

## **Invisible beings. Adam Smith's lectures on natural theology**

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### 1. Introduction: unwritten doctrines

The serious problem with any attempt to reconstruct Adam Smith's religious views is that his position 'is not readily defined: all that he says is orthodox, but he says as little as possible' (Vivenza 2001: 210). This encouraged several Dr. Frankenstein of intellectual history to manufacture two different artificial men: the Benthamite 'irreligious' and the German 'Deist' Smith. To add to the existing confusion, proponents of a self-styled 'New View' have announced the discovery of a 'Hidden Theology'. This allegedly includes rational proofs of God's existence and a deductive relationship between theology and economic theory, with a Panglossian view of the Market on top (Hill 2001; Long 2006; Oslington 2011). In the opposite camp, therapeutic obstinacy has been practised in keeping irreligious Smith alive beyond any deadline (Minozwitz 1993; Russell 2005b; Phillipson 2010). Neither group has felt that a third way, which has been available for half a century by now, deserved any refutation. This is the view of Smith as a theist – not deist - who justifies the possibility of religious belief in terms of morality's corollary, first proposed by Ralph Lindgren (1973: 133-52) and then developed by Haakonssen (1981: 75), who made a similar point on Kant and Smith, by Pack (1993), who argued that the relationship between scientific and theological views is for Smith a bottom-up rather than a top-down one; by Fleischacker (1995), who analyzed a number of correspondences between TMS and Kant's moral works; and Hanley (2010; 2015), who suggested that Smith's discussion of religion tackles more epistemological than ontological issues.

In what follows, I defend this third way by proving that what Smith's lost lectures on natural religion said can be reconstruct with some plausibility, and what they did *not* say with absolute certainty; I argue that he developed a sharp criticism of natural theology, that he claimed that at the root of religion there are a number of principles of the mind that make religious belief a 'natural belief'; I do so by reconstructing, first, the context of the missing lectures (sect. 2); then the contents of their first part, considering the proofs of God's existence and his attributes (sects 3-4); the 'principles of the mind' lying at the root of polytheism (sect. 5), of philosophical monotheism (par. 6), and of pure and rational religion (par.7); I contend, then, that his vindication of toleration is consistent with 'pure and rational religion' (par. 8) and that attempts to prove a phantom conversion to 'natural religion' or 'irreligion' result from misreading (par.9).

## 2. The missing-lectures mystery

In this paragraph I review the existing evidence about context, structure and content of the lectures on natural theology. Smith was no unsystematic writer and his works are parts of a system of ideas that was never completely carried out and whose presentation in publishing is ‘fragmentary rather than consciously unsystematic’ (Forbes 1982: 187), but they are also ‘more empirical’ and in the meantime ‘less secular’ (202) than conventional wisdom used to assumed. His oeuvre was meant to include: (i) a theory of moral sentiments; (ii) a philosophical history of the arts and sciences; (iii) a theory of law and government (Ross 2004). He never fulfilled his promises with regard to the second, and in WN he carried out partially the third task. But, besides these two unfinished works, his system included – not unlike Plato – also *unwritten* doctrines, that is, ones that should *not* be written. They were, in Smith’s case, the theory of human nature and the theory of religion.

An intriguing circumstance is that, while notes from his lectures on natural jurisprudence and rhetoric have been discovered, those on natural theology are still missing. Is this evidence to the fact that he never really lectured on the subject and - by an odd implication – was an atheist? A more obvious account for their still being in hiding is that these belonged to the first section of the Moral Philosophy course, most of whose contents were soon transferred to a published work while leaving outside just the opening lectures on natural theology, and this was a reason why fewer manuscript versions kept circulating than for the lectures on natural jurisprudence and chances of coming across a still extant copy have been lower.

Natural theology, as distinguished from ‘Inspired Theology’, is ‘knowledge of God, or better such a spark of knowledge as may be had through the light of Nature and the contemplation of Creation’ (Bacon 1963, III.2: 544). In modern language, it is ‘putative knowledge of God arrived at by the study of nature alone, without any reliance on the “revelation” supposed by the faithful to be recorded in sacred scriptures’ (Waterman 2004: 105). The Reformers’ despise notwithstanding, it was core subject for Anglican clergymen and, from Hutcheson’s time on, also for Presbyterian Moderates. It was expected to provide a remedy for both ‘superstition’, that is, popery, and ‘enthusiasm’, that is, sectarianism. At Glasgow the moral philosophy course was expected to start with natural theology. Dugald Stewart reports the account of his moral philosophy classes by a former pupil, John Millar, who describes the course as composed of four parts, the first of which ‘contained Natural Theology; in which he considered the proofs of the existence and attributes of God, and those principles of the mind on which religion is founded’ (Stewart 1980: 274). The distinction of two parts, considering respectively *proofs* and *principles*, is telling, and also Millar’s careful phrasing implies that Smith was just *considering*, which does not mean *endorsing* (Hill 2001: 5-7), such proofs.

## 3. Proofs of the being of God

In this paragraph I tackle Smith’s discussion of a traditional topic, the proofs of God’s existence.

A reminder about those accepted or discussed at his time may be appropriate. Rational proofs were first formulated in a systematic way by rationalist Islamic philosophers. In Latin-speaking Christianity, Anselm of

Canterbury formulated the most controversial one, the ontological argument. Aquinas took over a number of such proofs from Christian, Jewish and Islamic sources and reduced them to Five 'Ways'. Note that he understood them as explanations *secundum quia*, not *secundum quid*, that is, as proofs of God's *existence*, not accounts of his *nature*, which he assumed to lie beyond human understanding. They are: (i) the proof from motion and change; (ii) the proof from the order of efficient causes; (iii) the cosmological argument; (iv) the proof from different degrees of perfection; (v) the teleological argument (Thomas Aquinas 1975, pars 1 caput 13; 1964-73, 1a q 2 a 3).

The last one deserves comment. It is a more modest version of the early modern Argument from Design. It differs from the cosmological argument in starting with an assumption more ambitious than mere existence of contingently existing beings, namely a description ascribing them some kind of functioning, and from the fifth way in starting with the assumption that the Universe is well-ordered, more demanding than the one that unintelligent things act '*always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result*' (Thomas Aquinas 1964-73, 1a, q 2 a 3).

The author of the preface to Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy* wrote that the latter was not convinced of the 'force and solidity' of the arguments a priori formulated by Samuel Clarke and was 'extremely doubtful of the justice and force of all the metaphysical arguments, by which many have endeavoured to demonstrate the existence, unity, and perfections of the Deity' (Leechman 1755: iv), and he believed 'that as some subjects from their nature are capable of a demonstrative evidence, so others admit only of a probable one; and that to seek demonstration where probability can only be obtained is almost as unreasonable as to demand to see sounds or hear colours' (v).

