

Providence, Divine Power, and the ‘Invisible Hand’ in Adam Smith

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Abstract. This contribution advances a critical examination of Smith’s thought in theological perspective, with a point of departure in a recent interpretation of the ‘invisible hand.’ We show that the concept of general providence has displaced traditional understandings of special providence in the way Smith presents God’s care for the world. Whereas in traditional Reformed theology providence functions within the framework of a qualitative difference between the two orders of God’s being and the order of creation, in Smith we encounter an ‘immanentized’ providentialism, in which these orders are collapsed into one. It is argued that an application of a particular version of the distinction between special and general providence to Smith’s thought obscures older classical theological categories and distinctions—most specifically the dialectic of divine power—and that a retrieval of these older categories provides a more helpful framework for contextualizing and understanding Smith’s own thought.

Keywords: Adam Smith, providence, happiness, invisible hand, divine power, economic life

1. Introduction

The most famous phrase associated with Adam Smith (1723-1790) is undoubtedly that of the ‘invisible hand.’ It is a formula that has been addressed at great length in the scholarly literature and the significance of which has been much debated (Samuels 2009; 2011). At various times it has been downplayed as a mere passing expression. Others have seen it as a central image referring to the self-regulation of the market (Grampp 2000; Aydinonat 2008). Many of these

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interpretations construe the invisible hand as a reference that moves from the sacred to the secular; that is, it evokes images of the transcendent but ultimately makes no strong claims with regard to divine action (Kennedy 2016; Hengstmengel 2019, 164). A broader and recent historiographical trend seeks to recontextualize the thinkers of the Enlightenment in religious and theological perspective (Viner 2015 [1972]; Ahnert 2006; Haakonssen 2006; Sorkin 2008; Gillespie 2008; Burson 2010; Firestone and Jacobs 2012; Bulman and Ingram 2016; Lehner 2016; Muscolino 2016; McInelly and Kerry 2018).

Significant and fruitful revisionist attempts have been made to recast the relationship between religion, theology and the sacred in different Enlightenment contexts (Stewart 2003; Ahnert 2014; Paganelli 2015; Sher 2015; Sytsma 2020), including the work of seminal figures such as Adam Smith (Cockfield et al. 2007; Fleischacker 2009; Long 2009; Raphael 2009; Hanley 2011; Oslington 2011; 2019; Yang 2012; Graham 2016; Phillipson 2016; Bloch 2019). With respect to the ‘invisible hand,’ for instance, Paul Oslington (2011) argued for a distinctively theological interpretation—and even defended the claim that the expression should be regarded as an instance of special providence in the economic realm.

In this contribution we would like to advance the critical examination of Smith’s thought in theological perspective, taking as point of departure the recent interpretation of the ‘invisible hand’ offered by Oslington. We will see that in the way Smith presents God’s care for the world, the concept of *general providence* has displaced traditional understandings of *special providence*. Whereas in traditional Reformed theology providence functions within the framework of a qualitative difference between the two orders of God’s being and the order of creation, in Smith we encounter an ‘immanentized’ providentialism, in which these orders are collapsed into one. We will see that Oslington’s application of a distinction between special and general providence to Smith’s thought obscures older classical theological categories and distinctions—most specifically the dialectic of divine power—and that a retrieval of these older categories provides a more helpful framework for contextualizing and understanding Smith’s own thought. Our conclusions support a significant line of scholarship that interprets Smith’s work in terms of natural theology and general providence (Kleier 1995; 2000; Hill 2001; 2004; Waterman 2002; Alvey 2004a; 2004b; 2007), as opposed to interpretations of Smith’s thought as esoterically skeptical, atheistic or purely naturalistic (Haakonssen 1981; Minowitz 1993; Phillipson 2010; Kennedy 2011; 2013; Heydt 2017; Rasmussen 2017). To underscore the distinction between general and special providence in the dialectic of divine power, particularly as it is employed in the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, we also provide additional intellectual historical context and grounding.

