudence' in Smith's moral system is a direct imitation of Epicureanism like Epicurus, Smith preaches that our 'passions' are frequently 'constrained, not so much by a sense of their propriety' (a Stoic virtue) 'as by prudential considerations of the bad consequences which might follow from their indulgence' (TMS, VI.3: 263). He endorses the statement that 'pleasure and pain are the great objects of desire and aversion' (1976: 320) suggesting that the 'plan and system which Nature has sketched out for our conduct seems to be altogether different from that of the Stoical philosophy' (1976: 292) As for the 'system which places virtue in utility' (Hume's) Smith says 'the only difference between it and that which I have been endeavouring to establish, is, that it makes utility, and not sympathy . . . the natural and original measure' of virtue (1976: 305–6). Smith also despised Stoic apatheia believing as he did in the importance and desirability of personal liberty (1976: 143).

As Kleer rightly notes: ‘[f]ar from stating that final causes should be removed from scientific explanations, the general thrust of the passage is to stress their importance’ (Kleer 1995: 298). Reisman also argues for a teleological Smith (1976: 84–5).

The happiness of mankind, as well as of all other rational creatures, seems to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of Nature, when he brought them into existence (ibid.: 166). Since human happiness is the final end of spontaneous order, Smith’s approach could be described as a kind of ‘system-utilitarianism’, a term used by John Gray to describe Hayek’s work (Gray 1989: 92). The term is also used by Campbell and Ross (1981: 73–92).

Both Reisman and Campbell also suggest that Smith’s God is a ‘utilitarian’ (Reisman 1976: 85; Campbell 1971: 219).

As Daniel Bell notes: Smith gave us a ‘proposition that was almost entirely new in the history of civil society: in a free exchange, both parties to a transaction could gain . . . under the conditions laid down by Smith, economic life could be a non-zero-sum game’ (Bell 1973: 303).

Smith declares ‘self-preservation and the propagation of the species’ to be ‘the great ends of human existence’ (1976: 77).

Significantly, Malthus’ views on population were also of a theological bent (Pullen 1981: 39–54).

Malthus agreed that state interference in population control was unnecessary and would only exacerbate any existing problems (Malthus 1960: 37).

As Martin points out, once the ‘Intelligent Author of the Universe’ is expunged from Smith’s thesis ‘the entire beneficent schema loses its necessary character’ (Martin 1990: 283).

In contrast to Smith’s, later, secular theories of spontaneous order describe a universe that only appears to be underwritten by a Creative demiurge. As Barry observes: ‘What is important about the theory of spontaneous order is that the institutions and practises it investigates reveal well-structured social patterns which appear to be the product of some omniscient designing mind yet which are in reality the spontaneous co-ordinated outcomes of the actions of, possibly, millions of individuals who had no intention of effecting such overall aggregate orders’ (Barry 1982: 8).

Kleer provides a substantial list of other moral equilibria among which he includes: ‘agents are led to perform actions good for themselves and society as a whole and are dissuaded from actions with harmful consequences . . . there is a natural tendency to a ‘distinction of ranks’ by which political order is maintained . . . human beings are compelled by their nature to act with justice, but not to be benevolent . . .
people have a genuine desire actually to be, rather than merely to appear, virtuous... the expression of self interest is kept within bounds suited to the maintenance of societal relations... the inability of the majority of mankind to form well-considered moral judgements is compensated by the emergence of an authoritative code of social mores... the rich “make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants”... agents are induced to express that precise degree of every different kind of sentiment which is most to their benefit’ (Kleer 1995: 281–2).

23 Viner asserts that Smith’s understanding of human motive forces is in fact ‘partly Providentialist and teleological, and is so expressly, deliberately and repetitively’ (Viner, Role of Providence, p. 79).

24 This reasoning did not, of course, lead Smith to a strictly non-interventionist view of the state. He realized that some things could not be achieved via the self-regarding act of individuals, hence the famous three functions of government: defence, justice and public works (1979, V, passim). Smith’s further acknowledgement that government intervention was sometimes necessary for the correction of market behaviour errors (usury laws, monopolies) also presents a problem for his theodicy which is difficult to reconcile.

25 ‘We may observe that these principles of the human mind which are most beneficial to society are by no means marked by Nature as the most honourable. Hunger, thirst and the passion for sex are the great supports of the human species. Yet almost every expression of these excites contempt’ (1978: 527).

26 As also noted by MacFie (1971: 597–9) however, Macfie seems to limit a genuine Providentialism to the Theory of Moral Sentiments.

27 That is, attempts to explain the puzzle: if God is good, why evil?

28 The virtues associated with the practice of propriety are contingent because they are socially determined behaviours shaped and moderated by our inherent love of praise and concomitant aversion to ‘offend’ (1976: 116).

29 To use Nicholas Phillipson’s phrase (in I. Hont and M. Ignatieff, p. 185).

30 See also 1792, II: 126: ‘But, in this reference to a supposed well informed and impartial observer, there is an implied confession, that there is some previous standard of estimation, by which to select the judge of our actions’. It was David Kettler who first drew attention to this criticism of Smith by Ferguson (Kettler 1965: 114).

31 ‘[R]ecent examinations of Charles Darwin’s notebooks suggest that his reading of Adam Smith in the crucial year 1838 led Darwin to his decisive breakthrough’ (1976: 115).

32 For example, all our ordering drives are offset by other deliberately endowed counter-forces (see above). Similarly, the ‘political body’, like the human body, is capable of both ‘preventing and correcting... the bad effects; of bad public policy. Even the ‘folly and injustice’ of ‘partial and oppressive’ economic policy will be corrected by the overpowering drive of self-interest, a provision which has been ‘fortunately made’ by ‘Nature’ (1979: 674).

33 The biologist Michael Ghiselin has noted: ‘The fact that our moral sentiments have an adaptive significance was clearly grasped by Adam Smith, although, being a man of his times, he thought they exist for the good of the species’ (Ghiselin 1974: 257).

34 He also makes reference to ‘the providential care of Nature’ which has ensured that every species is born with the necessary ‘tubes and canals’ for survival (1980: 163, 165).

35 Thanks go to Sacha Moran for his invaluable help in the development of this idea.

36 A view with which Martin agrees unreservedly (1990: 284, 273).
References


The hidden theology of Adam Smith


Abstract

This paper contests late readings of Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ as an essentially secular device. It is argued that Smith’s social and economic philosophy is inherently theological and that his entire model of social order is logically dependent on the notion of God’s action in nature. It will be shown that far from being a purely secular, materialist or evolutionist approach Smith works from the argument from design to construct a model that is teleological and securely located in the chain of being tradition. His focus upon happiness as the Final Cause of nature renders improbable any claims for proto-evolutionism in his work while his arguments about the deliberate endowment of defects in the human frame make no sense without the supposition of design and purpose in nature.

Keywords

Adam Smith, invisible hand, teleology, spontaneous order, self-interest, Stoicism