Hutcheson's discussion ends with rejection of two arguments. One is the ontological proof, which falls 'into an obvious fallacy' (Hutcheson 1969a, III.2.1: 307), the other is the argument from consent accepted by Cicero and Grotius, against which the objection is that, even though there are obvious reasons why mankind has been persuaded of the existence of 'some superior Mind, or Minds, endued with knowledge and great power', yet, the 'certainty of any tenet depends not on the motives of inquiry into it, but on the validity of the proofs' (Hutcheson 1969c, I.ii.9.1: 169). He accepts instead two different arguments. One is the Design argument, which starts with the remark that in the world 'there occur as great evidences of design, intention, art, and power, as our imagination can conceive' (Hutcheson 1969c, I.i.9.2: 169) and signs of 'contrivance and regular design appear in the most exquisite fitness of parts for their several uses, and in mutual connexions and dependences of things very distant in place' (I.i.9.2: 170). From the observation of adaptation of parts to each other as well as of means to ends in all parts of the world, we may prove that natural phenomena 'owe nothing to any wisdom of their own' (I.ii.9.4: 172) but we may conclude instead 'that there is a superior *all-ruling Mind*' (I.ii.9.4: 173). The other is the cosmological argument. It proceeds by inferring the necessary from the contingent. From matter we can argue to a cause of matter, and from the various causes in the world to an ultimate cause, that is, 'God the architect of the world' (Hutcheson 1969a, III.1: 305). Note that Hutcheson admits of these proofs as just 'probable'.

Let us come now to his successor. According to the report, he did 'consider' these proofs. Keeping both the

traditional list and Hutcheson's more restricted one in mind, a reasonable guess is that Smith at least mentioned all traditional proofs and discussed in depth those considered by his predecessor. The way to detect what he rejected from Hutcheson's discussion or added to it may be looking for traces in published writings.

#### *The ontological argument and the argument from consent*

Neither was accepted by Hutcheson. Of the first, no mention is made by Smith, but reason is for him a faculty able to formulate distinctions and organize ideas into wider categories, not to prove matters of fact (TMS III.iii.2.6; Smith 1976a). An *a fortiori* argument may be enough to prove that religious knowledge cannot be based on a priori arguments.

As to the second, for Smith even superstition is able to provide a psychological sanction to moral laws (TMS III.5.4; III.i.v.4). This has been presented as an argument from consensus for the existence of God (Hill 2001, fn 10), one that not even Minister Hutcheson accepted, and which is in fact for Smith not a proof of God's existence but just an argument for the moral *irrelevance* of monotheism. It is true that in the EPS he argues that civil and intellectual progress *naturally* leads from polytheism to monotheism (Astronomy III.3; Ancient Physics 9; Smith 1980); the trouble, yet, is that *natural* for him does not mean *true*. As a consequence, what these passages prove is that he argues that there is a spontaneous tendency of the imagination to feign invisible beings hidden behind abnormal phenomena, and another to imagine One Superior Being behind laws granting order in the world, but also that neither is warranted. Besides, both labour under incurable difficulties. Let us consider the moral attributes either of invisible beings who act on no more respectable criterion than anger or caprice or, even worse, those of God who is on the one hand the source of impartial moral laws and on the other of *both* good and evil in the world. On balance, the passages on religion from the EPS, far from proving acceptance of the argument from consent, prove instead that Smith *rejected* it.

#### *The cosmological argument*

This is the first of those endorsed by Hutcheson. The only relevant Smithian passage is a description of Aristotle's conception of God as 'the first and supreme mover of the Universe' (Ancient Physics 10). The problem for anybody who wished to quote this as proof of Smith's acceptance of the cosmological argument is, yet, that he does not manifest any approval, and even comments that Aristotle's 'idea of the nature and manner of existence of his First Cause [...] is indeed *obscure and unintelligible in the highest degree*' (Ancient Physics 10; my emphasis).

### *The argument from Design*

Let us consider the other argument accepted by Hutcheson, which was the target of Hume's criticism (Russell 2005a). The watchmaker passage in TMS allegedly provides evidence for Smith's endorsement of such argument (Hill 2001: 6). What Smith writes, yet, is that in

every part of the universe we *observe* means adjusted with the nicest artifice to the ends which they are intended to produce [...] 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 (TMS III.19).

Also other passages on final causes might be worth examining (TMS II.ii.3-5; III.5.7; III.5.12). Yet, this is both the preferred one by the 'New View' proponents and one which proves fairly well the opposite of what they contend. Let me compare it with the parallel passage in Hutcheson. The latter argues that, if we observe the World, we cannot but realize that

all is full of power, activity and regular motion, wisely and exquisitely adapted to the uses of the living and sensible parts of the creation. The several classes of plants, and animals, owe nothing of this wondrous structure to any wisdom of their own or their parents [...] This immense power and wisdom must reside somewhere else (Hutcheson 1969c, I.ii.9.3-4: 172).

As already illustrated, the argument goes on proving that, since nature is regular, 'there is a superior *all-ruling Mind*' (I.ii.9.4: 173). Note that the argument is paraphrased by Hume's Cleanthes: the world is 'nothing but one great machine', the 'curious adapting of means to ends' goes beyond 'human design', but - after Philo's minimalist twist imposed on Cleanthes' argument - all this, 'by all the rules of analogy', allows no more than the inference that '*the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*' (Hume 1998, XII.26: 88).

The remarks are in order here that Smithian epistemology is no subject for guess-work, since there is abundant material in EPS, and that it is no news that he was Hume's fellow-traveller and his philosophy was what his friend had named 'true scepticism' (Cremaschi 2000). Thus, when he uses the verb 'to observe', we should be careful to avoid reading it as meaning the same as when used by an epistemological realist. He writes that 'philosophy'

may be regarded as one of those arts which address themselves to the imagination [...] Let us examine, therefore, all the different systems of nature [...] and, without regarding [...] their *agreement or inconsistency with truth and reality* (Astronomy II.12; my emphasis).

After this, he goes on illustrating how perception is steered by imagination, how our mind desires to face a smooth flow of appearances, how habit and custom make succession of one impression to the other *natural* for us, how our imagination, when confronted with unexpected appearances, perceives something like a gap between two subsequent phenomena. Thus, theories are ‘imaginary machines’, or systems of ideas combined in such a way as to produce the impression of consistency between discordant appearances; they result from addition of ideas provided by our imagination to impressions provided by perception in order to build ‘invisible chains’. Yet, what philosophers do when constructing such machines is not different in principle from what primitives used to do by imagining, behind ‘irregular events of nature’, the presence of ‘intelligent, though invisible causes’ or ‘beings’ (Astronomy III.1-2). This is described - echoing Hume’s mention of ‘*unknown causes*’ which become ‘the constant object of our hope and fear’ (Hume 2007, III: 40) - as ‘pusillanimous superstition, which ascribes almost every unexpected event, to the arbitrary will of some designing, though *invisible beings*’ (Ancient Physics 9; my emphasis). The remark may be appropriate that ‘invisible’ does not mean ‘hidden’, but is for Smith tantamount to ‘imaginary’. In other words, Smith is an epistemological anti-realist of the most radical kind and he contends that our imagination creates all sorts of ‘invisible chains’, ranging from the invisible beings of primitive superstition through the invisible hand of a Pagan Deity slyly introduced to fill the gap every time the primitives were at loss of an explanation for unexpected phenomena to the imaginary machine of Newtonian gravitation (Cremaschi 1989: 85-7; 2000: 73-7). Even the philosophical theist’s God is no more than one of such ideas of the imagination transposed by analogy to fill some blank. On purely *cognitive* grounds, such a God would fare no better than primitive ‘invisible beings’.