The first section of this contribution briefly introduces and engages Oslington’s interpretation of Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ as referring to so-called ‘special providence.’ We then

provide a corrective historical and theological context for understanding the ‘invisible hand’ imagery. This contextualization outlines the traditional distinctions between God’s absolute and ordained power (that is, the dialectic of divine power), as well as between general, extraordinary and special providence. In Smith we see that the distinction between general and special providence has disappeared and has been absorbed by a firm and even optimistic belief in a universal providential order where divine benevolence predominates. Against this background we then briefly discuss Smith’s providentialism before drawing some conclusions about the prospects for understanding Smith’s thought in theological context.

2. Providence and the dialectic of divine power

Oslington locates the metaphor of the invisible hand in the “British natural theological accounts of divine action and providence, mediated through Smith’s Scottish Calvinist environment” (2011, 63; see also Oslington 2018, 37-45). This interpretation differs from an explanation simply in terms of general providence, as Oslington points instead to Newtonian physics for another basis of interpretation. Newton represents a strong version of providentialism in that God acts directly in everything that happens. For the most part, divine action is regular, predictable and discoverable. Thus, writes Oslington, “Newton affirms a strong version of the doctrine of providence. In his universe everything that happens is in some sense an act of God. For scientific work a crucial question is how regular or lawlike is God’s activity” (2011, 65). On the basis of Newtonian astronomical imagery, Oslington concludes that the best explanation of the metaphor of the invisible hand in Smith relates to “special providence, operating against, although ultimately supporting, general providence in the economic realm” (2011, 66). In this understanding, God’s action as represented by the ‘invisible hand’ is the irregular and special action God takes to reorder and adjust economic realities (Oslington 2011, 70). Thus, according to Oslington, the ‘invisible hand’ is best understood as referring to God’s special providence.

The distinction between general and special providence in Oslington’s usage here refers to the difference between God’s more basic and fundamental action of ordering and ordaining powers in the world (general providence) and God’s direct and occasional intervention in the world order (special providence), a distinction which Oslington claims “is well grounded in Smith’s philosophical and theological context” (2011, 70). Oslington establishes this to some extent as plausible for the broader philosophical context, including not only Newton but also figures like William Whiston (1667-1752).

The distinction that Oslington invokes to undergird his interpretation of Smith maps differently onto the Reformed and Calvinistic theological landscape, however, and shows that the classical theological categories of general and special providence as related to the absolute and

ordained will of God have become confused. What Oslington calls “special providence,” following the British natural theological tradition he outlines, is, as we will see, more akin to classical accounts of the possibility of an actualized absolute divine power (*potentia absoluta*), rather than *specialis providentia* in the Reformed theological tradition.

Although there were disputes in the late middle ages and into the modern period about the exact relationship between these two understandings of divine causality and action, the dialectic of divine power essentially refers to a distinction between God’s power conceived of as infinite and abstract, that is, unrelated, unconstrained and unconditioned by any other reality (*potentia absoluta*) and God’s power as conditioned by or related to the created order in time (*potentia ordinata*) (Courtenay 1990; Oakley 1998). By deigning to instantiate a particular world order, God has determined that the world will work in particular ways and according to particular rules, patterns and ordinances, and that his own work in the world will typically uphold and support (rather than contravene) those orders.

The major dispute about the relationship between these two powers had to do with whether in the created order God retained his absolute power as an active and actual potency, or whether it was merely understood as a virtual or primal set of possibilities that were no longer possible given God’s decision to instantiate a particular world order. For those who defended the idea of God’s absolute power as an active potency, sometimes identified as the *via moderna*, miracles and other direct activity of God were often explained in terms of this *potentia absoluta*. Miracles, within this view, are God’s direct intervention into the world order according to his absolute power. For those who retained God’s absolute power as only a virtual or primal power, sometimes identified as adhering to the *via antiqua*, miracles and other phenomena were explained as simply manifestations of God’s own ordained power, which may seem irregular to us but which are always latent possibilities in the nature of the created order.

There has been considerable debate about the substance and significance of the dialectic of divine power, particularly for understanding the developments of early modern science. Peter Harrison (2002), in the course of an extended critique of what he calls the “voluntarism and science thesis,” focuses on the distinction between the *potentia absoluta et ordinata* and its reception in the early modern period, concluding that a close connection between divine voluntarism and an operationalized absolute divine power is “difficult to sustain” in the face of numerous counter-examples (Harrison 2002, 72). Harrison’s critique was subsequently addressed by John Henry (2009) and more recently by Francis Oakley (2018), who defend in diverse ways some variation of a view connecting doctrines of divine voluntarism and an operationalized absolute power with the rise of empirical science.

