



# Providence and the Invisible Hand: Comments on Van der Kooi and Ballor

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I welcome Cornelis van der Kooi and Jordan Ballor's (2021) contribution to the debate about the role of divine providence in Adam Smith's work and the meaning of the invisible hand metaphor. It is a fitting opening article for the new *Journal of Economics, Theology and Religion* which bodes well for its future contribution to the growing interdisciplinary field of economics and religion.

I agree with much of what Van der Kooi and Ballor have written. They emphasize traditional Reformed theological discussions of providence as background to Smith's work, whereas I emphasized British natural theological accounts of divine action and providence, mediated through Smith's moderate Scottish Enlightenment Calvinist environment (Oslington 2011; 2012; 2018). It is really hard to weight different influences on Smith, but both Van der Kooi and Ballor and I emphasize the Calvinist background more than previous scholarship. The biographical evidence (for instance Ross 2010) still I believe points more to importance of the Newtonian natural theological background than traditional Reformed theology; for me the commonality of language and the clear evidence of the influence that Newton (and his Scottish popularizer Colin Maclaurin) exerted on Smith's social scientific methodology are crucial. Nevertheless, the texts they quote from Smith's contemporaries, especially Gerardus de Vries and Petrus van Mastricht whose writings they show Smith would likely have been familiar with, suggest that further investigation of Reformed theological influences on Smith would be fruitful. The lack of evidence in Smith's correspondence and library holdings for him having much interest in the finer points of Reformed dogmatics means that caution is needed here though. It is interesting that much of the invisible hand language that Harrison (2011) unearths as background to the phrase in Smith comes from the British scientific natural theological tradition, notwithstanding his discovery that the divine hand appears in the translation of Calvin's *Institutes* that Smith probably used. Hengstmengel (2019) discusses some of the other providential backgrounds.

Van der Kooi and Ballor devoted much of their article to the distinction between God's absolute power (*potentia absoluta*) and ordained power (*potentia ordinata*) which has a long-running controversy in history of science literature (from Oakley 1961 through Harrison 2002 to

Oakley 2018). In my view this is a veritable quagmire, and almost any mediaeval or early modern text that can be brought out in support of a particular interpretation of the distinction, any number of texts can be brought out on the opposite side, so that any thesis about what ‘the distinction’ really is and what it means for the development of modern science is problematic. In this I’m on Peter Harrison side of the debate and agree with his conclusion that Van der Kooi and Ballor cite that “the power distinction was not considered equivalent to the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary providence” (29). Van der Kooi and Ballor seem to align ordinary with general providence and extraordinary with special providence. But if the power distinction does not map into a distinction between general and special providence, how then does it connect with my argument about a special providential role for the invisible hand or help us with the interpretation of Smith’s invisible hand texts? This is why I didn’t deal with it in my contribution. And why I can’t see “Oslington’s essential identification of special providence with an operationalized absolute power” (29).

The thing I was most puzzled about in Van der Kooi and Ballor’s article was the connection they make between interpretations of the invisible hand and different views of human motivation. They write: “Pace Oslington’s interpretation of the invisible hand, self-interest is not some special case; it is rather the typical assumption of human motivation” (39). I can’t find any basis in what I’ve written about the invisible hand for their view that I reject self-interest as the primary human motivation in Smith’s works. Like them I see self-interest, interpreted properly in its 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish context, as the primary human motivation. Smith’s invisible hand is about divine action rather than human action.

I also can’t see where I equate special providence with God’s salvation of the elect. That was another version of the distinction between general and special providence, but not the one drawn from the Newtonian natural theological tradition that I emphasized. I’m struggling to understand what they mean by their conclusion that their alternative interpretation “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” (39).

In the end though I don’t think is a great deal of difference between their interpretation of the invisible hand as an expression of a broader conception of general providence shaped by the Reformed writers they cite, and my interpretation of it as an expression of special providence in the Newtonian sense. Under both interpretations it is the hand of God who is active in the world. They emphasize the harmony of divine purposes as an argument for holding the invisible hand within the category of general providence, and in my interpretation the forces of general and special providence complement each other, working towards a single divine purpose. We must be careful not to overemphasize the distinction between general and special providence.

As alluded to earlier, which way we go depends a lot on the relative weights we place on the Reformed and Newtonian natural theological influences on Smith. There are also indications in the invisible hand texts, especially the *Wealth of Nations* text, that Smith's invisible hand is an exception to the general providential forces operating in markets. If whatever mechanism the invisible hand represents is the norm then why does it appear just once in *Wealth of Nations*? How do we account for the ironic tone that several authors have noted in the invisible hand texts? Adam Smith watched the emergence of commercial society in Britain, without our benefit of hindsight. In my interpretation the hand expresses Smith's ambivalence about commercial society—his clear and strong welcoming of its potential to transform the lives of his Scottish compatriots, but his noting of its deleterious effects, and uncertainty about its future. Commercial society disturbs the static picture of reformed dogmatics that Van der Kooi and Ballor describe where “providence is thought of as a fixed order” (37). For me the invisible hand represents Smith's tentative and somewhat wistful hope that the emerging commercial society was within God's plans and that its instabilities will be restrained by divine activity.

May the debate continue, as it has been enriched by Van der Kooi and Ballor's contribution.

## References

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