A second comment is that, if we compare Hutcheson’s and Smith’s passages, we may note that, while the order of the arguments is the same, something is missing in the latter’s argument, namely the conclusion that an inference may be drawn from order in the world to an Architect of the world. The drastic difference is that, in Smith’s argument, God’s existence is declared to be *not proven* for the physical world, while, as regards the moral world, it is described as commonly *taken for granted* – which does *not* mean *proved*. That is, while Smith almost *verbatim* repeats considerations by his teacher, he does not take his premises as a starting-point for a proof of the same conclusion, but uses them instead to prove a different one, namely that effects of human action may be, no less than those of either a clock or the world as a whole, dependent on a non-immanent intention, one intention *imposed* from outside (Cremaschi 2002a).

The third comment is that the passage is followed by these two lines:

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 (TMS II.ii.19).

If we read these too, we may discover what the *argument’s direction* is. The focus is not God’s existence, but instead the distinction between multi- and mono-causality, efficient causes and final causes. Hanley aptly

notes that here and in a few other important passages ‘Smith’s intention is rather to provide an application of - and indeed an extension of - Hume’s theory of natural belief’ (Hanley 2010: 202) and the passage, thus, should not be read as an argument for either theism or religious scepticism. The question at stake is the existence not of final causes, but of mechanisms promoting conservation of individuals and species. The point is to explain features of mind promoting these goals. The claim is that reason does not lead us to promote them, and their attainment is entrusted to principles of the mind independent of our awareness (204-5). This is far from lip-service to dominant beliefs, but just recourse to an assumption that the author is not interested in questioning at this stage, and elsewhere will proceed to prove that is a candidate for *admissible* belief.

#### 4. Proofs of the attributes of God

In this paragraph I reconstruct Smith’s ‘consideration’ of the proofs of God’s attributes. In Christianity, the latter were held to be omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness, with providence as an implication. Hutcheson (1969c, I.ii.9.5: 174-7) believes, instead, that the latter is the most evident among God’s attributes; indeed, he believes the Design Argument to be coextensive with the proof of God’s moral attributes. He declares that what we need to know about God *in relation with morality* amounts to his ‘Goodness and moral Perfection’, for knowledge of divine attributes will inspire, first, an ‘ardent love of virtue and the Deity’ and a ‘constant endeavour to imitate the Deity’; secondly, a steady ‘purpose of exerting all our power in acting well that part which God and nature has assigned us’, thirdly, total commitment ‘to his conduct, government, and direction, with an absolute resignation’ (Hutcheson 1969b, I.4.3: 78); and declares that such knowledge will provide ‘*sure ground of hope and security*’ (I.4.2: 74; my emphasis).

Let us conjecture, then, about contents of Smith’s own lectures with regard to God’s attributes. A *prima facie* suggestion may be that, since his line of argument about God’s existence points at the conclusion that *we simply don’t know*, that concerning God’s attributes cannot but suggest that we cannot, *a fortiori*, do anything more than *imagining* them and, since imagination proceeds by analogy, we can only portray God as an Architect, a Judge, and a Father.

To a superficial reading, yet, mentions of a teleological world order by Smith may sound as ‘proofs’ of God’s providence (TMS II.iii.1.2), or ‘proofs’ of divine wisdom and benevolence (TMS II.5.2; VI.ii.1.20; VI.ii.3.2; VI.ii.3.5; VII.ii.3.2; VII.ii.1.39) or justice (TMS III.2.12; III.2.33; III.5.3; III.5.7; VII.ii.3.20; II.ii.3.12). Yet, all such readings disregard obvious considerations. Let us examine an often quoted alleged proof of divine providence:

Human society, when contemplated in a certain *abstract and philosophical* light, *appears* like a great, an immense machine, whose regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand *agreeable* effects (TMS II.iii.1.2; my emphasis).

A comment the passage calls for, is, first, that problems arise with the very idea of observation: human society *appears as* something, but just when considered *in some light*; in other words, social, no less than natural, science is nothing more than an ‘invention of the imagination’. A second comment is that contemplation of society may be *agreeable* when we look at it as if it were the heavenly vault, but less fun is to be expected from watching humans at close range, indeed, no *agreeable effects* are produced and movements observed are far from ‘*regular*’. Smith writes that the

ancient stoics were of opinion that as the world was governed by the all-ruling providence of a wise, powerful, and good God, every single event ought to *be regarded, as* making a necessary part of the plan of the general order and happiness of the whole: that the *vices and follies* of mankind, therefore, made as necessary a part of this plan as their wisdom or their virtue: and that by the eternal art which educes good from ill, were made to tend equally to the *prosperity and perfection* of the great system of nature (TMS I.II.3.4; my emphasis).

Those who want to read this as proof of belief in a teleological order need to ignore the two following lines, adding that ‘no speculation of such a kind could weaken our natural abhorrence for vice, whose immediate effects are so destructive, and whose remote effects are too distant to be traced by the imagination’ (TMS I.ii.3.4). The Stoic view might be right at the contemplative level, but contemplation is a matter more of *imagination* than *reason*. Such a view of phenomena is dictated by wonder, which may arise in the civilized but not in the savage mind and is indeed the source of philosophy. But, first, philosophy is not a *discovery* of the ‘real chains Nature makes us of in binding together her several operations’ (Astronomy IV.76; Cremaschi 1981: 118-21; 1989: 85-7; Pack 1993: 53-5), and secondly, such a view pleases one set of principles of the mind, those governing imagination, but, once confronted with the principles governing our moral sentiments, turns out to be incompatible with *whatsoever* moral judgement to the point that the Stoic and the licentious systems yield the same conclusions (Vivenza 2001: 75-6; Cremaschi 2010: 359-60). Furthermore, the doctrines of ‘philosophical monotheism’, namely, God’s wisdom, benevolence and justice, and the providential world-order, are the result of our imagination’s longing for order, simplicity, and harmony, not of our moral sentiments looking for mutual recognition (Lindgren 1973: 136-41; Pack 1995: 302-3). Last of all, apparent order in the world is a fruit of our imagination’s *perfection*, but our moral faculties are, ironically, a bounty from its *imperfection*; it is precisely our imagination’s short-sightedness that makes moral distinctions hold; were it as far-sighted as Stoic philosophy is, our natural abhorrence for vice would be suddenly wiped off. Thus, deception is ubiquitous. It is there when we believe we are observing order in the world, and it is there again when we focus moral distinctions, which, were our sight more keen would simply vanish. As though it were not clear enough that he was *not* endorsing the Stoic view, he approvingly quotes Massillon declaring that it does not ‘suit the greatness of God, to leave the world which he has created in so universal a *disorder*’ (TMS III.5.11), and that a God ‘who sacrifices mankind to his insolent vanity’ would be ‘no more than an indolent and fantastical tyrant’ (TMS III.5.11). The conclusion is that, far from

endorsing traditional proofs, Smith believes that they are the fruit of our imagination's natural tendencies but also that their conclusions are even *less* warranted than the primitive's 'invisible beings'.