With regard to the argument here, the most salient feature of this much broader debate and discussion in the scholarly literature is the claim that there is a conflation or confusion of

the dialectic of divine power and divine providence in at least some of the thinkers from this period. Harrison points out that the understanding of divine providence is more complex and variegated in many early modern, particularly Reformed, thinkers than a simple dichotomy between absolute and ordained power. Thus, concludes Harrison, “the power distinction was not considered equivalent to the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary providence” (2002, 75).

John Henry links disputes about intellectualism and voluntarism to contextual pragmatic concerns, with various figures concerned with finding “the best strategy for combating atheism or for showing the compatibility of their natural philosophies with whatever religious orthodoxy to which they felt most committed” (2009, 82). Oakley, responding to Harrison’s concerns about the conflation of ordinary and extraordinary (or special) providence with the dialectic of divine power, asserts that for those thinkers who affirmed an operationalized absolute divine power, maintaining a separate set of distinctions for providence became less important. As Harrison puts it, “It was only when the absolute power was understood in a presently active sense, thus referring to an extraordinary power that could transcend the ordinary course of things (as in the case of miracles), that the equivalence of the two distinctions became not only possible, but obvious” (2018, 92). The tendency to conflate the dialectic of divine power with divine providence is not limited, however, to various theologians, philosophers and natural scientists in the eighteenth century, but is also evident in much secondary scholarship. This helps to explain in part how Oslington’s essential identification of special providence with an operationalized absolute power comes about.

One implication of this dispute might well be that a distinction between the dialectic of divine power, on the one hand, and between different types of providence, on the other, could be a mark of a more traditional or classical understanding of God’s absolute power. It is not the case, however, as we shall see, that the traditional understanding of God’s providence, at least in the Reformed tradition and proximate to Smith’s own context, was a simple dichotomy between general/ordinary and special/extraordinary providence. Reformed distinctions concerning providence are more complex and do not map directly onto a dichotomy between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*.

Oslington’s linkage between Newton and Smith underscores the significance of the conflation of divine providence and the dialectic of divine power. Newton has usually been understood to represent a more modern approach to divine power, in which special divine interventions are necessary to maintain the order of the cosmos. The Newtonian tradition thus seems to be firmly aligned with the modern approach. As B.J.T. Dobbs summarizes, “The theological framework of *potentia dei ordinata et absoluta* guided Newton and many of his contemporaries when they inquired into the relationships between God and the world, and it is

now widely recognized that Newton and Newtonian science were deeply indebted to voluntarist theology and to the struggle to define God's ordained and absolute power" (1991, 110; see also Force 1990, 85-7).

3. Reformed teaching on providence

The distinction between general and special providence is a standard feature of doctrinal works in the Reformation and post-Reformation era, but the typical understanding differs from the later distinction which Oslington highlights and which Oakley identifies as equivalent to the operationalized dialectic of divine power.

In John Calvin's significant treatment of providence in the *Institutes* (I.xvi), the distinction between general and special providence (*specialis providentia*) has to do with the difference between divine action in a broader, more general and impersonal sense (akin to Stoic or Epicurean teaching) and divine care that is particular and specific, including (as Calvin puts it) the belief that God "directs everything by his incomprehensible wisdom and disposes it to his own end" (2006, I.xvi.4, 202). It is the special nature of God's providence that makes it universal in the most basic sense: "He governs all events" (2006, I.xvi.4, 202). On Calvin's account, general providence when taken by itself amounts to what could be seen as a kind of deistic vision of divine power. The wisdom of the philosophers, or what Calvin calls "carnal sense," can in some sense apprehend this aspect of divine work. This understanding of general providence "contemplates, moreover, some general preserving and governing activity, from which the force of motion derives. In short, carnal sense thinks there is an energy divinely bestowed from the beginning, sufficient to sustain all things" (Calvin 2006, I.xvi.1, 197). A Christian understanding of special providence, however, leads one, "having found him Creator of all, forthwith to conclude he is also everlasting Governor and Preserver—not only in that he drives the celestial frame as well as its several parts by a universal motion, but also in that he sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything he has made, even to the least sparrow" (Calvin 2006, I.xvi.1, 197-98). God's providential rule is direct, an ongoing dynamic of divine action.