A corollary is that, far from endorsing any kind of theodicy, he concludes that all proofs of God's wisdom, benevolence, and justice are no more warranted than those of his existence, and besides are also *morally repugnant*. It is true that he admits that if

we consider the *general rules* by which external prosperity and adversity are commonly distributed in this life, we shall find, that notwithstanding the *disorder* in which all things appear to be in this world, yet even here every virtue naturally meets with its proper reward, with the recompense which is most fit to encourage and promote it (TMS III.v.8; my emphasis).

The problem is that, first, this is true just *most of the time*, and secondly, it seems to be so *to the observer* who, by definition, looks *for* order and harmony and just when he considers the world in a 'cool and philosophical light'. And, what is the worst, though such general rules,

when considered *in this cool and philosophical light*, appear to be perfectly suited to the situation of mankind in this life, yet they are by no means *suited to some of our natural sentiments* (TMS III.i.5.9; my emphasis).

That is, the world order is good enough for the imagination, not for the impartial spectator. The latter would expect to see generosity, wisdom, justice, beneficence rewarded, not less noble qualities such as 'prudence, industry and application' (TMS III.i.5.9). In a word, Smith – not unlike Kant – announces the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy (Cremaschi 2010: 360-61).

By way of conclusion, Smith tried to chart a third way between rationalism and scepticism, first in epistemology and then in other fields. Also his theory of religion should be read as one more result of this search. In fact, he does not accept any of the traditional proofs of God's existence, nor does he pronounce natural theology viable.

##### 5. Principles of the mind: Polytheism

Having proved that Smith's 'consideration' of the *proofs* of the being and attributes of God amounts, more than to their endorsement, to a close scrutiny out of which they do not come in good form, let us discuss the contents of the second part of the lost lectures on natural religion, that is, the *principles* of the human mind upon which religion is founded. These principles account in a plausible way for primitive beliefs, that is, polytheism. This kind of belief arises from naïve anthropomorphism. The imagination tends to lessen the awe caused by unexpected events by feigning, behind those events, 'invisible beings' acting in a way analogous to the one in which we act. In the 'History of Astronomy' he writes:

Man, the only designing power with which they were acquainted, never acts but either to stop, or to alter the course, which natural events would take, if left to themselves. Those other intelligent beings, whom they imagined, but knew not, were naturally supposed to act in the same manner; not to employ themselves in supporting the ordinary course of things, which went on of its own accord, but to stop, to thwart, and to disturb it (Astronomy III.2).

The story of the first of Smith's well-known three invisible hands, the source of the 'New View' proponents' enthusiasm (Denis 2005: 16; Oslington 2011: 67, 71), is a central chapter of his treatment of polytheism. Jupiter's invisible hand is mentioned immediately after describing 'that vulgar superstition which ascribes all the *irregular* events of nature to the favour or displeasure of intelligent, though *invisible* beings, to gods, daemons, witches, genii, fairies' (Astronomy III.2; my emphasis). And then he adds: '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' (Astronomy III.2), Note, first, that 'Jupiter's invisible hand' is *not* the hand of the Christian *God* but that of a heathen divinity; secondly, that it is *not* a hand imparting a regular and beneficial order, whose provision is supposed is supposedly the job of divine Providence, but just one of those invisible beings called up by savages to account for exceptional events and about which Smith displays irony (Vivenza 2008; Lindgren 1973: 135-7; Pack 1995: 295-6). He mentions it immediately after describing the 'vulgar superstition' of the primitives and the main point he is making is that for the savage mind, only *irregular* events seem to need an explanation, while what is customary, normal, and apparently *natural* seems not to require any. And when he adds mention of 'the *invisible* hand of Jupiter' (Astronomy III.2) he is practising precisely irony - consisting, in Doctor Johnson's definition - in combining something great with something mean, here *Jupiter* and *obvious facts from everyday life*.

Let us discuss now the *moral* - as opposed to *cognitive* - side of polytheism. Polytheism adds to naïve anthropomorphism also a crude kind of moral reactions. Here Smith recalls the Jansenist theory of deception. He writes: 'our passions, as Father Malebranche observes, all justify themselves; that is, they suggest us opinions which justify themselves' (Astronomy III.1). Some of the irregularities of nature are

perfectly beautiful and agreeable. These, therefore, from the same impotence of mind, would be beheld with love and complacency, and even with transports gratitude; for whatever is the cause of pleasure naturally excites our gratitude. A child caresses the fruit that is agreeable to him, as it beats the stone that hurts him (Astronomy III.2).

But polytheism also needs a view of the moral qualities possessed by the imagined invisible beings as would be more consistent with our moral sentiments. Human beings are naturally led to ascribe to those 'mysterious beings' which happen to be the objects of 'religious fear',

indiscriminately, all the passions of human nature, those not excepted which do the least honour to our species, such as lust, hunger, avarice, envy, revenge. They could not fail, therefore, to ascribe to those beings, for the excellence of whose nature they still conceived the highest admiration, those sentiments and qualities which are the great ornaments of humanity, and which seem to raise it to a resemblance of divine perfection, the love of virtue and beneficence, and the abhorrence of vice and injustice... These natural hopes and fears, and suspicions, were propagated by sympathy, and confirmed by education; and the gods were universally represented and believed to be the rewarders of humanity and mercy, and the avengers of perfidy and injustice (TMS III.i.v.4)

#### 6. Principles of the mind: philosophical monotheism as invention of the imagination

In this paragraph I review one more piece of Smith's analysis of psychological tendencies at the root of religion, namely those yielding philosophical monotheism, the doctrine of Plato, the Stoics, as well as of modern teachers of natural theology.

Polytheism is still morally crude, affording just a rudimentary idea of a divine moral authority, and epistemologically childish, contenting itself with imagining invisible entities behind unexpected phenomena, among them the invisible hand of Jupiter. Let us come now to less primitive religious views. These are ancient monotheistic doctrines such as Platonism and Stoicism. Such doctrines originate from a law of the imagination, namely love of unity and simplicity. He writes that the tendency of the human mind to see unity and consistency where there is multiplicity and disorder gradually led the Greek philosophers to see the Universe 'as a complete *machine*, as a coherent system, governed by general laws, and directed to general ends, viz. its own preservation and prosperity, and that of all the species that are in it' (Ancient Physics 9). By one more principle of the human mind, namely love of analogy, philosophers were led to think of a maker of such a machine, not unlike those artificers who build man-made machines. Thus, the idea of the world as a unified system, more perfect than any man-made machine

suggested the idea of the unity of that principle, by whose art it was formed; and thus, as ignorance begot superstition, science gave birth to the first theism (Ancient Physics 9).