The distinction between general and special providence for Calvin, therefore, is not between God's normal and continuing activity and his occasional, special intervention. It is rather, between a primal creative power that stands as the general background for all of reality and the special, detailed care and preservation of the entirety of creation, with a particular concern for the salvation of his elect. Calvin thus affirms that "the universe is ruled by God, not only because he watches over the order of nature set by himself, but because he exercises especial care over each of his works. It is, indeed, true that the several kinds of things are moved by a secret impulse of nature, as if they obeyed God's eternal command, and what God has once determined flows

on by itself” (2006, I.xvi.4, 203). The “secret impulse of nature” for Calvin is God’s eternal determination to work through and preserve the discrete activities of secondary causes. This can rightly be understood as a kind of general concurrence that is exhaustive and particular in the sense of applying to all of created reality.

It is within the context of Calvin’s discussion of the differences between the former (general, and more abstract understanding of providence) and the latter (particular, and more concrete conception) that Calvin claims that whatever happens—even if it seems inexplicable to human beings—is willed by God: “what for us seems a contingency, faith recognizes to have been a secret impulse from God” (2006, I.xvi.9, 210). In this concluding discussion Calvin (2006, I.xvi.9., 210) refers to “the secret stirring of God’s hand” (*secreta manus Dei*), which has been variously rendered into English as “the secret agency of the hand of God” (Calvin 1845, 244), “the secret exertion of the Divine power” (Calvin 1816, 223), “the secret stirring of the hand of God” (Calvin 1561, fol. 61r), and, as Peter Harrison observed, “the direction and influence of God’s invisible hand” in the Glasgow edition of 1762 (Smith 1762, 84, col. 2; Harrison 2011, 38). Harrison shows how the metaphor was used as a shorthand expression for the hidden manner in which God exercised control over the course of history. The difference with earlier conceptions of general grace was that God’s beneficent work could be understood in faith.

This Reformed distinction between general providence, as God’s primal purposes for the created order, and special providence, more narrowly referring to his ongoing care of creation and especially saving concern for the elect, is reflected as well in the Presbyterian tradition. The Westminster Larger Catechism describes God’s “works of providence” as “his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory” (Dennison 2014, 302). Providence is thus understood most generally to be a universal governing, ordaining and directing divine work—one that applies to all things in history and in the world as well as to the primal ordering and framing of the world order.

The contrast between general and special providence figures in the treatment of Thomas Blackwell (c. 1660–1728), a Scottish divine at Aberdeen, in his influential *Schema sacrum*, which appeared in editions in 1710, 1753, 1781, 1786, 1800 and 1841. In this treatise, Blackwell distinguishes between God as the general superintendent and governor of all of creation and as caretaker who has special concern for rational creatures (angels and humans). God is “the glorious Creator of both worlds” and “the All-wise Governor of so great an universe.” He briefly considers the “wonderful preservation of the material world” along with “the harmonious concurrence of second causes therein. God the great first Cause, moveth and absolutely overruleth all.” Following these observations about general providence and its coherence with secondary causes, however, Blackwell considers “the far more remarkable and wonderful conduct

of divine providence, towards angels and men,” especially as concerns the decrees related to salvation (1781, 64; see also Muller 2015).