The observation is in order here that Smith is not presenting such a world-view as an achievement. On the contrary it is clear enough that he believed that what philosophers do is not *to see* but just *to imagine*, that the invisible chains by which they construct their imaginary machines are made of ideas provided not so much by the external senses as by the imagination, that is, he 'rejected the claim that the connecting principles of our knowledge of nature replicate or signify in any way the manner in which external objects are or may in fact be connected' (Lindgren 1973: 139; cf. Pack 1993). Besides, even though any kind of philosopher would not do much better than the primitives, yet the ancient Stoics were also the wrong kind of philosophers, in so far as they were, not unlike Descartes and the Cambridge Platonists, 'men of system' who bend facts to

theory (Cremaschi 2000: 73-7). Thus, theism on a theoretical basis is epistemologically unwarranted and its proponents pretend they are *seeing* something they are just *imagining*; in fact we do not really *see* the nice adjustment of means and ends that we *observe* in the world when we consider it in an ‘abstract and philosophical light’.

Besides, no less than primitive polytheism, even philosophical monotheism is prompted by a moral motif resulting from an evolution of the primitive’s crude reactions of fear or gratitude facing phenomena of nature. This is moral identification with God’s eye. Since God is the governor of nature, his will and the laws of nature itself are one and the same thing. Thus, a wise man

never complains of the destiny of Providence, nor thinks the universe in confusion when he is out of order [...] He enters, if I may say so, into the sentiments of that divine Being, and considers himself as an atom, a particle, of an immense and infinite system, which must and ought to be disposed of, according to the conveniency of the whole (TMS VII.II.i.20).

On balance, monotheism is being treated a little harder than polytheism. The latter is judged to be epistemologically unwarranted and morally rudimentary, but the former both epistemologically unwarranted and morally repugnant. It is because of dogmatic delusion, of mistaken belief of having *observed* the *real* world order that the Stoics identified virtue with aesthetic identification with the eye of the Creator of the world, thus submitting to evil instead of fighting it.

## 7. Principles of the mind: pure and rational religion

In this section I complete the reconstruction of Smith’s analysis of psychological tendencies at the root of religion, namely those playing in favour of moral theism - as opposed to rational or philosophical theism of natural theology.

Passages where Smith refers to partial evil and the good of the whole (for ex. TMS VII.ii.1.42-7; III.2.32) have been read by Cliffe Leslie, Leslie Stephen and Wilhelm Hasbach, the proponents of ‘Deist’ Smith, as expressions of some kind of cosmic optimism close to the Cambridge Platonists (who would have been horrified at being labelled Deists). But - as will be discussed in more detail below - for Smith, the existence of ‘that benevolent wisdom which directs all the events of human life’ (TMS VII.ii.1.45) is not a *theoretical* claim on which ethics and economics would *depend*. Smith is asserting once more the limits of our knowledge (Pack 1993), in this case our moral knowledge, and the impossibility of reconciling the theoretical with the practical viewpoint, asserting once more that *practice comes first*, and the contemplation of God’s wisdom displayed in the universe may be a noble calling but would never justify ‘the neglect of the smallest active duty’ (TMS VI.ii.3.3).

To sort out things, we should start once more with Smith’s relationship to Hume. The difference in temperament and attitudes is well-documented and allegations of Smith’s infidelity based on his friendship

with Hume date back to his lifetime. Twentieth-century scholarship has rescued an image of Hume softer and subtler than the all-the-way sceptic of his nineteenth-century image. If we read the *Dialogues* taking the text at its face value, namely as a dialogue, then Cleanthes may fairly well be identified with Hutcheson and Philo becomes a more interesting figure than that of a dogmatic Atheist would be, namely a ‘true sceptic’, ‘diffident of his philosophical doubts as well as of his philosophical convictions’ (Hume 1998 I.7: 273). This is also why, as regards religious scepticism, proposals have been advanced, indeed backed by a number of good reasons, to take Hume’s ‘true religion’ at its face-value, not just as a rhetorical trick to play against his opponents but as a viable option, even if Hume himself would never adopt it (Gaskin 1978; Fergusson 2013; Willis 2015).

Smith’s attitude may also be read as not too far removed from Philo’s, but with a number of telling nuances. In fact Smith allows more room for religion not because of any theoretical difference between his and Philo’s argument: the difference lies in moral reasons. What he allows is more than what Hume admits and his conclusions are similar to Philo’s in Hume’s *Dialogues*: that the game between the creation of the world and its self-production ends in a tie (Hume 2007, XII: 102-3), but he then adds one more reason that does not add anything to the theoretical arguments advanced but, on their bases, *inclines to* believe in one of the two options (Hanley 2015: 46). In a word, Smith concludes that Philo’s arguments are fine, and one *could* live without faith and hope, yes, but, echoing a well-known sentence by Vladimir Jankélevitch, *pas si bien*. This is not far from Kant, since for both Smith and Kant religion turns out to be ‘founded upon a particular type of moral rather than cognitive experience’ (Lindgren 1973: 135; cf. Hanley 2015: 48-9).

It is worth noting that faith in God’s wisdom and benevolence is required *not* as a source of moral motivation but just as a source of ‘tranquillity’ (TMS III.2.33). Justifying prescriptive altruism on the basis of psychological egoism was the remarkable *tour de force* performed by such Anglican thinkers as John Gay, Thomas Brown, and William Paley, whose attitude could fit well under the label ‘consequentialist voluntarism’ (Cremaschi 2014: 16-30) but Smith does not endorse psychological egoism and does not need *derived* altruistic motivation because sympathy may be assumed to be a basic principle of human nature. Faith and hope respond to a ‘nobler’ demand, a desire to escape despair. The virtuous man is led to faith not so much by fear of death or hope of rewards in an afterlife as by refusal of the gloomy view of a ‘fatherless world’ (TMS VI.ii.3.2), that is,

*not only by the weakness, by the hopes and fears of human nature, but by the noblest and best principles which belong to it, the love of virtue, and by the abhorrence of vice and injustice* (TMS III.5.10).