John Brown of Haddington (1722–1787), an orthodox Presbyterian contemporary of Smith, outlines a fivefold division of providence in his explication of the classical Reformed doctrine. Brown defines providence as the continuing governance and maintenance of creation, through which “God upholds and governs all his creatures, and all their actions” (1817 [1782], 178). Brown distinguishes this divine providential administration into 1) *natural*, by which the created order is maintained in its being and existence; 2) *ordinary*, by which “God allows second causes to have their full influence, and acts in, and by them agreeably to their nature as inferior agents or instruments in his hand” (1817, 181); 3) *miraculous*, “in which his agency surpasses, or is contrary to the influence of second causes, and stated rules of his common operation” (1817, 182); 4) *moral* providence, “by which he manages the morally good or evil dispositions and actions of his reasonable creatures” (1817, 183); and 5) *particular* providence, which specially concerns Christ and the salvation of the church. God’s ordinary providence, writes Brown, “is not merely general, fixing a particular impression upon secondary causes, and then leaving them to move and act of their own accord; but it is particular with every particular creature, and producing every particular motion or act, in its particular form” (1817, 181). Brown’s distinction between “ordinary” and “miraculous” providence corresponds most closely to the general/special providence distinction outlined by Oslington, and is grounded in the classical distinction between God’s ordained and absolute power.

4. The dialectic of divine power in Smith’s context

The relevance of the dialectic of divine power in addition to the classical Reformed distinction between general and special providence for understanding Smith can be elucidated from what we know about the teaching on divine power during his education in Edinburgh. John Loudon (d. 1750), one of the teachers and later senior colleague of Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) at the university of Glasgow, taught metaphysics based on a textbook by the Dutchman Gerardus de Vries (1648–1705). Hutcheson himself designed his metaphysics as a “counterpart” to that of de Vries (Moore 2006, xiii). In the work of de Vries we find an explicit statement on the difference between God’s absolute power and ordained power. *Potentia absoluta* refers to “all possible things that are noncontradictory and these objects which he subjected to his Decree; ordained [power] refers only to those things which according to the Decree at some point must be realized”

(de Vries 1713, 153).² De Vries seems here to hold to the traditional distinction and limits the *potentia absoluta* to a virtual or unrealized power constitutive of God's nature.

Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706), an older friend and colleague of Gerardus de Vries at Utrecht, wrote *Theoretico-practica theologia*—a work familiar to Adam Smith—in which he not only proposes a standard twofold understanding of providence, but also distinguishes between the absolute and ordained power of God (van Mastricht 1724). Smith owned at least the first volume of the work (Bonar 1932, 190), which included a detailed outline of the entire system. In describing “a twofold Providence,” Mastricht distinguishes between “a physical, or general” providence and “an ethical, or special” providence, echoing the traditionally Reformed distinction outlined above (van Mastricht 2018, 50). Both of these discussions appear in the volume owned by Smith.

The divine power distinction, writes Mastricht, is between God's absolute power, conceived of as “preceding his will,” and God's ordained power, understood as “following his will” (van Mastricht 2019, 432). In a series of discussions clarifying the import of this distinction, Mastricht employs the dialectic of divine power in a traditional fashion to show that God's absolute power establishes his infinite sovereignty from eternity and that there are many things that are possible according to his absolute power that he does not will according to his ordained power: “Although God's ordained power, seeing that it is restricted by the divine will, does not extend to all possible things, even so his absolute power does extend to all possible things, which are infinitely many” (van Mastricht 2019, 439).

In the philosophical environment in Smith's Scotland, the idea of a particular or salvific providential care for the elect had faded away in favor of a more general apprehension of divine providence according to which everything that happens in nature and history is somehow the effect of laws implanted by God. There is continuity in some sense with the traditional Reformed understanding of providence as involving both a general provision for the frame and government of the world order as well as a particular and special care for each creature, activity and moment within the world. Hutcheson's description of God's providence illustrates this. He writes,

It is simply not credible that a superior nature adorned with all wisdom, goodness, and power does not care about the world and its parts and especially about those parts that are endowed with reason and capable of so much happiness and misery, all of which he made with so much skill and intelligence; it is simply not credible that he has left them to the tender mercies of blind fortune (Hutcheson 2006, 182).

² “... omnia quaecunque non sunt contradictoria; eaque Decreto objecta substernit: & Ordinatam, quae respicit tantum illa, quae juxta decretum aliquando sunt producenda.”

God as the great director of nature works by the laws of nature and in the human constitution. This is a kind of theology where everything is decided in the beginning. Hutcheson explicitly states that “we must not think that God desires or decides different things at different times in the manner of men, and therefore that he first proposed the *end* and subsequently the *means* to obtain the end, but rather we must suppose that at the same time he both decided and effected in one unwavering decree the whole series of all things which seemed best to him” (2006, 183). In other words, from God’s side, everything—goal and means—is fixed. It is a common opinion of this milieu that the very fabric of the world is built to a benevolent design, as Hutcheson similarly observes that “there are far, far more good and happy things in life than there are sad and gloomy things, so that nearly everyone has a good reason to go on living; and even those who at some time feel it would be better to depart from life have had a happy and desirable life through far more years” (2006, 175).

In these statements Hutcheson typifies a kind of moderate Presbyterianism of the age: a strong belief in the benevolence of the created order, faith in God’s sovereign and unchanging will governing every event, and the focus on the human constitution of a moral sense striving for love and happiness. The shift of the word ‘benevolence’ in the theological framework here is worth notice. Whereas in Calvin’s definition of faith God’s benevolence is reserved for those who know him in Christ (2006, 549-51), benevolence in Hutcheson’s context is now the mark of God’s universal providence. Bloch analyses the moral philosophy of Hutcheson and Smith as part of a transformation process within Calvinism (2019, 83-107 and 381-93). Here we see something like a distinctive of this development in Reformed thought, such that providence is no longer primarily a comfort for only the believer, but has transformed more generally into a universal expectation of happiness.

Another example of this positive outlook in combination with a strong providentialism is a famous sermon on prayer by William Leechman (1706–1785). The emphasis in this exposition is on the spiritual and moral formation of the believer: that is what prayer is about. Prayer does not move God’s affections, nor is God subject to change, but prayer is meant as a means of “harmonizing with the wise order of his Providence” (Leechman 1743, 17). His providence can be trusted as aimed at universal happiness. We must learn “to leave the all-wise disposer of every event to lead us to happiness, in whatever path he pleases” (1743, 11). Leechman is clear about the world as fixed order, a system, where God governs every event. This applies to the human mind as well, where within the turmoil of emotions and impressions the need for prayer surfaces. The motives to pray are, according to Leechman, not just natural. Against those who ascribe these motives to “the natural force of arguments and motives,” he advises them to go one step further. The motives have God as the original author. In response to a merely natural explanation, one

should reply that “it belongs to Deity’s method of operation that it is imperceptible in itself and only discernible by its effects” (1743, 27).

It is in this context of a world that is thought of as a fixed, stable and beneficent order that the formula of an ‘invisible hand’ must be understood—not as an irregular departure from a reliable and predictable world order or an instance of divine absolute power, but rather as an expression of God’s ordained, animating and governing power. Everything that happens in this world is an immediate effect of the universal and general guidance of God as the all-wise Being. In that case, virtuous and vicious behavior alike are effects of this all-wise Being’s hand. What happens in life, including fate and fortune in economic life, is willed by God. The effect is that the events of life are identical with God’s eternal will and that submission to this will is the only option.

Less than a claim about novel metaphysical action or divine intervention, the image of the invisible hand in Smith seems more to concern an epistemic discovery of an already present, but heretofore hidden or occult, pattern of order and regularity. The dispute over dialectic of divine power in the late medieval and early modern period is thus brought into a new context in Smith’s time. Mechanical philosophy and other natural theological traditions seem to have operationalized the absolute power of God to explain seemingly occasional interventions or miracles. Smith, by contrast, takes up something more like a traditional Reformed providentialism, albeit without focus on the need for special grace and particular providence concerning the church and salvation of the elect.

5. Smith’s focus on order and regularity

As we have seen, Oslington claims that Smith’s assertion, each time he employs the image of the invisible hand, is that “the divine hand acts irregularly to maintain the stability of the system” (2011, 70). As opposed to an emphasis on extraordinary or irregular divine activity, however, Smith emphasizes the idea of order and regularity as marks of divine brilliance, and the human recognition of such divine order stands as a feature of civilizational development. Smith’s world is, as David Fergusson has described it, “a world that is providentially ordered but without any sense of particular divine interventions” (2018, 157). A brief look at the three instances where Smith mentions the metaphor will suffice to substantiate this claim.