That is, in *pure and rational religion* moral principles come first. They are the grounds of faith and hope, and theoretical considerations limit themselves to strengthening such grounds. The formula ‘pure and good religion’ mentioned by Hutcheson (1969c, I.10.5: 220) is repeated almost literally but substituting ‘reason’ for ‘goodness’. Note that Hutcheson believes that faith in God prompts ‘trust and resignation, and entire submission to everything ordered by Providence, from a firm persuasion that all is ordered for the best, for

the greatest universal interest, and for that of every man'; but he also believes that the feeling of our dependence 'will retard no kind and virtuous purposes of ours, but rather invigorate and support us with joyful hopes of success', so that our devotion will be manifested partly 'by the execution of the active virtues' (Hutcheson 1969c: I.10.2: 211). Smith insists on the idea that faith is recommended, more than by selfish motives, *by the noblest and best principles*, but he also adds that it is not the subject of demonstrative proof, but at most of 'humble hope and *expectation*' (TMS III.2.12; my emphasis), once more echoing the 'sure ground of hope and *security*' evoked by Hutcheson (1969b, I.4.2: 74). Smith's suggestion is that our 'reverence for those important rules of conduct', the 'general rules' at the root of what is properly called a sense of duty,

is still further enhanced by an opinion which is *first* impressed by *nature*, and *afterwards* confirmed by *reasoning* and philosophy, that those important rules of morality are the commands and laws of the Deity, who will finally reward the obedient, and punish the transgressors of their duty (TMS III.5.3; my emphasis).

The subtle difference between Smith and Hutcheson lies in the substitution of 'sure' and 'security' with 'humble' and 'expectation'. Yet such a substitution is scant evidence for his intention to reject religion, for the simple reason that, in his view, nothing else - not even Newtonian physics - is based on more solid ground. Thus, the assertion that belief in God's existence, benevolence and wisdom is 'useful', far from being evidence for his atheism, is just one reason inclining us to believe in God's existence, a reason with as much force as those in favor of the Newtonian system, which is nothing more than an 'imaginary machine' (Cremaschi 2009: 86-7); and the fact that Smith argues that, in order to obtain 'tranquillity', we should adopt a 'quite unconvincing' belief (Rothschild 2002: 299-300; cf. Minowitz 1993: 205-6; Phillipson 2010: 28, 94, 190) is not tantamount to a *reductio ad absurdum* of religion; it is instead an argument heading towards the conclusion that we have one more reason to believe in God's existence rather than his non-existence. The decisive point is that no kinds of belief, including scientific ones, are adopted on any safer grounds, and the assumption on which Smith's whole system of ideas rests is the limits-to-knowledge thesis which is the main claim in his epistemology (Pack 1993).

But what is *rational* in 'pure and rational religion'? And, if rational, how different is it from 'natural theology'? Smith is as careful as usual in his choice of words. Here he is talking of religion, not theology. If he avoids mentioning *natural theology*, he has a reason for doing so. He mentions 'theism', a rational doctrine about God, that is, another name for natural theology, in terms nowhere near implying endorsement. Note also that he talks of *rational* religion, a phrasing different from both Hutcheson's *good* religion and Hume's *natural* religion. Besides, he was a close friend to an author who had written that, since 'morals [...] have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be derived from reason' (Hume 1998, III.i.1: 457), besides being himself the author of a work where moral distinctions are declared independent of reason, whose task is not 'the first perceptions of right and wrong' (TMS VII.iii.2.7) but is limited to discovering 'those general rules of justice by which we ought to regulate our actions' and 'those

more vague and indeterminate ideas of what is prudent, of what is decent, of what is generous and noble' (TMS VII.iii.2.7). How could he have believed that religion – by far a more elusive subject than morality – should actually be the province of reason? The solution of the puzzle has been provided by Fleischacker when he argues that 'reason' in Smith denotes something different from what Clarke, Wolff, and Kant meant by the same term, and it instead overlaps with Kant's *Urtheilskraft* (Fleischacker 1995: 267-8). Then, talk of 'pure and rational religion' is compatible with the limits-to-reason thesis, for it does not imply that any rational proofs are at the root of religious faith. It is, instead, compatible with awareness of the weakness of human nature and the limited knowledge we can have of 'objects so little fitted to its comprehension' (TMS III.2.31 fn *r*) [third ed.] and necessarily comes down to teaching that precepts first suggested by Nature may 'be regarded as the laws and commands of the Deity' (TMS III.5.6).

#### 8. Toleration as antidote to absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism

In order to substantiate the claim that pure and rational religion was an option taken seriously, not just a rhetorical device to sidetrack bounty killers chasing disguised atheists, I examine in this section Smith's proposals on religious affairs in his times.

What were Smith's views concerning religious issues in his time? This is an important question in order to establish more clearly the contours of his 'pure and rational religion'. It is clear enough that he despises *superstition*, which in plain eighteenth-century English means Popery, and he likewise abhors *enthusiasm*, which means sectarianism, but his expressions have been more than once read out of context, and bent to mean the opposite of their original meaning. For example, Minowitz (1993: 151) jumps from 'disparaging of the Catholic Church' to 'Atheism' by smuggling in an intermediate clause, that is, 'if not of Christianity', but he simply forgets that in a Protestant country disparaging the Catholic Church was a mark of orthodoxy, not of Atheism.

Smith's main concern was obviously the same as John Locke's or Pierre Bayle's, that is, toleration. In WN, starting with the 'evident enough' assumption that 'articles of faith, as well as all other spiritual matters [...] are not within the proper department of a temporal sovereign' (WN V.i.c.18; Smith 1976b), he recommends religious *Laissez-Faire*, that is, a 'plan of ecclesiastical government, or more properly of no ecclesiastical government', on which basis every religious sect would have been left free of control but also deprived of any support by the State. He adds that such a proposal had already been made towards the end of the civil war by the Independents, 'a sect no doubt of very wild enthusiasts', but if such a plan had been established, 'though of a very unphilosophical origin, it would probably by this time have been productive of the most philosophical good temper and moderation with regard to every sort of religious principle' (WN V.i.c.18). Such full-fledged religious freedom, which 'allowed every man to chuse his own priest and his own religion as he thought proper' (WN V.i.c.18) would lead to such a situation where the

teachers of each little sect, finding themselves almost alone, would be obliged to respect those of almost every other sect, and the concessions which they would mutually make to one another, might in time probably reduce the doctrine of the greater part of them 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 establish (WN V.i.c.18).

The 'natural principles of religion' would suggest that the first religious duty for human beings is 'to fulfil all the obligations of morality', not to 'regard frivolous observances, as more immediate duties of religion, than acts of *justice* and *beneficence*', and not to 'imagine that by *sacrifices*, and *ceremonies*, and vain *supplications*, they can bargain with the Deity' (TMS III.5.13). This was neither a utopia for the future nor an alternative to Christianity (Minowitz 1993: 151-3), but amounts rather to saying that existing religions could become religions of a decent kind, and that what would make them better is not the right kind of theological doctrines but instead refusal of fanaticism and sincerity and weal in prompting morally commendable behaviour (Lindgren 1973: 144).

Smith suggests that what had alienated the common people from the Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation were the relaxed morals of the clergy. This was a consequence of a tendency to align more with the affluent people's relaxed attitude than with the more austere one of people of lesser fortune. Thus, any religious establishment that would leave the clergy without great benefits, and possibly all its members in an almost equal condition would yield 'some very agreeable effects', for 'nothing but the most exemplary morals can give dignity to a man of small fortune' (WN V.i.c.48), and a clergyman in such condition is obliged in his conduct 'to follow that system of morals which the common people respect the most' (WN V.i.c.48). The strategic idea, here, is that 'the credibility of religion is assessed not on theoretical, but on moral grounds, that, unless the practices urged by a sect appear to support 'the moral convictions which prevail within a community, they are judged improper' (Lindgren 1973: 143). And in fact Smith believes that Presbyterian congregations of his time had come close to the ideal he was pointing to, for the circumstance of being accountable to their own congregations, not to some ecclesiastic or political authority, had turned the Presbyterian clergy into one of the most respectable kinds of men, and they accordingly 'have more influence over the minds of the common people than perhaps the clergy of any other established church' (WN V.i.c.48).