For Smith, the discovery of order and regularity in natural phenomena marks the great progress of humankind. In his essay, ‘History of Ancient Physics,’ he writes, “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, without regard to that of any private individual, was a notion to which they [the savages] were utterly strangers” (Smith

1980a, 113). Smith does not relate the benevolence of God with a particular intervention in history; it is the regularity of order that is experienced as graceful. The section in his 'History of Astronomy' where reference is made to an invisible hand relates his evaluation of an older and primitive age:

For it may be observed, that in all Polytheistic religions, among savages, as well as in the early ages of Heathen antiquity, it is the irregular events of nature only that are ascribed to the agency and of power of their gods. Fire burns, and water refreshes, heavy bodies descend and lighter substances fly upwards, by the necessity of their own nature; nor was the invisible hand of Jupiter ever apprehended to be employed in those matters (Smith 1980b, 49).

The discovery of law and regularity is in this quote identified with civilization and progress as well as with divine action (Macfie 1971). The invisible hand, understood as applying to divine regular order, was never "apprehended" by primitive peoples. Smith's cultural world reflects the sympathy for a spirituality in which the divine powers are no longer related to perceived irregularity. The observation of irregularity belongs to a primitive time, while divine power and benevolence is associated with regularity and safety. The modern world is no longer unoccupied; it is rather a world that excites "magnanimity and cheerfulness," and renders people "less disposed to employ, for this connecting chain, those invisible beings whom the fear and ignorance of their rude forefathers had engendered" (Smith 1980b, 50). General divine providence and benevolence have replaced capricious, local and unpredictable action by gods, spirits and supernatural forces.

The second example of the image comes from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith observes that "it is to no purpose, that the proud and unfeeling landlord views his extensive fields, and without a thought for the wants of his brethren, in imagination consumes the whole harvest that grows upon them" (1976 [1759], 184). However, such landlords

are only able to consume a little portion of their surplus and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity ... they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to 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 habitants ... When Providence divided the earth among a few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition (1976, 184-85).

This use of the metaphor does not point to an external intervention that adjusts the system. Rather, consideration for those who are not affluent landholders is present in the origins of the system itself. Besides this claim concerning general providential care for all, Smith gives an additional clue for an interpretation that runs in a non-interventionist direction. Concerning the landlords, Smith adds:

In what constitutes the real happiness of human life, they are in no respect inferior to those who seem so much above them. In ease of the body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for (1976, 185).

This analogy, drawn from Cicero and Epictetus, suggests that it is the construction of the world—the whole machinery of nature and society—that brings about public welfare. The focus in this instance is not on special intervention; it is rather the providential system and beauty of order that deserve admiration and indicate divine power.

The third example is in the *Wealth of Nations*, where Smith discusses the risks of foreign trade. Traders might look for a maximum of profit by selling their products abroad, but for reasons of security they often invest domestically. Smith observes that the merchant “intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention” (1979 [1776], IV.2.9, 456). The invisible hand in this instance does not seem to be an instance of extraordinary providential intervention. Rather it perfectly aligns with Smith’s idea of a harmonious order, in which a clever merchant not only gives in to his desire for maximum profit, but also weighs it out against the profit of more security. Such a deliberation is completely rational, wise and in line with the merchant’s own interest, which the all-wise providential designer and creator has ordered to also provide positive externalities beyond the merchant’s narrow intentions. It is thus appropriate to liken this instance to Smith’s conception of the providential order: a perfect system, in which seemingly contradictory elements of self-interest, prudence and sympathy work together in favor of the best outcome. This latter usage fits within a concept of general providence, in which providence is thought of as a fixed order. Smith’s focus is on the regularity of the system of our reality and on the laws imprinted thereon.

Additional support for this interpretation can be seen in Giorgio Agamben (2011, 277-87). In his search for what he calls an “archeological operation” to uncover the Trinitarian theological background of modern government and economy in the West, Agamben argues that Smith represents the opinion that the machine of the world functions precisely by correlating a transcendent principle with an immanent order. Smith’s use of the image of an invisible hand is

to be understood as the action of an immanent principle. The ontological, transcendent trinity and economic trinity as the government of history are nothing but two sides of the same apparatus, of the same *oikonomia*. Agamben argues that modernity, by abolishing the divine pole of an intradivine trinity, has not emancipated itself from its providential paradigm (Agamben 2011, 285). The reality of this world, the whole process of politics and economics is presented as an expression of an inescapable necessity.