To sum up, notwithstanding the irreligious-Smith proponents, Smith argued that *theology* does tend to be particularly destructive of society but that *religion* instead may be, at its worst, destructive and, at its best, a source of motives for co-operative behaviour.

## 9. A phantom conversion to irreligion

In this section I address another decisive complementary question, namely did Smith's religious views change between 1759 and 1790? I criticize mythology about Smith's gradual shift from orthodoxy to some

kind of 'natural religion' or 'irreligion' which has grown around Raphael and Macfie's comments on the 'atonement passage'.

Much ado about nothing has been made about Smith's alleged 'conversion'. First came the eighteenth-century German discovery of his conversion to materialism during his 1764-1766 stay in Paris; then, the discovery of his gradual shift from Christianity to some kind of natural religion or Stoic theism with the suggestions that changes in the third edition of TMS reflect the author's increased freedom of speech after his resignation from Glasgow University (Raphael and Macfie 1976: 383) or that changes in the sixth edition reflect the waning of his scruples vis-à-vis his pious mother's feelings after her 1784 death (Russell 2006; Minowitz 1993: 189-90; Kennedy 2013: 468-9). But the authors of such speculations, besides failing to distinguish biography and intellectual history, also ascribe to Smith's character a rather implausible spineless opportunism.

Moreover, an accurate analysis of changes in the text may prove precisely the opposite of what has been claimed. In fact, treatment of religious topics was expanded in a remarkable way in the second edition of 1761 and additions were preserved without any change through the fifth edition of 1781, that is, eight years and two more editions after Smith's resignation from Glasgow College. Besides, his mother died in 1784 and, had he been eager to disclose to the public his true irreligious views, he could probably have done so somewhat earlier. Another consideration is that in the sixth edition as much was added as it had been withdrawn. Dickey argues that an analysis of additions yields conclusions opposite to those of Raphael and Macfie, namely that there is evidence of a deeper, not weaker, religious sensibility (Dickey 1986: 604-9). His suggestion is that 1759, 1776, and 1790 are three steps in Smith's path of inquiry, and the third step introduces an ambiguity into the term 'nature' so as to distinguish it from existing social norms, providing a higher standard, Nature in one of its two senses - roughly, Spinoza's *Natura naturans* - and this makes room for deeper religious sensibility.

Dickey's claim may be articulated more. Besides his analysis of shifting nuances in the meaning of 'nature', an analysis of the passages specifically dedicated to religious belief may also be carried out, one that Dickey is not interested in doing, but such an analysis requires a more complex framework than the one proposed by Dickey, adding one more step to the reconstruction of Smith's path of inquiry. This additional step is 1761, the year of the second edition, where the passage on the invisible throne of eternal justice is added (TMS III.2.31 fn *r*).

Let us examine this passage. In editions 2-5, chap. 1 of part III treats 'Of the consciousness of merited praise and blame'. Its general claim is that our fellow-beings are the only mirror where we can look at ourselves and judge our actions; after this, it argues that God needed to keep himself - the highest legislator - partly hidden from human sight in order not to overwhelm human beings with so terrifying a spectacle.

The great judge of the world has, for the wisest reasons, thought it useful to interpose, between the weak eye of human reason and the throne of his eternal justice, a degree of obscurity and darkness, which though it does not intirely cover that eternal tribunal from the view of mankind, yet renders the impression of it faint

and feeble in comparison of what might be expected of the grandeur and importance of so mighty and object. If those infinite rewards and punishments which the Almighty has prepared for those who obey or transgress his will, were perceived as distinctly as we foresee the frivolous and temporary retaliations which we may expect from one another, the weakness of human natures, astonished at the immensity of objects so little fitted to its comprehension, could no longer attend to the little affairs of this world; and it is absolutely impossible that the business of society could have been carried on, if, in this respect, there would have been a fuller revelation of the intentions of Providence (TMS III.2.31 fn r).

The reason why God kept his throne partially hidden is that is the weakness of human nature, astonished at the immensity of ‘objects so little fitted to its comprehension, could no longer attend to the little affairs of this world’ (TMS III.2.31 fn r). Thus, it was better that humans should be somewhat short-sighted. And because of such limits he had chosen to impose, he decided to constitute our fellow-beings into a legislating or judging body acting in his place. Thus he ‘made man the immediate judge of mankind, and has [...] appointed him his vicegerent upon earth’ (TMS III.2.31).

Consistent with his epistemology, here Smith has recourse once more to his limits-to-knowledge thesis, from which he derives our inability to achieve theoretical knowledge about ‘metaphysical’ subjects, including those of natural theology. Yet he presents such weakness – rather than as a deplorable circumstance - as a *necessary condition* for the survival of the species. And the remedy to this weakness is our spontaneous tendency to act as *spectators*, the ‘only mirror’ in which the individual may see himself. This is necessary precisely because looking at human deeds through God’s eyes would yield such *demanding* prescriptions as to impracticable and such far-fetched judgments as to decree that the ‘vices and follies of mankind’ contribute, no less than virtuous deeds, ‘equally to the prosperity and perfection of the great system of nature’ (TMS I.ii.3.4), thus abolishing morality (Cremaschi 2010: 354-61).

It is worth noting also that the passage was *added* to the second edition and *substituted* - not *dropped* - not earlier than the sixth. Note that, according to the irreligious-Smith view, in 1790 he should have felt free, by then independent of any clerical institution and left alone by his pious mother, to drop any reference to the ‘throne of eternal justice’ and ‘the great judge of the world’. Yet what he actually does is below these expectations. It does not go any farther than substitute the previous expressions with ‘a still higher tribunal’ and an ‘all-seeing Judge of the world’ (TMS III.2.32), ones that apparently convey as little flavour of ‘irreligion’ as the former phrasing had done.

The overlooked fact is that the five paragraphs substituting in ed. 6 six passages from editions 2-5, while not dropping reference to God, do drop expressions concerning ‘obscurity and darkness’ and ‘the throne of eternal justice’. Reasons for such omission may arguably have been, more than firm determination to evict God from his throne once for all, a concern with the possibility that the notions he had adopted of *obscurity and darkness* partially hiding something from our view might be mistaken for an ‘invisibility’ of the same kind as the one he mentions when talking of invisible beings feared by the primitives, Jupiter’s hand, the ‘invisible chains’ of connecting principles by which natural philosophers build their ‘imaginary machines’.

That is, he may have feared that the imaginary character of the invisible entities might be ascribed also to God's throne of justice, which was *not* his intention precisely because he avoided discussing the *truth* or *falsity* of religious belief.

Let us consider another already quoted passage from the 6<sup>th</sup> edition - the one where Smith is expected to drop any vestige of orthodoxy - where he declares that when a man loses confidence in his own conscience, the only consolation 'lies in an appeal to the tribunal of 'the all-seeing Judge of the world' (TMS III.2.32). What should be kept in mind is the circumstance that Smith is not describing something he believes could be proved on *theoretical* grounds, but he is instead reporting that the virtuous man cannot avoid *wishing* to believe. In other words, he is discussing here an *epistemological*, not an *ontological* issue. In Smithian language, he is spelling out beliefs required by our *natural sentiments* and in Kantian jargon, backing claims of *theoretical reason* through postulates of *practical reason*.

A third passage worth examining is the one on atonement commented on by Raphael and Macfie (1976) and Kennedy (2013: 480-3). The passage concludes a discussion of the function of punishment in part II, whose main claim is that the final cause of punishment does not coincide with the source of its approbation. Nature – the passage argues - teaches us to hope that injustice will be punished in a life to come, and the idea of a 'consequentialist God', who hates vice in so far as it is a source of unhappiness is an ingenious refinement of philosophy. Yet, our natural sentiments prompt us to believe that God hates vice in itself. The passage goes on to argue that humans are led to believe that they will feel little and weak before God's majesty and will need to entreat happiness not from his justice but from his mercy; but finally they will feel that also this is not be enough, and somebody should make atonement for his sins, and concludes that the doctrines of revelation coincide with those 'original anticipations of nature' (TMS II.ii.3.12 fn e).

It is as well to note that the passage was already there in the first edition, and was kept through the fifth. What is introduced in its place in the sixth is the scant statement that 'Nature teaches us to hope, and religion authorises us to expect' that injustice will be punished, 'even in a life to come' (TMS II.ii.3.12). This version omits mention of revelation but keeps that of 'religion'. Is such a change evidence for conversion to 'natural religion' as opposed to Christianity? My suggestion is that the reasons for the change become clear enough if we take the circumstance into account that the doctrine of atonement had been the subject of discussion in the Presbyterian Church, and the controversy had been revived in the last decades of the century (VanDoodewaard 2011; Garret and Heydt 2015: 110-11). The last thing our wary Scot was looking for was controversy. Besides, nobody expected a professor of secular subjects to treat topics of revealed theology, and thus mention of Revelation had been a mistake from the very beginning. What he did instead in 1790, by mentioning a belief shared by 'all religions and superstitions' (TMS II.ii.3.12), was precisely to carry out an 'analysis of the principles, by which men naturally judge concerning the conduct and character, first of their neighbours, and afterwards of themselves' (Smith 1774, title words). In order to rescue the original intention, or *direction of the argument*, in the passage - we should focus on the claims that 'nature teaches us to hope', and that 'every religion' insists on a place provided for the punishment of the wicked. A reasonable

conclusion would be that Smith ‘studiously avoids pronouncing on the truth of natural beliefs, and instead restricts his arguments to their origins and functions’ (Hanley 2006: 204).

The point is that they are necessary for the preservation of the individual and of the species. Besides, the kind of ‘natural religion’ inspired by Stoic Theism which Raphael and Macfie seem to have in mind looks like a rather indistinct entity. It is true that themes from Renaissance neo-Stoicism were in fashion among Moderate Presbyterians precisely because of the role they ascribed to moral philosophy, but also that Smith’s own philosophy was not Stoicism and that, when discussing Stoicism, he constantly takes it as an extreme point of view, no more than one pole in the dialectical development of our moral sentiments, and in the sixth edition, he arguably became *less - not more -* sympathetic toward the Stoic philosophy (Vivenza 2001: 191-4).

#### 10. Conclusions: humble hope and expectation

Let me summarize the line of my argument. Smith’s philosophy is a third way between Rationalism and Phyrromism, arguing that doctrines confirmed by reason in every field, from natural science to theology, are nothing more than combinations of ideas *agreeable to the imagination*; if we try, on the basis of both Smithian texts and their context and co-text, to reconstruct his lectures on natural theology, all kind of evidence converge in indicating that he reduced proofs of God’s existence to ‘inventions of the imagination’ and argued that philosophical theism is not different in status from primitive belief in invisible beings, or that it is as unwarranted as any *system* is, and besides that it generates a fatal moral conundrum; he argued also that teleological explanations are no more and no less imaginary than those based on efficient causes, that the teleological order we may imagine in the world is not too bad from a ‘consequentialist’ point of view, and yet it is far below any possible moral standard; I argued that this is by no means a proof of Smith’s ‘irreligion’, and also that no convincing proof of any turn from religion to irreligion on his part has been provided so far, and finally that the two viable options he left open were either *dismal unbelief* or *Theism on a moral basis*.

The above is a summary of the argument I developed. Now one final consideration may be added. Biography is *not* intellectual history and the main rule of the philosophical game is rationality, not sincerity. This implies that the man’s *existential attitude* vis-à-vis the Christian faith is one question and the philosopher’s *theory of religion* is a different one (Pack 1995: 303-4). Trying to detect Smith’s *real beliefs* is just waste of time, for a ‘person’s religious beliefs or unbeliefs are seldom stable and coherent, seldom completely understood by that person or by others, and never reliably signified by documentary evidence alone’ (Waterman 2004: 89). This is the main point on which my argument differs from Heydt’s refutation of the ‘New View’, that is, while we both argue that Smithian ethics is independent from natural theology, I contend for something more and something less. First, I would say that the ‘literal meanings’ of the texts mentioning teleology in TMS do *not* ‘put the burden of proof on those who would read the texts differently’ (Heydt 2017: 82) from the New-View reading, but the latter is simply wrong in that their reading is based on

systematic cut of undesirable sentences in the passages I have tried to read in full in sections 3 and 4. Secondly I tend to think, for the same reasons as Waterman, that our conclusions should stop at Adam-Smith-the-philosopher's arguments, leaving his personal beliefs and existential choices aside without venturing into speculations about his 'breaks with religious orthodoxy' (Heydt 2017: 89). And yet, whichever belief Adam-Smith-the-man might have held, it may have co-existed with a theory of religion which may instead be reconstructed, if not exactly, at least consistently. This theory fits his general philosophy, which was the 'Newtonian Philosophy', or a 'third way' between Rationalism and Pyrronism. It is on this basis that, while refusing to endorse God's existence qua *theoretical* claim, he justified the option for faith on *moral* grounds. His final word is that God, while being because of the weakness of our nature a subject 'so little fitted' to our 'comprehension', is a legitimate subject of *faith*. This is not far from Hume's conclusion that 'there is a great and immeasurable, because incomprehensible, difference between the human and the divine mind' (Hume 1998, XII.7: 80) but also from Kant's conclusion that there is no *theoretical proof* and yet there are *moral* reasons in favour of God's existence.

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