The work of the invisible hand is an integral part of this order, and human apprehension of and appreciation for this order is characteristic of civilizational development. As Eric Schliesser summarizes this view, “it seems that Smith claims that when we uncover the sometimes hidden mechanisms of nature, we discern features of general providence” (2017, 253; see also Viner 2015, 82; and Evensky 2005, 6-7). The mark of the political economist of Smith’s time is that he might begin to see that which is normally and heretofore unseen, the orderly and harmonious action of divine providence. There is an underlying divine design that is progressively discovered as human science, in its broadest senses, advances.

6. Conclusion

Smith uses the methodological approach characteristic of moral philosophy in his day, restricting himself carefully to philosophical argumentation to the effect that providence is a belief that complies with the structure of human nature. However, this does not necessarily mean that the all-wise Being is only the author of the system and no longer is active in it. Smith reflects his larger Reformed and Presbyterian background in describing God as the final source and director of all that happens in nature (and history). Smith seems to suggest that this will be to the benefit of all, and does not address the prospects of eternal salvation or damnation. As has been previously noted in the literature, the final edition of *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* excises a substantive discussion of the atoning work of Christ, although there are disputes about the significance of this revision for Smith’s own theological convictions. Our claims here are modest with respect to Smith’s own religious beliefs; we have shown that the classical distinction between God’s absolute power and his ordained power is salient for understanding Smith’s providentialism.

Indeed, the fact that the providential teachings of the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions are more complex than a simple dichotomy between God’s ordained and absolute powers shows that the two teachings cannot simply be identified or conflated—at least from a historical perspective. It also raises the very pertinent issue of identifying whether Smith’s understanding of providence and divine action in the world allows for special divine intervention, by which acts may transcend or even be contrary to secondary causes and the “laws” of nature.

Our contention is that self-interest is foundational in Smith's system of moral economy. While self-interest does not explain everything in Smith's system and is not the sole motivation for humans in Smith's understanding, it remains integral to his system. Pace Oslington's interpretation of the invisible hand, self-interest is not some special case; it is rather the typical assumption of human motivation. Therefore divine providential action to account for self-interest should be understood as general, embedded within the context of nature and creation, rather than a special case to be addressed by special providential intervention. Self-interest, even in its most narrow and excessive expressions, is for Smith an integral part of the system. Providential action in this case works within the context of secondary causes, and is not miraculous in the sense of an absolutized divine power.

The providence of God, the workings of the invisible hand, and the sentiments of the people all work in favor of the achievement of happiness and a flourishing society. Smith endorses the conviction that all that happens will contribute to "the greatest possible quantity of happiness" (1976, 235). This means also that the inner reflex of every being to maintain himself and take care what is profitable for himself or his family is not wrong but perfectly fits with the whole frame of the world order. To care for one's own business does not amount to evil-doing but is instead activity intended and used by God as the governor of the world. Acceptance of the facts of life and obedience to what is a given for the human individual (his own little system) are, on Smith's account, motivated by a deep trust that God directs it all, thereby contributing to the greatest amount of happiness for all. The doctrine of providence appears to be the strong and motivating background narrative to accommodate the individual to his own fate.

It is in this respect that Smith reflects the heritage of the older Presbyterian tradition. At the same time, Smith's framework does not include the notion of a special revelation, the hope fixed on a new world that will be brought about by God as a new act. This understanding of Smith allows us to better interpret Smith's view of the 'invisible hand' as a reference to the general activity founded within a (system of) providential deism rather than the special intervention of a personal, saving God. Rather than seeing the work of the 'invisible hand' as an act of special providence according to the divine *potentia absoluta*, Smith's understanding of providential ordering does not require or perhaps even allow for such occasional divine intervention. His is a view that accords much more closely with an understanding of providence as general—that is, comprehensive and meticulous with respect to its ordering, a perfect manifestation of divine wisdom.

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